



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 19, 2021



## Will the Hurricanes' goalie changes pay off?

By Adam Gretz

Goaltending has been the one major question for the Carolina Hurricanes for the better part of the past decade.

The position has been a revolving door of short-term solutions with varying degrees of success. But during the 2020-21 season the trio of Alex Nedeljkovic, Petr Mrazek, and James Reimer clicked in every possible way and combined for one of the best team save percentages in the entire league, and gave the Hurricanes a capable three-headed monster that helped power them to the top of their division.

The responded this offseason by completely redoing the entire position.

- Reimer and Mrazek left in free agency.
- Nedeljkovic was traded to Detroit.
- They signed free agents Frederik Andersen and Antti Raanta to replace all of the exiting goalies.

That is where the Hurricanes stand now going into the 2021-22 season. Let's dig into it a little bit here.

Trading Nedeljkovic is surprising but also understandable

This is the obvious starting point because it was such a surprising move given his success last season.

Nedeljkovic was a game-changer for the Hurricanes and put together a magnificent season, complete with a .932 save percentage that was good enough for the top mark in the league. Maybe the type of goalie performance that would make most teams say, "this is our goalie, we do not need to look anywhere else."

Then the Hurricanes traded him to Detroit for the free agent rights to Jonathan Bernier (who later signed in New Jersey in free agency) and a third-round draft pick.

It was an eye-opening move not only because he was really good, but also because he was a restricted free agent and it created speculation that the Hurricanes may not have wanted to pay him his asking price. But there is a sensible hockey argument for moving on from him when they did. The reasoning is simple: At no point in Nedeljkovic's career has he ever consistently played at a level close to that for a full season. Not in the AHL. Not in the ECHL. Even in his junior league days he did not produce numbers like that.

While projecting goalies and their performance is sometimes an exercise in futility, how confident are you that a 25-year-

old goalie, after multiple years of good, but not great, play suddenly became an All-Star level player out of nowhere?

Crazier things have happened with goalies, but it is a calculated gamble on the part of the Hurricanes to trade him at what might have been his highest possible value. There could be nowhere to go but down for his production after this.

While the return might seem like a small price, you have to also keep in mind the trade market for goalies is always tough. Even the good, established goalies do not bring significant returns.

What do Raanta and Andersen have left?

This is the ultimate question for the Hurricanes right now because it will play a big role in what they are able to do this season.

At one time Raanta and Andersen were both among the most productive goalies in the league when healthy. Between 2015-16 and 2019-20 no goalie (minimum 100 games played) had a higher save percentage than Raanta's .923 mark, while Andersen was 12th (out of 55 goalies) at .918. They were both outstanding for several years.

But that run ended two years ago and both goalies are now into their 30s, while injuries have seriously impacted Raanta's availability and productivity the past couple of seasons. Since the start of the 2019-20 season Raanta and Andersen saw their save percentages drop down to 17th and 45th respectively.

Andersen was a rock in Toronto for his first three years with the team, taking on a major workload and playing behind a team that was not always totally focussed on defense (at least in his early days with the team). He not only produced at a better than league average rate despite that, he was also extremely durable and capable of playing major minutes. But his production has dropped the past two years while he was limited to just 24 regular season games this past season during what was the least productive season of his NHL career.

It seems like a given that this is going to be a shared net and that neither goalie is going to be relied on to carry the bulk of the playing time, and maybe that is what they both need at this stage of their careers? Perhaps if you get each of them for 37-45 games and let them split time you can get the most out of them at this stage of their careers while keeping them both fresh.

When it comes to big picture track records both of them are more proven over a far lengthier stretch of time than



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Nedeljkovic, whose entire career to this point has been made off of 32 games in a shortened season with an unbalanced schedule. It may not be a surprise if the the Andersen-

Raanta duo produce better results this year than what Nedeljkovic produces in Detroit.

## Six crucial NHL RFAs who still need contracts, including Pettersson, Hughes

By James O'Brien

Considering the lack of recent free-agent activity, you'd think that NHL teams are done for the offseason. However, if you merely peek at the robust list of remaining restricted free agents, you'll notice that the Canucks and other NHL teams still have some enormously important work to do.

(Just imagine how stressed out NHL teams would be about big-name RFAs if offer sheets came along more often than unicorns.)

Truly, there are a wide range of possibilities for upcoming contracts between RFAs and their NHL teams. Some might prefer "bridge deals," either to test the free-agent market or to bail on terrible situations (or both). Others may be more-than-willing to go the maximum eight years with their next contracts.

Let's take a look at how some of the most prominent NHL RFA situations could play out.

Pettersson and Hughes: Two challenging RFA situations for the Canucks

On the ice and during offseasons, a lot has changed each year for the Canucks. Yet, if there's been one refrain — even through the bleaker moments — it's been, "At least the Canucks have Hughes and Pettersson."

Naturally, there are key differences between the two, starting with Pettersson being a center, and Hughes a defenseman. Also: Pettersson could receive an offer sheet if a team discovers a unicorn of courage. Hughes, meanwhile, joins Kirill Kaprizov on the short list of RFAs who aren't eligible for offer sheets.

For all those differences, they're bound by key similarities.

- Even though they struggled from a two-way perspective (especially Hughes) last season, both still put up the sort of "counting numbers" that help their market value.
- Back in January, Pettersson switched to CAA, who also act as Hughes' agent(s). They could easily hold out as a tandem, ask for matching deals, and/or generally make this a coordinated challenge for Vancouver.

Let's drill down to some specifics for each of Hughes and Pettersson, too.

Specifics for Hughes

If you just look at point totals, Hughes had a strong 2020-21 season, with 41 points in 56 games. Truly, it's remarkable how much offense he's produced (97 points) while already logging 129 career regular-season games at age 21. In 2019-20, Hughes also looked like a true all-around gem.

Look deeper at 2020-21, and his all-around play is more troubling. Maybe the defensive drop-off is expected, but his overall offensive impact might have also been overrated.

An at-times-batty defenseman market shows that teams will look the other way about certain concerns when it comes to who they believe will be No. 1 blueliners. Consider Seth Jones.

The most Hughes-relevant, former-RFA defenseman deals are probably those of Cale Makar (six years, \$9M AAV) and Miro Heiskanen (eight years, \$8.45M cap hit). Frankly, Hughes and Heiskanen line up in fascinatingly similar ways, and that could make things uncomfortable for the Canucks. At least if they want to sign Hughes long-term:

Evolving Hockey's wonderful contract projection tool predicts a few outcomes for Hughes:

- The top prediction is a six-year deal with a \$7.017M cap hit.
- Short-term deals (one, two, or three years) represent just 16-percent of the outcomes.

As the Evolving Hockey twins mentioned in their first podcast, that contract projection tool factored in deals from before 2021 NHL Free Agency, though.

A bridge for Pettersson?

Thanks to the Canucks' salary cap crunch, you can't ignore a "bridge deal" possibilities for both Hughes and Pettersson. In separate June and late-July interviews, JP Barry wondered if the Canucks' cap issues might derail long-term deals for both RFAs.

Still, Pettersson, in particular, has been attached to "bridge deal" ponderings. Pettersson getting less term and Hughes receiving more was floated by Barry, and Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman also noted that could happen.

Mathew Barzal's current deal (three years, \$7M cap hit) was noted as a possible comparable.

Via Evolving Hockey, a possible Pettersson bridge could look like two years, with a cap hit of just under \$5M. If both Evolving Hockey projections came true, Pettersson and Hughes would combine for \$12M per in cap hits, albeit on very different terms (two for Pettersson, six for Hughes).

Such a combination might just-barely work for the Canucks ... for now. It would be uncomfortable for a number of reasons, though.

- What if Hughes isn't as much of a "net-positive" in the grand scheme of things?
- Frankly, Pettersson might be the player you'd rather sign long-term. He could easily cost a lot more after two or three more seasons.



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- Last season, the Canucks didn't even make the playoffs. Changed or not, is this really a group you want to go to the salary cap ceiling with?

It's all messy, but it will be even messier if the Canucks fail to sign one or both of Pettersson and Hughes. Maybe those situations will go down to the wire?

Kaprizov, Svechnikov, Dahlin, Tkachuk: Plenty of other crucial RFA situations

There are a lot of noteworthy RFAs who still need free-agent contracts. Here are the key ones, though, in the "non-Canucks division."

Andrei Svechnikov

When the Hurricanes matched the Sebastian Aho offer sheet, people mocked the Canadiens. The Hurricanes even got cheeky about it on Twitter.

Yet, considering how penny-pinching the Hurricanes have been under Tom Dundon, was it that outrageous to test the waters?

It would be surprising if someone tried to poach Svechnikov from the Hurricanes with an offer sheet. It will also be interesting to see if Aho's contract (five years, \$8.45M cap hit) serves as any sort of barometer for what Svechnikov will sign.

Could that \$8.45M serve as something of a rhetorical ceiling, with the Hurricanes asking: "How can you make more than Aho?" (Or at least, "You can't make too much more than Aho, right?")

Perhaps it won't be relevant to Svechnikov, overall. Evolving Hockey's top projection is intriguing: four years, \$6.175M. As a winger, it might make sense for Svechnikov to come in at a lower clip.

Would the Hurricanes maybe want to bump up that AAV a bit, to buy UFA years, though? That would be a smart move if the Hurricanes believe Svechnikov will leap from "star" to "superstar." At 21, Svechnikov could still make those strides.

(A rich offer, even a potentially proactive one, could be too rich for Carolina's tastes.)

Kirill Kaprizov

You've probably already read up on how Kaprizov's KHL threats make things a bit complicated for the Wild. There's also the matter of how complicated the Wild's overall situation is, especially if Kaprizov commands huge dollars.

Those posts provide more detail, but here are a few thoughts.

In some ways, you'd expect less leverage. He's a little older than some of the other top-end RFA forwards, being that he's 24. He also only has one season of NHL experience, even if he was sensational in winning the Calder Trophy. Kaprizov didn't file for salary arbitration, and isn't eligible for an offer sheet.

Granted, that age isn't all bad. With his UFA window closer, every year of a Kaprizov contract means more. And maybe costs more.

While the Wild are publicly shrugging off the KHL threat, it's a fairly impressive negotiation tactic.

Considering Evolving Hockey's top Kaprizov projection (seven years, \$7.74M), the situation is fascinating. After all, The Athletic's Michael Russo reports that Kaprizov had seven or eight-year offers ranging in \$9M per year.

Not every remaining RFA compares seamlessly to Kaprizov, but one wonders if they might want to see how that plays out before signing.

Brady Tkachuk

Late in the 2020-21 season, the Ottawa Sun's Ken Warren threw out some pretty bold comparables for Tkachuk's next possible contract. Warren wondered if Tkachuk's contract might even exceed that of Senators teammate Thomas Chabot (eight years, \$8M cap hit). Names like Mikko Rantanen (six years, \$9.25M) were thrown around.

To Brady Tkachuk personally, perhaps two deals are most relevant: that of Chabot, and perhaps his brother Matthew's three-year bridge with the Flames (\$7M cap hit).

Overall, assessing Tkachuk's value could be an interesting riddle for the Senators.

It's easy to see how Brady Tkachuk might sell himself.

- The offensive production is already there. Tkachuk scored 22 goals and 45 points as a rookie in 2018-19, then produced at almost the exact same level a year later (21G, 44P in 2019-20). Last season, he kept going, as his 17 goals and 36 points came in 56 games.
- Naturally, as a Tkachuk, he's also a nuisance for opponents. Tkachuk hits, fights heavyweights like Shea Weber, and has a nose for the net. Plenty pencil him as a possible Senators captain.
- His scamp-like behavior seems downright wholesome at times.

If you're really getting into that high-spending stratosphere, then you need to be more critical. (Or, uh, you should be.) And that's where you ask: yes, Brady Tkachuk is good, but how good?

Again, though, it's not just about production, or finishing ability. Tkachuk brings "intangibles" to the table, and teams spent huge dollars for grit this offseason.

Naturally, as UFAs, Blake Coleman, Barclay Goodrow, and others had different leverage than an RFA like Tkachuk. Those contracts might make it easier for people to stomach something bold for Brady, though.

Here are a few projections for Tkachuk's next contract with the Senators.

- Evolving Hockey's top projection: six years, \$6.467M cap hit.
- Others lean more in the "bridge" range. For instance: the Athletic's Ian Mendes broke down Brady Tkachuk's possibilities in a number of ways (sub required). Mendes wondered if Tkachuk might



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play to his jersey number, and go with a \$7.7M cap hit for three years.

Like Dundon in Carolina, you must also at least ponder if certain Tkachuk offers might be too rich for Senators owner Eugene Melnyk's blood. Overall, there are a lot of moving parts with this one.

Rasmus Dahlin

The Jack Eichel trade (and surgery) situation is the most important, and messy, thing the Sabres must deal with. But getting Rasmus Dahlin's next contract right is also crucial.

So, what do we make of the first overall pick of the 2018 NHL Draft?

On one hand, he's been a bit disappointing compared to the sheer hype he came in with. We've seen plenty of No. 1 overall picks enter the NHL with rave reviews, but it's rare to see a defenseman labeled so close to a sure-thing. It's at least been a while.

By lofty standards, Dahlin's been up-and-down. A mixture of unspectacular offense and below-average defense was not what many envisioned.

Even Dahlin's ice time went through ups and downs.

- As a rookie in 2018-19, Dahlin averaged 21:09 time on ice.
- In 2019-20, that average strangely dipped to 19:18 TOI.
- At least that ice time bounced back in 2020-21, setting a career-high of 21:36 TOI. Still, the Sabres haven't trusted Dahlin like the Canucks deploy Hughes, or the Stars lean on Heiskanen.

How much blame do you place on the Sabres for possibly stunting Dahlin's growth, though? Under Ralph Krueger, Dahlin strained with a short leash. Dahlin flourished — relatively speaking — under Don Granato, and maybe can blossom further.

"His way to play is how I learned to play hockey," Dahlin said of Granato, according to John Vogl of the Athletic. "He trusted me as a player. He really saw what my potential was, and I felt comfortable playing out there."

And, hey, for all that went wrong, Dahlin still produced reasonably well. As a rookie, Dahlin scored 44 points in 82 games. Despite being limited to 59 games in 2019-20, Dahlin still scored 40 points. Last season didn't help his cause, however, as Dahlin scored 23 points in 56 games. That said,

107 points in 197 games is pretty impressive for a 21-year-old on an often-dreadful team.

On one hand, what's the rush for a mess of a Sabres franchise? Do they want to get burned by another Rasmus after just now ridding themselves of a bad Rasmus Ristolainen investment?

The counterpoint is poignant, though: Sabres fans need something to latch onto. Signing Rasmus Dahlin before the season starts might end up being the bare minimum.

What are some possibilities, though?

- In June, Vogl gave some ideas. A two or three-year Dahlin deal might command something in the \$6.5M range. Meanwhile, an eight-year deal may fall in the \$8M-\$8.25M range.
- Evolving Hockey's prediction fell somewhere between those ideas: six years, \$6M.

Both projections happened before Makar and Heiskanen signed their own RFA deals, ones that both did and did not compare to the benchmark of the Chabot 8x8 contract.

How much might Dahlin's deal compare to that of Heiskanen, Makar, or Hughes? Could a bridge make more sense for a defenseman who arguably hasn't shown his best work yet? Should be intriguing, which is something you could say about these other big-name NHL RFA situations, too.

Other noteworthy NHL RFAs

- Travis Sanheim (not offer-sheet eligible, filed for salary arbitration), Flyers.
- Anthony Beauvillier, Islanders.
- Ilya Sorokin, Islanders.
- Robert Thomas, Blues.
- Casey Mittelstadt, Sabres.
- Jesperi Kotkaniemi, Canadiens.
- Eeli Tolvanen, Predators.
- Kailer Yamamoto, Oilers.
- Nolan Patrick, Golden Knights.
- Drake Batherson, Senators.
- Filip Hronek, Red Wings.



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## About Last Season: Nino Niederreiter Performance Review and Grade

Niederreiter bounced back in a big way during the 2020-21 season and provided plenty of offense for the Hurricanes.

By Matthew Somma

Nino Niederreiter 2020-21 Season By The Numbers

- Age: 28
- NHL seasons: 9
- Scoring: 20 goals, 14 assists, 34 points in 56 games
- Advanced numbers: 58.78 CF%, 60.47 SCF%, 71.83 GF%, 61.16 xG%
- Average TOI: 15:43

It's no secret that the 2019-20 season was a season that Nino Niederreiter would have liked to forget, so he was a man on a mission heading into the 2020-21 campaign. After a season of struggling to finish chances, Niederreiter was looking to return to form and make an immediate impact. He did just that, scoring 20 goals over the course of the season and finishing with 34 points in 56 games. Niederreiter finished seventh on the team in scoring and second in goals, proving to be one of Carolina's most impactful forwards in the middle six.

It always seemed like the 2019-20 season was a fluke for Niederreiter. He was doing everything right but the shots weren't going in and he wasn't getting any puck luck whatsoever. His GF% was 57.47 and his xG% was 56.88. Niederreiter improved on both stats this season and was on the ice for an impressive 51 goals for in all situations. Compare that to the 20 goals against and you have yourself a player that was flat-out dominant when he was on the ice.

Niederreiter has held the majority of the shot share since he was traded to Minnesota and he has always been a responsible two-way player. Nothing changed this season, as he and the Hurricanes were able to carry the play when he was on the ice. Niederreiter was due for some bounces this season after getting robbed for what felt like an entire season the year prior. Chance after chance was stopped and it looked as if it was getting to Niederreiter. This year, Niederreiter got the monkey off of his back and did his part to help the Hurricanes win the Central Division.

Niederreiter's 34 points in 56 games would have put him on pace for roughly 49-50 points in a normal 82-game season. It's clear that we won't get the 30 points in 36 games version of Niederreiter that we saw after the trade from Minnesota, but it's clear that Niederreiter can score 20+ goals and play in all situations for the Hurricanes. He's an ideal middle six forward that will play in the corners, get to the front of the net

and find a way to put the puck in the back of the net. You can't ask for much more than that.

This is a goal that wouldn't have gone in for Nino during the 2019-20 season. Now, he's able to find the tiniest amount of space to put the puck in.

There was this goal, a huge moment in this game. The Hurricanes had blown a lead and Nino's goal helped propel the team to a shootout victory.

It wasn't just Nino's goal scoring that made him a threat this season. He looked like a much more confident playmaker, as you can see in the next clip. This pass would have connected for a goal had it been almost anyone else on the Hurricanes' roster.

Niederreiter was a force for the Hurricanes offensively. This season gave fans an idea of what he is as a player and what to expect heading into next season. Niederreiter can control play and will be on the ice for the majority of the offense, but at the end of the day, he's only as good as his linemates. He isn't going to wow you with individual skill or dangles but what he can do is put the puck into the net if you get it to him. Nino isn't going to be the primary catalyst of the team's offense and it's why I loved seeing him on the ice with a player like Necas. Niederreiter needs a playmaker on his wing in order to be successful and Necas was able to feed Niederreiter crisp pass after crisp pass.

Niederreiter did disappear a bit at the end of the regular season, however. He was held to two points in his last seven games, both of which were goals in a 6-3 win over Chicago. While it may not mean anything for his performance next season, his spotty production towards the end of the season may cause some concern.

Niederreiter's postseason was a bit of a disappointment, too. He scored the eventual game winning goal in game one versus Nashville and was held pointless in the next six games. Niederreiter was injured for all but one game in the second round and played a grand total of 9:16 in game six against the Predators. The Hurricanes' offense as a whole dried up during the playoffs, and Niederreiter's lack of production was certainly a part of that. He didn't look to be the player that we saw during the regular season and was shut down by Nashville's defense for five games after letting him sneak past them in game one.

Niederreiter's 2020-21 season was largely a return to form as he provided some much-needed goal scoring into the lineup. The AAV on Niederreiter's contract will always inflate the expectations for him, but his 2020-21 season should be celebrated. The Hurricanes were able to get some excellent play out of Niederreiter and now he has something to build off of for next season. He'll have additional fire in his game



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due to it being a contract year, so he'll be working hard to earn every penny on his next deal.

## Hurricanes Prospects Showcase roster announced

The roster includes four 2021 draft picks and a number of top prospects in the organization.

By Matthew Somma

The Hurricanes have announced their roster for the upcoming Prospects Showcase in Florida. The tournament will feature the Hurricanes, Panthers, Lightning and Predators and will run from Sept. 8-21.

The roster features top Hurricanes prospects such as Seth Jarvis, Jamieson Rees, Dominik Bokk, Ryan Suzuki and more. It also features four members of the Hurricanes' 2021 draft class: Justin Robidas, Bobby Orr, Patrik Hamrla and Bryce Montgomery. The Prospect Showcase gives the Hurricanes a chance to see where each prospect is at in their development as well as what each prospect needs to work on in the upcoming season. It's a nice training camp primer as we could see a handful of these prospects getting a look in camp right afterwards. It's also a chance for the Hurricanes to get some extra looks at a few names that might have been on their radar in the later rounds of the draft or in free agency discussions. Camp invitees usually don't make an impact, but it's not unheard of for an invitee to earn an NHL or AHL contract after a good tournament.

College and European prospects will not attend the prospects showcase. College students have all returned to school and most European players will be gearing up for the start of their season if it hasn't started by Sept. 18. As a result, we won't be seeing any on the roster.

Jarvis, Drury, Rees, Suzuki and Bokk should all be top forwards for the Hurricanes during the showcase. We've come to expect big things from these players and it should give Canes fans an idea of who might be close to the NHL.

Players such as Joey Keane and Jesper Sellgren will be vying for a depth role on the team and will use this tournament to help stake their claim. Another interesting battle might be the one in net. Patrik Hamrla is QMJHL bound and might see a start during the tournament, but the battle between Warm and Makiniemi should be interesting. Both goalies will be fighting for the backup role behind Alex Lyon.

The Hurricanes have invited seven players to the prospects showcase: Ethan Ritchie, Paul Christopoulos, Ty Nash, Carter Robertson, Tucker Robertson, Artyom Serikov and Riley Stotts. Four of the invitees on this year's roster are from the OHL. One player spent the season in Slovakia once the OHL cancelled its season, but the other three didn't play a single game. The lack of viewings may have caused some of these players to go undrafted despite having a handful of NHL skills in their tool box. The showcase should give them a handful of extra games to show the Hurricanes what they're capable of. Riley Stotts is an invite that intrigues me. Stotts was drafted 83rd overall by Toronto in 2018 and went unsigned, making him a free agent. He has been a solid WHL player for years and might be someone that the Chicago Wolves could use on the depth chart. Artyom Serikov recently signed an AHL contract with the Wolves and the Hurricanes likely want to get eyes on him to see if he's worth an entry-level contract.

All in all, the Hurricanes should have one of the better rosters at the prospects showcase. Their roster is full of high-end prospects and has depth and professional experience at every position. I'm excited to get a look at four of the Hurricanes' newest prospects as well as the Hurricanes' top prospects as we move closer and closer to a new season.

### TODAY'S LINKS

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