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NHL.com

Stars coach weighs in on Rocky Mountain pie

By Nicholas J. Cotsonika

April 29, 2025

DENVER -- Here is a slice of life in the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

Pete DeBoer knows Denver well from years of coaching against the Colorado Avalanche, and he'll be back with the Dallas Stars for Game 6 of the Western Conference First Round on Thursday. Dallas leads the best-of-7 series 3-2.

Asked about his routine the other day, he told the media that he likes to walk from the team hotel to Ball Arena and back.

"I really enjoy downtown Denver, and it's a nice walk to the hotel," he said in the press conference room at the rink. "There's a pizza place about halfway between here and our hotel I try and stop at a lot.

"It's got a Big Mac pizza that tastes exactly like a Big Mac. It's unbelievable. I've never had anything like it.

"And it has a jalapeno popper pizza with grape jelly. Sounds crazy. It's maybe the best thing I've ever tasted. Try it out."

Hmmm.

OK. I decided to try it out.

In the spirit of investigative journalism, of course.

The place is SliceWorks, a joint in a brick building on 17th Street two blocks from Union Station. Bags of flour and cans of sauce are stacked against one wall, and an Avalanche logo is part of a graffiti-like mural on another.

I walked over from my hotel Tuesday, and I ordered one slice of the Big Mac pizza and one of the jalapeno popper pizza for lunch.

My sophisticated foodie review:

Yummm.

The Big Mac pizza does taste exactly like a Big Mac, with chunks of all-beef patties, a drizzle of special sauce, cheese, pickles and onions. But instead of a sesame-seed bun, it's on a crispy, sesame-seed crust.

The jalapeno popper pizza with grape jelly doesn't just sound crazy. It is crazy. Cream cheese. Jalapenos. Mozzarella. Cheddar. Grape jelly. The sweet heat is delicious, and you can dip your crust in the extra grape jelly that slides off onto the paper plate.

Pro tip: Get extra napkins.

"I had no idea about this," said Austin Falter, who has worked at SliceWorks for a little more than three years and was at the register Tuesday. "This made my day. This is pretty cool."

I played Falter a recording of DeBoer's comments. Turns out, DeBoer doesn't just know hockey. He knows pizza too.

"He's not wrong," Falter said. "Those are my two favorite pizzas as well. Those are my go-tos."

NHL.com

Harley stepping up, playing big minutes to help Stars get 1 win from West 2nd Round

By Nicholas J. Cotsonika
April 29, 2025

DALLAS -- The Dallas Stars have been riding their Harley in the Western Conference First Round.

Thomas Harley leads the Stanley Cup Playoffs in average ice time at 28:39, and his 16 blocked shots are tied for first with Devon Toews of the Colorado Avalanche. The defenseman is tied for the Dallas lead in goals with two and tied for second in points with four.

He's a big reason the Stars lead the Avalanche 3-2 in the best-of-7 series and can eliminate them in Game 6 at Ball Arena in Denver on Thursday, even though Miro Heiskanen, their No. 1 defenseman, has been out because of a knee injury.

"Playing this much is a challenge, but it's fun," Harley said. "Hopefully I can continue to stay fresh and play well."

The 23-year-old took a leap forward this season.

He was headed for vacation when Canada called to make him an emergency addition during the 4 Nations Face-Off.

Not only did he jump into a best-on-best tournament, but he jumped into a wild Canada-United States game at Bell Centre in Montreal on Feb. 15. He had three blocked shots in 18:17 of ice time in a 3-1 loss.

Then he played in the rematch, the championship game at TD Garden in Boston on Feb. 20. He had an assist and two blocked shots in 21:56 of ice time in a 3-2 overtime win.

"It was the best thing, I think, [that] ever happened to him and our team," said Stars coach Pete DeBoer, an assistant for Canada during the tournament. "I remember going in, and he was on the bubble, and he actually went into the 4 Nations break ... I thought he was just playing OK. He looked a little worn down, so I thought, 'You know what? Maybe it's for the best to get a break here and take a couple weeks off.'"

"And then when he got called in, with the way he performed, it was almost like a switch flipped within him, like, 'Hey, I can play at this level with these guys and be effective.' When he came back, I mean, he was at a different level. His game went to a whole different level. It was like the League really slowed down for him and he had a great confidence to his game."

"And honestly, with Miro out, if he doesn't fill that hole with the level of play he did, we might not be sitting here."

Harley had 18 points (six goals, 12 assists) in his first 16 games after 4 Nations. He finished the regular season with NHL career highs in goals (16), assists (34) and points (50) in 78 games.

"The first half of the year, I think I was not playing as well as I am now but still doing a lot of good things, a lot of the same things," Harley said. "Just wasn't quite getting rewarded for it the same way.

"And then 4 Nations happened. It's a confidence boost, for sure. Come back to the NHL, and it's just a little bit slower. Made plays, and point production took off. Power play took off. When you're feeling good you play better, and it kind of steamrolls from there."

Heiskanen led Dallas in average ice time (25:10) before he left the lineup Jan. 31. At that point, Harley was second (22:29). From that point forward, Harley led the Stars at 24:53. His workload has increased further in the playoffs.

In Game 1, the Stars called timeout during a power play. DeBoer said they had one power-play defenseman with Heiskanen out and gave Harley a breather so they could take advantage of the rest of the man-advantage. It paid off when center Roope Hintz deflected Harley's shot for a power-play goal that cut Colorado's lead to 2-1. Harley had an assist and six blocked shots, and was a minus-1 playing 27:34 in a 5-1 loss.

In Game 2, Harley scored a goal and was plus-2 in 35:54 in a 4-3 overtime win, and in Game 3, he had an assist and two blocked shots playing 29:47 of a 2-1 overtime win. The day after Game 3, Makar said he noticed the effect of 4 Nations on Harley.

"He's definitely gotten better," Makar said. "I think it benefits everybody to play in a competition like that, myself included."

Game 4 was rough for Harley. Makar turned him inside out on a rush and hit a post. Forward Logan O'Connor swiped the puck from him at the point, streaked down the ice and scored short-handed to give Colorado a 1-0 lead. Harley had five blocked shots and was minus-2 in 23:58 of a 4-0 loss.

But DeBoer was not concerned.

"The one thing about Thomas Harley -- and the reason that he was able to do what he did at the 4 Nations and basically come off vacation mode and step into a Canada-U.S. game in Montreal on Saturday night -- is because he has an unflappability and a confidence to his own game," DeBoer said the morning of Game 5. "He's harder on himself than we can be.

"There's never a time you walk up to him with a computer and a clip, and he doesn't already know what happened or what he could have done better. That's I think what is going to make him a great player."

Sure enough, Harley rebounded in Game 5. He scored a goal, had three blocked shots and was plus-2 in 26:00 of a 6-2 win.

"I think [it's] just how level-headed he is," Stars goalie [Jake Oettinger](#) said. "He doesn't get too anxious or worried about messing up. He's just a good dude, super chill, loves to play hockey, and he's a heck of a player."

"He's stepped up big time. I think he's showed that even when Miro's back he deserves to play a ton and be relied on."

NHL.com (Dallas Stars)

NHL announces start time for Dallas Stars/Colorado Avalanche Game 6 on May 1

By Dallas Stars Communications
April 29, 2025

FRISCO, Texas -- The National Hockey League announced today that the start time for Game 6 of the 2025 Stanley Cup Playoffs First Round series between the Dallas Stars and Colorado Avalanche has been set for 8:30 p.m. CT on Thursday, May 1 at Ball Arena.

The game will be televised on Victory+ and TBS and heard on Sportsradio 96.7 FM/1310 AM The Ticket.

As details become available on playoff schedule, watch parties and events, they will be posted on DallasStars.com/Playoffs.

Dallas Morning News

Mikko Rantanen's adjustment to Stars' 'stingier' style of play improving with time

By Nate Sanchez
April 29, 2025

Mikko Rantanen's 2024-25 season hasn't been the one he expected to have. He has been uprooted by a shocking trade not once, but twice after spending the first decade of his career with the Avalanche.

Rantanen was dealt from Colorado to the Carolina Hurricanes on Jan. 24 and was again traded from Carolina to the Stars on March 7.

As if this campaign hasn't already been strange enough for him, factor in the fact that, in his first playoff series as a Dallas Star, he is facing the team he spent a decade with that traded him just three months ago.

Rantanen has needed time to adjust to playing with the Stars, and while he hasn't yet put up the superstar numbers in Dallas that he put up in Colorado, he is getting there.

It took him a bit to get settled in the playoffs as he was held to just one point (an assist on Tyler Seguin's game-winning goal in Game 3) in the first four games of the series.

But Rantanen finally broke through with his first goal of the Stars-Avalanche series, tallying a goal and two assists in Dallas' 6-2 Game 5 win.

"Sometimes that's the one you need," Stars forward Matt Duchene said in a radio interview with 96.7 FM/1310 The Ticket [KTCK-AM]. "That open net, backdoor and then everything changes."

Rantanen's biggest adjustment to playing with the Stars is how differently Dallas plays than Colorado does. While the Stars do their fair share of scoring, it's not the same high-flying Avalanche system that saw Rantanen tally 105 and 104 points in his final two full seasons with Colorado.

"I think we've all been trying to find the line between playing hard-nosed, gritty, mistake-free hockey and also playing our game," Duchene said. "And Mikko is a very creative, offensive-minded player. He's coming from a team that free-wheels."

"Basically, him and [Nathan] MacKinnon had carte blanche to do whatever the heck they wanted out there and we play a little different way."

What exactly is the difference in the Stars' style of hockey? Duchene described it as "stingier." Dallas prefers to keep things simpler and grind opponents down, putting the puck in areas where opponents can't attack.

“That’s something that I think he’s been adjusting to,” he said. “It’s harder to produce that way, but I think in the game last night, I thought we just had a really good balance.”

Don’t believe Duchene? Ask Stars coach Pete DeBoer, who also joined The Ticket on Tuesday. After hearing what Duchene said of Rantanen, DeBoer weighed in.

“I think that’s spot-on,” DeBoer said. “I think he’s been programmed for 10 years a certain way, and he is adjusting. But I think he’s adjusting really well.”

Playing in an open, freestyling system alongside MacKinnon for a decade creates habits and there is almost always going to be an adjustment period when changing teams. Rantanen had 64 points through 49 games with Colorado this season prior to being traded.

But in his 13 games with Carolina before being traded again, he registered just six points in a Hurricanes uniform. Rantanen’s production ticked back up a bit in Dallas with 18 points in 20 games.

“I think the Carolina experience probably was his initial moment of shock to ‘I’m not in Colorado anymore with Nate MacKinnon in the middle of the ice,’” DeBoer said.

It isn’t always easy to get a star player like Rantanen to buy in to a new team and playing style in the middle of a season. He bought into Dallas by signing his massive contract extension with the Stars at the trade deadline, but DeBoer thinks things are improving due to his level of buy-in on the ice.

“That adjustment period, I think is getting shorter and we’re seeing big improvements,” he said. “The one thing about him is he’s all in. There’s no complaining about it.

“He understands that he’s a smart hockey guy and he’s all in. I think last night was a perfect example of we can play that game and still create offense.”

Dallas certainly created its fair share of offense in Game 5 as it took control of the series and put the Avalanche on the brink of elimination.

If the Stars are able to finish off the Avalanche and move on to the second round, Rantanen would have another series to get comfortable with his new team and could lead to more performances like he had in Game 5

As the Stars await the returns of Miro Heiskanen and Jason Robertson, they may also be getting a leveled-up version of Rantanen as the playoffs continue.

Dallas Morning News

Stars' Pete DeBoer says Miro Heiskanen 'still has some hurdles to clear' before returning

By SportsDay Staff
April 29, 2025

Dallas Stars coach Pete DeBoer joined the Hardline on Sportsradio 96.7 FM/1310 The Ticket [KTCK-AM] to discuss the Stars' Game 5 win over the Avalanche, provide an update on Miro Heiskanen and more.

Here are some highlights of the conversation, edited for clarity.

The crowd at the American Airlines Center for Game 5 was incredibly loud and it kind of seemed like everyone was feeding off each other.

Pete DeBoer: It was a great night and again, our great home fans in Dallas at American Airlines gave us a huge boost, which we needed coming off Game 4. It's always great to return under those type of circumstances to the confines of our rink and our fans because they really do play a big part in that.

Wyatt Johnston sure has a knack for making big plays at big moments, doesn't he?

DeBoer: You're right. The more important the game, the more he seems to rise to the occasion. The moment's never too big for him, as he's shown over his young career here, in the deep playoff runs we've been on already, the Game 7 production. When we need him most, he steps up. He was dialed in all night and he really did lead the way for us.

You said before Game 5 that you needed more from your top guys and they led the charge last night.

DeBoer: I think I said, "We need more from our top guys, it's money time and I'm confident these guys are going to show up and be a part of this." They all were. I don't know about calling anyone out, but the reality is we're not going to win without production from our best players. They know that, they carry the weight of that around every day. They don't need me to tell them that. It was more a shot in the arm of, "Hey, I know they're going to be there when it matters most," and they were.

In certain games of a series, one team has a desperation advantage. In your sport it feels like either that usually holds true. I have to think that's one of the psychological tests for a coach to get his guys to raise their desperation.

DeBoer: You're exactly right and I think that's what makes hockey such a great sport. That statement right there tells you how emotionally and physically involved you have to be in the game in order to compete. If your level isn't at the same as the other team, you're probably not

winning. There's a real physical price to pay to win games at the NHL level in the playoffs. You've got to get there and your group has to be in that headspace. There is a difference between "We have to win or all the work we've put in since September is gone and we're home for the summer" or "It'd be nice to win, but we still have another life if we don't." Sometimes it's how your group handles that. There's some groups that wilt under that pressure and there's some groups that embrace that and find another level.

I am so impressed with Lian Bichsel, but had no idea what to expect. He's really measured up to what you guys are hoping for.

DeBoer: He really has. He's got so many things you can't teach. First, you're 6-5 and 240 pounds and you have a natural mean streak. It's not something you have to push him into, if anything, we've got to try and back him off, reel him in a little bit, which is really rare for any young defenseman coming up today but particularly a young European defenseman. He's been great, he's still got a lot to learn, but you saw a glimpse of the fan favorite that he's going to become because of his style of play. He's built for the playoffs and this type of hockey.

On the Miro Heiskanen front, would you like to provide an update?

DeBoer: There's been zero setbacks. He was on the ice today. Status quo as far as "Is he going to be playing or not?" That hasn't changed. He still has some hurdles to clear, including some doctor sign-offs and things like that. But he is getting closer.

Dallas Morning News

Stars make key strides in physical game that will bode well for high-stakes Game 6

By Lia Assimakopoulos
April 29, 2025

Stars rookie defenseman Lian Bichsel saw his face on the jumbotron with just more than a minute remaining in the Stars' 6-2 Game 5 win over Colorado on Monday night.

After a late-game scrum, Bichsel was among four players flagged for roughing and given a 10-minute misconduct. As he sat in the box, he flashed the crowd a smile and cupped his ear, motioning for the crowd to cheer him on louder.

The rookie defenseman led Dallas in its best physical performance of the series. Now with 20 hits in the postseason, Bichsel enjoyed the moment, as the crowd showed their appreciation for what he brings to the lineup.

"He's 7-feet tall or something with skates and 300 pounds, so I'm happy to be on his side," Stars forward Mikko Rantanen said of the young defenseman. "With the way he hits guys, it's hard to go to the net when he's on the ice. ... It's a physical game in the playoffs, and I think he feeds off that."

Bichsel has been a key part of the Stars making the transition to their playoff game. In the regular season, the Stars were one of the least physical teams in the league, ranking second to last in hits given with an average of 15 per game and leading the league in hits taken with 25 per game.

But in the playoffs, it's a more physical game, and the Stars have had to raise their level, especially against a rival like Colorado. Through the first four games of the series, the Stars struggled to walk the line of physicality and emotion, taking some costly penalties and putting themselves in dangerous situations. But for the first time in Game 5 — even while getting outshot 51-29 — the Stars used their physicality to their advantage. They frustrated some of Colorado's top scorers, and the penalties they took, according to head coach Pete DeBoer, were smarter.

"We were much more competitive physically [Monday] night than we were in Game 4. That's a big part of our game, particularly defensively. I thought the entire group was more competitive in that area," DeBoer said. "The penalties that we took were defending, which I don't mind. If you're battling in front of our net to help save a goal, no problem."

Outside of the last minute, Dallas took four penalties, but held Colorado scoreless on the power play. Even though the Avalanche had a significant edge on paper in terms of hits, it didn't feel that way on the ice. Colorado's players let their emotions get the best of them at times, like a costly elbowing penalty by Sam Malinski against Sam Steel when Colorado had cut it to a one-goal game. Dallas scored on that power play and quickly regained a three-goal lead after that.

Colorado became visibly frustrated down the stretch, throwing punches and breaking sticks in the third period. But Dallas responded well, and multiple players pitched in.

"We've got some big men back there," DeBoer said. "Lindell, Bichsel, Petrovic, even Ceci, Lyubushkin, Harley. It's a big group of defenders, and I think they're hard to play against when our forwards are managing the puck. That group can really play a physical, hard game, and I thought they took a toll on some of their guys."

Most of Dallas' usual culprits also managed to stay out of the box. Entering Monday, Mason Marchment led Dallas with 10 penalty minutes in four games, but did not take one in Game 5, and managed to score a timely goal at the other end. Jamie Benn was a strong physical presence with five hits and drew a high-sticking call without committing any penalties of his own.

Entering Game 6 in Colorado where the emotions and desperation are going to be at an all-time high, the Stars need to bring that same controlled aggression. Now five games into the series, it seems that they've settled into their playoff style of hockey. By meeting Colorado's emotions with poise, the Stars will have a chance to end the series at Ball Arena and avoid a high-stakes Game 7.

"We've got to stay out of the box when we go there," Rantanen said. "Of course, there's gonna be penalties, but nothing o-zone. We try to prevent that and just play like we played the three games we won. I think those are all games how we want to play and play it simple."

DLLS

Good news: Dallas Stars have proven they can win without Miro Heiskanen & Jason Robertson

By Sam Nestler
April 29, 2025

Much, or even most, of the Dallas Stars conversation right now surrounds the injuries and potential return of Miro Heiskanen and Jason Robertson.

And understandably so. We are talking about the leading scorer and overall best player on the team. I get it.

But right now, there is both good and bad news when it comes to these two.

First, let's go over the details on more time...

Heiskanen was injured by Mark Stone on Jan. 28, underwent knee surgery soon after, and was given a return timetable of 3-4 months. The timeline shifted slightly over the past few months, but the consensus seemed to be somewhere around the end of the regular season or early into the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

Heiskanen was on crutches at first, worked out in the gym, and finally began skating on his own for a bit before recently joining the team practices and morning skates.

Over the past week, Heiskanen has been a full participant in practices. Stars coach Pete DeBoer called Heiskanen day-to-day and said they still have not reached any sort of "planned contact," which is likely the final step of his recovery before the superstar defenseman becomes available.

I know fans are frustrated. I know everyone is anxiously awaiting his return and is let down each day I tweet that he is not an option. But we are now nearing Game 6 in Denver, and DeBoer says Heiskanen remains "status quo."

Robertson was the unfortunate casualty of an ugly loss to Nashville in the regular-season finale on April 16.

Dallas, being locked into a first-round series against Colorado, opted to rest some key players to avoid injury late in the season. Unfortunately, they lost one of their top offensive weapons in a meaningless game, as Robertson suffered a knee injury after an awkward low hit from Michael McCarron.

Weird video, but a good look at the hit:

Robertson was labeled "week-to-week."

Here's the good news... Dallas has proven it can win without two of its best players. Not only that, but the Stars have shown the hockey world they can compete and even lead in a series against one of the top Stanley Cup contenders without these two.

It has not been perfect. The Stars needed back-to-back overtimes to take a 2-1 series lead. That was quickly flipped into a 2-2 series with a dominant 4-0 Avs win in Game 4. But then the Stars played their best game in quite a while, dominating Colorado 6-2 in Game 5 and giving themselves a chance to close out the series and advance on Thursday in Denver.

Here's the bad news... I would be surprised to see either player return in this series.

To me, Heiskanen is close.

But I have a hard time believing he has not been able to play yet, but will all of a sudden be good to go for Game 6 or Game 7, if necessary. I could be wrong about that, but after watching how long it took Tyler Seguin to return once he began skating, I feel that Heiskanen is more of a round two addition (if applicable).

The Dallas defense has done an excellent job covering for Heiskanen's absence.

Thomas Harley has been dominant, Cody Ceci and Ilya Lyubushkin have taken a very necessary step up in their play, Esa Lindell is just ridiculous, and Lian Bichsel is discovering his walk-the-line while agitating, hitting, and annoying the crap out of opponents style of play while also being much better defensively.

Last night was an amazing example of that.

Robertson is even further away.

The winger just began skating on his own while the team was in Denver last week, and so far, has not taken any further steps. I saw Robertson walking without a brace after Game 5, but if I were to guess, I don't think his return will come until late in the second round or later.

Dallas had trouble filling that hole early in the series. After four games, the Stars ranked 16th out of 16 playoff teams with only 1.75 goals per game.

But in Game 5, the right players stepped up and delivered in a game where Dallas nearly scored as many goals as they had in the other four contests. Roope Hintz scored and looked fast, Wyatt Johnston tallied two goals and three points, Mikko Rantanen scored a huge goal — his first of the series — and Matt Duchene whipped a beauty of a cross-crease pass to Johnston on the power play.

If the Stars are going to close out the Avs, they need all of that to continue. That, and the continued excellence from Jake Oettinger, who has gotten better as the series has gone along — something he has done throughout his career.

So, Stars fans, there is bad news. I felt I needed to give you that news and temper expectations. I hope I end up being wrong.

But there is also some good news and a few trends that show the Stars may be capable of pushing this season further until reinforcements arrive.

Stars Thoughts

Three Cool Things: The Relentless Dallas Power Play, the Other Ceci, and Thomas Harley

By Robert Tiffin
April 29, 2025

#1: The Dallas power play is creating chances like (almost) nobody else

The job of a power play, as every Stars fan has heard, is to create three things: momentum, scoring chances, and goals.

You won't score on every power play, but sometimes that's not your fault, so all you can do is just pressure and create good looks, and hope the goaltender doesn't go unconscious with his play for two minutes.

Speaking of which, Mackenzie Blackwood has been doing heroic work for Colorado in holding Dallas to "just" four power play goals in five games. Blackwood has faced the most shots from an opposing power play of any goalie in the playoff so far, as Dallas has sent 31 pucks his way. And those haven't been lobs from distance, either; Blackwood has also faced the most scoring chances of any goaltender in the playoffs, per Natural Stat Trick. And he's been outstanding at frustrating some really incredible chances all series.

Those Dallas power play numbers become easier to believe when you look at this graph of shots by Dallas (shown in tan), which shows Dallas creating the second-most overall offense of any power play in the playoffs (behind only Toronto's terrifying five-forward unit).

In fact, Blackwood has stopped 12-of-12 shots from Dallas's power play in the most dangerous areas of the ice (per NST). You could easily see that frustrating some teams, and certainly in Game 4, it felt like the Stars might be running out of ways to solve the Colorado netminder.

But when you step back and look at the whole picture, you realize that Dallas has adapted their approach to put four crucial pucks past Blackwood anyway: Tyler Seguin and Wyatt Johnston, who scored crucial power play goals from the circle on quick shots, and Roope Hintz and Jamie Benn, who beat Blackwood with deft high-tip plays from between the circles further out.

Blackwood's athleticism and outstanding play could really have started to make the power play sag, but Steve Spott's group has found a way to turn their fantastic puck movement into good-enough goal generation, and that's all you need to do in a playoff series—be better than the other team.

Oh, and let's just throw Colorado's shot generation map up here for fun, too, for comparison, and also because it's kind of obvious what their approach has been:

(Guess which side of the ice Nathan MacKinnon is usually on.)

Colorado has scored three power play goals to Dallas's four. The penalty kill deserves all the praise it's gotten—and so does Jake Oettinger—but the Dallas man-advantage has been resilient in the face of great goaltending, and that's been enough to tip the series when they've needed it most. So far.

#2: Cody Ceci's brother is an MVP and a league champion

Cole Ceci, younger brother of the Stars' defenseman, led the Evansville Thunderbolts to the SPHL1 championship last week with a .962 SV% and 1.30 GAA, along with two shutouts.

I had a chance to chat briefly with Cody the other day, and he mentioned that when they were growing up, Cole was a defenseman, like himself. His memory is that Cole was around 12 years old when he made the switch to goalie, and obviously Evansville couldn't be happier about it.

The Thunderbolts entered the playoffs as the seventh seed (of eight teams), but they blitzed the competition in the playoffs thanks to outstanding goaltending from Ceci, who played seven games in fifteen days. Evansville won the championship when they took two games in a row over Knoxville, winning 4-3 in double overtime in Game 1, then 2-1 in overtime.

Two things to note about that schedule: First, Cole Ceci's two wins against Hunstville, with 105 saves over two games on back-to-back nights to take the best-of-three series after dropping Game 1.

Second, Ceci also beat Knoxville in the SPHL Final on back-to-back nights again, with both of those games going to overtime as well.

Maybe something about clutch playoff performances runs in the family.

#3: Thomas Harley

Pete DeBoer told a story today about what Thomas Harley's defensive game looked like in training camp back in 2022, when DeBoer first arrived in Dallas.

"If I could rewind to that first training camp, I remember running one-on-one drills, and he couldn't have been softer," DeBoer said on Tuesday. "At that point when we sent him back, it was a long way to go. And to his credit, he listened. The coaches down there worked on it with him. They understood the mandate. They didn't preach offense, they didn't play him on the power play."

As you'll recall, Harley had played 34 games for Dallas in the 2021-22 season prior to DeBoer's arrival, so he had gotten more than a cup of coffee in the NHL to that point. But the Stars decided Harley needed to work on his defensive game, so back to the AHL he went, with the coaches in Texas—Neil Graham, Max Fortunus, and Travis Morin—helping him to start winning those one-on-one battles he hadn't been strong on in training camp.

"They based how they were judging him on how he was defending, and he bought into that," DeBoer said. "I think that was the right path, because he started to recognize the importance of it to play at this level, and he added that to his game. The offensive instincts have always been there."

We've heard this part of the story before, of course. Harley would come back up to the NHL late in the 2022-23 season after doing that work, and not even two years later, he was playing for Team Canada at the Four Nations Face-Off.

"It's a great lesson for young players," DeBoer said. "Instead of pouting and saying, 'That's not who I am, I'm an offensive guy,' he added that layer to his game, and all of a sudden, now he's a world-class player."

That story about one-on-one battles was only the appetizer of this cool part, though.

Here's what caught my eye this morning when looking at the top six defensemen in ice time (all situations) during the playoffs:

Yeah, Harley has been playing more minutes than the Norris Trophy guy below him. He's been putting a Heiskanen-less Stars team on his back for three months now, and he's gotten his team to a 3-2 series lead.

But the other question is: how have those minutes been going? It's one thing to play minutes, but quite another to play well during them, right?

Here are Harley's 5-on-5 numbers: He's been on the ice for five Dallas goals, and just one Colorado goal in 108 minutes. See for yourself:

Some of that 5-1 advantage might be due to better goaltending, but a whole lot of it is consistent with Harley's regular season, in which he was a +29 at 5-on-5 nearly 10% better than expected—a differential which was first in the NHL among the few dozen players with at least 1,400 minutes at 5-on-5 this year.

And just for good measure, don't forget Harley was leading the team in scoring until Wyatt Johnston popped off last night.

In summary:

Harley leading the league in ice time

He's scored two big goals and set up three more

Harley has only seen one Colorado goal in over 108 minutes at 5-on-5 against the best players Colorado can throw at him

Harley has done this all without Miro Heiskanen

If Harley keeps anything even remotely close to this performance up during a deep playoff run, you could easily see him winding up with an NHL version of Cole Ceci's award.

1For the uninitiated, the SPHL is the professional hockey league right below the ECHL.

Stars Stack

Tales From The Clipped: How Dallas' penalty kill continues to ruin Colorado's day

By David Castillo
April 30, 2025

Right now Dallas is currently in control of the series over Colorado. It is by no means over. After all, the Avalanche have home ice this Thursday. There's a very good chance this series goes to Game 7, which nobody's heart rate will appreciate.

However, there's one pattern that feels sustainable and it's the work Dallas is doing right now on Colorado's power play. In my preview, I talked about why making a difference on special teams would be an uphill battle precisely because both Jake Oettinger and MacKenzie Blackwood were so good on the PK throughout the regular season. That uphill battle has been a lot harder for the Avalanche.

Through five games, Colorado is 10th in shots-for per 60 on the man advantage. They rank even lower in shot quality, generating only 7.5 expected goals per hour, which is 11th. The only reason they can claim some measure of success is Nathan MacKinnon. He has three power play goals thus far. The rest of the team? Zero.

That's been the long and short of it. Unfortunately for Colorado, it's also a lingering problem under assistant coach Ray Bennett, who Avs fans are none too pleased with. The outrage is justified. Colorado was 26th in shot attempts this year per hour of PP time, suggesting they can't even maintain possession on the man advantage. And therein lies my personal assessment: Dallas is doing great work, and Colorado has meandered.

Today I'll be looking at the three pillars of Dallas' penalty kill, each of which has its own mix from the film room: 1) how Dallas is defending Colorado's entries 2) the way their formation is holding steady and 3) how Colorado has been "able" to beat themselves.

I'll also do a quick refresher on Dallas' tactical approach on the penalty kill, since I'm sure there are plenty of new hockey fans who might not understand why coaches choose the formations they do to begin with.

How Dallas' penalty kill works

As most of modern hockey leverages a 1-3-1 formation on the PP where only one player controls the point, the end result on the penalty kill are various formations to counter the 1-3-1, such as the one Alain Nasreddine and Pete DeBoer employ, which is a diamond formation. (Credit to Jack Han for these systems sheets.)

The general philosophy here is that with a diamond formation — and each player in position to disrupt each top position — it's easier to keep opposing power plays from getting into formation¹. Yes, it leaves the blueline more vulnerable to odd-man situations, but isn't it easier

to adjust with the play in front of you rather than behind you? It also allows for power kill plays, which Dallas has been able to generate.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. How is Dallas beating Colorado on the power play?

Defending entries: and why Dallas doesn't care

One thing I find interesting so far is that the Stars have been content to let Colorado break into the zone. Rather than focus on disrupting them before their entries, like letting a pawn take the fall to protect a rook, Dallas has been content to give them just enough speed to break in, but not enough speed to threaten the house.

At first glance, it certainly looks like Colorado is doing something dangerous. But look at how often the middle is open. Even with the speed Colorado has, no one is ever open in the slot. It's a tidy bit of work that the Avalanche haven't been able to adjust to. That brings us to Dallas' second layer of defense.

Defensive formation: and how Dallas' PK neither bends, nor breaks

There are times when I'm not even sure Dallas is even opting for a diamond formation. This is where someone like Rod Brind'Amour in Carolina has really led the way. Their approach is a basic box, but with a modern spin: leave the weak shots on the table, pressure the high position, and accept no substitutes.

Here are the formation(s) in practice.

Dallas' forwards are constantly hounding the point and the flank positions. Colin Blackwell and Ilya Lyubushkin have been the standouts here, as they seem to have the highest motors in making this aggressive approach work the way it's designed. That's not to downplay anyone else; they just happen to be the most rabid hounds IMO. Statistically, this is exactly how things are playing out. Dallas has locked Colorado out completely on one side of the ice.

Martin Necas plays the right flank position, which is where a lot of Colorado's shots are coming from. Necas doesn't have any goals so far, and has looked downright awful at times. Leaving Colorado's weakest link wide open has worked like a charm thus far. It's not the kind of fate you necessarily want to tempt, but it's the penalty kill: you have to concede some territory. So Dallas will take that all day and twice on Domingo.

Colorado in their own heads

Two things can be true at once: Dallas is elite on the penalty kill, and Colorado is disappointing on the power play. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but here's one minute of Avalanche players freelancing and/or making boneheaded decisions.

You'll notice something right off the bat: "kind of just looks like Dallas' penalty kill laying the smackdown." That's also true. Dallas is forcing Colorado into these mistakes. However, Colorado's power play also feels in keeping with their multi-year struggles under power play coach Ray Bennett. They allow players too much freelancing, and seem to play the PP the way they do at even-strength: with a lot of speed. But power plays are not about speed. They're about timing. Dallas is simply compounding an existing problem.

Why the Avalanche are still a team to fear on the PP

While Colorado hasn't had much success, every now and then they challenge Dallas down low where they're vulnerable. It's led to some very good chances. Thankfully, Oettinger (and Esa Lindell) have been brickwalls on this front.

All in all, full marks to Alain Nasreddine and Pete DeBoer. And the players, of course. Not only have they executed their own gameplan to near-perfection, but they've put Colorado's power play units on tilt: getting them to second guess themselves, make an unnecessary extra move, or make moves too quickly. In response Jared Bednar and Ray Bennett have come up with nothing new.

Again, this series is by no means over. You have to wonder at what point Cale Makar will adjust at the point, where he's largely been bullied. You also wonder how the different looks could pay off, as it took far too long to get Valeri Nichushkin on that top unit. As great as Dallas' PK is, this is not a team that needs many chances to capitalize.

However, I don't think it's too early to credit the penalty kill for their hard work and intelligence.

Bonus clip

One unbroken minute of Colorado having complete control of the puck and not being able to do anything significant with it. (I thought about splitting this one up, but it's a full minute of non-stop action and thus gives you a better sense of how fast Dallas' PK is.)

1

For a proper introduction on different penalty killing strategies, check out Dave Shapiro's breakdown [here](#).

Shap Shots

On Wyatt Johnston's goal, the RVH, and an introduction to "The Panda"

By Sean Shapiro
April 29, 2025

A lot happened in Game 5 between the Dallas Stars and Colorado Avalanche.

The Stars won 6-2, taking a 3-2 series lead, and the series now shifts back to Denver for Game 6 in a series that's been one of the most entertaining of the playoffs.

But I want to focus on what happened in the first nine seconds of the game, because when I went back to watch the game this morning, I spent close to 15 minutes re-watching the opening goal by Wyatt Johnston.

This is a bad-angle goal that kind of set the tone of the night for Colorado. Dallas fed on it, the Avalanche tumbled and the series potentially swung on this play.

It's also a play that brings up one of the most popular discussion points about modern goaltending.

The Reverse Vertical Horizontal, better known as the RVH.

I've written a lot about the RVH before and how goalies overly use the technique, including this piece from back in December.

As a quick refresher, the RVH is a valuable tool, but it's a tool that's supposed to be used on transition plays with threat of a pass to the back door and wrap-arounds.

Instead the RVH has become more of a default setting for pucks below the goal line, and there are some smart shooters — like Johnston — that intentionally shoot for the holes in it.

Johnston, for example, spends time picking the brain of both Stars goalies and goalie coach Jeff Reese, trying to find holes that goalies leave exposed, according to Jake Oettinger.

So when Johnston shoots from this space it's intentional.

It's not a high-probability shot, but is a dangerous one and with Blackwood having his leg inside the post, it creates the potential backboard for the goal that eventually happens.

Now it's easy to point at the negatives on a goal against, to yell "you shouldn't do that," but we also owe it to readers here to explain what other course of action the goalie should have taken — because it's not as simple as "just stay on your feet."

This is where we are going to get nerdy with goalie stuff, buckle up.

OK, first we should talk about Blackwood in general.

One of the strengths of Blackwood's game is how explosive he is going side-to-side and how well he typically uses his posts. Blackwood uses his post like a hinge to move with play and then push across, often staying a bit deeper in the crease and taking advantage of his 6-foot-4 frame.

So for Blackwood if there's a passing threat, he's typically well prepped for it from this position, and on this goal by Johnston, Jamie Benn is turning into a passing threat in front of the net.

So while there are sometimes egregious uses of the RVH, this actually isn't one of the worst examples.

Johnston has multiple options, can approach with speed, and has a developing passing threat coming to the front of the net.

Blackwood has also sealed the post well with his shoulder and upper body, as you can see from the overhead.

On this play, it's matter of poor execution, not necessarily poor save selection by Blackwood.

But, could there have been a better choice?

It's something I texted a couple goalie people about within NHL circles, and it led to a conversation about the next big thing in goalie post play, which you may or may not have heard of — the Panda Post Lock.

The Panda Post Lock, which was coined by Calgary Flames director of goaltending Jordan Sigalet, is a modified type play where a goalie combines an overlap — staying on his feet, with his pad overlapping the the post — with an RVH on their post play.

(Sigalet called it the Panda Post Lock because it reminded him of a panda rubbing its back against a tree.)

Here is Blackwood in that position against Dallas.

The biggest difference you'll notice is it's an RVH with the skate outside the post. It allows the goalie to stay square longer to the shooters and a bit more depth, while also covering a bit more of space above the shoulder.

"The Panda" as it's called by some, has been slowly trickling into the NHL in the past two years, with many pro goalies working on it for the first time really in 2023.

For a better video visual, here is goalie coach Brian Daccord teaching the technique. Daccord is also the father of Seattle Kraken goaltender Joey Daccord.

So if the Panda is fixing problems the RVH presented, should the RVH be tossed out completely?

According to one goalie coach, both should be used. The Panda (which is more fun to say), can hurt a goalie's ability to explode across on wraparounds or plays where the forward completely orbits the net with possession of a quick corner-to-corner pass.

There's also slightly more room for a goalie to be used as a bank shot from below the goal line on a quick passing play.

So there are times where the RVH works and times for the Panda. There are also times for a goalie to stay on their feet with an overlap approach.

Either way, goaltending needs to be about reading the play and being an athlete, not simply being robotically programmed.

Breakaway on Sports Illustrated

Stars' Mikko Rantanen Finally Breaks Through vs. Former Team

By Jon Alfano

April 29, 2025

From the moment the first-round matchup between the Dallas Stars and Colorado Avalanche became official, all eyes were on Mikko Rantanen.

Rantanen, 28, spent nearly 10 years with the Avalanche and won a Stanley Cup in 2022 before a stunning trade to the Carolina Hurricanes in January. In a stunning twist, however, the Hurricanes sent him to the Stars about six weeks later, and he signed a massive extension to stay in Dallas for the next eight years. Suddenly, he was back in the Central Division and on a collision course with his former team.

Unfortunately, Rantanen did not start the series on the right foot. Through the first four games, the Finnish superstar had just one point, a secondary assist on Tyler Seguin's overtime winner in Game 3, and had a dismal minus-4 rating. Frankly, he and the Stars were lucky that the series was tied going back to Dallas considering they only led for just over a minute in those first four games.

That all changed in Game 5 on Monday night however. Rantanen scored his first goal of the series and added a pair of assists to lift Dallas to a dominant 6-2 victory. The Stars now have a 3-2 lead in the series and can close it out in Denver on Thursday night.

"Huge relief for him," Stars head coach Peter DeBoer told reporters after the game. "You could tell by our group's reaction how happy our guys were for him. I mean, they feel that. They see him carrying that around.

"Having said that, I can't tell you how professional he's been in his approach every day in putting the team first. You wouldn't know he hasn't scored. He cares about us winning. I think more importantly he wants to know defensively what we can do, what he can do to help us win. But this guy has scored his whole life. He gets paid to score, and I think when guys like that finally get one, hopefully, look out."

Adjusting to life after Colorado has clearly been difficult for Rantanen. He had just six points (two goals, four assists) in 13 games with the Hurricanes, and while he improved with 18 points (five goals, 13 assists) in 20 regular-season games with the Stars, he still wasn't scoring at the rate he was with the Avalanche.

He finally looked like his old self on Monday night, though, and at the perfect time too. If Rantanen can keep playing like that, he and the Stars will be a very tough out for any opponent.

Daily Faceoff

Dallas' stars have woken up at the right time

By Scott Maxwell

April 29, 2025

The Dallas Stars have had an underwhelming performance from their top players in their first round series against the Colorado Avalanche. Going into Game 5, only Tyler Seguin, Jamie Benn and Roope Hintz had scored out of any of their elite names.

But in Game 5, they finally got some more production from their big guns. Wyatt Johnston scored two, Mikko Rantanen scored one, Mason Marchment scored one, and Hintz got his second of the playoffs, and it played a huge role in their 6-2 win, giving them a 3-2 series lead.

Frank Seravalli and Tyler Yaremchuk talked about the Stars' stars showing up for the team in Game 5 on Daily Faceoff Live.

Frank Seravalli: The amazing part is they were all square before that without [their star players] really contributing in significant ways. If you go look at the Stars' big gun scorers from the regular season, only three of them were on the board prior to Game 5.

I think the amazing part about watching this series really closely is how quickly it's flipped. Go back to Game 2 when the Avs had a chance to to win both in Dallas to open up the series. Within that game, it flipped right there. But then if you walked out of Ball Arena on Saturday night after watching Game 4, and you saw how dominant the Avs were and MacKinnon was, you're thinking this team is flying, there's zero chance that they're going to lose this series. You would have walked out of the arena thinking that that team is your cup winner this year.

Now they're on the ropes and it happens in the blink of an eye. Not just to start that period, but you watch how the rest of it played out. Colorado draws to 3-2 and you're thinking "we're in OT here, this is happening", and the Stars just pounce.

They've been opportunistic, they've been a lot of things. They've had some serious stick-to-itiveness considering that this is a team that's playing without their top defense and without one of their best forwards in Jason Robertson.

Tyler Yaremchuk: The officiating is obviously a massive storyline in pretty much every series that's going on right now because y'ts that time of year when every call is criticized. Gabe Landeskog saying some of the calls on the Avs were preseason level, but I sit there and think that the Stars went one for four on the power play, you lost the game 6-2. Take out the empty netter, it's still a three-goal lead, take out the power play goal, it's still a two-goal lead. That's not why!

I look at this blue line for Dallas. You have Cody Ceci and Ilya Lyubushkin playing north of 20 minutes. You have Alex Petrovic, he didn't score, they changed it to Marchment, but he's playing 14:54. This Avs forward team being as deep as they are should be feasting on this blue

line and they're not, and I think that's why you even saw some of the frustration from Nate MacKinnon last night screaming at Charlie Coyle on the bench.

Frank Seravalli: You're right, Dallas did not figure out the right side of their defense. They have not figured out their defensive depth because the same thing is doing them in the year after year after the way things ended in the Western Conference Final. But the amazing part is they might beat the Avs and then get Heiskanen back for round two, and then who knows what happens after that? All bets are off.

