



**Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips
September 17-18, 2024**

Columbus Blue Jackets

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By Mark Scheig- September 17, 2024

Welcome to the start of the 2024-25 season, at least for us anyway. Training camps open across the NHL this week as we are now under a month away from regular season hockey beginning.

The Columbus Blue Jackets are in Buffalo participating in the Prospect Challenge. They have one more game to play Monday afternoon against Ottawa. Then camp opens on Wednesday with medicals and off-ice fitness testing.

Even with camp opening, there is still some business the Blue Jackets have to take care of before the regular season starts. On Sunday, the team signed a much-needed veteran presence. That's expected to be only the beginning.

van Riemsdyk Signs

The Blue Jackets have agreed to a one-year contract worth \$900,000 with forward James van Riemsdyk. This move was widely expected after he was talking to some teams about a potential PTO. The Blue Jackets stepped up with a one-year contract given their immediate need for help.

van Riemsdyk is exactly the kind of player the Blue Jackets' locker room needs. Widely considered one of the good guys in hockey, he will be looked upon as a calming influence and leader. He also still has plenty to give on the ice too.

Here is what GM Don Waddell had to say about signing van Riemsdyk.

"James van Riemsdyk has been a very consistent, productive player throughout his career and bringing him to Columbus will not only provide depth to our group up front, but also valuable leadership and another veteran presence in our dressing room."

The Blue Jackets will be JVR's fourth NHL team. While spending most of his career with the Flyers and Maple Leafs, he played last season for the Boston Bruins.

van Riemsdyk scored 11 goals and 38 points in his 71 games with the Bruins. At age 35, he becomes the second player signed by the Blue Jackets this offseason who was born in the 1980's joining defenseman Jack Johnson.

van Riemsdyk is best known for doing a lot of the dirty work in front of the net. He is a seven-time 20-goal scorer and two-time 30 goal scorer in his career. Many of those goals were scored from near the crease. On this one-year contract, he will fill an immediate need.

The question now becomes what other business will the Blue Jackets do between now and the season? Waddell opened up about that on Saturday.

Waddell Speaks

Waddell spent about 10 minutes on Saturday discussing the upcoming training camp and some other details surrounding their current situation. The first thing that stuck out is the opportunity the young players will get this season.

"We got to go out every night and play the best we can, play hard," Waddell said. "We got to show improvement. We're going to give our young players an opportunity this year. Some of them have had

that opportunity. Some maybe not as much, so we got to give them an opportunity because we got to find out which guys we could move forward with moving into not only this year but the future.”

Waddell reiterates what has been known about the 2024-25 season for the Blue Jackets. They are going through a full evaluation of everyone under a new manager. Young players will get a chance to show what they can do. It will be a fresh start for some.

Not only will young players get a chance, they’ll get a chance in a top role. Expect a lot of mixing on the lines as the team tries to figure out where players belong for their best chance of success. There will be a lot of trial and error.

Waddell then spoke about the power of togetherness and how it’s a major priority for the team. They want to get the players together in the room as quickly as possible.

“Boone Jenner and I were talking about the guys and we both agreed the quicker we can get guys back in the room together, the better it would be for everybody and a hundred-percent agreed. And so we both worked to make sure we get the guys back. They’re in their element. They’re with their teammates. They’re friends everyday. And I think that’s a big healing part of the process. We all mourn and heal differently, but I think as a team being together that is going to be critical for moving forward.”

Waddell said that both the NHLPA and Ohio Health have been great in providing resources to help the players. Among other things, counselors have been available for support. Waddell believes everything is going well in that area.

Waddell also said on Saturday before signing van Riemsdyk that “we’re at least two forwards short right now.” He went on to say that they may sign one or two guys right now “if we think there’s a good fit for us and for them.” It seems the preference in this case is signing a contract over a PTO. If the Blue Jackets sign anyone to a PTO, another team could sign them to a contract right away.”

Could this mean someone like Phil Kessel is next? Or perhaps the Blue Jackets will look for players from other teams as they figure their camp situations out. Expect at least one more signing to take place in the near future. At this point, Waddell said he’s not worried about the cap floor “yet.”

Side Dishes

- Couple injury updates to share. Waddell said that Justin Danforth might not be ready for the season. He suffered a wrist injury at the end of last season and had offseason surgery. He hasn’t been able to stick handle much. Danforth is scheduled to see a doctor on Monday. “So if he gets cleared now, he’ll be a full go, but it’ll take him a month or so to get going.”
- Kent Johnson is 100% after surgery to repair a torn labrum. He will be a full go at the start of Training Camp.
- As of the end of last week, only Kirill Marchenko and Dmitri Voronkov were not in town. They were set to arrive over the weekend. David Jiricek just got to town as well. He just graduated high school, in case you needed a reminder of how young he is.
- The Blue Jackets got into five fights over their first two prospect tournament games. Is there really a need for that in this setting? Monsters coach Trent Vogelhuber said that he’s not telling the guys to look for fights. “I’m saying that we want to stick together for sure and have each other’s backs as teammates and hopefully future teammates. I’m certainly not going to get in the way of them trying to impact the game. It’s not something we’re looking for in a prospect tournament but good for them to stand up for themselves and for each other in a sense.”

- Wednesday will be the annual Media Day at the start of Training Camp. Waddell along with head coach Dean Evason and players Boone Jenner, Zach Werenski and Sean Monahan are scheduled to speak to the media. The team will stream the press conference live on their YouTube page.

1st Ohio Battery / An in-depth look at what James van Riemsdyk brings to Columbus

By Will Chase- September 18, 2024

An obvious need at forward, president and general manager Don Waddell dipped into free agency on Sunday, signing veteran forward James van Riemsdyk to a one-year, \$900,000 contract.

Van Riemsdyk, 35 years old, has spent 15 seasons in the NHL with the Philadelphia Flyers (2009-12, 2018-23), Toronto Maple Leafs (2012-18), Boston Bruins (2023-24), and now Columbus.

The veteran has compiled 629 points (311 goals, 318 assists) in 1,011 games. Last season with the Bruins, van Riemsdyk scored 38 points (11 goals, 27 assists) in 71 games.

Needing to fill a roster spot following Johnny Gaudreau's passing, it was announced on Saturday that the Blue Jackets would be without Justin Danforth due to off-season wrist surgery for the start of training camp.

Waddell is still considering additional forward options for the Blue Jackets, who open training camp on Wednesday with physicals.

As The Athletic's Aaron Portzline wrote on Sunday, van Riemsdyk is friends with former Blue Jackets and Flyers players Scott Hartnell, Cam Atkinson, and Jody Shelley.

"I've heard a lot of players say a lot of great things about the city and organization," van Riemsdyk said.

"For me, just looking at the roster, there are a ton of really good pieces. There are some really established veterans. There are some young guys, too, guys who are looking to take the next step. That's an exciting time for an organization, when you've got those pillars and those prospects. There's experience, but there's a lot of excitement and exuberance, too."

In addition to being a solid veteran in the locker room and on the ice, van Riemsdyk has a proven knack for his scoring contribution, scoring at least 20 goals in seven seasons and registering at least 40 points in eight seasons.

Another area that can help his new club is his offensive production on the power play, as he has 163 career points (93 goals) with the man advantage. Last season with Boston, he had 12 power-play points and six goals.

Kirill Marchenko led Columbus with nine power-play goals a season ago, and the Jackets had three skaters with double-digit power-play points (Gaudreau (18), Marchenko (13), and Zach Werenski (12)).

Van Riemsdyk was third among Bruins forwards last season with 7.42 shots/60 and 0.93 individual expected goals/60 per Natural Stat Trick.

On top of van Riemsdyk's impact on the ice, it can't be left unsaid the role he's embracing, going to a team that might not have a lot of wins on the ice but is also dealing with unfathomable tragedy following Gaudreau's passing.

van Riemsdyk can be a leader in a multitude of ways and help bring light to a tough situation.

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets at the Buffalo NHL Prospect Challenge: 5 things to know

By Brian Hedger- September 18, 2024

After a long run in the cherry capital of the world, the Blue Jackets experienced their first prospect showcase in the birthplace of buffalo wings.

The Jackets' prospect team concluded their inaugural appearance at the Buffalo NHL Prospects Challenge on Monday with a 4-1 victory over the Ottawa Senators at Lecom Harbor Center to finish the event with a 2-1-0 record. Denton Mateychuk, Gavin Brindley, Luca Del Bel Belluz and center Pano Fimis, a free agent, led the way for Columbus in victories over the Senators and Boston Bruins that followed a rough 3-1 opening loss to the host Buffalo Sabres.

Unlike last year, when Adam Fantilli wowed fans in Traverse City, the Jackets didn't have their most recent top pick with them. Cayden Lindstrom, selected fourth overall in June, stayed in Columbus along with forward Jordan Dumais for medical reasons, which took the Jackets' roster down a peg.

What their absence didn't do was prevent those who played from impressing.

After an ugly opener Friday, the Jackets galvanized into a solid group while continuing to grieve Johnny Gaudreau's death as an organization. Here are five things to know about the Blue Jackets' first year in the Buffalo NHL Prospects Classic:

Denton Mateychuk eager for third NHL training camp

Mateychuk was so impressive in last year's preseason that it wouldn't have been surprising had the Blue Jackets kept him to start the season. Instead, they sent him back to Moose Jaw of the Western Hockey League for another developmental season that turned into a great final spin at the junior level.

Now it's time to focus on the professional game. Finally.

The organizational depth chart on defense appears to be stacked against Mateychuk once again, but he'll either play in the NHL or with the Cleveland Monsters in the American Hockey League this time — one small step away. Regardless, Mateychuk continues to show his NHL potential every chance he gets, including another dominant performance in a prospect showcase while wearing a captain's 'C' on his jersey.

Despite nursing a minor knee flexor strain that shouldn't keep him out of camp action, Mateychuk displayed a poise in the final two games that paved the paths to victory — including a no-look backhand pass to Del Bel Belluz for an overtime goal against the Bruins. Training camp and preseason games are next for the slick skating lefty, who was selected 12th overall in 2022.

"I feel like, for sure, I took steps," Mateychuk said of returning to Moose Jaw. "I had a good camp and showed what I can do out there in the rookie tournament and preseason, and that's what I'm trying to do (again). I want to show these guys that I think I'm ready, and I'm just going to go out there every day and do that."

Columbus Blue Jackets continue conservative path with Cayden Lindstrom

Lindstrom will be cleared to skate starting camp Thursday, but the power forward/center won't be cleared to participate in 1-on-1 "compete" battles initially. He's allowing a back injury that cost him half of last season in the WHL to fully heal, and the Blue Jackets aren't interested in rushing it.

Lindstrom, 18, is too important to risk a setback or worse going into a season that he'll almost certainly spend in the WHL with the Medicine Hat Tigers. Lindstrom also had surgery last season to repair a fractured hand, but that's now healed.

"He's doing really well," Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell said. "We've held him back. He's been eager to get going, and the doctors ... we've had lots of talks about it. We want to slow play this. There's no reason to rush an 18-year old player ... for what reason? It's an abundance of caution."

Columbus Blue Jackets' top prospects will have busy preseason

Waddell has said several times since taking over that he plans to add some veterans into the Blue Jackets' locker room during their ongoing rebuild effort. He added forward James van Riemsdyk, 35, with a one-year deal Sunday and is expected to sign more experienced NHL forwards before the regular season arrives.

That doesn't mean there won't be opportunities for rookies to earn NHL roles. Gaudreau's death combined with trading Patrik Laine and not having Justin Danforth (wrist) has left the Blue Jackets short of a full forward group and Waddell will make room for any breakout rookies to be part of the solution.

"I always say we're going to keep the best players," he said. "We're going to keep the best players who give us a chance to win ... so this is a great opportunity for these young kids to showcase their abilities and give them a leg up as they go into the big camp. The kids who are going to have a chance are going to get a lot of exhibition games. We play eight games in 11 nights, so they're going to get a chance to play in those games."

Columbus Blue Jackets get feisty at Buffalo NHL Prospects Challenge

The Blue Jackets have added "grit" into the developmental system the past couple years through draft picks and free agent signings out of the college and junior ranks.

It stuck out like a blackened eye in Buffalo, where the Blue Jackets got into seven fights and picked up five additional roughing infractions during three games. That was par for the course years ago, but fights and physical play have diminished overall for at least the past decade — especially at prospect showcases.

The Blue Jackets seemed intent on bringing physicality and a nastier style of play back into vogue during this event, which Cleveland Monsters coach Trent Vogelhuber enjoyed seeing. Those who fought included Charlie Elick, Max McCue, Cam Butler, Nick DeAngelis, Nolan Collins (twice) and Mael Levigne. Elick, McCue, Luca Pinelli and Nicholas Sima were whistled for roughing.

"I'm definitely not telling guys to (fight)," Vogelhuber said. "But some players like to play a hard-nosed style and feel they can make an impact that way, and I'm certainly not going to get in the way of them trying to impact the game. It's not something we're looking for at a prospect tournament, but good for them to stand up for themselves and for each other, in a sense, to show they have that in their arsenal as they turn into pros."

Pano Fimis makes strong impression with Columbus Blue Jackets

One guy stood out most among the group of undrafted free agents the Blue Jackets brought to Buffalo, and it wasn't because of his unique name.

Pano Fimis, 20, scored three goals in the tournament while centering the Jackets' fourth forward line and logging time with the top penalty-killing unit. Fimis, a two-way pivot, is expected to play his final

season with the junior level Erie Otters if he doesn't sign an NHL contract first and get assigned to an AHL team.

That might become a possibility if Fimis' play in Buffalo carries into the Blue Jackets' camp. His three goals weren't the only things that stood out in wins over the Bruins and Senators. Fimis also shined as a penalty-killer, breaking up passes high in the zone and scoring the winner against Ottawa while shorthanded Monday.

Fimis averaged more than a point per game last season for the Otters with 25 goals, 51 assists and 76 points in 68 games before adding 4-7-11 in six playoff contests. Odds are the Blue Jackets will allow him to return to Erie, but Fimis opened some eyes in Buffalo.

[Bluejackets.com / Analysis: Blue Jackets prospects get the job done in Buffalo](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- September 18, 2024

As fitting for an organization known to have one of the top prospect pools in the National Hockey League, the Blue Jackets put together a successful stint at the Prospects Challenge in Buffalo over the weekend.

After a slow start that included a Friday night loss to Buffalo, Columbus got better as the tournament went on, downing Boston in overtime Saturday and then pulling away from Ottawa on Monday to complete the event with a 2-1 record. That was good enough to tie for second at the six-team event behind unbeaten Pittsburgh.

While it's nice to see some wins on the board, the event is also a chance for the players on hand to get a leg up going into the team's training camp presented by OhioHealth, which begins on-ice activities Thursday.

Columbus had five players in Buffalo with NHL experience in forwards Gavin Brindley, Luca Del Bel Belluz, James Malatesta, Hunter McKown and Cam Butler, while first-round picks Denton Mateychuk and Corson Ceulemans also took part, giving the Blue Jackets plenty of players who were in the mix for jobs at the top level.

While new general manager and president of hockey operations Don Waddell has spoken about the Jackets' need to add some veterans up front, he also noted the up-and-coming prospects will have as good a chance as anyone to make the roster.

"I always say we're going to keep the best players," Waddell said in Buffalo. "We're going to keep the best players that give us the best chance to win. If we sign guys and somebody ends up down in the minors, we also know right now we have 10 healthy forwards. To think we're going to go through a whole season with 12-13 guys, I don't care what the franchise is. I know we have a history (of injuries), but it's not going to happen.

"It's a great opportunity for these young kids to showcase their abilities but also give them a leg up as they go into the big camp. Most of the kids that have a chance, they're going to get a chance to play exhibition games. We play eight games in 11 nights, so they're going to get a chance to play in those games.

"I always say contract aside means nothing to me. We're trying to win hockey games here as the Columbus Blue Jackets, and we're going to keep the best players possible."

Three Stars

A look at three players who stood out on the ice in Buffalo.

Denton Mateychuk: It's no surprise here, as Mateychuk has a great chance to earn NHL minutes this season after a dominant season a year ago in which he led Moose Jaw to the WHL championship. A defenseman chosen 12th overall in the 2022 draft, Mateychuk uses smooth skating and an excellent hockey mind to excel in all three zones. His assist on the overtime winner vs. Boston was an example of his skill and hockey sense, as Mateychuk outraced two Bruins skaters to the puck along the wall and threw a pass to a wide-open Del Bel Belluz for the score. It's probably no surprise the Jackets struggled in game one without him, as Mateychuk has the ability to control the game from the blue line. Going into his first pro season, the 20-year-old will likely make a push to join the Jackets, but it also wouldn't be a huge surprise if he starts the season getting his feet wet in Cleveland.

Gavin Brindley: Like Mateychuk, Brindley is someone the Blue Jackets expected to do well at the event; rookie tournaments are usually a chance for the top prospects to shine. Brindley, a wing taken in the second round of the 2023 draft, did just that, including in Monday's one-goal, two-assist performance in which his speed, agility, vision and skill allowed him to lead the way on the score sheet. He's known for darting around the ice putting himself in good scoring areas, and Brindley showed those abilities in all three games over the weekend, scoring in the opener vs. Buffalo as well. The University of Michigan product turns 20 just before the season and made his NHL debut a season ago; this year, he could see time in Columbus if he pushes the envelope but seems more likely to gain experience in Cleveland at the start of the year.

Pano Fimis: Blue Jackets fans could be excused if they know little about the wing, as he's not a CBJ draft pick but instead played for the squad as an undrafted free agent invite. Fimis stood out, though, with a team-best three goals at the tournament. He has scoring bona fides in the junior ranks, as the 20-year-old Ontario native had 25 goals and 76 points in 68 games a year ago with Erie of the OHL. Fimis scored in a variety of ways in the tournament, setting up a goal vs. Boston by stealing the puck and then finishing at the net, then tallying the game-winner vs. Ottawa with a slick finish on a shorthanded breakaway. For a player looking to make a name for himself in an NHL sweater, he did so on a pretty big stage.

Other Player Observations

Del Bel Belluz was impactful on the score sheet throughout the event and continued to showcase the two-way play that made him a second-round pick in 2022. ... Signee Max McCue was a constant annoying presence for the opposition, just as the forward was a year ago with OHL champion London, and should be fun to watch in Cleveland. ... 2023 seventh-round pick Tyler Peddle had perhaps his best weekend in CBJ colors, creating chances and throwing in some physical play. ... 2023 fourth-round pick Luca Pinelli is coming off an excellent season for Ottawa of the OHL and was able to show his skill on the puck, including with a nice goal in the win over Boston. ... Ceulemans showcased his aggressive play with the puck when the play was open but was still pretty solid on the defensive end. ... 2024 second-round pick Charlie Elick was plenty physical on the back end, which will pair nicely with his excellent skating ability. ... Given the chaotic nature of rookie camp games, goalies are often put to the test, and both Nolan Lalonde (undrafted signee) and Evan Gardner (2024 second-round pick) played well when under the gun in the opening two games.

The Hockey Writers / 3 Blue Jackets' Takeaways from Buffalo Prospects Challenge

By Mark Scheig- September 18, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets finished the Buffalo Prospects Challenge on a high note Monday. After splitting their first two games against the Buffalo Sabres and Boston Bruins, the Blue Jackets defeated the Ottawa Senators 4-1. Erie Otters' center Pano Fimis led the way with two goals.

After a tough opener against the Sabres, the Blue Jackets settled in and played much better in their final two games. Although they got into some penalty trouble, they were able to find a way to keep the games in range before securing their wins.

This Prospects Challenge is the prelude to main Training Camp which starts on Wednesday at Nationwide Arena. The first time the team will hit the ice is on Thursday. We'll see on Wednesday who from the Prospects Challenge roster gets an invite to main camp.

I was in Buffalo on Friday and Saturday and then watched Monday's game against Ottawa online. Here are my three takeaways from the weekend that was.

Mateychuk & Brindley

The two best players on the Blue Jackets' roster for this challenge were Denton Mateychuk and Gavin Brindley. Each has a legitimate case to make the opening-night roster.

Mateychuk didn't play in the game Friday against the Sabres. With their game Saturday starting at 3:30 P.M. after a 7 P.M. start, it made no sense to play him in both games.

Mateychuk wore the C for the Blue Jackets and showed why. He picked back up right where he left off from the seven-game series against the Hershey Bears.

Mateychuk's offensive instincts and vision are off the charts good for someone his age. The play Saturday in overtime when he was on the wall demonstrated the creativity he has. With multiple defenders on him, Mateychuk was able to find Luca Del Bel Belluz coming down the slot for the overtime winner.

Mateychuk was consistently one of the best players on the ice in the two games. His poise allows him to make good decisions with the puck. He also operated as the quarterback of the power play.

The one thing that was worth noting is that teams circled Mateychuk as a threat and tried hitting him as much as possible. As close as he is to being NHL ready, that is the one area in which there is a question. He will be looked at as a potential target for hits, slashes and the like. How ready will he be for the physical side of the NHL?

Mateychuk has worn the C in multiple places. This past weekend was the first time he's worn it for the Blue Jackets in any capacity.

"It's an honor," Mateychuk said. "I've been dreaming of putting on an NHL jersey since I was a little kid and I think to have the C on there, it's just a bonus. (I) try to be the best person I can be all the time off the ice, on the ice and just try to lead."

Expect to see plenty of Mateychuk in the preseason as the Blue Jackets determine where he'll start the season. With Jack Johnson and Jordan Harris now in the fold, Mateychuk's NHL roster spot is not locked in. But he's really close and will be one of the camp storylines to follow.

As for Brindley, he showed off his speed and awareness. He was in the right place at the right time for a couple of goals over the weekend.

The one area of Brindley's game that came up was trying to force plays that weren't there. He plays and thinks the game at pace. Sometimes that leads to poor decision making with the puck.

And like Mateychuk, teams are going to target the smaller Brindley in the physical game. He took a couple of big hits. To his credit, he shook it off and continued to play his game.

With the Blue Jackets' roster still in some flux, Brindley has an opportunity in the preseason to potentially make the opening-night roster. His spot is far from guaranteed though, especially given the signing of James van Riemsdyk and potentially others as camp goes on. His opportunity will be there if he has a strong preseason and shows he can handle the physical demands the NHL presents.

Aggression Everywhere

Perhaps the biggest on-ice takeaway for me in the games I saw was just how aggressive the Blue Jackets were all over the ice. They presented a strong forecheck at every opportunity.

This seems to be where the Blue Jackets are going under new head coach Dean Evason. Every time the opponent had the puck in their own end, a Blue Jacket forechecker was already tracking them down.

Prospect tournaments generally give a first-impression look at what the team and their AHL affiliate might be doing once their season gets going. Head coach Trent Vogelhuber admitted the systems are completely changing organization wide even from last year.

"Systematically, there's changes all over the ice," Vogelhuber said. "There are from the way we played in Cleveland last year and the way that they started in Columbus. Every coach comes in and puts their personality stamp on the way they want things done. And Dean is a huge personality that's all about family which is just great because that's how I like to do things as well. He's brought us right in and we've been a part of it from early on and we've started building the systems."

Evason is already on record as saying that his teams are going to be the hardest working on the ice. Given the level of aggression we saw in Buffalo, it seems that the process has started in making sure that becomes their reality in 2024-25.

Togetherness Prioritized

By being at the Buffalo Prospects Challenge, the Blue Jackets were able to gather as a team. One of the things they are prioritizing given the circumstances is togetherness and being there for each other at every turn.

The players are noticing how much of a priority that is. From everyday interactions to just being around their teammates, the players agree this is going to help them through some expected difficult times.

"I think it just pulls everyone in the hockey world closer together and especially the guys in Columbus," Brindley said. "I've been there for a little bit now and just seeing all the guys and the interactions and it is just good to see everyone and have everyone's company and be around the locker room. It's been very tough but I think it's hopefully forming the guys together. This is how you push forward."

"It's huge that everyone's staying close," Mateychuk said. "It's a terrible thing and you have to keep moving forward. We're all here to play hockey. Guys just try and keep it at that when it's at the rink. I think that's good they're going out there and they're playing their hearts out."

"Obviously it's been a tough couple of weeks," James Malatesta said. "(In) times like these, you try to lean on each other. We're just trying to get through it the best we can."

“I think the one thing especially here that they established early was trying to be the tightest team,” Del Bel Belluz said. “We spent a lot of time away from the rink together and I think that’s a huge thing in hockey. Tight groups go a long way and it’s a really main important factor.”

Seeing the celebration on Saturday after Del Bel Belluz scored the overtime winner put the togetherness into perspective. The team was able to find a moment of happiness and comfort when everyone could use it.

This togetherness will be an organizational thing. As GM Don Waddell said, there will be some dark days even as time passes on. But it’s their job to stay on top of things and manage them as they come up.

At least for one weekend, the Blue Jackets were able to come together and play hockey. That’s the first step in the long process of pushing forward. Now the real journey begins starting Wednesday.

The Athletic / These 5 NHL stars will demand huge contracts. How can their teams afford it?

By Harman Dayal- September 17, 2024

NHL front offices must budget for a star player's looming contract status far in advance.

Planning ahead of time is necessary because there's a major trickle-down effect when one of the best players on a team goes from being significantly underpaid to commanding huge money. There are fewer dollars to go around for other parts of the roster, which can force teams to make tough decisions to let other players go.

Leon Draisaitl's eight-year, \$112 million extension is the first domino to fall among marquee players whose contracts are set to expire at the end of the 2024-25 season. Which stars could be next, how much could they cost and how will it impact their respective team's cap situation? In this piece, we're going to analyze some of those questions, focusing primarily on players who are projected to see a significant spike in their cap hit (we won't include Sidney Crosby, for example, because his next deal won't cost substantially more than the \$8.7 million AAV he's already on).

Every team on this list can afford to extend the elite player in question, but the point is to highlight which clubs can handle it more comfortably than others and what sacrifices it may require elsewhere.

When a team and player negotiate the price of a new contract, they'll search for players who are comparable in production, age and overall value. They'll look at what those comparables earned on their contracts and that often becomes a ballpark range for that player's market value. One key concept to understand as we find comparables to estimate these star players' next contracts is that cap hit percentage matters more than AAV.

The easiest way to explain this is with an example. The \$14 million cap hit that Draisaitl signed for is the highest AAV in NHL history. Some people may have been shocked to see a number that high, but it's perfectly reasonable when you account for the salary cap's expected rise in 2025-26. Draisaitl's cap hit in Year 1 of his deal will eat up a nearly identical percentage of the salary cap ceiling as Auston Matthews and Nathan MacKinnon's deals consumed in Year 1 of their respective contracts.

Remember to focus on salary cap percentage, rather than AAV for contract comparables.

There are so many elite players' contract situations we could analyze, but let's focus on five intriguing cases for today.

Igor Shesterkin, New York Rangers

Current cap hit: \$5.67 million

Expiry status: Unrestricted free agent

What his next deal could roughly cost: Shesterkin is arguably the best netminder on the planet and he'll be paid accordingly on his next deal.

As colleague Arthur Staple wrote, Carey Price's 2017 extension, which ate up 14 percent of the salary cap at the time, could be the bar that Shesterkin's camp pushes for. Fourteen percent of the salary cap would translate to a \$12.9 million cap hit if we assume the cap rises to \$92 million for 2025-26. The most favorable comparable for the Rangers, meanwhile, might be Connor Hellebuyck's seven-year extension, which ate up 9.66 percent of the cap and would translate to an \$8.9 million cap hit. Shesterkin's numbers are superior to Hellebuyck's, especially in the playoffs, but in most negotiations, the two

parties start far apart and meet closer to the middle. The Rangers might bring a comparable like Hellebuyck to the table, but they obviously wouldn't expect this to be the final number.

If we split the difference between the Price and Hellebuyck cap hit percentage, we'd arrive at about 11.8 percent of the cap, which equates to a \$10.9 million cap hit. That seems like a reasonable ballpark. It would be a record-setting AAV for a goaltender to sign and right around the neighborhood of Andrei Vasilevskiy's last deal (his cap hit percentage would translate to a \$10.7 million AAV).

The Rangers' problem is that Shesterkin isn't the only key player who'll be looking for a significant raise. Lafrenière will need a new deal and if last year's massive progress is any indication, he may have a monster 2024-25 season that inflates the price of his next deal further. K'Andre Miller, a top-four cornerstone, will require a new contract too.

How tight will the Rangers' cap squeeze be? Let's map out a rough projection. We'll plug in a \$10.9 million cap hit for Shesterkin and we'll use AFP Analytics' projections for Lafrenière (\$7 million AAV) and Miller (\$6.4 million AAV). You may disagree with the estimates for these players (I believe \$7 million is quite low for Lafrenière, for example), but the purpose of this is to just be in a semi-realistic neighborhood so we can illustrate the big-picture cap view rather than nailing these contract projections as precisely as possible.

Shesterkin, Lafrenière and Miller would cost a combined \$24.3 million with the aforementioned estimates. New York would be left with \$9.5 million of cap space in this hypothetical scenario, which is peanuts considering there'd only be 13 players signed, including the need for another top-six forward and top-four defenseman (Lindgren's not included because he'll be a pending UFA). The Rangers probably can't afford to re-sign Lindgren next summer and will need to find a way to offload the final year of Jacob Trouba's \$8 million ticket next summer. Without a Trouba trade, it'll be exceptionally difficult for the club to maintain its Stanley Cup contender status given how expensive their best players will be in 2025-26.

The big X-factor in all of this will be top prospects Gabe Perreault and Brennan Othmann. It'd be massive if they could emerge as top-nine forwards on cheap entry-level contracts by 2025-26 to help alleviate this cap crunch.

Evan Bouchard, Edmonton Oilers

Current cap hit: \$3.9 million

Expiry status: Restricted free agent with arbitration rights

What his next deal could roughly cost: Bouchard erupted for 18 goals and 82 points last season and finished fifth in Norris Trophy voting. He's arrived as an elite defenseman and will continue piling up ludicrous point totals playing alongside Connor McDavid at even strength and on the power play. He'll have a little bit less leverage because he's still under team control as a restricted free agent, but he'll have arbitration rights which is extremely valuable.

AFP Analytics projects that Bouchard's next deal will clock in the \$10.1 million AAV range. If he has another monster season his camp could push for a deal closer to Rasmus Dahlin's \$11 million AAV extension last summer. For now, we'll plug in AFP Analytics' \$10.1 million cap hit.

Oilers 2025 pending RFAs: Bouchard

The Oilers will be squeezed cap-wise next summer, but they may not be as screwed as you'd expect given Draisaitl and Bouchard's raises. Right off the bat, the club will have an extra \$3.225 million to play with because the dead cap space of Connor Brown's performance bonus overage will disappear. A big

chunk of Draisaitl and Bouchard's salary increases will already be accounted for with just the \$3.225 million from Brown's performance bonus and the projected \$4 million cap increase.

Edmonton will have around \$4.5 million of cap space with 17 players signed if Bouchard extends at a \$10.1 million AAV. That will certainly be tight — the Oilers will need to find a middle-six forward if Jeff Skinner walks, plus a few depth forwards — but there isn't going to be a major talent exodus. Matt Savoie could realistically be ready to grab a top-nine opportunity at an entry-level contract price to help alleviate this crunch too.

The Oilers could also look to jettison the final year of Evander Kane's contract (\$5.125 million) to carve out additional flexibility because his no-movement clause will transition to a 16-team trade list by next summer. Edmonton could invest those potential savings to land a right-shot top-four defender.

Sure, GM Stan Bowman won't have much money to throw around next summer, but the club won't be forced to sacrifice valuable pieces off the roster for cap purposes.

Mikko Rantanen, Colorado Avalanche

Current cap hit: \$9.25 million

Expiry status: Unrestricted free agent

What his next deal could roughly cost: William Nylander's extension last season should be the floor for Rantanen's next deal. Nylander re-signed for eight years at an \$11.5 million AAV (13.1 percent of the cap), which converts to just over \$12 million based on a \$92 million cap ceiling for 2025-26. Rantanen has eclipsed 100 points in back-to-back seasons and averaged 1.27 points per game over the last three seasons compared to Nylander, who's never hit the 100-point mark and has averaged 1.08 points per game in that same timeframe.

Draisaitl's mega \$14 million AAV extension, meanwhile, represents the ceiling for Rantanen's contract. However, Draisaitl has outproduced Rantanen in each of the last six seasons and plays center, which is a more valuable position.

Rantanen should make more than Nylander but less than Draisaitl, so \$13 million would be the middle ground between those two deals. Another contract comparable that isn't as new, but could be relevant is David Pastrnak's eight-year extension from 2023. That deal ate up 13.5 percent of the cap, which would equate to just shy of \$12.5 million for 2025-26. My rough estimate of Rantanen's market value would be \$12.5-13 million. Let's split the difference and plug in a \$12.75 million cap hit for Rantanen.

Some Avs fans will disagree with the notion of Rantanen potentially eclipsing Nathan MacKinnon's \$12.6 million cap hit. Maybe that's an internal lever that brings the number closer to \$12.5 million, but keep in mind that MacKinnon's deal is already outdated because it was signed two years ago with a lower salary cap.

Projected cap space before Rantanen extension (assuming a \$92 million cap ceiling): \$21.3 million (13 players signed)

Avalanche key 2025 pending UFAs: Rantanen, Jonathan Drouin, Alexandar Georgiev, Logan O'Connor, Oliver Kylington, Calvin de Haan, Joel Kiviranta

Avalanche key 2025 pending RFAs: Nikolai Kovalenko, Erik Brannstrom

If we plug a \$12.75 million estimate in for Rantanen, the Avs will have about \$8.6 million of cap space left over with only 14 players signed. It will be extremely tight because they'll need a starting goaltender, one or two top-nine forwards (since Drouin and O'Connor are pending UFAs) and they only have four NHL defenders under contract for 2025-26. It also hurts that they don't have any blue-chip

prospects who are expected to graduate to the NHL in 2025-26 to provide cheap value on an entry-level contract.

Will Colorado need to move out a substantial contract so it can afford to acquire a legit starter and address the rest of its depth lineup needs for cheap? Ross Colton, for example, has been a strong fit as the club's third-line center but at \$4 million, will he be a luxury the Avs can no longer afford? He has a full no-trade clause right now but that will shift to only partial control next offseason. Valeri Nichushkin's future with the club also looms as a question mark that will carry major cap ramifications.

In any case, GM Chris MacFarland will need to make creative, shrewd moves to flesh out his roster adequately after Rantanen's contract has been taken care of.

Wyatt Johnston, Dallas Stars

Current cap hit: \$894,167

Expiry status: Restricted free agent

What his next deal could roughly cost: Johnston has strong breakout potential heading into the final year of his entry-level contract. The 21-year-old scored 28 goals and 65 points as a sophomore but will be in line for increased first-unit power-play time following Joe Pavelski's retirement that could juice his offensive numbers closer to the point-per-game mark. He already produced at that level in the second half, scoring 21 goals and 41 points in his final 41 games.

A huge platform year would certainly inflate the cost of his next contract. Another pivotal factor will be whether the Stars opt to bridge him short-term on a lower cap hit (like they did with Jason Robertson, Roope Hintz and Jake Oettinger) or extend him long-term on a higher cap hit (like they did with Miro Heiskanen).

According to AFP Analytics, Johnston is projected to earn around \$8.1 million annually on a six-year deal or \$6.4 million annually on a three-year deal.

The \$42.7 million in projected cap space might sound like a big number but it's deceiving. The Stars only have nine players under contract for 2025-26 and several key players to re-sign beyond Johnston. Thomas Harley, a key top-four building block, hasn't yet been signed for this season. Oettinger will be a restricted free agent at the end of next season, while Benn, Duchene and Lindell stand out among the pending UFAs.

Just how difficult will the Stars' cap outlook be next summer? Let's insert AFP Analytics' projection for a Johnston bridge contract (\$6.4 million), a Harley bridge contract (a two-year deal at a \$4.1 million AAV) and a long-term deal for Oettinger (\$7 million x five years) since he's closer to unrestricted free agency. In this scenario, Dallas would have \$21.2 million of cap space left over with 12 players signed. The Stars also have to consider that 2025-26 will mark the final year of Jason Robertson's team-friendly bridge deal.

It'd be ideal for Dallas to lock up Johnston long-term because he's a rising star, but with all the other business the club needs to get done, they may have to opt for a shorter bridge deal.

Noah Dobson, New York Islanders

Current cap hit: \$4 million

Expiry status: Restricted free agent with arbitration rights

What his next deal could roughly cost: Dobson emerged as a bona fide No. 1 defenseman last year, scoring 70 points in 79 games and ranking top-10 in Norris voting. AFP Analytics estimates that his next

contract will clock in at around a \$10 million cap hit. Truthfully, that number seems a touch too high. Dobson's offensive point totals are elite — which is what these projections are primarily based on — but he's still a work in progress defensively.

I'd bet nearly every NHL GM would take Charlie McAvoy over Dobson, for example. McAvoy signed an extension in 2021 at 10.8 percent of the salary cap, which would equate to \$9.9 million for 2025-26. I'd argue that Dobson should clock in a bit below that, perhaps closer to the \$9.5 million range. For this exercise, let's pencil in a \$9.5 million cap hit.

The Islanders won't have much room to improve their roster next summer because of their cap situation.

If Dobson re-signs for a \$9.5 million AAV, Lou Lamorello will have around \$16.7 million to spend, which isn't a lot considering their needs. Brock Nelson and Kyle Palmieri's expiring contracts mean the Isles need two top-six forwards just to maintain what they currently have, and defenseman Alexander Romanov will be looking to get paid as an RFA after solidifying himself in the top four last season. After that, they'll need to fill out several depth lineup spots, too.

The Isles must find exit options on Jean-Gabriel Pageau and/or Anders Lee's overpriced contracts to free up the cap flexibility if they have serious ambitions of upgrading the roster next summer.

ESPN / Burning questions for all 32 NHL teams this preseason

By Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton- September 18, 2024

It has been about three months since the Florida Panthers won the Stanley Cup, the 2024 NHL draft was held at the Sphere, and hundreds of players found new homes via free agency.

But as autumn quickly approaches, so too do the NHL preseason and training camps for all 32 teams ahead of opening night on Oct. 8.

To help get you ready for the next few weeks -- as teams decide on which players make the roster, and how their lines, D pairings and goalie tandems will shake out -- here are the biggest lingering questions for each club, courtesy of Ryan S. Clark (Western Conference) and Kristen Shilton (Eastern Conference).

Atlantic Division

Boston Bruins

How will the Bruins reshape their top six?

Yes, there is also the question of whether restricted free agent Jeremy Swayman will have a new deal in place to officially take the mantle as Boston's No. 1 goaltender. But that financial stickiness is, as B's captain Brad Marchand said, "part of the business."

The job for Bruins coach Jim Montgomery going into camp is figuring out how to revamp the offense. The Bruins finally landed top center Elias Lindholm in free agency while losing winger Jake DeBrusk to Vancouver. So who will step in to fill that void on the wing? Boston has a prized prospect in Fabian Lysell to keep an eye on, and a formerly bottom-six skater like Morgan Geekie could push for an expanded role.

Lysell is the real one to watch, though. Boston held him out of rookie camp so he would be "extremely ready" for the team's main event. In other words, the Bruins expect he's ready to snag an NHL roster spot for opening night. We'll see if that's the case.

Buffalo Sabres

Was Buffalo right to stand pat offensively?

The Sabres' inactivity in free agency was a head-scratcher. Buffalo didn't add a single notable asset, and it bought out veteran Jeff Skinner's contract to, quite possibly, make them worse up front than they were a season ago.

How will new coach Lindy Ruff piece his forward lines together now? If Jack Quinn can come back strong from an injury-shortened 2023-24 campaign, that would be a huge boost and give Buffalo a potential top-line partner for Alex Tuch and Tage Thompson. A rebounded Dylan Cozens to go with JJ Peterka would also improve the Sabres' prospects.

It remains to be seen though whether Buffalo will suffer from a lack of new talent. GM Kevyn Allen might be able to tell quickly in camp if he was right to bet on Buffalo's incumbents.

Detroit Red Wings

What -- or who -- will be the difference-maker?

The Red Wings have been missing ... something. Despite good talent, a solid structure and, at times, long stretches of momentum last season, Detroit managed to fall just short when it mattered most. How will the Red Wings go about fixing that?

It starts with training camp. Detroit is expecting growth from its young players like Simon Edvinsson, Jonatan Berggren and Carter Mazur. Patrick Kane and Vladimir Tarasenko will need to play key roles as veterans on and off the ice. And other returning stars -- led by captain Dylan Larkin -- have to be better, too.

On the back end, the Red Wings could be minus one significant skater in Moritz Seider. He doesn't have a contract yet (fellow RFA Lucas Raymond signed his new deal on Monday night), and that's a potential distraction the Red Wings can't afford to let derail their progress. Coach Derek Lalonde has enough to sort through as it is identifying how to get Detroit back into the postseason picture.

Florida Panthers

Will two short summers catch up to Panthers?

Florida lost in the Stanley Cup Final two years ago -- only to make up for it with a thrilling Game 7 victory over Edmonton in June to secure the franchise's first championship. That elation bled into a busy -- and decidedly brief -- summer of Cup parties and events that have no doubt kept players from their usual offseason routines. Does that come back to bite Florida as it gets set to defend its title?

While the Panthers used losing to Vegas in 2023 as motivation for redemption the following year, Florida was able to bask in Cup-winning glory the past two months. Certainly no player will be resting on his laurels come training camp, but that is where the first indications of fatigue -- mental or physical -- might be.

Florida wouldn't be the first team to experience it. Many skaters lucky enough to go deep into the playoffs multiple times have said the grind eventually takes its toll. Will that be the Panthers' reality after two long runs?

Montreal Canadiens

How will the defense be built?

The Canadiens are still in the middle of a long-term rebuild. However, there's potential for the team to take significant steps forward -- once they settle on a strong blue line.

Fortunately, the Canadiens have options. The recently extended Kaiden Guhle is a lock for a top-pairing role, while David Savard and Mike Matheson should provide solid veteran presence. It's a full-blown competition for spots from there. Justin Barron, Jordan Harris, Jayden Struble and Arber Xhekaj will all make their case for ice time, and prospect Lane Hutson will show in camp whether he's ready for an NHL gig.

Montreal was tied for No. 27 overall in goals against last season (3.43 per game) and No. 30 in shots against, so finding the right formula on the back end is vital to improving.

Ottawa Senators

Can Travis Green get the Senators to the next level?

Ottawa has -- to put it mildly -- gone through some changes. There has been a new owner, new management and a new coach implemented all in the past 12 months, and a number of fresh faces looking to take roster spots on the ice. That's all been done in the name of helping Ottawa become an actual contender in the Atlantic again.

New bench boss Travis Green is at the center of that mission. Speaking of centers, Green has superb depth there -- from Josh Norris to Tim Stutzle to Shane Pinto -- ready to go, and a healthy Thomas Chabot on the back end.

From there, it's on Green to sift through a landslide of depth options -- Noah Gregor, Nick Cousins, even Nikolay Kulemin -- on offense, and the likes of Jacob Bernard-Docker and Maxence Guenette on defense. Green said his players can expect a tough training camp.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Who fills the Steven Stamkos-sized hole?

The Lightning have entered a new era, and it doesn't include former captain Steven Stamkos. Tampa Bay let the longtime face of the franchise walk in free agency, essentially replacing him with Jake Guentzel.

There's no telling how Stamkos' absence will affect Tampa Bay on the ice and in the locker room, where he'd been a stable presence for more than a decade (and through two Stanley Cup victories). The Lightning have been aggressive in their dealings before, and moving away from Stamkos, trading Mikhail Sergachev to Utah, reeling in Guentzel and even bringing back former defenseman Ryan McDonagh showed GM Julien BriseBoise isn't afraid of making waves.

Training camp will be the first take on a new-look Lightning group and could signal whether Tampa Bay is back on a potential championship track, or proof that too much change isn't a good thing.

Toronto Maple Leafs

Will center depth be a problem?

The Leafs prioritized adding to several areas in the offseason, but center wasn't one of them. Is that going to be a problem for new coach Craig Berube?

Toronto's current lineup has Auston Matthews and John Tavares locked into their top-six pivot spots. After that, it's anyone's guess how Berube is going to fill in those gaps.

Naturally, the idea of William Nylander sliding back to center has surfaced. It's an experiment the Leafs have gone back to -- with varied results -- at least once a season for years. Max Domi had success at center last season as an injury replacement but he wouldn't be a long-term solution for a job. And David Kampf is stronger in a fourth-line position.

So what will Toronto do? Turn to Pontus Holmberg or Fraser Minten? The team has to think Berube's fresh eyes on the roster will help in finding a quick solution.

Metropolitan Division

Carolina Hurricanes

After offseason losses, is there enough defensive depth?

The Hurricanes enter training camp without Brady Skjei and Brett Pesce, two previous stalwarts on their blue line who played heavy minutes. Those are mighty big skates to fill.

Carolina made some free agent acquisitions for the back end, bringing back Shayne Gostisbehere and inking veteran Sean Walker. Jaccob Slavin will be an expected star on the defense, too, and Dmitry Orlov will play big minutes. But what about the aging Brent Burns? Can he still play an effective role to keep Slavin from burning out? Will Jalen Chatfield carry a larger load?

Carolina has prospects waiting in the wings, but rushing them with too much responsibility could backfire. The Hurricanes' history as a heavy, defensive group could be shifting this season -- and might unveil a whole new identity for a team that's perennially knocking on the door of a Cup Final bid.

Columbus Blue Jackets

How will the offense be redefined?

The Blue Jackets will have an open competition for roster spots when training camp opens, but the offensive possibilities are intriguing. The Blue Jackets signed veteran Sean Monahan, while Patrik Laine and Alexandre Texier have exited. Monahan had 26 goals and 59 points last season, proving he can still have an impact in the right role. That's good news for Columbus. Adding veteran James van Riemsdyk on a one-year deal gives Columbus depth.

The Blue Jackets are obviously grieving the loss of Johnny Gaudreau, whose tragic death leaves an irreplaceable void in their organization. Columbus has to figure out who can help it light the lamp and improve on an offense that ranked 25th in the NHL in 2023-24, averaging fewer than three goals per game.

Can Kent Johnson come back strong from a poor 2023-24 campaign and offseason surgery? That would help. The Blue Jackets dealt with consecutive years of poor injury luck that limited the availability of top skaters, including Boone Jenner and Adam Fantilli. Both of them will need to thrive in significant roles for Columbus to make progress this season.

New Jersey Devils

How will Sheldon Keefe get the team back on track?

The Devils missed out on a playoff berth last season. It's partially why GM Tom Fitzgerald needed to find a new coach, tapping Sheldon Keefe for the job. Keefe's resume includes four consecutive trips to the playoffs in his first NHL head-coaching stint with the Maple Leafs. He has experience managing young talent, something with which New Jersey is stocked.

On paper, it appears Keefe and the Devils are an ideal fit. Training camp will start to reveal whether that's truly the case.

This is Keefe's first professional opportunity outside Toronto -- he was the organization's AHL coach for five years before taking over behind the Leafs' bench -- and there will be a learning curve in New Jersey. Keefe might even have more rising stars to juggle now than ever. Will the Devils embrace Keefe's style and thrive? That answer will define New Jersey's success.

New York Islanders

Can they score enough goals?

The Islanders' most pressing problem now or at any point in the season would be an injury to goalie Ilya Sorokin. New York's coach Patrick Roy revealed Sorokin had offseason back surgery that was not "the perfect thing" but Roy said he "thinks [Sorokin] will be fine....when he's ready, he'll help us." GM Lou Lamoriello said previously that the injury is not something the team is "concerned" about, and Sorokin should be available at some point during camp.

Let's assume that's the case and move onto familiar territory for the Islanders: scoring ... or a lack of it.

New York's 22nd-ranked offense last season barely got it into the playoffs (Sorokin was a primary catalyst in that feat). Lamoriello signed Anthony Duclair and Maxim Tsyplov (a 30-goal scorer in the

KHL last season) after New York's first-round postseason exit. But it raises the same questions; do the Islanders expect that's enough to enliven their offense? We'll see.

New York Rangers

Is Jacob Trouba poised to bounce back?

The Rangers have an established roster at this stage. Other than settling on their top-line right winger -- a position that was constantly in flux last season -- there's a pretty clear picture for the rest of the lineup.

What's less obvious is how captain Jacob Trouba will bounce back from last season's slide into a third-pairing slot, a lackluster playoff performance, and a long offseason of trade rumors. Trouba suffered an injury late last season that impacted his play down the stretch, so health is a primary factor in any sort of comeback attempt.

And that's what New York needs from him. It doesn't mean Trouba has to carry 24 minutes per game. He just has to make positive impact plays at even strength and on special teams, to be the difference-making defenseman the Rangers obviously still believe he can be.

Philadelphia Flyers

What is the Flyers' identity?

There's a lot going on in Philadelphia. The Flyers have an exciting talent in Matvei Michkov who's already impressed his new coaches during rookie camp. Where might Michkov fit into Philadelphia's offense out of the gate, and how big a role will coach John Tortorella allow for him?

On that note, the Flyers are figuring out their center situation as well, with moving parts to slot into potentially new roles -- does Morgan Frost finally get a larger opportunity?

Defensively, the Flyers have an unknown in Rasmus Ristolainen given his health following triceps surgery. It all feels a little unsettled. Which is why, of course, training camp will be critical for Philadelphia to start building a foundation.

Pittsburgh Penguins

Who will be the starting goaltender?

Pittsburgh enters training camp without a clear-cut starter. Tristan Jarry held the No. 1 job for much of last season, but was replaced by backup Alex Nedeljkovic for the final 13 games. Nedeljkovic was an impressive 8-1-3 over that stretch, and his strong finish helped earn a two-year extension with the Penguins. He'll battle Jarry for a top spot on the depth chart during camp.

At the same time, Pittsburgh must also consider Joel Blomqvist's development following a standout season in the AHL, with top-five finishes in several major statistical categories. Managing each of their goalies will be critical for Pittsburgh's success in the short and long term. Camp will be the place for each goaltender to showcase his best work.

Washington Capitals

How will the newcomers fit in?

The Capitals are banking that a third trade is the charm for center Pierre Luc-Dubois, as he is a potential top-line center following his acquisition from Los Angeles this summer. The Capitals are hoping that Dubois can return to that level and perform like he did in 2022-23 for the Jets (posting a career-high 63 points in 73 games).

Beyond Dubois, Washington added Andrew Mangiapane, Brandon Duhaime and Taylor Raddysh to work into the rotation up front, and Jakob Chychrun and Matt Roy to bolster the defense. Logan Thompson also arrived via offseason trade to give Washington a one-two punch with Charlie Lindgren in net.

It's a significant number of new faces, and the Capitals are also dealing with uncertainty surrounding T.J. Oshie's future -- will he be back this season? -- and too much depth is a problem every team would like to have. The only question is how the Capitals will go about using theirs.

Central Division

Chicago Blackhawks

How will this season impact their long-term plans?

There's no question the Blackhawks are staging a promising rebuild, and their offseason moves raise questions about the speed at which they'll be truly competitive again. Adding several veterans -- such as Tyler Bertuzzi, Laurent Brossoit and Teuvo Teravainen, among others -- could help with addressing the deficiencies that made them one of the NHL's worst teams last season. So could the return of a fully healthy Taylor Hall, who sustained a knee injury last November.

Plus, this will be a pivotal season in the development of young cornerstones such as Connor Bedard, Kevin Korchiński, Philipp Kurashev and Alex Vlasic.

Finding cohesion among all those moving parts could see them finish with more than 70 points for the first time since the 2019-20 season. And if not, it could result in some of those veterans being moved at the trade deadline.

Colorado Avalanche

Is the supporting cast strong enough?

Performing well in the regular season isn't the issue for the Avalanche; they finished with more than 107 points the past two seasons. The playoffs, however, are another discussion altogether.

Since winning the Stanley Cup in 2022, they've hit a wall in two straight postseasons. One of the reasons for their struggles stems from a lack of consistent secondary and tertiary scoring. Having that supplementary support allowed them to beat the Jets in five games, only to lose to the Stars in six, scoring only six goals in the final four games of the series (three coming in one game).

Being in a championship window means that a front office must find solutions without significant cap space. The Avs added around the edges in the offseason, but it's also what makes the situations with Gabriel Landeskog, Nikolai Kovalenko, Logan O'Connor and Valeri Nichushkin so crucial. Their collective contributions could play a sizable role in the Avs' bid for the fourth Stanley Cup in franchise history -- or they could be looking for help at the deadline.

Dallas Stars

Is this the Stars' best Cup chance with this core?

Every championship challenger is forced to navigate the salary cap and must get creative. One of the ways the Stars have been creative with their cap challenges is having at least one player on an entry-level contract perform in a significant role. Alleviating their cap challenges with those sorts of players does come with a long-term problem: Eventually, they need to sign those players to bigger deals.

That process has already started for Dallas with defenseman Thomas Harley, who is an unsigned RFA after his rookie contract expired. It will continue with Mavrik Bourque and Wyatt Johnston, who are

entering the final year of their ELCs. Goalie Jake Oettinger is also a pending RFA, and his next deal could be sizable.

Meanwhile, captain Jamie Benn and Matt Duchene are among the team's six-player UFA class next summer. There is certainly pressure on this group to excel given those realities.

Minnesota Wild

Do they have enough?

Enough scoring? Enough players who can stay healthy? Enough depth to take on another injury crisis?

Granted, that's more than just one question, but these are some of the more imperative ones in assessing whether the Wild have enough to make the playoffs.

Last season the Wild finished 21st in goals per game, and rookies Brock Faber and Marco Rossi were the only players on their roster to play in all 82 games. With their cap limitations, their major signing this summer was Yakov Trenin, who has hit double figures in goals in each of the past three seasons.

But can Trenin, along with incoming rookie Marat Khusnutdinov, provide another layer of scoring and stability needed for a team that saw 59% of its goals come from five players last season? And would that be enough to reach the playoffs?

Nashville Predators

After massive additions, what's a realistic expectation?

Even with their first-round exit, the Predators had a clear identity. They were a two-way team that just needed more goals and players who had significant playoff experience. So what are they now? That's where it gets interesting.

At minimum, the Predators remain a playoff-caliber team, and should be aiming for a top-three spot in the Central instead of the wild card. Beyond that is where the intrigue lies.

Adding Jonathan Marchessault, Brady Skjei and Steven Stamkos signals that the Predators are in win-now mode. What separates the Predators from a crowded field in the Western Conference appears to be cohesion. Both the Avalanche and Golden Knights had years to find the right combination needed to win a title. The same applies to the Oilers and the Stars, as they seek to find the configurations that could see them win it all.

So are the Preds in that class of teams that's capable of winning a Stanley Cup in 2024-25? Or are they in that next tier below, where there might be one or two details they need to address before cementing their status as a legit championship challenger?

St. Louis Blues

Have the defensive issues finally been solved?

This is a question that has plagued the Blues for the past two seasons, with the acknowledgment that there is rarely a quick solution. Shuffling their defensive corps wasn't a real option considering they have four defensemen each making more than \$4 million annually who all have no-trade clauses.

Instead, the tactical adjustments started in the 2023 offseason, when they hired assistant coach Mike Weber to oversee their defensive overhaul. Even when Drew Bannister took over during the 2023-24 season, the Blues allowed the fourth-most high-danger chances per 60 minutes, the fifth-most shots per 60, and the sixth-most scoring chances per 60. The reason they remained in the wild-card hunt was that their goalies finished with the fifth-best team save percentage under Bannister's watch.

This summer, GM Doug Armstrong added two-way forwards such as Radek Faksa, Mathieu Joseph and Alexandre Texier, while also acquiring defensemen such as Philip Broberg, Pierre-Olivier Joseph and Ryan Suter, with Torey Krug lost for the year because of ankle surgery. Will the results be different?

Utah Hockey Club

Can they make the playoffs in their first season?

New franchises can get into the playoffs early in their existence. The Golden Knights made the Cup Final in their first season, while the Kraken made it to the second round in their sophomore campaign. Could Utah could make the playoffs in its first season?

Utah coach Andre Tourigny has a strong familiarity with several players on the roster given he coached more than a dozen of them when he was in charge of the Arizona Coyotes last season. Tourigny had the Coyotes challenging for a playoff spot through late January, until a 14-game losing streak derailed those aspirations. Coupled with offseason defensive additions such as Ian Cole, John Marino and Mikhail Sergachev, there's belief Utah could challenge for a wild-card spot.

If that's not enough, Utah GM Bill Armstrong has more than \$9 million in cap space to strengthen the roster with impact additions.

Winnipeg Jets

How will Scott Arniel put his stamp on the team?

There are teams that are judged by what they do in the playoffs. There are teams that are judged on whether or not they reach the playoffs. It appears the Jets might be somewhere in the middle when it comes to what they can accomplish now that Arniel has gone from an assistant under Rick Bowness to head coach.

Part of the challenge facing Arniel is how to get the Jets beyond the first round. The past two postseasons have shown a similar pattern: The Jets scored at least five goals to win the opening game, only to then lose the next four en route to an early exit.

But before that, there's a question of whether the Jets will claim one of the three divisional playoff spots or be among the teams going for a wild card. The Avs and Stars look like top Cup contenders, while an aggressive offseason could see the Predators force the issue. Arniel can't simply put the team in cruise control and expect to make the postseason again.

Pacific Division

Anaheim Ducks

Can they eclipse 30 wins in Greg Cronin's second season?

Every rebuild has its nuances, but all seek some signs of progress. For the Ducks, one of those benchmarks is winning 30 games or more. They were one of four teams last season that won fewer than 30, and have surpassed the 30-win mark just once in the past five years.

A big thing that prevented the Ducks from hitting the mark in Cronin's first season were the lengthy losing streaks -- the Ducks had five stretches in which they lost more than five in a row. Then there's how they lost those games. The Ducks had 23 games in which they allowed more than three goals, and nearly half of those games saw them lose by more than three. Getting the details down better in Year 2 for Cronin should lead to better results and some steps in the right direction.

Calgary Flames

What is the Flames' identity?

A year ago, the Flames were in a state of flux. They didn't know what players were staying or going, despite having several players who were under contract for more than two years.

After maneuvering the roster challenges, the Flames appeared to find an identity: They were seven points out of the wild-card spot by early March, only to lose eight of their next 10 games, which effectively took them out of the playoff conversation. But they were able to get a stronger feel for in-season acquisitions Andrei Kuzmenko and Daniil Miromanov, and see how homegrown talents such as Matt Coronato and Dustin Wolf performed.

Those players -- along with the Flames' offseason additions -- will play a key part in assessing their short- and long-term identity, and whether a playoff berth is in the cards.

Edmonton Oilers

Is this the best Oilers team in the Connor McDavid-Leon Draisaitl era?

Everything the front office did this offseason was focused on winning that 16th playoff game and capturing an elusive sixth championship. That includes signing UFA forwards Viktor Arvidsson and Jeff Skinner, while returning a number of veterans and inking Draisaitl to a \$112 million contract that kicks in for 2025-26.

All of it came with a cost: The Oilers couldn't afford to keep homegrown talents such as Vincent Desharnais, who left in free agency, while Philip Broberg and Dylan Holloway signed offer sheets with the Blues that the Oilers didn't match. While those decisions led to questions in the short term, the concerns won't matter as much if this season ends with the Oilers winning the Cup.

Los Angeles Kings

Is Darcy Kuemper the solution to the goaltending woes?

As the Kings continue to struggle to get out of the first round, one of the issues is their goaltending. They've gone through Cal Petersen, Jonathan Quick, Pheonix Copley, Joonas Korpisalo, David Rittich and Cam Talbot, with the belief that one of them could be the answer only to end up still asking the same question.

That's what made getting a Cup winner in Kuemper in exchange for Pierre-Luc Dubois rather intriguing. Kuemper was arguably the biggest reason the Coyotes made it out of the opening round in the 2020 bubble playoffs. He also played a key role in the Avs' Cup victory back in 2022. The Kings are banking on the fact that Kuemper could help them get into (and beyond) the second round, knowing another early exit would mark their fourth straight.

While those factors made it one of the worst seasons in franchise history, it has paved the way for their current situation.

It starts with hiring a new head coach in Ryan Warsofsky. They won the draft lottery and used the No. 1 pick to draft Macklin Celebrini, pairing him with 2023 No. 4 pick Will Smith to serve as the faces of their franchise. They also added veterans such as Cody Ceci, Barclay Goodrow, Tyler Toffoli and Jake Walman, and traded for a long-term franchise goalie in Yaroslav Askarov.

With these moves, there's belief that the rebuilding Sharks will be much better than the basement-dwelling version of a season ago.

Seattle Kraken

Can a new coaching staff solve old problems?

The Kraken were a win away from the Western Conference finals in their second season. But last season, they had the fourth-lowest shooting percentage in the league coupled with general inconsistency, which is why they missed the playoffs and subsequently made an offseason coaching change.

They hired former Penguins and Sabres coach Dan Bylsma to take over after he and his staff took the Kraken's AHL affiliate to consecutive Calder Cup finals on the strength of one of the league's most prolific offenses.

Promoting Bylsma along with assistant coach Jessica Campbell, the first woman to be behind a bench in NHL history, was done with the belief that their AHL success can help the Kraken rediscover their scoring touch and challenge for a playoff spot.

Vancouver Canucks

In which direction are the Canucks heading?

Progress has been at the forefront ever since the Canucks hired coach Rick Tocchet. He won 20 of the first 36 games after replacing Bruce Boudreau in 2022. He led them to a 109-point season, winning the Pacific Division and coming within a victory of advancing to the Western Conference finals. And they did it all while missing star goalie Thatcher Demko for a substantial portion of the season.

So what's next? Building on that momentum -- or regression?

While the Canucks lost Elias Lindholm and Nikita Zadorov in free agency, they have the rest of their core intact. They used the offseason to add more scoring, while supplementing their defensive group as well. It all sets the Canucks up to be one of the teams to watch in the West; this season could be defined by more progress -- or a lack thereof.

Vegas Golden Knights

How will the new-look Golden Knights fare?

Change is nothing new for the Golden Knights. If anything, managing everything that comes with change has been the constant for a franchise that has been defined by its win-at-all-costs mentality.

The Golden Knights lost seven players in the offseason, and six of them were on the Stanley Cup-winning roster. They now have 13 players remaining from that championship team. Much of the core is intact, but Conn Smythe winner -- and original Golden Misfit Jonathan Marchessault -- was among those who are now playing elsewhere.

All of that talent and experience heading out the door raises questions: How will Victor Olofsson fit within their forward rotation? What sort of impact will Alexander Holtz have? Which version of Ilya Samsonov will they have in a goaltending tandem with Adin Hill?

[Sportsnet.ca / 32 Thoughts: Where remaining RFAs stand as training camps near](#)

By Elliotte Friedman- September 17, 2024

Prospect tournaments underway...rookies being hyped beyond belief...fans ripping their rivals' top young players all over social media...I'm invested in a whole bunch of players I've barely seen...we are so back.

It's a great time of year.

While rookie tournaments are the focus — for good reason — one of last week's biggest hockey stories was delivered via an "X" post from Braxton Whitehead. The 20-year-old American-born forward with the Regina Pats announced his "verbal commitment" to play at Arizona State after finishing his WHL eligibility in 2024-25.

Under current rules, Whitehead would not be allowed to do this. CHL players are ineligible under NCAA rules because they compete alongside players who have signed professional contracts. That's a no-no.

Even appearing for one second in a CHL exhibition game is enough to eliminate you from any NCAA option. That's what happened to 19-year-old defenceman Rylan Masterson, who played the last three seasons with the Greater Ontario Junior Hockey League's Fort Erie Meteors. Even though he's never played an OHL game, he did dress for exhibition play.

Last month, Masterson filed suit to eliminate this barrier — pointing out that Europeans who have played in similar situations were not blocked from the NCAA.

While we don't know how that case will turn out, we do know the NCAA is losing court battle after court battle across several sports. There are only so many punches you can take; only so many lawyers you are willing to pay. The entire landscape is changing, with athletes able to earn money on their name, image and likeness like never before.

The NHL told its GMs to prepare for a new world at last March's meetings. NCAA hockey coaches stubbornly believed they could resist this tidal wave, but, at last spring's convention, reality set in.

What we don't know yet is the scope of this change for hockey in particular. A few years ago, there was a bold, new developmental system proposed where CHLers could play in the NCAA, USHL teams could compete for the Memorial Cup, the draft would go back to 19 years old (except in the first round). One source reminded me recently that it was considered "too early" for this idea, and, depending on how everyone feels (including the NHLPA), maybe something along these lines becomes part of CBA negotiations.

One of the major reasons several NCAA coaches were against a rule change is they think they are winning the fight against the CHL, and they don't need its players. Maybe that's true, but I believe there's another angle at play here. I think the NHL would love to see more men's and women's NCAA programs — especially in non-traditional areas where hockey has made critical inroads the last two decades. (For example, Tennessee State is scheduled to debut in 2025-26.)

More good players, more good programs. A change in NCAA eligibility means a lot of young people looking for somewhere to go to school and play.

THOUGHTS

1. Philadelphia is still trying to figure out where things will go with Alexei Kolosov, who did not arrive to camp and remains in Russia. Teams who have inquired were told a second-round pick is the price, but, before anyone is willing to do so, they would have to figure out if Kolosov would join them.

2. The Detroit Free Press reported the Red Wings want to keep Lucas Raymond and Moritz Seider below Dylan Larkin's \$8.7M. I see the rationale from their perspective: Larkin signed his contract right before becoming an unrestricted free agent, while the current duo are still restricted. I don't believe that will be a problem in Raymond's case, as his comparables (ranging from Seth Jarvis to Tim Stutzle) are lower than Larkin.

If Seider and the Wings opt for maximum term, the defender would argue to eclipse the Red Wings' captain. Yzerman has made it clear he is not crazy about term. I don't know how he feels about this specific case, but some teams are trying to lock up core players before the cap is expected to jump in 2026-27 — just as some agents are wary of signing long-term deals that look tiny if the anticipated rises occur.

Seider has been skating with Dallas Eakins' Adler Mannheim club and Raymond has joined them from time to time.

3. On that topic, NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly said the league and the players have not discussed the idea of "smoothing" any potential bump at that time. The CBA indicates the cap should be around \$92M next season, the final one of the current deal. Comparing the NHL to the NBA is not apples to apples, but here's an illustration of what it means: In 2016, the NBA suggested spreading out a major leap, but were rejected by the union. The upper limit rose by \$32M. However, in their new CBA, both agreed to increases no higher than 10 per cent season-to-season. If you're wondering why NHL players might even consider agreeing to that, it's to make sure more than one free-agent class benefits. We will see what the membership says.

4. One executive called the Winnipeg/Cole Perfetti negotiation the "politest in recent memory." Perfetti went to the NHL/NHLPA media tour — I can't remember an unsigned player doing that before — and represented the team this weekend at a charity fishing event. Perfetti re-iterated he is not unhappy with the Jets and wants to stay. I don't think term is the problem here. A few sources (both team-side and agent-side) said Shane Pinto's Ottawa extension is a challenge for Winnipeg, as the two have similar career numbers.

5. Otherwise, not a ton from the weekend on the RFAs. Quiet around Jeremy Swayman as everyone tries to bridge the philosophical differences. I stick to my prediction Dawson Mercer builds a bridge deal. The most stress-free negotiation so far is Thomas Harley's, but we'll see what happens this week.

6. One thing that's definitely happened with Swayman: it has reminded teams why you should move mountains before taking cornerstone players to arbitration. Every few years there's a case — Tommy Salo, P.K. Subban, Shea Weber — leaving lasting bitterness on someone's part. (I always admired Brendan Morrison for not losing his mind when the NHL's lawyer called him the mouse to Todd Bertuzzi's elephant.) The best news for the Bruins is their No. 1 goalie still wants to sign long-term.

7. Watching Montreal pack its building for two rookie games against hated Toronto makes me think of only one thing: that market needs an outdoor game in the worst way. I recently watched a video of a lightbulb that uses facial recognition to change lighting to match a person's mood. Surely, if we can do that, we can find a way to get an outdoor game in Montreal. The weekend highlights looked fantastic.

8. One Canadien heard me waxing poetic about Matvei Michkov and warned not to ignore Lane Hutson. Montreal's players are true believers of the rookie defender.

9. Dylan Ferguson's PTO in Vancouver ensures the Canucks have enough goalies for the pre-season. There's still a dance with Kevin Lankinen, but the two sides are not in agreement on compensation.

10. Seth Jarvis's deferred contract raised a lot of interesting questions about where things could go. Most agents said they would recommend not following this path, as money now is worth more than money later. One player who lives in a high-tax state said he explored it until after he retired for tax reasons, but was advised not to do so.

What's clear is that Jarvis's representative (Gerry Johansson) and the NHLPA made sure his deferred money was protected, while the team worked with the league to make sure no CBA rules were broken. Daly mentioned one example: contract variability. There are rules limiting how much each season's salary in a contract can change. Vegas pitched Jonathan Marchessault on deferred payments, which renewed discussion of this possibility around the league. The tweak Carolina made was to move the deferred money immediately to the end of Jarvis's upcoming eight-year term. Marchessault would not have collected for a much longer period of time.

11. Sidney Crosby's extension, as he said, was on the front-burner. He laughed when we asked if there would be an "87" in it. He signed the deal Monday, two years with an AAV of...\$8.7 million.

He changed one previous stance, that he wouldn't play at 40 (this extension ends when he's 39). There's still no guarantee, but after a 94-point season that still cemented him as one of the NHL's best, he acknowledged the possibility.

"I would say I'm probably a little more open than I was before to get to that point if I feel good...You're basically trying to predict where you're going to be in a few years. I'd love to sign an eight-year deal, don't get me wrong, but with my age and not knowing how long I'm going to play for, we'll see. We'll see what that term is. But it wouldn't be something on the longer side."

Crosby also pooh-poohed my suggestion that he was concerned about the Penguins not being a Stanley Cup contender.

"I really enjoy the expectation to win. I think that's something that pushes all of us. For the guys who have been there for a number of years (Evgeni Malkin and Kris Letang), that's something that we're proud of. We want to go into a season with that expectation, regardless of what moves are made, what the team looks like....There's going to be different moves, going to be turnover and that's okay. But we're coming into the season to try to win, and I don't think there's anything wrong with that and hopefully that gets the best out of us."

He did admit he watched more playoff hockey than usual — "you just want to see what separates the teams that make it and those that don't." He was very impressed with the quality of play.

12. Crosby has hit batting-practice home runs at beautiful PNC Park. Could he do it against Paul Skenes? "I would love to make contact with one," he said. He has not yet met the electric Pirates pitcher, but is watching with the rest of us. Would he want the opportunity to dig in for fun? "I'd love to. Yeah, I'd love to. It'd be scary, I think. But I'd love to make contact." This has to happen. (Crosby saying he hasn't met Skenes eliminated my follow-up — if he's met Livvy Dunne.)

13. Connor Bedard said he tried a 75-flex stick this summer, but won't go there yet. He's currently in the low 70s and is more comfortable there. "It's pretty wacky, but it feels comfortable to me," and admits eventually "I do think it would be beneficial, maybe, to go up a bit." Bedard said he wants to see the Blackhawks take a step. "It's hard losing that many games...We want to be playing important games by the end of the year and be in the fight."

14. Some fun miscellaneous stuff from the North American leg of the NHL/NHLPA media tour: Roope Hintz's Dallas teammates saw his short, blonde haircut when he returned to North America, and immediately started calling him "The Real Slim Shady."

Sportsnet's social media team had a bit where they tested grip strength. I don't want to give it away, but Radko Gudas had to do it with his "weak" hand because he's still recovering from injury. And he scored very well against those who did it normally.

15. The CHL and U.S. U18 team are looking at a pair of games, Nov. 26 in London, Ont., and the next night in Oshawa, Ont.

16. Only 16 this week, as the boss and I are celebrating our 15th anniversary. If you've never been to Red Rocks, make a point to go. It's worth it.