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Columbus Dispatch / Why Columbus Blue Jackets Mateychuk, Malatesta were sent to AHL's Cleveland Monsters

By Brian Hedger – October 8, 2024

There are probably a couple of NHL teams that would have kept Denton Mateychuk for at least the start of the regular season.

The Blue Jackets didn't for one main reason.

They're overflowing with young, left-handed, two-way defensemen, including two at the NHL level they don't want to put on waivers. One is Jake Christiansen, who has paid his dues since signing with the Blue Jackets in 2020 as an undrafted free agent from the Western Hockey League. The other is Jordan Harris, who arrived in Columbus in the offseason trade that sent Patrik Laine to the Montreal Canadiens.

Add those factors up, combine them with Mateychuk's scant professional experience compared to fellow 2022 first-rounder David Jiricek, and the answer becomes clearer on why an impressive preseason performance — two goals, one assist and three points in four games — didn't lead to an NHL role.

"The camp was fantastic, right ... it really was," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "Clearly, we've got a lot of defensemen here. There's still eight guys here. But I'll tell you this ... for all of us (coaches), he's in the mix. Just because he's not here at this time, it's more of a numbers thing than anything."

Mateychuk, picked 12th overall in 2022, is starting his entry-level contract. It twice was pushed back after he was forced to return to juniors last year based on an age agreement between the NHL and the Canadian Hockey League. He can now be recalled/returned to AHL Cleveland without exposure to NHL waivers, which contributed to his initial pro assignment.

Harris and Christiansen each require waivers for an AHL assignment. Jiricek can also move freely between Columbus and Cleveland, like Mateychuk, but has a big right-handed shot and has 84 AHL games plus 47 NHL games to his credit.

As such, the Jackets are keeping eight NHL defensemen. Based on defensive pairings Monday at practice, Harris and Jiricek worked as the fourth pairing — extras — heading into the season opener Thursday at Minnesota. Christiansen, meanwhile, worked with Damon Severson as the projected second pair. The third included veterans Jack Johnson, 37, and Erik Gudbranson, 32.

Asked if carrying eight defensemen might become a hindrance to the development of young defensemen, Evason pushed back. It should also be noted that Mateychuk will likely get first pairing ice time in the AHL as opposed to second or third pairing minutes in Columbus.

"It's a tough league ... and defensemen get hit a lot," Evason said. "So, to have a lot of them and have depth (is good). You want to have competition, too, right? Do we want everybody to play? Sure. Do we want everybody that's not playing to push the guys that are playing to stay in the lineup? Yeah, and I think that's what we have now."

Evason called it a "healthy competition," that doesn't exist just on the NHL roster. Should Mateychuk continue to thrive in the AHL, he could play his way into an NHL role at some point. Another key injury or two could also make it happen, but the Blue Jackets would much prefer the former scenario.

And if Mateychuk spends more or all of this season with the Monsters, that's fine, too. He's only 20 and appears solidly on track to have a long, successful NHL career ahead.

“Young players, especially defensemen, it’s hard for these kids,” said general manager Don Waddell . “You’ve got to be careful, because we want him to be a Blue Jacket for the next 15 years, not just the next three months.”

Why the Columbus Blue Jackets loaned James Malatesta to the AHL

Until 2 p.m. Monday, it looked like rookie forward James Malatesta had made the Blue Jackets’ opening roster.

That changed when it was announced veteran Zach Aston-Reese, 30, was headed to Columbus off waivers from the Vegas Golden Knights. Just like that, Malatesta was loaned to the Monsters for more development.

Malatesta, like Mateychuk, is exempt from waivers while playing on his entry-level contract. He also has an NHL frame already, also like the sturdy Mateychuk. Unlike Mateychuk, he already made his NHL debut late last season and scored his first NHL goal. Rather than keeping him in Columbus to compete with Dylan Gambrell on a fourth line that’s missing Justin Danforth (wrist), the Blue Jackets sent Malatesta to Cleveland to handle a more significant AHL role.

The Jackets’ final decision on forwards likely came down to keeping Malatesta or Mikael Pyyhtia, another rookie. Pyyhtia earned a spot on the third line by playing in seven of eight preseason games and due to injuries to captain Boone Jenner and power forward Dmitry Voronkov.

“We’ve talked about our depth early in camp, and our depth is being challenged now,” Evason said prior to Aston-Reese forcing Malatesta to Cleveland. “There’s a sign in the locker room that says you need to earn being here. It’s not given to you ... and both of those guys (Pyyhtia, Malatesta) earned their opportunity to be in that locker room.”

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets release 2024-25 opening NHL roster

By Brian Hedger – October 8, 2024

It's almost time for the Blue Jackets to drop the puck in games that count.

After a spirited practice Monday, they're just three days away from opening the regular season on the road against the Minnesota Wild at Xcel Energy Center, where coach Dean Evason ran the bench at the start of last season.

The team that joins Evason for his return to the Twin Cities has been altered dramatically by injuries and Johnny Gaudreau's tragic death, but it's time for the Blue Jackets, as now comprised, to get another season started.

Here's a look at the opening roster:

Columbus Blue Jackets forwards

Here are the forwards who will break camp with the Blue Jackets: Yegor Chinakhov, Sean Monahan, Kirill Marchenko, James van Riemsdyk, Adam Fantilli, Kevin Labanc, Mikael Pyyhtia, Cole Sillinger, Kent Johnson, Zach Aston-Reese, Sean Kuraly, Dylan Gambrell and Mathieu Olivier

Projected lines vs. Minnesota Wild:

Chinakhov – Monahan – Marchenko

Van Riemsdyk – Fantilli – Labanc

Pyyhtia – Sillinger – Johnson

Aston-Reese – Kuraly – Olivier

Extra: Gambrell

Injured reserve: Boone Jenner (upper body), Dmitry Voronkov (upper body)

Injured/non-roster: Justin Danforth (wrist), Jordan Dumais (lower body), Max McCue (upper body)

Breakdown: Since trading Patrik Laine to the Montreal Canadiens in August, the Blue Jackets' skill level and NHL depth have been ravaged by the heartbreaking loss of Gaudreau plus injuries to three lineup stalwarts – Jenner, Voronkov and Danforth.

While a front office led by president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell has done its best to fill the voids with van Riemsdyk, Labanc and Aston-Reese, the Jackets' opening forward group just doesn't have the firepower the team envisioned when signing Monahan on July 1 as a free agent.

That's the bad news. The good news is a collection of young forwards might be on the cusp of making a bigger NHL impact this season, including Fantilli, Johnson, Marchenko, Chinakhov and Sillinger.

Columbus Blue Jackets defensemen

Here are the defensemen who will break camp with the Blue Jackets: Zach Werenski, Ivan Provorov, Damon Severson, Jake Christiansen, Erik Gudbranson, Jack Johnson, Jordan Harris and David Jiricek

Projected defense pairings vs. Minnesota Wild:

Werenski – Provorov

Christiansen – Severson

Johnson – Gudbranson

Extra: Harris, Jiricek

Breakdown: The Blue Jackets are keeping eight defensemen to start the season, even though it looks like Jordan Harris and David Jiricek, two guys who are still early into their NHL careers, appear to be the odd men out in the opening rotation. As for pairings, the Jackets started camp with Werenski and Severson as the top pairing, but that has since changed to Werenski and Provorov, who flips to his “off” side on the right to make it work.

Severson could play his way back into another shot at the top pairing, and there’s just as much flexibility with the second two pairs. Christiansen, Harris and Jiricek could all see time on either unit, while Johnson and Gudbranson are starting out as a seasoned, gritty third pairing.

Columbus Blue Jackets goalies

Elvis Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov will begin the season as the Blue Jackets’ goaltending tandem. Jet Greaves will handle the starter’s role for the Cleveland Monsters again, staying ready as the third goalie on the organizational depth chart.

Projected goalie roles vs. Minnesota Wild:

Elvis Merzlikins (starter)

Daniil Tarasov

Breakdown: Merzlikins outplayed Tarasov in the preseason, but it’s tough to be critical of Tarasov’s exhibition numbers because he was put into some bad situations behind a couple of inexperienced lineups. Merzlikins goes into the season as the unquestioned starter, but it’s a long season and Tarasov will be looking to challenge him.

Columbus Blue Jackets coaching staff

Here is the Blue Jackets’ NHL coaching staff: Head coach Dean Evason, assistant coach Mike Haviland (forwards/power play), assistant coach Steve McCarthy (defensemen/penalty kill), assistant coach Scott Ford (multiple roles), assistant coach Jared Boll (skills), Niklas Backstrom (goaltending coach)

Breakdown: Evason is known for getting his teams to play their hardest, so look for that to become a hallmark of the Blue Jackets regardless of their record. Promoting Haviland should help offensively. He won the Stanley Cup in 2010 as a Chicago Blackhawks assistant and helped AHL Cleveland make a deep playoff run last season while working with defensemen. McCarthy is becoming a seasoned defensive assistant, Boll is going into his second season as a skills coach and Ford is getting his first NHL coaching look after playing and coaching for Evason with the AHL’s Milwaukee Admirals.

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets claim NHL forward Zach Aston-Reese from Vegas Golden Knights

By Brian Hedger – October 8, 2024

The Blue Jackets practiced Monday with 21 skaters and two goals, which appeared to be the 23-man roster they'd use to start this season.

Instead, Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell had another move in the hopper. Still looking for proven NHL forwards, he claimed forward Zach Aston-Reese off waivers from the Vegas Golden Knights, adding another veteran forward to go with his signing of James van Riemsdyk before training camp and Kevin Labanc on Saturday — both on one-year contracts worth less than \$1 million.

“Zach Aston-Reese is a smart and versatile player that can play any of the forward positions,” Waddell said in a statement. “He brings over 300 games of NHL experience to our lineup and will provide additional depth to our group up front.”

The Blue Jackets lost experience, depth and a lot of size last week within a 14-hour span thanks to two upper-body injuries to power forward Dmitry Voronkov and captain Boone Jenner. Voronkov played only 15 seconds against the Pittsburgh Penguins on Thursday, leaving after an awkward collision with Sam Poulin. Jenner was injured the next day, crashing hard into the boards at practice during a “small area” drill.

Voronkov isn't expected to need surgery, but Jenner is consulting a specialist for a second opinion that could lead to a surgical procedure. Both forwards join Justin Danforth (wrist) on injured reserve, leaving the Blue Jackets with three holes in the lineup they hoped to ice prior to camp. Jenner and Voronkov were “top nine” forwards and each played in front of the net for separate power-play units.

Jenner was also skating at left wing on the top line in a spot vacated by the tragedy that took the life of Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew. Voronkov, who scored 18 goals as a rookie last season, skated most recently on the left side of the third line with Cole Sillinger and Kent Johnson.

“It sucks,” Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. “Is it a downer? I don't know. It's an opportunity for other guys to step up. Do we want Boone and ‘Vronny’ in our lineup? Yeah, of course, but there's nothing we can do about it now, and we had a good chat with the group this morning about that. Boone had a little chat with the group, too, after (the coaches). We just move forward. We've got to turn everything, as much as we can, into a positive.”

[BlueJackets.com / Meet the Blue Jackets: Breaking down the opening roster](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – October 8, 2024

It's officially game week, and the 23-man Blue Jackets roster is now here.

Things certainly went down to the wire, with preseason injuries suffered by captain Boone Jenner and fellow forwards Dmitri Voronkov and Gavin Brindley unfortunately complicating things. General manager Don Waddell was active in the final days before rosters were due, signing wing Kevin Labanc to a one-year deal and claiming forward Zach Aston-Reese on waivers.

Those veterans were the final pieces of the puzzle for the opening roster, which includes 13 forwards, eight defensemen and two goaltenders. Eleven were first-round picks at some point in their careers, while they range from 19 years old (Adam Fantilli) to 37 (Jack Johnson). Ten were born in the United States, while six hail from Canada, four from Russia and one each from Finland, Czechia and Latvia.

So what can Blue Jackets fans expect from that diverse collection of talent on the squad? Meet the Blue Jackets with profiles of each player below.

Forwards (13)

27 Zach Aston-Reese (6-1, 200, age 30): Columbus claimed the wing on waivers today to add another body that can play in the bottom six. Aston-Reese led college hockey in scoring as a senior at Northeastern, but his NHL game has been that as a responsible player who can add scoring when the opportunity arises. Aston-Reese has played in 310 games over seven NHL seasons with Pittsburgh, Anaheim, Toronto and Detroit, notching 42 goals, 80 points and a plus-33 rating.

59 Yegor Chinakhov (6-1, 204, age 23): The Russian wing has steadily built his game in his first three seasons in the NHL, posting career highs of 16 goals and 29 points a season ago. The 2020 first-round pick could be in line for a breakout, as he's learned the NHL game the past few years and has excellent tools, including elite top-end speed and one of the hardest wrist shots in the NHL. Chinakhov should play top-six minutes and score plenty of goals if he can stay healthy, as he's been limited by injuries to 83 games the past two campaigns.

19 Adam Fantilli (6-2, 194, age 19): The No. 3 overall pick in the 2023 draft is one of the top building blocks for the CBJ future, and the future could be now. The University of Michigan product had a solid first season in the NHL, posting 12 goals and 27 points in 49 games before suffering a season-ending injury, and looks primed to do even more now that he's in year two. Fantilli is big, isn't afraid to play with an edge and can put the puck in the net at a high level. He should center the second line and improve upon his numbers from a year ago.

18 Dylan Gambrell (6-0, 190, age 28): Added as a free agent this offseason, Gambrell had a solid camp and showed he's ready to resume his NHL career after spending all of last season in the AHL. A veteran of 233 NHL games over six seasons with San Jose and Ottawa, where he notched 17 goals and 40 points, he's been a center most of his life but will likely play wing for the Blue Jackets in a bottom-six role. A high scorer in college at Denver, his game now is all about playing responsibly and being in the right spots.

91 Kent Johnson (6-0, 178, age 21): Johnson was drafted fifth overall in the 2021 draft with the promise of being a creative, high-scoring forward, and he showed it when he had one of the best rookie seasons in franchise history (16 goals, 40 points) two seasons ago. Last year was not much fun, though, as he had 6-10-16 in 42 games before suffering a season-ending shoulder injury. Rather than sulk, though, Johnson

attacked his rehab, hit the gym hard and has noticeably added weight. He looked more confident in camp and filled up the scoresheet in the preseason, leading many to believe he's ready for a big season on the wing.

7 Sean Kuraly (6-2, 215, age 31): The Central Ohio native needs little introduction, as Kuraly enters year four with the Blue Jackets as one of the more popular players on the team. An alternate captain, Kuraly is expected to center the fourth line and bring a high level of effort on a night-in, night-out basis. That's not to say he can't add offense, though, as Kuraly has 34 tallies in his three seasons with the Blue Jackets, including a 9-9-18 mark in 62 games a campaign ago.

62 Kevin Labanc (5-11, 185, age 28): Signed Saturday after leading the NHL with six preseason goals while on a tryout deal with New Jersey, Labanc could be a solid pickup given his career numbers and will slot right in on the wing in a middle-six role for Columbus. An eight-year NHL veteran with San Jose, he posted 82 goals and 225 points in 478 career games with the Sharks, including a career-high 17 goals and 56 points in 2018-19. Labanc didn't fit under a new regime a year ago, finishing with 2-7-9 in 46 games with the Sharks, but this could be the fresh start he needs.

86 Kirill Marchenko (6-3, 195, age 24): Marchy Madness returns, as the ever-smiling Marchenko is one of just two players in team history to begin his NHL career with consecutive 20-goal seasons. Could 30 be on tap this year? The Russian wing is expected to begin the campaign on the top line, and he'll have every opportunity to score plenty of goals. Marchenko was streaky a year ago, but if he can even things out, it wouldn't be a surprise to see his scoring total continue to climb. After 21 goals and just four assists as a rookie, he had a 23-19-42 line last season.

23 Sean Monahan (6-2, 202, age 29): The team's biggest acquisition in the free agent market, Monahan has spoken already about how he's found a home in Columbus after inking a five-year deal. He'll be expected to serve as a top-six center and will begin the season on the top line, a spot befitting one of the more consistent players in the NHL, as his 26-goal, 59-point season a year ago between Winnipeg and Montreal is right in line with his career averages. Monahan is also a veteran leader and one of the league's top faceoff men.

24 Mathieu Olivier (6-1, 222, age 27): One of the NHL's toughest customers is back in Columbus for year three, and his hope is to continue to add to his game. Olivier has led the Jackets in fighting majors the past two seasons, but he also has some touch and a hard shot, allowing him to total 10 goals and 27 points in his tenure in union blue. A fourth-line wing, Olivier is expected to use his physicality and energy to give the Jackets a jolt.

82 Mikael Pyhtia (6-0, 166, age 22): Perhaps a surprise entrant to some on the roster to begin the season, Pyhtia made his NHL debut a year ago with two assists in 17 games. A fourth-round draft pick in 2020, he is a responsible player with a well-rounded game, but his offensive skill bears watching – he was one of the top goal scorers in Finland's Liiga three years ago and boasts a sneaky good shot. Pyhtia is expected to fill a bottom-six role, but the team thinks he could surprise with his scoring.

4 Cole Sillinger (6-1, 199, age 21): Already a veteran of more than 200 NHL games over the past three seasons, Sillinger played his best hockey at the end of last year, bouncing back from a tough sophomore campaign to post 13 goals and 32 points. He seems primed to take another step this year, as well, after a solid preseason. An NHL legacy, Sillinger has always thought the game well, and his defensive play took a major step a year ago; will the offense follow this year?

21 James van Riemsdyk (6-3, 208, age 35): Signed on the eve of training camp to add a scorer and a veteran to the mix, the man known as JVR has played in more than 1,000 NHL games over 15 seasons with Philadelphia, Toronto and Boston. He was more than a bit player a year ago with the Bruins, scoring

11 goals and improving his playmaking to post 27 assists in 71 games. A middle-six winger who can play the netfront on the power play, van Riemsdyk should add offense and leadership.

Defenseemen (8)

2 Jake Christiansen (6-0, 193, age 25): Signed as an undrafted free agent out of the WHL in 2020, Christiansen has paid his dues in the organization, and he's just one of two AHL defensemen to score double digits in goals each of the past three campaigns. An All-Star last year in Cleveland, he has excellent offensive instincts and has worked on his defensive game over the years, but it hasn't yet translated to the NHL, where he has a goal and six assists in 44 career games. It feels like Christiansen has been on the bubble for a while, but there are many who think he can stick in the NHL.

44 Erik Gudbranson (6-5, 222, age 32): After a transition year after being signed as a free agent in the summer of 2022, Gudbranson put together a solid season a year ago (6-20-26 in 76 games) and should be a mainstay on the right side of the defense. He's added some to his offensive game over the years, but his bread and butter is being a defensive defenseman with some snarl when the situation calls for it. Entering year 14 in the NHL, Gudbranson is a steady performer and an alternate captain who has brought a lot to the locker room.

22 Jordan Harris (5-11, 189, age 24): Acquired this summer in the trade that sent Patrik Laine to Montreal, Harris became a regular the past two seasons in Montreal, posting a career line of 8-24-32 in 131 NHL games with the Habs. Skating is a big part of his game, and Harris sees himself as a two-way defender who can hold his own defensively while adding some offense when the opportunity arises. When Harris was acquired, he spoke of feeling as though he has more to give at the NHL level, and he could get the chance here. Versatility will also help, as he's a left-shot defenseman who can also play the right side.

55 David Jiricek (6-4, 207, age 20): All the tools are certainly there for Jiricek, from excellent size and reach to a booming shot. The next step for the 2022 first-round pick will be adapting his game to the NHL – he loves to be aggressive and shut plays down before they happen, but there's a time and place for that at the top level. He's also still just 20 years old, and a ton of potential remains for the Czech blueliner who has a goal and 10 assists in 47 NHL games to his credit over the past two seasons.

3 Jack Johnson (6-1, 227, age 37): What's old is new again, as Johnson has returned to the Blue Jackets after a seven-year stay from 2012-18. Once a minutes eater for the team, he's now a third-pair defender and penalty kill specialist, but the 19-year NHL veteran should add steadiness and leadership to the room. Since leaving Columbus, Johnson won a Stanley Cup in Colorado in 2022 and was a key part of the Avs a season ago, posting three goals, 16 points and a plus-15 rating in 80 games

9 Ivan Provorov (6-1, 220, age 27): Provorov enters year two with the Blue Jackets expected to be a solid blueliner who can play well in all three zones. His debut season with the Blue Jackets featured five goals and 32 points while playing in all 82 games, and Provorov is a versatile player who can help on both the power play and penalty kill. He may also play on the right side as the Blue Jackets try to stabilize things there at the start of the campaign.

78 Damon Severson (6-2, 202, age 30): A big addition in free agency a year ago, Severson acknowledged there was a transition period to the start of his CBJ tenure after spending his entire career in New Jersey. That could portend bigger things for him this season now that he's comfortable in Columbus, and Severson is a great skater who can add offense from the back end. The right-shot defenseman posted nine goals and 28 points in 67 games in his debut season in Columbus and could do more this year.

8 Zach Werenski (6-2, 219, age 27): Werenski is a CBJ mainstay, serving as an alternate captain and the driver of things from the back end for the Blue Jackets. He's coming off the most productive campaign in

his eight-year career, as his 57 points tied the franchise record for defensemen. Werenski has also solidified himself as a respected leader in the Blue Jackets room, as the two-time All-Star is one of the best offensive defensemen in the league and a franchise player. Simply put, he's fun to watch, a true blue Blue Jacket, and he'll again be the top CBJ blueliner while playing in every situation.

Goaltenders (2)

90 Elvis Merzlikins (6-3, 184, age 30): It's year six in Columbus for Merzlikins, who improved his numbers a year ago as he tries to get back to the level that made him the fifth-place finisher in the Vezina voting as a rookie in 2020. There's certainly talent there, but consistency has been the biggest issue the past few seasons for Merzlikins, who was 13-17-8 with a 3.45 GAA and .897 save percentage last year. He was excellent in his preseason appearances and hopes to continue to build his game.

40 Daniil Tarasov (6-5, 201, age 25): The Blue Jackets have long thought the massive Russian has the tools to be a top NHL netminder if he could just stay healthy, and he showed it a year ago when he posted a .933 save percentage in his last 13 appearances. In all, Tarasov was 8-11-3 with a 3.18 GAA and .908 save percentage, and his game improved as he gained comfort and confidence in the cage after missing the start of the season with injury. He and Merzlikins will battle for time in the early going with the hope their experience can make them a solid duo.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Signing of Kevin Labanc Is Low Risk

By Nicholas Arnold – October 8, 2024

As we continue to drudge towards opening night, the Columbus Blue Jackets have signed another player to a contract. Kevin Labanc has only been a member of the San Jose Sharks in his eight seasons in the NHL, but now finds a home in Ohio.

Labanc is still only 28 years old, but has almost 500 NHL games under his belt. At one point in his career, he was a real high riser. Coming out of the 2018-19 season, he had been a solid depth scorer for the Sharks. It was his career year, in which he put up 17 goals and 56 points. He had made a really strong impact on the team's run to the Stanley Cup Final as a top-six forward and the team looked like they had a key piece to their future. That hasn't quite been the case and he's been struggling with injuries, only playing in 56.5% of possible games over the last three seasons.

"Kevin Labanc has been a productive offensive player in this league for several years," said Waddell in a media release. "He has an excellent shot and playmaking ability and given his character we believe he will fit in very well with our group."

That potential was showcased in his strong preseason performance on a pro-tryout contract with the New Jersey Devils. He put up six goals and one assist in his four games with the squad, which is likely to have attracted the eye of Waddell. The Blue Jackets have been open that they were looking to add NHL forwards on contracts since the passing of Johnny Gaudreau, and have since done so with Labanc and James van Riemsdyk.

Labanc's Best Case Scenario with the Blue Jackets

A best-case scenario comparison for this signing is if we look back to 2016-17 when the Blue Jackets signed Sam Gagner to a one-year league minimum contract. Gagner had some struggles after leaving the Edmonton Oilers, and even wound up spending some time in the American Hockey League (AHL). He was coming off of a career-low season, eight goals and 16 points, when he signed with Columbus. Then he found a home in John Tortorella's system becoming a powerplay specialist and parlaying that role into his most productive offensive season.

If Labanc can find a similar role in Dean Evason's lineup, taking a middle or bottom-six role, and racking up minutes on the second powerplay unit, this will be a massive win for the Blue Jackets. He was a powerplay specialist for the Sharks when he was at his best, scoring 35.7% of his points on the man advantage during his three most productive seasons. Becoming a mainstay with some of the skilled younger players may rejuvenate his numbers.

For the Blue Jackets, just having Labanc be an everyday NHLer is a win. They have zero risk in this situation. Only shelling out a one-year league minimum salary for a player who has averaged 14 goals and 38 points per 82 games throughout his career could go really well for Waddell and company. If it doesn't work out, oh well. At least they tried something as they continue their journey back to being a playoff-relevant team.

Where Labanc will fit in over the course of the entire season is to be determined, but early on he should get a real opportunity to make an impact. Key forwards Boone Jenner and Dmitri Voronkov are injured and expected to miss some time. If Labanc is going to make an impact on the team, he'll have to make it early or he may find himself squeezed out of a roster spot. Only time will tell, the Blue Jackets' regular season kicks off on Oct. 10 on the road against the Minnesota Wild.

The Hockey News / 8 Days Until Opening Night At Nationwide Arena: The History Of Jersey #8

By Jason Newland – October 8, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets have had many players don the Union Blue in its history. The #8 has only been worn a handful of times though.

Who Wore It First?

- **Geoff Sanderson** - Sanderson played 268 games as a Jacket and had 168 points. In the franchise's first season, he dazzled the NWA crowds when he scored 30 goals and had 56 points. He retired in 2008 after playing 1100 games and totaling 700 points. His son Jake is now a star defenseman for the Ottawa Senators.

Who Wore It Last?

- **Zach Werenski** - Werenski has played 486 games for Columbus in eight seasons. He was a star at the University of Michigan and helped the Lake Erie Monsters win the Calder Cup in 2016. He also totaled 47 points in his rookie year.

Who Wore It Best?

- **Zach Werenski** - Werenski has 302 points in eight seasons so far. Had it not been for a few injuries, his points total would be much higher. He currently holds the CBJ records for most goals, assists, and points by a Columbus defender, as well as power-play goals. He's also tied for most points in a season, and most points in a single game by a defenseman. Werenski's records should stand for a lot of years.

Others That Have Worn #8

- **Jan Hejda** - Hejda was drafted by Buffalo in 2003 and came to Columbus as a free agent in 2007. Hejda played for four years in Columbus and had the best seasons of his career while wearing the Union Blue. He totaled 11 goals and 67 points for his CBJ career. He signed with Colorado in 2011 and would finish his career there. He retired in 2016.
- **Scottie Upshall** - Upshall played 21 games as a Jacket and had seven points. He retired in Switzerland in 2020.
- **Maksim Mayorov** - Mayorov played 22 in Columbus and totaled 11 points. He never played another game for the Jackets and left for KHL in 2012 where he would play until retiring in 2021.
- **Nathan Horton** - Horton only played 36 games for Columbus after signing with the Jackets in 2013. After netting 19 points, he was forced to medically retire due to a back issue.

There are 8 days left until opening night at Nationwide Arena.

The Hockey News / Columbus Claims Forward Zach Aston-Reese Off Of The Waiver Wire From Vegas

By Jason Newland – October 8, 2024

Columbus has claimed forward Zach Aston-Reese off of the waiver wire today. He was put on waivers by the Vegas Golden Knights. He is signed through the 24-25 season at \$775k.

Aston-Reese is the veteran of 310 games and has 80 points. He has an 82-game average of 21 points.

He spent last season with the Detroit Red Wings organization. He played only three games with Detroit while playing 61 games for Grand Rapids of the AHL.

GM Don Waddell says about Aston-Reese, "Zach Aston-Reese is a smart and versatile player that can play any of the forward positions." "He brings over 300 games of NHL experience to our lineup and will provide additional depth to our group up front."

He spent the first five years of his career with Metro rival Pittsburgh, where he scored 29 goals and totaled 62 points.

The claiming of Aston-Reese comes on the heels of the Jackets losing Boone Jenner and Dmitri Voronkov to a major injury.

1st Ohio Battery / Ready, Set, Go: Blue Jackets Finalize Roster In Advance Of Thursday's Season Opener

By Ed Francis – October 8, 2024

It was anything but a smooth ride.

But the Columbus Blue Jackets have finalized their roster for the season-opener Thursday night in Minnesota against the Wild.

Injuries to Boone Jenner and Dmitri Voronkov — both believed to be long-term — put the Blue Jackets in the positioning of needing to either play guys who they felt might not quite be ready to be a mainstay in the NHL, or check the market for available players to fill those roles.

They opted (wisely) for the latter choice, signing Kevin Labanc over the weekend to a one-year deal and claiming Vegas forward Zach Aston-Reese off waivers Monday.

That gave the club some flexibility, which they exercised late Monday by sending forward James Malatesta to the Cleveland Monsters. He had an excellent camp, but — similar to the decision made with defenseman Denton Mateychuk — the team decided a big role in Cleveland was more valuable to their development than a limited role in Columbus.

In addition to the Malatesta move, Boone Jenner was placed on injured reserve. Forwards Justin Danforth, Jordan Dumais, and Max McCue were placed on the Injured/Non-Roster list.

Here's a look at those decisions resulted in, as well as an idea of what lines could look like when the Blue Jackets play the Minnesota Wild in Thursday night's season-opener:

FORWARDS:

Line 1: Yegor Chinakhov — Sean Monahan — Kirill Marchenko

Line 2: James van Riemsdyk — Adam Fantilli — Kevin Labanc

Line 3: Mikael Pyyhtia — Cole Sillinger — Kent Johnson

Line 4: Zach Aston-Reese — Sean Kuraly — Mathieu Olivier

Scratch: Dylan Gambrell

DEFENSE:

Pair 1: Zach Werenski — Ivan Provorov

Pair 2: Jake Christiansen — Damon Severson

Pair 3: Jack Johnson — Erik Gudbranson

Scratches: Jordan Harris / David Jiricek

GOALIES:

Elvis Merzlikins — Daniil Tarasov

1st Ohio Battery / Blue Jackets Claim Forward Zach Aston-Reese Off Waivers From Vegas

By Ed Francis – October 8, 2024

On the day that rosters across the league are being finalized, the Columbus Blue Jackets continue to make some tweaks of their own.

The club claimed veteran forward Zach Aston-Reese off waivers from the Vegas Golden Knights on Monday afternoon, giving the Blue Jackets additional bottom-six depth.

“Aston-Reese is a smart and versatile player that can play any of the forward positions,” said President of Hockey Operations and General Manager Don Waddell. “He brings over 300 games of NHL experience to our lineup and will provide additional depth to our group up front.”

That depth up front will further allow Columbus to get talented prospects a large role in Cleveland, as opposed to a more limited role with the Blue Jackets.

Aston-Reese, 30, has spent a majority of his career with the Pittsburgh Penguins, scoring 29 goals and chipping in 33 assists in 213 games with the Penguins between 2017 and 2022.

The 6'1", 205lb winger then spent the 2022-23 season with the Toronto Maple Leafs, playing 77 games in a mostly fourth-line role. He scored ten goals and added four assists for a total of 14 points while averaging just under 11 minutes per game.

He then signed a one-year deal with the Detroit Red Wings during the summer of 2023, but played in just three games with the club and spent the rest of the season with their AHL affiliate, the Grand Rapids Griffins. There, he had a stat line of 14g-16a-30p in 61 games.

Aston-Reese then signed a one-year, two-way deal with the Golden Knights in July before being waived over the weekend. He becomes the second native of Staten Island, New York to join the Blue Jackets since Saturday — that was the day the team signed Kevin Labanc to a one-year deal worth \$775,000.

The Athletic / NHL waiver tracker: Best players on the wire throughout 2024-25 preseason

By Corey Pronman and Harman Dayal – October 8, 2024

As NHL teams trim their rosters before the regular season, The Athletic's Corey Pronman and Harman Dayal will provide analysis of the top players placed on waivers every day. Once a player is waived, the rest of the league has 24 hours to put in a claim for him. If a player goes unclaimed, they can be assigned by their team to the minor leagues.

Monday, Oct. 7

Austin Watson was placed on waivers by the Detroit Red Wings after signing a one-year, two-way contract.

Sunday, Oct. 6

All players on waivers: Patrick Brown (Bruins), Brandon Bussi (Bruins), Jiri Patera (Bruins), Billy Sweezy (Bruins), Jeffrey Viel (Bruins), Kale Clague (Sabres), James Reimer (Sabres), Lukas Rousek (Sabres), Devin Cooley (Flames), Jakob Pelletier (Flames), Cole Schwindt (Flames), Josiah Slavin (Hurricanes), Ty Smith (Hurricanes), Ryan Suzuki (Hurricanes), Isaak Phillips (Blackhawks), Sheldon Dries (Red Wings), Justin Holl (Red Wings), William Lagesson (Red Wings), Brogan Rafferty (Red Wings), Joe Snively (Red Wings), Josh Brown (Oilers), Drake Caggiula (Oilers), Raphael Lavoie (Oilers), Olivier Rodrigue (Oilers), Pheonix Copley (Kings), Samuel Fagemo (Kings), Jack Studnicka (Kings), Marc Del Gaizo (Predators), Shane Bowers (Devils), Nick DeSimone (Devils), Nolan Foote (Devils), Colton White (Devils), Samuel Bolduc (Islanders), Pierre Engvall (Islanders), Hudson Fasching (Islanders), Liam Foudy (Islanders), Marcus Hogberg (Islanders), Grant Hutton (Islanders), Frederik Karlstrom (Islanders), Jakub Skarek (Islanders), Matthew Robertson (Rangers), Adam Gaudette (Senators), Jan Jenik (Senators), Sebastian Aho (Penguins), Boko Imama (PIT), Corey Schuenemann (Blues), Tyler Tucker (Blues), Gage Goncalves (Lightning), Steven Santini (Lightning), Jesse Ylonen (Lightning), Matt Murray (Maple Leafs), Marshall Rifai (Maple Leafs), Matt Villalta (Utah), Erik Brannstrom (Canucks), Zach Aston-Reese (Golden Knights), Tanner Laczynski (Golden Knights), Jonas Rondbjerg (Golden Knights), Hunter Shepard (Capitals), Jaret Anderson-Dolan (Jets)

Update: Center Zach Aston-Reese was claimed by Columbus; goalie James Reimer was claimed by Anaheim; goalie Jiri Patera was claimed by Vancouver; winger Cole Schwindt was claimed by Vegas; winger Raphael Lavoie was claimed by Vegas. The rest of the players cleared waivers.

Saturday, Oct. 5

Kole Lind, RW, Dallas Stars

It took Lind a while to adjust to the leap from junior hockey to the AHL when he began his journey as a Canucks prospect (drafted No. 33 in 2017). Over the last handful of years, he's significantly improved his foot speed and developed into an elite AHL player while part of the Kraken organization. Lind scored at just shy of the point-per-game mark during the last two seasons, in addition to owning a projectable 6-foot-1 frame. However, he never really got an extended opportunity in the NHL because Seattle has had an excess of depth forwards. The 25-year-old signed a one-year, two-way contract with the Stars this summer. Dallas is also really deep up front, though, which leaves Lind on the outside looking in despite a solid training camp and preseason. Lind may just be a classic tweener player who excels in the AHL but

can't stick in the NHL, but there's a possibility that he can provide some secondary offense at the bottom of an NHL lineup if given an extended opportunity.—Dayal

Josh Mahura, LHD, Seattle Kraken

Mahura is an excellent skater, which is why teams have continued to take chances on him. He can make a decent enough first pass, but I wouldn't call him a natural offensive type. He's average sized and not overly physical too, which has made him a tweener at the NHL level.—Pronman

Other players on waivers: Oscar Dansk (Ducks), T.J. Tynan (Avalanche), Chris Wagner (Avalanche), Kyle Capobianco (Stars), Magnus Hellberg (Stars), Cameron Hughes (Stars), Alexander Petrovic (Stars), Jacob Pettersson (Stars), Matt Kiersted (Panthers), Hunter Jones (Wild), Connor Mackey (Rangers), John Hayden (Kraken)

Update: All players cleared waivers.

Friday, Oct. 4

Ethan Bear, RHD, Washington Capitals

Bear is a smooth-skating puck-mover. The 27-year-old right-shot defender was a competent No. 4/5 defender for the Canucks in 2022-23, which included some time on the top pair with Quinn Hughes. Vancouver was interested in re-signing him but he was forced to have shoulder surgery after getting hurt playing for Team Canada in the 2023 IIHF World Championship. Bear wasn't going to be ready for the start of last season so the Canucks pivoted and Washington swooped in and signed Bear to a two-year contract. Bear appeared in 24 games with the Capitals last season — he struggled at times, with his underlying two-way numbers cratering. In late March, he entered the NHL/NHLPA player assistance program and was cleared to return approximately a month later.

The Caps are deep on the right side of the blue line with John Carlson, Matt Roy and Trevor van Riemsdyk, which left Bear as the odd man out. Bear can be suspect defensively at times, but he unquestionably has the mobility and puck skills to provide legitimate NHL value. The biggest risk for teams thinking about claiming Bear would be his \$2.062 million cap hit, with his contract expiring at the end of the season.—Dayal

Samuel Poulin, LW, Pittsburgh Penguins

Poulin, drafted No. 21 in 2019, has some heavy, hard skill to his game. He hasn't had the smoothest transition to pro hockey, largely because his footspeed is a concern. He also missed a large chunk of the 2022-23 season as he stepped away to take care of his mental health. Last season, he started to find his groove in the AHL, producing 31 points in 41 games. Poulin has projectable NHL tools if he can improve his skating.—Pronman

Other players on waivers: Jansen Harkins (Ducks), Michael DiPietro (Bruins), Vinni Lettieri (Bruins), Jordan Oesterle (Bruins), William Lockwood (Panthers), Taylor Ward (Kings), Justin Dowling (Devils), Mike Hardman (Devils), Samuel Laberge (Devils), Nathan Legare (Devils), Max Willman (Devils), Olle Lycksell (Flyers), Anthony Richard (Flyers), Emil Bemstrom (Penguins), Nathan Clurman (Penguins), Jonathan Gruden (Penguins), Joona Koppanen (Penguins), Filip Kral (Penguins), John Ludvig (Penguins), Matt Tomkins (Lightning), Alex Steeves (Maple Leafs), Luke Philp (Capitals), Michael Sgarbossa (Capitals)

Update: Defenseman John Ludvig was claimed by Colorado; the rest of the players cleared waivers.

Ludvig is a highly competitive defenseman with decent enough hockey sense. He's likeable without the puck in his D-zone when he's killing penalties or breaking up plays. His skating and skill are both just OK,

though. He's not a natural puck-mover by any means and lacks the pure talent to play at an NHL pace. He could be a useful depth defenseman in an organization.—Pronman

Thursday, Oct. 3

Simon Lundmark, RHD, Winnipeg Jets

Lundmark was a 2019 second-round pick by the Jets. He was picked that high because he's a big right-shot defenseman who skates well. At the time I'm sure Winnipeg was hoping for some more offense or meanness to develop in his game, but he's struggled to find a clear, definable NHL role for himself. He has tools that someone may be willing to take a chance on if they feel he can make a first pass at the top level.—Pronman

Nick Blankenburg, RHD, Nashville Predators

Blankenburg could be a genuinely intriguing project. The 26-year-old right defender is a thunderous body checker despite being listed at just 5-foot-9. He pairs that physicality with good skating ability and decent puck skills. Blankenburg looked like a legitimate NHL player whenever he suited up for the Blue Jackets. Blankenburg's biggest problem is durability — he hasn't played more than 40 games in a season since turning pro in 2021-22. It's fair to wonder if he can sustain his aggressive, max-energy playing style at such a small size in the NHL.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Jarred Tinordi (Flames), Dryden Hunt (Flames), Walker Duehr (Flames), Rasmus Asplund (Panthers), Jaycob Megna (Panthers), Zac Dalpe (Panthers), Tobias Bjornfot (Panthers), Cale Fleury (Kraken), Nick Abruzzese (Maple Leafs), Patrik Koch (Utah), Ben McCartney (Utah), Andrew Agozzino (Utah), Axel Jonsson-Fjallby (Jets), Mason Shaw (Jets), Dominic Toninato (Jets)

Update: All players cleared waivers.

Wednesday, Oct. 2

Calle Rosen, LHD, Colorado Avalanche

Rosen, a 6-foot-1 left-shot defender, was solid in 49 games for the Blues in 2022-23. He drove decent underlying numbers in a sheltered third-pair role and chipped in with 18 points. He played well enough to deserve another NHL crack as a depth defender, but he became a victim of the numbers game. Last fall, as colleague Jeremy Rutherford explained, the Blues didn't want to risk losing Scott Perunovich or Tyler Tucker on waivers. Perunovich and Tucker were younger, higher potential defenders. Because of his older age and lack of upside, Rosen was waived and spent most of the year in the AHL. Now, on a loaded Colorado blue line, he couldn't crack an NHL roster again.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Spencer Martin (Hurricanes), Trey Fix-Wolansky (Blue Jackets), Calle Rosen (Avalanche), Matthew Phillips (Avalanche), Jack Ahcan (Avalanche), Cal Petersen (Flyers), Jimmy Huntington (Penguins), Marc Johnstone (Penguins), Mac Hollowell (Penguins), Bo Groulx (Rangers), Andrew Poturalski (Sharks), Scott Sabourin (Sharks)

Update: All players cleared waivers.

Tuesday, Oct. 1

Phil Di Giuseppe, LW, Vancouver Canucks

What a difference a year can make. Last fall, Di Giuseppe not only made the Canucks out of training camp but earned a top-six role alongside J.T. Miller and Brock Boeser. The 30-year-old left winger made a strong impression on Rick Tocchet because of his disruptive forecheck and reliable defensive play. Di Giuseppe was relegated to a fourth-line role as the season progressed but stuck in the NHL as a full-time

contributor for the first time in his career. Now, he's been cut after an offseason where the Canucks significantly upgraded their winger depth. Di Giuseppe could be a decent 12th/13th forward — he's trustworthy without the puck and a solid forechecker.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Carson Meyer (Ducks), Josh Dunne (Sabres), Felix Sandstrom (Sabres), Jack Rathbone (Sabres), Brett Murray (Sabres), Mason Jobst (Sabres), Colton Poolman (Sabres), Ilya Solovyov (Flames), Lane Pederson (Oilers), Ben Gleason (Oilers), Phil Kemp (Oilers), Collin Delia (Oilers), Jacob Moverare (Kings), Reese Johnson (Wild), Louis Domingue (Rangers), Anton Blidh (Rangers), Brandon Scanlin (Rangers), Casey Fitzgerald (Rangers), Gustav Olofsson (Kraken), Ales Stezka (Kraken), Ben Meyers (Kraken), Max McCormick (Kraken), Brandon Biro (Kraken), Jiri Patera (Canucks), Nate Smith (Canucks), Christian Wolanin (Canucks)

Update: Goalie Jiri Patera was claimed by Boston; the rest of the players cleared waivers.

With Jeremy Swayman still unsigned, the Bruins have landed extra goaltending insurance by claiming Patera from the Canucks. Patera posted a .903 save percentage in 25 AHL games last season, which seems underwhelming, but the Henderson Silver Knights weren't a good team. He has a .902 save percentage in eight career NHL games with Vegas. Patera struggled during Canucks training camp. He was getting beat during rush drills very often and didn't look comfortable. That may have provided extra impetus for Vancouver to sign Kevin Lankinen. However, Patera was very good during the preseason start he got a week ago against Calgary. Patera doesn't look very big in the crease despite being listed at 6-foot-3 but has intriguing potential because of his powerful legs and movement.—Dayal

Monday, Sept. 30

Nikita Alexandrov, C, St. Louis Blues

Alexandrov has intrigued scouts at points due to his high skill level combined with a solid work ethic and ability to help at both ends of the ice. He makes and finishes plays well, and is quite effective inside the offensive zone. He's average-sized with below-average skating, though, and while he's played 51 games with the Blues, there are questions on how well his game translates to the NHL with his pace.—Pronman

Travis Boyd, C, Minnesota Wild

Boyd is a veteran right-shot center with nearly 300 games of NHL experience. During the Coyotes' lean rebuilding years, Boyd was a decent middle-six stopgap, scoring in the 35-point range in back-to-back years. He was relegated to a fourth-line role last year, contributing eight points in 16 games before an injury ended his season. Boyd struggles in the faceoff circle and his two-way metrics aren't great, but he's demonstrated a long track record of contributing reliable secondary offence in a bottom-six NHL role.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Jacob MacDonald (Avalanche), Cam Dineen (Oilers), Connor Carrick (Oilers), Jeff Malott (Kings), Devin Shore (Wild), Brendan Gaunce (Wild), Jimmy Schuldt (Sharks), Justin Bailey (Sharks), Kevin Connauton (Utah), Travis Barron (Utah)

Update: All players cleared waivers.

Sunday, Sept. 29

Vinnie Hinostroza, RW, Nashville Predators

Hinostroza is a plug-and-play option for depth offense. The speedy, undersized winger has scored five-on-five points at a bona fide middle-six clip over nearly 400 career NHL games. He's a bit of a tweener, though; he isn't dynamic enough to contribute on the power play and his lack of size and strength mean he's not an ideal stylistic fit for many teams' bottom six.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Marc McLaughlin (Bruins), Justin Kirkland (Flames), Martin Frk (Flames), Zach Sanford (Blackhawks), Brett Seney (Blackhawks), Reilly Walsh (Kings), Tyler Madden (Kings), Joe Hicketts (Kings), Glenn Gawdin (Kings), Joseph Cecconi (Wild), Cameron Crotty (Wild), Adam Raska (Wild), Lucas Condotta (Canadiens), Brandon Gignac (Canadiens), Matt Murray (Predators), Kieffer Bellows (Predators), Hunter Skinner (Blues), Hugh McGing (Blues), MacKenzie MacEachern (Blues), Mathias Laferriere (Blues), Derrick Pouliot (Lightning), Tobie Paquette-Bisson (Lightning)

Update: All players cleared waivers.

Saturday, Sept. 28

Grigori Denisenko, LW, Vegas Golden Knights

Drafted No. 15 by Florida in 2018, Denisenko's initial transition to North American pro hockey was bumpy. The skilled but slightly undersized winger produced at a solid but unspectacular clip in the AHL through three seasons between 2020-21 and 2022-23 and struggled during his brief opportunities with the Panthers in the NHL. Vegas claimed him off waivers last fall.

Denisenko, 24, took a significant step in the AHL last year, producing 56 points in 65 games, although he still couldn't stick in the NHL, as he went pointless in six games for the Golden Knights. Denisenko is a crafty, slick offensive creator and the step forward he took last season could be a sign that he still has some untapped upside.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Jonathan Aspirot (Flames), Clark Bishop (Flames), Keaton Middleton (Avalanche), Wyatt Aamodt (Avalanche), Kevin Mandolese (Avalanche), Maxime Lajoie (Kraken), Anthony Angello (Predators), Kevin Gravel (Predators), Jake Lucchini (Predators), Tyce Thompson (Islanders), Egor Sokolov (Utah), Callahan Burke (Golden Knights), Mason Geertsen (Golden Knights), Dysin Mayo (Golden Knights), Gage Quinney (Golden Knights), Robert Hagg (Golden Knights), Mason Morelli (Golden Knights), Ethen Frank (Capitals), Riley Sutter (Capitals), Alex Limoges (Capitals), Chase Priskie (Capitals), Hardy Häman Aktell (Capitals)

Update: All players cleared waivers.

Friday, Sept. 27

Ronnie Attard, RHD, Philadelphia Flyers

Attard has played games in each of the last three NHL seasons but hasn't broken through yet as a full-time player. He's a big right-shot with good offensive skills and can play both ways due to his frame and compete. He isn't an amazing skater, though, and his decision making has given him issues over the years.—Pronman

Other players on waivers: Louie Belpedio (Flyers), Rhett Gardner (Flyers), Hayden Hodgson (Senators), Cole Reinhardt (Senators), Jamieson Rees (Senators), Garrett Pilon (Senators), Nikolas Matinpalo (Senators), Maxence Guenette (Senators), Jeremy Davies (Senators), Luke Henman (Kraken), Nikolas Brouillard (Kraken), Zach Sawchenko (Blue Jackets), Jake Leschyshyn (Rangers), Ben Harpur (Rangers), Alex Belzile (Rangers)

The Athletic / Ray Ferraro to call two NHL games in one day, how ESPN got the viral Vandy QB interview, and more: Media Circus

By Richard Deitsch – October 8, 2024

There are occasional benefits to a working lunch. Such was the case last June in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., when ESPN senior vice president of production and remote events Mark Gross brought up an idea to his company's lead NHL game analyst, Ray Ferraro. As the two dined near the beach before one of the Stanley Cup Final games, Gross made his pitch to Ferraro.

"I said to Ray, 'You know I already know what our opening-night schedule is going to be in October,'" Gross recalled last week. "Ray said, 'What is it?' I said, 'Seattle is going to play a day game Pacific time, and if Florida wins (which they did), they'll raise the banner in the middle game. And we're also going to get Utah's first home game too. ... In order to create a little excitement and buzz for opening night of the NHL, what do you think about calling two games that day if we can figure out the travel and charters and all of that stuff? It's something a little different, right?'"

Ferraro did not hesitate as he waited for his avocado toast and smoked salmon.

"I'd love to do that," Ferraro told Gross.

Gross told him to plan on it and ESPN would figure out the logistics for him. So here's the plan: Ferraro, Mike Monaco and Stormy Buonantony will call the St. Louis Blues against the Seattle Kraken at 4:30 p.m. ET Tuesday at Climate Pledge Arena in Seattle. After the game, Ferraro will whisk off to the airport and head to Salt Lake City for the 10 p.m. ET faceoff between the Utah Hockey Club and the Chicago Blackhawks at the Delta Center. Play-by-play announcer Bob Wischusen, analyst A. J. Mleczko and reporter Leah Hextall will also be on hand for the Utah-Blackhawks game. It is the franchise debut for Utah upon its move from Arizona.

"I'm going to have a car waiting in the loading dock and as soon as the horn goes, I'll scurry my way to the car," Ferraro said. "That car will take me to a plane somewhere and we'll fly to Salt Lake City. Then there'll be a car to take me to the rink. So they better not have overtime in Seattle."

When contacted by The Athletic on Friday, no one in the NHL's communication department could recall a national announcer doing two games in one day during the regular season.

"It's not the gimmick of having Ray go to two places," said Linda Schulz, a VP of production for ESPN and the company's point person for NHL coverage. "That's fun, and we'll enjoy it and embrace it. But when it comes down to it, it's a benefit to us to have him on opening night do two broadcasts with two different matchups."

This is true, but it's certainly a way for ESPN to get a little extra pub (as this column confirms).

"It's definitely a little bit of a takeoff of Kirk Herbstreit doing 'College GameDay' and then the game that night in another city," added Gross.

ESPN is making a significant outlay for Utah's franchise opener, which should produce great optics for viewers. The company is sending its NHL studio team consisting of Steve Levy, Mark Messier and P.K. Subban to do that show live onsite. They'll have a set outside the Delta Center and one inside for when Utah takes the ice.

"We'll do all of our pregame and wraps coverage from that studio set in Utah outside and then we will move inside once we're getting closer to puck drop," Schulz said. "You have to pick your spots in terms

of your coverage and where you're going to really go all in, and we made the decision that this is something not only because we want to be strong partners with the NHL, but because we as hockey fans are super excited about being there."

Asked about his preparation to call two games in one day, Ferraro said that he had a similar experience for the IIHF World Junior Championship.

"I've actually done three games in a day," Ferraro said. "Of course, there's no travel involved when you're doing that, but nonetheless, it's different teams for each game. The prep for me here doesn't change, and it will be somewhat easier because we will know the lineups in advance for the most part. Remember, teams aren't dealing with players with questionable injury status in Game 1."

Ferraro and the other announcers who will be in Utah all expressed excitement on the prospect of calling the first-ever game for the franchise. Wischusen joked that Ferraro would be picking up the tab for the crew's postgame meal given the double per diem for calling two games.

"I played in an expansion franchise in Atlanta," Ferraro said. "Everything is so new for the team and the players and the coaches and the fans. Maybe if they haven't been in there for basketball, they don't even know how to get to their seats. "There's a different electricity to it, and I know that'll be apparent on Tuesday."

The SEC Network and ESPN's Alyssa Lang was literally in the middle of one of the great college football upsets in recent vintage — Vanderbilt's 40-35 stunner over then-No. 1 Alabama on Saturday night. The Commodores hadn't beaten the Tide in 40 years and were 0-60 against AP top-five teams.

At game's end, those watching on the SEC Network saw Lang sprinting on the field in an attempt to get to Vanderbilt quarterback Diego Pavia.

Lang said she and the game producer, Bill Paladino, started discussing an end-of-game strategy when Vanderbilt got the ball back with 2:44 left. Lang was working the game with play-by-play announcer Tom Hart and analyst Cole Cubelic.

"I knew there would absolutely be a field storm if Vandy pulled it off," Lang said. "When Vandy was officially one first down away from running the clock out, I let Bill know what my plan was. I was going to tail Diego and hope that Vanderbilt's SIDs (sports information directors) could bring (Vanderbilt coach) Clark Lea over to me during his interview.

"I've gotten to know Diego fairly well over the last few weeks. I knew he would be emotional and physically running all over the place celebrating. My thought was if I get (Lea) first, there's a very high chance I lose Diego to the crowd. I let them know and asked them for help on this with about a minute left, then stayed right on the line of scrimmage to beeline to Diego as soon as it went final."

Lang described the scene as madness and that viewers only saw about 10 percent of the journey to try to get to Pavia. She said Vanderbilt's SIDs were attempting to corral Pavia while she was navigating the crowd like "a human pin ball." When she finally did get Pavia, he delivered a memorable postgame interview that included one F-bomb, which Lang said she anticipated.

"The guy is just next-level fired up at all times," Lang said. "I actually sent a text to my fiancé at the start of the fourth quarter and said, 'If I interview Pavia on TV postgame, he's definitely going to cuss.' At that point my biggest focus was listening to him and trying not to let him take my mic, which seemed like what he was trying to do!"

Last year, Lang was part of a field-storming when Missouri beat Kansas State on a last-second, SEC-record 61-yard field goal by Harrison Mevis.

“In that game, I got to (Missouri coach) Eli Drinkwitz fairly quickly, but then it was a few minutes and a lot of running to find Harrison Mevis. He was celebrating with students and I got a bit swallowed up in a storm of much taller people.”

The 2024 MLB Wild Card round was very good to ESPN. The network said the nine games they telecast, including games on ABC, ESPN and ESPN2, averaged 2.823 million viewers, up 25 percent from last year.

The New York Mets’ stunning come-from-behind win over the Milwaukee Brewers last Thursday in the final game of that series averaged 4.017 million viewers — ESPN’s most-watched MLB game since the 2021 American League Wild Card Game. Per Austin Karp of Sports Business Journal: The Mets have played in the five most-watched Wild Card games under the new format.

Speaking of the Wild Card round: I happened to watch the final two innings of that Game 3 between the Mets and Brewers and was impressed with how both lead announcer Jon Sciambi and analyst Doug Glanville set up everything prior to Pete Alonso’s game-winning homer. They were both on the prospect of what might happen early.

As far as the actual call, Mets announcer Howie Rose delivered an all-timer, as my colleague Will Sammon points out here.

ESPN / NHL season preview: Power Rankings, predictions, X factors

By Ryan S. Clark and Kristen Shilton – October 8, 2024

Reactions

Opening night of the 2024-25 NHL season is Tuesday, with a tripleheader of games on ESPN and ESPN+: St. Louis Blues at Seattle Kraken (4:30 p.m. ET), Boston Bruins at Florida Panthers (7 p.m. ET), Chicago Blackhawks at Utah Hockey Club (10 p.m. ET).

We're here to help get you up to speed with intel on all 32 teams, including the key players who were added or subtracted, best- and worst-case scenarios, X factors and fantasy tips, plus bold predictions.

Our season preview also features the first edition of our Power Rankings, which provide the order in which these teams are presented. The weekly rankings are formulated through votes from ESPN hockey broadcasters, analysts and reporters.

1. Edmonton Oilers

Last season: 49-27-6, 104 points. Lost in the Stanley Cup Final.

Stanley Cup odds: +700

Key players added: F Viktor Arvidsson, D Josh Brown, F Vasily Podkolzin, F Jeff Skinner

Key players lost: D Philip Broberg, F Sam Carrick, G Jack Campbell, D Vincent Desharnais, F Warren Foegele, F Dylan Holloway

Most fascinating player: Evan Bouchard. With Leon Draisaitl signing an eight-year contract, it leaves Bouchard the only homegrown Oiler that's central to the team's future who does not have a long-term deal. He'll be a restricted free agent next summer, as he has one more year left on a contract for a team that's trying to return to the Stanley Cup Final. Bouchard was a massive part of the success last season. He finished with 82 points in the regular season while scoring 32 points in the playoffs. What makes Bouchard even more vital is that he's doing it at a time in which teams know the premiums that come with young puck-moving defensemen. Replicating, if not, surpassing what he did in 2023-24 could lead to Bouchard getting rewarded in his next deal, with the reality the Oilers might need to dump cap space to make a long-contract viable.

Best case: Winning the Stanley Cup. Difficult as it may have been for the Oilers to process a Game 7 loss during the offseason, it does reinforce that they are in a championship window and aren't that far off. If what they added in free agency can provide consistent secondary offense while harnessing what allowed them to reach the Cup Final, it's possible the Oilers win the title that's eluded them for more than 30 years.

Worst case: A first-round exit. Going to the Cup Final only to lose in the first round would be a letdown for any franchise. But that could happen to the Oilers based on recent history. Two years ago, the Avs won the Cup only to be bounced in the first round. Last year, the then-defending champion Golden Knights were also knocked out in the first round. Is it possible that a similar fate awaits the Oilers given there's a bit of a precedent involving Western Conference champions the past few years? Or is this the year they get that 16th playoff win instead?

X factor: Arvidsson and Skinner. Last season, Draisaitl, McDavid and Zach Hyman combined to score 44% of the Oilers' goals. Add in the fact they moved on from 20-goal scorer Warren Foegele in the offseason, and it creates the need for more secondary scoring options. That's what made the decision to sign

Arvidsson and Skinner alluring. Arvidsson is a five-time 20-goal scorer while Skinner is a 10-time 20-goal scorer, and gives them top-six options.

Fantasy outlook: If Skinner secures a spot on Draisaitl's wing, as expected, the veteran winger should enjoy a campaign similar to when he put up 35 goals and 47 assists with the Sabres only two years ago. Stuart Skinner likely merits more fantasy love after a successful postseason. Once the top goalies are taken, Edmonton's No. 1 should be snatched up quickly.

Bold prediction: Evander Kane does the "LTIR special," and returns for the playoffs

2. Florida Panthers

Last season: 52-24-6, 110 points. Won the Stanley Cup.

Stanley Cup odds: +1000

Key players added: F Jesper Boqvist, F Tomas Nosek

Key players lost: F Ryan Lomberg, D Brandon Montour, D Oliver Ekman-Larsson, G Anthony Stolarz

Most fascinating player: Gustav Forsling. Florida knew it had something special in Forsling despite his quiet ascent. The past two seasons have been Forsling at his best as he anchored the Panthers' blue line through consecutive Stanley Cup Final appearances (and recent victory). Now, will Forsling find a way to improve even further on what was a career season in 2023-24? Florida made several changes to its back end, with Brandon Montour and Oliver Ekman-Larsson in particular gone from the depth chart. It'll be paramount that Forsling -- alongside partner Aaron Ekblad -- continue carrying a heavy load.

Best case: Florida doesn't miss a beat amid its post-championship roster turnover and flies out of the gate into another successful regular season -- and long playoff run. The Panthers have a rock-solid base of high-speed, highly skilled players who pick back up where they left off with chemistry to spare. The depth additions Florida made in the offseason -- especially Nate Schmidt and Boqvist -- carve out solid roles in the system to provide the Panthers' stars with enough support that no one is overworked or under pressure nightly to steal a win.

Worst case: Cup fatigue sets in early for Florida and puts them behind the Eastern Conference pack. Two years of short summers makes the Panthers slower and less assured as losses begin piling up. Starter Sergei Bobrovsky begins showing his age at 36, and Chris Driedger -- who played just two NHL games last season and is replacing Bobrovsky's former partner Anthony Stolarz -- can't stop the bleeding in net. Florida fails to find a rhythm until midway through the season. Even a late push for the postseason fails and the Panthers flame out of the playoff mix by April.

X factor: Florida's depth. The Panthers parted ways with a number of players following their Cup win, including Montour, Ekman-Larsson, Stolarz, Vladimir Tarasenko, Nick Cousins and Steven Lorentz. While GM Bill Zito didn't leave the cupboard completely bare -- Boqvist and Nosek have since come on board -- that's still a good deal of change to contend with as they look to repeat as league champions. How will the new faces fit in? Are any of Florida's prospects -- particularly Mackie Samoskevich -- ready to take on a full-time role? And will Driedger provide the support Bobrovsky needs? Florida's depth has been a difference-maker before, and whether it can be again will be a decisive factor in how their season plays out.

Fantasy outlook: With seven players finishing among the top 200 in fantasy points last season, the Stanley Cup champs remain a fantasy force. It's reasonable to expect more of the same from Matthew Tkachuk, Aleksander Barkov and Sam Reinhart as elite players. There's upside from Forsling and Ekblad on defense, while Adam Boqvist could be a sleeper if he secures power-play time.

Bold prediction: Regression, thy name is Sam Reinhart.

3. Dallas Stars

Last season: 52-21-9, 113 points. Lost in the conference finals.

Stanley Cup odds: +1000

Key players added: F Colin Blackwell, D Matt Dumba, G Casey DeSmith, D Ilya Lyubushkin, D Brendan Smith

Key players lost: F Radek Faksa, D Jani Hakanpaa, F Joe Pavelski, F Craig Smith, F Sam Steel, D Ryan Suter, D Chris Tanev, G Scott Wedgewood

Most fascinating player: Wyatt Johnston. One of the biggest reasons why the Stars are in a championship window is their ability to draft and develop homegrown talent. Through just two seasons, Johnston has already emerged as a success story. He went from finishing with 41 points as a rookie to breaking out for 32 goals and 65 points during the 2023-24 campaign. What Johnston does in his third campaign will play a significant role in the Stars' championship aspirations. More importantly, it will also play a large role in the team's long-term plans with Johnson entering the final year of his entry-level contract. Figuring out Johnston's next deal is just one of a few financial considerations facing the Stars as captain Jamie Benn enters the last year of his deal while star goaltender Jake Oettinger will be a restricted free agent at season's end.

Best case: Winning the Stanley Cup. It really is that straightforward for the Stars -- or any team that's in a championship window. Advancing to the conference finals in consecutive seasons only adds to that belief that the Stars are among the NHL's elite teams, and one that can pose a serious challenge to win the Cup. The fact they're doing this in a western landscape that features two of the three most recent Cup winners, the Avs and Golden Knights, along with the team that was a win short of giving the West three straight titles, the Oilers, only enhances the Stars' path to get there.

Worst case: Getting eliminated before the conference finals. There would be the assumptive disappointment that comes with falling short despite making the conference finals three times in the past five seasons. Another detail that would make a pre-conference finals exit challenging is what it could mean for the Stars' roster. Key figures such as Matt Duchene, Esa Lindell and Benn are all slated to become UFAs while homegrown talents such as Mavrik Bourque, Johnston and Oettinger are pending RFAs in need of new deals.

X factor: Their offseason defensive additions. Stars coach Peter DeBoer knows what he has with Thomas Harley, Miro Heiskanen and Lindell on the back end. The same holds for Oettinger in net. As for the rest of the Stars' defensive setup? That's where it gets interesting. They used the offseason to add Dumba, Lyubushkin and Smith to their blue line while getting a new backup goaltender in DeSmith. There's also the possibility that at some point in the season they could call up 20-year-old prospect Lian Bichsel, their first-round pick from 2020. It's a group that will seek to retain the continuity that saw the Stars have one of the strongest defensive identities in the NHL last season.

Fantasy outlook: High-ceiling rookie Logan Stankoven deserves inclusion in deeper fantasy leagues, while young defender Harley merits grabbing once Heiskanen is off the draft board. After a mediocre first few months, Oettinger wrapped up the regular season 10-1-0, with a .941 SV% and a 1.54 GAA.

Bold prediction: Dallas wins the Western Conference.

4. New York Rangers

Last season: 55-23-4, 114 points. Lost in the conference finals.

Stanley Cup odds: +1400

Key players added: F Sam Carrick, F Reilly Smith

Key players lost: F Barclay Goodrow, F Alex Wennberg

Most fascinating player: Jacob Trouba. The Rangers' captain has been under a microscope after playing poorly down the stretch last season -- particularly in the playoffs -- and weathering a summer filled with trade rumors. The question now is whether a healthy Trouba can be the role player New York needs him to be. At his best, Trouba can be a second-pairing asset who blocks shots and is reliable in his own end while also pitching in on the penalty kill. If that's what he can deliver, then the Rangers should be pleased. But what if Trouba continues to decline? New York didn't make any notable additions in the offseason; mostly, what you see is what you get. The Rangers have to hope what they see (and get) from Trouba matches with their expectations for improvement.

Best case: New York finally puts all the pieces together and wins the Cup. The Rangers have run it back with essentially the same roster that earned them a Presidents' Trophy last season, and this time around they're better than before -- Alexis Lafreniere is a full-blown star, Kaapo Kakko overdelivers, New York's blue line is cohesive and Igor Shesterkin is otherworldly. The Rangers' best players show up for them consistently and with a healthy roster intact most of the season, New York is primed for another long spring of playoff success.

Worst case: An early playoff exit. The Rangers didn't make any needle-moving additions in the offseason -- and their depth took a hit with the loss of Wennberg and Goodrow. New York is betting on its group to take strides from last season -- but what if that doesn't happen? While the likes of Lafreniere, Kakko and Filip Chytil should be entering their primes, it remains to be seen if they can provide enough support so that veterans like Artemi Panarin -- already dealing with an injury from the preseason -- and Chris Kreider aren't burnt out by April. It would be a nightmare for New York if it wound up too top-heavy and too dependent on star power that can easily fizzle out under the wrong circumstances.

X factor: How will New York handle the pressure? Some call it a privilege to be among a handful of teams most pundits can agree should be excellent in the coming season. The Rangers stuck with their (mainly) intact roster because of what it accomplished in 2023-24. With Peter Laviolette settling into a second year behind the bench and their aforementioned young skaters expected to progress, there are sky-high hopes that this will be the campaign where New York goes all the way to another Stanley Cup Final. We know the Rangers have talent. They have experience. Will they be able to block out the noise, though, and still play with that little chip on their shoulder that's helped produce positive results in the past?

Fantasy outlook: The Rangers' identity was their dominant power play last season, making Panarin, Mika Zibanejad, Vincent Trocheck, Kreider and Adam Fox locked-in fantasy superstars. Shesterkin is a top-tier goaltender capable of being a top-10 fantasy play. Watch for reclamation winger Reilly Smith if he succeeds in the top six.

Bold prediction: Shesterkin gets a new deal.

5. Colorado Avalanche

Last season: 50-25-7, 107 points. Lost in the second round.

Stanley Cup odds: +1100

Key players added: D Calvin de Haan, F Parker Kelly, D Jacob MacDonald, D Oliver Kylington

Key players lost: F Andrew Cogliano, F Brandon Duhaime, D Jack Johnson, D Caleb Jones, F Zach Parise, F Yakov Trenin, D Sean Walker

Most fascinating player: Gabriel Landeskog. Back in May, the 31-year-old Avalanche captain was asked when he would return to the lineup. He said sometime between mid-September and April with a laugh, while also acknowledging at the time he was uncertain of his return. The last time Landeskog played was June 26, 2022 when the Avs won the Stanley Cup. Since then, he's undergone a few knee surgeries that have kept him out of the lineup with the intent he could eventually return. When he does, it would give the Avs another potential scoring option as Landeskog has authored nine seasons of more than 20 goals. Avs coach Jared Bednar told reporters during the preseason that while the Avs are "encouraged by the progress he's made" that they would not place a timeline on when he could return.

Best case: Landeskog plays more than 50 games and they win the Stanley Cup. Perhaps two of the largest questions facing the Avs are centered around Landeskog's return and if they can win another title within their current championship window. And even with the questions around Landeskog's return, there are even more questions about what he would look like after such a lengthy layoff -- and how many games he could play. Receiving a version of Landeskog who could play more than 40 games while providing top-six certainty would fill a few needs for the Avalanche.

Worst case: Another playoff exit in the first two rounds. While having Landeskog return to the lineup is a focus, so is winning another Stanley Cup. Losing to the Stars in the second round exposed how the inability to gain consistent secondary and tertiary scoring has remained an issue. It was like that in 2023 when the Avs were knocked out in the first round, a year after they won the Stanley Cup. Their first-round performance in 2024 made it look as if they solved those problems, only to get outscored 16-6 in their four losses to the Stars.

X factor: The supporting cast. Every team in a championship window stresses the need for a strong secondary and tertiary unit. And because of cap space, they're often forced to undergo an annual reconfiguration. stalwarts such as Andrew Cogliano and Jack Johnson are gone, while in-season additions such as Brandon Duhaime, Zach Parise and Sean Walker either left in free agency or retired. Restructuring their supporting cast started back in February when backup goaltender Justus Annunen became a full-time NHL player. During the playoffs, the club gave oft-discussed prospect winger Nikolai Kovalenko his debut. It kept going when they used the offseason to add four defensemen who are expected to compete for the bottom pairing and seventh defensemen roles. The decision to re-sign bottom-six winger Joel Kiviranta along with Logan O'Connor's return from injury are the sort of options the Avs believe can help them win another Cup.

Fantasy outlook: If not the NHL's No. 1 defender, Cale Makar is right there, while goalie Alexandar Georgiev benefits his managers by playing often, and well enough, for one of the better teams in the West. Unless Annunen steals more starts than anticipated, Georgiev endures as a top-10 fantasy goaltender.

Bold prediction: Landeskog wins the Masterton Trophy.

6. Toronto Maple Leafs

Last season: 46-26-10, 102 points. Lost in the first round.

Stanley Cup odds: +1200

Key players added: D Chris Tanev, D Oliver Ekman-Larsson, G Anthony Stolarz

Key players lost: F Tyler Bertuzzi, D TJ Brodie, G Ilya Samsonov

Most fascinating player: Mitch Marner. The Leafs' top-line winger doesn't want to discuss it -- the "it" being his contract negotiations. This is the final season on Marner's deal, and conversations around an extension -- or lack of one -- have been rampant for months. Marner has chosen to stay mum on the topic publicly, so it's his on-ice performance that'll do the talking. The Toronto native isn't likely to take any hometown discount either, not when Auston Matthews (earning \$13.25 million per season) and William Nylander (\$11.5 million per year) didn't take that route. So will the pressure of earning his next salary add to -- or detract from -- Marner's game this season? Toronto relies on his contributions as a capable 30-goal scorer, tenacious penalty killer and top power-play option.

Best case: Toronto's biggest offseason pivots pay off by giving the Leafs a hard-nosed identity to complement their enviable talent. The Leafs immediately respond to new head coach Craig Berube's no-nonsense approach, and their beefed-up blue line (now with Chris Tanev and freshly minted Cup winner Oliver Ekman-Larsson) provides a stability the team hasn't had there for years. Nylander starts the season at center and despite failing to thrive there in the past becomes a perfect second-line option between a surging Matthews and John Tavares anchoring the Leafs' top-ranked units. Joseph Woll proves he's ready to be a No. 1 starter and Anthony Stolarz is the ideal veteran backup to keep Woll healthy for once. Toronto cruises their way into the playoffs and a long run from there.

Worst case: The Leafs' nightmare would be having made changes at significant spots in the offseason and seeing those backfire. Berube is the exact opposite to former head coach Sheldon Keefe and the transition from one to the other is rocky. Marner and Nylander struggle early on and Toronto's defense takes so long to work out the kinks that Woll -- under siege every night -- can't provide enough solutions. The Leafs don't find any consistency despite Berube repeatedly shuffling the deck and frustration inevitable sets in that puts Toronto on its heels late in the season, with the postseason in jeopardy.

X factor: Goaltending. GM Brad Treliving focused on making Toronto's blue line better. Fair enough. And the Leafs are betting that Woll -- who's coming off a strong regular season and playoffs -- is ready to top their goaltending depth chart. What if that's not the case, though? Woll absolutely has the talent to do it. He also has a fraught history with injuries, which could come back to haunt Toronto. Stolarz is an excellent No. 2. After that, the Leafs have Matt Murray -- who didn't play at all in the NHL last season due to injury. It all feels precarious, like a house of cards that's one Woll injury away from crashing down.

Fantasy outlook: The Leafs are one of the few teams that could have five skaters reach 200 fantasy points. Matthews, Nylander, Marner, Tavares and Morgan Rielly are the only players assured of early draft consideration. However, there's value beyond them: Matthew Knies aims for top-line minutes, Tanev and Jake McCabe boost their totals with physical play.

Bold prediction: Marner re-signs with Toronto.

7. Boston Bruins

Last season: 47-20-15, 109 points. Lost in the second round.

Stanley Cup odds: +2000

Key players added: F Max Jones, F Elias Lindholm, D Nikita Zadorov, G Joonas Korpi

Key players lost: F Jake DeBrusk, F Jesper Boqvist, F Danton Heinen, D Matt Grzelcyk, G Linus Ullmark

Most fascinating player: Lindholm. The Bruins chased after Lindholm long before landing him as a free agent last summer, to the tune of a seven-year, \$54.25 million contract. The investment signaled Lindholm as Boston's newest top-line center candidate, an heir apparent if you will to franchise icon Patrice Bergeron. But Lindholm has already navigated rocky waters in Boston, via an undisclosed injury

in training that held him out of most preseason action and severely limited his opportunities to build chemistry in a new system. Will that ultimately affect his performance early this season? He was back at Bruins' practice by late September, centering Pavel Zacha and David Pastrnak, but even coach Jim Montgomery could admit Lindholm wasn't "up to speed" as everyone would have liked. Lindholm is one of the league's brightest centers though and if anyone can catch on quickly, it'll be him, right?

Best case: Boston reloads (again) to be a top-tier contender in the Atlantic. The Bruins have been written off numerous times in the past few years -- for being too old, too slow, too not quite good enough to keep up with the division's younger squads. Well, Boston has proved its critics wrong in the past and, in a perfect world, does the same again now. Prized signings Lindholm and Zadorov fit seamlessly into the lineup, replacing pieces the Bruins lost and there would be no signs of Boston losing steam down the stretch. Jeremy Swayman's contract drama is settled before the season starts and he proves to be a bona fide No. 1. Boston punches their way back to another playoff berth and continue to show why they've avoided any rebuild despite significant roster turnover.

Worst case: The Bruins are the odd man out the playoffs as other Atlantic teams move ahead. Boston has benefitted from the likes of Ottawa, Buffalo and Detroit all struggling to gain traction in the division. Even so, every team in the Atlantic earned at least 75 points last season -- something no other division could claim. Boston's veteran group would finally be on the outside looking in without as much firepower and tenacity as the up and comers around them. Swayman, although signed to a new long-term extension, struggles as a full-time starter and Boston falters without the strong goaltending it's been accustomed to.

X factor: Goaltending. Boston had one of the league's enviable tandems last season with Ullmark and Swayman. The pairing helped the Bruins exceed expectations in 2023-24. And it was Swayman's hot hand in the playoffs that took Boston into the second round. Now Ullmark is in Ottawa, and Swayman's would-be partner Joonas Korpisalo (who came over from the Senators) is the Bruins' projected opening night starter as Swayman gets back up to speed following a prolonged contract negotiation. There's no question Swayman will be Boston's go-to guy in net eventually. Korpisalo has to pull his weight as the No. 1 right now, and that's not exactly how Boston drew up its goaltending. Korpisalo has been fine in backup roles before, but the Bruins will need something more out of him to ensure they don't fall behind the competition.

Fantasy outlook: David Pastrnak is a first-round fantasy superstar, while Charlie McAvoy ranks in the top 20 for defenders. If Lindholm builds chemistry with Pastrnak, the rewards could be substantial. Charlie Coyle and Zacha provide low upside but reliable fantasy output.

Bold prediction: This is Jim Montgomery's final season in Boston.

8. Carolina Hurricanes

Last season: 52-23-7, 111 points. Lost in the second round.

Stanley Cup odds: +1400

Key players added: F Jack Roslovic, D Shayne Gostisbehere, D Sean Walker

Key players lost: F Jake Guentzel, F Stefan Noesen, F Teuvo Teravainen, D Brett Pesce, D Brady Skjei

Most fascinating player: Roslovic. Carolina has a need for (more) speed and is counting on Roslovic to provide some this season. The winger has posted up on the Hurricanes' top line with Sebastian Aho and Seth Jarvis, linemates who can amplify what Roslovic brings on his own. Carolina witnessed those strong qualities during its second-round playoff series against the Rangers last season -- Roslovic was new to the Blueshirts after being traded from Columbus at the deadline, but his speed stood out to now-coach

Rod Brind'Amour. And it still does. Those expectations are a good thing for Roslovic to embrace. This is something of a redemption year for the 27-year-old after last season's recording of his lowest goal total (9) since 2018-19 and fewest points (31) since 2019-20. The talent around Roslovic creates a tremendous opportunity for him to thrive and give Carolina a boost offensively.

Best case: Carolina is right back in the mix to get to the Stanley Cup Final again. The Hurricanes went through significant changes on the back end but get surprisingly solid output from an aging Brent Burns and returning Gostisbehere to keep the Hurricanes' defense on track. Both Carolina goaltenders, Frederik Andersen and Pyotr Kochetkov, remain healthy and emerge as one of the league's most productive tandems. An offense led by elite performances from a healthy Andrei Svechnikov and Aho puts the Hurricanes ahead of the pack immediately and they lead a race to the playoffs from there.

Worst case: Defense has long been a backbone of Carolina's success. Losing Skjei and Pesce was always going to sting, and their absence is quickly apparent for the leaky Hurricanes. Injuries wind up coming back to bite Carolina (again) and even its usually potent offensive attack can't make up for that. The Hurricanes aren't a good fit for Roslovic, and they feel the losses of Guentzel, Teravainen and Noesen in significant ways. Brind'Amour has to make sweeping changes early that Carolina struggles through while trying to stay in the wild-card mix in the Eastern Conference.

X factor: Goalie health. It's the elephant in the room for Carolina: Will Andersen and Kochetkov be available often enough to be a real one-two punch in net? Andersen missed the majority of last season with blood-clotting issues, and the Hurricanes struggled to replace him. Veteran Antti Raanta was passable at best (he has since departed the organization) and Kochetkov tried to help -- until he too was sidelined in January by a concussion. So Carolina turned to a waiver wire pickup (Spencer Martin) and Raanta. Not ideal. Andersen and Kochetkov are quality netminders who give the Hurricanes a superb chance to win each night. Protecting their health will be a critical part of Carolina's success.

Fantasy outlook: Does Andersen have another big season, or does Kochetkov steal enough minutes to be the fantasy choice? More likely, do they limit each other's potential? Newly signed defenseman Gostisbehere offers sleeper value on the power play if Burns continues his twilight career decline.

Bold prediction: Canes miss the playoffs.

9. Nashville Predators

Last season: 47-30-5, 99 points. Lost in the first round.

Stanley Cup odds: +1600

Key players added: F Jonathan Marchessault, D Luke Schenn, D Brady Skjei, F Steven Stamkos, G Scott Wedgewood

Key players lost: F Jaret Anderson-Dolan, G Yaroslav Askarov, D Tyson Barrie, F Anthony Beauvillier, F Jason Zucker

Most fascinating player: Tommy Novak. Why Novak and not Marchessault or Stamkos? Easy. Because it appears that Novak will be the one centering the line with a former Conn Smythe Trophy winner in Marchessault on his right and a future Hall of Famer in Stamkos on his left. Since the Predators decided to retool their roster, they've seen Novak emerge from a promising prospect to someone who has firmly established himself as a key part of their future. Novak has shown he can be a top-six center who now has a chance to have the best year of his young career if he ends up anchoring this star-studded line.

Best case: Making a long playoff run. Andrew Brunette's first season showed the Preds have a roster capable of getting to the postseason. Following that up by having what might have been the NHL's most

aggressive offseason campaign furthers the belief that the Preds can pose a serious challenge once the playoffs arrive. But there's also a reality that comes with the Preds in that advancing beyond the first round has been an issue. Failing to get past the opening round is why previous GM David Poile thought a retool was necessary, a belief that was carried by his successor, Barry Trotz. While the Predators likely have higher aspirations, they're also a franchise that has not made it beyond the opening round since the 2017-18 season.

Worst case: Another first-round knockout. The Predators did more than just sign Marchessault and Stamkos to bolster their top six. They added Schenn and Skjei to strengthen a team that already took its defensive identity rather seriously as the season progressed. All those moves are what make the Predators an attractive preseason pick. But they're trying to make strides in a conference with established powers such as the Avalanche, Golden Knights, Oilers and Stars. Not that another first-round exit torpedoed the Preds' long-term plans, but it does make things interesting given they have 10 players older than 30.

X factor: What happens in Brunette's second season? That alone could be the most alluring question facing the Preds. Here's why: Brunette is known for having an instant impact. He had one with the Panthers when he made them the NHL's most prolific offense in his lone season as an interim coach. As a Devils assistant, he made them one of the league's most dangerous groups for his one season. Brunette's first season with the Predators saw them finish in the top 10 in scoring and 13th in goals allowed. So what happens this season with Brunette getting a second season for a franchise that has gone all-in?

Fantasy outlook: Does Stamkos score another 40 in his new Nashville digs? How does Vegas export Marchessault fare after earning 42 in 2023-24? Perhaps a dip in those impressive totals from both is to be anticipated. Center Novak can't be disregarded as a promising fantasy performer, should he end up cemented between the two on what amounts to a dynamic second scoring line.

Bold prediction: Roman Josi wins the Norris Trophy.

10. Vancouver Canucks

Last season: 50-23-9, 109 points. Lost in the second round.

Stanley Cup odds: +2000

Key players added: F Jake DeBrusk, D Vincent Desharnais, D Derek Forbert, F Danton Heinen, F Daniel Sprong

Key players lost: D Ian Cole, G Casey DeSmith, F Elias Lindholm, F Vasily Podkolzin, D Nikita Zadorov

Most fascinating player: Brock Boeser. Even with all the times he reached the 20-goal mark, there was a thought that Boeser could score more if he ever stayed healthy. That's exactly what happened last season when he finished with a career-high 40 goals and 73 points in a career-high 81 games. His performances helped the Canucks win the Pacific, advance to the second round of the playoffs and prove they could have everything needed to be among the conference's Stanley Cup challengers. PLUS: He's in the final year of his contract.

Best case: Reaching the Western Conference finals. A strong start to the regular season led to them finishing with more than 100 points and winning their division. But they fell one win short of advancing to the conference finals, losing to the eventual Western Conference champion Oilers. Now the Canucks will attempt to use this season to firmly establish themselves as one of the conference's legitimate Stanley Cup challengers.

Worst case: Failing to capitalize on their newfound progress. Teams such as the Avs, Golden Knights, Oilers and Stars have used the past few seasons to cement their statuses as Western teams in a championship window. As for the Canucks? They're trying to make the jump from a team that got into the playoffs to one that is a perennial participant and serious title challenger. Getting back to the playoffs would only enhance their reputation, while missing the postseason could create questions about where the Canucks fall in the conference's landscape.

X factor: Their offseason additions. Possessing a strong defensive identity is how the Canucks were the Pacific Division's No. 1 seed in the playoffs and won in the first round. A lack of consistent secondary scoring, however, played a part in why they were eliminated in the second. Managing their cap space while finding a way to address their needs was the priority in free agency. The result was signing three forwards who can help with those secondary scoring challenges while the defensemen they added should rebuild their third defensive pairing.

Fantasy outlook: With Thatcher Demko working through a complicated knee injury to start 2024-25, Arturs Silovs is now the guy between the pipes for one of the more competitive teams in the West. A fantasy wild card, the largely untested 23-year-old could either shine or fall flat straight away. If Silovs struggles, new backup Kevin Lankinen could see a lot more early action.

Bold prediction: Elias Pettersson bounces back big.

11. New Jersey Devils

Last season: 38-39-5, 81 points. Missed the playoffs.

Stanley Cup odds: +1000

Key players added: D Brett Pesce, G Jacob Markstrom, F Stefan Noesen, D Brenden Dillon, F Tomas Tatar

Key players lost: F Tomas Nosek, F Alexander Holtz

Most fascinating player: Markstrom. New Jersey has been searching for a stable, No. 1 netminder. Can the 34-year-old Markstrom be that player? Devils GM Tom Fitzgerald believes he can, and swapped a 2025 first-round pick and defenseman Kevin Bahl to Calgary over the summer for Markstrom's services. Now all the veteran netminder has to do is produce. Markstrom wanted out with the Flames and has a terrific chance to be the backbone for a high-flying Devils team that too often has seen its admirable efforts upfront negated by leaky goaltending. Markstrom is two years removed from being a Vezina Trophy finalist and produced a decent .905 SV% for a comparatively bad Calgary team last season. The question now is what Markstrom can do all season long with the kind of support the Devils should provide.

Best case: The Devils make the playoffs -- and make a run. New Jersey hardly resembles a team that missed the playoffs last season, and is rapidly on pace to be an Eastern Conference contender. New coach Sheldon Keefe seamlessly implements a structure that highlights the Devils' skill and speed with a strong defensive focus. The star skaters perform as expected and New Jersey's depth players -- especially Noesen and Tatar -- make immediate impacts to give the team a top-to-bottom attack. For once, the Devils stay mostly healthy on the back end, and good goaltending is the missing link to push New Jersey back into a prominent postseason position.

Worst case: Change, it turns out, doesn't do any good for the Devils. After a solid start, Keefe's approach grates on New Jersey's major players and that early friction sets a negative tone. The top six looks a mess and Keefe goes into panic mode trying to find the right combinations before it's too late. Newly added Pesce isn't a difference-making presence on the back end, and the Devils' seriously feel that loss

of Luke Hughes -- out seven weeks with a shoulder injury -- from the get-go. New Jersey winds up muddling along for the first couple of months and ends up in a hole too large to climb out of by spring.

X factor: How will the defense evolve? The injury to Hughes is a blow, but also creates an opportunity for someone else to step up. New Jersey's lack of defensive depth was an issue last season and Fitzgerald addressed it by adding Pesce, Dillon and -- perhaps less notably at the time -- Johnathan Kovacevic from Montreal. The latter is a bruising right-shot defender clocking in at 6-foot-5 and 220 pounds. That's a good start. What sort of role might Kovacevic be able to create in Hughes' absence? Likewise, what would a healthy Dougie Hamilton mean for the blue line? Hamilton appeared in just 20 games last season and that had a significant impact on New Jersey's defensive prospects. Now more than ever, the Devils need Hamilton available and performing like a top-pairing skater.

Fantasy outlook: Jack Hughes, Jesper Bratt, Nico Hischier and Timo Meier will drive the offense, with Hamilton healthy on the blue line. Markstrom provides the reliable goaltending needed for more wins. We'll need to see if Hughes can carve out a fantasy role alongside Hamilton once he's fully healed.

Bold prediction: New Jersey wins the Eastern Conference.

12. Vegas Golden Knights

Last season: 45-29-8, 98 points. Lost in the first round.

Stanley Cup odds: +1600

Key players added: F Alexander Holtz, F Victor Olofsson, G Ilya Samsonov

Key players lost: F Michael Amadio, F William Carrier, F Paul Cotter, F Anthony Mantha, F Jonathan Marchessault, D Alec Martinez, G Logan Thompson

Most fascinating player: Samsonov. Which version of Samsonov will the Golden Knights see as part of their tandem with Adin Hill? The one who had a .919 save percentage in his first season with the Maple Leafs? Or the one who has posted a sub-.900 save percentage in two of his past three seasons? And regardless of what version the Golden Knights get, how will it fit within the structure of a team seeking a second championship in three seasons?

Best case: Winning a Stanley Cup. Make no mistake about the Golden Knights and how they operate as a franchise. Unless something changes, they're still a franchise with the primary objective of trying to win as many Stanley Cups as possible by any means necessary. They have 13 players remaining from the team that in 2023 won the first championship in franchise history. And with that comes the expectation that the Golden Knights could still once again win it all.

Worst case: Another first-round exit. Everything has an expiration date, and that includes teams in a championship window. That's what makes the Golden Knights' circumstances such a complex dynamic. While they have already won a championship, there's no guarantee that a franchise built on a win-at-all-costs approach will win another. It's a lesson the Golden Knights learned last postseason when they saw their 2-0 series lead against the Stars eventually turn into an opening-round departure. And considering the amount of talent they lost in the offseason due to financial reasons, that only adds to the Golden Knights' win-now mentality.

X factor: The front office. Every season, it's the same thing. The Golden Knights look like they can't make any more major moves because they lack the cap space -- only to come up with a trade that not only clears the cap but leads to them to a big-name player who adds another dimension to an already strong roster. Could that be the case again this season?

Fantasy outlook: After a brief stint in which he collected four points in six contests, and only one playoff goal, Tomas Hertl is ready to settle in full time as a scoring threat at 5-on-5 and on the top power play. While Noah Hanifin is expected to see valuable minutes with the extra skater, veteran Alex Pietrangolo shines in fantasy competition that rewards blocked shots in addition to scoring categories.

Bold prediction: They win at least one playoff round.

13. Tampa Bay Lightning

Last season: 45-29-8, 98 points. Lost in the first round.

Stanley Cup odds: +2500

Key players added: F Cam Atkinson, F Zemgus Girgensons, F Jake Guentzel, D Ryan McDonagh

Key players lost: F Anthony Duclair, F Tanner Jeannot, F Steven Stamkos, D Mikhail Sergachev

Most fascinating player: Guentzel. The Lightning effectively moved on from former captain Stamkos in part so they could sign Guentzel to a seven-year, \$63 million contract. On its own, that looks like a safe bet -- Guentzel is a point-per-game player with three consecutive 30-plus goal seasons. Tampa Bay is rightly expecting this to be the prime of his career and he'll have every opportunity to flourish. But there's pressure, too, following a player like Stamkos. The Lightning are looking to replace a veteran performer who was their third-leading scorer last season, racking up 40 goals and 81 points in 79 games. That's no small void to fill and Tampa Bay is counting on Guentzel to provide that production when he officially hits the ice for his new team this season.

Best case: Tampa Bay continues to master the art of the retool. GM Julien BriseBois went big, going after Guentzel, trading top-pairing defenseman Sergachev to Utah and bringing back defenseman McDonagh. Those moves all prove worthwhile as the Lightning look refreshed and reinvigorated. New captain Victor Hedman seamlessly transitions into a role Stamkos held for over a decade and Tampa Bay responds with strong early chemistry that carries it through a few inevitable bumps as fresh faces work into the lineup. The Lightning build up steam in the regular season and hit the playoff scene on a high note.

Worst case: BriseBois' risky business doesn't pay off as planned and the Lightning look lost to start the season. Tampa Bay's design is too top-heavy and when Guentzel can't find a groove, the Lightning feel Stamkos' absence -- on the ice and in their dressing room -- from the get-go. Goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy has a slow start to the season and Tampa Bay's refurbished blue line looks blah despite Hedman's strong play. The Lightning's offseason depth additions -- including J.J. Moser and Atkinson -- don't quite fit and Tampa Bay never looks like the cohesive bunch BriseBois was seeking to create. The Lightning are run over by the Atlantic's rising squads and miss the postseason.

X factor: Jon Cooper. It's not easy being the longest-tenured coach in the sport. Cooper is that elusive leader, though. He guided the Lightning to consecutive Stanley Cup wins in 2020 and 2021, then got them back to the Final in 2022 despite a somewhat tumultuous playoff run that could have derailed a lesser group (and coach). Cooper is the constant for an ever-changing Tampa Bay team that has had to contend with backbreaking salary cap issues year after year. He'll find a way to at least give Tampa Bay a chance to succeed no matter who is in the lineup. That magic touch is invaluable to the Lightning -- now more than ever.

Fantasy outlook: If Vasilevskiy returns to form, the Bolts could have three top-25 fantasy players in Nikita Kucherov, Brayden Point and Vasilevskiy himself. Hedman, who will quarterback the power play, and Guentzel are just outside that range. Beyond them, there is upside in Brandon Hagel and Atkinson, along with reliability from Anthony Cirelli and Nicholas Paul.

Bold prediction: Guentzel scores 40 goals or more.

14. Winnipeg Jets

Last season: 52-24-6, 110 points. Lost in the first round.

Stanley Cup odds: +3000

Key players added: F Jaret Anderson-Dolan, G Eric Comrie, D Haydn Fleury, G Kaapo Kahkonen, D Colin Miller, F Mason Shaw

Key players lost: G Laurent Brossoit, D Brenden Dillon, F Sean Monahan, F Tyler Toffoli

Most fascinating player: Nikolaj Ehlers. What's clear is the seven-time 20-goal scorer is going to get paid next season. Whether it's the Jets who are paying him? That appears to be the most notable question for the 28-year-old winger, who is entering into the final season of a seven-year contract worth \$6 million annually. Any number of scenarios could be presented to the Jets and Ehlers, who has a modified no-trade clause, between now and the end of a season that could see the club reach the playoffs.

Best case: Winning a first-round series. Clearly, advancing beyond the first round is a theme for a number of Western Conference teams. What makes the Jets' situation unique is the fact that they can win Game 1 only to struggle the rest of the way. In 2023, they scored five goals in a Game 1 against the Golden Knights only to allow more than four goals per game before getting eliminated in five games. Then there's what happened last year. The Jets outlasted the Avalanche with a 7-6 win in Game 1 only to then allow more than five goals per game and lose the series in five.

Worst case: Either missing the playoffs altogether or another first-round exit. There comes a point in which every franchise must ask difficult questions about its direction. It's possible the Jets could be heading in there should either of those scenarios play out. The Jets are essentially a perennial playoff team, having made the postseason in six of the past seven campaigns. But they've reached the second round only once in that time. The upcoming offseason could see them reshape their roster, using \$38.6 million in cap space as they seek to firmly establish themselves as one of the favorites in the West.

X factor: How will the team adapt to Scott Arniel in his first season? Arniel was an assistant under Rick Bowness for two seasons and was hired to take over once the venerable Bowness retired following the Jets' first-round exit. What philosophies will Arniel use now that he's in charge? And could those traits that could be parlayed into the Jets not only returning to the playoffs but winning a first-round series?

Fantasy outlook: Kyle Connor is a 40-goal scorer when healthy, while Mark Scheifele is a second-tier fantasy center behind the league's best. The third member of that Jets' top line, Gabriel Vilardi, could break out with 70 points if he stays fully fit. Cole Perfetti appears ready to crank it up a productive notch on the power play. The 22-year-old deserves a roster spot in deeper fantasy leagues.

Bold prediction: Connor Hellebuyck leads the U.S. to a 4 Nations Face-Off victory.

15. Los Angeles Kings

Last season: 44-27-11, 99 points. Lost in the first round.

Stanley Cup odds: +3000

Key players added: D Kyle Burroughs, D Joel Edmundson, F Warren Foegele, F Tanner Jeannot, D Caleb Jones, G Darcy Kuemper

Key players lost: F Viktor Arvidsson, F Pierre-Luc Dubois, F Carl Grundstrom, F Blake Lizotte, D Matt Roy

Most fascinating player: Kuemper. Forget whom he was traded for and the episodes that came with "He who shall not be named" during his only season with the club. The Kings are still a franchise that has shuffled through Phoenix Copley, Joonas Korpisalo, Jonathan Quick, Cal Petersen, David Rittich and Cam Talbot since 2022 only to still fall in the first round. Kuemper, who won a Cup in 2022, has inherited a position that could be one of the difference-makers in the Kings getting to the second round.

Best case: They reach the second round. It wasn't that long ago when the Kings' rebuild was seen as one that could cement the team as a championship contender. And there's still the possibility that can happen. But when a franchise has struggled to get out of the first round for three straight seasons and each opening-round exit presents questions that are both old and new in the process? That's where it gets complicated. This is what makes winning a first-round series so pivotal for the Kings.

Worst case: Losing in the first round or missing the playoffs. A fourth consecutive first-round exit is going to lead to even more questions about what needs to be done going forward. And with teams such as the Blues on the cusp while others such as the Flames, Kraken, Utah and the Wild are also trying to pose a threat? There's also a possibility the Kings miss the playoffs altogether which would only amplify the pre-existing concerns about the direction of the franchise.

X factor: The games they play without Drew Doughty. Losing Matt Roy in free agency was an already major item considering he led the Kings in short-handed minutes and was second in average ice time. Now the Kings are going to be without Doughty on a month-to-month basis as he recovers from a fractured ankle. Doughty was second in the NHL last season in ice time and also led the Kings in power-play minutes as he quarterbacked a unit that was 11th. The Kings used the offseason to add Kyle Burroughs and Joel Edmundson to help fill the void left by Roy, hoping their additions would help strengthen their overall defensive approach. It's just that Doughty's absence gives the Kings another area to address in the early stages of the season.

Fantasy outlook: A healthy Adrian Kempe is good for 35 to 40 goals, while captain Anze Kopitar remains one of the game's more well-rounded fantasy performers. Cemented in the top six, Quinton Byfield should build on last year's 20-goal, 35-assist total, and goalie Darcy Kuemper has sleeper potential behind a better defensive system than he had in Washington.

Bold prediction: Quinton Byfield breaks 70 points.

16. Detroit Red Wings

Last season: 41-32-9, 91 points. Missed the playoffs.

Stanley Cup odds: +4000

Key players added: F Vladimir Tarasenko, G Jack Campbell, G Cam Talbot

Key players lost: F David Perron, D Jake Walman, G James Reimer

Most fascinating player: Simon Edvinsson. The Red Wings rookie turned a successful 14-game NHL stint last season into heightened expectations for what he can add to the team's blue line. Edvinsson skated alongside veteran Jeff Petry to form a solid second pairing for Detroit in the waning weeks of the 2023-24 season. It's not that Edvinsson had a significant impact on the box score (he netted just one goal and one assist); it's more that Edvinsson made good decisions in his own end, was hard on the cycle and generally exhibited a poise beyond his 21 years. It will be intriguing to see what Edvinsson can do now that the curtain's been pulled back on his NHL game.

Best case: Detroit ends the franchise's longest playoff drought with a return to the postseason field. Losing a tiebreaker to the Washington Capitals kept the Red Wings from playoff competition a year ago

but this time around there's no waiting until the final minute to know they're in the mix. The Red Wings capitalize on top-tier performances from their best skaters -- particularly Dylan Larkin, Alex DeBrincat and Moritz Seider -- while Cam Talbot and Ville Husso are the high-caliber tandem Detroit has been missing in recent seasons. A full-team buy-in to the defensive details finally curbs the Red Wings' leaky habits of the past and they are primed to excel in the club's first playoff berth in eight years.

Worst case: The Red Wings have been their own worst enemy before by not prioritizing defensive play. Detroit does that again -- to its own peril. Another strong start to the season is derailed by inconsistencies from the blue line on out. The power play -- which ranked among the league's top-10 a year ago -- fails to launch and without that boost Detroit can't keep pace offensively in the Atlantic. Their veteran additions -- including Vladimir Tarasenko and Patrick Kane -- are a nonfactor and Talbot proves to no longer be a No. 1 option. Detroit slowly slides down the standings and lands with another disappointing thud outside the playoff picture.

X factor: Derek Lalonde. The Red Wings finished ninth offensively last season -- and 24th defensively. There's been a clear disconnect for Detroit on how to play a strong two-way team game, and it's on Lalonde now to pull it out of this group. GM Steve Yzerman believed in Lalonde's ability when he made the former Tampa Bay assistant a first-time NHL head coach in 2022. Now three seasons into his tenure, it's time for Lalonde to help the Red Wings turn a corner by adhering to a defense-focused structure. Detroit has shown enough offensive potential that if Lalonde can fix the defensive deficiencies then this could be a significant season for the Red Wings.

Fantasy outlook: Dylan Larkin brings stability, making Alex DeBrincat and Lucas Raymond solid bets for value. On defense, Moritz Seider stands out as a star, Simon Edvinsson has significant fantasy potential and Erik Gustafsson could be a power-play specialist.

Bold prediction: Red Wings hit reverse in Motor City, miss playoffs.

17. New York Islanders

Last season: 39-27-16, 94 points. Lost in the first round.

Stanley Cup odds: +5000

Key players added: F Anthony Duclair

Key players lost: D Sebastian Aho

Most fascinating player: Maxim Tsyplov. It's rare for the Islanders to pursue a free agent signing so there must have been something about Tsyplov that GM Lou Lamoriello couldn't ignore. Tsyplov was a coveted commodity coming out of the KHL, and while there's a certain air of the unknown about how he'll transition to the NHL, Tsyplov has shown in training camp he's ready to compete for a roster spot. Linemate Bo Horvat said early on that while the 26-year-old won't wow you with speed, he's smart, strategic and a solid playmaker. That's a good foundation for any forward to build off, and if Tsyplov can continue to deliver on that, it would be a serious boost for an Islanders offense that's consistently lacking depth up front. If Tsyplov can beat out the competition for an opportunity in the Islanders' lineup he seems set up for success in the season ahead.

Best case: The Islanders' offensive struggles are finally a thing of the past as New York's key weapons -- including Horvat, Mathew Barzal and newcomer Anthony Duclair -- all find a rhythm early. Ilya Sorokin is not only healthy but recaptures his form from two years ago as a dominant netminder. Speaking of health, Ryan Pullock and Adam Pelech -- who both missed about 25 games last season -- are stronger than ever anchoring the Islanders' back end, and that sets a tone for the entire defense to follow. Patrick

Roy excels in his second season behind the bench as players get more comfortable in his structure. New York is a playoff contender throughout the season and cruises into a postseason slot with little drama.

Worst case: New York returns an almost identical roster to last year's, and similar problems inevitably crop up. The Islanders' 22nd-ranked offense from a season ago doesn't make vast improvements and continues to average fewer than three goals per game -- not enough to keep up with the Metro's other high-scoring squads. New York's blue-line depth was thinner than expected and can't survive the inevitable wear and tear that comes when the top four are taking on big minutes. Sorokin's not 100% following offseason surgery and the fallout from that carries over to the regular season. Without a strong backbone in net, the Islanders lose too many tight games and start to slide down the standings.

X factor: Health. The Islanders were run aground last season by key injuries, particularly on the defensive side. New York had a league-worst penalty kill (71.5%) because skaters such as Pelech, Pulock and Scott Mayfield (who missed 41 games) were unavailable for long stretches. The Islanders don't have a lot of prospects (especially on defense) to pull from or veterans waiting in the wings to step in and take on significant roles if they do run into health woes. That could come back to bite them. The Islanders could benefit from an insurance policy or two in case the injury bug creeps quickly back into the equation.

Fantasy outlook: While Noah Dobson stood out, finishing 17th in fantasy points last season, the Islanders return 10 players who finished among the top 250; only the Stars have more. Brock Nelson, Bo Horvat and Mathew Barzal provide reliable value, while Kyle Palmieri, Anders Lee, Alexander Romanov, Ryan Pulock and Jean-Gabriel Pageau often fluctuate in lineups.

Bold prediction: Mathew Barzal sets a career scoring mark.

18. Pittsburgh Penguins

Last season: 38-32-12, 88 points. Missed the playoffs.

Stanley Cup odds: +5000

Key players added: F Anthony Beauvillier, F Kevin Hayes, D Sebastian Aho, D Matt Grzelcyk

Key players lost: F Reilly Smith

Most fascinating player: Drew O'Connor. When the Penguins traded Jake Guentzel to Carolina last March there was a hole on the top line winger alongside Sidney Crosby and Bryan Rust -- and O'Connor got the opportunity to slot in. He rode shotgun with Crosby all the way through Pittsburgh's feverish 17-game push to the end of that regular season, a strong audition that ultimately earned him the same spot to start training camp. If that trio developed enough chemistry to be an intriguing go-to option again for coach Mike Sullivan, it's on O'Connor now to show that he can re-create those previous positive results (including seven goals and 10 points) from the outset. O'Connor complements his linemates with a straightforward attack and a big body to lend some physicality. This also happens to be a contract year for O'Connor, too. Building off his past could pay dividends on the ice and his bank account by year's end.

Best case: Pittsburgh ends its two-season playoff drought and proves there is still something special about Penguins hockey. Crosby is resplendent again as Pittsburgh's offensive leader, Evgeni Malkin continues to track as a near 30-goal scorer and Erik Karlsson not only stays healthy but shows more flashes of his recent Norris Trophy-winning play. The Penguins establish a strong goalie tandem with Tristan Jarry and Alex Nedeljkovic, where there's genuine confidence in either one to secure a win every night. Sullivan puts on one of his best coaching jobs in years and Pittsburgh looks closer to being a powerhouse (again) than we've seen in years.

Worst case: The Penguins find old problems returning, and they can't come up with quick solutions. Pittsburgh's goaltending is average and that negates whatever strides they're able to take offensively. Despite adding younger skaters such as Rutger McGroarty, there remains an obvious lag in Pittsburgh's game caused by their overall age. Matt Grzelcyk is a liability on the back end, and Kris Letang's game suffers. The Penguins make a midseason coaching change in an effort to change their momentum, but that doesn't provide enough of a boost to get back on track. The Penguins fall short of the playoffs again and face a long summer of questions about what a potential rebuild will look like.

X factor: The power play. It's hard to believe that even with the likes of Crosby and Malkin available the Penguins ranked 30th (15.3%) with the extra man last season. For a club that was fighting to the finish for a playoff slot, a putrid power play can be the untimely back breaker. How will they prevent special teams from being a liability again this season? Sullivan has needed a Patric Hornqvist replacement as Pittsburgh's net-front man and Michael Bunting should (in theory) be that person -- but Bunting didn't take naturally to the role in his first season. Will Bunting's sophomore attempt there be any better? Could Rickard Rakell be the right guy? Pittsburgh has to capitalize on its talent to make the power play a real weapon to drive confidence and spark momentum.

Fantasy outlook: Sidney Crosby was the only Penguins player in the fantasy top 50 last season, but there's potential for more. Improved power-play performance could elevate Erik Karlsson back to elite status, and make Bryan Rust and Evgeni Malkin reliable starters. Newcomers Anthony Beauvillier, Kevin Hayes, and Rutger McGroarty offer sleeper potential.

Bold prediction: The power play finishes in the top 10.

19. Minnesota Wild

Last season: 39-33-10, 87 points. Missed the playoffs.

Stanley Cup odds: +4000

Key players added: F Yakov Trenin

Key players lost: D Alex Goligoski, D Dakota Mermis

Most fascinating player: Marco Rossi. Not that everything about the Wild comes back to the combined \$14.743 million buyout cap charges for Zach Parise and Ryan Suter. But it is rather important when it comes back to how the Wild find success while navigating such a financial burden. That's what made Rossi breaking out for 21 goals and 40 points to emerge as a top-six center while still on his entry-level contract so critical. He gave the goal-starved Wild another option at a team-friendly price. Rossi's second season has a chance to be beneficial for the Wild in that he could help them challenge for a playoff spot. But it also has a chance to be just as beneficial for Rossi, who is entering the final year of his ELC just as the Parise and Suter buyouts will dip to a combined \$1.66 million annual cap hit.

Best case: Return to the playoffs -- and make some noise. Staying healthy and scoring consistently will play a major role in the Wild's bid to challenge for a playoff spot in what's expected to be a competitive field for the Western Conference wild-card race. Fielding a consistent roster was a challenge at times last season, which was the case last January. In one day, they moved captain Jared Spurgeon and star winger Kirill Kaprizov to injured reserve, while also having Jonas Brodin, Marcus Foligno, Filip Gustavsson and Mats Zuccarello out of the lineup. So what happens if the Wild can find a way to stay healthy and increase scoring? A team that remained in the hunt into April last season will qualify this time around.

Worst case: Taking a step back and missing the playoffs by a wider margin. Yes, the Wild missed the playoffs and finished 11 points behind the Golden Knights for the final wild-card spot last season. But they actually had more points than the Golden Knights after Nov. 27, the day Hynes was hired to replace

Dean Evason. The Wild won the 12th most games in the NHL and were on the cusp of being in the top 10 in fewest goals allowed per game in that span. But if the injury woes continue, and veterans take a step back without young players able to step up to fill the gaps, it could be another postseason on the outside looking in.

X factor: The Wild's development model. Recently, the Wild have enjoyed an annual tradition of watching one of their homegrown talents break into their lineup and shape their roster. Enter Marat Khusnutdinov. He arrived in the NHL late last season after spending the past three years as a full-time KHL player. His most recent KHL campaign saw him finish with six goals and 20 points in 49 games. Khusnutdinov joined the Wild, and had four points in 16 games. It appears he could start this season as a bottom-six center, with the idea he might not be the only young talent to make their mark. Both Liam Omgren and Jesper Wallstedt could also feature at some point.

Fantasy outlook: In addition to scoring, second-line center Joel Eriksson Ek throws his body around and wins plenty of faceoffs alongside linemate Matt Boldy, who projects to flirt with a point/game rate. Sophomore defender Brock Faber is tasked with anchoring the club's top power-play after collecting 47 points in his first full NHL campaign.

Bold prediction: Jesper Wallstedt takes Filip Gustavsson's job.

20. Washington Capitals

Last season: 40-31-11, 88 points. Lost in the first round.

Stanley Cup odds: +7500

Key players added: F Pierre-Luc Dubois, F Andrew Mangiapane, D Jakob Chychrun, D Matt Roy, G Logan Thompson

Key players lost: D Nick Jensen, G Darcy Kuemper

Most fascinating player: Pierre-Luc Dubois. Washington is the third team Dubois has played for in three years. Will this finally be the right fit he's been looking for? The third overall pick in 2016 was acquired by the Capitals in a blockbuster trade with Los Angeles in June after a one-season effort with the Kings produced just 16 goals and 40 points in 82 games. Despite all of Dubois' potential, he has yet to show it fully formed at any of the stops he's made over the last few years. That could all change in Washington. Dubois is set to anchor the Capitals' second line with Connor McMichael and Tom Wilson, and there's a perfect opportunity for him to grow along with a burgeoning Washington squad. It's on Dubois to take advantage and illustrate not only what he's learned going through some tough seasons but what still makes him a special player.

Best case: Washington makes the playoff field again, and more definitively this time. The Capitals' young, hungry group tears through the early-season competition with strong performances from Alex Ovechkin, Dylan Strome and Dubois. Washington's scoring woes are a thing of the past and their special teams explode accordingly. Logan Thompson is a perfect partner for Charlie Lindgren in net. Jakob Chychrun stays relatively healthy and is a solid partner to John Carlson throughout the season. The Capitals' confidence continues to grow under Spencer Carbery's leadership as a fresh era for Washington hockey appears to have truly begun taking shape.

Worst case: The Capitals' experiment working new faces into the lineup backfires when chemistry is hard to come by, and they miss the playoffs. Washington's top six doesn't connect -- Dubois looks particularly out of place -- and Carbery is forced into early-season line-juggling that affects the team's confidence. The Capitals' defense depth is too thin to withstand early injuries and that puts extra pressure on Lindgren and Thompson to save the day. Ovechkin's attempts to hit Wayne Gretzky's goal-

scoring record slow along with the rest of Washington's offensive output, and the Capitals look too shaky overall by Thanksgiving to be considered a true contender.

X factor: Is Washington's new-look defensive corps up to the task in a challenging Metropolitan Division? The Capitals retooled their blue line in a big way with offseason acquisitions Roy and Chychrn. Carlson remains one of the league's preeminent defenseman, and the Capitals are hoping to see more from 24-year-old Rasmus Sandin. Will there be enough for Washington to roll with a strong top six this season -- with enough bodies to guard against a downturn like the one caused by Carlson's past injury? The Capitals ranked 16th in goals against last season and 12th in shots against, and Carbery expressed in April wanting more size and speed from the back end going into this year. We'll soon see if they have found the right mix.

Fantasy outlook: The Capitals' retooling around Alex Ovechkin is full of fantasy potential. John Carlson and Jakob Chychrn provide offense from the point, while Matt Roy was a top-100 fantasy player last season. Dylan Strome has found success as Ovechkin's pivot, and Tom Wilson remains a reliable producer. Pierre-Luc Dubois and Andrew Mangiapane aim to rediscover their past form.

Bold prediction: Alex Ovechkin passes Wayne Gretzky's goal-scoring mark.

21. Utah Hockey Club

Last season: N/A

Stanley Cup odds: +10000

Key players added: D Ian Cole, F Liam O'Brien, D John Marino, D Mikhail Sergachev, F Kevin Stenlund

Key players lost: D Travis Dermott

Most fascinating player: Mikhail Sergachev. There are several candidates here, but what makes Sergachev the winner is, well, everything about why he's in Utah in the first place. There was the shock and awe that came with trading for him. There's the question about how he will perform over a full season after breaking his tibia and fibula last season. There's the question about what Sergachev could accomplish as a team's true No. 1 defenseman compared to his situation with the Lightning, where he was behind a generational talent in Victor Hedman. For all the conversations about the promise that comes with Utah's first season, the argument can be had that nobody embodies that sentiment more than Sergachev.

Best case: Making the playoffs in their first season. Recent history has shown that brand-new franchises can get into the postseason pretty quickly. The Golden Knights did it in Year 1, while the Kraken did it in their second season. There are 14 players on Utah's roster that were part of last year's Arizona Coyotes team. Under Utah coach Andre Tourigny, it was a group that went from 57 points in his first season to hitting 70 points in his second. Tourigny's third year in charge started strong. He guided a roster that was competing for a playoff spot in late January before a 14-game losing streak scuppered those plans. It's possible that the lessons learned from that last season coupled with their offseason additions could lead to Utah emerging as a serious challenger for one of the two Western Conference wild-card spots.

Worst case: Having a poor start to the season and missing out on the playoffs. One of the dynamics of this particular Western Conference wild-card race is there could be six or more teams competing for one of those two spots throughout January and February. Utah is expected to be one of those teams, and it's what makes the idea of getting off to a strong start pivotal. There's the unwritten rule about that comes with teams being in a playoff spot (or within a few points) when American Thanksgiving arrives. In the case of the UHC, a strong start could prove essential for that reason and for the fact the club has garnered a level of excitement that it wants to harness for as long as it can.

X factor: Their defensive personnel. Even with the 14 players that Tourigny coached in Arizona last season, Utah still had needs to address. Defense was among them, and filling those voids is what essentially became the hallmark of Utah's first offseason. They traded for John Marino on the same day they got Sergachev, before signing two-time Stanley Cup winner Ian Cole in free agency. Those three join a group that already included Sean Durzi, Michael Kesselring and Juuso Valimaki. Durzi and Sergachev could be used as Utah's top pairing while Marino and Valimaki could be the second pairing, which leaves Cole and Kesselring as Utah's bottom duo. Regardless of configuration, it's a group that could play a significant role in Connor Ingram building upon his breakout season in 2023-24 that saw him win a career-high 23 games.

Fantasy outlook: Entering his second season, Logan Cooley is endeavoring to kick it up a notch after scoring 20 goals and 24 assists his rookie year. Ex-Lightning player Mikhail Sergachev is the club's new No. 1 fantasy defenseman, bumping Sean Durzi from that spot and the top power play. Connor Ingram could prove a solid No. 3 netminder in deeper leagues if Utah wins more games than many anticipate.

Bold prediction: We'll just start calling them the Yetis.

22. St. Louis Blues

Last season: 43-33-6, 92 points. Missed the playoffs.

Stanley Cup odds: +7500

Key players added: D Philip Broberg, F Radek Faksa, F Dylan Holloway, D Pierre-Olivier Joseph, F Mathieu Joseph, F Alexandre Texier, D Ryan Suter

Key players lost: F Kevin Hayes

Most fascinating player: Jake Neighbours. Was last season just a launching pad for Neighbours? He went from scoring seven goals in 52 games over parts of two seasons to break out for a career-high 27 goals, tied with Pavel Buchnevich for second on the team. Goals were at a premium for the Blues last season, as they scored the eighth-fewest in the NHL. That's what made Neighbours' contributions so important, and there's now an expectation he could play a significant role in getting the Blues back into the playoffs after they missed out by just six points.

Best case: Making the playoffs. Anyone who either knows the Blues' history or has studied it is aware that this is a franchise that doesn't really go through playoff droughts. The Blues have had just one three-year stretch in which they missed the playoffs. Even though they missed out on the postseason the last two years, their retool appears to have them in a position to challenge for a playoff spot. Those expectations will only intensify if they can continue the progress they made under Drew Bannister, who went 30-19-5 after he was hired to replace Craig Berube.

Worst case: Not supporting their goaltending and missing out on the postseason again. Even though the Blues found consistency under Bannister, they still struggled in a number of areas. Bannister's 54 games in charge of the team still saw the Blues face challenges in both zones. Offensively, they had the fifth fewest shots per 60 minutes, the fifth fewest goals per 60 and the third fewest scoring chances per 60. Defensively, they allowed the fourth-most high-danger chances per 60, the fifth-most shots per 60 and the sixth-most scoring chances per 60. And yet, they had the fifth-best team save percentage, which also played an instrumental role in why they allowed the 13th-fewest goals per game in that time. However, if the goaltending takes a step back under all that duress, they will be in trouble.

X factor: The offer sheet additions. What was an initially subtle offseason suddenly became a lot more noticeable once the Blues signed Philip Broberg and Dylan Holloway to offer sheets, a tactic which ultimately worked as the Oilers declined to match. Broberg's arrival not only provides the Blues with a

young defenseman, but gives them another player who could help fill the void left by Torey Krug, who will miss the season after having ankle surgery. As for Holloway, he'll challenge for a top-six role on a team in need of more goals.

Fantasy outlook: Jordan Binnington rewarded his managers with a top-10 fantasy total in ESPN leagues this past season. The question is, can he again win more often than not in a fiercely competitive Central Division? Otherwise, the Blues' top line -- Robert Thomas, Jordan Kyrou, and an emerging Neighbours -- boast value in diminishing order. No one blocked more shots than defenseman Colton Parayko (218) last season.

Bold prediction: Doug Armstrong wins both offer sheet signings.

23. Buffalo Sabres

Last season: 39-37-6, 84 points. Missed the playoffs.

Stanley Cup odds: +6000

Key players added: F Sam Lafferty, F Beck Malenstyn, F Jason Zucker, G James Reimer

Key players lost: F Zemgus Girgensons, F Victor Olofsson, F Jeff Skinner

Most fascinating player: Bowen Byram. Buffalo acquired Byram in exchange for Casey Mittelstadt because they believed he'd be a big part of the team's future. The 23-year-old certainly has that potential. Byram just hasn't been able to showcase all of it yet due to injuries and on-ice inconsistencies. Coach Lindy Ruff has had a landslide of young blueliners to sort out before the final lineups are made, and there's no question Byram will continue to be given his opportunity in a prominent role. But can Byram stay healthy and showcase some of that evolution in his game that Buffalo's looking for? Byram was the No. 4 overall pick (by Colorado in 2019) for a reason. There's serious two-way talent there to work with.

Best case: Buffalo starts the season strong -- despite the 0-2 hiccup in Czechia -- and eventually ends a 13-year playoff drought. The Sabres have tried just about everything to halt their losing skid -- including bringing back Ruff. That move works to plan as Ruff re-tools Buffalo's lineup with the right mix to highlight the young core and veteran depth, and the team's goaltending is consistent throughout the year. Buffalo manages to recapture the offensive spark from that 2022-23 campaign which nearly brought them back to the playoffs, and builds off it with a stronger defensive performance. A more mature Sabres team rises up the Atlantic standings and enters the playoffs with expectations to perform upon arrival.

Worst case: The Sabres didn't make many additions in the offseason, and that comes back to bite them. While anticipating growth from within from the likes of JJ Peterka, Zach Benson and Dylan Cozens, it never comes around and Buffalo never finds its scoring niche. The top-heavy Sabres are worn down early and Ruff's adjustments don't take. Despite making moves at the trade deadline, it's too little, too late for the Sabres to gain any traction against more established teams and Buffalo doesn't qualify for the playoffs again, putting jobs around the organization in jeopardy.

X factor: How will Buffalo's goaltending situation hold up? Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen has the inside track to be the No. 1 after how well he finished last season. Behind him are up-and-comer Devon Levi and veteran James Reimer. It's a good amount of depth (in theory) for Buffalo to wield but will that translate into wins? Buffalo allowed fewer than three goals against last season, a testament to both goaltending and their defensive efforts, so they'll be looking for better from both areas to improve on their previous results. And while Luukkonen's breakout in 2023-24 was an important step for the Sabres, they won't want to put excess pressure on him to be a savior each night, either.

Fantasy outlook: Will new fantasy contributors emerge from the young forwards stepping up? JJ Peterka is the best bet, with Jack Quinn also having potential on the second line with Dylan Cozens. Tage Thompson and Alex Tuch are reliable but could improve on last season. Rasmus Dahlin leads the defense, while Bowen Byram and Owen Power could emerge as starters.

Bold prediction: The playoff drought ends.

24. Philadelphia Flyers

Last season: 38-33-11, 87 points. Missed the playoffs.

Stanley Cup odds: +6000

Key players added: F Matvei Michkov

Key players lost: F Cam Atkinson

Most fascinating player: Matvei Michkov. No player has created a stir like Michkov in Philadelphia since ... well, it's been a while. Perhaps it's no coincidence Michkov -- Philadelphia's seventh overall pick in 2023 -- has landed on the scene just in time for the Flyers' 50th anniversary season of their most recent Stanley Cup championship. Michkov is a beacon of hope that the Flyers can, at least, be playoff contenders again soon. The 19-year-old is a confident playmaker already and has kept up in his first NHL training camp. There are bound to be bumps along the way, but Michkov is impossible to ignore.

Best case: Philadelphia's rebuild continues and the team returns to playoff-caliber form. This team was knocking on the door of the playoff field just last season and with enough discipline can bust right through it. Philadelphia's top-six benefits from a breakout season from not just Michkov but Morgan Frost, and a healthy Sean Couturier makes all the difference up front. Samuel Ersson takes another step in his development after a solid rookie season and cements his place as Philadelphia's No. 1 between the pipes. Tortorella's style continues to mesh well with his players, and the building blocks Philadelphia has been stacking for years put them in an optimal position to earn a wild-card playoff spot.

Worst case: The Flyers have been adamant about not rushing through their process and that comes with ongoing growing pains. After an initial surge, Michkov begins to struggle against the tougher NHL competition and Philadelphia's offensive depth can't match up on a nightly basis. All the expectations of strides from Frost and Ersson don't materialize and Philadelphia has to lean too much on its veterans. Special teams suffers and frustration comes naturally from Tortorella trying to get the club back on track.

X factor: Philadelphia's youth. It's not just Michkov. Or even Frost. It's Bobby Brink. And Joel Farabee. And Jett Luchanko. And Ersson. And all the 25-and-unders that the Flyers will be relying on to carry them this season. The success or failure of Philadelphia's whole campaign can hinge on what they're able to produce. It's Tortorella's job to put them in positions to succeed of course, and then the skaters themselves have to make the most of their opportunities. It's an exciting prospect to see what those players can do - and an equally nerve-wracking one, too.

Fantasy outlook: Four Flyers finished last season ranked between 80th and 100th in fantasy points. With top rookie Matvei Michkov joining, can any of them break into the fantasy elite? Expect lineup changes to position Michkov for success, which could benefit Travis Konecny, Owen Tippett, Tyson Foerster, Morgan Frost or Sean Couturier, but not all of them.

Bold prediction: Jamie Drysdale stays healthy, breaks out.

25. Ottawa Senators

Last season: 37-41-4, 78 points. Missed the playoffs.

Stanley Cup odds: +4000

Key players added: D Nick Jensen, F Michael Amadio, F David Perron, G Linus Ullmark

Key players lost: D Jakob Chychrun, G Joonas Korpisalo

Most fascinating player: Tim Stutzle. The Senators received a star performance from Stutzle in 2022-23, when the forward pocketed 39 goals and 90 points in 78 games. Stutzle failed to reach those heights again last season (although 70 points in 75 games was a fine finish for him) and Ottawa similarly struggled to reach its full potential. Expectations for Stutzle to rebound from a comparatively down year are high going into a new season -- and the Senators hopes of getting back into the playoffs could hinge on how high Stutzle (and others, of course) can climb. When Stutzle is at his best he's capable of being Ottawa's most dynamic skater and driving their offense forward.

Best case: Ottawa's core players set the tone with excellent early play and the Senators quickly establish consistency in all three phases of their game. Linus Ullmark's arrival provides an elite level of goaltending the Senators haven't had in years and he's a backbone to the team's run of regular season success. Ottawa's offense -- ranked ninth last year -- vastly improves with a healthy Jake Sanderson and Thomas Chabot leading the way and newcomers Michael Amadio and Nick Jensen providing some veteran support. Travis Green's newly implemented system brings out the best in Ottawa's lineup and leads to career seasons for the Senators top skaters, who carry the club back into a postseason spot for the first time since 2018.

Worst case: The Senators stars step up, but the lack of secondary scoring options can't be overcome (again). Efforts to improve defensively produce minor results and without a full-team buy-in to the process, Ottawa begins losing more close games while frustration sets in. The team's decision not to add more in the offseason can't be fixed with trade deadline acquisitions and those same top players who were previously driving Ottawa's success begin to burn out. The Senators fade from relevancy again with 20 games to go and face another long offseason to figure out how to make real progress.

X factor: The evolution of Ottawa's young core. It's not just Stutzle. Brady Tkachuk, Drake Batherson, Shane Pinto, Josh Norris, Sanderson -- there's a whole group of talented skaters that will be feeling the heat. These are highly coveted, highly skilled players after all, and it's their contributions that will determine how far Ottawa goes this season. There's no excuse now for those top-end forwards to not be playing a committed, 200-foot game. And Green will harp on those details -- among other things -- to ensure the Senators are getting the most out of their best players. Will those guys tune in and respond the way Ottawa needs them to? Stay tuned.

Fantasy outlook: Brady Tkachuk and Tim Stutzle are fantasy superstars, while Drake Batherson is reliable, but then questions arise. Jake Sanderson is poised to stand out on defense, but can he seize the opportunity with Thomas Chabot lurking? Linus Ullmark won't have the Bruins in front of him, but are the Sens good enough? What are expectations for Josh Norris and Shane Pinto after fewer than 50 games last season?

Bold prediction: Linus Ullmark is one-and-done in Ottawa.

26. Seattle Kraken

Last season: 34-35-13, 81 points. Missed the playoffs.

Stanley Cup odds: +7500

Key players added: D Josh Mahura, D Brandon Montour, F Chandler Stephenson

Key players lost: F Pierre-Edouard Bellemare, G Chris Driedger, D Brian Dumoulin, D Justin Schultz

Most fascinating player: Matty Beniers. After scoring 57 points, winning the Calder and getting the Kraken to the playoffs as a rookie, there was a belief that Beniers was going to build upon his first season. Instead? He only scored 37 points while the Kraken missed the playoffs which also coincided with Beniers' ELC coming to an end. Despite that dip in production, the Kraken signed Beniers to a seven-year extension worth \$7.14 million annually ahead of a season that could prove pivotal for both parties. Especially as the Kraken have brought in a new coaching staff that could provide solutions to address the offensive woes that challenged Beniers and the Kraken last season.

Best case: Their offseason moves lead to offensive solutions. Much of the narrative around the Kraken last season was centered around how they went from almost scoring at will in the 22-23 season to scoring the second-fewest goals per game a year later. An inability to score was the biggest issue facing a team that constantly relied upon their defensive structure to stay in games. That's what makes hiring Dan Bylsma as coach and adding Brandon Montour and Chandler Stephenson in free agency so important to a Kraken franchise recovering from a difficult season.

Worst case: Nothing changes from last season. Remember how the Kraken responded from a difficult first season by reaching the playoffs in their second campaign? That's exactly what they are trying to do in their fourth season after having a difficult third season. If they can have a strong fourth season can that be parlayed into long-term success for a franchise that's still trying to establish its identity rather than one with an inconsistent persona.

X factor: Their AHL success translating to the NHL. One of the reasons the Kraken hired Bylsma and later, assistant coach Jessica Campbell, goes back to the continuity they created during their two years with the Coachella Valley Firebirds. What they did at Coachella Valley led to their prospects developing, consistently fielding one of the league's strongest attacks and advancing to the Calder Cup Final in both of their seasons. The Kraken are banking on the notion they could accomplish the same at the NHL level.

Fantasy outlook: Matty Beniers is due to rebound in the points department after a dud-like sophomore turn following his Calder Trophy-winning run in 2022-23. The 21-year-old should reach 60 points with ease. Brandon Montour takes over running the top power play with his new squad. The Florida export presents as the most promising fantasy performer with a team that otherwise likes to get it done by committee.

Bold prediction: Shane Wright quiets the critics.

27. Calgary Flames

Last season: 38-39-5, 81 points. Missed the playoffs.

Stanley Cup odds: +10000

Key players added: D Jake Bean, G Devin Cooley, F Ryan Lomberg, F Anthony Mantha

Key players lost: F A.J. Greer, D Oliver Kylington, G Jacob Markstrom

Most fascinating player: Dustin Wolf. His performances in the WHL and AHL over the last few years have added to the belief the Flames have their long-term goalie. Wolf will work in tandem with Dan Vladar at first, but is expected to emerge as the Flames' top option having started 11 of their final 18 games last season. Not only could Wolf use the 2024-25 season to help the Flames challenge for a potential wild-card spot, but it could also lead to him possibly becoming the first goaltender since Steve Mason in 2009 to win the Calder Trophy.

Best case: Establishing an identity. Were they going to have an exodus? Could they convince players to stay? Could they somehow make the playoffs? Where's the direction of this franchise exactly going? The

Flames spent the majority of last season trying to answer those questions before finding an answer -- dealing away Elias Lindholm, Sean Monahan, Chris Tanev and Noah Hanifin ahead of the deadline, and Jacob Markstrom this summer. As for this season, it appears the major question facing them is will it be another year where they don't have enough points for a playoff spot and too many points to win the draft lottery? Or is this the year they make the playoffs after a two-year hiatus?

Worst case: Lengthy losing streaks, and finishing in the mushy middle. Losing six straight games early in the season made it even more difficult for the Flames to get back to .500. A separate four-game skid in December didn't help their cause either. And just when it appeared as if they were on the verge of making a late push with a five-game winning streak in late February, it was a five-game losing streak in March that was part of a stretch that saw them lose eight of their next nine games that dealt a crippling blow toward their playoff chances. In the worst-case scenario, there are multiple such streaks again -- but enough winning otherwise to deny them a good shot at winning the draft lottery.

X factor: Cap space. Being armed with more than \$19 million in cap space only adds to the intrigue when it comes to the Flames. Say they are in a position to push for a playoff spot; having that much cap space means they can be one of the more competitive teams should they enter the sweepstakes for a certain player. And if they're not in the playoff hunt, they could use that space to help broker deals and add more assets for the future.

Fantasy outlook: With Jacob Markstrom settled in New Jersey, rookie Dustin Wolf is set to battle Dan Vladar for the bulk of starts in Calgary's net. Fantasy managers shouldn't expect a surplus of victories from either, as the club is in the midst of a minor rebuild. Up front, Nazem Kadri remains an underappreciated performer with point-per-game potential, while winger Yegor Sharangovich could bust through the 60-point mark after coming oh-so-close in his first turn as a Flame.

Bold prediction: The front office stubbornly refuses to tank.

28. Montreal Canadiens

Last season: 30-36-16, 76 points. Missed the playoffs.

Stanley Cup odds: +20000

Key players added: F Patrik Laine

Key players lost: None

Most fascinating player: Patrik Laine. It's an understatement that the last two seasons have been difficult for Laine. The second overall pick in 2016 has been hampered by injuries, and Laine entered the NHL/NHLPA Player Assistance Program in January. Not long after being cleared by doctors in July, Laine was traded (for the third time in his career) to Montreal. And all eyes will be on the winger to see what he can do with a fresh start -- after he recovers from a preseason knee injury that has him out for two to three months. Laine was a point-per-game player for two seasons in Columbus and performed well in Winnipeg before that. The Canadiens acquired him because they believe he can still be a game-changing talent. If Laine were to grab hold of a top-six slot and showcase some of that innate talent again, how much could the Canadiens see their offense improve right away?

Best case: Montreal taps into the full potential of its young core and stays healthy throughout the regular season. Kaiden Guhle comes back strong from injury and is the difference-making asset Montreal's been lacking to steady its defense on a nightly basis. The Canadiens' prized defensive prospects -- including Lane Hutson and Logan Mailloux -- prove they're ready for NHL jobs and Montreal's back end performs better than it has in years. The Canadiens continue to evolve their team game and make a serious push for a wild-card playoff spot in early spring.

Worst case: The Canadiens fail to take any steps forward and are ultimately doomed by making too many changes in the offseason. Montreal's swap of Jordan Harris for Laine looks bad, and doesn't produce the desired result of giving the Canadiens offense a proper boost. A piecemeal defense doesn't click when Justin Barron and Arber Xhekaj don't show more promise out of the gate. Key injuries pile up again and there's not enough depth to fill the void. Montreal stands pat at the trade deadline instead of trying to push for the postseason and the Canadiens finish at the bottom of the Atlantic again.

X factor: How will the Canadiens' defense shake out? Montreal entered training camp with a serious competition for spots between their returning players and incoming prospects. It's a question of chemistry, though. Whatever pairings coach Martin St. Louis decides to roll out on opening night will still feel somewhat precarious in the long term given the number of options available for jobs. And Montreal must improve on that side of the puck. They were sixth worst in goals against last season, and third worst in shots against.

Fantasy outlook: The stars align for big seasons from Nick Suzuki, Cole Caufield and Juraj Slafkovsky, possibly making them one of the league's top lines. Mike Matheson's value could be at risk if Lane Hutson or another prospect emerges, but Kaiden Guhle's fantasy value remains secure. Don't overlook Kirby Dach's potential after missing almost all of last season.

Bold prediction: Lane Hutson is a Calder Trophy finalist.

29. Chicago Blackhawks

Last season: 23-53-6, 52 points. Missed the playoffs.

Stanley Cup odds: +20000

Key players added: F Tyler Bertuzzi, D T.J. Brodie, G Laurent Brossoit, F Ilya Mikheyev, F Patrick Maroon, D Alec Martinez, F Craig Smith, F Teuvo Teravainen

Key players lost: F Colin Blackwell, F Tyler Johnson, F Sam Lafferty, D Jaycob Megna, D Jarred Tinordi, D Nikita Zaitsev

Most fascinating player: Connor Bedard. All the expectations that came with being touted as the NHL's next generational talent was met with a rookie season that saw him win the Calder Trophy. What Bedard showed throughout his first season was that he was capable of handling the demands that come with being a No. 1 center. He finished tied for first on the team in goals, led the club in assists and points, and logged the most ice time among forwards while finishing third among all Chicago skaters. Seeing what Bedard does in his sophomore effort adds to a larger narrative regarding what steps the Blackhawks take as a whole in 2024-25. Especially when their front office used the offseason to add more veterans with the belief it could see them improve upon from how the team performed last season.

Best case: Winning more than 30 games for the first time in four seasons. From a big-picture standpoint, the Blackhawks added veterans who can help shape the future culture of the club. As for what it all means in the immediate future, these were also moves that are expected to improve a team that struggled to score goals and prevent them. Last season saw the Blackhawks finish with the fewest goals per game while allowing the fourth most goals per game. But with players such as Bedard and Alex Vlasic having another year of experience, coupled with what they did to strengthen their top-nine forward corps along with their defense and goaltending, presents the possibility they could reach 30 wins.

Worst case: Winning fewer than 30 games for a fifth straight season. Promise has been at the heart of Blackhawks' rebuild. What helps with sustaining that promise is growth. Especially as this has been the

most painful stretch of on-ice performance for many years. One of the ways the Blackhawks' progress could be measured is through certain benchmarks. It appears that winning 30 games could be that metric for the Blackhawks this season. Of note: The last time the Blackhawks had five straight seasons of fewer than 30 wins came during the 1950's when they played only 70 games per season.

X factor: Goaltending. One of the biggest challenges facing the Blackhawks last season was their goaltending. Or rather, the lack of consistency between the pipes. Arvid Soderblom's on five of his 29 starts as a rookie, while posting a .880 save percentage. It's a bit of a contrast compared to Petr Mrazek, who won 18 games with a .908 save percentage. Adding Brossoit now gives the Blackhawks another proven option in net who has recorded a save percentage greater than .918 in three of his last four seasons. But that also comes with the realization that while Brossoit, who has been in tandems before, could receive the most playing time of his career in 2024-25 after starting the season on IR following a knee procedure in August.

Fantasy outlook: On Connor Bedard's wing, Tyler Bertuzzi should enjoy his most productive season since punching out 62 points in 68 games with Detroit back in 2021-22. Bedard himself is expected to take another leap forward after collecting 61 points in 68 contests in his Calder Trophy-winning season. Alec Martinez provides good value in competition that compensates blocked shots.

Bold prediction: Seth Jones is traded.

30. Anaheim Ducks

Last season: 27-50-5, 59 points. Missed the playoffs.

Stanley Cup odds: +30000

Key players added: D Brian Dumoulin, F Robby Fabbri, F Jansen Harkins

Key players lost: F Max Jones, F Jakob Silfverberg

Most fascinating player: Trevor Zegras. There was the lower-body injury in November that led to him missing 20 games. Then there was the broken ankle in January that didn't see him return to the Ducks' lineup until late March. And then of course there were the trade rumors. It all amounted to what was a challenging third season for Zegras. His first two seasons saw him emerge as one of the NHL's future superstars only to see his future -- and whether or not that future would see him remain in Anaheim -- come into question. Even with a tumultuous season, Zegras finished the regular season with a point in six of his team's final seven games. Given that the trade rumors are swirling again, he is a main character for Anaheim as 2024-25 begins.

Best case: Finishing with more than 30 wins. Progress is the most important metric in any rebuild. For the Ducks, like the Blackhawks, the notion they could potentially reach the 30-win mark could be a sign of progress. Their most recent season of more than 30 wins came during the 2021-22 campaign. It's the only season of more than 30 wins over the last five, and hitting that benchmark again would show that they're on the right path back to contention.

Worst case: A third straight season with fewer than 60 points in the standings. Rebuilds present challenges and that's what the Ducks have endured the last two seasons. In 2022-23, they finished with 58 points while an injury-riddled 2023-24 campaign played a part in them ending the season with 59 points. Those are the only seasons in franchise history -- that didn't include a lockout or a pandemic-impacted campaign -- in which the Ducks have finished below 60 points.

X factor: Defensive improvements. Before Greg Cronin took over last season, the Ducks allowed a league-high 338 goals in the 2022-23 campaign. Cronin's first season in charge saw that figure dip to

295, which was still the third most in the NHL. They finished with the second worst penalty kill in the league while also being in the top 10 of most high-danger scoring chances allowed per 60 minutes, and the most scoring chances allowed per 60. It will take a full-team approach to get those trends reversed this season.

Fantasy outlook: Rookie Cutter Gauthier boasts 50- to 60-point potential on Leo Carlsson's wing, top-line skater Trevor Zegras is looking to bounce back following last year's injury-riddled campaign, while Frank Vatrano will be hard pressed to score 37 once more. New captain Radko Gudas sports noteworthy value in leagues that reward hits and blocked shots.

Bold prediction: Cam Fowler is traded now, Trevor Zegras later.

31. Columbus Blue Jackets

Last season: 27-43-12, 66 points. Missed the playoffs.

Stanley Cup odds: +30000

Key players added: F Sean Monahan, F James van Riemsdyk

Key players lost: D Jake Bean, D Adam Boqvist, F Patrik Laine, F Johnny Gaudreau

Most fascinating player: Adam Fantilli. This is a crucial sophomore season for the third overall pick from 2023. Expectations were high for Fantilli's rookie campaign, and while he produced solid totals -- 12 goals and 27 points in 49 games -- it wasn't exactly a commanding performance, either. Fantilli had an injury (namely a lacerated calf), Columbus had a terrible power play (second worst in the NHL) and the team struggled across the board. This is a new season, though, and Fantilli will have every opportunity to shine. Let's not forget Fantilli had 30 goals and 65 goals in 36 games for Michigan in his draft year. What can Fantilli do for Columbus' offense with a locked-in top-six role and consistent linemates? That combination could draw something extra special out of the 19-year-old.

Best case: Columbus needs a boost to start the season, and gets it from top to bottom. The Blue Jackets begin to thrive under new coach Dean Evason with a surprising offensive attack led by offseason addition Sean Monahan, a resurgent Boone Jenner and healthy Fantilli. Columbus' top four on D clicks into place quickly, and finds a solid rhythm in front of a settled-in Elvis Merzlikins. The club's special teams -- once a source of pure frustration -- become an asset that helps drive the Blue Jackets all season as they remain in the playoff hunt longer than anyone expected.

Worst case: Another season near the bottom of the Metro. The Blue Jackets' history of health issues becomes an early problem, and the team's confidence immediately dwindles. Already Columbus is dealing with an injured Boone Jenner and Dmitri Voronkov, and that's a poor omen. Evason can't find the right forward mix, and even the addition of experienced depth players such as van Riemsdyk don't provide enough options to keep Columbus strong up front. When Merzlikins starts to stumble, the defense follows suit and the Blue Jackets are playing catch-up again while other Metropolitan teams pull away. In the end it's more of the same disappointment for a Blue Jackets team that aimed to turn a corner.

X factor: Special teams. Columbus' pitiful power play (15.1%) and ineffective penalty kill (76.3%) from last season can't be another primary storyline for the club. The Blue Jackets have talented skaters to fill those roles -- van Riemsdyk alone is one of the best net-front power-play options Columbus could have signed -- and they must turn those two parts of their game into assets. There's no getting around the things Columbus can't avoid going into the season, like how difficult it will be bearing the death of Johnny Gaudreau, but taking steps forward where they can as a team will give the Blue Jackets much

needed positive momentum and allow them to make the most of this coming year despite some otherwise brutal circumstances.

Fantasy outlook: While potential scoring stars are scattered throughout the lineup, defenseman Zach Werenski is the primary fantasy focus. Boone Jenner, Kirill Marchenko, Ivan Provorov, Kent Johnson, Adam Fantilli, Sean Monahan and Yegor Chinakhov all have potential to reward this season, but likely only two or three will shine. Fantilli and Marchenko stand out, but drafting anyone aside from Werenski carries risk.

Bold prediction: Adam Fantilli has his breakout year.

32. San Jose Sharks

Last season: 19-54-9, 47 points. Missed the playoffs.

Stanley Cup odds: +40000

Key players added: G Yaroslav Askarov, F Macklin Celebrini, D Cody Ceci, F Carl Grundstrom, F Barclay Goodrow, F Will Smith, F Tyler Toffoli, D Jake Walman, F Alexander Wennberg

Key players lost: D Calen Addison, F Alexander Barabanov, G Devin Cooley, D Ty Emberson, F Mike Hoffman, F Kevin Labanc

Most fascinating player: Logan Couture. So much about this particular Sharks offseason has centered around adding Macklin Celebrini and Will Smith. After all, they are the two players who have now become the face of a rebuild that could see the Sharks return to prominence. There is, however, something to be said about the Sharks' past run of contention, and those who remain. A persistent groin injury limited Couture to playing in just six games last season, with all of them coming in January. Couture was in training camp with the team, where he has continued rehabbing while telling reporters "there's no immediate plan to get onto the ice."

Best case: Celebrini and Smith each finish with more than 20 goals. The children are indeed the Sharks' future, and this season is about establishing a foundation. Namely, can they both handle the demands of what comes with being a pair of top-six forwards? Celebrini is expected to anchor the top line while Smith, who appears to be their second-line center, could also be used on the wing. For them to both score 20 goals would not only prove that they could carve a place in the NHL, but it would potentially provide optimism that the Sharks are starting to trend upward after a dreadful 2023-24 campaign.

Worst case: They're worse than they were last season. What ultimately became David Quinn's final season in charge was obviously a difficult one. In fact, there was one point in which the Sharks struggled so much that they were in contention to finish with the fewest points in the salary cap era. They finished eight points higher than the mark set by the 2019-20 Red Wings, but still faced numerous issues. Hiring a new coach in Ryan Warsofsky, while signing Celebrini and Smith, and adding more veterans has set up the Sharks to potentially show improvement from the team that had 47 points last season.

X factor: The NHL trade deadline. As of now, the Sharks have seven players entering the final year of their contracts before hitting free agency. Rebuilding teams who have those sorts of players are usually the type that have a chance to trade those players in exchange for picks or young players that will help in the future. What makes the Sharks' situation different than most is they don't have a salary retention slot, in order to act as a third-party broker to take a portion of a veteran's salary in a trade. Each team has three retention slots, and the Sharks' are filled from previous deals involving Brent Burns, Tomas Hertl and Erik Karlsson.

Fantasy outlook: A top target in keeper leagues, Macklin Celebrini boasts a 60-plus-point ceiling in his first NHL season. This year's first-overall NHL draft selection deserves a roster spot in all leagues of larger size. Same applies to fellow rookie, and second-line center, Will Smith. Defenseman Jake Walman projects as a sleeper due to power-play production.

Bold prediction: Macklin Celebrini wins the Calder Trophy.

[ESPN / 2024-25 NHL betting preview - Five storylines to watch](#)

By Doug Greenberg – October 8, 2024

The puck dropped on the 2024-25 NHL season thousands of miles away on Friday, when the New Jersey Devils defeated the Buffalo Sabres 4-1 in Czechia, but back in North America, the focus is squarely on the best player in the world, wondering whether this season will finally be the one when he breaks through and wins the Stanley Cup.

After their run to the Stanley Cup Final last season, the Edmonton Oilers are the consensus betting favorites to win it all in 2025, showing anywhere between +700 and +850 odds across the sportsbook marketplace. Oilers phenom Connor McDavid shows odds around +150 to win the Hart Memorial Trophy, pacing the field by a wide margin.

Despite the short odds for the championship this season, the Oilers are seeing action across the board.

"I think people just feel that maybe the McDavid story can finally have that Stanley Cup ending," BetMGM senior sports trader Matthew Rasp told ESPN. "The money's been coming in on the Oilers ever since the season ended last year."

There are 31 other teams out there vying for the Cup and anything can happen once the chaotic playoffs start in April, but history and conventional wisdom generally say that many of the usual suspects will be the competitors over the next few months, starting with the final two teams that competed for the trophy last season.

"I think the NHL sometimes gets the reputation that it's got a lot of parity and that's just kind of not true, at least in the last 10 years or so," said Caesars Sportsbook head of hockey Karry Shreeve. "Twelve out of 16 teams that were in the last postseason get into the next postseason. Obviously, the trick is nailing those 12 teams, but we're gonna see a lot of the same stuff."

Oilers, Panthers lead the way again

Getting back to the Stanley Cup Final isn't easy, but if there's one team that knows something about it, it's the reigning champions.

After sneaking into the playoffs as an 8-seed and fighting their way to a Final appearance in 2023, the Florida Panthers dominated the NHL last season, recording a straight-up favorite record of 46-18-2 (a profit of 5.23 units) and overperforming on their preseason points total by 11.5 points, according to ESPN Research. It ended with the Panthers hoisting the first Stanley Cup in franchise history.

Florida will seek to be the first repeat champion since their in-state rival, the Tampa Bay Lightning, did it in 2022. That year, the Bolts outperformed their preseason points total by just 1.5 points. For the 2024-25 campaign, the Panthers' regular-season point total stands at 102.5 points and their odds to win the Cup are +1000.

The team getting the most attention from sportsbooks and bettors alike is the 2023-24 runner-up Oilers, who show a league-leading preseason point total of 108.5, as well as the leading odds to capture the President's Trophy (+550) and, of course, the Stanley Cup.

"The Oilers are best for the customers right now if they do come through this season. They've been bet the most in terms of stake, not necessarily ticket count, but they have been the highest bet team," Shreeve said. "The Panthers may have been the more complete team [in the 2024 Final], but the Oilers

have the superstar and that really does play large for somebody that wants to place a bet over the summer as, 'Let me just simply bet the best player.'"

BetMGM, DraftKings, ESPN BET and FanDuel all show Edmonton as their most-backed team to win the Cup by both bets and handle, taking around a quarter of the money market-wide.

Florida is seeing comparatively very little interest from bettors. ESPN BET says that, of the top six favorites, the Panthers have the lowest ticket and handle count, while BetMGM says that the team has just 4.2% of the bets and money, ninth in the league for both.

"A lot of times, just because they won last year doesn't mean they'll win the following year, but it has happened," DraftKings sportsbook director Johnny Avello told ESPN. "There are teams that go back-to-back, but it's difficult to do."

An open field

In all likelihood, there won't be a repeat Stanley Cup Final matchup and there could be a new champion. A few are standing out among sportsbooks and bettors ahead of the new campaign.

The first is the New York Rangers, who are perennially one of the biggest wagers both for futures and game-to-game. They stand at +1400 to win the Cup at ESPN BET, and are a top-three pick by bets and handle at several sportsbooks, with BetMGM and Caesars reporting the Blueshirts as one of their biggest liabilities for futures.

"The Rangers are just staples for taking money every year in the future book," said Avello. "We know that the Rangers are gonna be a liability every game."

Another popular team this season is the Colorado Avalanche, who will look to return to the sport's pinnacle after winning it all in 2022, showing +1100 odds to do so. BetMGM and DraftKings both report the Avs as a top-five selection for bettors, though other books say the action on them is a bit cooler.

The Nashville Predators, who made the high-profile acquisitions of Steven Stamkos, Jonathan Marchessault and Brady Skjei, among others, are +1600 to win the Stanley Cup (ninth on the odds board) and have been one of the most popular "dark horse" picks, according to ESPN BET.

BetMGM, Caesars and FanDuel all report significant action on the Preds, with Rasp saying, "they've naturally been a favorite for everybody" given the splashes they made. However, DraftKings hasn't seen the same levels of fervor for Nashville, as they've gotten just 3% of the bets and 6% of the handle to win the Cup.

"The Predators are getting action because they, out of all teams, probably won the offseason," Shreeve said. "But I don't know if that always translates to next July when it matters most."

Other teams receiving a fair amount of action include the Devils (+1000) and Toronto Maple Leafs (+1200), while previous darlings like the Dallas Stars (+1000) and Carolina Hurricanes (+1400) are not drawing as much bettor attention.

A new day in Utah

The 2024-25 season will also see an NHL team call Salt Lake City home for the first time, as the Utah Hockey Club will begin operations after moving from Arizona.

Relocation hasn't been kind to modern teams, according to ESPN Research, as the previous two franchises to move, the 2011-12 Winnipeg Jets and 1997-98 Carolina Hurricanes, both missed the playoffs after beginning the campaigns with at least the sixth-longest championship odds in the league.

However, there is precedent for relocating teams performing well. The 1996-97 Phoenix Coyotes were +2500 to win the Stanley Cup and made the playoffs, while the 1993-94 Dallas Stars did even better, losing in the conference semifinals after beginning the season with +6000 odds to win it all, eighth-longest in the league.

Then there's the 1995-96 Colorado Avalanche, who had built up momentum the season prior as the Quebec Nordiques and came into the campaign with the third-shortest odds to win the Cup at +800. They ultimately cashed those tickets, winning the championship that season.

While Utah won't have nearly as high expectations going into this campaign, given their 100-1 title odds, bettors are backing the newly minted team in other ways.

BetMGM reports that Utah has taken 17.2% of handle to win the Western Conference, third-most of any team and their biggest liability in that market. DraftKings says that the Hockey Club is its most-bet team to make the playoffs, currently at +140 odds.

The books will also be aware of adjusting the team's power ranking as the season goes on so that it doesn't continue to get beat by bettors on a future and game-to-game basis.

"What I wanted to do this summer was to find who the next Vancouver was going to be. Vancouver last year took the league by storm at the beginning, and us as a book, we kind of got beat up for it, the customers were on top of that faster than we were," said Shreeve. "Utah kind of fits that bill and they fit it because these last couple years, teams that finish the last 25% of their regular season significantly higher than their full regular season, then that has tended to drift into the next season."

Awards season

Given the immense betting expectations and popularity for the Oilers, it should come as little surprise that Connor McDavid is dominating the odds and action to win the Hart Trophy as well.

The 27-year-old is the +140 favorite to take home his fourth MVP award and third in five seasons. Big money bettors don't seem keen to bet against him doing so, as he has upwards of 60% of the handle at BetMGM, Draftkings and FanDuel.

Auston Matthews (+850) and reigning winner Nathan MacKinnon (+500) are attracting a respectable amount of smaller wagers market-wide, but sportsbooks aren't anticipating the market to heat up until the season actually begins.

"The season needs to be going on and you need to have these moments with the players," Rasp said, alluding to Matthews' four-goal game and highlight reel goals from Jack Hughes (+1200) last season. "When stuff starts happening like that, that's when we'll start to take the money on those players."

A much more interesting market this preseason has been for the Jack Adams Award, given to the coach of the year. The consensus leader across sportsbooks is Sheldon Keefe, who will be in his first season with the Devils and shows anywhere from +400 to +700 odds. While the former Maple Leafs boss is seeing some decent ticket write, the most intriguing action has been on the coach he faced in Czechia.

Lindy Ruff, the former longtime Sabres head coach who returns to the team this year, is seeing relatively long odds ranging anywhere from +1400 to +2500. Many bettors believe his return could spark the Sabres to break the longest playoff drought in NHL history, which would surely make him the Adams winner.

To that end, Ruff has taken an astounding 78.9% of the handle at BetMGM. Rasp says that the huge money number was the result of a few big wagers at the sportsbook and that he was "fine" with accepting them.

"It's a team that is expected to be better than they were last year. People just look for that big price on a guy who has a better chance of winning the award than what maybe they're being priced at," he said. "I don't see it happening, but I think it was a good educated wager to say the least. Like, it's not impossible for that to happen."

The Great 895?

There are fun specialty markets at sportsbooks this season, but perhaps none more enticing than for Alex Ovechkin to finally break Wayne Gretzky's career goals record, which currently sits at 894.

Ovechkin needs just 42 more goals to stand alone as the NHL's all-time leading scorer, but his ability to do so this season is dubious: The 39-year-old achieved this goal total as recently as 2022-23, but last season saw his production drop off significantly to "just" 31 goals.

The odds reflect his goalscoring ability dropping off with age, as he's seeing a consensus +1000 to break the record this season. Still, many fans are taking a flier on him to achieve the feat, particularly in the Washington, D.C. area.

"We're certainly getting action on it," said Avello. "That's the kind of bet that our users like to play. Something where you get some pretty good odds, something to root for the whole year."

ESPN / Best goalie masks across the NHL in the upcoming season

By Anthony Gharib – October 8, 2024

The 2024-25 NHL season is here, marking the beginning of another run to the Stanley Cup and, most importantly, new goalie masks.

The league's top goaltenders are set to show up in style while protecting their respective goals.

Playing in his final season, Marc-Andre Fleury is going out strong with a handful of bold looks. Jake Oettinger continues the theme of having his friends and an otter with golf clubs on his mask. For his first season with the Ottawa Senators, Linus Ullmark will rock a red mask that includes Swedish Vikings.

Most notably, the debut of the Utah Hockey Club will bring fresh designs. Connor Ingram has a sweet Joker decal on his white and blue mask, while Karel Vejmelka has a 3D-heavy look.

Here's a look at some of the best goalie masks this upcoming season.

Anaheim Ducks

Lukas Dostal

With the Ducks rebrand officially complete, Dostal took the chance to add the world famous logo to his mask on the bottom. There's also a sweet detail of what looks to be a silhouette of the Disneyland castle above his face.

Boston Bruins

Joonas Korpisalo

Intimidation can be a key component of strong goalkeeping, and Korpisalo's mask leans into exactly that idea. There's a huge bear decal with glowing eyes on the top, scary enough to potentially distract a player from taking a shot.

Buffalo Sabres

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen

One of Luukkonen's masks is heavy on ice accompanied by a raging buffalo. The combination creates a look that pops instantly. Luukkonen also has a sweet half-blue, half-black-colored mask.

Devon Levi

Sticking with the buffalo theme, Levi has a design with red eyes on the side of his look.

Calgary Flames

Dan Vladar

Vladar has a simple flame-themed look that can be paired with any uniform combination.

Carolina Hurricanes

Pyotr Kochetkov

Raging animals seem to be a theme around the league, and Kochetkov has arguably the most realistic. A raging bear covers the top of the mask alongside 3D logos and elements from his hometown of Penza, Russia. He had a similar look last season.

Chicago Blackhawks

Petr Mrazek

Popular goalie mask artist David Gunnarsson subtly weaved in the Blackhawks logo for a sleek design.

Laurent Brossoit

Brossoit's mask is primarily covered in a design of red bricks. The Blackhawks feather is also nestled near the ear pocket on both sides to cap off a simple and effective mask.

Colorado Avalanche

Alexandar Georgiev

Nicknamed "The Abominable Snowman," Georgiev's mask includes a gaping mouth and red eyes, reminiscent of a Yeti that may scour around the Rocky Mountains.

Justus Annunen

Annunen opted for something a little bit more simple compared to Georgiev. His mask includes a silhouette of the Rocky Mountains.

Columbus Blue Jackets

Elvis Merzlikins

One of Merzlikins' masks has a deeper meaning this season -- he dons the No. 13 on the chin, in honor of teammate Johnny Gaudreau, who died in August. There's also a plate of pasta on the left of it, Gaudreau's favorite post game meal, and a bottle of beer on the right, Gaudreau's choice of drink after a game, according to the Columbus Dispatch.

Daniil Tarasov

One of the neat design quirks is when goalies include teeth where theirs would actually be. Tarasov has exactly that in this mask -- not to mention a skull on the top with red surrounding it.

Dallas Stars

Jake Oettinger

Oettinger loves two important details for his masks -- an otter and his friends. That theme continues this season with another fun look.

Detroit Red Wings

Ville Husso

Husso kept it basic with his mask, leaning into the Red Wings brand.

Cam Talbot

In his first season with Detroit, Talbot opted for something simple rather than his typical heavy element masks. The red "D" silhouette on both sides of the mask is similar to the MLB's Detroit Tigers logo. The initials of Talbot's twins are also included on the back -- a staple of his masks.

Edmonton Oilers

Stuart Skinner

Skinner might be near the top of the leaderboard when it comes to neat details. Of course, there's his mustache near the chin strap, but there's also three bear paw prints representing his wife and two kids.

Calvin Pickard

Pickard's latest oil design mask included elements of previous ones, creating a clean look.

Florida Panthers

Sergei Bobrovsky

Big Bob's "Brick by Brick" series returns for another season with a familiar look.

Spencer Knight

There's a classic feel to Knight's mask as it's transformed into the Panthers logo with 3D details. It also includes kid drawings scattered around the look.

Los Angeles Kings

Darcy Kuemper

Kuemper's debut Kings season comes with a sleek mask that includes palm trees and a beautiful crown.

David Rittich

It takes a second to identify, but Rittich's mask has a famous character nestled on the back of it -- Bart Simpson. Equipped with a smirk and crossed arms, Simpson blends into the LA Kings crown.

Minnesota Wild

Marc-Andre Fleury

Fleury is coming in hot for his final NHL season. His dark green look creates a menacing mask, but he can keep it light too with a white design that includes a large "M" on both sides. The bears on two of the masks are one of the more neatly drawn in the league.

Filip Gustavsson

It's a nice look for Gustavsson this season with a simple, effective mask full of Wild colors.

Montreal Canadiens

Sam Montembeault

It's a heavy Canadiens theme for Montembeault with the colors. His mask has a neat touch -- the famous torch that's passed at each season's Canadiens home opener is hidden near the ear.

Cayden Primeau

Primeau, similar to Montembeault, leans into the Canadiens palette for a simple design.

Nashville Predators

Juuse Saros

The "Pred Rogue Rage Splatter" theme has been common for Saros dating back to 2022. That continues this season with a fresh design.

Scott Wedgewood

For better or for worse, Wedgewood's mask introduces a new character -- the "Wedge Reaper."

New Jersey Devils

Jacob Markstrom

Markstrom plays to the Devils' namesake in one of the more detailed masks across the league.

Jake Allen

Allen has a sweet, simple look that matches the Devils colorway.

New York Islanders

Semyon Varlamov

Varlamov had a similar graffiti look last season, and it returns again with a slight remix this time around.

New York Rangers

Igor Shesterkin

The Statue of Liberty was a common element of Shesterkin's masks last season and that continues again. This season, its silhouette also appears alongside key New York City buildings.

Ottawa Senators

Linus Ullmark

For his first mask as part of the Senators, Ullmark's fun look includes Swedish Vikings and a Viking sailboat.

Anton Forsberg

Forsberg's Ottawa-centric mask includes the Parliament Buildings and ducks scattered throughout it.

Philadelphia Flyers

Samuel Ersson

Ersson's mask does a creative job of utilizing the Flyers' logo with Philadelphia's famous "City of Brotherly Love" moniker.

Ivan Fedotov

Artists are not shy about drawing animals on masks -- and Fedotov's look is no exception. Focused on the Phoenix bird, the details of the design pop out, including a glowing Flyers' logo on the top.

Pittsburgh Penguins

Tristan Jarry

It's hard to find a more creative look than the mask that Jarry could potentially wear this season. The animated comedy series "Tom and Jerry" is prominently featured in the design, including Jerry catching a fish on the line with a goalie stick.

Alex Nedeljkovic

Nedeljkovic has a matte and gloss look to work with, both including a sweet Penguins logo.

San Jose Sharks

Vitek Vanecek

It's a simple yet effective look for Vanecek with shark teeth displayed throughout the mask.

Yaroslav Askarov

Askarov's mask is one that will make Harvey Dent proud -- it's a two-sided look with opposite coloring on each side and consistent 3D elements.

Seattle Kraken

Joey Daccord

It's the best of both worlds for Daccord. He has the option to go with a simple look or an eye-popping one that's equipped with a bold octopus.

St. Louis Blues

Jordan Binnington

Nicknamed the "Blue Grim Reaper," Binnington's mask has sweet elements -- trumpets on both sides and an eerie grim reaper on the back.

Joel Hofer

The cursive lettering and prominent Blues logo makes for a clean mask for Hofer.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Jonas Johansson

An electric team name means an equally electric mask for Johansson. His look is full of 3D lightning bolts.

Toronto Maple Leafs

Joseph Woll

There may not be a more fun name for a mask this season -- "The Blue Wolf of Woll," which lives up to the hype with a detailed cartoon wolf.

Anthony Stolarz

Stolarz kept it simple with his look, opting for a blue chrome design that includes multiple maple leaves.

Utah Hockey Club

Connor Ingram

With the newly established Utah Hockey Club, Ingram had room for a neat design and he delivered. He has a clean white and blue look with a Heath Ledger "Joker" drawing on the back.

Karel Vejmelka

Vejmelka's mask is full of razor sharp details for a nice look.

Vancouver Canucks

Arturs Silovs

Silovs' Canucks-centric look includes a Greek god on the side and a skating figure on the top.

Thatcher Demko

Demko is known for putting movie characters on his masks -- last season he stole the show when he included Jacobim Mugatu, the popular character played by Will Ferrell in the 2001 film "Zoolander," on a design. So far, it looks like he'll keep that look in his rotation to start out the season.

Vegas Golden Knights

Adin Hill

Hill had strong looks last season and it looks like he's going to keep some of them in his rotation, headlined by a mask that includes a sweet tribute to Vegas.

Ilya Samsonov

Samsonov's first season in Las Vegas comes with a busy mask full of strong 3D details.

Washington Capitals**Charlie Lindgren**

Patriotism comes first for Lindgren's mask, with the American flag on top and a bald eagle on both sides.

Logan Thompson

The details are stunning for both of Thompson's masks. One of them includes a screaming eagle, while the other has key elements of Washington D.C., like the Lincoln Memorial.

Winnipeg Jets**Connor Hellebuyck**

Hellebuyck's all-white design pops with a hand drawn fish on the top.

Kaapo Kahkonen

Playing to the Jets' namesake, Kahkonen's mask has a flying plane on both sides.

[Sportsnet.ca / Report: Blue Jackets' Boone Jenner expected to be out long-term](#)

By Sportsnet Staff – October 8, 2024

The news isn't good for Boone Jenner.

The Columbus Blue Jackets captain is expected to be out long-term after suffering an upper-body injury in practice on Friday, Brian Hedger of the Columbus Dispatch reported Monday.

Coach Dean Evason told reporters that Jenner addressed his teammates at practice on Monday.

The Blue Jackets signed veteran forward Kevin Labanc this past weekend in the aftermath of injuries to Jenner and Dmitry Voronkov.

Jenner has dealt with injuries each of the last three years, missing at least 10 games each season.

The 31-year-old native of Dorchester, Ont., had 22 goals and 13 assists in 58 games last season.

Sports Illustrated / Blue Jackets Claim Former Maple Leafs Forward

By Jacob Punturi – October 8, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets enter the 2024-2025 season with low expectations. In a crowded Metropolitan Division, the Jackets are projected to be near the bottom of the standings again. Despite the pessimistic outlook, the organization is making every move it can to be competitive.

The Blue Jackets weren't quite done making moves as official rosters were due to the league. After a huge group of players were placed on waivers, Columbus found some much needed depth for their forward group. According to NHL insider Elliotte Friedman, the Jackets claimed forward Zach Aston-Reese after being waived by the Vegas Golden Knights.

Aston-Reese joins the Blue Jackets hoping to provide spark and energy to their bottom-six forward group. The 30-year-old forward is now with his fifth organization in the NHL. He spent last season with the Detroit Red Wings organization. The majority of his season was played in the AHL with the Grand Rapids Griffins, but he did skate in three games with the NHL club.

Aston-Reese began his NHL career with the Pittsburgh Penguins. Signed as an undrafted free agent out of the NCAA, he became a quality fourth-line winger for the Pens. His best offensive campaign came during the 2019-2019 season, when he recorded eight goals and finished with 17 points. Over his NHL career, he has appeared in 310 games with 42 goals and 80 points.

Sports Illustrated / Insider: Blue Jackets Captain Injury Looks Serious

By Nick Horwat – October 8, 2024

It hasn't been an easy few months for the Columbus Blue Jackets organization and their fans, and it doesn't seem to be getting easier as the season gets ready to start. Captain Boone Jenner suffered an injury during a preseason practice and it's possible he miss a lot of time.

Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell said to the Athletic that Jenner is going to get a second opinion, but is expected to start the season on long-term injured reserve.

Despite getting a second opinion, Elliotte Friedman said on the 32 Thoughts Podcast that the outcoming isn't looking good.

"I don't like what I'm hearing," Friedman said. "We'll see what Jenner comes up with, but I don't like what I'm hearing. It sounds like a pretty significant injury."

Aaron Portzline of the Athletic added that Jenner could be out for multiple months rather than just a couple of weeks.

Reports indicate that Jenner took an awkward fall into the boards during a recent practice and was diagnosed with an upper-body injury.

Injuries have piled up for Jenner over the last few years with him only playing in 185 games in the last three seasons.

"I just feel terrible for the organization," Friedman said. "It sounds like it could be quite a while."

Jenner has been with the Blue Jackets organization his entire career after being a second-round draft pick (37th overall) of Columbus in the 2011 NHL Draft. Since then, he's gone on to play 715 games in the NHL with 192 goals, 172 assists, and 364 total points.

The Blue Jackets named Jenner the seventh captain in franchise history ahead of the 2020-21 season. Columbus hasn't made a playoff appearance since defeating the Toronto Maple Leafs in the qualifying round of the 2020 Stanley Cup Playoffs that were played in the bubble.

Jenner has two years remaining on a contract that earns him \$3.75 million annually.

No matter how Jenner's injury turns out, it's expected to be another tough season for the Blue Jackets.