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The Athletic / At Gaudreau Family 5K, memory of late brothers Johnny and Matthew shines bright: 'The boys are here'

By Peter Baugh – June 1, 2025

In the hour before the Gaudreau Family 5K on Saturday morning, with the sidewalk still wet from a rainstorm the previous night, hundreds and hundreds of participants filed into Washington Lake Park and headed toward a clearing where the race was to begin.

A rainbow in the sky greeted all of them.

"The boys are here," said Deb Vasaturo, one of the event organizers.

Nine months ago, mere days after John and Matthew Gaudreau were struck and killed by an SUV driver while riding bicycles together on Aug. 29, a group of close friends, including Vasaturo, had gathered at the family home in Penns Grove, N.J., hoping to offer support to the brothers' parents, Jane and Guy. That day, a double rainbow had split through the sky — a tiny comfort in a period of unimaginable grief.

The 31-year-old John, better known as Johnny among fans, was playing for the Columbus Blue Jackets when he and 29-year-old Matthew died, and Zach Aston-Reese felt his presence throughout the NHL season. In February, on the first birthday of John's oldest son, a beautiful sunset graced Columbus; late in the season, before a must-win road game for the Blue Jackets, a rainbow appeared above the Philadelphia Flyers' arena. He was touched again when another rainbow emerged before the 5K, as throngs of runners and walkers gathered for the race.

"It's almost a year since (the accident), but I think it's something that can take a lifetime to heal from," Aston-Reese said. "Any time you get a chance to support, especially the bigger events, it's really special."

Around 1,100 people signed up for either the competitive 5K, which kicked off at 8 a.m., or a more casual 8:45 a.m. race of the same distance. Kids had their chance to compete in a one-mile run later in the morning. Multiple race participants wore jerseys of John, a seven-time NHL All-Star nicknamed Johnny Hockey, who played for the Calgary Flames and Blue Jackets. Some also wore gear for Matthew, who reached the AHL after a four-year career at Boston College and most recently suited up with the ECHL's Worcester Railers in 2021-22.

The park was alive with activity throughout the morning. One tent showcased signed jerseys up for a silent auction, as kids played lawn games nearby. Baskets sitting on the covered stage were raffled off. Below them, attendees wrote memories and messages of support for the Gaudreau family on a big white banner.

The event raised money for an adaptive playground at Archbishop Damiano, a special education school in Westville, N.J. The Gaudreau family has deep family connections with the school: Jane's brother has special needs, and their mother worked there for more than 40 years. All four of the Gaudreau kids — Kristen, John, Matthew and Katie — have either volunteered for or worked at the school too.

"The playground has been a project for I think four or five years, and there just never was enough funding," Vasaturo said. "(The 5K) was a perfect marriage of doing something good to honor the boys and seeing children laugh and smile."

Fans sign a banner for the Gaudreau family. (Peter Baugh / For The Athletic)

Jane, Guy, Kristen and Katie were present throughout. Both boys loved children, Jane said, so seeing all the smiling kids would have been everything they would've wanted in the event. "I think they would just be so proud of us that we did (this)," she said.

Guy noted that Matthew would have run the 5K and won. He frequently beat John in off-ice exercises growing up, leaving his older brother "so mad he couldn't see straight," their dad said with fondness.

Professional hockey players went out of their way to attend as well. South Jersey natives Buddy Robinson, who played 62 NHL games and is now in the KHL, and Tony DeAngelo, who played with the New York Islanders this past season, were both there. Ottawa Senators captain Brady Tkachuk, a teammate of John Gaudreau's for the United States at the World Championships last summer, traveled from his offseason home on the Jersey Shore and wore a black sweatshirt that read "Johnny Hockey." Aston-Reese and Erik Gudbranson represented the Blue Jackets.

"Our family wouldn't have missed this," said Gudbranson, who came with his wife and kids straight from a trip to Disney World. "There's no way."

In the aftermath of John and Matthew's deaths, the Gaudreau family's friends wanted to find ways to help. Vasaturo initially thought of the charity 5K. When she approached Guy and Jane in October, Jane thought it was a wonderful idea but felt the family didn't have the emotional bandwidth to provide much help.

That wasn't an issue. Their friends — a committee of around 18 people — took care of it all.

"They did everything, organized everything," Guy said. "They just wanted us to be here."

Community members beyond the committee, including Aston-Reese, helped too. The Blue Jackets forward studied graphic design while playing college hockey at Northeastern University, and one of Jane's friends reached out and asked him to create the event logo. Honored, the Blue Jackets forward came up with a design — two interlocking hockey sticks with doves above them and the Gaudreau family name across the middle — that ultimately went on the race shirts and medals.

"It was pretty surreal pulling in and seeing everyone with their shirts on and the logo you created," Aston-Reese said.

Along with the race in Sewell, more than 1,300 people signed up to compete in a virtual 5K, with participants across the U.S. and Canada, as well as in multiple other countries, including Ireland, Sweden and the United Arab Emirates. Florida Panthers players, who are preparing for the Stanley Cup Final, participated from Fort Lauderdale.

"Thursday, yesterday and even this morning I woke up, (and) I can't clean out my inbox because I get all the notices of all the donations and all the registrations," said Paul O'Connor, an organizing committee member whose son was a childhood friend of Matthew. "It just keeps growing."

Jane Gaudreau said it was emotional pulling into the park and seeing how many people were there. She and Guy initially expected the 5K to draw maybe 100 or 200 people. To see it balloon into an event with more than 1,000 was "overwhelming, but in a good way," she said.

After the races, the family stood on stage for an award ceremony. The public address announcer listed off the overall top finishers, then the winners of each age group. The NHL players on hand presented

awards: In place of trophies, each person received a gift card and one of the hockey sticks left at public memorials after John and Matthew's deaths.

"Just to be able to show support for this amazing family and see this amazing turnout, it was pretty great to be a part of," said Tkachuk, who walked the more casual 5K. "I'm just so thankful they had me here."

Every finisher received a medal that read "1st annual 5K run/walk," indicating Saturday wasn't a one-off event, and indeed the current plan is to continue it in the future. Jane has seen messages asking if the family would host the race in Calgary or Columbus, which has given her ideas. She saw requests from Calgary first, so she said she'll perhaps run next year as a virtual participant with people there.

But this year the Gaudreaus were home in New Jersey, only a five-minute drive from Hollydell Ice Arena, the rink where the boys spent countless hours as kids. Jane stood near the end of the course as the fastest runners wrapped up the competitive race. She clapped and whooped as they neared the finish line.

Guy, meanwhile, ran the race. He wore a bright orange long-sleeved shirt, and the crowd burst into applause when the public address announcer pointed him out as he came around the final turn. Vasaturo, the friend whose idea led to Saturday's event, cheered and cheered from the stage.

"His strength and Jane's strength and their resiliency is just amazing," she said. "We just want to be there and help them along the way, take these steps with them."

"I'm just really happy to get a gold medal for him this year."

The Hockey Writers / Columbus Blue Jackets Mock Draft 3.0: Two Late-Round Targets

By Matthew Buhrmann – May 29, 2025

In my third Columbus Blue Jackets Mock Draft for The Hockey Writers, we'll take a look at two later-round prospects who could fit well with the team. With picks at 205th and 218th overall in the seventh round, the Blue Jackets have a chance to grab some underrated talent and make a splash.

We'll know a lot more about the Blue Jackets' draft plans after the NHL Combine next week, where general manager (GM) Don Waddell and his staff will get a closer look at the prospects.

"Waddell said they will meet with prospects on Tuesday that week from 9:10 A.M. until 5:00 P.M. with just one 45-minute lunch break built in. On that Wednesday, they'll go from 10:00 A.M. until 5:25 P.M. Besides Waddell, Rick Nash, Trevor Timmins, and Ville Siren will be in the room talking with the prospects at different points." – Mark Scheig, The Hockey Writers

While these two players likely won't be picked by the Blue Jackets, they're the type of prospects I'd like to see them consider.

For the sake of a mock draft, here are two potential fits for Columbus.

205th Overall (Seventh Round) – Grayson Burzynski (LD) – WHL

Grayson Burzynski is a big, playmaking defenseman who had a breakout 2024-25 season in the Western Hockey League (WHL). He moves the puck well, creates plays under pressure, and uses his size effectively. The Blue Jackets need more depth in large defensemen who can generate offense, and Burzynski could be a great fit.

After going undrafted in 2024, he's improved significantly and has become a riser in the 2025 Draft class. Teams would be making a mistake by overlooking him again.

Burzynski recorded 49 points in 67 games this past season while being plus-9 when on the ice, proving he can contribute offensively while staying strong defensively. His ability to control breakouts, find passing lanes, and bait forecheckers makes him a unique player.

"A transition specialist, Burzynski always steps off the boards before making plays to draw pressure and potentially weaponize it. Instead of forcing plays straight ahead, he works laterally, then passes through the forechecker that fell for the bait. Then, he activates, where he quickly moves pucks as they arrive on his stick." – Elite Prospects 2023 NHL Draft Guide

Burzynski's hockey IQ, puck-moving skills, and size make him a strong sleeper pick with a lot of upside. The Blue Jackets should take a serious look at him, or at least someone like him in this draft.

218th Overall (Seventh Round) – David Deputy (RW) – USHL

David Deputy is an intriguing prospect who's been overlooked throughout most of his career, but lately he's been gaining serious attention from the media, and for good reason. Despite being an unranked 2004-born prospect, his late-season surge and United States Hockey League (USHL) standout playoff performance have put him on the radar for NHL teams.

A hard-working, speedy winger, Deputy put up 21 goals and 36 assists (57 points) in 59 games between Omaha and Muskegon during the 2024-25 regular season. When the playoffs rolled around, he took his game to another level, recording 10 goals and four assists (14 points in 14 games) while helping the Muskegon Lumberjacks win their first-ever Clark Cup championship.

Deputy thrives in a fast-paced, aggressive offensive system, using his elite skating ability and hard forechecking to create scoring chances out of nothing. His speed allows him to open up space and drive play on the rush, and he constantly moves without the puck to find weak areas in defensive coverage.

“It’s fast, I would say it’s pretty fast,” Deputy said of his playing style. “Skating is a big part of my game—making plays, using skill, scoring goals. I like scoring goals, assists—so yeah, anything the team really needs.”

Despite standing just 5-foot-9, he doesn’t shy away from contact and battles hard in the dirty areas, especially around the crease. Many of his goals come from second-chance opportunities, where he uses his quick reflexes and determination to bury rebounds and fight for space in the slot.

Deputy is set to play college hockey at Miami University starting in the fall, which is just a short two-hour drive from Columbus. This close proximity would allow the Blue Jackets to easily monitor his development in the NCHC, one of the toughest conferences in college hockey.

Columbus has had some success with RedHawks before, as Jack Roslovic and Sean Kuraly both developed there before making an impact at the NHL level.

Despite his impressive numbers, Deputy was left off the 2025 NHL Central Scouting Final Rankings, something that has fueled his drive heading into college hockey. Based on his strong finish and growing attention from NHL teams, I would love to see the Blue Jackets take a chance on him in the seventh round.

Note: The Vegas Golden Knights originally held this pick but traded it to Columbus in the deal that sent Jonathan Quick to Vegas in exchange for Michael Hutchinson and a 2025 seventh-round selection.

With these two late-round picks, the Blue Jackets can grab underrated talent with real upside, who sometimes even end up making a huge impact at the NHL level.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Defensive Options If Provorov & Fabbro Walk in Free Agency

By Mark Scheig – May 30, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets hope they are able to re-sign defensemen Ivan Provorov and Dante Fabbro. According to GM Don Waddell, both players made it clear in their exit interviews that they'd like to stay.

The sides are expected to continue talks now and throughout the month of June. In particular, Waddell is expected to meet with Provorov's agent at the NHL Combine in Buffalo which starts next week.

The interest is there. But there is still some question if one or both players can cross the finish line in contract negotiations. Both players are due significant raises. Particularly in Provorov's case, he'd prefer a contract with as much term as possible.

Can Waddell and the Blue Jackets find enough common ground to get new deals done? If not, the team faces the reality of losing two top-four defensemen from last season's roster. Those kind of players aren't easy to replace.

If the Blue Jackets are unable to re-sign both players, there are some potential options they can explore to replace them. Given that one of their biggest issues last season was goals against, there would be extra urgency in making sure the defense is addressed.

The Blue Jackets have four options available to them here. Those are internal options, free agency, trades and potential offer sheets. Let's look at each option.

Internal Options

As we described recently in our Blue Jackets' Roster Projection 1.0, the team has five players under contract that project to make the roster. Those are Zach Werenski, Damon Severson, Erik Gudbranson, Denton Mateychuk and Jake Christiansen.

Jordan Harris is a pending RFA. With a new deal, he could make the roster as a depth defenseman.

The Blue Jackets do have some defensemen in the organization with a contract. It remains to be seen exactly how close they are to making an impact in the NHL. Those players are Corson Ceulemans, Charlie Elick, Guillaume Richard, Luca Marrelli, Stanislav Svozil and newly-signed Caleb MacDonald. The only one from this group to see the NHL so far has been Svozil.

There doesn't appear to be a player who is a slam dunk to make the roster this season. If we consider others who need a contract, such as Daemon Hunt or Samuel Knazko, it reinforces that there are no obvious candidates at this moment that would replace what Provorov and Fabbro brought to the Blue Jackets.

Given the current situation, this option appears to be a last resort if the team doesn't address this in other ways.

Free Agency

The Blue Jackets can look to the free agency market to see if there is a fit. If he gets to market, Provorov would immediately become one of the best players available on defense. The same can be said for Fabbro given the resurgence he had after being claimed off waivers.

Here is a sample of some of the potential names available on the market. This is not an all-inclusive list. You can see the full list [here](#).

Matt Grzelcyk

Aaron Ekblad

Vladislav Gavrikov

Brent Burns

Dmitri Orlov

Cody Ceci

Ryan Lindgren

Brian Dumoulin

Nick Perbix

Oliver Kylington

John Klingberg

The biggest name on the list is Ekblad. He's about to play in his second consecutive Stanley Cup Final. Given who else on the Panthers needs a new contract, this is a situation worth monitoring.

Ekblad would immediately change the look of the Blue Jackets' defense. He'd immediately slot into the top-four bringing size to the right side on top of what Gudbranson does.

While Ekblad is not the goal scorer he's been in the past, he had one of his best playmaking seasons in 2024-25 with 30 helpers. His experience would be a welcomed addition on a Blue Jackets' team looking to take the next step.

There would be significant questions with Ekblad on a long-term extension. He's coming off making \$7.5 million on his last deal. At age 29, he's going to cash in with a raise. Would the Blue Jackets be willing to pay at that level?

Ekblad has also missed significant time due to injuries. He's played a lot of games given how far into the playoffs the Panthers have gone. A long-term deal comes with significant risk.

The Panthers also would love to re-sign Ekblad if possible. There's no guarantee he gets to market.

If the Blue Jackets lose Provorov and Fabbro, they should check in on Ekblad. Although there's risk, he checks a lot of the boxes that would make him a good fit in the top-four.

Former Blue Jacket Gavrikov would be a fit. But would he want to re-sign there? He played significant first-pairing minutes with the Kings and will be due a raise.

Grzelcyk is coming off a career-high in assists. Burns and Orlov helped the Hurricanes to another Eastern Conference Final. Waddell would know them. Lindgren is coming off a tough season that saw him traded from the Rangers. Dumoulin showed well for the Devils especially when injuries mounted.

Free agency provides some options although everyone has risks and questions attached to them. My take? If Ekblad hits market, the Blue Jackets should inquire and see if they have a chance to add him. Outside that, let the market play itself out and see if something falls to the team that's too good to pass up.

Trades

Waddell has made one thing clear. In the right deals, the 14th and 20th picks are available. While he hasn't said this publicly, it wouldn't surprise anyone if one of the Blue Jackets' main targets in a potential trade is for a defenseman.

There are a couple of situations in the league worth monitoring from a Blue Jackets' perspective. These are players in which their current situations could point to a trade if things don't get worked out.

An example of this would be a player like Rasmus Andersson with the Calgary Flames. He has one year left on his current deal. There are questions out there about his future with the team given the timeline and what his next contract would look like among other factors.

If Provorov and Fabbro aren't re-signed, Andersson would fit what the Blue Jackets are looking for, a right-handed defenseman who can play a shutdown role. Making a trade like this can be tough given the need for a new contract. Is this more of a trade deadline kind of deal?

Remember Damon Severson was a sign and trade. If there was enough interest in the player, that's a possibility for Andersson. He's an example of a player in which seeing if there's a match makes sense.

Another example of a player in that category is Connor Murphy. The Blackhawks are clearly building for the future. They are a few years away at least from the contention conversation. He is entering the final year of his deal with the Blackhawks.

Like Andersson, this could setup as more of a trade deadline situation. Murphy seems to be happy in Chicago. But with his future beyond this season in question, he's the kind of player that will circulate in the rumor mill. He's also from the Columbus suburb of Dublin so this would make for a homecoming story if this ever became reality.

A couple other potential trade candidates include the likes of Erik Karlsson with the Penguins and maybe even a player like Vince Dunn in Seattle. No, the Blue Jackets wouldn't seem to be in on a player like Karlsson. As for Dunn, the Kraken have new management and a new head coach in Lane Lambert. With a couple seasons left at over \$7 million and the need to shake some things up, could we see a player like him moved? Maybe. Just don't think the Blue Jackets are looking here.

When it comes to the Blue Jackets, remember that Waddell was interested in trading for Jacob Trouba. There is a desire to make a deal. There are other players we haven't mentioned that could be in play if a bigger deal comes together.

Of all the options, trade appears to be the most likely option for the Blue Jackets especially if Provorov and Fabbro leave. Waddell has cap space and a desire for improvement. Given how thin the free agent market is in general, it all points back to the potential of a trade.

Offer Sheets?

The fourth option is Waddell electing to sign someone to an offer sheet. League-wide speculation says we could see some in this offseason. Given how much these could improve a team, there's certainly an argument that can be made for an increase in them.

Waddell has been involved with them in the past. He initiated one with Jesperi Kotkaniemi with the Hurricanes. Montreal elected not to match.

Two players come to mind when thinking of a potential offer sheet. The first is Oilers' Evan Bouchard. The second is Golden Knight's Nicolas Hague.

Bouchard would obviously attract attention from 31 other teams. What he's been able to do for the Oilers to help them get to consecutive Cup Finals would help anyone. He's even garnering some Norris Trophy discussion.

As for Hague, he's exactly the kind of big body defenseman teams would love to add. If the Golden Knights run into salary cap trouble, he becomes a prime offer sheet candidate. At 6-foot-6 and around 230 pounds, he would fill a hole on the left side with the Blue Jackets.

Bowen Byram with the Sabres is also eligible for an offer sheet. He could also get traded. Several teams are actively monitoring to see what the Sabres do here. The same can be said for the Rangers and K'Andre Miller. Elliotte Friedman said on 32 Thoughts his name is out there.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Blue Jackets have several options available to explore if Provorov and Fabbro walk. Ideally, they'd like to re-sign both so they don't have as many questions heading into next season.

One way or another, the Blue Jackets have the ability to be one of the more active teams this offseason. From a big free-agent signing to potential trades to even an offer sheet, all are possible outcomes for Waddell to improve his roster.

There are no shortage of options. For the Blue Jackets, they have to find the right option. That'll be their biggest challenge in all of this.

CHL.ca / London Knights edge Medicine Hat Tigers to secure a historic third Memorial Cup title

By Christopher Séguin – June 2, 2025

The London Knights captured their third Memorial Cup title with a 4–1 victory over the Medicine Hat Tigers in the 2025 final on Sunday night at Sun Life Financial Coliseum in Rimouski, Québec. Philadelphia Flyers prospect Denver Barkey led the way with two goals, San Jose Sharks prospect Sam Dickinson recorded three assists, and goaltender Austin Elliott turned aside 31 shots to anchor a strong performance for London.

With the win, the Knights join the Cornwall Royals, Kamloops Blazers, and Windsor Spitfires as the only CHL clubs to claim three Memorial Cup titles since 1972. London's previous Memorial Cup championships came in 2005 and 2016.

Winnipeg Jets prospect Jacob Julien and Toronto Maple Leafs prospect Easton Cowan also scored for London in Sunday's championship game. Cowan, who finished with a tournament-best seven points (3G-4A in 5 GP), was awarded the Stafford Smythe Memorial Trophy as the MVP of the 2025 Memorial Cup.

"What an opportunity that we had here today. We just took it and ran with it," shared Cowan on the ice following Sunday night's 4-1 victory. "That was some of our best hockey we played all year. We locked it down when we had to, and we scored when we had to. I am just super proud of this group."

By sharing the scoring lead with teammate Denver Barkey, Cowan became the first player since 1972 to lead or co-lead the tournament in points in back-to-back years. Barkey matched Cowan's production with seven points of his own (3G-4A in 5 GP). With identical stat lines at the 2025 Memorial Cup, Barkey and Cowan became the first set of teammates to share the Ed Chynoweth Trophy as the tournament's leading scorers. The award, introduced in 1996, had never previously been shared between two players.

Additionally, when including his eight-point performance at the 2024 Memorial Cup, Cowan now ranks tied with Mitch Marner for the most career Memorial Cup points in London Knights franchise history, with 15 points in nine games at the CHL's championship event.

Jacob Julien opened the scoring at 11:21 of the first period, taking a feed from 2025 NHL Draft prospect Henry Brzustewicz up the middle and sliding a backhand past Tigers goaltender Harrison Meneghin for his second of the tournament.

The Knights broke the game open in the second, striking for three goals. Easton Cowan made it 2-0 at 3:13, finishing off a slick feed from Sam O'Reilly in tight for his third of the Memorial Cup. Just 1:40 later, Denver Barkey added to the lead on a breakaway, beating Meneghin with another backhand. Cowan appeared to score again at 9:59, but the goal was disallowed. London would strike again shortly after, however, as Barkey wired home a power-play goal from the left circle at 12:08 to make it 4-0.

Medicine Hat showed signs of life early in the third when Gavin McKenna scored his third of the tournament at 2:43, stepping inside and snapping a quick wrister to cut the deficit. The Tigers nearly added another late, but McKenna's second goal was waved off after a review showed Oasiz Wiesblatt played the puck with a high stick.

“It’s what we’ve been working for for three years ... it meant everything to this whole group,” Knights defenceman Dickinson said. “[There’s been] so much to overcome to get to this point. Nothing is better.”

Elliott, who stopped 31 of 32 shots in the final, led the tournament in goals-against average (1.59) and save percentage (.943), earning the Hap Emms Memorial Trophy as the tournament’s top goaltender. After beginning the season with the WHL’s Saskatoon Blades before joining the Knights in October, 21-year-old Austin Elliott put together a remarkable 2024-25 campaign – winning 55 of his 58 starts across the regular season, playoffs, and Memorial Cup.

Gavin McKenna tallied Medicine Hat’s lone goal in Sunday’s final and finished the tournament with six points (3G-3A), just one behind scoring leaders Denver Barkey and Easton Cowan. The 17-year-old joined both Knights forwards on the 2025 Memorial Cup All-Star Team, which also featured defencemen Sam Dickinson of London and Tanner Molendyk of Medicine Hat. Dickinson led all blueliners with six assists in five games, while Molendyk followed closely with four assists in four outings.

“They cared, they tried,” stated Medicine Hat Tigers head coach Willie Desjardins after the game. “Coming in, we only have one problem, that’s London’s a really good hockey team. It wasn’t that we didn’t want it, wasn’t that we didn’t try. They’re just a good team.”

Alex Mercier of the Moncton Wildcats was awarded the George Parsons Trophy for sportsmanship at the 2025 Memorial Cup after he registered five points (1G-4A) and zero penalty minutes over four games played.

Behind the bench, Dale Hunter etched his name further into CHL history by winning his third Memorial Cup as a head coach –all with the Knights. He now shares the all-time record with Don Hay and stands alone as the only coach to win three titles with a single CHL club.

Sunday’s win also served as redemption for London, who fell in heartbreaking fashion to the Saginaw Spirit in the 2024 championship game.

Next season, the 2026 Memorial Cup will mark the 106th edition of the event, and it will be hosted by the Kelowna Rockets of the WHL.

2025 Memorial Cup Awards

Stafford Smythe Memorial Trophy (MVP) – Easton Cowan (London Knights / OHL)

Hap Emms Memorial Trophy (Outstanding Goaltender) – Austin Elliott (London Knights / OHL)

George Parsons Trophy (Sportsmanship) – Alex Mercier (Moncton Wildcats / QMJHL)

Ed Chynoweth Trophy (Leading Scorer) – Easton Cowan (London Knights / OHL) & Denver Barkey (London Knights / OHL)

2025 Memorial Cup All-Star Team

F – Easton Cowan (London Knights / OHL)

F – Gavin McKenna (Medicine Tigers / WHL)

F – Denver Barkey (London Knights / OHL)

D – Sam Dickinson (London Knights / OHL)

D – Tanner Molendyk (Medicine Hat Tigers / WHL)

G – Austin Elliott (London Knights / OHL)

The Athletic / Mitch Marner NHL free agency sweepstakes: Ranking all 32 potential landing spots

By James Mirtle – June 2, 2025

The calendar has flipped to June, which means we're into NHL free agency talk in a big way for the next four weeks.

And in a shallow year for UFAs, Mitch Marner is going to be the big fish that most of the league pursues on July 1. By my count, as many as 15 teams make sense at the moment for a Marner bid, and that may be a conservative number.

Taking into consideration teams' roster needs, cap situations and likelihood of pursuing him, as well as Marner's potential desired landing spots, here's my look at all 32 teams and how they will likely approach one of the biggest names making it to free agency since John Tavares (seven years at \$11 million a season) in 2018 and Artemi Panarin (seven years at \$11.6 million) in 2019.

The most likely fits

Carolina Hurricanes

No contending team will have a bigger need for a star offensive player and as much cap space as the Hurricanes, who figure to be aggressive this July 1 given another disappointing exit. Marner turned down a trade to Carolina near the March 7 deadline, but with a no-movement clause and the fact that he was about to become a father, that made a lot of sense on the personal side. That situation hasn't dampened the Hurricanes' interest. But will Marner be interested if they are the highest bidder in free agency?

Los Angeles Kings

One of the few playoff teams in a desirable market that definitely needs help up front, has cap space and will be aggressive in free agency. New GM Ken Holland has signaled he intends to use his cap space to put his team in a better position to finally advance further in the postseason. Marner feels like a perfect fit on a team that has such a strong defensive approach, and he knows coach Jim Hiller well from their time in Toronto. The Kings won't be the front-runner, but they're certainly in the mix.

Utah Mammoth

I hesitated to put Utah here, as Marner will most likely want to go to a contender and the Mammoth didn't even make the playoffs. (In fact, this group has qualified only once in the last 13 years, dating back to the Coyotes years.) But they're certainly well-positioned to take a big step given their youth movement and all their cap space. If charismatic new owner Ryan Smith can put on a good sell job, perhaps Marner decides to take a chance on an up-and-coming team rather than a sure thing? It certainly would be a quieter media environment out near the Wasatch Range.

Vegas Golden Knights

They'd have to find a way to shed salary, but when has that ever been a problem for Kelly McCrimmon and friends? The ultimate big-move team feels like they'll find a way to be in on this one, and their bid would have the right ingredients of something Marner would be interested in.

The maybes and long shots

Anaheim Ducks

I've seen a lot of people connecting Marner to the Ducks, but they've been in the rebuilding phase for such a long time that I feel like this will be a tough sell for such a high-profile UFA. But they certainly have the need and the acres of cap space, so maybe they can put in a high bid and have a shot at winning him over.

Boston Bruins

It was certainly a lost season in Boston this year, but do they try and pull a Capitals and retool quickly? Between David Pastrnak, Charlie McAvoy and Jeremy Swayman, they have a lot of strong pieces in place, so scorched earth doesn't seem like the way to go. It would be a bit of a heel turn for Marner, given they're such a big rival in the division, but I don't think we can rule it out entirely just on that basis. They certainly have the cap room after their big sell-off before the deadline.

Chicago Blackhawks

There's frustration building in Chicago as the rebuild stretches on. They'll certainly be in the mix with a massive bid, and Connor Bedard gives them one foundational piece to play with. The Blackhawks are still years away from making the playoffs, so they don't have to worry about the cap hit initially, which could allow them to put a \$15 million-plus offer on the table without breaking a sweat. If Marner wants the most money, it could be here. But I don't expect that'll be the leading consideration, which drops them into this tier.

Colorado Avalanche

After dealing away Mikko Rantanen, the Avs certainly have a big hole on RW. And playing with Nathan MacKinnon has to hold some appeal for Marner. Colorado's cap situation is complicated by having Gabriel Landeskog off LTIR, though they can make a Marner contract work with a few savvy moves. But are they willing to offer a big number after declining to give Rantanen \$12 million — especially with Cale Makar up for a monster new contract in 2027?

Columbus Blue Jackets

Columbus was one of the biggest feel-good stories of the season, pushing to within two points of making the playoffs despite a roster barely above the floor and after dealing with an unthinkable tragedy in the death of Johnny Gaudreau. The Blue Jackets have a cannon-load of cap space and an intriguing youth movement, so maybe they do big here? It's a market UFAs don't always flock to, but that could start to change as they have more success.

Detroit Red Wings

Steve Yzerman needs a big swing. The Red Wings' rebuild is now entering its eighth or ninth year, depending on where you mark the clock, and they could use another star or two to push them forward. They have the cap space to make this work and are still an iconic Original Six franchise, even after all the losing over the past decade. But the shine is off for free agents, and Marner would most likely look elsewhere for a better chance to win.

Florida Panthers

Another popular choice in the rumor mill, but the Panthers' situation is somewhat more complicated than it seems at first glance. If they let Sam Bennett and Aaron Ekblad walk — which feels unlikely — they'd have the cap room but will have key holes, especially on defense. And no one on this team makes more than captain Aleksander Barkov's \$10 million. Would Marner take less than market value to play for the Leafs' rivals? That would certainly add more spice to next year's Atlantic Division playoffs.

Nashville Predators

Always a desirable market to go to, the Predators will have the cap room to make a bid. But after some high-profile misses in free agency last year and a brutal season on the ice, will they want to try again? And, more importantly, will Marner be willing to overlook their struggles and take a chance on a rebound?

San Jose Sharks

Another rebuilding club with tons of cap space and some intriguing young prospects, led by Macklin Celebrini, that could be a UFA draw. The Sharks have historically been a market players want to be in, too, and Marner is close with local legends Patrick Marleau and Joe Thornton. A long shot, perhaps, but a shot nonetheless.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Likely a spot Marner would want to be, and coach Jon Cooper has spoken glowingly about him in the past. But the cap gymnastics to make this happen feel tough. They're \$7 million short of being able to fit in a \$13 million addition; would they be willing to jettison a core piece to add on the wing, where they're already fairly deep?

Probably not going to happen

Buffalo Sabres

They're going to struggle to sign any marquee free agents with what's been going on there.

Calgary Flames

Despite their surprising showing this past season and some promise in goal, it's hard to see them being a draw given all the competition. I suspect Marner ends up in the U.S. on this deal, too.

Dallas Stars

Obviously a desirable market, but they're loaded up front and very tight against the cap. Rantanen was their big bet on the wing.

Edmonton Oilers

Just getting Evan Bouchard under the cap is going to be a challenge. And they have to keep their eye on Connor McDavid's bank-breaking extension for 2026, too.

Minnesota Wild

With a bunch of cap space opening up, the Wild will likely make a big UFA addition or two, but I suspect their targets to be more along the lines of Brock Nelson and Brock Boeser than Marner. They have a massive Kirill Kaprizov extension to be mindful of in 2026, too.

Montreal Canadiens

A big bid on Marner doesn't fit with their offseason game plan. And, again, I don't expect Marner to stay in Canada

New Jersey Devils

The Devils are going to be somewhat cap challenged after they sign RFA Luke Hughes. And they don't feel like a destination for Marner at this point, given the other options he'll have.

New York Islanders

Similar to the Devils, but with a weaker team on the ice with less upside. New GM Mathieu Darche has his work cut out for him cleaning up some of the mess he's been left.

New York Rangers

There are huge cap challenges here with RFAs K'Andre Miller and Will Cuylle, among others. They need to worry about being an offer-sheet target this summer. And find a way to shed salary. No pressure.

Ottawa Senators

As juicy a storyline as it would be, I don't see Marner going to the Leafs' provincial rival.

Philadelphia Flyers

Big-game hunting doesn't seem to be in the cards for the Flyers this offseason. Maybe in another year or two, as they do have interesting pieces coming.

Pittsburgh Penguins

A reunion with Kyle Dubas and Jason Spezza would headline this one, but playing with Sidney Crosby might be the bigger draw for Marner. The problem is the Penguins appear years away from contention and don't feel like a realistic draw for marquee UFAs at the moment.

Seattle Kraken

Not a great fit given their on-ice struggles. They have the cap space, even after trying to make a big splash a year ago in free agency, but that might be their only plus point.

St. Louis Blues

Going big on Marner doesn't feel like a fit for either side here, for a variety of reasons, including the fact he'll likely have other markets higher on his wish list. But GM Doug Armstrong likes to get aggressive, and Marner is friendly with Robert Thomas. The Blues can also free up the requested cap space, if needed, with Torey Krug destined for LTIR.

Vancouver Canucks

It's certainly possible they could open enough cap space to try, especially if Elias Pettersson is on the move, but as Marner is looking to escape a high-pressure media environment, I wouldn't recommend this one. No offense to my home province.

Washington Capitals

Their cap situation is a bit challenging here without significant surgery, so I'd be surprised to see this one line up. But they've been aggressive before, so maybe they throw their hat in the ring given Alex Ovechkin's big salary might be off the books in a year.

Winnipeg Jets

Unfortunately for the Jets, their location is likely to work against them in this case.

Groundhog Day

Toronto Maple Leafs

It certainly seems like Marner is ready to move on, based on what he's said publicly and what I've heard from behind the scenes. The only question is if the offers he wants don't materialize and if he decides to circle back with the Leafs after July 1. You look at the list above, and it's clear not many contenders are likely to be able to offer \$13 million. Does that matter, in the end? Will he go to a Chicago or San Jose if they're the only ones that hit that mark? Or re-engage Toronto?

If you pressed me, I'd put this at a 2 percent chance of happening.