THE ATHLETIC

Bag of Jerks: Canes' trade rumors, lineup moves and Central Division thoughts

By Sara Civian

For the past three months, I've started this mailbag congratulating us all on getting through another month without the NHL and reminding us all how close we were to some sort of season. Now I can tell you something more tangible: There are three days until the 2020-21 season. It won't be perfect, but it's almost here.

How are the Hurricanes looking compared to their new opponents? What should we look forward to? How is any of this going to work?

Let's get to it.

(Editor's note: Questions have been edited for length and clarity.)

With all these rumors about Laine and Canes trade rumors in general, I'm surprised I haven't seen anything about a Dubois trade from Columbus. He said he wants out and he's a much better two-way player than Laine, which it seems like Rod Brind'Amour would appreciate as a coach. Both would command similar salaries. Is this because Dubois specifically said he wants a bigger market? Or is there another reason he hasn't been mentioned? If there is a trade with Columbus, could it also include Merzlikins? – Cameron K.

Just kidding, Cameron K. We have all the time in the world to unpack all of that.

The thing about these trade rumors that sent me into a Twitter spiral Thursday evening is they don't necessarily mean anything consequential but they still manage to rile everyone up. And the people who churn them out with no context know exactly what they're doing.

The reason you're seeing that the Canes "have interest" in Patrik Laine is probably because someone involved on either side is either more lax with leaking information or wants that specific piece of information out there. It is true and it's been true for months — you'd be an idiot to dismiss anything Pierre LeBrun reports, and he has reported multiple times that this interest exists. But I have always appreciated the way LeBrun reports with context and this situation has been no different.

So, why aren't the Canes interested in Pierre-Luc Dubios? Who says they aren't? For all the Laine situations, there are as many that never see the light of day on social media. It makes sense that the Canes are interested in Laine, someone who their star Sebastian Aho is close with and has played with. But — and I feel like I say this every day — if you're an NHL team not interested in great players on the trade block, what are you even doing?

All I can tell you right now with complete confidence is the Canes are currently not working on any trades. There's a chance they actually have "expressed interest" in Dubois as well, but the difference is no one found out.

And Cameron, I love where your head is at with Elvis Merzlikins, and I love the increasing ambition as this question went on, but I don't think anything at all is imminent in terms of Hurricanes trades.

I'm not saying any of the above will never happen, but I do worry about the impact Twitter and other instant social media platforms have when it comes to reporting. One time when I was starting out in college hockey, I was struggling with a potential scoop I got that I could've done a vague tweet about in a way that would let me off the hook if it wasn't true. My boss at the time, Adam Wodon of College Hockey News, said if you aren't willing to write a whole story about it, don't tweet it. I still try to live by that rule.

More likely to average a point per game this season: Aho or Svech? – Spencer R.

Oooh, good question. I'd say it depends on the lines. Rod Brind'Amour is currently rolling Andrei Svechnikov out on the second line, but then again, he said he doubts these will be the opening night lines. If Svechnikov and Aho are linemates, it'll be close. But if Svechnikov is on the second line, Aho is more likely to average a point per game based on assists alone.

What do you think Rod's plan is to get more out of Trocheck offensively? Do you think he would bring Svechnikov down to line two for an extended look? – Todd H.

This has been the case every day of training camp so far, but see the above disclaimer about opening night lines. I personally think the Canes are rolling out Nino Niederreiter on the first line and Svechnikov on the second to get more out of both Niederrieter and Vincent Trocheck. Unfortunately there's no great way for me to tell if it's working with limited scrimmage-esque situations, but there will be a scrimmage Monday so at least we'll learn a few things then. We'll truly find out what the coaching staff thinks about that opening night.

Other than tweaking the lines like so, there's not much Brind'Amour can do to get the most out of Trocheck — that's gotta come from within and with a little bit of luck. Jake Gardiner addressed the media Sunday and singled Trocheck out for having a great camp, for whatever that's worth.

One thing in the 2021 season that you are looking forward to. One challenge that you have identified to conquer. I support the way you are presenting lines. Please keep it up all season. – Howard H.

I'm looking forward to the chaos. Obviously the circumstances that brought this looming chaos to the league are terrible, and there will be a laundry list of unfortunate things that happen this season. But if we have to be here, we might as well dance in the rain. We're going to learn so much about coaches and front offices we probably never would have learned otherwise.

I'm trying to get more organized with my writing process. I can't just waltz into the dressing room and talk to whoever I want every day like I used to be able to, so I need to be more strategic.

Thank you. I will. Excited to see how my doodles end up by the end of the season.

General thoughts on division realignment? Does it help or hurt the Canes? – Jack F.

Honestly, and as the Canes have been half-joking every time I ask them a question like this, ask me in a few weeks. Off the bat, I'd say it benefits them considering how much trouble they had in the Metro last season, and teams like Detroit and Chicago shouldn't pose too much of a threat. But there's so much uncertainty about virtually everything this season, ya know? I will say the Lightning made so many changes and Nikita Kucherov's injured, so they might not be as impossible to play against as before. Then with the absence of Tyler Seguin for the first few months, the Stars should be slightly easier to play against as well. But then you look at the East and there's more of the same craziness and shuffling. I'd go as far as to say it doesn't even matter what division you're in this season; it will be how prepared you are to potentially deal with devastating changes to your roster out of nowhere. The team with the best ability to adapt will probably win the Cup this year.

How does the organization feel about being moved into the Central Division from a competitive and logistical perspective? – Thomas S.

Jordan Staal: "I think it's interesting. Most of the teams we haven't played a ton. It's obviously weird we're going to play those same teams the whole year. I think it's going to maybe cause some quick rivalries and obviously some good games, but it is what it is. We're happy we're getting going, we're happy we're playing hockey and we're excited to be back."

Brind'Amour: "The coaches aren't out there banging heads all the time. The (players are) the ones that do it. When you have to do it over and over against the same team, that's where the rivalries really get cooked up, and like Jordo said, we haven't played those teams that much. It might be a little breath of fresh air for some of our guys to create kind of rivalries with some other teams, but at the end of the day, you heard it: The guys just want to play. It doesn't matter. They'll play anybody."

How different is it for you to cover games from watching on TV versus live? – Jeff W.

Good question. To be honest, I have pretty severe ADHD that has especially reared its head during the pandemic. Very sorry if anyone can relate to me on that, but if you can, you'll understand how hard it is to work from home. For some reason being in a rink with around 20,000 people and loud music is my place to dial in, but I need complete silence when trying to work from home or it takes me all night.

But I've realized it's all about changing the way I cover games, and it's sort of exciting that I get both perspectives this year. Barring rule changes, I'll be attending all the Hurricanes home games and watching the away games from home. So when the Hurricanes have home games, you can probably expect more of a fun, column-y vibe in my stories. When I'm watching from home, I get the benefit of seeing things up close and rewinding on anything interesting.

Remember when I took one road trip off last season and it ended up being the Dave Ayres game? That was a top-five bad decision in my life full of bad decisions. But I did write this, and stuff like this is what you can expect when the Canes hit the road this year.

Who are the ideal wingers for Jordan Staal? – Pat C.

It depends on what the Hurricanes are going for. If they want a true checking/hard-to-play-against line, Warren Foegele and Jesper Fast make the most sense. That's what I suspect will end up happening, but as of Sunday they keep rolling out Foegele-Staal-Martin Necas at camp. I have a theory they're trying to look at plan B/C/D during camp in case the worst scenario happens and a few Canes players can't play, or maybe they're trying to see how scoring depth on each line could work. But I like Fast on Staal's wing.

What is the deal with the players that were put on waivers and their connection to the team? – Peter V.

Once players are no longer waiver-exempt, they have to clear waivers before they can be put anywhere other than the NHL roster. That means the taxi squad or the AHL or any of the European leagues, etc. The Hurricanes knew that the seven players — Antoine Bibeau, Jeremy Bracco, Gustav Forsling, Max McCormick, Steven Lorentz, Spencer Smallman and Drew Shore — they placed on waivers Jan. 8 weren't going to make the NHL squad out of camp. Again, they need to clear waivers before they can be put on the taxi squad or assigned to the AHL. It stinks for the Canes in terms of depth that the Panthers claimed Forsling, but it's a necessary evil of this season.

Down Goes Brown: NHL bottom feeders to contenders, where each team will end up

By Sean McIndoe

Seven years ago, the NHL made big changes in advance of the 2013-14 season, shifting teams around and going from having six divisions back to a traditional four. It was a major realignment, and you probably remember it as being the year we all spent going "No really, it's can't be called the Metropolitan, what's the real name going to be?"

Back then, I thought it would be cute to build my season preview around the concept of new divisions. But instead of the NHL's versions, the twist was that I'd divide the league up into four groups that made more sense to me: The bottom-feeders, the middle-of-the-pack, the true contenders, and then a "your guess is as good as mine" divisions for the teams I couldn't figure out. It was a bit of a silly concept, but it stuck, and I've been using the format for my previews ever since.

Then came this year, and suddenly the NHL is stealing my schtick by making up weird division on the fly, and slapping ridiculous names on them to boot. They didn't really have a choice, and the all-Canadian thing is cool, but you will never be able to convince me that the league isn't secretly shifting new teams in and out of the Central every morning and waiting to see if anyone notices.

In these difficult times, I know you're counting on me for some stability, so we'll stick with our traditional divisions as we take a look around the league and try to figure out who lands where. We'll start from the bottom and divide the league into groups of seven or eight (with no particular order within those divisions). Then we'll wait and see how it all turns out, and come back here in a few months to laugh about how wrong I was.

Bottom-feeders, middle-of-the-pack, contenders and [shrug emoji], let's do this.

The Bottom-Feeder Division

It's never been more dangerous to declare a team a bottom-feeder than in today's NHL, because the gap between the truly bad and the merely mediocre is so thin. That will be especially true in a short season. Is that going to keep me from inevitably embarrassing myself here? Of course not.

Chicago Blackhawks

Last season: 32-30-8, -6 goals differential (not counting shootouts), lost in the first round

Their offseason in one sentence: Corey Crawford and Brandon Saad are gone, Kirby Dach is out, and now so is Jonathan Toews, although we're not sure for how long.

Why they're here: The rebuild sure seems to be on, whether the veteran core likes it or not. That's probably the right call, but the Hawks are still raising some eyebrows by heading into the season without any NHL-proven goaltenders. Maybe we're all making too much out of that, since goaltending is unpredictable and maybe one of the kids steps up and proves they can handle the job. But even if that happens, the rest of the roster is looking shaky, especially if Toews is out long-term.

Ottawa Senators

Last season: 25-34-12, -48, missed the postseason

Their offseason in one sentence: They used all the draft picks, added Matt Murray and went bargain-hunting with their cap space.

Why they're here: I liked their offseason, at least apart from the Murray contract, and the prospect pipeline is close to overflowing. There's plenty of optimism for the future in Ottawa, and it's been well-earned. But even their owner is saying that this isn't their year, so we don't need to overthink this.

Los Angeles Kings

Last season: 29-35-6, -32, missed the postseason

Their offseason in one sentence: The rebuild mostly stayed the course, getting some lottery help to add Quinton Byfield along the way.

Why they're here: Because they're doing a fairly traditional tear-it-down rebuild, albeit one that hasn't touched any of the core veterans quite yet. It's a plan, and so far it's working, as the Kings have put together a nice pipeline of young talent. As I've written before, there's at least an outside chance that the Kings eventually have one of those "all the kid show up at the same time" breakout years like the Leafs did back in 2016-17. It doesn't sound like it will be this year, though.

New Jersey Devils

Last season: 28-29-12, -39, missed the postseason

Their offseason in one sentence: They brought in Ryan Murray and Andreas Johnsson without giving up all that much, and thought they'd added Corey Crawford too before his surprise retirement.

Why they're here: Remember last year when they drafted Jack Hughes and added P.K. Subban and everyone put them in the playoffs and I was like "wait are we sure about that?" and people yelled at me? Those were good times.

I don't hold grudges. But there's unlikely to be enough improvement here to push for the playoffs, or come all that close, and I felt that way before Crawford's announcement, which obviously hurts. Mackenzie Blackwood is one of the better young goalies in the league, so goaltending isn't likely to be the big problem, but it needed to be absolutely great for the Devils to have a shot and the odds of that are lower now than they were a week ago.

Anaheim Ducks

Last season: 29-33-9, -43, missed the postseason

Their offseason in one sentence: Replacing Erik Gudbranson with Kevin Shattenkirk was one nice improvement for a team that needs many.

Why they're here: After years of contending in the Pacific, the window slammed shut on the Ducks in 2018-19 and should stay that way for a while. That's the circle of life in the NHL, and there are signs of genuine optimism for the future. But with three very good teams already looking like locks for West

Division playoff spots, it would be a shock to see the Ducks contend for anything meaningful this year.

Detroit Red Wings

Last season: Look let's not even talk about it.

Their offseason in one sentence: They found a goalie and enough talent around the lineup that they may have improved more than any other team.

Why they're here: The Red Wings improving in the offseason is like me getting a haircut and some clean clothes that don't have holes in them — it's an upgrade, sure, but it doesn't make me a supermodel. The Wings are bad, mostly by design at this point, and unless Thomas Griess has a miracle in him, none of those additions will change that. It's a rebuild. Detroit fans know the deal.

Arizona Coyotes

Last season: 33-29-8, +7, lost in the first round

Their offseason in one sentence: It got weird.

Why they're here: The Coyotes are tricky. They're young, they have good goaltending, they were on the playoff bubble for most of last season, and they won a qualifying round, so there's something to build on. All the offseason upheaval made for an embarrassing mess, but maybe that doesn't translate into anything on the ice. Could they grind their way to the last playoff spot in the West? I think it's very possible, with only the three California teams and the Wild to beat, so there's a risk in ranking them with the bottom-feeders. I think this was a mediocre team before they lost their best forward in free agency, so I'm not optimistic, but if any team in this section is going to make me look bad, it's probably this one.

The Middle-of-the-Pack Division

If the NHL had their wish, every team would be here every season. Instead, about half are, and I have to narrow it down ever further to get a division-sized group.

Winnipeg Jets

Last season: 37-28-6, +12, lost in the qualifying round

Their offseason in one sentence: They didn't trade Patrik Laine.

Why they're here: The optimist's take on the Jets is that they were pretty good last year despite lots of doom and gloom about their thin blue line, then looked like a playoff team and only lost in the qualifying round because everyone got hurt. The pessimist would point out that "pretty good" isn't all that great when you have a Vezina winner in goal, and the blue line isn't significantly better. If Connor Hellebuyck stands on his head again, cool. If he does like a lot of Vezina winners and regresses to the mean even a little, they might fall out of the playoff hunt. I realize "they need their goalie to play well" is an insight that would apply to every team in the league, but it really applies to the Jets.

Florida Panthers

Last season: 35-26-8, +4, lost in the qualifying round

Their offseason in one sentence: A new GM shuffled plenty of names on and off the roster, but kept the core intact.

Why they're here: I really thought the Panthers might break through last year, but it didn't happen. It's not hard to figure out why, either — they spent $70 million on a new goalie, then watched him have a terrible season. The young core still has some nice pieces, so this figures to come down to Sergei Bobrovsky again. He can't possibly be as bad as last year, I think, so the question becomes how much better he has to be to get this team into the playoffs. For that last spot in the Central, it may not take a much as you think.

Minnesota Wild

Last season: 35-27-7, +1, lost in the qualifying round

Their offseason in one sentence: Lots of movement, with Marcus Johansson and Cam Talbot among the additions but Eric Staal, Devan Dubnyk and Mikko Koivu among the exits.

Why they're here: Because they're the Wild and they're destined to be in the middle-of-the-pack tier forever.

I could probably stop there and every Minnesota fan would be like "yep." But after a busy first full offseason from Bill Guerin, it's at least possible we're sleeping on the Wild just a bit. They were better than you might remember last year, so if Guerin hits on a few of those offseason moves, they could take another step. I'm still not sure how that gets them higher than fourth in the West, though, and it would take a disaster to drop them lower than fifth or sixth. That's pretty much your textbook middle-of-the-pack outlook.

Columbus Blue Jackets

Last season: 33-22-15, -3, lost in the first round

Their offseason in one sentence: They traded Josh Anderson for Max Domi, added Mikko Koivu, and got a deal done with their young franchise player who may not want to be there anymore.

Why they're here: The Pierre-Luc Dubois storyline is by far the most intriguing of the Blue Jackets' season, but we'll see if it means much on the ice. Columbus exceeded expectations last year and shut down the Maple Leafs in the qualifying round, but they still lost four more games than they won during the season and improved only marginally in the offseason, if at all. Defense wins in this league, and the Blue Jackets know how to play it, which should keep them in the playoff mix, especially in the Central. I'm just not sure I see an obvious path to go much further.

Nashville Predators

Last season: 35-26-8, -2, lost in the qualifying round

Their offseason in one sentence: Lots of names moving in and out, none of them especially huge, and there's no guarantee that any of it actually made them better.

Why they're here: They're coming off a year where they won 35 and lost 34 and had a near-even goals differential, and they're in a division with two bad teams and last year's two Cup finalists and four teams fighting for the other two playoff spots. They'll probably be on the bubble all year long. I don't think anyone will be arguing with this pick.

Calgary Flames

Last season: 36-27-7, -10, lost in the first round

Their offseason in one sentence: They won the Jacob Markstrom sweepstakes, although he didn't come cheap, and didn't trade Johnny Gaudreau or Sean Monahan.

Why they're here: I've written before about my Flames confusion, as they're just two years removed from an excellent season and still seem like they have some strong pieces in place, especially if Markstrom upgrades the goaltending as much as they hope he does. It didn't click last year, but maybe Geoff Ward can figure it out in his first full season as an NHL head coach. They're no lock for the playoffs, but I think the all-Canadian division gives them a relatively good chance at some postseason success.

New York Islanders

Last season: 35-23-10, -1, lost in the conference finals

Their offseason in one sentence: They lost a good goaltender and a very good defenseman and didn't add all that much at all thanks to a cap crunch.

Why they're here: Welcome to year three of the ongoing debate over whether the Islanders are actually good. They are, and they've proven it, and they'll prove it again when they beat your favorite team 2-1 and you get mad about it online. I can't quite get them into the contenders' division, but maybe Ilya Sorokin can.

New York Rangers

Last season: 37-28-5, +13, lost in the qualifying round

Their offseason in one sentence: It was a changing of the guard, with Henrik Lundqvist and Marc Staal out but Alexis Lafreniere coming in.

Why they're here: Last year was pretty much exactly the sort of step forward a rebuilding team wants to see. You had the big offseason addition playing like an MVP candidate in Artemi Panarin, one major breakout from a key player in Mike Zibanejad, and a Calder-ish debut from a rookie in Adam Fox. That shouldn't have been enough to add up to a postseason appearance, but it kind of did, and then they won the lottery anyway. Everything's moving in the right direction, which for this year means the middle of the pack.

The Your-Guess-Is-As-Good-As-Mine Division

My favorite part of doing this post every year is all the fans who'll read the first two divisions, get excited because their team isn't listed, and then realize they forgot about this one.

Buffalo Sabres

Last season: 30-31-8, -22, missed postseason

Their offseason in one sentence: The entire organization seemed to collapse under the weight of a decade of failure, with overwhelmed ownership flip-flopping on a GM change and ultimately handing the job over to an inexperienced and over-his-head rookie who, uh, then went out and made the roster a lot better.

Why they're here: They have to be good some year, right?

Maybe not. There are no guarantees in the modern NHL, and that includes ever being swept along by the relentless march towards leaguewide parity. Somebody's got to be the cautionary example. It's usually Buffalo.

But when you add a recent MVP, and a solid second-line center, and you've got some good young talent on the way, and a franchise player who should be hitting his peak and also seems seriously pissed off about where his team is at … I mean, if the big breakthrough happened this year, it wouldn't feel like it was coming out of nowhere, right? They didn't upgrade the goaltending, and they're in a tough division for a playoff bubble team. But we all apparently agree that Montreal is a playoff lock based on adding Josh Anderson and Jake Allen, while a Sabres team that finished last year with virtually the same record adds Taylor Hall and Eric Staal and we all think they're still miles away?

They might be. Honestly, if they finished dead last I'm not sure I'd bat an eye. But if they shock us all and actually make a run at respectability, just remember that I kind of vaguely thought I might have seen it coming.

Carolina Hurricanes

Last season: 38-25-5, +24, lost in the first round

Their offseason in one sentence: They said goodbye to Justin Williams, but not either of their goalies or any of their trade-bait young defensemen.

Why they're here: I'm pretty sure we're into year four of the Hurricanes being the trendy breakout pick, and we kind of saw it happen in 2018-19. Last season was a minor step back, but it was a weird year and they were still on track for almost 100 points. Is that the ceiling here, or is there another level? I think it's the latter, but I'm nowhere near as sure as everyone else seems to be. They should be a playoff lock in the Central, and home ice seems like a good bet. But legitimate Cup contenders? With Petr Mrazek in goal and only three forwards who had more than 36 points last year? Yeah, actually, I could see it.

San Jose Sharks

Last season: 29-36-5, -45, last in the Western Conference

Their offseason in one sentence: They needed a new goaltender who'd be an improvement over Martin Jones, and they certainly got a new goaltender.

Why they're here: The Sharks made me look bad. Last year's predictions had them in the contenders' group, and while I did hedge a bit — writing that "when (their window) closes, it might happen quickly" — I didn't remotely see last year's disaster coming. I'm not sure anyone did, but it's still tempting to stuff them down in the bottom feeders this year as payback.

But then I remember that they have two former Norris winners on the blue line, one of whom has had nine months to get fully healthy for the first time in years. And that they did bring in Devan Dubnyk, who might just be bad now but could also be a classic change-of-scenery guy. And that overreacting to one season where everything goes wrong is usually a mistake. And soon I'm … well, not back on board, but back into hedging just a bit. I can't see them making the playoffs, but I wouldn't be shocked if they at least made it interesting.

Pittsburgh Penguins

Last season: 40-23-6, +25, lost in the qualifying round

Their offseason in one sentence: Jim Rutherford is not messing around.

Why they're here: Because the Penguins look at least a little like a team that could be this year's Sharks, where it all just falls apart and they go from contender to bottom-feeder with no stops in between.

But also … they had the seventh-best record in the league last year. Better than the Golden Knights, and Stars, and Leafs, and Islanders. Yes, they lost a qualifying round that they shouldn't even have had to play, and it's tempting to overreact to that. But when they're right back in their usual spot, comfortably in the league's top 10 and cruising to another playoff spot, don't act surprised.

(Unless they're the Sharks. That might happen too.)

Philadelphia Flyers

Last season: 41-21-7, +36, lost in the second round

Their offseason in one sentence: Don't try to fix what's already working, I guess.

Why they're here: I outlined my ongoing confusion with the Flyers in more depth a few months ago, so here's the summary. I didn't expect them to be good last year, I wasn't sure they were for most of the season, I like Carter Hart a lot, but I'm still not sure they're a top ten team. And yeah, I'm prepared to be very wrong all over again. Luckily Flyer fans are notoriously chill so no hard feelings if that happens.

Vancouver Canucks

Last season: 36-27-6, +10, lost in the second round

Their offseason in one sentence: They got pummelled in free agency, including the loss of Jacob Markstrom and Tyler Toffoli, but did add Nate Schmidt without giving up much.

Why they're here: Over the offseason I was on a Vancouver radio station and they asked me who I thought would win a (then theoretical) all-Canadian division, and I said I could see it being the Canucks, and they basically laughed at me. In Vancouver. So yeah, may have overshot the runway on that one.

So let's say this: The Canucks lost their starting goaltender, among other useful pieces, and they weren't so good last year that they can afford a big step back and still be a playoff team. They're also a young enough roster that you'd expect some improvement just due to aging curves. But young teams also sometimes hit a wall, at least temporarily. But the Canadian division isn't all that scary and Elias Pettersson is my darkhorse pick for the Hart Trophy.

In summary, stop inviting me on your radio shows.

Montreal Canadiens

Last season: 31-31-9, -12, lost in the first round

Their offseason in one sentence: They were busy, adding Jake Allen and Josh Anderson through trade and Tyler Toffoli on a nice discount deal.

Why they're here: You already saw me mention them in the Sabres entry, so I won't belabor the point, except to say that last year's Habs were worse than you probably remember and I'm not completely convinced that they improved as much as most of us seem to think. But they're in a weak division that they could even win, and if Carey Price ever looks like his old self again then they'll be a scary opponent in the playoffs. I don't have the guts to write them off, but if they turn into a pumpkin and you read "nobody saw it coming" takes, remember me.

Edmonton Oilers

Last season: 37-25-9, +8, lost in the qualifying round

Their offseason in one sentence: They made some decent bets on Tyson Barrie and Kyle Turris, but lost Oscar Klefbom to injury and didn't upgrade the goaltending.

Why they're here: Because at some point I'm just going to go ahead and rename the Your-Guess-Is-As-Good-As-Mine Division as "The Oilers and some other less confusing teams".

You know the drill by now. They have Connor McDavid, and also the reigning MVP. They don't have enough forward depth around them. The blue line is OK but not great, although that's kind of unavoidable when your best defenseman misses the season. The goaltending wasn't good enough but that's fine because there will be a ton of good goalies available in the offseason and whoops, there they all went.

I don't know, man. Neither do Oiler fans. Neither does anyone else. Last place in the North? Sure. First place? Sure. A Stanley Cup? Let's not get crazy, but McDavid has to at least get close some year, right? They have some of the pieces. They'll apparently never address some of the others. It will probably end badly. Edmonton!

I will now get started on rewriting those last few paragraphs for next year's Oilers entry.

The Contenders Division

This last category is self-explanatory and probably less interesting than the others, but it's still fun to try to figure out which of these teams will be the annual one that I declare a contender and is then completely terrible.

Colorado Avalanche

Last season: 42-20-8, +46, lost in the second round

Their offseason in one sentence: Devon Toews and Brandon Saad in, not all that much out.

Why they're here: Because they were already Cup favorites last year, their youth and offseason additions should mean they're even better this year, and we don't need to overthink things. They'll almost certainly make the playoffs, but the path out of the West is a tough one, so there's no guarantee they go any further than last year. But yeah, they're Cup contenders for sure.

Boston Bruins

Last season: 44-14-12, +60, lost in the second round

Their offseason in one sentence: They lost Torey Krug, but it should be OK as long as Zdeno Chara is around to … oh no.

Why they're here: Because they were really, really good last year, and I think that gives them enough cushion to survive losing two good blueliners and a month or so of David Pastrnak. Tuukka Rask should silence any critics after his sudden playoff opt-out, and Charlie McAvoy should have the breakthrough they're counting on. Am I nervous about a tough East Division that seems to have at least five playoff-worthy teams and only four spots? I am, but I don't think the Bruins are the team left without a chair when the music stops, and they'll be a scary out in the playoffs for anyone they run into.

Dallas Stars

Last season: 37-24-8, +4, lost in the Stanley Cup final

Their offseason in one sentence: They barely did anything beyond making Rick Bowness the full-time coach.

Why they're here: First things first, I'm not factoring their current COVID-19 troubles into any predictions, because they won't be the only team to go through this.

That said, it was long enough ago that you might not remember, but Dallas was a disaster to start last year. They eventually turned things around, and from November through to the end of the playoffs they were one of the best teams in the league. Was it a hot streak, or is that who they really are?

I'm not completely sold, because it still feels a little like last year's run was a perfect storm, driven largely by an aging backup playing some of the best hockey of his life. I'm always a little nervous around teams where so many of the key forwards are on the wrong side of 30, and having the Lightning in their division makes the path to another long run look daunting. Still, they're a very good team that should at least make the playoffs, and they've already proven that they know what to do when they're there. They've earned the right to be called contenders.

St. Louis Blues

Last season: 42-19-10, +33, lost in the first round.

Their offseason in one sentence: Alex Pietrangelo left, but they replaced him with Torey Krug (but will also be missing Jake Allen and Alex Steen).

Why they're here: First of all, did you remember that the Blues were in first place in the Western Conference at the pause? I did a double-take on that one, because it feels like we've all moved ahead to hyping a big Colorado/Vegas main event in the West. We might get that, but it feels like the Blues are being overlooked at least a little here, especially with Mike Hoffman in the fold and Vladimir Tarasenko eying a return during the season. It's always a little bit boring to pick a recent champion as a top contender, but the Blues are well-positioned to spoil the whole Avs/Golden Knights coronation.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Last season: 43-21-6, +49, won the Stanley Cup

Their offseason in one sentence: Nikita Kucherov's injury was bad news, but also meant that the big salary cap reckoning can wait for another season.

Why they're here: They're the best team in the league, and finally proved it once and for all last year. You don't need me to convince you that they're good. If anything, you might be hoping for a contrarian take that's at least vaguely pessimistic. Somebody will get there, but I can't do it, especially in the revamped Central. You never say never in the NHL, but I'll be absolutely shocked if they're not very close to the top of the standings again this year.

Toronto Maple Leafs

Last season: 36-25-9, +15, lost in the qualifying round

Their offseason in one sentence: They signed Joe Thornton and T.J. Brodie and a bunch of other veteran free agents, and we all apparently decided to ignore that they had to sacrifice most of their scoring depth to do it.

Why they're here: The Leafs have been one of the most talented teams in the league for years and have nothing to show for it, and under normal circumstances, I think you could come up with an apocalyptic "this is the year it all falls apart" scenario without sounding too silly. But in an all-Canadian division? Maybe it still happens, and the spotlight will be bright, but I don't think any team benefited as much as Toronto did from the realignment. I don't quite share Dom's confidence that they're the division's best team, but let's put this way: If they can't win at least a round or two this year, maybe it really isn't ever going to happen.

Vegas Golden Knights

Last season: 39-24-8, +15, lost in the conference finals

Their offseason in one sentence: They signed Alex Pietrangelo and kept Robin Lehner, but it cost them Nate Schmidt, Paul Stastny and (maybe) a happy Marc-Andre Fleury.

Why they're here: They're widely recognized as one of the league's very best teams, which is why it's a little jarring to look back at last year and remember they only finished eighth overall, behind teams like Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Still, we don't need to get crazy here, especially after they added a stud on the blue line. Unless the goaltending drama blows up, the Golden Knights are one of the strongest bets to make the playoffs. The bigger question might be whether they can finish first in the West and avoid having to go through both St. Louis or Colorado.

Washington Capitals

Last season: 41-20-8, +24, lost in the first round

Their offseason in one sentence: Holy crap they added Henrik Lundqvist, but wait it turns out he's not going to play, but wait holy crap they added Zdeno Chara!

Why they're here: It's easy enough to forget that the Capitals were the best regular-season team in the Metro last season, partly because it was so long ago and partly because they looked awful in the playoffs. That cost Todd Reirden his job, and I liked the Peter Laviolette hire a lot. But a lot of the key players are in their 30s and they've got a goalie who's never been a full-time starter, so there's some uncertainty here. I'm going to hedge and say they drop a bit, and of my eight contenders, they're a pretty solid eighth on the list.

Top 100 NHL players: The Athletic's Player Tiers — from Connor McDavid to Jamie Benn

Craig Custance and Dom Luszczyszyn

An email was sent out to 20 or so people in the NHL. The request to this group of coaches, executives and analysts was a little more complex than usual. For starters, it included a color-coded PDF with over 100 players' names on it. And we weren't necessarily looking for concrete answers. Just for people within the walls of NHL teams to check our work. It was an audit, really.

The work? We were attempting to replicate our NBA colleague Seth Partnow's project in which he separated the NBA's top 125 players into five tiers. In our case, we were omitting goalies, already covered in our annual Goalie Tiers package.

We wanted it to be more than just a player ranking or even the less subjective results of a mathematical model. We wanted analytics to have a say as well as those who collect a paycheck doing this for a living for one of the 32 teams.

This was our attempt to meld analytics and the eye test to determine where players rate right now, heading into this season. And thankfully, people in the game were willing to play along.

"Thanks for including me in your exercise …" started one response from an NHL assistant GM who then went on to provide detailed bullet-point breakdowns of where he disagreed with our first attempt at sorting the Top 100.

"This is a great exercise for all of us," said a Western Conference executive.

And it was! Starting as a conversation between the authors whose bylines you see on this piece, with Dom's model as a baseline, we spent hours on the phone shifting players up and down, debating the merits of each player's individual value. Then, as the responses arrived from coaching staffs and front offices, we shifted again and debated again, merging quantifiable data with our own intuitions and observations.

The result, below, is our final version of many.

Before we get to our tier-by-tier look at how each and every player fell where he did, let's get a few key terms and methods out of the way. First: The players are in tiers, not ranked. And there are not rankings within the tiers, even if there's plenty of debate on who's better than whom. For terminology, you need to know: Game Score Value Added, or GSVA, listed as the first stat in the charts is the resulting metric of Dom's model, a one-stat-fits-all valuation of a player. The other stats are projected stats for the 2020-21 season — goals, assists, points, individual expected goals, penalty differential and 5-on-5 (offensive and defensive) impact, plus an adjustment for the difficulty of each player's minutes.

Now, let's dive in.

TIER 1: MVP caliber

Starting at the top, three players comprise Tier 1A. They are the three most valuable players in hockey, listed alphabetically: Nathan MacKinnon, Auston Matthews and Connor McDavid. They're hockey's three unicorns, the most irreplaceable players in the league, all with elite and distinctive skill sets.

This isn't a ranking, but the discussion starts with McDavid, generally regarded as the best player on Earth. This is our first version of this project, but in previous ones there would have definitely been an argument for one special sub-tier right at the very top — a Tier 1A-plus. In six of the past 10 seasons, the projected best player by GSVA had a half-win lead on the next best, and McDavid's leads in 2017 and 2018 were both over a win, the second and third largest gaps of the decade.

That lead slipped last season to just 0.13 wins, and now it's disappeared completely, according to the model. That doesn't mean McDavid is not the best player in the world. It just means it's an actual debate now. When the gap is one win, there's no discussion. Now? There are legitimate challengers to the throne.

"I think McDavid is number one, but definitely not in his own tier. He has the most impressive resume of those guys, but it's not a great sign that of his five seasons in the league his worst two were the last two seasons," said an analyst.

Everyone knows why McDavid is always at the top: He's the best offensive player in the world in almost every way measured and it's not close. He's scored 2.89 points-per-60 at 5-on-5 since entering the league, with the difference between him and second being equal to the difference between second and ninth. He's the catalyst for Edmonton's offense and also impacts transition play and offensive zone shot contributions. He ranks at or near the top in all those facets league-wide, thanks mostly to his incredible speed with the puck, a skill that sets him apart from everyone else.

But the reason his grip for the top spot has slipped in recent years is his results at the other end of the ice. If his defense was only average, McDavid would be Tier 1A-plus — easily, too. It's not and hasn't been for enough time to be a legitimate concern, one that stronger data from teams echo — to an extent.

"I think his defensive issues are overblown, but I think you can point to other changes in his game over the years," said a source. "He used to be a one-man breakout machine but has become a more-willing passer on the breakout. He's still a top breakout player, but a McDavid skate-it-himself breakout is probably the best breakout in the league. When you start alternating that with a pass to his teammates and let them try to make the play, it's not going to be as effective. Maybe that's a purposeful change to help him manage his workload over a full season."

In 2017-18, his best season, McDavid exited the zone with control 77 percent of the time, but that dropped to 63 percent last season.

Over the past two seasons, McDavid has one of the league's worst defensive impacts by public metrics, a potential byproduct of this change, potentially driven by a lack of capable support. And his willingness to use it more. At 5-on-5, it led to McDavid being on the ice for just 52 percent of the goals last season, which is a fine number but not one expected from the best player in the world. At his best, he was closer to 60 percent.

And yet here McDavid is, still at the top anyway. That's how freakishly good the rest of his game is. But it leaves the door open for two competitors, one expected and one probably less so.

After an incredible bubble performance, there's been a lot of talk about whether MacKinnon is better than McDavid, and it's a fair question. It was close before, and MacKinnon's incredible playoff showing might have been enough to tip the scales. He scored at a 137-point pace in the playoffs while dominating at both ends of the ice with a 63 percent expected goals rate. It's that latter fact that puts MacKinnon at McDavid's level, as he has a much more complete game than McDavid, contributing to a 55 percent expected goals rate during the season and a 61 percent actual goals rate — and that's thanks to strong impacts at both ends of the ice. MacKinnon is nearly as fast and explosive as McDavid with a similar ability to completely take over a game. The gap between the two on offense probably isn't big enough to completely cover the larger one on defense.

Then there's Matthews, whose mere presence next to McDavid and MacKinnon might be a surprise. It's understandable, but this is a projection after all, and he looks in line for a massive season. And, for the record, there wasn't a single person in hockey we ran this by who objected to Matthews in the highest tier.

Matthews is a rare archetype in this league whose value is driven by his incredible ability in the sport's most important category: Scoring goals. He's not nearly as flashy or as fast as his two contemporaries, but he's incredibly deceptive and creates goals on his own. It's a rare ability that is fueled by his lethally deceptive shot, arguably the league's best. He was on pace for 55 goals last season and is the only player projected to eclipse the 50-goal pace this upcoming season. He may not be the only one to get there, but he is the only one where that's the expectation. Matthews being arguably the league's best goal-scorer (especially at even strength, where it's harder) while being staunch defensively is a rare feat. Last season, his on-ice metrics at 5-on-5 were nearly identical to MacKinnon's, on a worse team.

Any doubts he really belongs in this tier may come from the lack of big point totals, as McDavid and MacKinnon both paced over 110 points last season while Matthews was on pace for 94. The reason Matthews is considered here is the hierarchy of points — goals are worth more than assists, especially secondary ones, and his totals have historically been obfuscated by usage. It wasn't until Sheldon Keefe came in as his coach that Matthews started getting the 21 or 22 minutes per night McDavid and MacKinnon are accustomed to, and Matthews hasn't gotten nearly as much power-play opportunity either. Matthews' offense isn't on McDavid's level, but it's worth noting his rates are slightly better than MacKinnon's over the past two seasons at both 5-on-5 (2.53 points per 60 minutes, compared to MacKinnon's 2.41) and the power play (6.71, compared to MacKinnon's 6.62). The only difference is more ice time.

It's not fair to assume those rates will translate to heavier usage, but the point is Matthews is closer to MacKinnon than he appears. If the current logic dictates MacKinnon is close to McDavid, then Matthews arguably also belongs. He may not realistically be on their level, but he's closer to those two than

he is to the next tier, and with this being a projection for next season, it's not difficult to envision him belonging by season's end.

It was hard to argue the conclusion of one source: "How many centers are there out there that can score 50 goals?"

1B – "He's knocking on the door."

Here's the basic way we attacked some of these tiers. Everyone has a different top 10 or 20 player list – who are the players that overlap most on those lists, and who are the players in the conversation? Tier 1 features seven players we consider to be pretty close to slam-dunk top-10 players with those directly on the outside in Tier 2A being the closest to filling the final three spots, with plenty of debate. It's the same story within Tier 1 where 1A has three players we feel very confident in with two free spots to fill out the top five. Tier 1B is essentially the four guys competing to be a top-five NHLer, bonafide MVP-calibre players who are just a shade below the 1A guys.

For the longest time, the best player in the world conversation started with Sidney Crosby, and this might be the first time ever he'd be outside Tier 1A. That he's still in the conversation at 33 is nothing short of remarkable, with his 2018-19 campaign being particularly strong. Last year, his 5-on-5 numbers really dipped, giving some reason for concern, but he's still very much an elite player who can score 90 points and be a dominant force at 5-on-5. Crosby remains one of the league's best passers.

If there's a player with the best argument for being in that 1A group, it's probably the guy who won the Hart Trophy last season, Leon Draisaitl. A group of our NHL sources felt the same way.

"Is Draisaitl really not a top-tier player?" asked one Eastern Conference executive.

"I'd have Draisaitl up with McDavid and MacKinnon," said a Western Conference executive.

"Draisaitl is the other guy. Fuck, he's right there in that 1A," said an Eastern Conference coach. "He's pretty dominant. I don't know if he's there with McDavid. It's a hard one. He's knocking on the door for sure. He sticks out. He might be dominant enough."

What kept him out?

"At the end of the day, he doesn't drive 5-on-5 offense the same way the rest of the top guys do," said one analyst. "And that's before you get to the defense. No one is asking him to be Brayden Point. Going from where he is to only just below-average would be a very big step."

"McDavid's defense is below-average, whereas Draisaitl's is just bad," said another.

We debated long and hard about this one, acknowledging his absolutely elite offense while still considering his poor defensive numbers. Only his teammate McDavid is expected to score more points this season, and Draisaitl's brilliance there is not at all up for debate. He might be the second-best offensive player in the world. But like McDavid dropping from a tier of his own at 1A-plus, Draisaitl falls out of that top tier based on his defensive play. Like McDavid, Draisaitl was only

on for 53 percent of the goals at 5-on-5 last season, and that's a result of the Oilers allowing 3.2 goals against per 60. Considering his expected goals against rate was 2.9 per 60, the 16th worst mark in the league last season, that goals against rate is probably no fluke.

If Draisaitl was just average there, he's a 1A shoe-in. Even just a little below would've qualified, and the fact he's close despite near league-worst numbers is still a very impressive feat. Given all the talk around the Edmonton duo's shortcomings in their own end, it wouldn't be surprising to see that be a real point of emphasis next year, leading to both players climbing the player tiers ladder.

On top of his defense, though, there is one other concern, and it is the McDavid factor in general. Draisaitl can drive a line on his own, as he proved in the second half by playing his best hockey of the year. But would he be at the same level he showed last year if he wasn't on McDavid's wing or behind him on the depth chart, getting secondary matchups? It's not a question we know the answer to, but it is worthy of discussion.

If Nikita Kucherov wasn't out for the season, the 2018-19 Hart Trophy winner would be an easy choice for 1B, especially after a sensational playoff performance in which he scored 34 points in 25 games. The elite play-making Russian winger contingent is well covered here, though, with Artemi Panarin, who finished third in Hart Trophy voting last season. He had a career-high 95 points in 69 games and is one of the game's best passers. His vision is incredible, and that leads to him legitimately being able to turn otherwise ordinary players into strong scorers. Panarin's best reason for belonging here, though, is what the Rangers looked like without him last season. With Panarin on the ice, the team outscored opponents 75 to 38. With Panarin off the ice, they were outscored badly, 105 to 75. The gap between the two percentages was not just the largest last season; it was the largest since 2007-08.

There shouldn't be any argument over who the best defenseman in hockey is, not after the performance Victor Hedman had during the postseason. He was dominant nearly every shift, tilting the ice with his smooth yet hulking presence. During the playoffs, he had a GSVA of 1.3, a 4.5-win added rate off the strength of outscoring teams 24 to 10, a 54 percent expected goals rate, and 22 points in 25 games. He's projected to be the league's most valuable defensemen next season at just more than three wins added.

In terms of defensemen, there's no one quite like Hedman, with his ability to skate, move the puck, defend, score and intimidate. He may not have won the Norris Trophy, but his consistency during his peak can't be matched. He's been a finalist in four straight seasons with one win.

TIER 2: Franchise Player

There isn't a huge drop-off from Tier 1B to 2A, but it's still noticeable. There's just a little more uncertainty regarding each player's total value — a question mark here and there, or maybe what they do just isn't at the same high level. There are three top 10 spots left after Tier 1, and these seven players all have a very strong case to be included without much separation between them.

Nashville Predators captain Roman Josi, the only defenseman in 2A, is the bridge between Victor Hedman and the next tier of defensemen. And the reigning Norris Trophy winner's impressive play wasn't limited to the regular season.

"I thought Josi and Hedman were the best two (defensemen) in the bubble, of all the games that I watched," said a Western Conference executive.

Josi led all defensemen in shots and assists, but his most-telling stats are the ones not officially tracked by the NHL: He led in zone entries, zone-entry percentage and zone-exit percentage. He was a monster with the puck.

On the surface, the Bruins have two elite wingers, Brad Marchand and David Pastrnak, with the GSVA to qualify to be in the MVP tier, with Pastrnak's being nearly 1A caliber. What current models still struggle, with due to the lack of more granular data, is the interaction between players and that's something we thought a lot about. When it comes to the Bruins' top line, are they all individually top 10 players, or do they all look that way because they play with each other? Elite players who play with other elite players have the ability to drive each other's value up, and having three on one line takes it a step further.

We had a hard time putting either Marchand or Pastrnak in Tier 1 for that reason, but the argument is there. Pastrnak won the Rocket Richard Trophy last year and is easily one of the league's top goal-scoring threats. Marchand is a real play-driver, a strong puck-carrier who is also a sneaky elite passer, ranking third in assists over the past two seasons behind Kucherov and McDavid. That Marchand and Pastrnak form two-thirds of one of the best 5-on-5 lines in the league is also a worthy consideration. Picking between the two at this point feels like splitting hairs, but it is probably their line more than Bergeron's at this point, which is why he's in Tier 2B.

"They're all really good," said a Western Conference executive. "I have a center bias so I'm going to go Bergeron, Marchand and Pastrnak, if you're asking me. But I can't quibble with how it is there."

The preference for centers runs deep and brought up an interesting debate for where to slot winger Mark Stone. He impacts the game like a center, but his inclusion in 2A was definitely noticed, especially when it came at the cost of well-respected centers in the next tier.

"I think Mark Stone is a good hockey player," said one coach. "I don't know if he's 2A."

"If you're playing to win today, I'm putting (Bergeron) over Mark Stone," said another.

The interesting thing about Stone is that he's switched teams in recent years so those who were considering making a play for him got to know him really well while scouting him. One of those executives said that close study helped him grow an extra appreciation for Stone's game.

"I know Mark Stone is a great player," he said. "You watch him, and you see how elite he is with his brain and his stick and defensively. … You come back watching him and you're like, 'Fuck, he's good. He's better than Pastrnak and Marchand.'"

While Stone has a strong reputation as a two-way forward, his passing ability is extremely underrated. Only Crosby and Evgeni Malkin set up more shots last season.

It's the next wave of superstar centers who are perhaps the most tantalizing among the players comprising 2A, with all having a compelling case to be a top 10 player in the world. Point was right there with his 1B peers, Kucherov and Hedman, during the playoffs in a show-stopping performance. Game-in and game-out he showed what a dominant force he was with the puck, an elite one-man zone-entry machine. That's his defining trait, and it led to some truly lopsided scoring chance shares during the postseason. The way he controls play is special, and with Kucherov out he has a real chance to show he belongs in Tier 1 next season. It's worth noting that by Evolving-Hockey's wins above replacement, Point actually ranks first over the last two seasons.

"You could easily convince me that Point belongs in the top grouping," said an Eastern Conference executive.

Interestingly, Elias Pettersson also finds himself in the top five by WAR, whereas GSVA isn't quite as high on either player. WAR rewards Pettersson for having a high on-ice goal rate, while GSVA takes issue with the fact Pettersson didn't have a point on a high percentage of those goals. That's just a quibble on how high to rate him as he's a very special player who creates a huge advantage for the Canucks at 5-on-5.

The Sabres didn't seem to get that same advantage with Jack Eichel last season, with a strangely low 47 percent expected goals rate that was right in line with the team average. That's the only thing really holding Eichel back from being a bonafide 1B player, and of these three young centers, he's arguably the closest. Eichel was given a lot of consideration for his supreme offense after scoring at a 94-point pace last season and the fact he's on a team with no help. That he earns the results he does without much of a supporting cast is remarkable, and he was bumped up a fair bit from where the model sees him as a result. With Taylor Hall next to him this year, Eichel will have a real shot to prove he belongs in the top tier.

"It's time for Pettersson, Eichel, Point and (Miro) Heiskanen in the MVP tier," said an NHL source.

2B – "On any given night, he can be the best player in the world."

Mitch Marner is an extremely tricky player to grade. The talent is obvious, and his ability to hold onto the puck and make plays with it is exceptional. He's an excellent passer and actually plays competent defense. He's well regarded by GSVA for his ability to score a lot of points and drive play at a reasonably high level. After Keefe arrived, Marner scored at a 98-point pace and led the Leafs in expected goals percentage.

The issue is that Marner's big breakout coincided with the arrival of John Tavares; Marner's early-season slump last year coincided with a Tavares slump of his own and Marner's second-half surge coincided with playing with Matthews. It's hard to know who the real driver was there, but the fact that Marner has the opportunity to play with two elite, goal-scoring centers is tough to ignore. This will be an important season for Marner to cement his franchise-player status or risk falling into the All-Star tier below if it becomes clear he's at least partially

a byproduct of his centers. That uncertainty is why he's outside the Eichel-Pettersson-Point group.

"I know he didn't have a great year last year, but I think (Marner) can get in that 2A group," said a head coach. "I think he can get there."

This tier also features a quartet of elite two-way centers every coach would love to have but whose value (aside from Bergeron's) doesn't perfectly translate in this model. They're drivers at both ends of the ice.

Aleksander Barkov, Patrice Bergeron, Sean Couturier and Ryan O'Reilly are the kind of two-way cornerstone centers you can build a championship team around. With Bergeron, Couturier and O'Reilly in particular, their respective teams earned over 60 percent of the goals at 5-on-5 last season with them on the ice, and each was a strong influence on expected goals relative to teammates. Barkov wasn't at that level last season, but he also has a significantly heavier burden from a weaker supporting cast.

A total value model like this one does consider each player's 5-on-5 dominance, but it might love a guy like, say, Pastrnak more because of his game-breaking finishing talent and individual offensive ability. It struggles a bit more with those top centers who can just eat minutes in all situations and win tough matchups handily. If NHL executives were drafting a team to play tonight, Pastrnak probably goes lower than these four centers.

"I'd have Bergeron, Barkov, Couturier and O'Reilly ahead of Pastrnak," said one executive. "Centers are so hard to get."

Another veteran center whose name was debated at the top of the list was Malkin. He's 34 years old but is coming off a season in which he averaged 1.35 points per game and led all players in 5-on-5 points-per-60 with 3.43. It was his best production since the 2011-12 season on both accounts.

There's a case to be made to move him up, and he definitely looked MVP-calibre last season, as he was on a 4.5-win pace.

"On any given night, he'd be there with McDavid, Matthews and MacKinnon," said a head coach. "On any given night, he can be the best player in the world."

Vegas made a big bet this offseason in signing Alex Pietrangelo, and it gives the Golden Knights something arguably no other team has: Two franchise defensemen manning different pairs. That depends on how high you are on Shea Theodore, but his recent playoff showing should dispel any lingering doubts. His postseason performance was right there with Heiskanen's, Quinn Hughes' and Cale Makar's, and he was flat-out dominant at 5-on-5. He's an incredible puck-mover and has been the primary reason Vegas has been such a puck-possession powerhouse over the last two seasons. His 58 percent expected goals rate led all defensemen last season, and he was even better during the playoffs.

"Shea Theodore was awesome," said an executive of his play in the bubble.

Theodore is an offensive force deployed as such; while Pietrangelo is the all-around stud capable of defending well, moving the puck, and winning tough minute matchups. Both

are highly capable of driving their own pairs and create a huge advantage for the Golden Knights.

The Dougie Hamilton debate

By far the most contentious player here is Dougie Hamilton, whose place on this list had a very wide range of opinions. As you can see by his very high GSVA, he is very highly regarded by this model based entirely on his ability to drive play at 5-on-5.

"You guys think Dougie Hamilton is a franchise player?" a Western Conference coach wondered when he saw an early version of the tiers.

"I would not have Dougie Hamilton in 2B. And I'm a Dougie fan and have been for years," said an Eastern Conference executive. "But for me, he is not a franchise player. 3A, for sure, but I struggle with calling him a franchise player."

Despite playing tough minutes, he has back-to-back seasons with a 58 percent expected goals rate in Carolina, the second-highest mark among defensemen. Last year, he earned true No. 1 defenseman minutes for the first time in his career and crushed them. He was en route to a Norris-caliber season before getting injured in January. It is getting difficult to deny Hamilton's value, and even the old appeal-to-authority excuse is gone with him averaging 23:17 of ice time last season. And yet, despite us preemptively moving him down (we do think the model is too high on him), there were still detractors suggesting it wasn't far enough.

"Dougie has good analytics, but he's not a good defender," said a head coach. "Who are you going to win a championship with?"

For the record, Hamilton's defensive game took massive strides last season, and no Carolina defender allowed fewer actual or expected goals per 60. Relative to teammates, only 11 other defenders suppressed more chances than Hamilton, and none of them played tough minutes.

He may not look good doing it, but he gets the job done. The Hamilton debate is a major battleground in the eye test vs. analytics debate, a debate we're trying to bridge with these tiers showing the value to both sides. With Hamilton, it's easy to see why there's a sizable divide as he does do some strange stuff on the ice. He's different.

"People who don't like him won't change their mind. He's different and does stuff that's grating," said an analyst. "He is as good of an example of the problem with using the eye test. You make calculations in your brain of good things equal X, bad things equal Y. The bad things stick with you more, and he has a lot more of those moments. But his teams do so much better when he's on the ice."

"People insist Dougie Hamilton can't do certain things — be a top pair defensemen, run a first-unit power play, kill penalties — and have to be dragged, kicking and screaming, to only end up surprised with how well he handles those minutes," said another.

He's also never had a bad partner in his life. It's not a coincidence, and though he has some off moments here and there, the good far outweighs the bad.

"It's fair to look at a guy who spent most of his career getting somewhat limited minutes with Zdeno Chara, Mark Giordano and Jaccob Slavin and wonder what he'd do in a different situation," said one source.

"He ends up playing with those guys because they do better with him," said another.

That's been true in almost every season, and while it's likely true he benefitted from his partners early on his career, his numbers away from them over the last four years suggest otherwise, especially in Carolina.

The next wave of centers is the most tantalizing in Tier 2A, and it's the same for two defensemen in Tier 2B: Heiskanen and Makar. Those two comprise half of a group of four very strong young defensemen who will grow to define the position over the next decade. There was a growing feeling that there was a fair bit of separation between these two and the other two, found at the top of the next tier.

Heiskanen and Makar are similar in the sense that they're both good at moving the puck up ice, whether that's breaking it out or leading the rush. With their elite skating, elusiveness and vision, they're end-to-end forces, which was on full display during the playoffs. That end-to-end ability is something a lot of the best defensemen have in common, and it creates another layer to a team's attack.

It's what once made Erik Karlsson the league's most special defender and the next wave have fully adopted the rover mentality. Both strongly influence 5-on-5 expected and actual goal rates thanks to their natural talents, but they get there in different ways.

"Cale Makar is going to be there with Hedman," said a head coach. "I think (this) year is going to be his breakout. Makar and Heiskanen are coming. I think they're 2As. I'd put Makar ahead of Heiskanen, but just barely."

Heiskanen is strong in the offensive zone, but his best asset is his sheer defensive awareness. He already plays tough shutdown minutes and makes it look easy, having one of the strongest defensive impacts in the league. That's especially impressive considering how often he jumps into the play. For Makar, his primary utility is on offense, and he's extremely dangerous in the offensive zone at both 5-on-5 and with the man advantage. In his rookie year, he tied John Carlson for the league lead in points per 60. Both players have been complete game-changers for their teams' blue lines.

Tier 3: All-star

We wanted to group Heiskanen, Makar, Hughes and Charlie McAvoy together. The next group of great young defensemen. But the more opinions we received, the more we realized there might be a hint of daylight splitting the four. Hughes and McAvoy are really good. They're going to be better, but right now they remain a shade below Heiskanen and Makar.

"For me, Heiskanen is special. Really special with what he does," said a Western Conference executive weighing in on the debate. "You've got those guys right. But Quinn is really good. Dynamic with the puck."

"I would have to think hard about how I wanted to handle the guys who had a strong rookie year but don't have the track

record to build confidence that that's their long-term talent level," said an analyst.

So, as much as we like Hughes, we feel good about him in this spot. Not sure we can say that about Seth Jones. He sits in 3A and if you ask those on the analytics side, they'll probably tell you to move him down.

In fact, they did.

"I was going to say move Jones down, but I know that's a touchy subject with many. I legitimately don't know what he does above a 'pretty good level,'" said one.

Those behind the bench or in a more traditional front-office role? They'll see Jones in 3A and think it's too low. Way too low.

"Seth Jones reminded me of a young Chris Pronger," said a Western Conference executive of Jones' play in the postseason, where he averaged 32:40 of ice time per game. "I'd move up Jones. Seth Jones is a star."

"He's a franchise D for me. I'm guessing the relatively lower production is what pushed him down, but he's a two-way horse," said an Eastern Conference executive.

The bigger reason than raw production is that in each of the past two seasons, the Blue Jackets earned 50 percent of the expected goals with him on the ice, which was below average relative to the team. The model doesn't love that. The major difference between 2019-20 and 2018-19 is that this time, the goals started going Jones' way. On-ice metrics won't fully capture just how involved he is and his overall burden, though. And it's clear from watching that there is indeed something missing from the equation with Jones.

Factor in Slavin, another favorite, a tier below his teammate Hamilton, and those might be the two biggest points of contention between the model and those auditing it.

"I think there are more things that catch my eye on the defensemen than on the forwards. Slavin being behind Hamilton is definitely one of them," said one of our auditors.

"(Slavin) does everything very well, which means you can drop him into any role on any team and he'll excel," said another.

"I understand Hamilton's offensive edge, but he may not be the best defenseman on his team," said an executive. "I would probably have him in the same tier as Slavin."

OK, one more so we can talk a bit about John Carlson.

"I would take John Carlson over Dougie Hamilton," said a head coach.

"John Carlson is who people think Dougie Hamilton is," countered an analyst.

Carlson finished second in the Norris Trophy voting. He's been in the top five the past three seasons. He put up a career-high 75 points, but his team was out-chanced with him on the ice and only earned 52 percent of the goals. That was because no Capitals defender allowed more actual and expected goals against last season.

"I'm actually a John Carlson fan," said one source. "I think his defensive issues are probably overstated."

He later added: "But there's a real level of difference in their abilities there between Carlson and Hamilton. A good glimpse into that is how much more effective Hamilton was in the shorthanded minutes he was given this season, which was a first in his career."

Where should Ovechkin and other aging superstars slot?

Tier 3A is also the home to another group of potential Hall of Famers who would have occupied the top tier for a large portion of the previous decade. Deciding where to slot Patrick Kane, Alex Ovechkin, Tavares and Steven Stamkos at this point in their careers is tough. On any given night, they're able to dominate. So this section becomes an elevator shaft of sorts between superstars on the way down and the next generation ready to pass.

"3A is definitely the most chaotic tier," said an analyst. "Got some really good young up-and-comers with, like, the ghost of Steven Stamkos and friends."

Having Ovechkin that low definitely got push back. After all, he did lead the league in goals last season, including an NHL-best 35 at even strength.

"Ovechkin … should probably be in 2A now that I think about it," said an executive.

"I'd still have Alex Ovechkin in 2B. He's in that group for sure," said a head coach. "He still scores too much. Too big. Too strong. … I'd still put Ovi up with those big boys. At least one more year."

Ovechkin does still score a lot, but how much did it really matter last season when the Capitals were outscored 53-48 with him on the ice at 5-on-5, out-chanced by a similar margin and had a below average power play? It's that last part that most don't realize about Ovechkin's decline: Last year, he was tied for fifth in power play goals, but that's mostly because he played 90 percent of Washington's power-play minutes. By goals per 60, he ranked 56th.

We've seen age and time start to impact the game of Stamkos and Tavares, too. Stamkos has had trouble staying on the ice, and when he plays, he is someone much more dependent on linemates for success than others in the higher tiers. Especially when you compare him to his teammate Kucherov. And this season may be a big one in determining what to expect from Tavares in Toronto as his contract matures.

"Tavares definitely had a down year, but I think, looking at his past Islanders performance, that first year in Toronto was the outlier and the second year was closer to his baseline," said an analyst.

For a 32-year-old forward, Kane has shown a remarkable ability to hold off regression offensively. He remains as dynamic as anyone in the offensive zone. It's his play on the other side of the ice that puts him in this slot.

"If you watch Patrick Kane, that man has an open contempt for even the idea of pretending to play defense," said one source.

There are four forwards here who all have a shot at being in the franchise player tier at their peaks and could make us look silly by the time the season is over. We don't doubt that, but they're just missing a little extra something at the moment.

Mathew Barzal is not regarded as highly as he should be by the model, which doesn't see just how involved he is in transition. The franchise-player tier is a tough sell for now, with the net results including his production being great but not quite elite. Matthew Tkachuk is in a similar boat, in terms of the net result not being quite there yet. He's much closer in that regard and is unicorn-like in his ability to mix skill with grit, a rare blend in today's NHL. Mikko Rantanen is a terrific young player, but his scoring rates aren't as high as you might think on a per-60 level. It's also difficult to separate the MacKinnon factor. Sebastian Aho was the toughest cut and is very underrated in Carolina. He drives offense really well but was less involved in the breakout last season. There's still another level to his production that he flashed in the bubble that would surely see him move up.

"My hot take is Aho could win MVP one day," one source said.

3B – "3B is where it gets interesting."

If there's anyone who could really make us look dumb, it's 2018 No. 2 pick Andrei Svechnikov. No player drives more offense than him, and once those expected goals turn to actual goals, it's over for the rest of the league. He's already a monster at creating chances. It makes this portion of the tiers project fascinating.

"3B is where it gets interesting," said an Eastern Conference executive.

Tier 3B is definitely where we start asking questions about whether these players are truly elite, and that's an interesting mid-tier cut-off. For the All-Star consideration tier, that question is what separates the top half that are all mostly elite with the bottom half.

The "are they elite?" question applies to Mark Scheifele and Mika Zibanejad, in particular, two very highly regarded centers. Any team is happy with either of them as their top center, but once you start actually counting centers who are probably better, the realization hits that they're a lot closer to average first-line center than expected. In the top two-and-half tiers, there are 15 centers ahead of these two. For both, it's a question of whether he is a strong enough two-way player. Both are strong offensively, but Scheifele had some very weak results this year, while Zibanejad was badly out-chanced. With Zibanejad, there's also a concern regarding the repeatability of his high goal-scoring rate from last season. If he keeps that up for another year, he moves up.

On the winger front, it's the same question with Hall and Gabriel Landeskog, who are bonafide top-line wingers with strong play-driving ability, but presently lack that top-end gear. Hall had it two years ago, no doubt, but a very down season drops him. For Jonathan Huberdeau and Jake Guentzel, the worry is how much of their high GSVA is driven by playing with elite centers. Over the last two seasons, both have shown some passenger-like tendencies in transition (Guentzel really improved in 2019-20, for what it's worth), though both are still gifted enough offensive threats in-zone to belong here.

On defense, Mark Giordano and Kris Letang are aging veterans who are still dominant at one end, defense and offense respectively, but have lost a step the other way. Their age also makes them worthy of a downgrade, but both very much used to be franchise players. Analytically, both Jared

Spurgeon and Ryan Ellis qualify as-is with some exceptional underlying numbers, but each has questions attached to his game. Spurgeon is a defensive beast, but his numbers in transition aren't particularly strong. Ellis is great and has taken strides on the breakout and in the offensive zone, but playing with Josi offers concern over how much of his value should be attributed to him.

Ivan Provorov doesn't fit neatly with the other defensemen here, nor the defensemen in Tier 4A. He has elite potential and is strong at both ends of the ice, but he'll have a big test this season in carrying his own pair. That's something he's struggled with in the past and will decide whether he's a 3A or 4A player next season.

Tier 4: Top of the lineup

Let's start with a pair of young centers at the top of 4A. Both Pierre-Luc Dubois and Dylan Larkin received support to move up this list. Dubois especially has had visibility over the last year, with a strong performance (10 points in 10 games) in the playoffs. Now he's in the spotlight because of his trade request, and it's no surprise teams are calling.

"I would move him up, and here's my opinion: He's a size and strength centerman that the (coaches) know they can throw out against any centerman in the league and not have to worry about it at all," said one executive. "He may not get the 80 points that some of these other guys get, but his 55 points might be just as valuable as Mark Scheifele's 70 points."

When sources made their case to move a player up, we'd often counter by asking who they'd move down. You can't just load up the top tiers.

"I'm taking Dubois' next five years over Stamkos'," answered one. "But I'm not sure that's the right lens to look through for this project."

"Huberdeau for me. You swap those guys: Florida is a better team, Columbus is worse," answered another.

There's also a case to move Larkin, whose exposure to those around the league has been diminished because of the Red Wings' rebuild. In the last calendar year, he's played a grand total of 26 games. Sure, he has points in 24 of those games, but nobody noticed. He's rounded out his game, is better defensively and is expected to be named the captain in Detroit. As the program there rises, so will his stock.

Both Larkin and Dubois have potentially interesting comparables as they mature:

Along with the two young centers, there are two young wingers on Canadian teams who are shooting upward. Kyle Connor has a great shot and is a very gifted scorer, but his defense remains suspect. If he cleans that up, his offense could be enough to push him higher.

"He's Phil Kessel 2.0," said an analyst.

On the Leafs, detractors may give William Nylander the same label for his perceived lack of intensity, but he took massive strides last season. He's a strong play-driver and is very good in transition. He scored 31 goals last season, doing a lot of damage in tight. Teuvo Teravainen isn't as young as these two wingers, and he's more of a playmaker. But still, he fits

the mold as a very solid top-line winger. Of the three, he's the best defensively.

At 33 years old, it's natural to see a player like Claude Giroux slide down an evaluation like this. He's coming off a season in which he averaged 0.77 points per game, his second-lowest in the last decade. When people were making a case for another player, Giroux was a target to move down.

"I think Horvat is better than Claude Giroux," said one executive when tasked with re-arranging. "Horvat is a beast."

"No major issues," said another executive while looking over the top of tier 4. "Giroux probably belongs in 4B."

Johnny Gaudreau's slide isn't age-related, but his reputation took a hit after a down season. The common concern there was his production at even strength.

"Gaudreau would be way lower for me," said an executive. "Not enough of an impact on 5-on-5. Great player."

Brendan Gallagher is extremely highly regarded by the model, mostly for his high shot volume and play-driving ability. He's Marchand-lite for his pest-like qualities, though not nearly as dynamic or as gifted a passer. Gallagher also doesn't get a lot of minutes, which limits his total output. It's the same story for Filip Forsberg, who is usually in the 17-minute range. He's a volume shooter, too, and you really wonder what he could do outside of Nashville.

On defense, there's a really large subset of defensemen who we can mostly just define as "chaotic." They will do a lot for you offensively and look like true number ones at times, but they just can't get that full distinction at the moment as wild cards with some glaring holes. Karlsson made a career out of being a rover with his offense being so good that he was considered MVP-calibre despite the holes. He inspired the next generation, but his ability to exit the zone cleanly took a hit last year, making his play even riskier than usual. He's better than given credit for and can bounce back this season with full health, but hockey people were much less kind.

"Erik Karlsson is interesting," said a coach. "I would take Provorov over Karlsson any day of the week. I think Thomas Chabot will go by him. I don't know if he's there yet. But he'll go by him. I'd take Brent Burns over Karlsson. When I look at defending, scoring, possession — I'd put Karlsson in 4A. I don't think he defends at all."

"He's been awful," said a Western Conference executive. "What is wrong with this guy? He went from maybe his game is just off, maybe he'll get it back. Karlsson is one to look at. I know why he's where he is (in the tiers). But this guy is not really good right now."

Chabot is his heir apparent in Ottawa, and he really just doesn't have any help. John Klingberg once looked like the next version of Karlsson, a silky-smooth Swede who loves to move the puck up ice, but he took a noticeable step back last season offensively. He looked much better in the playoffs, at least, and back to his regular self, a player who would likely belong much higher here.

Zach Werenski actually gets more credit than his partner Jones, according to GSVA, and is the better puck-mover, but he too has some defensive shortcomings. As for Morgan

Rielly? He's the definition of a wild card. By the model, he has one of the best offensive impacts in hockey among defensemen. And also one of the worst defensive impacts.

Torey Krug is a super interesting player — a strong puck-mover who might be one of the league's best power-play quarterbacks. He's also generally been heavily sheltered for much of his career and will get a big test playing tough minutes this year with Colton Parayko, who falls in the same tier.

"Parayko doesn't move the puck great, but the defending, the size — fuck, he's pretty good," said a coach.

As you might expect, because of the universal respect he tends to have within the game, there were some who thought this was too low for Shea Weber.

"Weber still belongs in 3A or 3B in my books," said an executive from the East.

4B – "He's become a dominant player."

At the top of 4B are some of the league's best second-line centers: non-superstar division. Teams with Draisaitl, Malkin and Tavares — that's a luxury. Outside of those talents, there's a strong group of Anthony Cirelli, William Karlsson and Bo Horvat who give their respective teams real depth down the middle.

Cirelli was Selke Trophy-worthy last season, an incredible defensive force who freed up Tampa Bay's top three players to focus on offense. There are worries about his offense, though. Horvat doesn't drive play nearly as well, but he does play tough minutes and handles them well enough. He's very gifted at entering the zone with control. Karlsson might be the most talented of the three and is also technically his team's best center. He's a terrific playmaker and defensively responsible, but he also has the most help on his wings.

Tomas Hertl is San Jose's top center and is just a season removed from almost scoring at a point per game. With how dramatically the team fell off last season, he's often forgotten about, but he's legit. On a team with a better center ahead of him, he'd potentially look even stronger than the trio of centers above.

This tier also features a trio of high-volume shooters in Max Pacioretty, Tyler Seguin and Vladimir Tarasenko. All are still capable of big seasons (though Tarasenko and Seguin both enter the 2020-21 season with significant injuries), but a couple of them were candidates to move off the list entirely by some in the game.

"Seguin wouldn't be on my list," said one executive.

This executive said he'd instead look hard at removing a player like Seguin, Tarasenko, Teravainen or Blake Wheeler to make room for Tom Wilson. At this point in the exercise, we're looking for people who bring a unique skill set to the table, and Wilson certainly qualifies.

"I'm taking Wilson," he said, highlighting Wilson's size, physicality and ability to play up in the lineup. "I know that's what Montreal is probably hoping to get a reasonable facsimile in Josh Anderson. There's just not a lot of guys with that skill set. The difference between Tom and Josh is that Tom enjoys that uniqueness, that meanness. I think Josh just does it and will do it."

J.T. Miller's emergence in Vancouver was certainly noticed, and this might even be low for him if he continues to expand his influence with the Canucks.

"He's become a dominant player," said a coach.

"Miller played unreal last year," added an executive.

Travis Konecny is coming into his own and might have a 4A argument. He's a strong play-driver with a scoring touch, but he needs to build up a longer resume.

Same goes for Brady Tkachuk, who still hasn't eclipsed 50 points in a season but fits the same arch-type as his brother, a rare skilled pest. Few players get to the front of the net better than him, and he led the league in expected goals last season. Actually finishing those is the next step for him.

The model does not ignore defense, and both Jonas Brodin and Mattias Ekholm are highly regarded for it. Brodin offers very little in the way of offense, but his ability to suppress chances is nearly unmatched league-wide. He's almost the opposite of Rielly. Ekholm has a bit more two-way utility but is still as solid and steady as they come defensively.

Ryan Suter remains a calming, dependable horse for the Wild defense, and his point production per game was actually the highest of his career last season (0.70). Both he and Burns are hitting their mid-30s, and it's fair to expect some decline in their game from here on out.

On the flip side, the duo of Adam Fox and Ryan Pulock are on the rise and might already be better than people realize.

"Adam Fox will go by these guys," said a coach when looking at this tier.

"Adam Fox is not a top (pair) D yet," said an executive. "Good offensively, great on the PP, but lots of flaws in his game — although he is quickly improving."

4C – "I thought 4C was fair."

Getting to the cutoff was tough. You won't find a trio of veteran centers more respected than Nicklas Backstrom, Jonathan Toews and Anze Kopitar. Each has been instrumental in Stanley Cup championships — they have six of them total. They're going to the Hall of Fame. They have such respect and star power, it's not easy seeing them in the lowest tier.

"That seemed low for Kopitar," said a Western Conference executive who has seen a ton of him. "But it's not easy."

A couple of people had a really hard time seeing a player like Cirelli slotted higher compared to these three.

"That might be a bit rich for (Cirelli)," said one. "Considering Backstrom is below him."

"Does Cirelli really belong above Backstrom?" said another executive.

But the issue with the entire Capitals' top six was they just didn't get the necessary results at 5-on-5 last season, and that applies to Backstrom too. He's an elite passer still, but the days of Washington getting 60 percent of the goals with him on the ice might be over.

Nikolaj Ehlers and Kevin Fiala are two of the most tantalizing players in transition in the league. Ehlers, in particular, can go

end-to-end almost better than anyone in the NHL and would get a lot more respect with power-play time. He led a star-studded Jets team in points-per-60 last season. Fiala has real star potential after his late-season surge last year, but he needs to sustain it for longer than 20 games. He wasn't on our initial list, but one executive was adamant he be included.

"Squeeze in Fiala," said the executive. "He was carrying that team. He's their go-to guy."

A couple drivers of play in Anthony Mantha and Jaden Schwartz worked their way into this tier. Mantha is an interesting case because he shows glimpses of star power but also can't stay healthy. He's a candidate to move up if he can put it all together for a full season.

"Jaden Schwartz — the guy just works," said an executive. "Really good player."

There's also a trio of No. 1 picks in this group: Aaron Ekblad (2014), Ryan Nugent-Hopkins (2011) and Nico Hischier (2017). They're all good players, but it's probably not the tier you want the top pick in the draft settling in.

"The guy I struggle with is Ekblad," said an executive. "I see him just enough to know he's a good player, but I always walk out of the building and say, 'What am I missing?'"

"I don't love Ekblad. Some guys love him," said another executive. "I can't wrap my head around what I thought he was going to be. I thought he'd come in and get 50 points … and they overpaid him. I have a problem with how much he's making."

As for Hischier, he still has the time and talent to work his way up.

"At least with Hischier, the counter would be he's at an age and on a track where he could become seen as a high-end two-way guy pretty soon," said an analyst.

This tier is also the home of your strong second-pair shutdown types like Ryan McDonagh, Jeff Petry and Jake Muzzin. These are players everyone appreciates but also were candidates to remove from the list to work others in. For instance, a coach saw an opportunity here to work in Drew Doughty, who ultimately didn't make the list.

"Doughty has gone down a bit. To me, you still take Doughty over Ekblad, over Muzzin, you'd take him over Petry," he said. "He's still in that group. Doughty is wild in L.A. They've lost. It's gotten away. But put him on the Toronto Maple Leafs, and he's their best right-shot defenseman, hands-down."

"Muzzin feels like a reach to me," said an executive. "And I'd have to take a long hard look at McDonagh at this point in his career. Not sure I'd take those guys over some of the guys (off the list)."

Mikhail Sergachev's role and responsibility continues to grow in Tampa, and he was consistently identified as a move-up candidate.

"I think Sergachev will be moving up to (Tier 3) if he isn't there already," said an Eastern Conference executive.

One analyst essentially told us to get Brock Boeser as far away from this list as possible. We kept him on primarily because of how much potential he has with Pettersson and

how strong his shot is. His shooting percentage took a dip, but a bounce-back feels likely.

Jamie Benn is essentially player No. 100, the final cut who made it in following Kucherov's injury. Benn has been in a bit of an offensive decline over the past few seasons but can still be a play-driving force. He put up elite forechecking numbers last season and was instrumental to Dallas' deep playoff run. He was arguably their best forward.

There might have been a better pick, and we'll open it up to debate. It's a debate that will likely continue well into the season.

"It's fun," concluded an executive. "This is the stuff that is fun."

Under the radar and ready to go, Pesce back with Hurricanes

By Jared Fialko

February 20, 2020 is fondly remembered as the "David Ayres Game." When a zamboni driver turned emergency backup goaltender saved the day in a crucial, almost must-win affair in Toronto. What some tend to forget, is that goalies Petr Mrazek and James Reimer weren't the only ones to suffer from the bite of the injury bug. Defenseman Brett Pesce also banged up his right shoulder in that one, leading to what was projected as a season-ending surgery.

It wasn't the first time that bum shoulder gave him problems. It had given him grief he hoped in vain would just vanish.

"I dislocated it two years ago, I opted to not get surgery and just rehab it, hoping it would just hold up," Hurricanes defenseman Brett Pesce detailed.

Spoiler alert: it eventually caved. Making surgery no longer an option, but a necessity.

"At the end of the day I had to make a very tough decision on what's best for the future of my career," Pesce recalled.

It turned out to be a pretty invasive operation, but a successful one.

"The doctors assured me that if I had this done, the odds are in my favor now," Pesce said.

A long anticipated wait behind Brett, his return also improves the odds in his team's favor. The missing link from a Stanley Cup run where Pesce planned to return had the Canes lasted one more week.

"He's one of those guys that when you have him in there maybe you take him for granted a little bit because when he's not in the lineup, you certainly miss it," said Hurricanes head coach Rod Brind'Amour.

"People take 'Pesc' for granted about how good he is and he's the guy that goes untalked about or unnoticed, but he's the steadiest they come," smiled Canes alternate captain Jordan Martinook.

"He's a rock in front of you and he always seems to make the right play, he blocks shots, and he's got a great stick," listed James Reimer, Hurricanes goaltender.

One hundred percent healthy, but Pesce won't deny that missing the playoffs took its toll. It's why everyone plays the game, he says. At least now, he'll get a chance to do so, pain-free.

Notebook: Canes Continue to Hone Details, Prepare for Scrimmage

Red-White scrimmage will help simulate game action as regular season nears

by Michael Smith

After a scheduled off day on Saturday, the team's first and only in an abridged training camp, the Carolina Hurricanes returned to the ice at Wake Competition Center on Sunday.

With it came a shift in mindset, too. The first half of camp placed an emphasis on pace, work and review. The latter half, which leads into the start of the 2020-21 season, will focus on dialing in to a game-ready attitude and routine both on and off the ice, and with that comes another level in preparation and intensity.

"It's been a pretty good training camp so far. It's been a lot of systems and battling," Teuvo Teravainen said. "We're getting kind of ready to play. It's good to have at least some game action tomorrow. We'll see how it goes."

Teravainen is referencing the Red-White scrimmage that was added to the calendar for Monday, replacing the group practices we've seen each day. It's time to take the details the Canes have been reviewing early in camp and apply them in a game situation.

The countdown to puck drop is on, and the regular season is just four days away.

"I think everyone looks really good," Petr Mrazek said. "I think everyone is ready to go and realy excited for the season to start."

Scrimmage on Tap for Monday

In the absence of a preseason, an intrasquad scrimmage will be as close as the Canes can get to game action prior to Thursday's season opener in Detroit.

"I think we need to have at least one [scrimmage] just to feel like a game," Brind'Amour said last week. "I don't really expect it to be very intense. I'd like it to be, but those have really fallen off over the years."

Though the scrimmage will take place at Wake Competition Center and will begin at the team's typical morning practice time, the Canes are treating it as similar to a gameday as possible, with an on-ice warm-up at 10:30 and puck drop at 11. It won't be a full-on exhibition per se, especially since both sides will have just 14 skaters, but it will at least feel more like an actual game than anything the Canes have been able to do in camp so far.

"You're never going to crush a teammate or anything like that," Jake Gardiner said. "You can't really replicate playing a game, even in something like [a scrimmage]. Thursday is going to be really when we get started, but our practices have been really hard, and physically I think our team is in pretty good shape."

The Lines & Pairings

After the second day of camp, Brind'Amour cautioned against reading into the forward line combinations and defensive pairs. But, it's worth noting that what the team rolled out on day one has remained largely unchanged and will be featured in Monday's scrimmage.

With that in mind, here's how the Canes have lined up through the first six days of practice.

Niederreiter-Aho-Teravainen
Svechnikov-Trocheck-Fast
Foegele-Staal-Necas
Dzingel-Martinook/Geekie-McGinn

Slavin-Hamilton
Skjei-Pesce
Gardiner-Fleury
Ryan-Bean

Forsling Claimed on Waivers

In advance of finalizing their active roster and taxi squad, the Canes placed Antoine Bibeau, Jeremy Bracco, Gustav Forsling, Steven Lorentz, Max McCormick, Drew Shore and Spencer Smallman on waivers. Everyone cleared on Saturday except Forsling, who was claimed by the Florida Panthers.

Forsling played in 122 NHL games with Chicago from 2016-19 and now reunites with head coach Joel Quenneville in Florida.

The Canes remain deep on the blue line with Joakim Ryan, who has logged 141 NHL games since 2017, and Jake Bean both capable of stepping in. Joey Keane, who was named to the AHL's All-Rookie Team last season, practiced with the NHL group on Friday and is one to watch, as well. Losing Forsling does dent Chicago's potential defensive depth, but that's where the split affiliation with Nashville will be beneficial.

Player Milestones to Watch in the Upcoming Season

Reachable achievements, the longer shots and everything in between

by Michael Smith

The 2019-20 regular season was unexpectedly cut short by the COVID-19 pandemic, as the Carolina Hurricanes played 68 games in their 82-game schedule. As the world continues to cope with the ongoing health crisis, the Canes will play even fewer games in the 2020-21 regular season.

But even with just a 56-game slate on tap, there are a number of player milestones within reach. Some could happen as early as Jan. 14 when the Canes drop the puck on the regular season in Detroit. Some might take a little longer. Some could require more herculean efforts.

From reachable achievements to the ones that are perhaps more of a stretch to everything in between, here are milestones to watch for the Canes this season.

Many stick taps to Mike "Three Piece" Brown "Brownie" of CanesPR for his superior stats tracking.

Cross 'Em Off the List Now

Dougie Hamilton: Needs 1 point for 300 in his NHL career

Andrei Svechnikov: Needs 2 points for 100 in his NHL/Canes career

Teuvo Teravainen: Needs 2 assists for 200 in his NHL career

A Safe Bet

Sebastian Aho: Needs 37 points for 300 in his NHL/Canes career

Ryan Dzingel: Needs 7 assists for 100 in his NHL career

Jesper Fast: Needs 8 assists for 100 in his NHL career

Hamilton: Needs 4 goals for 100 in his NHL career

Hamilton: Needs 48 games played for 600 in his NHL career

Jordan Martinook: Needs 26 games played for 400 in his NHL career

Brock McGinn: Needs 7 points for 100 in his NHL/Canes career

Martin Necas: Needs 28 games played for 100 in his NHL/Canes career

Nino Niederreiter: Needs 10 points for 300 in his NHL career

Brett Pesce: Needs 50 games played for 400 in his NHL/Canes career

Jaccob Slavin: Needs 23 games played for 400 in his NHL/Canes career

Jordan Staal: Needs 39 games played for 1,000 in his NHL career

Svechnikov: Needs 50 games played for 200 in his NHL/Canes career

Teravainen: Needs 9 goals for 100 in his NHL career

Teravainen: Needs 11 points for 300 in his NHL career

Vincent Trocheck: Needs 16 points for 300 in his NHL career

There's Potential Here

Dzingel: Needs 33 points for 200 in his NHL career

Petr Mrazek: Needs 37 games played for 300 in his NHL career

Brady Skjei: Needs 12 assists for 100 in his NHL career

Win Big

Aho: Needs 58 assists for 200 in his NHL/Canes career

Dzingel: Needs 26 goals for 100 in his NHL career

Necas: Needs 62 points for 100 in his NHL/Canes career

Pesce: Needs 18 assists for 100 in his NHL/Canes career

James Reimer: Needs 37 games played for 400 in his NHL career

Svechnikov: Needs 46 assists for 100 in his NHL/Canes career

Trocheck: Needs 28 assists for 200 in his NHL career

ESPN.COM

Carolina Hurricanes 2021 season preview: Is the goaltending good enough for the Canes to contend?

By Emily Kaplan

A somewhat surprising run to the 2019 Eastern Conference finals meant that expectations were higher on the Carolina Hurricanes this past season. A trip to the 2020 postseason, however, ended the same way: a lopsided series loss to the Boston Bruins.

The 2020-21 season puts the Canes in a new division -- the Central, away from most of their usual Metropolitan Division foes -- but expectations for another playoff berth remain.

What should fans expect out of the team in 2021? Here's everything you need to know before opening night:

Big question: How much of a story will Dougie Hamilton's expiring contract be?

The Canes have developed a clear identity under coach Rod Brind'Amour. They have young stars to build around and have impressed in each of their past two playoff runs, showing that they're ready for more.

However, one of their top defensemen, Hamilton, is entering the final season of the six-year, $34.5 million contract he signed with Calgary in 2015. Can the Canes agree to keep him long term (and are they willing to shell out the going rate for a top-tier defenseman in his prime, which is far more than the $5.75 million he's getting this season)? Or could he potentially be traded for assets -- or walk away for nothing this summer? Stay tuned to this lingering storyline.

Did realignment hurt or help?

Things were getting crowded in the Metropolitan Division, so the Canes don't mind the breathing room in the hodgepodge Central. A top-four spot, which means a trip to the playoffs, is very much up for grabs, and Carolina is a good bet to secure one of those.

Offseason comings and goings, plus the cap situation

The Hurricanes have $932,261 in projected cap space, according to Cap Friendly. The Canes had their captain, Justin Williams, retire and said goodbye to defensemen Trevor van Riemsdyk and Joel Edmundson as well as goalie Anton Forsberg. Carolina signed longtime New York Rangers forward Jesper Fast to replace Williams in the lineup and inked veteran defenseman Joakim Ryan to a two-way deal.

Bold prediction

Ryan Dzingel bounces back. The 28-year-old joined the Canes in the summer of 2019 as a free agent. His first season in Carolina was unfortunately his worst as a pro, as he scored only eight goals in 64 games (for context, he had 26 the season before that). Though Dzingel ended 2019-20 skating

on the fourth line, expect him to work his way back up to the middle six (with middle-six-like production).

Breakout candidate: Martin Necas

The 21-year-old had a solid rookie campaign, scoring 16 goals (third on the team) and 36 points (fifth) in 64 games. Expect him to continue that momentum. And if Necas improves his play away from the puck, he'll earn more playing time from Brind'Amour (Necas averaged just over 14 minutes per game last season).

Biggest strength: The top line

If you haven't been paying enough attention to Sebastian Aho, Andrei Svechnikov and Teuvo Teravainen, it's time to start now. The trio (average age of 23) has developed incredible chemistry. These three are only getting better (especially Svechnikov), and they have enough talent to keep you entertained with their blend of puck possession and skill.

Biggest weakness: Goaltending

Despite a plethora of goaltending options available on the free-agent and trade markets this offseason, the Canes have decided to stick with Petr Mrazek and James Reimer. Although it's not the worst option -- the duo ranked 17th in the league last season with a combined .903 save percentage -- there were plenty of ways Carolina could have upgraded, but it chose not to.

Hurricanes in NHL Rank

- No. 27: Sebastian Aho, C
- No. 48: Dougie Hamilton, D
- No. 58: Jaccob Slavin, D
- No. 88: Andrei Svechnikov, RW

Prospect perspective

Pipeline ranking: 11

Prospects in the top 100: No. 46 Seth Jarvis (LW), No. 60 Ryan Suzuki (C), No. 73 Jake Bean (D)

Fantasy facts to know

Sebastian Aho has cemented himself as a first-round fantasy asset, and Dougie Hamilton will compete to be among the top five defensemen. Andrei Svechnikov and Teuvo Teravainen are also strong choices, with Svechnikov collecting a sneaky number of hits.

The Canes have some late-round options with upside, including Jaccob Slavin and Vincent Trocheck, who would both play at elite levels if called upon to fill in for an injury at the top of the depth chart.

Petr Mrazek got enough separation on James Reimer last season, so the upside of him backstopping the majority of games for an improving Hurricanes squad is something to consider if you don't draft a goalie early. -- Sean Allen

SportScan

Articles from outlets covering the Hurricanes' upcoming opponents and league-wide news

1198656   Websites

The Athletic / 2021 NHL Goalie Tiers: Anonymous panel of GMs and coaches rates all 31 starters

Craig Custance Jan 10, 2021

One of the panelists for our annual Goalie Tiers project floated a theory.

In a condensed season, like 2020-21, having a starting goalie who can handle a heavy workload will be more important than ever. We'll hear a lot publicly about two-goalie systems and the importance of having a strong backup, but when push comes to shove, it's going to be about No. 1. There's just too much on the line in each game.

"Being robust as a starter during this year is going to be critical," said one NHL coach. "What happens on a back-to-back when Connor Hellebuyck pitches a shutout in Edmonton and they play the next night in Edmonton? You're fucking right: He's going to play again."

And that means, contrary to what many expect, that having a top-tier goalie may be more important than ever in this shortened season.

And who might those top-tier goalies be? Or maybe more importantly, who isn't?

Welcome to the 2021 Goalie Tiers.

If you're unfamiliar, every year we ask a group of NHL general managers and coaches to rate every single starting goalie on a scale of 1 to 5, with one being best and five being worst. Then the ratings are averaged and the goalies sorted into tiers. We grant anonymity to encourage honesty and participation.

This year, the panel was made up of six general managers, four head coaches and five goalie coaches.

Let's dive in:

Tier 1

1. Andrei Vasilevskiy, Lightning

35-14-3

.917

2.56

3

Average 2021 tier rating: 1.03

For the third consecutive season, Vasilevskiy is at the top of this list. He's the best goalie in the league, and it might not be close. Asked to rate him on a 1 to 5 scale with one being best, one GM quipped: "Zero? I think he's the best. If you can find someone better, let me know."

"He has no weakness," said a head coach. "He's got unbelievable size, athleticism, work ethic and focus. … He's perfected his craft."

Vasilevskiy got ones across the board. Except a single panelist who gave him a 1.5. His average rating of 1.03 was the lowest since Carey Price got ones across the board for a perfect 1.0 in 2016.

"What can you say bad about him? Start off with the way he handles the puck. He's engaged in the game from the start. He can handle the puck for a big guy. Two, he's aggressive. He's not a big guy who plays in the paint and is conservative," said a coach. "You add that other element of flexibility and athleticism and his compete to keep the puck out of the net — he understands what his job is. It's not to look pretty all the time. His hockey awareness of where the puck is is incredible. That's why he's the best in the league. Now that he's done it, it's a hard title to take away."

"You knew at some point, he was going to win a Cup, and I don't think he's done yet," said a goalie coach. "When you get a guy that big who can move and who competes like he does — his puck handling has gotten so much better. You've seen this guy mature. He's 26 now, and he has a lot of good hockey left in front of him."

On top of winning a Stanley Cup, Vasilevskiy hasn't finished lower than third in Vezina voting the past three seasons. While wins may not be the

best stat to measure goalies, he's led the league in wins each of the last three seasons. He's a workhorse.

Did we mention he's still just 26?

"I'd put him in a class by himself," concluded a coach.

2 (tie). Connor Hellebuyck, Jets

31-21-5

.922

2.57

6

Average 2021 tier rating: 1.27

He was great last year for the Jets. He beat out Tuukka Rask and Andrei Vasilevskiy for the Vezina. He's catapulted himself to the top of the U.S. Olympic goalie conversation. He led the league in shutouts and saw more shots than any other goalie in the league while finishing with a save percentage of .922. As you might expect, the panel was nearly unanimous in its praise.

"I would want him to play for my team anytime," said a coach.

"I like him," said another. "He plays heavy minutes. … I don't think there's anybody who plays more in the league. That team, they open it up a little bit. It's not like it's St. Louis or Dallas defensively. Last year was a statement year for him."

But if you ask enough people about goalies, you almost always find a dissenting opinion.

"He's one of those guys who is really good on a bad team," said one panelist. "I just haven't seen it yet where the money is on the line and he's a gamer. Last year was a disaster in Winnipeg. Fuck, he did a great job keeping them in games. The mindset was, 'Hey, there's no pressure. Just keep us in this one.' If you're going to throw around the word Vezina, that's not a Vezina winner for me. … He did let in clear-sighted goals a fair amount. I think his rebound control is poor. He does a lot of things that are good, but a Vezina winner is the best goalie in the world."

2 (tie). Carey Price, Canadiens

27-25-6

.909

2.79

4

Average 2021 tier rating: 1.27

Price finished last season with a .909 save percentage, well under his career .917 average. Over the past three regular seasons (in 115 games), Price has a .910 save percentage. His numbers are starting to slide as he gets into his 30s but not his reputation inside the game. That he was great in the bubble only solidified his place amongst GMs and coaches.

This exchange with an Eastern Conference GM was typical.

"Carey Price."

"One."

"Any hesitation?"

"No."

People in the game continue to love Carey Price.

"He just looks like he's going to stop the puck," said a coach.

"All I know is if I could pick any goalie to start a game, I'd pick Andrei Vasilevskiy one and Price two," said another head coach. "When your stock is that high and you're not on a great team, people want to knock you down."

Said one more head coach: "Until somebody shows me different, he's a one."

The goalie coaches tended to be a little more critical of Price. They still liked him and respected him, but they definitely were tougher on him.

"The team has gotten worse, so he's been let off the hook a little bit," said one. "Carey Price is a really good, pretty good, goalie to watch who is elite at his craft. He's also never been able to get done what people hope he can get done."

He continued.

"Every goalie school across the world has clips. If you could build a goalie, that's what it looks like. No one knows what to do with Carey Price. You understand not one guy can take a team on a Cup run. It takes way more than that. Things just have never aligned up for him in Montreal."

Another goalie coach gave him a high rating but said he would have been a three had he not made adjustments for the playoffs.

"He made some changes over the break, you could tell," he said. "If he plays that way — the way he played in the playoffs based on some of the changes that it looked like he made — we obviously know the skill he brings to the table and how easy the game comes to him. He was at a different level in the playoffs."

Tier 2

4. Tuukka Rask, Bruins

26-8-6

.929

2.12

5

Average 2021 tier rating: 1.67

Rask is entering the final year of his contract with the Bruins, so this becomes a pivotal season for him and his future. He has provided context for his decision to leave the bubble, and that should help take heat off him.

"I think he'll flourish this year playing in front of no fans in Boston," joked one panelist about the scrutiny he always seems to be under in that market.

At 32 years old, the 2014 Vezina winner finished second in voting last season and is going to go down as one of the best goalies of his era. His .929 save percentage last year was up from his career average of .922.

"I'm a huge, huge fan. I think he's fucking unreal," said one coach.

"Over the years, other than Vasilevskiy, Tuukka Rask has been the most consistent. His style is so rock-solid in his play," said a goalie coach. "He's had some great playoffs. His opt-out might have eaten him up a little bit, but even at his age he can have a bad night and still rely on his foundation. He's one of the best looking goalies in the NHL. Just the consistency is pretty amazing."

Said another coach: "He's still getting it done … and the two goalie system: (Jaroslav) Halak has played a lot the last two years and has taken the added pressure and burden off Rask. I'm still a fan of his."

5. Jacob Markstrom, Flames

23-16-4

.918

2.75

2

Average 2021 tier rating: 1.97

Markstrom is an interesting one. He's 30 years old. He's coming off the best season of his career. He carried the Vancouver Canucks at times. He has continually improved during his decade in the league. Last year, for instance, he was No. 22 on this list.

"He's come a long way too," said a head coach. "He's fucking quality."

But now he's switching teams. And the success he had under a demanding goalie coach in Vancouver needs to transfer to a new city in a new organization under the pressure of a big contract.

One panelist articulated that concern: "What I know about (Canucks goaltending coach) Ian Clark: Everywhere he goes, things turn to gold. … The guy gets results out of his goalies. He has a lot of confidence in his work."

He explained that Clark, who coaches with a bit of an edge, started working with Markstrom at the perfect time, when he was receptive to coaching, and he wondered if he was quite ready to go on his own.

"I'd feel better if Markstrom moved to Calgary in three more years," he said.

Another goalie coach acknowledged the challenge of the franchise change and the severing of that relationship with Clark but anticipated it going well.

"It's a big year. He has to show who he is. He has great compete, and Ian is great. He's stern. He does a really good job of managing them when they need days off. (Markstrom) bought into his style. He'll be fine, but it's going to be different."

6. Carter Hart, Flyers

24-13-3

.914

2.42

1

Average 2021 tier rating: 2.00

There wasn't much debate from the panel over whether Hart is trending up, even if he saw a slight dip in his save percentage. The bigger debate centered on what exactly he is right now. Or what he'll be this season.

In the minds of some panelists, he's already there. He received three votes for Tier 1 from the panel — people who already think he's a top-tier goalie. But there are still those who want more time to assess.

"He's going to be a (Tier) 1," said a goalie coach. "We're going to have a discussion in two or three years that he's a 1. He still has a lot to improve."

Added a head coach: "I like Carter. I like him. It's a little bit … wait and see. I think he's going to be really good."

So what does he already do well at age 22? Other than being able to handle the pressure of playing for a franchise where goalies have historically struggled, Hart's style should lend itself to consistency as he matures.

"He is one of the most efficient goalies in the league, the way he tracks, the way he moves. I just think, physically, he's as skilled as you can get," said a goalie coach. "There's going to be part of it between the ears that's going to be the determining factor of how consistent he'll be. He can shut you down, and it's fairly simple for him. He's a modern guy who has grown up in a way that is more efficient than guys (who came before him)."

A few panelists brought up Hart's struggles on the road as something that needs to be improved moving forward. Last season, Hart was 20-3-2

with a .943 save percentage at home. He was 4-10-1 with a .857 save percentage on the road.

"He was horrendous on the road," said a panelist. "He cannot play on the road right now. He's got to figure that part out. He's very well versed on the psychological aspect of hockey and life. He's a man of routine. He gets himself into a pregame rhythm. I just don't know if he's found out how to do that at the NHL level (on the road)."

7. John Gibson, Ducks

20-26-5

.904

3.00

1

Average 2021 tier rating: 2.03

We're going to jump to the most interesting opinion here, because most panelists really like John Gibson and think he's an upper-echelon goalie. But one, who gave him a 3.5 rating (tied for his lowest), explained why we might be seeing the downward arc of his career.

"I don't see him working at his craft. I don't see parts of his game that have really gotten better," this panelist said. "There are older guys in the league — look at Jacob Markstrom. His game has changed quite a bit. Even a guy like Freddie Andersen has made adjustments. I feel like Gibson is collecting his paycheck. Would that be different if they had a better team in front of him?… I'm hard on him because I feel like he could be so much more."

A GM countered that opinion.

"I disagree," he said. "I see John Gibson play with my own two eyes. He didn't have a good year last year, but he's a very good goalie."

But a goalie coach, who likes Gibson, echoed the notion that his style may be dated.

"I see his numbers every year, and they're unbelievable, but you look at his style from a goalie coach's point of view — he has a touch of old school to him," he said. "It's not pretty. There are certain parts of his game I don't trust. But I give him credit: He's a workhorse who can handle the load."

Said another: "Put him on a good team and he could be a top guy."

8. Sergei Bobrovsky, Panthers

23-19-6

.900

3.23

1

Average 2021 tier rating: 2.10

Last year, Bobrovsky received the highest rating of his career. It seemed like he'd finally won over the league and earned universal respect. Then came Year No. 1 with the Panthers. It didn't go well.

"He had a terrible year," said one GM.

Another GM said he had a hard time disconnecting his inflated salary ($10 million per season for six more years) from his analysis when assessing Bobrovsky.

But even at half the price, a .900 save percentage in 48 starts isn't particularly good. So it all comes down to whether you think he bounces back in Florida, away from the structure and comfort zone of the Blue Jackets.

He definitely has his defenders. One panelist who knows him well predicted a big season. Another said Bobrovsky played much better

down the stretch after showing an inability to "catch up to the style of play" of the Panthers.

"I think he'll bounce back," said a Western Conference GM.

But a detailed assessment from a goalie coach suggested that Bobrovsky's style of play may never perfectly mesh with the Panthers system.

"The problem with Bob is there is a compound effect in Florida where they give up the middle of the ice a lot and he's not a great lateral mover. In the highlights, you see him making saves in the splits when the reality is, if Carey Price was in the same system, he'd be making the saves with his chest," the coach said. "People are saying Bob had an off year — question is: Did he? He comes from Columbus, where the system really matched his gameplay there. I'm concerned his weakness, lateral movement, is open. We might have a bad match there."

9. Robin Lehner, Golden Knights

19-10-5

.920

2.89

1

Average 2021 tier rating: 2.13

Lehner will be starting the season on his fourth different team in four years, but by virtue of a five-year deal worth $5 million per season, he finally has a chance to establish himself with one franchise and give his career some stability.

"I love that kid's story, and he's always in the way of the puck too," said one head coach.

A couple of panelists brought up the fact that Lehner has only started more than 50 games once in his career so there's some question if he can be a long-term workhorse in Vegas, but with Marc-Andre Fleury still around, he doesn't have to be. Most people liked the fit between the Golden Knights and Lehner.

"Good goalie on a good team," said one goalie coach.

"I think he'll be happy with the fact that he has a long-term deal," said another. "He fit in well with the team. They've got good structure, a good group. He's a very honest person, and sometimes that can rub people the wrong way, but I think he'll do well. I don't know if I see him as a Vezina guy, but I think he could be."

On the flip side, there were some slight concerns.

"His puck handling is atrocious," said a panelist. "He's the worst shootout goalie in the league. I think he got protected really well. … For me, he's still above average, but I want to see him win."

"His style is so sloppy at times. He's not a clean Carey Price-type of goalie," said another. "Robin likes to play his way. He'll drop his knee to the ice on a shot from the blue line. He's got that old-school style to him sometimes. But it works. The guy battles his ass off. He's a competitor."

10 (tie). Frederik Andersen, Maple Leafs

29-13-7

.909

2.85

3

Average 2021 tier rating: 2.17

For a few years now, Andersen has been a goalie that panelists fly right by, mostly giving him a two rating before moving on to the next goalie. They're confident he's better than average but not convinced he's a

Vezina candidate. Just about the perfect Tier 2 goalie. But this year, there was a lot of Andersen love from the group.

"I think he's an impact player on that team. I just think he's really good. I just think that when I look at his skills, when he's at his best, he's a top guy in the league," said one coach. "He might not get it because at times they give up some stuff that makes it hard. He's pretty consistent."

An Eastern Conference head coach was even more adamant about Andersen's place in the game.

"I don't understand all the hate. I don't get it. I don't understand all the negativity towards him. It's like anything in life, the playoffs. I get it. You have to win," he said. "It gets overamplified. He's a hell of a goalie. Night in and night out. He's huge. They don't play great D. They don't have this great D-corps. You throw him on Columbus, and his numbers would be unbelievable."

"Any goalie who has played in Toronto — (Felix) Potvin, (Ed) Belfour, (Andrew) Raycroft, go down the list —no matter what they do there, they get run out of town," said another panelist. "Andersen is a steady goalie. He can play a shit ton of games. He's a workhorse. I don't see him as a guy who will win the Vezina, but I see him better than an average goalie. If you put in an average goalie in Toronto, he wouldn't do what Freddy does."

And if you're just looking for the bottom line, here's another coach: "Contract year. The team will be better. He's going to have a big year."

10 (tie). Darcy Kuemper, Coyotes

16-11-2

.928

2.22

2

Average 2021 tier rating: 2.17

For two seasons, Kuemper has been legitimately great in Arizona. He has a .923 save percentage in 94 games since joining the Coyotes in the 2017-18 season.

"His stats say he's a (Tier) 1," said a head coach.

And yet, there was definitely hesitation to put him in that bracket.

"That is an interesting one. Fuck. I don't know," said another head coach when asked to rate Kuemper. Most seemed comfortable giving him a two and moving right on to the next goalie.

One panelist also felt the condensed season would present a real challenge to Kuemper's continued success.

"To me, Darcy Kuemper is in trouble," he said. "He's got to be healthy for 70 percent of the starts, and that's not a good recipe for a guy like him who is injured often."

12. Igor Shesterkin, Rangers

10-2-0

.932

2.52

0

Average 2021 tier rating: 2.23

So, this one was interesting. Typically, when people are asked to project or evaluate a 25-year-old goalie who's played 12 career NHL games, they want to see more before drawing conclusions. They are conservative in their assessment. But something about the way Shesterkin performed (.932 save percentage) in New York while replacing a Hall of Famer eliminated the normal reservations.

"He hasn't been overhyped," said a head coach. "Whenever I see him, I really, really like him. He's pretty damn good."

"He's the real deal," said another. "He came in under pressure. He's the young guy everyone is talking about, getting his chance."

"This kid walks down Broadway and says, 'See you later Lundqvist,'" said a panelist. "And pushes the other guy out of the way. Do we know a lot about him in the world of goaltending? Not a lot. What I do know is that on the mental side of things, he's done something very interesting. … I'm very intrigued about this guy's mental game. He reminds me of the way (Vasilevskiy) came in and treated things when he came to Tampa. 'Move over. I'm coming through.' This guy, I don't know if he's exactly like that. His play will tell us that."

13 (tie). Jordan Binnington, Blues

30-13-7

.912

2.56

3

Average 2021 tier rating: 2.33

Panelists still are having a hard time deciding exactly what they think of Binnington. They appreciate his performance in winning a Stanley Cup in 2019. They also remember the .851 save percentage in five games last year in the playoffs.

"He will be remembered for his bubble play," said one panelist, who added that he didn't want to put too much stock in such a small sample size. "I take that and throw it in the garbage."

"We're in a condensed season, and he's fighting for a contract," he said. "He's going to be dialed in. I'd expect a good year from him."

Not everyone is convinced.

"Jordan Binnington has always worried me," said a head coach. "He's been OK. I don't think he's better than that. At best, he's an OK starter."

13 (tie). Elvis Merzlikins, Blue Jackets

13-9-8

.923

2.35

5

Average 2021 tier rating: 2.33

Joonas Korpisalo got the nod in the playoffs and was incredible for the Blue Jackets in the bubble, finishing with a playoff-best .941 save percentage in nine games. He may end up with more starts. But Merzlikins is the wildcard of the two. When starting this exercise, the feeling was that his ceiling was higher and it might make for a more interesting analysis.

Like, for instance, this prediction from a panelist: "At some point, he'll win a Vezina."

While that might sound like a bold statement 33 games into his NHL career, Merzlikins finished fifth in Vezina voting last year. Sure, he only got two votes, but he clearly impressed people.

"I love that kid," said another panelist. "He has a lot of upside. It's tough because Korpisalo played so well in the playoffs. … Merzlikins has the higher contract. He's got the size, the swagger. He has a lot of upside. His potential hasn't been tapped yet."

So which of the Columbus goalies would you pick?

"It's so tough when you talk about these guys who have only played like 30 games. But I'm going to go Merzlikins because he could be a

franchise guy," said a coach. "He's very sure of himself. I can't tell you that I love his quotes in interviews — he wouldn't be my type of guy. The safer bet is Korpisalo. He's more mature. More games under his belt."

15. Semyon Varlamov, Islanders

19-14-6

.914

2.62

2

Average 2021 tier rating: 2.37

Ilya Sorokin is the exciting new goalie for the Islanders, but Varlamov is the veteran incumbent, and his success during the playoffs (.921 save percentage in 20 games) suggests he's not going anywhere. And while it's easy to suggest that goalies playing for Barry Trotz get the benefit of a structured team in front of them, one panelist said Varlamov deserves credit for the success too.

"He saw more high-danger shots than I thought," he said. "He was in a good system, but he saw more than I thought."

Said another: "I'm not in love with him, but I like him a lot. … He's actually much calmer in the net now. When you watch him, you think of Colorado and Washington days when he was athletic and low in his stance. Now he's calm and big at the top of the crease. I liked how he played all year."

More praise from a goalie coach.

"I liked his game a lot last year," he said. "His game technically was better — and I assume the system helps him and that D, but he did a nice job there. He was consistent. He's not over-the-top old, has pretty good athleticism and reactionary skill."

16. Ben Bishop, Stars

21-16-4

.920

2.50

2

Average 2021 tier rating: 2.53

Bishop may not be the Stars starting goalie until late March, but he's on this list instead of Anton Khudobin because when he's healthy and dialed in, he's one of the best goalies in the league. The problem, as nearly every panelist pointed out, is that he isn't either often enough. It consistently hurt his ratings.

"The numbers say he's a (Tier) 1 all day long. The way he plays the puck is a huge advantage," said a GM. "If he wasn't hurt all the time, I think he'd have multiple Vezinas. When he's in the net, he's elite for me."

Rinse and repeat.

"He has great ability, but he's hurt. He always has something going on," said a head coach, echoing many others.

One goalie coach expressed concern that, this time, even when he's back it may be tough for Bishop to get going.

"I'm concerned about this injury," he said. "I like what he does as a big man, I'm just not sure it's going to be a good year for him."

Tier 3

17. Ilya Samsonov, Capitals

16-6-2

.913

2.55

1

Average 2021 tier rating: 2.57

After missing time in the bubble with an upper-body injury, Samsonov stayed in D.C. to train. And with Henrik Lundqvist out, he will now shoulder heavy expectations for the Capitals this season. The No. 22 overall pick in the 2015 draft is talented but young (23 years old).

"He had a good year last year, but he leaked a little oil in the second half," said one panelist. "He had the injury, so there's uncertainty with that and how much he can play. I know they love him there. He was really good in the first half of last year."

Samsonov was outstanding in December and January but struggled in his last six starts before the pause. It's a small sample size, for sure.

"I'm concerned he's getting thrust into it a little too soon," said a goalie coach. "He's got to back it up. But he was really good on the penalty kill for them. That was something he did well."

Said another: "He's the same as Shesterkin. A young guy taking over. He could be a (Tier) 1 or 2 by the end of the year."

18. Mackenzie Blackwood, Devils

22-14-8

.915

2.77

3

Average 2021 tier rating: 2.69

For the sake of transparency, this spot was initially Corey Crawford's, with the initial reporting done to get ratings on him. For those interested, Crawford averaged a 2.77 rating from the full panel.

But then on Saturday, Crawford announced his retirement in a move that will send the Devils scrambling to add depth to support Blackwood.

"Crawford to me is a Hall of Famer," said one of the head coaches. "He doesn't get enough credit."

To get a sense of how Blackwood compares, texts went out to a group of panelists for updated ratings on Blackwood. His average is based on those eight responses.

"I think Blackwood has a bright future," texted one goalie coach. "(I'd rate him higher) if he had a little stronger team in front of him."

Texted another coach about Blackwood: "Two. Soon to be one."

And another: "I think this year there's gonna be a little bit more pressure on him, and losing that veteran presence as a partner could add some more, so I think it will be interesting how he handles it."

People like Blackwood. The challenge for the Devils is finding a goalie to take the pressure off the 24-year-old so he can continue to develop as an NHL starter without carrying too heavy of a burden. Crawford was just about the perfect goalie for that role.

"I think they like Mackenzie Blackwood a lot," said a GM. "I think they're trying to insulate him. In my opinion, Corey Crawford (increased) the chances of Mackenzie Blackwood being a good goalie."

19 (tie). Braden Holtby, Canucks

25-14-6

.897

3.11

0

Average 2021 tier rating: 2.77

Thatcher Demko could easily end up playing the majority of the games for the Canucks, but with his two-year, $8.6-million dollar deal, Holtby is the high-paid veteran brought in to replace Jacob Markstrom. And because of his experience and exposure, he's a goalie the panel would provide better context about.

"Here's the thing with Braden Holtby," one panelist started. "I don't love his style and how he plays sometimes. … During the game, he's funky on his post. He handles the puck great. He has a little unorthodox style. Technically he does some old-school stuff. He lets in bad angle goals."

But then came the positive.

"In every single game, (he makes) a save that is game-changing," he continued. "He always finds one spectacular save in a game, and when you look at the time, look at the game, look at the situation, that is momentum changing. He's so good at competing."

In the goalie community, Vancouver goalie coach Ian Clark earned praise for his handling of Jacob Markstrom, and one coach suggested that the combination of Holtby's work ethic and Clark's coaching would create positive results in Vancouver.

"I think he's going to do well," he said. "He's a worker, such a good dude, and he's such a competitor. He's willing to get better and put the work in. With Ian Clark, they'll find a good partnership."

19 (tie). Tristan Jarry, Penguins

20-12-1

.921

2.43

3

Average 2021 tier rating: 2.77

Jarry went from beating out Casey DeSmith for the backup job behind Matt Murray to removing Murray as the starter and finished with a .921 save percentage in 33 games. He got both Hart and Vezina votes. It was pretty impressive.

"The coaching staff and management is putting faith in him," said a panelist. "They still have good structure there, I think that helps him."

But how good is Jarry, really? There's not a great sample size at the NHL level, and the Penguins are putting a lot in his hands.

"He definitely was above average. He's not big. He handles the puck well," said a coach. "Very good puck handler. He brings that to the table."

Said another: "He was consistent in the American League for four years. It's always tougher to continue to do it year after year, but I think that the way he plays and the mentality and what his character is like, there's a level of consistency there that he can learn adjustments at the highest level. He's competitive. Guys love him. He's smart."

21. Philipp Grubauer, Avalanche

18-12-4

.916

2.63

2

Average 2021 tier rating: 2.80

Health is always a factor when evaluating Grubauer, and many panelists were wary of rating him too high because of it. Grubauer has never played more than 37 games in a season, and he started this year's training camp unfit to play. But he also has a .920 save percentage for his career.

And the Avs need him on the ice.

"His mentality, he's built to be a No. 1," said a panelist. "He doesn't get too high or too low. He works. He's smart. Durability has been a bit of an issue the last couple years. … You saw what happened to Colorado. Not having Grubauer hurt them."

Another panelist pointed out the difference he saw when Grubauer was in the lineup and wasn't for the Avs. On a star-studded team, he's a difference-maker.

"You look at that team and you look at their goalie numbers, he's done an amazing job there," the panelist said. "They lose him for the playoffs, and they were just hanging on. They needed to score six goals to win a game. They needed him. They're an offensive team, and he has been solid. You can't complain about him."

"He's a legit starting goalie," said a coach. "When he's at his best, he can be a top guy in the league."

22. Matt Murray, Senators

20-11-5

.899

2.87

1

Average 2021 tier rating: 2.83

After five years with the Penguins (and a couple of Stanley Cups), Murray is now the No. 1 goalie in Ottawa, with healthy long-term contract to go with the scenery change. It's a solid bet by the Senators but not one without risk. Murray finished last season with an .899 save percentage and lost his starting job to Tristan Jarry.

"That's going to be an interesting one," said a goalie coach. "He's got something to prove. It'll be interesting to see how he handles being on a team that has struggled in the past and gives up a lot of opportunities. He's going to have to regain his game and stay healthy."

Said another coach: "Never discount those Cups he's got. You can't take those away. He has the moxie and he's a big stage goalie."

23 (tie). Juuse Saros, Predators

17-12-4

.914

2.70

4

Average 2021 tier rating: 3.10

For the first time since the advent of these goalie tiers in 2014, a goalie other than Pekka Rinne gets the evaluation for the Nashville Predators. Saros earns the edge here because of his play down the stretch for the Predators last season. He also was the goalie for the Predators during the postseason. The long transition from Rinne to Saros appears to be happening.

There were panelists who wondered if he was ready. Or even capable.

"I love Juuse Saros when he's in the Anton Khudobin role," said a GM. "When he's in the starter role, he looks like a little goalie after awhile. Pekka Rinne will be better this year."

"I'm not a fan, and it's not because of his size," said a coach. "I think he's been a good backup. He has to prove himself. He's been on a decent team for a long time. He's been handed the ball quite a few times. He's never taken the ball."

23 (tie). Linus Ullmark, Sabres

17-14-3

.915

2.69

1

Average 2021 tier rating: 3.10

For a guy who is 27 years old and has never played in more than 37 games in his NHL career, the 6-foot-4 Swede received a sneaky high amount of love. Especially in the goalie-coaching community.

"I'm a fan. I like his style. I love his compete. He plays with an edge," said one. "Ullmark has paid his dues. He's going to surprise people. He can hold his team up this year."

"I've seen enough of him in Buffalo. He made some good improvements last year with (goalie coach Mike) Bales and his skill level with playing a little bit more conservative," said another. "He's going to be pretty consistent."

One more vote of confidence from a coach: "He's the better of their two goalies. I like him a lot. He's athletic. I think he's got a great future."

25. Cam Talbot, Wild

12-10-1

.919

2.63

2

Average 2021 tier rating: 3.23

Talbot signed a three-year deal worth $11 million in free agency to help upgrade a goaltending situation that wasn't great in Minnesota last year. If he replicates the .919 save percentage he posted last year with the Calgary Flames, things will be interesting with the Wild this season. Panelists seemed to think that might be a shade optimistic. People talking about Talbot tend to use descriptors like steady or solid or…

"He's adequate. I guess that's what I'd call him," said one GM. "He does improve their goaltending."

"It's a good fit," said a goalie coach. "Cam is a steady goalie. I don't know if he's an unreal No. 1 guy. But it's a good opportunity for him."

For fans in Minnesota still unsure exactly what they're getting in Talbot, this description from a coach might help: "He's a methodical, systematic goalie. You know what you're getting. If there's a rush, 2-on-1, and I showed 10 of them in a row, he would look the same every time. The fact that Minny has a good D-zone structure, it might be an OK match. … I'm not saying Minny is going to win the Cup, but they definitely might have found a goalie who will stop the ones he's supposed to."

26. Petr Mrazek, Hurricanes

21-16-2

.905

2.69

3

Average 2021 tier rating: 3.33

It's a bit surprising that Mrazek is still the guy in Carolina. The Hurricanes pushed for an upgrade in goal during the offseason, including serious talks to add Marc-Andre Fleury. But Mrazek perseveres. And while he'll always have his critics (one panelist tried to give him a six), he's also won over others around the league.

"Petr has grown on me. I hated him in Detroit. He was all over the place," said a coach. "He plays with more control in his crease. I like him in Carolina. He's turned the page in his game, for sure."

Said another: "He's settled it down a bit. We're talking about a team in Carolina that doesn't give up as many shots. They have a good D. He's a little riskier than some of the guys we talk about. He hasn't changed enough of his game, but he's quieted his game down with maturity."

27 (tie). Thomas Greiss, Red Wings

16-9-4

.913

2.74

0

Average 2021 tier rating: 3.37

Greiss is going from a very structured, strong defensive team in the Islanders to, well, one that is not. This spot very could be Jonathan Bernier, who was actually pretty good last season in a tough situation. The Red Wings seemed to realize that Bernier does well with a heavy workload, and it's possible he plays more than Greiss, who has had success as a spot starter. But Greiss got the offseason contract after a solid five seasons with the Islanders. The question is: Can he do that in Detroit?

"I like Greiss a lot. I think he's underrated. We'll see how he does now," said one panelist.

Added a head coach: "Greiss is better than a lot of the goalies on this list."

This seemed to be a fair summation of the goalie situation in Detroit: "(Greiss is) a good quality backup goalie. I don't think he's a No. 1 guy. I don't see him doing any better than Jonathan Bernier. They're comparable goalies."

27 (tie). Mikko Koskinen, Oilers

18-13-3

.917

2.75

1

Average 2021 tier rating: 3.37

The Oilers' pursuit of Jacob Markstrom didn't pan out, so they're betting that Koskinen can deliver another solid season after last year's .917 save percentage in 38 games almost justified his healthy contract. The problem here is that if it doesn't work out, it's a big risk to have 38-year-old Mike Smith as the Plan B.

Koskinen is huge (6-foot-7) and, according to goalie coaches on the panel, beatable.

"He lets in bad goals," said one. "Bad angle shots find a way in at bad times. … I wouldn't be comfortable with those two guys."

Said another: He's a big guy but once you get him moving, you can open him up. With Edmonton, (head coach Dave Tippett) does a good job, has a defensive system, but between (Koskinen) and Smith, they're both big guys and I just don't think they move that well. That's where I can see them getting opened up and letting in leakers."

29. Jonathan Quick, Kings

16-22-4

.904

2.79

1

Average 2021 tier rating: 3.43

Quick is 34 years old. There's real concern about his body breaking down. He has an .896 save percentage the past two seasons. His team isn't great. It's not trending the right way for the former Stanley Cup winner and Olympian.

"He's gone right over the cliff," said one GM. "And he has time left on his contract, which is unfortunate for the team that employs him. That's not going to end well."

That's the pessimistic point of view. But a couple of panelists mentioned that the offseason has been a good one for Quick, and the word in the goalie community is that he had a good summer.

"I think we'll see a better Jonathan Quick," said a goalie coach.

Tier 4

30. Martin Jones, Sharks

17-21-2

0.896

3

2

Average 2021 tier rating: 3.77

The decline of Martin Jones has been a lengthy one. Since he finished sixth in the Vezina voting in the 2016-17 season, he has a .903 save percentage in 163 games. He's been a below-average goalie for much longer than he was a goalie worthy of his big contract.

And man, if this thought from a goalie coach doesn't cut right to the heart of it:

"He looks the part. He knows how to play. He just never gets it done," he said.

But Jones continues to have his defenders.

"I think he's been criticized for no reason at times," said one panelist.

Another thought a change of scenery would do him good.

"He's been in one spot for too long. A full career in one city is hard. It just grows old," he said. "Another problem is the game is changing. His ability to adjust to broken plays is not that great. There are times a puck ends up in a spot he doesn't think and he can barely get there. … I understand why people don't like him, but I just think (a change) is overdue. I don't think he's as bad as he is."

31. Collin Delia, Blackhawks

Did not play in the NHL

Average 2021 tier rating: 4.23

Two things here. One, this assessment could have easily been Malcolm Subban. Or maybe even Kevin Lankinen. There's going to be an opportunity all three to seize the opening created by Corey Crawford's departure.

Two, a majority of panelists didn't know much about Collin Delia. Just being completely transparent here. In fact, two head coaches used the same exact phrase when his name came up: "I don't even know him."

That usually results in a lot of four and five ratings, which is probably a fair place to start Delia, considering he has 18 NHL games under his belt with a .906 save percentage.

Those who did know him tended to like him but didn't love the situation he was stepping into with the Blackhawks embarking in a full-on rebuild and already hit by adversity.

"There are a lot of fans of him," one panelist said. "People say he's a great guy. … A lot of times, if you have an average goalie on a bad team, they look worse than they are. That's what is going to happen with him.

He's going to have an average season on a team that may not have interest in playing hockey at times. A lot of this game is timing and luck in making it in this league, and this guy has awful timing."

Another assessment: "I'd give him a higher number if he wasn't on (Chicago). I like his skill."

"Good athletic goalie," said a coach. "He just hasn't played enough."

How this year's starters rank over time

Vasilevskiy

1.03

1.03

1.45

2.55

N/A

N/A

N/A

Hellebuyck

1.27

2.41

1.85

N/A

3.11

N/A

N/A

Price

1.27

1.32

1.98

1.05

1.00

1.00

1.07

Rask

1.67

1.71

2.35

2.30

2.52

1.57

1.29

Markstrom

1.97

2.97

3.45

3.50

N/A

N.A

N/A

Hart

2.00

2.81

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

Gibson

2.03

1.69

2.10

2.75

3.33

N/A

2.85

Bobrovsky

2.10

1.44

1.45

1.45

2.53

1.68

1.86

Lehner

2.13

N/A

3.55

3.20

3.36

3.11

N/A

Andersen

2.17

2.15

2.10

2.35

2.85

2.54

N/A

Kuemper

2.17

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

Shesterkin

2.23

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

Binnington

2.33

2.43

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

Merzlikins

2.33

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

Varlamov

2.37

2.76

2.60

3.05

2.73

1.96

1.93

Bishop

2.53

1.87

2.95

2.25

1.75

2.00

2.07

Samsonov

2.57

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

Blackwood

2.69

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

Holtby

2.77

2.09

1.90

1.65

1.65

2.11

3.07

Jarry

2.77

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

Grubauer

2.80

2.82

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

Murray

2.83

2.31

2.20

1.65

2.28

N/A

N/A

Saros

3.10

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

Ullmark

3.10

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

Talbot

3.23

N/A

2.90

2.05

2.93

2.75

N/A

Mrazek

3.33

3.24

N/A

N/A

3.10

N/A

N/A

Greiss

3.37

N/A

N/A

3.50

N/A

N/A

N/A

Koskinen

3.37

3.69

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

Quick

3.43

2.69

2.00

1.85

1.95

1.21

1.00

Jones

3.77

2.99

2.23

2.30

2.60

3.04

N/A

Delia

4.23

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

N/A

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The Athletic / The NHL's top 10 bounce back candidates for 2020-21

By Harman Dayal Jan 10, 2021

There's a difference between a player's ability and the results they produce. Ability doesn't change too drastically on a year-to-year basis, typically just following the natural slope of aging. Results, however, can be volatile because there are so many factors outside of an NHLer's control (eg: ice time/opportunity, health, teammate quality, bad luck, etc.) that influence the observed outcomes and cause them to often bounce around peaks and valleys.

When a player has a down year it's crucial to figure out if the disappointing campaign is a signal or just noise. That's most often done by looking at the forward or defenceman's underlying profile to see if the process matches the results — if a scoring forward, for instance, has a consistent shot rate but has seen a massive decline in shooting percentage you'd typically expect the results to turn around over the long run.

The goal of today's article is to identify skaters who've underperformed their talent level and look due to bounceback. Let's get into it.

1. Johnny Gaudreau, LW, Calgary Flames

Johnny Gaudreau needs a bounceback season to reshape his image in Calgary. The Flames' star left-winger has been a backbone for the team's success over the last handful of seasons but he's been much-maligned for disappearing in the playoffs and only caused the voices of criticism to grow louder by slumping in the regular season with just 58 points in 70 games.

What I find really interesting is that his disappointing 2019-20 campaign is eerily similar to the down year he had in 2016-17.

Johnny Gaudreau Since Sophomore Year

2015-16

79

30

48

78

13.3%

9.6%

2016-17

72

18

43

61

8.9%

7.8%

2017-18

80

24

60

84

12.8%

9.6%

2018-19

82

36

63

99

12.4%

10.6%

2019-20

70

18

40

58

7.6%

7.6%

Both years, the 5-foot-9 winger dipped to the 18 goals, 60 points neighbourhood over roughly 70 games following a 30-goal campaign. Both years were the only time his individual five-on-five shooting percentage slipped below 10 percent. Both years, the team's shooting percentage when Gaudreau was on the ice (on-ice shooting percentage) dipped to just north of 7.5 percent. Calgary scored less than 2.5 goals for every 60 minutes that Gaudreau was on the ice for last season, the only other time that's happened is … you guessed it 2016-17.

We've seen this story play out before, it ends with Gaudreau's conversion rate regressing upward to his career norms as he finds his footing again as a roughly point-per-game contributor — that's the same outcome I'm anticipating this time.

Now to be clear, we can't absolve Gaudreau of all blame by just pointing to bad luck. A lot of last year's decline can be attributed to bounces not going his way but his line was less effective at driving high-quality scoring chances too. That's where part of the responsibility falls on Sean Monahan to be a better driver on that line because his two-way impact last season left a lot to be desired when you adjust for usage using Evolving-Hockey's RAPM model.

We know that Monahan and Gaudreau are capable of better and I'd bet on them rebounding both in how they drive play and with finishing luck. That would probably be enough for Gaudreau to knock on the door of point-per-game status again.

2. Morgan Rielly, LD, Toronto Maple Leafs

Coming off a stellar 2018-19 campaign where he exploded for 20 goals and 72 points, Morgan Rielly came crashing back down to Earth with just three goals and 27 points through 47 games. When dissecting both last season as well as what lies ahead, there a number of incremental improvements that should combine to key a bounceback.

He's finally going to get a chance to play with an upper-echelon partner with the signing of TJ Brodie. Consider that Rielly's most common defence partners over the last three years are Cody Ceci, Ron Hainsey and Nikita Zaitsev … Brodie will be a monumental upgrade.

Rielly's career shooting clip is 4.9 percent but that rate was cut in half last season at 2.4 percent. Expect some positive regression there.

Rielly will be fully healthy. He admitted to playing through a nagging injury early in the season and was later shelved with a foot injury. You could tell the BC native was labouring at times last year, particularly at the start of the season on the defensive front — that issue will fix itself

now that he's had plenty of time to recover from any knocks and ailments.

I wouldn't expect Rielly to reach the gaudy heights that he did in 2018-19, especially with the goal scoring, but it wouldn't be surprising if he cracked 40 points in the shortened season.

3. Taylor Hall, LW, Buffalo Sabres

Taylor Hall has been through a rough ride since his MVP performance in 2017-18. He missed most of 2018-19 with injury and while he remained productive last year, he wasn't the star-calibre forward that he has been in years past.

The 29-year-old's move to Buffalo presents new opportunities that could help him get back to that form.

Arguably the most important one is the massive improvement in linemate quality that's coming and it begins with Jack Eichel being the best centre Hall has played with since leaving Edmonton. If Eichel can turn Jeff Skinner into a 40-goal scorer, there's no reason to believe he can't help unlock the best from Hall, especially in a contract year where the speedy left-winger will need to produce to cash in next offseason.

Buffalo isn't a deep team but they have explosive top-end talent, with Hall likely getting a chance to play with Eichel, Sam Reinhart, Rasmus Dahlin and Victor Olofsson on the first power-play unit. Having these kinds of dynamic offensive creators to operate with is a notable improvement compared to what he had to work with in Arizona and New Jersey, not to mention the fact that he escapes the defence-first system that the Coyotes play.

Oh, and Hall's better than the 6.8 percent shooter he was in 2019-20 — that number should move closer to his 10.4 percent career average.

4. Alex DeBrincat, LW, Chicago Blackhawks

After bursting onto the scene with a 28-goal rookie campaign and then following it up with a 41-goal season, Alex DeBrincat slumped to just 18 goals in 2019-20.

A look under the hood indicates that DeBrincat was getting pucks on net and individual expected goals at the highest rate of his career. This tells us that he was producing the same number of quality chances, the puck just wasn't going in. Case in point, the diminutive left-winger was snakebitten with a 4.8 percent five-on-five shooting clip when in his first two years his conversion rate was 14 percent.

Even just a modest boost to a 10 percent shooting clip at five-on-five would have resulted in the 2016 second-round pick netting seven extra goals, which would have brought him up to 25 markers in 70 games.

With consistent shot volume and a release that's deadly from distance, the goals should come with more regularity for DeBrincat.

5. Ryan Johansen, C, Nashville Predators

Nashville's de facto No.1 centre has five years left on his deal at a whopping $8-million cap hit. There's virtually no chance he can provide full value for that. Despite the grim long-term outlook, there's still juice left in the tank for him as a credible top-six centre, more than the modest 36 points he managed in 68 games last year.

What I find really peculiar about Johansen's drop-off is that it literally only came in the playmaking department.

Ryan Johansen Last Two Years

2018-19

80

14

50

64

2019-20

68

14

22

36

Johansen's been uber consistent with 14-15 goals in four consecutive seasons, but you'll notice that his assists total plummeted from 50 to just 22. What's behind such a precipitous decline? Well, part of it is the fact that the line spent less time with offensive zone possession, as the Predators generated six fewer shots on goal and seven few scoring chances for every 60 minutes that Johansen was on the ice at five-on-five.

This part of the equation is concerning as it indicates that the underlying process wasn't as strong. It's worth noting, however, that while the Johansen line generated less offence their defensive results improved to partially offset the step back. In 2018-19, Johansen's trio was peppering extra shots and chances but they were also allowing a lot more — it was high-event, back and forth hockey in contrast to this past year where there wasn't as much happening on both ends of the ice.

That said, I think this decline in shot and chance generation isn't enough to justify Johansen's assists rate falling off a cliff. And quietly, there are signs that the 28-year-old was holding up his end of the bargain. Corey Sznajder's data ranks Johansen in the 99th percentile of NHL forwards with respect to passes that led to shots last year. He was still setting his teammates up for shots at an elite rate which suggests that his playmaking ability probably hasn't left him to the extent that the actual assists rate might indicate.

Data via Corey Sznajder, viz by CJ Turtoro

The reason shot assists matter is because they've proven to be better at predicting future assists than past assists themselves. Intuitively this makes sense because a player like Johansen can only control the passes he makes, he can't control his linemates' finishing ability. With Viktor Arvidsson and Filip Forsberg, Johansen's two most common linemates, slumping there's a chance they can collectively bounceback as a group.

I wouldn't expect Johansen to return to the 64-point pace he produced at in 2018-19 because that would require a substantial rebound in play-driving but it wouldn't be surprising if he produced at a 50-55 points per 82 games pace — otherwise translating to a 34-37 point range over a condensed 56 game schedule.

6. Tyson Barrie, RD, Edmonton Oilers

Let's not sugarcoat it: last year was an absolute disaster for Tyson Barrie in Toronto. He was a poor fit from Day 1, struggled mightily at even-strength and wasn't even his usual self offensively with 39 points in 70 games.

Arriving in Edmonton, Barrie will be handed the keys to an electric Oilers' power play that ranked best in the league with a starry 29.5 percent conversion rate. That's going to be an awesome opportunity for him to go stat-padding compared to Toronto where he only got PP1 opportunities midway through the year. It's also a great fit for the Oilers because it gives them a true power-play quarterback for the first time in a while as well as a right-handed shot on a lefty dominant top unit. The need for a defenceman who can run PP1 is even bigger with Oscar Klefbom out with injury.

It can't be overstated how important that opportunity will be for Barrie's point totals. In Toronto, his five-on-five points rate was nearly identical to what he managed in Colorado, the main difference that nerfed his counting stats is that he scored 13 fewer power-play points than he did in 2018-19.

Barrie probably won't impress outside of the power play but his rough cameo in Toronto will ensure that expectations are calibrated accordingly. If the Oilers carefully deploy the 29-year-old as a sheltered second-pairing defenceman with PP quarterback utility, he should be able to rebound, at least as far as the counting stats are concerned.

7. Max Domi, C, Columbus Blue Jackets

Max Domi had everything possible go in his favour in 2018-19 when he exploded for 28 goals and 72 points in 82 games. In 2019-20, his usage changed significantly, regression hit and he tumbled to 44 points in 71 contests.

Domi was asked to play wing at times and his two most common five-on-five linemates were lesser offensive talents in Artturi Lehkonen and Joel Armia — two factors that worked against his strengths.

His move to the Blue Jackets will fix both issues — he'll be able to make plays through the middle of the ice and skate alongside more talented linemates. The feisty 25-year-old slots in as Columbus' clear-cut second-line centre and will be flanked by Cam Atkinson on his right in what forms a really compelling duo on paper. Domi has emerged as a dual threat, capable of both setting up chances or finishing them on his own, but he's always been a pass-first player whose shot assist data shines brightly. That will be perfect for Atkinson who's a high-volume shooter in need of a setup man since Artemi Panarin left.

In addition to the better fit, Domi should also benefit from more fortuitous bounces. Domi got on the scoresheet with 27 points on 46 five-on-five goals, which amounts to a 58.7 percent (27 divided by 47) individual points percentage. Individual points percentage (IPP) is partly influenced by ability and partly influenced by luck. The better a player you are the more involved you're going to be with the offence, so naturally you'd expect a player like Connor McDavid to have a higher IPP than a fourth-line grinder. That said, an abnormally high or low IPP is a sign of fortune impacting the results one way or another and thus the key is to examine how a player's IPP compares to their career average. If a player's IPP is way higher than their career norm, odds are they'll regress closer to their career average and if their IPP is way lower than usual, it's a sign they've been unlucky.

In Domi's case, his IPP was 58.7 percent last year, compared to a career average of 70.1 percent. That means Domi probably deserved more points than he actually got for all the goals that he was on the ice for. If you were to apply his career average IPP to the number of goals he was on the ice for, he would have collected an extra five points.

Full-time minutes at centre, a really well-fitting linemate in Atkinson and a little positive regression through IPP should see Domi get a modest bump in his point totals.

8. Josh Anderson, RW, Montreal Canadiens

The Josh Anderson for Domi swap was a classic change of scenery move and it really is fitting that both players managed to make the list as bounceback candidates. Columbus will be thrilled to get the dynamic, playmaking 2C they've long yearned for while the Canadiens get the robust power forward winger they've lacked for so long.

In Anderson's case, there is literally nowhere to go but up after a frustrating 2019-20 year. The 6-foot-3, 222-pound forward managed just a single goal and three assists in 26 games, missing most of the season with a shoulder injury. Anderson's skill set is very different from Domi's — the former won't help in transition and can't create plays on his own but he can be a dominant shot generating machine from the inside, ranking 17th among all NHL forwards over the last three years with his five-on-five shot rate.

The ideal fit for him would then be with a dynamic play creator and that's exactly the position Claude Julien is putting him in, slotting him on a line with Nick Suzuki and Jonathan Drouin to open training camp. That type of player wasn't really available for Anderson in Columbus so that could really benefit the 2012 fifth-round pick's game.

As for what happened last season? Well, Anderson's five-on-five shot and scoring chance rates did dip slightly but it wasn't really by a significant margin which hints that it may have been more about tough luck conversion-wise. That makes sense logically given that he shot just 1.96 percent individually, owned a 5.96 percent as a line when on the ice, plus just a 30 percent IPP.

A full offseason of recovery, a nice potential fit in Montreal and a more efficient conversion rate should all aid Anderson. He probably won't click at the 27-goal, 47 point pace he was at in 2018-19 but something like 15 goals seems reasonable for a 56 game schedule.

9. Phil Kessel, RW, Arizona Coyotes

There's no question that Phil Kessel's best days as an offensive force are behind him. The two-way impact continues to erode, his point totals plummeted and his ability to independently create chances is trending downward when examining microstats. And yet despite all those headwinds, it feels like the counting stats are selling Kessel a little bit short.

The 33-year-old winger shot just 4.6 percent at five-on-five, with his line as a whole converting on a measly 5.8 percent of on-ice shots. Kessel's individual shooting percentage ranked 316th among 334 NHL forwards with at least 500 minutes at five-on-five last year — he's not that poor of a finisher. Arizona's lacklustre offensive environment can definitely nerf some of those numbers but it's not capable of doing so to this extreme of an extent on its own. For context, Kessel produced at a fourth-line rate of 1.12 points per hour at five-on-five — I'd be very surprised if that number didn't improve because he's not completely washed yet. You can see that he's still a top forward at creating offensive zone entries and is still maintaining a decent volume of both shots and shot assists.

Dropping from 82 to 38 points is as steep of a cliff as it gets. A lot of that was to be expected when moving from Pittsburgh to Arizona and through the age-related decline in Kessel's game, but there's clearly been some bad fortune involved too.

This is probably one of the riskier bets — his underlying profile clearly suggests he deserves better but he's going to be a year older on a roster depleted of offensive talent.

10. Kevin LaBanc, RW, San Jose Sharks

There are many San Jose Sharks who disappointed last season and forward Kevin LaBanc was certainly among them. The playmaking winger was expected to be one of the club's top offensive leaders after breaking out with 56 points in 2018-19, but he sputtered and contributed just 33 in 70.

LaBanc's underlying profile reveals that his down year was a combination of poor play and tough luck. His assists rate fell and unlike Johansen, his shot assists rate also dipped from the 82nd percentile in 2018-19 to just the 57th percentile last year. That's definitely something to watch for and one of the reasons that I think this could be a modest bump rather than another breakthrough performance like he had two years ago.

It's interesting to note, however, that LaBanc's line as a whole didn't see a drop-off in the number of shots or scoring chances they generated — there's no question that he deserved a better fate. San Jose's on-ice shooting percentage with LaBanc deployed at five-on-five dropped all the way to 6.6 percent and they significantly underperformed their expected goal output based on the quantity and quality of the shots they created.

Kevin LaBanc 5-on-5 Profile

20162017

2.53

2.1

9.2%

20172018

2.38

2.47

7.2%

20182019

2.96

2.54

9.4%

20192020

2.13

2.83

6.6%

You can see that with LaBanc on the ice the Sharks scored just 2.13 goals per hour at five-on-five, despite having earned 2.83 expected goals for every 60 minutes. If his line can continue controlling possession and getting chances this consistently, they'll eventually overcome the hurdle.

LaBanc's currently pencilled onto the top line with Timo Meier and Logan Couture so this could be an opportunity for him to stretch his wings in a bigger role with the club's top players.

Honourable mentions

Frederik Andersen, G, Toronto Maple Leafs: Andersen may never become a big-game goalie but he's a career .917 save percentage performer with an improved defence in front of him — he should be more solid than he was last year.

Matt Dumba, RD, Minnesota Wild: One of the best shots in the league from the back-end with an impressive 7.6 percent shooting clip. That efficiency was cut in half last year and should rebound.

Alex Radulov, LW, Dallas Stars: Individual and on-ice shooting percentage that begs positive regression — some concern though with Tyler Seguin now out of the lineup.

Claude Giroux, LW, Philadelphia Flyers: Usage is key. If the Flyers keep Giroux on the wing (and ideally next to Sean Couturier), he'll bounce back and continue racking up the points.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.11.2021

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Sportsnet.ca / Canucks to resume practice Monday after cancelling activities on Sunday

Sportsnet Staff

January 10, 2021, 7:43 PM

The Vancouver Canucks will hold a training camp practice on Jan. 11, one day after the team cancelled practices and workouts out of an abundance of caution due to potential COVID-19 exposure.

According to the team, the practice will take place at 11:00 a.m. PT. Details about the potential exposure to the virus were not made available by the team at this time.

Vancouver was the fourth team to have training camps impacted by the novel coronavirus over the last three days.

The Pittsburgh Penguins cancelled practice Saturday after a potential exposure to COVID-19. The NHL was forced to delay the start of the Dallas Stars' season in light of six players and two staff members testing positive for the novel coronavirus.

The Columbus Blue Jackets also announced Friday that multiple players would miss practice due to the NHL's COVID-19 protocols.

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Sportsnet.ca / Flames season preview: Can Calgary put it together when it matters most?

Eric Francis

January 10, 2021, 10:07 AM

The Calgary Flames have the goaltending, the depth and the star power to contend for a Stanley Cup.

What they don't have is any semblance of proof they can put it all together when it matters most.

"We know we're going to be judged off the playoffs," said Matthew Tkachuk, whose club is coming off yet another first-round playoff exit.

"We have a very competitive team and too many disappointing endings in the past years we want to change. We have to change it. We'll be ready to go to try to redeem ourselves after the last two seasons in particular. We have the right pieces and guys who really want to redeem themselves and make a difference."

He knows redemption can only come if they, first, make the playoffs in a tight North division.

Assuming they can, a roster returning almost all its core pieces believes it is equipped to finally get over more than just one hump.

"Why can't our team win it this year? We have to go in with that mentality. It's almost like we're going all in and trying to win it this year."

Given the franchise's playoff futility since 2004, few people outside Calgary consider the Flames Cup contenders. Nor should they until this team proves it's strong enough physically and mentally to fight through a grind that may actually be simulated through 56 games of Canadian battles.

The team is hoping that, unlike past years, when the recent division winner faltered in the spring, the shortened season will prepare them better for what's ahead.

Eric Francis

2019-20 regular season record: 36-27-7

2019-20 season finish: Lost in Round 1 to Dallas in six games

Top 2020 draft pick: Connor Zary (24th)

Additions: Jacob Markstrom (G), Chris Tanev (D), Nikita Nesterov (D), Chris Leivo (W), Dominik Simon (W), Joakim Nordstrom (W)

Subtractions: T.J. Brodie, Erik Gustafsson, Mark Jankowski, Travis Hamonic, Tobias Rieder, Derek Forbort, Cam Talbot

Outlook

The core of the Flames remained intact through an off-season in which most moves outside of the Jacob Markstrom and Chris Tanev signings were minor.

Josh Leivo and Dominik Simon have opened camp flip-flopping between the Matthew Tkachuk/Elias Lindholm line and the Johnny Gaudreau/Sean Monahan line.

All four additions serve to improve Canada's deepest team, with Markstrom completing the league's only roster with two all-star goalies on it from last year.

A revamped defence will count on former Norris Trophy winner Mark Giordano to maintain his level of play at age 37 while youngsters like Rasmus Andersson, Noah Hanifin and Juuso Valimaki have shown they are ready to take on bigger roles in a group also steadied by Tanev.

*I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time.

With his interim tag removed in the off-season and a chance to fully implement his style of play, coach Geoff Ward is asking the lads to focus even more on their defensive play, with an eye on creating turnovers that translate into quick-strike offence.

The team's depth up front should create more favourable matchups for a club hellbent on rolling four lines. Case in point: Mikael Backlund and Andrew Mangiapane will likely open the year on the third unit despite the fact they combined with Tkachuk a year ago to be the team's best trio at both ends of the ice.

The team's best line in the play-in and playoffs – Milan Lucic, Sam Bennett and Dillon Dube – is now the club's fourth unit.

No wonder players are focused squarely on chasing the Stanley Cup.

While COVID-19 could certainly throw a wrench into any team's plans, the Flames' depth in a 56-game war of attrition should give them an advantage.

Management has worked hard to ensure this is no longer a team that goes as Gaudreau and Monahan go. There are plenty other difference-makers throughout the lineup.

Winning the Canadian division is a very strong possibility.

Rasmus Andersson has taken control of Flames powerplay

X-Factor: Matthew Tkachuk

No one stirs the Flames' drink more than the future captain, whose hockey smarts will be counted on for more than just providing offence.

No one can take the temperature of a game – or elevate it – better than the man who led all Flames scorers last year while also drawing the most penalties. The division's premier agitator figures to be the most prominent figure in almost every divisional matchup, giving Canadians from coast to coast an opportunity to gain newfound respect or hatred for him.

Either way, expect to hear his name (in vain) often when the Flames come to your town.

Player who could surprise: Dillon Dube

The former captain of Canada's junior team essentially had his breakout in the playoffs last summer when he was arguably the Flames' best skater.

Because of the 22-year-old's versatility and ability to check and skate, he has opened camp on the same depth/energy line with Milan Lucic and Sam Bennett that ran the show against Winnipeg and Dallas in the post-season.

However, many believe that he'll soon make the jump to one of the top two lines, where a 20-goal season in the next couple years would shock no one.

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Sportsnet.ca / 'Put him into hell and wait': Why Romanov is ready to thrive with Canadiens

Eric Engels

January 10, 2021, 2:29 PM

MONTREAL — "Nuclear bomb go off, and he's laughing," deadpans Bogdan Kiselevich in the exact accent and with the precise cadence you expect from a 30-year-old who hails from Cherepovets, Russia.

With this one-liner, Kiselevich, a left-handed defenceman who spent 32 games with the Florida Panthers in 2018-19, is describing his friend Alexander Romanov — the 21-year-old Montreal Canadiens defenceman with whom he teamed up for the KHL's CSKA Moscow in 2019-20. It's halfway through a 20-minute WhatsApp call on Saturday that he offers this quip — which could easily be misinterpreted — as a commentary on Romanov's always sunny disposition and his seemingly unflappable personality.

We find it to be a particularly important distinction about a kid who's jumping into a scorching hot cauldron of a hockey market in Montreal with no parachute. Since Romanov signed with the Canadiens in July, the expectations have gone from high to practically unreasonable — fuelled mostly by his virtual guarantee to a spot on a deep and versatile blue line, but also by some comments like this one Montreal defence coach Luke Richardson made on a recent Zoom video conference:

"At this point in time, based on what I've seen, I'm not scared at all that he's not able to do any kind of job in the NHL."

Richardson said this in early December, exactly a month before the Canadiens took to the ice for their first training camp practice at the Bell Sports Complex in Brossard.

We'd bring it back down to Earth if what we had seen over the last week hadn't confirmed exactly what Richardson had gleaned from just a handful of viewings on television and even fewer playoff bubble practices in Toronto, where Romanov was a Black Ace for the Canadiens in August. The kid looks like a man: a six-foot, 208-pound man with an authoritative skating stride and a penchant for covering a lot of ice and involving himself in every aspect of the play.

The Canadiens also love Romanov's play-killing ability in the defensive zone and, from what we've seen, they should. His gap control is precise and calculated, his stick is active and seemingly always in the right place and his body is engaged and prepared to dole out some physical punishment.

It can also be deduced the Canadiens coaches feel Romanov's skill set should lead to more offence than his KHL stats — one goal and 11 points in 86 games over two seasons with Moscow — suggest he's capable of producing. One of the reasons they have him quarterbacking the second unit of the power play is because, as head coach Claude Julien put it earlier this week, "he has a really good shot."

Romanov's speed and instincts also factor into his placement there.

Still, the Canadiens will start the 38th pick in the 2018 draft walking before running, partnering him with Brett Kulak on the team's third defence pairing — a move that Kiselevich believes will greatly benefit him.

"Let him learn and he will take off," Kiselevich says. "It's best to understand everything and don't make mistake. Look at (Tampa Bay Lighting star Nikita) Kucherov: he played in the AHL, went to NHL third line and now he's a (expletive) machine."

But Kiselevich also describes a player who will be hard to keep down.

"Romanov is the kind of guy that, if you just give him, he'll take... Just put him into hell and wait about 10 games, and he'll come out on top," he says. "He will survive and end up becoming the best at it. He's that kind of guy."

Remaining Time -0:55

Bryon explains why Canadiens believe they are a playoff team this year

Kiselevich also gave us some more insight on Romanov's personality, which is vital to gain some semblance of how the kid will adapt to his new environment and fit into a room with five Stanley Cup winners and some big-league personalities.

In a normal year, we'd get a small window into all of that and be able to use some of that information to add perspective to what gets said about him by Julien or the other players. But this isn't a normal year, and we're still conducting all media availability virtually.

Hence our desire to speak with someone who spent at least a year as Romanov's teammate.

"He's like (expletive) battery, always charged," Kiselevich repeats several times throughout our conversation. "One time, we had a schedule where we had four games in a row and we're tired and we get in the room and it's like, 'Don't make music too loud,' and 'I need coffee,' and he'll walk in and be, 'Let's go on the ice, guys, let's go to warmup or play basketball or something,' and we'll yell at him and tell him to shut up.

"He's always full of energy. Even when you're sitting with him on the bench, he's always jumping around or yelling or screaming, and he's just watching and doing everything at 100 per cent. He always can't wait to get back on the ice."

Kiselevich also calls Romanov "shy," but it's obvious he means that he's a well-mannered person and respectful.

"He's always, 'You're the older guy, you can be first,'" he says. "He's not the guy who speaks bad about other guys, like some guys do… He sees the good side of a person and gets along with everybody."

And Kiselevich says Romanov can take a good ribbing as well as anyone, which matters in the team construct.

"He has ugly shoes. He's young and loves those ugly sneakers, so we laugh a lot about that," Kiselevich says. "They're terrible.

"And we laugh at him because he takes a Mercedes from his father and drives like 'Look at me, I'm driving a Mercedes.'"

Kiselevich says those aren't the only things Romanov's friends and teammates razz him about.

"We call him Bill," which is a teasing ode to the kid's legendary grandfather.

"The Mike Babcock of Russia," is how Kiselevich refers to Romanov's grandfather, Zinetula Bilyaletdinov, who played 15 years of pro hockey with Dynamo Moscow before building one of the most impressive coaching resumes in the country's history as a winner of multiple Gagarin Cups, a world championship gold medalist and the bench boss of Russia's Olympic team for the 2014 Games in Sochi.

Kiselevich says Romanov relies on his grandfather's advice, and that he checks in here and there with his father, Stanislav Romanov — a left winger who bounced around the old Russian Super League for 16 seasons.

But Kiselevich also said Romanov's his own man, who "wants to be independent" and one who "can handle himself and knows what to do."

To these eyes, that appears to be a very accurate description of Romanov the player, too. As we wrote earlier this week, he's consistently been the first player on for practice and the last player off.

And in between, Romanov's engine has seemed to be steadily red-lining.

"If he's going to play 10-12 minutes (at even strength) on a third pair, that's nothing for him," says Kiselevich. "In the summer, we always play pro tournaments of 3-on-3, and you can have three games per day of 3-on-3. A normal team would have nine guys and they change fast, but in his team this summer, some days, it was four or five guys and he was (expletive) playing without changes and loving it. And the games are one hour-and-a-half.

"We're watching him like, 'Hey, are you never tired on some days? What the (expletive) are you drinking? What the (expletive) are you eating?' And he's like, 'No, I'm not tired. I want to play more.'

"Just (expletive) kill him or break his skates. He can skate at night and skate in the morning and he'll skate all day if you don't stop him."

Remaining Time -1:03

Drouin reflects on playoff experience, believes Canadiens will be ready

When you hear stuff like this, it's not hard to understand why the Canadiens' brass is so high on Romanov.

With a more complete snapshot of who Romanov is and how he plays, the biggest question now is about how he will adapt. After all, he's in a foreign country with a limited but functional understanding of the English language, facing the best quality of competition he's ever seen, playing on a smaller ice surface than he's accustomed to — and on the right side of the ice, where he's barely played as a pro.

But Kiselevich told us Romanov's a quick learner, a player unlikely to repeat mistakes and he also said he welcomes advice.

"We tell him something and he goes and does it on the next shift," Kiselevich said.

It's something the Canadiens have seen in their limited exposure to Romanov thus far.

"What you like about him… this guy's (21) years old, he's played in the KHL, so he's got some good experience here at the pro level," said Julien on Saturday. "He's very confident. He's gonna make mistakes like anybody else, but he's really gung ho on fixing his mistakes as soon as he makes one.

"Sometimes you gotta live with mistakes to a certain extent at this level, but the thing with players like that is they learn quickly. And we just see a guy that's really excited to be part of our group and, from what I've seen since Day 1 at training camp, he seems to be adapting well, he seems to be fairly comfortable and very receptive also to some of the things that we're telling him."

With all of that said, and with Kiselevich offering a deeper perspective on Romanov's background, it's time to see how it all plays out in his first NHL games.

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Sportsnet.ca / ARE YOU READY TO ROCK, HOUSE, HIP-HOP, COUNTRY AND OCCASIONALLY GOSPEL?

By Luke Fox

They are the unsung — and sometimes unwilling — heroes who set the tone before every big game. But how does an NHL player become his team's dressing room DJ?

Jay Beagle is standing in the Vancouver Canucks dressing room and firm in his stance. "J.T. Miller. One hundred per cent," the veteran asserts. "Oh, yeah."

Beagle, 35, has just been asked to name the best dressing-room disc jockey in the league — a key, if unsung, role on any hockey team worth a jukebox quarter. "J.T. does a good job. When it's Christmastime, he busts out the Christmas carols. I mean, his music is like more old-school rock. Classic rock. Nineties rock. That's kind of what I grew up listening to," Beagle elaborates. "There's not too much rap. I do not like rap music. That's just the way I've always been. I don't like rap music."

An invisible dagger pierces his interviewer's heart. Beagle does not know he's speaking to a diehard hip-hop head. But music can be at once personal and universal — that's the beauty.

"I like country and classic rock, and I'm actually into Christian music right now, gospel music," says Beagle. The savvy depth centre picks up on his questioner's quizzical look. "Seriously."

Oh, and one more thing: Beagle likes his pre-game tunes loud. Like, cranked-to-11 loud. So, the first day Miller, a new Canuck last season, seized control of the club's stereo, Beagle barked at him: "Put some hair on that."

And he did.

"So, it was good," Beagle smiles.

Miller — first-time DJ, long-time listener — says he was randomly chosen to select the Canucks soundtrack but learned well from Louis Domingue's expertise in Tampa Bay prior to getting traded in the summer of 2019. Tunes set a tone.

"It just helps get you in the right frame of mind. It makes you feel good. Makes you wake up," Miller explains. "We get it really loud in here, so it's always good songs played loud. Loud as it goes. Loud rock. Loud techno. Gets you going."

The winger describes his taste as "laid-back" and mingles his personally curated playlists with some preprogrammed mixes via Spotify. He's unafraid to go seasonal or full-blown country, a curveball for some of his European teammates. "I'm not used to that, but I'm starting to like it more," star centre Elias Pettersson says. "Country music is big here compared to Sweden."

"You take the iPod from someone who's playing really bad music. I don't want to name any names."

Miller is not a tyrant, though. After the team's 5:30 pre-game meeting, he's known to let someone else (Jordie Benn, Jake Virtanen) plug in the aux cord and ramp up the BPMs ahead of puck drop. "I got the pump-up songs too, but guys like a little more techno-y sound these days," Miller says. "We got a pretty open locker with the music, but guys seem to be happy with the laid-back music I've been playing. I'm just playing what I normally listen to, and everybody seems to like it."

Last winter the Canucks opted for The Cranberries' 1994 alt-folk-rock Irish protest jam "Zombie" for their celebratory win song. An unlikely selection. "We played it at our Halloween party on team night, and we all were jamming and singing to it pretty good. Like, That's going to be our win song," Miller says. "And so it was."

According to the U.S. National Centre for Health Research, listening to music while engaging in sport can increase your stamina and thrust you into a better mood. A 2006 study by English psychologists Judy Edworthy and Hannah Waring that examined the effect of music on the selection of treadmill speed found that while listening to fast-paced tunes, participants upped both their pace and distance travelled without becoming more tired. In 2010, a study by sports psychologist C.I. Karageorghis concluded that music improves athletic performance by either delaying fatigue or increasing work capacity. Karageorghis wrote that the effects of music lead to "higher-than-expected levels of endurance, power, productivity, or strength." And a 2012 Oxford study revealed that participants who listened to music they deemed "pleasing" benefitted

from a boost in serotonin, the feel-good hormone — or, as a sampled Will Ferrell blurts in the middle of a Jay-Z and Kanye West song: "No one knows what it means, but it's provocative… gets the people going!"

The right song at the right moment absolutely gets us going. Which is why the 2019 St. Louis Blues grabbed hold of Laura Branigan's "Gloria" and rode that glimmering 1982 disco ball of power synths all the way to the franchise's first Stanley Cup. And why the Toronto Maple Leafs' forward-thinking head coach Sheldon Keefe hasn't hesitated to keep the beats pumping after gym work is finished.

On occasion last season Keefe tapped a team employee to blast music during practice, ready to cut the volume if the coach needed to address the group or explain the next drill. "For me, it's the tempo and the energy," Keefe explains. "Especially on days [when] you're coming back from a game, it may be tough to put your gear on and get some work in. Just raising the energy level, not unlike what you'd do in the gym.

"The other part of it is, we don't play in quiet environments," he continues. "Even though the music doesn't play during the game, there's other elements that make it loud — during play, stoppages, TV timeouts — and you have to learn to communicate within that."

Leafs centre Auston Matthews, an NBA fan, likes the pulse during practice. The more music, the merrier. "I know basketball plays music during the games," Matthews says. "I don't know how that would really work in the NHL — stuff's moving so fast and you're kind of contained in this rink and stuff — but it is nice to have the music bumping in practice."

Given the power of music to uplift and inspire, finding the right guy to operate the play button in the locker room is crucial. It'd be a stretch to say it can mean the difference between a win and a loss, but the energy a team brings into the opening frame can go a long way toward determining a game's outcome. Some clubs opt for DJ-by-committee; others have entrusted longstanding playlist kings. But no team prepares for that opening faceoff in silence. And heading into 2021, a number of NHL powerhouses will need to anoint new dressing room disc jocks.

DJ Kevin Shattenkirk, who inked a new deal in Anaheim, may have only spent one season with the Tampa Bay Lightning, but the playmaking defenceman's influence reverberated off the ice. Not unlike Miller in Vancouver, Shattenkirk's musical tastes helped him quickly integrate.

"He's very good," Victor Hedman approves. "He's old-school sometimes, depends what kind of mood he's in. He feels the room well, finds out what guys want."

Shattenkirk credits noted lover of good times Pat Maroon with assisting his selections. "When you feel like you have some good jams in your stable, you wanna let the boys hear it," explains Shattenkirk, stressing the need to keep your playlists fresh. "That's important. You got to make sure that you switch it up from time to time, but a lot of times it's a lot of rap, a lot of house music. And in the morning, you set up some rock and Zen out a little bit."

But how did Shattenkirk actually get his finger on the play button? How does the new guy strut in and snatch such an important gig? Well, sometimes the answer's complicated, but sometimes it's simple. "You take the iPod from someone who's playing really bad music," Shattenkirk quips. "I don't want to name any names."

When Torey Krug — the little guy in charge of the tall speakers — manned the tunes for the 2020 Presidents' Trophy–winning Bruins, he blasted explicit versions of big, boasty, early-2000s frathouse rap anthems like 50 Cent's "P.I.M.P.," Linkin Park and Jay-Z's "Numb/Encore," and fellow Michigander Eminem's "Not Afraid."

"Classic college kid, right?" chirps David Pastrnak.

Prior to signing with the Blues, Krug was always open to requests — but your track had to be Krug-approved if it was to be added to his go-to playlist.

When the Colorado Avalanche traded Nikita Zadorov to the Chicago Blackhawks in October, they didn't just lose their nastiest hitter. They

also gave away a crateful of aggressive Euro beats that charged up perennial MVP candidate Nathan MacKinnon nicely. "He just took control, and he plays good music, so we like it," MacKinnon says. "He's got all these DJ mixes, so doesn't have to pick a new song all the time. it's kind of like a big flow. He plays a good variety. A lot of like Russian techno, but it's actually pretty good."

Which begs the age-old question: Is Russian techno better for your hockey than Russian rap? The answer lies in the ear of the beholder.

31 Thoughts: The Podcast

Jeff Marek and Elliotte Friedman talk to a lot of people around the hockey world, and then they tell listeners all about what they've heard and what they think about it.

Beagle shakes his head when he thinks back to the sounds of his 2018 Washington Capitals Cup run, which were controlled by captain Alex Ovechkin — a onetime rap star in his homeland. "Listen, we had Russian rap and Russian all sorts of stuff going on, and we still won a lot of games," Beagle says. "I could never understand it. His music was… not for me. And I heard it for a while."

In Beagle's opinion, things improved when Tom Wilson squeezed some time in the booth. "Every time we would lose, it would switch," Beagle says.

That's how the Columbus Blue Jackets rolled last season, too. French-Canadian Pierre-Luc Dubois, EDM-loving Swede Emil Bemstrom (big on Calvin Harris and Avicii) and Latvian Elvis Merzlikins were all part of their DJ rotation, the length of their residencies often determined by the scoreboard. "It really depends on how hot we are at the time," explains Seth Jones, whose club was enjoying a six-game win streak when he was interviewed. "It's kind of on and off for us, it's kind of a feel thing. One guy doesn't want to anymore, but we keep telling Bemstrom to do it because we keep winning right now."

The Winnipeg Jets also rely on teamwork, though of a different sort. Andrew Copp soundtracks practice days and gym work on game days, skewing country. Copp then passes the baton to Mathieu Perreault to hammer the EDM before puck drop. "It's kind of funny to see what style of music every guy has," Mark Scheifele says. "When you want to get really pumped up, Matty Perreault does it. When you want to be in a relaxing practice mode, Copper does a great job with that."

A young group like the Ottawa Senators leans on its young leaders, Thomas Chabot and Colin White, to ease into the day with rap music and gradually ramp up to techno, while established veteran teams come with established DJs. Brian Dumoulin was drafted by the Penguins in 2009; his Spotify account rules all. ("He's been doing it for years now, so he's really good at it," goalie Tristan Jarry says.) And it makes sense that the Dallas Stars, one of the oldest rooms in the league, leave the duties to 34-year-old Blake Comeau. "We're a bit of an older team, so not too many new styles of music coming in," says goalie Ben Bishop. Comeau-cued classics like John Cougar Mellencamp's "Jack and Diane" and Queen's "Under Pressure" blare as we speak at Bishop's stall. "He takes suggestions, and he doesn't take it to heart if he's chirped."

Music lover Tyler Seguin gives Comeau a five-star rating. "Fantastic. He's got it all. He's got some oldies to start off with, and then he gets to rap and hip-hop and the beats going earlier for the younger guys. I control the music for warm-ups on the ice [inside American Airlines Center]. But Blake's very good at what he does," Seguin says. "It's important. I mean, everyone's relying on you — one guy. It's changed over the years, but Blake has taken hold of it last couple years, and he's good."

Good, but not the best Bishop has ever had. That honour goes to deep-cut NHLer Pierre-Cedric Labrie, who had a 46-game cup-of-coffee career alongside Bishop in Tampa Bay. "Oh yeah," Bishop says, lighting up. "P.C. always had the newest songs, always on top of it. He was really good. That year [2013–14], they even got a speaker made for the road.

Like, we had this huge speaker that traveled in a case and stuff, so the music was, like, twice as loud."

Toronto's Matthews — a hip-hop head whose tastes run from DaBaby and Lil Baby to Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole — prefers the on-ice warm-up tunes, run by DJ Cale Granton, cranked, and the Maple Leafs arranged for a state-of-the-art sound system to propel the sound down toward the players. "At least the music's a little bit louder. Last year it was super quiet," Matthews says. "People were complaining that it was too loud, but we're the ones playing, so I think they bumped it up a little bit. And we've been able to request songs, so it's been a lot better this year."

"They're looking for any reason to chirp you at any given moment. So, it's almost an audition."

Times (and genres) have changed in Toronto.

Back in Doug Gilmour's heyday, the Hall of Famer recalls guys bringing in mixtapes to load into the boombox. During his early-'90s Maple Leafs campaigns, Gilmour and the boys would let the whole GTA in on their pre-game pump-up. They'd turn the dial to Q107, the local rock station, and plant a bug in radio DJ-slash-sports junkie Joey Vendetta's ear. "Knowing he would be working 4 to 7 p.m. or whatever it was, we'd give him a heads-up beforehand. We'd say, 'Hey, play some good music for us, whether it's Metallica, Pearl Jam.'"

Regardless of the decade, volume matters. The beats must transcend the noisy hum of game night — the filing in of fans, the stretching of tape, the sharpening of skates, the persistent chatter. "Heavy loud," stresses former NHLer Anthony Stewart, outlining tips and tricks for aspiring dressing-room DJs. "Loud, loud, loud."

Stewart honed his locker room DJ skills in junior with the Kingston Frontenacs. Thanks to Stewart, that outfit rushed onto the ice to the old Blades of Steel Nintendo theme, which bled into "heavy, heavy '90s raps." Stewart chuckles in retrospect: "The scouts are coming into Kingston listening to our pregame music on the ice, like, 'What's going on with these guys? These guys are maniacs!'"

Drafted in the first round in 2003 by Florida, Stewart studied from then-team DJ Greg Campbell, picking the veteran's brain on which songs to play. When Stewart joined the Atlanta Thrashers, in 2010, and Carolina Hurricanes, in 2011, he took ownership of and pride in the role. (Hurricanes DJ Erik Cole joined Montreal as a free agent that summer, taking his Sirus XM subscription with him.) "The key to being a good DJ is knowing the room. You can't just play what you like. I'm a big hip-hop guy, but you can't just play hip-hop. Because the one thing about hockey players, they love to chirp. They're looking for any reason to chirp you at any given moment. So, it's almost an audition process where you've got to cater to everybody, or they're going to get you out of there fairly quickly," Stewart says. "If you play too much dance music, they say, 'Oh, this isn't Electric Circus!' There's too much country? 'Oh. I didn't know we're in the Deep South!' "

Anthony Duclair confirms the chirping: "If you're putting a bad song on, you know you're gonna hear it from the boys. Sometimes even when it's a good song, you'll hear it from the boys."

Before practice or a game, as teammates are filtering in and out of the room to stretch or tape sticks, Stewart advises pre-programming a minimum of 20 minutes. Think six or seven tunes ahead. Because if you leave to kick the soccer ball around and the air goes dead, someone else will jack the aux. "You have to make a playlist," Stewart advises. "My [go-to] playlist I still have now, it's on Spotify. It's called CHFI FM 98, which was not too hard, not too soft. All the soft-rock songs in the morning — the boys love that."

"If you're putting a bad song on, you know you're gonna hear it from the boys. Sometimes even when it's a good song, you'll hear it from the boys."

But don't just lazily run back the same joints. Add one or two new tunes per week. Mix the classic with the current, Stewart advises. "My favourite playlist was one I got from Greg Campbell, the DJ Danny D mix they

used to have on Z103.5 FM in Toronto," he says. "If I knew I was gonna be gone longer than 15 minutes out of the room, I would just put that playlist on, and the boys would love it. Especially the European players."

Stewart fondly recalls some heated pre-NHL camp speaker battles involving himself, brother Chris Stewart, Devante Smith-Pelly, Wayne Simmonds, Seguin and Michael del Zotto — a.k.a., DJ MDZ — during summer workout sessions guided by Toronto-based trainer Matt Nichol. A core group of players wanted hard beats and rhymes all day long, "but Del Zotto, who's a DJ, would be playing his new mixes and some heavy, heavy dance," Stewart says. "So we literally had to have a concession where it was, 'Okay, you play two songs, this guy plays two songs.' You're there for two hours, almost worrying more about the music than your workout."

For a select few, however, silence can be golden.

Colby Armstrong had spent his life in loud locker rooms, but it took until his final NHL season, with the 2012–13 Montreal Canadiens, to see a non-DJ assume the control their starting goalie did. "I was sort of amazed to see that Carey Price would switch up the tunes or shut the music off at a certain time before the game to dial it in sometimes," Armstrong chuckles. "Never saw a goalie ever do that. Most sit in their own world. He is chill, though. Didn't matter. Just got up, handled the DJ duties at times, and it was nothing."

In Philadelphia, it is everything. Jakub Voracek is entering his 10th season with the Flyers, and it is with dusty, reluctant fingers that he's loosening his control of the play button. "I absolutely hate modern music," Voracek told Spittin' Chiclets in November 2019. The 31-year-old Czech loves him some Bruce Springsteen, U2 and Led Zeppelin. Proficient in air guitar, Voracek caught AC/DC live in Berlin ("With Brian Johnson!") and has seen Springsteen 15 times, twice on Broadway. "I play my rock 'n' roll after meetings, and I blast it all the way up," Voracek said. He estimates that 70 out of 82 games the final song he fires up is Springsteen's "Atlantic City." "The live version, MTV Plugged — that one's the best version."

"If you're the guy doing the music, you're screwed. You're always in the wrong."

When prized free agent Kevin Hayes showed up at camp in 2019 and turned up the hip-hop in Philly's room, Voracek checked him. "That's not going to fly here, buddy. Get that shit outta here," Voracek blocked. "He's got about 500 less games than me, so he's got nothing on me."

Still, Hayes persisted, and carved out a time slot. "He gets on from 5 p.m. to 5:15 before the PK meeting, and that's it," Voracek said. "I'm not even invited to the PK meeting."

The voice of experience isn't always — or even usually — the voice of the people. Travis Konecny, 23, prefers the upbeat house selections of Scott Laughton, who gets some spins before Voracek takes over. "Voracek loves his Bruce Springsteen, like, all the older music," Konecny says. "That's kind of when the majority of the guys are out of the locker room. We're playing soccer and getting warmed up, so he has some time."

The trade of Nazem Kadri and departure of Jake Gardiner in 2019 served as a double-whammy for the Maple Leafs' DJ responsibilities. Gardiner was the mellow game-day skate jock and Kadri the hard beats game-time guy. To fill that vacuum, the team forced Mitch Marner into the role, essentially throwing him to the wolves. "It's been hit-and-miss," Matthews said after practice one day last season, Marner within earshot. "If you're the guy doing the music, you're screwed. You're always in the wrong. Either the music's not playing, the Bluetooth's not working, or it's a bad song… it's like a no-win situation. But somebody's gotta do it."

Matthews turned to Marner with a sly grin: "You just throw on the top charts and let it run?"

This was not entirely a compliment.

"Top charts into hip-hop," Marner shot back, chest puffed. "Absolute bangers."

Marner was asked for examples of songs that work with the group. "Nothing works. They always criticize," he said, defeated. "No matter what song gets played, everyone hates it.

"I got screamed at to grab my phone and play music, so whatever. I just put on a radio station on my app and tell everyone to suck it up. I'm barely in the room until 26 minutes [before puck drop]. I don't take requests. I don't care," explained Marner, the reluctant selector.

"I'm not too picky with my music. On a long bus ride, I can sit on my phone and play music and just chill."

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TSN.CA / Six Flames players Eastern Canadian fans should know about

By Salim Valji

With less than a handful of trips to Eastern Canada every year, it'd be tough to fault Canadiens, Leafs, and Senators fans if they hit up HockeyDB when they look at the current Calgary Flames roster.

As the Flames embark on a season that'll see them play an unprecedented 27 times against those teams, here are six under-the-radar Calgary players that Eastern Canadian hockey fans should get to know. There's a good chance they'll have a significant impact on how things unfold in the North Division.

David Rittich

It's funny to write that an all-star is unknown, but Rittich is exactly that. Coming into Flames camp, he's penciled in as the clear No. 2 goaltender behind Jacob Markstrom. Last season, the 28-year-old was 10th in the league in wins (24), one more than Markstrom.

He says he's looking forward to working with Markstrom and made a couple of changes this off-season. During the extended pause, Rittich, known for being emotional and wearing his heart on his sleeve, used a mental skills coach and incorporated virtual reality into his training. With such a compressed schedule, Rittich will still be playing fairly often for Calgary and could be a dark horse key to their season.

Rasmus Andersson

With Mark Giordano's impressive career winding down, his heir apparent on the Flames' blueline appears to be the 24-year-old Swede, a 2015 second-round pick who's cemented himself as a key part of the team's future. Andersson spent most of the off-season in Calgary with his fiance after signing a six-year, $27.3 million extension last January.

He'll start the season paired with Giordano and quarterback the team's top powerplay unit. Geoff Ward wants more shots from the back end and will rely heavily on Andersson for that. At the 2018 AHL All-Star Game, Andersson clocked a 101.5 mph slap shot - putting him in some elite company.

Juuso Valimaki

The Finnish blueliner has had some bad injury luck early on in his career but looked mobile and confident so far in training camp. During the fall, the 2017 first-round pick was a point-per-game player with Ilves Tampere. The rookie has been open about his Calder Trophy aspirations and will start the season on the Flames' third defensive pairing with Nikita Nesterov.

Andrew Mangiapane

On a roster last season with the likes of Johnny Gaudreau, Sean Monahan, Matthew Tkachuk, Elias Lindholm, and Mikael Backlund, it was actually the Toronto-born Mangiapane who was third with 17 even-strength goals. All that production despite starting just 46 per cent of his shifts in the offensive zone while getting the seventh-most ice time among the team's forwards.

According to Natural Stat Trick, his on-ice even-strength goals for percentage (52.94) was third among Flames regulars last season, behind only Giordano and Derek Ryan, while his expected goals for percentage (53.4) was second only to Giordano. Mangiapane could move up and down the lineup and get more opportunities to contribute as the team moves towards a balanced attack this season.

Dominik Simon

Simon played the majority of his minutes with Sidney Crosby last season in Pittsburgh. He's again being given a chance to play with high-end offensive players, this time in Calgary with Gaudreau and Monahan. Crosby commended Simon's ability to win puck battles in the corners, a skillset that should complement the Flames' two talented forwards.

Dillon Dubé

Again, a bit ironic to list a recent Team Canada World Juniors captain as under-the-radar, but it suits Dubé. After winning gold in 2018 in Buffalo, he's turned in a couple of solid professional seasons both with Calgary and in the American Hockey League with the Stockton Heat.

Last season, he teamed up with Milan Lucic and Sam Bennett to form an extremely effective third line for the Flames. Dubé plays with grit and sandpaper, and it's not out of the question that he ends up getting an extended look with Gaudreau and Monahan at some point this season.

SPARKS OFF THE FIRE

-We've talked about Dubé perhaps getting a top-six look this season, but he cautioned about using a fantasy pick on him. "I think my buddies should take Monny and Johnny," he joked after practice on Saturday.

-When asked about similarities between Crosby and Gaudreau, Simon said that they're both high-IQ players who think the game really well. Simon also said he learned from Crosby about work ethic and playing a full 60 minutes – not the first time someone's gleaned that from Sid.

-Sunday's big waiver dump means the Flames' taxi squad is coming into focus. Likely on it is goalie Louis Domingue, blueliner Alex Petrovic, and forwards Buddy Robinson, Byron Froese, and Justin Kirkland (provided they all clear). Two candidates for the second defenceman spot on that taxi squad: former Flame Michael Stone and college free agent signing Connor Mackey.

-On Sunday, Geoff Ward emphasized the importance of that taxi squad. That group will travel with the team and allow for tailoring lineups to opponents, as well as giving regular roster players maintenance days during practices.

-Ward also noticed Rittich's use of a mental coach. He called the goalie's approach this training camp "more business-like" than it has been in the past.

-Flames fans will be able to watch Monday's intrasquad game on the team's website. There's a chance that World Juniors medalists Jakob Pelletier, Connor Zary, and Dustin Wolf see some action.

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