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The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Lock Down Unique Player in Dmitri Voronkov

By William Espy – July 7, 2025

With the majority of high-end free agents off the board, the Columbus Blue Jackets are focusing on some internal matters they need to handle. They have a few restricted free agents (RFAs) to address, including Daemon Hunt and Mikael Pythia, however, they've now taken care of the biggest issue, both literally and figuratively. Dmitri Voronkov has been signed to a new two-year contract extension, which will keep him as an RFA when it expires.

The Blue Jackets reportedly offered Voronkov to the New York Islanders as a piece of a Noah Dobson trade; however, the Islanders opted to accept the Montreal Canadiens' offer instead. In the long run, although Dobson would've been a phenomenal acquisition for the Blue Jackets, it may have been a blessing in disguise, as we've yet to see what Voronkov's ceiling will be.

Voronkov's Career So Far

The hype around Voronkov, a fourth-round pick by the Blue Jackets in 2019, really started to take off during his final season in the Kontinental Hockey League. The 6-foot-5 center had a breakout season with Ak Bars Kazan during the 2022-23 season, finishing with 18 goals and 31 points in 54 games. The Blue Jackets had attempted to bring him to North America before that point, but it seems that he made the right decision for his development by staying in Russia.

Voronkov made the jump to the United States the following season and immediately became an impact player for the Blue Jackets. He spent four games with the Cleveland Monsters of the American Hockey League before being recalled swiftly and never looking back. During his rookie season in the NHL, he finished with an impressive 18 goals and 34 points in 75 games.

This past season, Voronkov took another step forward. He spent quite a bit of time on the top line with Sean Monahan and Kirill Marchenko. In his sophomore season, he finished with career-highs in every offensive statistic. He scored 23 goals and totaled 47 points in 73 games. His line was dominant for the Blue Jackets, and they can attempt to run it back this coming season.

What Makes Voronkov Special?

There aren't many players in the NHL like Voronkov. His combination of size and scoring ability makes him an attractive asset for any team around the league. Add in the reality that he's only 24 years of age, with plenty of development still ahead of him, and he becomes one of the Blue Jackets' most valuable players. He has 30-goal potential, and if he continues developing at the rate we've seen from him so far, that could happen as early as this season. Even though he can't communicate with his teammates well, he knows what they want him to do, and where they want him to be.

Voronkov isn't afraid to go into the dirty areas, but he also doesn't panic with the puck on his stick like many of his size do. He's comfortable performing at a high level, both offensively and with physicality. While his defensive metrics could use some work, his overall performance gained praise from everybody in the organization. Adam Fantilli told Blue Jackets insider Jeff Svoboda: "He's extremely skilled for a guy his size. He plays that netfront position perfectly, and he's complementing that first line really, really well. We just want him to keep doing what he's doing. It's great."

While fans were excited by the prospect of acquiring a high-end defenseman like Dobson, they should be just as excited by retaining a player like Voronkov. He's a unique talent who will only get more

entertaining to watch as he approaches his prime. Hanging onto him may be a move that the Blue Jackets look back on with pride in a decade's time.

The Athletic / Sean Kuraly discusses emotional Columbus departure, excitement for Boston return

By Aaron Portzline – July 8, 2025

Sean Kuraly didn't pump a fist in the air. He didn't lock eyes with a fan seated on the glass and launch his body into the boards, a signature move. When he scored a goal in the final game of the Columbus Blue Jackets' season on April 17, the veteran center simply drifted behind the net to celebrate with his linemates.

It was a bittersweet moment on a bittersweet night.

"I was pretty certain that was my last game (in Columbus)," Kuraly said. "It was pretty clear to me that it might not work out (for me to stay with the Blue Jackets), so that was in the back of my mind, absolutely. Really, it was right there in everything I did that night."

Kuraly signed a two-year, \$3.7 million contract with the Boston Bruins a few hours after free agency opened on July 1, returning to the franchise and the city where he started his NHL career nine years earlier.

When free agency opened at noon that day, Kuraly and his agent, Justin Duberman, fielded calls from more than 10 teams expressing interest. They didn't choose Boston based on the longest term or the highest salary, but because it was the best fit.

"I'm so unbelievably excited," Kuraly said. "I have no regrets — zero — about coming back to play in Columbus. That's something I wanted to do at some point in my career, and if I hadn't done it (in 2021), I probably would have done it later. So, no regrets."

"But Boston ... I have so many connections there, too. I know them and they know me. And when they talked about a role, or how they saw me as a player ... yeah, it was like, they get it. They know me."

Kuraly signed as a free agent with the Blue Jackets four years ago. In addition to fulfilling a childhood dream — he grew up in suburban Dublin, idolizing franchise legend Rick Nash — he also wanted to help sustain the franchise after it had lost star players Artemi Panarin, Sergei Bobrovsky and others.

It was not an easy stay. There were losses. So many losses. His second and third seasons were especially rough.

There was dysfunction, too. So much dysfunction. The Pierre-Luc Dubois meltdown happened one month into his tenure in Columbus. Kuraly played for three coaches in his four seasons, and he might have played for a fourth if Mike Babcock wasn't fired four days before training camp in 2023.

This season, though, was as tough as any of them, Kuraly said. He quickly fell out of favor with new coach Dean Evason, lost his spot on the penalty kill — his calling card in the NHL, and not exactly a Blue Jackets strength last season — and played the fewest minutes (11:45 per game) of his entire career. He played less than 10 minutes in 14 games.

In Boston, Kuraly developed a reputation for scoring big goals on big stages in big moments. In Columbus, he never played in a postseason game.

When Kuraly walked out of the Blue Jackets' dressing room after that 6-1 win over the New York Islanders to end the regular season, he embraced his mom, Jane, who was crying.

"She was really emotional. I was, too, but in a different way," Kuraly said. "She was crying, and I was like, 'C'mon, Mom. It's been a really tough year here, but now it's over.'"

Kuraly had to laugh two days later, he said, when he returned to Nationwide Arena to collect his belongings and say goodbye to teammates. It was his last time in the dressing room, and the support staff had left a memento for his farewell.

"The puck (from the goal vs. the Islanders) was taped in my locker," Kuraly said. "And it read: 'Sean Kuraly, last goal as a Blue Jacket,' and it had the date on it. Yeah, I laughed."

Kuraly "grew up" in the Bruins organization, reaching the NHL to stay in 2017-18. Around him were respected veterans such as Patrice Bergeron, Zdeno Chara, Brad Marchand and David Krejci.

When he joined the Blue Jackets in 2021, just as they were beginning a roster rebuild, it was his chance to pass on the wisdom he'd gained in five regular seasons and 57 postseason games.

"What an honor it was to learn from those guys in Boston," Kuraly said. "I didn't deserve it any more than the next guy. I just got lucky. And the coolest part for me, coming to Columbus, was switching roles from Boston and now being the guy who is counted on to work with younger guys."

"I was pretty proud of the way I handled myself in Columbus those first couple of years when the young guys were just starting to arrive. Obviously, (former GM) Jarmo (Kekalainen) made a lot of impressive picks, and it was so fun to be around them. Honestly, I might have learned as much from them as they learned from me."

Kuraly became an older brother type. Nothing drove that point home more powerfully, or poignantly, than the vigil outside Nationwide Arena to honor Blue Jackets forward Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, who tragically died a couple of weeks before training camp last fall.

Cole Sillinger, then only 21, stepped down from the stage after delivering a powerful, tear-filled tribute to the Gaudreaus, then broke down in tears and crashed into Kuraly's arms.

"It was such an honor to play with those guys," Kuraly said. "Great group of guys, and I'm so, so excited for what's coming for them. They've got a chance to do something good with the hockey players that are there in that room."

"Becoming friends with Boone (Jenner) and 'Z' (Zach Werenski) and the other guys in there ... we'll be friends forever. I'll cherish that."

Kuraly, 32, had 40 goals and 45 assists in 290 games with Columbus. His goals, points and ice time decreased every season in Columbus, a clear sign that it was time for a change.

Once the Blue Jackets acquired third-line center Charlie Coyle from the Colorado Avalanche five days before free agency, it became clear that Kuraly would not be back. Coincidentally, Coyle and Kuraly played together for parts of three seasons in Boston.

Kuraly had a little contest with his family heading into July 1, he said. His brothers and his mother were asked to guess which NHL club he would join via free agency.

"Nobody had any idea where this was going," Kuraly said. "But when I told them, my mom screamed so loud, I think all of Dublin would have heard her. She's excited. I think she knows how much fun I had there, the success we had, how much I love the city."

"She knows her kid is going to be happy, and so she's happy. Yeah, it's good."

[TSN.ca / Blue Jackets first-round pick Andreyanov signs five-year deal in KHL](#)

By TSN.ca Staff – July 10, 2025

Columbus Blue Jackets first-round pick Pyotr Andreyanov signed five-year deal contract extension with CSKA Moscow of the KHL on Thursday.

Andreyanov was the first goaltender selected in last month's draft, going to the Blue Jackets at 20th overall. The team also selected defenceman Jackson Smith at 14th overall.

The 18-year-old netminder went 23-6-6 with the CSKA Red Army Jr. team last season, posting a .942 save percentage and a 1.75 goals-against average.

"I'm not a goalie expert, but I can interview people," Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell said last week of selecting Andreyanov([opens in a new tab](#)). "Our goalie guys, Nick (Backstrom) and Brad Thiessen and Jimmy Viers all said, by far, they thought this was the best guy. You know, we came into the draft saying that we'd like to draft a goalie. So when we put our list together, it worked out two ways. It's kind of interesting, because he's our No. 1 goalie, but he was actually our next guy on our list, so we didn't have to debate at all.

"Every kid that we talked to down there ... we always ask them this question – if you had one player that you could take with you to your next team, (who would it be)? And 90 percent of the players said Pyotr."

The new deal keeps Andreyanov under contract in Russia through the 2029-30 season.

The Athletic / NHL 2026 RFA watch: An early look at what some of next year's contracts could be worth

By Shayna Goldman – July 8, 2025

The 2025 offseason teased excitement in a growing cap world. But for all the hype and attention focused on this summer, most are keeping an eye on next year's class of free agents.

The 2026 free agent class is stacked. It's hard to carve out space when Connor McDavid, Kirill Kaprizov and Jack Eichel headline the UFA class. But 2026 RFAs can't be overlooked, either.

A number of general managers got to work on restricted free agent extensions early this offseason. Maybe it was to have a better handle on their financial flexibility ahead of July 1. Maybe the threat of offer sheets forced general managers to handle business early. Or maybe it was an effort to avoid extra rising costs that could have been recalibrated by UFAs on July 1.

In any case, it could inspire teams to get a jump on the 2026 class before the market recalibrates for next year's salary cap growth. Here's an early look at what some of next year's top restricted free agent contracts could be worth.

Jason Robertson, Dallas Stars

Robertson's name has generated early buzz this summer, but not solely for extension purposes. His name was floated around the rumor mill after the Stars were eliminated in the Western Conference final for the third straight year.

The Stars are in a salary bind this year. It helps that Robertson's next deal (and Thomas Harley's) won't kick in until 2026-27, but those extensions, plus any other roster moves, will quickly fill up their projected \$28 million in cap space.

Robertson is in the final year of a four-year deal carrying a \$7.75 million cap hit. Evolving-Hockey's model points to an eight-year extension worth a \$10.9 million AAV. If the Stars want to go the distance with their franchise winger, that contract will have to be signed sooner rather than later since the new CBA will limit extensions to seven-year terms. That could be influential in a number of these RFA dealings over the next few months. If not, maybe Dallas will take note of Nikolaj Ehlers' six-year term and push the cap hit below the \$10 million mark.

Players who can score 40-plus goals don't grow on trees, and he brings more to the table than just his shot. Robertson's passing and defensive growth make him a well-rounded threat. What holds him back is his playoff pedigree. While he gave his team a spark this spring after returning from injury, he doesn't have a strong track record in years past. Neither does Mitch Marner, who just signed for a \$12 million AAV.

That, paired with the Stars' cap situation (and yes, the tax advantage), could motivate him to sign a hometown discount to help management build the most competitive team possible around him.

Thomas Harley, Dallas Stars

Like Robertson, the Harley situation will be tricky for the Stars to navigate. This was the risk of signing him to a bridge deal two years ago. His value exploded as he emerged as a true top-pair defenseman in Dallas.

Since he is a couple of years younger than Robertson, maybe there isn't that same urgency to sign him to a mega-deal right now to buy more cap flexibility. But that would bring him closer to unrestricted free

agency and create another problem. The best course of action is to lock him up sooner rather than later, before his value spikes any higher.

Harley may be the number two to Miro Heiskanen in Dallas, but he stepped up in Heiskanen's absence to showcase what his ceiling is. The question is whether Heiskanen's contract serves as an internal cap of sorts at \$8.45 million a year. That was worth 10.4 percent of the cap back in 2021, which equates to \$10.8 million in a projected \$104 million salary cap in 2026-27. Evolving-Hockey's model suggests something in between: a \$9.53 million cap hit on an eight-year deal, which would be team-friendly with his ability and trajectory in mind.

What makes the situation a little more challenging is that there aren't a ton of comps for Harley to point to his long-term direction, outside of Alex Pietrangelo and Kevin Shattenkirk. So the Stars have to pave their own way here in gauging his value.

Lane Hutson, Montreal Canadiens

The Harley situation is exactly why Montreal may want to go big on Hutson's deal right after his entry-level contract expires. The difference here is that Hutson made more of an instant impact in the NHL, which earned him the Calder Trophy this year. So unless the player chooses to bet on himself with something short-term first, there may not be any question of how to proceed here.

A long-term deal would be in line with how the Canadiens acted with other core players. While the Nick Suzuki extension was a part of the Marc Bergevin era, Kent Hughes signed Cole Caufield and Juraj Slafkovsky to eight-year contracts right after their ELCs. Caufield signed his contract a few weeks before his ELC expired, while Slafkovsky's was done a year early.

Hutson has game-breaking offensive potential from the back end. And while his defense isn't perfect just yet, it improved a ton down the stretch. So, how much will that be worth? Evolving-Hockey suggests an \$8 million cap hit over the next seven years. But the bar may be a bit higher here.

Like Harley, Hutson doesn't have a ton of close comps. But his best match, Cale Makar, could be the best model to follow. Makar signed a six-year deal with a \$9 million cap hit after his ELC. That translates to an \$11.5 million cap hit in a \$104 million cap world, which may be too drastic of a jump off an entry-level deal — especially when the star players aren't the ones benefiting the most from the rising cap (the middle class is). So something in between Makar's AAV and that number could be the sweet spot for Hutson. A six-year term, like Makar, would click for Hutson's sake; it would open the door to another big contract at 28 years old.

Connor Bedard, Chicago Blackhawks

Players drafted first overall in their draft class 1) are thought to have the highest ceiling and 2) are expected to hit that ceiling sooner. That can create a high-pressure situation for a player early in their career, and sometimes it's a burden they have to carry alone. Most lottery-winning teams are in a rebuilding phase, so that top pick usually isn't joining a roster flush with high-end talent. Instead, they're dropped into a situation and expected to be the difference. That can weigh on their game and create some wrinkles in their long-term outlook.

The Blackhawks haven't done the best job supporting Bedard in Chicago, which has amplified some of his shortcomings. Bedard's defense is a weakness that has been exposed in tough minutes over the last couple of years. That could explain why his offensive impact got a little stagnant this past season.

Evolving-Hockey points to a \$10.6 million AAV over the next eight years, which is true superstar money for someone his age. It's above what Bedard is projected to be worth over that span, but that could easily change if he starts hitting his stride more consistently.

Bedard's top comps both suggest it's possible — from Eichel, who thrived despite his surroundings, and Clayton Keller, whose skill took a little more time to translate at this level consistently. But there aren't a ton of close matches to base decisions on in Bedard's case, which adds another element of uncertainty to the situation.

Even with those question marks, the most likely outcome is a long-term deal with management chalking up any shortcomings to his surroundings, based on how most teams manage franchise players.

Logan Cooley, Utah Mammoth

Over the last year or so, Utah has distinguished itself from the Arizona era with a willingness to spend. Will Cooley benefit from that?

Dylan Guenther got the bag months before his ELC expired, which could provide a blueprint for Cooley. Guenther had only played 45 games at the NHL level before management extended him for eight years with a \$7.14 million AAV. So the fact that Cooley hasn't fully blossomed into a true first-line-caliber center may not sway management from jumping into the \$8 million range. While Cooley isn't an \$8-9 million center just yet, he can grow into the deal.

Some of Cooley's top comps support that idea, with Keller, Nathan MacKinnon and Elias Pettersson in mind. But there's also a complementary player track he could follow, like Trevor Zegras and Anthony Duclair. Sam Gagner and Alex Galchenyuk paint a more concerning picture.

The latter two paths are especially concerning for a team that isn't very deep at center. Add in the fact that Barrett Hayton is also an RFA next summer after his bridge deal expires, and it's possible management opts for a more patient approach.

But with a handful of contracts coming off the books over the next couple of seasons, and a lot of cap space to work with, the Mammoth may want a solidified core before their window of contention even starts.

Adam Fantilli, Columbus Blue Jackets

Most of the Blue Jackets' up-and-coming forwards are playing through bridge deals. Kent Johnson, Cole Sillinger and Dmitri Voronkov all signed two-year deals after their ELCs expired. Kirill Marchenko is in the middle of a three-year second contract. So there is a precedent in Columbus for a short-term deal for Fantilli next summer.

A two-year deal is projected to carry a \$4.63 million cap hit, which would be a cautious path to take. It would be a chance for management to ensure that he isn't going to be the next Dawson Mercer or Filip Zadina.

But Fantilli showed a lot of promise, especially when he jumped up to the top line in Sean Monahan's absence last year, which could convince management that he is on a Dylan Larkin path. And that could be a reason to go big sooner than later — maybe to that same \$8 million range as Cooley.

Two things work in Fantilli's favor: The Blue Jackets have a ton of space to work with, and management expects to work on his contract this summer. The latter may be the best indication that a long-term deal is the goal; it wouldn't make sense for the player to sign anything short-term before playing out this next season. By working on an extension sooner, the Blue Jackets have a better chance of keeping the cap hit team-friendly before he grows any more this year.

Whoever signs first of Fantilli, Cooley or Bedard could set the bar for the others.

Dustin Wolf, Calgary Flames

Wolf was the brightest spot in Calgary this year. Not only did he earn Calder Trophy hype, he also put himself up there with some of the top goalies in the league. His 26.4 goals saved above expected ranked seventh in the league, across 53 games. If that's an indication of what is to come, he is going to carve out a career as a bona fide starter.

For goalies, that doesn't always mean an immediate long-term deal post-ELC. Most goalies play through a shorter-term deal first. Jake Oettinger and Andrei Vasilevskiy signed three-year second contracts, while Igor Shesterkin's had a four-year term. Jeremy Swayman was somewhat of an exception, with a one-year post-ELC contract before an eight-year extension.

So with past precedent in mind, Wolf could be in for a two- or three-year deal in the \$4 million range, per Evolving-Hockey. That would buy the Flames time to build the team up around him and line up his next contract with their playoff window. It would also give the team more time to study Wolf at this level, considering how volatile the goaltending position can be.

In theory, if the team wanted to go longer-term now, it could keep costs down (maybe around the \$6 million mark). Then again, the Swayman deal recalibrated the market for goalies with a shorter track record, which could help him push closer to the \$8 million echelon.

Pavel Dorofeyev, Vegas Golden Knights

Vegas' winger depth has been depleted over the years, as management built up the center position and defense. Dorofeyev's emergence was exactly what the Golden Knights needed this year, between his team-leading 35 goals, volume shooting and power play production. And most importantly for a team with a ton of pricey contracts to balance, he did it on a budget, with a \$1.84 million cap hit.

But in a year, he's going to be in for a raise — especially if he can repeat this year's production. That question mark is what could give the Golden Knights pause on an early extension, especially when there are bigger contracts to deal with, like Eichel's. Is Dorofeyev the next Patric Hornqvist, a reliable part of the supporting cast, or is he more like Andrew Mangiapane and a flash in the pan in the goal column?

Since that isn't clear, Evolving-Hockey's three-year projection would make a lot of sense for Vegas. Right now, that carries a \$4.96 million cap hit. In a year, that number will go up if he can put up another 30-plus goals in a rising cap world.

The challenge of waiting is that Dorofeyev could prove the former and raise his worth. If Vegas lets this drag out into next summer, he could be a prime offer sheet target, too. That middle-tier of the RFA class can be the best to target — it doesn't cost as much as the big names, and can be the best way to squeeze a cap-crunched team like Vegas. The Golden Knights are a team most competitors would be willing to slight.

Data via Evolving-Hockey, HockeyViz, HockeyStatCards, All Three Zones, Dom Luszczyzyn, TheStanleyCap and Natural Stat Trick. This story relies on shot-based metrics; here is a primer on these numbers.

The Athletic / 2026 NHL Mock Draft: Gavin McKenna is No. 1 in Corey Pronman's way-too-early projection

Corey Pronman – July 7, 2025

The 2025 NHL Draft was deep at the center position high in the draft. The 2026 class, extremely early on/a lot will change/standard caveats ... does not look that way. Three of the top four-ranked forwards are wingers, and the two top-ranked centers are both on the smaller side. I am a little more excited about the high-end talent in this draft compared to 2025 at the same point in time, although the lack of elite talent at premium positions is concerning. The top-ranked prospect is Gavin McKenna, who some may recognize from this year's Canadian World Junior team. He's a standard/solid No. 1 pick and is analogous to Matthew Schaefer as a prospect.

The mock draft order is based on betting lines for the 2025-26 season. There are 31 selections in the first round, as the Ottawa Senators have forfeited their pick due to the Evgenii Dadonov trade mishap.

1. San Jose: Gavin McKenna, LW, Medicine Hat (WHL)

McKenna was one of the very best players in the CHL this season. He's an electric forward with truly elite skill and offensive sense. He's one of the most creative and skilled players I've seen in recent years. That McKenna is also a high-end skater who can make his difficult plays at quick tempos gives a lot of confidence about how his game could fare in the NHL. If teams were going to pick him apart, it would be that he's an average-sized winger who doesn't have a super high motor, but his talent and scoring are so good that it's nitpicking. I wouldn't call him a Macklin Celebrini/Connor Bedard level prospect, but he's not far off.

2. Chicago: Ryan Roobroeck, LW, Niagara (OHL)

Roobroeck is a very talented forward who had a big second season in the OHL. It's rare to see players who are 6-foot-4, can skate and have legit high-end offensive skills. The difficult puck plays he can make in small areas and on the move for a guy his size will be highly enticing to NHL teams. He's a gifted playmaker and scorer who projects to score in major numbers at the next level. His compete level is average, which is my only critique of him, although it's not a significant issue. He has all the tools to be a star in the NHL.

3. Anaheim: Keaton Verhoeff, RHD, Victoria (WHL)

Verhoeff was an impactful player for Victoria as a 16-year-old defenseman and one of the best defensemen at the U18 Worlds for Canada. He's a tremendous athlete who moves very well for 6-foot-4. He competes hard and has shown the ability to outmuscle older junior players. He's a skilled offensive player who can create plenty of offense. He isn't a high-end playmaker, but he makes tough plays on the move and can run a power play with a big shot from the point. He has the potential to be a major minute defenseman in the NHL.

4. Seattle: Ivar Stenberg, LW, Frolunda (SHL)

Stenberg, the younger brother of St. Louis first-round pick Otto Stenberg, was exceptional at the junior level in Sweden this season. He eventually got bumped up to the SHL, where he took a regular shift for Frolunda. He was also a top player for Sweden's U18 team, posting big numbers at several international events. Stenberg is super skilled and smart. He makes a ton of difficult plays with the puck, and often does so with pace. He's a high-end playmaker and shooter who can project to run a power-play flank in

the NHL. He's undersized, but he skates well and plays hard, so I think his size won't be a major hindrance.

5. Pittsburgh: Tynan Lawrence, C, Muskegon (USHL)

Lawrence was tremendous this season. He played major minutes in the USHL on a good team, was a leading scorer in the playoffs and was very good for Canada's U17 team, too. He's a high-end skater who competes hard and brings a high level of pace to each of his shifts. Lawrence is also a great stickhandler and passer who generates a ton of scoring chances. He projects to be a play-driving center in the NHL that coaches can rely on at both ends. His only real issue is that he's not that big.

6. Buffalo: Ethan Belchetz, RW, Windsor (OHL)

Belchetz is an absolute monster of a young prospect. As a 16-year-old in the OHL, he already measured at 6-foot-5, 220-plus pounds. He has typically overpowered players much older than him. He plays hard as well, which only adds to his physical dominance. There is a worry with a guy who is that big, that young, to debate how he's going to project when he gets to play against men. Belchetz has legit talent to go with his frame, too. He's a strong skater with a fluid, big-man stride. He's also very skilled and creative with the puck. I wouldn't call him a natural playmaker, but he creates plenty of chances. He has star potential at the next level if he continues to develop well.

7. Boston: Mathis Preston, RW, Spokane (WHL)

Preston's talent level jumps out at you. He's a tremendous skater and puck handler whose rushes and one-on-one play are quite special. When he's barreling down the wing, especially with how well Preston shoots the puck, it's quite easy to envision him scoring a lot in the NHL. He's not that big, physical or an amazing playmaker, but he's competitive and smart enough that I don't think those areas will hold him back as a pro.

8. Montreal: Xavier Villeneuve, LHD, Blainville-Boisbriand (QMJHL)

Villeneuve was one of the best defensemen in the QMJHL this season. He's a dynamic offensive player. He's an elite skater with the clear edge work and foot speed of a top NHL defender. He's also a super creative and intelligent puck-mover who makes a lot of plays. He can beat opponents one-on-one off the rush and make creative plays with pace. He's also an excellent, patient passer who can create a lot off the blue line. Scouts' main concerns with Villeneuve will be without the puck. He's a small defenseman who doesn't play very hard at times.

9. Detroit: Carson Carels, LHD, Prince George (WHL)

Carels played big minutes for Prince George this season and for Canada's U18 team. He's a well-rounded defenseman. He skates well and competes hard, showing the ability to make a lot of stops. Carels is a strong puck mover who makes a lot of good decisions with the puck and possesses solid puck skills. For a 6-1 defenseman, if he's dynamic enough will be a minor question, but he just seems to make so many positive plays.

10. Nashville: Daxon Rudolph, RHD, Prince Albert (WHL)

Rudolph was an important player for a strong Prince Albert team as a 16-year-old. The first-overall pick in his WHL Bantam Draft, I wouldn't call Rudolph the most dynamic 1/1 you'll ever see. He's a very smart and steady defender. He makes a lot of good decisions with the puck, while also having the skill and vision to execute difficult plays. He's a good skater who can make a lot of stops and projects as a solid two-way defender.

11. Calgary: Viggo Bjorck, C, Djurgarden (Sweden Jr.)

Bjorck dominated the Sweden junior circuit this season as one of the very best 16-year-olds at that level in recent memory. Bjorck is small at 5-foot-9, but every other aspect of his game is excellent. He's a very quick skater who competes at a high level and can push the pace. He's extremely skilled and intelligent. He sees plays others don't and controls the puck when he's on the ice. He plays through contact very well and attacks the net despite his size.

12. Columbus: Tomas Chrenko, RW, Nitra (Slovakia)

Chrenko played against men this season in Slovakia and was one of their U18 team's best players at the World Championships. He has standout skill with the puck, displaying high-end creativity, vision and ability to create off the perimeter. He's a good to very good skater with strong speed and edge work. Chrenko isn't that big and can be pushed to the outside by stronger defenders, which will be his main issue as he advances levels, but he works hard enough to potentially overcome that.

13. Philadelphia: Lars Steiner, RW, Rouyn-Noranda (QMJHL)

Steiner was excellent in his first QMJHL season, scoring over a point per game. He's a high-end skater with the quick twitch to get by a lot of NHL defensemen. Steiner has a very high skill level, and when he's coming down the wing with his speed, he can be a handful to defend. He shoots it well and can set up plays. I wouldn't call him a super high compete type, but he does win battles even though his 5-11 frame will be an issue in the NHL.

14. New York Islanders: Adam Novotny, LW, Mountfield (Czechia)

Novotny played up all season at the top pro level in Czechia and made their World Junior team as an underager. He's a tremendous skater who competes hard. The energy he brings to shifts will easily endear him to NHL coaches. Novotny has a high skill level, too, although I wouldn't call him a top-tier playmaker who projects to be a major point producer in the NHL.

15. Vancouver: Simon Katolicky, LW, Tappara (Finland Jr.)

Katolicky played this season in Finland's U18 league, not their top junior league, and did very well there. He did impress at the international level too for Czechia against better players, inspiring confidence that his talent is real. Katolicky is a huge winger who is a great skater for his size. He's a strong puck handler who creates offense at fast tempos. He sees the ice well and has a big point shot that projects to beat pro goalies from range.

16. St. Louis: Beckham Edwards, C, Sarnia (OHL)

Edwards had a great first OHL season, scoring a lot of goals for Sarnia. The talent in his game is obvious between his speed, hands, offensive creativity and ability to finish. On his best shifts, Edwards has a dynamic element. I wouldn't call him an overly competitive player, though, and his game can lack physicality.

17. Utah: Ryan Lin, RHD, Vancouver (WHL)

Lin played a lot of minutes for Vancouver this season while scoring at a very high rate for a 16-year-old defenseman in the WHL. Lin is a very smart puck-moving defenseman. He sees the ice at a high level, displaying great patience and ability to make plays under pressure. He's a slick puck handler who makes a lot of difficult plays seem easy. He's a good skater who can transport pucks up ice as well. Lin's main issue is his frame, and while he defends well in junior, the issue for scouts will be whether his game will translate.

18. New York Rangers: Chase Reid, RHD, Sault Ste. Marie (OHL)

Reid had a strange season. He started off playing well in the NAHL, and following the ruling that CHL players could go to college hockey, he left to play in the OHL, where he became one of the best young defensemen in the league. He's a very skilled player whose creativity and offensive IQ stand out consistently. Reid is a good enough skater who can lead a rush effectively and attack with tempo. His defending is mediocre, and the main area to improve, though. He's committed to playing at Michigan State.

19. Minnesota: Alberts Smits, LHD, Jukurit (Liiga)

Smits played well in Finland this season, ending up earning time in Liiga for Jukurit and was a top player for Latvia's U18 team. Smits isn't going to bring a ton of offense to the higher levels, but he's a mobile 6-foot-3 defenseman who competes well and makes a reliable first pass. He's the type of player coaches will feed minutes to.

20. Washington: Tobias Tomik, LW, Dukla Trencin (Slovakia)

Tomik played regular minutes against men in Slovakia this season. He also made their World Junior team. Tomik is a well-rounded winger. He skates well and competes at both ends of the ice. He's a skilled puck handler who can make difficult plays at high tempos. I wouldn't call him a dynamic offensive player, but he sees the ice well and has a good wrist shot.

21. Boston (via Toronto): Niklas Aaram-Olsen, LW, Orebro (Sweden Jr.)

Aaram-Olsen continues in the recent trend of highly touted Norwegian prospects. His skill stands out right away. He's a super slick puck handler who beats defenders one-on-one often and does so at full speed. He's a creative playmaker who can make and finish plays from the perimeter. He's a good skater who should be able to handle the NHL pace. He's not overly physical or competitive, but those aspects look good enough to be able to play versus pros.

22. Winnipeg: Marcus Nordmark, RW, Djurgarden (Sweden Jr.)

Nordmark impressed with his play at the junior level in Sweden and internationally. He has a lot of offense in his game and often ends up on the scoresheet. Nordmark's skill stands out consistently. He beats defenders one-on-one at a high rate and is a creative playmaker. Nordmark is also a good skater who can beat opponents wide. His compete level is fine. I don't see him running over opponents in the NHL, but it won't hold him back.

23. Los Angeles: Casey Mutryn, RW, U.S. NTDP (USHL)

Mutryn was a top player for the USA U17 team this season and got time with the U18 team, too. He's a tall winger who skates and handles the puck quite well. He plays a direct style of game, getting to the net to create offense. He wins a lot of battles and has an edge in his game. I don't think he's an overly instinctive playmaker, but he's smart enough to create offense at the next level.

24. New Jersey: Gleb Pugachyov, LW, Torpedo (Russia Jr.)

Pugachyov impressed as a 16-year-old in Russia's top junior league, including scoring nearly a point per game in Chaika's playoff run. He has some skill, even if he's not super creative, while being a 6-foot-3 wing who skates well and is highly physical. His style of play will be quite endearing to NHL teams.

25. Seattle (via Tampa Bay): Arseni Ilyin, LW, SKA (Russia Jr.)

Ilyin played regular minutes on a top junior team in Russia this season. When he went to play for Russia's U18 team, he stood out, arguably being their best player as a 16-year-old. Ilyin is a tall winger who skates and handles the puck very well. He can break shifts open with his puck handling and

playmaking. He makes plays with pace and can run a power play well, too. He's not overly physical, though.

26. Calgary (via Vegas): Elton Hermansson, LW, Orebro (Sweden Jr.)

Hermansson scored at a significant level as a 16-year-old in Sweden's top junior league. The type of plays he can make with the puck stands out consistently, and especially the pace at which he can make those plays. He's a very creative offensive player who is dangerous inside the offensive zone and on the power play. The main concern with Hermansson is his effort level and playing too much on the outside.

27. New York Islanders (via Colorado): Pierce Mbuyi, LW, Owen Sound (OHL)

Mbuyi was highly productive as a 16-year-old in the OHL as a top scorer for Owen Sound. His skill/skating combination is clearly NHL quality. He's a very creative playmaker who makes a lot of difficult plays in small areas and on the move. Mbuyi is a threat to create or finish chances from the perimeter. He's not that big or physical, so there will be minor questions on how his game will translate, but he may have so much offense that it won't matter.

28. Carolina (via Dallas): Alessandro Di Iorio, C, Sarnia (OHL)

Di Iorio had a productive first year in the OHL after being the second-overall pick in his OHL draft. Di Iorio may not be the most purely talented player in his age group, but he's a well-rounded player who will endear himself to coaches. He has legit offensive tools between his speed, hands and hockey sense and decent size too. He also works hard and has two-way forward potential as a pro.

29. Chicago (via Florida): Colin Fitzgerald, C, Peterborough (OHL)

Fitzgerald was up and down as a rookie OHLer, but he remains a highly touted prospect due to how talented he is. He's a 6-foot-2 right-shot center who can skate and handle the puck like an NHL player. On his best shifts when he's flying up the ice and beating defensemen one-on-one with pace, it's easy to envision him at the next level. He also has a little bit in his game and projects to play down the middle. I'd like to see him make more plays and be more consistent.

30. San Jose (via Edmonton): Oliver Murnieks, C, Sioux City (USHL)

Murnieks had a good first year in North America. He won't land on many highlight reels, but he's a hardworking, detailed center who contributes at both ends of the ice. He has good pace in his game, strong puck skills and hockey sense and engages physically.

31. Carolina: Adam Nemec, LW, Nitra (Slovakia)

Nemec, the younger brother of New Jersey's Simon Nemec, played decently against men this year in Slovakia and was an important part of Slovakia's U18 team. He's a forward who does a lot well, even if he's not overly flashy. Nemec is quite skilled, is a good skater and competes hard. He could be a forward who lines up on both special teams.

Sports Illustrated / 2025 NHL Free Agency Winners and Losers

By Karl Rasmussen – July 7, 2025

Ultimately, the NHL's 2025 free agency class was rather lackluster, with many teams having had been successful in re-signing some of their key players before they hit the open market. As a result, the free agency class lacked much star power, which was lessened further when the Toronto Maple Leafs and Vegas Golden Knights agreed to a sign-and-trade to keep Mitch Marner out of unrestricted free agency.

It's likely that the trade market will be the source of bigger blockbuster moves throughout the offseason, as teams have plenty of spending power at their disposal. Because the lackluster pool of free agents left much to be desired, there's a chance some big contracts could end up being moved via trade in the coming weeks as teams look to further fortify their roster and spend what money they have.

Still, there were some big moves made already after free agency opened on July 1, and many teams took advantage of some quality players hitting the open market. We're going to take a look at teams that made good deals, those who did not, and those who stayed too patient and failed to make a significant splash whatsoever.

These are the winners and losers of 2025 NHL free agency.

NHL Free Agency Winners

Florida Panthers

The Florida Panthers got the bulk of their business done before free agency officially opened, and in doing so they not only kept together some key pieces from their championship-winning core, they also prevented other teams from even getting a chance to speak to some prime free agent targets.

Sam Bennett, Aaron Ekblad and Brad Marchand were all slated to hit the open market, where they'd have been highly coveted free agents especially in a weaker class. Instead, all three returned to Florida on long-term deals, opting to run it back in Sunrise, Fla. in hopes of winning more championships.

It's hard to argue any team had a better offseason than the Panthers, who focused on retention of key players rather than the addition of new ones.

Carolina Hurricanes

Marner opting to join the Vegas Golden Knights resulted in Carolina looking elsewhere this offseason. And quite often, they were successful wherever they looked. Nikolaj Ehlers was widely regarded as the next best option on the market after the Marner trade. He also had plenty of leverage with a lack of standout free agents competing with him. While he could likely have driven his price up and gotten teams into a bidding war, Ehlers ended up signing a six-year, \$51 million deal (\$8.5M AAV) with the Hurricanes.

Additionally, Carolina traded for restricted free agent K'Andre Miller from the New York Rangers and signed him to a long-term extension. He's young and has plenty of upside, and will also help in their immediate pursuit of a Cup.

Great business from the Canes.

Vegas Golden Knights

Mitch Marner is a Golden Knight. Vegas got the deal done, and they were able to sign Marner to a relatively inexpensive contract extension, when considering some of the gargantuan figures that were rumored to be in play for the 28-year-old in free agency.

Marner heads to Vegas on an eight-year, \$96 million deal with an average annual value of \$12 million. Needless to say, he's an amazing addition to a franchise that's been contending for practically its entire existence. Marner was indisputably the top player available this summer and the Golden Knights avoided a bidding war by bringing him aboard in a sign-and-trade before the market opened.

NHL Free Agency Losers

Los Angeles Kings

Los Angeles Kings defenseman Brandt Clarke tangles with Edmonton Oilers right winger Corey Perry / Walter Tychnowicz-Imagn Images

The Kings struck out on many of the top free agents this offseason, and they didn't provide much optimism with the additions they were able to make. Corey Perry enjoyed a solid playoff run with the Edmonton Oilers, but he's set to embark on his age-40 season and may not have too much left in the tank.

They gave a rather significant four-year, \$18 million deal to veteran defenseman Cody Ceci while also bringing Brian Dumoulin to the team, but it's been a rather lackluster offseason for a team that was hoping to make a big splash. None of these additions seem like ones that will be the difference between a first-round playoff exit and reaching the second round for the first time in over a decade.

Toronto Maple Leafs

Parting ways with Marner is a significant but not unexpected blow for the Maple Leafs. Thus far, they've done little to make up for his loss in production, though they managed to retain some important pieces such as Matthew Knies, John Taveras and Max Pacioretty.

They traded for Matias Maccelli, who is a solid addition, and got Nicolas Roy from the Golden Knights as part of the Marner deal, but there's still plenty of work to be done for Toronto if they want to take a step forward in 2025-26, instead of back.

The lackluster free agency market didn't leave the Maple Leafs with too many options (if any at all) to replace Marner, so they'll need to work the trade market if they want to land a significant addition heading into next season

Columbus Blue Jackets

The Blue Jackets were unsuccessful in their pursuit to upgrade their top six forwards, and instead walked out of free agency with three bottom six skaters, who will effectively replace veterans who left for free agency. The additions of Charlie Coyle, Miles Wood and Isac Lundestrom don't move the needle much for a team hoping to get back to the playoffs.

Additionally, Columbus paid a pretty penny to retain Ivan Provorov, handing the defenseman a seven-year, \$59.5 million deal (\$8.5M AAV). The team hasn't made any real improvements despite having made some moves, and they'll need to get active in the trade market if they're hoping to make the necessary upgrades for a playoff run.