



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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THE NEWS & OBSERVER

Carolina Hurricanes tuned up Monday for 2020-21 NHL season opener. How did they look?

By Chip Alexander

Rod Brind'Amour watched the Carolina Hurricanes' game-like scrimmage Monday from a perch high in the Canes' new practice facility, not from behind the bench.

His view of things?

"I like where we're at," the Canes coach said.

The Canes used their seventh training camp practice to allow the players to get in some five-on-five play at something approaching game speed, with a certain degree of physicality. The final score and the winner — for the record, the Red team won 4-3 — was irrelevant but not the competition, which was intense enough.

"We started off on a good pace and kind of kept that pace during the scrimmage, which was nice," defenseman Brady Skjei said on the Monday media call. "It was more of a game feel and I think the guys enjoyed it and kind of helped them get their feet under them."

NHL teams will enter the 2020-21 season with shortened training camps and no preseason games. Some are having bigger dress rehearsals than others, to prepare for the season openers. Some will be more ready than others.

Brind'Amour said he was pleased with the way the Canes, who open the season Thursday on the road against the Detroit Red Wings, went about things Monday.

"I thought it was good. What I saw was a group that has been together and kind of knows what we're doing," he said.

"Puck drop, Game 1, is going to be a different animal. Playing a real game is a different animal. But hopefully this knocks off a little of the rust."

Brind'Amour opened with the forward lines he has maintained in camp. Sebastian Aho centered Teuvo Teravainen and Nino Niederreiter, Vincent Trocheck was at center with Andrei Svechnikov and Jesper Fast, Jordan Staal centered Warren Foegele and Martin Necas, and Jordan Martinook centered Brock McGinn and Ryan Dzingel.

During the second period, Necas was moved to right wing on Trocheck's line, with Fast going to the right side of Staal's line. Brind'Amour is looking for balance on the lines and that was an interesting look, combining two of the Canes' most dynamic young wingers with Trocheck, who was active most of the scrimmage.

Brind'Amour also gave forward Seth Jarvis some work in the scrimmage at Wake Competition Center. Jarvis, 18, was the Canes' first-round draft pick in 2020.

On the back end, it was Jaccob Slavin with Dougie Hamilton, Skjei with Brett Pesce and Jake Gardiner with Haydn Fleury as the top three defensive pairs.

Skjei scored early in the scrimmage, jumping into the play to beat goalie Petr Mrazek. It's possible Skjei, traded to the Canes in February by the New York Rangers, will be given that kind of offensive freedom this season by Brind'Amour.

"Roddy (Brind'Amour) and the coaches here like to play with that aggressive system," Skjei said.

JAKE BEAN WANTS TO PLAY GAMES

Jake Bean, named the AHL's best defenseman last year with the Charlotte Checkers, also has made an impression on Brind'Amour. A former first-round draft pick by Carolina, Bean has "definitely taken a huge step" in his development, Brind'Amour said.

Bean, 22, should end camp as the team's seventh defenseman, bringing up an interesting decision: To keep him on team's NHL taxi squad, or have him playing games with the Chicago Wolves, the Canes' new AHL affiliate.

Bean said his preference was to be wherever he can play games, even if that means returning to the AHL.

"I think I'm definitely NHL ready," Bean said.

Teams are allowed to carry four to six players on a taxi squad in the 56-game regular season, and that decision must soon be made by the Canes.



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THE ATHLETIC

Hurricanes scrimmage: Game speed, Greek expressions, Lady Byng predictions

By Sara Civian

The first rule of NHL preseason scrimmage club is don't talk about NHL preseason scrimmage club.

It's not that they don't matter, and this year the reason they actually matter — to give the players that first taste of game speed — is more important than ever.

"It was more for the players than for me," head coach Rod Brind'Amour said after Monday's scrimmage. "It's for them to go at the pace, or closer to the pace, you're going to go to in a game. That was the mindset of it, the routine of a game, pregame, all that stuff was important."

But there's a catch with the part we care about — the performance of the players vying for a roster spot. Naturally, they're going to try the hardest, while the players who know they're in the clear probably aren't operating at 100 percent and risking injury. Brind'Amour inadvertently brought that notion up again when asked about Teuvo Teravainen after the scrimmage Monday.

"He's a gamer, I mean if you watched today he wasn't really into it, I'm just going to be honest," he said. "But I can guarantee you when we play on Thursday he will be dialed in. He's sneaky competitive in that way."

Even though "Team Red" technically won the even strength portion of the scrimmage, it randomly devolved into an overtime format and then a shootout, driving home the point once again that this is for the players.

Despite Teravainen's ever-apparent nonchalance — and despite someone on the "other" team screaming to make him mess up — he won the post-scrimmage shootout in a walk-off. Hey, if Justin Williams is gone, someone's gotta do it.

(Yes, that is me laughing.)

Other loose pucks from Monday's scrimmage

- Brind'Amour watched from above with video coach Chris Huffine as his assistants coached the teams. "Just to kind of get a good view of everything. I find when I'm coaching I'm watching one team a lot, and I didn't just want to focus in on one group. I just wanted to get a birds-eye view on everything. Nice to talk with (Huffine), we spitball a lot of things about systems, so when I saw something break down I'm asking him, it's just nice to have that kind of communication and a different look."
- Brady Skjei scored the first goal of the day and he was all over the place in a good way. Brett Pesce's return to the Canes no doubt lets him access that offensive flair more easily, and it's no coincidence the two seem familiar with each other. Skjei, Pesce and Jacob Slavin played at the same USA Development camp when they were 15 and have kept in touch. Skjei on Pesce: "We're just trying to communicate as

much as we can on the ice and off the ice. I think we've done a good job of that in camp and it's been fun playing with him."

- Andrei Svechnikov's set up on Skjei's goal was just as good as the goal, which validates my mildly hot take that he will up his passing game more than his shooting game this season. The second rule of NHL preseason scrimmage club is you're allowed to throw rule No. 1 out the window if something happens that aligns with any of your preconceived takes.
- Speaking of Pesce's return, it has been very loud. Every time I tweet that someone is screaming, people want to assume it's Jordan Martinook. But I'd guess at least 20 percent of the time it's been Pesce. Monday was no different. For some reason he screamed "Opa!" a Greek expression used to express enthusiasm, at least five times throughout the scrimmage. After he scored, he ventured over to the other team's bench looking for high fives. They were not impressed.
- Speaking of volume, witnessing NHL players play in a game-like situation in complete silence was hilarious, odd and kind of informative. The silence was the odd part, it's like they're all standing around a water cooler in a corporate office between whistles. The informative part was getting a glimpse into how certain players interact with each other on the ice. Maybe it was just because he was playing close to where I was sitting, but Haydn Fleury seems particularly vocal. Martinook struck me in the same way, but less in the scream-y way you'd expect, and more in a "calmly communicating with his linemates" way. A puck came flying at Slavin and he said "Oh!"... If that happened to 99.9 percent of NHL players an expletive would've followed. In a year where we can actually hear what the players are saying on the ice, I'd bet on Slavin to finally win the Lady Byng.
- Even with the aforementioned catch about training camp scrimmages taken into consideration, Jake Bean looked good. His speed and confidence immediately stood out compared to his camp last season and even the summer's return to play training camp. He sounded confident, too, and went as far as to say he'll actually be better in the NHL than he's been in the AHL. "It's obviously exciting. It feels like a long time coming for me. It's not exactly how I felt like it would go 2-3 years ago, but I've been able to use it to my advantage getting a bunch of ice time in the AHL. I'll do my best to make all that work come to think I'm NHL-ready. I think I'll be better in the NHL than the AHL. The AHL is good, but the NHL is full of guys who can make plays. I think if I surround myself



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with players like that I can make plays and have guys finish the plays I make.”

- I absolutely love that kind of talk, and his point is valid considering his offensive upside. If he can keep up with the pace (which it looks like he can), it only makes sense that surrounding himself with better playmakers will allow him to ... uh ... make plays. Brind'Amour on if Bean will get into the lineup at some point this season: "Do I want to see him in there? No, I don't want to see him in there necessarily, because that means we probably had something go down. But will he get in there? I'm almost sure of it. We need to see what we have in him."

- For whatever reason, Sebastian Aho laying a medium-ish hit on Warren Foegele caught my eye. It was obviously all in good fun and anyone could have been at the receiving end, but several Canes players and coaches have noted how dialed in and prepared Aho has seemed at camp. That should excite you, unless you're Teravainen, who is probably somewhere rolling his eyes while scoring another shootout goal.
- The Red Wings put Evgeny Svechnikov on waivers. The Canes aren't going to claim him, but it sure would be fun if they did.



Prove it-or-lose it fast approaching for Canes' former first round pick Bean

By Jared Fialko

First round draft picks come packaged with labels, expectations. For 2016's 13th overall selection, Jake Bean, his road to meeting those has a touch more windy than he cared for.

"Personally, it's not exactly how I thought it was going to go the last two or three years or so, but I think I took advantage of being in the American League and getting a lot of ice time in," says Hurricanes defenseman Jake Bean, who scored 23 goals in the last two seasons with the Charlotte Checkers.

Now, patience, Bean's acquired and essential personality trait, may be about to pay off.

"If you ask me who I think is standing out a little, that'd be him," says Hurricanes head coach Rod Brind'Amour. "He looks different than he did, certainly last year."

On the cusp of making Carolina's opening day roster, but perhaps the victim of depth. A stacked squad of blue-liners

featuring Jaccob Slavin and Dougie Hamilton, Brett Pesce and Brady Skjei, Haydn Fleury and Jake Gardiner likely leave Bean as the odd-man out. Which wouldn't exactly be worst-case scenario given this season's shakeup.

"There's 56 games in a short amount of time, back-to-backs, all season long, so guys are going to get hurt more than they ever have," Bean explains. "I'm not projecting any kind of roster, but if there ever was a year to be a 7th D, this is probably the year where you're gonna play the most."

"Do I want to see him in there?" asks Brind'Amour. "No, I don't want to see him in there necessarily because that means we've probably had someone go down, but will he get in there? I'm almost sure of it."

In what could become a prove it-or-lose it scenario,

"We need to see what we have in him," Brind'Amour nods.

Bean remains unphased. He says this opportunity's been a long time coming, and he's not about to squander it.



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Three Takeaways from Red-White Scrimmage

Brind'Amour: 'Playing a game is a different animal'

by Michael Smith

The Carolina Hurricanes played a hockey game on Monday.

Well, sort of.

On the seventh day of camp, the team staged a Red-White scrimmage at Wake Competition Center. With the focus of the week shifting toward a game-like mindset, the intrasquad friendly served as a barometer of individual and team preparedness before the 2020-21 season gets underway on Thursday.

Here are three takeaways from Monday's Red-White scrimmage.

1. The Feel of the Game

Pregame warm-ups. Music (Vincent Trocheck's mix, apparently) blaring. Three periods. Faceoffs. Line changes. Three-on-three. A shootout.

Monday's Red-White scrimmage was, as best as the Canes could replicate, the game before the game that counts.

It wasn't a true exhibition game, but it will have to do.

"It felt good. It started off with a good pace, and we kept that pace throughout the scrimmage, which was nice," Brady Skjei said. "I think the guys enjoyed it. Just helped getting our feet under us."

"It was more to just get the feeling back. I don't think any of us were too worried about little plays and stuff like that," Jake Bean said. "It was more just feeling line changes, feeling faceoffs, feeling how that feeling is. It's quite a bit different than practice."

In the absence of a true dress rehearsal, the scrimmage marked an important step in the process prior to opening night: an opportunity for the coaching staff to evaluate concepts and execution, and an opportunity for the players to up the competitiveness and get a feel for game flow.

"It was more for them to go at the pace or closer to the pace you're going to go to in a game. That was really the mindset of it," head coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "The routine of a game, pregame, all that stuff was important. I thought it was good."

What's most important is that the Canes got out of it what they wanted to get out of it. The first 10 minutes on Thursday are going to be markedly different, but at least maybe now it won't be so unexpected.

"Puck drop in game one is going to be a different animal because playing a game is a different animal," Brind'Amour said. "Hopefully this knocks off a little rust."

2. The Little Details

In case you were wondering, Team Red bested Team White, 4-3. Down by two heading into the three-player shootout, Teuvo Teravainen netted the lone goal for White, as they fell just short.

Of the six goals that were scored in the scrimmage itself, five came in the first period alone. Brady Skjei netted the first of the game, as he snuck in from the point and beat Petr Mrazek with a snap shot.

"I like to use my skating to my advantage and get up into the offense," Skjei said. "I was playing with Pesce for most of the scrimmage, and with him back there to man the fort, you feel pretty good jumping up into the play."

It was back-and-forth for the rest of the first period. Red jumped out to a 2-0 lead before Sebastian Aho redirected a Bean shot to get White on the board. Seth Jarvis banged in a shot in tight to tie the game shortly after. Then, Red's young line grinded out a shift that ended with Morgan Geekie scoring on a quick-hitter in the slot.

Brett Pesce stretched Red's lead to 4-2 with a goal late in the second, and that was the only scoring of note in the scrimmage's final 30 minutes.

So, Canes win!

(The ice was randomly resurfaced with 8:07 left in the second period, and the scrimmage ended with just over four minutes of three-on-three action, for the record.)

3. The Coach's Thoughts

Even though the scrimmage was more for the players' benefit, what did the head coach think?

"What I liked is that I feel like the stuff we put in, you could see we were trying to do it. It's not like we had five guys all over the place," Brind'Amour said. "What I saw was a group that has been together and kind of knows what we're doing, which is what you'd expect."

Instead of manning a team behind the bench, Brind'Amour observed from a corner perch alongside video coach Chris Huffine.

"I find when I'm coaching I'm watching one team a lot. I didn't want to just focus in on one group," Brind'Amour said. "I wanted to get a bird's eye view of everybody just to have a different look."



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It will be back onto the ice for Brind'Amour on Tuesday, when the Canes practice in two groups as they have throughout camp. Then, the team will be down to just its active roster and taxi squad for Wednesday before flying out to Detroit.

Projecting the Canes Forward Lines

Svechnikov, Aho, Teravainen will drive the offense

by Michael Smith

Since the start of training camp, the Carolina Hurricanes have practiced with consistent forward lines.

What does that mean?

Well, probably not a lot, especially if you ask head coach Rod Brind'Amour.

Lines (and defensive pairs, too) are fluid in the course of an entire season, and even more granularly, in the course of a period or game, as coaches make adjustments and search for any advantage or spark they can find.

But analyzing, dissecting and rearranging the forward lines remains a fun exercise, if not to simply stimulate discussion, much like what happens inside the coaches' office.

With that in mind, let's project some lines.

Andrei Svechnikov - Sebastian Aho - Teuvo Teravainen

This is the bread and butter. This is the line that's going to drive the Canes' offense. This is the line that, even if it's not together on Opening Night, Brind'Amour confidently knows he can turn to it if needed. It's a proven trio of elite offensive talent.

On the left side is Svechnikov, one of the league's budding young stars who is entering his third year. His sophomore campaign, even though it was cut short due to the pause, was one to remember. He improved in every statistical category from his rookie season with 24 goals, 37 assists and 61 points. And who can forget not only the first lacrosse-style goal in NHL history, but also the sequel?

In his first four seasons in the NHL, Aho has developed into one of the league's best centers (the 13th best, according to NHL Network). In 2019-20, he set a career high in goals with 38 and scored at nearly a point-per-game pace, leading the team with 66 points (38g, 28a) in 68 games. From Jan. 21 through Feb. 28, Aho recorded a career-long 14-game point streak that included 12 goals and nine assists. In the 2020 postseason, Aho again led the team in scoring with 12 points (3g, 9a) in eight games. He recorded at least a point in every game but one and in the sweep of New York in the Qualifiers, Aho tallied eight points (3g, 5a) in three multi-point games.

Aho has led the team in goals and points in consecutive seasons, and he's just the fourth player in team history (since relocation) to record consecutive 30-goal seasons. Even at just 23 years old, Aho is beginning to etch his name into the Canes' record books.

"He's one of the best players around," Brind'Amour said.

Teravainen is perhaps one of the league's most underrated players. He has elite playmaking skills - just look at the pass below - and an effective shot that he should probably show off

"I'm excited just to see where we're at and get going for real," he said.

more often. He's the perfect complement for Aho, as the two Finns recorded a point on the same goal 33 times in 2019-20. That's going to be an effective offensive duo no matter who is on the left wing.

Nino Niederreiter - Vincent Trocheck - Martin Necas

This line will feature Trocheck in the middle with what could be a mixed cast of characters around him. Whatever it looks like, this trio is going to be critical to the Canes' secondary scoring; it's a given that the first line is going to produce, so how dangerous can this second line become?

With nine goals and six assists, Niederreiter was a point-per-game contributor in his first 15 games with the Canes in early 2019. In total, Niederreiter finished with 30 points (14g, 16a) in 36 games with Carolina following the trade, his offensive contributions undoubtedly helping fuel the Canes' surge up the standings in the latter half of the 2018-19 season. His production fell off in 2019-20, though, as he finished with 11 goals and 29 points in 67 games. Niederreiter, a 20-goal scorer in four of his previous five seasons prior, ideally plays a key role in the team's secondary scoring.

Trocheck has been on the Canes roster for nearly 11 months now, but he's only played in seven regular-season games and eight playoff games with his "new" team. Trocheck spent time digesting video and learning systems prior to the postseason, and in the offseason since returning from the Toronto bubble, he's put in off-ice work with the Canes' head strength and condition coach, Bill Burniston. Trocheck finished with career highs in goals (31), assists (44) and points (75) in 2017-18, and if he can rediscover that level, he's going to be a weapon down the middle.

"I think Trocheck has looked good this year," Jake Gardiner said. "He looks fast and confident. I think he's going to have a big year for us."

Necas has dazzling speed and skill, and in front of him is the opportunity to take the next step in his development after a rookie season in which he scored 16 goals and totaled 36 points in 64 games. He followed that up with four points (1g, 3a) in eight games in the playoffs. In a full 82-game schedule, a 20-goal season wouldn't be out of the question; 13-15 would make for a solid sophomore season.

Warren Foegele - Jordan Staal - Jesper Fast

This line is a handful for the opposition. It's tough and frustrating to play against. They're going to get pucks deep and force the opposition to return and retrieve before hounding them with a dogged forecheck. And when the puck goes the other way, they'll backcheck with just as much vigor.

Foegele is coming off a sophomore campaign that saw him improve in every statistical category from his rookie year with 13 goals, 17 assists and 30 points in 68 games. He plays with energy, and an offensive skill touch allows him to contribute in



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all scenarios. He scored three shorthanded goals in 2019-20, one behind the league (and team) lead of Aho's four.

Staal's game isn't flashy or surprising. It's honest and sturdy. He'll win the faceoff. He'll hang onto the puck. He'll use his big frame to protect the puck, nudge an opposing player off it or gain positioning in front of the net. He's a bear and a handful for the opposition each and every shift.

Fast is the lone new name amongst the forward group. Signed as a free agent in the offseason, Fast is a perfect fit both on and off the ice for this team. He's a versatile, right-shot winger who can throw his body around and log quality shorthanded minutes. Fast plays, well, fast, hard minutes and is the embodiment of a team player.

"We play similar styles," Jordan Martinook said. "He's one of those guys who goes out and works his tail off every shift. A guy like me respects that so much."

Ryan Dzingel - Jordan Martinook - Brock McGinn

As a skill player who was signed as a free agent to provide a scoring punch, Dzingel is probably a little out of place here, but he has the talent to work his way up the lineup. He's coming off a disappointing 2019-20 season in which he scored just eight goals and totaled 29 points. Worth noting is his abnormally low shooting percentage of 8.2%; he's career shooting percentage is much closer to 15%, and seeing that number climb will also lead to an increase in goals. He'll also be featured on one of the team's power play units.

Martinook has played both center and wing in his time with the Canes and will probably play a little of both this season, as well. He can be effective in either position, but he's admittedly more defensive-minded when he's in the middle.

"I feel like I'm comfortable at both. My mindset definitely changes a little bit. If I'm playing in the middle ... I think a little more defensively," he said. "Playing center, you get to see more of the ice, get involved more and get more touches. That's something I'm excited about."

Brind'Amour knows what he's going to get out of McGinn, who can provide rugged even-strength minutes and be one of the team's most reliable penalty killers. He's got enough offensive touch to convert shorthanded opportunities, too; he scored two in 2019-20 and added another in the First Round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

In the mix: Morgan Geekie

Geekie burst onto the scene just before the pause with an eye-catching first two NHL games. Geekie's stat line from his debut: two goals, one assist, three points, plus-3, one hit, four blocked shots and a perfect 100% shooting percentage (two goals on two shots). Two nights later, in what ended up being the Canes' final game in the 2019-20 regular season, Geekie scored his third NHL goal on his third NHL shot. Though he's been utilized as an extra forward thus far in camp, he'll see time in the lineup this season.



Super 16: Lightning edge Avalanche to open season No. 1 in power rankings

Golden Knights, Blues, Flyers round out top five

by Dan Rosen

The Tampa Bay Lightning are the No. 1 team in the preseason Super 16, but just barely.

The Lightning, who won the Stanley Cup last season, edged the Colorado Avalanche by one voting point in the exercise that featured 13 NHL.com staff members submitting their preseason power rankings.

Each was ranked No. 1 by six staff members and No. 2 by five, but the Lightning picked up the extra voting point by being ranked No. 3 by two staff members. The Avalanche were ranked No. 3 once, but one staff member had them as low as No. 4.

One voting point also separated No. 4 (St. Louis Blues) from No. 5 (Philadelphia Flyers), No. 6 (Washington Capitals) from No. 7 (Dallas Stars), and No. 13 (Pittsburgh Penguins) from No. 14 (Edmonton Oilers).

To create the Super 16, each of the 13 participating staff members put together his or her version of what they think it should look like. Those were submitted and a point total assigned to each.

The team that was selected first was given 16 points, second got 15, third 14 and so on down to No. 16, who got one point.

Here is the Super 16:

1. Tampa Bay Lightning

Total points: 199

Hit: The Lightning, who won the Stanley Cup last season, should have captain Steven Stamkos healthy and ready to go when they open the season against the Chicago Blackhawks at Amalie Arena on Wednesday (8 p.m. ET; NBCSN). Stamkos played in one game in the Lightning's Stanley Cup run last season because of a lower-body injury.

Miss: Nikita Kucherov will miss the regular season following hip surgery last month. The forward led the NHL in postseason scoring with 34 points (seven goals, 27 assists) in 25 games



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after scoring 85 points (33 goals, 52 assists) in 68 regular season games.

2. Colorado Avalanche

Total points: 198

Hit: The Avalanche's lineup got deeper in the offseason with the acquisitions of forward Brandon Saad and defenseman Devon Toews. Saad, who was acquired from the Blackhawks, will play in a top-six role. Toews, acquired from the New York Islanders, could be paired with Cale Makar, who won the Calder Trophy last season.

Miss: Defenseman Erik Johnson has been "unfit to practice" since training camp began. He is unlikely to play when the Avalanche open the season against the St. Louis Blues on Wednesday (10:30 p.m. ET; NBCSN).

3. Vegas Golden Knights

Total points: 179

Hit: Alex Pietrangelo was the big offseason addition. The veteran defenseman who won the Stanley Cup with the St. Louis Blues signed a seven-year, \$61.6 million contract on Oct. 13. He'll likely start the season paired with Brayden McNabb.

Miss: To create the cap space to sign Pietrangelo, the Golden Knights had to part with center Paul Stastny (traded to the Winnipeg Jets) and defenseman Nate Schmidt (traded to the Vancouver Canucks). Stastny scored 38 points (17 goals, 21 assists) in 71 games last season. Schmidt scored 31 points (seven goals, 24 assists) in 59 games.

4. St. Louis Blues

Total points: 135

Hit: The Blues lost Pietrangelo but added defenseman Torey Krug on a seven-year, \$45.5 million contract. Krug will likely start the season on the top defense pair with Colton Parayko.

Miss: Left wing Vladimir Tarasenko will start the season on long-term injured reserve after undergoing his third surgery on his left shoulder during the offseason. Tarasenko was limited to 10 games last season because of shoulder surgery in late October. He led St. Louis in goals for six straight seasons (2014-19).

5. Philadelphia Flyers

Total points: 134

Hit: The Flyers should have center Nolan Patrick in the lineup when they open their season against the Pittsburgh Penguins on Wednesday (5:30 p.m. ET; NBCSN, SN1, NHL.TV). Patrick, the No. 2 pick in the 2017 NHL Draft, missed all of last season because of issues with migraines.

Miss: They will have to replace defenseman Matt Niskanen, who retired after last season. Niskanen played on the top pair with Ivan Provorov last season and scored 33 points (eight goals, 25 assists) while averaging 21:54 of ice time per game in 68 games.

6. Washington Capitals

Total points: 112

Hit: The Capitals believe their defense is deeper and better with the additions of Justin Schultz and Zdeno Chara. Schultz signed a two-year, \$8 million contract and Chara left the Bruins after 14 seasons and signed a one-year, \$750,000 contract with Washington.

Miss: Henrik Lundqvist won't play this season after having heart surgery. The 38-year-old goalie signed a one-year, \$1.5 million contract with the Capitals and was supposed to push Ilya Samsonov for playing time. Craig Anderson has been in training camp on a PTO.

7. Dallas Stars

Total points: 111

Hit: The Stars are optimistic about the continued development of forwards Denis Gurianov, Roope Hintz and Joel Kiviranta as well as defenseman Miro Heiskanen. They're all 24 years old or younger and played big roles in helping the Stars reach the Stanley Cup Final last season. Heiskanen led the Stars and all NHL defensemen by scoring 26 points (six goals, 20 assists) in the playoffs.

Miss: Their training camp had to be postponed last week because six players and two staff members had positive tests for the COVID-19 virus. Their training facility was closed and the NHL announced the Stars won't start their season until Jan. 19 at the earliest.

8. Boston Bruins

Total points: 106

Hit: Left wing Brad Marchand will start the season on time, which was in doubt a few months ago as he was recovering from sports hernia surgery he had Sept. 14. Marchand scored 87 points (28 goals, 59 assists) in 71 games last season.

Miss: Right wing David Pastrnak will not start the season on time, which was likely after he had a right hip arthroscopy and labral repair on Sept. 16. Pastrnak led the Bruins and was tied for third in the NHL with 95 points (48 goals, 47 assists) in 70 games last season.

9. Toronto Maple Leafs

Total points: 102

Hit: The Maple Leafs feel they'll be harder to play against, especially on the cycle, in front of the net and in the corners, with the additions of veteran forwards Joe Thornton and Wayne Simmonds, and defenseman Zach Bogosian.

Miss: Toronto is determining their defensive depth after Morgan Rielly. The top candidates to round out the top-four group include TJ Brodie, who will likely be paired with Rielly to start the season, Jake Muzzin and Travis Dermott. They're also high on Bogosian, Rasmus Sandin, Justin Holl and Mikko Lehtonen.

10. Carolina Hurricanes

Total points: 94

Hit: The Hurricanes have a healthy Brett Pesce back for the start of the season. The defenseman sustained a shoulder



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injury in a game against Toronto on Feb. 22 last season and had surgery in March. He did not play in the postseason.

Miss: They'll have to carry on again without forward Justin Williams, the Hurricanes' former captain who retired in the offseason. Williams scored 11 points (eight goals, three assists) in 20 regular season games and one point, a goal, in seven postseason games last season. He sat out the first half of the season contemplating retirement.

11. Vancouver Canucks

Total points: 81

Hit: The Canucks have been impressed by the play of 20-year-old Nils Hoglander in training camp. Hoglander, a second-round pick (No. 40) by the Canucks in the 2019 NHL Draft, appears to have earned a spot on the second line with Bo Horvat and Tanner Pearson, replacing Tyler Toffoli, who signed with the Montreal Canadiens in the offseason.

Miss: Vancouver is hoping it won't miss goalie Jacob Markstrom, who signed with the Calgary Flames after last season. The Canucks have Braden Holtby, who they signed to a two-year contract, and Thatcher Demko, but it was Markstrom who was arguably their most valuable player the past two seasons.

12. New York Islanders

Total points: 60

Hit: Mathew Barzal signed a three-year contract on Saturday, when the center also made his training camp debut. Barzal, who missed the first four days of on-ice training in camp because he was a restricted free agent, has led the Islanders in scoring each of the past three seasons.

Miss: New York won't have defenseman Johnny Boychuk, who announced his retirement in the offseason because of a left eye injury he sustained in a game against the Canadiens on March 3 of last season.

13. Pittsburgh Penguins

Total points: 53

Hit: Jake Guentzel said he feels 100 percent healthy and that he's looking to build on his accomplishments from previous seasons. The forward played four games in 2020, all in the Stanley Cup Qualifiers, after sustaining a shoulder injury that required surgery on Dec. 30, 2019. He scored 43 points (20 goals, 23 assists) in 39 games before the injury after scoring 76 points (40 goals, 36 assists) in 82 games in 2018-19.

Miss: They won't have forward Kasper Kapanen available when they open the season against the Flyers on Wednesday. Kapanen had to sort out some immigration issues before

finally arriving in Pittsburgh on Saturday. He is in the process of a mandatory seven-day quarantine.

14. Edmonton Oilers

Total points: 52

Hit: The Oilers are hopeful that with forwards Kyle Turris and Jesse Puljujarvi on their third line they will have better scoring depth this season, especially since Leon Draisaitl (110 points) and Connor McDavid (97 points), the top two scorers in the NHL last season, will be centering the top two lines.

Miss: Edmonton will not have defenseman Oscar Klefbom all season because of a chronic shoulder injury. Klefbom scored 34 points (five goals, 29 assists) and led them in ice time per game (25:25) in 62 games last season.

15. Montreal Canadiens

Total points: 41

Hit: The Canadiens are excited about their potential because of the additions they made in the offseason, including goalie Jake Allen to backup Carey Price, forwards Josh Anderson and Tyler Toffoli to play in the top-nine group, forwards Corey Perry and Michael Frolik for depth purposes, and defenseman Joel Edmundson to potentially land in a top-four role. They're also excited about defenseman Alexander Romanov, who could be a Calder Trophy candidate as rookie of the year.

Miss: The hope is that some of the changes will improve their power play, which was 22nd in the NHL last season (17.7 percent) after being 30th in 2018-19 (13.3 percent). They were 15.2 percent (5-for-33) in the postseason last year.

16. Columbus Blue Jackets

Total points: 28

Hit: The Blue Jackets are hopeful their offense and power play will improve this season after finishing last season tied for 27th in goals per game (2.57) and 27th in power play (16.4 percent). But they're confident that they will have one of the best goaltending tandems with Elvis Merzlikins and Joonas Korpisalo and top defense pairs with Seth Jones and Zach Werenski in the NHL.

Miss: Forward Gustav Nyquist will miss the bulk of the season, if not all of it, after having shoulder surgery on Nov. 3. He was given a recovery time of 5-6 months, which means returning to the lineup in April or May. Nyquist had 42 points (15 goals, 27 assists) in 70 games last season.

Others receiving points: Calgary Flames 18, New York Rangers 12, Winnipeg Jets 9, Arizona Coyotes 2, Nashville Predators 2, Florida Panthers 1



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NHL Power Rankings: Contenders and pretenders for 2020-21 NHL season

By Adam Gretz

In this week's NHL Power Rankings we are going to take a look at the the three different tiers of teams in the league this season. The contenders, the pretenders, and the lottery teams.

While it can be difficult, and maybe even impossible, to know exactly which teams are going to end in the Stanley Cup Final we should at least have a pretty good idea as to which teams fit into which category. At least to a point.

How are we defining each tier? The contenders are the teams that should have the best chance to win the Stanley Cup. Teams that as of right now you could conceivably see winning it all. The Pretenders are teams that could be good, could easily make the playoffs, but may not quite be at a Stanley Cup level. The lottery teams are teams that seem destined to miss the playoffs entirely.

So let's take a look.

Which tier is your team in?

To this week's NHL Power Rankings!

The Contenders

1. Tampa Bay Lightning. Even without Nikita Kucherov for the regular season the defending Stanley Cup champions still have an absolutely loaded roster.
2. Colorado Avalanche. An already great team managed to get even stronger this offseason with the additions of Brandon Saad and Devon Toews.
3. Vegas Golden Knights. They have two starting caliber goalies, two legit top-pairing defensemen, and an excellent group of forwards. A third trip to the NHL's semifinals in the first four years of their existence seems possible.
4. St. Louis Blues. Losing Alex Pietrangelo hurts, but Torey Krug is a more than capable replacement and the rest of the team is outstanding. Which version of Jordan Binnington they get in goal will play a big role in how far they go.
5. Boston Bruins. There is every reason to be concerned about the state of the defense following the losses of Krug and Zdeno Chara (and not replacing them from outside of the organization) but the forwards and goalies are good enough to make them a force.
6. Washington Capitals. Back-to-back First Round exits is a concern, but they have finished in first place in their division five years in a row, are consistently near the top of the league standings, and still have an excellent roster. The window is still open.

7. Dallas Stars. Surprising fact: No team in the NHL has won more playoff games than the Stars over the past two seasons. The offense is not great, but the goaltending and defense are both great.

8. Carolina Hurricanes. Stop me if you have heard this one before, but if they can get the goaltending the sky is the limit for this team.

9. Pittsburgh Penguins. Do you remember the end of the Dan Bylsma/Ray Shero era when the Penguins had two great forward lines built around Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin that could carry them to the playoffs, and then the rest of the team looked severely flawed? This team looks similar to that on paper.

10. Philadelphia Flyers. There is some question as to how good they really are, but if Carter Hart is the goalie they think he is (and he should be) they could be dangerous.

11. New York Islanders. Islanders fans will not like this ranking, and I get it. They were in the Eastern Conference Final just a year ago and now in 11th in the preseason rankings? But it was such a weird season. They started great for 18 games. Then they were awful for the next 50 games and may have even missed the playoffs in a normal season. Then they got white hot in the bubble. Which team are they? They have enough flaws to make me question them, but enough strengths that I also do not want to bet against them.

12. Toronto Maple Leafs. On one hand, this team has to actually do something when it matters for anyone to take them seriously. On the other hand, they are in probably the most winnable division in the league this season and could easily end up in the semifinals. But again, the time has come to do something. Finish higher than third in the division. Finish in the top-five of the league standings. Win a playoff round. Give me something.

13. Edmonton Oilers. A lot of really good, under-the-radar free agent signings this offseason, but is that enough help for Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl?

The Pretenders

14. Calgary Flames. They are not as good as they looked two years ago, but they might be a little better than they showed a year ago. Jacob Markstrom will dictate which direction this thing goes.

15. Columbus Blue Jackets. They have two outstanding defensemen and some underrated forwards that can keep them competitive. They desperate need the goaltending to repeat its performance from a year ago.



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16. Vancouver Canucks. The top of the lineup is a championship core. The bottom of the lineup is going to be a liability. The goaltending is a question.

17. Montreal Canadiens. They had great underlying numbers a year ago and needed some finishing ability at forward. I think they found some in Tyler Toffoli and Josh Anderson, and watch out for Nick Suzuki to have a breakout season.

18. Nashville Predators. When things stay at even-strength they are pretty good. When it turns into a special teams game they are as bad as it gets. That has to change.

19. New York Rangers. The forwards and the goalies are cause for a lot of optimism, perhaps as soon as this season. The defense after Adam Fox is a big concern.

20. Florida Panthers. They need the Columbus version of Sergei Bobrovsky or another busy offseason will be rendered pointless.

21. Winnipeg Jets. Connor Hellebuyck gives them a chance every night. I still think that defense is going to be too much to overcome.

22. Minnesota Wild. I could see them making the playoffs as the fourth-team in a top-heavy West Division. But I do not see them getting through two of Colorado, Vegas, or St. Louis if they get there.

23. San Jose Sharks. Take the entry above about the Wild and repeat the same thing here.

24. Arizona Coyotes. Love the goalies, but where is the offense going to come from?

The Lottery Teams

25. Buffalo Sabres. All of the offseason excitement that came with adding Taylor Hall and Eric Staal, only to do nothing about the goalies and then be placed in a division with Boston, Washington, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, the New York Islanders, and New York Rangers.

26. New Jersey Devils. The reason for optimism here was the potential of Mackenzie Blackwood and Corey Crawford goalie duo. Now it is just down to Blackwood. They need more offense, and that division is going to be brutal.

27. Ottawa Senators. The roster definitely looks like more of an NHL roster this season, and the cupboard is being restocked. Still a long way to go in this rebuild.

28. Los Angeles Kings. Within two years they will be a playoff team again. Within three years they will be a contender. Their time is coming. It is just not right now.

29. Chicago Blackhawks. An already thin roster is already being impacted by injuries and the season has not even started yet. The goaltending question could really make this season a challenge.

30. Anaheim Ducks. Some intriguing young players here, but they need to get the memo that they need to pick a new direction and follow it.

31. Detroit Red Wings. Some really smart offseason signings and a lot of cap space to spend after this season, but this is going to be another tough season.



Looking at the new division: Goaltenders

The Hurricanes' longtime perceived weak point might not be so weak when looking at the goaltending tandems in the division.

By Brian LeBlanc

You're probably tired of hearing it, just the same way that the media is tired of writing and reporting it and, frankly, in the same way that the players themselves have gotten sick of it.

"If the Carolina Hurricanes had a top-level goaltender," the conventional wisdom goes, "they'd be a true Stanley Cup contender."

The spotlight this season will be on the goaltending perhaps moreso than in any other season in recent NHL history. With only 56 games and four games scheduled nearly every week — not to mention the inevitable rescheduling and roster reshuffling due to COVID-19 issues — goaltenders have very little margin for error. Successful teams will need to platoon their goalies. If your goalie plays 70% of your team's games, that's likely to be a disadvantage, not a strength.

Fortunately, a platoon is a situation in which the Hurricanes are very comfortable. How does the rest of the division stack

up? And - let's whisper it so as to not jinx it - could the Hurricanes' perceived weak link actually be an advantage this season?

Let's find out.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Andrei Vasilevskiy, Curtis McElhinney

At the top, there's no question that Vasilevskiy, a Vezina Trophy finalist three years running who won the award two seasons ago, is the class of the division (at least, unless and until Ben Bishop gets healthy or Sergei Bobrovsky gets his act together). McElhinney is a capable backup who can get on a hot run, as we saw when he was with the Hurricanes two seasons ago.

But for a team with repeat Stanley Cup ambitions, there's a lot resting on the shoulders of one player. Vasilevskiy is the workhorse, and if he goes down injured, there's not much behind him to handle a compressed schedule. The Lightning are good enough that Vasilevskiy can take a break once a week or so, probably playing between 35 and 40 games, but



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if McElhinney is asked to take on any more of the workload that could foretell a bit of trouble.

Dallas Stars

Ben Bishop, Anton Khudobin, Jake Oettinger

Is it possible to have the best goaltending tandem in the division and also have the most question marks surrounding the position of any team in the Central? The Stars are doing their best to make that so. Bishop, who missed the majority of the Stars' run to the Stanley Cup Final, is one of the best goalies in the league when healthy, the runner-up to Vasilevskiy for the 2019 Vezina and a true number one in every sense of the moniker.

But...man, those two words - "when healthy" - are doing a whole lot of heavy lifting.

That's not to disparage the job Khudobin did, a stabilizing force that may not have the game-stealing ability of Bishop but is certainly capable in his own right. But there's a reason he's never started more than 37 games in a season. With Bishop out until March following knee surgery, it's going to come down to Khudobin and Oettinger to mind the shop. By the time we hit March, the Stars will have played a third of their schedule. Is that too much time lost for them to potentially need to claw back once Bishop is healthy?

Columbus Blue Jackets

Joonas Korpisalo, Elvis Merzlikins

The Jackets are a pain in the neck to play against, in part because of a goaltending tandem that very much resembles that of the Hurricanes. Korpisalo stymied the Leafs in the qualifying round and did his level best to hold the Lightning at bay in the first round of last year's playoffs. If he can replicate that level, and Merzlikins continues to show that his first season in the NHL wasn't a fluke, the Jackets will have good enough goaltending to make a run for the final playoff spot in the Central.

Now, it should be noted that the Jackets are, bar none, the stingiest defensive team in the division, so their style of play tends to make the goalies look better than they actually are. But John Tortorella's squad doesn't need either of their netminders to play lights-out hockey to be successful. The Jackets don't have the firepower of the Hurricanes, but if Korpisalo and Merzlikins can platoon their way through the season, they might not need it.

Florida Panthers

Sergei Bobrovsky, Chris Driedger

This has the potential to get bad in a hurry if the Bobrovsky from last year rears his ugly head again. Paid \$10 million for his services, Bob was a black hole in net for Florida last season. And the Panthers are right back in the same spot again, fielding the same three goaltenders as last year, only this time with a compressed schedule. Yikes.

Now, things are...well, we can't really say better, but let's say "less bad" on defense in front of Bob. Markus Nutivaara is a nice pickup for the Panthers' blue line, and ridding themselves of the dumpster fire that was Mike Matheson's contract is addition by subtraction. And Bob simply can't be as bad this

year as he was last year, right? There's something to be said for a goalie taking a year to get acquainted to new surroundings, but then again, we saw with Scott Darling how sometimes that initial impression holds up over time. For the Panthers' sake, they'd better hope that Bobrovsky's second act is more appealing than his first.

Nashville Predators

Pekka Rinne, Juuse Saros

Last season marked the start of a changing of the guard for the Predators, in more ways than one. Yes, there was a coaching change, and some longtime franchise stalwarts (Craig Smith, Nick Bonino and Kyle Turris among them) moved onto greener pastures. But where it was most pronounced was in net, where a trend became a true shift: for the first time in 10 years, the Predators' crease is no longer the exclusive domain of Pekka Rinne.

One could easily make the argument that the Preds held on to the past for too long. Saros clearly outplayed his countryman last season, and by the time the playoffs started the shift was complete. This is Saros' job now, with Rinne clearly the backup.

But with the season so compressed for time, the Preds will need both goaltenders to handle their business. Saros kept up his end of the bargain last year in a nearly dead-even time share with Rinne. If Rinne can bounce back from a sub-.900 performance last year, the Preds could be in good shape to grab a playoff spot. But if Rinne continues his decline in a losing battle with Father Time, putting everything on Saros' shoulders will make or break the Preds' season. We'll know early in the season, in all likelihood, which way this is heading.

Detroit Red Wings

Thomas Greiss, Jonathan Bernier

If you looked at the Wings' goalies in a vacuum without looking at the dearth of talent elsewhere on the roster, you could squint hard enough and see a Greiss/Bernier tandem backstopping the team to the edge of a playoff berth. That isn't going to happen, because the rest of the Detroit roster is still largely a wasteland, but we're not talking about the rest of the roster here. We're talking about the goaltending, and let's be honest, the Wings are nowhere near the basement of the division in that department.

Similar to Korpisalo and Merzlikins a couple of hours to the south, this is an underrated duo that could keep the Wings in games they have no business being competitive in. (Pour one out for Jimmy Howard, who did precisely the opposite last season. The numbers are incredible: 27 starts and a goals saved above average of minus-22!) Greiss was the odd man out when the Islanders decided to go with a pairing of Semyon Varlamov and Ilya Sorokin, but he was a workhorse for the Isles two years ago and was more than respectable last season. His addition by itself is a significant upgrade.

Bernier, a loyal soldier through some very dark days in Detroit, had to fight harder than he should have needed to to wrest the starter's job away from Howard, but he's at worst a capable 1B next to Greiss. The Wings have plenty of issues, but this isn't one of them. Put this tandem on any other team in the division and they'd hold their own.



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Chicago Blackhawks

Malcolm Subban, Collin Delia

Here's one place where Greiss and Bernier would make a difference. Or, really, any other goalie in the league, starter or backup.

The rebuild is on in Chicago, and after trading Robin Lehner and moving on from the just-retired Corey Crawford, the Hawks somehow looked at what they had - a career backup who has never posted a GSAA above zero, and a third-stringer with 16 NHL starts to his name - and said "yep, we're good here."

No, they really aren't. This is a historically bad tandem, one that recalls the strip-it-all-down Sabres of 2014-15. That was the season where any goalie that showed any promise

whatsoever was exiled to the AHL or immediately traded. After all, they couldn't risk their shot at Connor McDavid. If your team is being compared to that squad, heaven help you.

Next to this, Mrazek and Reimer might look like a tandem of Patrick Roy and Martin Brodeur. It's going to be a long season in Chicago.

Wrapping it up, the Hurricanes look to actually be in the upper tier of the division in net. The Lightning are in front of them as long as they can ride Vasilevskiy, and they're also behind a healthy Stars tandem. But given a two-month head start with Bishop recovering from surgery, the Hurricanes might be able to come out ahead of them. Everyone else is largely on their level or - ahem - significantly below. The Hurricanes don't have a game breaker in net, but in this year's Central, they might not need one.

Pesce, Hurricanes ready for long-awaited reunion

Hurricanes defenseman Brett Pesce will make his return to the lineup for the first time since Feb. 2020 when the team opens its season this week.

By Andrew Schnitker

The aftermath of the Hurricanes' 6-3 win over the Toronto Maple Leafs on Feb. 22, 2020 was most notable for the loss of both of the team's goalies. After all, losing both NHL-caliber players at such a vital position is tough to overcome.

But the loss of the netminders overshadowed an arguably equally-significant subtraction that night, defenseman Brett Pesce. One of the Canes' best blue liners suffered a shoulder injury that required surgery. He missed the rest of the shortened regular season, and all of the Hurricanes' postseason action in the bubble.

Now, with the 2021 regular season rapidly approaching, Pesce is fully healed. The shoulder injury was a dislocation, one Pesce had suffered before. He had opted not to get surgery that time, but didn't have much choice this time around. It was an invasive procedure, but Pesce said one that gives him the best chance of not having future issues with the shoulder.

A fully healthy Pesce is ready to get back on the ice and resume his place in the Hurricanes' top four on defense.

"I'm good," Pesce said. "I'm really excited to be back with everybody. It was a long-anticipated wait for me, especially coming in with an extra few months off due to COVID and the season starting late. But it's good to be back with the guys, and I'm just happy to be playing again."

It's a cliché, but the saying often goes that with many defensemen, they did a good job on the ice if you don't notice them. While Pesce's offensive game has continued to grow over his career, his best attribute is his solid, steady play in the defensive zone.

Pesce is able to match up with and shut down the opposition's top players and help keep them off the scoresheet. His strong defensive play was only magnified in his absence.

The Hurricanes managed to sweep the New York Rangers in the qualifying round without him, but the absence of such a steady, sound defender was sorely missed in a first-round loss to the Boston Bruins.

"He's an elite defender, for me," said head coach Rod Brind'Amour. "It's that whole element that he's bringing, that safety of knowing he's hard to play against. I can't say enough about it. If you don't have it, you really notice it. He's kind of one of those guys, when you have him in, maybe you take it for granted a little bit because he just does such a good job at what he does. There's offense there too. He's a really smart player. When he's not in the lineup, you certainly miss it. No doubt about it."

Pesce's teammates felt his absence as well, particularly the pair for whom he's tasked with making their jobs easier.

"When he's on the ice, you know that he's dependable," said goalie James Reimer. "I think that's something that's big for any teammate, but especially for a goalie. A defenseman, that relationship, when you trust the guys in front of you, that just makes your game a whole lot easier. Pesce's one of those guys. He's a rock in front of you. He always seems to make the right play, and he blocks shots. He's got a great stick. So it's a lot of fun playing behind him."

For Pesce, not being able to play in the bubble didn't sit well. He had plans to meet them in Toronto for a possible return to action if the Hurricanes advanced past the first round.

But that's not how events worked out, as the Hurricanes fell in five games to Boston. Not getting to play in the postseason a year after his playoff debut and having to watch his teammates go to battle without him was not an experience the sixth-year defenseman enjoyed.

"It's not a good feeling," Pesce said. "You want to be out there battling with your teammates. Missing the playoffs kind of took a toll on me even more so on me, because you have an opportunity to compete for a Stanley Cup, which is why everyone plays the game. So that hurt, I had to make a very tough decision for what's best for the future of my career. I'm hoping to play this game in this league for a long time, so it



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needed to be done. It's such a relief to be back with all the boys and working hard with all of them."

Pesce is not just a valued presence for Carolina on the ice, but off it. When one thinks of players tasked with bringing energy and personality to the Hurricanes' locker room, forward Jordan Martinook is probably at the top of the list.

But Martinook is quick to point out that Pesce plays a key role in that as well.

"He's one of the guys that keeps it light and has fun," Martinook said. "He's always smiling when he comes to the rink. You'll get that New York side to him where he gets in your face and chirps you a little bit. I think that's why everybody's drawn to him. He's happy but he can throw jabs with the best of them. And then his play on the ice, it's like he's just smooth and steady. That's how he is in the room. He's smooth, laughing, throws a jab here and there. He's a great guy to have in the room."

Having Pesce back in the lineup for all of this shortened season would play a major role in the Hurricanes' success. He's likely to anchor the second pairing alongside Brady Skjei

acquired at last year's trade deadline, a pairing that has a lot of potential with Pesce's shutdown ability paired with Skjei's offensive acumen.

As the Hurricanes head into this season coming off their first back-to-back playoff appearances since 2001 and 2002, the team is looking to take the next step and compete for a Stanley Cup. It's a step Pesce thinks his team is ready to take, and he's ready to help them get there.

"I think we've proven the past few years that we're a threat to any team in the league," Pesce said. "We're only getting better, and our young studs are getting older and more mature. They're only going to improve. So I think it's no secret anymore that we're a good team."

If the Hurricanes are going to take that next step, and go from a good team to a great team, a healthy Brett Pesce figures to be front and center in those efforts. And, following his lengthy absence, he just might get a little more notice this time.

TODAY'S LINKS

<https://www.newsobserver.com/sports/nhl/carolina-hurricanes/article248418040.html>

<https://theathletic.com/2316189/2021/01/11/hurricanes-scrimmage-game-speed-greek/>

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SportScan

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

1198693 Carolina Hurricanes

Carolina Hurricanes tuned up Monday for 2020-21 NHL season opener. How did they look?

BY CHIP ALEXANDER

JANUARY 11, 2021 03:57 PM

Rod Brind'Amour watched the Carolina Hurricanes' game-like scrimmage Monday from a perch high in the Canes' new practice facility, not from behind the bench.

His view of things?

"I like where we're at," the Canes coach said.

After having Sunday as an off day, the Canes used their seventh training camp practice to allow the players to get in some five-on-five play at something approaching game speed, with a certain degree of physicality. The final score and the winner — for the record, the Red team won 4-3 — was irrelevant but not the competition, which was intense enough.

"We started off on a good pace and kind of kept that pace during the scrimmage, which was nice," defenseman Brady Skjei said on the Monday media call. "It was more of a game feel and I think the guys enjoyed it and kind of helped them get their feet under them."

NHL teams will enter the 2020-21 season with shortened training camps and no preseason games. Some are having bigger dress rehearsals than others, to prepare for the season openers. Some will be more ready than others.

Brind'Amour said he was pleased with the way the Canes, who open the season Thursday on the road against the Detroit Red Wings, went about things Monday.

"I thought it was good. What I saw was a group that has been together and kind of knows what we're doing," he said.

"Puck drop, Game 1, is going to be a different animal. Playing a real game is a different animal. But hopefully this knocks off a little of the rust."

Brind'Amour opened with the forward lines he has maintained in camp. Sebastian Aho centered Teuvo Teravainen and Nino Niederreiter, Vincent Trocheck was at center with Andrei Svechnikov and Jesper Fast, Jordan Staal centered Warren Foegele and Martin Necas, and Jordan Martinook centered Brock McGinn and Ryan Dzingel.

During the second period, Necas was moved to right wing on Trocheck's line, with Fast going to the right side of Staal's line. Brind'Amour is looking for balance on the lines and that was an interesting look, combining two of the Canes' most dynamic young wingers with Trocheck, who was active most of the scrimmage.

Brind'Amour also gave forward Seth Jarvis some work in the scrimmage at Wake Competition Center. Jarvis, 18, was the Canes' first-round draft pick in 2020.

On the back end, it was Jacob Slavin with Dougie Hamilton, Skjei with Brett Pesce and Jake Gardiner with Haydn Fleury as the top three defensive pairs.

Skjei scored early in the scrimmage, jumping into the play to beat goalie Petr Mrazek. It's possible Skjei, traded to the Canes in February by the New York Rangers, will be given that kind of offensive freedom this season by Brind'Amour.

"Roddy (Brind'Amour) and the coaches here like to play with that aggressive system," Skjei said.

JAKE BEAN WANTS TO PLAY GAMES

Jake Bean, named the AHL's best defenseman last year with the Charlotte Checkers, also has made an impression on Brind'Amour. A former first-round draft pick by Carolina, Bean has "definitely taken a huge step" in his development, Brind'Amour said.

Bean, 22, should end camp as the team's seventh defenseman, bringing up an interesting decision: To keep him on team's NHL taxi squad, or have him playing games with the Chicago Wolves, the Canes' new AHL affiliate.

Bean said his preference was to be wherever he can play games, even if that means returning to the AHL.

"I think I'm definitely NHL ready," Bean said.

Teams are allowed to carry four to six players on a taxi squad in the 56-game regular season, and that decision must soon be made by the Canes.

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1198694 Carolina Hurricanes

Hurricanes scrimmage: Game speed, Greek expressions, Lady Byng predictions

By Sara Civian Jan 11, 2021

The first rule of NHL preseason scrimmage club is don't talk about NHL preseason scrimmage club.

It's not that they don't matter, and this year the reason they actually matter — to give the players that first taste of game speed — is more important than ever.

"It was more for the players than for me," head coach Rod Brind'Amour said after Monday's scrimmage. "It's for them to go at the pace, or closer to the pace, you're going to go to in a game. That was the mindset of it, the routine of a game, pregame, all that stuff was important."

But there's a catch with the part we care about — the performance of the players vying for a roster spot. Naturally, they're going to try the hardest, while the players who know they're in the clear probably aren't operating at 100 percent and risking injury. Brind'Amour inadvertently brought that



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notion up again when asked about Teuvo Teravainen after the scrimmage Monday.

"He's a gamer, I mean if you watched today he wasn't really into it, I'm just going to be honest," he said. "But I can guarantee you when we play on Thursday he will be dialed in. He's sneaky competitive in that way."

Even though "Team Red" technically won the even strength portion of the scrimmage, it randomly devolved into an overtime format and then a shootout, driving home the point once again that this is for the players.

Despite Teravainen's ever-apparent nonchalance — and despite someone on the "other" team screaming to make him mess up — he won the post-scrimmage shootout in a walk-off. Hey, if Justin Williams is gone, someone's gotta do it.

(Yes, that is me laughing.)

Other loose pucks from Monday's scrimmage

Brind'Amour watched from above with video coach Chris Huffine as his assistants coached the teams. "Just to kind of get a good view of everything. I find when I'm coaching I'm watching one team a lot, and I didn't just want to focus in on one group. I just wanted to get a birds-eye view on everything. Nice to talk with (Huffine), we spitball a lot of things about systems, so when I saw something break down I'm asking him, it's just nice to have that kind of communication and a different look."

Brady Skjei scored the first goal of the day and he was all over the place in a good way. Brett Pesce's return to the Canes no doubt lets him access that offensive flair more easily, and it's no coincidence the two seem familiar with each other. Skjei, Pesce and Jaccob Slavin played at the same USA Development camp when they were 15 and have kept in touch. Skjei on Pesce: "We're just trying to communicate as much as we can on the ice and off the ice. I think we've done a good job of that in camp and it's been fun playing with him."

Andrei Svechnikov's set up on Skjei's goal was just as good as the goal, which validates my mildly hot take that he will up his passing game more than his shooting game this season. The second rule of NHL preseason scrimmage club is you're allowed to throw rule No. 1 out the window if something happens that aligns with any of your preconceived takes.

Speaking of Pesce's return, it has been very loud. Every time I tweet that someone is screaming, people want to assume it's Jordan Martinook. But I'd guess at least 20 percent of the time it's been Pesce. Monday was no different. For some reason he screamed "Opa!" a Greek expression used to express enthusiasm, at least five times throughout the scrimmage. After he scored, he ventured over to the other team's bench looking for high fives. They were not impressed.

Speaking of volume, witnessing NHL players play in a game-like situation in complete silence was hilarious, odd and kind of informative. The silence was the odd part, it's like they're all standing around a water cooler in a corporate office between whistles. The informative part was getting a glimpse into how certain players interact with each other on the ice. Maybe it was just because he was playing close to where I was sitting, but Haydn Fleury seems particularly vocal. Martinook struck me in the same way, but less in the scream-y way you'd expect, and more in a "calmly communicating with his linemates" way. A puck came flying at Slavin and he said "Oh!"... If that happened to 99.9 percent of NHL players an expletive would've followed. In a year where we can actually hear what the players are saying on the ice, I'd bet on Slavin to finally win the Lady Byng.

Even with the aforementioned catch about training camp scrimmages taken into consideration, Jake Bean looked good. His speed and confidence immediately stood out compared to his camp last season and even the summer's return to play training camp. He sounded confident, too, and went as far as to say he'll actually be better in the NHL than he's been in the AHL. "It's obviously exciting. It feels like a long time coming for me. It's not exactly how I felt like it would go 2-3 years ago, but I've been able to use it to my advantage getting a bunch of ice time in the AHL. I'll do my best to make all that work come to think I'm NHL-ready. I

think I'll be better in the NHL than the AHL. The AHL is good, but the NHL is full of guys who can make plays. I think if I surround myself with players like that I can make plays and have guys finish the plays I make."

I absolutely love that kind of talk, and his point is valid considering his offensive upside. If he can keep up with the pace (which it looks like he can), it only makes sense that surrounding himself with better playmakers will allow him to ... uh ... make plays. Brind'Amour on if Bean will get into the lineup at some point this season: "Do I want to see him in there? No, I don't want to see him in there necessarily, because that means we probably had something go down. But will he get in there? I'm almost sure of it. We need to see what we have in him."

For whatever reason, Sebastian Aho laying a medium-ish hit on Warren Foegele caught my eye. It was obviously all in good fun and anyone could have been at the receiving end, but several Canes players and coaches have noted how dialed in and prepared Aho has seemed at camp. That should excite you, unless you're Teravainen, who is probably somewhere rolling his eyes while scoring another shootout goal.

The Red Wings put Evgeny Svechnikov on waivers. The Canes aren't going to claim him, but it sure would be fun if they did.

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1198695 Carolina Hurricanes

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

By Sara Civian Jan 11, 2021

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.



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So, why aren't the Canes interested in Pierre-Luc Dubois? 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 Svechek? — 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 Niederreiter 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



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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.

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1198715 Detroit Red Wings

Why Detroit Red Wings risked losing Evgeny Svechnikov for nothing

Helene St. James

The Detroit Red Wings sound like they hope Evgeny Svechnikov will remain with the organization, but they left themselves vulnerable to losing a former first-round pick for nothing when they placed him on waivers Monday.

How general manager Steve Yzerman explained the decision to Svechnikov is not known, but if another team puts in a claim before noon Tuesday, it's "sayonara, Svechnikov."

"Unfortunately, Evgeny has had a number of injuries so he hasn't been able to show a full kind of season of where he is at," coach Jeff Blashill said Monday. "But we also have to make roster decisions and you're restricted to your roster.

"Nothing is permanent. You have that risk, potentially, of losing guys, but let's see where we're at here at noon tomorrow."

Svechnikov, 24, might appeal to another team. He has size (6-feet-3, 208 pounds), works incredibly hard, and is on a one-year, \$874,125 deal and will still be a restricted free agent upon expiration.

One intriguing possibility is the Carolina Hurricanes, Thursday's 2021 opening opponent and home to Svechnikov's younger brother, Andrei. The two have talked multiple times of their dream of playing against one another in the NHL; now maybe it will be together. Another possibility is former Wings GM Ken Holland, now with the Edmonton Oilers, puts in a claim for a guy he drafted.

Svechnikov has not come close to living up to being drafted 19th overall in 2015, enduring a number of setbacks, the most serious of which was a knee injury in September 2018 that sidelined him for all of the 2018-19 season. The most recent was an apparent arm injury that sidelined him for a week this year — a crucial time in a shortened training camp.

Svechnikov has made 20 appearances with the Wings, tallying two goals and two assists. While it is easy to draft in hindsight, it is noteworthy the Wings passed on Brock Boeser (23rd, Vancouver) who has 161 points in 197 games, and Travis Konecny (24th, Philadelphia), who has 185 points in 299 games.

Svechnikov was not available for comment after Monday's move.

The other players waived in advance of needing to trim the roster to 23 men by Tuesday are forwards Dominic Turgeon, Turner Elson, Kyle Crisculo, Riley Barber; defensemen Brian Lashoff, Dylan McIlrath and Joe Hicketts; and goaltenders Calvin Rickard and Kevin Boyle.

"Waivers just simply means that if they're not claimed, you have flexibility to send people to Grand Rapids, to send people to the taxi squad," Blashill said. "With the whole group of guys, it gives you flexibility to do that.

"This is kind of decision day, but it's totally flexible. Guys that are on your roster opening day, it doesn't mean they're going to stay. And guys that aren't certainly have the opportunity to be called up at some point."

If Svechnikov clears waivers, he can be assigned to the Griffins — or to the Wings' taxi squad. Rosters have expanded from the usual 21 to 23 because of the pandemic, so teams can carry 21 skaters and two goaltenders, plus four to six players on a taxi squad (one of which has to be a goaltender).

PREDICTIONS: Even in shortened season, steps forward in Red Wings rebuild are vital

Teams have to submit their rosters Tuesday. The Wings went with 12 forwards and eight defensemen in Monday's practice: Dylan Larkin, Anthony Mantha, Tyler Bertuzzi, Vladislav Namestnikov, Robby Fabbri, Filip Zadina, Valtteri Filppula, Mathias Brome, Sam Gagner, Luke Glendening, Frans Nielsen and Michael Rasmussen up front, and Danny DeKeyser, Filip Hronek, Marc Staal, Patrik Nemeth, Troy Stecher, Jon Merrill, Alex Biega and Gustav Lindstrom on the back end.

Darren Helm, Bobby Ryan and Adam Erne were unfit to practice. Helm has not skated since New Year's Day, and Ryan hasn't since Jan. 7, so it's unlikely they will be available when the Wings open the season Thursday against Carolina.

"We have to gain understanding of who is available to play," Blashill said. "But we are closing in on a roster and who we think is going to start with our team."

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1198716 Detroit Red Wings

Detroit Red Wings waive former first-round pick Evgeny Svechnikov

Helene St. James

NHL teams generally use waivers the day before rosters are due to facilitate assigning minor league players to AHL teams.

The Detroit Red Wings did that Monday — but also used it to expose a former first-round pick.

Among the names on the Wings' waiver list Monday was Evgeny Svechnikov, who in the five-plus years since he was selected at 20th overall in 2015 has not been able to gain a foothold at the NHL level.

The other players waived in advance of needing to trim the roster to 23 men by Tuesday are Brian Lashoff, Dominic Turgeon, Turner Elson, Dylan McIlrath, Joe Hicketts, Calvin Rickard and Kevin Boyle.

Svechnikov, 24, has endured a number of setbacks in recent years. He practiced Monday for the first time since leaving the Jan. 5 scrimmage with an apparent injury to his right arm.

WAIT A SECOND: Wings look like they have a second scoring line. Here's why

In September 2018, he suffered a knee injury that ended up sidelining him the entire season. He appeared in just four games with the Wings last season, producing no points, and otherwise spent the season with the Grand Rapids Griffins, where he had 11 goals and 14 assists in 51 games.

In 20 career NHL games, Svechnikov has two goals and two assists. He is on a one-year, \$874,125 contract, which could appeal to a team hoping a change of scenery will spark Svechnikov.



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It is a surprise general manager Steve Yzerman would risk losing Svechnikov for nothing so soon in camp. Because of the pandemic, teams can carry 23 players, instead of the usual 21.

If Svechnikov clears waivers, he can be assigned to the Griffins — or to the Wings' taxi squad.

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1198717 Detroit Red Wings

Red Wings place former first-round pick Evgeny Svechnikov on waivers

Ted Kulfan

Detroit — Is Evgeny Svechnikov's time as a Red Wing coming to an end?

It might be, as the 2015 first-round pick was put on waivers Monday, as the Wings begin the process of getting down to a 23-man roster and a 4- to 6-man taxi squad.

Players have until noon Tuesday to be claimed. Afterward, they can be assigned to either the NHL's teams taxi squad or to the team's minor-league affiliate (for the Wings, it would be Grand Rapids).

Svechnikov, 24, was on the ice Monday after injuring his arm in the team's first intra-squad scrimmage Jan. 5.

Svechnikov has only played in 20 games over three seasons with the Wings, with four points (two goals, two assists).

Svechnikov missed the entire 2018-19 season after tearing an ACL in the Wings' final exhibition game.

In 51 games with Grand Rapids last season Svechnikov had 11 goals and 14 assists, but struggled overcoming the knee surgery at times.

"He's had a number of injuries and hasn't been able to show a full season of where he's at," coach Jeff Blashill said. "But we have to make roster decisions and you're restricted to your roster."

Whether the Wings actually lose Svechnikov is another matter entirely.

Svechnikov barely has taken part in this training camp, so other teams might be leery of adding someone who may not be ready to play quickly.

There's also the question of coming off severe knee surgery just two years ago.

And, is Svechnikov better than any of the 12 to 14 forwards a given NHL team presently could roster.

"Nothing is permanent," Blashill said. "You have that risk of losing guys, but let's see where we're at here at noon (Tuesday)."

Two teams to keep an eye on potentially claiming Svechnikov:

► Carolina, where younger brother Andrei Svechnikov stars, and Evgeny mostly trained during the long offseason caused by the pandemic.

► And Edmonton, where former Wings general manager Ken Holland could be interested, having drafted Svechnikov.

Also placed on waivers by the Wings were forwards Riley Barber, Kyle Crisculo and Dominic Turgeon, defensemen Joe Hicketts, Brian Lashoff and Dylan McIlrath, and goaltenders Kevin Boyle and Calvin Pickard.

Camp over

Monday's practice essentially ended training camp — Tuesday is an off day — and what a quick, blur of a camp it was.

With the shortened season and not enough time to have a usual exhibition season, teams were limited to about 10 days of camp and no preseason games.

The Wings, because they failed to qualify for the playoffs, were given three extra days of practice time.

Blashill relished the chance to have more practice time in this different format.

"You get more practice time relative to the amount of time you have," Blashill said. "In a normal training camp you have those four days at the beginning of camp and start into the exhibition (game) season, and your practices get disjointed and you don't get to practice with your (likely NHL) group."

"The cons are you don't get those exhibition games and those games get you ready and are for evaluation."

Blashill added evaluation not just in terms of personnel, but who plays on what forward lines and defensive pairings, the power play and penalty kill.

"In the end, we tried to be as effective as we could given the parameters that are given," Blashill said. "Each team is given similar parameters."

Ice chips

Adam Erne joined Bobby Ryan and Darren Helm as players "unfit to practice".

It's doubtful Ryan and Helm will be able to begin the season, given the length of time they've been off. Blashill wouldn't speculate to whether Erne would be ready to practice Wednesday.

... Michael Rasmussen was one of the 12 forwards on the ice for Monday's practice, and filled Ryan's spot on the power play on the net-front.

"Raz has had an opportunity to play in that spot the last two (scrimmages) and he's done a pretty good job," Blashill said. "That's his strength, specifically net-front on the power play. That's probably the biggest reason he was put in that spot and is one of the 12 (forwards)."

"Also, I want to take a good, long look at a young, talented player with a big body and as the pace got higher how he reacted."

... Undrafted free agent Mathias Brome has all but locked a spot on the opening night roster.

Brome is skating on a line with Valteri Filppula and Sam Gagner.

"He's been stronger on his skates and more tenacious than I realized when I watched him on tape," Blashill said of Brome. "That's helped him be real effective. When coaches have walked off the bench or walked off the ice they've generally said, 'Brome played pretty well.'"

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1198718 Detroit Red Wings

Filip Zadina, Thomas Greiss impress in final Red Wings scrimmage

By Ansar Khan

Filip Zadina did a good job of taking pucks away from his teammates, and Thomas Greiss did well to turn pucks away.

They were among the players who stood out Sunday in the Detroit Red Wings' third and final intrasquad scrimmage as they prepare to open the regular season Thursday against Carolina at Little Caesars Arena.



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The Red Wings need Zadina to develop into a sniper, but they do not want him to simply skate around and wait for teammates to set him up. They want him to work at getting pucks, and that is what he did in this scrimmage.

"Going back to watching him play in the Czech League (from September to early December), I thought his puck battles were real good and it's carried forward and I think he's put a real emphasis on leveraging his body and winning those stick battles," coach Jeff Blashill said. "He must have had four or five takeaways (Sunday) where he stripped guys of the puck, and because of that he can play offense.

"I think he's learned how important it is to be a guy who goes and gets the puck himself and not wait for other guys to do that. If you win pucks, you get the puck more, you get to play way more offense."

Zadina has played on Robby Fabbri's line during camp. Bobby Ryan was the right wing on the unit at the start but has been unfit to play the past few days. Vladislav Namestnikov took his place in this scrimmage.

"I thought that line right off the bat was really good," Blashill said. "Fabs was skating real good, had good jump, did a good job in the D-zone, same with Z and Vladdy. That line was real noticeable in the first period and maintained it most of the game.

"We need more lines. The fact they could be impactful in a scrimmage is good."

Valtteri Filppula scored a pair of goals while Namestnikov, Givani Smith, Luke Glendening and Zadina (three-on-three overtime practice) scored in a 6-2 victory for the White team. Anthony Mantha and Michael Rasmussen scored for the Red team.

Blashill described Namestnikov as a complete, versatile player.

"Over his time in the NHL, and he's told me this, he is really focused on being a good two-way player and not just relying on offense," Blashill said. "He was a first-rounder for a reason.

"He's pretty smart. I love smart hockey players. In the chaos of all the action out there, smart players can make good decisions that are critical. That would probably be my No. 1 attribute that I look for. He can go in a situation where he's matched up against other teams' best lines in a checking role and I think he can play up the lineup in an offensive role."

Goaltending battle

Blashill said Greiss and Jonathan Bernier will split duties early on and possibly for the entire 56-game season unless one emerges as the clear No. 1.

"I'd like to get both of them going at a high level," Blashill said. "If one guy really outplays the other guy then we'll make that decision at the time. I'm not necessarily going to back myself into a corner in terms of the exact set schedule, but I think both will get a good chance in the early part of the season to get going."

Greiss made several point-blank saves early in the game.

"I think Greiss looks real calm," Blashill said. "He's a real unflappable guy, nothing seems to bother him."

Rasmussen back at wing?

The Red Wings are grooming Rasmussen to be a center, his natural position, but he skated on the wing the past two scrimmages. His goal came on the power play from the net-front.

"That's certainly the strength of his game, around the net," Blashill said. "I still think long-term I want him to be a center to make the biggest impact five-on-five, but we'll see how that goes. If he can become a big centerman who's rangy, quick and defends against the other team's best, I think he's a big-time asset five-on-five."

Some not likely to be ready

Darren Helm has missed all but the first practice in camp. Evgeny Svechnikov has not returned since getting injured in the first scrimmage. Ryan has been out the past few days.

All are "unfit to play" and might not be available for the opener.

"The longer guys are out, the harder it will be, but I don't have any total determination as we get closer to Thursday," Blashill said. "Let's see where guys are at tomorrow."

Michigan Live LOADED: 01.12.2021

1198719 Detroit Red Wings

Red Wings brace for 'strange year' amid COVID-19

By Ansar Khan

The Detroit Red Wings have their temperature checked and get tested for COVID-19 every time they enter Little Caesars Arena.

They wear masks inside the locker room, which is limited to essential personnel, and social distance when they can. Coaches wear masks on the ice during practices. All media interviews are conducted through Zoom.

This is the NHL during a pandemic. But even extreme precautions are not foolproof.

The regular season starts on Wednesday (a day later for the Red Wings) and already the coronavirus is disrupting schedules and routines.

The Dallas Stars had their first two games postponed and won't play before Jan. 19 after six players and two staff members tested positive, prompting the closing of team training facilities for several days. The Pittsburgh Penguins canceled practice Saturday as a precaution due to potential exposure, a day after 19 players on the Columbus Blue Jackets did not practice as a precaution.

"These are different times," Red Wings coach Jeff Blashill said. "It's just the reality of it.

"When I've taken teams to Europe, I've used the phrase, 'You got to roll with the punches.' That's how it's going to have to be this year. There might be times where the schedule changes. There might be times where guys that were supposed to be in the lineup all the sudden aren't in the day you're playing a game. We're going to have to be relaxed and ready to handle whatever comes our way."

Dylan Larkin said players are trying to be as safe as possible in the room and away from the rink.

"When you come to the rink, you're not going to put yourself or anyone else at risk that could jeopardize our team," Larkin said. "You can do all that, but unfortunately in the world we live in and the uncertainty of this virus, sometimes it's not enough and you can't control it.

"It's going to be a strange year. Just have to be ready for the unknown and any possible situation."

Anthony Mantha said precautions have increased as the season draws near.

"You never know where you can catch COVID," Mantha said. "We're a week away from the start of the season so for me personally I'm trying to stay away from anyone that could have been in contact, if it's at their work or wherever. Obviously, if it gets in the room it spreads super-quick.



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"It's the life we live in right now and we're going to have to live with it this season. It's going to be hard, a lot of sacrifice from players and staff and anyone around the team."

Limiting risk could be a greater challenge on the road, where routines will be much different.

"From what I understand, on the road we're going to be pretty confined to our hotel," Larkin said. "There won't be hopefully much outside contact. From what I've heard it's going to be pretty much all meals at the hotel. You can go for a walk with a mask, but that's about it, which is OK."

"We're willing to do that because we want to play. We're trying to be as safe as possible. It is a concern as we get traveling and there's more contact outside of what we have at LCA. Our guys are really committed to wearing a mask and doing all the right things to make sure we're not jeopardizing ourselves or our teammates to miss time this year."

Said Luke Glendening: "We're going to do the best we can, be as safe as we can while we're here and while we're at home. Unfortunately, it's part of the reality we're living in."

'Unfit' players running out of time

Robby Fabbri did not practice Saturday. He appeared to get injured during Friday's scrimmage but finished the game.

He joined Darren Helm, Evgeny Svechnikov and Bobby Ryan as players declared "unfit to play," some or all of whom might not be ready for the season-opener. Teams are not permitted to reveal injury/illness information until the start of the season.

Depending on how long a player is out, he will need some practices before being cleared to play.

"The longer you miss, the more (practice) time you'd need," Blashill said. "The guys that have missed a significant amount of time, it's hard to put them back in on short notice. Guys that have missed a day or two, it's a little bit easier."

"Every guy is a different situation and we're not going to put a player in, regardless of his name or stature, if he's not ready to play. Ultimately, those guys need to be 100 percent or pretty close to be effective. Part of being 100 percent is being in game shape, spending enough time in practice that you can react accordingly. So, it may take some time for some of those guys."

Michigan Live LOADED: 01.12.2021

1198720 Detroit Red Wings

Can Dylan Larkin take his game to Selke level? The Red Wings may need him to

By Max Bultman Jan 11, 2021

After Bobby Ryan's first official practice as Dylan Larkin's teammate, the 13-year NHL veteran made a joking comment that actually said quite a lot.

He was talking about competing with Larkin in informal skates during the offseason, from the perspective of a player who had only ever previously been on the opposing bench. Now, he was seeing Larkin in his day-to-day.

"I knew he was a little jerk to play against," Ryan said, cracking into a laugh, "but the compete level that he has in every drill, every 3-on-3 game that we've been playing — his intensity, I guess, it's overwhelming."

Ryan asked for his language to be excused in referring to Larkin as a "jerk" to play against. But in reality, that's exactly how the Red Wings should want opponents to view their No. 1 center: as a frustration. An obstacle. A problem.

Because while the Red Wings are still a long way from even making the playoffs, the overwhelming recent history shows that teams who win in the NHL tend to be led by centers who make life hard on their opponents at both ends.

The Selke Trophy is the award given to the league's top defensive forward. Last year's Cup winner, the Lightning, had two centers who finished in the top 10 for the 2020 award. The year before, St. Louis was led by Selke winner Ryan O'Reilly — and the Boston team it beat for the Cup was headlined by Patrice Bergeron, one of the great two-way centers of all time.

Go back further and you'll find championship teams featuring Nicklas Backstrom, Sidney Crosby, Jonathan Toews and Anze Kopitar. Some of those players are known as much, or even more, for their offense — Crosby certainly has headlined a generation of hockey and is known most of all for being a six-time 100-point scorer. But he's also evolved, as his career progressed, into a player with four top-10 Selke finishes, including in each of the Penguins' last two championship seasons. Backstrom, for all the assists he's racked up over the years, also has five Selke finishes in the top 20.

Where a player finishes in media awards voting is hardly an end-all-be-all to their contributions or value, of course. And already, Larkin is a player who can do so many things on the ice, from scoring goals to making plays to holding his own in matchups with some of the league's top players. He even earned his way onto the Selke radar in 2018-19, finishing 20th in voting.

But the two-way names above include some of the best of the best. Larkin is not in that tier yet.

So as the Red Wings look to turn the corner in their rebuild over the coming years, the No. 1 thing they may need from their No. 1 center is to begin trending toward the league's two-way elite.

Last season, the Islanders' J-G Pageau (a well-regarded defensive center himself) said of Larkin, "It's hard to play against him. He's always on the good side of the puck, he doesn't (make) a lot of mistakes, and I think that's what makes him such a good player, both sides of the puck."

In March, Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour, who won multiple Selkes as a player, added: "(We) wanted to draft him back in the day — it just didn't work out. Everyone did. Why wouldn't you? Because he's competitive. To me, the talent is pretty easy to see. ... But then when you add that competitive edge, that's what separates guys from being OK players to great players, and that's what he (has)."

That competitive edge has become Larkin's calling card, as Ryan alluded to. And as he continues to grow in the NHL, it's also the quality that can drive him to the two-way excellence the Red Wings will ultimately need from him.

"In the big picture, when you buy into the team game and when you become a complete player, it helps your team win," Larkin said. "And that's what we're all here to do. That's what I want at the end of my career, is to be known for team success. And, yeah, I'm still working on it, I still have a long way to go, but it is something that I want to take pride in and continue to work to be a 200-foot player."

The Selke Trophy itself is not what matters in this conversation. It would be entirely possible for Larkin to never win it, or even finish top five for the award, but still become the kind of 200-foot force that leads the Red Wings to playoff victories some day.

But by examining some of last season's top Selke finishers, a few things jump out about what it takes to be in that company, from a statistical perspective.

How Larkin compares to Selke contenders



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Sean Couturier

27

19.8

2.28

2.1

94%

40.43%

Patrice Bergeron

34

18.7

1.91

2.19

93%

31.75

Ryan O'Reilly

28

20.6

2.06

1.95

92%

44.06%

Anthony Cirelli

22

18.5

1.96

1.45

95%

51.12%

Mark Stone

27

19.4

2.14

2.44

74%

36.88%

Phillip Danault

26

18.8

2.12

2.36

99%

50.12%

Anze Kopitar

32

21

2.3

2.04

95%

39.38%

Dylan Larkin

23

21.2

2.43

2.64

92%

13.99%

2019-20 data via Hockey Reference, Evolving Hockey and Dom Luszczyszyn

When it comes to the quality of forwards (based on average 5-on-5 Game Score) Larkin is asked to face nightly, he's already right there. His quality of competition rates in the 92nd percentile, on par with O'Reilly and just shy of Bergeron and Couturier. He's also asked to play slightly more on a nightly basis than any of these forwards, a function of Detroit's lack of depth behind him.

But on a per-60 basis, he's behind the pack when it comes to both goals against and expected goals against at 5-on-5. There's no shame in that — again, this group represents the best of the best — but it does show that Larkin still has strides to take before he can enter this kind of conversation. That's also clear when it comes to the penalty kill, where Larkin is on the ice for just 14 percent of the Red Wings' shorthanded minutes, compared to around 40 percent (or more) for most of the others.

Part of that could come back to Larkin's higher ice time than the rest of the group — Detroit's already using him so much at even strength and on the power play that asking him to kill half of every penalty, too, could drain him excessively. Most of these other names also have stronger blue lines to help them out when it comes to on-ice xGA and GA, especially Cirelli and O'Reilly in Tampa Bay and St. Louis, respectively.

But nonetheless, the numbers above contextualize the defensive gap between Larkin and the league's two-way elite right now: not a canyon away, but separation nonetheless.

Of course, presented here, those are just numbers on a spreadsheet. In practice, they're the end result of so many small details out on the ice — things that the game's best defensive players do — some of which Larkin is still working on. And frankly, some of which vary even between the players within that tier.

In February, Couturier, who had long been considered one of the league's top two-way centers even before finally winning the Selke last season, summed up being a great defensive forward as "being on the right side of the puck all the time. Not cheating, not hoping for plays." That's certainly a core principle to abide by.

But within the broad group of the league's top defenders, you also have your puck-stripping takeaway machines, your savvy lane disruptors and those who win battles along the boards, as well as key face-offs.

"You don't always see it in games, but when you look back on things, you're like, 'Wow, that was impressive,'" said Red Wings center Luke Glendening. "Or, you know, they're just great positionally, or they're hard to play against — they're always in the right position."

The point is, while Larkin talked about watching "a lot" of players such as O'Reilly and Bergeron as he focuses on defense, he doesn't have to try



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to become a carbon copy of them to succeed. He just needs to take the right lessons away, while still being himself. Because he has a lot going for him already.

"He's got that motor," said Columbus defenseman Zach Werenski, a teammate of Larkin's growing up and in college, last season. "He never stops moving his feet, he never stops working hard. He wants the puck on his stick. He wants to make a play. So I think he's just tenacious in all areas on the ice and it makes it hard for other teams to play against him."

"Larks is as competitive a person as I've been around," said Red Wings coach Jeff Blashill. "When he goes up against the other team's best players, he wants to win that battle to a level that the great ones have, in terms of competitiveness. His strength is his quickness, his strength on the puck, his ability to win those battles. And where he needs to continue to improve is just those areas where you just, at times, learn that it's a contain and you're more in the lane."

Larkin, it seems, is well aware of that. At his first media availability of the preseason, he talked about wanting to slow down mentally in the defensive zone to be in better position, not lose his man, and then use his speed to exit the zone.

"I find when I really try and slow my thinking down and be in great position, I get the puck more," Larkin said. "And I think good defense leads to better offense, and being in good spots and always talking and being in good spots for our defensemen will help us break the puck out and spend more time in the offensive zone."

That mindful approach to positioning certainly fits with one comment Couturier made about facing the league's toughest defensive forwards, saying, "There's not really a whole lot of room, there's not really odd-man rushes, because they're always in the right position. They're always cutting plays or creating turnovers."

Pageau's comments echoed that sentiment, saying he was told over and over again (and logged significant video time) to make sure he was putting his stick in the right place at the right moment, to help his defensemen and create turnovers.

It's the kind of skill that will take Larkin time to master, too — which might challenge the competitor in him that wants to be aggressive and play fast, but also ultimately suits his willingness to work and improve.

Blashill said earlier this offseason that he and Larkin have talked about what he calls "winning centers," saying Larkin has worked hard to become one and that "he understands that's how you win."

That, above all, is the main reason to believe this kind of evolution is possible from Larkin: because he's already begun setting his mind to it.

"First and foremost Dylan's just a competitor," Glendening said. "He wants to be great every night. And I think he uses his skating so efficiently, which makes him such a great defender. But, you know, I think it's just his compete, his desire to be successful, his desire to be great, and I think he just embraces that."

As for the individual honors that could ultimately accompany those traits some day, the reality is it may take the Red Wings winning for Larkin to receive any meaningful widespread recognition for his defense. That's a two-way street, because for Detroit to win, it first needs Larkin to rise to that elite two-way level — even before the wider hockey world realizes it's happening.

It certainly won't be easy. But for those who work closest with Larkin, the possibility doesn't seem far-fetched.

"I think just as he continues to progress as a player, it's a natural progression for him to be that type of guy," Glendening said. "... I know he takes great pride in his defense and he takes great pride at keeping the puck out of the net in our end, and I think honestly it's just a natural progression of the player that he already is."

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1198746 Nashville Predators

Here's what we've learned after first week of Predators training camp

PAUL SKRBINA | Nashville Tennessean

The Nashville Predators began their second and final week of training camp Sunday with an intrasquad scrimmage at Bridgestone Arena.

There were some new participants such as Matt Duchene, Erik Haula and Rocco Grimaldi, who had late starts to camp for various reasons. There were some absences, notably Mikael Granlund (immigration).

With just two intrasquad scrimmages, no exhibition games and an abbreviated camp, evaluation becomes more difficult.

"It's a little bit of the unknown," Predators coach John Hynes said. "We had a mindset coming into this camp that we were going to have to dive right into competitive battle practice situations.

"We limited some of the teaching and really get to the core guts of the game — your ability to forecheck, your ability to play defensive zone coverage, special teams."

Not to mention the Predators are without a full AHL affiliate this season after the Milwaukee Admirals opted out. Oh, and there also will be a taxi squad of four to six players who will practice and be allowed to travel with the team in case of COVID-19 emergency.

With that in mind, here are five things we learned about the Predators through the first seven days of camp:

JoFa is back

The Predators' top line has been top-of-the-line.

So if there's one sure thing that's come out of camp, it's that Ryan Johansen, Filip Forsberg and Viktor Arvidsson look like much more of an exclamation point than a question mark going into the season.

The three played just 124 minutes, 19 seconds of five-on-five last season, after playing a team-high 523:24 in 2018-19.

They've campaigned since the beginning of camp to play together, and will leave coach Hynes little choice, at least to start the season.

First things second

Granlund's absence from camp because of visa issues has given Hynes and his staff zero time to evaluate him. Granlund, who signed as a free agent after spending the last season and a half with the Predators, could very well eventually slide into a second-line role with Duchene, but he won't play in at least the team's first couple of games. Once he arrives in Nashville he will be required to quarantine for seven days. The Predators are scheduled to open the season Thursday against the Blue Jackets.

Erik Haula and Luke Kunin played on Duchene's line Sunday night. Kunin scored a goal during the team's first scrimmage Friday and added another Sunday.

For now, this seems to be the way to go.

Oh say can Juuse?

Juuse Saros took over as the starting goalie last season, a role he held through the Predators' return to play last summer in the NHL bubble. The 25-year-old allowed six goals in two periods Friday during the team's first scrimmage but showed better Sunday when he allowed just two.



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Pekka Rinne is 38 years old and entering the final season of his contract. He's looked OK during camp. The extra rest during a long offseason could pay dividends considering he'll likely be called up more than a usual backup because of the condensed schedule.

2021 Predators regular season: TV schedule with dates, times

Tough enough?

The Predators have preached all camp about being tougher to play against.

General manager David Poile afforded Hynes some options when he signed Mark Borowiecki, Kunin and Nick Cousins.

The toughness and willingness to hit. Borowiecki was 11th in the league with 199 hits last season when he was with the Senators. Austin Watson led the Predators with 131 last year. Colton Sissons was next with 84. Borowiecki also blocked 120 shots, which would have led the Predators last season (Roman Josi had 108).

D No. 3?

The Predators' third pairings were a sore spot last season, with a musical chairs of pairs consisting mostly of Yannick Weber, Dan Hamhuis, Matt Irwin and sometimes Jarrod Tinordi.

The Predators hope Matt Benning and Borowiecki can resolve some stability in that spot.

Reigning Norris Trophy winner Roman Josi and Ryan Ellis are a lock for the team's top pairing. Mattias Ekholm and Dante Fabbro seem to have claimed the second pairing spot, while Borowiecki and Benning appear to have solidified the third spot.

Several others, including Jarrod Tinordi and Weber, appear to be candidates for the seventh defensive spot.

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1198747 Nashville Predators

Will Eeli Tolvanen break Predators' top six? Answers to key questions from camp

By Adam Vingan Jan 11, 2021

And just like that, Predators training camp is over. Opening-night rosters are due to the NHL on Tuesday, and the Predators' regular season starts Thursday.

You probably have questions about what happened at camp last week. Fortunately for you, I (mostly) have answers.

What stood out at practice?

I will refrain from using Allen Iverson's famous line, but he had a point.

From afar, all hockey practices basically look the same. But multiple players mentioned that the level of intensity during this training camp was higher than usual. That stemmed in part from the Predators' desire to be tougher to play against this season.

As defenseman Ryan Ellis said on the first day of training camp: "In years past, we've always been the team that outworks. The last couple of years, we've been the outworked team."

In order to reverse that trend, Predators coach John Hynes preached to his players the importance of having strong structure.

"It allows your skill to come out," Hynes said. "You can play faster, because you know where your teammates are going to be. If everyone is doing their job, from an offensive perspective, you know where you can put pucks. You know where your support options are going to be, so you can make plays quicker. The puck support is there. Guys can play fast from an offensive perspective when you stay to the structure (and) concepts that you want to be able to work on. That allows players, then, to be able to use some creativity, because they're not questioning or guessing where things are going to go. They know what it is, and then you let your skill and talent be able to make plays and make decisions.

"From a defensive standpoint, it's really important (that) when you don't have the puck, you have to work as a five-man unit and be able to do your job. When you have strong structure, there's times where you don't have your A-game. You could be tired. It could be just a night where you're not playing as well as you need to be. Maybe sometimes guys don't have their legs, or the other team's playing really well. If you can maintain your structure and keep playing and stay with it and don't give up big plays and don't break down, it gives you a chance to win every night."

What are the potential forward lines?

Here is a sampling of the combinations from the Predators' second scrimmage:

Filip Forsberg

Ryan Johansen

Viktor Arvidsson

Erik Haula

Matt Duchene

Luke Kunin

Nick Cousins

Colton Sissons

Eeli Tolvanen

Calle Jarnkrok

Brad Richardson

Rocco Grimaldi

Yakov Trenin

Michael McCarron

Sean Malone

Other than the tried-and-true Filip Forsberg-Ryan Johansen-Viktor Arvidsson line, the other lines are still under construction, so do not read too much into them. We will get a better idea once the roster is set. Hynes and Predators management will use Monday to make decisions.

If there is a wild card in the forward group, it is Eeli Tolvanen.

Last week, The Athletic's Sean McIndoe wrote, "(I)t feels like one last chance to live up to all that 'best prospect in hockey' talk that seems so long ago." Tolvanen needs to be put in the right situations to succeed, which means power-play time and a healthy dose of offensive zone starts at even strength.

With Mikael Granlund (more on him later), Erik Haula and Luke Kunin in the mix to flank Matt Duchene on the second line, Tolvanen faces an uphill climb to crack the top six.

How about the defense?

The starting six on defense is set with no surprises.

Predators projected defense



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Roman Josi

Ryan Ellis

Mattias Ekholm

Dante Fabbro

Mark Borowiecki

Matt Benning

Ellis and Norris Trophy winner Roman Josi are arguably the best defensive pair in the NHL. Mattias Ekholm and Dante Fabbro were OK last season as first-time partners, but they should see improvement now that they have experience together.

Free-agent signees Mark Borowiecki and Matt Benning upgrade the third pair, which last season consisted of replacement-level defensemen.

"I think that was just the natural conclusion that everyone made and myself and Matt made, too," Borowiecki said, referring to his partnership with Benning. "We both went out of our way to connect not just as players but as people when we moved (to) Nashville. ... I'm a big believer that as a (defensive) pairing, if you can connect in that aspect, it's going to translate on the ice, too. Laying that foundation for us has given us a comfort level on the ice.

"Matt's a really smart player. He's very steady. He reminds me a lot of a guy that I played with in Ottawa, Dylan DeMelo. Matt plays with some bite, too. ... Hopefully we can solidify the third pair here."

Jarred Tinordi appears to have the inside track on the seventh spot.

Who is still missing?

Granlund, who has been awaiting his visa, will not be available at the start of the regular season. Once he arrives in Nashville, he will have to self-quarantine for seven days and produce four negative COVID-19 tests before he is eligible to play.

Top forward prospect Philip Tomasino is expected to join the Predators by midweek after fulfilling his quarantine requirements.

Who could be on the taxi squad?

Each NHL team will carry an extra four to six players who will form the taxi squad. Here is a rundown of the rules, courtesy of CapFriendly:

TAXI SQUAD DETAILS FOR THE 2020-21 #NHL
SEASON: [HTTPS://T.CO/XPDRFRGPBT](https://t.co/xpdrfrgpbt)
PIC: [TWITTER.COM/5QNA7LA2ZL](https://twitter.com/5QNA7LA2ZL)

— CAPFRIENDLY (@CAPFRIENDLY) DECEMBER 20, 2020

Since every team is required to carry at least three goaltenders, Connor Ingram or Kasimir Kaskisuo will take up one of the spots on the taxi squad. As for the other openings, Hynes wants to fill the Predators' taxi squad with players who can jump right into the lineup.

Among the forwards, Tomasino is a good bet to earn a spot, with the OHL season delayed indefinitely. Michael McCarron, Mathieu Olivier, Rem Pitlick and Anthony Richard are also strong candidates.

On defense, veteran Yannick Weber, who attended training camp on a tryout contract after four seasons with the Predators, would bring experience to the taxi squad if he is signed. Alexandre Carrier and Jeremy Davies are under consideration, too.

Carrier, Kaskisuo, McCarron and Richard cleared waivers Sunday. Davies, Ingram, Olivier, Pitlick and Tomasino do not require waivers to be assigned to the taxi squad or minor leagues.

Where will the prospects go?

Last Monday, the Milwaukee Admirals announced that they were opting out of the 2020-21 AHL season, leaving the Predators without their top minor league club.

As a result, the Predators will share the Chicago Wolves with the Carolina Hurricanes. They can have up to six forwards, three defensemen and one goaltender in the Wolves' lineup per game. The AHL is planning for a Feb. 5 start.

Hynes said over the weekend that the Predators are still determining what Admirals coach Karl Taylor and his staff will do this season.

ECHL Florida will also host Predators prospects. Forwards Patrick Harper, Tanner Jeannot, Tommy Novak, Cole Smith and Josh Wilkins played for the Everblades before reporting to training camp.

Others could be sent to Europe. The Predators assigned forward Egor Afanasyev, who played in the OHL last season, to CSKA Moscow of the KHL last week.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.12.2021

1198724 Florida Panthers

Panthers returning to Fox Sports Florida for all but one game; opener set vs. Blackhawks on Sunday

By BRETT SHWEKY

Beginning with the Florida Panthers' opening game against the Chicago Blackhawks on Sunday, Fox Sports Florida will broadcast 55 of the 56 regular-season games for the team this season.

Fox Sports Florida announced Friday it will not broadcast the Panthers' matchup against Detroit on Feb. 21 as NBCSN has exclusive rights for that game.

The Panthers had their initial season-opening series against Dallas postponed last week after the Stars had six players and two staff members test positive for COVID-19. The two-games have yet to be rescheduled.

Play-by-play announcer Steve "Goldie" Goldstein is set to come back to the booth this season alongside color analyst Randy Moller, marking year two of the duo's pairing. The Fox Sports Studio in Fort Lauderdale will serve as the network's remote broadcasting center for the Panthers road games, allowing Goldstein and Moller to call away contests remotely throughout the season and avoid travel during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Panthers Live hosts Craig Minervini and Jessica Blaylock will also return the broadcast as well as pregame, postgame and intermission analysts Ed Jovanovski and Jeff Chychrun. In-game reporter Katie Gaus rounds out this year's broadcasting team.

In addition, every Panthers game this season can once again be streamed through the Fox Sports Go app, available through mobile and tablet devices.

Sun Sentinel LOADED: 01.12.2021

1198725 Florida Panthers

Hello, Patric: Hornqvist finally joins Florida Panthers at training camp

By George Richards



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Patric Hornqvist, one of the Florida Panthers big offseason acquisitions, finally joined the team at training camp this weekend as he took the ice for the first time Saturday morning.

Hornqvist, a two-time Stanley Cup champion with the Penguins, said he hated to miss the first week of camp but he was here now and is not looking backward.

"Obviously it was not ideal but I have tried to put that behind me, look forward and try to get better every time I come to the rink from now on," Hornqvist said on Sunday.

"I can't take that time back, so I may as well focus on what is in front of us. Obviously when you (hold informal) practice on your own, you only have 10 guys in your group and now we're back to normal skates, normal practices.

"It's great to see the boys out there and get to know them on the ice. The scrimmages are good so hopefully we can have a few more of those to get ready for Sunday."

Coach Joel Quenneville said Hornqvist "looked good coming off that absence."

Quenneville added that he and the coaches were going to keep an eye on the 34-year-old power forward but no need. Hornqvist ran through all the drills and looked sharp.

"He was fine," Quenneville said. "He's going to really help our team in a lot of ways."

Hornqvist is working with an all-new second line, one featuring Jonathan Huberdeau on the left and newcomer Alexander Wennberg at center.

Florida's top line now consists of Sasha Barkov at center with Carter Verhaeghe and Anthony Duclair on the wings.

"Right now we just have to get together as a group and improve and get better every day in practice," Hornqvist said after his second official workout with the Panthers on Sunday.

"So far, so good. Both of them are very creative with the puck so I am going to try to create space for them, get open and go to the net for them."

Florida Panthers camp news

How excited was Gustav Forsling to get to his new team?

Well, not long after he found out that the Panthers claimed him off waivers at noon on Saturday, he loaded up his car and started heading south.

Forsling, who was in Carolina Hurricanes, said he arrived in South Florida from Raleigh at around 1:30 on Sunday morning.

"It (was) pretty tough because I had never driven that far before," Forsling said. "This would be like driving all of Sweden."

He was then on the ice with his new teammates — and was paired up with former Charlotte Checkers defensive partner Chase Priskie — for Sunday's 10 a.m. workout.

"I found out and headed down here straight away. It was a little stressful but it's all good," said Forsling, who played for Quenneville and new defensive coach Ulf Samuelsson in Chicago.

"I am really excited, it feels good to be with a new team with a new opportunity. I am ready to go. It was good to see (Quenneville), it has been a few years. It was very nice."

Quenneville said he feels the 24-year-old Forsling looked to be in really good shape and said he looked sharp for being in his first practice with a new team.

New Florida assistant GM Paul Krepelka also knows Forsling after serving as the general manager of the Checkers last season while with the Hurricanes.

"When we had him in Chicago, he had outstanding training camps and great starts to the season," Quenneville said.

"He looks a lot fitter than we have seen him. I think he put on some good weight, added some strength. He has good ability on both sides of the puck and in a shot amount of time, I really liked his practice."

After first cuts, who makes the Florida Panthers final roster?

— On Saturday, the Panthers practiced together as a full unit — well, the 30 players who were left after cuts and were not on the 'unfit to play' list.

Sunday, Quenneville split things up a bit.

On the ice for the morning session appeared to be the team Florida could go into its opener with.

In the later session were nine players who, with one large exception, seem to be on the fringe of making the team.

Quenneville said he was going to look at the two groups "every day" and there could be changes to them as the team continues preparing for its season-opener Sunday night.

Here were the line combinations and defensive pairings on Sunday:

Forwards

- Carter Verhaeghe / Sasha Barkov / Anthony Duclair
- Jonathan Huberdeau / Alexander Wennberg / Patric Hornqvist
- Frank Vatrano / Eetu Luostarinen / Owen Tippett
- Ryan Lomberg / Noel Acciari / Brett Connolly

Defensemen

- MacKenzie Weegar / Aaron Ekblad
- Riley Stillman / Anton Stralman
- Brady Keeper / Radko Gudas
- Chase Priskie / Gustav Forsling

Goalies

- Chris Driedger / Sam Montembeault

In Group 2: Keith Yandle, Vinnie Hinostroza, Mason Marchment, Scott Wilson, Kevin Connauton, Aleks Heponiemi, Cole Schwindt, Grigori Denisenko and Philippe Desrosiers.

The Panthers have to make their final cuts this week with the season-opener coming Sunday against Chicago.

Florida has 34 players in camp with three — Sergei Bobrovsky, Markus Nutivaara and Juho Lammikko — still on the UPL.

As far as having Yandle in with the second group, Quenneville said the Panthers wanted eight defensemen in the top group and he wanted to see some of the younger players.

The two defensemen in the later group were NHL veterans Yandle and Connauton.

"Like I said, we could be moving guys around so we will see how that goes," Quenneville said.

"We have some younger guys on the back end that we want to see."

— The Panthers will have a few extra days to prepare for the 2021 season after the two opening games against the Dallas Stars were postponed until later.



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Quenneville had planned to have the Panthers practice all the way into the Thursday opener, but now may throw in another off day — as well as more scrimmages to try and keep things fresh.

Florida Panthers opener vs. Dallas Stars postponed due to COVID-19

"We will deal with it," Quenneville said. "As players, you want to start playing for keeps because practicing can slow down your excitement in coming to the rink."

"Games are entertaining and fun, gives an extra flavor and some fun every day. It is what it is. We want to be ready, come out of the gate flying."

"We have to be flexible and adapt throughout the season, whomever handles it the best will probably going to find success."

Florida Hockey Now LOADED: 01.12.2021

1198842 Websites

The Athletic / NHL's losses will top \$1 billion: What Gary Bettman revealed about the season

By Scott Burnside Jan 11, 2021

From sustaining billion-dollar losses to holding teams and players accountable for following rigid COVID-19 protocols to confirming the outdoor games sans fans on the shores of Lake Tahoe, it was an eventful update from NHL commissioner Gary Bettman and deputy commissioner Bill Daly.

The two, along with a handful of league executives, spent an hour answering media inquiries on a wide variety of topics in advance of the 56-game 2020-21 NHL season set to begin on Wednesday.

Here are some of the highlights of that call.

- Bettman said that the NHL would actually lose less money had league owners opted to cancel the entire season than it will playing for the most part without fans. He stated that in-arena revenues make up about 50 percent of all hockey-related revenues — less than many people believe — but the losses are still expected to go from millions of dollars to at least \$1 billion.

"The magnitude of the loss starts with a 'B'," Bettman said but was not more specific on whether that could be billion singular or billions plural.

Bettman insisted that owners were unanimous in the decision to play games in spite of the bottom line because the good of the game demanded the league not shut down. The commissioner added that all owners are in position to emerge from the pandemic. He referenced financial support for some owners from the league to help during this shortened season.

The fact is there was little serious discussion about shutting down the league for the 2020-21 season, multiple league and team executives have told The Athletic, because to do so would have struck at franchise values, which is one of if not the most important economic driver for the league's long-term health, especially with all other major professional sports leagues continuing to play. There is also the issue of a new national broadcast deal to hammer out in the United States that would have been delayed had the season not been played.

- Three teams are planning to start the season with a small percentage of fans in their buildings (fewer than 5,000): Arizona, Florida and Dallas.

Tampa Bay recently announced it would hold off having fans at Amalie Arena given a COVID-19 surge. Columbus and Pittsburgh could allow

fans in the coming days, Daly said. But Bettman insisted the small number of fans is less about generating revenue than strengthening the connection between member clubs and their fan bases.

- The San Jose Sharks hope to get some clarity on what this season looks like as they are expected to meet with Santa Clara County health officials Tuesday to see whether regulations might change so the Sharks could return to San Jose. When Santa Clara County health officials restricted body contact activities in the area, the Sharks moved their training camp to Arizona and will begin playing at Gila River Arena in Glendale, home of the Arizona Coyotes. They do not technically have a home game scheduled until Feb. 1.

- The NHL is still waiting for medical updates from the Dallas Stars organization where six players and two staff tested positive for COVID-19, forcing the NHL to shut down the team's practice facility last week and delay the start of the Dallas season until at least Jan. 19. Medical staff were meeting Monday evening to get an update on the recovery of all those infected.

Daly said they were still "trying to get our arms around how the spread occurred" during Stars training camp. Daly called it a "classic outbreak" and said the team won't be returning to play until they can ice a competitive team.

Meanwhile, Bettman reiterated that the league's 213-page document covering protocols for proper behavior by teams isn't a guide but a document to be followed to the letter and that the league will "vigorously enforce" those protocols.

- Bettman would not give a specific number of positive cases of COVID-19 that would lead to the postponement of a game but that they will be dealing with each situation as it presents itself. The league's top doctor, Dr. Willem Meeuwisse, remains in regular contact with other major professional leagues in North America, including MLB, NFL, NBA and MLS via a weekly call to discuss protocols ranging from testing to travel. Said Bettman: "there are no secrets" among the pro leagues when it comes to COVID-19 issues.

- Much has been made in recent days about the NHL's plans to place small ads on helmets and selling naming rights to the four redefined divisions that will be in place for this season. Bettman said the helmet decals are more about "revenue retention" in that the ads will help teams not have to pay back sponsors money that had already been paid out as opposed to generating new revenue streams.

As for the discussion that these creative advertising strategies might inevitably lead to ads being placed on NHL jerseys, Bettman insisted that isn't the case. "The jury is still out on jersey signage," the commissioner said. But sponsorship experts believe that strategies to increase sponsorship in this unprecedented time will be hard to walk away from when and if things return to "normal" for the NHL.

- The league once again reiterated it has no plans to shoulder its way into vaccine distribution. "We're going to get in line like everybody else," Bettman said. Daly added he is not expecting there will be widespread vaccinations available to players this season. As for determining protocols for players to get vaccines once vaccines are available to players, Daly said he's hoping it's a "this year" situation as in before the end of 2021.

- The commissioner confirmed earlier reports that the NHL will play two games outdoors in the Lake Tahoe area. Colorado and Vegas will play on Feb. 20 and Boston and Philadelphia will play on Feb. 21, both at an NHL-built rink at the Edgewood Tahoe Resort in Stateline, Nevada.

Perhaps the most artful dodge of the briefing was when Bettman was asked why San Jose wasn't included among the four teams given their relative proximity to the area. Bettman did not mention that the Sharks weren't good enough to get an invite, although he did confirm the Sharks asked about perhaps using the facility for a game of their own after but that wasn't going to be possible.



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• The league remains confident that they will return to a normal schedule next fall, which will include the introduction of the NHL's 32nd team, the Seattle Kraken. What might change, however, is the lead-up to the annual draft as many of the developmental leagues are either not operating this season or operating in a severely reduced fashion. Daly acknowledged there has been some discussion from within the league's Central Scouting Bureau about having some sort of bubble tournament that would allow young players to be seen by NHL teams prior to the draft, which is scheduled for July 23-24. The priority, of course, is getting the NHL season up and running smoothly before turning attention to offseason events like that.

• NHL players will wear a special helmet decal beginning Jan. 16, honoring Willie O'Ree to coincide with Martin Luther King Jr. Day weekend. Jan. 18 happens to be the 63rd anniversary of O'Ree's first NHL game and those decals will be worn through the end of February, which is Black History Month. O'Ree, inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 2018, was the first Black player to skate in the NHL. A documentary on his life will be widely available for viewing and special educational programs related to O'Ree's life will be made available to 1,500 schools, Bettman said.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.12.2021

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

Craig Custance and Dom Luszczyszyn Jan 11, 2021

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

Auston Matthews

1A

TOR

C

4.6

21.1

52

45

96

37

10

8.7

2.8

1.4

Connor McDavid

1A

EDM

C

4.5

22.2

43

78

121

35

17

10.9

-11.7

2.2

Nathan MacKinnon

1A

COL

C

4.3

21.0



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40

61

100

31

17

7.4

4.3

1.7

Artemi Panarin

1B

NYR

LW

4.0

20.5

32

64

96

22

6

11.2

3.4

2.0

Leon Draisaitl

1B

EDM

C

3.9

22.9

47

66

113

33

6

8.3

-9.4

1.6

Sidney Crosby

1B

PIT

C

3.5

20.0

31

59

89

27

5

6.1

-0.2

1.6

Victor Hedman

1B

T.B

D

3.2

25.4

14

51

65

12

-10

8.7

6.3

2.0

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,



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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.



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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

David Pastrnak

2A

BOS

RW

4.5

18.8

47

52

99

30

9

6.6

4.4

1.3

Brad Marchand

2A

BOS

LW

4.1

19.3

33

63

96

26

7

9

4.6

1.3

Brayden Point

2A

TB

C

3.7

19.1

35

47

82

27

10

10.5

4

0.8

Elias Pettersson

2A

VAN

C

3.5

20

35

49

84

24

23

7.7

2.5

0.8

Mark Stone

2A

VGK

RW

3.5

19.7

29

48



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77	30
25	-5
5	6.9
11.8	5.2
4.1	0.6
1.1	Evgeni Malkin
Jack Eichel	2B
2A	PIT
BUF	C
C	3.5
3.1	19.5
22.2	33
38	62
55	95
92	27
28	-8
15	9.5
1.5	-1.3
0.9	0.6
2.1	Mitch Marner
Roman Josi	2B
2A	TOR
NSH	RW
D	3.5
3	21.6
25.7	27
16	69
47	96
63	25
16	4
-3	6
8.2	1.6
2.5	0.5
1.6	Dougie Hamilton
Patrice Bergeron	2B
2B	CAR
BOS	D
C	3.2
3.6	24.4
18.5	21
37	36
41	56
78	17



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-17	4.4
13.2	-3
6.3	1.5
0.8	Ryan O'Reilly
Cale Makar	2B
2B	STL
COL	C
D	2.7
3.1	20.6
24.3	21
16	48
54	69
70	21
13	8
2	2.6
5.7	8.9
3.4	1.7
0.7	Shea Theodore
Sean Couturier	2B
2B	VGK
PHI	D
C	2.6
2.8	22.1
20	13
28	34
41	47
69	12
26	-3
5	10.4
7.1	7.3
3.7	-0.3
1.9	Alex Pietrangelo
Aleksander Barkov	2B
2B	VGK
FLA	D
C	2.4
2.8	24.8
21.4	15
29	36
54	52
83	13
26	3
15	6.3



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2.9

2.7

Miro Heiskanen

2B

DAL

D

2.2

24.1

11

33

43

12

4

0.8

8.9

3.4

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



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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-Petterson-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 GSV, 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 defenseman, 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.



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"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

Steven Stamkos

3A

T.B

RW

3.7

19.1

39

53

93

26

0

7.3

0.5

0.5

John Tavares

3A

TOR

C

3.2

19.8

38

44

82

33

6

7.3

-5.7

1.4

Sebastian Aho

3A

CAR

C

3.1

19.7

38

43

81

35

5

7.7

-2.4

0.7

Mikko Rantanen

3A

COL

RW

3

19.8

34

52

86

22

3

2.9

1.9

1

Matthew Tkachuk

3A

CGY

LW

2.9

19.2

32

45

77

29

8

3.9

0.8

1.4

Patrick Kane

3A

CHI

RW

2.7

21.2



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36	55
57	65
93	8
29	1
5	6.8
3.6	-2.5
-7.5	2.6
1.6	Mathew Barzal
Charlie McAvoy	3A
3A	NYI
BOS	C
D	2.4
2.7	20.4
23.7	24
9	53
34	77
43	24
8	9
-1	3.4
6.1	-0.9
12.7	1.6
3.8	John Carlson
Alex Ovechkin	3A
3A	WSH
WSH	D
LW	2.4
2.7	24.5
20.4	14
49	59
30	73
79	12
36	-5
-2	7
4.8	-12.2
-6.4	2.9
1.4	Jacob Slavin
Quinn Hughes	3A
3A	CAR
VAN	D
D	1.8
2.4	23.7
24	8
10	29



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37	31
8	3
5	5.7
9.6	-2.7
3.4	2.2
0.4	Andrei Svechnikov
Seth Jones	3B
3A	CAR
CBJ	LW
D	3
1.7	18.4
25.3	31
11	43
39	73
50	33
10	-10
-4	10
-0.7	-2.2
2.8	0.8
1.2	Jonathan Huberdeau
Jake Guentzel	3B
3B	FLA
PIT	LW
LW	2.9
3.2	19.2
19.7	28
38	58
40	86
77	23
28	7
6	5.4
8.3	-3.3
1.5	1.4
1.1	Mika Zibanejad
Taylor Hall	3B
3B	NYR
BUF	C
LW	2.9
3	21.6
21.3	44
29	44
55	88
84	29



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8	3.7
2.1	8.9
-4.4	3
2.2	Jared Spurgeon
Gabriel Landeskog	3B
3B	MIN
COL	D
LW	2.5
2.6	22.6
18.8	13
29	28
35	41
64	9
27	-1
-2	4.3
1.6	12.8
8	1.9
0.6	Kris Letang
Ryan Ellis	3B
3B	PIT
NSH	D
D	2.3
2.5	25.7
23.4	16
10	42
38	58
48	11
10	-12
4	9.7
10	-4.6
4.7	3.6
-0.5	Mark Scheifele
Mark Giordano	3B
3B	WPG
CGY	C
D	2.2
2.5	21.9
25.3	34
11	48
40	83
52	29
10	9
-12	3.9



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-10.1

1.5

Ivan Provorov

3B

PHI

D

1.4

24.8

13

27

41

10

0

1.2

1.2

2.2

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.



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"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

Brendan Gallagher

4A

MTL

RW

2.9

17.2

31

25

56

34

2

10.7

2.1

1.9

Teuvo Teravainen

4A

CAR

RW

2.8

19.4

22

55

76

23

-1

6.6

2.7

0.6

Johnny Gaudreau

4A

CGY

LW

2.6

19.7



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27	35
53	65
80	27
24	0
15	5.7
3.1	-0.6
-1	0.7
1	Torey Krug
Claude Giroux	4A
4A	STL
PHI	D
LW	2.4
2.5	23.4
19	12
24	51
47	63
71	10
19	-3
6	0.6
5.2	5.6
2.5	0.1
1.4	Morgan Rielly
William Nylander	4A
4A	TOR
TOR	D
RW	2.3
2.4	23.8
18.9	11
30	51
39	62
69	10
27	-5
6	11.7
6.7	-10.5
-1.4	3.6
0.2	Erik Karlsson
Filip Forsberg	4A
4A	SJ
NSH	D
LW	2.2
2.4	24.8
17.9	8
30	53



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61	10
9	-9
-1	10.4
6.5	-1.3
-4	2.5
3.2	John Klingberg
Pierre-Luc Dubois	4A
4A	DAL
CBJ	D
C	1.9
2.2	23.2
18.6	9
25	42
38	51
63	9
22	-2
3	3.9
4.8	-0.2
2.5	3.6
0.8	Kyle Connor
Dylan Larkin	4A
4A	WPG
DET	LW
C	1.9
2.1	21.2
21.2	40
26	39
43	79
69	34
26	0
3	1.7
1.4	-11.3
0.1	1.1
2.7	Zach Werenski
Shea Weber	4A
4A	CBJ
MTL	D
D	1.8
2	24.2
24.1	18
17	32
26	50
43	12



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-2	6.1
1.3	4.4
2.3	0.5
1.1	Brady Tkachuk
Thomas Chabot	4B
4A	OTT
OTT	LW
D	2.5
1.7	19.1
26	28
11	33
42	61
53	39
10	9
-8	5
5.5	-2.7
-5.6	2.1
3.5	Vladimir Tarasenko
Colton Parayko	4B
4A	STL
STL	RW
D	2.5
1.3	17.6
22.9	29
9	35
21	63
30	26
7	9
3	3.6
-4.9	3.1
12.4	1.5
2.4	J.T. Miller
Max Pacioretty	4B
4B	VAN
VGK	LW
LW	2.5
2.7	19.8
18.2	28
31	48
33	76
64	22
30	-3
-3	5.5



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1.6

-0.1

Tomas Hertl

4B

SJ

C

2.5

19.3

30

36

66

30

3

5.5

-0.7

0.7

Travis Konecny

4B

PHI

RW

2.4

18.1

30

40

70

22

5

4.7

-0.4

1.2

Adam Fox

4B

NYR

D

2.4

21.1

10

38

48

9

-5

9

2.3

2.1

William Karlsson

4B

VGK

C

2.4

19.4

26

37

64

25

4

5.7

4.6

0.4

Tyler Seguin

4B

DAL

C

2.4

19.2

27

39

66

30

1

0.6

3.3

1.7

Anthony Cirelli

4B

TB

C

2.4

18.8

23

33

56

20

18

3.5

9.3

1



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Blake Wheeler	4B
4B	SJ
WPG	D
RW	1.7
2.3	25.6
19.4	13
22	48
56	61
78	13
20	-9
-1	2.9
-0.1	-7.9
0.7	1.6
1.3	Ryan Suter
Ryan Pulock	4B
4B	MIN
NYI	D
D	1.4
2	23.7
23	7
12	36
32	43
44	6
10	-6
-3	3.2
0.9	3.5
4.4	1
4.7	Jonas Brodin
Bo Horvat	4B
4B	MIN
VAN	D
C	1.3
1.7	21.4
19.6	4
27	22
34	26
61	4
26	-4
6	-5.2
-1	16.1
-2	2.8
1.7	Mattias Ekholm
Brent Burns	4B



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NSH	LW
D	2.2
1.2	17.7
23.3	26
9	29
29	55
37	26
7	0
-3	3.6
5	4.2
-1.6	1.6
1.6	Ryan Nugent-Hopkins
Anthony Mantha	4C
4C	EDM
DET	LW
RW	2.2
2.6	20.7
19.6	30
31	46
36	76
67	25
27	0
-3	1.7
4.6	0
4.8	1.2
2.2	Jaden Schwartz
Brock Boeser	4C
4C	STL
VAN	LW
RW	2.2
2.3	18
18.6	22
29	36
39	58
68	25
25	6
1	-1.4
3.9	9.6
2.1	0.8
0.6	Nikolaj Ehlers
Jamie Benn	4C
4C	WPG
DAL	LW



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2.1	21.7
17.4	11
30	34
34	44
64	8
21	-12
14	3.9
1.7	8.6
-0.5	-1.6
1.4	Nicklas Backstrom
Kevin Fiala	4C
4C	WSH
MIN	C
RW	1.9
2.1	19.4
18.9	19
28	51
40	70
68	18
24	1
2	3.2
2.4	0
0.2	1.2
0	Nico Hischier
Anze Kopitar	4C
4C	NJ
LA	C
C	1.9
2	19.1
21.2	23
25	38
45	61
70	25
19	17
10	3.9
-1.7	-3
3.7	2.1
2	Jeff Petry
Mikhail Sergachev	4C
4C	MTL
TB	D
D	1.8
2	23.7



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12

32

44

9

0

7.4

0.6

0.5

Jonathan Toews

4C

CHI

C

1.6

18.8

24

41

65

23

-7

5.6

-9.1

1.2

Aaron Ekblad

4C

FLA

D

1.4

23.3

10

32

43

9

-7

5.5

-4.7

3.7

Jake Muzzin

4C

TOR

D

1.3

21.6

8

26

34

5

-9

6.9

-0.7

2.6

Ryan McDonagh

4C

TB

D

1.2

21.9

5

25

30

5

1

1.3

4.2

2.2

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.



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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



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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."

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The Athletic / NHL trades and deals that could set trends in the league

By Ryan S. Clark Jan 11, 2021

Learning the nuances of long-term injured reserve and professional tryout offers is what everyone had listed on their offseason bingo card, right?

Attempting to strike a balance between having a successful team with a manageable salary cap situation while having another eye on the future is the objective every offseason. This is what forces NHL general managers to be creative. It's just that this specific offseason forced them to expand into additional avenues either because of the flat salary cap or the looming, ever-present threat that is the Seattle Kraken expansion draft.

Some GMs were forced to pursue alternative routes in an effort to improve their rosters. Others were in a position to take advantage of another team's cap situation to better themselves. Creativity was key, and some of these offseason moves could create copy-cat deals around the league.



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Here were the deals that others around the league could learn from and what league executives and an agent had to say about them:

What was the biggest takeaway here? Was it patience? Was it luck? Was it both? Could it be something else altogether different?

The answer depends on who you ask but the result is Lightning GM Julien BriseBois managed to organize several moving parts by placing the franchise cornerstone winger on LTIR. Losing Nikita Kucherov for the regular season means the defending Stanley Cup champions must navigate the upcoming campaign without one of the game's most dangerous players. But the byproduct is his \$9.5 million cap hit could be moved to LTIR, so the Lightning had the cap space to re-sign Anthony Cirelli (three-years, \$4.8 million AAV) without unloading Tyler Johnson's \$5 million cap hit.

BriseBois also made a trade with Ottawa's Pierre Dorion to clear up more cap space, sending Braydon Coburn, Cedric Paquette and a 2022 second-round pick to the Senators for Marian Gaborik's and Anders Nilsson's contracts — both of which will go on LTIR to create more cap space.

One longtime executive said: "Lou Lamoriello has one of the best quotes: 'If you have time, use it. You don't know what is going to happen.' ... They did not do something until they had to do. This has allowed them to certainly keep a competitive team. ... A lot of it is Julien has experience and part of it is luck and part of it is timing and part of it is also bad luck. They had to give up a second-round pick to Ottawa. The guys they are taking on are (dead contracts) and their LTIR money allows you to go over the cap. If you do that, you better not have guys on entry-level contracts with any sort of performance bonuses. It was patience and it was timing. I'm sure he had many plans and had some that did not work out and he could then go to Plan B or C or D. The Ottawa deal gives them more comfort."

But what if Kucherov was healthy?

"I think with Kucherov, if he was not hurt, I don't know what they have for draft capital but they already put Johnson through waivers. I don't know what they would have done. You're scouring around the reserve lists and LTIR and you look at someone like Marian Hossa. He has a year left on his. I don't know what they would have done."

Agent said: "Obviously, we know why they had to do some other things with Ottawa. They did not want to get rid of Paquette. That's for sure. Paquette was a good player. I know you can't invent injuries. Maybe there was an elective nature with this and it was something where everyone said, 'Let's get it done' or 'This is a shortened season and this is bugging me, yeah, let's do it.' I don't know if there is something you can learn from that."

Blues sign Mike Hoffman to a PTO

Initially, the idea Blues GM Doug Armstrong swung a deal to sign the most consistent scoring unrestricted free agent winger available to a PTO led to some questions. The explanation is that the Blues are waiting to put Vladimir Tarasenko's \$7.5 million cap hit on LTIR before signing Mike Hoffman to a contract expected to be for one year and worth between \$3.5 and \$4.5 million. This comes with the idea Tarasenko will return this season and the Blues will have to make room for that money, but it gives them extra time.

The other caveat: Hoffman could be offered an NHL contract by another team and sign elsewhere. The same applies to the Calgary Flames with Brett Ritchie and the Vancouver Canucks with defenseman Travis Hamonic.

Agent said: "I just know how hard it is to find guys jobs. If there are guys out there and Tarasenko has been fighting something for a while, I am fine with them using whatever rules and whatever creativity they can and have premier players who get to make money. Good on them if they thought about it can make it work. We are in dire straights to find jobs and if a loophole gets exposed that other teams can use to create opportunities for a client, I am good with that."

Executive said: "They have a deal with him. That's what everyone says. You could always leave to go somewhere else if someone offers him more. It's like the whole Brent Sopel thing in training camp with the Red Wings. He played a few exhibition games and then Chicago signed him. ... I am sure with Hoffman, he has been out there for a time. They were patient. Let's be honest, if there was a deal that was out there for more than one year, he'd have signed. The terms and dollars were not there. I think when Taylor Hall is taking a one-year deal, that is the economic reality of where things are with a flat cap. Even if there is not a cap, the owners are only going to spend so much."

Taylor Hall signs one-year deal with Sabres

Speaking of the aforementioned former New Jersey Devil, the belief is Hall signed the one-year deal with Buffalo with the idea he could spend a year playing alongside one of the game's top players in Jack Eichel. A strong season, in turn, could lead to Hall potentially receiving a large payday with term should the NHL's financial climate allow for more teams to spend.

Of course, questions come with the Hall deal. What made Buffalo the option as opposed to a legitimate Cup contender? Also, could we see more NHL players on Hall's level go with a one-year deal in the hopes they can sign for more money on their next deal? Or is this more of a unique situation because of the flat cap?

Another executive said: "(The Sabres) are insulating themselves by giving him one year in a crazy year. The \$8 million they are paying is not really \$8 million. It's 30 percent off and whatever discount players have to take off. It was a very good move by Buffalo."

Agent said: "It's interesting, huh? That's a hard one. You get to the point you have expectations of what you think your deal is going to look like and it's just not there. Instead of changing expectations and taking this, it's, 'hey. Let's take a high-dollar figure on a one-year deal and hopefully the world gets back to normal. If I have a 100-point season or an MVP season, I will get paid.' The deal he wanted was not out here and he decided to go to a place where he has some talent around him and a good number on a short-term deal. Whether that becomes a trend or not, we'll see what Hoffman's deal is. It's interesting. Some guys would say I will take five over five if that was out there and for him and other guys, they are not willing to take that lower number. I don't know if they would. I would have not advised him to do what he did."

First executive said: "I don't think any player or star player is going to preferably take a one-year deal. All of those guys from (Anthony) Duclair to Hall to Hoffman, it's a finite amount of time that a guy can play in the league. It was different with escrow starting high and then going down with the way contracts are structured. I think with Hall, we will see how it goes, how he likes it. I don't think he will look for another one-year deal. It's about security. Nobody is going to say, 'I want to have one good year, let's do a one-year deal.' How many guys have done that in the past? You can think of (Teemu) Selanne and (Paul) Kariya in Colorado, but those were for different reasons. ... I don't think it was a risk for Buffalo at all. This is as risk-free as it can get. From Buffalo's standpoint, it makes sense."

Canadiens, Canucks add veteran goalies with an eye on the expansion draft

More NHL teams are using a tandem approach in net for a number of reasons. The Canadiens and Canucks are no different. It might appear that their respective decisions were simply about adding two veteran goaltenders. And while true, could these moves come with a fair share of risk?

Let's start with the Canadiens and Jake Allen, who was acquired from the Blues for two draft picks. He has one year left at a \$4.3 million cap hit, then his two-year extension carrying a \$2.875 million AAV begins. The Canadiens have \$14.850 million — 18.2 percent — of their cap space toward goaltending between Allen and Carey Price. It is a large sum, but it provides an experienced option in the event Price gets hurt, gives time



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for promising prospect Cayden Primeau to develop, and then there is the Kraken expansion draft.

As for Holtby, the Canucks signed him to a two-year deal with a \$4.3 million AAV to replace Jacob Markstrom. Pairing Holtby with Thatcher Demko still gives the Canucks a more proven option as they seek to learn more about Demko's potential to be a No. 1 goaltender. But the fact he only has 37 career NHL games reinforces why the Canucks were prudent in getting someone like Holtby. But, similar to Allen, a good year in Vancouver could see Holtby take a trip down Interstate 5.

Second executive said: "It's always a risk if they don't play well or Seattle prefers someone else, then, they are stuck with them. That is sort of the risky proposition to plan for the expansion draft. Jake Allen is there to probably play 20 games this year and set up Carey Price to have a long, deep playoff run. That is where Montreal thinks they are at in their cycle. They think they are better than where they finished. That playoff win over Pittsburgh helped their psyche. Jake Allen is there to help them go over the hump. If Seattle takes him, then they have to readdress their backup next year. Holtby's situation is the same but different in terms of if Demko falters. They have had a short sample size with Demko and they have to make sure they have someone there where it is a 1A and 1B situation. I think that's why they did that."

Agent said: "I think they are great moves. The market as it stands, it is difficult for players who have that long-term security in free agency and the spending in free agency is restricted. Guys don't want to lock in somewhere if they can show they can be the guy and not get what they think they are worth. From a team perspective, these guys are great short-term solutions who might turn into good long-term solutions. It does turn into an audition, a development piece, a short-term marriage that can maybe develop into something longer. As an agent, would I like for (teams) to throw around more money and sign Braden Holtby and sign him to a seven-year extension? Yeah! For us, salaries and all that is how we make our money. That is just not the case. You gotta go with what is in the market right now. That is what is out there."

Senators capitalize on their financial flexibility

The Senators took advantage of the Pittsburgh Penguins' cap problems by trading for Matt Murray and then signing him to a four-year extension. Ottawa then signed Connor Brown, Evgenii Dadonov and Alex Galchenyuk. Only to then apply their financial flexibility to be trade partners in deals that saw them acquire Coburn, Paquette and Derek Stepan while still having \$10.9 million in cap space available. Doron and his staff have hypothetically placed themselves in a situation to have their young players like Drake Batherson, Logan Brown and Tim Stuetzle get the needed playing time while letting them develop around veterans.

First executive said: "Veteran guys like Stepan and Coburn are fantastic people. That is part of your culture for these young guys. They are not being thrown to the wolves by themselves. ... I am not sure anyone has come out better the last few drafts than Ottawa. What happened with San Jose could have been a disaster. But they got (Brady) Tkachuk. They got Stuetzle. They were nine points behind Montreal and Montreal beat Pittsburgh in the playoffs. These younger players that are in the league, it is important to surround them culturally with older players."

Agent said: "Let's be honest. It is a case of them not spending to the cap and being able to absorb salary and being nimble at a time when not a lot of other people are. There are not a lot of buyers out there and there are a lot of people that need to offload salary or get cap compliant. It is an opportunistic moment for them that they were super well positioned to say, 'We are one of the teams that can add.' They have a buy-in nature and have more ability to add compared to five years down the line when they have these young guys locked in at a high number."

Second executive said: "I think they took on a lot of expiring deals to insulate some of their kids. I wouldn't say it accelerated their rebuild but it did keep it on its normal track. Pierre is in a tough spot with money and the owner does not necessarily open the wallet up. He has to be cash conscious and term conscious. I think signing Dadonov was a smart move by them. He is going to open space for his teammates. Taking on

contracts from Tampa was a purely cash move. When you are in a position to do those types of things, that is a smart move. But it does not mean you are going to win. Owners are like guys at a poker table who want to win. But it's hard to understand at times that this is a rebuild and it is about being patient and that is going to be the challenge for Pierre. ... If I was grading their offseason, I would give them a C-plus. ... They did a good enough job to get guys to insulate their kids and gave themselves a more competitive team. But they made some moves that were questionable like Josh Brown and Erik Gudbrandson. I'm not sure if those will work out long term."

Avalanche keep cap flexibility while in Cup window

Avalanche GM Joe Sakic entered the offseason with a little more than \$22 million in available cap space, needing to re-sign RFAs Andre Burakovsky, Ryan Graves, Tyson Jost and Valeri Nichushkin. Yet their Stanley Cup contender status is what made many around the NHL believe the Avs could still do something.

Turns out, they did. They acquired veteran two-way winger Brandon Saad (with the Blackhawks retaining \$1 million of his salary) and sent two second-round draft picks to the cap-challenged Islanders to land defenseman Devon Toews.

How have the Avalanche managed to strengthen a roster that can challenge for a title all while staying in position to not financially overextend themselves?

Agent said: "They have done a nice job of saying, 'We need to plan for some of these young guys. We think this is going to be making this. We want to add this piece from the outside.' We don't know where Cale Makar or Bowen Byram (in terms of contract) is going to be in a few years. They are getting guys who have cost-certainty to them. They knew where Toews was at with that deal. That is my sense of it. They have done a nice job of blending the high-quality veterans without adding the major stars knowing they have Nathan MacKinnon, Mikko Rantanen and Cale Makar who will be the bulk of their cap."

First executive said: "(Joe Sakic's) the only one who can show up to the lottery, lose the No. 1 pick, go to four and get Makar and Byram. He's been very patient and he's got the bigger picture in mind. ... The 'aw shucks' routine Joe has is not going to be working anymore because he's pretty savvy. He's done some deals. ... If Saad has two or three years left, maybe that deal does not happen. But because it is one year left? Yes. Those are the things to look at with term. There are times you like to make that deal but if this is two years and not one, you have to think about that. Sometimes, you do it anyway and figure out the rest later down the road like Tampa did."

Second executive: "I call those moves predatory. You are taking advantage. It's good. You have to be the first to the market. ... The only thing about the Toews deal that could be a problem is you have to protect Erik Johnson with the expansion draft. Unless they get him to waive his no-movement clause and they may, but I doubt it. You have (Samuel) Girard and Makar to protect. You have to expose Toews and Ryan Graves as of right now. They are going to lose one of those guys unless they make a corresponding move like a trade or something with Seattle. That is the only thing about being so good with young players in a cycle."

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The Athletic / Wheeler: 2021 NHL prospect pool rankings

By Scott Wheeler Jan 11, 2021



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Welcome to the 2021 edition of my ranking of every NHL team's prospect pools.

This 30-day project counts down to the NHL organization with the best collection of prospects. This page will be updated daily from Jan. 11 to Feb. 9. In its totality, this series includes more than 100,000 words of evaluation on more than 500 prospects.

While I have made efforts to regularly feature the commentary of scouts, coaches, and other team staff, the evaluations and rankings themselves (both of individual prospects and each team's farm system overall) are my own. In many cases, those assessments are the byproduct of countless viewings (both on tape and in person) spanning several years. Throughout, whenever my exposure to a prospect has been more limited, I have made as much clear — and have relied more heavily on others.

In an effort to provide expansive looks at all 31 teams, each individual prospect pool ranking will run a minimum of 15 prospects deep. In the interest of evaluating only prospects who I believe have even a remote chance at the NHL, the rankings are capped at a maximum of 20 players. Naturally, the teams that rank lowest in the league will feature shorter lists of players, while the teams with the best prospect pools will feature 20. Unless I make particular mention of a player who didn't crack a team's top 20 (a handful of teams will have honourable mentions), you can assume I don't believe that prospect has NHL upside.

To be eligible for inclusion, a skater must be:

Under 23 years old as of Jan. 1. We now know that by the time a player turns 23, he is largely done the steep upward progression we see in prospects and will begin to plateau.

Not a full-time NHL player. This is the only arbitrary section of the criteria. Here, I trust my judgment for whether or not a rostered NHL player is still likely to bounce between levels more than any pre-determined games played cutoff. Preference for inclusion as an NHL prospect is more likely to be given to teenagers than 22-year-olds.

Either signed to an NHL contract or selected in the entry draft, without the expiration of either of those rights. Players who are signed to AHL contracts were not considered.

To be eligible for inclusion, a goalie must be:

Under 25 years old as of Jan. 1. This expanded age criteria (it was set at under-24 last year) is more reflective of the typical goalie trajectory and allows for the continued consideration of goalies who are very much still prospects.

Not currently established as one of their NHL club's two go-to options.

The rankings are also broken down into team-specific tiers in an effort to provide you with better insight into the distinction between Player A and Player B, as well as a sense for the potential fluidity within groups of tightly-ranked prospects. Those tiers are not universal and do not have pre-set boundaries or projections, as I prefer not to box prospects in with specific expectations.

You will, however, notice that consistent emphasis is placed on upside and skill in my rankings. These are not rankings based on proximity to the NHL. Players with star-level talent or top-of-the-lineup potential may rank higher than players with NHL experience who project into depth roles, even if the former group of prospects are less likely to reach their destination. And teams who've consistently swung on talent, at the expense of playing it safe, will tend to grade higher overall. That approach, I believe, should be the foundation of modern drafting and recruiting. In the long run, teams that will distinguish themselves in a league built on parity are those who will develop homegrown stars that can make an impact, in a cap world, on entry-level contracts. Those are the sport's most precious resource, particularly when depth pieces are so readily available through trades and free agency. My rankings should reflect that.

For more insight into my experience, my process, the things I look for, and my potential biases and limitations, check out my guide to scouting.

And for a second opinion on the vast majority of these players, check out the work of The Athletic's Corey Pronman in his NHL org rankings, last released in October.

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

By Sean McIndoe Jan 11, 2021

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.



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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



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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 league-wide 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



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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 runaway 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



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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.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.12.2021

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Sportsnet.ca / NHL bracing for bumpy ride ahead of unparalleled 2020-21 season

Chris Johnston

January 11, 2021, 7:53 PM

Should you need a reminder about how unusual this upcoming NHL season is, commissioner Gary Bettman said explicitly during his season-opening press conference that there are reasons for it not to be played at all.

"It would be cheaper for us to shut the doors and not play," Bettman told reporters Monday.

With significant business challenges that include buildings completely closed to fans in at least 28 cities, this is a grin-and-bear-it campaign. It will largely be a TV-only property starting Wednesday night and, while the realigned divisions hold great promise for those who love the game up here in particular, the league's head office is bracing for a bumpy ride.

Games have already been rescheduled, just as they were in the other three big North American sports. Challenging situations are bound to arise with COVID-19 caseloads still spiking across the country. And the roughly 50 per cent of annual league-wide revenues that come from fans entering arenas will be reduced to a tiny fraction of that amount.

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

"There's not a lot of money to be made at the numbers we're talking about, both with respect to the number of teams who can permit fans in the building now and also the number of fans in the building," said deputy commissioner Bill Daly.

All told, a \$5-billion industry stands to lose at least \$2 billion over the course of an abbreviated 56-game season. Maybe more. In Bettman's words: "The magnitude of the loss when you add it all up starts with a 'B.' We're out of the 'M' range and into the 'B' range."

"All of our teams have the ability to get through this," he added. "We've made some financial arrangements that makes sure that cash flow is



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what it needs to be, although that's not found money, that's debt, and our clubs and our owners are having to write cheques."

We live in challenging and honest times.

The most powerful men in the NHL made no attempt to sugarcoat the current situation during Monday's hour-long Zoom session and really what good would that have accomplished anyway?

The league isn't approaching these coming months any differently than you and I are individually. All it is trying to do is get through the pandemic as safely as possible while keeping the lights on for better days ahead.

"Let me make something really clear," said Bettman. "We're coming back to play this season because we think it's important for the game, because our fans and our players want us to, and it may give people -- particularly those who are back in isolation or where there are curfews -- a sense of normalcy and something to do."

The rules

They aren't carved in stone. They're not even written out in pen.

Given the uncertainty, there's a general understanding that the league will have to be agile and open-minded.

So there's isn't a precise threshold for how many players below the typical 20-man roster a team would have to be missing in order to force the postponement of a game. Taxi squads of four to six players are being instituted to combat this issue, but it's not likely to be eliminated completely during a compressed campaign played amid a pandemic.

"Obviously we don't want situations where clubs are playing significantly short-handed," said Daly. "Our clubs on a regular basis in the regular season, from year to year, will play short of 18 [skaters] and two [goaltenders] occasionally given circumstances. The primary difference and advantage that clubs will have this year is probably the taxi squad."

...

"We think that creates an added element of flexibility that will allow our clubs to better navigate the situation in the COVID world. We're really just making sure that we're in the best situation possible, that our clubs are in the best situation possible, to adjust on the fly if they have to adjust so that we are not in a position where we lose a significant number of games."

Even though the NHL built in an extra week after the regular season to accommodate postponements and cancellations, Bettman acknowledged that a team might end up not being able to get in its full schedule of games.

As for what happens in that potential circumstance, he couldn't yet predict.

"We're going to have to be in a position to understand and address situations as they occur," said Bettman. "Having a series of just hard and fast rules in this environment I'm not sure is going to be -- actually I'm pretty sure it's not going to be the best approach. I think for us, if we get confronted with a variety of situations that we wish hadn't occurred, we want to be in the best situation at that time, not hypothetically, to deal with them."

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.

The Dallas Stars practice facility has been closed since Friday after six players and two staff members produced positive COVID-19 results. At minimum, the team's first three regular-season games will be rescheduled.

However, it's not yet clear when the Stars will resume skating and how soon they'll be able to play their first game -- decisions that hinge entirely on the health of players and the safety of the situation.

"We're still trying to get our arms around exactly how the spread occurred," said Daly. "It has turned out to be kind of a classic outbreak and there may be a variety of factors associated with it. Having said that, we think we're at the end."

"We hope we're at the end of that outbreak and everybody is recovering nicely and being cared for and doing what they need to do to get healthy. We'll play that through."

The Sharks

When, or if, the San Jose Sharks can go home is also an open question.

There's a meeting scheduled with government officials in Santa Clara County on that issue to be held Tuesday.

Without clearance to operate at home, the Sharks are conducting training camp in Scottsdale, Ariz., and they're preparing for a regular season that starts with eight consecutive road games. That was a gift from NHL scheduler Steve Hatze Petros -- a little extra time to work through issues before their first designated home game arrives on Feb. 1.

But Daly said it's not yet clear if that game will be played in San Jose or at a neutral site.

The additional revenue

Advertisements on helmets are debuting this season, but Bettman cautioned against categorizing those as new streams of revenue.

In most cases, those are about satisfying pre-existing sponsorship deals that might otherwise have been lost, according to the commissioner.

As a result, it's dangerous to conclude that it's a step towards placing ads on sweaters. That's already common practice in the NBA, but isn't on the horizon for the NHL.

"The jury is still out on jersey signage and if we are going to do that, that was something that is important enough on a whole host of ways that I didn't want to do it under these [circumstances] and ask the clubs to do it, and approve it, because it's ultimately subject to their approval under these circumstances," said Bettman. "So nobody should jump to any conclusions about what it all means in terms of what's next."

The vaccine

There won't be a big rush towards getting players and NHL staff vaccinated. They'll join the queue with everyone else, according to Bettman.

"I saw some commentary about this, there was never any thought about us jumping the line or anything like that," he said. "Like with PPE and like with testing, if there's an alternate source that we could at the appropriate time buy and use that would be one thing, but that's not the case and it would be silly for anyone to suggest that we have any notion that we could or would."

As a result, the NHL doesn't expect a meaningful amount of its people to receive the vaccine during the 2020-21 season. That's somewhere off in the distance yet.

"I don't think the issue is a 'this season' issue," said Daly. "I hope it's a 'this year' issue."

The lowdown

So, given everything swirling around, what constitutes a successful season?

Florida, Arizona and Dallas are the only teams that will operate with fans from the get-go, with Columbus and Pittsburgh hoping soon to join them. There is much less money to be made. And more risks being taken by everyone involved.

"What's aspirational is we get through the season, we have an on-ice terrific season, great playoffs, we present the Stanley Cup and the world



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is back to normal for the '21-'22 season," said Bettman. "Anything beyond that would be great."

Fingers crossed.

Stay safe out there.

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Sportsnet.ca / Flames notebook: Mangiapane on verge of another breakout

Eric Francis

January 11, 2021, 11:42 PM

It was the type of move generally reserved for veteran snipers intimately familiar with year-end highlight reels.

Spotting the tiniest of gaps between Oliver Kyllington and Alex Yezesin, Andrew Mangiapane cut hard between the young duo at the blue line with an eye on pulling off the rare split.

Managing to find daylight - and the puck - at the other side, Mangiapane was promptly pulled down in front of the goal crease, doing well to earn his squad a power play.

This one came in Monday's intra-squad matchup Monday night, but Flames fans can expect plenty more such boldness from the 24-year-old moving forward.

After all, the third-year winger who started last season on the fourth line and almost finished with his first 20-goal campaign will tell you he's poised to make another jump every bit as monumental.

"Every time I'm on the ice I feel confident enough now that I can be an elite player in this league," said the 5-foot-10, 185-pound Toronto native, exuding a belief that defies being an undersized, sixth-round draft pick.

"It was kind of a breakout season for me. I've always believed I could be a top-six player in this league and last year I think I proved that."

He did so despite arriving late to camp following a contract impasse that left him with a bottom-barrel deal with plenty to prove.

Mission accomplished.

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

Playing alongside Mikael Backlund and Matthew Tkachuk the bulk of last year, Mangiapane helped turn the team's shutdown line into the team's best trio at both ends.

And with the confidence it gave him - not to mention a two-year contract extension for \$4.85 million this summer - he believes he's capable of continuing an unlikely trajectory along the same lines as his childhood hero, Martin St. Louis.

An undrafted walk-on with Barrie of the OHL where he scored 51 goals his final year, proving people wrong has been his forte.

"I think I have more to show," said Mangiapane, who scored 17 even-strength goals before the season was shortened by COVID-19.

"This is one of the harder off-seasons I've trained. Coming in with confidence and believing in your game. Every year I believe in myself and believe I can be a top player in the league and that's what I'm working towards. Now I just have to go out there and be consistent with it."

He'll likely do so with Backlund on his side, as part of three pairings coach Geoff Ward has kept together throughout camp. The other two are Johnny Gaudreau/Sean Monahan and Tkachuk/Elias Lindholm.

In Monday night's final intra-squad game Backlund and Mangiapane were teamed up with newbie Josh Leivo, proving dangerous on several occasions, including a breakaway by Mangiapane stopped in spectacular fashion by David Rittich.

As part of his continued growth and importance to the team, Mangiapane was killing penalties alongside Sam Bennett Monday - a new wrinkle for the youngster who posted almost a point a game through parts of three AHL stints along the way.

Special teams work has rarely been part of his duties, which is all about to change as he'll be a fixture on the second power-play unit where he was prominent Monday.

Mangiapane capped a solid night by being the only one to score while playing three-on-three late in the evening.

SCRIMMAGE NOTES:

- Dillon Dube was the first Flame to be traded this year, switching jerseys several times Monday night just so he could work the wall on Team Iginla's power-play unit (the team's second unit) with Mark Giordano, Milan Lucic, Backlund and Mangiapane.

- Welcome to the big leagues, Connor Zary.

Monday's scrimmage was the lone chance for the three Flames prospects returning from the World Juniors to measure up against the big boys.

Playing on the left side alongside Buddy Robinson and Derek Ryan, Zary got a good shot off in close on Jacob Markstrom before the 19-year-old was deposited on his keister by Michael Stone as the play ended.

- Jakob Pelletier played alongside Brett Ritchie and Glenn Gawdin, exhibiting plenty of jump and speed, but very few touches.

- Rittich played all 60 minutes for the win - his second in two complete scrimmage outings. Markstrom gave way to Louis Domingue midway through the game, allowing two goals.

- Rittich said Monday he has yet to sit down with coaches to discuss how the goaltending workload will be handled this year with Markstrom. The over/under seems to be pegged at somewhere between 35 and 40 starts for Markstrom in a 56-game schedule shoe-horned into 114 days.

- Team McDonald got the 3-2 win - and clinched a trophy at game's end - thanks to goals from Lindholm, Gaudreau and a beauty shorthanded finish by Noah Hanifin, who executed his stated desire earlier in the week to act on instincts to join the rush more. Mangiapane and Adam Ruzicka scored for Team Iginla.

- Don't be surprised if Dominik Simon gets the plum, opening night assignment next to Gaudreau and Monahan. Plenty of speed, tenacity and skill there to keep up.

- The veteran centre Ryan was one of close to 100 NHLers who were put on waivers Monday ahead of Tuesday's 5 p.m. opening roster deadline. As useful as the 34-year-old centre has been in Calgary the last two years, he is unlikely to be snagged as he makes \$3.125 million as a fourth-liner. He was joined by Oliver Kyllington and Zac Rinaldo. Kyllington is more likely to be snapped up as the 23-year-old defenceman makes \$787,500 and is a brilliant skater, who still can't seem to prove to the Flames he's an everyday NHLer. Those who pass waivers Tuesday morning will be able to move freely from the taxi squad or the minors for 30 days. Teams are expected to shuttle players back and forth with regularity to save cap space and these moves help open that door.

All three played in last night's scrimmage.



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- Other prime Flames taxi squad candidates who passed waivers Monday morning included forwards Robinson and Byron Froese, defenceman Alex Petrovic and goalie Domingue.

- Plenty to be excited about with Emilio Pettersen in both scrimmages, including work Monday alongside Adam Ruzicka and Matthew Phillips, who are all destined to be top players in Stockton once the AHL gets going Feb. 5.

- Interesting trios as the team decided to spend the final four minutes of the game playing three-on-three: Mangiapane/Backlund/Rasmus Andersson vs. Gaudreau/Monahan/Juuso Valimaki.

Jeff Marek and Elliott 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.

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Sportsnet.ca / Travis Hamonic finally debuts, unites with Hughes at Canucks camp

Iain MacIntyre

January 11, 2021, 8:29 PM

VANCOUVER – The Vancouver Canucks aren't getting an exhibition game to prepare for the NHL season, but at least they had a COVID day to help them get ready.

With a streamlined practice of 24 players, the Canucks returned to the ice Monday after scheduled workouts on Sunday were abruptly cancelled for what coach Travis Green revealed was a "false positive" test for a player.

This is how the season is going to be.

The Dallas Stars suffered a coronavirus outbreak during training camp, and a handful of other teams have had to adjust practice schedules or rosters due to COVID test results and/or contact tracing. There is no protective "bubble" this season in which NHL players can be shielded from the global pandemic.

They're playing in the real world, working in it with the rest of us, as vulnerable to sickness as everyone else.

No wonder Green has retained the buzzword the Canucks adopted for last summer's Stanley Cup tournament: adaptable.

"We've seen it in other sports," Green explained Monday. "We've already seen it in our sport, so it's probably going to be that way. It's going to happen. It's a little bit of a wake-up call, too, just making sure that we're doing the right things. And the next time it happens, it won't be as big of a surprise to our group."

"Yeah, classic case of adaptability, you know?" defenceman Nate Schmidt said. "That's really what it comes down to. We're going to have things like this. I mean, even if it's inconclusive, false, whatever you want to call it, it sucks. But you can't be naive to think that things like this are (not) going to happen."

The only player missing Monday from the Canucks' projected roster was depth defenceman Jordie Benn. Green said that the veteran "wasn't available today."

The Canucks practise again Tuesday at Rogers Arena before flying to Edmonton for their season-opener against the Oilers on Wednesday. We think.

PLAYING HAMONIC

After fulfilling the league-mandated one-week travel quarantine, defenceman Travis Hamonic finally practised with the Canucks. His pairing alongside the dynamic Quinn Hughes, replacing former Canuck Chris Tanev in a defensive role, was expected.

Technically, Hamonic is on a professional tryout. He won't sign the one-year deal he and the Canucks are believed to have outlined until Tuesday, so the former Calgary Flame wasn't made available to the media on the daily Zoom calls.

"Anytime a player gets on the ice for the first time with a new team, regardless of when it is, there's a lot of thinking going on for them," Green said. "Things are moving fast, new drills, new teammates. I thought he looked pretty good today. His wind was alright. But I'm not hasty to judge a player that has missed a week of training camp. I do like Hamonic a lot as a player, and I thought he looked good today."

WHO'S YOUR DADDY NOW?

Hughes was among the Canucks who referred to Tanev as "Dad," and the prodigy credited his season-long partner for helping him transition to the NHL last year. Hughes spent virtually every day of last season with Tanev, who was partnered with the rookie from the first day of training camp.

Hughes began this camp with Jalen Chatfield, but lately has seen his blue-line partner change almost daily while the Canucks waited for Hamonic to become available. This isn't ideal preparation for a 21-year-old who could average 25 minutes a night in his sophomore season.

"Definitely different because last year the whole goal was for me to play with Chris," Hughes said. "The whole camp we were trying to just figure each other out, and that obviously helped us going into the year. This year, it's not like that. I had probably three or four different partners (before) Travis coming in today. But at the end of the day, you know it doesn't really matter. We've got a lot of great players here, great options, and I'm excited that Travis is here now."

WAIVE GOODBYE

Loui Eriksson, the \$36-million free-agent disappointment who has two years remaining on his contract, was among six Canucks waived on Monday, subject to re-assignment. There was a bookkeeping element to the transactions as the Canucks need to know whether these players would clear before the team sets its 23-man roster and six-player taxi squad ahead of Wednesday's opener.

Eriksson could still end up on the taxi squad, but it's also possible he has played his final game with the Canucks. In 245 games over four years in Vancouver, the 35-year-old has contributed just 38 goals and 89 points. He has been paid \$31 million so far.

General manager Jim Benning tried unsuccessfully to trade his way out of his worst mistake with the Canucks, and the team had hoped Eriksson might agree to simply terminate his contract rather than potentially finish his career in the minors. The winger's buyout-proof contract has only \$5 million remaining over its final two years.

If Eriksson is assigned to the taxi squad or buried in the AHL, the Canucks will save \$1.075 million against his \$6-million annual cap charge.

MORE SCHMIDT PLEASE

Canucks defenceman Nate Schmidt's personality is so effervescent, even the stultifying medium of video calls can't suppress him.

Appearing in Monday's Zoom call with goalie Braden Holtby, his friend and former teammate with the Washington Capitals, Schmidt took over the interview.

"I was actually going to ask you a question," Schmidt said, turning to Holtby. "Is it harder to get your angles down with a new team, or is it harder to play the puck on a new team?"



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Holtby: "Playing the puck. Getting used to the guys, the lingo. Every team has different. . ."

Schmidt: "Terminology?"

Holtby: "Terminology, yeah. Getting to know everyone's voices."

Schmidt: "I actually didn't even think of that. Did you recognize my voice the first time?"

Holtby: "It's pretty easy to spot."

Asked if he ever has a lousy day at the rink, Schmidt said: "There are days after an adult beverage or two where you maybe don't have quite the same energy. But hey, you're still coming in and you're still getting to see the guys. I love playing hockey. Let's be real here: we get to play a game."

Schmidt says he actually has to calm himself between periods so he doesn't squander energy talking with teammates.

"I don't drink any caffeine," he said. "I don't know what that would be like."

MONDAY'S PRACTICE COMBOS

Forwards: J.T. Miller-Elias Pettersson-Brock Boeser, Tanner Pearson-Bo Horvat-Nils Hoglander, Antoine Roussel-Adam Gaudette-Jake Virtanen, Tyler Motte-Jay Beagle-Brandon Sutter.

Defencemen: Alex Edler-Nate Schmidt, Quinn Hughes-Travis Hamonic, Olli Juolevi-Tyler Myers.

Goalies: Braden Holtby, Thatcher Demko.

Extra skaters: forwards Zack MacEwen, Marc Michaelis; defencemen Jack Rathbone, Jalen Chatfield.

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Sportsnet.ca / Explaining why Canadiens waived Perry, Juulsen and Frolik

Eric Engels

January 11, 2021, 4:44 PM

MONTREAL — Know this: The Montreal Canadiens don't want to lose anyone to waivers.

Not Jordan Weal, not Xavier Ouellet, not anyone else who you might think of as being low enough on the depth chart that it just wouldn't matter to them.

It does matter to them.

Canadiens general manager Marc Bergevin didn't secure all of this depth over the off-season just to lose pieces for nothing.

The Canadiens definitely didn't want to lose Noah Juulsen for nothing like they did to the Florida Panthers on Monday. They knew it was a possibility well before they opened up training camp in Brossard, Que., eight days ago, but they had hoped it was just that and not a probability.

Remaining Time -1:38

Perry, Perreault top list of most surprising players placed on waivers

With no jobs available on their blue line, and with salary cap constraints only making it possible for the Canadiens to carry six or seven defencemen on their active roster, they had no choice but to open

themselves up to losing Juulsen. He played just 16 AHL games since November of 2018. He suffered an eye injury that led to lingering migraines and vision problems and, even if he had recently cleared those hurdles, there was no way to secure his spot on the Montreal roster.

So, Juulsen was waived.

In a prior season, it's entirely possible the Canadiens would've stuck Juulsen right on their third pair and let him work his way back into NHL rhythm at his own pace.

But this isn't the Canadiens' blue line of years past.

Alexander Romanov was brought over from the KHL to play, and the expectation is that he'll make a considerable impact even as a 21-year-old. Six-foot-four Joel Edmundson was traded for and immediately signed to a long-term contract to play, and he's joining Jeff Petry on the second pair to give the Canadiens a massive look in their top-four (with "Big" Ben Chiarot and Shea "Mountain Man" Weber on the first pair). And the depth of this group has pushed Brett Kulak to the third after he played the best hockey of his life in the August playoffs, and it's pushed Victor Mete from a regular spot in the lineup right to the margins.

The Canadiens weren't going to carry Juulsen on the roster to have him watch the games. They wanted him playing a big role with the AHL's Laval Rocket, regaining the step two years of inactivity stole from him.

The Panthers had other plans.

With former Canadiens brass members Rick Dudley and Shane Churla assisting Florida general manager Bill Zito, and with the Panthers not having as much depth as the Canadiens do on the blue line, the appeal of a 23-year-old, six-foot-two, right-handed defenceman with obvious NHL upside was too strong to pass up. Especially with Juulsen on a two-way contract that will pay him just \$700,000 in the NHL and \$125,000 in the minors.

"Shane's the guy who drafted Noah Juulsen, and guys that draft certain guys always have a little bit of an attachment to them," said Canadiens coach Claude Julien a little over an hour after Juulsen was claimed by Churla, Dudley and the Panthers. "Maybe they feel Noah can help their team. On our end of it, we didn't have a choice. We could only protect 21 players and we thought Noah had practically not played over two years and maybe some teams would hesitate to claim him."

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

Which brings us to the other thing that happened at noon on Monday.

The Canadiens placed Corey Perry and Michael Frolik on waivers. It was a risk they knew they'd probably have to take when they signed them to one-year deals worth the league minimum just prior to training camp, but knowing that didn't make the decision to do it any easier.

It had to have been particularly hard for the Canadiens in Perry's case.

"Corey's a winner," Bergevin told Sportsnet in an exclusive interview held just minutes prior to the waiver announcements Monday. "He's won at every level he's played. Even up to last year in the bubble, he was very good in Dallas. He's got character. Again, you saw [in Sunday's scrimmage], in front of the net [where Perry scored] — there's not many guys as good as him. So we got him here for a lot of intangibility that he has and we count on him to be part of our team."

If you're wondering why a GM would say that about a player and still go ahead with waiving him, it's because he was faced with an extremely difficult decision in order to make the Canadiens cap compliant prior to submitting the team's official roster to the NHL Tuesday afternoon.

The Canadiens were roughly \$50,000 over the cap with 22 players remaining at camp (with the decision already made to waive Frolik), and now they had to decide between risking losing Mete or Perry on waivers.

They chose the lesser risk in the end.



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With Perry signed for cheap and just days ahead of training camp, any and every team had ample time to take a crack at him and had already opted not to. The Canadiens know another team might bite now — especially with Perry's pedigree offering much-desired depth for next to nothing — but they also know there's a chance one won't.

But that wasn't the case with Mete.

The Canadiens had to feel a team would certainly snatch up a 22-year-old, turbocharged defenceman who's already played 181 NHL games (playoffs included). And with Juulsen already at risk of being claimed, they opted to keep Mete as their seventh defenceman and carry only 12 forwards.

Why didn't the Canadiens place Jake Evans, who wasn't waiver-eligible, on the taxi squad? Why weren't they willing to do that and buy themselves time until they had accrued enough cap space to carry 22 players instead of 21?

The answer is because the Canadiens want Evans in their lineup on Wednesday, when the season begins in his hometown of Toronto against the Maple Leafs. He's spent all of training camp as the fourth-line centre, he's been plugged into the team's penalty kill, he's been impressing Bergevin and Julien since things got underway a week ago and they want him playing.

Some fans wondered if the Canadiens could solve their cap problems by waiving Paul Byron and placing him on the taxi squad — a thought that took for granted his importance to their lineup but also underestimated his potential appeal to another team.

The 31-year-old Byron may be under contract for three more seasons at \$3.4 million, which is a lot to be paying a player on your fourth line, but it's also very little to be paying a 20-goal scorer to be a top-six forward. The idea that he'd slip through waivers, when a team like his hometown Ottawa Senators could plug him into their top-six and immediately make themselves better for the next three years, was convoluted.

All to say, there was no kicking the can down the road on this decision. The Canadiens want to ice the best lineup available to them for every single one of the 56 games they're playing in what they expect will be the most competitive division in the NHL this season, and that means risking losing players they'd prefer to keep.

"There's a price to pay when you go to the cap, and that price you pay is you might have to make moves and you might have to trade or lose players," Bergevin said to us on Monday. "That's just the reality. You can't be close to the cap without any management or running into some issues sometimes. Right now, knock on wood, we don't have any injuries. But if that happens, you have to manage it.

"It's always easier when you have more cap space, and that's why teams usually don't go to the cap. But sometimes, like I said, we have an opportunity (like) this (past off-season) to be able to get some players. And I knew we were going to be tight, but that's a price we were willing to pay and hopefully we'll make it work."

As Julien put it later, "You control what you can and keep your fingers crossed on the things that you can't."

The Canadiens are crossing their fingers on Frolik and Perry.

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Sportsnet.ca / 21 people who will define the NHL's 2020-21 season

Luke Fox

January 11, 2021, 8:41 AM

At the core of every good (and bad and ugly) hockey story, you'll find people.

Here are the 21 newsmakers and game-breakers likely to define the thrilling 56-game sprint that will be 2020-21 NHL season — ranked in order of importance.

21. Owen Power

Power, our early favourite to go No. 1 in the 2021 draft, is one of a handful of promising 18-year-old defencemen (Carson Lambos, Simon Edvinsson, Luke Hughes, Brandt Clarke) ready to crowd the top of the entry class. As with every NHL season, the temptation to shed NHL bodies for picks and increase your lottery odds will be there for organizations obviously reloading for the future (Detroit, Ottawa, L.A., Chicago, et al.). Just ask Jeff Gorton or Pierre Dorion how a high pick can stoke the fan base's hope. Prizes like Power define the season by the moves made to secure them.

Bonus: Power, who is patrolling the University of Michigan blue line, will actually be playing games — something that cannot be said for all top prospects in this unique year.

20. The Brothers Hughes

OK, we're cheating a bit here, squeezing in a three-for-one.

The eldest Hughes brother, Vancouver's Quinn, has played just a single season and is already being touted in some corners as the most dynamic D-man of the Canadian division. He's already the type of game-breaker who could drive his club and its wicked power-play into the post-season.

More compelling will be the sophomore campaign of Jack, often overwhelmed as a slight NHL rookie. All Jack did during quarantine was pack on 14 pounds of muscle (weighing in at 180 pounds) and invest in his own confidence boost. "I'm ready to have a breakout year," he proclaims.

Toss in Jim and Ellen's youngest son, six-foot-two draft bait Luke — whose physical maturity and hockey IQ are turning scouts' heads — and the next seven months could be Hughes.

19. Kendall Coyne Schofield

Ever so slowly, women are breaking into the old boys' club. The Leafs hired Hayley Wickenheiser and Noelle Needham. Seattle made Cammi Granato the league's first female pro scout and added strategist Alexandra Mandrycky. And for 2020-21, the Blackhawks made Coyne Schofield their first-ever female development coach.

The year 2021 began with Team USA assistant Theresa Feaster slipping on a world junior gold medal. We're certainly not proclaiming the NHL's glass ceiling broken, but cracks are starting to form.

All Coyne Schofield does these days is bust barriers with a smile on her face. Whether it's swiping the spotlight at the men's all-star weekend, joining the San Jose Sharks broadcast team, or playing an integral role in the Blackhawks' rebuild.

"This might be the first time some of these players have a woman as a coach," Coyne Schofield said. "But I know through my talent, through my experiences, through my work ethic, I can provide these players with the skills to help them get to the next level. And that level is the NHL with the Chicago Blackhawks."

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

18. Marc-Andre Fleury

He's the affable posterboy for a carefree franchise starring in iPhone commercials and securing a \$21-million commitment. No. He's a No. 2 netminder skewered by the blade of evil coach Pete DeBoer. No. He's cool with sharing a \$12-million crease with fellow No. 1 Robin Lehner, because you totally need two bona fide starters to thrive in 2021's



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compacted schedule. No. He's still totally available for trade if you want to ring up Kelly McCrimmon.

The Flower is still rooted in Vegas — a Cup contender — but even his bubbly presence won't distract from the Golden Knights' cap issues. Or the inevitable analysis over which great goalie deserves the next start.

17. Jacob Markstrom

Picked and paid (\$36 million) to stabilize a Flames crease that has been searching for a bona fide No. 1 since Miikka Kiprusoff hung up his blocker, Markstrom is the king piece of these Calgary Canucks. He and his elite save percentage on high-danger shots have the power to make Brad Treliving's overhauled blueline and new bench boss look great. Should the Flames falter, however, the time limit on this general manager's core may be up. (P.S. We have no doubt Agitator of the North Matthew Tkachuk will put his stamp on 2021, too.)

16. Dr. Anthony Fauci

Safely executing an entire sporting season across two countries over seven months in the swirl of an unrelenting pandemic is a different beast than hunkering down in two locations for a 24-team tournament.

There will be obstacles we don't see coming. So, it is both wise and telling that Commissioner Bettman has been in consult with the United States' foremost COVID-19 authority in pulling this show off. Some teams (Florida and Arizona, for example) will open with fans inside a closed roof. Others will want to follow suit. Every decision the NHL makes during this navigation must be made with health in mind. Already, outbreaks in Dallas, Columbus and Pittsburgh have reminded that the virus is still dictating things.

15. Joe Thornton

"I need to win a Stanley Cup," the oldest NHL forward declared after leaving San Jose, probably the hardest hockey decision of his life. "This team is ready to win now. I'm ready to win."

At 41, the sure-shot Hall of Famer has accomplished everything a player can in this game. Except the most important thing. Like poetry, Thornton's lifelong pursuit aligns with the mission of the tortured Toronto Maple Leafs, who haven't lifted sport's shiniest trophy since the NHL invited a seventh team. We'll know in July (or sooner) if this marriage has a fairytale ending or ends in tragedy. But with Thornton getting a shot alongside top-line stars Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner, he'll be must-see TV regardless.

14. Bill Armstrong

"I didn't come all the way to the desert to get a tan. I came here to win a championship," Armstrong proclaimed upon assuming the reins in Arizona.

The GM inherited a mess. No first-round picks for two drafts. No cap space. And a captain with a no-move clause that wanted out but held all the leverage. The Coyotes were left in a bad way, but Armstrong has attacked his first GM job with purpose.

He's made efforts to patch up the organization's relationship with icon Shane Doan. He already traded Derek Stepan to Ottawa and should look to move more of his eight(!) impending UFAs during this ambitious rebuild. (The reverse retro Kachina sweaters are dope, too.) Patience will be the order of the day, as much as Yotes fans won't want to hear it.

13. Donald Fehr

The NHLPA honcho knows that just because a memorandum of understanding between his constituency and the owners was signed in July, that doesn't mean the negotiating is over and done with. As obstacles arise, gambling and player tracking get implemented and the vaccine rolls out, Fehr must protect the interests of a union whose middle class and youngest members are getting squeezed. Fehr says he expects "a dramatic return to the international stage" after negotiating

player participation in the Olympics — and growing the game and its personalities is his responsibility, too.

11. Josh Anderson

Anderson scored one more NHL goal than you did in 2019-20, and Marc Bergevin rewarded him with a seven-year, \$38.5-million commitment upon trading for him in the off-season. The power forward is coming off a significant shoulder injury (hence the lone goal) and hasn't dressed for a hockey game in 13 months. He is not the type of player you add unless you truly believe your roster has a legit shot. Anderson personifies this meaner, deeper Habs image — one built for grudge matches and the post-season grind. The risk: He also could represent one of Bergevin's last big swings. Montreal hasn't won a playoff round in five years, and no one in that organization is predicting mediocrity.

11. Tom Renney

The CEO of Hockey Canada will invest a great portion of his year assembling the pieces charged with defending the crown. The last two times NHLers were invited to participate in the Olympic Games (2010, 2014), the Canadian men left with gold dangling from their necks. But an eight-year gap and an influx of new national heroes has set the stage for great turnover heading into 2022. (Just ask Drew Doughty how he feels about passing torch.)

Will serial winner Mike Babcock return as head coach? Or will a fresh face like Jon Cooper or Jared Bednar run the bench? Smith will assemble the brass that will assemble arguably the most hotly anticipated superteam of this generation (Connor McDavid and Sidney Crosby on the same power-play!). Low-key, the 2021 season is a tryout. And every decision Smith and his group makes will be doused in scrutiny.

10. Peter Laviolette

The star-studded Washington Capitals went out with whimper in 2020, looking like a shadow of their 2018 public-fountain-partying selves. Word is, they got too cozy. The loss of longtime goalie Braden Holtby is one jolt. The arrival of no-nonsense veteran head coach Laviolette is another one entirely.

Laviolette has a Cup ring and track record of getting results early when he steps behind a new bench, but how he motivates such an established core and so many healthy egos will be intriguing. Toss in the fact captain Alexander Ovechkin is entering a contract year and new/old guy Zdeno Chara will be looking for all the ice time he can get, and the dynamics within the Capitals' room should be dynamite to follow.

9. Alexis Lafreniere

Jeff Gorton's New York Rangers were already off to a promising rebuild, and then they went and won a cotdamn lottery. Held back from Team Canada at the world juniors so he could prep for NHL life in the Big Apple, 2020's No. 1-overall pick joins Artemi Panarin, Adam Fox and Igor Shestorkin. He bolsters the Blueshirts' bid to become a young, exciting playoff team in the league's deepest division. How quickly 19-year-old Lafreniere adjusts to the man's game will affect both his Calder chances and New York's shot at becoming the city's best hockey team.

8. Tuukka Rask

We're not sure if it's the 2021 Bruins who have a Last Dance vibe about them. Or if, in hindsight, the 2020 Presidents' Trophy winners already performed the final tango? Captain Zdeno Chara is off to a division rival. Power-play QB Torey Krug joined the very organization that crushed Boston's soul in the final game of 2019, without much of a bidding war. And now, the two greatest cap hits on the roster — Rask and underrated pivot David Krejci — are embarking on the final seasons of their deals.

Rask memorably and understandably bowed out of the 2020 playoff bubble early due to family concerns. He has publicly pondered retirement. When he's on his game, however, Rask is one of the very best at his position. Even at 33.



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In 2021, he could lead the Bruins on another deep run or win another Vezina or throw on a new sweater or quietly retreat from the sport.

7. Taylor Hall

Under consult with agent Darren Ferris and encouragement from supreme communicator Ralph Krueger, Hall did what no top UFA in hockey's cap era has done: He took a juicy one-year contract (\$8 million). Often expressing his desire to (finally) align with a contender, Hall is betting on himself and... the Buffalo Sabres.

Problem is, the Sabres own the longest playoff drought in the league and now find themselves in the realigned East Division of Death. Can Hall and MVP candidate Jack Eichel pull this group out of the cellar? Moreover, will Hall's novel approach to free agency have a trickle effect next off-season?

6. Evander Kane

Kane is finding his voice. Granted, sometimes he uses it to challenge the TikTok twins to boxing matches. Mostly — and most importantly — the San Jose Sharks star has used his platform to push for long-overdue change.

A rare active NHLer brave enough to not only speak out but activate, Kane co-heads the Hockey Diversity Alliance with Akim Aliu. Matt Dumba, Wayne Simmonds, Nazem Kadri, Joel Ward, Chris Stewart, Anthony Duclair and Trevor Daley are all on board. Operating independently of the NHL, the group is on a mission to eradicate systemic racism and intolerance in hockey.

Too many events of 2020 and 2021 underscored what a challenge they're in for — and how important it is for the HDA to take it on. A formal alliance with the NHL fell through. May they remain undeterred and be supported by significant corporate backing.

5. Patrik Laine

"I'm here, aren't I?"

Indeed, the Finnish sniper has been present and accounted for during Winnipeg Jets camp after an off-season curdling with trade requests and rumours of a move. Like Jacob Trouba before him, Laine may not be long for Manitoba. But he's under club control and it will serve all involved parties for Laine to light it up alongside centre Paul Stastny in his contract year. Come July, the bridge is over.

"Patrik Laine today, he practised like a man. He was hard, he was fast, he was as good as I've ever seen him practice. So, I'll judge that," coach Paul Maurice said on Day 1 of camp. "He was here. He was in a good mood. He was fun to watch. He's committed."

To the Jets? To pumping his own trade value? To both? Get your popcorn.

4. Connor McDavid

Last season, McDavid scored his sweater number in points — 97 — despite playing only 64 games. But that wasn't good enough to earn the Oilers captain a Hart or Ted Lindsay nomination. Not even a spot on the NHL's Second All-Star Team. Edmonton bowed out in the qualification round to a ho-hum Chicago squad, and McDavid is still stuck at one playoff series victory over five years.

The all-Canadian division will give the entire country reason to tune in regularly to McDavid's otherworldly rushes, and the fastest star player a greater spotlight for his talents. Whether he and that other Oilers MVP, Leon Draisaitl, are enough to drive Edmonton to greatness will be fascinating.

3. Nathan MacKinnon

MacKinnon has never won a Hart, Conn Smythe or Art Ross trophy; it only feels that way. The biggest bargain in hockey is far and away the best player on his team, if not the planet. Last time we saw this beast, he was piling up 25 points in 15 playoff games, turning each shift into must-

see TV. And — on paper — his Colorado Avalanche have never looked so legit. With key pieces on expiring contracts (Gabriel Landeskog, Brandon Saad, Ian Cole, Philippe Grubauer), it's no stretch to imagine 2021 as the Avs' best shot at a title in the Nate Dogg era.

2. Gary Bettman

The commissioner has scaled a mountain (awarding a '20 Stanley Cup come hell or high water) only to look up and stare at an even steeper one. As he navigates COVID-19, fan-free arenas and a closed border, Bettman is squishing the schedule, flattening the salary cap, redrawing the divisions, and flipping over the couch cushions in search of every morsel of hockey-related revenue.

The divisions have corporate names, the helmets have corporate logos, Lake Tahoe is hosting outdoor games that matter, and the gambling game is a priority. Oh, and then there are the small matters of launching a 32nd franchise and negotiating a critical new U.S. broadcast deal to help the sport get back in the black.

1. Ron Francis

A superspy will be lurking in the shadows throughout the 2021 campaign, secretly scouting and quietly rerunning his Seattle Expansion Draft Simulator to the brink of carpal tunnel syndrome. Much like George McPhee in 2017, Francis can't wait to get his roster construction crackin' (sorry).

Yes, his peers will be leery of getting fleeced by the general manager of Franchise 32, but in a flat-cap world, \$81.5 million in breathing room opens up a world of possibilities. Every trade, extension and transaction the Original 30 sign off on will be made with Francis's greedy palms in mind. They don't want to be responsible for turning the 2021-22 Kraken into a monster.

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs Notebook: Engvall misses cut, Dell staying with big club

Luke Fox

January 11, 2021, 4:17 PM

TORONTO -- Rare is the occasion throughout his first year behind the Toronto Maple Leafs bench that Sheldon Keefe has called out a specific player and demanded better.

Publicly, at least, Keefe has been much more the encourager than the critic when it comes to individual analysis.

Yet in this sprint of a training camp that has made it awfully difficult for players to scramble up the depth chart, there's been no mistaking who has been bumped down.

Pierre Engvall won a Calder Cup under Keefe in 2018. He played in the majority of the Maple Leafs' games last season as an NHL rookie and earned himself a two-year, \$2.5-million contract extension. During this camp, he was the first man up when a forward from the main group fell to injury (Alexander Kerfoot, leg).

And yet, on Monday, Engvall was among the first was on a path back to the Marlies after a deep round of roster cuts.

"I expect Pierre to be better, to be honest," Keefe said Saturday night, following the Blue and White's intrasquad scrimmage. "I think it might be coming up on, if not past, the one-year anniversary of his last goal."



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Ouch.

That Engvall, 24, scored in the scrimmage didn't matter. That a player whose role in the bigs will be a defensive, bottom-six role committed turnovers did.

Keefe wants a stronger physical commitment from Engvall, who's more likely to rely on his smooth skating than his outsized six-foot-five, 214-pound frame. And, of course, the occasional offensive contribution can't hurt. Engvall went pointless in the Columbus bubble series.

Engvall's last goal arrived on Feb. 22, when he scored on Carolina Hurricanes emergency backup David Ayers. He has one point in his past 25 games.

Who's in? Who's out?

In all, Toronto trimmed 14 bodies off its roster Monday, sending the following players down to continue their training with the Marlies:

Forwards Kenny Agostino, Joey Anderson, Justin Brazeau, Rourke Chartier, Engvall, Tyler Gaudet, Scott Sabourin, and Nic Petan; defencemen Mac Hollowell, Teemu Kivihalme, Timothy Liljegren, Martin Marincin, and Calle Rosen; and goaltender Michael Hutchinson.

The remaining group participated in an intense, 70-minute session at the Ford Performance Centre spread over two sheets and featuring battle drills, special teams work and line rushes. Music blared.

Keefe cautioned that by no means should these roster decisions be considered final.

"It's going to be a fluid situation," the coach said. "Throughout the season, we're going to need a lot of people."

As things stand, here is the projected lineup for Wednesday's opener versus Montreal:

Thornton-Matthews-Marner

Vesey-Tavares-Nylander

Mikheyev-Kerfoot-Hyman

Barabanov-Spezza-Simmonds

Robertson-Brooks-Boyd (extras)

Rielly-Brodie

Muzzin-Holl

Dermott-Bogossian

Sandin-Lehtonen (extras)

Andersen

Campbell

Dell (extra)

Note: Robertson, Lehtonen, Barabanov and Sandin are all waivers-exempt.

Lehtonen's development gives Dermott a shot

Until Monday, Mikko Lehtonen -- the reigning KHL Defenceman of the Year and a fascinating new recruit -- had been slotting to the left of Zach Bogossian on the third pairing, and the Finn's offensive flair was on full display Saturday.

The Maple Leafs have decided, however, that the 26-year-old will be best served by watching some small-ice action from the press box and taking a step back to work on his reads and own-zone play in practice before making his NHL debut.

"Looking at last week for Mikko, the game the other day," Keefe said, "we like a lot of things about him, [but] we think there are areas that need more time."

T.J. Brodie assumed Lehtonen's spot up top on the second power-play unit, and Travis Dermott slid in as third-pair left D.

Keefe has had direct conversations with Dermott. The defenceman has bounced up to the top four and down to the fourth pairing over the past year, and he's been used on both the left and right side during this camp.

"I would really like to see Travis really latch on to his strengths," Keefe said.

The coach has identified three elements for Dermott to focus on and improve: (a) puck retrievals and starting the Leafs' breakout on dump-ins, (b) defensive-zone puck pressure and causing turnovers, and (c) gap control during the opponents' rush.

Check those three boxes, and Dermott will help his own cause.

Waiver worry means carrying three goalies

Third-stringer Aaron Dell did not train with the main group, as a three-goalie practice rotation is seldom ideal. But it's notable that Dell, 31, was not placed on waivers either.

There is a serious concern that Dell -- a bargain at \$800,000 -- wouldn't slip through the wire without being claimed. The New Jersey Devils, for one, are in need of goaltending depth in light of Corey Crawford's recent retirement.

For now, Toronto will carry three goalies. On Monday, extra forwards Nic Robertson, Travis Boyd and Adam Brooks skated over to the Marlies pad after practice to shoot on Dell and keep him sharp.

"We like having the depth at the position. We feel it's important in this season. So, that's how we're doing things here to start," Keefe explained. "We've had some discussions about whether or not we utilize him at different times to back up here in the early going. We're going to continue to discuss that."

One-Timers

Alexander Kerfoot returned to his third-line centre spot Monday after missing the bulk of camp nursing a leg injury suffered Tuesday. Kerfoot explained that he'd lost balance and fallen awkwardly into the boards during a 3-on-2 line rush. "I feel good on the ice right now," Kerfoot assured. The plan is to deploy Kerfoot for more D-zone draws this season. He has started 53 per cent of his NHL shifts in the O-zone.... Because all coaches are mandated to wear masks during practice, Keefe uses an electric whistle.... New assistant Manny Malhotra, who suffered a serious eye injury in 2011, smartly coaches with a helmet and visor on.... Marner on Thornton's inability to carry stress: "I don't think he has social media. He barely knows anything about social media. So, it's great in that aspect."... BREAKING: Mitch Marner now casually refers to Auston Matthews as "Tony."

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Sportsnet.ca / Vancouver Canucks Season Preview: Can they weather free-agency losses?

Iain MacIntyre

January 11, 2021, 10:22 AM

VANCOUVER -- After four years stumbling through the wilderness, the Vancouver Canucks were discovered alive and well last season, younger, better and hungrier after their ordeal.



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Driven by young stars Elias Patterson, Quinn Hughes, Brock Boeser and Bo Horvat, and supported by a few key, mid-career veterans, the Canucks made it back to the National Hockey League playoffs for the first time since 2015 and won two rounds – Vancouver's first post-season success since the 2011 run to the Stanley Cup Final.

The challenge now, of course, is to stay out of the woods and do it again. Heading into a season when a lot of people outside British Columbia expect the Canucks to regress, coach Travis Green must find a way to improve his team's win rate for a fourth straight year. No one on the Canucks is planning a step back, nor are their re-energized fans likely to accept one.

2019-20 regular season record: 69 GP, 36-27-6, 78 pts

2019-20 season finish: 7th, Western Conference

Top 2020 draft pick: Joni Jurmo (82nd)

Additions: Nils Hoglander, F; Nate Schmidt, D, Olli Juolevi, D, Travis Hamonic, D, Jalen Chatfield, D; Braden Holtby, G.

Subtractions: Tyler Toffoli, F, Josh Leivo, F; Chris Tanev, D, Troy Stecher, D, Oscar Fanteberg, D; Jacob Markstrom, G.

No team seemed to lose more ground in free agency than the Canucks, who saw an October rush to the exits by all of their unrestricted free agents, including starting goalie Jacob Markstrom and veteran defence leader Chris Tanev.

Even after general manager Jim Benning made what could be his best trade in six years in charge, acquiring top-pairing defenceman Nate Schmidt at clearance prices from the salary-cap squeezed Vegas Golden Knights, predictions and projections for the 2021 season almost universally have the Canucks missing the playoffs in the Canadian division.

The team fuelled itself last year, both before the regular season and the summer playoffs, on external skepticism about their ability. Almost nobody picked them to be even close to the playoffs, but they thrived as underdogs, which wasn't surprising to anyone who understands the fierce drive of their best players and especially Pettersson and Hughes.

But the challenge before them this season is significant.

Without deadline rental Tyler Toffoli on the top line, the Canucks have to continue to score the way they did last season (eighth in NHL with 3.25 goals per game, fourth on the power play at 24.2 per cent) while finding ways to be better and tighter defensively (19th at 3.10 GA/PG, 28th at 33.3 shots allowed per game).

Remaining Time -0:39

Travis Green evaluates first day at Canucks camp

The blue line has been overhauled with Schmidt, Travis Hamonic and Olli Juolevi replacing Tanev, Troy Stecher and Oscar Fantenberg. On paper, this looks like an upgrade and Schmidt, certainly, is better than anybody the Canucks had playing behind Calder runner-up Hughes last season. But the biggest question is in goal, where former Capital Braden Holtby is being counted on to return to something close to career form after a fairly dismal final season in Washington. His tandem partner is sophomore Thatcher Demko, whose magnificent playoff cameo last September in place of an injured Markstrom still left him with only 41 appearances in the NHL.

Even if the scoring holds up and their defending is better, well, nobody succeeds in the NHL without solid goaltending. If Holtby and Demko deliver it, the Canucks will again surprise people by making the playoffs in the North Division, which hasn't a dominant team, and make opponents uneasy once they get there.

X-FACTOR: Braden Holtby

Even with his Stanley Cup win in 2018, Holtby hasn't been the same goalie the last three seasons than he was the six years before that. His

.897 save percentage last season – just .906 at even strength – was easily the worst of his career, and his minus-16.8 goals-saved-above-expectations made Holtby a liability.

Holtby admitted when he signed a two-year deal (\$4.3-million average) with the Canucks that he allowed the uncertainty of his final season with the Capitals to affect his play. His decline also co-occurred with the departure from Washington three years ago of goaltending coach Mitch Korn.

Happy to be in Vancouver near his Western Canadian roots, and working with Canucks goaltending guru Ian Clark, whose ideals closely align with Korn's, Holtby believes he will have a bounceback season. Obviously, so do the Canucks. The goaltender may never return to his Vezina Trophy form of five years ago, but his save percentage could be much closer to his career average of .916 than last year's .897. It will have to be for the Canucks to make the playoffs.

Just when it looked like the young talent pouring into the Canucks would slow to a trickle in 2021 after the emergence in consecutive seasons of Boeser, Pettersson and Hughes, along comes this five-foot-eight Swedish dynamo.

The 2019 second-round pick, who just turned 20, still has to actually make the Canucks' roster and lineup. But he was the story of the opening week of training camp, darting around the ice and making confident plays with the puck after an eyebrow-raising deployment by Green alongside Horvat on Vancouver's second line.

After starting this season with Rogle of the Swedish Hockey League, Hoglander isn't expected to follow Boeser, Pettersson and Hughes to the (virtual) awards podium as a Calder Trophy finalist. But he is great on his skates, surprisingly strong on the puck, loves to make plays in the offensive zone and could fill the gap in the top six left by Toffoli. He may even pull off a lacrosse goal -- perfect for an all-Canadian division.

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Sportsnet.ca / Edmonton Oilers Season Preview: Can new faces push them to next level?

Mark Spector

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EDMONTON — Nobody got crushed by 'The Pause' the way the Edmonton Oilers did.

From challenging for the Pacific Division title and — at worst — looking forward to a Round 1 series against the hated Calgary Flames, the Oilers returned nearly five months later as an unrecognizable team, beaten handily by a Chicago Blackhawks club that would bow out easily at the hands of Vegas the following series.

They were percentage points from getting a bye through the Qualifying Round. Instead, the Oilers technically missed the playoffs altogether, which makes for a confusing duty in handicapping what kind of team they'll be this year.

Were they the team that was mighty good through 71 games? The team that stunk the joint out in four games versus Chicago? Is the goaltending good enough this year, just because the same tandem was good enough last year? Can Tyson Barrie fill in for the injured Oscar Klefbom?

Let's dig in on an Oilers team that has two of the top five players in the world, but hasn't accomplished much yet.



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2019-20 regular season record: 37-25-9

2019-20 season finish: 2nd in Pacific, 4th in West (by points), 5th in West (by %)

Top 2020 draft pick: C Dylan Holloway

Additions: Dominik Kahun, LW; Jesse Puljujarvi, RW; Kyle Turris, C; Tyson Barrie, RD; Slater Koekoek, LD; Theodore Lennstrom, LD.

Subtractions: Riley Sheahan (to BUF); Matt Benning (to NSH); Andreas Athanasiou (to LAK); Oscar Klefbom (to LTIR)

The hardest thing to get your head around when analyzing the Edmonton Oilers is to stay in the moment.

Sure, they've missed the playoffs for 13 of the last 14 years. Yes, the organization is guilty of pushing young player after young player into its lineup too soon, stunting their growth. We get it: The history is lousy.

The recent history however — like, the past 16 months — is much better. Much more stable.

Today, Edmonton has depth at forward, has veteran players like James Neal, Alex Chiasson, Tyler Ennis and Juhar Khaira battling just to get into the lineup. They're deep at forward — no more minor league fill-ins as soon as the first injury occurs.

Edmonton was the best Canadian team last season in both points (83) and winning percentage (.585), with a new head coach in Dave Tippett and new GM in Ken Holland. They're not rushing prospects now like they have for years, and when you look at their lineup you'll find NHL depth that has not been there for ages.

Of course, losing Klefbom — their minutes leader last season who has arthritis in his shoulder — is a blow. So Barrie comes in to run the power play, and you count on some growth from Ethan Bear, Caleb Jones and perhaps even Evan Bouchard.

Holland wanted better goaltending than the Mike Smith-Mikko Koskinen tandem, but struck out in free agency. So he pivoted to Kyle Turris, a pretty good find for 3C, brought in wild-card Jesse Puljujarvi, Dominik Kahun to play next to Leon Draisaitl, Barrie, and depth defenceman Slater Koekoek.

This team is better than last year's team, and last year's team was pretty good. This team will make the playoffs in the North.

You want to have Barrie on the ice with McDavid as often as possible, and Draisaitl the rest of the time. If his strength is delivering pucks to the tape of speeding forwards at precisely the right moment, and following up the play as a threat to score as the trailer, then we are ready to say that the Oilers haven't had that defenceman in a long, long time.

A trailer should be able to make some money on a team that has the vision of Draisaitl, McDavid, Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and Kahun in its top six. Barrie is on a one-year deal and came here to do just that. It's a nice match.

Player who could surprise: Jesse Puljujarvi

Puljujarvi is back, and we are reminded of what a specimen he is: six-foot-four, 202 pounds. An above-average skater with an above-average shot. There is so much hockey player here that it would be a tragedy if it cannot be mined.

The leadership group has gone out of their way to welcome Puljujarvi back to the team, but the most important change is that Puljujarvi's English has improved immensely. How many times did he tell a coach that he understood during his first NHL stint, when he did not? How little fun must it have been when he couldn't even have dinner with the boys and understand what was being said?

A comfortable 22-year-old Puljujarvi could be a difference-maker.

Now, we wait and see.

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TSN.CA / Thornton making jumbo impression on Marner

By Mark Masters

TSN Toronto Reporter Mark Masters reports on the Maple Leafs, who practised at the Ford Performance Centre on Monday.

The line of Joe Thornton, Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner generated a couple goals on Saturday night and, even though it was just an intra-squad scrimmage, they all wore wide smiles during the group hugs. Following the game, Matthews and Marner, both 23-years-old, each posted a picture of the first celebratory moment as an Instagram story.

As for the 41-year-old Thornton?

"I don't even think he has social media or barely knows anything about social media so it's great in that aspect," said Marner. "He's just going to go out every day and be the same guy and joke around and me and [Matthews] are going to try and do the same. We're not going to focus on outside noise."

There was a lot of outside noise around Marner at the start of last season as negotiations on a new contract spilled into the start of training camp. The six-year deal worth more than \$65 million got done, but the increased expectations and scrutiny seemed to weigh heavy on the 6-foot, 175-pound winger.

The Leafs are hoping Thornton's influence will help the fun-loving Marner play loose and free.

"He keeps the focus on where it needs to be which is in the gym, in our meetings, on the practice ice and in games so that's what Joe's all about," observed head coach Sheldon Keefe. "Joe's got a great ability, even in the early going, just to know when it's time to dig in and get the work done and, most importantly, stay focused and block out the noise and not get distracted by anything that's outside your control."

Thornton also appears poised to have a significant impact on how Marner plays. The Markham, Ont., native has consistently talked about the need to shoot more throughout his professional career. He's averaged between 2.3 and 2.8 shots per game in four seasons with the Leafs.

"Just trying to get more of a mindset of being a shooter," Marner said again on Monday. "I know I have it in me. I've shown it a lot of times so I know it's inside. It's just being that guy that can believe in it."

Marner has tremendous vision and takes great pride in his ability to set up teammates. His charity is even called The Marner Assist Fund. But now he'll have one of the greatest playmakers in National Hockey League history on his line. Thornton is seventh on the all-time assists list having recently passed Adam Oates.

"Playing with Joe is going to put more pucks on his stick in positions to shoot so I think that will help," noted Keefe. "Also, he'll be thinking about the fact Joe is a passer and then you need to have another shooter on the line."

Marner potted a goal in Saturday's intra-squad scrimmage with a beauty short-side snipe.

"We got Jumbo on our line, a guy who can really move the puck well and find open guys so my [outlook] is now to be an open guy and be ready to get it off my stick quickly," Marner noted.



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Keefe has also called on Marner to attack the net more this season.

"He needs to be of the mindset that he doesn't always have to look for Auston," said Keefe. "He's a good player that can score himself and put a defence and goalies in bad spots and take advantage of it. We want him to have that mentality [of] producing more shots or getting to the net more and producing more goals or just simply drawing more penalties with the way he skates and the way he attacks and makes D nervous."

Thornton helping Marner handle 'Jumbo' expectations

Mitch Marner started last season under increased scrutiny thanks to a rich new contract that wasn't signed until after training camp opened. The 23-year-old winger lamented the fact his hometown had been pretty hard on him during negotiations. Well, this season is starting off a lot differently. As Mark Masters reports, a new linemate is helping Marner deal with Jumbo expectations.

Alex Kerfoot returned to practice for the first time since hurting his leg last Tuesday.

"I just fell into the boards," he recalled. "It was a three-on-two rush and [Zach Hyman] put it to the net and I kind of lost balance a little bit and went into the boards awkwardly."

Kerfoot slotted back in as the third-line centre skating between Ilya Mikheyev and Hyman. That new-look trio is expected to bring some defensive grit to Toronto's stacked lineup.

"Really excited about it," said Kerfoot. "You've seen Hymns and Micky a lot and they're both good players and hard to play against. They've got a lot of speed, hound pucks and that's really just our job is to be able to take maybe a few more defensive zone faceoffs, be able to be relied upon in those scenarios and prevent goals, but also be able to produce offensively."

After bouncing between centre and wing in his first season in Toronto, Kerfoot should benefit from a more defined role. And he won't be using the injury as an excuse for a slow start.

"In the grand scheme of things it wasn't that long and I was able to skate the last couple days as well, so I feel good on the ice now," the Harvard product said.

Pierre Engvall, who had filled in for Kerfoot the last week, was among the training camp cuts announced on Monday.

Kerfoot returns to practice; ready for new role

Alex Kerfoot said it felt good to return to practice after recovering from his injury, and along with linemates Ilya Mikheyev and Zach Hyman, is embracing the role of a tough line to play against in the defensive zone.

Keefe emphasized conditioning during a short, but intense training camp.

"This was as hard a camp as I've had in my five years, especially the first two or three days, there was a lot of skating," said left winger Jimmy Vesey. "It's a little bit of a shock to the system to get back out there at such a high speed."

Considering he hadn't played since the Buffalo Sabres were eliminated in March, the 27-year-old was thrilled with how he handled his first week as a Leaf.

"I was really happy with how my body felt and with my conditioning, especially after I hadn't played competitive hockey since March. I was really happy with how camp went. I felt good every day on the ice. In terms of our line, we've gotten better every day."

That line includes John Tavares and William Nylander. It's a plum assignment for a free-agent signee who produced just 20 points in 64 games last season. Vesey blames a timid start for derailing his season with the Sabres and he's vowed to begin this year "with my hair on fire." That may explain his harsh self-evaluation for Saturday's scrimmage.

"I don't think it was my best game," he said despite seeing Tavares and Nylander score during the dress rehearsal at Scotiabank Arena. "I have more to give in a game setting like that ... When we get going here on Wednesday we have to focus on the details in our neutral zone and D-zone structure and that will lead to more offence for us."

The coaching staff has provided specific marching orders for Vesey, who is entering his fifth NHL season with his third team.

"My role on that line is when we don't have the puck to disrupt the other team and get in on the forecheck and turn pucks over and then hold onto it until I get my linemates there for support. Sheldon emphasized that it's not going to be about goals and points, it's about doing some legwork on that line. For me, a successful season would be bouncing back after last year and proving I can play and complement top guys."

Vesey, who stands 6-foot-3, 202 pounds, believes his style will fit well with the way Keefe wants the Leafs to play.

"It's a really aggressive system," he said. "I feel like I can pressure a lot of pucks and cause those turnovers that he wants me to. I'm still adjusting to it and when to go, when I can be very aggressive and when I should hold back a little bit. In the scrimmage settings so far, I have gotten in on the forecheck and caused a lot turnovers and it was nice [for our line] to get rewarded with two goals Saturday."

Keefe sees a player who can provide something comparable to Andreas Johansson, who was traded to the New Jersey Devils in the off-season.

"What I see from him is a guy who's a really good complementary player," the coach said. "[He] can move up and down the lineup and play on the power play, kill some penalties and play with good players. He can score in the league at even strength. He's a big guy who gets around the ice well. He has a really good stick. It's unbelievable how many times he gets a stick on a puck and creates a turnover. That's a strength of his and just want to get him confident and feeling good. We also think he can contribute on the penalty kill by utilizing that good stick and instincts and speed."

Vesey took reps with the third penalty kill forward group at practice on Monday. The top two units feature Marner with Hyman and then Kerfoot with Mikheyev. Matthews and Jason Spezza will also see time shorthanded with a focus on winning faceoffs.

Vesey believes he has more to give Maple Leafs

The line of John Tavares, Jimmy Vesey and William Nylander scored two goals in the team's scrimmage Saturday, but Vesey believes he has more to give to the team, and is thankful for the words of encouragement from head coach Sheldon Keefe. Vesey has been impressed by Nylander's speed and ability to make space for himself on the ice.

After skating on the third defence pair with Zach Bogosian throughout training camp, Mikko Lehtonen was dropped to the fourth pair at Monday's practice and the KHL import will start the season as a healthy scratch.

"We don't want to rush him into a situation that he may not be adjusted to quite yet," said Keefe. "We're going to take our time with that."

Lehtonen posted a pair of assists on Saturday night and showed positive flashes in the offensive zone, but admitted afterwards that it didn't go as smoothly as hoped.

"I just have to sometimes give the puck away [to a teammate] and don't force the game," Lehtonen told reporters on Saturday night. "That's the biggest thing. You don't have that much time. I like to keep the puck, but sometimes you have to make a simple play."

Unlike a traditional training camp, this one featured no exhibition games against other teams, which worked against the 26-year-old rookie.

"We'll take a little step back with Mikko and give him more time to watch and get a feel for the league and then also more time to work on things in



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practice," said Keefe. "We expect that he obviously will get in at some point and we hope he's more prepared when that's the case."

Leafs Ice Chips: Dermott promoted to third D pairing

Travis Dermott has been promoted to the third defensive pair with Zach Bogosian, which has newcomer Mikko Lehtonen likely a healthy scratch for the season opener on Wednesday. Mark Masters has more.

Travis Dermott took Lehtonen's spot beside Bogosian. The 24-year-old settled for a one-year extension in the off-season and is under pressure to prove he can be a reliable NHL regular. Keefe has been very clear about what he's looking for from the Newmarket, Ont., native.

"I would really like to see Travis latch onto his strengths which, to me, are three really key areas," Keefe said. "One, going back for the puck to start break outs. Then defensive zone puck pressure to create separations, get us out of our end that way. And then just his gap control in order to [stop opponents from getting] into our zone. Those are three areas I'd like to see him really excel at and if he focuses on those three then a lot of really positive things come into his game. Over time he can stack some other things on top of it, but focusing on that and being reliable in those areas are key."

TSN's Kristen Shilton has more on Toronto's defence here

The Leafs trimmed their roster to 26 on Monday. The following players were loaned to the Toronto Marlies or placed on waivers for the purposes of being sent down: Kenny Agostino, Joey Anderson, Justin Brazeau, Rourke Chartier, Engvall, Tyler Gaudet, Mac Hollowell, Michael Hutchinson, Teemu Kivihalme, Timothy Liljegren, Martin Marinčin, Nic Petan, Calle Rosen and Scott Sabourin.

Notably not on that list is Aaron Dell, the team's third-string goalie, who also wasn't on the ice at practice.

"We don't want three goalies at practice, but we got him some extra work with some of our extra guys to keep him sharp," Keefe explained. "We've had some discussions about whether we utilize him at different times to back up in the early going. We'll continue to discuss that. He's a good goalie in the league and we like having the depth at the position and feel it's important this season so that's how we're doing things to start."

It was only a couple years ago that Toronto's goalie depth was decimated when both Curtis McElhinney and Calvin Pickard were plucked off the waiver wire at the end of training camp.

Lines at Leafs practice on Monday:

Forwards

Thornton - Matthews - Marner

Vesey - Tavares - Nylander

Mikheyev - Kerfoot - Hyman

Barabanov - Spezza - Simmonds

Robertson, Brooks, Boyd

Defencemen

Rielly - Brodie

Muzzin - Holl

Dermott - Bogosian

Lehtonen - Sandin (L)

Goaltenders

Andersen

Campbell

Special teams units at practice on Monday:

PP1

Rielly

Marner - Thornton - Matthews

Simmonds

PP2

Brodie

Nylander - Tavares - Spezza

Hyman

PK1

Hyman - Marner

Muzzin - Holl

PK2

Kerfoot - Mikheyev

Dermott - Bogosian

PK3

Vesey - Barabanov

Note: Matthews and Spezza also took reps with the PK

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TSN.CA / Dermott back into top six on Leafs' blueline

By Kristen Shilton

The Maple Leafs have thought better of their plan to start rookie defenceman Mikko Lehtonen in the top-six rotation this season, bumping the blueliner onto their fourth pairing (and off the second power-play unit) at Monday's practice in favour of Travis Dermott.

"We think there's areas of [Lehtonen's] game that need a little bit more time. We don't want to rush him into a situation that he may not be adjusted to quite yet," said head coach Sheldon Keefe on a Zoom call Monday. "So we're going to take our time with that....and take a little step back with Mikko and give him more time to watch and get a feel for the league. ...We expect that he obviously will get in at some point, and we hope he's more prepared when that's the case."

For now, Lehtonen is paired with Rasmus Sandin, while Dermott is with Zach Bogosian. T.J. Brodie has taken over Lehtonen's previous spot on the power play.

It's a somewhat unexpected turn of events for Lehtonen, who the Leafs were counting on to contribute right away. Toronto signed Lehtonen to a one-year, entry-level contract in May 2020, just days before he was named the KHL's Defenceman of the Year for a 49-point effort in 60 games with Jokerit Helsinki.

Never drafted by an NHL club, the 26-year-old had spent the entirety of his professional career bouncing around the Finnish and Swedish Elite leagues before producing his standout campaign with Jokerit in 2019-20.

Lehtonen had drawn rave reviews from teammates since arriving at the Leafs' practice facility in November for his inexhaustible work ethic and commitment to mastering the defensive systems. Keefe's decision to slot



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him on Toronto's third pairing with Zach Bogosian to open training camp only seemed to underscore just how fast Lehtonen had caught on.

But in Saturday's Blue and White scrimmage, a game designed to replicate the look and feel of the exhibition contests Toronto won't be getting before this pandemic-shortened regular season begins, Keefe began seeing more cracks in Lehtonen's game.

Despite Lehtonen quarterbacking the Leafs' second power-play group and notching a pair of assists, Keefe felt there were still something off.

"I thought he did what he does well in terms of getting pucks at the net; he was more comfortable in that sense and that was really good to see," Keefe said on Saturday. "At the same time, you could tell that with the increased pace of play, the way this game was here today in comparison to our previous scrimmages, it was a lot more game-like in that sense. And I think you can still see him adjusting to that."

Keefe did admit in Monday's availability that Lehtonen's special teams work was strong ("Certainly on the powerplay, we feel like he's ready right now to contribute there."), but ultimately he and his staff determined that Lehtonen just wasn't as ready for showtime as they thought.

In an effort to learn from past mistakes, they opted to demote him sooner than later.

"[We did this] knowing we're playing off a little bit of some of the history of players in his situation that have come into our organization and have been put in right away," Keefe said.

"And [those players were] coming off of a more traditional exhibition season where they get a lot of games to find their way. In this case, it's a scrimmage and no games against other competition."

While he didn't name names, Keefe could have been referring to a few recent attempts the Leafs made to bolster the blueline with players excelling overseas. Calle Rosen and Andreas Borgman were heralded free agent signings from the SHL in spring 2017, but Borgman flamed out after appearing in 48 games for Toronto in 2017-18 and Rosen skated in only four contests that same year. Both were eventually traded in 2019 (Borgman to St. Louis and Rosen to Colorado, although he was re-acquired by Toronto last fall).

There was also Igor Ozhiganov, a highly recruited Russian defenceman who signed an entry-level deal with Toronto ahead of the 2018-19 season only to produce seven points in 53 games before returning to the KHL.

Those are the types of situations Toronto doesn't want happening again, where new defencemen they push into prominent roles can't handle the pressure.

Instead, Keefe will put Dermott back into the third-pairing role he held most of last season, with an eye on seeing the 24-year-old improve further.

"I would really like to see Travis latch on to his strengths," Keefe explained. "For me there were three real key areas: One, going back for the puck to start our breakouts. And then defensive zone puck pressure and creating separation, creating loose pucks to get us out of our end that way. And then just his gap control in order to get into our zones. Those are three areas I'd like to see him just really excel at [and] a lot of really positive things come into his game over time."

Skating with Bogosian also puts Dermott back on his natural left side after he was taking a right-side position with Sandin. While Bogosian himself is new to the Leafs as well, the veteran has found just about everyone on the blueline easy enough to play with, including Dermott.

"He's a good skater, good communicator," Bogosian said of Dermott. "I like the way things are shaping up back there [on defence]. There's not a bad player back there to play with, so whoever you're playing with on any given night, that's exciting. Derms is a good puck mover and I'm looking forward to getting some more reps with him and getting that chemistry."

Bogosian went on to say the defence has received specific instructions throughout training camp on how to help the team succeed, and it starts with pulling in the right direction.

"[Keefe has] preached, 'speed, speed, speed' and 'it's north, north, north,'" Bogosian laughed. "So it's been it's been fun so far. I think when you have the skill group like we do up front, you want to play fast, and that starts with us back there on the back end moving the puck up as quick as possible, getting the puck in their hands and letting them go to work."

The one thing Keefe has also made clear over the past week is that nothing he's doing now is set in stone, not even after Toronto cut 12 players from their roster on Monday ahead of Wednesday's opener against Montreal. The door is always open for anyone - including Lehtonen - to bounce back.

"I don't know if any decision that's been made would we describe as final," Keefe said. "We're just getting started here. We're expecting whether those guys that are going to be in the lineup or guys who are on the taxi squad or guys that are assigned directly to the Marlies, it's going to be a fluid situation as we see throughout the season and we're going to need a lot of people. Everybody is important and has a role to play."

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TSN.CA / Ovechkin's scoring slowed only by things out of his control

By Travis Yost

Seven hundred and six.

That's the number of goals Washington Capitals winger Alexander Ovechkin has scored over the course of his career, already within the National Hockey League's top 10 all-time.

Ovechkin has tremendous opportunity to jump inside of the top three this season - he's just 60 goals back of Jaromir Jagr for third overall and 188 goals away from the top spot, held by Wayne Gretzky.

Where Ovechkin will end up on the all-time list is really up to him. Though he is now 35 years old and in the final year of a \$124-million contract, he is as impressive as ever on the ice.

Ovechkin scored 48 goals last season, sharing his ninth Rocket Richard trophy with Bruins forward David Pastrnak. In other words: this is not a player in the twilight of his career, scratching and clawing his way to stay inside of his team's top six. This is the league's preeminent goal scorer who appears to have years of high productivity left, assuming he wants to continue to play.

What's particularly interesting about Ovechkin and his run at being crowned the best goal scorer ever - if he isn't there already - is that he has been uniquely sidetracked by the league.

As predictable as Ovechkin's goal scoring has been over the course of his career, so too has been his durability. The Russian sniper simply does not miss games to injury, and it's paid huge dividends for a Capitals franchise that has relied on him to deliver sustained offence over the years:

This is a rather silly looking graph because of how impressively consistent the Capitals captain has been, but it also drives home the point that it's just as difficult to find players as durable as Ovechkin as it is to find a goal scorer as productive as Ovechkin.



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If there are NHL games being played, Ovechkin is on the ice. And if Ovechkin is on the ice, there's a 61 per cent chance he has scored a goal. It's a rare case of simple math.

Which brings me to an uncomfortable reality for the NHL, and that's the sheer number of games that Ovechkin has missed outside of his control. Let's reflect on those stretches for a moment:

- 2004-05: 82 games missed due to lockout
- 2012-13: 34 games missed due to lockout
- 2019-20: 13 games missed due to COVID-19 stoppage
- 2020-21: At least 26 games missed due to shortened season

Two different labour stoppages and a global pandemic have effectively taken 155 games from Ovechkin's resume. And because of how stable Ovechkin's durability and productivity have been over the last two decades, we can reasonably assume that (a) he would have been available for the lion's share of those games; and (b) would have scored a bunch of goals in those missed games.

How many goals are we talking about? We can do some fairly quick math to assess what that would've looked like. Let's make a few assumptions!

- 2004-05: In Ovechkin's actual rookie season (2005-06), he scored 52 goals in 81 games. We know 18- and 19-year-old forwards – injected into the NHL early as blue-chip prospects – score at very similar rates, about 0.9 goals per 60 minutes of play. We can reasonably infer Ovechkin lost 5.0 goals by missing this season.
- 2012-13: This was a shortened season where Ovechkin scored 32 goals in 42 games, near his career average. We can infer this season cost Ovechkin about 23 goals.
- 2019-20: Another shortened season where Ovechkin scored 48 goals in 68 games. We can infer Ovechkin lost 10 goals here.
- 2020-21: Ovechkin will play up to 56 games this season. In the previous three seasons, Ovechkin has averaged 53 goals per 82 games played. Assuming Ovechkin plays to his career average and remains similarly durable, we can assume he will lose 17 goals outside of his control.

Those are four pretty conservative assumptions, and they take about 100 goals out of Ovechkin's profile. A similar attempt at quantifying the loss Ovechkin has incurred from outside factors, completed at Russian Machine Never Breaks last week, has it at 96 goals lost. It's a significant number, and one that may convince those who are on the fence of crowning the Russian as the greatest goal scorer ever to change their tune.

For frame of reference, consider the actual goal scoring leaderboard versus where we would be without the stoppages:

This isn't to say other players haven't been adversely impacted by external factors – Gretzky, for an obvious example, played through a shortened 1994-95 season. But it seems significant to point out that a player like Ovechkin, playing in one of the lowest-scoring eras in the history of the NHL, would likely already have passed Jagr and Gordie Howe on the scoring list and be two seasons away from catching The Great One if not for situations completely out of his control.

Here's to hoping Ovechkin sticks around the NHL for a few more seasons and makes this chase as compelling as possible.

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TSN.CA / 10 players poised to break out in 2020-21

By Frank Seravalli

Who is about to level up in the National Hockey League this season?

Last preseason, we listed 10 players poised to break out. There were some hits (Filip Hronek), some misses (Kevin Labanc) and some can't misses (Jakub Vrana).

We called Oliver Bjorkstrand's coming-out party, completely whiffed on Casey Mittelstadt, got it right on Samuel Girard, and hinted at Jack Campbell's potential departure from the City of Angels. It also took until August to see Jesperi Kotkaniemi deliver his breakout performance.

With the help of TSN director of scouting Craig Button, we're back with 10 new breakout stars for the 2020-21 season.

The guideline remains the same. There are too many impact rookies to list (hello, Tim Stuetzle) and many sophomores are already well on their way after solid rookie seasons. See: John Marino, Joel Farabee, Nick Suzuki and Emil Bemstrom, to name a few.

Here are 10 third-year (or later) players ready to take the next step toward stardom in 2020-21, complete with a realistic (pro-rated) projection called the Button Bump:

(Players are listed in alphabetical order)

Anthony Beauvillier, LW, New York Islanders

Age: 23

Last Season: 68 GP, 18 goals, 21 assists, 39 points

2020-21 Button Bump: 20 goals, 35 assists, 55 points (56 games: 14 + 24 = 38)

Scoop: In four seasons on the Island, it's seemingly been one step forward and two steps back for Beauvillier. Nicknamed 'Tito,' Beauvillier showed glimpses in the playoffs – with nine goals and 14 points in 22 games – of what his finished package could look like. Beauvillier's confidence is on the right track and has proven he can be a critical cog in Barry Trotz's wheel.

Pavel Buchnevich, RW, New York Rangers

Age: 25

Last Season: 68 GP, 16 goals, 30 assists, 46 points

2020-21 Button Bump: 25 goals, 35 assists, 60 points (56 games: 16 + 24 = 40)

Scoop: It's been a journey of fits and starts for Buchnevich, now entering his fifth season on Broadway. Whether it's been a lack of opportunity or Buchnevich's own doing, something has held him back from a starring role. He's started training camp on the Rangers' top line with Mika Zibanejad and Chris Kreider, and there's so much talent up and down that lineup that if he doesn't produce this season, he'll have no one but himself to blame.

Conor Garland, RW, Arizona Coyotes

Age: 24

Last Season: 68 games, 22 goals, 17 assists, 39 points

2020-21 Button Bump: 30 goals, 20 assists, 50 points (56 games: 21 + 14 = 35)

Scoop: Never, at any level, has there been a feeling that Garland isn't going to produce – dating back to his time with Jack Eichel and the Boston Jr. Bruins. He always delivers. He's not the fastest player or biggest player (5-foot-10), but he's a rink rat with great touch and unbeatable work ethic. Too many have overlooked Garland for what he doesn't do, instead of focusing on what he does do – score. Garland might provide the best goals per dollar value in the NHL this season.



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Vladislav Gavrikov, LD, Columbus Blue Jackets

Age: 25

Last Season: 69 games, 5 goals, 13 assists, 18 points

2020-21 Button Bump: 8 goals, 15 assists, 23 points (and meaningful minutes)

Scoop: Remember him, Maple Leafs fans? Gavrikov was a linchpin in shutting out the Maple Leafs twice in the five-game qualifying round last August. He's an underrated shutdown defenceman who can play against anyone. He might not get a lot of points, but for a Columbus team where defence drives a lot of the attack, he drives it in a different way by busting the cycle and getting the puck up the ice. He might only be a sophomore, but he fits the spirit of the breakout player after a number of years in the KHL, and completes a top four in Columbus that is as good as any in the NHL.

Alexandar Georgiev, G, New York Rangers

Age: 24

Last Season: 34 games, 17-14-2 record, .910 save percentage, 3.04 goals against-average

2020-21 Button Bump: To break out, Georgiev needs to break out of New York

Scoop: As Igor Shesterkin takes his rightful place as heir to King Henrik Lundqvist's throne, Georgiev will take a back seat in one of New York's famous yellow cabs. He will see plenty of action in a shortened season that will place a premium on teams that can turn to either netminder in a tandem. But Georgiev has shown little to suggest he isn't ready for a full-time starting job, which makes him either an incredible trade chip for GM Jeff Gorton, or fodder for the Seattle Kraken in the Expansion Draft.

Alex Iafallo, LW, Los Angeles Kings

Age: 27

Last Season: 70 games, 17 goals, 26 assists, 43 points

2020-21 Button Bump: 22 goals, 33 assists, 55 points (56 games: 15 + 23 = 38)

Scoop: Want a clue on where Iafallo is heading? Take a look at his college resume at Minnesota-Duluth. He collected 22, 25 and 23 points in each of his first three seasons under Scott Sandelin. In his senior year, he busted out for 51 points, one less than Hobey Baker winner Adam Gaudette tallied at Northeastern. After a steady progression of 25, 33 and 43 points in his first three NHL seasons, he's ready to bust out and go to the next level in LA.

Oskar Lindblom, LW, Philadelphia Flyers

Age: 24

Last Season: 30 games, 11 goals, 7 assists, 18 points

2020-21 Button Bump: 25 goals, 25 assists, 50 points (56 games: 17 + 17 = 34)

Scoop: Lindblom was one of hockey's many tear-jerker stories last season, managing to make it back into the Flyers' lineup for two playoff games in August after only ending his chemotherapy treatments for Ewing's sarcoma (bone cancer) on July 2. Lindblom is reportedly back to full strength now and making an impression in training camp. He's more than just a great story, he's a great hockey player. He led the Flyers in goals (11) at the time of his shocking diagnosis last December. Bet against Lindblom bouncing back to that level at your own peril.

Robert Thomas, C, St. Louis Blues

Age: 21

Last Season: 66 games, 10 goals, 32 assists, 42 points

2020-21 Button Bump: 20 goals, 50 assists, 70 points (56 games: 14 + 34 = 48)

Scoop: Thomas is a certified Craig's Crush™. (Full disclosure: Thomas nearly made Button's Top 50 players ballot for 2020-21.) Thomas is an outstanding skater, with an outstanding brain that swivels on an outstanding competitor's body. He is ready to take on the challenge, and the Blues are well positioned with Ryan O'Reilly and Thomas as the Arch City's one-two punch down the middle.

Devon Toews, LD, Colorado Avalanche

Age: 26

Last Season: 68 games, 6 goals, 22 assists, 28 points

2020-21 Button Bump: 12 goals, 33 assists, 45 points (56 games: 8 + 23 = 31)

Scoop: This will be Toews' fifth professional season, but this late-blooming fourth-round pick is going to take full advantage of more opportunity given in Colorado. Simply put: the Islanders knew they couldn't afford to keep Toews, who signed a \$16.4 million deal with the Avs after his off-season trade for two second-round picks. He will only gain confidence from here. Book him for 45 points in a typical season. All he's got to do is make a simple pass to Nathan MacKinnon and away they go.

Sean Walker, RD, Los Angeles Kings

Age: 26

Last Season: 70 games, 5 goals, 19 assists, 24 points

2020-21 Button Bump: 10 goals, 30 assists, 40 points (56 games: 7 + 21 = 28)

Scoop: Walker and Iafallo are two of the better undrafted free agents plucked from the NCAA over the past decade. The 5-foot-11 defender Walker has the Kings' front office buzzing with his strides over the last calendar year and they're expecting him to be a big part of their blueline this season. With a little more power-play time under Todd McLellan, expect to see Walker's minutes and point production climb.

TSN.CA LOADED: 01.12.2021

1198859 Websites

USA TODAY / NHL analyst Mike Milbury will no longer be with NBC Sports as season gets set to start

Lorenzo Reyes

When NBC Sports released its roster for NHL play-by-play announcers and analysts Monday, a notable name was missing.

Mike Milbury, a long-time analyst with the network who had become controversial over misogynistic and insensitive comments he made in the past, will not be returning for the 2020-21 season.

"We are grateful to Mike for all of his contributions to our coverage for 14 years, but he will not be returning to our NHL announce team," an NBC spokesperson said in a statement emailed to USA TODAY Sports. "We wish him well."

The new NHL season begins Wednesday with a tripleheader that will be broadcast on NBC Sports Network.



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The analysts NBC will feature this year on its NHL broadcasts include Eddie Olczyk, Brian Boucher, Pierre McGuire, AJ Mleczko, Kendall Coyne Schofield, Keith Jones and Anson Carter.

NHL POINT PROJECTIONS: How we see the 2021 season unfolding

Milbury stepped away from his duties for the remainder of the Stanley Cup playoffs this August after he made a misogynistic joke about the bubble that had been created amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

"If you enjoy playing and enjoy being with your teammates for long periods of time, it's a perfect place," analyst Brian Boucher said during a first-round playoff game between the Islanders and the Capitals before Milbury interjected that there were "Not even any women here to disrupt ... your concentration."

His remark was condemned by the NHL, which said Milbury's words were "insensitive and insulting" and that his comment does "not reflect the NHL's values and commitment to making our game more inclusive and welcoming to all."

Milbury later said of his decision to step down that he didn't want his presence "to interfere with the athletes as they try to win the greatest trophy in sports."

During the 2018 Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, Milbury minimized a domestic violence conviction that led to the banning of former Los Angeles Kings defenseman Slava Voynov from the NHL. During a broadcast, Milbury called it "an unfortunate incident" as the Russian team toppled the U.S. team.

Our Sports Announcer Power Rankings: Who's No. 1?

"He left a huge void in the Los Angeles Kings' defense, otherwise may have gone on to win more than the championships they did already," Milbury said during a broadcast. "This guy was a special player, and an unfortunate incident left the Los Angeles Kings without a great defenseman."

Milbury was a defenseman for the Boston Bruins for 12 seasons (1975-87) — a career that saw him infamously go into the Madison Square Garden stands during a 1979 brawl and hit a man with his own shoe. He later became head coach of the Bruins, guiding them to the 1990 Stanley Cup Final and spent several more seasons coaching, including with the Islanders, where he also became general manager.

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1198860 Websites

USA TODAY / With start of NHL season approaching, Commissioner Gary Bettman says league losses will eclipse \$1 billion

Chris Bumbaca

When the 2021 NHL season begins this week, a handful of teams will have the ability to host fans at their indoor rinks in accordance with local health guidelines.

But the reality is most games this year will not be played in front of fans, as was the case inside the two Canadian "bubbles" in which the league hosted the 2020 playoffs after the coronavirus pandemic upended the 2019-20 regular season.

Another bubble was not on the table, NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman said Monday, and teams will play a 56-game, modified division-only schedule in home arenas. The lack of fans, however, means the financial losses incurred by the league and each of its 31 clubs will be significant.

"The magnitude of the loss starts with a 'B,' " he said on a Zoom conference call with league media. "We're out of the 'M' range and into the 'B.' "

Indirectly or directly, Bettman said, fans going through the gate accounts for roughly 50% of the league's revenue. He added that the NHL and teams would lose less money if they didn't play this upcoming season.

"Let me make something really clear: We're coming back to play this season because we think it's important for the game, because our fans and our players want us to, and it may give people — particularly those that are back in isolation or where there are curfews — a sense of normalcy and something to do," the commissioner said.

"The owners unanimously are OK with that because they know how important it is for our fans and for the game."

All of the teams and their owners have the financial capability to survive the season, Bettman said, although "we have made some financial arrangements that make sure our cash flow is what it needs to be."

"While there's an economic consequence to playing the season, all of the owners of our clubs are in a position to weather it and we have no concerns in that regard," Bettman said, "other than that everybody is going to lose a lot of money to do this."

Here is what else the NHL commissioner said during his hourlong availability.

Dallas Stars coronavirus update

League deputy commissioner Bill Daly said the league is still trying to determine the cause of the Dallas Stars' outbreak that infected six players and two staff members. The team's facility has been closed since Saturday.

It was a "classic outbreak" due to a "variety of factors," according to Daly, who added that the league hopes the spread within the organization has ceased. The Stars medical staff was convening Monday night to determine when they'd be able to play.

Dallas will not begin its season until Jan. 19 until the earliest, although it's possible the team might need to wait until a later date.

One thing seems clear: There will be no steadfast set of circumstances or rules regarding roster numbers.

Daly said: "We don't want situations where clubs are playing significantly short-handed," adding that teams will have access to an expanded taxi squad (four to six players per team).

San Jose Sharks, Santa Clara County update

While the NFL's San Francisco 49ers made headlines for having to leave their home of Santa Clara County in order to finish their season, as the county enforced COVID-19 guidelines that made gathering impossible, the San Jose Sharks have confronted a similar challenge.

Like the Niners, the Sharks have relocated to Arizona, where they have conducted training camp and will start their season if they must. Daly and Bettman said the league is meeting with county officials Tuesday.

The Sharks will play their first "designated" home games on Feb. 1. Those contests will take place at alternate sites if they cannot return to SAP Center at San Jose by then.

"It's a difficult situation for the club," Bettman said. "It's a difficult situation for the players."

NHL to play two outdoor games at Lake Tahoe

It won't be an official Winter Classic, but the NHL will play two outdoor games at Lake Tahoe in February, Bettman confirmed.

The Colorado Avalanche will play the Vegas Golden Knights on Saturday, Feb. 20 and the Philadelphia Flyers will play against the Boston Bruins the next day. Both contests will take place on a rink



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constructed on the lakefront 18th fairway of the golf course at the Edgewood Tahoe Resort.

"We were looking for a picturesque, magnificent place with a lake and mountains that are snow-covered," Bettman said. "It had to have a location where you could put a rink for that visual."

Bettman added that other locations with similar vistas were considered, but Tahoe offered a resort option near a major airport that could accommodate the number of people required to make the operation possible."

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1198861 Websites

USA TODAY / Jay Bouwmeester says he has retired, 11 months after he collapsed in game

Mike Brehm

NHL defenseman Jay Bouwmeester announced his retirement to The Athletic Monday, 11 months after he collapsed from a cardiac episode during a game.

Bouwmeester, 37, won a Stanley Cup with the St. Louis Blues in 2019. But his career was cut short when he became unresponsive on the bench on Feb. 11 and needed to be revived by a defibrillator after completing a shift against the Anaheim Ducks.

Taken to the hospital, he had an internal defibrillator implanted three days later to regulate his heartbeat.

"I'm feeling OK," Bouwmeester told The Athletic. "I wouldn't say it's been totally smooth sailing, but generally, I've been pretty good. I've generally been able to do whatever I want to do and I've stayed pretty active."

Bouwmeester was drafted No. 3 overall by the Florida Panthers in 2002. Though known for the defensive side of his game because of his skating, reach and positioning, he did top 40 points three times and had two 15-goal seasons.

He was exceptionally conditioned, had a 737-game ironman streak at one point and logged big minutes.

Bouwmeester was dealt to the Calgary Flames in 2009 but did not make the playoffs until his 2013 trade to the Blues. A fixture in the top four, he reached the postseason every season except one in St. Louis and averaged 23 minutes, 30 seconds a game during the 2019 playoffs as the team won its first Stanley Cup.

The Blues signed him to a one-year, \$3.25 million contract in the summer of 2019 and he had nine points in 56 games before the February incident.

In addition to the Stanley Cup, he won an Olympic gold medal with Canada in 2014 and was named to two All-Star Games.

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USA TODAY / NHL point projections: How we see the 2021 season unfolding

USA TODAY Sports

The NHL season will have a (temporarily) different look in 2021. There will be a shorter season (56 games), realignment designed to limit travel amid the coronavirus pandemic and solely intra-divisional play. The highlights are a regional setup that includes a North Division of all of the Canadian teams and a Stanley Cup Final matchup that can be the East vs. East (or West vs. West) because the teams are reseeded in the third round regardless of division or traditional conference.

Our USA TODAY Sports experts predict that the Colorado Avalanche will lead the league in points, with the Tampa Bay Lightning, Boston Bruins and Toronto Maple Leafs also pacing their respective divisions. The all-Canada division seems to be the most competitive.

North Division

The Maple Leafs will benefit from the arrival of defenseman T.J. Brodie and a full season of coach Sheldon Keefe. Plus, Boston and Tampa Bay are no longer in the division. ... The Flames are two seasons removed from a division title, have a strong mix of players and now they have a solid goaltender in Jacob Markstrom. ... The Canadiens were one of the busiest teams in the offseason and could be the most improved this season, especially if Nick Suzuki builds on his playoff performance. ... Recent MVPs Leon Draisaitl and Connor McDavid will provide the Oilers with plenty of offense, but there's not much depth behind them and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins. Defenseman Tyson Barrie will be motivated on a one-year contract. ... With Markstrom gone, the Canucks will have to hope Braden Holtby regains his form or Thatcher Demko shows his playoff form. ... Vezina Trophy winner Connor Hellebuyck was a workhorse last season and the Jets need more of the same. Will Patrik Laine be with the team at season's end? ... The Senators' offseason moves give them improved forward depth and goaltending, but they're still the weak link in the division.

East Division

After losing Torey Krug and captain Zdeno Chara in free agency, the Bruins have holes to fill on defense. But the NHL's best regular-season team from last season still has its top line with Patrice Bergeron, David Pastrnak and Brad Marchand and deep collection of role players. ... Henrik Lundqvist's open-heart surgery announcement puts the pressure on Ilya Samsonov to shoulder the load as the Capitals' No. 1 goalie, but the 2018 Stanley Cup champs could have one more run in them with veteran coach Peter Laviolette. ... The Flyers are on the upswing under Alain Vigneault. What they lack in star power they make up for with depth, versatility and grit, not to mention one of the league's best young goalies, Carter Hart. ... Analytics paint the Islanders as a middle-of-the-pack team, but they went to the conference finals during the summer restart. Their defense was lockdown and they could grind out wins in tight games, particularly if rookie goalie Ilya Sorokin is as good as advertised. ... Will the addition of Kasper Kapanen give an aging roster a jolt? The Penguins also need vintage performances from Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin. Don't be shocked if their 14-year playoff streak ends. ... The Rangers should be fun to watch, led by Artemi Panarin and Mika Zibanejad and two Calder Trophy candidates in goalie Igor Shesterkin and No. 1 pick Alexis Lafrenière. But they're probably a year or two away from seriously contending. ... It sure will be interesting to see how Sabres center Jack Eichel meshes with free-agent addition Taylor Hall. Regardless, there are just too many holes in their bottom six, on defense and in net. ... The Devils' top six forwards are intriguing, especially if 2019 No. 1 pick Jack Hughes can take the next step after an uneven rookie season. The hiring of coach Lindy Ruff was a head-scratcher for a team that will be relying on too many inexperienced players.

-- Vince Mercogliano, The Journal News, part of the USA TODAY Network

Central Division



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Even with Nikita Kucherov out for the season, the Lightning have the pieces to win a second Stanley Cup in a row. ... If the Hurricanes get consistent goaltending, watch out, Tampa Bay. ... The defense will carry the Stars, a team that needs more scoring and will start the season without Tyler Seguin; can Denis Gurianov and Roope Hintz take the next step? ... The Blue Jackets are top-heavy and might lack enough game breakers on offense, but coach John Tortorella and a weak division will keep this team competitive. ... The Predators have not reached their lofty expectations in recent seasons, though the team still has a formidable core. ... The key to the Panthers remaining in the picture is goalie Sergei Bobrovsky. A .900 save percentage like he had in his first season won't get the job done. ... As the Blackhawks embrace a youth movement, they will be nothing if not exciting; it could be a long season if the Collin Delia-Malcolm Subban tandem in net underwhelms. ... The Red Wings could be in the mix for the league's worst team again.

West Division

The Avalanche have spent the past few years ascending from worst to top Cup contender. After suffering Game 7 losses in the second round in back-to-back years, is it Nathan MacKinnon and Co.'s time? ... After reaching the final four but coming up empty in two of their first three seasons, the Golden Knights took another big swing by inking defenseman Alex Pietrangelo to a monster deal in free agency. ... The Blues stumbled in the bubble after having the second-most points in the NHL before the shutdown. Pietrangelo is gone and winger Vladimir Tarasenko is expected to miss the start of the season What kind of team does the Wild want to be? Minnesota fired Bruce Boudreau, a move that seemingly signaled the start of a rebuild – except they then had a strong showing under coach Dean Evason before the shutdown. They don't have a path to achieve the salary cap flexibility to tear it all down. ... The Sharks made the conference finals two seasons ago, but the core continues to get older, the depth is diminished and there doesn't seem to be an answer in goal. ... A team stuck in transition, the Ducks have aging talent matched with young, largely unproven prospects. They could find themselves in contention in the division if goalie John Gibson bounces back. ... The Coyotes have been in turmoil off the ice lately, which doesn't seem to bode well for a team that has hardly inspired much reason for excitement on it. ... It's going to be a rough season for the Kings, but with one of the best prospect pools in hockey, better days seem not too far away.

-- Jace Evans, USA TODAY

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