



Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips June 24-25, 2025

Columbus Blue Jackets

- PAGE 02: The Athletic: Ten prospects to watch if the Blue Jackets keep both of their first-round picks
- PAGE 06: The Athletic: Could Sascha Boumedienne, with strong Columbus ties, be a draft fit for Blue Jackets?
- PAGE 08: The Athletic: Nationwide Arena owner plans \$400 million in upgrades to Blue Jackets' 25-year-old home
- PAGE 10: Columbus Dispatch: Columbus Blue Jackets: 2025 NHL draft preview
- PAGE 13: The Hockey Writers: Blue Jackets Still Have Hard Work Ahead to Become Premier Destination
- PAGE 16: NBC4i.com: Columbus Blue Jackets' 2025 preseason schedule announced
- PAGE 17: Columbus Dispatch: Columbus Blue Jackets release 2025-26 preseason schedule featuring seven games

Cleveland Monsters/Prospects

NHL/Websites

- PAGE 18: The Athletic: Where will all the goalies go? Breaking down the NHL's upcoming moves in net
- PAGE 21: The Athletic: Which NHL teams need to upgrade on defense? Ranking all 32 by current quality
- PAGE 32: The Athletic: Which NHL teams need to upgrade at center? Ranking all 32 by current quality

The Athletic / Ten prospects to watch if the Blue Jackets keep both of their first-round picks

By Aaron Portzline – June 25, 2025

Let's play make-believe, shall we? Let's pretend the Columbus Blue Jackets are actually going to use their two first-round draft picks — No. 14 and No. 20 — to select players on Friday.

Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell has been saying for months that he's willing to listen to trade offers for one or both of those picks, signaling that he believes his young roster needs an immediate impact player more than it needs another prospect.

But wanting to make a trade is only half the battle.

Waddell needs to find another club during Friday's first round that is so smitten by a player still on the board at No. 14 or No. 20 that they're willing to give up a significant piece of their lineup to make it happen. Frankly, that's sounds like a stretch.

More likely, Waddell will use one or both of those picks as a sweetener toward a larger deal. He wants a top-six forward. He wants a right-side defenseman. Oh, and he could use a veteran goaltender, if you're not convinced that Elvis Merzlikins will return next season.

If neither of those come to pass, Waddell will make two selections, and his scouts have been working all year — with intense meetings at the NHL scouting combine in Buffalo and back here in Columbus recently — to be prepared for that possibility.

The conventional wisdom is that the Blue Jackets will be on the lookout for a top-notch defenseman. They don't have one in the system after trading David Jiricek to the Minnesota Wild early last season, a deal that brought them, among several other future picks, the Wild's No. 20 overall selection this year.

But that might be misguided.

All things being equal, the Blue Jackets would want to have another blueliner for the future, especially one with a right shot. But at that spot in the draft, it's probably foolish to go chasing specific positions with an eye toward the current lineup, when a mid-round prospect will likely need two or three years to reach Columbus.

Here is the latest mock draft by The Athletic's Scott Wheeler, and here are colleague Corey Pronman's top 125 prospect rankings.

With these as our reference points, let's move forward with a "best-player-available" mindset. Here is a thumbnail look at 10 players who could be Blue Jackets by the end of Friday's round:

Kashawn Aitcheson, LHD

Pronman: No. 11

Wheeler: No. 11

The last several Stanley Cup playoffs have prompted NHL GMs to seek toughness and aggression in their lineups, not just size and/or skill. Aitcheson has decent size (6-foot-2, 196) and skill, but it's his drive and determination — and a willingness to get greasy — that is a big draw. He projects as a left-side, top-four defender. It would be a mild surprise if he were still on the board at No. 14.

Carter Bear, LW

Pronman: No. 17

Wheeler: No. 17

Bear isn't necessarily big — 6-foot, 180 pounds — but he plays a physical game that allows him to score goals in traffic and prevail in puck battles along the wall. The Blue Jackets have some highly competitive players in the pipeline, but none with as much skill and scoring ability as Bear. One thing for NHL clubs to consider is that Bear suffered a partial tear of his right Achilles in March. He's expected to be ready for training camp.

Sascha Boumedienne, LHD

Pronman: No. 21

Wheeler: No. 23

No team in the NHL would have greater insights into Boumedienne — his game and his character — than the Blue Jackets. He played for the Ohio AAA Blue Jackets in Columbus for two seasons, and he knows many members of the front office and scouting staff due to his father, Josef, working for the Blue Jackets before departing after last season. Boumedienne is a terrific skater who projects more as a puck-mover than an offensive force.

Justin Carbonneau, RW

Pronman: No. 18

Wheeler: No. 18

Carbonneau's biggest weapon is his elite shot, but he has many top-end offensive traits that portend a top-six future in the NHL. Scouts see him as more of a goal-scorer than a playmaker.

Logan Hensler, RHD

Pronman: No. 26

Wheeler: No. 20

Again, the Blue Jackets won't make decisions in this draft based on current roster needs, but there's never a bad time to take a right-shot defenseman. Hensler has decent size (6-2, 195 pounds) and can move a puck, but there's a wide range of opinions on his NHL outlook. The Blue Jackets could look this way, though, if the top-flight blueliners are all off the board.

Lynden Lakovic, LW

Pronman: No. 23

Wheeler: No. 14

Lakovic has a frame (6-4) that suggests a potential power forward, but he doesn't play that way. He's a shooter who tries to do most of his damage from the perimeter, which could require an adjustment at the NHL level.

Radim Mrtka, RHD

Pronman: No. 16

Wheeler: No. 9

It might be hard for the Blue Jackets to trade the No. 14 overall pick if Mrtka somehow remains on the board. Then again, it could drive up the price they could ask to trade the pick. The 6-6, 210-pounder will most likely be a shut-down, second-pair guy in the NHL, but he has the athleticism to play heavy minutes.

Joshua Ravensbergen, G

Pronman: No. 19

Wheeler: No. 26

The best goalie in the draft, Ravensbergen has towering size (6-5) and is surprisingly agile with his feet, scouts say. But there's a lot of projecting with this pick. Ravensberger has all of the traits of a franchise goaltender, but there is a lot of work required before it can all come together. The Jackets drafted Evan Gardner in the second round last year. They haven't taken a goaltender in the first round since Pascal Leclaire in 2001.

Cole Reschny, C

Pronman: No. 13

Wheeler: No. 19

It's a deep draft for centers, but Reschny could be on the board when the Blue Jackets draft at No. 14. He's highly skilled, but not an elite-level skater and not particularly big (5-11, 183 pounds). That's why he may still be on the board at this spot. But his stock climbed sharply following a strong second half and playoffs.

Jackson Smith, D

Pronman: No. 12

Wheeler: No. 12

Same as with Mrtka. If Smith is still available at No. 14, the Blue Jackets could be delighted (and draft him) or field offers for a player most expect to go just before Columbus' turn. He's a big prospect (6-3, 195 pounds) who moves very well and has the look of a future top-four guy.

The Athletic / Could Sascha Boumedienne, with strong Columbus ties, be a draft fit for Blue Jackets?

By Aaron Portzline – June 24, 2025

He's only 18 years old, but Sascha Boumedienne already has the passport of a diplomat. He's lived in six countries, including his native Sweden, and traveled to several others. He's lived in three different U.S. cities and speaks two languages fluently.

Boumedienne, who spent three years in Columbus and whose father, Josef, worked for the Columbus Blue Jackets for more than a decade, will learn of his next destination this weekend when the NHL Draft is staged in Los Angeles.

It won't take long for an NHL club to say his name, either. The first round of the draft is set for Friday at 7 p.m. Eastern.

Boumedienne, the latest product of the Ohio AAA Blue Jackets program, is expected to be drafted in the back half of the first round, likely somewhere in the 20s. He's the type of mobile, skilled defenseman that NHL clubs are looking for, and his speed belies his size. He's 6-foot-2, 183 pounds, and growing.

"With the way my game grew this year (at Boston University), both defensively and all-around, I see myself being a 200-foot player, a two-way defenseman who can make an impact all over the ice," Boumedienne said. "I want to log a lot of minutes for my team and compete all over the ice. I play the game the right way."

NHL clubs seem to agree.

At the NHL Scouting Combine this month in Buffalo, Boumedienne interviewed with 28 of the league's 32 clubs. The only clubs that didn't ask for a sit-down were Anaheim, Dallas, Montreal and Seattle, he said, and most of the 28 clubs have continued to follow up in the weeks that followed.

The Blue Jackets have the No. 14 and No. 20 picks on Friday.

GM Don Waddell has made clear his willingness (desire?) to trade at least one of those picks for immediate roster help. But if he ends up using either of those picks, Boumedienne would make sense, especially since the Jackets could use a blue-chip defender in their prospect ranks.

Boumedienne said the interview with Columbus went "really well."

"Yeah, it was great," Boumedienne said. "That was kind of memorable, actually, because I've known those guys (the scouts) in the room since I was I-don't-know-how old."

One might wonder if the Blue Jackets drafting Boumedienne would be a touch awkward. His father, after all, was let go last summer — his expiring contract was not renewed — after working for the franchise in multiple capacities as a scout and as an assistant coach since 2014.

"I don't think it would be weird at all, no," Sascha Boumedienne said. "I think it would be a blast. I'd go to development camp and all of my friends from high school, from Columbus, would be able to come. Yeah, that'd be great."

Boumedienne is an interesting player to evaluate. The skill is obvious, and the skating is elite. But, like every prospect in this draft, the challenge is in predicting their talent ceiling. But Boumedienne may be more difficult than most.

He's never played a full season against players his age.

He played two seasons with the Ohio AAA Blue Jackets' 16-under team when he was 14 and 15 years old, attending Olentangy Liberty High School in suburban Delaware County for two years. He played in the USHL (Youngstown) for only one season, when he was 16 years old.

When he debuted last season at Boston University, he was the youngest player in college hockey, at 17 years old. He finished with 3-10-13, plus 33 penalty minutes and a plus-8 rating, in 40 games.

At every step, the adjustment has been quick. Last season, he was one of Boston U.'s top players in the second half of the season, helping the Terriers go all the way to the NCAA Frozen Four championship game. He knows he'll be back in Boston next season, no matter where he's drafted on Friday.

"It hurts real bad, still, that we made it all the way (to the championship game) before losing," Boumedienne said. "We struggled at the start of the year. We had a bumpy road, but we battled back and came together. There's even more motivation.

"I was lucky to get there (the championship game) in my first season. Some guys never get there, some guys have to wait three or four years. But it's definitely motivation to get back."

For now, Boumedienne's focus is on the weekend. He'll have well over 20 people in the crowd he said, from his family, extended family, longtime friends and his agent. His billet family from Youngstown, Brie Seekford and John Tomko, will be there, too.

Boumedienne will be the seventh alum from the Ohio AAA Blue Jackets to be drafted, joining Trent Vogelhuber (2007), Connor Murphy (2011), Sean Kuraly (2011), Cole Cassels (2013), Jack Roslovic (2015) and Carson Meyer (2017). He could become the third to get drafted in the first round, joining Murphy and Roslovic.

"We moved to Columbus (from Sweden) as a whole family (in 2020), and we were so excited," Boumedienne said. "My brother (Wilson) and I were fired up, just to live in an NHL city. Our dream has always been to play in the NHL, so we knew we'd be living in North America at some point.

"I had a great time in Columbus. I met some of my best friends there."

The Athletic / Nationwide Arena owner plans \$400 million in upgrades to Blue Jackets' 25-year-old home

By Aaron Portzline – June 23, 2025

As it approaches its 25th birthday, Nationwide Arena's owners are planning a facelift to keep the home of the Columbus Blue Jackets looking spiffy and on par with some of its competitors across the world of major-league sports.

The Franklin County Convention Facilities Authority told WBNS-TV in Columbus that it plans at least \$400 million in upgrades and expansions to Nationwide Arena, which cost \$175 million when it opened in September 2000, when the Blue Jackets joined the NHL as an expansion franchise.

Among the biggest changes:

- The main entrance will expand 30 feet from the building into what is now an expansive plaza between the arena and office buildings.
- An outdoor terrace and food hall will be added in the upper concourse.
- An enclosed walkway will connect the McConnell parking garage to the arena and the attached practice rink.
- A new team store will be located on the main concourse.
- Escalators and elevators will be added throughout the building.
- New LED screens will be installed throughout the arena, including, possibly, a new main scoreboard for the main ice in Nationwide.

"It's really impactful as we bring out the entrance that allows people to get in out of the weather and through security faster and quicker," Ken Paul, the executive director of FCCFA, told WBNS.

"It's really focusing on accessibility, connectivity, the fan experience, and upgrading amenities, all of which is really to stay competitive in the marketplace to ensure that we're able to attract our fair share of events to Columbus."

Paul told WBNS that the construction will be spread out over a four- or five-year span, likely beginning, at the earliest, next season. He said he hopes to have a timeline by the end of the year once Franklin County secures funding, likely through a private-public partnership.

"We're starting that conversation with the statehouse right now," Paul told the station. "There are several proposals being considered where the state would invest in sports facilities across the state. We're hoping to be part of that solution."

Nationwide Arena will host the NCAA Women's Final Four and the women's volleyball national championships in 2027. In 2028, the arena will once again host first- and second-round games in the men's NCAA basketball tournament.

Paul told WBNS that upgrades are necessary to keep them in the running to land future NCAA events.

Franklin County purchased Nationwide Arena in 2012 from Nationwide Mutual Insurance Company and Dispatch Publishing Group.

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets: 2025 NHL draft preview

By Brian Hedger – June 25, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets hold the 14th and 20th overall picks in the 2025 NHL Draft.

The team is considering trading one or both of their first-round picks for NHL-ready talent.

The Blue Jackets are also looking to address potential free-agent losses.

If the Blue Jackets keep their picks, they may select a forward and a defenseman.

It's another draft week for the Blue Jackets, who are making final preparations to select another crop of prospects June 27-28.

This will be the NHL's first non-COVID draft conducted without its 32 teams represented in-person for the two-day event at the Peacock Theater in Los Angeles. Don Waddell, the Blue Jackets' president of hockey operations/general manager, will preside over his team's actions from Nationwide Arena while NHL commissioner Gary Bettman and select prospects attend the draft in L.A., similar to other professional leagues' drafts.

As of June 23, the Blue Jackets have seven picks topped by the 14th and 20th overall selections in the first round. This is the first time since 2020 they haven't had a top-10 pick. Here's a draft preview, including how to watch all seven rounds:

The Blue Jackets selected Cayden Lindstrom with the fourth overall pick in the 2024 NHL Draft.

How to watch the 2025 NHL Draft

Viewers in the U.S. can watch the first round on ESPN and ESPN+ starting at 7 p.m. ET on June 27. The broadcast of the second through seventh rounds will be shown on NHL Network and ESPN+ starting at noon June 28.

Locally, the Blue Jackets are hosting a draft party June 27 at Nationwide Arena for fans who'd like to congregate to watch the first round. The Front Street entrance will be the lone access point for entry starting at 5:30 p.m.

2025 NHL Draft: Columbus Blue Jackets picks

The Blue Jackets have two picks in the first round (14th and 20th overall) plus picks in the third round (77th overall), fourth round (109th overall), sixth round (173rd overall) and seventh round (205th and 218th overall).

Erie Otters defenseman Matthew Schaefer, right, is projected to be one of the top picks in the 2025 NHL Draft.

2025 NHL Draft: projected first overall pick

The New York Islanders overcame long odds to win the draft's top pick via lottery draw, and they're expected to take either Erie Otters defenseman Matthew Schaefer or Saginaw Spirit center Michael Misa.

Schaefer, who was injured for much of the Ontario Hockey League's 2024-25 season, is a gifted puck-mover who shoots from the left side and is listed at 6-feet-2, 186 pounds. Misa is a high-scoring center who finished with 62 goals, 72 assists and 134 points in 65 games for Saginaw.

"I don't see anything imminent," Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell said about the possibility of trading one of the team's two first-round draft picks.

2025 NHL Draft: Columbus Blue Jackets exploring trades

Waddell hasn't kept it a secret that one or both of the Blue Jackets' picks in the first round – plus any others it might take – are available for the right return.

However, Waddell said on June 13 that it seemed more likely the Blue Jackets would make both picks in the first round rather than trade one or both.

"I spent three days (at the combine), and ... it was probably the best three days I've spent this summer, as far as talking with people," Waddell said. "We've had plenty of conversations about the picks, but I don't see anything imminent that may change that in the next few days ... but every day is a new day."

Should a deal or deals arise, look for Waddell to address the potential losses of pending free agents Ivan Provorov and Dante Fabbro. (They need re-signed by July 1 to assure their return.) The Blue Jackets could also use an impact scoring winger plus a veteran depth forward or two up front with potential losses including James van Riemsdyk, Sean Kuraly and Justin Danforth as free agents.

Trades involving one or both goalies, starter Elvis Merzlikins and backup Daniil Tarasov, could materialize.

Waddell also has attractive potential trade chips with young forwards such as Cole Sillinger and power forward Dmitri Voronkov – a pending restricted free agent who scored 23 goals while playing mostly on the first line.

NHL draft prospect Lynden Lakovic plays forward for the CHL in an exhibition against Team USA.

2025 NHL Draft: prospects who might be available for Columbus Blue Jackets' first-round picks

Should Waddell and his executive staff make picks with both first-round slots, the Blue Jackets could look to split them between available forwards and defensemen.

The 14th pick is their own after missing the playoffs by two points and then dropping in the lottery thanks to highly improbable wins by the Islanders and Utah Mammoth to determine the first two picks. The 20th overall selection was acquired from the Minnesota Wild in a trade for David Jiricek, the Jackets' former top defensive prospect.

An array of talented prospects could be available with either pick since the top five picks are less predictable than in the past two years.

Boston University defenseman and NHL draft prospect Sascha Boumedienne passes the puck in the 2025 Frozen Four championship game against Western Michigan.

The Athletic's latest mock draft has the Blue Jackets selecting WHL forward Lynden Lakovic, a projected left wing from Moose Jaw, with the 14th pick and right-handed defenseman Logan Hensler from the University of Wisconsin with the 20th pick. Tankathon lists the Blue Jackets taking OHL defenseman Kashawn Aitcheson (Barrie) 14th overall followed by forward Malcolm Spence, a University of Michigan recruit from OHL Erie, 20th overall.

The Blue Jackets could also be positioned to select Sasha Boumedienne, a puck-moving defenseman from Boston University who played for the Ohio AAA Blue Jackets. Boumedienne's father, Josef Boumedienne, is the general manager for Sweden's national teams and worked for the Blue Jackets under former GM Jarmo Kekalainen as the head of North American professional scouting. He shifted into an assistant coaching role in 2023-24, prior to Waddell's arrival as Kekalainen's replacement.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Still Have Hard Work Ahead to Become Premier Destination

By Mark Scheig – June 25, 2025

The 2025 NHL offseason is about to kick into overdrive. Once the madness of the draft goes by this weekend, it will be just days until the free agency period opens.

For the Columbus Blue Jackets, they have a lot they would like to accomplish in the next week. Ideally, they would like to add a top-six forward, remake their defense and perhaps even address their goaltending. That's a lot of business to handle in a condensed amount of time.

The Blue Jackets will be in on a lot of trade possibilities. Whether it's at the draft involving their two first-round picks or soon thereafter, the team is monitoring several situations around the league.

Then come Tuesday at noon eastern, they can start signing unrestricted free agents. That leads us into today's discussion.

Path to Becoming a Destination

When it comes to free agents, it's anyone's game. Players can pick and choose where they want to play for a specified amount of time.

If a team hopes to have the best chance at landing the top free agents, they need to make sure everything is in line for them to be a premier destination. Each market is in a different place with different things to offer.

It's no wonder we hear about the same teams being linked to top free agents. For example, there's a belief that the Vegas Golden Knights are a serious contender to land Mitch Marner. Why are the Golden Knights usually in these kind of conversations? It's easy. It's Vegas. They have a reputation of doing whatever it takes to try to win. Sure, the no-tax thing helps. But it's not the main driver.

Winning is the main driver. Most free agents will get their money. But players have one thing on their mind. They want to win the Stanley Cup. Ideally, they'd like to pick a market that will consistently have the chance to win championships.

Look at the Florida Panthers. They have several players who want to stay. They'd even stay for less than what they could get on the open market. Winning is a powerful drug. Being in South Florida doesn't hurt either.

Why are the Panthers a premier destination? The top answer is they are winning Stanley Cups. They've always had the weather and location factor. But winning ultimately brought out the best in all of that.

It took the Panthers decades to get to this place. Between the mid 1990's when they made the Stanley Cup Final and now, they struggled mightily. It wasn't until the right people got into leadership while making shrewd business decisions before the Panthers became the premier destination they are now.

It took years of hard work to make it all happen in South Florida. If the Blue Jackets even hope to want to become a premier destination, they have to start winning. The rest will eventually work itself out.

Blue Jackets Have Hard Work Ahead

The 2024-25 Blue Jackets were the darlings of the NHL. They made a great effort trying to make the playoffs before falling short in the end. While that was a great story, they still didn't reach their goal.

It was yet another season of no playoffs in Nationwide Arena. This is the realization of where the Blue Jackets are at. They have a great core in place. But they also have significant questions too namely on defense and in goal.

Imagine being a free agent. How would they view the Blue Jackets in the grand scheme of things? There's a reason you don't hear them in the same breath as teams like the Carolina Hurricanes, New York Rangers and others. These teams are more established for winning (Hurricanes) or their track record of wanting to win (Rangers).

The Blue Jackets want to win. They just haven't done it consistently enough to be mentioned in the upper echelon of teams. This is why the 2025 offseason for them is of utmost importance. If they hope to ultimately become a premier destination, they have to make moves to unlock the potential we always seem to be talking about with them.

GM Don Waddell appears to not be messing around. He has a boatload of assets at his disposal in order to make the team better. He has the desire to make the team better knowing cap space isn't a problem. What could still be an issue though is convincing free agents that the Blue Jackets are their best option.

The Blue Jackets are not the Panthers. They're not like anyone located in New York or Los Angeles. However, they have a list of positives that make them an attractive place to sign.

Take Sean Monahan for example. He said at last season's exit interviews he views Columbus as his forever home. Several other players have either said the same or are living there now after their careers are over.

Columbus is quiet. The media attention isn't as much as a lot of places. It's a great city for families to be raised in. It has its share of great activities. Its location is ideal in the east as one of the biggest cities in the country yet you are still close to a lot of places.

But to this day, the Blue Jackets have never fully unlocked their true potential as a destination despite all the things the city offers. Why? They lack the winning most free agents crave.

Blue Jackets Will Be Put to Test

There is no question progress has been made on the corner of Front and Nationwide in downtown Columbus. The center depth has never been better. The Blue Jackets have a Norris-caliber defenseman who loves playing there. There is young talent that project to be great players in the coming years.

This promise will now be put to the test. How do free agents view the situation in Columbus? Do they see a path to consistent winning soon?

The hockey world is watching. If free agents feel the goals against are still going to be a problem, they may elect to choose a more stable situation if given the choice. Every aspect of the team on and off the ice need to be on point to really start being able to attract top free agents to sign.

The Blue Jackets have promise and a bright future. However, that alone isn't good enough. Results are what matter. They have to start winning soon. That is the catalyst of them becoming a premier destination in the NHL.

Otherwise, we'll continue hearing the same teams over and over when it comes to where free agents want to sign. The process isn't going to be overnight. This 2025 offseason for the Blue Jackets could go a long way to helping them start on the path of consistent winning.

This is where Waddell's decisions this offseason go beyond just making some changes. He's being put to the test. What he does will ultimately affect the Blue Jackets' perception to future players when deciding if they want to sign.

Progress has been made in Columbus in trying to become that premier destination. But there is a lot of hard work ahead. We'll see this offseason how far they've really come in that regard.

NBC4i.com / Columbus Blue Jackets' 2025 preseason schedule announced

By Orri Benatar – June 24, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets will be celebrating its 25th anniversary during the 2025-26 season and now have its preseason schedule set.

Fresh off its best season since 2018-19, the Blue Jackets will be hoping they can break a five-year playoff drought and that journey begins in the preseason.

Columbus will play four games in four days to kick start its preseason, starting with a home game against the St. Louis Blues on Sept. 21 at 5 p.m. The Jackets will then play the Buffalo Sabres, Pittsburgh Penguins, and Washington Capitals twice each before starting the regular season.

2025 Blue Jackets preseason schedule

Sept. 21 – vs Blues (5 p.m.)

Sept. 22 – vs Sabres (7 p.m.)

Sept. 23 – at Sabres (7 p.m.)

Sept. 24 – vs Penguins (7 p.m.)

Sept. 27 – at Penguins (7 p.m.)

Sept. 30 – vs Capitals (7 p.m.)

Oct. 4 – at Capitals (7 p.m.)

The 2025-26 NHL regular season schedule is expected to be announced in July. Columbus missed out on a playoff spot on the final day of the season after the Montreal Canadiens claimed the last wild card berth in the Eastern Conference.

Next up on the league's schedule is the NHL Entry Draft from Los Angeles with the first round taking place on Friday. The New York Islanders have the first selection in the draft. The Blue Jackets are picking 14th in the first round.

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets release 2025-26 preseason schedule featuring seven games

By Brian Hedger – June 24, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets will play seven preseason games for their 25th anniversary season.

The preseason schedule includes four home games and three away games.

The Blue Jackets' preseason schedule for 2025-26, the team's 25th anniversary season, features seven games, including four home dates starting Sept. 21 against the St. Louis Blues.

The past few years, the Jackets' preseason slate included eight games played home and away against four opponents. This year, they'll host the Blues before playing home/away sets against the Buffalo Sabres, Pittsburgh Penguins and Washington Capitals.

The first four games will be played on four consecutive days, with home faceoffs against the Blues on Sept. 21, Sabres on Sept. 22 and Penguins on Sept. 24, as well as a road game Sept. 23 in Buffalo.

Center Kent Johnson and the Blue Jackets have seven games scheduled for the 2025-26 preseason, including four home games.

The Blue Jackets are finalizing preparations for the NHL draft to be held June 27-28 in Los Angeles. They have the 14th and 20th overall picks in the first round plus five additional picks in the third, fourth, sixth and seventh rounds.

Don Waddell, the Blue Jackets' president of hockey operations/general manager, said his two first-round picks remain in play as trade chips going into the event, which will be followed by the start of free agency at noon July 1.

The NHL's full 2025-26 regular-season schedule is usually unveiled a day before the draft's first round, so expect that to happen soon.

Here is the Blue Jackets' preseason schedule:

Sept. 21 vs. St. Louis Blues, 5 p.m.

Sept. 22 vs. Buffalo Sabres, 7 p.m.

Sept. 23 at Buffalo Sabres, 7 p.m.

Sept. 24 vs. Pittsburgh Penguins, 7 p.m.

Sept. 27 at Pittsburgh Penguins, 7 p.m.

Sept. 30 vs. Washington Capitals, 7 p.m.

Oct. 4 at Washington Capitals, 7 p.m.

The Athletic / Where will all the goalies go? Breaking down the NHL's upcoming moves in net

By James Mirtle – June 24, 2025

With all of the hockey world's attention on Mitch Marner, teams needing centers and defensemen, and the Florida Panthers getting obliterated at the Elbo Room, one thing we haven't had time to talk about all that much is what's happening in goal around the league.

Though there might not be as big of names available in net in free agency this year, there is still likely going to be a lot of movement. By my count, two teams potentially need a new starter and at least another six need to sign a backup.

At least eight established goalies, meanwhile, are either on the trade block or buyout/demotion candidates. And there are 10 experienced netminders who are UFAs and another nine who are set to become RFAs on July 1.

Add it up, and there could be quite the game of musical chairs happening in NHL creases over the next few weeks.

To make sense of it all, here's my goalie big board for 2025. Slots marked in blue are pending RFAs. Those in red are trade, buyout or demotion candidates. And orange indicates a clear-cut opening at the position.

This isn't an exact science, as some of those I've listed as No. 3s could end up with the backup role, and some of those as No. 2s could end up getting supplanted by a free-agent signing or trade acquisition. But after talking to some people around the league, I think this represents a decent portrait of where things stand.

Let's further break these teams down into separate groups, with a bit more information on the most interesting clubs at the bottom.

The status quo

Teams with established No. 1s, backups or tandems:

Boston Bruins, Carolina Hurricanes, Chicago Blackhawks, Colorado Avalanche, Dallas Stars, Detroit Red Wings, Minnesota Wild, Nashville Predators, New York Islanders, New York Rangers, St. Louis Blues, Tampa Bay Lightning, Toronto Maple Leafs, Utah Mammoth, Washington Capitals, Winnipeg Jets

That's 16 teams, or half the league, where there's probably not a lot to see. In some cases, such as Detroit, they could make a move, but with other needs more pressing, I wouldn't bet on it.

There are some unknowns here, such as Connor Ingram's health status with Utah, and how some young goalies such as Jesper Wallstedt will fare, but for the most part, these feel like teams unlikely to make a major change.

The might-make-a-moves

Teams that could pull the trigger on a big goalie trade or sign a UFA backup:

Anaheim Ducks, Buffalo Sabres, Calgary Flames, Florida Panthers, Los Angeles Kings, Montreal Canadiens, New Jersey Devils, Ottawa Senators, Pittsburgh Penguins, Seattle Kraken, Vancouver Canucks, Vegas Golden Knights

Some of these teams have big names on trade boards right now, but they don't have to make a move. John Gibson in Anaheim, for example, is down to two years left on his deal, has been supplanted as the No. 1 and has been in trade talks for years. Could it finally happen, as general manager Pat Verbeek gets aggressive? Yes. But it doesn't have to.

Similarly, the Penguins, Kraken and Canucks all have veterans with big contracts who have struggled and could get moved or bought out in Tristan Jarry, Philipp Grubauer and Thatcher Demko, but there is no significant pressure on those GMs to do so.

Buffalo, Montreal, New Jersey, Ottawa and Vegas, meanwhile, need to decide whether they feel like their younger backups are enough or whether they need to dip into the free-agent market for more help.

Both the Panthers and Kings need a UFA backup to spell their aging No. 1. And Calgary needs a veteran to relieve rising star Dustin Wolf from time to time.

The NHL's four most intriguing goalie situations

1. Edmonton Oilers

Two consecutive runs to the Stanley Cup Final. Two losses to a Panthers team that has a likely Hall of Famer in net.

It feels time for a rethink for the Oilers in goal, but what do you do? Stuart Skinner and Calvin Pickard are signed cheaply, and Edmonton isn't flush with cap space given the need to sign Evan Bouchard. It is going to attempt to ship out some underperformers, including likely one of the netminders, but getting the new addition right is pivotal.

Signing Jake Allen feels like one possibility, but he turns 35 in August and likely commands a three-year deal at more than \$10 million total. None of the other UFA goalies would seem to be No. 1 material for a Cup contender, so the trade route could be another avenue to pursue.

2. Philadelphia Flyers

The Flyers are in the unique situation of having three goalies signed ... and not wanting to rely on any of them after a really tough season in goal. Samuel Ersson was their top option with an .883 save percentage, but Russians Ivan Fedotov and Aleksei Kolosov feel destined for the AHL (or KHL) this season.

Philadelphia has the cap room to make something happen here. Perhaps it's the right fit for Allen? Or maybe it goes big on a trade for someone like Gibson, Demko or one of the Edmonton goalies?

Definitely a team to watch as they continue to be heavily in the trade and free-agent mix after acquiring Trevor Zegras earlier this week.

3. San Jose Sharks

The future in the Sharks crease is Yaroslav Askarov's. But is he ready to be their No. 1 of the present?

The 23-year-old No. 11 pick in 2020 performed ably in the AHL last season with the Barracuda and was fine in the 13 games he played in the NHL. But taking on a bigger load on a rebuilding club like San Jose could be a lot to ask, even with his considerable pedigree and upside.

Committing to Allen likely doesn't make sense at this point given his age and the need for term, so we suspect the Sharks will invest in a UFA veteran like Dan Vladar, Anton Forsberg or David Rittich who can tandem with Askarov and show him the ropes.

4. Columbus Blue Jackets

It appears time might be up for Elvis Merzlikins after his prolonged struggles (plus some drama) and the emergence of Jet Greaves. (There's more on that from our CBJ beat writer, Aaron Portzline, [here](#).)

The Blue Jackets only missed the playoffs by 2 points last season and likely would have made it with better showings from Merzlikins (.892 save percentage) and Daniil Tarasov (.881). Greaves had an outstanding season last year in the AHL and in 11 games with Columbus and now will be waiver eligible, but how much can it rely on him next season? And what should it do with Merzlikins and Tarasov, assuming it can't find takers in a trade?

Other UFA goalies not yet mentioned who might be options:

Alexandar Georgiev, Alex Lyon, James Reimer, Ilya Samsonov, Vitek Vanecek

The Athletic / Which NHL teams need to upgrade on defense? Ranking all 32 by current quality

By Sean Gentile and Dom Luszczyszyn – June 25, 2025

The offseason is here, and one of the most crucial things to know going into it is how each team stands on a position-by-position basis. Today, we look at each team's defensive depth with regard to what they already have and what they need this summer.

Using Net Rating as a starting point, we looked at how much value each team is currently carrying on the back end to figure out what holes it needs to address.

The stronger a team looks through the lineup, the better its baseline looks. We've also detailed our center depth rankings and winger depth rankings.

After adding a subjective touch, here's how each team's defensive depth ranks from best to worst before free agency begins.

1. Edmonton Oilers

Current quality: 99th percentile

Looking for: None

One of the reasons the Oilers were able to march back to the Stanley Cup Final was a defensive group so deep it was able to survive an injury to Mattias Ekholm, a top-pair star. That was made possible by the addition of Jake Walman, a lower-lineup luxury who gave the Oilers a heavy advantage in easier minutes.

Edmonton's group is a strong mix of offensive mobility and defensive suppression throughout, led by Evan Bouchard — a no-doubt franchise defenseman. This is a huge position of strength, one that could be parlayed into fixing an area of need elsewhere.

2. Colorado Avalanche

Current quality: 91st percentile

Looking for: Top-four defenseman

The Avs employ the best defenseman on the planet and another who'd be No. 1 for, give or take, half of the rest of the league. Cale Makar and Devon Toews, all by themselves, are enough to put their team near the top of any list like this one. They're that good.

What Colorado currently rolls behind their all-world pair, though, is a bit of a problem. Josh Manson is third-pair caliber these days, and Sam Girard would be best served with a higher-quality partner. Behind them, only Keaton Middleton is signed for 2025-26, and the Avs are close to the cap. If Makar and Toews are the best version of themselves, it's not a huge issue, but there's also not much of a safety net.

3. Winnipeg Jets

Current quality: 87th percentile

Looking for: Depth defenseman

Thanks to the emergence of Dylan Samberg and the resurgence of Neal Pionk, the Jets have a strong top four that has become their backbone. It strengthened the team's superpower in net, turning the Jets into one of the league's very best defensive teams.

It's not perfect though, not with a bottom pair that struggled often last season. While the Jets don't have a hole to fill on the third pair, they still could use an upgrade.

4. Dallas Stars

Current quality: 87th percentile

Looking for: Top-four defenseman

The Stars get nearly all their value from Miro Heiskanen and Thomas Harley, both of whom are projected to have top-10 seasons at the position. Esa Lindell is also a capable partner for Heiskanen on the top pair. That's an outstanding foundation.

Dallas, though, once again badly needs a legit No. 4 who plays on the right side — because Ilya Lyubushkin and Matt Dumba aren't going to cut it. Lian Bichsel works as a third-pair guy with upside, and Lyubushkin would look better playing easier minutes beside him, but there's still a hole in the top four.

5. Vancouver Canucks

Current quality: 85th percentile

Looking for: Depth defenseman

At the great expense of the team's center depth, the Canucks have a top-five blue line. Was it worth losing Bo Horvat and J.T. Miller? Probably not! But for now, it's the team's biggest strength.

Quinn Hughes is a top-two defenseman in hockey, no argument there. The top four behind him is much more settled with his usual partner Filip Hronek and the addition of Marcus Pettersson. Both are decent 2/3 types. The addition of Pettersson allows Tyler Myers to slip into a more appropriate role as a No. 4 as well.

If there's a quibble here, it's with the third pair. Neither Derek Forbort nor Elias Pettersson (defenseman version) really move the needle and are below-average for their role. There's a chance Elias Pettersson can grow in his second season, but for now it's what's keeping the Canucks from a higher standing.

6. Washington Capitals

Current quality: 83rd percentile

Looking for: High-end defenseman

The Capitals didn't clock in all that highly at center or on the wings. Defense, though, is another story; Washington has one of the deepest blue lines in the league. All six of their every-day D-men are returning for the 2025-26 season. That's great news for a team that finished last season atop the Eastern Conference. It's a talented, diverse group.

Just how good they are moving forward probably hinges on whether John Carlson, who had 51 points in 2024-25, keeps performing at a high level. When he truly starts to decline, Washington will need Jakob Chychrun, who crushed relatively sheltered minutes, to take over some of his responsibilities. The two played together in the postseason to mixed results.

7. Vegas Golden Knights

Current quality: 82nd percentile

Looking for: Depth defenseman

Vegas' placement on this list hinges on whether Alex Pietrangelo can play, but the Golden Knights already had a bit of a contingency plan in place when they acquired and signed Noah Hanifin. With him and Shea Theodore in tow, plus the defensive might of Brayden McNabb, Vegas should be just fine — even without Pietrangelo. The Golden Knights have a top-five defense with him, but even without, they're firmly in the top 10.

The strength of the team's top three means Vegas doesn't necessarily need a flashy top-four guy when an internal promotion can do. That could be Zach Whitecloud or Kaedan Korczak, who put up some sparkling results in sheltered minutes, enough for a model to be a fan despite his usage. In a bigger role, Korczak could be this year's Pavel Dorofeyev, who broke out on the wing for Vegas last season.

8. Tampa Bay Lightning

Current quality: 66th percentile

Looking for: Depth defenseman

From 1 through 5, Tampa is in great shape. Victor Hedman still projects as a high-end No. 1, even as he approaches his 35th birthday. Ryan McDonagh, at 36, is still eminently capable of handling tough minutes on his own pair. J.J. Moser and Erik Cernak, as their top-four running mates, get the job done. Darryn Radysh is a solid third-pair guy.

The issue for the Lightning, at least as it relates to this list, is that the model doesn't like Emil Lilleberg at all; his projection is near the absolute bottom of the league. The good news is that he's still just 24 and has only played one full NHL season, so there's room for growth, especially from such a brutal starting line.

The Lightning are in good shape with Victor Hedman leading the way. (Mike Carlson / Getty Images)

9. Utah Mammoth

Current quality: 75th percentile

Looking for: Top-pair defenseman

The Mammoth acquired Mikhail Sergachev to emerge as a legit No. 1 defenseman, and everything on that front is trending in the right direction. They could use a better option playing to his right on the first pair, but plenty of other teams find themselves in a similar situation. John Marino and Sean Durzi are probably capable of getting the job done in that regard.

The rest of the group is deep enough to work, too. Utah is in good shape. It doesn't mean it shouldn't try to upgrade in some spots, but the Mammoth have done well.

10. New Jersey Devils

Current quality: 71st percentile

Looking for: High-end defenseman

The Devils' group is basically set in terms of who's playing and where, and the end result is a group that lands just inside the top 10. What they need is one of their young defensemen to step up as Dougie Hamilton ages. While Hamilton still has offensive juice, he's no longer defensively stout enough to be franchise-level. The Devils badly need Luke Hughes or Simon Nemec to take over that mantle.

New Jersey needs a No. 1 defenseman and spent a lot of draft capital to make it happen. Is this the year that one of them makes due on that promise?

11. Minnesota Wild

Current quality: 64th percentile

Looking for: High-end defenseman

The Wild are deep defensively, that's no secret. From top to bottom, Minnesota has high-quality players. It's their identity down to each player's defensive ability.

What they lack, though, is a No. 1. That was Jared Spurgeon, but age is starting to catch up with him. It was supposed to be Brock Faber, but his game fell off hard in the season's second half. It could be Zeev Buium, but he's only a rookie who looked very green in the playoffs.

The Wild sit on the cusp of the top 10 and don't need to make any additions to solidify the group. But they do need someone to step up and be franchise-caliber. Whether it's Spurgeon turning back the clock, Faber breaking through or Buium dominating from the jump, someone has to be The Guy.

12. Carolina Hurricanes

Current quality: 61st percentile

Looking for: Top-pair defenseman

Brent Burns' time on the first pair is almost certainly over. He turned 40 in March and is a pending UFA, and his performance noticeably dipped in 2024-25. That means it's time to find Jaccob Slavin, one of the very best defensive defensemen in the NHL, a new partner.

Carolina has in-house options, and nobody on its current group is a problem, which is part of the reason they find themselves on the edge of the top 10 even with a hole next to Slavin. That said, none of those options are ideal.

Jalen Chatfield has become a solid second-pair guy, and Slavin has a way of making his partners better, but that'd be a lot to ask. You could say something similar about Sean Walker. Scott Morrow remains a solid prospect, but he wasn't great in the postseason. Alexander Nikishin is green, too, and a left shot. The puzzle pieces are interesting, though, even if they don't fit perfectly at the moment.

13. St. Louis Blues

Current quality: 57th percentile

Looking for: High-end defenseman

The Jim Montgomery Effect is clear on the Blues' defense. With him in place as head coach, Colton Parayko — at 31 and after a couple seasons' worth of declining play — looked like something close to a No. 1 guy. Cam Fowler, acquired from Anaheim around the time Montgomery took over, turned back the clock as well.

The end result is a solid, deep group that projects well for 2025-26, though it'd all look even better for St. Louis if it had a true high-end piece. Can Parayko keep marching back toward that designation? Does Phillip Broberg, already a huge success story with the Blues, have another offensive gear? Those two are their best in-house bets.

14. Florida Panthers

Current quality: 52nd percentile

Looking for: Top-pair defenseman

Never, ever doubt Florida's ability to find a defenseman. Gustav Forsling, Niko Mikkola, Dmitry Kulikov — all look much, much better with the Panthers. Seth Jones, too. Whoever they sign or acquire this offseason will probably work out well, because their acquisitions almost always do.

Still, it's hard not to be a little concerned about the sizable hole to their blue line potentially left by Aaron Ekblad and Nate Schmidt. The former has been a Panthers lifer, a No. 1 pick and a top-pair stalwart for a decade. The latter has been a monster on the third pair. They won't be easy to replace.

With both back, the Panthers would have a top-10 defense with no holes. Re-signing Ekblad alone brings them to the 78th percentile. With neither, the team's group only looks average.

15. New York Islanders

Current quality: 53rd percentile

Looking for: Top-pair defenseman

The Islanders have a pretty solid group with one real hole thanks to the degradation of Ryan Pullock's game: a first-pair defenseman. Noah Dobson is their top guy (if they keep him), but it would be ideal to have another to add to a strong top four that also includes Adam Pelech and Alexander Romanov.

Lucky for the Islanders, that hole looks likely to be filled at the draft with the No. 1 overall pick. While it's unlikely Matthew Schaefer, the likely choice, will be top-pair caliber as a rookie, it is very likely that he gets there one day.

16. Los Angeles Kings

Current quality: 52nd percentile

Looking for: High-end defenseman

Last offseason, the Kings found themselves in a similar spot, largely due to the pending exit of No. 2 defenseman Matt Roy. Vladislav Gavrikov stepped up and now finds himself in position to cash in, big-time, on the UFA market. Once again, Los Angeles has a hole to fill on its top four — and Joel Edmundson is not nearly as good an in-house option as Gavrikov.

The bigger issue, though, is that Drew Doughty, who turns 36 in December, started to look his age after a franchise-caliber 2023-24 season. Los Angeles badly needs someone, ideally Brandt Clarke, to replace some of that production. Jordan Spence is also an interesting right-side option.

17. Buffalo Sabres

Current quality: 51st percentile

Looking for: Top-pair defenseman, top-four defenseman

The Sabres are here primarily because of Rasmus Dahlin. He's one of the best defensemen in the league, a no-doubt, high-end No. 1 who finished sixth in Norris voting last season and is a solid bet to do it again in 2025-26.

Behind him is some talent and plenty of uncertainty. Bowen Byram's results were good to Dahlin's right, but he's a left shot and a pending RFA who struggled with other partners. Mattias Samuelsson is a buyout candidate.

Worst of all, Owen Power's development seems to have stagnated. If he figures it out, Buffalo will be in good shape. That can't be taken as a given, though, and neither can anything about the Byram situation. The end result is, not surprisingly, a mess. But hey, Dahlin is really good!

18. Toronto Maple Leafs

Current quality: 49th percentile

Looking for: High-end defenseman

Over the last decade, one of Toronto's biggest problems has been a lack of a true No. 1 defenseman. Morgan Rielly at his peak may have been offensively gifted enough, but he gave way too much back to really qualify.

To this day, it remains an issue for Toronto, leading to the team's top forwards playing one-dimensional hockey when it matters. When Nathan MacKinnon can play with Cale Makar and Connor McDavid can play with Evan Bouchard, they can offensively dominate while not giving much back. Auston Matthews playing with all-defense guys such as Jake McCabe and Chris Tanev does not offer the same luxury.

So while Toronto's blue line is mostly complete and is deep, it's lacking the high-end talent necessary to go all the way. The Leafs have three No. 2s and two solid guys in Oliver Ekman-Larsson and Brandon Carlo, but the lack of a clear-cut No. 1 is a huge problem.

19. Boston Bruins

Current quality: 48th percentile

Looking for: Top-four defenseman

The top of Boston's blue line is in fine shape. Charlie McAvoy projects as a true top-pair guy, and all signs point to him being fully healthy after a scary, unfair injury in the 4 Nations tournament. You could say something similar for Hampus Lindholm, a solid complement to McAvoy whose season ended after a February knee injury.

Boston badly needs a partner for Nikita Zadorov on the second pair, though — and not just as a complement, either. Zadorov is more of a No. 4, at this point in his career. Mason Lohrei has clear potential there but also needs to improve as a defender.

20. Montreal Canadiens

Current quality: 41st percentile

Looking for: Top-pair defenseman

The model, like nearly everyone else who watched him play, has made its decision on Lane Hutson. He's projected to be a top-10 defender in terms of value for the 2025-26 season. One of Montreal's priorities should be figuring out whether Kaiden Guhle is Hutson's long-term partner — and Guhle showed some signs — or if David Reinbacher is the better fit.

Reinbacher, the No. 5 pick in 2023, had a rough season but still profiles as a high-floor, low-ceiling option who would make sense next to Hutson. He's also a right shot, something Montreal lacked last season. If he pops, Montreal will be in fine shape.

Beyond that, Montreal has two capable veterans (Mike Matheson and Alex Carrier) and Arber Xhekaj, a player whose poor projection pushes the Canadiens down these rankings.

21. Nashville Predators

Current quality: 58th percentile

Looking for: Top-pair defenseman, top-four defenseman

Roman Josi's presence does a lot of the heavy lifting. It pays to have a franchise defenseman in the fold, and Nashville's place is colored a fair bit by his presence.

Nashville's big need is help for Josi, especially in the wake of his Postural Tachycardia Syndrome (POTS) diagnosis. Brady Skjei is probably an OK No. 4, even after a rough season, but there's a big gap between him and Josi in the top four. To their credit, a few of Nashville's depth guys — Nick Blankenberg and Adam Wilsby — earned competent results last season. They could work as internal options if that wasn't a fluke. Still, it would help to add an established player.

22. Ottawa Senators

Current quality: 38th percentile

Looking for: Top-four defenseman, depth defenseman

There's nothing inherently wrong with Ottawa's top four. Nick Jensen sliding down into a third-pair role would be ideal, but he's still a passable No. 4.

The biggest concern is with the team's third pair, which got crushed last season in heavily sheltered minutes. To their credit, they looked solid during the playoffs, but Ottawa is counting on some massive growth from Tyler Kleven and Nikolas Matinpalo that might be wishful thinking. Both look well below replacement level, which is the main reason the Senators fall below average here.

23. New York Rangers

Current quality: 36th percentile

Looking for: Top-pair defenseman, top-four defenseman

Adam Fox, unsurprisingly, is at the top of the list for the Rangers. He might not have acquitted himself all that well for Team USA at the 4 Nations, but he remains an extremely effective NHL player, and he's on the bubble of the top five for 2025-26 projections.

Behind him is K'Andre Miller, who remains a very real trade piece. On some level, that's understandable, because he's set to be an RFA and he seemed further than ever from true top-pair status after last season. For now, though, he's the only non-Fox Rangers defenseman who works on a top pair. Moving him would create another hole.

24. Columbus Blue Jackets

Current quality: 23rd percentile

Looking for: Top-pair defenseman, top-four defenseman

It helps to have Zach Werenski, one of the league's top defensemen, but losing Dante Fabbro and Ivan Provorov in one offseason would hurt. That'd be half the team's top four gone. Having Damon Severson as the team's second-best defenseman is a scary place to be.

Unless the Blue Jackets find a way to address the top four, it'll be very difficult to build on last season's success.

25. Seattle Kraken

Current quality: 25th percentile

Looking for: High-end defenseman

Analyzing anything about the Kraken can feel like listening to a broken record. Sing it with us: Lack of top-end talent.

Vince Dunn, Brandon Montour and Adam Larsson are all solid NHL players, but they're all slotted one spot too high in the lineup. We said something similar about Seattle's forwards, too. The end result is a roster that'll need to catch a bunch of breaks if it's to end up as anything more than mediocre.

26. Philadelphia Flyers

Current quality: 45th percentile

Looking for: High-end defenseman

The best way to describe Philadelphia's defense corps? Fine. It's fine. No serious weaknesses, decently deep, but also no legit stars. It's fine. Is "fine" enough? Probably not, which is why we bumped the Flyers down several pegs.

Like the team's issues up front, the main need here is star power. Travis Sanheim is a good defenseman, but it's hard to call him a great defenseman, one a franchise is built around. On a contender, he's an ideal No. 2, but as a No. 1, he's probably miscast.

Can Sanheim take an unexpected leap to that level? It's possible. Jamie Drysdale and Cam York have a small chance of getting there, too. But it's not probable for any of the three. For now, there's a serious lack of high-end talent on the Flyers' blue line, and it's a big reason they'll be unlikely to compete for a playoff spot anytime soon.

27. Detroit Red Wings

Current quality: 17th percentile

Looking for: Top-four defensemen, depth defensemen

For plenty of reasons, last season was a disappointment in Detroit. Moritz Seider and Simon Edvinsson, though, weren't part of it. Seider posted the best five-on-five numbers of his career against still-brutal competition, and Edvinsson showed that he works both as a partner for Seider and an anchor on a second pair. There, the Wings are set.

Beyond them, there's very little. Albert Johansson showed some promise, but Ben Chiarot's days on a top four should be over and Justin Holl is a buyout candidate. There are prospects in the pipeline, led by Axel Sandin-Pellikka, but the NHL group is extremely thin.

28. Calgary Flames

Current quality: 21st percentile

Looking for: Top-pair defenseman, top-four defenseman

MacKenzie Weegar is a No. 1 defenseman and the team's leader from the back end. But there's a pretty large gap between him and their next best defenseman, Rasmus Andersson, who looks closer to a No. 4. Andersson is solid offensively, but gives a lot back the other way. He's also reportedly a trade candidate.

Either way, the gap between Weegar and Andersson leaves a pretty large hole in Calgary's top four. The Flames are missing a No. 2 and No. 3. The rest of the group is pretty uninspiring, but fine for a third pair. When they play higher, there's an issue.

The X-factor here, even with Andersson's status, is rookie Zayne Parekh. Can he step in and immediately fill the top-four gap?

29. Pittsburgh Penguins

Current quality: 15th percentile

Looking for: High-end defenseman, top-four defenseman

Erik Karlsson and Kris Letang used to be No. 1 studs, but those days are over. That leaves the Penguins wanting in the high-end talent department on the back end. They're also lacking in top-four talent altogether, as it's just those two and then a bunch of third-pairing options.

Pittsburgh's goal is clearly to compete for Gavin McKenna, so all the power to them. The defense, as currently constructed, should help.

30. Anaheim Ducks

Current quality: 9th percentile

Looking for: High-end defenseman, top-four defenseman

Anaheim has a pair of competent, overextended veterans in its top four, in Radko Gudas and Jacob Trouba. Jackson Lacombe also took a major step forward as a point-producer and offensive element, but he's unlikely to become a No. 1. In all, it could be worse.

The Ducks, though, saw stagnation from Olen Zellweger and regression from Pavel Mintyukov last season, and that's a major concern. If the rebuild is to actually work, they need both to be legitimate NHL defensemen and for one to be top-four worthy.

31. Chicago Blackhawks

Current quality: 2nd percentile

Looking for: High-end defenseman, top-pair defenseman, top-four defenseman

With Seth Jones gone, Chicago's defense looks barren. The drop-off of Alex Vlasic last season didn't help, and he now grades out closer to a No. 4, possibly a result of being crushed in a difficult role on a bad team. If he can get back up to top-pair caliber, that would help.

The Blackhawks still need the rest of their top four adequately filled out, though, and that means that their two highly drafted defensemen need to step up. Neither Artyom Levshunov nor Kevin Korchinski have looked ready defensively, and that's a worrying sign.

The Blackhawks may need to add a veteran presence who can actually handle tough minutes so the kids aren't fed to the wolves too quickly.

32. San Jose Sharks

Current quality: 1st percentile

Looking for: High-end defenseman, top-pair defenseman, top-four defenseman

Big picture, the main concern for the Sharks should be whether Sam Dickinson can step into the lineup and immediately go from top prospect to legitimate NHL defenseman. The Athletic's Scott Wheeler is among those who love the long-term potential for the No. 11 pick in 2024.

As it stands, the defensive group is brutal. Timothy Liljegren is competent, and Mario Ferraro has been at points in his career. Even then, there's not much worth analyzing here.

The Athletic / Which NHL teams need to upgrade at center? Ranking all 32 by current quality

By Dom Luszczyszyn and Sean Gentile – June 23, 2025

The offseason is here, and one of the most crucial things to know going into it is how each team stands on a position-by-position basis. Today, we look at each team's center depth with regard to what they already have and what they need this summer.

Using Net Rating as a starting point, we looked at how much value each team is currently carrying down the middle to figure out what holes they need to address. The stronger a team looks up the lineup, the better its baseline looks.

After adding a subjective touch to the rankings, here's how each team's center depth ranks from best to worst before free agency begins.

1. Edmonton Oilers

Current quality: 100th percentile

Looking for: Bottom-six center

No surprise which team ranks first: it's the one that has the best player in the world and the second-best player in the world down the middle. As long as Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl are around and dominating, the Oilers will be the top team at center every time. And it's not particularly close.

All the Oilers really need here is a center for the bottom six. Whether he slots in ahead of or behind Adam Henrique doesn't really matter; Edmonton is already stacked enough.

2. Vegas Golden Knights

Current quality: 97th percentile

Looking for: None

Assuming Vegas doesn't pull anything truly wacky to clear space for anyone (cough, Mitch Marner, cough), it might have the most complete depth chart in the league. Rolling Jack Eichel, Tomas Hertl, William Karlsson and Nicolas Roy down the middle is a terrific place to start. Hertl is still effective and would be a first-liner on plenty of teams, and Karlsson remains a complete player.

Vegas' issue here, if there is one, is that Eichel isn't an all-world talent on par with the McDavids and Draisaitls of the world. It's not that Eichel isn't great in his own right, either; the bar is just that high — and this past postseason, when he had zero goals in a five-game loss to Edmonton, provides some proof.

3. New Jersey Devils

Current quality: 96th percentile

Looking for: Top-nine center, depth center

We debated between the Golden Knights and Devils as the best non-Oilers team at center and settled on Vegas. As great as Jack Hughes and Nico Hischier are as a 1-2 punch — arguably only the Oilers are better — Vegas' depth earns the edge. With Cody Glass currently in the 3C slot and the need for a 4C still present, the Devils fall just shy of Vegas.

Ideally, New Jersey looks for an upgrade at 3C to shift Glass to the wing, but that's a nitpick. What the Devils have with Hughes and Hischier is seriously special, a strong foundation toward contention. It makes the need for a stronger top-nine center behind them more of a luxury than a pressing concern.

4. Colorado Avalanche

Current quality: 94th percentile

Looking for: None

No single player in the league is better equipped to deal with McDavid and Draisaitl than Nathan MacKinnon. His presence gives Colorado an edge on virtually every other team. Brock Nelson, who this month signed a three-year deal with a \$7.5 million AAV, is the above-average second-line center the Avs had chased since Nazem Kadri left town.

Behind them are Charlie Coyle and Jack Drury. Coyle is fine as a 3C in a vacuum, but his contract (\$5.25 million AAV for one more season) isn't ideal. Drury gives them some decent defensive depth for the fourth line.

5. Dallas Stars

Current quality: 88th percentile

Looking for: None

On Thursday morning, it was fair to wonder what Dallas' lineup would look like at the end of the offseason. Roope Hintz is a solid first-liner and Wyatt Johnston, as a 2C, is a luxury item. You can't reasonably ask for much more from your top two guys. Matt Duchene's pending UFA status, though, was a wrench in the works. If he were to walk, Dallas would need to replace him — and that'd be no easy task. Duchene led the Stars in overall points (82) and was second at five-on-five (47).

Now, after Duchene's four-year, \$4.5 million AAV extension on Thursday, our question has an answer. Down the middle, Dallas is set.

6. Tampa Bay Lightning

Current quality: 76th percentile

Looking for: Depth center

After the Stars and Avalanche, there's a fairly steep drop to the next tier. The Stars have three top-six centers to the Lightning's two. As for the Avalanche, Brayden Point is obviously not MacKinnon. Point and Anthony Cirelli don't even add up to MacKinnon, which is part of what creates such a divide.

Regardless, the Lightning are pretty set down the middle. Point is a high-end 1C, Cirelli is a great shutdown center coming off a career year and one of Yanni Gourde or Nick Paul rounds out the top nine with defensive utility. It's a very strong trifecta that's easily contender-caliber, especially when paired with Tampa Bay's strengths elsewhere.

All the Lightning really need is a stable 4C. Ideally, they get an upgrade from Luke Glendening, the team's go-to option last season. While the fourth line isn't and shouldn't be high on many teams' priority lists, it does help to at least be average at center there. The Lightning have been playing a bit too much catch-up with that role over the last few years.

7. New York Islanders

Current quality: 72nd percentile

Looking for: None

Things are in flux for the Isles. Jean-Gabriel Pageau, a still-solid 3C, is once again a trade candidate, and there are indeed interested teams, according to Islanders reporter Stefen Rosner. If new GM Mathieu Darche decides to move him, it's even more likely that Mathew Barzal will move back to center. He spent most of last season on Bo Horvat's right wing.

Either way, the Islanders are in decent shape. Horvat is a competent 1C, and Barzal's offensive production will give them a major advantage on the second line. If Pageau is moved, prospect Calum Ritchie — acquired from Colorado for Brock Nelson — figures to be in the mix as his replacement.

8. Florida Panthers

Current quality: 61st percentile

Looking for: Middle-six center

While there's a good chance that Sam Bennett will remain a Panther, he's not signed yet, so it's worth looking at where the Panthers stand with and without him.

Without him, the Panthers will probably be fine thanks to having a succession plan in line with Anton Lundell. That's an advantage that other teams with 2Cs hanging in the balance don't have. Lundell should have no trouble moving up the lineup and already looks 2C-worthy at age 23. That means the Panthers only need to find a middle-six center to fill the void, and not a true 2C — a much easier job.

Alternatively, Sam Reinhart can also shift to the middle, if needed. The Panthers have options, a result of having a deep team led by Aleksander Barkov, one of the league's top centers.

If Bennett returns, that's obviously ideal because it would give the Panthers the vaunted 1-2-3 punch that's made them feel unstoppable over the last two years. With Bennett, Florida has a top-five center group in the 88th percentile.

9. Los Angeles Kings

Current quality: 60th percentile

Looking for: High-end center

If you're a Kings fan who's yelling, "We have two high-end centers," take a breath. Anze Kopitar and Quinton Byfield are both, indeed, really good. But as Kopitar ages — he'll be 38 on opening night — it becomes even more crucial for Byfield to continue his development. Last season, once his puck luck changed in December, it was another step in the right direction. For now, though, Byfield is projected to be a low-end 1C in 2025-26. They need him to continue pushing that number in the right direction.

At 3C, little has changed. Phillip Danault is one of the best in the league at what he does.

10. Buffalo Sabres

Current quality: 62nd percentile

Looking for: None

Assuming Tage Thompson is the team's 1C, the Sabres look surprisingly set. Thompson is a bona fide star at the top of the lineup, especially now that he's taken serious strides defensively. He's Buffalo's best forward and the main reason the Sabres rank so highly. If the Sabres put Thompson on the wing, however, they would drop to 22nd.

Both Ryan McLeod and Josh Norris look like decent top-six options, which should give the Sabres an advantage on the third line — again, assuming Thompson is driving the top line. Add Peyton Krebs, a solid 4C, to the mix, and Buffalo's pivots look playoff-caliber. Whether they (finally) make due on that promise is the big question.

11. Ottawa Senators

Current quality: 65th percentile

Looking for: Depth center

The Sens' top three makes plenty of sense. Tim Stützle has the juice necessary to be a first-liner on a good team, though he shot the puck less frequently in 2024-25 (about six per 60 minutes) than ever before. Dylan Cozens still profiles as a 2C, even though his numbers lag a bit. Shane Pinto, meanwhile, brings plenty of defensive value to a third line.

If they find a competent fourth-liner and if Cozens resumes his upward trajectory, things will look even better for the Sens.

12. Carolina Hurricanes

Current quality: 57th percentile

Looking for: Top-six center

When Carolina signed Jesperi Kotkaniemi to an offer sheet, the vision was clear: lock in the entire prime of a potential 2C behind Sebastian Aho once Jordan Staal ages. Kotkaniemi, still just 24, has shown flashes, but never for long enough to believe he's that caliber of player. Within a deep lineup, that's one of Carolina's most glaring holes.

Aho is still a great 1C, Staal is fine as a 3C and Mark Jankowski is great as a 4C. But the presence of Kotkaniemi is what keeps the Hurricanes outside of the top 10. An upgrade there, or Kotkaniemi finally realizing his potential, is sorely needed.

13. Toronto Maple Leafs

Current quality: 52nd percentile

Looking for: Top-six center, Top-nine center

A John Tavares-less world is not an ideal one for the Leafs — at least not without an acceptable backup plan to fill the void behind Auston Matthews. With Tavares, the Leafs jump to the 94th percentile and into the top five. Without him, they're barely above average. The presence of Matthews can only do so much.

That's partially because the team's bottom-six center depth is also lacking. Neither Max Domi nor Scott Laughton looks like a strong enough 3C option, and that was apparent against the Panthers when going up against Lundell. Laughton works very well as a defensively responsible 4C, but an upgrade on Domi is necessary. If Tavares leaves on top of that, Toronto might be in trouble.

14. Detroit Red Wings

Current quality: 59th percentile

Looking for: None

Dylan Larkin once again projects to provide completely legit production for a first-line center. For the first time in a long time, Detroit has reason for optimism behind him. Marco Kasper's first NHL season was a success. He led Detroit's regulars in expected goal share and popped off in the season's second half, leading all rookies with 17 goals after Jan. 10 and adding a welcome dose of creativity and tenacity to the mix.

For next season, he projects as an average 2C. That should be great news for the Red Wings — and the better news, based on his age and second-half production, is that he seems to be capable of more. Larkin needs help, and the other options (Andrew Copp and J.T. Compher) are limited for a team desperately trying to take the next step.

15. Washington Capitals

Current quality: 41st percentile

Looking for: High-end center, Bottom-six center

The key theme for the Capitals across the board will be similar: prove last year was no fluke. That might be harsh, but when it came time to actually play a legit contender, the Capitals folded. It was enough to warrant skepticism that many of the career years experienced throughout the roster were just that: highs that will be hard to repeat.

That brings us to Pierre-Luc Dubois. He's a high-pedigree player who flashed the potential of a two-way stud early in his career, but has also been plagued by consistency issues. Last year, he finally realized that potential, playing to the level of a top-15 center. Can he do it again? Maybe, but we're going to wait and see.

Dubois is the big key to Washington seeing consistent success, as he and Dylan Strome form a solid one-two punch down the middle: a shutdown center and a scoring center. They just need one of them to do it at a high enough level, and Dubois seems like the better bet.

Aside from that, Washington's only external need is another bottom-six center to pair with Nic Dowd. Ideally, Dowd works as a wonderful defensive 4C and someone is brought in above him. But he's strong enough that getting a depth center to play behind him is also fine.

16. Pittsburgh Penguins

Current quality: 44th percentile

Looking for: Top-six center

There's a reason this could be Evgeni Malkin's last year with Pittsburgh. He's starting to fall short of expectations. Malkin's age (39 on opening night), combined with his drop in point production (50 in 68 games, 1.65 per 60 at five-on-five), has him projecting as a below-average second-line center for the first time in his career. He once was an MVP-caliber superstar. Then, he was an elite 2C. Then, he was an adequately, appropriately paid 2C. Now, we're talking about the end of the line. Age and injury catch up with everyone.

There's obviously no such problem for Sidney Crosby, who should remain a high-end 1C in his age-38 season. Still, Malkin's decline combined with underwhelming options on the bottom six — Kevin Hayes, Connor Dewar and so on — means that Pittsburgh can add "overall down-the-middle ability" to its list of problems.

17. Minnesota Wild

Current quality: 44th percentile

Looking for: Top-nine center

As is, Minnesota's center depth is probably not good enough. Joel Eriksson Ek is a solid 1C, just not to the level of the league's top teams. And the team has a gaping hole at 3C that needs to be addressed.

Naturally, that means one thing: the Wild should make it worse by trading their 23-year-old 2C. With Ryan Hartman sliding up in the event of a Rossi trade, the Wild would drop to 25th in these rankings.

It's odd that a franchise that's spent decades searching for center depth is so willing to trade a young 60-point center. Yes, Rossi's size is a concern, and yes, his production is partly a Kirill Kaprizov byproduct. Still, he's worth holding onto unless an obvious upgrade comes back the other way. And that feels unlikely.

With Rossi, Minnesota's center depth is at least average. Without? Woof.

18. Winnipeg Jets

Current quality: 39th percentile

Looking for: Top-six center

Like too much of the dialogue surrounding the Jets, their lack of down-the-middle talent is old news. It's still a fact, though, even with Mark Scheifele once again projecting as a legit first-liner.

Vladislav Namestnikov has some defensive value. Adam Lowry is a solid 3C. Neither of them comes close to offering the reliable offensive pop that the Jets need if they're going to show the capability to truly rely on anything other than consistently great goaltending. They had that shot against Dallas and, once again, fell short.

19. St. Louis Blues

Current quality: 38th percentile

Looking for: Middle-six center

Robert Thomas was incredible last season and has emerged as one of the game's best. Oskar Sundqvist is a perfectly cromulent 4C. Those are St. Louis' center bookends — what they need is to fill the hole between them, whether that means a top-six center in front of Brayden Schenn, or a top-nine center behind him.

Schenn looked great once Jim Montgomery took over, meshing well on a line with Dylan Holloway and Jordan Kyrou. But if we're looking at the league's best teams, 2C is definitely an area where St. Louis is lacking in comparison. Shifting Schenn down would be the ideal move, allowing him to win bottom-six matchups. Without a superstar forward, St. Louis' best bet is building a depth advantage.

If that can't be accomplished, the Blues at the very least need a trustworthy player behind Schenn. Sundqvist won't cut it as the team's 3C.

20. New York Rangers

Current quality: 33rd percentile

Looking for: Bottom six centers

If the Rangers hold on to Mika Zibanejad — though there's increasing reason to think that they won't — their on-paper center depth would improve. In these rankings, they'd be comfortably inside the top 10.

Of course, that'd leave out some important context. Both sides seem to be done with each other, though Zibanejad's contract (\$8.5 million AAV through 2030 with full trade protection) remains a roadblock. Getting out from under Zibanejad's contract isn't a bad idea, but his absence would certainly make the Rangers worse in the short term.

We'll see what happens there. For now, we're assuming that Zibanejad is either playing elsewhere or on the wing. That leaves the Rangers' situation behind J.T. Miller, a middle-of-the-road first liner, and Vincent Trocheck, a high-end 2C, incredibly bleak. There's not a solid fourth-liner on the roster, let alone another top-nine option.

21. Columbus Blue Jackets

Current quality: 33rd percentile

Looking for: Bottom-six center

There are a lot of variables at play when it comes to analyzing Columbus' center depth. Can Sean Monahan repeat last year's magic? Is Adam Fantilli ready to become a star? How good can Cole Sillinger be? For all three, there's a wide range of possibilities where it's easy to see the potential upside. But we're going to play things a bit safer.

Mostly, what we need to see is Fantilli and Sillinger offering the substance in the middle-six necessary to bring Columbus into above-average territory. Fantilli looks like a future star with this production (with his top comp being Dylan Larkin), but his two-way game is still lacking. The same thing goes for Sillinger, who's had his fair share of struggles at five-on-five.

While Boone Jenner is an option to solidify things, it might be prudent for the Blue Jackets to look at a defensively capable bottom-six center to keep things steady. Betting on growth from Fantilli and Sillinger is the way to go, but it wouldn't hurt to have a safety net in case they struggle again.

22. Calgary Flames

Current quality: 37th percentile

Looking for: Top-line center

In some spots, you'll hear that the Flames — who scraped their way to 96 points last season — need a center to play behind Nazem Kadri. What they actually need, though, is someone to play in front of him. At this point in his career, Kadri projects as a high-end second-line center.

On teams with another similar player in the mix, that's acceptable enough. The Kings, with Kopitar and Byfield, come to mind. The Mammoth do too, to a lesser degree. Sticking a garden-variety 2C between Kadri and Mikael Backlund, though, won't get Calgary anywhere close to contender status, especially as Backlund — always offensively limited — enters the back half of his 30s. It might not get them too far into the wild-card discussion, either. Dustin Wolf can only do so much.

23. Utah Mammoth

Current quality: 27th percentile

Looking for: High-end center

It's no secret that the Mammoth are looking to add down the middle, and it's easy to see why. Barrett Hayton has turned into a solid shutdown center who would be perfect for the third line, while Logan Cooley is an ascending star, but still a second-liner at the moment. In order for Utah to make the playoffs, the Mammoth need to add to those two — and they need those two to add to their games.

Even if Utah adds a strong second-line center, internal development will decide the team's ceiling. The top contenders all have legitimate high-end stars as their 1Cs and unless Cooley gets there, a shiny 2C probably won't get the Mammoth to where they need to go. Cooley is the team's biggest X-factor.

24. Montreal Canadiens

Current quality: 27th percentile

Looking for: Middle-six centers

Last season, Nick Suzuki should've removed all doubt: he's a quality first-line center. Did he deserve that first-place Hart Trophy vote? Nope. Would he have been a reasonable down-ballot consideration? Absolutely. He does it all for Montreal and was one of the best players in the league after the 4 Nations break. There, the Canadiens are set.

Behind him, it's a plane built entirely of below-average third liners. There, the Canadiens are not set. Kirby Dach showed promise in 2022-23 but had his last two seasons derailed by major injuries. Alex Newhook has yet to show he's capable of producing enough offensively. Jake Evans has some defensive utility, but he fits best on a fourth line.

What's left? The single biggest impediment to the Canadiens' attempt to build on last season's great leap forward. They've got long-term pieces in place everywhere else, but that's a big asterisk to carry.

25. San Jose Sharks

Current quality: 26th percentile

Looking for: Top-six center, depth center

Macklin Celebrini is already a star. The next step is superstardom, and that should cause the Sharks to quickly rise up these ranks. In Celebrini, the Sharks have locked in the most important piece. Will Smith is next in line, though he still needs to show a fair bit more to establish himself as a bona fide 2C.

Smith started really slow and looked overwhelmed without the puck at the NHL level, but to his credit played a lot better in the season's second half. More of that effort would boost his stock heavily. If Smith can be the guy many expect him to be, the Sharks would have a formidable 1-2 punch that could be top-five worthy sooner rather than later — just not yet.

After the team's dynamic duo, the Sharks look pretty settled at 3C with the steady and defensively capable Alex Wennberg. It's after him where there's room to improve.

For teams of San Jose's ilk, addition by subtraction usually goes a long way. Just having an average 4C would push the Sharks to the middle of the pack. Further growth from their young dynamic duo should take care of the rest.

Connor Bedard will be a high-end first-liner one day. (Daniel Bartel / Getty Images)

26. Chicago Blackhawks

Current quality: 23rd percentile

Looking for: High-end center, middle-six center

Perhaps no team is better situated to have its needs met by internal candidates than the Blackhawks. Connor Bedard isn't a high-end first-liner yet — but can he be? Obviously. And it might happen soon. Frank Nazar isn't a quality middle-six center yet — but can he be? Obviously. And it might happen soon.

Behind those two is Jason Dickinson, a solid bottom-sixer. In a perfect world, Chicago would add someone in the middle of the mix to stabilize things and help both Bedard and Nazar reach their potential. In the meantime, they're closer to the bottom of these rankings than the middle.

27. Vancouver Canucks

Current quality: 22nd percentile

Looking for: Top-six center

Last year the Canucks — with Elias Pettersson, J.T. Miller and Pius Suter — ranked sixth. No team has fallen farther after Pettersson struggled heavily, Miller was downgraded to Filip Chytil and Suter looks likely to walk in free agency. The depth that made the team a contender during the 2023-24 season has evaporated.

While Pettersson should be able to bounce back with good health and Chytil should be a suitable Suter replacement, that still leaves the Canucks with a gaping hole at 2C. Maybe Chytil steps up and the need lowers to a competent 3C. For now, it's difficult to see the Canucks doing much damage.

28. Seattle Kraken

Current quality: 18th percentile

Looking for: High-end center

Here's the optimist's view for the Kraken: If they shift Matty Beniers to 2C, Shane Wright to 3C and Chandler Stephenson to 4C, everything looks great. That's partially due to Wright popping a bit in his first protracted NHL action; he scored 19 goals last season as a 21-year-old.

Here's the pessimist's view for the Kraken: they can't actually shift any of those guys, so everything looks ... not-great, let's say. All of their centers are playing a level over their heads, and that's no recipe

for success. Beniers and Wright are still young enough to make a leap, but the clock is ticking, and the options behind them are basically non-existent.

29. Anaheim Ducks

Current quality: 12th percentile

Looking for: High-end center, top-nine center

Before last season, Leo Carlsson's top comps were Zibanejad, Barkov and Dubois. He looked like he had the makings of a two-way stud — the exact type of player a rebuilding team needs at the top of the lineup. One year later, his top comps are Nolan Patrick, Brendan Perlini and Christian Fischer. Not ideal!

There are other comps that paint Carlsson in a better light (Ryan Johansen, Sean Couturier and Zibanejad again), but after a slightly disappointing sophomore season, there's a little more doubt about Carlsson's ceiling. The same is true of Mason McTavish, whose poor defensive game has him lining up closely with Max Domi, Dylan Strome and Casey Mittelstadt at the same age.

More than anything, the Ducks need Carlsson and McTavish to step up and break through. Anaheim needs one of them to be a high-end center. Otherwise, this rebuild will struggle to get off the ground.

One thing that could help: a reliable 3C behind them. Trevor Zegras is probably better suited to the wing anyway.

30. Boston Bruins

Current quality: 12th percentile

Looking for: High-end center

For a few seasons in Calgary, Elias Lindholm centered a first line. In 2024-25, the Bruins bet on him being a true first-line center. Those aren't quite the same things, and now Boston has proof.

While Lindholm settled in at least a bit as the season progressed, it's safe to say that Boston is still living without any sort of legit replacement for Patrice Bergeron. Lindholm isn't the whole problem either. He still projects as an above-average 2C. Behind him is Casey Mittelstadt, who had a nightmare of a season and was traded at the deadline for the second straight year, and Matthew Poitras, who bounced between the AHL and NHL. The Bruins, in other words, are looking for centers, plural — not just one fit to take the opening faceoff.

31. Philadelphia Flyers

Current quality: 17th percentile

Looking for: High-end center

From a center-ice perspective, things look really rough for the Flyers. Sean Couturier, Noah Cates and Ryan Poehling — that depth is not great, to say the least. Couturier, at this stage of his career, is probably similar in quality to Anton Lundell, the 3C of the Stanley Cup champions.

Cates is a fine shutdown 3C — but neither he nor Couturier provides much offense, which is a big problem. The Flyers are in desperate need of an offensive star, and they're probably only finding what they need at the draft.

A stud 1C is the most important piece to find in a rebuild and until the Flyers do, they'll be a long way from relevancy.

32. Nashville Predators

Current quality: 9th percentile

Looking for: High-end center, top-nine center

Last season, Nashville's situation down the middle wasn't ideal, but it still made sense. All four of their centers fit neatly into their roles, but all four also came in on the lower end.

This season, things have devolved. Ryan O'Reilly is now a high-end 2C playing on a first line. Behind him are two players who project as fourth-liners (the recently acquired Erik Haula and Colton Sissons) and not much else. So, if you find yourself watching the Predators and wondering how a team with Filip Forsberg, Jonathan Marchessault and Steven Stamkos could look so punchless, there's your answer.