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Columbus Dispatch / Elvis and Aleksandra Merzlikins honor Johnny Gaudreau with second son's middle name

By Brian Hedger – March 27, 2025

Elvis and Aleksandra Merzlikins' second son, Jaxon, already has something in common with his older brother, Knox.

Less than two weeks after joining the Merzlikins and Blue Jackets families prematurely, the new addition's middle name, John, honors Johnny Gaudreau — the former Blue Jackets star who, tragically, was killed along with his brother, Matthew, while they biked last Aug. 29 in Salem County, New Jersey.

Knox, his 3-year old brother, has the middle name "Matiss" to honor former Blue Jackets goalie Matiss Kivlenieks, who was killed July 4, 2021 in a fireworks tragedy at the home of former Blue Jackets goaltending coach Manny Legace. While heartbreaking reasons prompted each name, the idea was to keep the memories of both former players with the Merzlikins the rest of their lives.

"It was important to have him with us," Elvis Merzlikins said of honoring Gaudreau. "Eventually, we are all going to go (back) to Switzerland and continue living our lives, and now there're going to be something from Johnny with us, and I think it was a good idea."

It's not his only tribute to Gaudreau and Kivlenieks.

Merzlikins began this season with a mask that had Gaudreau's No. 13 on the front chin plate, he puts both of their numbers, 13 and 80, on the back plate of new masks and his mask design for the Jackets' first outdoor game March 1 at Ohio Stadium featured a sketch of Gaudreau shooting at puck at Kivlenieks on the back.

Merzlikins also walked right behind Gaudreau's wife, Meredith, and mother, Jane, as they led the Blue Jackets out of the home tunnel at Ohio Stadium for the Jackets' victory over the Detroit Red Wings in the 2025 NHL Stadium Series matchup — which drew an attendance of 94,751 that became the league's second-largest crowd to ever watch a game live.

"Before we started going out, I think Meredith told me, 'Go get it, Elvis,'" Merzlikins said. "It was really important for us, and it felt amazing (walking out). It was such a nice thing to have them there, walking us out. They are a big part of our family here, and they will always be."

Merzlikins and his wife thought of the idea to give Jaxon — whom they call Jax — the middle name "John" while they sat in a hospital room hours after the delivery.

"We talked to Meredith and asked if that was cool," Merzlikins said. "We thought it was a cool idea to do it, especially since Knox has Matiss. Jax can have John. He's kind of our own, I want to say, guardian angel, you know? We just wanted to keep that legacy going. You never know. Maybe he's going to be a hockey player or something, and he's going to have something from Johnny."

Jaxon Merzlikins needed to spend "a couple days" in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at Nationwide Children's hospital, but he's been home for about a week and is doing well. In fact, he and Elvis spent Tuesday bonding.

"We call him Jax," Merzlikins said. "I enjoyed my whole (off) day with him. You just put him on your chest and he's sleeping on you, and there is not much to do. He is just eating. I'm not even changing diapers right now because I am still scared. I have two big hands to manage that, and he's too tiny."

Merzlikins said his new son was almost 21 inches long (53 centimeters) at birth and weighed 6.8 pounds despite arriving in Aleksandra's 36th week of pregnancy. Following the outdoor game, a little more than two weeks earlier, Merzlikins said during the postgame press conference that he nearly had to miss the game due to signals their second child might arrive that weekend.

After his arrival March 16, a short NICU stint at Nationwide Children's Hospital was required.

"He was there three or four days in the NICU," Merzlikins said. "They took amazing care of him. We were definitely grateful."

Since bringing the family's newest member home, the family of three — four counting beloved dog, Koby — has cherished their first time at home.

"As soon as (Jax) got to the house, Knox ran over to meet his brother and he wanted to see him, touch him, play with him," Merzlikins said. "He's 3-½, and he's an amazing bigger brother. He has love in his eyes and he tries to help as much as he can."

The Hockey News / Could Jakob Chychrun's Extension Set The Market For Ivan Provorov?

By Spencer Lazary – March 27, 2025

The Washington Capitals have announced that they have signed Jakob Chychrun to an eight-year extension worth \$72 million, carrying an AAV of \$9 million per season.

While it's great that Chychrun has finally found a home and secured a big payday, fans around the league know this signing will have a ripple effect. For Columbus Blue Jackets fans, this likely impacts the contract Ivan Provorov could receive this summer.

Provorov, a pending free agent, was retained by the Blue Jackets at the March 8 trade deadline—and rightfully so, as they remain in the Eastern Conference wild-card race. But now, with Chychrun landing \$9 million per season, the question becomes: what will Provorov command?

It's an interesting debate because these two defensemen play different styles. Provorov has offensive ability but leans more toward a two-way/defensive role, whereas Chychrun is more offensively driven.

With that in mind, it's worth taking a deeper look at how Chychrun's contract might affect Provorov's potential deal—and if it does, by how much.

First, let's look at their games played, points, and points per game stats.

Chychrun:

2024-25 Season:

Games: 65

Points: 43 (18G + 25A)

Points Per Game: .66 PPG

Career:

Games: 532

Points: 259 (94G + 165A)

Points Per Game: .48

Provorov:

2024-25 Season:

Games: 70

Points: 30 (7G + 23A)

Points Per Game: .42

Career:

Games: 684

Points: 279 (77G + 202A)

Points Per Game: .40

Over the course of their careers, Provorov has recorded more points in more games. However, Chychrun has a higher points-per-game rate. If Chychrun were to play the additional 64 games to match Provorov's total, he would be projected to add roughly 30 more points, bringing his total to 289 points in 684 games.

One important factor to consider with Provorov is that he isn't the Blue Jackets' top defenseman the way Chychrun is for Washington. Zach Werenski holds that role in Columbus, so Provorov shouldn't be expected to be paid like a true No. 1 defenseman.

With Chychrun signing for \$72 million over eight years, Provorov could command somewhere around \$55 million over seven years if he hits the open market, which would give him an AAV of \$7.85 million. If he were to re-sign with the Blue Jackets and wanted that same \$55 million spread over eight years, his AAV would drop to \$6.87 million due to the extra year Columbus can offer.

Regardless of whether Columbus extends him, Provorov shouldn't be in the same salary range as Chychrun or defensemen making north of \$9 million. That tier is reserved for elite defensemen, whereas Provorov likely falls into the second or third tier of top NHL blue-liners.

The Hockey News / Blue Jackets Sign Northeastern University Captain Jack Williams

By Spencer Lazary – March 27, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets have announced the signing of Northeastern University captain Jack Williams to a two-year contract.

Williams, 23, spent the past three seasons at Northeastern, where he recorded 39 goals and 55 assists for 94 points.

Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell spoke about the signing:

"Jack Williams is a skilled, hard-working player with a passion for the game who was a very productive player and leader during his time at Northeastern," said Waddell. "We think he has great potential and are excited to welcome him to the Blue Jackets family."

Williams will report to the AHL's Cleveland Monsters for the remainder of the season.

The Hockey News / Loading The Cannon: Jack Williams

By Jason Newland – March 27, 2025

Yesterday, the Blue Jackets announced the signing of forward Jack Williams of the Northeastern University Huskies.

Williams signed a two-year entry-level contract beginning in 2024-25 and is expected to join the CBJ later this week.

But who is Jack Williams?

Williams is from Biddeford, Maine, and has played the last three seasons at Northeastern University.

Before joining Northeastern, he played three-plus seasons for the Muskegon Lumberjacks of the USHL. For Muskegon, he played 163 games and totaled 116 points. He had 45 goals in his three seasons plus. He captained the Lumberjacks in his final season with the team.

He then moved on to Northeastern, where he played three seasons. He played 106 games for the Huskies, totaling 94 points. He scored 39 goals, including 10 power-play goals, in his time at Northeastern. He also landed on Hockey East's All-Academic Teams in 2022-23 and 2023-24.

GM Don Waddell said of Williams, "Jack Williams is a skilled, hard-working player with a passion for the game, who was a very productive player and leader during his time at Northeastern."

Williams is expected to join the Blue Jackets this week. Whether he plays or not will be interesting to watch. He could add some valuable depth to the Cleveland Monsters as well, but getting him into the NHL locker room and getting him acclimated will be a great experience for the young forward.

What's Next: The Vancouver Canucks visit Columbus on Friday.

The Hockey News / Blue Jackets Sign Defense Prospect Charlie Elick

By Spencer Lazary – March 27, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets have signed defense prospect Charlie Elick to a three-year entry-level contract. Yesterday, the Blue Jackets made another signing, when they agreed to a two-year deal with Jack Williams from Northeastern University.

Elick, 19, was selected by the Blue Jackets in the second round of the 2024 NHL Draft. He has spent the past four seasons in the WHL, splitting time between the Tri-City Americans and Brandon Wheat Kings.

Over 196 career WHL games, Elick recorded 10 goals and 45 assists for 55 points, along with 164 penalty minutes. Standing at 6-foot-3 and 206 pounds, he has the potential to develop into a strong defensive presence on the blue line.

While it remains unclear where he will start his professional career, Elick is expected to report to the Cleveland Monsters in the AHL.

The Hockey News / Blue Jackets Sign Another Undrafted NCAA Defenseman

By Spencer Lazary – March 27, 2025

It's that time of year when undrafted NCAA players start signing entry-level contracts with NHL teams, and the Columbus Blue Jackets have been particularly active in adding college talent.

After signing Jack Williams from Northeastern University yesterday, the Blue Jackets have now reached an agreement with defenseman Caleb MacDonald from the University of North Dakota.

MacDonald, 22, played 35 games as a sophomore this season, registering three goals and seven assists for 10 points.

Blue Jackets President of Hockey Operations and General Manager Don Waddell shared his thoughts on the signing:

"Caleb MacDonald is a big, strong defenseman who excels at blocking shots and being sound and sturdy in the defensive zone," said Waddell. "We are pleased to welcome him to the Blue Jackets and look forward to his taking the next steps in his career with our organization."

The 6-foot-3, 224-pound defenseman has recorded seven goals and 17 assists for 24 points over 66 career NCAA games between the University of North Dakota and the University of Alaska-Fairbanks from 2023 to 2025.

The Hockey Writers / Hughes, Makar & Werenski Have Great Cases For 2025 Norris Trophy

By Mike Fink – March 27, 2025

The 2024-25 Norris Trophy race is tight, and even as the season enters the home stretch, it's too early to tell who will win. There are three top candidates – Cale Makar of the Colorado Avalanche, Quinn Hughes of the Vancouver Canucks, and Zach Werenski of the Columbus Blue Jackets – which is why the Norris Trophy was the debate topic on the latest episode of Ice Time (which you can listen to here).

All three defensemen could easily take home the Norris, which will make voting difficult. In previous seasons, the award had a clear-cut favorite – a player with a lot of offensive skill, if not much defense. This time, all three defensemen are great on the offensive end of the ice but also defend, and the winner will likely come down to the details, whether Hughes or Makar wins their second Norris Trophy or if Werenski earns his first.

The Case For Cale Makar

If it comes down to which defenseman has the best stats, the trophy is Makar's for the taking. As of March 26, he leads all defensemen in goals (27), assists (55), defensive point shares (12.5), and goals created (29.5). He is the best defenseman in the league and has been for a while.

It's why it's surprising that he's only won the Norris Trophy once in his six-year career. The 2021-22 season wasn't his best, but it was the only time he won it, and his great play and Hall-of-Fame career have since been taken for granted. Makar is in a Connor McDavid-esque tier where he won't win the Norris unless he exceeds even his own standards of greatness.

Yet, that's what's happening this season. Makar is on pace to score 30 goals and pass the 100-point mark. If he does both, it will mark a historic season for a defenseman. While many blueliners scored 100 points in the 1970s and 1980s – and Erik Karlsson reached 100 points in 2022-23 to win the Norris Trophy that season – Makar's season would be in a league of its own because of his defensive play. Makar is making his mark at both ends of the ice and proving just as good, if not better, on the defensive end than he is offensively (which is saying a lot).

The counterargument to Makar winning it is that he plays on the same team as Nathan MacKinnon, a Hart Trophy candidate who drives the offense. It's also worth noting that the Avalanche, for the first time in a while, aren't a top-heavy group carried by their stars, especially after the front office overhauled the roster midseason. Those changes might hurt Makar's case, but they should work in his favor because he stayed the same dominant defenseman despite all the moving parts.

The Case For Quinn Hughes

If the Norris comes down to the biggest bang for your buck, Hughes easily wins it. When he's on the ice, the Canucks are one of the best teams in the Western Conference. When he's not, they are one of the worst. Hughes impacts everything the Canucks do, which is why the team's play goes hand-in-hand with his.

Hughes doesn't have the same stats as the other finalists because he's missed time. But consider this: Makar has 2.0 points per 60 minutes this season, while Werenski has 2.2, and Hughes has 2.9. When he gets going, there's no defenseman more valuable in the league.

Missing games will be the first thing held against him. The 4 Nations Face-Off put Makar and Werenski in the spotlight, but Hughes missed the event recovering from injury. That shouldn't and won't work against him, as the Norris is based on regular-season achievement, but the 14 games he missed might hurt his chances with voters. That said, he's on pace to play 68 games, which is not only a good number but will also give him great stats in the end, comparable to Makar's, whom he's chasing.

The other issue is the roster drama. Last season, everything went right for the Canucks, and their best defenseman was their best player, allowing Hughes to win the Norris. This season, the rift between J.T. Miller and Elias Pettersson forced the front office to trade Miller to the New York Rangers halfway through the season.

Hughes is the captain, and it's easy to point to him as one of the reasons the situation got out of hand. He's the leader, and when everything unraveled, he didn't step in. It's a glass half empty or glass half full situation that might be used against him or work in his favor. The team was a mess, and there's an argument to be made that he handled the situation well by not speaking out, dealing with it behind the scenes, and while the rest of the roster fell apart, he powered through to keep his team competitive.

The Case For Zach Werenski

Hughes burst on the scene last season after he rounded out his game to become a complete defenseman. That's Werenski this season when the Blue Jackets needed him to become an elite blueliner. The talent was always there, but now he's tapped into all the skills that make him one of the best in the league.

The Blue Jackets had a difficult offseason, to say the least. They lost a lot of talent and then, late in the summer, had to endure Johnny Gaudreau's tragic passing. They were expected to be one of the worst teams in the NHL, a lottery pick team, and instead, they are fighting for a playoff spot in the Eastern Conference. A lot of credit is due to the young skaters emerging into form, but most of the Blue Jackets' success can be pinned on Werenski's great play.

At 27 years old, Werenski hit his stride and became a complete player. He's stepped up on the offensive end of the ice as the playmaker at the point with 20 goals and 49 assists (with five goals and 16 assists on the power play) while also playing remarkable defense. The Blue Jackets know he's their best player and have treated him like it, averaging 27:06, which not only leads all skaters but is close to half the game.

The question is whether his case hinges on whether the Blue Jackets, who are in a similar boat as the Canucks, make the playoffs. They are on the outside looking in, and by the end of the season, they will either be a wild-card team or close to it. That said, there's a good chance the Blue Jackets will unravel and finish 12th in the East. Whether that takes away votes from Werenski or not is up for debate, but one thing is clear: he needs a strong finish, and so does the team.

Why Werenski Will Win The Norris

The question voters must ask themselves is, how will they remember this season, and what will they take away from it? The Blue Jackets overcame all the obstacles to become a playoff team. Credit will go to head coach Dean Evason, who kept his team on track while establishing a winning culture in an organization that didn't have one. However, credit will go to Werenski.

This is particularly relevant considering how the Blue Jackets will likely end their season. They will rely on Werenski in their push for a playoff spot. His ice time will increase (if that's possible), and he'll play in all situations. His stats will improve, and his impact will be greater by the end of the season.

Werenski also had his “Norris moments,” or moments that put him in the spotlight in the eyes of voters. The 4 Nations put his skill on full display but so did the regular season. His five-point performance on Nov. 21 against the Tampa Bay Lightning, where he scored two goals, including the game-winner, stands out. That game came during an eight-game point streak with 16 points. Then there was the Stadium Series game in Ohio Stadium, where Werenski’s two assists helped the Blue Jackets defeat the Detroit Red Wings 5-3.

Columbus will finish the season with three games against the Ottawa Senators and a game against the New York Islanders, two teams they are battling for a playoff spot. If Werenski can have more signature moments in those games, it will put an exclamation point on his Norris Trophy case.

The Hockey News / Blue Jackets Assign Prospect To AHL Monsters

By Spencer Lazary – March 27, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets have announced that they have assigned OHL prospect Luca Pinelli to the AHL, where he will join the Cleveland Monsters.

Pinelli, 19, has spent the last four seasons in the OHL with the Ottawa 67's. Now that his junior career has come to an end, he will transition to the AHL.

In 246 games with the 67's, he recorded 128 goals and 124 assists for 252 points, along with 209 penalty minutes, 45 power-play goals, 838 shots on goal, and a cumulative +26 plus/minus rating.

He has the potential to develop into a strong middle-six forward for the Blue Jackets in the future. His NHL debut could come as early as next season if he impresses at training camp and earns a roster spot.

Pinelli is known for his ability to get under his opponents' skin. Once he senses he has struck a nerve, he keeps pushing until he draws a penalty. That agitator style is exactly the kind of presence the Blue Jackets could use in the years ahead.

The Athletic / Which of the NHL's bottom 10 teams is most likely to win the Stanley Cup in 10 years?

By The Athletic Hockey Show – March 27, 2025

This week on “The Athletic Hockey Show”, Max Bultman and Corey Pronman were joined by Scott Wheeler and FloHockey’s Chris Peters to discuss which of the bottom 10 teams from last season are most likely to lift a Stanley Cup in the next decade.

A partial transcript has been edited for clarity and length. The full episode is available on the “The Athletic Hockey Show” feed on Apple Podcasts and Spotify.

Max: I want to start with an exercise Corey suggested about which of the bottom 10 teams from last season are most likely to win a Stanley Cup in the next 10 years. We’re going to use last season because those results are final. There are going to be some teams like Detroit, Philadelphia and Buffalo that were not in the bottom 10 last year that maybe belong in the same conversation. If people want to mention those in their answers, I don’t have a problem with that. But just to keep some boundary on it, we are going with the bottom 10 from last year. Which, just to refresh everybody’s mind, was San Jose, Chicago, Anaheim, Columbus, Montreal, Arizona (now Utah), Ottawa, Calgary, Seattle and New Jersey. From that pool, Scott, give me your number one team to win a Stanley Cup in the next ten years.

Scott: I’ll go with the San Jose Sharks. I’ve been really excited by what they’ve done this year, despite how poor they’ve been in the standings and the goal differential. Macklin Celebrini is a transformational player for them. Will Smith has played at a very high level over the last two or three months and has me excited about his ongoing potential to be an upper-echelon point producer in the NHL. Very different conversations, but kind of the Leon Draisaitl to the Connor McDavid or the Mikko Rantanen to the Nathan MacKinnon kind of thing. I think Will Smith has a chance not to be a Hall of Famer like those guys are going to be, but to be a high-end offensive talent. And I’m excited about what they have coming elsewhere in the organization. Yaroslav Askarov is a stud. Sam Dickinson is a stud. And they’re going to add another player of that Sam Dickinson, Will Smith caliber in this year’s draft by drafting again in the top five. It’s not going to be a Macklin Celebrini addition to that group, but I would fully expect they’ll add another high-end piece. If they spend their money well when the time is right — and if they strike in free agency — of the teams that are in a true rebuild and relying on their youth right now like Montreal, Anaheim and Columbus, I think they’ve got the best chance to strike when the iron is hot in a more advantageous way than those other teams do.

Max: Chris, how about you?

Chris: I also went with the San Jose Sharks. It’s really for one reason and one reason only, that’s the centerpiece — Macklin Celebrini. You look at the teams that have won Stanley Cups in recent years, they have that core player. They have that guy who has been part of the organization and has made a difference. You look around the league and see the players that have come in through the draft over the last couple of years, I don’t think we’ve seen a player as complete and as good a building block as Celebrini, notwithstanding guys like Connor McDavid and others. But you see what he is, and you get that feeling that he is what Nathan MacKinnon became for Colorado. Even more so than some of the other guys like Connor Bedard, who we think is going to be a centerpiece for Chicago for a long time to come, and the best is yet to come in his career. But when you have that central figure, and when I think about teams we’ll talk about later, like Montreal or Ottawa — although with Ottawa you can argue whether it’s Tim Stutzle or Brady Tkachuk — there are teams in the bottom 10 that have that core player, but not a single one of them will match what Macklin Celebrini’s ultimate upside is going to be.

Then, as Scott mentioned, they have these other pieces. Will Smith can be the Patrick Kane to the Jonathan Toews. That Batman and Robin scenario that eventually flip-flopped over time, even though I don't think that'll necessarily happen between Smith and Celebrini. The fact that they have Yaroslav Askarov as well is interesting to me. As we've seen, teams can win without centerpiece goaltending and elite goalies. It helps when you have it, but it doesn't necessarily preclude you from winning the Stanley Cup because it's much more about building the rest of that team. But with Celebrini at the forefront and this year's draft, they're adding those pieces. There's more work to be done for the Sharks among those other teams. But to me, the cheat code is Celebrini. You can't win hockey games with one player, but you can't start a rebuild without a cornerstone, and they have it.

Max: I tried to do mine based on replaceable pieces, or pieces that would be impossible to find otherwise, and Celebrini certainly fits that definition. I also love where San Jose is positioned, as Scott alluded to, to get another key piece in this draft. Whether it's Matthew Schaefer, Michael Misa or Porter Martone. They're going to get another premium piece, so I also have them at one. Is it a clean sweep, Corey?

Corey: This is the tough thing with these kinds of exercises, because again, I love Macklin Celebrini. He's an elite player and has a good chance to be a top 10, top five player in the league when he really hits. The problem is where they are at this point right now. To get from where San Jose is right now, which is still an exciting young team from a talent perspective, but as an NHL team, they're quite poor. To get from there to win a Stanley Cup is a giant climb. Think about the last 10 or 15 years, how many times we've said we're excited by the young talent in Buffalo, or excited by the young talent in Columbus? And the real marginal progress those teams took. It can be really tough. So I'm not going to put San Jose at one because I think they have so much room to go to become a playoff team, let alone a contender. A lot is going to need to go right. Yes, we've liked the development of the young kids. But is Will Smith going to become a star? Is William Eklund going to become a star? Will Sam Dickinson become a star? Will Yaroslav Askarov become one? Maybe. But there's so much uncertainty there. It's why the team I have at one is actually one of those organisations I just named, who we said we've always been excited about, and I'm starting to get excited about them again — that's Columbus.

Why Columbus? They've fallen off a little bit lately in the standings, because they were in a playoff race, but they're slipping away from the race right now. But I look at this lineup, both the current lineup and where I think this team is going. One, I see the elite pieces. Zach Werenski is in the MVP discussion this year, so they have the elite player. The way he's playing this year, I also think Adam Fantilli is going to get to that elite level. I don't think he's going to get to Macklin Celebrini level, but I don't think he's going to be dramatically off. This guy looks like he's emerging as a star number one centre in this league. He's gotten comfortable one and a half years into his NHL career. You also look at the talent around him. Kirill Marchenko has elevated, Kent Johnson is having a fantastic year, and Denton Mateychuk looked very promising as a rookie pro. The rebuild hasn't gone perfectly, i.e. David Jiricek. But again, not all rebuilds are going to go perfectly, there's going to be misses. But I think they are a lot further along. They are around 12th in the league in goals this year, and yes, they've got to shore up their goals against. But I think there's a lot of promise there. They have the elite pieces, they have the quality of young depth, and I see a path if things continue to go well for them to build an elite team.

The Athletic / NHL faces in new places: How players traded at the deadline are faring with their teams

By Shayna Goldman – March 27, 2025

When the Oilers stumbled out of the 4 Nations Face-Off break with four consecutive losses, management needed to do something at the trade deadline if the team had any hope of returning to the Stanley Cup Final.

Would they upgrade their chaotic goalie situation? Or focus on the two-way issues in front of the blue paint?

With the addition of Jake Walman, Edmonton addressed a major area of need with one of the best defensemen on the market. Through eight games, the fit has been pretty perfect.

Elsewhere? From Seth Jones in Florida to Mikko Rantanen on his third team of the season in Dallas, let's examine five big-name players in their new surroundings now that the dust has settled from the deadline fallout.

Mikko Rantanen, Dallas Stars

The Stars came into the season as Stanley Cup favorites. But the addition of Rantanen, without subtracting up-and-coming stars such as Wyatt Johnston or Thomas Harley, only solidified their status as a Western Conference contender to watch.

Trading for Mikael Granlund in February boosted the Stars' depth, but Rantanen transformed it. With his elite offensive skill set at the top of the lineup, Dallas has one of the deepest forward groups in the league.

On paper, the Stars look absolutely stacked. That just hasn't translated on the ice often enough in March.

Rantanen got off to an encouraging start with a two-point performance in his Stars debut. He earned a secondary assist on the advantage in the first period, then scored a power-play goal in the third to help spark a comeback attempt that ultimately fell short. One night later, he scored against the Canucks. Through eight games, he is up to five points.

It's been a pretty unremarkable start for Rantanen in Dallas, on the scoresheet and at five-on-five. The Stars look disjointed lately since the trade, and some other existing shortcomings on the back end are holding this group back. It doesn't help that the center the coaches envisioned him starting with, Roope Hintz, was injured in their first game together. Combinations of Rantanen and Johnston, with Jamie Benn and Jason Robertson on the top line, didn't have immediate chemistry, either. Over the last few games, Rantanen has gained some traction with Robertson and Hintz; the results aren't there yet, but this trio shouldn't be expected to shoot 6.3 percent forever, either.

It's easy to get concerned about Rantanen, especially after his time with the Canes, which didn't go according to plan. Just because he isn't popping off doesn't necessarily mean he was just a product of Nathan MacKinnon's game-breaking ability. While the line with Hintz and Robertson has some potential, neither has the speed or similar skills Rantanen is accustomed to. So the winger has to find his footing in a different environment, and the coaches may need to find a better complement for him.

Brock Nelson, Colorado Avalanche

The Avalanche have been one of the most active teams on the trade market throughout the season, but adding Nelson was one of the most pivotal parts of their deadline dealings. After fitting in well with the team last season, 2C Casey Mittelstadt's game fell completely flat this year. To replace him, management added an elite second-line center in Nelson.

Nelson's first game with the Avalanche was an exciting and high-scoring matchup. The new-look second line of Nelson, Valeri Nichushkin and Jonathan Drouin made an impact on the scoresheet with two goals but also was on the ice for two against. Their numbers below the surface were somewhat of a mixed bag, too. And that became a theme over the next six games. While Nelson's line generally won the shot battle and had a 4-3 scoring edge in their five-on-five minutes, the trio was out-chanced and only earned a 37 percent expected-goal rate.

A few lineup tweaks later, Nelson started to find his footing in Colorado. Sharing the ice with MacKinnon for parts of two games helped. Stacking the centers wasn't an ideal solution, but sometimes it helps to play alongside the team's best to get up to speed.

Then against Ottawa, the coaches moved Nelson back to 2C with wingers Artturi Lehkonen and Martin Necas, who have chemistry together. This combination helped ignite Nelson's scoring touch. The Avs dominated play in their first two games, with a combined 70 percent expected-goal rate and a 3-1 edge in scoring versus the Senators and Canadiens. If this line can keep up the momentum, Colorado should have the top-six balance it has been missing all season.

Seth Jones, Florida Panthers

When the Panthers acquired Jones, it looked like an ideal fit. The Panthers have had a knack for maximizing defensemen within their system, and Jones brought something this team was missing with his ability to retrieve pucks back in his own zone and transition up the ice. Florida's defensive depth would help insulate some areas of his game that have trailed off. And instead of being over-leveraged in a top-pair capacity, he just had to be a key cog in the top four.

While he saw a lot of Nikita Kucherov in his first game in Florida on the second pair with Niko Mikkola, he made a solid first impression. Against the Blue Jackets and Sabres in the following days, that pair's minutes were eased. Together, in about 53 five-on-five minutes across those three games, the Mikkola-Jones pairing wasn't on the ice for any goals and earned a 43 percent expected-goal rate.

Then Aaron Ekblad was suspended, which changed the makeup of the team's top four.

Jones has been tasked with replacing Ekblad on the top power-play unit and the first pair with Gustav Forsling, which has subsequently meant taking on heavier usage. It started with a tough outing against Boston when Jones went head-to-head with David Pastrnak. In nine matchup minutes, the Bruins only slightly outshot Florida 9-8, but the quality of those chances separates the two. The Panthers earned less than 34 percent of the expected goal share in those minutes. Two days later, the story was similar against Toronto. The Maple Leafs and Panthers broke even in shots when Jones and Auston Matthews were matched up, but Florida only mustered an 18 percent expected-goal rate.

The Forsling-Jones pairing has had better outings since, including against the Penguins on Sunday. But the results as a whole are pretty discouraging — the pair has a 40.6 percent expected goal rate and has been outscored 5-3. The early results are concerning, but maybe with more time to acclimate to his new team and role, Jones can stabilize his game ahead of the postseason.

Dylan Cozens, Ottawa Senators

The Cozens for Josh Norris deal was one of the most interesting of deadline day. It wasn't the typical trade that sees a playoff hopeful moving draft picks and prospects in exchange for a pending UFA. It was

a player-for-player hockey trade, similar to one the Sabres made a year earlier when Casey Mittelstadt went to Colorado in exchange for Bowen Byram. What added more intrigue this year was that it involved two players who play the same position in their own way. Unlike Norris, Cozens is a puck-mover who needs more puck touches to be successful.

Cozens' value had plummeted in Buffalo since his breakout year in 2022-23. His scoring slowed and his puck-moving ability dropped off. While he was still entering the zone often and efficiently this season, Cozens struggled to turn his rushes into shots and chances.

In eight games, there have been some signs of improvement at five-on-five. With the team shooting 14.7 percent in his minutes and rocking a 0.914 save percentage, there is an element of luck in play here. However, positives below the surface contribute to that, like Cozens' shot creation; his shot volume is unchanged from earlier this season, but the quality has improved now that he is driving to the slot a bit more. His play-making also seems to be trending up, and playing between shoot-first wingers in David Perron and Drake Batherson helps.

Cozens' defense is still suspect, and he has to generate more offensively if the team is going to sustain its hot shooting. But it's a promising start for a player who has struggled to turn his skill into consistent results over the last couple of seasons.

Eighteen days after arriving in Ottawa, the young center has fit in seamlessly — thanks in part to the help of an old friend.

Jake Walman, Edmonton Oilers

Last summer, the Red Wings packaged a second-rounder as a sweetener to clear Walman's cap hit. A few months later, the Oilers spent a first-round pick to acquire him. And so far, the fit has been pretty seamless.

Walman's Oilers' tenure started with a bang. In his first game with Edmonton, he earned a season-high Game Score of 5.24 thanks to his two-way play. The Oilers outshot the Stars with 26-10 attempts, controlled play with 83 percent of the expected-goal share and outscored Dallas 3-0. A Walman stretch pass helped set up one of those goals, scored by Zach Hyman.

Against the Stars, he skated alongside Darnell Nurse, his primary partner so far. In that second-pair role, he brings a lot of value on both ends of the ice with his speed and anticipation. He can be counted on to break out of his own zone with control and make quick passes up to the Oilers' forwards. He also brings some defensive strengths, such as his ability to close lanes and block shots.

One of the most important elements Walman brings to Edmonton is his versatility. When Mattias Ekholm was sidelined, he jumped up to Evan Bouchard's left on the first pair. There, he can play a more defensive role to complement his partner. In about 57 five-on-five minutes with Bouchard, the duo earned 56.6 percent of the expected-goal share and a 3-1 scoring edge. On Nurse's right, the team has outscored opponents 5-2. His play on either pairing helps solidify the top four.

The Oilers' flexibility was pretty limited on defense through much of the season, but Walman opens up more possibilities thanks to his ability to play both sides in different capacities. That adaptability should be clutch in the postseason.

The Athletic / NHL history's greatest record-breaking goals: Ranking 12 from worst to best

By Sean McIndoe – March 27, 2025

With the Alex Ovechkin goals chase now down to single digits, it no longer feels like a question of if he'll break Wayne Gretzky's mark this season, but rather when.

We've already covered that question a few weeks back. But there's a second and maybe even more important question that's now looming: Will the record-breaking goal be any good?

The NHL is already worrying about this, especially the possibility that the record-breaker falls victim to their very bad and nit-picky replay review system. Other fans have been openly antagonizing the hockey gods with ideas for the most Team Chaos-worthy way the record could fall. (Personally, I'm a big fan of the "Ovechkin has an empty-net look against the Penguins but Sidney Crosby throws his stick for an automatic goal, meaning Sid's the one who actually 'scores' the record-breaker" scenario.)

Whatever happens, it will be a cool moment. But how cool? Just in case Ovechkin is looking for inspiration, today's column is going to look at a dozen historic NHL goals that broke an important record. To be clear, we're not worried about individual milestones, or important game-winners or sudden-death snipes. We want the guys who broke a significant record, did it with a goal and did it in style. Just as we all hope Ovechkin will over the next few weeks.

We'll use a modified version of the scale we established for the goalie goals ranking, with an emphasis on the creativity and/or skill of the goal itself. We'll go from worst to best, which means there's really only one pick for the 12th spot ...

12. Wayne Gretzky's 50th goal in 39 games, 1981

The record: I suppose you could argue over whether this one is really a "record" so much as a milestone. But it's the fastest anyone has ever made it to the hallowed 50-goal mark, and it's certainly stood the test of time all these decades later, so we'll allow it. Gretzky came into the Oilers' 39th game already having 45 goals, then scored four times to set the stage for some history.

Style points: It's an empty-net goal. As far as those go, this one is fine, but come on. When it comes to Ovechkin's moment, nobody wants this. 2/20.

The reaction: Pretty good. The game is in Edmonton, so the fans go nuts, and the commentators give it the perfect mix of excitement and incredulousness. Even the director gets into the fun, as we cut to an artsy close-up of the red light. 8/10.

The celebration: The open-field tackle by a teammate is pretty fun. 7/10.

Bonus points: Having the goal come at 19:57 is as close to a buzzer-beater as we'll come on this list. +1.

Total score: Acting like hitting 50 goals in 39 games is more impressive than just doing it in 40 is kind of arbitrary, but since the next game was on the road, this was a cool moment for Edmonton fans. You could even argue that this is one of the best empty-net goals ever. But that still doesn't make it good. 18/40.

11. Denis Potvin's 271st goal, 1986

The record: With this goal, Potvin became the all-time leading goal scorer among defensemen.

Style points: Ugh. He dangles a bit, but even based on the standard of “mid-80s goals against the Maple Leafs,” that one’s got a stench to it. 8/20.

The reaction: It’s decent, although you wonder if all the fans realized what they’d just watched. 7/10.

The celebration: A little understated, but that’s appropriate when you’ve won four recent Cups and are in the process of beating the Leafs 9-2 in January. 5/10.

Bonus points: For that salad bowl of a helmet. -1.

Total score: The record didn’t last all that long, as we’ll see in a few entries. 19/40.

10. Phil Esposito’s 59th goal, 1971

The record: At this point, the record for goals in a season is 58, held by Bobby Hull. Esposito ended up shattering it, with the record-breaker coming with nearly a month left in the season.

Style points: It’s a nifty little tip play on a setup from Ted Green. Not bad, but it all happens so quickly, you don’t really get the build. 11/20.

The reaction: We can’t really tell from the clip since it’s not the original footage, but this game is in Los Angeles and they’ve only had the NHL for a few years at this point, so it’s probably fair to assume they may not have fully appreciated the moment. 5/10.

The celebration: Esposito has a nice little solo dance, and I’m always a sucker for the “teammate immediately goes to get the puck” move. 7/10.

Bonus points: For those Kings uniforms, which have ruined my whole day. -3.

Total score: It’s still wild that Esposito ended up topping Hull’s record by 131 percent. If somebody did that to the single-season record today, it would mean scoring 120 goals. I’ll file that under “unlikely.” 20/40.

9. Ray Bourque’s 386th goal, 1999

The record: With this goal, Bourque passes Paul Coffey, who’d already passed Potvin as the all-time goals king among defensemen.

Style points: It’s not exactly a highlight-reel goal, but it’s classic Bourque, as he gets open and then rips a quick shot that finds the net. 13/20.

The reaction: Not bad. 6/10.

The celebration: It’s understated compared to some others we’ll see, but you can never go wrong with the classic fist pump. 8/10.

Bonus points: This is where we have to hold this goal up as a cautionary example, for reasons you may have already caught on to. Did you catch the announcer saying “first goal of the season” there? That’s because this is the Bruins’ season opener, meaning Bourque had chased the record the year before but fallen a goal short, making everyone wait a summer for it to finally fall. Don’t even think about doing that to us, Alex. -2.

Total score: Solid work by the organist, though. 25/40.

8. Darryl Sittler’s ninth point, 1976

The record: This will be the only single-game record on our list, which has its pros and cons. While you get the “I can’t believe this is happening” vibe, you also lose the long-term build that season or career records bring. Still, this one is basically as big as it gets, and is still standing almost 50 years later.

Style points: It's pretty good, in that 1970s way. The record-breaker is certainly better than the 10th point, which is a lucky bank shot from behind the line. 12/20.

The reaction: The Maple Leaf Gardens crowd gives the moment the reaction it deserves. 8/10.

The celebration: Nothing too crazy, although Sittler does that personal trademark where he looks like he's about to fall over. Having Lanny McDonald arrive for the hug is a nice moment. 5/10.

Bonus points: For the other coach being Don Cherry, which was always a fun touch. +1.

Total score: Let's pour one out for Dave Reece. 26/40.

7. Wayne Gretzky's 1,851st point, 1989

The record: While it's not a goals record, it's broken with a goal, so we'll include it. Enjoy it while you can, kids, this is the last time we'll ever see the NHL's all-time points record fall.

Style points: It's no beauty, but it does nicely combine two Gretzky trademarks: his backhand and his ability to just leak out of the play until he's all alone in exactly the right place at the right time. 10/20.

The reaction: It's not often that a record can be broken on the road and have it feel even more appropriate than it happening at home, but Gretzky scoring in Edmonton a year after he was traded away was just too perfect. Gordie Howe being there is the icing on the cake. 10/10.

The celebration: It's fine. 6/10.

Bonus points: For the way longtime linemate Jari Kurri delivers an almost imperceptible pat on the back right after the goal. +1.

Total score: Not bad, but just short of the next (and final) Gretzky entry. 27/40.

6. Wayne Gretzky's 802nd goal, 1994

The record: Five years after Gretzky broke the points record, this is the big one, the one Ovechkin is chasing right now. At the time, Howe had held the mark for three decades, passing Rocket Richard's 544 in 1963-64 and finishing his career at 801.

Style points: It's pretty close to the easiest record-breaking goal you'll ever see, as Gretzky gets fed for a wide-open net. Still, it's a cool play that develops at just the right pace, and I always thought it was neat that the underrated Marty McSorley was the one to put it on a platter for his longtime teammate. 12/20.

The reaction: The crowd goes nuts, Gary Thorne knocks it out of the park and then we grind the whole game to a halt so new commissioner Gary Bettman can come out and give Gretzky a scrapbook that he presumably made himself. No notes. 10/10.

The celebration: Nothing overboard, although Gretzky does break out his trademark tippy-toe dance. 7/10.

Bonus points: For the presence of that Target ad in the corner boards in L.A. in the early 90s. It knows what it did. -1.

Total score: I didn't plan it this way, but I kind of love that the last time the all-time goals record fell, it was a moment that sets the bar reasonably high while still leaving room for Ovechkin to pass it. 28/40.

5. Mike Modano's 1,233rd point, 2007

The record: This is the moment that saw Modano become the highest-scoring American-born player in history. He still holds the record, retiring with 1,374 points, although Patrick Kane should catch him next year.

Style points: We'll see some nice goals on today's list, but this is the only classic breakaway. He basically flubs it, but recovers enough that it looks vaguely intentional, and the whole thing basically sends Evgeni Nabokov to the shadow realm. 17/20.

The reaction: It's a road game, although the San Jose crowd gives it a decent pop. 5/10.

The celebration: A wave that turns into a high-five. It's fine. 6/10.

Bonus points: For Mike Babcock not being there to ruin it. +1.

Total score: It's not the most memorable record-breaking moment in NHL history, but as far as goals go, it's pretty great. 29/40.

4. Bobby Orr's 100th point, 1970

The record: Orr establishes a new record by becoming the first defenseman to ever hit the 100-point mark, which was supposed to be hallowed territory reserved only for forwards.

Style points: It's classic Orr, an end-to-end rush where he seems like he's moving at regular speed and everyone else is stuck in slow motion. Short-handed too. 17/20.

The reaction: It's a bit muted, only because "Bobby Orr embarrasses a whole team" wasn't exactly a unique moment back then. 6/10.

The celebration: The goal makes it 3-2, which means the game is close enough that Orr can actually celebrate a bit instead of acting embarrassed like he usually had to. 6/10.

Bonus points: For Derek Sanderson's sideburns. +1.

Total score: This one is a beauty. And to make it even better, nobody seems to have taken any overrated photos of it. 30/40.

3. Paul Coffey's 47th goal, 1986

The record: With three games left in the season, Coffey ties and then breaks Orr's single-season goals record for a defenseman.

Style points: That's just a jaw-dropper of an end-to-end rush, including a one-on-four finish. 18/20.

The reaction: We get that great combo of a crowd going wild and an announcer who's smart enough to go quiet and let us take it in. 8/10.

The celebration: Not bad, although you can tell Coffey is a little sheepish over how bad he just made the Canucks look. 6/10.

Bonus points: For a pre-goal cameo from the soon-to-be-traded Cam Neely, who gets a partial break only to have Coffey catch him and blatantly hook him, just in case you forgot this was the 1980s. +1.

Total score: To this day, Orr and Coffey are the only two defensemen to get to 40 goals. 33/40.

2. Bobby Hull's 51st goal, 1966

The record: It had been 21 years since Rocket Richard became the first player to hit 50 goals, and while that record had since been tied by Bernie "Boom Boom" Geoffrion in 1961 and Hull himself in 1962, nobody has ever topped it.

Style points: It's just about the perfect Hull goal, a solo rush that ends with a booming slap shot. Seriously, if Ovechkin did exactly this to break the record, it would be just about perfect. 18/20.

The reaction: The fans are buzzing, as they've been waiting four games since Hull hit 50. They throw hats on the ice even though it's his first goal of the game, because why not? Great job by the announcer, too, and we eventually even get an on-ice interview. 9/10.

The celebration: It's relatively low-key, although I kind of love Hull stopping to offer firm handshakes to his teammates on the bench. 6/10.

Bonus points: For the moment at 8:00, where Hull picks up a hat and puts it on, which I would like to make mandatory for all players from now on. +2.

Total score: As far as record-breaking goals go, this one is pretty much perfect. Do this, Alex. 35/40.

1. Teemu Selanne's 54th goal, 1993

The record: With 20 games left in the season, there wasn't much suspense over whether Selanne would break Mike Bossy's rookie goals record. But doing it at home was going to be tough, as he went into this game needing three goals and with a long road trip looming. But goals in the first and second periods set the stage for some late-game drama.

Style points: Yes, that is indeed Tie Domi making the Hail Mary pass to spring Selanne. From there, it's a foot race, which turns out exactly as you'd expect. Stephane Fiset's desperation dive doesn't work, but it makes the goal even more memorable. 16/20.

The reaction: The crowd is fantastic, but the real highlight here is when the Jets owner randomly shows up with a gold hockey stick, and Selanne's confused reaction makes it clear he had no idea that was going to happen. 9/10.

The celebration: Quite possibly the most iconic celebration in NHL history. But we're deducting a point for Dallas Eakins trying to casually one-hand the flung glove and dropping it, a moment I assume haunts him every day. Use two hands, kids! 9/10.

Bonus points: For the "52, 53, 54, Bossy's record is no more" sign in the crowd that predicted Selanne's three goals. Honestly, that might be the best fan-made sign ever, right? +3.

Total score: That doesn't leave a lot of room for Ovechkin to top. Here's hoping he's got a home-ice hat trick and a sick celebration ready for us. And that one of his teammates knows how to catch a glove. 37/40.

ESPN / Top NHL prospects in the men's NCAA hockey tournament

By Rachel Doerrie – March 27, 2025

With the end of March approaching quickly, the college hockey season is coming to an end, and the NCAA tournament begins on Thursday on the networks of ESPN. The Frozen Four takes place the second weekend in April, with the national championship on April 12.

Many players involved in the proceedings will find themselves in NHL uniforms in the next few weeks, or next few years. There is no shortage of talent in this year's tournament, and it should make for some incredible hockey and memorable moments.

With that in mind, there are some key NHL prospects to watch over the next couple of weeks, sorted by team.

Whether they are highly touted draft picks from years past, expected lottery picks this summer or late bloomers who have grabbed the attention of the scouting world, there are quite a few players who will be looking to make their mark on the tournament -- and the pro ranks thereafter.

Boston College Eagles

Ryan Leonard, James Hagens, Gabe Perreault and Jacob Fowler

Boston College is loaded with talent and owns the top ranking in college hockey. The offensive engine is led by three first-round picks. Leonard, expected to sign with the Washington Capitals at the conclusion of the college season, finished tied for the Hockey East lead in points per game. He is also a Hobey Baker finalist after being named the Hockey East Player of the Year. The highly skilled forward has "do what it takes" competitiveness, with physicality, skill and the emotional toolbox to lead the Eagles. He will certainly leave his mark on this tournament, through clutch goals or tide-turning shifts.

Perreault is expected to sign with the New York Rangers at the conclusion of the season, and they can certainly use his offensive prowess. Perreault's game is more well-rounded, as he has developed reliable playmaking ability in his time at BC. Perreault can put the puck in the net through the tightest of windows, and that kind of ability makes him a game breaker. He showed it at the World Juniors, and he has been a consistent offensive powerhouse for the Eagles, tying Leonard and Cole O'Hara (UMass) for the Hockey East lead in points per game.

Perreault's playmaking development has made both Leonard and Hagens more dangerous and keeps defenders honest. For Boston College to win the tournament -- and the Eagles are the favorite -- Perreault will need to play a major role in dicing up defenders and scoring on goaltenders.

The third member of that line is 2025 lottery pick James Hagens. Ranked second in ESPN's draft rankings, the true freshman is up for the Rookie of the Year after a point-per-game season for the top-ranked team in the nation. Hagens is a well-rounded player and has shown an ability to play a shutdown game as well as an offensive game. He protects pucks well, and constantly moves his feet to create space. He defers to his linemates more than he should, but a standout performance that showcases a dynamic playmaking ability would go a long way to cementing himself as the top forward in this year's NHL draft class.

Not only do the Eagles have significant talent up front, their goaltender has also been one of the NCAA's best for two seasons. Fowler (Montreal Canadiens) was nominated for the Mike Richter Award for the second straight season, with a save percentage of .940, a goals-against average of 1.64 and an NCAA-leading seven shutouts. He is the backbone of the Eagles' roster and has shut the door in numerous key

situations. Boston College is expected to go on a deep run in the Frozen Four, and Fowler will need to be a key difference-maker if the Eagles plan to be playing on Championship Saturday.

Denver University Pioneers

Zeev Buium, Jack Devine and Carter King

Buium (Minnesota Wild) has left a significant impression during his time in the NCAA, and the dynamic defenseman is looking to add to his trophy case. The Hobey Baker finalist tallied 43 points in 38 games this season, and played key roles for both Denver and the U.S. World Junior team. Buium has already won an NCAA title, and he's looking for a second to match two gold medals at the World Juniors.

Buium will dictate the pace of play from the back end and tilt the ice in Denver's favor, while playing a significant portion of each game. His transition game is elite, both offensively and defensively, and his skating allows him to walk the line to find lanes with ease. Denver is going to need him to be at his dazzling best to make the Frozen Four.

Jack Devine (Florida Panthers) led the nation in scoring this season, with 56 points in 41 games, and is Denver's second Hobey Baker finalist. He drives play for the Pioneers, forcing his way to the middle of the ice and creating dangerous scoring chances. Devine will be a handful for any defender or goalie to manage at the front of the net. He generates some of the best scoring opportunities in the nation because of his quick hands and willingness to play in the dirty areas. He finds small passing lanes to generate opportunities for teammates and is a well-rounded offensive player with play-driving capability.

One of the top NCAA free agents, King will draw significant attention from scouts at this tournament. The Pioneers' captain has been a threat all season, notching a 20-goal/40-point season. The 23-year-old brings a level of gritty physicality that is disruptive on the forecheck and at the front of the net. He's almost always the hardest worker on the ice and is a key cog in Denver's offensive scheme that centers around activation and free movement throughout the offensive zone.

There is potential for a fourth-line role in today's NHL, and if King can showcase his well-rounded game, there will be more than a few teams interested in signing him.

Maine Black Bears

Albin Boija

The Swedish-born Boija is a finalist for the Mike Richter Award after posting a season that included a save percentage of .930, 1.75 goals-against average and four shutouts. He backstopped Maine to the Hockey East title and won tournament MVP in the process.

He seems to be leaning toward going back to school next season, but a standout performance in the NCAA tournament may have some NHL teams banging down his door to sign a pro contract. The 6-foot-1 goaltender is technically sound and makes critical saves at key times for his team. There is real potential for Boija to become a platoon goalie in the NHL or a quality backup. The Black Bears drew host Penn State in the first round, and while Maine is better on paper, Boija will need to be the backbone for his team to win in enemy territory.

Penn State Nittany Lions

Aiden Fink

The Nashville Predators have a good one in Fink, as the sophomore is a Hobey Baker finalist after finishing third in the NCAA in scoring. He's an outstanding play driver with quality puck touches, plays to high-danger areas and there is little doubt that he is the offensive engine for the Nittany Lions.

He manages the puck well with good decisions and puck protection, while generating scoring chances off the rush and during offensive zone play. His transition play is notable on both sides of the puck, and is a translatable skill at the professional level. If Penn State is going to knock off the Black Bears, Fink is going to have a lot to do with it.

Connecticut Huskies

Joey Muldowney and Jake Richard

Muldowney (San Jose Sharks) had quite the season for the Huskies and landed on the Hockey East All-Tournament Team. He tied the record for most hat tricks (three) in a season by a Husky and finished second in the NCAA goal-scoring race behind Ryan Leonard. The sophomore is red-hot heading into the NCAA tournament, with seven goals in his past four games, and is often the best player on the ice for the Huskies.

The sixth-rounder saw his production skyrocket this season, with an elevated role and a better release. He's an excellent skater with speed to burn and uses quick strikes to get past defenders to create passing lanes in dangerous areas. If there's a Husky that's "got that dawg in him," it is Muldowney and his team-leading six game-winning goals this season.

With 42 points in 35 games as a 20-year-old, Jake Richard (Buffalo Sabres) had an impressive season. His vision and ability to execute quality passes from anywhere on the ice is excellent. He finds players through traffic, in short and long range and hits the tape. Richard heads to the NCAA tournament with 13 points in his past six games, and he facilitates the Huskies offensive scheme with his playmaking ability. If the Huskies need a big play, count on it coming from Muldowney or Richard.

Michigan State Spartans

Trey Augustine, Isaac Howard and Karson Dorwart

Howard (Tampa Bay Lightning) led the NCAA with 1.42 points per game and finished third with 26 goals. The first-round draft pick took a non-traditional route compared to most first-round picks, opting to play a third season in college. It has paid off, with Howard named the Big Ten Player of the Year and scoring the championship winner in the Big Ten tournament.

The chemistry between Howard and Charlie Stramel (Wild) has defined Michigan State's season, leading the Spartans to back-to-back Big Ten titles. Howard is an elite scorer, and if Stramel can continue to find him in space, it bodes very well for the Spartans to make the Frozen Four.

Trey Augustine (Detroit Red Wings) is a nominee for the Mike Richter Award after being named the Big Ten Goaltender of the Year. With a .927 save percentage, 2.02 goals-against average and three shutouts, Augustine backstopped Michigan State to its second straight conference title, and the second overall seed in the NCAA tournament. Augustine is technically sound and widely believed to be Detroit's future in goal. The Michigan native makes key saves, shows excellent flexibility and reads the play to anticipate threats. It could come down to Augustine versus Fowler for the championship, and Augustine is more than capable of holding his own in that battle.

Dorwart is drawing attention as a free agent and should have plenty of opportunity to showcase himself over the next two weeks. Dorwart has been a consistent offensive producer for the Spartans over three seasons, and his status as a 6-foot-1 center with a fast-paced game and good playmaking ability has drawn the attention of NHL teams.

Dorwart is unlikely to be an offensive producer at the NHL level, but his playmaking and awareness are translatable and lead to him becoming an effective transition checker. The Spartans need scoring from

their secondary options to have success in the tournament, and Dorwart can play a key role and boost his status as a free agent.

Cornell Big Red

Ondrej Psenicka and Dalton Bancroft

Cornell has two players that scouts will be watching closely, as both are free agents drawing significant interest.

Psenicka stands out for a few reasons, starting with his 6-foot-6 height. The 24-year-old Czech uses his size to his advantage, leaning on defenders, bullying his way to the middle of the ice and winning battles. He lacks flashy offensive talent but is positionally sound, makes quality defensive plays and wreaks havoc at the net front. NHL clubs love big guys who are reliable and will do the dirty work, so it is easy to see why teams think Psenicka could be a reasonable bet to play bottom-six NHL minutes in the next few seasons.

Bancroft is one of the more interesting players to watch at the tournament. There are times where Bancroft looks dominant, beating defenders with ease, creating chances and catching goalies by surprise with an NHL-quality release, which is sure to bring fans out of their seats. There are questions as to whether he plays with enough pace to score at the professional level, but if he doesn't, there is a path to being a bottom-six, defensive checking winger who chips in occasionally on offense.

Boston University Terriers

Quinn Hutson, Cole Hutson and Cole Eiserman

The Hutson brothers are having quite the season, between Lane's rookie season in Montreal and the brilliant seasons of Quinn and Cole at BU.

Cole (Capitals) is a dynamic offensive defenseman, who tallied 40 points in 35 games as a freshman. His agility and balance routinely allow him to send opponents in the wrong direction, create open space and make him a menace to deal with at the top of the offensive zone. Cole was one of the best, if not the best, defensemen in the NCAA this season, and he should be a standout player for BU in the tournament.

Quinn, the eldest of the Hutson brothers and the only forward, led BU in scoring this season with 47 points in 34 games. A goal scorer by trade, the eldest Hutson shows tremendous chemistry with his brother and is always moving to find the best areas to generate scoring opportunities. He plays a give-and-go style, relying on quick possessions and playing off his teammates. This speaks to his anticipation and ability to read the game. There is quality NHL upside to Quinn's game, and he is a free agent. Showcasing his capabilities by putting the puck in the net a few times at the tournament will certainly grab the attention of NHL managers and scouts.

New York Islanders prospect Eiserman has developed nicely this season, with 21 goals in 35 games, and he led the nation with 10 power-play goals. Eiserman's shot has been his calling card for a number of years, and there is no reason to believe that it will be any different in the tournament. Eiserman's game lacks well-roundedness, but he's a game breaker with his goal-scoring ability. That was on full display at the World Juniors, and Boston University is going to need Eiserman to beat goaltenders early and often to have a chance at making the Frozen Four.

Ohio State Buckeyes

Gunnarwolfe Fontaine and Riley Thompson

Fontaine (Predators) notched his first point-per-game campaign in his fifth NCAA season, his first with Ohio State after four at Northeastern. He notched career highs in goals and assists, and Nashville retains his signing rights until he can become a free agent in August.

Fontaine led the Buckeyes in scoring during a season that saw them lose the Big 10 championship game in double overtime to Michigan State. He comes into the tournament with three goals on 11 shots in his past two games. He has been a consistent shooter for the Buckeyes, finishing second on the team with 105 in 39 games. The 24-year-old is small, which works against him in today's NHL, but his work rate, speed and ability to get shots off interest scouts for an organizational depth role (if he doesn't sign with Nashville).

Thompson is a free agent drawing significant attention and stands out because of his 6-foot-4 frame. The 22-year-old forward tallied 17 goals and 33 points in 39 games after transferring from the University of Alaska-Anchorage. What he lacks in flash, he makes up for in effectiveness. He plays off his teammates well, understands spacing, is efficient with his puck movement and consistently creates scoring chances.

Scouts speak highly of his off-puck play, defensive positioning and reads, leading some to believe he'll be an effective NHL player. He tracks back through the middle, takes away passing lanes and doesn't chase physicality. The maturity of his game could see him develop into a quality defensive forward, providing organizational depth in the NHL.

UMass Minutemen

Cole O'Hara, Aydar Suniev and Michael Hrabal

UMass has been a quality program for quite a while, and have more than a few players of interest in the tournament. Their top three centers -- Lucas Mercuri (Carolina Hurricanes), Dans Locmelis (Boston Bruins) and Kenny Connors (Los Angeles Kings) -- are as deep as it comes in the NCAA, with quality skill and reliability.

O'Hara (Predators) led Hockey East in scoring and ought to have been a Hobey Baker finalist with 22 goals and 51 points in 38 games. O'Hara plays both sides of the puck well as an offensive driver and quality penalty killer. He is an all-situations player that shifts momentum into his team's favor. The right winger is impactful in many areas of the ice, and the Predators would do well to convince him to sign at the conclusion of the season. O'Hara can turn the tide of a game on his own and was a rising star in college hockey. Teams are going to have their hands full with his speed, rush attacks and defensive prowess that turns into offense quicker than any other player in college hockey. Whether it is offensively or defensively, expect O'Hara to play a key role for UMass.

Suniev (Calgary Flames) had a great sophomore season, notching 18 goals and 36 points in 33 games. His playmaking has always been good and his shooting developed nicely this season, leading to a 50% increase in goals. Suniev led UMass with 116 shots and finished tied for second in goals on the team. He protects the puck well, is difficult to pin and creates scoring chances with very little space. His vision and ability to execute offensive plays will be key in the first matchup against Minnesota.

Hrabal (Utah Hockey Club) has been excellent in his second season as the starter, posting a .926 save percentage and 2.33 goals-against average with two shutouts. The 20-year-old has provided quality starts on a consistent basis and is a key pillar of UMass' success. Hrabal's size (6-foot-7) allows him to see over screens, making it very difficult to "take away his eyes." He covers the bottom of the net well with his length and is able to seal vulnerable areas of the net with ease. If UMass is going to make a run, Hrabal will need to be at his puck-stopping best.

Minnesota Golden Gophers

Jimmy Snuggerud, Matthew Wood and Sam Rinzel

Snuggerud (St. Louis Blues) outscored his closest teammate by 11 points this season, and led Minnesota with 22 goals and 49 points in 39 games. A finalist for the Hobey Baker, the first-rounder bounced back after a down season in his sophomore campaign and is expected to be a middle-six NHL scoring winger. He reads the game and anticipates the play well, allowing him to capitalize on open space and create scoring opportunities for his line.

He's a dual-threat player who can reliably score and set up teammates, making him difficult to defend. He'll need to be a standout player for Minnesota if the team hopes to go on a deep run.

Wood (Predators) transferred from Connecticut to Minnesota, and his production increased dramatically. The 6-foot-4 right winger is a goal scorer who creates opportunities by protecting pucks well and getting to the net at the right time. He's learning to use his body to more effectively shield defenders and allow him to take advantage of his excellent shot. He's not the powerful play driver you think someone his size would be, favoring a more methodical approach that allows him to lurk and arrive at the right time to get a quality shot on goal.

Rinzel (Chicago Blackhawks) had quite the season at Minnesota, a program that has developed quite a few quality defensemen over the past few years. His game is more refined than the raw potential he was drafted with, and the big, right-handed defender tallied 31 points this season. His skating has always been top-quality and has allowed him to develop into one of the premier NCAA transition defenders. He reads the play well and understands how to utilize his skill to affect the outcome of a play. There is a real chance Rinzel becomes a second pairing defenseman in the NHL by the time he's 24.

Minnesota leans on Rinzel and Ryan Chesley (Capitals) to anchor their back end, and both consistently tilt the ice in Minnesota's favor. They'll need to play effectively and often if Minnesota is going to make a run to the Frozen Four.

Minnesota State Mavericks

Alex Tracy

After being named the Central Collegiate Hockey Association's Player of the Year and Goaltender of the Year, Tracy found himself on the short list for the Hobey Baker and a nominee for the Mike Richter Award as well. A free agent, Tracy has cemented himself as one of the NCAA's best goaltenders.

In three seasons at Minnesota State, his workload increased season over season, and his performance flourished. The 23-year-old finished with a .945 save percentage, a goals-against average of 1.41 and five shutouts. The Mavericks lack the star power that other schools bring to the tournament, and they will need to rely on Tracy to give them a chance at beating the likes of Western Michigan, Massachusetts or Minnesota in their regional. Tracy did not give up more than three goals in a regular-season game in 2024-25, a trend he will need to continue through the tournament.

Western Michigan Broncos

Alex Bump

It has been fun to watch Bump's development trajectory. With 23 goals and 46 points in 38 games, he is the premier offensive player for Western Michigan. Generating a whopping 225 shots on goal this season, the Philadelphia Flyers prospect has a knack for generating scoring chances and keeping Western Michigan in the offensive zone while he's on the ice.

Bump is excellent in transition, showcasing his quick hands, deception and ability to change pace to burn defenders. His release is top-notch, and he catches goaltenders by surprise on multiple occasions each night. Expect Bump to drive the play forward for Western Michigan and be their key marksman throughout the tournament. There's real potential for Bump to become a middle-six NHL scorer, and Philadelphia should be very excited about him.

Sportsnet.ca / Scout's Analysis: Ranking the top 64 prospects for the 2025 NHL Draft

By Jason Bukala – March 27, 2025

With the major junior playoffs and NCAA tournament set to begin this weekend, and European league playoffs already winding down, the 2025 NHL Draft is on the horizon. It's an exciting time of year for fans of the game and the scouting fraternity.

My colleague, Sam Cosentino, released his draft rankings just last week. This week, it's my turn to step to the plate and present my personal list identifying who I currently value in the top two rounds of the draft class.

THE TOP FIVE

No. 1: Matthew Schaefer, D, 6-foot-2, 183 pounds, Erie Otters (OHL)

NHL Projection: Two-way, transitional, top-pairing defenceman. Complete player.

Despite only playing 17 regular season games for the Erie Otters, Schaefer remains my top prospect. Canadian hockey fans will recall he suffered a broken collarbone at the world juniors and had surgery to repair the injury soon thereafter. By all accounts he is healing up well and vows to come back stronger than ever.

Schaefer is a workhorse. He averaged over 28 minutes per game when he did play for the Otters this season, and was deployed in all situations. He produced 7G-15A, rolled over the boards for an incredible 519 shifts, connected on 72 shots on goal and was a plus-20. He also played a top pairing role for Team Canada at the Hlinka Gretzky tournament in August and seemed destined for the same responsibility with the U20 world junior team at Christmas.

Schaefer is a complete player. He's a massive threat off the rush with his pace and puck skill and sees the ice exceptionally well when distributing on the power play. He's engaged defensively and is one of the most competitive and mature prospects in the draft class.

Since he's been out of sight for an extended period of time, here's a reminder of what Schaefer will bring to the NHL team lucky enough to draft him this summer:

No. 2: Michael Misa, C, 6-foot-1, 184 pounds, Saginaw Spirit (OHL)

NHL Projection: Top line forward. Point producer. Bulk of ice time will come at even strength at PP1.

Misa has had an incredible season, winning the CHL scoring race with a total of 62G-72A in 65 games. He was granted exceptional player status in the spring of 2022, and has therefore completed three full years of major junior hockey.

Misa moved to the centre ice position this year and it agreed with his skill set. He utilizes the full width of the ice with his speed and drives play with the puck on his stick in transition. Misa has developed into one of the most lethal shooters in the draft class. In the past he leaned playmaker/distributor, but his goal scoring more than doubled from last season's total of 29.

Misa averaged over 23 minutes per game skating in Saginaw and, like Schaefer, he was also deployed in all situations. His defensive detail has been reliable. Like any offensive star who is still developing he has moments where he needs to keep his feet moving and lock on to his check sooner in his zone, but it's not an area of weakness that concerns me. Misa finished the season plus-43.

No. 3: Anton Frondell, C, 6-foot-1, 198 pounds, Djurgardens (Allsvenskan)

NHL Projection: Top line scorer. Shooter. Power play specialist.

Frondell is a riser on my draft list and he has earned the momentum. In my opinion he is the most elite pure shooter in the draft class. His skill set, hockey sense, and pace allow coaches to deploy Frondell at the centre ice position or on the wing. He's already strong enough for the pro game.

Frondell has benefited from playing pro in Sweden. He averages around 14 minutes of ice time per game, deployed at even strength and the power play, and has produced 11G-14A in 29 games with Djurgardens in the Allsvenskan. In his last 25 games played with the U18 National Team amongst his peer group, Frondell has contributed 14G-17A. Frondell is a difference maker offensively and a game changer who craves having the puck on his stick in big moments.

No. 4: James Hagens, C, 5-foot-11, 177 pounds, Boston College (NCAA)

NHL Projection: Top line forward. Play driver and play maker. Power play specialist.

Hagens has had a strong freshman year at Boston College and skates on the Eagles' top line alongside Gabe Perreault (NYR) and Ryan Leonard (WSH). He averages nearly 20 minutes per game of ice time with almost all of his shifts coming at even strength and the power play.

Hagens is always in motion. He's exceptionally difficult to check and contain. On the power play he floats around the offensive zone in an attempt to find open ice and get pucks to the net. In all situations he displays dogged pursuit of the puck along the boards and works to win back possession for his group.

Hagens ended up producing 10G-25A in the regular season. He also played a significant role for Team USA's gold medal-winning team at the world juniors, contributing 5G-4A in seven tournament games. His elite element is what he provides offensively. I envision a top line, scoring forward at the NHL level who pushes the play with speed and skill.

No. 5: Caleb Desnoyers, C, 6-foot-2, 178 pounds, Moncton Wildcats (QMJHL)

NHL Projection: Top six forward. Trending towards a complete player. Deployed in all situations.

Desnoyers is the kind of player who can be thrust into a variety of roles. He takes pride in competing, and providing positive results, in all three zones. His regular season statistics provide a glimpse of what he is capable of contributing to his team. In 54 regular season games, Desnoyers produced 35G-49A and was a plus-51. He averaged 20 minutes per game of ice time and was deployed in all situations.

Desnoyers thinks the game at an elite level. He's calculating off the rush and displays an ability to attack with speed or pull up, take stock of his options, and distribute. It's nearly impossible to teach forwards to play the game the way Desnoyers does. He's gifted offensively, but also makes the choice to compete appropriately on the defensive side.

LOTTERY PICKS: 6-16

No. 6: Porter Martone, RW, 6-foot-3, 208 pounds, Brampton Steelheads (OHL)

NHL Projection: Top-six power forward. Natural goal scorer.

Martone uses his size to his advantage in the hard areas of the ice, extending plays along the boards and driving to the crease. When pucks arrive on his stick in high danger scoring areas they usually end up in the back of the net. Martone has a very quick catch and release. He wastes no time ripping pucks on net. He's a solid skater for his stature and was deployed in all situations for the Steelheads in the regular season. Martone averaged over 19 minutes per game of ice time and produced 37G-61A in 57 games.

Martone is a late birthday (Oct. 26, 2006) which means he isn't eligible for the U18 World Championship this spring. Scouts will be flocking to Brampton to get their last looks on Martone in the OHL playoffs.

No. 7: Roger McQueen, C, 6-foot-5, 208 pounds, Brandon Wheat Kings (WHL)

NHL Projection: Top six forward. Equal parts shooter/distributor.

McQueen missed the bulk of the year dealing with an ailing back, but he's returned with purpose and looked strong down the stretch for the Wheat Kings. He's a giant of a man who has a presence. McQueen is equally adept at directing pucks on net, using his size and strength to shield opponents in the process, or extending plays and distributing the puck.

In his last 10-game segment McQueen averaged 16 minutes of ice time and produced 2G-7A. Almost all of his shifts come at even strength and the power play. I especially appreciate his puck touch and vision with the man advantage. He has the ability to slide off the weak side flank and rotate up top in the zone to open up shooting and passing lanes.

No. 8: Victor Eklund, LW, 5-foot-11, 161 pounds, Djurgardens (Allsvenskan)

NHL Projection: Top six skill forward. Quick striker. Play driver.

Eklund is a darting forward who is very quick out of the blocks, attacks with speed off the rush, and can be elusive and hard to check in the offensive zone. He plays on the same team as Frondell and had a very productive world junior tournament for Team Sweden (2G-4A).

Eklund never goes away. He's undersized but always around the play. He generally leans goal scorer, but has the vision and playmaking ability to distribute as well. His 19G-12A at the pro level in Sweden are very impressive stats for a draft eligible prospect. He averaged over 15 minutes per game of ice time with all of his shifts coming at even strength and the power play. He's average defensively but has the ability to provide dynamic offensive results.

No. 9: Carter Bear, LW, 6-feet, 179 pounds, Everett Silvertips (WHL)

NHL Projection: Top six forward. Equal parts shooter and distributor. Deployed in all situations.

Bear suffered an unfortunate season-ending injury when he went down with a lacerated achilles at the beginning of March. He had contributed 40G-42A to that stage of his season and averaged over 16 minutes per game of ice time.

Bear is the kind of player who can be relied upon to score timely goals and provide reliable detail, and tenacity, in all three zones. The Silvertips are a team that plays an "in your face" style of hockey and Bear fits the mold. I appreciate he is always in the fight and uber competitive every night.

No. 10: Radim Mrtka, D, 6-foot-6, 207 pounds, Seattle Thunderbirds (WHL)

NHL Projection: Top pairing, two-way defenceman.

Mrtka has been logging massive minutes for the Thunderbirds, averaging over 25 per game and being deployed in all situations. The giant, right-shot defenceman provides a wide-ranging skill set. He's proven he's capable of contributing better than secondary offence (3G-32A in 43 regular season games) and can be relied upon to block shots and kill plays defensively with his size and length. His small area quickness will need to continue to evolve, but he's adjusted nicely to the smaller ice surface in North America compared to what he was used to playing on in his native Czechia.

No. 11: Jake O'Brien, C, 6-foot-2, 172 pounds, Brantford Bulldogs (OHL)

NHL Projection: Top six forward. Deceptive playmaker.

O'Brien is a crafty playmaker. He reads how plays are developing in the offensive zone and has a knack for finding opportunities in the deep slot and around the net. He works the weak side flank effectively on the power play and has added more of a defensive dimension to his overall game. He produced 32G-66A for the Bulldogs in the regular season and averaged over 20 minutes of ice time.

O'Brien's skating mechanics are sound, but he needs time to add more strength to his frame, which should result in more separation in open ice and the ability to track the full 200 feet even more effectively.

No. 12: Brady Martin, C, 6-feet, 178 pounds, Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds (OHL)

NHL Projection: Top six forward. Relentless competitor. Deployed in all situations.

An argument can be made that Martin is the most competitive player in the entire draft class. He's a relentless, leads-by-example forward for the Soo Greyhounds. In his most recent 10-game segment Martin produced 8G-11A while averaging over 24 minutes per game of ice time and being deployed in all situations. He finished the regular season with 33G-39A overall.

Martin never cuts corners. He only weighs 178 pounds, but plays much bigger than his listed size. He finishes all of his checks, battles in the trenches, drives to the net and makes life generally miserable for opponents.

No. 13: Jackson Smith, D, 6-foot-3, 195 pounds, Tri-City Americans (WHL)

NHL Projection: Middle/potential top pairing two-way defenceman. Deployed in all situations.

Smith is a "do it all" prospect. He averages north of 26 minutes per game of ice time in all situations and matches up to shut down top six forward groups on a nightly basis. Smith is an excellent skater. He has the legs to escape pressure and lead the rush on his own, plus the agility to walk the offensive blue line to open up shooting and passing lanes. His offence spiked dramatically this season (11G-43A) but it's his size and strength that impress me in the defensive zone.

No. 14: Logan Hensler, D, 6-foot-2, 192 pounds, Wisconsin (NCAA)

NHL Projection: Middle pairing two-way defenceman. Skill set to be deployed in all situations.

Hensler is an interesting prospect for me. He's a highly coveted right-shot defenceman with a combination of size and skating ability that projects well for the NHL. He was used in all situations at Wisconsin this season and provided secondary offense (2G-10A in 32 games). Hensler defends with purpose and shows a willingness to front shooters and get in lanes to block shots.

I feel like he's scraping the surface of his overall ability. There's a real chance he might end up only providing depth offence at the pro level, but his quickness combined with his size and work ethic project Hensler as a shutdown defender at worst.

No. 15: Ben Kindel, C, 5-foot-10, 176 pounds, Calgary Hitmen (WHL)

NHL Projection: Top six forward. Playmaker.

It was hard for me to ignore the trajectory Kindel's game has been on for several months now. The Calgary Hitmen forward ended the regular season with 35G-64A. He averages around 19 minutes per game ice of time with almost all of his shifts coming at even strength and the power play.

Kindel has a role as a power play quarterback, which speaks to his vision and playmaking ability. Despite his current size, Kindel isn't shy about taking the puck to the net off the rush or setting up around his opponent's net searching for tips and rebounds.

No. 16: Justin Carboneau, RW, 6-foot-1, 191 pounds, Blainville-Boisbriand Armada (QMJHL)

NHL Projection: Top six scoring winger. Shoot first approach.

Carboneau is a high-volume shooter who finished second in Quebec League scoring with 46G-43A in the regular season. He averages over 21 minutes per game of ice time, with the bulk of his role coming at even strength and the primary power play unit. I appreciate his secondary battle. Carboneau never gives up on a play. He works to extend zone time and has a very quick stick. He strips opponents of the puck and makes plays before defenders have an opportunity to react.

His small area playmaking is an elite element that he possesses compared to some others in this draft class. There's room for improvement with his skating stride, but he gets from point A to point B on time.

BACK HALF OF ROUND 1

No. 17: Jack Nesbitt, C, 6-foot-4, 185 pounds, Windsor Spitfires (OHL)

NHL Projection: Top six power centre. Deployed in all situations.

Nesbitt has grown tall in his youth and has loads of room to add more weight and strength to his frame. It's impossible to teach size, and Nesbitt has it in spades. He approaches the game with a combination of power and skill. He finished the regular season on a high note. In his last 10-game segment he produced 7G-8A while averaging over 20 minutes per game of ice time and being deployed in all situations. Nesbitt is a name to keep an eye on. It wouldn't surprise me if a team stepped up on him before this draft slot.

No. 18: Cameron Reid, D, 6-feet, 193 pounds, Kitchener Rangers (OHL)

NHL Projection: Top-four defenceman. Two-way/transitional. Power play quarterback.

Reid is compact in stature, but plenty strong in the trenches. He doesn't shy away from physical contact, but his most elite element is his skating ability. Reid has the agility and explosiveness to close on opponents defensively and spin off checks to launch the attack offensively. He walks the offensive blue line with purpose as the power play quarterback in Kitchener and produced 14G-40A in the regular season. Reid is deployed in all situations for the Rangers. He averages north of 24 minutes per game TOI.

No. 19: Kashawn Aitcheson, D, 6-foot-2, 196 pounds, Barrie Colts (OHL)

NHL Projection: Middle pairing defenceman. Physical, two-way.

Aitcheson is a bit of a throwback. He's a very intense, competitive, physical defenceman who plays with a presence. Opponents can't sleep on him when tracking through the neutral zone with the puck on their stick. Aitcheson gaps up with authority and finishes his checks. He's also willing to drop the mitts on occasion.

Aitcheson is deployed in all situations for the Colts and averaged an incredible 28:18 in ice time in his last 10 regular season games. His offence spiked considerably this year (26G-33A) but it's his all-around game that intrigues me the most.

No. 20: Cole Reschny, C, 5-foot-11, 183 pounds, Victoria Royals (WHL)

NHL Projection: Middle six, potential top six forward. Quick strike skill.

Reschny is a player I'm monitoring very closely down the stretch of the season and could move up my rankings by the end of the year. He's not the biggest prospect but he's sturdy/strong and very hard to check. Reschny explodes up ice with the puck on his stick and pressures as F1 on the forecheck when opponents are attempting to break out plays. He's always visible, competitive, and involved in an area of

the game. Reschny is deployed in all situations at the junior level. He averages over 22 minutes per game and produced 26G-66A in the regular season.

No. 21: Bill Zonnon, C, 6-foot-2, 185 pounds, Rouyn-Noranda Huskies (QMJHL)

NHL Projection: Middle six forward. Better than secondary scorer.

The first thing people analyze with Zonnon's game is his skating. His first three strides are definitely short and somewhat choppy, but when up to speed he arrives everywhere on time and plays the game with detail and intensity. Zonnon contributed 28G-55A in the regular season for the Huskies. He's deployed in all situations, works to extend plays and is always involved. He's a very valuable team player who scores as much as he works to keep the puck out of his net.

No. 22: Malcolm Spence, LW, 6-foot-1, 203 pounds, Erie Otters (OHL)

NHL Projection: Middle six forward. Secondary scorer. Skill set to be deployed in all situations.

Spence has the ability to be a difference maker. When he's on his game he brings a combination of skill and will to the equation. He's put together physically and already plays at NHL pace. Spence has been streaky offensively, but he still generated 32G-41A for the Otters while being deployed in all situations. I'm intrigued by his ability to be thrust into a variety of roles, but I've also left some games wanting more from his effort and detail. His best nights would land him higher on my list, but I have to see him bring his "A" game every night in the playoffs.

No. 23: Braeden Cootes, C, 5-foot-11, 183 pounds, Seattle Thunderbirds (WHL)

NHL Projection: Middle six energy forward. Secondary scorer.

The team that selects Cootes will be inheriting a "lead by example" prospect who empties the tank every time his number is called. He's the captain in Seattle, rolls over the boards in all situations, produces offence at even strength and on the power play and provides energetic penalty-killing. He plays much bigger than his listed size. Cootes will provide secondary scoring at the NHL level and he can be trusted to check top six forwards. Cootes ended the regular season with 26G-37A.

No. 24: William Moore, C, 6-foot-2, 175 pounds, USNTDP

NHL Projection: Middle six skill forward with potential top six upside in time.

After a bit of a slow start Moore's game has built momentum and he's trending up as his team heads towards the U18 World Championships next month in Frisco, Texas. Moore is a big body who is difficult to check and has the ability to take over shifts offensively. Sometimes it takes prospects who grow tall early in their development more time to mature in all areas of their game. Moore has the coordination, speed, and hockey sense to have significant impact. I'm looking for even more engagement from him in the last month of his season and monitoring his consistent compete.

No. 25: Joshua Ravensbergen, G, 6-foot-5, 190 pounds, Prince George Cougars (WHL)

NHL Projection: No. 1/1B NHL goalie.

Ravensbergen is an athletic goalie who is big in his net. He plays a butterfly style, has very good feet and tracks the play on time moving laterally. His length provides him an opportunity to make second saves that some smaller goalies aren't capable of reaching. I appreciate how aggressive Ravensbergen is challenging shooters at the top of his crease, especially when he fights to find pucks directed on net through traffic. He's the top-rated goaltender in the draft class.

No. 26: Jack Murtagh, LW, 6-foot-1, 200 pounds, USNTDP

NHL Projection: Middle six, two-way forward. Secondary scorer.

Murtagh is the kind of player NHL teams were searching for at the trade deadline this year. He's a physical forward who makes himself noticeable with his relentless compete. Murtagh works to extend plays and create turnovers. He never backs down from a challenge and plays with pace. He's deployed in all situations at the USNTDP and produced 20G-24A in 45 games this season. When he isn't scoring, he makes life miserable for opponents in all three zones. Murtagh is a Boston University commit.

No. 27: Blake Fiddler, D, 6-foot-4, 209 pounds, Edmonton Oil Kings (WHL)

NHL Projection: Middle pairing two-way defenceman. Physical, shot blocker.

Fiddler is a big, strong, right-shot defenceman who is deployed in all situations for the Oil Kings in the WHL. He's the son of former NHL forward Vern Fiddler. Blake captained Team USA at the Hlinka Gretzky tournament in August and leads by example with his club team.

For his stature, Fiddler moves very well off the puck and has the ability to join the rush as an extra layer. Defensively he does whatever it takes to keep pucks out of his net. He gets in shooting lanes to block shots and he's efficient with his outlets. Fiddler has potential middle pairing upside as a two-way/match-up defenceman.

No. 28: Cullen Potter, C, 5-foot-10, 172 pounds, Arizona State (NCAA)

NHL Projection: Middle six skill forward. Power play specialist.

Potter is an intriguing prospect for a team to target in the back half of the first round. He will eventually add more strength to his frame, which will lead to more of an interior game. But for now, he relies on his speed and skill to push opponents off their blue line when he is coming through the neutral zone.

Potter works the strong side on the power play and he's aggressive directing pucks on net when he sees an available shooting lane. Potter leans goal scorer at this stage of his development. He produced 13G-9A for the Sun Devils and averaged over 18 minutes per game of ice time. All of his shifts come at even strength and the power play.

No. 29: Ivan Ryabkin, C, 5-foot-11, 201 pounds, Muskegon Lumberjacks (USHL)

NHL Projection: Middle six, potential top six forward. Goal scorer. Power play specialist.

Ryabkin is a wild card to keep an eye on in the first round. It's a realistic thought that a team will be more aggressive and call his name before this slot. My concerns regarding Ryabkin's ability to create offence, and score goals, is minimal. What I'm more concerned about is his fitness – which is a choice – and the overall pace he plays the game. When the game is more predictable, and in control for his team, Ryabkin's skill definitely shines on the power play. It's undeniable that he's coming into his own at the USHL level, however, and his stats don't lie. Ryabkin has 7G-4A in his most recent 10-game segment.

No. 30: Lynden Lakovic, LW, 6-foot-4, 190 pounds, Moose Jaw Warriors (WHL)

NHL Projection: Middle six forward. Even strength. Power play.

Lakovic is an intriguing prospect. He's a big body forward who can be elusive in open ice with his effortless stride. He's difficult to check when he's handling the puck due to his long reach and stature. He has excellent puck touch for a big man and contributed 27G-31A in 47 games for Moose Jaw this year.

With the Warriors not qualifying for the playoffs his season has come to an end. Lakovic is a late birthday (Dec. 12, 2006). He has aged out of being eligible for the U18 World Championship and his style

of play will be debated in scouting meetings leading up to the draft. For his stature he isn't physically overpowering, he's more of a finesse forward.

No. 31: Cole McKinney, C, 6-feet, 200 pounds, USNTDP

NHL Projection: Middle six forward. Secondary scorer. Ability to be used in all situations.

McKinney is on the rise. He's the type of forward who can be thrust into a variety of roles up and down the lineup. With the U18 Team USA group he is deployed in all situations and has been averaging over 20 minutes of ice time. He's being rewarded offensively as well, with his season now up to 22G-29A. The University of Michigan commit complements darting wingers and leverages very well in the hard areas to extend plays.

No. 32: Milton Gastrin, C, 6-feet, 185 pounds, MODO (Sweden J20/J18)

NHL Projection: Middle six forward. Can be deployed in variety of roles.

Gastrin is part of the leadership group with the U18 Swedish National Team. He burst on to the scene at the Hlinka Gretzky tournament last August in Edmonton with a 2G-6A game versus Switzerland. Gastrin is a responsible player on and off the puck. He reads how plays are developing in the offensive zone and has a habit of finding open ice. He makes plays quickly and has an accurate release in high danger areas. Gastrin is also willing to get in shooting lanes to block shots and works to win battles defensively. He isn't super elite in any one category, but he's well rounded and reliable. He's posted 18G-24A in 40 junior games in Sweden and added 7G-11A in 10 U18 National Team games.

SECOND ROUND PROSPECT RANKINGS

No. 33: Eric Nilsson, C, 5-foot-11, 156 pounds, Djurgardens (J20)

Darting forward who is deployed in all situations. (37GP – 12G-26A)

No. 34: Nathan Behm, C, 6-foot-1, 192 pounds, Kamloops Blazers (WHL)

Power style forward who's deployed at even strength and the power play. (59GP – 31G-35A)

No. 35: Jakob Ihs-Wozniak, RW, 6-foot-2, 184 pounds, Lulea HF

Opportunistic and streaky offensive winger. (40GP – 23G-34A)

No. 36: Sascha Boumedienne, D, 6-foot-1, 175 pounds, Boston University (NCAA)

Two-way defenceman with transitional element and secondary scoring upside. (36GP-3G-9A)

No. 37: Henry Brzustewicz, D, 6-foot-2, 203 pounds, London Knights (OHL)

Two-way defenceman who has better than secondary offence and is deployed in a variety of roles. (67GP-10G-32A)

No. 38: Cameron Schmidt, RW, 5-foot-7, 161 pounds, Vancouver Giants (WHL)

Undersized offensive dynamo – Shoot first approach – Exceptionally dangerous on the PP. (61GP-40G-38A)

No. 39: Kristian Epperson, LW, 5-foot-11, 183 pounds, Saginaw Spirit (OHL)

Passed over in last year's draft. Two-way forward who's deployed in all situations. (58GP-27G-53A)

No. 40: Adam Benak, RW, 5-foot-7, 160 pounds, Youngstown (USHL)

Darting, undersized, quick strike forward who's uber-competitive and can quarterback the power play. (53GP-16G-38A)

No. 41: Viktor Klingsell, LW, 5-foot-9, 188 pounds, Skelleftea AIK (Sweden J18/J20)

Plays quick and fast. Leans distributor more than shooter Playmaker from flank on the power play. (43GP-17G-22A)

No. 42: Alexander Zharovsky, RW, 6-foot-1, 163 pounds, UFA Tolpar (Russia, MHL)

Zharovsky is one of my sleepers in this draft class. He's an elusive offensive winger who's a consistent threat to score at even strength and the power play. His skating stride is solid, he now needs to add more strength which will lead to better separation in open ice. (45GP-24G-26A)

Here's a look at what Zharovsky has to offer:

No. 43: Ethan Czata, C, 6-foot-1, 175 pounds, Niagara Ice Dogs (OHL)

Two-way forward with better than secondary scoring upside. Used in all situations with Niagara. (68GP-21G-34A)

No. 44: Eddie Genborg, RW, 6-foot-1, 179 pounds, Linkoping HC (Sweden J18/J20/SHL)

Leans shooter more than play driver. Extends plays along the wall and out front of the net. (28GP-19G-15A)

No. 45: Ben Kevan, RW, 6-foot, 182 pounds, Des Moines Buccaneers (USHL)

Offensive upside is attractive. Dangerous working off the half wall and cycle. Has a plus release. (47GP-13G-29A)

No. 46: Charlie Tretheway, D, 6-foot-1, 200 pounds, USNTDP

Two-way defenceman. Bulk of ice time comes at even strength and the PK. Pushes back physically with secondary offence. (53GP-6G-13A)

No. 47: Luca Romano, C, 5-foot-11, 177 pounds, Kitchener Rangers (OHL)

Ability to play quick and fast and deployed in a variety of roles. Better than secondary offence. (67GP-25G-26A)

No. 48: Shane Vansaghi, LW, 6-foot-2, 210 pounds, Michigan State (NCAA)

Power winger. Net front distraction on the power play. Physical and an average skater. (36GP-6G-10A)

No. 49: Haoxi Wang, D, 6-foot-5, 215 pounds, Oshawa Generals (OHL)

Joined the Generals in the second half of the season. Two-way defenceman. Solid skater. Needs time. (32GP-0G-2A)

No. 50: Peyton Kettles, D, 6-foot-5, 190 pounds, Swift Current Broncos (WHL)

Averages over 24 minutes per game. Deployed in all situations. A two-way defenceman with depth offence. (53GP-5G-9A)

No. 51: Will Horcoff, LW, 6-foot-4, 190 pounds, University of Michigan (NCAA)

Made the move to the NCAA mid-way through this season. Power style and a net front presence. (18GP-4G-6A)

No. 52: Owen Conrad, D, 6-foot-2, 214 pounds, Charlottetown Islanders (QMJHL)

Two-way defenceman who averages over 22 minutes TOI. Deployed in all situations. Is just scratching the surface of his upside. (64GP-7G-19A)

No. 53: Reese Hamilton, D, 6-foot, 172 pounds, Regina Pats (WHL)

Two-way defenceman. Strong skater with the skill to produce more offence. Used in all situations. (59GP-4G-10A)

No. 54: Alexei Medvedev, G, 6-foot-2, 178 pounds, London Knights (OHL)

Good size and athletic. Calm demeanour. Structured. (34GP-2.79GAA-.912%)

No. 55 Jack Ivankovic, G, 5-foot-11, 178 pounds, Brampton Steelheads (OHL)

Athletic and competitive. Slightly undersized, but agile. Tracks quickly from side to side and fronts shooter. (43GP-3.05GAA-.903%)

No. 56: Philippe Veilleux, LW, 5-foot-9, 168 pounds, Val-d'Or Foreurs (QMJHL)

Undersized. Quick strike and skilled shooter. Skating will determine trajectory. (64GP-40G-47A)

No. 57: Luka Radivojevic, D, 5-foot-10, 165 pounds, Muskegon Lumberjacks (USHL)

Two-way/transitional defenceman. Offence is trending up, with 1G-7A in latest 10-game segment. Power play quarterback. (31GP-1G-18A)

No. 58: Ryker Lee, RW, 5-foot-11, 181 pounds, Madison Capitals (USHL)

Average skater with upright stride. Excellent puck touch. Deceptive release. Playmaker on the power play. (51GP-28G-33A)

No. 59: Carter Amico, D, 6-foot-5, 225 pounds, USNTDP

Hulking two-way and match-up defenceman. Deployed at even strength and PK. Out since November with knee injury. (13GP-0G-3A)

No. 60: Conrad Fondrk, LW, 6-foot, 193 pounds, USNTDP

Two-way forward with secondary offence. Hockey sense and ability to be used in a variety of roles. (40GP-13G-14A)

No. 61: Alex Huang, D, 6-foot, 170 pounds, Chicoutimi Saguenéens (QMJHL)

Two-way, transitional defenceman. Bulk of ice time comes at even strength and PP. Light, quick and agile. (64GP-7G-33A)

No. 62: Matthew Gard, C, 6-foot-4, 192 pounds, Red Deer Rebels (WHL)

Capable skater on straight lines. Reliable three zone detail. Secondary offence. Huge frame. (66GP-19G-17A)

No. 63: LJ Mooney, C, 5-foot-7, 162 pounds, USNTDP

Undersized playmaker. Pass first approach but with sneaky release. Patient and aware defensively. (38GP-7G-25A)

No. 64: Jimmy Lombardi, C, 6-foot, 175 pounds, Flint Firebirds (OHL)

Season-ending, 10-game segment produced 5G-10A. Good puck touch. Average skater. (63GP-13G-32A)