



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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'Legitimate chance' Canadiens considering not matching Kotkaniemi offer sheet

Elliote Friedman joined Sportsnet Today to discuss what might happen if the Montreal Canadiens choose not to match the Carolina Hurricanes' offersheet for Jesperi Kotkaniemi and why Arizona's Christian Dvorak may become an intriguing target.

By Lukas Weese

There is a "legitimate chance" the Montreal Canadiens are considering not matching the offer sheet tendered by the Carolina Hurricanes to forward Jesperi Kotkaniemi over the weekend, per Sportsnet's Elliott Friedman.

Friedman reported on 31 Thoughts: The Podcast, that the Canadiens are potentially weighing the merits of the one-year, \$6.1-million deal against the haul of draft picks from the Hurricanes and the flexibility offered by the 21-year-old coming off the books.

"I do think there is a legitimate chance that Montreal's considering not matching the offer sheet," Friedman said on 31 Thoughts: The Podcast. "Famous last words, it could change. It might just be a visceral reaction. They do have a week."

The Canadiens drafted Kotkaniemi third overall in the 2018 NHL Draft. Through 171 games played with the Canadiens, the centre has 22 goals and 40 assists. However, the 2020-21 season saw Kotkaniemi struggle to generate offence, evidenced by his five goals and 15 assists through 56 games.

For Canadiens general manager Marc Bergevin, the decision comes down to whether he should overspend on a young forward who has upside or go in a different direction with the cap space and draft compensation. Sportsnet's Eric Engels reported that Montreal may be interested in Arizona Coyotes centre Christian Dvorak.

"I think Montreal's going to take those picks around the league and are going to see," Friedman said. "I could see Montreal going to Arizona and saying, 'How would a first and a third be for Dvorak? Do we have the framework of a deal here?'"

Friedman also raised the question of the Canadiens going after Buffalo Sabres star Jack Eichel.

"I'm not sure Montreal is really big in the Jack Eichel sweepstakes. Their offer they knew was lower than what Buffalo would take," he said.

"We now know that Eichel has switched agents. There is a long history between Pat Brisson and Marc Bergevin. I just wonder does this change the dynamic between the Canadiens and the Sabres at all?"

If the Canadiens decide to not match the Hurricanes' offer sheet, they will lose Kotkaniemi but gain a first- and a third-round draft pick from Carolina. Montreal has until Sept. 4 to make a decision.

You can learn more about the Kotkaniemi offer sheet saga on the latest 31 Thoughts: The Podcast episode, co-hosted by Sportsnet's Jeff Marek and Elliott Friedman.



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Why the Jesperi Kotkaniemi offer sheet makes sense for the Hurricanes

Jesse Fuchs is joined by Eric Engels to make sense of the Carolina Hurricanes signing Jesperi Kapkeniemi to an offer sheet and whether the Montreal Canadiens should match the offer.

By Justin Bourne

I'm mad at Seattle. This article isn't even about them, but allow me start here.

I'm mad at Seattle because this whole off-season was supposed to be their time to shine, a team with a pristine cap sheet coming into the league at a time when the salary cap walls were squeezing in, crushing good teams and forcing them to move out quality players just to stay alive.

Elliote Friedman likes to reference the expression that when teams are drowning under cap and player issues, rivals don't throw them life preservers, they throw anchors. The Kraken are already nautical-themed, and I was bracing for a barrage of anchor-tossing. Instead they didn't seem to notice the drowning at all, presumably checking their collective phone to read more praise for their beautiful jerseys. They were going to "weaponize" their cap space, meanwhile a guy like Elias Pettersson, a 22-year-old centre and bona fide star on a cap-strapped team, is still sitting at home waiting for a new contract.

This piece is about the Carolina Hurricanes, though, and why they've done what they've done, which is legitimately attempt to weaponize their cap space. (Trying to get better despite what it might do to the feelings of an opposing front office. What a concept.)

Of course, we know how this came to pass in the first place. Two years ago Marc Bergevin and the Montreal Canadiens signed Sebastian Aho to an offer sheet, which forced the Canes to match what was ultimately an extremely reasonable deal. But the Canes didn't like having their hand forced. That's fair, given it was a direct challenge to Tom Dundon's finances, pressing him to part with \$21 million cash in the first year of the Aho deal. That residual bitterness gave them cultural permission to do the Kotkaniemi offer sheet under the legal precedent of "Yeah but Mom he hit me first."

And, will you look at that, they might make themselves better in the process.

There's a lot of faux-bitterness in these opening paragraphs, but to summarize why: teams should offer sheet good players because good players are tough to acquire and, logically, teams should always be trying to get better by any means possible, despite GMs around the league wanting to remain besties. The Seattle thing, well, we just heard a lot about the great off-ice team they assembled, and that's likely true (and they may be good on the ice) but I really wanted some fireworks here.

Let's take a look at why Carolina offer sheeted Jesperi Kotkaniemi at a salary that's a rough \$3 million over what the player is worth. "Pettiness" is the fun answer, but there are smart hockey reasons at its core.

- He's a desirable player, in that he's a 21-year-old centre with a clean 200 games of NHL experience, and has some

upside on the offence and physical side that's yet unfulfilled. Those players aren't easy to get into your organization outside drafting and developing -- and drafting and developing takes time and often (growing) pain. To cut out the "gaining experience" years and just grab the best season of KK's career for a cost that's mostly dollars is what I believe the kids call a "tidy bit of business."

(I feel it necessary to note I'm not much of a Kotkaniemi believer, but I recognize my personal take on the player isn't relevant here. As I said, there's upside that I can see, he's "desirable," but I haven't seen anything from him that makes me think he's going to be much of a difference-maker. But yeah: young, good size, some talent, it's not easy to get all those things in a single player.)

- In relation to acquisition cost I said "mostly dollars" because there would be a first and a third going the other way if Montreal doesn't match, but the Canes were already good and if they get the player they'll increase their odds of that first-rounder being a lot closer to a second-rounder. Once you're past the top-20 of the first round you're into another tier of less impactful players than we normally associate with the glorified status of "first rounder."

- Offering \$6.1 million makes it realistic that the Canes might actually get him. Montreal has inched their way up against the salary cap, even with the potential LTI relief of the Shea Weber deal, and it's not like they've used Kotkaniemi in a way that screams "We can't possibly bear the thought of losing this integral piece." The kid was healthy scratched twice in playoffs. Not a lot of teams with cap issues are falling all over themselves to pay \$6.1 million to guys they healthy scratch in big games, even if they expect improvement.

- The idea behind a big one-year deal is that, again, you actually get the player, which is the hardest part to pull off from all this. After that first season you then have to give the player a corresponding qualifying offer (of \$6.1 million), or the player can walk and become a UFA. Which sounds bad. Only, let's say Kotkaniemi puts up 35-40 points and is just OK, playing 15 minutes a night, still contributing but worth more like \$3 million per season after that.

If he becomes a UFA, he's only going to get paid that \$3 million or a bit more on the open market. Well, Carolina would also have the option to negotiate with Kotkaniemi to reach a number lower than the qualifying offer, and if he's been given a fair chance to succeed with the Canes and likes it there, it's reasonable to think he'd stay in the situation where he's happy, where they just did him the courtesy of over-paying him, and where they'd still be giving him market value of that \$3 million figure or whatever it would end up being.

Getting the prime years of a player's career is crucial to having success in the NHL, and the Hurricanes used one of the few tools at their disposal to acquire a guy poised to go into his.

There's all that, then there's the petty stuff that's grabbing all the attention, and granted, it is hilarious. The \$20 signing bonus. The Canes tweeting out the offer sheet news in



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French. The matching statements on why the player signed the sheet. Honestly, I was borderline gleeful at how Carolina didn't hide anything, they just wore their motivations like they were cutting WWE promos. Forget "Dundon," surely we're calling him Tom Petty now?

So, it all makes sense from that side. From Montreal's, I'm not sure exactly what they'll do, but I'm guessing the answer isn't just "match" or "not match." I think it'll lead to related moves. I just can't see them straight-up matching that number on a player my gut tells me they've got question marks about (see: healthy scratch in playoffs). The only reason they might match is if they can't make something else work, because sans "KK" their centre depth after Nick Suzuki would be truly abominable (Suzuki, then ... Jake Evans and Cedric Paquette? And?).

Our own Eric Engels wrote his take on the Montreal side here, where he discussed how Montreal needs to explore all options. One of those options was to use the picks from the Kotkaniemi offer sheet to acquire a player like Christian

Dvorak, who's about to toil on a rebuilding Arizona team that's hungry for picks. That makes sense to me – taking the picks and parlaying them into another centre. But that's provided they can find a trade partner out there to replace KK.

Pro sports are supposed to be competitive, and while moves like this might make opposing teams mad, that shouldn't prohibit them from happening more often. The odds of offer sheet retribution even being possible like this -- with a team having the cap space, player need, picks and all that just two years later -- is extremely unlikely. Like many fans and analysts out there, I'm on Team Offer Sheet, which is why I lead this article off being mad at Seattle, who have needs and picks aplenty. I'm mad because this is fun, and I want more.

Now we get to sit back and see how Montreal handles this off-season bombshell, with NHL training camps just three weeks away.



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NHL Power Rankings: Coaching hot seat tiers for 2021-22 season

By Adam Gretz

In this week's edition of the NHL Power Rankings we take a look at the 32 head coaches around the league and how comfortable they should be feeling in their position for the 2021-22 season.

In other words: The hot seat rankings. We placed the head coaches in different tiers ranging from the safest and more secure jobs, to the coaches that might be feeling some heat for one reason or another.

Where does each coach sit this week?

To this week's NHL Power Rankings!

Tier 1A: Not going anywhere. New guys (Everybody gets a season)

1. Dave Hakstol, Seattle Kraken. Whether or not you like the decision to go with Hakstol is irrelevant. He is a first-year coach for a first-year expansion team. Expectations for this season are low and that makes him probably the safest coach in the league.

2. Andre Tourigny, Arizona Coyotes. Similar to Hakstol in the sense that he is a first-year coach on a team that is actively gutting its roster and reducing expectations for this season. Is he the right coach long-term? We will find out. But he is safe this year.

3. Brad Larsen, Columbus Blue Jackets. The big challenge here is what can he get out of Patrik Laine.

4. Gerard Gallant, New York Rangers. He has the most pressure on him among the new coaches because the Rangers have such high expectations this season, but he is also the most proven and best coach of the bunch.

Tier 1B: Not going anywhere. Top coaches, performance related

5. Jon Cooper, Tampa Bay Lightning. In his eight seasons with the Lightning the team has reached the Eastern Conference Finals/Semifinals five times, played for the Stanley Cup Final three times, and has won the Cup in each of the past two seasons. As safe as you can get for an established coach.

6. Rod Brind'Amour, Carolina Hurricanes. The Hurricanes are one of the best teams in the league under Brind'Amour and he just signed a new contract extension. He is safe.

7. Barry Trotz, New York Islanders. He is, quite honestly, the face of the Islanders right now and has helped completely

change the culture of the team. He is going nowhere no matter what happens this season.

8. Jared Bednar, Colorado Avalanche. If Colorado fizzles out in the First or Second Round maybe the Avs consider a change after the season, but I can not envision an in-season change.

9. Joel Quenneville, Florida Panthers. The Panthers have real expectations this season and a roster that can compete, and that can be dangerous for a coach if the team underachieves. But Quenneville's resume and track record keeps him safe.

10. Dean Evason, Minnesota Wild. It would take a massive regression and absolutely disastrous season for a change here.

Tier 2: Extremely safe, probably not going anywhere

11. Dominique Ducharme, Montreal Canadiens. That Cup Final run is going to buy him a lot of time even if the Canadiens struggle to repeat that success this season. And they probably will.

12. Bruce Cassidy, Boston Bruins. Cassidy has been great for the Bruins and the team should still be a contender. Are you going to get a better coach than him right now?

13. Peter Laviolette, Washington Capitals. The Capitals are still a Cup contender and they do not really make knee-jerk reactions with their coaches.

14. Peter DeBoer, Vegas Golden Knights. The results should be good enough to keep him secure but the Golden Knights have proven to be the most ruthless, cutthroat organization in the league when it comes to making changes.

15. Darryl Sutter, Calgary Flames. Sutter is a giant in the Flames organization and they just brought him back. I am not ready to say he is completely safe, but it would be a shock if he went anywhere anytime soon.

Tier 3: Getting a little warmer

16. Craig Berube, St. Louis Blues. Not that Berube has done a bad job, but every year a coach gets away from their championship the shorter the leash gets. The Blues have lost in the first-round two years in a row. Maybe he is not in danger yet, but he could be getting close.

17. Mike Sullivan, Pittsburgh Penguins. He has been a wildly successful coach in Pittsburgh, but their past three playoff performances have been disappointing and the current front office did not hire him. They have no loyalty to him.



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18. Lindy Ruff, New Jersey Devils. It would be a major shock if Ruff got fired within his first two years, but the Devils spent major money this offseason and have an emerging superstar in Jack Hughes. They need to show some real progress this season.

19. Paul Maurice, Winnipeg Jets. He is one of the longest tenured coaches in the league with a mixed bag of results. He always seems to be on the hot seat, but the Jets winning a round in the playoffs probably bought him some time.

20. Rick Bowness, Dallas Stars. There should be reasonably high expectations in Dallas this season, and if they fall short early in the season a change seems at least like it could be something that is discussed.

21. John Hynes, Nashville Predators. The Predators' roster is weaker than it was a year ago and they needed Juuse Saros turning into superman to get into the playoffs.

22. Sheldon Keefe, Toronto Maple Leafs. It feels like everybody's seat in Toronto is getting warmer. The coach. The general manager. Star players. Time to do something.

23. Don Granato, Buffalo Sabres. He is entering his first full season, but the Sabres seem like they are set to embark on a disastrous season. I am not sure he will be the fall guy for it. But you never know.

24. Travis Green, Vancouver Canucks. He just signed a multi-year extension this offseason. They like him and think they are closer to competing than they might actually be. This seems like an "after the season" change if one happens.

25. Todd McLellan, Los Angeles Kings. The Kings should not have any delusions about competing this season, but they should expect some progress.

Tier 4: Danger zone

26. Dave Tippett, Edmonton Oilers. He is highly regarded, yes. But the Oilers have two MVPs in the primes of their careers and could not even win a single playoff game against

the Jets. Nobody's job in this organization is — or should be — totally secure.

27. Alain Vigneault, Philadelphia Flyers. To be honest, this probably depends on which version of Carter Hart the Flyers get this season.

28. D.J. Smith, Ottawa Senators. I really have no idea what sort of coach Smith is and neither do you, mostly because he has been given the task of leading a young, rebuilding team that is starting from scratch. Tough situation to win in, and the losing will almost certainly continue this season.

29. Jeff Blashill, Detroit Red Wings. Like Smith it is impossible to accurately evaluate Blashill because of the rosters he has had to work with. Still, in six years the Red Wings have one playoff appearance with him and have missed the playoffs five years in a row and almost certainly going on six years. Not many coaches get to keep coaching a team that long.

30. Dallas Eakins, Anaheim Ducks. The problem in Anaheim is probably more centered on the front office, but GM Bob Murray seems invincible. That is probably bad news for the coach.

31. Bob Boughner, San Jose Sharks. The Sharks are trending in the wrong direction, have a lot of problems on the roster, some bad contracts, and have missed the playoffs two years in a row. Recipe for a change if things start slow.

32. Jeremy Colliton, Chicago Blackhawks. The Blackhawks' only playoff appearance the past four years (including three with Colliton) was the bubble season where they had the NHL's 23rd-best record. They spent a ton of money this offseason, increased expectations, and still have a thin roster that looks nothing like a contender. Classic case of a team that might "disappoint" and make an early change.



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The Pros and Cons of Matching Jesperi Kotkaniemi's Offer Sheet

The Carolina Hurricanes have put the Montreal Canadiens in a bind. Should they shell out \$6.1 million to retain their No. 2 center or take the draft-pick compensation instead?

Matt Larkin

Embrace the chaos, baby. Don't fight it. Let that warm, fuzzy feeling envelop you...a concept, foreign to some in hockey circles, known as F.U.N. It's the same magical force behind things like flamboyant goal celebrations, Bud-Light-fuelled post-game press conferences and, yes, passionate team rivalries that play out on Twitter.

The Carolina Hurricanes aren't the old guard's jam. Fine. But, please, don't embarrass yourself by calling their weekend behavior embarrassing. Using Twitter to engage in WWE-heel-style victory laps after revenge-offer-sheeting Montreal Canadiens center Kotkaniemi was something we won't soon forget in the sport. That's a good thing. Embarrassing? Embarrassing would be drafting Logan Mailloux or failing to conduct an NHL investigation into the Chicago Blackhawks' sexual-assault scandal. A dark summer punctuated by mistakes like that is cause for hockey to hang its head in shame. Gloating over an offer sheet? Not so much.

So let's celebrate the anarchy of inking Kotkaniemi to a one-year, \$6.1-million offer sheet in blatant retaliation to the Canadiens signing the Canes' top center, Sebastian Aho, to a five-year, \$42.27-million offer sheet in 2019 which they matched. In the team news release this past Saturday, Carolina GM Don Waddell even used almost identical language to that of Habs GM Marc Bergevin in 2019. The Canes sent a secondary tweet of the news in French. The chef's kiss was the \$20 signing bonus, a nod to Aho's number. It's difficult to imagine a precedent for a team taking such public glee out of putting a rival club in a pickle. Raise your hand if you can't wait for the teams' first game against each other in 2021-22. It goes down Oct. 21.

Back to the Habs' pickle. With Phillip Danault gone to the Los Angeles Kings as a UFA, the Habs' center depth got depleted over the off-season, and Kotkaniemi was likely to rise as high as second on the depth chart despite the fact he was scratched for two of five games in the Stanley Cup final. At 21, he's hardly finished his ascension. Of the 597 forwards who played NHL regular-season games in 2020-21, 577, or 96.6 percent, were older than Kotkaniemi. But does that mean Bergevin should match on a player who has not delivered anything close to \$6.1 million in value? It's not an easy decision.

Historically, the offer sheets that have led to teams not matching occur when there's a major discrepancy in how

each team values the player. When the Edmonton Oilers swiped left winger Dustin Penner in the "barn fight" incident of 2007, they did so successfully because GM Kevin Lowe offered Penner a number Anaheim Ducks GM Brian Burke did not believe Penner was worth. It compelled the player to sign and his original team to walk away (as parties involved explained to me in this 2019 story). It appears the Canes are hoping to recreate those conditions. They know Kotkaniemi isn't yet a \$6.1-million player and are counting on the Habs to agree. Then again, a one-year deal isn't so prohibitive that the Habs can't match in hopes of negotiating a fairer pact for 2022-23 and beyond.

So what does Bergevin do? He has seven days from the date of the offer sheet to match, meaning he has until this Saturday, Sept. 4. Let's explore the pros and cons of matching.

PRO: The Habs need the center depth

The timing of Danault's departure really stings, doesn't it? He was an instrumental piece of Montreal's 2021 playoff puzzle, handling all the toughest defensive matchups during the Cinderella run to the final. When Tampa Bay Lightning coach Jon Cooper had the last change at home and could scheme his top line away from the Danault line, the Habs were exposed. They're slated to open 2021-22 without that defensive backbone after Danault, who had expressed reservations in the past about his long-term spot in the Habs' pecking order, signed a six-year, \$33-million deal with the L.A. Kings. Heady two-way center Nick Suzuki became the Habs' unquestioned, all-situations No. 1 center the second that signing happened. He has a ton of responsibility on his plate this coming season.

Whether he'd earned the job or not, Kotkaniemi was ticketed as the Habs' No. 2 center on paper after Danault left, with the rest of the depth chart up the middle consisting of checkers Jake Evans and Cedric Paquette. Prospect Ryan Poehling should get the best opportunity of his career and could eventually mature into a good shutdown player, but his overall ceiling might keep him in the bottom six, and that only further highlights how barren the Habs' depth chart would be after losing Kotkaniemi. If they do, they might be forced to experiment with Jonathan Drouin returning to center now that he's reportedly ready to return to the team.

CON: Kotkaniemi hasn't delivered on his potential at all

If we said it then and had the foresight, we have the right to flex the hindsight muscle: the Habs reached on Kotkaniemi at third overall in the 2018 draft. Our prospect guru Ryan Kennedy's final rankings had Kotkaniemi 18th going into that draft. Montreal went with positional need rather than picking



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the best available player, passing on the beastly left winger Brady Tkachuk, whom the Ottawa Senators happily snapped up at No. 4. When a baby-faced Kotkaniemi made the team as the NHL's youngest player the ensuing fall, it felt like Montreal was doubling down just to promote the idea it made the right choice. After an intermittently effective rookie year in which he managed 11 goals and 34 points, he stumbled as a sophomore and wound up demoted to the AHL.

Leading up to the draft, Kotkaniemi was lauded for his potential as a playmaker with a high hockey IQ. In his three seasons as an NHLer, however, he simply hasn't been a creator. Per naturalstattrick.com, Among 388 forwards who've played 1,000 or more minutes at 5-on-5 over that span, Kotkaniemi sits in the 46th percentile in shots per 60; 17th percentile in expected goals per 60; and 37th percentile in individual scoring chances per 60. As a playmaker, he unsurprisingly fares better at setting up teammates, but he's only slightly above average there, sitting in the 59th percentile. As JFresh, whose player-analysis card are must-reads, explained it on Twitter, Kotkaniemi hasn't enjoyed the same success in the regular season as he has in the playoffs, and the latter is boosted by a high shooting percentage.

PRO: Kotkaniemi is young enough to improve

It's certainly not too late for Kotkaniemi to figure it out, to find a way to uncork his underrated shot more, to fill out his 6-foot-2, 201-pound frame. He's shown a disruptive competitiveness in flashes throughout his career. The light could still switch on. He does have a first-round pedigree. Remember when the Hurricanes traded for Teuvo Teravainen in summer 2016? Teravainen carried a first-round pedigree, he was 21, he was coming from an organization that didn't trust him in high-stakes situations, and he hadn't yet performed to his draft-day standard. The parallels to his Finnish countryman Kotkaniemi are almost eerie, and the Canes organization turned Teravainen into the top-six forward he was always projected to be.

Revenge is fun, but they obviously aren't pursuing Kotkaniemi for revenge alone. They see breakout potential in him. Should that give Montreal pause? Then again, given coach Dominique Ducharme's refusal to rely on Kotkaniemi during the final, the bridge may be burned irreparably. Perhaps Kotkaniemi will only flourish if he changes addresses.

CON: Kotkaniemi isn't worth \$6.1 million, even for one season

Simply put: the \$6.1 million would put Montreal over the salary cap despite the fact all other Habs regulars' contracts are signed and ready for 2021-22 and that Shea Weber's

\$7.86-AAV will be stashed on LTIR. If you match on Kotkaniemi, you're forced to throw another body overboard in a trade and, given other GMs would recognize the Habs' desperate predicament, the Habs wouldn't have much leverage in negotiations. Kissing Kotkaniemi goodbye escapes that headache. And if the Habs are among the teams wanting to wade into the trade waters for Jack Eichel or Evgeny Kuznetsov, they won't want that \$6.1 million inhibiting a potential deal.

Also, if the Habs or the Canes don't work out an extension with Kotkaniemi by July 1, 2022, they'd have to give him a qualifying offer at \$6.1 million. If Kotkaniemi's camp knows he won't get anywhere close to that AAV, why sign an extension before next July 1, then? He could put himself in position to get another \$6.1 million or, if his team didn't qualify him, become an unbelievably young UFA.

PRO: Matching protects Bergevin's ego on multiple levels

In the most elemental sense, we can view the offer-sheet battle as a game of chicken. If the Habs don't match, it means Bergevin blinked. If he's perceived to have backed down, could it hinder him in future negotiations, be they for trades or contracts? Also, punting on Kotkaniemi and deciding he's only worth a couple draft picks would essentially be admitting the Habs botched their top-three pick in 2018.

CON: The draft-pick compensation is worth more than Kotkaniemi

If Montreal doesn't match, it receives Carolina's first- and third-round pick in the 2022 draft, per the offer-sheet compensation rules outlined in the CBA. On one hand, the Hurricanes fashion themselves a Cup contender, and a dominant season would nudge those picks down to the end of the first and third round. On the other hand? This Canes team has lost star blueliner Dougie Hamilton and Calder Trophy finalist netminder Alex Nedeljkovic, among several other prominent contributors, during a head-scratching off-season for Waddell. Are we sure the Canes are still good? If they're not, and there's potential for the picks to land in the top halves of their respective rounds, the value seems fair for Kotkaniemi, especially in a loaded 2022 draft. Even if the Canes deliver another strong year and the compensation ends up being picks in the high 20s and high 80s, one could argue that's still fair value when measured against what Kotkaniemi has accomplished.

THE VERDICT: To me, the cons of matching the offer sheet outweigh the pros. The Habs would find themselves in a financial bind for protecting a player who hasn't played like a top-six forward so far in his career and may or may not realize his potential.



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Andrei Svechnikov Deal Gives Hurricanes Value, Long-Term Cost Certainty

The Hurricanes went for the long-term deal with Svechnikov, who has a chance to become one of the best offensive players in the league over the next eight seasons.

By Brett Finger

The popular thinking surrounding contract negotiations between the Carolina Hurricanes and Andrei Svechnikov was that the two sides would eventually find common ground on a bridge deal, but if we've learned anything from this front office regime over the last three years, it's that they oftentimes don't make the decision you'd expect them to make.

In this case, the unexpected move appears to have been the right one, as they locked up their young budding star to an eight-year deal that carries a \$7.75-million AAV. Svechnikov's deal carries the highest AAV among all U23 players in the league and has the highest dollar amount of any contract in Hurricanes franchise history.

The national reaction to the deal has been largely positive, praising the Hurricanes for getting a young player with star potential locked up early and buying four UFA years for cheap. With the inevitable rise of the salary cap and player contracts on the horizon after a period of flat cap, the deal should only look better and better as time goes on.

That is dependent on Svechnikov regaining his 2019-20 form, though, after a down year in 2021. And there's plenty of reason to think that will be the case.

Despite seeing his on-ice finishing and goal-scoring numbers decline in 2021, he was one of the best playmakers in the NHL, according to Corey Sznajder's tracking.

Unfortunately, his high-end playmaking and scoring chance creation didn't lead to an increase in production for him. That, coupled with his lowest 5-on-5 individual goals per 60 in three NHL seasons, made the 2021 season feel like a bigger step back than it really was.

While it certainly wasn't the big next step that everyone expected after his breakout sophomore campaign, he was still a very productive offensive player.

Compared to his 2019-20 season, his offense took a step back, but his isolated defensive impact held pretty strong. He still isn't an above-average defensive player, though.

Svechnikov's on-ice finishing relative to expectation was the biggest red flag from last season. According to HockeyViz, his on-ice impact on goal odds of unblocked shots in 2021 was -4%. He was league average in that regard in 2019-20.

Svechnikov was at his most dangerous when he was firing his patented wrist/snapshot from the top of the left circle and when he was on his backhand going from left to right.

He shot way below expectation on chances right in front of the net, though, which has been a trend throughout his career to this point, but his ability to score from range with his lethal shot has made up for it. He was also just unlucky with deflections in front of the net last season.

With all of that in mind, it's easy to see why the Canes were willing to commit to a long-term deal with Svechnikov despite his down season in 2021. His playmaking has been outstanding, he's an excellent scorer from a distance, and if he can even be an average on-ice finisher, he will consistently score 30-35 goals. If he's above average, he can score 40.

That's a significant "if," but the risk is worth it for a player who projects to be a star in the NHL even after a disappointing age-21 season in a bizarre COVID world.

The benefits of this deal for Carolina go beyond just locking up a great young player on a team-friendly deal. Instead of having to worry about doing it all over again in two or three years, the team can plan for future deals with the likes of Martin Necas, Vincent Trocheck, Jesperi Kotkaniemi (maybe?), Sebastian Aho, Teuvo Teravainen and Brett Pesce with Svech locked into his deal until 2029.

There is value in cost certainty, especially when it's a cornerstone player signed to what should end up being a below market value deal.

If Svechnikov rebounds from 2021 and continues the upward trajectory he was on; this deal will be in the Nathan MacKinnon "how is he under contract for that many years at that dollar amount" conversation.

Since breaking into the league three seasons ago, he leads all 2018 draft picks with 59 goals and 140 points in 205 regular-season games to go with nine goals and 20 points in 26 playoff games. You have to like the odds of this thing panning out very well, and you know that the player will do everything in his power to deliver for the fan base.

"I've been loving this place for years and now I'll be here eight more," Svechnikov said in Thursday's press conference. "It's a special place. We have a great team, great coaches and all the guys make this locker room special. You come here and you just want to have fun. That's all we try to do. Have fun and win every game."



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SportScan

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

1219777

Carolina Hurricanes

The Hurricanes' swipe back at the Canadiens is more than just spite from the Aho offer

BY LUKE DECOCK

Put aside for a moment — if that's even possible — the extraordinary pettiness that the Carolina Hurricanes' offer sheet for Jesperi Kotkaniemi was swaddled in like gaudy gift wrap. It's actually a shrewd hockey move, even at \$6 million and change.

True, the Hurricanes probably wouldn't have been as motivated to put the Montreal Canadiens in the absolute fix they're in now if the Canadiens hadn't offered Sebastian Aho that front-loaded offer sheet that was a complete no-brainer to match, even if it will end up costing the Hurricanes down the road.

But this is more than retribution served at 0 degrees Kelvin, overflowing with snidery, from the \$20 signing bonus to the salvos of Twitter trolling and the press release cut-and-pasted from Montreal's own on Aho.

Think about it this way: Would you want a promising, 21-year-old two-way center, arguably rushed to the NHL, for what should be a late first-round pick and a third? Of course you would, even if he only scored five goals last season and was curiously scratched during the Stanley Cup Final, the genesis of the bad blood the Hurricanes are currently exploiting.

The Kotkaniemi offer sheet is also the latest salvo in a quietly simmering feud between the franchises that replaced the open Adams Division warfare of the the Hartford days. The old-money-nouveau-riche tension between the two franchises, the most storied in NHL history and the most mocked, didn't start with the Canadiens' offer sheet to Aho.

It goes back 20 years, to the extraordinary events of two remarkable playoff series, catalyzed by the disbelief that a team from Caroline du Nord, of all places, could eliminate — and even outright embarrass — the Habs on their own hallowed home ice. Twice. It was surely coincidence that for many years a new relocation rumor seemed to bubble up as soon as the Canadiens' charter left the ground on its way to Raleigh.

The Aho offer sheet didn't arise from that, but it certainly fed into it, mocking Hurricanes owner Tom Dundon's willingness to dip into his pocket to pay Aho an immediate \$11 million signing bonus. Now Dundon and the Hurricanes have returned the favor, and not merely for revenge.

Reap, sow.

The fact that Kotkaniemi will be paid about double what he's probably worth this season is just the price to get that done, a \$3 million tax paid to the player instead of the Canadiens. And there's nothing stopping the Hurricanes from doing a long-term deal with Kotkaniemi in January at a more reasonable fair-market rate for a young center who hasn't quite lived up to his draft position, but still has plenty of time to do so. (Should he be willing to factor the extra \$3 million in his bank account into the bargain, all the better, although he's certainly under no obligation to do so.)

At worst, he's a promising young forward who fills the immediate hole in the Hurricanes' top nine, making it tougher for top prospect Seth Jarvis to make the team — not the worst thing in the world for his development. (Jack Drury could still fit on the fourth line, and just might.) At best, Kotkaniemi is a future replacement for Vincent Trocheck at center, although the Hurricanes see Trocheck as a long-term piece of their core even in a smaller role someday.

There are salary-cap issues for a team with about \$4.5 million in space after Andrei Svechnikov's extension was finalized Thursday, but those can theoretically be addressed by putting Jake Gardiner on long-term injured reserve — which is, nevertheless, not the magic wand fans sometimes think it is. The Hurricanes would have to be \$4 million over the cap to take full advantage of it, which would require another move or signing, and Gardiner would have to fail his physical or be willing, essentially, to retire.

That's the easiest path forward, but it's not entirely assured.

And whatever issues the Hurricanes have are nickels and dimes compared to the Canadiens' own cap issues.

They already lost their best two-way center, Phillip Danault, in free agency. Losing Kotkaniemi would leave them very soft down the middle but matching the offer sheet would put them about \$8 million over the cap. It may make more sense for the Canadiens to take two draft picks for the player picked immediately after Svechnikov than further restructure their roster to fit him in, especially since the Canadiens would almost certainly have to qualify him at that salary next summer. This is a gift that would keep on giving and giving.



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The Aho offer will cost the Hurricanes in what might have been years six, seven or eight of the long-term deal he could have signed with them instead of accepting the offer sheet. There's time to plan for that. This hits the Habs where it hurts right now.

So it's kind of a no-lose for the Hurricanes — they'd happily give up a first and a third and \$3 million for Kotkaniemi in a vacuum — and very much a no-win for the Habs. That shouldn't get lost in all the extracurriculars, as entertaining or immature as they may be, depending on one's perspective.

It's a hockey move above all else, even if there's so much else.

News Observer LOADED: 08.31.2021

1219806 Websites

The Athletic / In Dorchester, Jimmy Hayes gets a special goodbye from youth hockey players lining the streets

By Steve Buckley Aug 30, 2021

The funeral for Jimmy Hayes was coming to an end now, and soon the procession would be making its way from St. Ann's Church in Dorchester down Gallivan Boulevard and onto Hallet Street, passing by Florian Hall.

That's where 12-year-old Andrew O'Malley and hundreds of other youth hockey players from throughout Boston and beyond were waiting to remember Hayes in their own special way: They were going to raise their sticks as the hearse containing Jimmy's remains approached, and then they planned to tap those sticks in the asphalt until every last car passed by en route to Cedar Grove Cemetery.

"I didn't even have breakfast this morning," said O'Malley, who is entering the seventh grade at Boston College High School. "I just got up, put on my hockey sweater, and came down here."

That they were doing this wasn't just because Hayes, who was only 31 when he died last week, was a former National Hockey League player who spent parts of two seasons with the Bruins. And it wasn't even that Hayes was a son of Dorchester, having learned to play the game as a member of Dorchester Youth Hockey alongside his brother Kevin, who plays for the Philadelphia Flyers now.

No, it was this: Jimmy Hayes never forgot where he came from. That's a bit of a cliché, sure, except that by all accounts Jimmy was a Dorchester kid growing up and he never stopped being a Dorchester kid, not once, not even after he made it to the NHL. That's why all these kids showed up Monday morning. Seems every one of them had a story to tell about meeting Jimmy Hayes, and every story had a specialness to it, the kids talking about how Jimmy would ask them what position they played, where they went to school, what team they played on.

O'Malley, who plays for the Dorchester Chiefs — Jimmy's old team — was asked to put into his own words why he and all these other youth hockey players were here on this grayish, slightly muggy Monday morning. He started to speak, delivering an answer that was crisp, eloquent and appropriate, but then, right in the middle of it all, he said, "Would you mind if I start over again?"

No need to, he was told. What he had said was perfect.

No, he said. He wanted to start over.

"I'm here because Jimmy was the heart and soul of Dorchester," he said anew. "He's one of three players from Dorchester Youth Hockey who made it to the NHL, and that's because he put the work in to get there."

He went on to explain that his father, Marty O'Malley, a Boston police detective, is friends with Jimmy's old man, Big Kevin Hayes. Because of

that friendship, young Andrew got to meet Jimmy. There was even a road trip down to New Jersey to see him play.

That connection— his father knew Jimmy's father — is more or less why Andrew decided to start over. He had made a determination that talking about his relationship with Jimmy Hayes wasn't a big deal. The big deal, he had determined, is that he'd always heard how hard Jimmy had worked during his own growing-up days in Dorchester. That's the information he wanted to get out, not the mere fact that he knew him.

"He worked so hard," Andrew O'Malley said. "I just think that's important and it's what I want to say about Jimmy."

What 12-year-old kid does that? What 12-year-old kid has the ability to — if you'll pardon the hockey jargon — change up on the fly and deliver an observation that's from the heart and not just an off-the-cuff remark?

It's true that it was the grown-ups who arranged for this Monday morning youth hockey salute along Hallet Street. And for that, a round of applause for Shawn O'Sullivan and all the other volunteers from Dorchester Youth Hockey. Three cheers for Jack Doherty of College Hype for getting the commemorative Jimmy Hayes T-shirts printed on short notice, and to "Signs by J" for the banners that lined the street.

But that was all just a game plan. It was the kids who pulled this off.

You could see it in their eyes.

You could hear it in their words.

James Neff, 13, from Archbishop Williams High School: "I was 6 when I first met him. He came to our rink in Dorchester. I got a picture with him. I think I'll keep it the rest of my life. Because he's from Dorchester."

Colleen Sansone, 12, entering Archbishop Williams said: "I'm here to support Jimmy Hayes and the Dorchester community. That's what he did, right?"

And it wasn't just kids from Dorchester. They came from all over town — from Charlestown, from Southie, from West Roxbury. One group came from Milton, which is one town south of Dorchester and has long been a place for the locals to move if perhaps they're looking for a bigger house but don't want to be too far from the old neighborhood. And how cool that it's precisely what Jimmy Hayes did. He moved, but not too far away that he'd miss anything.

Jordan Munsey, 13, is a youth hockey player from Milton. He says he always pays attention to the whereabouts of professional athletes — including Milton native Ryan Shea, a former Northeastern University star who played last season in the American Hockey League — and it did not go unnoticed by him that Jimmy Hayes had moved into his hometown.

"I guess I had a soft spot for him because he was from around here," Munsey said. "Every kid here today wants to play professional hockey, and you see what he did, and what he had to do to make his dream come true, and how everyone says he always came back, and you think maybe you can do that someday."

"I think I owe it to him to be here today. I think we all do."

The Athletic LOADED: 08.31.2021

1219807 Websites

The Athletic / NHL Pipeline Rankings 2021-22: Counting down to the best core of prospects and under-23 players

Corey Pronman Aug 30, 2021

Welcome to The Athletic's 2021-22 edition of the NHL Pipeline Rankings where we look at the future of the NHL, team by team.



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Every team will have a full ranking of the best young players in its organization with a projection of what is expected of each. Then those core groups are ranked from 1 to 32, so show how each compares to the rest of the league.

Player eligibility is determined by age. A player is eligible if they are 22 years of age or younger as of Sept. 15, 2021. This encompasses almost every prospect selected between the 2017 and 2021 NHL drafts. This is used to include a team's top prospects, without aggressively graduating players who have a lot of prime development years ahead of them, even if they are already in the NHL.

Full individual evaluations of all players with tool grades and tiers that can be applied across all teams are found within each team's ranking of its own players.

The rollout will be quicker than in past years due to the abbreviated offseason, with all the files being posted this week.

And now for the rankings:

25. Edmonton Oilers
26. Calgary Flames
27. New York Islanders
28. Washington Capitals
29. Boston Bruins
30. Tampa Bay Lightning
31. Pittsburgh Penguins
32. Seattle Kraken

The Athletic LOADED: 08.31.2021

1219808 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Why the Jesperi Kotkaniemi offer sheet makes sense for the Hurricanes

Justin Bourne

August 30, 2021, 2:16 PM

I'm mad at Seattle. This article isn't even about them, but allow me start here.

I'm mad at Seattle because this whole off-season was supposed to be their time to shine, a team with a pristine cap sheet coming into the league at a time when the salary cap walls were squeezing in, crushing good teams and forcing them to move out quality players just to stay alive.

Elliotte Friedman likes to reference the expression that when teams are drowning under cap and player issues, rivals don't throw them life preservers, they throw anchors. The Kraken are already nautical-themed, and I was bracing for a barrage of anchor-tossing. Instead they didn't seem to notice the drowning at all, presumably checking their collective phone to read more praise for their beautiful jerseys. They were going to "weaponize" their cap space, meanwhile a guy like Elias Pettersson, a 22-year-old centre and bona fide star on a cap-strapped team, is still sitting at home waiting for a new contract.

This piece is about the Carolina Hurricanes, though, and why they've done what they've done, which is legitimately attempt to weaponize their cap space. (Trying to get better despite what it might do to the feelings of an opposing front office. What a concept.)

Of course, we know how this came to pass in the first place. Two years ago Marc Bergevin and the Montreal Canadiens signed Sebastian Aho to an offer sheet, which forced the Canes to match what was ultimately an extremely reasonable deal. But the Canes didn't like having their hand forced. That's fair, given it was a direct challenge to Tom Dundon's finances, pressing him to part with \$21 million cash in the first year of the Aho deal. That residual bitterness gave them cultural permission to do the Kotkaniemi offer sheet under the legal precedent of "Yeah but Mom he hit me first."

And, will you look at that, they might make themselves better in the process.

There's a lot of faux-bitterness in these opening paragraphs, but to summarize why: teams should offer sheet good players because good players are tough to acquire and, logically, teams should always be trying to get better by any means possible, despite GMs around the league wanting to remain besties. The Seattle thing, well, we just heard a lot about the great off-ice team they assembled, and that's likely true (and they may be good on the ice) but I really wanted some fireworks here.

Let's take a look at why Carolina offer sheeted Jesperi Kotkaniemi at a salary that's a rough \$3 million over what the player is worth. "Pettiness" is the fun answer, but there are smart hockey reasons at its core.

Elliotte Friedman on Kotkaniemi's offer sheet, Eichel's future

August 30 2021

• He's a desirable player, in that he's a 21-year-old centre with a clean 200 games of NHL experience, and has some upside on the offence and physical side that's yet unfulfilled. Those players aren't easy to get into your organization outside drafting and developing -- and drafting and developing takes time and often (growing) pain. To cut out the "gaining experience" years and just grab the best season of KK's career for a cost that's mostly dollars is what I believe the kids call a "tidy bit of business."

(I feel it necessary to note I'm not much of a Kotkaniemi believer, but I recognize my personal take on the player isn't relevant here. As I said, there's upside that I can see, he's "desirable," but I haven't seen anything from him that makes me think he's going to be much of a difference-maker. But yeah: young, good size, some talent, it's not easy to get all those things in a single player.)

• In relation to acquisition cost I said "mostly dollars" because there would be a first and a third going the other way if Montreal doesn't match, but the Canes were already good and if they get the player they'll increase their odds of that first-rounder being a lot closer to a second-rounder. Once you're past the top-20 of the first round you're into another tier of less impactful players than we normally associate with the glorified status of "first rounder."

• Offering \$6.1 million makes it realistic that the Canes might actually get him. Montreal has inched their way up against the salary cap, even with the potential LTI relief of the Shea Weber deal, and it's not like they've used Kotkaniemi in a way that screams "We can't possibly bear the thought of losing this integral piece." The kid was healthy scratched twice in playoffs. Not a lot of teams with cap issues are falling all over themselves to pay \$6.1 million to guys they healthy scratch in big games, even if they expect improvement.

• The idea behind a big one-year deal is that, again, you actually get the player, which is the hardest part to pull off from all this. After that first season you then have to give the player a corresponding qualifying offer (of \$6.1 million), or the player can walk and become a UFA. Which sounds bad. Only, let's say Kotkaniemi puts up 35-40 points and is just OK, playing 15 minutes a night, still contributing but worth more like \$3 million per season after that.

If he becomes a UFA, he's only going to get paid that \$3 million or a bit more on the open market. Well, Carolina would also have the option to negotiate with Kotkaniemi to reach a number lower than the qualifying offer, and if he's been given a fair chance to succeed with the Canes and likes it there, it's reasonable to think he'd stay in the situation where he's



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happy, where they just did him the courtesy of over-paying him, and where they'd still be giving him market value of that \$3 million figure or whatever it would end up being.

Getting the prime years of a player's career is crucial to having success in the NHL, and the Hurricanes used one of the few tools at their disposal to acquire a guy poised to go into his.

There's all that, then there's the petty stuff that's grabbing all the attention, and granted, it is hilarious. The \$20 signing bonus. The Canes tweeting out the offer sheet news in French. The matching statements on why the player signed the sheet. Honestly, I was borderline gleeful at how Carolina didn't hide anything, they just wore their motivations like they were cutting WWE promos. Forget "Dundon," surely we're calling him Tom Petty now?

So, it all makes sense from that side. From Montreal's, I'm not sure exactly what they'll do, but I'm guessing the answer isn't just "match" or "not match." I think it'll lead to related moves. I just can't see them straight-up matching that number on a player my gut tells me they've got question marks about (see: healthy scratch in playoffs). The only reason they might match is if they can't make something else work, because sans "KK" their centre depth after Nick Suzuki would be truly abominable (Suzuki, then ... Jake Evans and Cedric Paquette? And?).

Our own Eric Engels wrote his take on the Montreal side here, where he discussed how Montreal needs to explore all options. One of those options was to use the picks from the Kotkaniemi offer sheet to acquire a player like Christian Dvorak, who's about to toil on a rebuilding Arizona team that's hungry for picks. That makes sense to me – taking the picks and parlaying them into another centre. But that's provided they can find a trade partner out there to replace KK.

Pro sports are supposed to be competitive, and while moves like this might make opposing teams mad, that shouldn't prohibit them from happening more often. The odds of offer sheet retribution even being possible like this -- with a team having the cap space, player need, picks and all that just two years later -- is extremely unlikely. Like many fans and analysts out there, I'm on Team Offer Sheet, which is why I lead this article off being mad at Seattle, who have needs and picks aplenty. I'm mad because this is fun, and I want more.

Now we get to sit back and see how Montreal handles this off-season bombshell, with NHL training camps just three weeks away.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 08.31.2021

1219809 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / 'Legitimate chance' Canadiens considering not matching Kotkaniemi offer sheet

Lukas Weese August 30, 2021, 12:49 PM

There is a "legitimate chance" the Montreal Canadiens are considering not matching the offer sheet tendered by the Carolina Hurricanes to forward Jesperi Kotkaniemi over the weekend, per Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman.

Friedman reported on 31 Thoughts: The Podcast, that the Canadiens are potentially weighing the merits of the one-year, \$6.1-million deal against the haul of draft picks from the Hurricanes and the flexibility offered by the 21-year-old coming off the books.

"I do think there is a legitimate chance that Montreal's considering not matching the offer sheet," Friedman said on 31 Thoughts: The Podcast. "Famous last words, it could change. It might just be a visceral reaction. They do have a week."

The Canadiens drafted Kotkaniemi third overall in the 2018 NHL Draft. Through 171 games played with the Canadiens, the centre has 22 goals and 40 assists. However, the 2020-21 season saw Kotkaniemi struggle to generate offence, evidenced by his five goals and 15 assists through 56 games.

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.

For Canadiens general manager Marc Bergevin, the decision comes down to whether he should overspend on a young forward who has upside or go in a different direction with the cap space and draft compensation. Sportsnet's Eric Engels reported that Montreal may be interested in Arizona Coyotes centre Christian Dvorak.

"I think Montreal's going to take those picks around the league and are going to see," Friedman said. "I could see Montreal going to Arizona and saying, 'How would a first and a third be for Dvorak? Do we have the framework of a deal here?'"

Friedman also raised the question of the Canadiens going after Buffalo Sabres star Jack Eichel.

"I'm not sure Montreal is really big in the Jack Eichel sweepstakes. Their offer they knew was lower than what Buffalo would take," he said.

"We now know that Eichel has switched agents. There is a long history between Pat Brisson and Marc Bergevin. I just wonder does this change the dynamic between the Canadiens and the Sabres at all?"

If the Canadiens decide to not match the Hurricanes' offer sheet, they will lose Kotkaniemi but gain a first- and a third-round draft pick from Carolina. Montreal has until Sept. 4 to make a decision.

You can learn more about the Kotkaniemi offer sheet saga on the latest 31 Thoughts: The Podcast episode, co-hosted by Sportsnet's Jeff Marek and Elliotte Friedman.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 08.31.2021

1219810 Websites

TSN.CA / Kotkaniemi offer sheet isn't a revenge story

By Travis Yost

The Carolina Hurricanes fired a shot across the 49th parallel on Saturday, signing Montreal Canadiens centre Jesperi Kotkaniemi to an offer sheet.

The offer sheet is quite significant in terms of compensation: on top of a first- and third-round draft pick, the Hurricanes will have to pay the 21-year-old Finn \$6.1-million next season should the Habs choose not to match.

There has been ample debate over whether the Canadiens should match or decline and accept the compensation. I think this debate is quite nuanced and there is merit to both sides. But do not let amusing press releases and \$20 signing bonuses serve as the basis for why you think this is merely a front office acting spiteful. This isn't a revenge story; it's simply how offer sheets work.

One of the fallacies here is that people are viewing the offer sheet through the wrong prism. This is not a straight trade for a restricted free agent. It is also not a signing of a player in unrestricted free agency. There are specific rules governing offer sheets and compensation, and for them to be useful they must be used in a way that (a) makes sense



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for the signing team; and (b) makes it difficult for the counterparty to match.

Consider the case of Kotkaniemi. He was the third-overall pick in the 2018 draft and has proven to be an exceptionally useful defensive forward. On the other hand, Kotkaniemi's offence has been missing in action. His 31 goals in 200 games puts him in fourth-line territory. Ultimately, there is still a wide range of developmental outcomes for the player.

In many ways, this is a reverse of what unrestricted free agency has become, where general managers pile in and outbid one another for older players, looking to cash in on how productive they were in their early 20s. The reality is Carolina signed Kotkaniemi to that one-year contract for two reasons: they had the space, and they think there is upside to the player worth what they are giving up.

I have long argued that for offer sheets (or dual offer sheets in an even more predatory sense) to be effective, they need to be deployed on second- and third-tier players. It's a little bit backwards, but the compensation packages for true NHL stars are quite punitive; similarly, players at the low end of the scale can either be found elsewhere around the league or internally.

A common refrain is that Kotkaniemi can't be worth \$6.1-million dollars off his offensive output alone, and I don't know anyone who would argue that, including the Hurricanes. But remember, this is more about the future value of the player than the current (or past) value of a player, a very different animal than the free-agent signings we are accustomed to.

Carolina also needs to be able to offer something that would force Montreal to consider walking. To that end, there are three options:

- Carolina could have tendered an offer sheet more realistically tied to Kotkaniemi's current value and in a lower range. Considering the Canadiens depth down the middle and how much they like the youngster, it's impossible to imagine them not matching here.
- Carolina could have tendered an offer sheet at less average annual value but still within the current compensation range. That's perfectly reasonable, but the entire point of putting it at the top of the range is to force Montreal out of cap compliance.
- Carolina could have tendered an offer sheet at a higher average annual value but that's in the next compensation range, which includes an additional second-round pick.

The entire point of offer sheets, if used correctly, is to target talented young players and to buy them before the upside is realized.

Consider this offer sheet against a theoretical one for Vancouver restricted free-agent forward Elias Pettersson. The Canucks' cap situation is dire, but teams must swallow the reality of offering a mega-contract and at least four picks. In the top range (\$10.3 million and up), those four picks are all in the first round. They also have to manage this in a flat-cap era where cap space is nearly impossible to come by.

An even better example might be Hurricanes centre Sebastian Aho, the player at the centre of the first drama between these two teams. Marc Bergevin's 2019 offer sheet for Aho failed because it simply wasn't punitive enough for Carolina to consider walking. A five-year, \$42-million contract for a first-line forward entering his prime is a contract most general managers want on the books, one well within current and future market value.

Aho has been a point-per-game player for three seasons now and worth every penny of the deal that Montreal initially signed him to.

For this to work, Carolina needs Kotkaniemi to be a more productive player. In his first three seasons, Kotkaniemi has been a bottom-six calibre forward with notable defensive upside:

The Hurricanes know this offer sheet has risk. First- and third-round picks are not inconsequential. And the high salary in year one – though it's easily fit into this year's lineup – will make subsequent contractual

negotiations more difficult. But the entire reason why Carolina is making this bet is the same reason this is so difficult a decision for Montreal: the Canadiens are, of course, concerned that Kotkaniemi could be a quality top-six option in short order.

The reason why this decision is so difficult for Montreal is because Carolina had to make it that way, full stop. The Hurricanes want Kotkaniemi and think he's better than he's shown in Montreal. The Canadiens want to keep the Finn just the same but have an opportunity to be risk averse on a player who has shown limited offensive upside.

If offer sheets are ever to become a part of normal hockey business, this is what they will look like. Overpays betting on a young player's upside against teams who either are cash poor, cap-strapped, or both.

TSN.CA LOADED: 08.31.2021