



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 12, 2021

## THE NEWS & OBSERVER

### Hurricanes' home-ice advantage won't be what it usually is against the Predators

By Luke DeCock

Home ice won't be as much of an advantage as it usually is for the Carolina Hurricanes in the first round of the playoffs.

Yes, the Hurricanes get to host a potential Game 7 against the Nashville Predators, but they'll be limited to around 6,000 fans in PNC Arena when the series begins Sunday or Monday, while the Predators will be allowed as many as 14,000 at their home games.

North Carolina's COVID capacity restrictions are likely to be loosened June 1, Gov. Roy Cooper has said, but the state has rejected the Hurricanes' request to allow more fans in the arena in the two weeks of playoff hockey before then.

"We've spent a lot of money and a lot of time making sure we did it right," Hurricanes general manager Don Waddell said. "We think we can do it right if we increase attendance. From our customers, the only complaints we've gotten is when someone doesn't have their mask on all the time and that's just going to be an ongoing thing anyway.

"We've sent out surveys asking if people feel safe in the building. We've got the cleaning crews going up and down cleaning the handrails. The restrooms are manned. We're doing everything we can to prove not only to the state but to our customers we have the best environment we can."

The current state restriction limits indoor arenas to 50 percent of capacity, which for PNC would be more than 9,000, but state social-distancing requirements have limited the Hurricanes to 4,987 since the latest loosening of restrictions in late March. That's up from a few hundred to start the season, and 2,924 starting at the end of February.

By utilizing more suites and creating bigger pods of fans within the stands, the Hurricanes will be able to bump that to about 6,000 when the first-round series starts Sunday or Monday, Waddell said.

The team also looked into creating a vaccinated section, Waddell said, but it would have unlocked only 120 or so seats while requiring considerable staffing and effort.

The need for capacity restrictions is obvious, even as we continue to emerge from the depths of the pandemic, but with the end in sight — and for arena attendance caps,

perhaps only a few weeks away -- it does seem like there's room for rational relaxation under the circumstances, at least to the 50 percent mark which was the intent (if not the letter) of the guidelines.

So it wouldn't be playing favorites if the Hurricanes-uber-fan-governor found a way to get a few more of his compatriots in the building, especially this close to June 1.

"The Governor is continuing to listen to and work with state health officials on pandemic response and the plan is to lift mandatory capacity limits by the end of the month," a spokesperson for the governor wrote in an email. "We understand that businesses and teams are eager to welcome back more customers and fans and the state will continue to make decisions on the right path forward."

Is it actually a competitive disadvantage for the Hurricanes? Maybe not. But it certainly can't help.

After a season spent playing in front of anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand fans both at home and on the road, the crowd in Nashville is going to sound like a few million. And while Hurricanes fans are famous for being loud during the postseason, there's only so much 6,000 fans can do in a building built for three times that many.

Unsurprisingly, the demand is there. The Hurricanes offered tickets to their core COVID group of 2,400 season-ticket holders last week, then put the rest on sale to other season-ticket holders with money on deposit with the team on Monday. They sold out Monday night, Waddell said. A few hundred tickets blocked by the NHL could also become available the day before Game 1.

PNC Arena has the ventilation capacity to host as many as 12,000 fans and still meet NHL standards without bringing in extra ventilation as Nashville and Florida both have. If the Hurricanes are able to get past the Predators, they might be able to bring that many in for the second round.

"They keep shooting for June 1," Waddell said. "If everything goes well the rest of this month, that will open it up some more."



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## The Athletic

### 'We're gonna flush it': Why the Carolina Hurricanes took a pass on Game 56

By Sara Civian

The only good thing about Game 56 of 56 for the Carolina Hurricanes is that it technically meant nothing. Well, it also ushered in the end of pre-playoff SZN — aka the sneaky worst time to Be Online.

We knew what was going to happen going into this game. The Canes benched Jordan Staal, Andrei Svechnikov, Dougie Hamilton, Brett Pesce, Cedric Paquette, Jaccob Slavin (day-to-day) and Brock McGinn (TBD), many of whom are varying levels of "banged up." Steven Lorentz led all forwards in time on ice, and Joey Keane's NHL debut almost cracked the 20-minute mark.

We knew that the Hurricanes already had clinched the No. 1 seed and that the Predators, who had just clinched the final Central playoff berth against the Canes Saturday, had more to prove.

We knew all this, just like we all knew this was a scheduled loss. But it was still the worst performance of the year, it was still a 5-0, chippy loss against the Canes' opening-round opponent, and something about how awesome the Predators' crowd was in response to the sentimental Pekka Rinne shutout just drove it all home.

It's OK if you felt bad about it for a second, for real.

But noted Jack Adams frontrunner Rod Brind'Amour brought us back to Earth when I asked what he's actually taking away from the game.

"Not much. We're gonna flush it," he said. "We played 56 games, and 55 games we were in every one, then this is the one game the whole year we weren't in. It's kinda flushed for me, to be honest with you. Obviously, we're going to look at some things system-wise, but overall we're just going to move on."

Brind'Amour had stated his objectives before the game, and none of them were actually winning the game.

He wanted to get Jordan Martinook some reps in his first game since April 22, and Martinook got 17:10 TOI, with some time on the power play and the penalty kill.

Brind'Amour hates losing, so I won't say he wanted to do this, but he knew he had to take this rare opportunity to rest some players. "We've got a lot of nicked-up guys right now dealing with a lot of stuff," he told color commentator Tripp Tracy. "When you talk about (keeping guys out of the lineup), that's why. We're hopeful a few more days of rest here will get a couple of guys back for sure, and maybe closer to the full group."

He has wanted to get 21-year-old Keane, a solid defensive depth option, an NHL game for a while. Brind'Amour isn't particularly ~keen~ on (sorry) trusting prospects with no NHL experience, so getting to unleash him tonight with zero real repercussions was a huge perk.

In that same vein, things were just accomplished behind the scenes tonight. We might look back on Brind'Amour's management of the situation in a few months in a different light.

One last regular season vibe check

Please, no banner discourse in Nashville territory.

This was legitimately awesome. Have to hand it to Predators fans for that atmosphere, too.

Probably the second-best take of the night, especially because of the James Reimer recognition.

Congratulations on the best take of the night.

And finally, one of my favorite GIFs:

News and notes

- I'm glad folks brought up practice because the Canes are actually looking forward to a week full of "tough" practices. They haven't held a real practice in almost a full month after the final stretch of the season consisting of at least a game every other night until this goose-egg conclusion. "We gotta get the tempo up again," Brind'Amour said postgame. "We haven't practiced in a month, like a real practice, where I could push the guys and get going, get our pace back and you could see it tonight. For me, the last two weeks you could see it. Once we clinched, I could just see that we got off the gas a little. So, we need to get that back. ... We're going to have some time to do that and get back to playing the way we've got to play."

- These practices will help everyone in different ways, but none are more urgent than goaltending. "I wouldn't say it's been answered," Brind'Amour said about his goaltending plans for the playoffs. "I think we needed to get (Mrazek) these games to get a good evaluation on it (post-injury) then hopefully have some good practices. The great thing is I feel good wherever we go, whatever direction, there."

- The only thing that worries me after today's game is the trend of the once-league-best power play falling off a bit. The Canes were 0-for-4 tonight, 0-for-1 Saturday, 0-for-1 Thursday, 0-for-3 Tuesday and 1 (1/3 of Sebastian Aho's hat trick)-for-3 on Monday. Teuvo Teravainen has been on his own, unique shot-taking rampage so I'm not trying to come at him, but I do think part of the recent power-play woes is just the adjustment period of getting him back up to speed with the system and moving others around, and of course the aforementioned "getting off the gas." Practice will fix this.

- I'm starting to think Max McCormick has justified having a place in the playoff lineup, and I don't think it's a knee-jerk reaction. Predators reporter Adam Vingan (toss him a follow) and I will be going over this matchup ad nauseam, and yeah, this game didn't technically matter for the Hurricanes. But they are about to face the same Nashville team up to seven more times, and things are already chippy. McCormick has



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been able to enter the lineup and score goals after not playing for months, and he's also willing to "answer the bell" as we saw Monday. That matters right now.

• Gilbert Gottfried is back.

## 2021 NHL playoff preview: Predators vs. Hurricanes

By Dom Luszczyszyn

If only things were back to normal with arenas at full capacity. Carolina and Nashville have two of the league's most passionate fan bases creating raucous crowds and absolutely electric atmospheres. The two teams are right near the top of the league in that department, nearly neck-and-neck with each other.

The actual on-ice matchup likely won't be that close. Carolina handily won a very competitive Central Division and has looked like one of the very best teams in hockey all season. Nashville has done well in the season's second half, miraculously climbing out of an early season hole to make the playoffs, but there is still a rather wide chasm between these two clubs.

This is a mismatch and the proof is in the games the teams have already played against each other.

### Series odds

It took seven tries for the Predators to beat the Hurricanes this season, and that happened on one of the final nights of the season when Carolina no longer had anything to really play for. The Predators won another meaningless matchup two nights later when both teams rested a plethora of starters, but for the most part, this has been the Carolina show. The two wins against Carolina to close the season did help lessen Nashville's matchup disadvantage slightly, but it's still an extra 3.3 percentage points in Carolina's favour.

Underdogs come through all the time and 35 percent is hardly a death sentence; in all honesty, it's a lot better than I expected. The Predators already faced much longer odds this season just to make the playoffs. Before this weekend's games, the odds were even steeper (closer to 30 percent), but Carolina is still rightfully the expected winner here with a five-, six- or seven-game series all being equally likely.

The Hurricanes are deeper on paper, finished higher in the standings, had stronger underlying numbers down the stretch and owned the head-to-head matchup during the season. There aren't many reasons to like the Predators here and they will be in tough to pull off the upset, but Nashville won't be a pushover. Despite the lopsided head-to-head record, the games were closer than they appear.

### Season stats

Across the board, the Hurricanes were just plain better this year, which is to be expected given the seeding. Carolina was better at five-on-five, playing a high-event style that worked in the team's favour given their weak finishing and strong goaltending. Nashville allowed fewer expected goals against but didn't generate anywhere near the same amount of chances the other way. That led to a five percentage point edge in expected goals, though the edge in actual goals was tighter due in part to Carolina's lack of finishing ability.

The difference on special teams is much more substantial and it's here where Carolina will likely do the most damage. The Hurricanes are the league's best overall team in that area, earning the second-best goal rate on both the power play and penalty kill this season. Nashville, on the other hand, was bottom 10 in both.

That turned out to be the team's demise during the season series as the Predators actually kept the attempts and chances closer than one might expect at even strength (though that's slightly obfuscated by the last couple of games). Despite being a below-average expected goals team, they kept the Hurricanes under their season average when the two went head-to-head at five-on-five. The power play was an entirely different story and it's the main reason Carolina went 6-2-0 against Nashville this season.

The Predators have a pretty pitiful power play for the year, but that reached new lows against Carolina where they only generated 4.4 expected goals and 3.6 actual goals per 60. The latter mark is almost half their season total. The penalty kill was an even bigger disaster as they allowed 7.7 expected goals and nearly double the actual goals per 60. Scoring 14.5 goals per 60 is a very high rate, one that led to a 34.6 percent success rate. Keeping Carolina in check at five-on-five means nothing if the special teams are that horrendous.

Power plays can be notoriously streaky, though, and that gives Nashville an avenue to success. It'll be an exceptionally difficult one to accomplish given the series results, but the Predators should have a fighting chance if they can stop the Hurricanes' power play and generate something the other way.

A lot of people figure the team will need Juuse Saros to steal the series as he's been doing marvellously during the second half, and that's correct to an extent given Carolina's power-play prowess. But the Hurricanes are also one of the few teams where Nashville doesn't have the edge between the pipes. The two teams finished first and second in five-on-five save percentage this year with next to nothing separating them. If that continues, Nashville will need more than Saros to come out ahead — and that's where a path to victory becomes a bit more difficult to envision with the talent the team has at its disposal.

### Roster breakdown

Before the season started this model was very high on both Petr Mrazek and Saros, much to the ire of some Canadiens fans who figured the thought of either of them being better than Carey Price was audacious. Mrazek only suited up for 12 games, but had a .923 save percentage in that time frame, saving 10 goals above expected. That's almost one per game. Saros was just as hot in the season's second half and finished the season with a .927 save percentage, saving seven goals above expected. They were in fact two of the



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league's top goalies and big reasons either team is in this position.

Carolina has the slightest edge here (especially considering Alex Nedeljkovic is rated just as highly as Mrazek and can step in if Mrazek falters) which doesn't bode well for the Predators. Saros is the team's biggest strength and he'll need to be the best goalie in the series for Nashville to have a chance, but that doesn't seem to be the likeliest scenario here. With goaltending, "likely" is always a crapshoot, but it's never a good thing when a team's biggest strength is still a step below the team it's facing.

Across the rest of the lineup, Nashville lacks the high-end talent to keep up with the Hurricanes, both up front and on the back end. The depth is there, sure, but depth isn't going to win a playoff series when there are colossal differences in top of the lineup talent.

At forward, Carolina's top line is very much one to fear, especially since Teuvo Teravainen has returned from injury. In the eight games since where all three played, the trio has dominated with a 59 percent expected goals rate, outscoring opponents 8-4 at five-on-five. Sebastian Aho and Andrei Svechnikov have been a terrific pair all season, putting up a 56 percent expected goals percentage without Teravainen, but there's no doubt his playmaking and defensive ability adds an extra boost. The top line was incredible during last year's playoffs and they're looking to pick up right where they left off during this postseason.

Aho, in particular, has been red hot down the stretch, scoring 24 points in his last 19 games, which ranks third leaguewide over the time frame. That's put him above a point-per-game pace for the season and while he may not be at the level of Connor McDavid or Auston Matthews, he's an elite talent thanks to his play-driving ability. He's the type of top centre that teams can win a Stanley Cup with.

The problem in previous seasons for Carolina was the depth behind the top line and down the middle behind Aho specifically. It was good, but not great. That's changed this season thanks to the resurgence of Vincent Trocheck, who has looked a lot closer to his peak self in his first full season as a Hurricane. He's projected for two wins here, but played closer to a three-win rate this season, resembling his peak from 2015 to 2017 in Florida. Injuries derailed his play since and he was on a worrying trajectory when Carolina acquired him at last year's deadline, but it's safe to say he's back. Trocheck scored 43 points in 47 games this season and was one of the team's top play drivers. When a team's first and second-line centres can both put up a 56 percent expected goals rate and earn over 60 percent of the actual goals, they're going to be in a good spot.

It helps to have lineup consistency throughout the year and Trocheck found some strong chemistry early with Nino Niederreiter and Martin Necas. The trio created one of the league's best and most unheralded second lines. Niederreiter continued his play-driving excellence thanks to his offensive zone ability and got back up to a 30-goal pace. The speedy Necas was an absolute revelation in his second season, scoring at a 63-point pace while unsurprisingly being the team's most efficient player at entering the zone with control. He did struggle against the Predators this season,

though, with just three points and a 37 percent expected goals rate in eight games.

Overall, the trio clicked and it allowed the Hurricanes to keep that terrifying top line intact (when Teravainen was healthy) as they finally had the requisite depth to allow it. It also allowed the team to establish an annoying checking line that doesn't have the pressure of providing secondary offense (though still has the ability to), headlined by Jordan Staal and Warren Foegele. Staal and Foegele are the team's best forecheckers and will be a pain in the butt during the playoffs, grinding down opponents hard. Staal fits a lot better as the third-line centre on a contender rather than the 2C. Though he had a productive scoring season, his on-ice numbers were his weakest in a long time. The Hurricanes' expected goal difference was 0.4 per 60 better with Staal on the bench, the first time since 2011-12 that Staal has been in the negatives. He has the capacity to be better and showed that against Nashville this season with a 64 percent expected goals rate to go with five points in six games.

It's a deep top nine with a clear hierarchy of ability. The Predators' top nine is much more of a mixed bag — spreading the wealth to create the illusion of depth, masking the lack of high-end talent. With the current lineup formation, the Predators don't really have a top line, they have three lines that look far too close to what Carolina puts out as its third line. That's ... a problem.

The Predators have a number of forwards with recognizable track records, the issue is that aside from Filip Forsberg, none of them appear to be very good anymore — at least not to their previous level. After a down year in 2019-20, there was an expectation of a bounce-back for a number of the team's top offensive players. Instead, there was further degradation. Forsberg led the team with 32 points in 39 games, which is roughly par for the course for him, but everyone else with any semblance of offensive expectations failed to deliver. Viktor Arvidsson had 25 points in 50 games (41-point pace) though to his credit 10 of those were in his last 15 games. More alarming are the team's highest-paid forwards: Ryan Johansen had 21 points in 48 games (36-point pace) this season while Matt Duchene somehow managed just 13 points in 34 games (31-point pace).

The latter two are especially disappointing because they're supposed to be the team's top two centres and they cost \$8 million a year each to combine to be about as productive as Trocheck. Duchene has had some very bad luck this year and is still the team's best player off the rush. He shouldn't be saddled to the third line, but a 52.3 percent expected goals rate doesn't scream dominance, either. Johansen has been out-chanced at five-on-five for the second straight season and was particularly weak against Carolina this season.

The top nine feels like a mish-mash of throwing things at a wall and seeing what sticks. The entire second line, and Duchene's presence on the third line, speaks volumes about what coach John Hynes values: goals. Duchene's PDO has been in the toilet all season and he's seen his ice time crater as a result. The second line was put together in mid-March and has stayed together despite an ugly 42 percent expected goals percentage together. Miraculously outscoring opponents 16-7 will do that for you. It's working for now as



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Hynes rides the hot hand, but that only stays true for so long. It's only a matter of time before the clock strikes midnight on those percentages and Nashville better hope it's not during this series because whichever of the top two Carolina lines that gets that matchup will likely eat it alive. Svechnikov and Aho already have expected goals shares north of 62 percent against Nashville this year, so the team has already had plenty of trouble keeping the top line at bay. That second line likely won't be the answer.

I'm not sure there's a combination of forwards here that would be the answer. The best trio Nashville can make still wouldn't be as good as Carolina's second line, let alone its first — and it would only leave the rest of the lineup more vulnerable. This looks like it'll be a matchup nightmare for the Predators, who don't look like they have the answers to solve Carolina's high-end depth. Only four players in the top nine had a positive expected goals percentage this season and that was led by Arvidsson at 53 percent. That would rank 11th among Carolina's forwards. Forsberg was the only imposing force against Carolina this year in terms of tilting the ice and he still only managed three points in six games. This is going to be an uphill battle, though Duchene returning to form would certainly help.

Things are a bit closer on the back end where both teams are led by a clear top three, and while Nashville indeed has some strong defensive talent, it once again pales in comparison to what Carolina can offer.

There aren't many teams that can match the triumvirate of Roman Josi, Ryan Ellis and Mattias Ekholm, but unfortunately for the Predators, Carolina is one of them. The comparison may have been in Nashville's favour last season when Josi won the Norris Trophy and Ellis was playing similarly well when healthy, but it's completely flipped this season.

Dougie Hamilton was right there with Josi in the Norris Trophy race last year before getting injured and he's managed to stay in that top tier this season. By GSV, Hamilton ranks third in defencemen value this year behind only Adam Fox and Devon Toews. He puts up points with the best of them, handles tough minutes well and drives play better than any other defender in the league. The Hurricanes have enjoyed a 57 percent expected goals rate of better in each season Hamilton has been on the team and a 62 percent goal rate in each of the last two. At five-on-five, it's hard to find a more valuable defenceman and it's no coincidence that Carolina's power play started to take off once Hamilton became the top option for it.

Josi was incredible at five-on-five last year, but a lot of that was on him enjoying some fortunate percentages at both ends of the ice that were likely outside his control. There's a massive difference between his 62 percent goal rate from last year and 45 percent from this year, but not much when it comes to expected goals where he's been steady at 52-53 percent in each season. Those percentages play a big role in shaping perception. Per the model, Josi isn't as bad as his numbers this season, but he's also not as good as he was last season. There are very few defenders who can move the puck up ice as well as Josi, but this year that hasn't translated to elite results.

In the battle of No. 1 defencemen, Carolina gets the edge. It wasn't even close head-to-head. Josi had one goal in five games and a 44 percent expected goals rate, good for an average Game Score of 0.10. Hamilton led the Hurricanes at 1.38, thanks to seven points in seven games and a 61 percent expected goals rate.

Outside of the obvious Hamilton vs. Josi battle is the one featuring a quartet of the league's most underrated defencemen, with similar qualities on each side. Jaccob Slavin and Ellis round out the top pairs to the superstar partners, providing a quietly staunch defensive presence that allows Hamilton and Josi to do their thing. They both play a dependable 200-foot game while staying out of the box, a very difficult thing to do for their role. On the second pair, both Brett Pesce and Ekholm don't earn the same praise as the top two defenders on their teams, but they are both defensive stalwarts with a surprising ability to drive offence, capable of manning their own pair. The quartet would normally be equal in value, but the matchup/recency adjustment skews things back toward Carolina. Slavin has been a rock on the top pair against Nashville while Pesce has quietly been one of the league's best defenders down the stretch, posting a 61 percent expected goals rate while chipping in eight points in his last 22 games. By average Game Score, he's seventh among defencemen in that time frame. The Nashville duo has both been out-chanced during that stretch.

Brady Skjei rounds out the top four for Carolina and his low rating here likely requires some explanation. He's been a capable top-four player for the Hurricanes this year, but the model seems to be giving a lot of credit for that to Pesce. While Skjei's expected and actual goals percentage are both above break-even, his relative numbers were fairly negative this season. Skjei looks a lot better than the numbers give him credit for and, according to data tracked by Corey Szajder, this year he was one of Carolina's best puck-movers from the back end. That's a welcome development given Skjei was a turnover machine in New York. He really cleaned that up this year, but there's still some reason for skepticism regarding his value.

The third pair isn't much to write home about on either side, but that's par for the course for most teams. I'm not sure what it'll take to get Jake Gardiner in the lineup, but he seems to still be one of Carolina's six best defencemen. His numbers have returned right to normal this year and his presence would give Carolina a boost. Nashville has a ton of options for the third pair and the one listed is by far the best case scenario. If the Predators opt for one or both of Erik Gudbranson or Ben Harpur, they're going to have a bad time and their odds will drop by a sizeable margin. Their lineup already has very little room for error.

The bottom line

Fancy math is unnecessary to make sense of any David vs. Goliath matchup and this series is no different. Carolina was one of the best teams this year while Nashville needed a small miracle to make the playoffs. The Hurricanes are relatively heavy favourites and it would be difficult to find anyone that would disagree with that.



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Carolina had better numbers across the board this season that were driven by high-end talent and depth that Nashville will have a very difficult time matching. There aren't many answers in the Predators lineup for what the Hurricanes will throw at them. And while depending on goaltending got them this far, Nashville meets their match in that department against the Hurricanes.

With all that being said, the two teams did play a relatively tight five-on-five game during the regular season. On paper, it looks like a heavy mismatch and special teams might make it so, but at even strength, Nashville might be able to hang with Carolina if the season series was any indication. This one has the potential to get interesting if the Predators' best players find a resurgence elixir somehow and Saros outduels Mrazek by a substantial margin, but all signs point to Carolina coming out on top.

## Down Goes Brown: The bandwagon-hopper's guide to the 2021 Stanley Cup playoffs

By Sean McIndoe

It's always a weird time to be an NHL fan when your team misses the postseason, he said, speaking from decades of personal experience. The playoffs are when the most exciting hockey of the year is played. When every moment is high-stakes and every game matters more than any that came before it. If your team is still alive, it's all-consuming. But if they don't make it... now what?

You really have two options. The first is to just stay neutral, maybe hope for the worst for a few hated rivals, and otherwise just root for lots of overtime and a few seventh games. But for some, there's another possibility: a short-term fling with another team, one you'll temporarily adopt for as long as their run lasts. They won't really be your team, but if all goes well, they'll be close enough to get you through the next two months.

Yes, we're talking about the dreaded bandwagon hop. For some fans, it's unacceptable, and if that's you then you can tag out now and check back with my next column later this week, which will have something more your speed.

But if you're willing to consider finding a bandwagon team for this year's playoffs, you'll at least want to make sure you choose wisely. An ideal bandwagon team will be good because you want them to win it all. But they won't be too good, because that would make you a shameless front-runner and they're the worst. In a perfect world, they'll play an exciting style, preferably with some elite stars, and an intriguing sub-plot or two. Ideally, they'll have an existing fan base that's paid their dues and that you'd want to see good things for, or at least one you don't already hate. And it helps if they're not going to get swept in round one.

So which of this year's 16 candidates offers the best bandwagon experience? Let's figure it out, with my annual attempt to rank the bandwagon potential of each of this year's playoff teams from worst to best.

### 16. Tampa Bay Lightning

Why you should get on board: They're really good, but over the last month of the season, they went from consensus Cup favorites to something a little less, so you wouldn't just be picking the best possible team. Nikita Kucherov and Steven Stamkos should be returning from injury, and a good comeback story is always nice. And while the NHL's marketing department loves parity more than you've ever loved anything in your life, there's something to be said for a mini-dynasty.

Why you shouldn't: They won the Cup last year, and we almost always rank the reigning champ at 16, because there's nothing worse than showing up to a party one year after all the cool kids did.

Bottom line: The Lightning are all sorts of fun to watch and to root for. Here's hoping you did that last year, because this year it's too late.

### 15. Washington Capitals

Why you should get on board: When they won in 2018, they had just about the best summer of Cup celebrations we've ever seen. If the sequel is even half as good as the original, that's worth rooting for. Plus you'd get to cheer for Alexander Ovechkin, which is always fun, and for T.J. Oshie, who might be one of the best stories out there these days.

Also, they have Zdeno Chara, meaning if they win the Stanley Cup there's a good chance we'll get to hear him go "YAAAY" again.

Why you shouldn't: Oh, you like the Capitals? Cool, you're a Tom Wilson fan now. Enjoy spending the next few weeks using low-quality screen captures to yell at random strangers on Twitter.

Bottom line: There's definitely something to work with here, but Wilson combined with a recent Cup, some injuries and a difficult path out of the division make this one a tough sell. And that's before we mention that a Caps win would be kind of weird for Henrik Lundqvist's OGWAC status. Pass.

### 14. Montreal Canadiens

Why you should get on board: They'll be underdogs, but the North isn't exactly a murderer's row, so they'll have a shot. And the roster is a nice mix of veterans you've heard of and kids you'd fall in love with. Honestly, it's worth considering for the Cole Caufield factor alone.

Also, you'll probably get to root against the Leafs in the first round, which tends to work out well.

Why you shouldn't: I mention this every year, but Montreal might be the least bandwagon-friendly market in the league. They've got such a large fan base and so much history that there isn't a ton of room for newcomers, and you're not going to be able to convincingly fake it. Some years, it's worth the effort to fit in. Is a year where you're probably going to go from facing Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner to Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl really the year to try? Maybe, especially if you've got a bit of a contrarian streak, but don't say you weren't warned.



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Bottom line: Hey at least they finished strong, right? (Checks notes.) Yeah, you have better options.

## 13. St. Louis Blues

Why you should get on board: Their 2019 journey from dead last to the franchise's first Cup was one of the all-time great bandwagon runs, one that we told you to get on board for. If you did, maybe you've got some loyalty here. If you didn't, maybe this is your chance to make up for your mistake.

Why you shouldn't: There may not be a team with a tougher path out of their division than the Blues, who'll have to go through the heavily favored Golden Knights and then face whoever wins the Avalanche/Wild series. For a team that wasn't all that good for long stretches this year, it feels like you're just signing yourself up for disappointment.

Bottom line: They're big underdogs this year but won a Cup recently enough that they can't really claim any scrappy underdog street cred. For a bandwagon-hopper, it's the worst of both worlds.

## 12. Pittsburgh Penguins

Why you should get on board: They have Sidney Crosby, and you're running out of chances to cheer for the biggest star of his generation. They also have Brian Burke, and if you've never had the experience of following a team that he's prominently involved with, you need to treat yourself. And of course, they're a very good team that's been hot down the stretch, so there's a solid chance you'll be able to root for a Cup winner.

Why you shouldn't: Oh good, another Cup run for the Penguins, so nice to see this franchise finally get a break. Maybe long-suffering Pens fans can enjoy another championship or two before the hockey gods gift them with yet another generational franchise player in a few years.

Bottom line: You'll get hammered by other fans for making this pick, but if you can handle that, you'll at least enjoy the run. Unless they run into a hot goalie.

## 11. Boston Bruins

Why you should get on board: They're a very good team with some very easy-to-root for players, including Patrice Bergeron and David Pastrnak, who might be the league's most marketable star. And they have Taylor Hall, a super-likable player who's been cursed to always play for bad teams. He's never had a decent playoff run, but he's woken up since landing in Boston, and it would be great to see him finally shine in the postseason.

Why you shouldn't: For all the same reasons that the Bruins never rank all that high in these lists. You'd have to at least temporarily get on board with Brad Marchand. And Jack Edwards. And rooting for the city of Boston to win a major championship that would be (run numbers) their 400th in the last two decades. Also, for reasons nobody can quite explain, becoming a Bruins fan will make you irrationally hate Tuukka Rask and want every random stranger you see on the streets to start the next game instead of him.

Even the best reason to root for them, Taylor Hall, was basically stolen from the last-place Sabres for next-to-

nothing. They stole the weak kid's lunch money, do you really want to reward that?

Bottom line: I can't rank them all that high, but I'm absolutely willing to move them up several spots if they promise to start dressing like this again.

## 10. Nashville Predators

Why you should get on board: They looked awful midway through the season, then got hot and outlasted the Stars to earn the final Central playoff spot. They're going to be huge underdogs in a loaded division, but that's not necessarily a bad thing for a bandwagon team if you've got the stomach for it.

Why you shouldn't: Seriously, they should get creamed by the Hurricanes, and if they can pull off an upset then it's either the Lightning or Panthers next. And the key to their second-half turnaround was red-hot goaltender Juuse Saros, which means you'll basically be watching them play more talented teams and hoping the game ends up being 1-0.

Bottom line: They're this year's obvious underdog pick. No guts, no glory, but know what you're in for.

## 9. Winnipeg Jets

Why you should get on board: They're the only team in the country that almost nobody hates, so if you're a Canadian that feels obligated to do the whole "Canada's Team" thing then you really have no other choice. (Note: You should not feel obligated to do the "Canada's Team" thing.) They've got a bunch of offensive talent and an elite goaltender, which is a great combination to root for. And the two versions of the Jets have combined to make it out of the second round once in four decades, so their long-suffering fans certainly deserve some love.

Why you shouldn't: They've been terrible down the stretch, and will head into the postseason as heavy underdogs. Maybe that's a good thing — you'll certainly have lots of legroom on the bandwagon, and if they do go on a run you can claim to have been there since the beginning. But be prepared to be picking a new team early on.

Bottom line: Do you really want to have to root against Connor McDavid, or be mad when he does something ridiculous?

## 8. Vegas Golden Knights

Why you should get on board: They're quite possibly the best team in the league, with a ton of skill and personality. The pregame shenanigans alone are more fun than most teams' actual games. They have a great shot at winning the Cup this year. And if you can plausibly fake being a Golden Knights fan, it gives you an excuse to go to Las Vegas to see a game in person someday.

Why you shouldn't: They joined the league in 2017 and are into year four of being a legitimate Cup contender without ever suffering through a rough season, and, at some point, the backlash is going to arrive. More concerning: If you decide to cheer for them you'll have to pretend those ridiculous gold helmets look cool. That might be a deal-breaker.



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Bottom line: The Knights have pretty much taken up permanent residence in the top half of these annual lists, and rightly so. Just be ready for war against the Avalanche or Wild in round two.

## 7. New York Islanders

Why you should get on board: One of the great pro sports dynasties of the 1980s hasn't won much of anything in a generation, and has had to endure all sorts of hardships since, both on and off the ice. That makes them an attractive bandwagon pick most years, and that's especially true this season since you've got the added emotion of saying goodbye to their long-time home, an arena that not many people like but that certainly has plenty of character.

On top of all that, they're a good team that plays a style designed for the playoffs.

Why you shouldn't: "A style designed for the playoffs" is my subtle way of warning you that they can be kind of boring. Only kind of, mind you — reports of them being some sort of unwatchable slog are greatly exaggerated. But if you like goals, know that Islander games feature fewer of them than any other playoff team.

They also haven't been very good down the stretch, and they're in a tough division. It's never easy for the Islanders, but that might be especially true this year.

Bottom line: Just as a heads up, if they happen to get out of the division and end up facing this next team, you're going to have to get very mad about bedsheets.

## 6. Toronto Maple Leafs

Why you should get on board: They've got a ton of speed and skill and maybe not enough defense or goaltending, so you can expect to watch some high-scoring back-and-forth action. They've got a great path out of the division, so you could reasonably expect to be in for a long-ish run. The OGWAC factor is off the charts, with not only the obvious Joe Thornton story but also Jason Spezza and a few others. The Jack Campbell story is cool. And while it's a little-known fact that doesn't get mentioned much, they haven't won a Stanley Cup since 1967. Remember those heart-warming stories of long-suffering fans when teams like the Blues and Capitals ended long droughts? That would be nothing compared to the Leafs finally winning.

Why you shouldn't: They're a divisive team in Canada, to put it mildly, so they'll be a total non-starter for just about anyone up here who doesn't already root for them, and I've made those fans irrationally angry by even suggesting it. That's fair enough, but if you're an American fan, maybe you don't care. Maybe it's even a selling point. If so, hop aboard, but just know that it's the Leafs — it always ends badly.

Bottom line: I can't put them in the top five because so many fans will be actively rooting against them. But if you haven't already yelled "HELL NO" and scrolled to the next team, the Leafs check off a whole lot of boxes on the list of what makes for a great bandwagon fling.

## 5. Colorado Avalanche

Why you should get on board: Do you like skilled players? Can I interest you in ridiculously good young defensemen?

How about watching your team win hockey games? The Colorado Avalanche might be right for you.

Why you shouldn't: First of all, the statute of limitations hasn't run out on Red Wings fans wanting anything good to happen to the Avalanche. If you're too young to understand, ask grandpa, but you're not allowed to root for the Avs.

As for anyone else, really the only argument against the Avalanche is that they're almost too obvious, so you won't get any cool hipster creativity points. But that's fine. Sometimes you want to get crafty with the curveball, but sometimes it's OK to go fastball down the middle.

Bottom line: By the way, at some point in the playoffs we're going to have to have a weirdly manufactured "Wait, is this player better than McDavid now?" argument. Be ready, Nathan MacKinnon fans.

## 4. Carolina Hurricanes

Why you should get on board: Last year, I had the Hurricanes ranked number one, and most of those reasons still apply. They're fun, they do silly celebrations, they tweet weird stuff, they occasionally try the lacrosse move. They have one Cup in a franchise history that includes being the Hartford Whalers, so you're not front-running, but they're definitely good enough to win another this year. And maybe most importantly, if you cheer for the Hurricanes you'll be annoying the sort of perpetually cranky people you should want to annoy.

Why you shouldn't: Last year's team hit that perfect sweet spot of being good enough to win but still feeling like underdogs, while this year's version is chasing a Presidents' Trophy. And they were just a little more interesting with Justin Williams.

Bottom line: Last season was the year to bandwagon the Hurricanes, but if you missed that chance then this current version isn't a bad fallback.

## 3. Minnesota Wild

Why you should get on board: The Minnesota Wild are fun, which feels kind of like writing "The surface of the sun is cold" or "McIndoe's article got right to the point". These guys have spent decades being the league's least interesting team. It's their whole thing. Suddenly, Kirill Kaprizov shows up and the Wild are must-see TV. We knew it was going to be a weird season, but nobody was prepared for this.

Why you shouldn't: Everyone is already getting worked up about a second-round series between Colorado and Vegas, and the Wild are the team most likely to get in the way and ruin everyone's fun. Wait, is that a bad thing? I'm not sure it is.

Bottom line: The Wild have never been a great bandwagon pick before and it may never happen again, so this may be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

## 2. Edmonton Oilers

Why you should get on board: They have Connor McDavid.

That's really it. I could give you a list of other reasons, from Leon Draisaitl's brilliance to the Mike Smith comeback story to the fact that Oiler fans have been through more ups and



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downs than any other fan base and deserve some happiness. But I don't think I need to. It's Connor McDavid, in the middle of one of the greatest heaters in modern hockey history. How often will you get the chance to get emotionally invested in this sort of player? Take the opportunity while you have it.

Why you shouldn't: Even with McDavid, they're a long shot to go all the way. And be warned, as soon as you start saying nice things about McDavid, very confused people will show up on your mentions to tell you that he's not all that good because mumble mumble bad division.

Bottom line: If you want to root for a Cup winner, the Oilers are a risky play at best. But sometimes you just have to cut loose and let yourself have some fun, and it's been a long time since we've seen anything as fun as the Connor McDavid experience.

## 1. Florida Panthers

Why you should get on board: First, they're a really good team, one stacked with good young players. Jonathan Huberdeau is amazing. Sasha Barkov would be a Hart Trophy candidate if that trophy were available this year. Carter Verhaeghe is a real guy who apparently just decided to be super good this year. Sam Bennett is making Flames fans feel very sad. Even Sergei Bobrovsky could write an impressive comeback story if he doesn't lose the job to Spencer Knight midway through round one.

But while they've had a great season, they're also a classic underdog story. The Panthers haven't won a playoff series

since 1996, a full quarter-century ago. They've only made it four times since then. There's due, and then there's overdue, and then there's whatever the Panthers are.

Oh, and while they were stumbling around in the void for 25 years, guess who came along and won two Stanley Cups while establishing themselves as one of the best-run franchises in the entire league? That would be their geographic rival and fellow early-90s expansion cousin, the Tampa Bay Lightning, who you may remember from the number sixteen spot on this list. The Panthers have a rivalry with the Lightning, in the same sense that the Generals have a rivalry with the Globetrotters. But they've never met in the playoffs. Now they will. You're going to root for the Lightning in this one? Really? Are you that broken inside?

Why you shouldn't: You're one of those annoying Canadian fans who think that any southern-U.S. team that doesn't sell out every game should immediately move to Quebec.

Bottom line: Remember all those jokes you made about the Florida Panthers not having enough fans? Well, now we can help, by temporarily becoming one. Yes, they're playing one of the best teams in the league and might get crushed. All the more reason to get on board now.

If you've ever made the Panthers into your own personal punchline — and let's face it, that's all of us — here's your chance to pay it back. Grab a dead rat and some sunscreen and start nodding awkwardly at all your friends, because it's time to fill up the Florida Panthers bandwagon.



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## Playoff Preview: Hurricanes and Predators Goalie Comparison

The deciding factor in the Hurricanes and Predators first-round series might be the performances they get from their young star goalies.

By Brett Finger

When the Carolina Hurricanes and Nashville Predators meet for the first round of the playoffs this week, they will be doing so thanks in large part to the performances of a couple of young star goalies.

For the Canes, that young star is Alex Nedeljkovic, who emerged out of nowhere as one of the best goalies in the NHL as a rookie and helped put the final puzzle piece in place to make this team more than just a middle-of-the-road playoff contender.

He has made this Canes team look like a Stanley Cup contender.

On the other side, Juse Saros has quickly gone from the young backup to the future of the position in Nashville after his best regular season to date. The 26-year-old posted top-10 league-wide goalie numbers in 2021 in a career-high number of starts.

This opening round showdown will be very entertaining for many reasons, but perhaps chief among them is the pending goalie battle that just might be the deciding factor in the series.

Welcome to our 2021 playoff previews.

### Hurricanes Goalie Breakdown

Alex Nedeljkovic: 23 starts, 15-3-5, .932 save percentage, 1.90 goals-against average, 3 shutouts, 13.78 goals saved above expected

James Reimer: 21 starts, 15-5-2, .906 save percentage, 2.66 goals-against average, 0 shutouts, -4.20 goals saved above expected

Petr Mrazek: 12 starts, 6-2-3, .923 save percentage, 2.06 goals-against average, 3 shutouts, 9.53 goals saved about expected

The Hurricanes' three-headed goalie monster very quickly shed itself down to a normal goalie tandem down the stretch of the regular season.

After Mrazek returned from injury, it became apparent that the club's preferred system would involve just the veteran Czech netminder and Nedeljkovic, Carolina's rookie star who emerged from the preseason waiver process and quickly became the best goalie on the roster and one of the best goalies in the league.

From April 4 through the end of the regular season, Nedeljkovic had nine starts, Mrazek had eight start and Reimer had three starts.

Nedeljkovic closed out the year with a .932 save percentage. His 13.78 goals saved above expected ranked fourth in the entire league, trailing only Marc-Andre Fleury, Connor Hellebuyck and Andrei Vasilevskiy. Mrazek wasn't far behind, ranking seventh in the league in GSAX despite getting just 12 starts.

While we don't know who will get the start for game one against the Predators, it will absolutely be one of Mrazek or Nedeljkovic, and whoever doesn't get the nod will absolutely see playing time in the opening round.

Surprisingly, the team's leader in starts this season was Nedeljkovic. But, of course, that has everything to do with Mrazek's injury issues.

Safe money says that Rod Brind'Amour and his staff will go with Mrazek for game one, but maybe a Nedeljkovic curveball is in order.

Last season, the Hurricanes had a very well-defined goalie duo. That same can be said this year, but the vibes surrounding them are very different. In 2019-20, you knew who your guys were, but I don't know how much confidence there was in them carrying you through multiple rounds of a postseason.

This season, Carolina has two of the top-seven goalies in hockey in goals saved above expected and possessed one of the best team save percentages in the league. As a result, goaltending went from the team's biggest concern to perhaps their best asset.

The question now is whether that will carry over into to postseason. The playoffs are a different animal, but to this point, Ned and Mrazek have given very little reason to be worried.

They have been alpha goalies.

### Predators Goalie Breakdown

Juse Saros: 35 starts, 21-11-1, .927 save percentage, 2.28 goals-against average, 3 shutouts, 8.24 goals saved above expected

Pekka Rinne: 21 starts, 10-12-1, .907 save percentage, 2.84 goals-against average, 2 shutouts, -10.52 goals saved above expected

While Carolina boasts a formidable goalie depth chart, Nashville forms a formidable starter and just the starter.



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Saros just completed a huge season in his career, establishing himself as the present and future of Nashville goaltending. After starting all of the Predators' playoff games in the bubble in 2020, he finished the 2021 season with 14 more starts than Rinne. It's the first time that Saros has eclipsed Rinne in regular-season starts, and he did it by a landslide.

Rinne could very well call it quits after this season. That is yet to be seen, but for now, we know that this Nashville team is rolling with one of the best goalies in the league in Saros.

The 26-year-old Finn finished 10th in GSAx, and his .927 save percentage and 35 starts set new career highs.

Among goalies with at least 500 5-on-5 TOI, Saros (1657:01 TOI) and Nedeljkovic (1130:25 TOI) finished tied for best in the NHL with a .945 5-on-5 save percentage. The two young goalies have a nearly identical high-danger save percentage as well at .868 and .869, respectively. Petr Mrazek finished

his season with almost the exact same numbers as well, just in far fewer minutes due to injury.

While Rinne will be available if needed, expect Saros to see the net every time out for the Predators in the first round. In many respects, he is the reason why this team is here. He had an outstanding regular season that may lead to him getting some Vezina Trophy votes. He was that good, and he is that responsible for this team's second-half success and their playoff berth.

He is capable of stealing games. He is capable of stealing a series.

On paper, These two teams match up very evenly with regards to their goaltending. Saros, Nedeljkovic, and Mrazek all posted eye-popping numbers this season, and it's safe to assume that team that gets the most out of their goalies will end up winning this series.

### Playoff Preview: Hurricanes Forwards vs. Predators Defensemen

The Carolina Hurricanes pose one of the best forward groups when healthy, so can the Nashville Predators stack up against them on the blueline? Let's take a look at how they compare.

By Ryan Henkel

The Nashville Predators have long boasted one of the top defensive corps in the league, but since their run to the Stanley Cup Final in 2017, only three members remain — captain Roman Josi, Ryan Ellis and Mattias Ekholm.

Now, the Predators support a rotating cast of blueliners for their bottom three options and are a bit of a far cry from the dominance they once held. However, they do deploy a strong collapsing system that aims to limit rebound chances in close, so the drop-off in talent isn't as glaring.

But those top three defensemen still make Nashville's blueline a formidable opponent if only for their ability to transition through the zones and pose a huge threat in the attacking zone.

So let's take a look at who the Carolina Hurricanes may see standing on Nashville's blueline come Game 1 of the first round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

\*(I am no expert on the Nashville roster, but am basing my analysis on what I've seen, heard and found)\*

#### Projected Hurricanes Lineup and Depth

LW	C	RW
Andrei Svechnikov (GAR: 5)	Sebastian Aho (GAR: 7.5)	Teuvo Teravainen (GAR: 3.9)
Nino Niederreiter (GAR: 6.2)	Vincent Trocheck (GAR: 5)	Martin Necas (GAR: 4.1)

LW	C	RW
Warren Foegele (GAR: 2.3)	Jordan Staal (GAR: 1.1)	Jesper Fast (GAR: 0.8)
Cedric Paquette (GAR: 0.8)	Jordan Martinook (GAR: 0.4)	Brock McGinn (GAR: 3.8)
Max McCormick (GAR: -0.6)	Steven Lorentz (GAR: -0.4)	Morgan Geekie (GAR: 0.9)

#### Projected Predators Lineup and Depth

LD	RD
Roman Josi (GAR: 2.5)	Ryan Ellis (GAR: 3.5)
Mattias Ekholm (GAR: 8)	Alexandre Carrier (GAR: 2.2)
Ben Harpur (GAR: 1.3)	Matt Benning (GAR: 1.5)
Dante Fabbro (GAR: -0.7)	Erik Gudbranson (GAR: -2.1)
Mark Borowiecki (GAR: -1.8)	

Roman Josi  
8-25-33; 48GP

The captain of the Predators and last year's Norris trophy winner, Josi is still one of the premier defensemen in the league.

While his overall game has taken a step down from his record year last season, he still is one of the best offensive



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defensemen in the league and one of the pivotal drivers of Nashville's offense.

He will be playing top minutes for Nashville and would be expected to be matched up with the Hurricanes' SAT line as often as possible which would in turn allow him some chances of his own.

Josi is the only Predators defenseman with a positive expected goals for percentage (according to MoneyPuck.com).

Ryan Ellis

5-13-18; 35GP

Ellis has been a longtime cornerstone of the Nashville defense and this year it's no different. Despite missing a large chunk of time in the middle of the season, Ellis has been dependable on the Predators blueline and been a big part of the team's turnaround.

More than likely paired alongside Josi, Ellis should see the top shutdown minutes for Nashville, but he also can be expected to try and drive offense the other way.

The Predators are a very bottom heavy team when it comes to their overall game plan and the ability of their defensemen to transition the puck out of their own end and into the attacking end is something Canes forwards will need to be cautious of.

Whether it's skating it up or stretch passes, Josi and Ellis are the two defensemen that will give Carolina's forwards the most trouble.

Mattias Ekholm

6-17-23; 48GP The biggest trade bait of the 2021 trade deadline, David Poile gambled on his team and as such Ekholm remained a Predator.

Now Ekholm is a bit of a one-sided defenseman this year. Great offensive numbers, but less than ideal defensive ones.

That's not to say he can't defend as the 6'4" Swede has both size and skating on his side, but it's been apparent that his best value this year has come from the offensive zone.

A guy to keep an eye on, but one that the Canes shouldn't have too much trouble getting goals by or winning net-front battles against.

Dante Fabbro

2-9-11; 40GP

Absolutely no offense, but decent all around defensive numbers. Fabbro was expected to make a bigger stride in both areas of his game this season, but he seems to really be developing into more of a one-dimensional defenseman.

He has been scratched a few times down the road of the season, so whether or not he has a place in the lineup is up in the air.

Erik Gudbranson

0-1-1; 9GP

For some reason, the Predators decided that they wanted to pick up the NHL's most traded pylon. No speed or skill, but damn can he hit somebody... so long as they stay still.

Can't see Nashville actually opting to put Gudbranson out onto the ice barring about four injuries to the blueline, but if they do, goals aplenty for Carolina.

Ben Harpur

0-7-7; 34GP

"Big" Ben Harpur. He's 6'6" and 231 lbs. A monster of a man, he loves to throw the body and he can utilize his size to protect the inside of the ice. However, he isn't that mobile and his game stops in his own end.

The only real threat with him and Gudbranson is if they opt to use their size to try and take out a Carolina player along the boards.

Matt Benning

1-3-4; 53GP

The quintessential third defenseman in Edmonton, Benning is fitting into that exact same role in Nashville. Dependable is the name of the game and really you can't ask for more from a defenseman.

Should be expected to be a third-pairing guy or at least in a rotating cast at the bottom.

Mark Borowiecki

0-1-1; 22GP

The Predators had obviously planned to go with grit this season, which is why they signed Borowiecki in the offseason. Not a great player, but he brings some leadership and physicality to the lineup.

Problem for him this year is his inability to stay healthy. At this point, it's doubtful that he'll make it into a playoff game.

Alexandre Carrier

1-2-3; 19GP

One of the surprising positives that the Predators have found in the second half of their season was Alexandre Carrier.

Carrier stepped into the lineup and immediately started playing top-four minutes and played pretty well in them.

Also in the last 10 games of the season, Carrier was actually seemingly becoming one of the Predators' top offensive play-drivers.

Arguably the biggest wild card on the Predators blueline as he just hasn't been around long enough to know too much about him and no idea if his recent success will translate in the playoffs.

Conclusion

The Hurricanes tout one of the top offensive groups in the league and I don't see the Nashville blueline being able to stop them.

The Canes employ an aggressive place and retrieve forechecking plan that works to get defensemen caught flat



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footed and force mistakes by overloading them when they try to move pucks.

The Nashville big three are all able to skate and hit stretch passes, so they may match up good enough to keep up against Carolina's system, but the Canes are relentless and end up manipulating the games of their opponents to react to the forecheck rather than the way they want to play.

Also the Hurricanes' forwards should feast on whoever the bottom pairing ends up being.

Nashville ranks 5th to last in takeaways from opponents, 5th to last in shots against allowed, 15th in shots blocked, 20th in hits given and have below 50% Corsi For Percentage (MoneyPuck.com).

The fact of the matter is that they have good offensive defensemen, but really lack the elite shutdown guys necessary to help elevate the group.

The biggest difficulty the Hurricanes will face is Juuse Saros, whose amazing play in the last half of the season is the true reason for the Predators' turnaround.

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# SportScan

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

1187921 Carolina Hurricanes

Hurricanes' home-ice advantage won't be what it usually is against the Predators

BY LUKE DECOCK

MAY 11, 2021 03:23 PM

Home ice won't be as much of an advantage as it usually is for the Carolina Hurricanes in the first round of the playoffs.

Yes, the Hurricanes get to host a potential Game 7 against the Nashville Predators, but they'll be limited to around 6,000 fans in PNC Arena when the series begins Sunday or Monday, while the Predators will be allowed as many as 14,000 at their home games.

North Carolina's COVID capacity restrictions are likely to be loosened June 1, Gov. Roy Cooper has said, but the state has rejected the Hurricanes' request to allow more fans in the arena in the two weeks of playoff hockey before then.

"We've spent a lot of money and a lot of time making sure we did it right," Hurricanes general manager Don Waddell said. "We think we can do it right if we increase attendance. From our customers, the only complaints we've gotten is when someone doesn't have their mask on all the time and that's just going to be an ongoing thing anyway."

"We've sent out surveys asking if people feel safe in the building. We've got the cleaning crews going up and down cleaning the handrails. The restrooms are manned. We're doing everything we can to prove not only to the state but to our customers we have the best environment we can."

The current state restriction limits indoor arenas to 50 percent of capacity, which for PNC would be more than 9,000, but state social-distancing requirements have limited the Hurricanes to 4,987 since the latest loosening of restrictions in late March. That's up from a few hundred to start the season, and 2,924 starting at the end of February.

By utilizing more suites and creating bigger pods of fans within the stands, the Hurricanes will be able to bump that to about 6,000 when the first-round series starts Sunday or Monday, Waddell said.

The team also looked into creating a vaccinated section, Waddell said, but it would have unlocked only 120 or so seats while requiring considerable staffing and effort.

The need for capacity restrictions is obvious, even as we continue to emerge from the depths of the pandemic, but with the end in sight — and



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for arena attendance caps, perhaps only a few weeks away -- it does seem like there's room for rational relaxation under the circumstances, at least to the 50 percent mark which was the intent (if not the letter) of the guidelines.

So it wouldn't be playing favorites if the Hurricanes-uber-fan-governor found a way to get a few more of his compatriots in the building, especially this close to June 1.

"The Governor is continuing to listen to and work with state health officials on pandemic response and the plan is to lift mandatory capacity limits by the end of the month," a spokesperson for the governor wrote in an email. "We understand that businesses and teams are eager to welcome back more customers and fans and the state will continue to make decisions on the right path forward."

Is it actually a competitive disadvantage for the Hurricanes? Maybe not. But it certainly can't help.

After a season spent playing in front of anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand fans both at home and on the road, the crowd in Nashville is going to sound like a few million. And while Hurricanes fans are famous for being loud during the postseason, there's only so much 6,000 fans can do in a building built for three times that many.

Unsurprisingly, the demand is there. The Hurricanes offered tickets to their core COVID group of 2,400 season-ticket holders last week, then put the rest on sale to other season-ticket holders with money on deposit with the team on Monday. They sold out Monday night, Waddell said. A few hundred tickets blocked by the NHL could also become available the day before Game 1.

PNC Arena has the ventilation capacity to host as many as 12,000 fans and still meet NHL standards without bringing in extra ventilation as Nashville and Florida both have. If the Hurricanes are able to get past the Predators, they might be able to bring that many in for the second round.

"They keep shooting for June 1," Waddell said. "If everything goes well the rest of this month, that will open it up some more."

News Observer LOADED: 05.12.2021

1187922 Carolina Hurricanes

'We're gonna flush it': Why the Carolina Hurricanes took a pass on Game 56

By Sara Civian

May 11, 2021

The only good thing about Game 56 of 56 for the Carolina Hurricanes is that it technically meant nothing. Well, it also ushered in the end of pre-playoff SZN — aka the sneaky worst time to Be Online.

We knew what was going to happen going into this game. The Canes benched Jordan Staal, Andrei Svechnikov, Dougie Hamilton, Brett Pesce, Cedric Paquette, Jaccob Slavin (day-to-day) and Brock McGinn (TBD), many of whom are varying levels of "banged up." Steven Lorentz led all forwards in time on ice, and Joey Keane's NHL debut almost cracked the 20-minute mark.

We knew that the Hurricanes already had clinched the No. 1 seed and that the Predators, who had just clinched the final Central playoff berth against the Canes Saturday, had more to prove.

We knew all this, just like we all knew this was a scheduled loss. But it was still the worst performance of the year, it was still a 5-0, chippy loss against the Canes' opening-round opponent, and something about how

awesome the Predators' crowd was in response to the sentimental Pekka Rinne shutout just drove it all home.

It's OK if you felt bad about it for a second, for real.

But noted Jack Adams frontrunner Rod Brind'Amour brought us back to Earth when I asked what he's actually taking away from the game.

"Not much. We're gonna flush it," he said. "We played 56 games, and 55 games we were in every one, then this is the one game the whole year we weren't in. It's kinda flushed for me, to be honest with you. Obviously, we're going to look at some things system-wise, but overall we're just going to move on."

Brind'Amour had stated his objectives before the game, and none of them were actually winning the game.

He wanted to get Jordan Martinook some reps in his first game since April 22, and Martinook got 17:10 TOI, with some time on the power play and the penalty kill.

Brind'Amour hates losing, so I won't say he wanted to do this, but he knew he had to take this rare opportunity to rest some players. "We've got a lot of nicked-up guys right now dealing with a lot of stuff," he told color commentator Tripp Tracy. "When you talk about (keeping guys out of the lineup), that's why. We're hopeful a few more days of rest here will get a couple of guys back for sure, and maybe closer to the full group."

He has wanted to get 21-year-old Keane, a solid defensive depth option, an NHL game for a while. Brind'Amour isn't particularly ~keen~ on (sorry) trusting prospects with no NHL experience, so getting to unleash him tonight with zero real repercussions was a huge perk.

In that same vein, things were just accomplished behind the scenes tonight. We might look back on Brind'Amour's management of the situation in a few months in a different light.

News and notes

- I'm glad folks brought up practice because the Canes are actually looking forward to a week full of "tough" practices. They haven't held a real practice in almost a full month after the final stretch of the season consisting of at least a game every other night until this goose-egg conclusion. "We gotta get the tempo up again," Brind'Amour said postgame. "We haven't practiced in a month, like a real practice, where I could push the guys and get going, get our pace back and you could see it tonight. For me, the last two weeks you could see it. Once we clinched, I could just see that we got off the gas a little. So, we need to get that back. ... We're going to have some time to do that and get back to playing the way we've got to play."

- These practices will help everyone in different ways, but none are more urgent than goaltending. "I wouldn't say it's been answered," Brind'Amour said about his goaltending plans for the playoffs. "I think we needed to get (Mrazek) these games to get a good evaluation on it (post-injury) then hopefully have some good practices. The great thing is I feel good wherever we go, whatever direction, there."

- The only thing that worries me after today's game is the trend of the once-league-best power play falling off a bit. The Canes were 0-for-4 tonight, 0-for-1 Saturday, 0-for-1 Thursday, 0-for-3 Tuesday and 1 (1/3 of Sebastian Aho's hat trick)-for-3 on Monday. Teuvo Teravainen has been on his own, unique shot-taking rampage so I'm not trying to come at him, but I do think part of the recent power-play woes is just the adjustment period of getting him back up to speed with the system and moving others around, and of course the aforementioned "getting off the gas." Practice will fix this.

- I'm starting to think Max McCormick has justified having a place in the playoff lineup, and I don't think it's a knee-jerk reaction. Predators reporter Adam Vingan (toss him a follow) and I will be going over this matchup ad nauseam, and yeah, this game didn't technically matter for the Hurricanes. But they are about to face the same Nashville team up to seven more times, and things are already chippy. McCormick has been able to enter the lineup and score goals after not playing for months, and



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he's also willing to "answer the bell" as we saw Monday. That matters right now.

- Gilbert Gottfried is back.

The Athletic LOADED: 05.12.2021

1187971 Nashville Predators

In the Nashville spotlight for possibly the last time, Predators' Pekka Rinne reminds us of his greatness

By Adam Vingan May 11, 2021

The spotlight shined on Pekka Rinne and the crowd roared as he was introduced as the Nashville Predators' starting goaltender Monday against the Carolina Hurricanes.

Humble to a fault, Rinne has never been one to bask in the adoration of Predators fans, roughly 7,000 of whom were in attendance at Bridgestone Arena to see him. But just this once, he made an exception.

"I don't know if I can find the right word (to describe) how much I appreciate our fans," Rinne said. "My relationship with the fans, this city, it means the world to me. I never want it to be about me."

Monday was all about Rinne. It had been exactly one month since his last appearance, an eternity for a longtime workhorse.

Those days are gone. Juuse Saros, like Rinne before him, carried the Predators into the playoffs, starting 23 of their final 28 games and posting ridiculous numbers. When the Predators open their first-round series against the Hurricanes later this week, Saros, who last season ended Rinne's decade-long streak of consecutive postseason starts, will be in goal.

With no guarantee that Rinne, 38, will play again this season, or possibly ever, Monday's game served as an unofficial going-away party. From the moment Rinne took the ice for warmups, he was the center of attention.

Signs dotted the stands. In Section 117, a young woman held one that read, "#35 Masks. Check. Waterproof Mascara. Check. Possibly Pekka's last season...WE'RE NOT READY."

A few rows below her, 5-month-old Paulus Rinne wore a No. 35 jersey with "DADDY" on the back, one of several versions of Rinne jerseys on display throughout the arena.

The cheers crescendoed with each save and reached a fever pitch at the TV timeout with 11:36 remaining in the third period, when Rinne and his teammates received a standing ovation. Rinne's eyes welled up as he patted his heart with his glove hand.

"I was emotional all day," Rinne said. "I had a hard time keeping it together."

Rinne, whose two-year, \$10 million contract expires this summer, avoided speculating about his future after the game, saying that he had not "made any concrete plans." He intends to play next season, agent Jay Grossman told The Athletic on Monday. But where?

In March, Rinne told The Athletic that he "(wants) to retire as a Predator." He certainly did not look like a past-his-prime goaltender Monday, stopping 14 slot shots and 30 overall in recording his 60th career shutout. At a reduced price, re-signing Rinne to continue backing up and mentoring Saros seems like a no-brainer if he is interested. The Predators would need to wait until after the July 21 expansion draft to avoid having to protect Rinne from the Seattle Kraken.

Rinne could also choose to return to his native Finland. A recent report in a Finnish newspaper said that Rinne is considering rejoining his original team, Oulun Karpat, at the end of his NHL career. Reached by email over the weekend, general manager Harri Aho told The Athletic that he and Rinne discussed the possibility before Rinne returned to Nashville for the season, but no assurances were made.

None of that is on the Predators' minds at the moment.

"This was a great night for him," Predators coach John Hynes said. "You probably couldn't have scripted it better, the last regular-season game, but no one's saying this is the last regular-season game for (Rinne). This team's got to get ready for the playoffs, and (Rinne) is a big part of it. ... I think his leadership, his ability to play, how he played tonight, I think it's inspirational to the team."

As the horn sounded on Rinne's 369th win, tied for 19th in league history, he twirled around center ice, saluting the fans as his teammates clapped their sticks. Rinne thought that was it, but it was hardly enough. At the suggestion of Brad Richardson, Rinne took a lap around the rink, beaming as he blew kisses with his blocker.

"I told him it's going to be awkward when he comes back next year and we do it again in Game 82," Predators forward Matt Duchene said.

Memories flooded over Rinne as tears flowed, forever grateful to the Predators for taking a chance on a lanky kid from Finland 17 years ago and the city of Nashville for embracing him.

For at least one more night, he was back in the spotlight.

"If it is (the end)," Rinne said, "I'm pretty happy."

The Athletic LOADED: 05.12.2021

1187972 Nashville Predators

Rexrode: Goodbye to Pekka Rinne? Maybe. Hello to an intriguing series? Certainly

By Joe Rexrode May 11, 2021

The roars will double or so in quantity the next time the Nashville Predators and their fans convene at Bridgestone Arena for a hockey game — Game 3 against the Carolina Hurricanes, day and time TBD — but maybe not in volume. This goalie isn't just the greatest player in franchise history, he's the foremost crowd pleaser as well.

Unofficially, Monday at Bridgestone was Pekka Rinne Night, Just In Case. And he heard all about it from the roughly 5,700 fans (it will be 12,135 in the postseason) when he was introduced and in the emotional aftermath of his 30-save, 5-0 win over the Hurricanes. Officially, this was a meaningless game between the team that just clinched first in the Central and the team that just clinched fourth, before their mutual dislike intensifies. And it was a tribute to a guy who intends to play hockey next season, as his agent told The Athletic Preds beat writer Adam Vingan on Monday, the unanswered question being: "Where?"

A Finnish newspaper last week reported a team there is interested in Rinne's services when he's done in the NHL. Rinne is a new father. He's 38 and has become the seldom-used backup to Juuse Saros, his protegee and the best goalie in the league over the past couple of months. So maybe this was it and the last chants he'll hear in appreciation of his rubber-biscuit-stopping greatness will be in Finnish (I suppose "Pekka! Pekka! Pekka!" will sound about the same over there). Or maybe he really likes what he's seen in the Preds' 20-7-1 second half of the season to stave off a presumed David Poile roster dismantling and would like to sign on for another year at a discounted rate. I can see him being intrigued by what this team, playing as it has been under second-year



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coach John Hynes, could be with a full season of that brand of crushing cohesion.

As Rinne said Monday after the game, and after clarifying that his kiss-blowing, eye-reddening lap around the ice after the game was not necessarily a farewell: "The season is all that matters to me right now. We're going to the playoffs and I'm very excited."

As Hynes said of Rinne: "He's not done. He's not done here. ... We're going to the playoffs and he's a big part of our team."

I can't see the Preds not wanting Rinne back next season if he's game, and not just because he's everybody's favorite person in the organization and one of the three most beloved athletes in Nashville sports history (it's him, Eddie George and the late Steve McNair, with Derrick Henry and Roman Josi in the middle of bids to crash the medal stand).

As we all were reminded Monday evening, Rinne can still play. That might yet matter before he has to make any decision on his next move. And that's part of why Monday was far from meaningless. It had meaning beyond the stirring postgame scene, which will certainly work well as a farewell if that's what it becomes.

All due respect to Rinne and Predators fans, their mutual feelings are well-known and have been thoroughly expressed. As tribute games go, this was special. But it is playoff time, and there are messages of more urgency to be sent than "We love you, Pekka!" or "Win one for the Pekk ... uh, the Rinner!"

Messages like: "We can hang with you."

Look, the Canes had the division wrapped up before the Preds beat them 3-1 Saturday in a tense meeting of two complete lineups to earn Nashville's seventh straight playoff berth. The Presidents' Trophy was still in play for them. But that's not going to create the same level of desperation as a team trying to get into the tournament. And Monday featured several of the best players on both sides resting. Still, there's something to be said for outplaying a team over a large percentage of 120 minutes of hockey, when you're about to see that team in the postseason after that team toyed with you for the first six meetings in the regular season.

Messages like: "We will hit you."

The "Herd Line" of Yakov Trenin, Colton Sissons and Tanner Jeannot has become this team's most important line, as seen in its team-leading ice time in Saturday's clincher. It's also clearly not the Hurricanes' favorite thing about Nashville. And those guys got in plenty of shots (and a Jeannot short-handed goal) Monday, with Sissons resting and Michael McCarron centering the line. There was even an extra "herd" member on the ice with Mathieu Olivier back from injury and playing on the third line. And there were some fists thrown, from Preds defensemen Matt Benning and Tyler Lewington, the latter taking advantage of an opportunity to cameo for a game. Speaking of which ...

Messages like: "I'm worthy of being in this lineup."

Two years after he was the Preds' best forward in a first-round playoff loss to Dallas, Rocco Grimaldi is only going to be in this one if someone gets hurt. Yet the crafty short-handed goal he opened the scoring with Monday served as a reminder of what he can bring. Olivier is a guy who needs to be ready. Dante Fabbro is a guy who needed to show Monday that he should be active for the Carolina series, and that's far from a sure thing.

And Matt Duchene? Hynes benched him for much of the third period of a loss to Columbus last week after Duchene's desperation level did not meet standards on at least one key play. Duchene was never going to be in any danger of being a scratch in the playoffs. But it was still good for him to score two goals Monday — good as a reminder to Hynes of what he can do, good so Duchene could see the puck in the back of the net. Duchene said after Monday's game that rejoining the team after his six weeks away with a lower-body injury was "like jumping on a moving train," but now it's time for him to do some driving.

Duchene ended up with six goals and 13 points in 34 games this season, which is a massive disappointment for an \$8 million-a-year player — and this after increasing his goal output by 50 percent on the final night. Ryan Johansen, the team's other \$8 million center, scored his seventh goal of the season Monday. The Preds aren't going to have a chance to pull what would be a massive upset in this series solely on hard hits and Saros saves. They're going to need goals, they're going to need both of those guys at their best, and it can't be a bad thing for them to carry something into the postseason.

As for the Hurricanes, Max McCormick said after trading blows with Lewington that the past two games were "a little bit of a foreshadow of the battle ahead." Coach Rod Brind'Amour said he intends to "flush" Monday's game, which is the opposite of what Predators fans and their favorite player will want to do with it. But it's playoff time now. And you can bet the Canes will have their own message prepared and ready for the first period of Game 1.

The Athletic LOADED: 05.12.2021

1187973 Nashville Predators

Predators to allow 70% fan attendance for playoffs

Team adding AC units to simulate air flow of outdoor venue

MICHAEL GALLAGHER MAY 11, 2021

The Nashville Predators have gotten the green light from the Nashville Metro Public Health Department and the National Hockey League to increase fan attendance at Bridgestone Arena to 12,135 people — roughly 70 percent capacity — for the team's home playoff games against the Carolina Hurricanes.

The team also announced that all future non-hockey events at Bridgestone Arena, such as the July 2 and 3 Alabama show and July 30 Luke Bryan concert, will be allowed to operate at full capacity.

"On the tail of the amazing stretch of hockey that secured our team's spot in the 2021 Playoffs, this capacity increase will take what is already an amazing atmosphere to the next level as we continue our pursuit of the Stanley Cup," Preds President and CEO Sean Henry said.

The Predators had been allowing nearly 33 percent capacity for their final home games of the regular season.

In preparation for the greater number of fans, Bridgestone Arena will supplement its current HVAC system with three additional AC units to accommodate air flow requirements from the NHL in order to simulate an air flow environment similar to an outdoor arena.

Details regarding the Preds' playoff schedule and ticket information are expected to be released later this week.

The Nashville Post

1187974 Nashville Predators

Commentary: Sports are good, Pekka is better

Monday night may have been Rinne's last game as a Predator — and it was perfect poetry

J.R. LIND MAY 11, 2021



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The math will tell you Monday night's game at Bridgestone Arena between the Nashville Predators and Carolina Hurricanes didn't mean much. Both teams had already qualified for the playoffs, and their seeds were locked in. Indeed, the teams will meet again in the postseason, as 2021's one-off Central Division will send four Southern teams (the Florida Panthers and the Tampa Bay Lightning will join the 'Canes and Preds) in the quest for the Stanley Cup, no doubt angering a host of humorless Canadians.

Oh how the mathematically inclined love to tell you math never lies, that its truths are universal and unchanging, that all the world's answers come at the end of an equation.

But sometimes — maybe lots of times if we look for it — poetry contains more truth than arithmetic.

No, Game 56 of 2021 for the Nashville Predators would have no effect on the standings, no input on draft order. A glorified exhibition! A preview filled with understudies before the curtain goes up on the big show this weekend (probably).

How charmless, how colorless one's life must be to think that way.

There was a reason 12,000-plus Smilodon-clad fans made the trek to Fifth and Broadway, likely for the first time this season for most of them. And that reason has been part of their lives for 15 years, wears unassuming cardigans and an easy smile off the ice, and wears No. 35 and steely eyes on it.

Pekka Rinne, who the math will tell you is the franchise's all-time leader in wins and shutouts, is in the last year of his contract with the team that drafted him in 2004, in the eighth round (which doesn't even exist anymore), taking a flyer on a guy who wasn't even the starter on his Finnish team, but who David Poile's insightful European scouts had a feeling about. The lanky youngster came to America to hone his skills with the minor league team in Milwaukee, won the starting job there, and through trades and injuries and talent and hard work, eventually became the No. 1 guy for the big club and crafted a legendary career — with All-Star Game appearances and a Vezina Trophy and hours and hours of desperation stick saves and glove work that would make Frank Robinson blanche.

There are teenagers who probably don't remember a time before Pekka. There are tweens, with their TikToks and their Roblox, who weren't yet born the last time Rinne wasn't the Preds' top netminder.

And there are newly minted 40-year-old men who can't imagine the Nashville Predators without him.

Yes, Monday night was all about Pekka. He's given away his top goalie role to his fellow countryman Juuse Saros, whose astounding spring propelled the Predators into the postseason against all odds. Saros, like his mentor Rinne, is beloved in a way that goalies have been in the Music City for more than two decades now.

But — and this isn't his fault — he's not Pekka.

It seems a foregone conclusion that Pekka is going to retire once they put a bow on this season. He's 38, he's accomplished plenty (though that Stanley Cup has been elusive), and he has nothing left to prove. He has nothing left to give to us.

So he decided to put on a show Monday.

The math will say it was him who stopped 30 shots, putting up his 60th career shutout in a 5-0 win over Carolina, playing behind a ragtag group of teammates as coach John Hynes opted to rest many of the team's best players. (Of course, this season, "ragtag" has been de rigueur for the Preds.) But it wasn't just Rinne. Every shot the 'Canes sent goalward, every chance, every bouncing puck, every slapshot that seemed destined for the net, every skidder that looked like it might sneak behind him, Rinne had 12,000-plus people with him, willing him to make a save, screaming as if the combined sonic force of the crowd might put just enough english on the puck to send it to safety.

I daresay there's not been another athlete in Nashville's short time as a big-league city so beloved as Rinne. The late Steve McNair, maybe, but he never got a proper goodbye from the city — either on the field or, tragically, off of it.

Rinne, always quick to take the blame and share the credit, always with a nice word, always asking how you're doing, always gracious with the fans, always visiting hospitals, always giving, from the beginning an underdog, counted out because of injury or slipping play a thousand times, only to cement his legend by backstopping a Stanley Cup run and being named the league's best goaltender as an encore. They say never meet your heroes, but if Rinne is yours — and there's plenty of reasons he should be — he's an exception. Meet him and you'll be glad you did. And he will too.

The Predators didn't officially declare Monday "Pekka Rinne Night" or anything — after all, he hasn't actually said he's retiring — but they didn't have to. We knew. With 10 minutes left in the game, the fans cheered throughout the media timeout, something Rinne's seen time and again. Before, the TV Timeout Standing O has been for the team, but Monday, it was just for him, because for so long, it's Rinne who has been the team, though he'd never allow himself to think so.

The cheers lasted as the seconds subtracted, and it was obvious, even from the stands, Rinne was getting emotional. He needed a little more time to compose himself during stoppages and even under a helmet, it was clear he was looking up at the stands and soaking in the moment.

And when the horn sounded and hands went up, when Rinne officially kept a team off the scoreboard yet again, the usual post-game applause grew into an avalanche of adulation for that lanky Finn. His teammates streamed onto the ice and the usual post-game fist bumps to the goalie became dude-hugs (except for famously enthusiastic hugger Ryan Johansen, who all but enveloped Rinne with his embrace). The guys who had the night off made their way from the suite down to the bench and they too poured their appreciation on Rinne.

No one made for the exits to beat the traffic and get in line at Wendy's. We stayed as Rinne, finally, decided it was OK if it was about him, for once, and took a lap around the ice, mask slid back, tears and smiles all over his familiar face, his stick raised. If this was it, it was perfect.

After the game, in front of the Zoomed-in press, he tried to gather his thoughts, but said he couldn't find the words. Maybe there's one in Finnish. Maybe there isn't.

Maybe there's only poetry that can explain it.

The Nashville Post

1187975 Nashville Predators

Mum on retirement talk, Rinne gets the curtain call he deserves

38-year-old Finn hasn't decided yet regarding playing future, says he's focused on playoffs

MICHAEL GALLAGHER MAY 11, 2021

As he took a solo lap around the Bridgestone Arena ice, Nashville Predators goaltender Pekka Rinne fought back tears, cracked a smile and mouthed "I love you guys" as the estimated 7,000 or so fans gave him a standing ovation.

Once he got back to the bench, Rinne was enveloped by his teammates — led by center Ryan Johansen, who wrapped him in a bear hug and celebrated the Finnish netminder's 369th — and possibly his final — career win.



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"It caught me by surprise," Rinne said. "I don't know whose idea it was that all the players came out on the bench. I really appreciated it. I love my teammates and I tried to tell the boys to go back to the locker room. We've got playoffs coming up and I don't always feel comfortable in the spotlight.

"But again, after a while I think it was Brad Richardson, he told me to take a lap. It doesn't happen too often, so I'm glad I did. It felt really unbelievable and just the reaction from the fans really felt special."

While Rinne didn't confirm that Monday's 5-0 win over the Carolina Hurricanes at Bridgestone Arena was the final game of his career, it was clear the 38-year-old approached it as if it was.

"I haven't made any concrete plans about my future," he said. "Hopefully, when that day comes, I'll be looking back at what happened in my last game. But I don't want to go too far ahead yet. We still have bigger and better things ahead. But if it is (my last game), I'm not going to lie to you, it was a pretty cool game."

If this is indeed the end for Rinne, he has much to be proud of. With his 30-save shutout over the No. 1 seeded Hurricanes on Monday, he moved into a tie for 19th place on the NHL's all-time wins list (369). And his 60 shutouts are tied for the 14th-most in league history.

Rinne ranks among the best at his position in several categories including 20th in save percentage (.917), 25th in saves (17,627) and 28th in goals-against average (2.43). He also won the Vezina Trophy in 2018 — the first Predator to ever win an individual performance award — and he led the team to its only Stanley Cup Final.

In fact, Rinne holds franchise records in basically every statistical category including wins, shutouts, goals-against average, minutes played and goals saved above average.

"His jersey is going to get retired here," Predators coach John Hynes stated.

"I've played about 100 games here now and he's one of my favorite teammates I've ever had," center Matt Duchene added. "He's just a great person. I told him it's going to be awkward when he comes back next year and we do it again in game 82."

Rinne hasn't confirmed or denied that he will retire after this season, but the evidence points to the former. Filip Forsberg gathered the puck after the final horn sounded on Monday — presumably for a specific reason — and Rinne has taken a solo victory lap only once in his career — Monday night.

There also are reports from a Finnish newspaper that Rinne is in talks with Finnish hockey team Oulun Karpat about signing to play for them once his contract expires in the summer.

But never one to make things about him, Rinne soaked in everything Monday night from the mid-game standing ovation to the many "Pekka" chants that broke out throughout each period to the countless fan-made signs that said everything from "one more year" to "thanks for everything, Pekka."

"Here's a guy that's one of the best...the best to ever wear a Preds jersey," Hynes said. "...He means so much to the organization, to the fan base, to the team...I think the big thing that you can tell about a person is the way his teammates reacted to him at the end of the game and how hard they played in front of him and how the fan base reacted to him. It was a special night for Pekks."

"I mean, overwhelming, I guess is the right word," Rinne added. "I don't know if I can find the right word (for) how much I appreciate our fans. My relationship with the fans, this city, it means the world to me. I never want it to be about me; this team is going to playoffs and we have big things ahead. But I truly appreciate what happened tonight and it goes very high on my on my personal list [of] my experiences in hockey."

The Nashville Post

1188063 Websites

The Athletic / From Preakness to Pulisic, NFL schedules to NBA playoffs: Here are 10 sports TV trends to monitor

By Bill Shea May 11, 2021 30

Americans love many things, and near the top of any such list of our delights and obsessions are sports and watching television.

The marriage of sports and TV in the mid-20th century was inevitable and brought the drama, thrills, tears, anger, comedy, boastfulness, tribal loyalties and nonsense of competition and talent into our living rooms. It also made a lot of people obscene amounts of money.

As a nation, we've been a hot mess when it comes to sports TV since the pandemic began. We're watching some events and leagues in far fewer numbers while sticking with others. The reasons abound and probably will be debated in the comment section.

The downward sports viewership trend appears to be leveling off, but who knows how it'll play out as we exit this historic and tragic era.

We're now in the springtime grind as the NBA and NHL wrap up their regular seasons, and baseball settles in for a long season that will take us into the fall. The NFL lurks around every corner, waiting to steal attention away from every other sport.

So, here are 10 sports TV plots, subplots, dramas, nuggets and trends to keep an eye on in the near- and long-term:

**PREAKNESS:** The Kentucky Derby posted solid TV audience numbers on May 1. But like 2019, when winner Maximum Security was disqualified in favor of second-place finisher Country House because of swerving, this year's race had drama, too.

Medina Spirit won on May 1 but news quickly spread that the Bob Baffert-trained horse failed a drug test and the victory could be in jeopardy while an investigation unfolds. Baffert's subsequent theorizing about the test results and suggesting "cancel culture" is at play before then saying it was an ointment has been met with scorn but kept the sport in the headlines. Medina Spirit is entered in Saturday's Preakness, so the question is: Will more people tune into the traditional second leg of the Triple Crown at Pimlico in hopes of the wildest horse theater since Anthony Hopkins and Richard Burton starred in various productions of "Equus," or BoJack Horseman's Oscar-worthy turn in "Secretariat?" Post time is 5:45 p.m. ET on NBC.

Last year, the Preakness was held in October instead of its normal May slot a couple of weeks after the Kentucky Derby, and it averaged a record-low 2.36 million viewers. That was down from 2019's 5.41 million average, per Sports Media Watch. It got 7.9 million viewers in 2018 when Justify won the second portion of his eventual Triple Crown title.

**NFL SCHEDULES:** The National Football League is a TV ratings hog, even in this era of declines. The league long ago mastered how to dominate the sports news cycle all year, and its off-season events and moments such as the draft, start of free agency, training camps, etc., siphon airtime away from everything else.

This week is another example: The NFL Network will air the 2021-22 schedule release with a special at 8 p.m. Wednesday. ESPN and other networks also have schedule programming planned. The league and its teams get additional attention from their clever schedule-release content on social media. Additionally, the NFL is expected to announce a return of its London games as part of the schedule extravaganza — the Jaguars and Falcons are set to host games in England, The Athletic's Dan Kaplan reported Tuesday.

**NIELSEN:** Since the pandemic began, those of us who write about sports media and viewership have typed a lot of words about TV audience declines, particularly for major live sporting events. But Variety reported Tuesday that the ongoing complaints that viewership tracker Nielsen has been under-counting eyeballs during the pandemic may be accurate,



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based on research by the Media Rating Council. The report says undercounting in the key 18-49 age demo coveted by brands could be between 2 and 6 percent, and that millions or even billions of dollars in ad spending may have been affected over the past year.

Nielsen has said it's working to improve how and where it tracks viewership. Ad rates are traditionally driven by how many people are watching, and the networks use those dollars to pay the media rights fees to air live sports. And those rights fees are what has driven the salaries and valuations across sports. How this plays out, and how people do or do not return to their pre-pandemic viewing habits, could have long-term ripple effects for the sports industry.

The health of LeBron James' ankle will play a big role in the Lakers' fortunes and, in turn, the ratings for the NBA playoffs. (Kirby Lee / USA Today)

**NHL PLAYOFFS:** The Stanley Cup playoffs begin after the Preakness on NBC this Saturday with the Boston Bruins visiting the Washington Capitals in Game 1 of the opening round. Hockey's playoffs are a month later than normal in 2021 compared to four months last season. They're also being played in team cities again rather than a neutral site. Will that help viewership?

Last year's playoffs took place in bubbles created in fan-less Toronto and Edmonton to keep teams healthy amid the pandemic. They also took place in August and September, months later than normal, and aired against college and NFL football. Hence, viewership declined, averaging 953,000 for NBC on linear and digital. That was down from a 1.53 million average in 2018-19.

The Stanley Cup Final between Dallas and Tampa Bay (played entirely in Edmonton) was even worse, plunging 61 percent year over year to average 2.15 million for the Lightning's six-game title run. That was the smallest finals average since 1.8 million for Ottawa-Anaheim in 2007. Those numbers apparently were not much of a drag on the NHL's recent media rights talks: It got a seven-year, \$2.8 billion deal from ESPN and \$1.57 billion over seven years from Turner Sports. That's atop the 12-year, \$4.9 billion Canadian TV rights contract with Rogers Communications that ends in 2026.

**NBA PLAYOFFS:** NBA viewership generates scrutiny and criticism second perhaps only to the NFL, thanks at least in part to the players and league taking public stances against racism and related social justice issues. It's also often in the vanguard when it comes to tech and trends in how its fans consume its games and content. So what sort of audiences will the NBA generate for the postseason?

Again, the pandemic's effects will drive that somewhat (and having the Knicks in the playoffs for the first time since 2013 could be a factor, as will be the status of LeBron James' ankle). Last year, the playoffs were in the fan-less Orlando bubble. Now, they're back to home arenas. But the league started later and is playing a shorter regular season. And it instituted a new playoff format (which LeBron has some thoughts about) that includes an eight-team play-in tournament to sort out the seventh and eighth seeds of the regular playoff bracket in each conference.

The play-in portion runs May 18-21, and the traditional playoff bracket begins May 22, with a potential Game 7 final on July 22.

The 2020 bubble playoffs faced NFL competition at times and averaged 3.04 million across ESPN, ABC, TNT, and NBA TV, per Sports Media Watch. That was a 37 percent fall from 2018-19's 4.83 million. The Lakers' six-game NBA Finals win averaged 7.49 million, which was down 49 percent from the year prior.

The NBA has struggled with viewership, with a bit of a Steph Curry bump lately, but the overall decline could be a factor in the league's next media rights cash grab. The NBA currently gets \$24 billion combined over the nine-year media rights deals with ESPN and Turner Sports that end in 2024-25. Like other sports, the league likely will have extensions or fresh rights contracts in place before then. The NBA reportedly is seeking \$75 billion in total for its next deals. Eyeball count is among the factors that will dictate if that's a realistic goal, but even in decline, live sports TV remains the most-watched programming. And that's what advertisers ultimately want.

**SOCCER:** NBC averaged 970,000 viewers for Chelsea's 2-1 victory over Manchester City on Saturday, a comeback for The Blues that temporarily

denied City its third Premier League title in four seasons (which City eventually won via Manchester United's loss on Tuesday). Add in digital and Spanish-language, the total average viewership was 1.32 million, the network said.

Heading into the match, Premier League matches on NBC and soon-to-shutter NBCSN were down 9 percent from last season, but the NBC-only match average of 869,000 was up 4 percent year over year, per the Associated Press. Eight matches have averaged more than a million viewers, the AP reported, and that's up from seven such games in 2020.

What's interesting is that NBC's six-year, \$1 billion Premier League broadcast rights deal signed in 2015 ends after next season. The network announced the end of NBCSN earlier this year, which is where most of its soccer content airs. Matches are moving to NBC-owned USA Network and the streaming service Peacock. Will that hurt NBC's desire to retain the Premier League? ESPN and CBS Sports also reportedly will chase the rights because of the younger demo appeal of the world's most popular sport. We could find out this summer where the league's future U.S. television home will be.

In the meantime, Chelsea and Man City meet again, this time at 3 p.m. May 29 in the UEFA Champions League final at Atatürk Olympic Stadium in Turkey (which could be moved to London or Portugal over COVID-19 concerns). CBS has the U.S. TV rights to the match, and it will air on linear TV and on Paramount+. Will an American audience tune in to see Pennsylvania-born U.S. men's national team star and Chelsea midfielder Christian Pulisic? Will the Super League imbroglio affect ratings?

**OLYMPICS:** The Tokyo Olympics were delayed from last summer because of COVID-19 and are scheduled to begin in July. However, Japan is seeing a rise in cases and has a low vaccination rate. Polling shows some resistance to proceeding with the games, but the money involved appears to be a major factor in staging them regardless.

NBC has the broadcast rights under a nearly \$4.4 billion deal signed in 2011 with the IOC that took the network through the 2020 games (extended to 2021, obviously). A reported \$7.7 billion extension keeps the Olympics on NBC through 2032. NBC plans a reported 7,000 hours of TV and streaming coverage of the Tokyo games. Meanwhile, new analysis shows that the global pandemic death toll may be far larger than previously understood — almost 7 million and counting, including about 905,000 U.S. deaths.

**RSNs:** For many years, regional sports networks delivered the bulk of live MLB, NBA and NHL games to consumers, with the national networks airing a smaller inventory of the marquee matchups. The rise of streaming services, the ongoing cord-cutting trend and the pandemic have roiled that model. RSNs also continue to struggle to reach delivery deals, particularly the Sinclair-owned Bally Sports (formerly Fox Sports) channels that are still not available on YouTube TV, Hulu and FuboTV.

RSN owners get most of their revenue from the money they charge cable and satellite operators to carry their networks, and they use that cash to pay flat broadcast rights fees to teams to air their games locally. Those payments have been an important revenue source for teams. Comcast-owned NBCUniversal has considered putting its RSNs on streaming or selling them, per a Wall Street Journal report that also notes RSN subscribers have declined 23 percent between 2014 and 2020, to 145.8 million. Is direct-to-consumer the answer? We'll likely find out soon enough.

**SPRING FOOTBALL:** Pro football played between the Super Bowl and summertime traditionally has been an expensive graveyard, and the tombstones include names like USFL, XFL and AAF. One still chugging along is the Spring Football League. Its 2021 debut on Fox averaged 380,000 viewers for a mid-afternoon game on Saturday.

The league has existed on the fringes of pro football since 2017, but it's been successful in sending more than 100 players to the NFL and CFL. It's a developmental league intended to be a feeder system for the pro leagues, and in 2021 it has eight teams playing 24 games over six weeks, playing all games in Houston and Indianapolis. Players are not paid, so that keeps expenses down. Fox airs one game a week and the remainder are on FS1/FS2. The title game is scheduled for 3 p.m. on June 19 on Fox.



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ESPN: Kenny Mayne, the dry-witted SportsCenter anchor, said Monday he's leaving the World Wide Leader after more than 30 years. His last broadcast is May 24. Why? Money. On Twitter, he called himself a "salary cap casualty," as in he has zero interest in taking a pay cut to stay in Bristol. What's next? A quote-tweet of his former colleague Keith Olbermann suggests a podcast.

I FEEL LIKE THERE'S ROOM FOR ONE MORE.  
[HTTPS://T.CO/HK2FUEPNMH](https://t.co/hk2fuepnmh)

— KENNY MAYNE (@KENNY\_MAYNE) MAY 11, 2021

The Athletic LOADED: 05.12.2021

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The Athletic / 'You can actually be yourself': NHL's relaxed dress code could give players a chance to show their style

Sean Shapiro May 11, 2021 85

Dressing for a home game used to be more of a plug-and-play approach for the Arizona Coyotes. Pick a suit, pick a tie and you're off.

"Now you get to actually think about it a little bit more," Coyotes center Clayton Keller said. "You actually have options."

In Arizona, pregame suits have been traded in for a more casual look. Players are free to wear what they want, ties have been ditched, and the entrance to Gila River Arena has turned into a runway, now featuring better lighting, for Coyotes players.

Before the season, Alex Meruelo Jr., the Coyotes' strategic advisor for business and hockey operations, brought the idea to Arizona captain Oliver Ekman-Larsson, who then discussed a change in dress code for home games with general manager Bill Armstrong and now former head coach Rick Tocchet.

"I thought it would be good," Ekman-Larsson said. "We've got some guys who would enjoy that, would want to show off their fashion sense a bit, and then we've got some guys who really don't care, and they can still wear suits if they want. I think it shows some personality, and fans like to see that."

It's a far cry from the NBA, where the pregame walk-ins better resemble runways and players have turned into fashion icons, but for hockey, it's part of a slight break from a tradition that required suits up until COVID-19 forced players into a bubble in 2020.

The NHL relaxed the dress code when it restarted the 2019-20 season in the Toronto and Edmonton bubbles. It was more of a logistical thing; asking players to pack that many suits for an unknown length of time seemed unnecessary, and while ditching suits still typically led to another form of conformity — polos became common pregame attire — it at least planted a seed that a strict dress code requiring a tie wasn't needed.

Players liked the more casual fit, and team executives began to realize a player not wearing a tie to a game wasn't going to impact how hard he worked on the penalty kill later that night.

And so there's been a slight step back in the strict suit policy in 2020-21. Call it a holdover from the bubble. The Dallas Stars, who spent more time in the Edmonton bubble than any other team, adopted a "bubble casual" policy for the last two months of the season after experimenting with a more relaxed dress code on a road trip to Chicago.

Stars GM Jim Nill said it's a policy that makes sense with the 2020-21 schedule, which he said is still similar to the bubble in Edmonton, if not more strict when it comes to the road.

"At least in the bubble you could go to a restaurant in the hotel, get together as a team, things like that on the road," Nill said. "You can't do that with the world the way it is now. It's 'get to the hotel, stay on your floor, go to the rink, repeat.' And you do that for about three days in each

city. It becomes mundane. We did the relaxed dress code just as a way to break up something from the mundane for the players."

Some teams have relaxed dress codes for specific games or road trips, while others have simply changed the road dress code to matching tracksuits, like the Columbus Blue Jackets.

Stars forward Roope Hintz said it's a welcome change. That echoes the sentiments of a majority of the league. In the NHL Players' Association's 2019-20 player poll, 73 percent of players were in favor of a more relaxed dress code like that of the NBA.

"There's nothing wrong with suits, but I like it a lot not having to wear one," Hintz said. "You can actually be yourself and mix it up more."

Hintz said it's a policy that, if it continues, allows players to become more of a brand and could create more off-ice opportunities than NHL players have typically been given in the fashion sector.

"I've always dressed a little bit different way than 90 percent of the people, so I can actually dress like who I am," Hintz said. "I have seen a lot of the pictures of how (NBA players) dress for the games, and I think it's normal for them to be able to do something else with that."

Dallas Stars forward Roope Hintz in a more casual look. (Jeff Toates/Dallas Stars)

The NHL, however, is steeped in tradition. Suits and conformity are expected. Players interviewed for this story had no idea when or why it started, but they did know it's written in the collective bargaining agreement that they must wear a suit, dress shirt and tie to the arena "unless otherwise specified by the head coach or manager."

Hockey is also a copycat sport. What's good for the Toronto Maple Leafs is good for the 12-year-old youth team, which is why even young hockey players, especially if they play in a higher-level league, typically head to tournaments with a shirt and tie or at minimum matching tracksuits.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with a nice suit; in fact, some players have been able to better paint a picture of and share their personalities with that canvas than others.

Erik Karlsson was voted one of the NHL's best-dressed players by his peers in 2019 and said hockey's growth as a global game, with a higher influx of Europeans in the NHL, has helped push the envelope.

"I think it's a world thing. Ten, 12 years ago when I came into the league, the dressing was a very different contrast between European and North American guys," Karlsson said. "Now it's more similar stuff, but back then the European style was kind of a thing that not most North American guys appreciated or (were) accustomed to wearing it."

Karlsson points to the proportion of slim-fit suits that NHL players wear. Early in his career, only a handful of North American players, he mentions Jason Spezza, embraced the tighter fit. In general, it was an easy tell on whether a player was born on this side or the other of the Atlantic based on how slim his suit was.

Led by the NBA, player fashion, particularly the pregame walk-in fashion, has sparked an entire industry.

Dex Robinson, an athlete stylist who works primarily with NFL and NBA players, said at this point "hockey isn't even on the spectrum" of sports fashion.

"When you think of sports fashion, you go NBA, and NFL second, and hockey isn't even part of it," Robinson said. "I've had maybe three conversations with hockey players, Evander Kane being one of them. He has a solid look, and we connected when he was in Buffalo, and I think he'd be awesome if he was able to spend a little more time focusing on his look, and I think so many more doors would open for him and other hockey players."

Katia Dragotis is the COO of ProTrending, a company that works with athletes to promote their pregame fashion and sells directly to consumers based on an athlete's look.

"Athletes have become the influencers when it comes to fashion," Dragotis said. "When you think of the ideal body type for brands, it's athletes. And in many ways, it's even a better fit for hockey players, so if



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the sport better embraced the fashion world, it already has the right body types.”

Dragotis compared NHL players to defensive players in the NFL. Athletes who typically aren't getting the most face time are part of more of a unit than an individual but can showcase themselves as a brand when they are off the field walking into a stadium or arena.

“We want to work more with hockey, and I think right now the sport hasn't really taken that big step yet. We were excited when we saw the NHL relaxed the dress code a bit this year, but it's just a good first step,” Dragotis said.

Rick Soto is a tailor in Austin, Texas, who works closely with NFL clients, more than a dozen of whom were wearing his threads when they were drafted this year. Soto's business has grown from a mobile truck to a brick-and-mortar business, partially because of his work with athletes and linebacker-turned-broadcaster Emmanuel Acho.

“I used to not be much of a believer in the idea that (Instagram) 'likes' led to sales, but I've changed my mind on that,” Soto said. “I've seen sales go up or people contact me when they are ready for that big suit purchase, weddings for example, and they found me because they want to look and dress like what they saw a particular NFL player wear on social media.”

At this point, Soto has limited experience with hockey players — mostly working with the Stars' AHL affiliate in a north Austin suburb — but said as a tailor, the concept of jumping into the NHL space would be exciting.

“For starters, I'd watch more if that was a bigger part of the culture of the sport. Athletes set the trends, and right now it's like the NHL doesn't even participate in the trends,” Soto said. “So if NHL players started putting more together and focusing on it, whether it's with suits or without suits, they'd have a ton of people ready and willing to work with them.”

One name that kept coming up from those in the fashion industry was Auston Matthews. The Maple Leafs forward and Rocket Richard winner has developed more of a reputation for being more fashion-forward and was once featured in GQ.

“And he's one of the best players in the world,” Dragotis said. “We need players like that, ones that people want to copy on the ice, to become the ones that people want to copy off the ice. Someone needs to be the face that pushes this.”

One of the next steps overall, Dragotis said, is the buy-in from teams and team photographers in promoting players when they walk into an arena. It's typical for an NBA or NFL photographer to make sure they are stationed and ready for pregame walk-ins. That's less common in the NHL, in which teams also don't promote players nearly as much in that capacity.

Karlsson said it's a steeper hill to climb than simply relaxing the rules and getting photographers to better promote athletes' pregame dress.

“I think the culture and the way that everything is with hockey, with the history, I think it's hard to compare to other pro leagues, in the U.S. especially,” Karlsson said. “In hockey, the culture is a little bit different and you have some guys here and there (who) like to express themselves and take a lot of interest in it, but it's a minority. So I don't really know if that's something that the hockey world would ever really focus on the way that other sports have and do.”

Marc Methot was Karlsson's defensive partner with the Ottawa Senators and during his career showed more personality than most, particularly with the media.

“I think the NHL is heading in the right direction; it's not there, and some teams are behind others,” Methot said. “But I think we are at least to the point where it's no longer 25 robots walking into a game in the same black suit. That's good for the game because even if a guy still elects to wear a suit when it's not required, that still says something about his personality and who he is.”

Keller said the Coyotes don't spend ample time looking at the social media reaction to their pregame outfits, but it has created some buzz and additional fan interaction in a year in which fan interaction has been extremely limited because of social distancing.

“It can bring some new eyes to the sport, that's for sure,” Keller said. “If you can dress and grab attention like some of the guys from the other sports, maybe you start bringing some of those people to watch hockey.”

Ekman-Larsson is hopeful the relaxed dress code in Arizona will spark a long-term trend in the NHL.

“It would be good for the sport if that happened,” he said. “I think it just helps connect the game more with everyone and shows a bit more who we are as people.”

The Athletic LOADED: 05.12.2021

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Sportsnet.ca / Canucks challenged to find motivation in final meaningless games

Iain MacIntyre@imacSportsnetMay 12, 2021, 12:56 AM

One day after the Vancouver Canucks' elimination turned their rotten season into actual garbage time in the schedule, the motivation disparity between one team going to the National Hockey League playoffs and one team not was amplified by the Winnipeg Jets' 5-0 win on Tuesday.

Mathematically eliminated from the Stanley Cup playoff race on Monday despite their 3-1 win over the Jets, the Canucks looked as empty mentally as they are hollow physically.

Their disengagement was understandable under the circumstances. The rallying cry that kept the Canucks going through a typhoon of challenges the last couple of months -- that they could still make the playoffs -- is now gone, and so Tuesday was their motivation.

Maybe it was just one game. Hopefully, they'll muster something better Thursday in Calgary against the equally-despondent Flames. Surely, there are enough young prospects and on-the-bubble veterans yearning for NHL paycheques next season that enthusiasm will lift the team a little.

If not, the most disappointing Canucks season in more than a decade still has its worst week to come as Vancouver, its schedule and misery prolonged by last month's COVID-19 crisis, play five more meaningless games while the Stanley Cup playoffs begin without them.

“I hope not,” beleaguered Canucks coach Travis Green said late Tuesday. “When you're playing teams like this, their intensity level's high. It becomes official last night. Were we a little tired? Maybe. But for me, your intensity level has to be high to play at the level needed at this time of year, especially against teams that are playing with that emotion, that intensity, that competitiveness. And if you're not quite there at that level, you're going to look like that. That's just the way it is. There's no hiding it; that's the fact.”

“We looked like we were a day late and a dollar short everywhere. Even getting a puck behind them and dumping it was a task tonight and when you do that, when you're playing like that against a good team, it's not going to be pretty.”

It wasn't. It set a new Canucks standard for not pretty.

The Jets led 1-0 after the first period, 3-0 after two and added two more goals in the third period when the Canucks managed only six shots.

Blake Wheeler had two goals and two assists for the Jets and goalie Connor Hellebuyck, who appeared to be fighting the puck much of the night but only when it came to him, had the easiest 24-save shutout he'll ever get.

The focus for Canucks fans the rest of the way, most of them angry, will naturally be on draft-lottery seedings and Vancouver's young players.

Dynamic defenceman Jack Rathbone logged his fifth NHL game on Tuesday, and that he became a focal point for the Jets at the end of the first period was revealing.



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The rookie embarrassed Wheeler a little late in the period, beating the Jets' captain with a drag move inside the Winnipeg blue line while drawing a tripping penalty at 19:19. Wheeler felt Rathbone flopped easily. During the ensuing power play, 210-pound Jets centre Adam Lowry took a gratuitous run at Rathbone behind the Vancouver net as the period ended.

It was a needless hit; time was expiring and Rathbone was going nowhere. But Lowry barrelled into him anyway. In the second period, Rathbone absorbed hits from Mason Appleton and Dominic Toninato. The 177-pound Canucks rookie, who left Harvard to turn pro a year ago, is already on the opposition radar.

"That's the way the league is: if you're a skilled guy, people are going to try to hit you," Green said. "He's watched Quinn Hughes for a while now. He's a smart kid; he knows that's going to happen. But you've got to live it, you've got to learn it."

Remaining Time -7:09

Paul Stastny honoured before playing in his 1,000th game

At this spectacularly early stage, Rathbone looks a little like Quinn Hughes Lite. Already it appears the Canucks will need to make room for both Hughes and Rathbone on the left side of their defence next season. Can the team's third left-side defenceman be Olli Juolevi, who would make the ages on that half of the blue line 22, 22 and 23?

Is that practical or must the team re-sign career Canuck Alexander Edler, 35, to a team-friendly one-year contract to return for a 16th season in a mentoring role?

That's one question to ponder over the next five games.

"I'm just preparing for the next game, and what happens after the season, we'll see," Edler said Tuesday. "I'm just trying to focus on these last games and that's kind of where my head is at."

"It's never fun to play in games that doesn't mean anything. But at the same time, we have a lot of young guys in the lineup that's trying to show themselves and prove that they can play in the league. They're going to play as hard as they can and be excited, so it's up to the older guys to get ready, too."

Edler said he's ready to play all five.

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Sportsnet.ca / How Maple Leafs stretched themselves to build deepest team yet

Chris Johnston@reporterchris May 11, 2021, 5:43 PM

TORONTO — Back when the bills were coming due on the Toronto Maple Leafs' collection of skilled young forwards it was popular to question whether they'd be able to navigate the constraints of the NHL's salary cap system and put a top tier supporting cast around Auston Matthews, Mitch Marner and William Nylander.

Consider this Kyle Dubas' unspoken follow up to "we can and we will."

The Leafs are returning to health with the Stanley Cup Playoffs just around the corner, and they showed a lineup during Tuesday's practice that should be pretty close to the real thing when they enter a best-of-seven with either Montreal or Winnipeg.

It featured regular-season mainstays Alex Galchenyuk and Pierre Engvall on the outside looking in. It didn't factor in the eventual availability of Rasmus Sandin (salary cap scratch) or Zach Bogosian (shoulder injury).

And it still looked imposing.

Hyman-Matthews-Marner

Foligno-Tavares-Nylander

Kerfoot-Nash-Mikheyev

Thornton-Spezza-Simmonds

Rielly-Brodie

Muzzin-Holl

Hutton-Dermott

Campbell

Andersen

"I think we're the most well-rounded team that I've seen here," said Jake Muzzin, a straight-talker not prone to overstatement or exaggeration. "As far as depth and grind and skill and defence and goaltenders. It's definitely a good feeling and it's a solid team."

"We're going to need everyone to buy in here to make it a long stretch."

Remaining Time -0:47

Matthews hopes extra days before playoffs lets teammates recharge

That group of 20 alone accounts for a total cap hit of \$85.15-million in a league currently operating under an \$81.5-million cap ceiling. And that's not factoring in the cost of the available options behind them, which includes but isn't limited to: Galchenyuk, Engvall, Adam Brooks, Nick Robertson, Stefan Noesen, Denis Malgin, Nic Petan, Sandin, Bogosian, Timothy Liljegren, David Rittich and Michael Hutchinson.

The Leafs have stretched themselves in every direction to make it all work — expending significant draft capital to acquire the contracts of Nick Foligno and Riley Nash with maximum retention at the trade deadline, and not being able to play everyone in these final two regular-season games while remaining cap compliant.

They will have Andersen back in goal for Wednesday's visit to Ottawa, which has to be considered a bonus after placing him on long-term injured reserve last month in order to create the space needed to add Foligno, Nash, Ben Hutton and Rittich before the deadline.

It would not have been possible without subsequent injuries to Bogosian and Hyman, but those may well end up being blessings in disguise with Andersen having not played an NHL game since March 19 because of knee issues. Consider it one more step towards getting him up to speed following 95 minutes of action in the American Hockey League last week.

"Fred's played a lot of games in the NHL, he's got a lot of experience, so you're not going to read too much into any one particular game, just like you're not going to read too much into his AHL conditioning stint," said Leafs coach Sheldon Keefe. "This is all about just him getting comfortable and feeling good when he leaves the net at the end of the day from a health perspective and then from our perspective just giving him those game reps and having him out there this close to playoffs is a positive thing."

Remaining Time -1:14

What Keefe wants to see in Andersen's return against Senators

We've arguably never seen a roster construction challenge like the one presented by this flat-cap, pandemic-shortened season.

It should not be overlooked that the Leafs are North Division champions, still have an outside shot at the Presidents' Trophy in the final days of the regular season and will almost certainly dress a lineup for Game 1 of the playoffs that they didn't use once before it.

They're not alone, either, with Tampa likely to activate Nikita Kucherov and Steven Stamkos for the post-season and Montreal due to welcome back Brendan Gallagher off LTIR and Vegas currently not able to ice a full lineup because of injury and cap issues that will only be cleared up when the cap goes away after the regular season.

Against that backdrop, the Leafs showed themselves more than capable of competing with other savvy front offices. They enticed above-replacement-level veterans in Joe Thornton and Jason Spezza to play for league-minimum contracts, added Galchenyuk for basically nothing and



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found a way to load up at the deadline while threading the needle through a delicate cap situation.

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Their ultimate success or failure hinges on the same young stars it did in years gone by, but they've insulated Matthews, Mamer and Nylander in a manner not previously seen. Having all of those players on the ice together with the playoffs top of mind Tuesday afternoon only underscored the work that's been done.

"Yeah it looks good," said Muzzin. "We're going to need everyone going into this and it's nice to see those guys back."

Sixteen wins short of a Stanley Cup, it's all hands on deck.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 05.12.2021

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Sportsnet.ca / 31 Thoughts: What caused the 'disconnect' between Eichel, Sabres

Elliotte Friedman@FriedgeHNICMay 11, 2021, 12:14 PM

- How did Eichel, Sabres get here?
- A look at the NHL coaching carousel
- When will North Division series start?

What we know: Jack Eichel dropped a neutron bomb on the Buffalo Sabres. As the team's captain revealed Monday, he's "a bit upset about the way that things have been handled since I've been hurt.... There's been a bit of a disconnect from the organization and myself.

"The most important thing is trying to get healthy and figure out a way to be available to play hockey next year wherever that might be."

Yiiiiikkkkesssss.

Sabres GM Kevyn Adams is scheduled to meet with the media on Wednesday.

What we want to know: Why did Eichel do it? Here's the best Picasso I can paint.

According to multiple sources, Eichel had a contentious exit interview with the organization. No one is commenting, but it's believed he is exploring — on the advice of his medical team — an artificial disc replacement in his neck.

The Sabres and their captain are believed to have agreed to a month-long "pause" to see how Eichel reacted to rest. The end of that period is approaching, and, from what I understand, he still wants the surgery. The Sabres aren't thrilled with the idea, and have not indicated they will approve.

I find it hard to believe Eichel isn't consulting the best of the best, while Buffalo's reticence comes from artificial disc replacement lacking evidence of its effectiveness on elite-level athletes. It's a relatively new phenomenon. As far as I could find, there are no examples of NHLers who returned to play after having one.

Mixed martial artist Chris Weidman announced he underwent this procedure in Jan. 2019, and proclaimed it a success. He's fought three times since then, suffering an unrelated injury three weeks ago. Another

fighter, Aljamain Sterling, went through it last month. He's resumed cardio and sounds optimistic, telling ESPN that doctors informed him, "I will heal in three months."

The Johns Hopkins Medicine website describes the procedure like this:

Cervical disk replacement surgery involves removing a diseased cervical disk and replacing it with an artificial disk. Before this procedure was available, the affected disk was removed and the vertebrae above and below were fused together to prevent motion. The use of an artificial disk to replace your natural cervical disk is a new type of treatment that has recently been approved by the FDA. Disk replacement surgery may have the advantage of allowing more movement and creating less stress on your remaining vertebrae than traditional cervical disk surgery.

"While any surgery carries some risk, disk replacement surgery is a relatively safe procedure," the website states, before adding it "is a new type of spine surgery so there is little information on possible long-term risks and outcomes."

There are recent examples of star players embracing the unconventional. Connor McDavid did it coming back from his severe knee injury. Sidney Crosby with his concussion recovery.

Prior to the 2020 bubble playoffs, the NHL and NHLPA amended the CBA section concerning "Second Opinions" for players. It allows players like Eichel to obtain these insights at their own cost, with full medical information provided by the team. A grievance or appeal of Buffalo's stance is always possible, but the passage seemingly puts power in an organization's hands: "The club physician shall determine the diagnosis or course of treatment (including the timing thereof) after considering any report or other records received from the player's physician and after giving due consideration to their recommendations."

Undoubtedly, we're going to hear more and learn more. But it's hard to see how Eichel plays another game for the home team in Western New York. It's clear that trust is broken, and arguments about medical care are much harder to fix than debates over franchise direction.

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.

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31 THOUGHTS

1. Potential trade partners will need to navigate his treatment, but don't kid yourself — there will be a ton of interest in Eichel. Teams you initially don't think of will be there. Think about it: He's still in his prime, turning 25 in October. He's signed for five years. Yes, this season was a disaster, but one year ago, he was excellent. He'll be incredibly motivated.

The obvious suitor is the Rangers, who made a legit pitch one year ago. If they want to do it, they definitely can. They weren't willing to do a first-rounder last fall — it was No. 1 overall — but unless they win the lottery back-to-back, that'll be an option this time around. No GM will be more comfortable with Eichel's representatives, Peter Fish and Peter Donatelli, than Chris Drury, who was their client when he played.

Big question: Will Buffalo want to send him there? Bigger question: If the Rangers make the best offer, can the Sabres afford to say no?

You have to think Boston tries, but do they have the pieces? No one lusts after a centre more than Columbus, but, again, do they have what Buffalo wants? Philadelphia could do it. Anaheim was in on Pierre-Luc Dubois, and they have the pieces. Los Angeles certainly can. It doesn't make sense for them, but Ottawa could, too. So could Montreal. There's going to be a serious suitor we don't think of.

2. Eichel overshadowed everything else from Buffalo, but two other year-end media goodbyes were notable. Sam Reinhart didn't reveal much and looked like he'd rather be eating lit cigarettes. Asked if he wanted to stay,



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he replied, "I don't really have much to say right now. Gonna take some time, that stuff's going to get figured out when the time comes."

Rasmus Ristolainen said that if Adams traded him, "I'm fine with that."

That's really, really bad. Reinhart was 10th in the league with 25 goals. Ristolainen had every excuse to bail on the year after a rough case of COVID. Both of them played hard, even when there was no playoff spot to play for. Reinhart's been there six years, Ristolainen eight. Those are two guys the Sabres invested in, and, one year from unrestricted free agency, both can't wait to leave.

More than one western Canadian team would love to have Reinhart, born and raised in West Vancouver.

3. Coaching vacancies: Arizona, Columbus. Expected to sort themselves out: Carolina. Awaiting clarity: Anaheim, Buffalo, Detroit, Rangers, Vancouver and post-playoff situations like Montreal.

The Coyotes will give someone new a shot. Several sources indicated things were "awkward" this season, simply because it was obvious this would not be a long-term marriage. Rick Tocchet's greatest strength is his ability to connect with players who are not easy to connect with. That's very valuable. Phil Kessel is the obvious example, and he scored 20 goals. Tocchet wanted to be able to interview elsewhere right away, and Arizona agreed.

When the organization plucked Cory Stillman from OHL Sudbury, there was a feeling it was with an eye on him eventually being head coach. I don't think that time is now, and you're going to hear names like Lane Lambert (Islanders assistant), Nate Leaman (Providence College), Todd Nelson (Dallas assistant), Rocky Thompson (San Jose assistant) and Mike van Ryn — along those lines. Van Ryn used to work in Arizona, and was with current GM Bill Armstrong in St. Louis. Will he be interested, though?

4. "There's going to be change," Arizona forward Christian Fischer said Monday. "When you don't make the playoffs, it's expected in the NHL."

Kessel is due a \$5-million bonus for next season, and, after that, a \$1-million salary. The Coyotes need picks and prospects. He was top 30 in goals. It makes sense.

Crazy rumour that isn't happening: a Nick Schmaltz buyout. It would be at one-third of his remaining value because he's 25, but that idea is not being considered.

5. Blue Jackets GM Jarmo Kekalainen said he will take his time, which makes sense because his hire might be determined by personnel choices. Seth Jones said Monday, "I really have to take a step back and think about what I want."

That's the biggest question facing the franchise. Columbus has let him know a huge payday awaits, and likely the captaincy, too. Opposing players said the strain of the season, both on-ice and off, noticeably weighed on Jones, so taking time away isn't a bad idea. The Blue Jackets also want clarity on Zach Werenski, eligible for an extension two years from unrestricted free agency. If both commit, the path is clear. If not, do you rebuild or deal for immediate help?

6. Doesn't sound like any immediate announcements are expected in Anaheim — GM Bob Murray and head coach Dallas Eakins have one year remaining on their contracts.

Adams certainly will be asked about Don Granato's fate. The Sabres noticeably improved under him.

The Rangers likely decide on David Quinn sometime this week.

I don't know what to make of Vancouver. There hasn't been much in the way of negotiation between the team and Travis Green. When they want to get something done — Thatcher Demko, Tanner Pearson — they get it done. When they're half-pregnant — Jacob Markstrom, Chis Tanev, Tyler Toffoli — things drag. We'll see.

There are several veterans available and eager for work. Mike Babcock (700 wins, ninth all-time). John Tortorella (673, 12th) has no interest in retirement. Bruce Boudreau (567, third in all-time winning percentage). Gerard Gallant (270 wins, taking an expansion team to the Stanley Cup Final) is expected to get some traction this week because he's shortly

headed to the World Championships for Team Canada. There's also Claude Julien (667, 15th all-time), who has been quiet since Montreal.

7. Philadelphia's season-ending availability was very interesting. One of the biggest challenges teams have is how to accurately grade things that went sideways. How real is this year? If a player trended well before 2020–21 and this season went badly, is it more than just performance?

GM Chuck Fletcher talked about players who went back to Canada last off-season and couldn't work out as normal because of shutdowns. Head coach Alain Vigneault made a passionate comment about the need for a "normal year," so players can regain the comfort they are used to.

"If adversity can help Carter Hart get better, then it can help Alain Vigneault get better," he said. "Adversity can help the Flyers get better."

They will, as the GM said, address their defence. I didn't expect a head-coaching change — Vigneault is a good coach and has approximately \$15 million to go on his contract — but wondered about what would happen around him. For the second time, Fletcher backed the group. Coaches and players battled there, questioning each other's preparation, but it appears the Flyers are challenging everyone to be better.

From Vigneault: "I came to Philly to win a Stanley Cup. I told Chuck when we were officially eliminated that I sort of let everyone down here."

8. Julien's former assistant, Kirk Muller, said on the 31 Thoughts podcast this week that he will pursue a second shot at being a head coach. Same with Patrick Roy, whose QMJHL Quebec Remparts were eliminated by Chicoutimi on Monday night. At the very least, Roy wants a clear picture of what it will take to get that opportunity.

Bob Hartley, who won the KHL's Gagarin Cup with Avangard Omsk, said the idea of returning to the NHL is "a hard one" for him to answer and would take the right situation. On the same day last December, Hartley mourned the loss of Pierre Lacroix, Jocelyn Morrisette (one of the brothers who owned the Laval Titan) and the father of one of his current players. That's a lot to handle, and it made him think. He's got one year left on his current contract, two granddaughters he wants to see, and a son (Steve) he wants to watch coach QMJHL Drummondville.

"I would need to go to rehab for coaching to stay away from a rink," he laughed. "I really don't know. I'm sometimes too honest.... I really didn't like the way things ended in Calgary, but that's the way it goes sometimes."

9. Speaking of coaches, sounds like there's a conversation about Jon Cooper and Canada's Olympic Team.

10. It's not pressing now that Montreal's clinched a playoff berth, but Canadiens owner Geoff Molson and GM Marc Bergevin have been discussing the latter's future. Going into the final year of a contract without certainty is riskier in some markets than others, and in Montreal it qualifies as a daily five-alarm blaze. I think this has gone in both directions: negotiating parameters of an extension, and considering the possibility that, after nine years, it's time. Not sure how to handicap this one, but those conversations are underway.

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Sportsnet.ca / Flames should turn focus to prospects with playoff hopes snuffed out

Eric Francis@EricFrancisMay 11, 2021, 1:45 PM

So now what? What can the Calgary Flames do over their final four games to add some semblance of meaning to the process?

It starts and ends with inserting as many prospects into the lineup as possible to evaluate and reward them while aiding their progression.



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As an added bonus, by taking veterans out of the lineup, it gives the team a better chance at falling in the standings and earning a better draft position than the No. 10 spot it currently sits in.

If the club is fortuitous enough to get swept by the Canucks over their last four games, there's a chance the Flames could improve their draft standing to as high as sixth.

Think you know how this year's playoffs will unfold? Before every round, from Round 1 to the Stanley Cup Final, predict the winners and number of games for each series and answer a few prop questions.

They can start the youth movement by re-inserting Juuso Valimaki into the lineup and giving him more meaningful minutes. Darryl Sutter has been particularly hard on the Flames' first-rounder, suggesting he's too slow with everything he does on the ice.

Scratched last game in favour of Oliver Kyllington, it's important for Valimaki to continue getting the reps needed to try to prove he is indeed destined to be a top-four defenceman in this organization.

After starting the season with Calder Trophy hopes, the seeds of doubt have certainly been planted in the 22-year-old's head, which is something he can only work his way through by playing.

Play him now and play him lots.

The only player who should be getting more minutes than Valimaki down this sordid stretch is Kyllington.

The 23-year-old's journey has been anything but a straight line, to the point he's certainly wondering if he has a future in Calgary.

The restricted free agent is certainly a candidate to be plucked by Seattle in the expansion draft this summer if the Flames opt to buck up with compensation to protect Mark Giordano. Either way, now is the time to give Kyllington a heavy workload and continue working out the inconsistencies in his game that have plagued his ascension to the lineup with any regularity.

Connor Mackey was the team's prized free-agent signing out of college last spring and the organization wasn't averse to seeing him jump into the lineup his first year as a pro. He did indeed play three games with the Flames, but understandably required some seasoning in the AHL where he led all Heat defenders with three goals and 16 points in 27 games.

He's a no-brainer to summon from the taxi squad immediately, as the 24-year-old lefty is a restricted free agent who the Flames will re-sign this summer with an eye on him battling for a roster spot next season. Start that process now with NHL starts.

Up front, the Flames got a jump on the most obvious of promotions last game when they started Glenn Gawdin as their fourth-line centre. The 24-year-old, with just six NHL starts this year, was rewarded with his first NHL point.

Gawdin led the Flames AHL affiliate in scoring last year and seemed poised to take a crack at an opening-night gig this year before the abbreviated season crushed his chances by putting a premium on having experienced backups on the taxi squad.

By scratching several veterans for the balance of the slate Gawdin should get significant minutes and roles down the stretch, which should include penalty killing.

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Flames management have long wondered how effectively Adam Ruzicka would be able to throw his six-foot-four, 203-pound frame around in the NHL, and now they have their chance. Plagued by a reputation for inconsistency, the 22-year-old who had four-straight three-point games early in the Heat's season deserves a looksee with the big boys.

He led the Heat in scoring this season and had a solid pre-season with the Flames, which makes him one of the top forward prospects in the

system. Let's get a glimpse of how his skill set fits in with the world's best.

This is also the perfect time to get Matthew Phillips in for his first NHL game. The five-foot-seven, 140-pound playmaker has been called up before but has yet to realize his NHL dream.

It's the perfect time to get a glimpse of whether the diminutive forward, who had similar numbers to Andrew Mangiapane's in junior, can find a way to defy the odds and mesh with NHL giants. It would also serve as a reward for being a good soldier in the minors the last three years.

Obviously, there's no reason for Jacob Markstrom to play another minute, giving Louis Domingue his long-awaited chance to debut with the Flames.

If management believes Artyom Zagidulin has progressed enough in his two abbreviated seasons with the Heat, the former KHL netminder should also get at least one start to see how comfortable he is.

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Sportsnet.ca / Sharks' Kane says decision to file for bankruptcy brought 'relief'

Emily Sadler@EmmysadlerMay 10, 2021, 12:26 PM

On the ice, Evander Kane has been having one of the most productive seasons of his career.

Off of it, the San Jose Sharks forward has experienced several life-changing events over the past year that have shaped his life and career moving forward.

He opened up about both in a personal, in-depth interview with Ryan S. Clark of The Athletic. In it, Kane said that filing for bankruptcy earlier this year — and seeing that news made public — actually brought relief.

"Yes, it's been stressful to deal with a lot of the bankruptcy. It's definitely been stressful. But it was a relief because I didn't have to try and hide it anymore. I didn't have to try to pretend. It was a big weight off my shoulders in a way," Kane told Clark.

Kane filed for bankruptcy on Jan. 9.

"For years, I was dealing with all these things. It's having that constant stress. Everybody has stress. But once I made that decision (to file for bankruptcy), people think it is the start of something. Really, it's the end of this chapter of my life. I think that is where the big misconception is about this," he said, calling the decision to file "the best decision I have made in a long time."

The Sharks were among the seven teams not included in the NHL's return-to-play extended post-season last summer. Kane said the extended time at home amid COVID quarantine protocols brought the opportunity to reflect, and the arrival of daughter Kensington (now 10 months old) was a major driving force in his decision to file.

"Having my daughter was a huge, life-changing moment. That gets you to think about what you need to do. Not only as a man, but as a father to be able to make the best decisions for your family moving forward," Kane said. "For me, it was taking it on the chin. It was knowing I had to make a decision that was the best for me and my family that would also not be the most flattering publicly. It took me a while, I think, to come to terms with my situation."

At the time of his filing, there was also some speculation that he might consider opting out of the 2020-21 campaign. While the season brought hurdles for the Sharks, who spent a chunk of the year in Arizona after not being permitted to play in California due to COVID restrictions, Kane played some of the best hockey of his career. His 22 goals, a career-high 27 assists, and 49 points through 55 games in this shortened season had



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him on pace for personal bests across the board had this been a full 82-game season.

"It was something that was a weight off my back. You've kind of seen it with my on-ice play, that is maybe part of the motivation. It is wanting to show people that I've been dealing with so much for so long. Nobody has had any idea about it. Maybe you've heard things. But nobody truly knows what I've been dealing with or what I've dealt with," he said.

"To have a lot of that removed and off my plate, it allowed me to focus on hockey and finally, actually enjoy coming to the rink and getting on the ice with my teammates and playing the game at a high level. It was enjoyable for the first time in a long time."

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TSN.CA / Nash remains out, but has potential to centre shutdown line

By Mark Masters

TSN Toronto Reporter Mark Masters reports on the Maple Leafs, who practised at Ford Performance Centre on Tuesday before travelling to Ottawa for Wednesday's game against the Senators.

Riley Nash and Zach Hyman skated on regular lines on Tuesday, but remain unavailable due to knee injuries.

"I really just wanted to make sure [Nash] was able to get proper reps," coach Sheldon Keefe explained. "That is important as we try to get both him and Hyman back and ready to play games. Today was their first full practice [with contact]. It is our last full practice of the week. It was important to give them that opportunity."

Hyman skated with Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner while Nash, acquired from Columbus ahead of the trade deadline, skated between Alex Kerfoot and Ilya Mikheyev.

Nash's defensive acumen is already turning heads.

"Just in practice he's always in position," noted defenceman Jake Muzzin. "He's got a good stick. He's on the defensive side of the puck, which is nice. He's a smart player and we're going to need that."

At the start of the year, Keefe expressed a desire to ice a reliable third line featuring Hyman, Kerfoot and Mikheyev. Injury issues limited that trio's usage and Hyman ended up back in the top six quite often. The Nash line at Tuesday's practice certainly has potential to fill that role as well.

"Nash has a lot of really solid defensive utility for us and can play against really anybody," Keefe said. "You can trust he is going to make good decisions with the puck and be in good spots defensively. He obviously hasn't played for a long time and he hasn't played for us yet. There is a lot of things to sort through there. In regards to today, I really just wanted to make sure he was able to get proper reps."

Nash hasn't played since suffering a knee sprain on April 4, but he's got 578 NHL games under his belt. He also got an up close look at the Leafs in the bubble last summer.

Nash will travel with the team on the two-game road trip, which will provide some additional bonding time.

"He is a veteran guy with a lot of experience both in regular season and in playoff hockey," said Keefe. "He is a confident guy who is very intelligent. He has a good demeanour about him and fits in well with his teammates. There are a lot of good things there that make us not overly concerned about the lack of time to adjust to new surroundings and new teammates."

Nash's relationship with Nick Foligno, who was also traded to Toronto from Columbus at the deadline, should also help ease the transition.

"He's a sneaky hockey player," Foligno said. "He somehow finds ways to get through and get to open ice. He does the subtle things in the game ... He does the little things in games that allow you to win. He's got great skill. He sees the ice so well and reads plays so well and I've really come to appreciate his game. I think people will really appreciate the little things he does and especially the guys in the room. I think the guys will see how he plays the game and it will really complement this group nicely."

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After missing the last two games with an upper-body injury, Foligno skated with John Tavares and William Nylander at practice.

"Such a well-rounded player," Tavares said. "He protects the puck extremely well. He's got great hands around the net and is just so smart all over the ice. Defensively, offensively, he just always seems to be in good spots and makes the game easier for his linemates."

Foligno slotted in beside Matthews and Marner in his first five games with the Leafs producing four assists. But Keefe wants to get the 33-year-old a look with different lines down the stretch to build some chemistry and create more options should changes be necessary in the playoffs.

Foligno is listed as a game-time decision for Wednesday night.

Leafs Ice Chips: Foligno skates with Tavares line; game-time decision in Ottawa

Nick Foligno was skating alongside John Tavares and William Nylander at Tuesday's skate however he remains a game-time decision for the Leafs game against the Senators on Wednesday. Mark Masters has more on who's available for Toronto's second last game of the regular season.

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Frederik Andersen gets the start in Ottawa. It will be his first NHL game since March 19.

"This is all about him getting comfortable and feeling good ... from a health perspective," Keefe said. "And then, from our perspective, just giving him those game reps and having him out there close to the playoffs is a positive thing."

Andersen, who has been dealing with a knee injury, made two appearances with the Toronto Marlies during a conditioning stint in the American Hockey League last week. He played a full game on Saturday afternoon.

"He's feeling good," said Keefe. "I thought he was tremendous in these last couple days on the ice. He's worked extremely hard to get himself back. His approach has been really good so it's good to have him back. The guys will be excited to play in front of him tomorrow."

"It's just a great boost of morale," Jason Spezza said following Monday's practice. "We know Freddie's been working hard to get back so to have him around our group has been fun. He's a big part of our team."

Andersen, who is in the final year of his contract, has had a tough season. His .897 save percentage is a career low. He lost five of his last six games while playing through the knee injury in March. But the 31-year-old Dane has built up plenty of goodwill in the organization based on his play since arriving in Toronto in 2016.

"He's got a lot of experience so you're not going to read too much into any one particular game just like you're not going to read too much into his AHL conditioning stint," Keefe stressed.

Andersen starts for Leafs in Ottawa; Nash, Hyman still unavailable

Head coach Sheldon Keefe revealed that Frederik Andersen will return to the goal for the Leafs on Wednesday against the Senators. He also says Riley Nash and Zach Hyman are still unavailable to return. Mark Masters has more.

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As he contemplated changing the curve of his stick for the first time in his NHL career, Tavares sought out a teammate for advice.



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"He asked me a few times about that and I was reluctant to really help him or suggest anything, because that stick's worked well for him over the years," said Spezza with a chuckle. "But he seemed pretty set on making a little change."

After using the Drury curve with a straight heel wedge since his minor hockey days, Tavares switched to a model with more of a toe curve. The centre, who will play his 200th game with the Leafs on Wednesday, shared more details about the change on Tuesday.

"Honestly, I've thought about it probably for a couple years," Tavares said. "The second time we were in Edmonton [in late February] I decided to try something different and see how it felt and it felt really good."

Specifically, Tavares liked how he was able to control the puck with the new curve. He also believes it improved his release.

Prior to the trip to Edmonton, Tavares had been struggling to produce in five-on-five play with only 10 even-strength points in 21 games. Since then, he's amassed 27 even-strength points in 33 games.

"He got some results right away from it and sometimes that's all it takes to get rolling," Spezza said. "He's a pretty talented player and I think he could use any stick, but it's good to see him have success with that."

It's not easy to get new sticks made and delivered during the pandemic so Tavares actually ended up using the twigs belonging to a teammate – Pierre Engvall – for a stretch.

"I wasn't sure I was going to want something made if I didn't like the pattern or curve he was using," Tavares said of this experimental phase. "I made one little tweak to it when I got my own made, but that's the one I was using there for about a month."

Once Tavares got his own personalized sticks, his offence took off even more. He has 18 even-strength points in 17 games since April 4.

First stick change since minor hockey seems to be working for Tavares

John Tavares says he's been thinking about a stick change for a while now and finally pulled the trigger on something new. Stick production is down with the global pandemic, so he was forced to test things out with Pierre Engvall's twig first.

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The Leafs clinched first place in the North Division on Saturday night, but they aren't done studying the standings.

"We'd like to make a push and continue to climb higher and higher in league as well and definitely push for that so, all in all, a pretty exciting week for us," said Matthews.

Toronto still has an outside shot at finishing first overall and winning the Presidents' Trophy. There are three teams in contention for that prize. The Leafs are two points behind the Colorado Avalanche who have two games remaining. They are four points behind the Vegas Golden Knights, who have one game left. Toronto has two games left and owns the tiebreaker (regulation wins) with Vegas, but not Colorado.

In the third round of the playoffs, the remaining teams will be re-seeded so the overall standings are important.

"We still have positioning to play for although the division is taken care of," Tavares said. "That's thinking down the road, but [that's] what we're trying to get to and ... there's still some jostling there."

The Leafs currently sit sixth overall one point behind the Pittsburgh Penguins who are done their 56-game schedule. Toronto is three points behind Florida and four behind Carolina, with both teams done with their regular-season schedules.

With division locked up, Matthews, Leafs aim to climb league standings

The Maple Leafs are getting important bodies back right in time for the playoffs and with two games remaining, they're hoping to make a push to climb the league standings now that the division is locked up.

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The Leafs spent plenty of time on special teams work at practice, but there was a wrinkle. The power play reps were timed and sprinkled in

throughout the workout between the five-on-five drills instead of being done all at once. That created more of a game-like feel.

Toronto failed to convert on nine chances over three games against Montreal last week. The Leafs have scored just five power-play goals on 71 opportunities over the last 30 games.

"I feel that the guys, they're working hard and we're trying to get some stuff going and today was a good day," said Muzzin, who quarterbacks the second unit. "It's important going into the playoffs to have your special teams clicking so we wanted to touch on that."

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Lines at Tuesday's practice:

F

Hyman - Matthews - Marner

Foligno - Tavares - Nylander

Kerfoot - Nash - Mikheyev

Thornton - Spezza - Simmonds

Engvall, Galchenyuk

D

Rielly - Brodie

Muzzin - Holl

Hutton - Dermott

Sandin - Hollowell

G

Andersen

Campbell

Power-play units at Tuesday's practice:

PP1

Rielly

Marner - Tavares - Matthews

Nylander

PP2

Muzzin

Kerfoot - Thornton - Spezza

Simmonds

TSN.CA LOADED: 05.12.2021

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TSN.CA / Free Agent Frenzy: Hamilton tops list with postseason, Expansion Draft looming

By Frank Seravalli

This isn't Canada's favourite game show, but we have a Quiz question ahead of Free Agent Frenzy: Who is the only NHL defenceman to hit double digits in goals in each of the last seven seasons?

A. Victor Hedman

B. Tyson Barrie

C. John Carlson



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D. Dougie Hamilton

E. Roman Josi

The correct answer: is D for Dougie, a model of consistency who is also the only blueliner to ring up at least 39 points in each of the last seven seasons - including 40 in 2019-20 despite playing in just 47 games because of a leg injury.

Hamilton logged the NHL's second-longest points streak this season at 14 games, sandwiched between Nathan MacKinnon (15) and Auston Matthews (13) – the sixth-longest streak by a defenceman in the last four decades.

Teach Me How To Dougie, indeed.

The Carolina Hurricanes know that tune, but they haven't exactly been in rhythm with Hamilton's camp over the past number of months on a contract extension, which is why the soon-to-be 28-year-old has emerged as the No. 1 free agent available ahead of the Frenzy.

Hurricanes GM Don Waddell told the DFO Rundown Podcast in late March that the two sides agreed to put off talks until after the season. Sources on both sides indicate there is a significant gap between what Carolina appear willing to pay and what Hamilton's camp believes is market value.

To that end, it makes little sense for the Hurricanes to even re-sign Hamilton at the moment, with July's Expansion Draft looming. Protecting the pending free agent Hamilton would mean the Hurricanes would also have to expose defenceman Jake Bean.

The Expansion Draft is just one complicating factor, ahead of a third consecutive off-season with the same \$81.5 million salary cap due to COVID-19, that makes 2021 one of the largest and most intriguing free agent classes ever.

For the first time ever, TSN Hockey's Top 30 Free Agents includes a coach in Rick Tocchet. The Arizona Coyotes and Tocchet announced their decision to part ways this week and Tocchet is expected to receive interest from multiple teams, including some that may opt for a coaching change specifically because the three-time Stanley Cup winner (once as Penguins player, twice as Penguins assistant coach) is up for grabs. Tocchet, 57, did more this season with less than almost any other coach in the league in Arizona.

It also includes an intriguing Group VI free agent in Arizona's Michael Bunting, who some teams think may be this season's Carter Verhaeghe or Jonathan Marchessault.

Two names that did not make the initial Top 30: Alex Ovechkin and Gabriel Landeskog.

To date, there is no indication that either captain will be leaving their adopted hometowns. Neither extension appears to be imminent. Talks have been cordial between Ovechkin (who is negotiating the deal himself) and the Caps; Both Landeskog and Ovechkin would have impact their team's expansion protection lists if they were re-signed before July 21.

It also does not include Anaheim Ducks captain Ryan Getzlaf. The Ducks have said they are open to Getzlaf returning, but it remains to be seen whether the veteran centre will get the itch to leave his Orange County roots to chase a Stanley Cup.

This may be a crowded class, but there is plenty of room for movement with the Stanley Cup playoffs on tap. With continued hot play, Taylor Hall could well jump former teammate Ryan Nugent-Hopkins to become the most sought-after forward.

Hall is one of the few rentals from the trade deadline who has made noise, with Kyle Palmieri and David Savard not enjoying immediate success despite their new teams paying significantly higher acquisition costs.

It's the playoffs where paycheques are earned.

Here is TSN Hockey's Top 30 free agents available, whose ranking seeks to blend a player's prominence with potential interest, positional availability and next contract total earnings:

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TSN.CA / Remaining games a delicate balance for Flames management

By Salim Valji

In the end, it was a fairly nondescript Artturi Lehkonen shot off the rush on Monday evening that sealed the Calgary Flames' seemingly inevitable fate of playoff elimination.

The Montreal Canadiens winger skated in and fooled Edmonton Oilers goalie Mikko Koskinen to tie the game 3-3 with less than seven minutes left.

With the point they would pick up when the game went to overtime, the Canadiens clinched the fourth and final playoff spot in the North Division, ending Calgary's faint hopes of catching them.

Now, general manager Brad Treliving and the Flames organization face a delicate balance with four games – all against the Vancouver Canucks – remaining in the schedule.

There is the development of younger players on the current roster, namely 22-year-old blueliner Juuso Valimaki.

The Finnish defender had Calder Trophy aspirations prior to the season, but has struggled to gain the trust of head coach Darryl Sutter. The veteran bench boss has scratched Valimaki five times since he was rehired in early March, and publicly said on numerous occasions that Valimaki isn't quite ready to be a full-time NHLer yet.

Despite his first year growing pains, the 2017 first-round pick is still a key member of the franchise and seen as a future top-four blueliner. Veteran defenceman Chris Tanev has helped both Noah Hanifin and Mark Giordano improve their games when paired with him, and could do the same for the young Valimaki.

Sutter could also see if Valimaki, who has played a total of less than eight minutes on the man advantage this season, can quarterback a power play and handle increased minutes without fear of losing playing time for any mistakes.

Dillon Dubé is another player whose development should be prioritized. In his second full season, he has 19 points in 47 games while playing mostly on the third line.

Under Sutter, Dubé has had the 11th-most power-play time per game of any Flames player. In the final few games, Sutter could accord more responsibility and playing time to the 22-year-old forward, who will likely be a top-nine winger with the Flames for the coming years.

The organization can also use the remaining games to see which American Hockey League players could fit into next season's plans.

They already inserted Glenn Gawdin into the lineup, having him centre a trio flanked by Milan Lucic and Brett Ritchie on Sunday evening versus Ottawa. Gawdin notched his first career NHL point that night, an assist on a goal by Michael Stone. The 24-year-old Gawdin was an AHL all-star last season, leading the Stockton Heat with 47 points in 53 games and has been used in all situations.

Beyond Gawdin, forwards Adam Ruzicka and Matthew Phillips have both shown the ability to score in the AHL, while blueliner Connor Mackey was fourth on the Heat in points this season.

Then there is the NHL draft lottery and improving the franchise's odds.

As of Tuesday morning, the Flames had the 10th-best odds for the No. 1 pick. Since moving to Calgary, the Flames have never had a top-three pick. Shutting down the likes of Jacob Markstrom and Tanev, among others, would certainly help the franchise in a year that's presented the rare opportunity for a high draft pick.



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

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The final four games of the season, of course, are a prelude to an off-season where major changes are expected.

But before that, there is a delicate balance of the development of current players, getting a look at possible future NHLers already within the organization, and keeping an eye on adding a top prospect in the upcoming draft.

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