



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • September 13, 2021



#NHLTopPlayers: Nos. 30-21

NHL Network reveals best of current crop

By David Satriano

NHL Network is getting ready for this season by ranking the top 50 players in the League. Researchers, producers and on-air personalities compiled the list, and players 30-21 were revealed Sunday in the premiere of the third program in a five-part offseason series. Here is the list:

30. Mathew Barzal, C, New York Islanders

Barzal scored 45 points (17 goals, 28 assists) in 55 games last season, the fourth time in his four full NHL seasons he's led the Islanders in scoring. His plus-15 was an NHL career high and tied with three others for the New York lead. Barzal led Islanders forwards in ice time per game (18:43), and led the team in power-play time per game (2:30). He has scored 31 points (11 goals, 20 assists) in 41 Stanley Cup Playoff games the past two seasons.

"The thing that really astounds me where Barzal is concerned is that ability to escape laterally," NHL Network analyst Stu Grimson said. "Side to side he's among the best players in the game today. Top-end speed, top-end puck handling, he's got a great shot. But that ability to change direction laterally, to throw off false information ... when you get this player underneath the face-off dots, underneath the hash marks in the offensive zone, I think he's as hard to contain, as hard to defend against, as there is in this game today."

29. Connor Hellebuyck, G, Winnipeg Jets

Hellebuyck, who won the Vezina Trophy voted as the best goalie in the NHL in 2019-20, was 24-17-3 with a 2.58 goals-against average, .916 save percentage and four shutouts in 45 games last season. He faced the most shots (1,335) and made the most saves (1,223) among all goalies for the third straight season. Since 2017-18, Hellebuyck is second in the NHL with 133 wins, behind Andrei Vasilevskiy (149), and third with 18 shutouts, behind Marc-Andre Fleury (23) and Vasilevskiy (22).

"He checks all the boxes where elite-level goaltenders are concerned," Grimson said. "He's big, he's rangy, very flexible, very determined. ... Really a remarkable collection of attributes in Connor Hellebuyck."

28. Alex Pietrangelo, D, Vegas Golden Knights

In his first season with the Golden Knights, Pietrangelo made an immediate impact, leading them in average ice time per

game (24:26) and scoring 23 points (seven goals, 16 assists) in 41 games. He had a plus-20 rating and was second on Vegas in blocked shots (80; Alec Martinez, 168) despite missing 15 games because of injury. Prior to last season, Pietrangelo scored at least 13 goals and 41 points in four straight seasons with the St. Louis Blues.

"A general manager's dream," Grimson said. "Comfortable playing every part of the game. He's a great leader, brings all kinds of leadership experience from a [Stanley] Cup-winning team in St. Louis. But he's very skilled in terms of how he defends from the blue line."

27. Jack Eichel, C, Buffalo Sabres

Eichel scored 18 points (two goals, 16 assists) in 21 games last season and was leading the Sabres in scoring prior to missing the final 33 games of the regular season with a neck injury. He scored an NHL career-high 36 goals in 68 games in 2019-20 and 82 points (28 goals, 54 assists) in 2018-19. Eichel had scored at least 24 goals in each of his first five NHL seasons prior to last season and is third among players selected the 2015 NHL Draft in scoring with 355 points, behind Connor McDavid (574) and Mitchell Marner (358).

"He tends to be one of the more cerebral players in our game," Grimson said. "For the most part forwards, even the high-level guys, the high-talent guys, they tend to play on a lot of emotion, a lot of adrenaline. Eichel is different in that respect. Yes, there is pace to his game, but he tends to be a little bit more cerebral. Kind of out-smarting his opponent and using that top-end skill set whether passing, the great [shot] release and firing one to the back of the net."

26. Ryan O'Reilly, C, St. Louis Blues

O'Reilly was second on the Blues with 54 points (24 goals, 30 assists) in 56 games last season, four points behind David Perron, and led their forwards in average ice time per game (20:45). He took the third-most face-offs in the NHL (1,196) and won the second-most (703), behind Patrice Bergeron (714). O'Reilly won 58.8 percent of face-offs (fourth; minimum 500 face-offs), and his plus-26 rating was tied for 10th. He won the Selke Trophy voted as best defensive forward in the NHL in 2018-19 and has finished in the top five each of the past three seasons.

"It starts with the determination, and he is infuriating in terms of the opposition forwards he plays against," Grimson said. "He's great with that stick. ... Really strong on the puck, really doggedly determined just in terms of winning those puck



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battles. And there is the offensive upside that comes along with all that."

25. Roman Josi, D, Nashville Predators

Although he took a step back offensively last season, scoring 33 points (eight goals, 25 assists) in 48 games, Josi was the anchor of the defense for the Predators, averaging 24:21 of ice time per game and leading them in blocked shots (83). He won the Norris Trophy voted as the best defenseman in the NHL in 2019-20 when he scored an NHL career-high 65 points (16 goals, 49 assists) in 69 games, and had scored at least 12 goals and 40 points in seven straight seasons prior to last season.

"He's a great defender, very capable in the defensive zone," Grimson said. "But just weighing the two aspects of his game, he is incredibly talented on the offensive side [and] it starts with the skating. ... We play in a game today where we look to our [defensemen] to provide more offense for us. We like to have somebody that behaves more like a fourth forward out there from time to time. Roman Josi can be that guy."

24. Mark Scheifele, C, Winnipeg Jets

Scheifele led the Jets with 63 points (21 goals, 42 assists) in 56 games last season and has finished third or better each season since 2015-16. He led Winnipeg in power-play points (17) and was second among Jets forwards in blocked shots (38; Andrew Copp, 41). Scheifele is one of two NHL players to have scored at least 20 goals and 60 points in six straight seasons (Brad Marchand). He also leads the Jets and is 10th in the NHL with 220 points (88 goals, 132 assists) the past three seasons.

"A great big, rangy guy, plays with a lot of pace, he's got top-end speed and he's a really great distributor," Grimson said. "Sees the game exceptionally well, processes it at a higher level. ... The kind of guy you want to have out there each and every night at the center position because he's a bear inside the face-off circle but also very capable of shutting down top-six offensive players from the other side."

23. Jonathan Huberdeau, LW, Florida Panthers

Huberdeau led the Panthers with 61 points (20 goals, 41 assists) in 55 games last season, which was tied with Mark Stone of the Vegas Golden Knights for 11th in the NHL. His 24 power-play points led Florida and his plus-12 was tied for third among forwards with Aleksander Barkov and Sam Bennett. Huberdeau has scored at least 20 goals and 61

points in each of the past four seasons and is Florida's all-time leader in points (498).

"He is dynamic, he is a game breaker and has great offensive instincts, great offensive flair, finding the back of the net with regularity," Grimson said. "This guy is just really hard to defend against. Never mind the great shot, he's a really gifted playmaker and has found some fabulous chemistry in the top-six with the Florida Panthers."

22. Adam Fox, D, New York Rangers

In his second NHL season in 2020-21, Fox won the Norris Trophy, finishing second among defensemen with 47 points (five goals, 42 assists) in 55 games, one behind Tyson Barrie of the Edmonton Oilers. He was plus-19 and led the Rangers in average ice time per game (24:42), more than three minutes more than defenseman Jacob Trouba, who was second (21:29). Fox scored 23 power-play points, tied for second in the NHL at the position behind Victor Hedman of the Tampa Bay Lightning (24), had 102 blocked shots, and was third in the League among defensemen in takeaways (38).

"From the moment he has stepped onto NHL ice, and it goes to the confidence that he has in his game and the skill set, but the way he processes the game, it allows him to do the things that he does on the offensive side of the game," Grimson said.

21. Sebastian Aho, C, Carolina Hurricanes

Aho led the Hurricanes with 57 points (24 goals, 33 assists) in 56 games last season, and has led them in scoring in each of the past four seasons. He led Carolina in game-winning goals (seven), takeaways (33) and shooting percentage (16.2 percent; minimum 10 shots on goal), and tied for first in power-play points (18) with Vincent Trocheck and Dougie Hamilton. Aho is fourth in points among players selected in the 2015 draft with 320 points (145 goals, 175 assists), behind McDavid, Marnier and Eichel. He also has produced in the playoffs, scoring 35 points (14 goals, 21 assists) in 34 games the past three seasons.

"He checks each and every box," Grimson said. "He's a tremendous disher, he's got a great shot, has a real knack for the net, a real know-how around the net. And he has top-end speed, and it's really the ability to shift gears on the fly. He kicks in an afterburner, and for a lot of NHL defenders, especially ones that don't see Aho a lot, he can get you back on your heels and you're losing him in time and space."



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Stanley Cup Windows 2021-22: Metropolitan Division

Which teams are squarely in win-now mode? Which teams are rebuilding? Who sits in the murky middle? Our division-by-division series continues with the Metropolitan teams.

By Matt Larkin

Welcome to part 2 of Stanley Cup Windows, an annual blog series in which I (attempt to) assess where each NHL team sits on its road to Stanley Cup contention. Some are squarely in their glory years, others have approached desperate win-now junctures, others are watching their Cup hopes slip away and some are obvious rebuilders.

So how does the Cup-window landscape look for 2021-22? Give the snow globe a vigorous shake. That'll give you a fair sense of what to expect from the NHL's standings: chaos. For the first time since March 2020, the NHL's divisions will align under their traditional structures: Atlantic, Central, Metropolitan and Pacific. Which teams will emerge as the alphas? It's difficult to know when so many haven't faced each other in a year and a half. The Seattle Kraken also join the fray as the league's 32nd franchise.

This year's Stanley Cup Windows exercise should prove particularly challenging, then. But that's part of the fun. We'll continue with the Metropolitan Division, which underwent significant player turnover this off-season.

WINDOW WIDE OPEN

(In position to contend for multiple seasons)

New York Islanders

The Isles did almost nothing all off-season before announcing the simultaneous re-signings of UFAs Casey Cizikas and Kyle Palmieri and RFAs Ilya Sorokin and Anthony Beauvillier Sept. 1. The telegraphed Zach Parise contract was finally made official Friday, too.

For a team that hasn't cleared the conference-final hump in consecutive seasons, Parise doesn't qualify as a major upgrade, but the Tampa Bay Lightning seem to be the only team New York can't handle, and those Lightning lost multiple important players this off-season. The Isles may thus be in the driver's seat as top contenders in the East. They own the best shutdown defense pair in the game right now in Adam Pelech and Ryan Pulock; a versatile, speedy No. 1 center in Matt Barzal; an elite goaltending tandem in Semyon Varlamov and Ilya Sorokin; a deep forward group top to bottom; and a peerless coach in Barry Trotz. They also get captain Anders Lee back from his ACL tear to patrol the left wing on their top line. With most of their key players still in their primes, the Isles appear to have plenty of runway left in their quest for a championship.

WINDOW CLOSING

(Aging perennial contender team, running out of years to make a deep playoff run)

Washington Capitals, Pittsburgh Penguins

We very much know who the Caps are at this point. They're a veteran team, still extremely deadly on the power play, armed with an enviable top-six forward group including Alex Ovechkin, Tom Wilson, Anthony Mantha and T.J. Oshie on the wings and Nicklas Backstrom and Evgeny Kuznetsov at center, though it remains to be seen if the Caps deliver on trade rumors and deal Kuznetsov. Elite offensive defenseman John Carlson adds to the firepower. The Caps played decent defensive hockey at 5-on-5 last season and had a great penalty kill, but they allowed a lot of goals because they didn't get consistent season-long goaltending from Ilya Samsonov and Vitek Vanecek. With key penalty-killing D-man Brendan Dillon traded to the Winnipeg Jets, there's more pressure on Washington's netminders to elevate their play. The Caps had the league's 17th-best save percentage and second-worst high-danger SP at 5-on-5 last season.

With a depleted D-corps and an effective but aging forward group, the Caps seem likely to remain a comfortably competitive playoff team, maybe even a division winner, but it feels like their Stanley Cup trajectory peaked with their 2018 win – unless prospect Connor McMichael makes the team and becomes a high-impact rookie.

As for the Penguins...eek. It was already a head-scratching off-season in which GM Ron Hextall (a) doubled down on Tristan Jarry as Pittsburgh's starting goaltender despite Jarry's playoff meltdown; (b) lost wingers Jared McCann (indirectly) and Brandon Tanev to the expansion draft; and (c) made no major upgrades unless you count signing checking left winger Brock McGinn. Center Evgeni Malkin's balky knee is slated to keep him out of training camp, and now center Sidney Crosby will miss at least six weeks after wrist surgery. That means the Pens' opening-night center will probably be 36-year-old Jeff Carter. It really feels like we're at the edge of the cliff in the fruitful Crosby-Malkin era, especially when Malkin and defenseman Kris Letang are in their final years of their contracts.

WINDOW FOGGED UP

(Unpredictable outcome and differing opinions on whether team is a contender or pretender)

Carolina Hurricanes, Philadelphia Flyers, New York Rangers, New Jersey Devils



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I'm shocking myself by placing the Hurricanes in this category. They should be up with the New York Islanders in the Window Wide Open section coming off a dominant season in which coach Rod Brind'Amour won the Jack Adams Award. Alas, GM Don Waddell's off-season decisions have eroded my confidence. Hagglng over money, he traded starting goaltender and Calder Trophy finalist Alex Nedeljkovic to the Detroit Red Wings. Replacing 'Ned' and Petr Mrazek are the high-risk duo of Frederik Andersen and Antti Raanta. The Canes also let No. 1 defenseman Dougie Hamilton walk as a UFA. Most of the forward group remains intact, and the Canes still have Jacob Slavin and Brett Pesce thwarting chances on defense, so it's entirely possible this team remains a top-tier contender. Given the significance of their player losses, however, they're difficult to forecast.

Same goes for the Flyers, who were extremely aggressive in overhauling their roster this off-season. They traded center and 2017 No. 2 overall draft bust Nolan Patrick as part of a three-team trade bringing stellar puck-moving defenseman Ryan Ellis to Philadelphia; swapped Jakub Voracek for Cam Atkinson in a hockey trade of right wingers; and broke the maligned but physically promising Rasmus Ristolainen out of prison, a.k.a the Buffalo Sabres blueline. Does that mean the Flyers return to Stanley Cup contention after it felt like they were right there a year ago? It depends on goaltending. Carter Hart mysteriously imploded last season, and his new backup, Martin Jones, is statistically the worst NHL netminder of the past three years if we measure by goals saved above average per 60 at 5-on-5. If no one can stop the puck, all the Flyers' other transactions might not matter. It all comes down to Hart and whether he can get his highly intelligent brain back on track.

The Rangers' current roster breakdown represents two conflicting philosophies colliding head on. Holdovers from Jeff Gorton's time as GM include top-end homegrown talents such as Igor Shesterkin in net, K'Andre Miller on defense and lottery picks Kaapo Kakko and Alexis Lafreniere on the wings, with blueliners Adam Fox, Jacob Trouba and Ryan Lindgren and center Mika Zibanejad having arrived via trades made by Gorton. Superstar left winger Artemi Panarin was also a Gorton-era signing. That core represents the promise of 'The Letter' the Rangers brass sent to their fans in 2018: a mix of pure skill and youthful upside.

The new additions represent owner James Dolan's impatience, which culminated in firing Gorton last season and replacing him with Chris Drury as GM. Attempting to inject the franchise with competitive fire, Drury overpaid massively for two-time Stanley Cup winning checker Barclay Goodrow, traded for rugged right winger Ryan Reaves and picked up hitting machine Sammy Blais from St. Louis. If Drury has the cocktail mixed correctly, we could see the Rangers bust out as a first-place team with sandpaper to complement their talent. If not, this group might be slower and less skilled than last year's. The Rangers will be a fun watch in 2021-22 because their range of outcomes is incredibly wide.

Another team whose fate could spin in many directions: the New Jersey Devils, a rebuilding team that has behaved this off-season as if it's done rebuilding. The Devils landed the top UFA on the market in Hamilton and traded for defenseman Ryan Graves while also fortifying their goaltending with Jonathan Bernier to work with Mackenzie Blackwood and adding Tomas Tatar as a scoring-line left winger. Given the Devils were unlucky last season, ravaged by COVID-19 early on and losing top center Nico Hischier to injury, there's potential for growth here. Don't sleep on Jack Hughes, either. It didn't look like he improved as a sophomore, but his under-the-hood stats say he did.

REBUILDING

(Laying foundation for the future, not interested in pursuing a Cup right now)

Columbus Blue Jackets

Gone are several pillars of a Columbus team that had fringe-contender potential as recently as the 2020 post-season: right winger Josh Anderson, then top center Pierre-Luc Dubois, then coach John Tortorella, then top defenseman Seth Jones. General manager Jarmo Kekalainen understands that he's been cornered into a reset. He used the Jones trade to net a package of picks and young blueliner Adam Boqvist, and the Jackets had three first-round picks at this year's draft. Getting Boqvist and Jake Bean in separate trades signified a shift toward targeting players who haven't approached their primes yet. Columbus should contend for a lottery pick in 2022.



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2022 Olympic Hockey Prediction: Team USA

The Americans have some incredible high-end options, too many good defensemen and a perfect trio of goalies. Can they finally climb the top of the podium again?

By Ryan Kennedy

It shouldn't take a miracle for Team USA to win gold at the Olympics these days, but the fact is the program hasn't taken top spot since Lake Placid in 1980. Sure, the Americans could have iced a great team had NHLers gone in 2018 - but you can't change the past. Luckily, some of the players who would have been young guns in South Korea are now superstars ready for Beijing and Team USA will have a number of elite talents on its side.

But is the squad good enough to go all the way? The Americans will benefit from an early test against Canada in the round robin, while also playing Germany and China. Barring something unforeseen, Team USA will make the playoff round and that's why we'll really see what this team is made of. As for who will be on that team, here's a look at a possible roster.

Each team is permitted a roster of 22 skaters (14 forwards, eight defensemen) and 3 goaltenders.

Forwards

Matthew Tkachuk - Auston Matthews - Patrick Kane

Johnny Gaudreau - Jack Eichel - T.J. Oshie

James van Riemsdyk - Paul Stastny - Cam Atkinson

Brady Tkachuk - Joe Pavelski - Alex Tuch

J.T. Miller, Kyle Connor

The sizzle comes right at the top, as former U.S. NTDP linemates Tkachuk and Matthews are reunited with American legend Kane on the other wing. That combination of size, skill, skating and snarl will be a handful and the second line's not too shabby, either. That trio hinges on Eichel's health of course and if he can't go, the Americans will be a little thin down the middle.

Oshie gets the nod on the second line because he is Captain America in clutch situations, while Atkinson can bring both scoring and penalty-killing acumen to the lineup. As for the fourth line, that's just a nasty set of wingers to deal with, plus a clutch vet in Pavelski. Miller brings versatility to the spares, while Connor brings more offense and speed if needed. Others considered include Blake Wheeler and Kevin Hayes.

If there is one concern about Team USA's roster right now, it's line matching. Knowing Canada's centers, for example, will the two scoring lines get any breathing room or puck touches when facing the likes of Crosby, Bergeron, McDavid, MacKinnon and O'Reilly? Special teams will be crucial in that respect.

Defensemen

Zach Werenski - Adam Fox

Torey Krug - Charlie McAvoy

Jacob Slavin - Brett Pesce

Quinn Hughes - Seth Jones

The defense corps was both the most fun to put together and the most agonizing. Simply put, the Americans have a ton of great options and some of the best also happen to be the youngest. So there's a bit of projection here in slotting in Quinn Hughes over Ryan McDonagh, the Tampa Bay warrior and veteran. As much as it pained me to leave McDonagh off, the man has played a lot of hockey the past two years.

Slavin and Pesce are the obvious shutdown pair, while Krug and McAvoy have familiarity from Krug's days in Boston. Fox is your top PP quarterback, while Werenski is the two-way leader. Jacob Trouba was another tough omission, while Keith Yandle was also considered thanks to his power play prowess. Jeff Petry could have been here, too.

In terms of minutes, you can pretty much throw all the pairings into a blender; there is talent everywhere.

Goaltenders

Connor Hellebuyck

John Gibson

Spencer Knight

Goaltending was pretty easy here because the candidates were so obvious and also so high-end. Hellebuyck is a Vezina winner with great size who will thrive with such a deep team in front of him, while Gibson has been known to steal the show on the international stage before. Knight is the youngster along for the ride and being in the Olympic atmosphere will be fantastic for the Florida phenom and he could very well be the starter in 2026.

Netminding is undoubtedly one of Team USA's greatest strengths in this tournament and they will arrive in China with one of the best trios in the Games.



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How the Hurricanes' deployment can get the best out of Jesperi Kotkaniemi

Jesperi Kotkaniemi is an intriguing player, but he will be a project for the Hurricanes, so how can the team best aid in his development?

By Ryan Henkel

BEGIN DRAMATIZATION

Straightening up his turtleneck, Don Waddell made the call to the central registry. In front of him a one-year, \$6,100,035 contract with the name, "Jesperi Kotkaniemi," signed on the dotted line.

One week later, after days of radio silence out of Montreal, the deal went unmatched.

The offer sheet was successful and Kotkaniemi was now a member of the Carolina Hurricanes.

Bottles popped and cheers of jubilation rang out.

SCENE

So, back to reality, what happens now? What kind of player is Kotkaniemi and where in the lineup can we expect him to slot in? Let's try to answer some of those questions.

Despite a steep dive in production — 5 goals and 20 points in 56 games last season— Kotkaniemi still has so much room for growth at just 21 years of age.

His defensive numbers have been very good for a young player and he had some of the strongest possession and generation analytics among Montreal forwards last season.

The talent is there, it just needs to get put back on the right track, and Carolina can help him reach his potential with the proper development and deployment.

There are three potential landing spots for Kotkaniemi in the lineup, and none of them are going to involve his natural position of center.

Don Waddell echoed a similar sentiment in his presser last Saturday, stating that Kotkaniemi would more than likely start at left wing.

And honestly? That's for the best.

Because the Hurricanes know that playing center in the NHL is one of the hardest positions to master. Being a center at the NHL level is a completely different animal than any other level of play before it and one that you need the proper development in before making that leap, barring special occasions.

Because of the rushed nature of his development in Montreal — anytime an undersized, 18 year old is thrown right into the NHL, he's being rushed — and the fact that the Canes have four great centers down the middle already, it would be for

the best for Kotkaniemi to get some solid playing time, learning what you need to be a successful NHL player and build confidence and creativity, at wing before jumping back to the center position.

And there is still an opportunity to get some time at center if injuries strike down the middle.

So where should Kotkaniemi slot in? Here are the three most likely options:

Finnish Line

What's better than two Finnish stars on one line? How about three?

Now Kotkaniemi is by no means a star nor is there any guarantee that he'll be able to blossom on a line with the two premier offensive talents of Sebastian Aho and Teuvo Teravainen, but he has the smarts and pedigree to be something more than he has been so far.

Kotkaniemi is a talented playmaker who can create chances both off the rush and on the forecheck.

Playing alongside two of Carolina's best offensive talents would obviously help anybody's numbers and the reduced burden of not being the main cog would allow him to be a bit more open in his play.

The line would also feature two strong two-way forwards with both him and Teravainen being great defensively.

The major worry though, would be the fact that Kotkaniemi is more of a perimeter player for offensive generation which would leave just Aho as the primary play driver and inside threat.

The Canes would be better off sticking with the offensive juggernaut that is the SAT line with another interior play driver like Andrei Svechnikov playing alongside the talented Finns, but it's an option regardless.

Second Line

So perhaps where Kotkaniemi could see the most growth would be alongside Vincent Trocheck and Martin Necas on the Canes' second line.

Kotkaniemi can provide a defensive boost on a line that has had its struggles with chances against and his transition and cycle skills would be a perfect complement for an offensively aggressive line mate like Trocheck or springing a speedster like Necas.

There is also the fact that with Trocheck being an impending free agent, the Canes may want to see if Kotkaniemi can be a potential replacement as a 2C, so it is imperative that he



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try to get his offense back on track as well as see if there is any potential chemistry with Necas.

With two talented offensive players alongside him that can create chances as well, Kotkaniemi could see an uptick in production and help build back up his confidence.

An area of concern was that Kotkaniemi, while generating chances, wasn't generating high enough quality chances with his playmaking. Having dynamic linemates like Trocheck and Necas may see a better trend towards higher-danger shot generation.

Shutdown Line

If the Canes, on the other hand, are expecting Kotkaniemi to become a defensive, shutdown centerman, who better to learn alongside than Jordan Staal?

Giving Kotkaniemi playing time alongside Staal and Jesper Fast can do wonders for his defensive development which is already the strongest part of his game.

Kotkaniemi has strong defensive awareness and is already responsible in his own zone, which may make it easier to gain the trust of the coaching staff to give the green light to get more creative on the offensive side.

And with Staal and Fast behind him, he can have more comfort in making mistakes which has been one of the areas of concern with Kotkaniemi.

Making the simple and safe play rather than trying to generate something more from a chance is seeing Kotkaniemi's offense stall out, so less responsibility may be the perfect thing he needs to rebuild his confidence.

Outside of 5v5 play, Kotkaniemi should also be getting the chance to expand his role within Carolina's special teams.

Penalty Kill

One of the areas that Kotkaniemi can see a real boost in his utilization is on the penalty kill.

Despite being one of the Montreal's best players at zone exits, on top of his strong defensive metrics, Kotkaniemi was surprisingly never used on the penalty kill.

Kotkaniemi could be a good partner for Necas — who proved to be a very effective PKer last season — providing both strong defensive play as well as the opportunity to transition play the other way given the opportunity.

Power Play

Kotkaniemi should also get a solid look on the other side of special teams.

Kotkaniemi is, by nature, a playmaker. The success of most power plays is predicated on puck movement and he can bring that.

If PP1 has two talented puck movers like Teravainen and Svechnikov on each circle, the Canes can see that same strategy replicated with Necas and Kotkaniemi on PP2. Alongside net-front guys like Niederreiter or Stepan, there is a real chance that the Canes second unit can see a huge upswing in effectiveness if Kotkaniemi can get back to form.

The most important thing for Kotkaniemi though, is to have stable linemates. In Montreal, the most time Kotkaniemi got with a single line was 84 minutes of 5v5 ice time — despite playing in 56 games — and he played 20+ minutes with eight different line combinations throughout the season.

He has seen success as a two-way forward, but seems to have plateaued his offense. Lessening his burden of responsibilities and providing him with stable linemates and there being less of a fear of losing time due to mistakes should be just what Kotkaniemi needs to get back on track in his development and become an integral piece in Carolina.

TODAY'S LINKS

<https://www.nhl.com/news/nhl-current-players-ranked-numbers-30-21/c-326116454>

<https://www.si.com/hockey/news/stanley-cup-windows-2021-22-metropolitan-division>

<https://www.si.com/hockey/news/2022-olympic-hockey-roster-prediction-team-usa>

<https://www.canescountry.com/2021/9/10/22666009/how-the-carolina-hurricanes-deployment-can-get-the-best-out-of-jesper-kotkaniemi>



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SportScan

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

1220261 Websites

The Athletic / Behind the masks: Inside the studios of the artists who give goalies their game faces

By Sean Shapiro

Sep 11, 2021

Over the past couple of months, Brady Lambert had been predicting — and hoping for — this moment.

So, when Joey Daccord was named as one of the Seattle Kraken's three goaltenders during the expansion draft in July, Lambert was elated. Not only because he was right, but because he had some work to do.

Lambert is an airbrush artist in Bakersfield, Calif., who has painted Daccord's masks since the goalie played at Arizona State. When Daccord made his NHL debut in 2019, he was wearing the Arizona State mask Lambert had painted. When Daccord broke into the NHL last season, it was a dream come true for Lambert as he saw one of his NHL-specific creations in the top league in the world for the first time.

Now he'll get to create one of the first masks in Kraken history.

"I've had Kraken ideas for a while now, and we've talked about that I have them, but not what they are specifically because we didn't want to get ahead of ourselves," Lambert said. "Now it looks like we get to actually tackle those ideas. I'm psyched about it."

One thing, however, that won't be on Daccord's mask? Davy Jones.

"I thought it would be fun to (have) Davy Jones from the 'Pirates of the Caribbean' movies, but it turns out Davy Jones scared Joey when he was a kid, so I guess we won't be doing that," Lambert said.

Lambert is a relative newcomer to the world of NHL goalie mask artists and one of the few in the industry who doesn't paint goalie masks full time. A retired motorcycle racer, Lambert is a paint salesman by day and paints masks and racing helmets in the evening and on weekends. He's the mask artist for Arizona State.

The other Kraken masks, those belonging to Philipp Grubauer and Chris Driedger, are likely to be painted by the most established name in goalie masks: Dave Gunnarson, better known as DaveArt. In a typical season, Gunnarson is responsible for the paint jobs of close to 60 percent of the NHL's goalies.

Mask art has been an NHL fixture since the 1970s when Gerry Cheevers started painting stitches onto his mask to represent where he would have been hit with the puck.

Increasingly elaborate designs have offered fans a unique window into the personalities of goaltenders, perhaps the most mysterious athletes in pro sport. Masks give goalies an opportunity to express themselves, share their identities with fans and build their brands. Think of the

instantly recognizable Eagle on Ed Belfour's mask or snarling dog with Curtis Joseph.

Lambert and Gunnarson represent two extremes of the niche business of mask painting.

Over the course of five decades, as mask art has evolved, so has the industry, the people and the tools behind those creations.

Even in a normal offseason, without an expansion draft, the summer is the start of the busy season for mask artists.

Orders for goalies playing in Europe, where players typically report to camp in August, are already being filled. Many masks for NCAA Division I goalies, where orders are typically placed by the school in conjunction with the goalie, are either in the works or at least in the design stage.

Getting those projects done early is often a priority for mask artists because soon they'll be expecting calls from their highest-profile clients as NHL goalies start to think about their look for the 2021-22 season.

Some goalies have already started discussing designs within days of winning the Stanley Cup. Andrei Vasilevskiy had already been sharing ideas with his mask artist Sylvie Marsolais. Other goalies, many without Vasilevskiy's job security, were more tentative about putting paint to mask, with many waiting to see how the game of goaltender musical chairs played out in the offseason.

"A lot is going to happen, the goalies we talk to feel that it's going to be a year with lots of movement," Marsolais said in July. "So while I can start with Andrei right away, others want to make sure we are designing and painting for the team they'll actually be playing on."

Painting NHL goalie masks is one of the world's smallest professions. During a typical season, all of the mask art in the NHL will be done by a group of roughly six artists, with a couple more hoping their paint job will make it to the NHL with their client in AHL getting a call-up at some point.

It's a group of men and women working out of studios, garages, and even barns, in places such as Minnesota, Quebec, Ontario and Sweden. Most of the artists also work with amateur and junior goalies, with the real prize and billboard for your business being an NHL client, and particularly a successful one that can grab the attention of others in the tight-knit goalie community.

Grabbing a foothold as a mask artist isn't easy, and there isn't a defined path. Most already have prior airbrush experience, many painted motorcycles before painting goalie masks, while others picked up an airbrush because of a passion for hockey.

Marsolais was a goalie herself who saw a poster for airbrush lessons when she was in college in Quebec. It piqued her interest and after the lesson, she started practicing on wood paneling and other projects her friends would bring her. After gaining some confidence on those projects she painted her own mask, and then the other goalie on her team.

Word of mouth started to spread, and Marsolais started to pick up clients from the QMJHL and minor hockey in the area. Through goalie camps and clinics, she'd start to get more commissions. Eventually, it progressed from something she did on weekends to a full-time job, where



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Marolais currently is the artist of choice for seven NHL goalies, including Vasilevskiy and Dallas Stars netminder Anton Khudobin.

Overall, she has more than 40 clients ranging from NHL to minor hockey and has a studio in her backyard where she runs the business, Sylabrush, with her boyfriend Alexandre Mathys. Mathys is also a goalie himself, and he works on mask preparation and designs with Marolais, who says a typical mask of professional quality takes about 30 hours of work.

Steve Nash has a similar turnaround time in his studio in Woodbridge, Ont., where he and his assistant, Stephanie Pasquariello, run Eyecandy Air.

Nash has been painting goalie masks for 20 years now. It started as a personal project, he painted his own mask, and then he started taking them to local rinks in the Toronto area where he made a couple of sales and eventually made the jump to the professional ranks when he was hired by Tim Thomas to do his masks.

The number of NHL goalies Nash has worked with has fluctuated in recent years. Currently, he's the artist for Connor Hellebuyck and Martin Jones, while the majority of his clients are still amateurs in the Toronto area.

"I love working with the kids a lot. Like starting out with them when they're like 9 years old, 8 years old. And then you see them grow up and then all of a sudden they're off to college," Nash said. "It's pretty awesome and to see their masks and tastes change and like you can look back at the masks you've done for them over the years."

Lambert has run his painting business since 2002 in Bakersfield, Calif., and was a season ticket holder for the Bakersfield Condors, then in the now-defunct West Coast Hockey League, who started painting masks for Kevin St. Pierre. St. Pierre became Lambert's vehicle into the goalie painting world as he moved around the ECHL, and eventually got to know equipment managers, one of whom eventually became the equipment manager at Arizona State.

Gunnarsson originally thought he'd work with cartoons and animated movies, something he dabbled in before his mask business took off and he became the preeminent mask artist in the NHL.

During the 2020-21 season, roughly 60 percent of NHL goalies used masks from Gunnarsson, who is better known as DaveArt in the goalie community. Gunnarsson has a studio on his old family farm in Savsjo, Sweden, about four hours south of Stockholm.

The corner where he paints used to house pigs, the collection of masks ready and waiting for paint sit in an area in the barn where Gunnarsson's grandfather would store hay for the cows. Much different product, but still a vital area for the family business from generation to generation.

Gunnarsson's meteoric rise in the goalie world came with a mix of luck and talent. He'd already been painting goalie masks for Swedish goaltenders, and they were loyal clients, but the base of NHL goaltenders was small until the 2001 NHL playoffs when Johan Hedberg became a cult hero in Pittsburgh and guided the Penguins to the Eastern Conference finals.

Hedberg had been playing for the Manitoba Moose when he was traded to Pittsburgh, because of the quick turnaround of the trade, he wasn't able to change his mask, which had a large moose on it and it quickly became Hedberg's nickname with Penguins fans. While fans found a cheering or "Mooooose" ing mechanism with the mask, other goalies wanted to learn where Hedberg had gotten the paint job.

Kevin Weekes was playing with the Tampa Bay Lightning at the time and became the first North American NHL goalie to reach out to Gunnarsson about hiring him to do his mask.

It started what Gunnarsson calls a snowball effect as the number of clients started to grow incrementally each season, eventually to a point where he adopted his current-day policy of professional goalies only, and no longer take commissions from someone without a professional

contract unless they can grab his attention with a design idea that really interests him.

It's funny because the circumstances around Hedberg's mask would have never happened with Gunnarsson's current setup. Gunnarsson prides himself on speed, he's widely considered the fastest mask painter in the business, and has a reputation for quickly turning around the product, even within days of a goalie getting traded in-season.

Part of that is Gunnarsson's setup; he only works on the intricate painting of a mask. The prep and post work is done by an employee, while he also has a stock of blank canvasses ready and waiting. According to Geergeek, 97 goalies that were on NHL rosters during the 2020-21 season used Bauer (61 goalies), CCM (18) or Vaughn (18) masks. All three companies provide Gunnarsson with masks to stock, so starting a new mask is simply a matter of walking across the barn.

This quick turnaround has made Gunnarsson a favorite of NHL equipment managers, who can often play the role of gatekeepers for artists working in the mask-painting industry.

According to mask artists interviewed for this story, roughly half of the league's equipment managers have a preference when it comes to a mask painter. The teams pay for the paint job, just like they buy the rest of the goalie equipment, and unless the goalie has a strong preference for an artist, they can end up switching artists when they change teams.

For example, Jason Livery used to do most of the St. Louis Blues masks. But after the team changed their equipment manager, the Blues' goalies have had their masks painted by Gunnarsson. Gunnarsson also works closely with Bauer and goalies that are between mask artists or changing teams, and use Bauer masks, are often urged to switch to Gunnarsson according to multiple NHL goalies contacted for this story.

Overall, the goalie art universe is both expanding and contracting at the same time.

Because of new technology and the ability to use vinyl wraps on helmets, having a custom helmet is more accessible than ever for amateur players and youth goalies. It's also more affordable, with wraps costing anywhere from \$250 to \$400, pricey, but not nearly as pricey as the custom paint jobs which can typically range from \$1,000 to \$3,000 depending on how intricate the design is.

Some mask artists have adopted more youth-hockey-friendly pricing for simpler designs or fewer paint colors, but those commissions are still close to \$700 per piece.

Some college teams also opt to use vinyl wraps instead of hiring a painter for their goalies; it's a small number of schools, but the number has grown in recent years.

It's a trend that makes the current group of mask artists more exclusive, it's harder to break into the industry for a newer artist, while it also helps elevate Gunnarsson. For some younger NHL goalies, it's now seen as a right of passage to be in a spot to get a DaveArt mask with that first pro contract, almost as a status symbol after using a wrapped mask in the past.

There's also been an overall change in approach when it comes to painting masks, with most current goalies looking for more intricate and finer details on their masks. Many goalies also use multiple masks in the same season, leading to a seismic shift from the 1990s and 2000s where goalies went bigger and bolder with one element, and many used the mask as a brand.

The classic example of this is Ed Belfour's eagle, which he had painted on each mask no matter which NHL team he played for. Todd Miska was the artist who designed and painted the eagle mask for Belfour.

"It was a brand thing, we created that eagle and the look and Eddie decided it was going to be his brand," Miska said. "It was something that could be iconic, you knew it was him, and it also could sell on other things, like mini masks, and it held a strong recognition to Ed Belfour even without saying his name."



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Martin Brodeur used the same mask design for the majority of his career, while Curtis Joseph was known for his snarling dog that followed him to each NHL team. In the present day, Tuukka Rask and Jonathan Quick have had consistency with their masks throughout their careers, but overall masks have moved from simpler and iconic, to more unique and ever-changing.

For most of the current crop of mask artists, this is a welcome trend and allows for more of an artistic spin. Gunnarsson sees it as a chance to better tell the goalie's story, while Marsolais looks at the finer details as the personal touch that allow the goalie to make it their own.

Others, like Nash, still pine for the older masks where a goalie had more of a set identity on their head, like the design he did for years with Jonathan Quick.

"I wish that era would come back," Nash said. "But I know that's not gonna happen."

There's also a practical reason for the attention to detail. In the 1990s and early 2000s, in order for a mask to draw attention, it had to pop from afar, the emergence of better television technology and the advent of social media has made it easier to share those intricate details to a wider audience.

When it comes to the goalies themselves, the artistic input ranges from ambivalence to fanatical.

Hellebuyck, Vasilevskiy and Carey Price were listed as some of the pickiest clients by their artists.

Each season Hellebuyck will order four masks from Nash, two for typical regular-season games and two special event masks. The goalie also is adamant about having many of his off-ice interests represented on the mask, including his dogs and fishing, while he and Nash will trade sketches back and forth before coming to a final design to paint.

"I really wish on his designs, I could paint on a big flat surface," Nash said. "Because they're like a giant painting really, it's like a storybook on his mask."

It's one of the reasons Hellebuyck works with Nash; he wanted to find an artist that had time for that back-and-forth on ideas and he intentionally worked with an artist that wasn't as busy with other NHL clients.

Marsolais said that Vasilevskiy knows exactly what he wants on each mask, down to the minor details. There is some back and forth, but in general, a mask for Vasilevskiy is the one he described for the painting process. On the opposite spectrum Khudobin will just tell Marsolais to "do something cool," and she's the one who deserves credit for Dobby the House elf making an appearance on his recent masks.

Price is a Gunnarsson client and is particular about his designs before signing off on the paint job. While Price wasn't selected by Seattle, his inclusion on the expansion list had at least started getting the wheels turning for Gunnarsson on what Price might have wanted on a Seattle mask.

"He knows exactly what he wants, so when I work with Carey I do a bunch of different sketches," Gunnarsson said. "And he'll sometimes choose things he likes from this sketch and that sketch, and then we start to actually build what the mask will look like together."

While there won't be a Seattle mask for Price, Gunnarsson will be likely working on designs soon for Driedger and Grubauer. Those will be his second and third Kraken masks after the league hired him to do a team-based one for the NHL store and headquarters when the team logo was initially unveiled.

"I think we'll have some fun with a new team," Gunnarsson said. "The goalies that play there will have a nice chance to be part of something brand new and historical."

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