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September 11, 2024**

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[The Hockey Writers / Johnny Gaudreau's funeral put his love for Columbus & the Blue Jackets on display](#)

By Mark Scheig- September 11, 2024

Johnny & Matthew Gaudreau were laid to rest on Monday afternoon in the Philadelphia suburb of Media, Pennsylvania. The sanctuary was filled to capacity as gatherers paid their respects to the brothers. The entire Blue Jackets' team including many of the staff attended the service.

The service itself lasted about two hours. As expected, there were many emotions. Tears and sadness filled the church at St. Mary Magdalene Catholic Church.

The service was led by Father Anthony Penna, who is the director of campus ministry at Boston College. Both Johnny and Matthew attended school and played their collegiate hockey there.

The Gaudreau brothers were eulogized by their widows, Meredith and Madeline. Each spoke at length about the impact the brothers had and will continue to have on them. They also shared some insight into what made each of the brothers special.

Our focus here will be on the words of Meredith in regards to her and Johnny's time in Columbus and with the Blue Jackets. In case you missed the service, you can watch the words of Meredith and Madeline below.

Johnny & Meredith Loved Columbus

When Johnny chose the Blue Jackets in free agency, most everyone in the hockey world was stunned. When asked about it, Johnny said it was his desire to be closer to his family.

That was repeated multiple times over the last two seasons even when the Blue Jackets struggled on the ice. Johnny & Meredith chose Columbus and loved every minute of their time.

If there was anything that this funeral brought out from a Blue Jackets' perspective, it's that we perhaps underestimated just how much Columbus meant to them.

What Johnny said was never lip service. It was his family's desire to be around each other more. Here's what Meredith had to say to Columbus and the Blue Jackets about their time.

"To Columbus and our Blue Jackets' family, I can't describe how shattered I am that I don't get more time in your amazing city with John, the most underrated city," Meredith said. "I'm so glad we got to learn the hidden gem that is Columbus, Ohio. Together, we had our first baby the same week we moved to Columbus for John's first season as a Blue Jacket. We welcomed our daughter Noa, daddy's twin (and) instantly was the best dad in the world. So cautious. So gentle. So loving and nurturing, absolutely in love with his little girl who never missed a single one of daddy's games. Noa is John's light that shines through everyday."

"Columbus, thank you for taking care of us when we were experiencing so many changes at once. We so quickly became home and became our family and the memories we made in Columbus as a growing family are the best years of my life. Without having to explain all the little details, know that there were so many little signs as we got to know the city that truly made us feel reassured that we had made the right choice choosing Columbus."

"Thank you to the 5th line and the Blue Jackets organization for your love and support and comforting words. John was so proud to wear your colors every single day. He knew and appreciated how special of a community you are. He felt comfortable and he felt like he fit right in. Thank you for giving him that

feeling of comfort, security, and belonging when he was enduring a massive change. You know it's a special place when the hockey season is over, but you're not quite ready to pack up and go home yet, and that is Columbus. The way I describe Columbus is similar to the way I described John. You have to come and find out for yourself and then once you know it, you love it."

A Big Surprise

Later on, Meredith dropped some huge news about the status of their family. It turns out that Noa and little Johnny are going to have a sibling.

"John and I had the best six months as a family of four. These will forever be the best six months of my life," Meredith said. There's specifically one week that I will cherish forever. It will be my favorite week of my life. Out of those six, once. We're actually a family of five. I'm in my ninth week of pregnancy with our third baby. A total surprise, but again, John was beaming and so excited. I was so nervous because this was again a total surprise, but his reaction was just immediately kissing me and hugging me even though I was driving the car."

"After the initial excitement sank in, every time he looked at me, he would just say, you're nuts. You know that? Three kids, Noa our oldest, hasn't even turned two yet. In less than three years of marriage, we made a family of five. It doesn't even sound possible, but I look at it as the ultimate blessing. How lucky am I to be the mother of John's three babies? Our last one being a blessing and so special despite these difficult circumstances. To my babies, daddy loves you all so much and you have the best daddy in the world."

Final Thoughts

The entire two-hour service was filled with many emotions and powerful words. But it was some of the words of Father Penna that really stood out about the overwhelming support to the Gaudreau family.

"The overwhelming presence and overwhelming number of people here today, they're sending a message to you that Johnny and Matthew's lives mattered," Father Penna said. "They were noticed on this Earth. They were loved on this Earth and valued on this Earth. This robust crowd is here to tell you, all of you, that they have your backs."

The hockey world has the backs of the Gaudreau's in mass. In particular, Blue Jackets' fans have the backs of the Gaudreau's in mass. It was Johnny and Meredith who chose Columbus. In return, Columbus fans will be forever grateful for the time they were able to get together. It is a bond that will now last forever.

The Hockey News / The Blue Jackets must follow Meredith Gaudreau's lead by staying strong while attempting to move forward

By Jason Newland- September 11, 2024

The shock and sadness of the sudden passing of Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew still hasn't worn off, but every day that goes by seems to go by just a little easier.

Everyone knew that yesterday was coming, however. The funeral services for the Gaudreau Brothers were held on Monday afternoon, and it was nothing short of sad. The Gaudreau family was shattered in an instant. One can't begin to imagine the pain and heartbreak that his family feels. But if you watched the funeral online, you could feel the pain and sorrow of the Gaudreau Brothers' parents, Jane and Guy.

From start to finish it was both beautiful and heartbreaking. Remembering Johnny and Matthew with stories told by their wives Meredith and Madeline was very moving. Both made sure to try to make the people chuckle at some points as a bit of laughter is always good for the soul.

Meredith Gaudreau told the story of how she and Johnny met from start to finish, getting a glimpse into their relationship. After telling everyone that the last six months were the best six months of her life while being a family of four, she revealed to the world that she's 9 weeks pregnant with their third child. For the countless people who were watching online, and for the people inside St. Mary Magdalen Catholic Church who didn't already know, this added more pain to the already devastating loss.

After Meredith Gaudreau spoke for nearly 30 minutes, the caskets were then taken out to a pair of waiting hearses.

After his passing, Meredith Gaudreau has been sharing photos, videos, and stories of her late husband on Instagram. She's also re-shared many photos and videos from other people as well. After listening to her speak about Johnny and the love she had for him, there's no doubt that she will make sure that his legacy lives on. She seems like a very strong woman, despite everything that has happened, and has no choice but to move forward with her kids and raise them to be great people, just as Johnny would want.

Now the Blue Jackets must do the same thing - Move forward and stay strong. Although very few people want to talk about hockey after this tragedy, the CBJ front office, and the players will be getting back to work soon, as camp starts in a few weeks.

Somehow, some way, the Jackets need to come together and play for Johnny. I can't fathom the idea of these players stepping onto the ice for the first time without their friend and teammate, but much like Meredith Gaudreau, they need to try to use his memory as motivation to get out there and play every day.

Johnny Gaudreau would want them to get back on the ice and play hard every day.

1st Ohio Battery / Johnny Gaudreau's best moments as a Columbus Blue Jacket

By Will Chase- September 11, 2024

Suffice it to say, it's been a heavy last few weeks.

On Monday, brothers Johnny and Matt Gaudreau were laid to rest following the Aug. 29 accident in which drunk driver Sean Higgins hit the brothers on their bikes in Oldmans Township, New Jersey.

Hockey has probably been the furthest from the minds of most, whether indirectly or directly connected to the recent tragedy.

As tough as it is to acknowledge and accept that the lives of Johnny and Matt have come to an untimely end so soon, I wanted to look back at Johnny's two seasons in Columbus where he starred on and off the ice every day.

Johnny led the Blue Jackets in points and assists in each of his two seasons with the club. In his first year in Central Ohio in 2022-23, he scored 74 points (21 goals, 53 assists). In 2023-24, he had 60 points (12 goals, 41 assists) in 81 games.

Not only did Gaudreau exhibit tremendous scoring ability, but he was also one tough customer who was hard to take out of the lineup. To the tune of 349 consecutive games, the third-longest active streak at the time that the streak ended due to a lower-body injury in 2023.

A seven-time NHL All-Star, Gaudreau represented the Blue Jackets at NHL All-Star weekend at Sunrise, Florida in 2023. He scored three goals during the Metropolitan Division's 10-6 defeat to the Central Division.

On Oct. 14, 2022, Gaudreau played his first game as a Blue Jacket at Nationwide Arena. At the 2:21 mark of the first period, he scored his first goal as a Blue Jacket.

Columbus lost the game 5-2 to the Tampa Bay Lightning.

Here is a look at all of Gaudreau's 12 goals from the '23-24 season thanks to Ice Hockey Vids and all 21 of his goals from '22-23 thanks to WallyCBJ.

One of the favorite Johnny goals occurred only four games in as a Blue Jacket on Oct. 18, 2022, at Nationwide Arena against the Vancouver Canucks.

A player who, by his admission, considered himself a playmaker — the numbers bear this out — at his introductory press conference upon signing with the Blue Jackets in the summer of 2022, he went end-to-end with the individual effort to shoot, score, and tie the game at 3-3. Columbus won the game 4-3 in overtime and Gaudreau had the first of his 35 multi-point games as a Blue Jacket, with a goal and an assist on this night.

In the very next game against the Nashville Predators on Oct. 20, Gaudreau had his first multi-goal game as Columbus found a rare win over Nashville, 5-3.

On Mar. 14, 2023, Gaudreau had a five-point effort (two goals, three assists) including the winning goal in a 6-5 overtime win at the San Jose Sharks. He had a career-best six-point game in 2019 with the Calgary Flames and a five-assist game in 2022 with Calgary.

On Apr. 9 against the Lightning, Gaudreau earned the 500th assist of his career in a 5-2 loss. Gaudreau's final career scoring tally is 743 points (243 goals, 500 assists) in 763 games.

In addition to Gaudreau's on-ice prowess and playmaking ability as a facilitator, Gaudreau was also a true man of the people, devoting much of his time to charitable acts and causes.

Among these included donating to support men's mental health through the OhioHealth Foundation in support of teammate Patrik Laine after Laine entered the Player Assistance Program earlier this year.

Gaudreau's presence on and off the ice has been felt by many through the years. And his memory provides a lasting imprint.

What was your favorite Gaudreau memory and highlight?

[Sportsnet.ca / 'The city came out in waves': Flames proud of Calgary's support for Gaudreau family](#)

By Eric Francis- September 11, 2024

CALGARY – Leave it to Blake Coleman to best sum up the mood as he and his teammates reconvened in Calgary for the team’s charity golf tourney on Tuesday.

“There’s still a lot of grieving and processing going on,” said Coleman, one of a handful of Flames who raced back from New Jersey Monday night in a private jet arranged by Mikael Backlund so they could attend Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau’s funeral.

“We were fortunate enough to get out to Jersey and be there to support the Gaudreau family and everything they’re going through.

“It definitely put into perspective how fragile life is, and how much we need each other.”

The last ten days have also put in perspective just how proud he is of the city and its fan base that showed up by the thousands to pay respects to the Gaudreau family via a makeshift memorial and a stirring candlelight vigil.

Flames' Coleman proud of Calgary's tributes to Johnny, Matthew Gaudreau

“I’m just proud of the response,” said Coleman, echoing the sentiments of so many teammates.

“Obviously with the way things ended with Johnny here, people could have been bitter, or had their reasons not to come out and rally and support, but the city came out in waves.

“I wasn’t in town yet, but watching it from afar it was pretty beautiful to witness the amount of uplifting that they were doing for the Gaudreau family and Meredith and their family.

“I was just really proud to be part of the city.”

Captain Mikael Backlund agreed.

“It was a beautiful night,” said Backlund of the vigil, which featured an emotional speech from him.

“It was very hard, but it was beautiful to see so many people show up and show support for Johnny and his family and Matthew.

“It was beautiful to see everyone turn on their phones and their lights.

“I know a lot of people were upset when Johnny left, but to just forget about that and remember how big he was for the city and how great he was on and off the ice, it’s been great to see how much support and love he’s gotten.”

'Love you man': Backlund delivers emotional tribute to Gaudreau

Talk of the Gaudreau tragedy will continue to dominate talk around the dressing room and the city for quite some time. They know that.

There will be tributes to open the first exhibition game, opening night and perhaps even Dec. 3 when the Blue Jackets visit.

Sharing memories of their fallen friend has provided comfort for the players, as they swap endless memories of the universally loved playmaker, who spent nine years in Calgary.

"I think it can galvanize a team and bring it together," said GM Craig Conroy.

"To see this city rally around the Gaudreau's, and what this team and individual players mean to the city, is a very powerful thing too."

Following a career year as a Flames newbie last year, 31-goal scorer Yegor Sharangovich bucked the trend of departing stars by signing a five-year, \$28.75 million deal at the opening of free agency this summer.

"Good organization, good teammates, good equipment and medical staff and good city for us," said the 26-year-old when asked Tuesday to explain his rationale for staying.

"My family likes it here. Good spot for us.

"I'm really happy to sign a five-year deal and stay in the same season for seven years.

"I'm comfortable here. The coaches trust me."

The Flames announced Tuesday they've signed defenceman Jarred Tinordi to a one-year, two-way contract that pays \$800,000 at the NHL level.

The six-foot-six, 230-pound 32-year-old was brought on to add muscle, experience and leadership to an organization full of young blue-line prospects.

"We're looking for quality players and we have a lot of young guys," said Conroy of the former first-rounder.

"He's been a captain or assistant captain so many places, and I've only heard good things, and I think he's a player that can push the culture and attitude we want."

Conroy also confirmed reports the team has signed Tyson Barrie to a PTO, meaning the 33-year-old will attend camps with no strings attached.

"Similar situation, high character, quality person, over 500 points in the NHL," said Conroy of the Victoria native who has played for Colorado, Toronto, Edmonton and Nashville throughout his 14 seasons in the NHL.

"I've heard nothing but great things about both guys."

Restricted free agent Jakob Pelletier has yet to sign with the Flames, but Conroy said he is expected to be in camp and get a deal done soon.

"It's never as quick as you'd like, but I'm pretty sure we're going to get it done," said Conroy of the 23-year-old fan favourite.

"We're getting closer."

The Athletic / NHL expansion, LTIR, Russians in the Olympics and renaming the Lady Byng: Bill Daly talks

By Michael Russo- September 11, 2024

LAS VEGAS — Fresh off what many considered one of the greatest NHL seasons, deputy commissioner Bill Daly addressed some of the hottest topics around the league Tuesday at the Encore, from expansion to long-term injured reserve to the Olympics.

Daly provided the latest on potential new franchises and an update on how the league is scrutinizing deferred compensation to prevent cap circumvention. He said the league's general managers are gaining an appetite to work with the NHL Players' Association on tweaking the LTIR loophole. He also said he can see a day when neck guards are mandatory in the NHL and that he's expecting the 2026 Olympics to be played without Russian NHL stars.

Here's Daly, in an extensive conversation with The Athletic, Canadian Press, Daily Faceoff, The Hockey News and The Score.

Where is the NHL on expansion?

I wouldn't say that we're in the expansion process. I wouldn't even say expansion is a priority. But I will say that our expansions into Las Vegas and Seattle, which were done separately, have both been very, very successful. And I think it's spurred interest around North America in other potential ownership groups and other potential cities.

We have seven teams in Canada, and we're really only in the 22 U.S. markets because we have three teams in the New York market and two teams in the L.A. market. And so that means we're at 22 U.S. markets when the other professional sports leagues are basically at 30, 31 markets. So that means there's market availability, which I think helps.

I know when I started this job, there was a real concern about talent dilution with expansion. ... Skill development and hockey development throughout the world, not just North America, has increased to such a point where I think we have plenty of players. I think we have very good players who could play in the National Hockey League. And so I don't think we have that kind of talent dilution ceiling either, at least imminently.

Besides potentially going back to Atlanta, there's a lot of belief that you'll go back to Arizona. How does the auction for land to build a potential new arena being canceled slow things down? Is there a plan to build an arena?

I don't think it slows down the potential expansion process because I think the process is kind of the same as (former Arizona Coyotes owner) Alex Meruelo would have had to deal with anyway. Having said that, it is a gating factor to go back to that market until we have definitive plans and progress on a state-of-the-art arena because right now that market doesn't have one that can house a hockey team. Whether that involves a renovation of an existing arena, I suppose that's always possible.

I would say if you're writing on a kind of clean slate, you'd love to have a hockey-specific arena that's designed for hockey or is predominantly for hockey. So we'll see how it plays out. Look, (commissioner Gary Bettman) and I like to joke that we've spent the last 20 years trying to preserve hockey in Arizona. And ultimately, we were unsuccessful with this iteration. Doesn't mean the next one won't be successful.

What was the league's perspective on the Carolina Hurricanes' deferred salary with Jaccob Slavin and Seth Jarvis? Did that come across your desk?

Oh, yeah. It came across my desk. I'm not going to go to the merits of deferred comp. I will say that deferred comp is specifically contemplated in the CBA and called for in the CBA that contracts can be structured this way.

There are some things about the cap system that cause some interpretation to have to happen, which we shared with Carolina in advance. We shared with the union in advance as to how we were interpreting the provisions. I'm not saying that I think deferred comp is the greatest mechanism in a system like we have and maybe in the future might be addressed in collective bargaining. But we're midterm now, so we kind of are where we are.

The league doesn't love the idea?

Yeah, it throws out of whack some of the other checks and balances we have in the CBA, which forces interpretations in terms of how we allow it and what's permissible and what's not permissible. The original deferred-comp rules were developed in a non-cap world as opposed to in the cap world, so they kind of were inherited, and so they probably need adjustment on some basis going forward.

Can it get to the point where it becomes cap circumvention?

It can be, sure.

Is that the fear?

That's a long-term big-picture fear, I suppose. It's less a micro-dynamic fear particularly because, as I said, we've had to make interpretations which I think will continue to be binding until we renegotiate over it.

We talk about LTIR all the time. Is there any more appetite for a playoff salary cap?

There are different ways to address that issue, and some of the ones that have been kind of thrown around in the media wouldn't necessarily be fair or the best way to approach it, I think, because of the way we do accrual accounting. So you can pick up an expensive contract at the end of its term and your cap only gets charged a certain amount. But all of a sudden if that \$1 million, say, you assume becomes \$5 million on Game 1 of the playoffs and you can't play that player as a result, I'm not sure that's a fair result because teams complied within the rules.

There are other ways to address that. I have heard now from all 32 general managers. I think the majority would like us to continue to consider making some kind of adjustment that would alleviate some of the concerns around that. That's what we'll look at, and that's what we'll discuss with the general managers before we discuss it with the Players' Association.

So you'd wait for the next CBA after the 2025-26 season or you can amend the CBA?

Well, you can always do an amendment before it, but you would have to agree to do the amendment before it. We've had preliminary talks with the Players' Association just so they're aware of the issue. They read about it, too. And I don't really know, quite frankly, what the players' view of it is. So it really would depend. I don't know what the receptiveness would be to try and address it. And it probably depends on how complicated the fix is.

Players have said they're testing out a couple neck guards here. The AHL mandated them this season. Is there a day coming when neck guards will be mandatory?

I hope so, on some basis. I think we're moving in that direction. It's really three different pieces of cut-resistant equipment we've seen the evolution of. We started with cut-resistant socks, and now the vast majority if not all the players are wearing cut-resistant materials around their sock area. And then the wrist guards, which was kind of a primary emphasis leading into last year. And they were mandatory in both the ECHL and AHL. And we got the union on board to strongly suggest the players use (them), or at least (consider it).

Look, they're the highest level of the game. NHL players don't want to be told necessarily what to do and what not to do, particularly when it could affect performance on some basis. So they're not going to jump into allowing us to make it mandatory. But I think they're protecting themselves better than they have in the past. We did propose a mandatory rule, but we clearly understand where the union is coming from and some of the difficulties they have with their constituents. It's a process.

If an AHL player is called up, he can take off his neck guard?

Yes.

What's the temperature in the relationship between the league and union, and what do you expect in the next CBA talks?

Certainly there are things we don't agree on. And there are things that we're going to want in the next CBA that they're going to resist to and probably vice versa.

But I don't see any of the contentiousness that I have seen in the past, particularly heading into the '04-05 but even the '12-13 negotiation. I think we all knew we had strong headwinds on (those).

Full steam ahead with the 2026 Olympics?

We haven't signed the final documents, but we're supposed to get together with the IOC and the IIHF around our Global Series games. Certainly from the NHL's perspective, I don't see any real gating issues from finalizing those documents. There may be more significant issues on the players' side, but I'll let them address that.

(Note: An NHLPA source, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said the outstanding issue is travel and accommodations but that it should be rectified around Oct. 4-5 in Prague at the Global Games.)

What's the World Cup calendar look like after the 4 Nations?

We're 100 percent committed to doing it in the February time period. So, in part, that's why we're doing 4 Nations the way we're doing it. We have wanted to get to the leagues and the European clubs and federations early to let them know that's what we're focused on and committed to doing. There continue to be some organizations in Europe who are resistant to it. But I think at the end of the day we have enough time to make it happen. I think most of the players who play in Europe who would be good enough to make a World Cup team will have the ability to individually protect themselves contractually to be able to participate for the international teams. We're going to have '26 Olympics, '28 World Cup, '30 Olympics, '32 World Cup.

How many teams?

So we've historically had eight teams, and what we probably want to do is create a qualifying tournament for two of the eight teams. So in other words, four teams competing for the last two spots with the other six teams being invited.

If the political climate hasn't changed with Russia, have you dreamed up contingency plans?

Well, I mean, we haven't thought that far ahead because the situation is so dynamic. In large part we would see where the international community is with respect to Russian participation and competition. That won't be a determining factor for us, but it would be probably somewhat persuasive depending on what the situation is. I don't want to rule out anything. I don't want to rule in anything.

When will the IOC make an official decision on whether Russia can participate in the 2026 Olympics?

People are assuming, really, it's kind of already been made unless there's a drastic change in the course of events. The Summer Olympics, they did not allow Russian team participation, unlike some of the other models that they've adopted in the past. So I would expect that same rule will apply.

Alex Ovechkin is 42 goals from passing Wayne Gretzky for the all-time goals mark. What does it mean for the league to have that potentially happen this season?

It's on the top of our list in terms of potential events that we want to promote and make sure don't slip under the radar screen. And some people have kind of suggested that because Alex is Russian that somehow this should be marginalized in some way. We couldn't disagree more with that. He's been a terrific ambassador for our game for 20 years now, and his enthusiasm for the game and passion for the game is infectious. And he's done a lot to lift the tide for the league and for all players during his tenure.

Still no revealing injuries despite the uptick in gambling?

I don't think it'll change, certainly in the near future. We've received no pushback at all from any of our sportsbook entities on our current injury reporting practices. Our general managers are very vested in the current state of affairs. So from my perspective, there's really no reason to change the rule.

Still a decentralized draft for 2025, correct?

Our current intention continues to be to move forward in a decentralized draft. There's really been no movement to change that direction. So I would expect that next year we'll do it the way (the GMs) want us to do it.

There will still be a host city, correct?

It'll be a smaller event.

Some have suggested renaming the Lady Byng Trophy after the late Johnny Gaudreau. What is the process to rename a trophy?

Anything that is done in that vein — and that's not the first time I've heard that suggestion with respect to some of the other great all-time players — we would go to the general managers probably first, and we probably would need board approval second. I don't think any of those ideas have been raised from time to time. I would say they've been kicked around from time to time. Never really gained a whole lot of traction. So I wouldn't want to handicap what the prospects of the change in trophy names would look like.

The Athletic / Ranking NHL rebuilds: Which teams are most likely to be contenders?

By Corey Pronman- September 11, 2024

In comparing the NHL's rebuilding teams against each other, this ranking aims to answer one question: Which organization is the most likely to build a Stanley Cup contender in the next decade? The list includes last season's non-playoff teams whether they consider themselves rebuilders or not. The primary variables used to determine this list are the quality of young talent in the organizations, the current NHL roster and the amount of star or potential star talents a team has.

1. Chicago Blackhawks

Chicago's rebuild is still a few years away from truly turning the corner, but the club is putting together the pieces it needs. The Blackhawks have the potential superstar every team is searching for in Connor Bedard. They also have a deep stable of young blue line players between Alex Vlasic, Kevin Korchinski, Artyom Levshunov and others. They could use a bit more skill in their organization, but they have premium center and defense talents. The Blackhawks could acquire scoring wingers through the open market as they will likely be a top free-agent choice by the time they start winning again.

2. Ottawa Senators

The rebuild has been slow and frustrating in Ottawa, but if you take a step back and look at the pieces the Senators have, it's quite a promising group of young players. They have elite talent up front in Tim Stützle and Brady Tkachuk, they have center depth and they have premium talent on the blue line. With some steady goaltending, this is an organization that could break up the typical playoff teams in its division.

3. Anaheim Ducks

Anaheim is building up a highly desirable group of young talent, which includes Trevor Zegras who everyone knows is on the trading block. Zegras aside, the Ducks have a lot of young, high-end forward talent, led by Leo Carlsson, and a strong group of young defensemen, too. This is still a very young team that is likely a few more years of talent accumulation and growth away from emerging out of the league's basement.

4. San Jose Sharks

Some people will be upset about how highly San Jose is slotted. The Sharks have a long way to go; they must basically add 50 points in the standings to get from last season to contending status. But there are pieces in place: their elite young talent led by No. 1 pick Macklin Celebrini, a lot of quality young pieces they've accumulated lately and a lot of cap space. I don't mean to insinuate they will be contending anytime soon — likely not even in the next five years — but they have a clear path to getting there.

5. New Jersey Devils

New Jersey is the closest to contention among the teams listed; it is a projected playoff team entering the season and had 112 points two seasons ago. The Devils have legit star talents in the Hughes brothers as well. That they are ranked fifth and not first is more reflective of the fact they are probably done accumulating talent, and the young core they assembled is excellent but not elite, hence why they missed the playoffs last year. If a few players take positive steps, that would change my analysis.

6. Utah Hockey Club

Utah (then-Arizona) has been building since it selected Clayton Keller in the top 10 in 2017, and the result of the last eight years has been some ups and downs but an organization trending in the right direction. Utah has some excellent prospects and a good, young roster as it tries to turn the corner into winning, including by acquiring strong veteran players like Mikhail Sergachev. Utah may not win right away in its first season but it has the components to win soon, although it arguably lacks a true superstar talent.

7. Buffalo Sabres

Buffalo has been a sexy pick to take a big step forward for several years now. The Sabres have drafted high for a long time and have built up an envious group of young players. They have two No. 1 blueliners in Rasmus Dahlin and Owen Power and a deep, talented group of forwards. They could become a contender, but at some point, if they can't progress into a consistent playoff team, their young team will just look like previous iterations of Sabres rebuilds.

8. Seattle Kraken

Seattle's expansion started off unsustainably hot, and then it came back to reality. It's likely going to take time to build a real team, but the Kraken have three excellent young centers in Matty Beniers, Shane Wright and Berkly Catton to start with. They will need to build up their blue-line talent, but their NHL team is already decent with the potential to improve.

9. Montreal Canadiens

Montreal has some very good young forwards in its organization. No. 1 pick Juraj Slafkovsky had a good second NHL season, recent draftee Ivan Demidov is quite talented and seasoned young forwards Nick Suzuki and Cole Caufield will be longtime NHL scorers. The Canadiens do need to find a true premium blueliner or two and ideally will get production from a healthy Kirby Dach, or else they will need to find some center help.

10. Minnesota Wild

The Wild are in a precarious position. Their NHL roster is one of the best among the 16 teams on this list. They have a solid farm system led by Zeev Buium and have quite a few strong prospects despite not drafting high. Hanging over any projection of the Wild's future is star Kirill Kaprizov, though, who will be a highly desirable free agent in two years. If he were to resign, I would argue the Wild's position one or two spots higher, but losing him would set them back years.

11. Columbus Blue Jackets

Columbus' organization has seemed to be in a rebuild from the second the franchise was born. I wish I could say it's a quick fix away, but there are probably still a few more years of pain in Columbus. I am an Adam Fantilli super fan and think he has the potential to be a superstar and bring this franchise from the gutter. After him, there are some very good young pieces, but I don't see the star-level projections on a lot of the Blue Jackets' recent high picks.

12. Detroit Red Wings

Detroit has a quality NHL team. The Red Wings were top 10 in the league in goals last season. They also have a solid farm system with some excellent high picks on the way who will be pushing for NHL time soon. So why 12th? If this was about becoming a playoff team, I could rank Detroit higher, but I'm looking at the path to winning it all, and other than Dylan Larkin and Moritz Seider, I don't see the true premium pieces in this organization to carry them the distance.

13. Philadelphia Flyers

The Flyers took positive steps forward at the NHL level this season, but it arguably set their rebuild mildly back as they ended up picking 13th in the draft. I expect their team to be close to the bottom of the standings next season. Matvei Michkov is an elite prospect and could be a star in the league, but they need a lot more than him.

14. St. Louis Blues

St. Louis is stuck in the middle right now as an organization. The Blues have a decent NHL team and farm system, but neither are very strong and there are questions about what their long-term strategy is. They have the pieces to become a potential bubble playoff team, but I don't see how they get past that level.

15. Calgary Flames

Calgary is beginning a downward path in its rebuild cycle after being a top team for several years. It started well with the drafting of Zayne Parekh, but this is probably the beginning of their troubles; the Flames aren't a quick fix or two away from being a winner again.

16. Pittsburgh Penguins

It's tough times in Pittsburgh right now. The Penguins have missed the playoffs the last two years, their farm system is rather thin, and the direction seems to be to try and find a way to make it work with the Sidney Crosby group as opposed to doing a complete reset and acquiring high lottery picks. I honestly don't know what the path forward is to becoming a contender again, as it seems either nearly impossible or 8-10 years away.

[Sportsnet.ca / One player who has to deliver for each team in NHL's Atlantic Division](#)

By Emily Sadler- September 11, 2024

The 2024-25 NHL campaign is just around the corner, and after a few months of off-season roster moves it's time to take a closer look at how each team's puzzle will come together.

While a winning season requires full commitment from everyone in the lineup, there are some players facing a few extra questions about whether they can raise the level of their game — and, in doing so, help those around them thrive, too.

From stars skating into new situations and role players with plenty to prove to young skaters eyeing fresh starts on familiar rosters, we're looking at one player from each Atlantic Division team who needs to step up and deliver in 2024-25.

(Teams are listed in order of last year's final division standings.)

Florida Panthers: Adam Boqvist

While Panthers general manager Bill Zito made some impressive maneuvers to keep much of his championship core in place — defenceman Gustav Forsling signed a bargain of an eight-year pact back in March, while leading scorer Sam Reinhart took a home-team discount to stay this summer — some losses were inevitable. And some of the biggest came on the blue line, where the team will open 2024-25 without Brandon Montour and Oliver Ekman-Larsson.

While veterans like Forsling, Aaron Ekblad, and Dmitri Kulikov will be leaned on heavily, Zito also brought in some low-risk, affordable free agents, including Adam Boqvist. The 24-year-old defender has played parts of five seasons since the Chicago Blackhawks drafted him eighth overall in 2018 but has yet to really hit his stride. Dealt to Columbus as part of the deal that sent Seth Jones to Chicago in 2021-22, Boqvist started to find his game but struggled with consistency. After he was ultimately unable to harness his first-round potential with the Blue Jackets, the club bought out the final year of his deal — a \$2.6-million cap hit. Zito signed Boqvist to a one-year deal for league minimum, handing the young rearguard an opportunity to prove he can turn his career around.

It's worked before in Florida — look at Ekman-Larsson, who took his post-buyout opportunity and turned it into a Stanley Cup ring and a four-year pact with the Toronto Maple Leafs in free agency this summer. Forsling, too, turned his fortunes around after Zito took a flyer on him. Could Boqvist be next? The opportunity is there for him to step up and take it.

Boston Bruins: Joonas Korpi

After boasting the league's most successful goalie tandem the past three years, Boston's crease is going to look different in 2024-25. The Bruins broke up BFFs Jeremy Swayman and Linus Ullmark, dealing the latter to Ottawa in a trade that included Joonas Korpi in the return. That Swayman, a restricted free agent for the second straight off-season, still hasn't signed makes the Bruins' crease all the more intriguing.

Korpi signed a five-year contract in Ottawa last summer, eyeing a long-term home after a short stint as a rental with the Kings. The veteran netminder spent the first eight years of his career in Columbus, where he was often stuck playing behind a less-than-stellar d-corps and was considered a solid upgrade in Ottawa. But the fit simply wasn't there, the 30-year-old struggling to hit his stride as the team in front

of him did the same. Korpisalo's season ended with some of his worst numbers to date, including 3.27 goals-against average and .890 save percentage to go with his 21-26-4 record.

There are plenty of questions about how, exactly, he'll be used in Boston. While the starter's slot is still Swayman's, assuming a deal gets done with the RFA, will the Bruins keep up their tandem approach with Korpisalo, or will the former Blue Jacket take a step back into a more conventional backup role? The veteran has plenty to prove with a fresh start behind a strong blue line that he can, in fact, still be a starter in the NHL.

Toronto Maple Leafs: Nick Robertson

After a summer of discontent, including a lingering trade request and a months-long contract stalemate, Nick Robertson is officially under contract with the Maple Leafs after the team signed their RFA to a one-year pact worth \$875,000 ahead of camp.

It's a quintessential show-me deal for a player who's brimming with offensive potential but has yet to carve out a regular spot in Toronto's lineup — a lineup that has an obvious need at left wing this year following the departure of Tyler Bertuzzi, who spent plenty of time manning Auston Matthews' left side last year.

Whether forced by injuries or prompted by desires to spark a little extra offence at times, the Maple Leafs saw quite a few variations of its top six last season. While Bertuzzi, who's now in Chicago, got comfortable there for much of the year, Matthew Knies got some looks as well and thrived. Knies, too, is a top candidate to step up and skate into that top-line job full-time after playing up and down the lineup in his rookie year.

With a new head coach in Craig Berube and job openings at left wing, Robertson has a renewed opportunity to grow into an everyday NHL role — the Maple Leafs need him to do just that if they're to take another step in contention themselves.

Tampa Bay Lightning: Jake Guentzel

Sure, it's easy to single out the new guy, but the Lightning's decision to let longtime captain and franchise cornerstone Steven Stamkos walk away in free agency and hand that money over to Guentzel made a real statement in Tampa Bay.

Let's see if the winger's play can do the same.

Now that we're (mostly) over the initial shock of a Stamkos-less Lightning, it's not hard to see why GM Julien BriseBois so coveted Guentzel — his speed and skill matches what Tampa Bay does best, and at 29 years old he's a safer long-term bet. But Stamkos' shoes will be hard to fill. The captain scored 40 goals last year and is coming off a three-season stretch of 80-plus points each. He was the heart and soul and face of the franchise, too.

Guentzel, who played alongside Sidney Crosby for the first eight years of his career, is no stranger to jumping into new situations — he did just that last spring when he was dealt to Carolina as a rental, and found instant success.

Doing the same in Tampa Bay will go a long way in helping the winger embrace this next chapter of his career — and have the fans embrace him in return.

Guentzel says 'winning pedigree' pulled him to Lightning

Detroit Red Wings: Jonatan Berggren

The Red Wings ranked ninth in goals per game last year (3.35) but lost a little fire power this off-season with the departures of David Perron, Daniel Sprong, and Robby Fabbri. While the signing of Vladimir Tarasenko and the return of Patrick Kane definitely addresses some of that, the team will also need to lean on internal promotions to fill out the lineup and bring more offence. Is Jonatan Berggren ready to take on a larger role?

After suiting up for 67 games in 2022-23, registering 15 goals and 28 points, the 2018 second-rounder took a step back last year. He appeared in just 12 games in 2023-24, recording six points, but couldn't stick.

With reliable goal-scorers atop the lineup in Lucas Raymond, Dylan Larkin, Alex DeBrincat, and hopefully Kane and Tarasenko, too, the Red Wings will need some of their younger players like Berggren to deliver on their potential if they are to take the next step into contention.

Buffalo Sabres: Alex Tuch

Since being dealt to Buffalo as part of the package that sent Jack Eichel from the Sabres to the Vegas Golden Knights, Alex Tuch has been an instant fan favourite — fitting, considering he's from the area and grew up a Sabres fan himself. The forward fully embraced suiting up for his hometown team, and his play has reflected that. After tallying 38 points in 50 games in 2021-22, Tuch broke out in a big way with a whopping 36 goals and 79 points — both personal-bests by a pretty wide margin.

While last year was still productive for Tuch individually, it did bring a step back — and he wasn't alone in that. The Sabres' scoring was down across the board, with teammate Dylan Cozens even reportedly stating last winter the team was playing "way too soft."

Enter Lindy Ruff, who in a full-circle moment makes his return to the Sabres' bench as its new-again head coach. Tuch sounded excited about the hire:

"I think I've probably watched Lindy coach about as many games as I've actually played [in the NHL] -- and more than I've played for the Sabres," he told reporters following the hire. "He was my favourite coach. That was the team that I watched, that I sat on the couch with my dad. ... Lindy's a great coach, a really smart guy. I've always been a huge fan of his."

Tuch should play a massive role in reviving the Sabres' flat offence this year.

Ottawa Senators: Linus Ullmark

Linus Ullmark's arrival marks the sixth straight season the Senators will start the year with a different No. 1 goaltender, and while there's no rush on either side to sign the netminder to an extension just yet, the team is no doubt hoping this one sticks.

Ullmark is certainly an upgrade over Korpisalo & Co., but still comes with a few questions. He's played his best hockey the last three seasons in Boston as one half of the Bruins' excellent tandem. At times, he's been the better half and at others he's taken more of a supporting role. How will he respond to a heavier workload with the Senators as a true No. 1?

The 31-year-old has a big opportunity to set the record straight that he's more than a 1B goaltender and can own a crease all his own. Should he find success behind a Senators squad that appears ready to (finally) leap into contention, he'll have an even bigger decision on his hands.

Why Senators hit an absolute home run with the Linus Ullmark trade

Montreal Canadiens: Juraj Slafkovsky

The 2023-24 campaign was a tale of two seasons for Juraj Slafkovsky. After a shaky start to his second season — which felt like a continuation of his uninspiring rookie year — the Canadiens' 2022 first overall pick suddenly hit his stride to the tune of 18 goals and 42 points in the final 51 games of last year. It wasn't just his production that popped off the page but the way he was playing — with confidence and a little grit, too.

Now, as Montreal appears ready to take a step forward in its youth movement, the pressure will be on for Slafkovsky to pick up where he left off. That kind of play and production would go a long way in making Montreal's top line, centred by Nick Suzuki with Cole Caufield most likely suiting up on the right side, a real offensive force.

[Sportsnet.ca / One player who has to deliver for each team in NHL's Pacific Division](#)

By Rory Boylen- September 11, 2024

When training camps open next week, the time for talk will be over. Players will officially return, new arrivals will be looking to fit in, and new forward lines and defence combinations will take shape.

Depending on which team you're talking about, each has its own set of expectations. But whether the Stanley Cup is the goal, or a chance at the first-overall pick is in the cards, there is always an individual who needs to step up and deliver.

With that, we begin our three-part divisional preview of the Pacific, with a player who needs to have a good season on each team. Listed in order of finish last season ...

Vancouver Canucks: Elias Pettersson

With 34 goals and 89 points in 82 games last season, it's hard to say it was a bad one for Pettersson. It was full of distraction, however, what with a contract that didn't get extended until early March and the very brief trade rumours that followed. However, he cooled off down the stretch after signing that deal and produced just one goal in 13 playoff games. This year marks the beginning of Pettersson playing with an \$11.6 million AAV, which comes with heightened responsibilities and expectations.

Pettersson will have to play under that weight with new linemates, and UFA signing Jake DeBrusk expects to be one of them out of the gate. The burly former Bruin scored 19 goals in 80 games last season, but scored 27 and 25 the two seasons before that in fewer games. Pettersson will be integral in unlocking DeBrusk's full potential.

As a whole, the Canucks are looking to build on a breakout season and are a good bet to get back to the playoffs, even if they don't win the division again. But getting past the upper echelon contenders in the Western playoffs will require Pettersson to be one of the best centres in the game.

Why Pettersson will be Canucks' main storyline in the 2024-2025 season

Edmonton Oilers: Darnell Nurse

Had the Oilers not given Nurse two bridge contracts, walking him to the edge of unrestricted free agency, perhaps the perception of him today would be entirely different. An early long-term extension would be nearing its end now, and on a much lower AAV that might better fit his impact on the team today. Instead, Nurse is entering Year 3 of a long-term contract paying \$9.25 million against the cap, when he's no longer the No. 1 blueliner on the team.

The Oilers need him to step up this season for a few reasons. First and foremost is the money. Especially after Leon Draisaitl's \$14 million extension begins next season (and then Connor McDavid's new number two years from now), the Oilers will be spending a huge percentage of their cap on three players. On top of that Evan Bouchard, who did step up last season, is eligible to sign an extension himself and that won't be a small number. There is no space to waste.

Secondly, as it currently stands, trade acquisition Ty Emberson is a decent bet to start the season next to Nurse on the second pair. While our scout, Jason Bukala, wrote that Emberson is an intriguing and capable addition to this group, the fact remains the 24-year-old blueliner only has 30 games of NHL experience and would be taking the spot of veteran Cody Ceci. Nurse, turning 30 in February, has to be

the reliable vet on that second pair, at least until the trade deadline when the team could be in position to seek upgrades.

Los Angeles Kings: Quinton Byfield

Last season was really a breakout performance from 2020's second-overall pick, who paced pretty similarly on offence to the one player picked ahead of him that year (Alexis Lafrenière). This is less of a "he's gotta step up or else" pick for the individual, and more one to point out that the Kings need Byfield to form into an elite No. 1 pivot to keep pushing ahead in the Pacific Division.

Anze Kopitar is entering his 37-year-old season and No. 3 centre Phillip Danault is a defensive specialist. After the Canucks took a step forward as a unit last season — and along with the fact Edmonton and Vegas aren't going anywhere as Cup contenders — the Kings' path to contention is not going to be easy, but becomes a little more realistic if Byfield explodes.

And, hey, if he does, perhaps a spot on Team Canada's 4 Nations entry could be attained as well.

Vegas Golden Knights: Tomas Hertl

As has become tradition, Vegas' front office had to do cartwheels at the trade deadline to fit in an injured Hertl, the biggest and most surprising move of the day. The ripple effect of that addition (and Noah Hanifin's extension, we might add) into this season was to lose Conn Smythe Trophy winner and original Golden Knight Jonathan Marchessault to free agency, as well as forward Chandler Stephenson.

As usual, we have to wonder how much the team chemistry will be affected. On paper, a 1-2-3 down the middle of Jack Eichel-Hertl-William Karlsson is deadly, but Hertl is coming back from a knee injury that kept him out for two months last season. He returned as a Golden Knight just before the playoffs, but scored only a single goal and was a minus-6 in a seven-game Round 1 series loss to Dallas.

Calgary Flames: Jonathan Huberdeau

In the early stages of a re-tooling process, the Flames could use any new additions or young players to "step up," from Kevin Bahl (acquired in the Jacob Markstrom trade), to Martin Pospisil (a 24-year-old who showed some pop last season), or Daniil Miromanov (a 27-year-old brought in from Vegas in the Hanifin trade). But, c'mon, after a 55-point season followed by a 52-point season to begin his time as a Flame, Huberdeau needs to bring something more to the team he's signed with for another seven years.

At \$10.5 million, his contract is virtually unmovable and so, for better or worse, he's going to be part of both ends of the long-term plan. On the one hand, another bad season would help the Flames at the draft table. On the other, if he can get back to being a 100-point player, or even something close to it, perhaps the Flames will get out of the mush more quickly.

Huberdeau on finding game again with Flames

Seattle Kraken: Matty Beniers

After a 15-goal, 37-point third NHL season, was Beniers' \$7.142 million AAV extension a bit rich? Perhaps, but had he not been given that contract and bridged instead, there's a decent chance he'd be worth much more than that in a few short years. What the Kraken did was lock in a 21-year-old top line pivot with good defensive instincts, who had scored 24 goals and 57 points two years ago, just as the cap is expected to shoot up. The second-overall pick in 2021, Beniers' contract is a long-term play the team hopes will allow it to be flexible elsewhere in the lineup as he blossoms.

There is time for him to round into form and for this vision to come together, but the fact is another sub-20 goal, sub-40 point season will begin some concern and likely indicate the Kraken are out of the playoff picture again. The team added Chandler Stephenson behind Beniers on the depth chart, but

have had trouble scoring in two of their three years in existence. A step forward for Beniers would likely be a step forward for the entire franchise.

Anaheim Ducks: Troy Terry

Heading into Year 2 of a long-term deal, Terry — who is Anaheim's highest-paid player — saw his goal and point totals decline for a second year in a row, from a high of 37 goals and 67 points in 2021-22, down to 20 goals and 54 points in 2023-24.

The payoff for this still-young team is still probably a few years away, but top prospects are filtering into the lineup and being supplemented with veteran know-how. If Anaheim does make a forward stride, Terry will be an integral leading piece in that as other, younger, players, such as Leo Carlsson, Cutter Gauthier and even third-year centre Mason McTavish, develop.

Also on Terry's radar is a place on Team USA for the 4 Nations Face-Off. Entering the season, Terry would have to be one of the bubble players in consideration.

San Jose Sharks: Yaroslav Askarov

San Jose will likely be a bottom-feeder once again, but Yaroslav Askarov arrives after a big trade from Nashville that was brought on by him insisting he's ready for the NHL. The 11th-overall pick of the 2020 draft has been considered one of the top netminders not in the NHL for a few years now and will be thrown to the, er, Sharks, for his first sustained opportunity.

San Jose's minus-150 goal differential last season was far and away the league's worst — and the worst of any NHL team dating back 30 years. They allowed a league-worst 35.1 shots against per game and more high danger looks at 5-on-5 than anyone else. So Askarov will be busy.

We wouldn't expect him to immediately become a Vezina contender, or lift the Sharks to some unforeseen heights, but the team made a sizeable investment in him to be their No. 1 going forward. Now all eyes are on Askarov to see what he's got.

Sportsnet.ca / One player who has to deliver for each team in NHL's Metropolitan Division

By Sonny Sachdeva- September 11, 2024

Less than a month stands between these off-season doldrums and opening night, when the game's best will take the ice, under the lights, and begin a new campaign.

But on the other side of the glass, a new season brings new pressures too, new expectations. For some, it's the weight of a hefty new contract sitting on their shoulders — for others, the chance to earn a new one. Players on the fringes will be scratching and clawing for a spot in the lineup, while the mainstays work to pull their teams forward.

Ahead of the NHL's 2024-25 season, Sportsnet is taking stock of each of the league's four divisions, and who among each of the 32 squads will be leaned on most heavily this season. Here's a closer look at one player who must deliver for each Metropolitan Division club to find progress in the new season.

New York Rangers: Jacob Trouba

It's been a tumultuous off-season for the Rangers captain. After a lacklustre 2023-24 campaign, the 11-year big-league vet found himself on the trade block this summer, with GM Chris Drury looking to move Trouba's hefty \$8-million cap hit out of a defence corps that's already well-stocked with top-end talent — and led by one of the game's most dominant rearguards, Adam Fox. But the deal never came, the new season is here, and now all eyes turn to No. 8 in blue.

After three seasons of this Rangers team looking like a bona fide contender, like they have all the pieces, and coming up short of their lofty goals, there's a growing sense something needs to change in New York. It was well within Trouba's rights to lean on his modified no-trade clause and avoid winding up as that change. But that choice also comes with renewed pressure — to prove he's worth his \$8-million price tag, and that his cap space wouldn't have been better spent elsewhere.

Could the Rangers look to trade or buy out Trouba?

Carolina Hurricanes: Andrei Svechnikov

On the doorstep of the 2024-25 campaign, the Canes find themselves in a tough spot. After seeming primed for a deep post-season run five months ago, the club now heads into a new year with key losses both up front (Jake Guentzel, Teuvo Teravainen) and on the blue line (Brady Skjei). With no marquee name brought in up front to bolster the offence, the pressure falls on the club's current stars to raise their level if they hope to keep Carolina among the league's best. And a resurgent season from Andrei Svechnikov is key to that effort.

After a promising 2021-22 that saw the young Russian reach the 30-goal plateau for the first time and flirt with 70 points, the ascent seemed to be coming. But injuries have held him back over the past two seasons, while his production has dipped. With a point-per-game performance in the post-season showing his level, the Canes will need a continued run of form from Svechnikov to make up for losses elsewhere on the roster.

New York Islanders: Mathew Barzal

The new season figures to be a more difficult test than the one the Isles faced in 2023-24. After a strong run down the stretch and a third-place finish in the Metro, the club enters 2024-25 with the division's

best still looking elite, and a number of clubs who finished below them looking better than they did a year ago. Still, the Islanders do have one undeniable game-breaker at their disposal, in Mathew Barzal.

The Coquitlam, B.C., native's skill has been evident from the jump. And yet, even after a season of improved health and performance in 2023-24, Barzal's best showing in the league remains his very first one, back in 2017-18, when he put up 85 points as a rookie. He's fresh off his first point-per-game effort since, which is welcome news for the Isles given it came in the first year of Barzal's hefty eight-year, \$73.2-million extension. In Year 2 of that deal, the question is how much the 27-year-old can build on that progress, and reach further towards his potential to join the game's elite.

Washington Capitals: Pierre-Luc Dubois

Pierre-Luc Dubois' turn with the Caps marks his fourth big-league organization in five years, a humbling run for a player tabbed third-overall back in 2016. Of the three previous stops, the most telling in terms of where Dubois' career is at right now was the spin with the Kings — who traded for him in 2023, signed him to a \$68-million extension soon after, and traded him away a year later.

Now, coming off a difficult 2023-24 effort in Los Angeles, Dubois gets a clean slate and a fresh opportunity in D.C., where he'll have a shot at being a key contributor for the veteran Caps. The club made clear this summer that they aren't ready to throw in the towel on the Alex Ovechkin Era, bringing in Dubois and Jakob Chychrun, among others, to help revive the team's chances in the East. Central to achieving that big-picture goal will be a resurgence from Dubois himself.

Dubois stoked for possibility of assisting Ovechkin's record goal

Pittsburgh Penguins: Evgeni Malkin

Father Time has caught up with the Pens over the past few seasons. After a string of first-round post-season exits since their back-to-back Cup wins in 2016 and 2017, the past two campaigns have seen Pittsburgh finish fifth in the Metro and miss the dance altogether. New president and GM Kyle Dubas has shaken up the roster some, bringing in Erik Karlsson last summer, and top prospect Rutger McGroarty this time around. Still, with the Penguins set to start a season without Jake Guentzel on Sidney Crosby's wing for the first time in nearly a decade, the onus will be on the rest of the club's top six to be at their best.

The captain has proven he can still do that with ease, Crosby entering the new season fresh off a dominant 42-goal, 94-point effort at age 36. For the club's other future Hall of Famer up front, Evgeni Malkin, the hope is 2024-25 will bring the type of timeless production he showcased a year ago, when he finished 2022-23 above the 80-point plateau. A late-season surge in production that nearly pulled Pittsburgh into a wild-card spot should give the Penguins faithful hope on that front.

Philadelphia Flyers: Sean Couturier

Big-picture, the Flyers are surely glad to simply see Sean Couturier back on the ice, back in the squad, leading the charge. After injuries derailed the former Selke Trophy winner's career, the 2023-24 campaign marked an important step in the long-time Philly leader finding his form. But that journey seems ongoing at the moment. After returning to the lineup last season, the 31-year-old endured something of a tumultuous campaign, looking not quite himself, and winding up in the press box down the stretch as a healthy scratch from time to time.

All eyes will be on rookie Matvei Michkov, but entering what's hopefully a healthier 2024-25, with the 'C' stitched to Couturier's chest and six years remaining on the weighty \$62-million extension he just began, the key question in Philly will be whether the captain can reassert himself as one of the game's premier two-way talents.

New Jersey Devils: Timo Meier

Rewind back to late February 2023, and the Devils seemed on top of the world. A dominant campaign had them sitting among the league's best, the Metro's power balance seemed upended, and Jersey had beefed up its offence courtesy of a blockbuster swing that landed Timo Meier. The 13-piece swap saw four players and three picks go out the door for the package highlighted by the ex-Sharks sniper, and through the early goings of his time in a Devils sweater, Meier seemed worth the price.

But after potting nine goals through 21 games in that first post-deadline spin (taking his season total to 40 even), the Swiss talent took a step back in 2023-24. Less than a week into the campaign, he was being benched by former head coach Lindy Ruff. Injuries complicated his season further. And the Devils' campaign as a whole finished as one to forget. A new coach in Sheldon Keefe, and a season of improved health across the lineup, could turn New Jersey's fortunes around. But there's no question a revival of Meier's old form will speed up that process.

[Sportsnet.ca / One player who has to deliver for each team in NHL's Central Division](#)

By Rory Boylen- September 11, 2024

From top to bottom the Central Division has a wide variety of team types to offer. There are a couple of legitimate Stanley Cup contenders, a few teams that could finish on either side of the playoff cutline and maybe even steal a round, and another in the deepest of rebuilds at the bottom.

Still, each has something to play for and some players who have something to prove.

Each new season comes with a renewed outlook for franchises and individuals. Continuing our run through each of the NHL's four divisions, we look at the Central, and one player who needs to step up in some way for each team.

Dallas Stars: Jake Oettinger

As RFA Jeremy Swayman's contract talks with the Bruins drag out into September and training camps a little over a week away, we're wondering how Jake Oettinger's next contract will go. There is little doubt the Stars highly value Oettinger, and rightly so. He was considered a Vezina favourite by some heading into last season, is one of five goalies with 100 wins over the past three seasons combined, and is ranked eighth in save percentage among netminders with at least 100 appearances in that time. He'll be considered a Vezina contender again heading into 2024-25.

At the same time, his 2023-24 was inconsistent, with a mid-season run through December, January, February and March where his save percentage dipped below .900. He rounded into form by the playoffs and was one of the best goalies all post-season, but there have been questions about how heavy of a workload the soon-to-be 26-year-old can handle.

Still, Oettinger is one of the best young players at his position and there's little doubt a deal will get done. On track for RFA eligibility next summer but one year away from UFA status, now is the time for a long-term extension. A Vezina worthy season would push his number higher, while any more inconsistency -- or even a playoff letdown -- would certainly make for interesting discourse.

How Jake Oettinger's response in key times shows signs of greatness

Winnipeg Jets: Cole Perfetti

Still without a contract, there is some indication that it's not all bad on the Perfetti front. With NHL Player Media day beginning in Las Vegas, Perfetti is still set to represent the Jets, unlike Swayman, another RFA who was supposed to be Boston's rep before pulling back.

On the latest 32 Thoughts Podcast, Elliotte Friedman said all indications were that Perfetti was happy to continue as a Jet and that there was no problematic breakdown in the relationship to overcome. Assuming a deal gets done, Perfetti becomes an important player in Winnipeg's season. An argument could be made that he should have received more ice time last season, so that will be one of the main things to watch. Scott Arniel is the new coach, though he was previously on the bench as an associate under Rick Bowness.

There's also a question as to who Winnipeg's No. 2 centre will be, with Mark Scheifele locked in at No. 1 and Adam Lowry a better fit for No. 3. Perfetti has not played much there in his NHL career yet, but is one of the candidates to do so. It would go a long way for Winnipeg if he was able to establish himself as a productive young player in that position.

Why Arniel feels Perfetti will have a big role with future of the Jets

Colorado Avalanche: Casey Mittelstadt

The Avs paid a hefty price at last season's trade deadline to get Casey Mittelstadt, but as bright as Bowen Byram's future is on the blue line, Colorado was trying to fill a hole in its lineup. And the early returns of Mittelstadt as an effective second-line centre on the Stanley Cup contender were promising.

In 18 regular-season games with Colorado, Mittelstadt's line heavily tilted scoring chances in the opposing end at 5-on-5 and it continued into the playoffs, where he also contributed three goals and nine points in 11 games.

When the Avalanche won the Stanley Cup in 2022, they were paying Nazem Kadri \$4.5 million to be their 2C, and he provided immense value at that cost and stability at a critical position. They felt his loss the next season and it continued to be a weakness well into 2023-24. After signing Mittelstadt to a three-year extension with a \$5.75 million cap hit, they'll be getting similar contract value as the cap rises to \$88 million this season and perhaps up to \$92 million in 2025-26. With Gabriel Landeskog hoping to be on track to return to the lineup some time this season as well, having Mittelstadt in the middle of a second unit will bring far greater depth to their forwards.

Nashville Predators: Steven Stamkos

There are a couple good candidates here, from Juuse Saros bouncing back from a down year, to Jonathan Marchessault sticking it to yet another former team. But we've got to go with Steven Stamkos who, turning 35 years old in February, is out to prove to the Tampa Bay Lightning (and Team Canada) he's still got it — and to the rest of the hockey world that he can still stack up the goals away from Nikita Kucherov.

After a contract negotiation that never seemed all that pleasant, the Lightning did the unthinkable and turned away from their own first-overall pick from 2008. After years spent trying to keep as many pieces of the Cup-winning core together as they could, Tampa Bay chose to go in a different, younger direction up front, and signed Jake Guentzel with Stamkos' money.

Under GM Barry Trotz, the Predators have made an attempt to become a more explosive and offensive team. Head coach Andrew Brunette leans into that style and the aforementioned signing of Marchessault should help accomplish the task as well. But can they take a step in the standings, or are they caught in the league's mushy middle?

Stamkos paying off at \$8 million, over a contract that will end when he's 38, will go a long way in ruling on Nashville's situation. He's 45 goals away from becoming the 22nd NHL player to reach 600 in a career (assuming Crosby, five away, gets there first). Heck, if Stamkos averages 36.25 goals per season over the life of this contract he'd reach 700 career goals, something only eight other NHL players have done before.

This could be 'watershed moment' in history of Predators' franchise

St. Louis Blues: Philip Broberg

All power to Philip Broberg for using his situation to maximize his earnings and get a \$4.58 million contract for two years in St. Louis that the Oilers weren't ever going to present. Money aside, the move to the Blues will also finally put Broberg in position to play on his preferred left side, something there wasn't room to do in Edmonton.

Torey Krug's season-ending injury even opens the door for Broberg to be a top four left-side defender all season long. However, part of the reason why Edmonton let him go, and why Broberg spent most of last

season in the AHL, was that they still didn't really know what they had in the 23-year-old. Would he hit on the potential he had as the eighth-overall pick of the 2019 draft if put in the right position, or are there holes limiting that upside? We're about to find out the whole picture in St. Louis.

Why Blues' Armstrong felt the need to pinpoint Broberg and Holloway

Minnesota Wild: Filip Gustavsson

When Filip Gustavsson first arrived in Minnesota from Ottawa, it looked like the Wild stole a promising young goalie from the Senators. In 38 games two years ago, Gustavsson went 22-9-7 with a .931 save percentage and 2.10 goals-against average splitting the net with Marc-André Fleury. Last season was a different story, however, as both goalies finished with sub-.900 save percentages and Gustavsson's GAA ballooned to over 3.00.

While this coming season is set to be Fleury's last in the NHL, opportunity is there for Gustavsson to prove capable of being part of future plans when his contract expires in 2026, or he could take a backseat to the next goalie up. Jesper Wallstedt, the 20th-overall pick of the 2021 draft, has been improving over two years in the AHL and GM Bill Guerin has said it's time to start finding ways to give him more NHL looks. Gustavsson could play his way into a future tandem, or out of Minnesota and become trade fodder in March.

Utah Hockey Club: Mikhail Sergachev

With a fresh look in a different city, the NHL's "newest" club has so far taken a different approach. Where the Arizona Coyotes were salary-floor penny pinchers hoarding draft picks and patiently building, the Utah team used some of that capital and cap space to add NHL players.

The defence has been completely rebuilt, with Sean Durzi, John Marino and Ian Cole some headline names added via trade and free agency. But the new No. 1 in town is Mikhail Sergachev, acquired from Tampa just before he heads into Year 2 of an eight-year deal. With the Lightning, Sergachev always played in the shadow of Norris winner Victor Hedman, and while that kind of mentorship will certainly help the 26-year-old in the next stage of his career, this is a much different challenge going from a Cup champion to a breakout hopeful. Utah will lean on Sergachev more than even Tampa did, and The Hockey Club is hoping to compete far more quickly than Arizona ever did.

'Let's shock the world': Utah GM Armstrong on trades

Chicago Blackhawks: Taylor Hall

Heading into last season, the idea was for Taylor Hall to play alongside super rookie Connor Bedard and be the one offensively productive veteran next to him on a wasteland of a rebuilding roster. But Hall only made it 10 games into the season, scoring two goals and two assists, before an ACL injury ended his year.

The Hawks are only slightly more competitive in 2024-25 and Hall is expected to be able to return to the lineup, hopeful to pick up his original spot and hang with last year's Calder winner. While it's entirely possible that a productive season could lead to Hall becoming a trade candidate at the deadline the 32-year-old (turning 33 in November) also has a new contract to play for, as he's set to become a UFA in July.