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Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets GM Waddell seeking NHL talent for top two draft picks

By Brian Hedger – June 26, 2025

The Blue Jackets' two first-round picks in the 2025 NHL Draft are available, but it'll probably take an established player to get one or both.

That's the main reason Don Waddell, the Jackets' president of hockey operations/general manager, still has the 14th and 20th overall picks in a draft held June 27-28 at the Peacock Theater in Los Angeles while GMs across the league operate remotely in a "decentralized" format.

"We could've traded both picks by now," Waddell said June 26 at Nationwide Arena. "I've had offers for both of them, but I didn't feel there was value for us. So, we're not just going to trade the picks because I said we're going to trade them. We're going to trade them if it's a meaningful trade for our hockey club."

Finding the right price is proving to be a bigger challenge than Waddell, a veteran GM, anticipated when he first said in May 2025 that his two highest picks were available. Each time he's inquired about adding an NHL player or two for them, it hasn't been enough.

"Right now, there seems to be a shortage of players, because everybody wants players for players," Waddell said. "There's a few teams that don't have first-round picks that might be looking for (picks), but most teams are trying to make deals ... 'hockey trades' for players. So, it's been a different year."

The Blue Jackets have nine pending unrestricted free agents who can explore the open market starting July 1 plus power forward Dmitri Voronkov as a key restricted free agent needing a new contract. Voronkov's signing rights still belong to the Blue Jackets, which allows Waddell to keep his contract situation warming on a back burner.

The nine UFAs are a different story because each could sign elsewhere, including those the Blue Jackets consider "priority" players.

Adding established NHL players via trades would provide a clearer picture for filling out the Jackets' roster, but might take patience to see if incoming offers rise as the first round unfolds.

Waddell would much prefer to get something done before the first round even starts but has found it a difficult task.

"I don't know where all the (NHL) players went, because there doesn't seem to be enough players to go around for everybody," Waddell said. "I guess we'll find out in another week or so, but ... I've talked to a lot of teams. I've been offered to move up from (14th overall) into the eight through 13 range (of picks), but we don't see the point in that right now. Maybe that changes on draft day, when you have multiple picks in the first round, but right now, it's been a ... I'll say, 'Very unique,' last few weeks for sure."

Moving up to eighth overall, which would likely require cashing in both of the Blue Jackets' picks in the first round and possibly more, isn't high enough for Waddell. The way the Blue Jackets see this draft class breaking down, there's a distinct group of seven prospects at the top and then a drop.

"I think pretty much everyone agrees the top seven guys are going to go with the first seven (picks) in some order, but after that ... the guy who goes eight, we might have him 20th on our list," Waddell said. "It doesn't mean they're not going to play (in the NHL) or it's a bad draft. It's just after that first group of (seven) players, there's certainly a drop-off."

That drop-off is likely the biggest deterrent to the Blue Jackets getting offers to acquire established NHL players for picks, even among 10 teams without a pick in the first round.

"We've had lots of discussions the last few weeks with a lot of teams," Waddell said. "There's certainly some teams that don't even have first-round picks that are waiting to see what might be available, and they'll start with 10, 11, 12 and work their way through."

Waddell did complete two trades June 26, including one that sent backup goalie Daniil Tarasov to the Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers for a 2025 fifth-round pick (160th overall).

Following that deal, the Blue Jackets currently have eight picks: 14th and 20th overall (first round), 77th overall (third round), 109th overall (fourth round), 160th overall (fifth round), 173rd overall (sixth round), 205th and 218th overall (seventh round).

"We'll make our hockey club better for today, but we've also got to guard the future too," Waddell said. "So, if we end up keeping both (first-round) picks and picking them, then we'll get players for the future. I'm still pretty confident there's something that's going to break here ... before the draft, and if it happens, great. If it doesn't, we'll move forward."

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets trade Daniil Tarasov to Florida Panthers for fifth-round pick

By Brian Hedger – June 26, 2025

A door for Blue Jackets rookie Jet Greaves to land a full-time roster spot in 2025-26 as one of the team's top two goalies appears to have opened.

The Blue Jackets have traded backup goalie Daniil Tarasov to the back-to-back Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers for a fifth-round pick (160th overall) in the 2025 NHL draft, which will be held June 27-28 in Los Angeles.

"On behalf of the Blue Jackets, I'd like to thank Daniil for his contributions to our organization over the past four years," Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell said in a statement. "He is an outstanding young man, and we wish he and his family well in the future."

Tarasov, a pending restricted free agent, played sparingly in 2024-25 as Elvis Merzlikins' backup. He struggled in the role, going 7-10-2 with a 3.54 goals-against average and .881 save percentage in 20 games. He needed an AHL conditioning stint to regain his timing after multiple poor outings led to long stints between appearances.

Greaves, meanwhile, seized his opportunity. His scorching stint to finish the season helped the Blue Jackets win six-straight games and wind up just two points shy of a playoff spot.

Listed at 6-feet, 190 pounds, Greaves is five inches shorter than Tarasov and undersized as a goalie. That's why the Jackets were able to sign him out of the junior ranks in 2021 from the Ontario Hockey League's Barrie Colts. Since turning pro, Greaves has worked his way up the organization's depth chart while starring in net for the AHL's Cleveland Monsters the past four years.

He has also impressed Blue Jackets teammates and coaches during his stints as an injury fill-in the past three years, culminating with the outstanding stretch to end last season.

After being recalled April 10 as an injury replacement for Merzlikins (concussion), Greaves started five straight games and went 5-0-0 with a .975 save percentage, two shutouts and just four goals allowed against 156 shots.

Tarasov, meanwhile, gets a fresh start with a team that has won the Stanley Cup the past two years with former Blue Jackets goalie Sergei Bobrovsky leading the way and former Blue Jackets assistant GM Bill Zito heading up the front office.

A 6-5, 203-pound netminder, Tarasov is only 26 and still has high-end potential at the NHL level. He's quick and athletic, especially at his size, and showed elite ability in spurts during his four seasons with the Blue Jackets. His problems were doing it consistently and staying healthy enough to play.

Tarasov, selected in the third round of the 2017 draft (86th overall), has battled multiple leg injuries that included hip surgery in 2022 and also missed extended time with at least one concussion. He's from the same hometown in Russia as Bobrovsky, Novokuznetsk. Bobrovsky grew up cheering for Tarasov's father, who was a tenured professional goalie.

Waddell also completed a swap of organizational depth forwards on June 26, sending AHL Cleveland forward Cam Butler to the Minnesota Wild for Brendan Gaunce, who has one year remaining on a two-year contract. Gaunce is rejoining the Blue Jackets after playing for Columbus and Cleveland from 2021-24.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets want offseason upgrades to start taking shape at NHL Draft

By Aaron Portzline – June 27, 2025

Columbus Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell is so driven to make immediate improvements, and he has spoken so openly about his willingness to trade one or both of his first-round picks for immediate help, that the opening of the NHL Draft on Friday night might have a different vibe to it.

Will there be disappointment if Waddell and his amateur scouts actually draft players with the No. 14 and No. 20 overall picks?

“We could have traded both picks by now,” said Waddell, who is now entering his second year in charge of one of the NHL’s youngest and more promising rosters. “We’ve had offers for both of them, but I didn’t feel there was value for us. We’re not just going to trade the picks because I said we’re going to trade ’em. We’re going to trade them if they’re meaningful trades for our hockey club.

“Our goal is to make our hockey team better today, but we also have to guard the future, too. If we end up keeping those picks and (taking players), we’ll get players for the future. I’m still pretty confident that something’s going to break here. If (trades happen), great. If it doesn’t, we’ll move forward.”

Put another way: Waddell is not going to accept the best offer on the table; he’s waiting for the right offer. But there are a couple of things to consider before 7 p.m., when the draft opens and the New York Islanders are officially on the clock.

First, Waddell might not get his strongest offers until the draft begins, particularly when it starts to get closer to the 14th pick.

This year’s crop of talent is seen as good but not great, and Waddell’s potential trade partners won’t want to swing a significant trade with the Blue Jackets — likely parting with a roster player — if the player they wish to draft is no longer on the board.

“Certainly there’s been some of those discussions,” Waddell said. “I would say, if somebody steps up with the right move prior to (the first round), we would love to do it prior than to sit there and wait for the pick. We get to (No. 14) and my amateur guys will say, ‘I love this guy who’s there, too.’

“We have lots of discussion the last three weeks with teams, certainly teams that don’t have a first-round pick and they’ll see who’s available. They’ll start with (No.) 10, 11, 12 ...”

The Anaheim Ducks pick 10th, followed by the Pittsburgh Penguins at No. 11 and No. 12, and the Detroit Red Wings at No. 13. Ducks GM Pat Verbeek has been one of the NHL’s most active GMs in the early going this offseason.

The teams without a first-round pick are the Colorado Avalanche, Dallas Stars, Edmonton Oilers, Florida Panthers, Minnesota Wild, New Jersey Devils, New York Rangers, Tampa Bay Lightning, Toronto Maple Leafs and Vegas Golden Knights.

Waddell is looking to upgrade the Blue Jackets at just about every position on the ice. In no particular order, he’d like:

- A right-side defenseman who could log top-four minutes to help balance the Blue Jackets’ back end

- A top-six or top-nine winger who could help boost one of the NHL's top emerging forward groups
- A right-shot center for the third or fourth line who can excel at faceoffs
- A veteran goaltender to partner with young Jet Greaves, who will be making the leap to the NHL next season

"I feel comfortable that we're going to be able to do a few things to make our hockey club better," Waddell said. "That's our hope. You have to remember, it doesn't stop on July 1, either."

What happens during the draft for the Blue Jackets could have an impact on how they handle their many players who can become unrestricted free agents on Tuesday. But if they swing and miss on adding immediate roster help, those players may become a priority before the market opens.

That list includes defensemen Ivan Provorov and Dante Fabbro, and forwards Justin Danforth, Sean Kuraly, James van Riemsdyk and others. The Blue Jackets are actively trying to sign Fabbro and Danforth, but it's likely Kuraly will move on after four years in Columbus.

The Blue Jackets made a couple of minor moves Thursday, one of which added to their pile of picks in this year's draft.

Goaltender Daniil Tarasov was traded to the Florida Panthers for a fifth-round pick (No. 160 overall), ending Tarasov's eight-year stay in the organization — he was drafted in the third round in 2017 — and a four-year run of play with the Blue Jackets.

Then, later in the day, the Blue Jackets made a minor-league trade, sending forward Cameron Butler to Minnesota for Brendan Gaunce, who spent three years in the Columbus organization — playing 59 NHL games — before signing as a free agent with the Wild last summer.

Gaunce has one year remaining on the two-way deal he signed with Minnesota. He's due to make \$775,000 at the NHL level and \$550,000 in the AHL. Gaunce, who would have to clear waivers at the end of training camp to join AHL Cleveland, was the Monsters' captain in 2023-24.

The Athletic / Columbus Blue Jackets trade Daniil Tarasov to Florida Panthers for draft pick

By Aaron Portzline – June 26, 2025

It was clear early last season that Columbus Blue Jackets coaches had lost confidence in goaltender Daniil Tarasov, allowing him to sit for long stretches of games and later calling up Jet Greaves from the minor leagues when starter Elvis Merzlikins needed a rest.

It made for an uncertain future in Columbus for Tarasov, and it came to an end on Thursday.

The Blue Jackets traded Tarasov to the Florida Panthers for a fifth-round pick (No. 160 overall) in this weekend's NHL draft, the first of what could be several moves for second-year Columbus general manager Don Waddell over the next week or so.

"On behalf of the Blue Jackets, I'd like to thank Daniil for his contributions to our organization over the past four years," Waddell said in a statement. "He is an outstanding young man, and we wish he and his family well in the future."

The Blue Jackets were playing to extend a qualifying offer to Tarasov, a restricted free agent, but it has been clear since the end of last season — when Greaves went on a hot streak in the final week of the season — that Greaves had supplanted Tarasov on the depth chart.

Merzlikins still has two years remaining on a contract that carries a \$5.4 million cap hit but he's been, statistically, one of the worst goaltenders in the NHL over the last three seasons. It's unclear if Waddell could trade him — it would take a creative package — or the club could consider a contract buyout.

The trade must have pleased Tarasov. Not only does he get a change of scenery and a chance to stay in the NHL, but he's in line to be Sergei Bobrovsky's backup with the Panthers, who have won two straight Stanley Cup championships. Bobrovsky and Tarasov are both from Novokuznetsk, Russia.

Tarasov has often spoken openly about his admiration for Bobrovsky, who spent seven seasons with the Blue Jackets — winning two Vezina trophies as the NHL's top goaltender, along with a franchise-record 213 games — before departing after the 2019 season.

The trade also makes sense on another level: Florida GM Bill Zito, who was an assistant GM in Columbus before taking the job with the Panthers in 2020, was part of the Blue Jackets management group that drafted Tarasov with a third-round pick (No. 86 overall) in 2017.

Tarasov, 26, was 19-34-6 with a .898 save percentage and 3.44 goals-against average in 65 games for the Blue Jackets, including 61 starts.

On Jan. 18, Tarasov made 26 saves in the Blue Jackets' 1-0 overtime loss to the New York Rangers in Madison Square Garden, becoming the first NHL goaltender to earn his first career shutout and suffer a loss in the same game.

The Athletic / Canadiens, Blue Jackets finalists in trade talks for Islanders' Noah Dobson: Sources

By Chris Johnston – June 27, 2025

As the New York Islanders continue working through trade scenarios involving free-agent defenseman Noah Dobson, league sources said they are down to two potential suitors: the Montreal Canadiens and Columbus Blue Jackets.

Dobson wishes to join a team on the upswing toward contention, and both of those landing spots are viewed as favorable.

The 25-year-old right-shot defenseman is expected to sign a contract extension as part of a trade from the Islanders. His next deal will carry a cap hit of at least \$9.5 million, according to league sources.

The Islanders explored a potential extension with Dobson before gauging the trade market. Dobson drew considerable interest, but only a limited number of clubs were able to meet the significant acquisition cost the Islanders are seeking in a trade, while also being able to sign him to a long-term contract to complete the transaction.

of cap-era draft busts?

Every NHL team's worst value contract in 2024-25

Dobson's previous contract carried a \$4 million cap hit and saw him produce among the top-10 scorers for NHL defensemen across the past four seasons.

He has spent his entire career on Long Island after the Islanders drafted him with the 12th pick in 2018. Dobson had a career-best 70 points for the team two years ago and finished last season with 10 goals and 39 points in 71 games.

The Canadiens are coming off a season in which they qualified for the playoffs and lost to the Washington Capitals in the first round. The Blue Jackets saw a big year-over-year jump and finished with 89 points, two shy of qualifying for a wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference.

The St. Louis Blues were among the teams previously reported to be engaged in Dobson trade talks.

The Athletic / Ranking every NHL team's salary-cap situation, from best to worst

By Harman Dayal, Sean Gentile and James Mirtle – June 26, 2025

The NHL offseason is here. Let's do some more math!

We've put together this list for the last several years around this time, as it's a good cheat sheet to look at how active teams are going to be able to be on July 1.

Our methodology is as follows:

Take a team's signed players, project what they'll need to pay the restricted free agents who will make the lineup, subtract those going on long-term injured reserve, and you have a solid estimate of what they can spend in unrestricted free agency to fill out their rosters.

This is not an exact science. Some teams may play hardball with their restricted free agents and give them all cheap one-year deals; other clubs may go long, long term, and that would cost more. We tried to be as reasonable as possible in coming up with projections, but we're talking about 120-plus contract forecasts, calculated in a compressed window. They're not all going to hit the mark.

But we're trying to come as close as possible, with invaluable assists from PuckPedia, Evolving-Hockey and *The Athletic's* staff of beat writers.

Remember that this isn't a ranking of how strong these teams are, or are set up to become. We're simply ranking how much cap space they likely will have to improve their rosters, beyond players who are already under team control.

By our accounting, nearly half of the teams have \$15 million or more to spend after signing their RFAs, so this is likely going to be a wild offseason.

1. San Jose Sharks

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$58.4 million

RFAs estimate: \$4.7 million

LTIR candidate: Logan Couture (\$8 million)

Dead money deals: Martin Jones buyout (\$1.66 million), Nikolai Knyzhov buyout (\$466,000), Erik Karlsson retention (\$1.5 million), Tomas Hertl retention (\$1.387 million)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Jan Rutta, Alexandar Georgiev

Problem contracts: Marc-Eduard Vlasic (\$7 million), Barclay Goodrow (\$3.64 million)

Projected cap space: \$37.1 million

Analysis: When building their rosters, most teams strategize around how to stay under the cap ceiling. The Sharks, on the other hand, must create a plan to hit next season's \$70.6 million cap floor. We estimate that San Jose will be approximately \$12.2 million short, even accounting for its RFA extensions.

That gives San Jose's front office options — they can take on undesirable contracts for sweeteners (as they did with Jake Walman last summer) and/or they can attract free agents with contract offers in which they're willing to overpay on AAV, so long as they're shorter-term deals.

Upgrading the blue line must be the Sharks' top priority because they arguably don't have a single true top-four-caliber defenseman on the roster right now.

2. Columbus Blue Jackets

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$56.0 million

RFAs estimate: \$5 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Alex Wennberg buyout (\$891,667), Adam Boqvist buyout (\$533,333)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Dante Fabbro, Ivan Provorov, James van Riemsdyk, Jack Johnson, Sean Kuraly, Christian Fischer, Luke Kunin

Problem contracts: Damon Severson (\$6.25 million), Elvis Merzlikins (\$5.4 million)

Projected cap space: \$35.4 million

Analysis: The Blue Jackets, thanks to their surprising performance in 2024-25, an abundance of cap space and a desire to spend it, are one of the most interesting teams of the offseason.

Columbus, according to *The Athletic's* Aaron Portzline, wants a top-six forward, a right-shot center and a right-shot (right-side) defenseman who can play in the top four. They're also interested in overhauling their goaltending. Other than that ...

Some of that cap space could go to Dante Fabbro, who looked good on Zach Werenski's right side after Columbus plucked him off waivers. The same goes for Ivan Provorov. Both are in line for big paydays on the open market, though. What's clear is that, whether through free agency or the trade market, Don Waddell is big-game hunting. If Columbus is to build on last season, he'll have to land a target or two, and he has the necessary funds.

3. Carolina Hurricanes

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$67.9 million

RFAs estimate: \$0

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: None

Notable unsigned UFAs: Brent Burns, Dmitry Orlov, Jack Roslovic, Tyson Jost

Problem contracts: None

Projected cap space: \$27.6 million

Analysis: The core of one of the Eastern Conference's best teams is intact, but the Hurricanes still have some work to do. They'll have an open slot on their top pair once Brent Burns hits the market, and they continue their pursuit of a high-end winger capable of helping them clear some postseason hurdles.

The good news is that they have the money necessary to do both, thanks in part to Burns (\$8 million AAV) and Dmitry Orlov (\$7.75 million) coming off the books. Whether the Hurricanes replace them with in-house options or less expensive UFAs, there will be enough space available to make a splash.

The question is how they spend it. Is this Mitch Marner's landing spot? If not, Nikolaj Ehlers would make plenty of sense. Either way, Carolina has plenty of cap space and clear motivation to spend it.

4. Anaheim Ducks

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$76.2 million

RFAs estimate: \$16.7 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deal: Cam Fowler retention (\$2.5 million)

Notable unsigned UFA: Robby Fabbri

Problem contracts: None

Projected cap space: \$19.3 million

Analysis: The Ducks have already been one of the most active teams this offseason, and yet the fireworks may only be beginning in SoCal. GM Pat Verbeek has made it clear that he expects the Ducks to make the playoffs next season, a lofty goal that would require serious roster upgrades.

Anaheim has a mountain of cap space and trade chips it can wield to make aggressive moves, even after you factor in Mason McTavish and Lukas Dostal's big RFA projections. And that isn't even factoring in the possibility of a John Gibson trade, which seems likely given how weak the goaltending market is.

Only two Ducks forwards, Troy Terry and McTavish, crossed the 50-point mark this past season, and none hit 25 goals, so you'd imagine that adding a top-flight scoring winger or two will be a priority.

5. Chicago Blackhawks

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$77.1 million

RFAs estimate: \$4.1 million

LTIR candidate: Shea Weber (\$7.87 million)

Dead money deals: TJ Brodie buyout (\$3.23 million), Seth Jones retention (\$2.5 million)

Notable unsigned UFAs: None

Problem contracts: None

Projected cap space: \$18.4 million

Analysis: A few weeks ago, the Blackhawks were tracking as one of the low-key interesting teams of the offseason. They had money to spend, too many lineup holes to fill and a franchise player without much help.

Now, Scott Powers and Mark Lazerus are wondering if their big moves have already been made. Andre Burakovsky added talent to the mix and \$5.5 million to the ledger. Ryan Donato, who popped last season as a goal scorer, isn't hitting the open market, either. They're good players, but not needle-movers. So much for all that Mitch Marner talk.

Still, without any major RFA concerns — Philipp Kurashev is a non-tender candidate — the Blackhawks have plenty of flexibility, should they wish to use it.

6. Detroit Red Wings

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$77.3 million

RFAs estimate: \$4 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Justin Abdelkader buyout (\$1.06 million), Bonus overage (\$871,150)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Patrick Kane, Jeff Petry, Alex Lyon

Problem contracts: Vladimir Tarasenko (\$4.75 million), Justin Holl (\$3.4 million)

Projected cap space: \$18.2 million

Analysis: The Red Wings have close to a full roster signed, especially once their relatively inexpensive RFAs are accounted for. They can also create another \$2.3 million or more in cap space if they decide to execute a buyout.

Bringing back Kane would eat into that room a little, but they have considerable space to be aggressive in free agency, which is a good thing given their needs. In an ideal world, they'd add a top-six forward and a top-four defenseman, but that may be challenging given the limited options out there.

This is a huge offseason for GM Steve Yzerman to fill some holes and finally get this group to the postseason for the first time in a decade.

7. Florida Panthers

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$77.4 million

RFAs estimate: \$875,000

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: None

Notable unsigned UFAs: Sam Bennett, Aaron Ekblad, Brad Marchand, Nate Schmidt, Vitek Vanecek

Problem contracts: None

Projected cap space: \$18.1 million

Analysis: The defending champs have some tough decisions to make, but the fact that they don't have any dead money or poor contracts certainly helps. In fact, they probably have the cleanest cap sheet in the league, which is part of why they're the champs.

Bringing back Bennett would figure to cost at least \$8 million, even on a hometown discount, which very likely doesn't leave enough cash for Ekblad, Marchand and a second goaltender. Regardless, the Panthers look set to again dress a top team next season, even if it means digging for a couple of bargain buys with the limited cap space they have left after signing some of their big-name UFAs.

8. (tie) Pittsburgh Penguins

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$77.5 million

RFAs estimate: \$6.5 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deal: Jack Johnson buyout (\$916,667)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Matt Grzelcyk, Matt Nieto

Problem contracts: Erik Karlsson (\$10 million cap hit), Kris Letang (\$6.5 million), Ryan Graves (\$4.5 million)

Projected cap space: \$18 million

Analysis: For the first time in a long time, the cap's upper limit isn't a concern for the Penguins, who could create even more space ahead of July 1. Bryan Rust and Rickard Rakell, both productive wingers with relatively high price tags, are available for the right price, and not many other teams are so clearly in "sell mode."

That doesn't mean Pittsburgh isn't interested in adding salary; it's just more likely to come in the form of younger players, particularly via trade. They have two first-rounders, a second-rounder and three third-rounders in the 2026 draft alone.

Also, while defenseman Pierre-Olivier Joseph seems like a non-tender candidate, we included him in Pittsburgh's overall RFA bill.

8. (tie) Los Angeles Kings

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$77.5 million

RFAs estimate: \$3.7 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Mike Richards buyout (\$600,000), Bonus carryover overage (\$212,000)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Vladislav Gavrikov, Andrei Kuzmenko, Tanner Jeannot, David Rittich

Problem contract: Drew Doughty (\$11 million)

Projected cap space: \$18 million

Analysis: Among this year's playoff teams, L.A. has some of the most cap flexibility. Incoming GM Ken Holland has nearly \$20 million to go big-game hunting with, and the Kings have already been linked as a top contender in the Mitch Marner sweepstakes. Adding a top-six game-breaking winger — even if it's

not Marner — should be a priority for a team that had only two wingers hit the 50-point mark this season.

We'd imagine the Kings will also take a run at re-signing Vladislav Gavrikov, who was arguably the club's best defenseman this year. If they strike out on him, they'll presumably be in the market for a top-four replacement.

10. Toronto Maple Leafs

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$77.7 million

RFAs estimate: \$9.1 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Ryan Reaves buried (\$200,000), Matt Benning buried (\$100,000), Max Pacioretty bonus overage (\$626,230)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Mitch Marner, John Tavares, Max Pacioretty, Steven Lorentz

Problem contracts: Morgan Rielly (\$7.5 million), Max Domi (\$3.75 million), David Kämpf (\$2.4 million), Calle Järnkrok (\$2.1 million)

Projected cap space: \$17.8 million

Analysis: The Leafs have almost a full roster with their RFAs signed, but two huge holes up front with Marner and Tavares still up in the air.

Marner's departure is basically a foregone conclusion, leaving a top-line RW spot alongside Auston Matthews to spend on. If Tavares doesn't return, that would create a large void at center that they can't really fill in free agency.

Moving out some of their bad money and getting aggressive up front feels like the right play, with building better scoring depth a necessary priority since Marner's 102 points aren't going to be replaced by one player. But it may take some patience and ingenuity for the right pieces to fall into place, given how thin free agency is.

11. Montreal Canadiens

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$89.5 million

RFAs estimate: \$2.69 million

LTIR candidate: Carey Price (\$10.5 million)

Dead money deals: Bonus overage (\$1.75 million)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Christian Dvorak, Joel Armia, David Savard

Problem contract: Patrik Laine (\$8.7 million)

Projected cap space: \$16.5 million

Analysis: If the Habs place Price on LTIR (or find a way to move the final year of his contract), they have oodles of cap room to get aggressive.

They don't have to — they essentially have a full roster under contract after getting RFAs signed and \$6 million to invest in free agency without using LTIR — and there are downsides to using it, as evidenced by the bonus overage they're carrying from last season, given the success of young players such as Lane Hutson.

Regardless, Montreal has a smart front office and loads of financial flexibility, so don't be surprised if they pull off something unexpected. They need a center, but it's a market where those are extremely difficult to come by. And they have enough young players coming that patience may end up being the best play. For now.

12. Boston Bruins

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$79.9 million

RFAs estimate: \$8.3 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deal: Brandon Carlo retained salary (\$615,000)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Henri Jokiharju, Parker Wotherspoon

Problem contracts: Casey Mittelstadt (\$5.75 million), Joonas Korpisalo (\$3 million)

Projected cap space: \$15.6 million

Analysis: It'll be fascinating to see what the Bruins do after an uncharacteristically brutal, 28th-place 2024-25 season.

The big selloff of Brad Marchand, Brandon Carlo and Charlie Coyle created some holes, to be sure, but when fully healthy, this won't be a bottom-feeding team again. How do they deploy \$16 million to fill out their forward group and back end? And will it make them competitive again, or merely get them into the mushy middle?

But with a bounce-back from Jeremy Swayman and a couple of smart additions, they could surprise.

13. Utah Mammoth

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$82.5 million

RFAs estimate: \$2.75 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deal: Oliver-Ekman Larsson buyout (\$650,000)

Notable unsigned UFA: Nick Bjugstad

Problem contracts: None

Projected cap space: \$13 million

Analysis: Don't sleep on the Mammoth this offseason. (Wait, that sounds weird.)

Even after acquiring and signing JJ Peterka on Wednesday night, Utah still has plenty of cap space and a lot of up-and-coming talent to build around. Utah was on the verge of making the playoffs in Year 1 in SLC, and they have a great chance to take a big step forward with another year of development from their young players and a big investment of talent using their remaining cap room.

Everyone around the league has been saying GM Bill Armstrong will be aggressive. We doubt he's done, even after the big swing with Buffalo.

14. Nashville Predators

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$82.6 million

RFAs estimate: \$3.8 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Matt Duchene buyout (\$5.56 million), Kyle Turris buyout (\$2 million), Mattias Ekholm retention (\$250,000)

Notable unsigned UFA: Jakub Vrana

Problem contracts: Steven Stamkos (\$8 million), Brady Skjei (\$7 million)

Projected cap space: \$12.9 million

Analysis: The Predators have clear needs at basically every position after a brutal 2024-25 campaign. How aggressive they'll be in attempting to get back to the playoffs will be interesting given how much they committed to older players in last year's UFA class — and how that blew up in their face.

Their \$13 million in cap space could go fairly far in terms of improving their offensive depth and adding another top-four defenseman, but they'll likely have to be creative as free agency (if you haven't heard) is a bit light on high-end talent.

But Nashville is always a place free agents want to go, which should help GM Barry Trotz if he opts to get aggressive again.

15. Calgary Flames

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$82.8 million

RFAs estimate: \$12.5 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deal: Jacob Markstrom retention (\$1.875 million)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Anthony Mantha, Dan Vladar, Joel Hanley

Problem contract: Jonathan Huberdeau (\$10.5 million)

Projected cap space: \$12.7 million

Analysis: Calgary was surprisingly competitive this season. It's probably too early in the club's retool timeline for them to make aggressive moves, unless it's for a player in his early to mid-20s who can grow with the core long-term, but GM Craig Conroy has the cap flexibility and assets (four first-round picks over the next two years) to take a big swing if he desires. The Flames might wind up with closer to \$15 million in spending power once their RFAs are taken care of, especially since Evolving-Hockey's projection for Morgan Frost's next deal seemed too high.

That pool of cap room and trade ammo will only increase if the club trades Rasmus Andersson, who is entering the final year of his contract.

16. Ottawa Senators

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$84.7 million

RFAs estimate: \$0

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Joonas Korpisalo retention (\$1 million), Colin White buyout (\$875,000)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Claude Giroux, Adam Gaudette, Travis Hamonic, Anton Forsberg, Nick Cousins

Problem contracts: None

Projected cap space: \$10.8 million

Analysis: After signing RFA Fabian Zetterlund last week, Ottawa has some decent flexibility, but a good chunk of that nearly \$11 million remaining is earmarked for the likely return of Claude Giroux.

The remainder of their cap space is probably best served filling out their forward depth and potentially bringing in a backup goaltender to replace Anton Forsberg.

The question facing GM Steve Staios is whether that level of sameness is good enough, given that the Senators are looking to take another step after making the playoffs this season. This roster is young enough that they can expect some growth from within and some better health from veterans such as Linus Ullmark, Brady Tkachuk and David Perron.

17. Winnipeg Jets

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$84.8 million

RFAs estimate: \$13.75 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deal: Nate Schmidt buyout (\$1.62 million)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Nikolaj Ehlers, Mason Appleton, Brandon Tanev

Problem contract: None

Projected cap space: \$10.7 million

Analysis: After signing Jonathan Toews, the Jets still have plenty to spend — although it would be prudent to keep in mind the big bonuses (\$2.7 million) he can hit simply by playing a lot of games next season and making the playoffs.

Winnipeg appears set on the back end, with eight NHL defenders under contract, but up front, there are some challenges with the pending departures of Nikolaj Ehlers and Mason Appleton, and the injury to captain Adam Lowry that will keep him out to start the season.

The Jets were one of the league's highest-scoring teams last season and won't want to jeopardize that, so finding a way to add another top-six piece with their cap space makes the most sense.

18. Seattle Kraken

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$85.4 million

RFAs estimate: \$8.6 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: None

Notable unsigned UFA: Michael Eyssimont

Problem contracts: Chandler Stephenson (\$6.25 million), Philipp Grubauer (\$5.9 million)

Projected cap space: \$10.1 million

Analysis: The Kraken are a dark-horse team to watch this summer. GM Jason Botterill told reporters at the end of the season that the Kraken are “going to be aggressive again in free agency,” one year after they landed Brandon Montour and Chandler Stephenson.

Seattle owns extra first-round picks in 2026 and 2027 as a result of the Bjorkstrand trade, and extra second-round picks. President of hockey operations Ron Francis has said that Seattle will consider using some of that currency as trade capital.

The Kraken already added Mason Marchment to bolster their winger group, and with their slick maneuver to dump Andre Burakovsky's inefficient contract to Chicago, they still have the cap room to be in on any emerging opportunities. The biggest hurdle they could face is finding realistically available players who fit their need for elite, star talent.

19. Minnesota Wild

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$85.6 million

RFAs estimate: \$5.9 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Bonus overage carryover (\$1.1 million), Zach Parise buyout (\$833,000), Ryan Suter buyout (\$833,000)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Gustav Nyquist, Justin Brazeau, Jon Merrill

Problem contract: Yakov Trenin (\$3.5 million)

Projected cap space: \$9.9 million

Analysis: Minnesota's offseason could go in very different directions depending on what the front office does with Marco Rossi. The Wild seem reluctant to commit a long-term, big-money contract to him. Minnesota will have closer to \$15 million available to spend if it trades Rossi, plus whatever premium assets he would fetch in return.

Of course, trading Rossi would also create a hole at top-six center. Perhaps prized 21-year-old prospect Danila Yurov can fill that position immediately, but the club needs a short-term contingency plan in the very possible scenario that he needs more time before being ready for such a high-leverage role.

The brunt of the pain from the Zach Parise and Ryan Suter buyouts is mercifully over. GM Bill Guerin finally has the shackles off — let's see what he does now that he has some legitimate flexibility to work with.

20. Philadelphia Flyers

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$86.35 million

RFAs estimate: \$6 million

LTIR candidate: Ryan Ellis (\$6.25 million)

Dead money deals: Kevin Hayes retention (\$3.57 million), Cam Atkinson buyout (\$1.76 million), Scott Laughton retention (\$1.5 million)

Notable unsigned UFAs: None

Problem contract: Sean Couturier (\$7.75 million)

Projected cap space: \$9.15 million

Analysis: GM Danny Briere has already put in some work this summer, hammering out deals with key RFAs in center Noah Cates and winger Tyson Foerster, and then acquiring Trevor Zegras in a low-risk, high-reward trade with Anaheim.

Briere's main bit of remaining business is figuring out how to proceed with Cam York. By the end of the season, he was the Flyers' best defenseman and he seems like a legit top-four piece. Things also got weird at the end under coach John Tortorella. Not coincidentally, Kevin Kurz reported on June 12 that long- and short-term deals are both in play for York. We have him signing a three-year bridge deal here worth \$5 million annually.

We're also not putting Ellis in an LTIR slot, though he'd certainly be eligible, as his career is functionally over. The Flyers left him on standard IR last season, as they didn't need to use an LTIR exemption to exceed the cap, and they preferred to use Ellis' status as a way of accruing daily cap space.

21. St. Louis Blues

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$93.5 million

RFAs estimate: \$3 million

LTIR candidate: Torey Krug (\$6.5 million)

Dead money deals: None

Notable unsigned UFAs: Radek Faksa, Ryan Suter

Problem contracts: None

Projected cap space: \$8.5 million

Analysis: The Blues are in a solid situation. Doug Armstrong said on June 23 that they planned to again place Krug on LTIR, which would leave them with enough space to add a middle-six center and match any (reasonable) offer sheet that might come for backup goalie Joel Hofer.

If they're going to level up in the Western Conference, handling both bits of business seems like it'll be crucial. Brayden Schenn, currently the 2C behind Robert Thomas, works best a bit farther down the lineup, and Hofer (.904 save percentage last season) gives them a solid option behind Jordan Binnington.

The longer-term issue for Armstrong (and incoming GM Alex Steen) is that Philip Broberg and Dylan Holloway — added last season via offer sheet to immense success — are soon to be eligible for new deals. Top-four defensemen and quality top-six forwards don't come cheap.

22. Buffalo Sabres

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$88 million

RFAs estimate: \$13.5 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deal: Jeff Skinner buyout (\$4.44 million)

Notable unsigned UFA: James Reimer

Problem contracts: Jordan Greenway (\$4 million), Connor Clifton (\$3.33 million), Mattias Samuelsson (\$4.29 million), Sam Lafferty (\$2 million)

Projected cap space: \$7.5 million

Analysis: Even after dealing Peterka, Buffalo still doesn't have a ton of flexibility for a team that hasn't made the playoffs for 14 years and finished 26th last season.

The combination of a big RFA contract due to Bowen Byram and all of the contract misses they've piled up isn't a good one. The Sabres are going to need to continue to be active in the trade market in order to improve their roster this offseason.

But another swap that will give them more reinforcements is likely coming, with Byram at the top of the "likely to go" list.

23. Washington Capitals

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$88.125 million

RFAs estimate: \$2 million

LTIR candidate: Sonny Milano (\$1.9 million AAV)

Dead money deals: None

Notable unsigned UFAs: Andrew Mangiapane, Anthony Beauvillier, Lars Eller, Taylor Raddysh

Problem contracts: None

Projected cap space: \$7.375 million

Analysis: The Capitals enter the offseason with relatively minimal needs and enough money available to address them. Their RFA class (Alexander Alexeyev and Hendrix Lapierre) doesn't pose any particular problem, either.

Washington's lineup isn't perfect. They could use another high-end piece and are certainly going to need a third-line center. The question is whether they will move Connor McMichael from his spot on Pierre-Luc Dubois' wing to fill it, look to the UFA market, or again start the season with Lapierre in that role. In any case, they have enough money to figure it out.

Milano, meanwhile, had a setback in his injury recovery in the spring and seems to be a candidate to hit LTIR should the Caps need that space, but there's too much uncertainty to assume that's the route they'll take.

24. Vancouver Canucks

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$88.5 million

RFAs estimate: None

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Oliver Ekman-Larsson buyout (\$4.76 million), Ilya Mikheyev retention (\$712,000)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Brock Boeser, Pius Suter

Problem contracts: None

Projected cap space: \$7 million

Analysis: Jim Rutherford and Patrik Allvin are expected to go all in this summer to improve their roster in an effort to maximize their chances of keeping superstar captain Quinn Hughes, who has two years left on his deal, in Vancouver for the long term.

The Canucks are searching for multiple top-six forwards to bolster an anemic offensive group that is staring at Boeser's likely departure in free agency. They're down to approximately \$7 million to spend after acquiring Evander Kane.

Vancouver is chasing a bona fide second-line center to play behind Elias Pettersson, but the organization may pivot to adding another winger if that proves too difficult. Vancouver's front office will almost certainly shop the No.15 pick to accomplish that goal, though it may not be easy to land an ideal target because countless teams are searching for a top-six center, yet not many are realistically available on the market.

25. New Jersey Devils

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$89.6 million

RFAs estimate: \$8.5 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: None

Notable unsigned UFAs: Jake Allen, Brian Dumoulin, Curtis Lazar, Daniel Sprong

Problem contracts: Ondrej Palat (\$6.0 million), Kurtis MacDermid (\$1.15 million)

Projected cap space: \$6.9 million

Analysis: The Devils have most of their lineup in place, though there are a couple of Hughes-family-centric asterisks in play. The first revolves around Jack's health, given his season-ending shoulder injury.

The other: Luke, a huge part of their current and future defensive group, is a restricted free agent. Here, we're projecting that he signs long-term for an AAV of approximately \$7.5 million, which could be on the conservative side.

Either way, the Devils don't have many open roster spots, and they won't have tons of wiggle room once their RFAs are signed. They need better bottom-six center options, though, and plan not to send a qualifying offer to Cody Glass.

26. Edmonton Oilers

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$79.3 million

RFAs estimate: \$10.6 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Jack Campbell buyout (\$2.3 million), Bonus carryover overage (\$250,000)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Trent Frederic, Connor Brown, Corey Perry, John Klingberg, Jeff Skinner, Kasper Kapanen

Problem contracts: Darnell Nurse (\$9.25 million), Viktor Arvidsson (\$4 million)

Projected cap space: \$5.6 million

Analysis: Trading Evander Kane is only the start of Edmonton's effort to carve out sufficient cap space for upgrades this summer. The Oilers are projected to have only approximately \$5.6 million in space after accounting for the massive contract extension that Evan Bouchard is expected to command. Viktor Arvidsson (\$4 million) and Adam Henrique (\$3 million) stand out as potential contracts to try offloading, though both of them have no-movement clauses.

If that extra space is created, the Oilers can consider re-signing some of their pending UFAs, such as Frederic, Perry and Brown, upgrading the goaltending and perhaps adding another top-six winger if there's leftover room.

27. Tampa Bay Lightning

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$91.7 million

RFAs estimate: \$850,000

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deal: Conor Sheary buried (\$850,000)

Notable unsigned UFA: Nick Perbix

Problem contract: Conor Sheary (\$2 million)

Projected cap space: \$3.8 million

Analysis: The Lightning could simply run things back again, since they have basically their entire team signed and are under the cap. But after a disappointing first-round exit, you wonder if there'll be changes as they attempt to catch up to their state rivals.

Any big move would require salary out, however. Tampa Bay does have some interesting young players coming, including potentially further progression from Conor Geekie, and can turn over some of their aging depth simply by letting UFAs such as Luke Glendening and Cam Atkinson walk.

Beefing up their depth feels like the right play if they can find the right trade or bargain UFA signings.

28. New York Rangers

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$92.1 million

RFAs estimate: \$10.5 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: None

Notable unsigned UFA: Calvin de Haan

Problem contract: Mika Zibanejad (\$8.5 million AAV)

Projected cap space: \$3.4 million

Analysis: It's fair to say that the Rangers' offseason hinges on the route they choose with K'Andre Miller. Here, we have him signing a four-year contract worth \$6 million, which is in line with Evolving-Hockey's projections.

Of course, a trade that puts him elsewhere is clearly on the table. While Chris Drury's appetite to change the look of his team is understandable, Miller is still New York's best non-Adam Fox defenseman. If he's moved, he'll have to be replaced, and the Rangers will still have a messy blue line behind Fox and Replacement X, without all that much money to spend.

And we haven't even gotten around to mentioning the situation at center. Zibanejad, if he's not traded, seems likely to move to the wing full time, which would leave a major hole behind J.T. Miller and Vincent Trocheck.

29. Vegas Golden Knights

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$92.3 million

RFAs estimate: \$4.4 million

LTIR candidate: Alex Pietrangelo (\$8.8 million)

Dead money deals: None

Notable unsigned UFAs: Victor Olofsson, Brandon Saad

Problem contracts: None

Projected cap space: \$3.2 million

Analysis: Vegas has one of the most fluid, fascinating cap situations in the league. Alex Pietrangelo's playing future for next season is reportedly uncertain because of ongoing injuries — if he lands on LTIR, it would suddenly give the organization \$12 million to play with.

Even if Vegas approaches this offseason with the assumption that Pietrangelo will be on the roster rather than LTIR, management has ways to manufacture more wiggle room, if necessary. Players such as Nicolas Hague, Nicolas Roy, William Karlsson and Ivan Barbashev could be cap casualties if the front office wants to open up room for a run at Marner, for example. All of those players would be fairly easy to find suitors for, if they desire.

In other words, no, the Golden Knights don't have much cap flexibility on paper to take home-run swings right now, but they have various ways of changing that in a hurry.

30. Dallas Stars

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$93.5 million

RFAs estimate: None

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: Ryan Suter buyout (\$1.43 million), Bonus carryover overage (\$368,000)

Notable unsigned UFAs: Mikael Granlund, Jamie Benn, Cody Ceci, Evgenii Dadonov, Colin Blackwell

Problem contracts: Tyler Seguin (\$9.85 million), Matt Dumba (\$3.75 million)

Projected cap space: \$2 million

Analysis: The Stars are stuck in a cap bind, even after offloading Mason Marchment's contract to Seattle. They only have approximately \$2 million available, with only nine forwards under contract for next season. Jamie Benn could help the team by taking a massive discount, especially on a performance bonus-laden contract now that he's hit the age of 35, but there's still more that needs to be done.

Seguin isn't a realistic candidate to be traded because of his full no-movement clause, but Matt Dumba and Ilya Lyubushkin could be cap casualties on defense. Dallas also has to keep an eye on next summer, when Thomas Harley and Jason Robertson will require significant raises. Barring a shocking Robertson trade, it's very likely that the Stars will have to let some of their pending UFAs walk, such as Mikael Granlund.

31. Colorado Avalanche

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$97.2 million

RFAs estimate: \$2.9 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: None

Notable unsigned UFAs: Jonathan Drouin, Ryan Lindgren, Joel Kiviranta, Erik Johnson

Problem contracts: None

Projected cap space: -\$1.7 million

Analysis: Brock Nelson's three-year, \$7.5 million AAV extension ate up the overwhelming majority of Colorado's cap space. The Avs currently have \$1.2 million in cap space, and could end up over that amount in salary commitments if they sign RFA Sam Malinski to anything longer than a one-year deal.

Colorado only has 11 NHL forwards and five defensemen under contract right now, so it's clear that GM Chris MacFarland will need to ship out a sizable deal or two to relieve the cap pressure. Ross Colton,

Miles Wood and Charlie Coyle have been floated out as potential cap dumps management could explore.

32. New York Islanders

Current projected 2025-26 salaries: \$97.9 million

RFAs estimate: \$24.2 million

LTIR candidates: None

Dead money deals: None

Notable unsigned UFAs: Tony DeAngelo, Hudson Fasching, Mike Reilly

Problem contract: Pierre Engvall (\$3 million AAV)

Projected cap space: minus-2.4 million

Analysis: Mathieu Darche's first summer at the helm of the Islanders won't be a particularly fun one. He has plenty of RFAs to worry about that, in all likelihood, will eat up the bulk of his salary-cap space.

Not all RFAs are signed, and not all of them are particularly crucial. Figuring out a deal with Noah Dobson, though, is vitally important to the organization, and it won't come cheap. Evolving-Hockey projects a long-term deal with him to cost more than \$10 million per season, and that doesn't seem far off. Alexander Romanov is another pending RFA defenseman who won't come particularly cheap.

If Darche figures out a workable solution with those two (and Romanov might be a trade candidate), everything else gets easier. A Jean-Gabriel Pageau trade remains a possibility, too.