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Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets overmatched in preseason opener against Buffalo Sabres

By Brian Hedger – September 24, 2024

The Blue Jackets couldn't make a splash or even stay close to the Buffalo Sabres in a 6-1 road loss Monday to open their preseason schedule.

Mathieu Olivier netted the lone goal for the Blue Jackets, tying it 1-1 in the first period, which ended with Columbus holding a 13-4 edge in shots. Buffalo dominated the rest of the game, scoring five unanswered goals against Blue Jackets goalies Jet Greaves and Evan Gardner, who played the third.

Buffalo dressed a lineup mostly of NHL regulars while preparing for a season opener against the New Jersey Devils in Prague, Czechia as part of the NHL's global series. They'll leave for Munich, Germany on Tuesday and have one more exhibition there.

The Blue Jackets brought seven projected NHL players to Buffalo along with a collection of prospects at various levels of their careers. Trey Fix-Wolansky and Mikael Pyyhtia led the Jackets with four shots each, while Olivier had three shots plus his goal. Greaves started in net, allowing three goals on 15 shots.

The Blue Jackets open their home preseason slate Wednesday against the St. Louis Blues.

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets getting 'clean slate' under new coach, general manager

By Brian Hedger – September 24, 2024

The term “clean slate” is a motto for this Blue Jackets training camp.

There's a new general manager, Don Waddell, who put the roster together and a new coach he hired, Dean Evason. Both are getting acquainted with their new team, which means Blue Jackets players began this camp at Square One. Evason's staff has carryovers with assistants who worked the past couple years for previous head coaches Pascal Vincent, Mike Babcock and Brad Larsen, but they've been asked not to relay much about each player's past.

The Blue Jackets are getting a 'clean slate' across the board, which means there are opportunities ahead for players to improve, decrease or keep their stock where it was before the new regime's arrival. After four practice days plus a scrimmage Sunday inside the Ice Haus rink packed with interested fans, it's time for the Blue Jackets to open their preseason slate. They'll start with a game Monday night in Buffalo and get seven addition games to earn NHL roster spots or bigger lineup roles.

“At the end of camp, inevitably, you have someone that says, ‘I didn't get a fair chance,’ ” Evason said. “(With eight games), everyone's going to get a chance to prove they can stay here in Columbus or they're close to being here in the near future.”

Here's a look at each position group for the Blue Jackets starting preseason action:

Columbus Blue Jackets looking for NHL forward depth

Apr 16, 2024; Columbus, Ohio, USA; Columbus Blue Jackets left wing James Malatesta (67) celebrates a goal during the first period of the NHL hockey game against the Carolina Hurricanes at Nationwide Arena.

It began with a trade prior to the NHL draft in June that sent versatile forward Alexandre Texier to the St. Louis Blues. Waddell's trimming of his new forward group also included his decision not to re-sign Alexander Nylander and grant Patrik Laine's trade request before the death of Johnny Gaudreau weeks before camp opened.

Throw in Justin Danforth's complications from wrist surgery last spring and the Blue Jackets suddenly have room to spare among their NHL forwards. Adding veteran James van Riemsdyk on a one-year contract helped, but the Jackets will still have only 12 NHL forwards even if Danforth makes it back for the regular-season opener. They have oodles of salary-cap space, so Waddell can boost the Jackets' depth through trades, more free agents or by keeping multiple prospects who played most of last season with the Cleveland Monsters.

Names to know among that group include Owen Sillinger, James Malatesta, Luca Del Bel Belluz, Gavin Brindley, Trey Fix-Wolansky, Mikael Pyhtia and Hunter McKown.

Columbus Blue Jackets sorting NHL defenseman roles

Depth isn't an issue defensively, but figuring out roles and who fills out the Jackets' NHL blue line is something to watch closely.

After signing veteran Jack Johnson and acquiring Jordan Harris in the Laine trade, those two likely have the inside track to getting the final two roster spots. Don't count Jake Christiansen out, though, since

he's likely as ready as he'll ever be for a role in Columbus. Christiansen, 25, has spent four years playing mostly for the Monsters and has also skated 44 games for the Blue Jackets.

Harris, 24, has a similar frame and plays a similar two-way game, so either could fit as a defense partner to Erik Gudbranson on the third pairing. That's also where Johnson is best suited. Despite his AHL experience being limited to a handful of games for the Monsters last season in the Calder Cup playoffs, rookie Denton Mateychuk is also close to starting his NHL career.

There is also the matter of deciding who plays in the top two pairings. Zach Werenski is still looking for a consistent partner to play the right side on the top pairing, and it looks like Damon Severson will get the first crack at that spot. Ivan Provorov also needs a partner on the right side of the second pairing, which could be David Jiricek, the sixth overall pick of the same 2022 draft that included Mateychuk taken 12th by the Blue Jackets.

Columbus Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins (90) skates out of the net during the NHL hockey game against the Ottawa Senators at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Sunday, Jan. 23, 2022.

Goaltending depth mirrors 2023-24 for Columbus Blue Jackets

The more things have changed at Nationwide Arena, the more they've stayed the same between the pipes. Elvis Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov return as the top two NHL goalies, while Jet Greaves is a solid third option who'll get the majority of minutes in Cleveland.

Greaves could push the top two with a dazzling preseason, but the biggest battle in camp is likely between Merzlikins and Tarasov for the starter's role. Merzlikins has the Blue Jackets' biggest goaltending contract, but Tarasov has outperformed him while healthy in his limited NHL experience. Merzlikins grew frustrated with his usage last season under Vincent and requested "a new scenario" at one point, but that trade request wasn't granted primarily because the Blue Jackets couldn't find a suitable deal.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets training camp: Here are the 8 big things to track

By Aaron Portzline – September 24, 2024

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Training camp is well underway for the Columbus Blue Jackets. The preseason opener — the first of eight exhibition games — is Monday in Buffalo, and the club made their first four cuts of training camp on Sunday after an intrasquad scrimmage.

But with still 2 1/2 weeks to go before the Oct. 10 season opener in Minnesota, the Blue Jackets' toughest decisions are still on the horizon, as are a few other issues general manager Don Waddell and coach Dean Evason would like to have settled before the games start counting.

Here, as the Jackets enter their second week of camp, are eight topics we'll be watching closely between now and the opener.

1. Waddell's wishlist

When Waddell arrived in Columbus in late May, he started purging the roster of on-again, off-again players who never quite grabbed NHL jobs but merely muddied the picture over the past few seasons, especially at this time of the year.

Now, though, he's looking for another roster boost, even after signing veteran James van Riemsdyk as a free agent this month.

Waddell expressed a desire to add another player even before it was known (at least publicly) that bottom-six winger Justin Danforth (wrist) would be limited at the start of training camp and might not be ready for the start of the regular season.

These days, Waddell has one eye on the proceedings in Columbus' camp and another eye on the rest of the NHL, trying to anticipate situations around the league that could help the Blue Jackets.

The waiver wire is the most obvious option, but that likely won't bear fruit until very late in camp, when clubs are forced to make tough decisions to get down to the league's 23-player limit.

There's also the trade market, but that may require patience, too. Waddell has had talks with several clubs, but there's nothing right now that excites him. The salary cap could play a role here, too, as the Blue Jackets have an abundance of cap room, which is commodity in this league.

2. From speed to size

The arrival of center Sean Monahan via free agency this summer has allowed Boone Jenner to move back to left wing. That, coupled with the addition of van Riemsdyk and the emergence of Dmitry Voronkov, has given the Jackets a different look along the wall.

Suddenly, this group is stout. It remains to be seen how this will all shake down, and there are no guarantees the Blue Jackets will create enough offensively this season. But it's gonna look different.

No longer will the Blue Jackets get pushed around and lose more than their share of puck battles down low. No longer will they look like a junior club getting off the bus.

Evason likes a heavy, competitive, combative club, so this roster is much more to his liking than the Blue Jackets would have been over the last two years.

Here's Evason upon seeing Voronkov (6-foot-5, 240 pounds) on the ice for the first time early last week: "I didn't realize how freaking big he is. He's massive! I'm very excited. You get little goosebumps talking about that."

3. Dealing with emotions

The Blue Jackets were devastated by the tragic death of star left winger Johnny Gaudreau on Aug. 29, and — as many have noted — there will be good days and tough days in the coming weeks, months and years.

The entire organization — management, players and support staff — has shown a tremendous capacity for grace, dignity and courage, both in honoring Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, and in finding an honest, meaningful way to begin to move forward.

They've found strength in Meredith Gaudreau's breathtaking and heartbreaking eulogy of her late husband, in which she implored the Blue Jackets to go play hockey, just as Johnny Gaudreau would have wanted.

Waddell, Evason and the players have kept Gaudreau's memory front and center in the dressing room. They've been encouraged to speak of him, remember him and grieve him, both on their own terms but most especially together.

It doesn't feel right without Gaudreau around, of course. But so far it feels like the Blue Jackets have found the right balance to be motivated by his memory.

4. Forward thinking

Sorting out the Blue Jackets' forwards isn't quite as confusing as it's been in previous seasons, but then that's not necessarily a good thing (see No. 1).

We can say with some authority that these 11 forwards are locks to make the opening-night roster: Yegor Chinakhov, Adam Fantilli, Boone Jenner, Kent Johnson, Sean Kuraly, Kirill Marchenko, Sean Monahan, Mathieu Olivier, Cole Sillinger, James van Riemsdyk, Dmitry Voronkov.

Danforth (offseason wrist surgery) isn't listed because it's unclear if he'll be ready to play by the Oct. 10 opener.

That leaves two open spots up for grabs over the next couple of weeks, assuming the Jackets break camp with one extra forward. Expect there to be a "Hunger Games" type of competition from the four or five players who should be considered candidates, many of whom have little or no NHL experience.

If Waddell gets his wish and adds a veteran forward, that would leave only one spot.

On Monday, Luca Del Bel Belluz, Trey Fix-Wolansky, Dylan Gambrell, Hunter McKown, Luca Pinelli and Mikael Pyyhtiä will play in the exhibition opener in Buffalo. The first game would be a great time to make a great first impression on the new coach.

Others to be considered — and perhaps the two who should be seen as the favorites at this juncture — are James Malatesta and Owen Sillinger.

5. As for the defense ...

Much like at the other end of the ice, the Blue Jackets' defense is much more streamlined during this training camp after an offseason parting with depth pieces such as Adam Boqvist, Jake Bean and Nick Blankenburg.

It's pretty clear how Waddell and Evason envision the Blue Jackets' top four, although there's plenty of time (obviously) to change if this just isn't working.

Zach Werenski and Damon Severson have worked as a pair so far in camp, a likely indication that they could be the top pairing at the start of the season. Ivan Provorov and youngster David Jiricek appear to be their initial idea for a second pair.

The third pair is where the mystery rests.

We can say with some certainty that Erik Gudbranson will be the anchor of the pair on the right side. But does he play with newcomer Jordan Harris, acquired in the Patrik Laine trade with Montreal, or with veteran Jack Johnson, who is back for a second tour in Columbus after signing as a free agent?

Denton Mateychuk begins his pro career with much fanfare, but the sense is that he'll at least begin play with AHL Cleveland. Nothing irritates Waddell more than rushing prospects.

6. Goalie split?

We may not get an indication of this until we're a week or two into the regular season, but it'll be interesting to see which goaltender(s) get the bulk of the work, especially late in camp when the top two start to play full exhibition games to get ready for the season.

The one-two punch will almost certainly be (in some order) Elvis Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov, with Jet Greaves waiting in the wings should injury woes saddle Merzlikins and Tarasov, as they've done so often in the past. If all parties are healthy, though, Greaves will be the No. 1 at AHL Cleveland for a second straight season.

Evason has avoided watching film from last season, he said, hoping to truly create a "clean slate" for all players at all positions. That sounds like there's a chance for either of Merzlikins or Tarasov to claim the top spot, but it wouldn't surprise anybody if it's a true 50-50 split to start the season.

7. Is Cayden OK?

The Blue Jackets knew they'd need to show considerable patience when they drafted center Cayden Lindstrom with the No. 4 pick in June. They've projected an "everything is fine" vibe the entire time, even as Lindstrom was ruled out for the prospects tournament in Buffalo and the start of training camp.

Lindstrom has begun skating on his own — progress! — but there's no timetable for him to join a camp practice or play in an exhibition game, Evason said.

Let's just say there is great consternation among the fan base regarding Lindstrom, and it would calm many nerves to see him skating hard and mixing it up in traffic and otherwise thriving. It bears watching the rest of camp.

Waddell has said that Lindstrom is almost certainly going back to his junior club, Medicine Hat of the Western Hockey League, this season. And he's insistent that Lindstrom won't go there until he's cleared by the Blue Jackets' doctors, for fear of him returning early.

8. Where's the floor?

It's a conversation nobody wants to have, but at some point, the Blue Jackets will need guidance from the NHL and the NHL Players' Association as to what their salary-cap floor will be this season. This is a topic, of course, due to the tragic loss of Gaudreau.

At present, the Blue Jackets are approximately \$3.4 million under the \$65 million salary floor. It's possible they will get a one-year exemption, given the circumstances, but it remains unsettled.

The NHL requires all clubs to be compliant when rosters are set in advance of the season. So there's still time.

[BlueJackets.com / Camp Q&A: Mateychuk looks to push for Opening Night spot](#)

By Garrison McDaniel – September 24, 2024

Now in his third year in the Blue Jackets organization, Denton Mateychuk has the best chance he has ever had to be wearing a Union Blue jersey come Oct. 10.

Mateychuk was drafted by the Blue Jackets with the 12th overall pick in the 2022 draft and has become one of the team's top prospects. The 20-year-old defenseman has spent the past three years playing with his junior team, Moose Jaw of the Western Hockey League, where he was the captain of the Warriors the past two years. He was the WHL's defenseman of the year a season ago, totaling 17 goals and 75 points in 52 games and adding 30 points in 20 postseason games.

After leading the Warriors to the franchise's first-ever WHL title as well as the semifinals of the Memorial Cup, he joined the Cleveland Monsters for the team's Calder Cup run, where he played four games and helped them force a Game 7 after being down 3-0 in the conference final against the Hershey Bears.

Mateychuk met with BlueJackets.com on Friday after CBJ practice. The conversation has been edited for length.

How does it feel to get back to playing some hockey? It was a shorter offseason for you compared to most of the guys, but getting the legs warm again?

"I mean, it's always exciting coming in here. And, you know, seeing all these guys and being with the pros, it's exciting. It's fun to get out there with them"

What kind of things you do on the offseason, maybe away from hockey, that keeps you kind of fresh in your mind?

"I think probably get on the golf course, and go fishing. Fishing is a big one for me. I love fishing in the summer. Just kind of get away and just be with your thoughts and stuff like that."

Do you pay attention to any other professional sports outside of hockey?

"I'm a big baseball guy. Diehard Toronto Blue Jays fan. Whenever they're in Minneapolis, I normally go watch."

What do you do through the training camp that you've learned from the previous years to push for an opening night spot?

"Just come to the rink to get better every day. It just starts with your habits, your details, and away from the rink, you're kind the rank, your recovery and all that stuff like, it contributes to what you can do on the ice so much. And, you know, try to keen in on that, and I feel like I've done a good job of that. You know, seeing it from these guys."

Is there a specific aspect of your game that you're looking to improve on for this upcoming season?

"Fine tuning stuff like my shot, to working on a lot these last two years. I feel like there's still room for improvement. That's something to keep working on. I like to work with skating and stuff like that also."

What kind of experience did you gain from playing in playoff games with the Cleveland Monsters last year?

“Playing at the pro level, you're gonna gain a lot, and just seeing what the competition's like. We get the preseason stuff and that, but coming into the playoffs, that's something we get excited for. Just want to take away as much as you can and go out there and try and win. I think I did a pretty good job, for sure.”

Coming straight from the Memorial Cup run with Moose Jaw, what was the difference in speed level, talent level that you saw?

“I think just the structure. I mean, they are very controlled, they're not just giving the puck away. Guys on the wall, they're strong, they don't want to give you the puck, and you got to be ready to take a little bump because they are going to do whatever they can to get that puck.”

[BlueJackets.com / For some rookies, training camp isn't about making the team](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – September 24, 2024

In some ways, it's like a job interview for a position you know you don't have a chance of getting.

In others, it's sort of like an internship – you're not quite a full part of the group, but you have a chance to learn and grow from those above you.

That's the situation a handful of young Blue Jackets draft picks find themselves in during the team's training camp. For those players taken in recent drafts, the opportunity to come to Columbus for training camp is a new and notable experience, but they also know the reality is they're not really auditioning for spots on the active roster.

Most will go back to their junior clubs for the upcoming season, cuts that started yesterday when defenseman Luca Marrelli and goalie Nolan Lalonde were returned to their OHL teams. For these players, the time in Columbus is a welcome to the organization, a chance to learn from the best, and an opportunity to perhaps catch an eye or two.

"We want them to see how Boone Jenner prepares, not only on the ice, but see, what's his preparation? What's he doing in the gym?" head coach Dean Evason said. "That's what we're asking them to do, to just get that knowledge and get a feel and get a feel for the guys so that they feel comfortable next time that they're here, if in fact they go back.

"We can talk until we're blue in the face that you have to do this to prepare, you have to do that to prepare, but if they are watching Boone Jenner go through his routine or his stretch or postgame or cold tub or whatever it is, and he goes back to his junior team, he says, 'Boone Jenner did that. I think I'm going to do that in my preparation and how I'm going to work in practice.'"

So what is it like going through this new and exciting time for couple of CBJ draftees? We caught up with two of the Blue Jackets' 2024 draft picks – Marrelli, a third-round pick out of Oshawa of the Ontario Hockey League, and second-round pick Evan Gardner, a goalie from Saskatoon of the Western Hockey League – to get their thoughts.

Evan Gardner

"I'm just trying to be myself out there because that's the reason the organization took me in the draft. So that's what I'm trying to do here, and then just soaking in everything I can. These are NHL guys, and it's pretty crazy being out on the same ice as them. I'm just learning from them and learning what they do off the ice, too, and being a sponge out there. These guys are pros for a reason. They can pick their corners, put it in spots most guys can't, and tight areas. There's definitely a different level when you're on the ice with these guys.

"I think the first few (shots) went by me (on the opening day of camp), and I was like, 'Whoa, this might be a tough day today.' Then I started making some saves, and I was like, 'This is awesome.' It's a bit of an adjustment period, right? Obviously the first day is a lot faster than what you're used to, especially coming from the WHL, but I feel like over the past few days, I've been getting more and more comfortable. It's been great. I felt like I was holding my own out there (Saturday) and felt pretty good about my practice. There's definitely a certain level to that, like, 'OK, I do belong out here with these guys.'

"Obviously I want to stick here as long as I can. Who knows when that's going to be, but it's just about coming out here and proving myself. An NHL contract is on my mind being here. That's something I want

to prove I deserve and earn. There's that aspect of it. But obviously, sticking here as long as you can is awesome.

"Being drafted, obviously going back home and seeing family and stuff, it's a really big deal. They're just so proud and pumped for you, just super, super happy for you. When I got to go back, it was pretty awesome, just knowing what went down, but after that it's pretty much back to reality. I was walking around and nobody knows who I am back home, really. But having family around you and them being so pumped and happy for you with all you've gone through in the last couple years, it's a great feeling.

"It's fun to be around the (prospects) group for sure. There's only a couple of us Western boys, so we have a smaller group. There's too many OHL guys here for us. But a few guys being in the same league, it helps a lot, building that connection and relationship with them. But there's only like three of us young guys who are in the Western Hockey League, so there's a lot of back and forth between us and the OHL guys about what league is better. It's awesome.

"In the evenings, we're just going out and getting dinner with one another. That's been our thing every night, just going out and seeing what's around here, exploring the town a bit. But other than that, it's been a whole lot of lying in bed and being exhausted after the day. All that talent around you, it tires you out. Lots of lying in bed."

Luca Marrelli

"Obviously it's a step up from everything you've done in your past, and it really is an eye-opener to see how good everybody is and how dialed in everybody is. It's a really good learning experience for myself. I'm going to try to take as much as I can and try to take it back to my junior team in Oshawa. Guys are snapping it around and there's not really many bobbled pucks, and passes are always on the tape. It's really good hockey out there.

"Obviously you want to leave an impression. It's another step that you have to take and try to make an impression here and try to learn as much as I can and just improve. You want to stay here as long as you can, right? It's just about making an impression and putting your best foot forward and giving your best effort. That's all you can do. They know what they're doing here, so I'm sure they'll do what's best for me.

"Obviously, getting drafted is really cool. You realize it from friends and family. Every time you see somebody, they're asking, 'How's Columbus? How was the draft?' For me personally, I didn't really think my life has changed, but from the people around me and the way everybody was always asking me questions, I started to understand this is a little bit of a big deal. It's just the next step for me, and I'm really looking forward to the future.

"Another thing you take from being here is you get to see these high-level pro athletes and what they do on a daily basis, day in, day out. That's what I try to work on and hopefully bring back to my junior team this year.

"It's really a pro schedule here. You're at the rink for three to four hours a day, so you have to make some friends to kill the rest of the hours in the day. We have a really good group of younger guys that hang out a lot. Honestly, the older guys have been great, very inclusive. I haven't met a bad guy here yet. I'm really happy and really fortunate to be here.

"Every dinner is on our own, so we're going out getting dinners, just going for walks, checking out different places in Columbus. You have guys here that you played against your whole life. (Luca) Pinelli is an example. I've played against him my whole life. It kind of made me not like him, but I hang out with him for like 10 hours every day now, so we're becoming good buddies. It's crazy how the world works,

right? On the ice, you might not like some people, but off the ice people can be a totally different person. It's really cool to see the other side of people and differentiate the player and the person."

[BlueJackets.com / Blue Jackets drop preseason opener in Buffalo](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – September 24, 2024

The Blue Jackets kicked off the preseason slate Monday evening in Buffalo with a 6-1 loss to the Sabres at KeyBank Center.

Game in a Paragraph

Buffalo fielded a much more NHL-ready lineup than the Jackets and showed it as the game went on, as the Sabres scored once in the first, twice in the second and three times in the third to pull away. Thirteen Sabres players finished with at least a point, while five had two-point efforts.

Quote of the Game

CBJ head coach Dean Evason: "They obviously had a very strong lineup. I thought there were spurts in that game that we were real good. We limit them to not a lot of chances early. Obviously it got away from us in the third period, but we competed hard. ... We got a lot of positive signs. Obviously the score isn't what we were looking for, but the experience is."

CBJ Standouts

- Mathieu Olivier scored the lone goal for the Blue Jackets in the first period and finished with three shots on goal.
- Mikael Pyhtia and Trey Fix-Wolansky tied for the team lead with four shots on goal apiece.

How It Happened

The Sabres started the game on the front foot and, aided by a couple of CBJ penalties, took a 1-0 lead 5:35 into the contest with a 5-on-3 power-play goal. JJ Peterka's centering pass got through some bodies at the front of the net and leaked to the back door, where Owen Power was free to collect and shoot past Jet Greaves. Columbus found its footing, though, outshooting the Sabres 13-4 in the frame, and tying the score at 11:34 as Olivier took the puck behind the net, collected it after goalie Devon Levi couldn't cover and then banked it into the net off Power in front.

Buffalo put together a much better second period, though, and took a 3-1 lead after 40 minutes on goals by Zach Benson and Peyton Krebs. Benson got the scoring started 5:15 into the frame as Henri Jokiharju shot the puck from the right point, and it got knocked down in front for Benson to spin and fire past Greaves before the goalie could get reset. Krebs then doubled the advantage at 10:40 as the Jackets were caught on a line change, and he came into the zone one-on-one with Greaves and beat the goalie past the glove.

Things got away from the Blue Jackets in the third, though, as the Sabres got a trio of goals past substitute goalie Evan Gardner in the first seven minutes. Dylan Cozens started the onslaught at 2:34 when he scored off a pass from Benson, Mattias Samuelsson snuck a shot short side from the right wall past Gardner at 5:23 and Nicolas Aube-Kubel finished a nice passing play alone in front at 7:00 to complete the scoring.

Notable

Greaves finished with 12 saves on 15 shots against, while Gardner – a second-round pick in this summer's draft seeing his first pro action – had 11 on 14 shots. ... Buffalo finished with a 29-26 edge in shots on goal. ... Columbus was 0-2 on the power play while the Sabres scored one time in four tries. ...

Jordan Harris led the Blue Jackets in time on ice, as the defenseman skated 23:17. ... Krebs and Benson each had a goal and an assist while Peterka, Jack Quinn and Bowen Byram had two helpers apiece for Buffalo.

Roster Report

The game marked the first for CBJ center Adam Fantilli since he suffered a season-ending injury last January, plus the return of Jack Johnson to the Jackets' fold.

Up Next

The Blue Jackets return to Columbus for practice Tuesday and then will host their first home preseason game of the year Wednesday, welcoming St. Louis to Nationwide Arena at 7 p.m.

The Athletic / Fixing the NHL schedule, trade candidates and memories of Johnny Gaudreau

By Eric Duhatschek – September 24, 2024

I went a little longer, below, answering a question from a reader about memories of Johnny Gaudreau, so I plan to tackle some topics that I've missed in my upcoming Friday notebooks, throughout the NHL exhibition season. As always, I appreciate your interest. These questions provide important food for me. They give me a clearer sense of what is actually on readers' minds.

Let's tackle a few more now.

I am writing from Europe where some national championships here started last week and others are going to do it in the next 24 hours. Many people in the U.S. suggest reforming the playtime period: from mid-September to the end of May. What is your position and what could be the advantages or disadvantages to revolutionize the calendar? — Andrea D.

This has been a longtime sore spot for me because my first full season covering the NHL was 1980-81, the year in which the New York Islanders defeated the Minnesota North Stars in the Stanley Cup Final. That season, the final playoff game was played on May 21. The regular season lasted 80 games, and the first round was a best-of-five, which was usually over in a week. Playoffs didn't spill into June until 1992 — and the season has just kept getting longer and longer ever since. The fact that a winter sport can't complete its season until the official start of summer most years is patently ridiculous.

In a perfect world, the ideal solution would be to shorten training camps, begin regular-season play on Oct. 1, play a 76-game schedule and ensure that the NHL playoffs end by May 31. That's not ideal, but it's better than the current system. Sadly, most U.S.-based teams want to start the season even later, because early-season hockey conflicts with baseball playoffs and the heart of the NFL regular season. Accordingly, there's little interest, on the part of NHL decision-makers, to amend and improve the schedule, though if they did focus groups in Canada, Europe and the northern U.S. states, I'm sure the vast majority of fans — the paying customers — would agree: The season stretches on far too long.

The fix is easy. Finding the will to make the fix is far more challenging.

With the rumors of unrest among some of Calgary's veteran players not wanting to be stuck in a rebuild, what would a player like Jonathan Huberdeau need to do to bring his value back up to a level where a team would even want to trade for him? And do players like Blake Coleman, Mikael Backlund, Nazem Kadri and Mackenzie Weegar have a market given their cap hits and term remaining? — Ryan H.

Every year, in my head, I make a list of contracts that seem impossible to trade and then, lo and behold, one or more of them actually do get traded. Two examples from this summer: Pierre-Luc Dubois, heading to Washington from L.A., with no salary retained by the Kings. Patrik Laine, heading to Montreal from Columbus, with no salary retained. Both teams trading away overpriced assets had to provide incentives to complete the deal. In L.A.'s case, they took on a contract, Darcy Kuemper's, that Washington wanted to shed. Columbus, meanwhile, got a young defenseman (Jordan Harris) but had to give up a second-round pick.

So, I've learned: Never say never. But in Huberdeau's case, without Calgary retaining at least 30 percent of the deal, I can't see a trade happening anytime soon. Huberdeau earns a staggering \$10.5 million per season and there are seven years to go on the contract. For Huberdeau to attract any interest, he needs to re-establish himself as, at least, a point-a-game NHL player.

When the Flames handed out that contract, Huberdeau was coming off an elite season — 115 points, tied for second in the league. We haven't seen anything close to that production, or impact, in his first two years with the Flames. Maybe if Laine isn't a fit in Montreal, and after his contract expires, there'll be interest in him there. But that's a hard contract to move today and frankly, at this point in Calgary's rebuild, they probably are OK carrying Huberdeau's cap hit, short term, because they are near the floor anyway.

The other players you cite all have value, on some levels.

Coleman, at 32, with three years to go at \$4.9 million, with a championship pedigree and coming off his best season yet, probably has the most value. I can absolutely see a contender asking after him at the trade deadline.

Backlund is 35 and took a pay cut to stay in Calgary and be the team's captain. He'd have value if he wanted to try to win a championship elsewhere — I believe Colorado had interest at some point — but it felt as if finishing his career where he started remains important to Backlund. I don't see him moving.

Weegar has seven years to go at \$6.25 million and played great last season. He's an important piece, on the ice and in the dressing room, during the Flames' transition. For the Flames to move him, someone would have to offer something special in return. I thought Ottawa might be a good landing spot for Weegar, because he can effectively play both sides, right and left, but the Flames would have probably asked for Shane Pinto and that was a non-starter.

Kadri is 33 and has five years to go on a contract worth \$7 million that's reasonable for what he's doing today, but probably wouldn't age well. If a team thought it had about a three-year window to win a Stanley Cup, he'd be a useful reinforcement. On the first day of camp, he asked reporters to "pump the brakes" on trade speculation — that at the start of a new season, he and his teammates just want to concentrate on hockey. That's fair. Let's see how the year unfolds.

From Calgary, the two likeliest players to move — assuming they have decent seasons — are Andrei Kuzmenko (one year left at \$5.5 million) and Anthony Mantha (signed for one year at \$3.5 million). They'll get an opportunity in Calgary to play premium minutes and plump up their trade value at the deadline.

Should Edmonton reach out to Chicago and offer Darnell Nurse for Seth Jones? — Mike C.

I had to think about this one because, at first blush, it sounds intriguing and has some symmetry. I'm assuming that Mike C. believes a change in scenery might benefit both players, neither of whom are producing at the level their salaries suggest. Moreover, the man who signed Jones to that contract in Chicago (Stan Bowman) is now general manager of the Oilers. So, let's examine this more closely.

Jones is 29, a right-handed shot defenseman (which Edmonton needs) and has six years to go on his contract with a \$9.5 million AAV. Nurse is 29, a left-shot defenseman, and has six years remaining on his contract at a \$9.25 million AAV. Jones was the fourth player taken in the 2013 NHL draft, Nurse was seventh overall. So, lots of similarities.

The major difference, last season anyway, is that Jones was fourth overall in time on ice (25:29), while Nurse was 56th (21:54). The limited number of times I saw both players play, Jones struck me as simply as a better all-around defenseman. I can see why Edmonton would do this swap in a heartbeat. It creates a better left-right balance on their defense corps. But I can't see any reason why Chicago would do it unless Edmonton offered an attractive sweetener. But definitely an interesting concept. Not quite Shea Weber for P.K. Subban, but potentially impactful nonetheless.

Which “old” Cup-winning team do you think has the best chance to recapture previous magic and win one more Cup, sending their veterans into the sunset? Thinking along the lines of Washington, Pittsburgh, Tampa Bay, Los Angeles, etc. — Daniel W.

I saw a response that said none of the above and I agree with three-quarters of that. I don’t see any of Washington, Pittsburgh or Los Angeles managing a last hurrah and returning to the winners’ circle, despite retaining several important pieces of their nuclei. But Tampa Bay? I’m not dismissing the Lightning just yet. For one thing, I believe a healthy and rested Andrei Vasilevskiy can be far better this year than he has been the last couple. Nikita Kucherov remains elite, and he’s just 31. Brayden Point is 28, Jake Guentzel 29. Last year, Victor Hedman didn’t show any signs of slowing down. The offense, as currently built, is too top-heavy for my liking — similar, in a lot of ways, to Colorado’s. And I’m not sure how long it will take Conor Geekie to get to the NHL and settle in as a top-six forward, but I don’t see the window closing on Tampa Bay in the next two seasons. Whereas it does feel as if the door has slammed shut on those other three teams.

When the league inevitably expands, do you think there is a limit to how many teams they would allow? Personally, I think 40 is the most that should happen. And if that’s the case, do you think there should be some sort of relegation so that the worst team has something to avoid tanking for? — John F.

Relegation to a lower division is a concept that’s been kicked around some time as a talking point — and a similar question was asked to me back in 2022. That of course was the year the Montreal Canadiens finished 32nd overall and, under a relegation scenario, would have been dropped to the AHL and replaced in the NHL by the 2022 Calder Cup champions, the Chicago Wolves. Somehow, the idea of relegation seemed far less interesting when the team relegated was arguably the most iconic franchise in the sport. So, the short answer is no.

I can’t imagine any scenario under which that happens — not in the NHL, nor in any major North American professional sport.

But as to how far the league expands, if it remains strictly a sport based in North America, then yes, 40 teams seem like the most that it will ever get to, at least in this century.

I believe they’ll expand to 34 teams within the next 3-5 years, to 36 within the next decade and then take a lengthy pause (as they did after the ambitious 2000 expansion). At that point, whoever is running the NHL after Gary Bettman retires can determine the timetable to get to 40.

Let’s go out on a limb and choose the next eight cities targeted for expansion: Atlanta, Houston, Phoenix, Portland, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Cincinnati and Omaha.

Even though I believe Quebec City should be first in line — because they could become to the NHL what the Green Bay Packers are to the NFL — I am convinced they will never get another team.

And I’ve been beating the drums for a second team in Toronto for over 30 years. Some alert readers can probably find the long-ago column I first did on that for The Hockey News. It hasn’t come close to fruition — though the league is leaving money on the table by limiting the metro Toronto area to a single team. And as we know from past practice, the NHL doesn’t like to leave money on the table for too long. If the NHL ever does add another team in Canada, that’s my best guess: That it’ll land somewhere in the Golden Horseshoe. But I’m no longer holding out much hope for that to happen, while Bettman is running the show.

What’s the succession plan for Gary Bettman, and how soon will it be implemented? — Michael H.

He’s not talking about it, but I believe he’ll step down around 2027 and then there’ll be a search committee to find his replacement. In all probability, Daly will be on that list. But if the NHL wants a

fresh vision going forward, they will likely take a look at a broader list of candidates before making a decision. My prediction is that the next NHL commissioner is someone you've never heard of today.

Do you have any fond memories of Johnny Gaudreau in Calgary? — D.j. N.

Like so many others, I found the news of Gaudreau's death and that of his brother Matthew, on the Friday before Labor Day, numbing, almost paralyzing. I covered Gaudreau for the first seven years of his career in Calgary and found him delightfully charming and disarming. He was like everybody's toothy, popular little brother. He had natural charisma, and the net effect was to brighten up the locker room every single day. Some people are just like that. You leave an encounter with them a little happier than you were before. In a world — professional sport, which has become more me-centric over time — he was a throwback to an earlier era, a refreshing change of pace.

The year Gaudreau briefly held out for a new contract — 2016, coming off a successful World Cup of Hockey on Team North America — he signed a few days before the season began and in the interview afterward, said he told his agent to get it done because he didn't want to miss any games. He just really wanted to get back to work. That summarized his on-ice approach in a nutshell. He was a hockey savant — and had to be to play the game at a high level for his size and weight.

I'd written dozens of stories on Gaudreau over the years and on the day of his death, I re-read a few. The one that finally stopped me in my tracks dated back to January 2019, a season when he was in the running for NHL MVP, and just before he was leaving to play in the All-Star Game. We sat down for a lengthy interview about the current state of his life and his game.

Near the end of our chat, I asked if he ever thought about what a life after hockey might look like. He'd been a communications major at Boston College, but a career in communications didn't look as if it would figure in his future. In fact, he told me that he'd had his sights set on a different post-playing career — following in his father, Guy's footsteps, as a gym teacher.

I remember venturing in print that if Gaudreau ever followed through on that plan, he would likely become the highest-paid PE teacher in U.S. educational history. But that was just like Gaudreau too. He was able to see himself in a gym, working with young people, helping to make them better athletes. Below is that story. It also includes all the details of his one-time fascination with purple Gatorade.

It also brushes up against an idea I had that I failed to execute — trying to get Johnny Hockey in the same room as Johnny Manziel (aka Johnny Football), who happened to be playing in the CFL that year. Alas, logistics made it impossible to pull off. But it would have been fun. And Gaudreau seemed open to the idea.

The other point from that story that I'd highlight is an observation from former Flames teammate Joe Colborne, who assisted on Gaudreau's first-ever NHL goal and had him as a housemate in Calgary during Gaudreau's rookie season.

"The thing with Johnny is, he doesn't have a single pretentious bone in his body," Colborne told me. "He was the best teammate, even as a rookie. I remember Burkie (former GM Brian Burke) saying a typical Burkie thing to him, something like, 'I don't want to hear your voice until we reach Christmas,' or something like that. He'd tell him, 'Your job is to smile, listen to your captain and listen to your veterans.' Within two weeks, Johnny is the guy that all the older guys are chirping and having the best time with him. He has that infectious kind of glue quality, where you just want to be around him."

Another story I remember that three of us reported at the same time — me, Kristen Anderson of the Calgary Sun and Jermaine Franklin of TSN. We were at Winsport Arena, it was just before training camp in 2019 at a captain's skate, and Flames TV had done a wonderful video profile of Gaudreau — modeled

on Cribs, that MTV staple, which toured homes of celebrities. Gaudreau gave a tour of the summer house he'd built on the Jersey shore. He'd asked the architects to install an elevator to the second floor because he had a cousin who was confined to a wheelchair, and this made it possible for her to move around more freely. I thought that was just a thoughtful and kind thing to do, something both Kristen and I said to Gaudreau. It wasn't even framed as an actual question. It was just an observation. Gaudreau seemed faintly taken aback by the praise. But it illustrated to us what others who've been reminiscing about him recently have said too — that in his life, family came first. Lots of people might say that. Gaudreau genuinely lived it. That story, if you want to revisit it, is available below

I don't think there's any question that Gaudreau's death will cast a pall over the entire 2024-25 NHL season. It was just senseless and unnecessary — and not something that can be easily processed in a day, a week or a month.

[Sportsnet.ca / Sportsnet Insiders rank the NHL's top 50 players: 50-41](#)

By Sonny Sachdeva – September 24, 2024

It's been called a golden era, this age of seemingly limitless skill and dizzying speed the National Hockey League is enjoying.

Records that stood for decades have crumbled. Benchmarks that signified greatness have begun to look commonplace. So, amid this new normal, it must be asked: If today's game is truly pushing the sport to new ground, who's leading the charge?

Who are the kings of the golden era?

We turned to our Sportsnet Insiders for an answer, asking them to rank the top 50 players in the NHL at this moment. If you take the young guns and the vets, the elite scorers and the Selke regulars, the high-flying defenders and the ever-reliable netminders, and stack them all up together, who comes out on top?

There was only one ground rule: This ranking is forward-looking. It doesn't factor in legacy or stature in the game — it considers only how the league's best are expected to perform in 2024-25. The overall ranking below is an amalgam of the Top 50 lists from Insiders across the network. For each Insider's list, players were assigned points based on how high they finished in that particular ranking — the higher they ranked on an Insider's list, the more points they accrued.

Each player's position on the overall ranking is a result of how many total points they collected across all of the Insiders' lists.

With that, here is Sportsnet's ranking of the Top 50 Players in the NHL, starting with Nos. 50-41.

50-41 | 40-31 | 30-21 | 20-11 | 10-1

A half-decade into his big-league career, one thing is clear: Tim Stutzle is the talisman the Ottawa Senators have been waiting for. The dynamic pivot enters 2024-25 as the most prolific scorer of his draft class to this point. And only beginning to approach his prime, the 22-year-old has already flirted with greatness, putting the league on notice with a 39-goal, 90-point effort a year ago. A step backwards last season suggests there are still some growing pains to work through, but numbers aside, there's no denying Stutzle has something every organization craves: the ability to make magic out on the ice, to pull fans out of their seats.

Nashville went all-in on Juuse Saros this summer, inking the 29-year-old to a deal that will take him to the cusp of his 40s and choosing the vet over young Yaroslav Askarov — the 2020 11th-overall pick who the Predators shipped to San Jose. You can trace Barry Trotz's decision to a late-season run that pulled the Preds back into the 2024 playoff picture, including a 14-game stretch that saw Saros go 12-0-2 with a .932 save percentage. Now, the standout Finn has a chance to build off that strong finish, while playing behind a noticeably improved squad in 2024-25.

After eight years that saw him go from Sidney Crosby's understudy to the captain's most trusted accomplice to the gem of Pittsburgh's offence, Jake Guentzel has struck out on his own. With a brief spell in Carolina behind him, the 29-year-old will begin a campaign dressed in something other than black-and-gold for the first time in his career. But heading into his first season in Tampa Bay, where he'll don the crest of an Eastern Conference powerhouse for the third time in his career, little figures to change for the 40-goal threat in terms of the calibre of talent around him. He'll have a Steven Stamkos-

shaped hole to fill in the offence, but Guentzel has enough high-end hockey sense to give the Bolts what they expect of him.

The arc of Nick Suzuki's career in Montreal has mirrored his club's trajectory as a whole over the past five years — slow and steady progress, incremental growth, pointing towards something promising. The young Habs captain has upped his offensive production each year he's been in the league. But in Year 5, he seemed to truly turn a corner and show some crucial growth, building off his dynamic skill by squaring off with the best opposing clubs have to offer, shutting down All-Stars, and winning the tough minutes out on the sheet — earning some Selke Trophy votes for the first time in his career. A new season brings a new opportunity to raise his level again, and to continue establishing himself among the game's premier two-way talents.

There are two versions of the ideal defenceman. One is the type we see dominating the Norris Trophy debate each year: the high-flying, highlight-reel rovers, who stack points with the best of them. The other is Jaccob Slavin. Considered one of the game's most underrated players for so long it started to feel like an inside joke, the veteran rearguard has made his name as one of the all-time shutdown defenders. He can put up points too, but what makes Slavin elite isn't found on the scoresheet — it's in what he keeps off it. The rangy defenceman is a wet blanket for the game's most prolific scorers, spoiling the fun like few others can.

Fresh off what seemed to be a breakthrough moment, Jeremy Swayman sits on the doorstep of what could be the most important campaign of his career. After serving as one half of the game's most dominant netminding tandem for the past few years, Swayman went out and wrestled away the No. 1 role for himself during the post-season. So convincing was the 25-year-old, the B's shipped 2023 Vezina Trophy winner Linus Ullmark off to Ottawa. Now, with the fate of the Bruins' net resting squarely on his shoulders, and a contract dispute dragging on longer than expected, the pressure will be on Boston's unequivocal starter to prove he can lead.

For years, Mathew Barzal has seemed just a few steps from putting it all together — the breakneck speed, the limitless skill — and pushing himself into the league's highest echelon. But plying his trade on a squad built squarely around responsible team defence, the breakout never fully came... until last year, when Patrick Roy arrived in town, turned the dial up to 11, and helped spur Barzal on to his first point-per-game campaign since he was a rookie. With a full season under the guidance of a bench boss intent on unleashing his lead horse in a high-tempo, high-energy system — and with a new offensively gifted linemate to work with — Barzal enters 2024-25 primed for another step towards greatness.

Sergei Bobrovsky finally slayed the dragon. It took a decade-and-a-half of tumult, stretches of brilliance between the pipes dotted with head-scratching blunders, but then came the past two campaigns — twin trips backstopping his Panthers to the Stanley Cup Final. To man the cage en route to a championship is one thing. To do so with Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl firing everything they have at you? That's entirely another. There's no question Father Time is going to come calling soon, but for now, the 36-year-old is playing his best hockey in years.

Roope Hintz can only fly under the radar for so long. And after the past few campaigns he's strung together, the talented Finn seems on a collision course with the spotlight. Twice in the past three seasons, Hintz has finished a stone's throw from the 40-goal plateau. A year ago, he proved to be built for the post-season, pacing Dallas with a 24-point, 19-game outburst that truly put his name up in lights. And then came last season, when Hintz planted his flag among the game's best two-way practitioners and earned a respectable collection of Selke votes as a result. Though he seems to be approaching Aleksander Barkov levels of perennial-underrated-status, Hintz heads into 2024-25 squarely in his prime, pushing a dangerous Stars team forward.

Few stars of Brad Marchand's ilk have undergone the type of on-ice transformation the Bruins veteran has over the course of his career — from irksome pugilist to century scorer, from controversy courter to veteran captain. After a late-career renaissance that saw a 30-year-old Marchand seemingly reach his final form — an agitator who could stack 100 points between calls from the Department of Player Safety — the past two seasons have seen the longtime Bruin slow down some. Still, his skill remains undeniable, and a 67-point effort at age 35 shows he's got plenty left to give. Heading into the final season of his current deal, and inching closer to his 40s, the last remaining leader of this Bruins era's old guard surely has his sights set on hanging another banner before all is said and done.

[Sportsnet.ca](https://www.sportsnet.ca) / **Calder Trophy Tiers: Who is in the running for rookie of the year?**

By Jason Bukala – September 24, 2024

With NHL training camps underway, and the first set of exhibition games already in the books, it's time to start predicting results for the upcoming season. Which teams could be contenders to hoist the Stanley Cup? Who are the favourites to win individual awards like the Hart Trophy (MVP), Vezina Trophy (top goalie), Norris Trophy (best defenceman) among others?

Today I'm going to focus on rookies who could have the most impact across the league in 2024-25.

I've broken down my list into two categories:

- The top tier identifies players who I believe will contend for rookie of the year honours and could win the Calder Trophy.
- The second tier of my list highlights prospects who might not land in the Calder discussion, but have the potential to play a significant role on their respective clubs.

Who qualifies as a rookie?

Before I present my list of names it's important to understand how the NHL defines who a rookie is.

The qualifications are as follows, via NHL.com:

"To be considered a rookie, a player must not have played more than 25 NHL games in any preceding seasons, nor in six or more NHL games in each of any two preceding seasons. Any player at least 26 years of age (by September 15 of that season) is not considered a rookie".

TOP TIER: THE CALDER FAVOURITES

I set out hoping to identify five prospects who could contend for the Calder Trophy this season, but ended up setting on six names in my top tier:

Macklin Celebrini, San Jose Sharks

The San Jose Sharks are in the midst of a complete rebuild and Celebrini is their most recent prized addition and a potential franchise player in the making — similar to Connor Bedard in Chicago.

Celebrini tops my list of Calder Trophy contenders. He's a relentless competitor who works the entire length of the ice. His elite element is what he provides offensively but he has the hockey sense and determination to be trusted in a variety of roles. He's a massive threat off the rush. He plays quick and fast. Celebrini is especially dangerous on the power play. His combination of playmaking and ability to rip pucks from the weak side flank is impressive.

Celebrini contributed 32 goals and 38 assists last year at Boston University and, at the age of 17, became the youngest ever recipient of the the Hobey Baker Award as the top men's player in the NCAA last spring.

Of all the players on my list Celebrini is the most likely to get the most touches on the power play and regularly skate on the top line compared to other potential Calder candidates.

Matvei Michkov, Philadelphia Flyers

Michkov arrives in Philadelphia with an opportunity to skate in the Flyers' top six forward group.

Michkov's offensive upside is significant. He craves having the puck on his stick and making plays. He contributed 19 goals and 22 assists last year in the KHL playing in Sochi, where almost all of his ice time came at even strength and the power play. He isn't a pure burner in open ice, but he's very crafty moving east/west and has the puck skill to beat opponents 1-on-1 in tight quarters.

Michkov's defensive detail will range. He will be challenged by the Flyers' coaching staff to compete to the best of his ability every night and defend with adequate purpose, but his offensive upside wins out for me.

Michkov is my second ranked Calder candidate. I'm looking forward to monitoring his development and impact. I also can't wait to see how head coach John Tortorella and Michkov co-exist in Philadelphia.

Logan Stankoven, Dallas Stars

Stankoven barely qualifies as a Calder candidate due to the fact he skated in 24 regular-season games for the Stars last season. He produced six goals and eight assists in his audition before suiting up in 19 playoff games and contributing three goals and five assists.

Stankoven only stands five-foot-eight and weighs around 171 pounds. His stature doesn't hold him back, though. Like most players on this list Stankoven also approaches the game with relentless compete. He's an elite thinker offensively who's difficult to check and determined to win pucks off opponents. Stankoven has top six forward upside. Before being summoned from AHL Texas, last year, he had produced 24 goals 33 assists in 47 games.

Cutter Gauthier, Anaheim Ducks

Gauthier dressed for one game in Anaheim last spring after his college season concluded at Boston College. The six-foot-two, 195-pound winger is an elite shooter who led the NCAA in goal scoring last season (38) and finished second in NCAA overall scoring with 65 points. Gauthier possesses a lethal "catch and release" in high danger areas. Pucks are off his stick quickly and accurately. Like many elite shooters he sets up on his weak side on the power play to blast pucks on net.

Gauthier has top line upside. He provides a combination of power and skill. I'm projecting Gauthier will land in the Ducks' top six forward group and on one of their power-play units.

Lane Hutson, Montreal Canadiens

The only defenceman on this list, Hutson has been one of my favourite players to watch for several years, dating back to his time with the USNTDP. He's an elusive, offensively gifted, undersized defenceman and power-play quarterback.

Hutson leans distributor overall, but his creativity leads to scoring chances off his own stick. He produced 15 goals and 34 assists in 38 games at Boston University last season. He has the legs to escape pressure and lead or join the rush in transition. His size will always be a big part of the discussion, but he defends with purpose and never backs down from competing to win pucks.

Hutson is in a battle to earn a spot on the Canadiens' blue line, but he's used to being the underdog and has a history of rising to the occasion. If he breaks camp with the Habs I'm confident saying there will be no looking back for Hutson. His game will take off at the NHL level in short order.

Will Smith, San Jose Sharks

Smith was drafted fourth overall two years ago and joins the Sharks after one year at the college level with Boston College. He led the NCAA with an incredible 25 goals and 46 assists in 41 games, skating alongside Gauthier for most of the year at BC.

Smith brings pure offence. In his draft year he had 51 goals and 76 assists in 60 games at the USNTDP. He will be challenged by bigger, stronger, more organized players at the NHL level but his skill and hockey sense will lead to plenty of offence. The Sharks have the luxury of rolling out Celebrini and Smith on their power play.

SECOND TIER: ROOKIES WHO COULD PLAY THEIR WAY INTO THE CALDER

Every year there's a player or two who surprise prognosticators with their immediate impact at the NHL level. An example from last year is Minnesota Wild defenceman Brock Faber who burst on to the scene and ended the year as one of the most discussed Calder finalists. Faber averaged 25 minutes of ice time, was deployed in all situations, and produced eight goals and 39 assists offensively. He signed an eight year, \$68-million extension this past off-season that kicks in next year.

Here's a look at some names who could garner consideration as the season rolls along:

Josh Doan, Utah HC

Doan skated in 11 games for the Arizona Coyotes last season and contributed an impressive five goals and four assists. He's proven he can skate at NHL pace and displays the ability to track the play and measure how it is developing. Doan is proficient at finding open ice and loose pucks in high danger areas.

The right-shot forward has a lethal release, shooting the puck quickly and accurately. Doan could be a sleeper pick for the Calder and a name to keep a close eye on this season.

Mavrik Bourque, Dallas Stars

Bourque projects as a top six scoring forward. He has two years of AHL development under his belt already and he's played to his identity. Bourque's primary element is his ability to create offence and he's produced 46 goals, 78 assists in 141 AHL games.

Rutger McGroarty, Pittsburgh Penguins

If McGroarty gets the opportunity to skate alongside Sydney Crosby in Pittsburgh there's a strong probability he will produce offence in his first year at the NHL level. Of course, nothing is given and his opportunity will have to be earned. McGroarty's combination of power and leverage along the wall and out front the opponents' net could lead to positive results.

Jiri Kulich, Buffalo Sabres

Kulich is undoubtedly Buffalo's top goal scoring prospect. He's scored 51 goals in 119 games at the AHL level playing for the Rochester Americans over the past two seasons.

However, Kulich will need to prove he can be trusted defensively at the NHL level. He's a work in progress off the puck, but his element could produce timely results for the Sabres.

Nikolai Kovalenko, Colorado Avalanche

Kovalenko is the oldest rookie in my tiers, a soon to be 25-year-old who was drafted in the sixth round (171st overall) in 2018. Kovalenko has a history of being a streaky scorer, but he has potential to be deployed in a variety of roles.

He's a stocky forward (five-foot-10, 192 pounds) who moves well and has good puck touch. He sees the ice and distributes well from the weak side flank on the power play. Kovalenko's top scoring season came in 2022-23 season when he produced 21 goals, 33 assists playing for Torpedo in the KHL. He had 11 goals and 24 assists in 42 games last season.

Dustin Wolf, Calgary Flames

Wolf has done all he can at the AHL level. He's won an MVP award, been recognized as the top goalie twice, been a first-team rookie and twice been honoured as part of the first-team AHL roster.

The net battle is open for the taking in Calgary. Wolf was originally selected in the seventh round (214th overall) in 2019 and the six-foot, 174-pound goalie has had to persevere every step of the way in his career so far.

NHL shooters will challenge his athletic ability and crease quickness. His small sample size of work in the league has been average to date — he posted a 3.16 GAA and .893 save percentage in 17 games last season — so it will be interesting to see how comfortable Wolf is this season in Calgary.

Yaroslav Askarov, San Jose Sharks

Askarov was acquired by the Sharks this past off-season after asking out of the crowded crease in Nashville's organization. The south-paw goalie has long been touted as one of the best netminding prospects outside of the NHL.

Askarov will most certainly be under duress with the Sharks this season. San Jose will give up more high danger scoring chances against than likely any other team in the league. If the athletic Askarov can post a goals against average at, or below, 3.00 and a save percentage of .915 or better he could end up in the Calder discussion despite his win/loss record.

[Sportsnet.ca / The top 23 prospects under 23](#)

By Sam Cosentino, Jason Bukala and Emily Sadler – September 24, 2024

From potential franchise cornerstones to soon-to-be everyday NHLers, it's all high ceilings and bright futures in Sportsnet's ranking of the top 23 NHL prospects under 23.

The landscape of the NHL is always changing.

While owners, general managers, coaches, and scouts are all important architects in building and rebuilding teams, no one drives the game forward like the players themselves.

The league is brimming with talent, and there's a pretty long lineup to get in, with all 32 franchises toiling behind the scenes to build up their prospect pools and develop the game's next great stars. So, who are the top skaters coming down the pipeline? That's the question we set out to answer here.

First, a few ground rules: The players on this list, which was ranked by Sportsnet's Jason Bukala and Sam Cosentino and written based on their insights and expertise, are all 23 years old or younger. None of them have made their NHL debut, which is important to note as it rules out highly touted prospects and soon-to-be stars like, say, Ducks prospect Cutter Gauthier, who got into the lineup for a game last April, or Marco Kasper, who saw game action a year earlier with the Red Wings.

Because goaltenders tend to develop at a different rate than those that play in front of them, we've focused on skaters. While some of the players listed below are expected to jump into pro lineups this fall — or at least challenge for a spot at camps over the next few weeks — many others will spend the 2024-25 campaign back with their Canadian junior clubs, overseas in the KHL, or on the NCAA circuit.

Eighteen NHL teams are represented on this list, with the San Jose Sharks, Montreal Canadiens, St. Louis Blues, Utah Hockey Club, and Vancouver Canucks all featured twice. There's a heavy offensive presence, with 18 prospects suiting up at forward as compared to just seven on the blue line. And only one prospect was selected outside of the first round.

From top picks and future franchise cornerstones to soon-to-be everyday NHLers and those whose debuts will require a little more patience, here is our ranking of the top 23 NHL prospects under 23.

18 | 6-foot, 190 pounds | Drafted first overall in 2024

Long before the hockey gods smiled on San Jose at April's draft lottery, everyone knew the name that would be called first from the draft stage in June: Macklin Celebrini, no matter what. And it's easy to see why.

With 32 goals and 32 assists in 38 games as a freshman at Boston University last season, Celebrini made history as the youngest-ever winner of the Hobey Baker Award, given to the best player on the men's college hockey circuit — and he's already a favourite for the Calder.

His is the kind of talent you can build a franchise around, the definition of a true No. 1 centreman who can be trusted in all situations and lead a club, both on the scoresheet and in the locker room. All synonyms for "fast" and "quick" apply to him, too. A constant threat off the rush, he's tough to defend in the offensive zone. And while he excels at setting up his wingers, he's certainly not afraid to rip one home himself.

He's the perfect candidate to lead a franchise weighed down with losses into the light of a new era.

18 | 6-foot, 192 pounds | Drafted fifth overall in 2024

While the Canadiens are expected to introduce some top young prospects and players into their lineup this season — or reintroduce, as the case may be — there's one budding star newly atop everyone's must-see list who won't be landing in Montreal just yet: Ivan Demidov. Widely projected as a potential top-three pick ahead of the 2024 draft, Demidov fell to Montreal at No. 5 — a gift Habs management welcomed with open arms. Demidov's game is a joy to watch, his style of play mixing equal parts skill and will with endlessly creative playmaking and a pro-ready shot.

Demidov's KHL contract will see him remain in Russia with SKA St. Petersburg for the entire 2024-25 campaign — highlight-reel goals are already showing up online as that season gets underway — but he's made it clear that he intends to make the jump to North America next spring.

22 | 6-foot-4, 216 pounds | Drafted 69th overall in 2020

If the Hurricanes liked what they saw in Alexander Nikishin when they selected him in the third round (69th overall) of the 2020 draft, they've got to be absolutely thrilled about his development in the four years since. Not only has he filled out his six-foot-four frame on the blue line, he's also grown into a leader — at 21, he was named captain of his 2023-24 SKA St. Petersburg squad and wears the 'C' again this year. He's deployed in all situations — he has the potential to be the future quarterback of Carolina's power play — and has elevated his offensive game every season. After finishing his rookie KHL year in 2022-23 as the league leader in overall assists and top point-getter among all defenders (55), he one-upped himself with an even better second season — including more goals (17) and points (56) than any other D-man league-wide. A springtime NHL arrival is expected.

19 | 5-foot-10, 176 pounds | Drafted seventh overall in 2023

Michkov was something of a mystery when the Flyers drafted him with the seventh-overall pick in 2023, but it was his KHL contract status — not his skill — that cast a bit of uncertainty over his future with Philadelphia. The dynamic goal-scorer, known for his pace and creativity in transition up-ice as much as for his ability pick pockets and put the puck in the net, was expected to remain under contract with SKA St. Petersburg through the 2026-27 season, but this summer brought welcome news of his KHL release and arrival in Philly.

Michkov put up 19 goals and 41 points in 47 games while on loan to HK Sochi last season, and while he'll need some time to adjust to the North American, game Flyers fans are right to be excited about what he can do.

A dynamic offensive player known for his pace and creativity in transition, Michkov put up 19 goals and 41 points in 47 games with HK Sochi last season.

20 | 6-foot-1, 172 pounds | Drafted 24th overall in 2022

The name of Danila Yurov's game is offence. And what he may lack in two-way play and defensive responsibility, he more than makes up for in production. While he isn't prolific in the trenches, you won't find him standing still — off the puck, he's always lurking in the offensive zone and ready to pounce. Get that puck on his stick, and he's capable of exploding through the neutral zone and either setting up a teammate with a slick pass or taking it home himself. He's honed his game in the KHL with Metallurg Magnitogorsk, splitting seasons between the senior and MHL levels for two years before making the big club full-time in 2022-23. He's under contract for at least one more year, and is poised to be an effective point producer at the NHL level once he crosses the pond.

19 | 6-foot, 181 pounds | Drafted fourth overall in 2023

After a pretty comprehensive tear-down, the Sharks' youth movement is underway. And between 2024 first-overall pick Macklin Celebrini and last year's fourth-overall selection in Will Smith, San Jose is about to inject a whole lot of skill down the middle of the lineup.

Smith's freshman season at Boston College saw him lead the team in assists (46) and points (71) in 41 games, earning himself a top-three finalist nod in the Hobey Baker race won by Celebrini. He also shone on the international stage with Team USA, contributing four goals and nine points in seven games as the Americans clinched world junior gold last winter. Questions this past spring about whether Smith might return to Boston College for his sophomore season were quickly put to rest when the 19-year-old chose to go pro and signed his entry-level deal.

19 | 6-foot, 190 pounds | Drafted eighth overall in 2023

Another Boston College forward and Team USA star, Leonard is the whole package. But what separates him from his talented teammates and peers is that hard-to-label quality that just makes guys tough to play against. Call him a bulldog, call him sturdy on the puck, call him a bulldozer — Leonard is a strong physical player, and he's got the production to match. It's no wonder he's considered such a crucial part of Washington's future as it begins to ponder life after Alex Ovechkin. The Capitals clearly love how he's developing — so much so they offered him a contract out of development camp this summer. Leonard opted not to sign just yet, choosing instead to return to Boston College for his sophomore year and a likely jump right into NHL action in the spring. There is little doubt he'll be ready.

19 | 6-foot-1, 203 pounds | Drafted 10th overall in 2023

From Slovakia to Sweden to Sudbury, Dalibor Dvorsky has thrived at every level he's played. It's no wonder fans in St. Louis are eager to see him suit up with the Blues. While the jury's still out on when, exactly, he'll make his NHL debut, as the club looks to continue its on-the-fly roster retooling, his track record for strong first impressions already speaks for itself. His arrival in North America last season brought an explosion of offence — 45 goals and 88 points in 52 games with the Wolves. Before that, he honed his game up and down the ranks in Sweden, after moving from Slovakia in search of tougher competition. His two-way game and strength on the faceoff dot really grew there, and both helped set the foundation for a strong arrival this side of the Atlantic.

19 | 6-foot-5, 203 pounds | Drafted sixth overall in 2023 (by Arizona)

Considering the size of their prospect pool, it seems the Utah Hockey Club is taking "go big or go home" to heart in their approach to building a roster. Just look at their 2023 draft haul, which featured a pair of towering skaters in Dmitriy Simashev and forward Daniil But. It may be Simashev's stature that catches your eye first, but it's the style with which he plays that really ranks him among the league's top prospects. His skating stands out most — a potential problem area among some longer skaters, but not for Simashev, whose mechanics are sound. He is able to use his size and some physicality to defend. And on offence? He's shown he can contribute, but that's likely something that will develop more with time.

18 | 6-foot-2, 209 pounds | Drafted second overall in 2024

One year after drafting their new franchise face in forward Connor Bedard, Chicago wasted no time selecting their future star blue liner with the second-overall pick in June. While there was no shortage of offensive talent at the top of this 2024 draft class, it's easy to see why Chicago chose the player they did. Blue-chip defencemen can win you championships, and an NHL-ready right-shot rearguard boasting Levshunov's offensive upside can be tough to find. That's not to say Levshunov won't require a little time to adjust to the NHL game after signing his entry-level deal in July. But considering how quickly he was able to thrive in the USHL in 2022-23 (42 points in 62 games) and on the college circuit at Michigan

State last year (nine goals and 35 points in 38 games as a freshman) it's safe to assume the top-pairing blue liner will get up to speed in no time.

Reinbacher, seen here in preseason action last September, could bring size and skill to the Habs' lineup sooner than later.

19 | 6-foot-2, 194 pounds | Drafted fifth overall in 2023

While the Canadiens will have to wait a little longer for Demidov to land in Montreal, their fifth pick from 2023 could soon be ready to jump into the mix — or at least to challenge for a spot on what's quickly become a crowded blue line. David Reinbacher, who signed his entry-level deal last summer before playing the bulk of the 2023-24 season in Switzerland, brings size and skill to the lineup. He projects as a top-pairing defender, but will likely see a few more AHL reps with the Laval Rocket before making the jump to everyday-NHLer status.

20 | 6-foot-2, 187 pounds | Drafted 23rd overall in 2022

Straight out of the Minnesota hockey mould, Jimmy Snuggerud has brought an enticing combination of grit and goal-scoring to every roster he's on, from the U.S. National Team Development Program to the University of Minnesota. He's shone on star-studded world junior squads two straight years, helping propel the Americans to bronze in 2023 with his 13-point effort in seven games, followed by gold last January (eight points in six games). With excellent vision and high-end read-and-react times, Snuggerud can play the game at any pace, making everyone around him better, but that doesn't mean he's going to defer a shot. After posting back-to-back 21-goal campaigns on the college circuit, Snuggerud could be due for a jump as he returns for his third year with the Golden Gophers.

19 | 5-foot-11, 165 pounds | Drafted 23rd overall in 2023

The son of former NHLer Yanic Perreault, hockey is in his blood. It's no wonder he seems to have a sixth sense when it comes to his playmaking. Though small in stature, he plays with the kind of intelligence that allows him to manoeuvre the puck in tight while avoiding hard contact. Perreault's breakout season couldn't have come at a better time — he compiled a whopping 53 goals and 132 points with the USNTDP in his all-important draft year in 2022-23 — and his success as a freshman at Boston College last season (19 goals and 60 points in 36 games) suggests there's plenty more to come for the future Ranger in his sophomore year.

20 | 5-foot-11, 192 pounds | Drafted 12th overall in 2022

With the 'C' on his sweater in Moose Jaw the last two years, Denton Mateychuk earned himself plenty of fans thanks to his no-quit drive and ability to eat major minutes in all situations. But he's not just a stay-at-home rearguard. As his impressive 75-point stat line last season suggests, he knows how to jump into the play and make opponents pay. Once the WHL-champion Warriors were ousted from the Memorial Cup Tournament last spring, he joined AHL Cleveland for a handful of their playoff games. A two-way rearguard with top-four potential who excels at puck distribution (think PP quarterback), Mateychuk could be a strong candidate to push for an NHL spot out of camp.

20 | 5-foot-11, 172 pounds | Drafted 15th overall in 2022

If you're looking for goals, you'll find plenty of them when Jonathan Lekkerimaki is on the ice. The Canucks' top forward prospect boasts perhaps the best shot of his 2022 draft class thanks to his elite release and ability to shoot accurately in motion — even from the tightest of angles. After a bit of a dip in production following his draft year, the Swede bounced back in a big way. He was named MVP at the 2024 world juniors following his tournament-leading seven-goal performance in seven games en route to Sweden's silver-medal finish. After wrapping up his SHL season with Örebro HK last year, which saw

him tally 19 goals and 31 points in 46 contests, Lekkerimaki landed with AHL Abbotsford — where he'll return to start this season. But for how long? It won't be surprising to see him get a shot in the NHL soon.

19 | 6-foot-6, 216 pounds | Drafted 12th overall in 2023 (by Arizona)

When Arizona, now Utah, drafted Daniil But early in the first round of the 2023 draft, the biggest thing that stood out about him was, well, his size. At 6-foot-6, he towered over the entire Coyotes staff onstage, who six picks earlier had already taken the six-foot-five Simashev. Strap on some skates and But is a giant on the ice — with big talent to go with that power-forward frame. While he may not boast the kind of fleet-footed agility of some of his smaller peers, But has really sound skating mechanics. And in addition to being a net-front force, he's a smart playmaker with understated vision for the game. He posted 10 goals and 21 points with Lokomotiv Yaroslavl of the KHL last year, and is under contract for at least one more.

20 | 5-foot-11, 163 pounds | Drafted 16th overall in 2022

The 2024-25 season is poised to be a big one for Noah Östlund. After spending his first full season in the Swedish Hockey League's top tier, he made the jump last spring to North America, where he appeared in a handful of AHL contests with the Rochester Americans. All signs point to the forward being ready for the American League, and Sabres faithful should enjoy having him a little closer to home — because he's a fun player to watch. What separates him from his peers is his energy and compete level. While he could stand to pack on more muscle, his no-quit play and creativity should see him find his game this side of the pond pretty quickly.

19 | 6-foot-1, 179 pounds | Drafted 11th overall in 2023

The top defensive prospect in the Canucks' system, Tom Willander's skating is what stands out most. After rising through the rankings in his all-important draft year in 2023, going from a projected mid-rounder to 11th overall, he made the jump from Sweden's junior ranks to the NCAA last year and found instant success on Boston University's blue line. He brings size and agility to the lineup, with the kind of offensive flair and hockey IQ that make him an asset in all situations. He finished his rookie season with the Terriers with four goals and 21 assists, and should shine as a sophomore.

A standout skater who made a huge jump in his draft year in 2023, Willander is poised for an excellent sophomore season at BU.

19 | 5-foot-11, 185 pounds | Drafted 28th overall in 2023

Easton Cowan is on the rise. Suiing up two hours south of the club that drafted him late in the first round of 2023, Cowan put on a show with the London Knights last season. His 34 goals and 96 points through 54 games were both career-highs by a wide margin, and he stepped up in the playoffs to the tune of 10 goals and a league-leading 34 points in 18 post-season games to propel the Knights to the OHL championship crown, plus three goals and eight points in four Memorial Cup contests. Perhaps most impressive is the energy with which he plays, his drive to create turnovers and ability to battle in high-traffic areas, making him a relentless competitor. Cowan's efforts earned him the OHL's most outstanding player award in the regular season as well as league playoff MVP.

19 | 5-foot-11, 185 pounds | Drafted 17th overall in 2023

Death, taxes, and teams coveting right-shot defencemen. Life has its inevitabilities. Lucky for the Red Wings, they've got themselves a future keeper in Sandin-Pellikka, whose elite skating makes him just as reliable under pressure as he is dangerous in transition. While his mobility is his biggest strength, speed

and skill factoring in as key elements of his game — think puck-moving, power-play quarterback — he could stand to put on more muscle to withstand the heavy demands in the trenches.

20 | 6-foot-4, 205 pounds | Drafted 11th overall in 2022 (by Arizona)

The younger brother of Boston's Morgan Geekie, Conor is similar in stature to his sibling but there are differences in their games. Where the elder Geekie is known more for his grit, the 2022 first-rounder plays a more skill-forward game, which showcases his excellent touch and elite vision. Geekie, who's coming off a 99-point WHL season split between Wenatchee and Swift Current, rarely enters a play without a plan. That he's able to use his size to impose his will on opponents makes him an enticing prospect with top-six potential in the NHL. It's easy to see why Geekie was such a valuable trade chip at June's draft — the Lightning landed him as part of a package from Utah in exchange for defenceman Mikhail Sergachev.

19 | 6-foot-2, 187 pounds | Drafted 27th overall in 2023

From his stride and speed to his overall playmaking, Calum Ritchie has shown steady development over the course of his three OHL seasons with Oshawa and is slated for another go-round this year with the Generals. His production has jumped from a 45-point rookie year in 2021-22 to 28 goals and 80 points in 50 games last season. He's regarded as a potential top-six forward, and a defensively sound one, too — he plays a complete 200-foot game that'll make him all the more valued once he jumps to the NHL.

20 | 6-foot-1, 205 pounds | Drafted 14th overall in 2022 (by Winnipeg)

With his trade request out of Winnipeg now settled, the biggest question when it comes to Rutger McGroarty's immediate NHL future is how quickly he'll be able to work his way up the lineup to play alongside Sidney Crosby. That's a coveted spot, of course, but one that could be well-suited to the power forward's skillset thanks to his elite hockey sense and vision and his ability to create space and funnel pucks to the net. There's no shortage of strong leadership in Pittsburgh, and in McGroarty the Pens have a little more. While he won't be relied upon right away, he brings experience captaining Team USA to U-18 silver and world junior gold.