



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • September 14, 2021



Aho Ranked Top-25 Player in NHL

NHL Network lists Aho 21st in annual ratings

Each season NHL Network ranks the Top 50 players in the League, a list compiled by researchers, producers, and on-air personalities. The network unveiled players 30-21 for the upcoming season on Sunday, with Canes' sixth-year center Sebastian Aho checking in at No. 21, making an eight-spot jump from last season.

The Finnish forward is coming off a 57-point season, in which he led Carolina in points, goals (24), assists (33), game-winning goals (7), short-handed goals (3), and shooting percentage (16.2), and tied for the team lead in power play goals (7) and power play points (18). In the playoffs Aho continued to flash his brilliance, tallying a team-high six goals and five assists in 11 games, including the

overtime winner to clinch the Hurricanes' first-round victory over Nashville. In 34 career postseason games, the center has tallied 35 points, (14 G, 21 A), and has a +/- of 14.

Aho's led the Canes in goals scored in each of the last four seasons, and since making his NHL debut in 2016, the forward ranks 13th among all NHL skaters with 145 goals, and is tied for the league-lead with 12 short-handed goals in that span.

Over the last two seasons the 24-year-old has been even better, ranking eighth in the league with 62 goals scored, and first with seven short-handers.

The full list of rankings to date can be found [here](#).



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Carolina Hurricanes: 2021-22 NHL season preview

By James O'Brien

The 2021-22 NHL season is coming and it's time to take a look at all 32 teams. Over the next month we'll be examining best- and worst-case scenarios, looking at the biggest questions, breakout candidates, and more for each franchise. Today, we preview the Carolina Hurricanes.

2020-21 Season Review

- Record: 36-12-8 (80 points); first place in Central Division
- Postseason: Reached Second Round, lost in five games to Lightning
- Offensive leader: Sebastian Aho (56 games, 24 goals, 33 assists, 57 points)
- Free Agent Additions: Jesperi Kotkaniemi (successful offer sheet), Tony DeAngelo, Frederik Andersen, Antti Raanta, Ethan Bear (trade from Oilers), Ian Cole, Derek Stepan, Josh Leivo, Stefan Noesen, Brendan Smith.
- Free Agent Subtractions: Dougie Hamilton (Devils), Alex Nedeljkovic (trade to Red Wings), Petr Mrazek (Maple Leafs), James Reimer (Sharks), Jake Bean (trade to Blue Jackets), Morgan Geekie (Kraken expansion draft), Warren Foegele (trade to Oilers).

Biggest Question Facing the Hurricanes

- Did the Hurricanes outsmart themselves?

Heading into the 2021-22 NHL season, the Hurricanes are betting big that they're the smartest people in the room.

Was it truly bitter revenge? Maybe a savvy move with a splash of trolling? Either way, the Hurricanes weren't being modest with the Jesperi Kotkaniemi offer sheet.

Yes, there could be more than meets the eye if that Kotkaniemi offer sheet translates to an affordable contract down the line. But there's the risk that the Hurricanes burned themselves with a "galaxy brain" move.

It's easy to act like the Hurricanes can just wash their hands of Kotkaniemi if he's a dud in 2021-22. They'd still need to accept that they paid him way more than expected, and also gave up picks in what's expected to be a strong 2022 NHL Draft. If it works, they can point to their craniums. But, yeah, it's possible that they trolled themselves, most of all.

It's not the only area where people can wonder if the Hurricanes were overconfident heading into 2021-22.

Did they underestimate how important Dougie Hamilton is to their defense? Maybe they weren't convinced that Alex Nedeljkovic was the real deal. If the younger, cheaper

Nedeljkovic is better than Frederik Andersen, then that's another strikeout in net. Andersen – Antti Raanta could be what the doctor ordered. It could also figure into a narrative of overthinking things.

What's the salary cap situation?

During a polarizing offseason, just about anyone would agree that Andrei Svechnikov's new contract is a big win.

Between Svechnikov, Sebastian Aho, and Teuvo Teravainen, Carolina enjoys a young, talented trio at about a \$21.6M cap hit for multiple seasons. It gets even better when you consider bargain deals for Jaccob Slavin and Brett Pesce.

Also, the Hurricanes may have simply made a difficult-but-necessary decision with Dougie Hamilton. From Erik Karlsson to Drew Doughty, we've seen teams burned by paying big for elite, aging defensemen.

On the horizon, the Hurricanes might soon wave goodbye to Vincent Trocheck, Nino Niederreiter, and/or Jordan Staal. Unlike less proactive teams, Carolina may already have solutions lined up. Kotkaniemi, Martin Necas, Seth Jarvis, Ryan Suzuki, and others could make up the difference. They could also end up even better.

(Oh, and the team cleared up a more immediate concern. With Jake Gardiner headed to LTIR, Kotkaniemi's offer sheet fits in to the cap puzzle.)

Breakout Candidate

- Jesperi Kotkaniemi, Martin Necas

Is it cheating to include Martin Necas as a breakout candidate? With 41 points in 53 games, he's already a valuable Hurricanes forward. Still, this season could be the time where Necas gains more mainstream attention.

If Necas counts as a cheat, then Kotkaniemi seems like a worthy candidate. Certainly, the Hurricanes have plenty of incentive to help him succeed. (If anything, there's the potential for grumbling if they try to force it.)

Frighteningly for the competition, there are other candidates. It's more likely that Hurricanes prospects Seth Jarvis and Ryan Suzuki will truly break out later than 2021-22. Don't count them out from leaping sooner than expected, however.



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Best-Case Scenario for 2021-22 Hurricanes

Look, the Hurricanes have been knocking on the door for a long time now. Carolina merely needs to look at the Capitals to recall that, sometimes, teams go deep later than expected. It wouldn't be outrageous if the Hurricanes remain daunting defensively, even without Hamilton. In that event, they're that much more likely to get the goaltending they've needed, while that offense looks potent. Few would be stunned if Carolina rises that one extra level.

Worst-Case Scenario for 2021-22 Hurricanes

Then again, it's easy to ignore that Dougie Hamilton's put up elite results for years. Multiple NHL teams have allowed him

to walk. What if the Hurricanes end up regretting that? Things could start to turn sour if they slip defensively, their goaltending bets backfire, and Tony DeAngelo does ... well, Tony DeAngelo things. The worst-case scenario would be missing the playoffs outright, then falling into a crisis of confidence. Patience may really start to wear thin if they barely make a postseason run, as well. At some point, a promising future needs to translate into a fulfilling present.

Pointsbet – Carolina Hurricanes Stanley Cup odds

+1600 (PointsBet is our Official Sports Betting Partner and we may receive compensation if you place a bet on PointsBet for the first time after clicking our links.)

Are the Hurricanes the team to beat in the Metro?

By J.J. Regan

2 strong>2021 record and finish: 36-12-8, 1st place in the Central Division, lost in the second round of the playoffs 4-1 to Tampa Bay2

Coach: Rod Brind'Amour

Notable additions: G Frederik Andersen, D Ethan Bear, D Ian Cole, D Tony DeAngelo, F Jesperi Kotkaniemi, F Josh Leivo, G Petr Mrazek, G Antti Raanta, D Brendan Smith, F Derek Stepan

Notable departures: D Jake Bean, F Warren Foegele, F Morgan Geekie, D Dougie Hamilton, D Jani Hakanpaa, F Brock McGinn, G Alex Nedeljkovic, F Cedric Paquette, G James Reimer

Schedule against the Capitals

At Carolina 1 p.m., Sun. Nov. 28

At Washington 7 p.m., Thurs. March 3

At Carolina 7 p.m., Fri. March 18

At Washington 7 p.m., Mon. March 28

Outlook: The Hurricanes have been trending upwards for a few years now, but have remained just a notch under the major Cup contenders. They will look to take the next step this season.

There is a lot more turnover than you would expect for a team that won its division and has been as good as the Hurricanes have been of late. In terms of depth, Carolina looks even better with additions like Kotkaniemi, Stepan and Bear. DeAngelo is a definite gamble but he is a very good player on the ice.

While the team's depth improved, however, they also lost two of their most significant players. Hamilton is one of the best defensemen in the NHL. There's no way to really make

up for that loss. Nedeljkovic is also gone after a breakout year and that leads to questions in net.

Advertisement

Biggest question: Is the goaltending good enough?

The biggest weakness for Carolina for years has been its goaltending. A Mrazek, Reimer tandem just was not good enough for a team with Cup aspirations. The ascendency of the 25-year-old prospect Nedeljkovic seemingly came at just the right time and he registered a .932 save percentage and 1.90 GAA in 23 games in 2021.

Stunningly, however, Carolina elected to trade Nedeljkovic away and will rely on an Andersen, Raanta tandem in net. Rather than pay a budding starter who addressed the team's biggest weakness, now the Hurricanes will use a tandem that again does not look good enough to make them legitimate contenders.

Expectations: The Nedeljkovic trade will remain forever baffling and will be one the team will ultimately regret, but his departure affects the team's long-term trajectory more than the short-term. Without a true No. 1 goalie, I don't see them as Cup contenders, but they have shown they are certainly good enough in the regular season to get by with average to above-average goaltending.

The loss of Hamilton hurts and bringing in a player like DeAngelo has the potential to blow up in their faces, but this remains a very good, and very deep team. They lost two of their better players, but they got deeper overall and Sebastian Aho is a legitimate superstar.

Carolina is going to be one of the top contenders for the Metro this season and is my pick to win the division. Their goaltending makes them vulnerable in the playoffs, but they will enter the postseason as one of the teams to beat.



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An offseason conversation with Rod Brind'Amour: Part one

By Andrew Schnittker

Canes Country recently sat down with Hurricanes head coach Rod Brind'Amour to get his thoughts on the unusual 2020-21 season, the Hurricanes' busy offseason and how he thinks this team is shaping up for the 2021-22 season, as things get back to some level of normalcy. This is the third straight offseason we've had the opportunity, and like last offseason, the interview was done by phone. We got plenty of insights from the coach, which we'll be sharing today, in part two on Wednesday and part three Friday.

In part one of the interview, we look back at last season, and discuss the players the Hurricanes said goodbye to this offseason.

Questions and answers have been lightly edited for flow and clarity, but they are listed in the order of the conversation. Enjoy!

Looking back at last season now that you've really had the time to step away and process it, how would you evaluate the way last season went for you guys?

I think it was a great season. We did everything we needed to do in the regular season, it was probably one of the best regular seasons that we've had. And then we hit the best team in the league. We're obviously not quite there for them, but clearly nobody was. They're the best. I think people sometimes get hung up on where you lose out, but I feel like we were knocking on the door anyway as one of the better teams, and now we've got to figure out how to get over that next hurdle.

In the three years that you've been head coach, you guys have taken that step to being a consistent playoff team and knocking on the door. How much harder is it to take that last step to being with the Tampa Bays of the world?

That's the hardest step, to win. That's why I think the hardest thing to do in sports is win a Stanley Cup. There's a million things that have to go your way. That's why it's the greatest trophy to win. It's that simple. So it's the hardest step, for sure. I think the challenge now is sometimes you get close and then, like we've done this year, we've made a bunch of changes. That worries me a little bit, I've got to be honest. But we've got to try to do something to get over that hurdle, and that's just where we're at.

Last season was a season like no other in the NHL with all the protocols, the condensed schedule and everything else. How challenging was that for you and everyone else?

Well, it was challenging. I think that's the one area that the league excelled at was figuring out and being able to have a season, and doing, I think, a remarkable job with how they handled everything. Once you kind of got in a routine, it just hummed along. I don't think it was really that challenging. It was actually an easier year in a sense, because the travel was less. We played two or three games in one city and then moved on. So there was, in a way, a lot of positives.

Obviously the negatives were no fans, no interaction with the players and team stuff. It didn't feel the same, so you missed that. But under the circumstances, we all understood it, and I thought the league and our organization made the best of it.

Do you feel like going through everything last year made you, your staff and everyone else better? Is there almost a sense of "We got through that, we can get through anything?"

Well, yeah, because who knows what's around the corner? I think if last year taught you anything, it was to take care of today, because we wouldn't know what tomorrow was going to bring. It's a good life lesson in anything — just make sure you make the most of the day you have. That's how we approached it. It's how we always did, but it really came to the forefront of that last year, because it was the reality.

You said you were nervous about all the changes you guys made. A lot of times in the past when we've talked to you going into a trade deadline or an offseason, you've talked about wanting to keep your group together as much as possible. This offseason saw significantly more turnover than any of the others with you as head coach. What was that process like for you with watching guys leave, new guys coming in, was it difficult?

If you remember the end of the year, I said I didn't want to make any changes. If we could keep the group together, that was the ideal way to do it. It's just unfortunate that this is the business that we're in, it doesn't work that way. Tough decisions are made. It's part of the game. I believe that we've done a good job in keeping the core together, the guys that have to be here for us to be successful. I think the culture builders, all the stuff that we talk about as being really important, those guys are anchored and they're here. That's a good thing. But like you said, we brought in a lot of new pieces. We did a lot of work on making sure we have those pieces. We feel like we made the right decisions, but you don't know until you know. That'll take time and we'll find that out as we get going here.

Some of the guys that left were guys that were here for your whole tenure as head coach and played a really big role in



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getting things turned around in guys like Dougie Hamilton, Petr Mrazek and Warren Foegele, and someone like Brock McGinn who had been in the organization for a really long time. What is that like as a coach when you see guys who have been such a big part of what you've built here end up leaving?

That's tough, I'll be honest. We develop personal relationships with the players. You invest in them, and they invest in what you're trying to do. It's hard to see them go. At the same time, generally, in Dougie and Brock's case, you almost feel like you helped them out in a way, because they got some big money. So that's part of the game; that's just the way it goes. We didn't want to lose either one of them. I thought we made good offers to keep them. I think that's the key. Brock's case was a little different. I didn't want to lose him, but I understand the game, the business. Dougie, that's a lot of money. Good for him. I'm happy for him that he's able to cash in on that.

Warren Foegele, that one's tough, but we had a need now. One move precipitated another move. We think we got a great player in Ethan Bear. So you've got to give up something to get something. That's kind of what happened there. Petr was great, I loved him. But again, that's where the

business side takes over. So there is that. I think you always feel like when guys come here and you have that relationship, it's tough to see them leave. But you're also happy for them, because you put them in a better place. That's how I feel for all our guys that left. They got better contracts. They served us well, and I think it was mutual, if you know what I mean.

One guy that you did bring back that I think a lot of us from the outside thought might move on is Jordan Martinook. I think I saw that he said that a conversation with you was a big factor in him returning. How important was it to you to bring a guy like that back?

Like I said, I wanted to bring all the guys back, it's just the financials didn't work on some things. That's the business side. With him, it was important. I think he's a big, big part of what we're doing off the ice as well as on the ice. He was a part of these last three years of kind of righting the ship and getting us in the right direction. I was happy that I was able to convince him to stay. I didn't think I had to convince him too much. It was a pretty easy conversation, but we need guys to bleed the colors, so to speak, and he's one of them.



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State of the Position: Wingers

By Ryan Henkel

The Carolina Hurricanes have a solid group heading into the 2021-22 season, with one of the strongest areas of their team being their forward group.

While the offseason saw an exodus of a few wingers, the Canes kept their talented top six together and will be leaning on a few of them to take another big step forward.

The team also went out and bolstered its bottom six and forward depth with more veteran presence.

So within the forward group, let's take a look at the winger position:

Left Wings

Andrei Svechnikov

Last Season Stats: 15 goals, 42 points in 55 games

Fresh off his eight-year, \$62-million extension, Svechnikov is going to have a lot to live up to in the coming years, but the Russian phenom should be more than up for the challenge.

Outside of being an electric goal scorer, Svechnikov has developed his skillset as a playmaker to already be one of Carolina's best.

Last season was a down year for him in terms of finishing, but Svechnikov's ability to drive play and create opportunities for his line mates helped to wash out those struggles.

On the verge of taking another step as a player, Svechnikov still has a few areas he needs to see an improvement in this season to take those steps towards stardom.

His play in his own zone needs a bit of tuning but most importantly he needs to work on his penalty differential. It's no secret that Svechnikov hasn't gotten totally fair treatment from officiating, but the biggest thing he needs to keep in check is the stick infractions which are avoidable most of the time without sacrificing physicality.

It should be another exciting year for Svechnikov as he continues to develop as one of the premier players in the league.

Nino Niederreiter

Last Season Stats: 20 goals, 34 points in 56 games

Niederreiter had a career-best goal scoring pace last season and would have set a new career high if not for the shortened season.

On top of being an efficient sniper, Niederreiter is also an excellent play driver and forechecker as well as a defensively responsible player. He's a full package winger able to play anywhere in the lineup in a myriad of roles.

Despite a noticeable pattern of high scoring followed by a bit of regression every other season, Niederreiter brings enough intangibles and positive impact to counteract most of that.

He could see a shift between the third line and second line depending on the strategy the Canes employ each game.

Jesper Kotkaniemi

Last Season Stats: 5 goals, 20 points in 56 games

The newest Hurricane is going to be a bit of a project and he's going to have to go through some growing pains before he is back on the right track.

But despite that, Kotkaniemi is a defensively responsible forward who is great in transition play and cycling the puck. His biggest issues have been his lack of offensive generation, but he just needs to regain confidence in himself to reestablish that ability he has shown in flashes.

There are a few potential landing spots for him in the lineup.

Josh Leivo

Last Season Stats: 6 goals, 9 points in 38 games

The Canes went out and bolstered their bottom-six with some more veteran presence and one of those players they brought in was Leivo.

Leivo is a serviceable fourth liner who has had fairly strong metrics in most areas. He isn't going to blow you away with his skill, but he's an honest player who plays hard and has had some scoring success.

He has the potential to play up in the lineup if need be, which is an important aspect to have in your bottom six.

Stefan Noesen

Last Season Stats: 0 goals, 0 points in 6 games

Noesen hasn't been an NHL regular since the 2017-18 season where he set a career best in goals and points with the New Jersey Devils, but he provides depth to the Hurricanes' roster.

Right Wings

Teuvo Teravainen

Last Season Stats: 5 goals, 15 points in 21 games

It was a tough season for Teravainen who battled both a bout with COVID-19 as well as brutal post-concussion symptoms that kept him out for the majority of the year.

When he's on his game and healthy, Teravainen is one of the most integral pieces of the entire Carolina team with both his elite vision and passing, as well as being a great defensive forward.

He doesn't get the praise he warrants around the league, but Teravainen is one of the best all-around players in the NHL. Effective in all three zones and on both special team assignments, Teravainen does it all and should see a huge bounce back season on the top line.

Martin Necas

Last Season Stats: 14 goals, 41 points in 53 games

The natural talent of Necas was on full display last season as the Czech winger earned in-season promotions to both the



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Hurricanes' top line and first power play unit and he also took on a new role playing on the penalty kill.

Necas' skating is out of this world, having both high-end speed and smooth edgework, which allows him to be a dominant force both in transition and in the offensive zone.

He's seen his playmaking and shooting skills develop to keep up with the speed of his skating and if he can keep building that up, he'll be a nearly unstoppable force.

At just 22, Necas still has some developmental areas to iron out, such as his defense (as is the case for most young, offensive stars) and his ability to win puck battles, but he's getting stronger each season and should see that come together more and more.

With Trocheck nearing the end of his contract, there is also the question of if the team will eventually try Necas at center — which is his natural position — but the team is probably looking for him to take another step either defensively or in terms of offensive play driving before they make any sort of move.

Jesper Fast

Last Season Stats: 6 goals, 19 points in 46 games

Jesper Fast is a defense-first forward who is very good at what he does. Playing alongside the Canes' shutdown center, Jordan Staal, Fast formed a strong duo with the captain and can continue to keep up his strong defensive game.

He won't bring much offensively, but he knows his roles and brings a lot of intangibles to the ice. It's a lot of the time a

thankless job, but the importance of his impact can't be overstated.

Jordan Martinook

Last Season Stats: 4 goals, 13 points in 44 games

The Canes' vocal leader, Martinook signed a three-year extension to remain in Carolina. A PK and defensive specialist who brings physicality and accountability to the lineup, Martinook plays an old style of game, but one that is crucial to the overall effectiveness of any team.

He's seen a steady regression over the past two seasons, but that has roughly correlated to multiple injuries and surgeries that he has gone through in that time period.

There is still hope for a bit of a bounce back for Martinook if he can remain healthy throughout the season.

Steven Lorentz

Last Season Stats: 2 goals, 8 points in 45 games

Lorentz has fought and earned his way all the way from being a seventh-round pick, to working his way from the ECHL up to the AHL and finally to breaking into the NHL last season.

The Canes have brought in a few veterans to bolster the bottom-six, which may see Lorentz's playing time drop, but he would be the first callup in the case of injuries and even still he still may earn a spot out of camp.

Regardless, the outcome won't bother Lorentz, who will just keep smiling and working hard to do whatever he can to help the team whether he's playing or not.



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TODAY'S LINKS

<https://www.nhl.com/hurricanes/news/aho-ranked-top-25-player-in-nhl/c-326134532>

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<https://www.canescountry.com/2021/9/13/22667508/carolina-hurricanes-rod-brindamour-offseason-jordan-martinoock-dougie-hamilton-brock-mcginj>

<https://www.canescountry.com/2021/9/13/22667794/state-of-the-position-wingers-carolina-hurricanes-svechnikov-teravainen-kotkaniemi-necas>

SportScan

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

1220343

Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Three up, three down: Predicting the direction of six NHL teams

Justin Bourne

On TNT'S Inside the NBA they do a segment featuring Charles Barkley called "Who he play for?", where they dial up the name and picture of some lesser-known NBAer, and ask Chuck the question: "Who he play for?"

He, um, he doesn't do so great.

It's for a laugh, but in fairness, the man watches NBA basketball every day of the season, and keeping track of the depths of the rosters can be a challenge, even in a league where benches are only 12 players deep. Those at the bottom of the roster don't play a ton, and so they don't get talked about that often, particularly those on the worst teams.

It's even harder to keep track of players on NHL rosters with nearly double the bodies per team, and right now it may be harder than ever. Free agency and the draft were absolute mayhem with everyone mashed up against the salary cap, and players changing colours like chameleons.

Phillip Danault is on the Kings, Nick Foligno is on the Bruins, Corey Perry is on the Lightning. Honestly it's like someone threw the league's sticks in the middle and picked teams at random.

Predicting this coming season is like predicting magic eight-ball outcomes, but we can at least go over some teams who appear to have made positive and negative strides. With the Blue Jays on an absolute tear here in Toronto, it feels fitting to give it the baseball theme of three up, three down.

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.

Los Angeles Kings

The thing about doing a full rebuild is that the literal rebuilding is hard. Like, give me the time and some tools and I can demolish just about anything, and GMs seem pretty good at doing that, too. But I struggle to build a children's fort, let alone a structure of consequence.

The Oilers tore it down and have struggled to reach meaningful heights. The Leafs are stuck in the first round after their fresh start. And there are far more dire examples. The Sabres are on rebuild number...god I don't even know. I wrote about this a week ago.

The Kings are trying to head the other direction though, and I think they're ready to make strides. Quinton Byfield should get into the lineup regularly and be impactful, and they made a trade for a player I really like in Viktor Arvidsson. He may not be the guy who scored around 30 goals three straight years anymore, but he's only 28 and a healthy Arvidsson is surely good for 20-plus.

They also signed Danault, who has cemented his reputation as one of the NHL's elite defensive centres. There are still holes, namely at D, where they're hoping a 35-year-old Alex Edler can help solidify things. But if Cal Petersen looks like he did last year, and the division is as soft as expected, the Kings should be closer to the wild card race than the league's basement.

New Jersey Devils

Last season the Devils had more points than only two teams in the NHL: the Buffalo Sabres and the Anaheim Ducks. They were among a cluster of struggling teams with a goal differential around minus-50, and they're still in a tough division. But they're almost certainly going to be better.

New Jersey's D got a massive boost from the signing of Dougie Hamilton, a rare player in the league with size and offensive ability and, now, experience. Ryan Graves was an underrated defender on the Colorado Avalanche blue line, and he brings a solid defensive element to a group that was maybe a little offence-heavy with PK Subban and Damon Severson. With Jonas Siegenthaler and Ty Smith on the back end, they'll be able to roll out a talented six.

Given the youth of their forwards, a meaningful step from any of their big dogs should make the Devils annoying each and every night. Jack Hughes will be better, Nico Hischier should join the league's elite centres and Yegor Sharangovich looks to be a quality contributor. The addition of Tomas Tatar should help, too.



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Vancouver Canucks (assuming they get their RFAs signed)

Of the seven Canadian teams in last year's North Division, the Canucks finished ... seventh. Behind the rebuilding Ottawa Senators. That was not the plan.

They're in the midst of contract negotiations with their best two players in Elias Pettersson and Quinn Hughes, but I have to believe they'll get them signed. And when they do, it's tough to look at Vancouver's roster and see a last place team. It's easy to see a playoff team, though. Whether you like what happened to their long-term cap sheet with the Arizona trade or not, in the immediate future there's just so much talent there.

Remaining Time -1:31

Garland excited to be going to 'great city, great team' with Canucks

Pettersson, Brock Boeser, Bo Horvat, J.T. Miller, Conor Garland, Tanner Pearson and Nils Hoglander make an extremely good top six (seven, I guess). They've got high quality depth players. Tyler Motte is effective, Jason Dickinson is a contributor, Brandon Sutter is back on a cheap deal.

Vancouver's D should be adept at moving the puck between Hughes and Ekman-Larsson. They've got a number of capable D-men who need to have good years (guys like Travis Hamonic and Tyler Myers), and they've added depth defenders like Tucker Poolman and Luke Schenn.

There's also this:

Thatcher Demko could end up being one of the NHL's best goalies in the years to come. I have no doubt the Canucks will be able to score, so if Demko is good, they'll win games.

Three Down

Arizona Coyotes

Shocker: the team that's trying to be bad might be worse than when they were trying to be good.

They traded Christian Dvorak, Darcy Kuemper, Garland, and Ekman-Larsson. I wouldn't bet on Phil Kessel playing out the season there.

They brought in Jay Beagle, Loui Eriksson, Antoine Roussel, Andrew Ladd, Conor Timmons and Shayne Gostisbehere.

Maybe the elements will combine perfectly and they'll surprise. Or maybe they'll lose, and get to draft a franchise-altering star, as per the plan. I'm guessing it's gonna be that one.

San Jose Sharks

If you look at the NHL 30 years ago, you'd never question if it's gotten better since, at least not in talent and speed and the depth of the league. Same for 20 years ago, and 10. The league gets better every year by some small percentage, whatever you think that number is. And so, you have to improve by that much each off-season to even keep pace.

How are the Sharks going to be better this year, exactly? The bulk of their cap hit goes to their aging defence corps in Erik Karlsson, Brent Burns and Marc-Edouard Vlasic. Their mileage hasn't gone down. Their captain, Logan Couture, is 32 and unlikely to get better. Up front they've added very little (Andrew Cogliano will be on the fourth line now), and they may well lose their leading scorer in the Evander Kane, almost certainly for nothing. They tagged in James Reimer to play net, which, OK, sure. I just can't see how this team is better this season, and maybe that's become the plan here?

Tampa Bay Lightning

Let's not do the thing where we take a reasonable point and twist it into something that wasn't said. When I say "Tampa Bay isn't going to be as good as they were last year," I am not saying "Tampa Bay will not be good." They've been the best team in hockey for the past couple seasons, and I think now they'll be among the best few.

The Lightning lost everyone from an unbelievably effective unit for them in Blake Coleman-Yanni Gourde-Barclay Goodrow, a group who was essential in ensuring their second straight Stanley Cup. Those guys became coveted players and salary cap/expansion draft casualties, so the Lightning are worse off having lost them.

A few random notes

- Digging through NHL rosters I was left with a few questions, and one was about how established teams will hold up to aging. Will the Capitals remain as effective as they've been for years as their core gets older? How about the Bruins? Oh, and don't look now, but the offensive producers on the Golden Knights aren't getting younger, and I'm not sure I expect career years out of guys like Reilly Smith and William Karlsson, or really anyone in their top six. We'll see if they can score enough, I suppose.

- There are a few teams that are utter wild cards to me. You can talk me into the Edmonton Oilers this season (I love how Zach Hyman fits with their group), but I wouldn't be surprised if that D-corps simply can't hold up and they struggle. What the heck are the Blackhawks, aside from a team caught between cores (age-wise), desperately trying to make it work while they're still paying Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews big dollars. If those guys are good, it's possible Chicago is improved, too -- there's lots of talent there.

- What are the Columbus Blue Jackets going to be? Their top-seven forwards by pay include a hodgepodge of guys who didn't exactly choose to be there, but were snapped up as talented players who had issues somewhere else.

There's enough talent there that they could be good, but plenty of reason to believe those players didn't work somewhere else for a reason.

It's going to be a fascinating NHL season, with rosters around the league heavily turned over. I feel pretty good about my selections for three up and three down, but anything can happen. What team would you have added, and where?

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs Mailbag: Will Toronto walk Morgan Rielly to free agency?

Luke Fox

So. Many. Questions.

The Toronto Maple Leafs do one thing better than any other hockey team: keep their fanbase searching for answers.

So it was of little surprise that our first opening of the team's 2021-22 mailbag summoned an immediate and overwhelming response.

Great variety was found in your queries, so thank you.

Morgan Rielly's uncertain future, forecasting the opening night lineup plus the Atlantic Division standings, the do-over management wished it had and another round of P.K. Subban trade rumours...

Let's dive in.

Tyler Bozak, James van Riemsdyk, Jake Gardiner, Tyson Barrie, Zach Hyman, Frederik Andersen... Morgan Rielly?

The go-for-it mindset of the Maple Leafs' current administration loves itself an "own rental," letting important players skate out the final year of their contracts with neither extension nor trade.



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A reasonable fear bubbling in Leafs Nation — judging by the number of Rielly questions for this column — is that the team's No. 1 defenceman will seek his dollars elsewhere in July and depart. Yet another asset walking without return.

"Morgan is a huge part of what we do here," general manager Kyle Dubas said this summer when asked about Rielly's looming free agency. "Throughout the league (in 2021), there was a lot of going all the way to the end with it, with key players and captains on some great teams."

Dougie Hamilton, Alex Ovechkin, Gabriel Landeskog and Philipp Grubauer are great examples. Two stayed, two left.

Hamilton, the best D-man of 2021's UFA class, is represented by J.P. Barry.

Barry is Rielly's agent, too.

He negotiated Hamilton's \$63-million whopper with the New Jersey Devils this summer, Tyler Myers' \$30-million windfall with the Vancouver Canucks in 2019 and may or may not have salivated when Seth Jones earned his \$9.5-million cap hit from the Chicago Blackhawks.

There's the high bar. Rielly falls under that, but with top defencemen so coveted, the Leaf's \$5-million AAV this season is a steal.

Dubas preaches patience, sometimes to the roster's detriment. The window to trade Rielly would've been at the draft, when Ryan Ellis and Rasmus Ristolainen were fetching nice returns.

So, Dubas doubles down on his belief in the current core, and Rielly stays put for one more season at excellent value.

"I don't necessarily think we can look at what Chicago, Columbus (with Zach Werenski's extension) and Edmonton (Darnell Nurse) did and say that we have to follow suit with them," Dubas told The Bob McCown Podcast.

"We know what our limitations are going to be. We like Morgan a lot, but we'll keep all the contents of that private between J.P. Barry and myself."

Unless the Leafs play themselves out of a playoff spot by the deadline, we suspect the whole thing plays out as it did with Hyman.

Team loves the player, the player loves the team. Team can no longer afford the player, the player must set up his family with life-changing money.

Rasmus Sandin, your time feels near.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Boston Bruins

Toronto Maple Leafs

Florida Panthers

Ottawa Senators

Montreal Canadiens

Detroit Red Wings

Buffalo Sabres

Seventeen.

Those passionate Montreal fans (some of whom tracked me down on Facebook to, um, critique my writing) will relish bringing up this prediction if I'm incorrect. But I see the Habs — 18th place in the 2020-21 regular season, remember — taking a step back in 2021-22.

Captain Shea Weber and Phillip Danault are important pieces to subtract. Jonathan Drouin will be quite the X-factor. And it will be a tall order for Tyler Toffoli to finish seventh overall in goal scoring again. I don't have the 2021 Cup finalists making the dance in 2022.

That said, the NHL is a better league when the Habs are in the race, so I'll be happy to be wrong.

Take it to the bank, like grandma.

A healthy Matthews has a legit shot to become the first 60-goal scorer in a decade (Steven Stamkos, 2012) and the third of this century.

Over his past 82 regular-season games, Matthews has scored 62 times. His goals per game have increased in each of his five seasons, from 0.49 as a rookie to 0.79 in 2021, when he terrorized the rest of Canada.

Provided recovery from his August wrist surgery goes smoothly, there's no reason why Rick Vaive's 54 won't be downgraded in the franchise record book and 60 (or more) becomes the new standard.

Agreed. That's typically the formula, Paul. And the two-time defending champs certainly meet all the criteria. Andrei Vasilevskiy, Victor Hedman and Nikita Kucherov have each won the ultimate individual trophy for their respective positions. (Brayden Point isn't a slouch, either.)

As for the Leafs? Well, the "elite forward" category shouldn't be an issue. They just need to stay healthy — and actually score in the post-season.

No, they won't dress a proven Vezina candidate. The late-blooming Jack Campbell and the streaky Petr Mrazek will battle it out all winter, and a short-lease net should go to whoever's playing best. After witnessing Jordan Binnington come out of nowhere, get scorching hot in 2019, then quickly slide from "great" to "good," we can't rule out a phenomenal run from an unsuspecting netminder.

No one will be placing Rielly as a Norris favourite in October, but we're not all that far removed from 2018-19, when he scored 20, added 52 assists and finished fifth in voting. A contract year and the threat of one last shot with a core he loves should be plenty of motivation. Plus, with T.J. Brodie, Jake Muzzin and the emerging Rasmus Sandin, Toronto's D-corps is solid.

I don't believe the Leafs check all three boxes right now. But outside of Tampa and maybe the Colorado Avalanche (depending how high you rate Darcy Kuemper), who does?

Blue Moon.

The Wayne Train's first tour as a Maple Leaf was divided into two seasons: pre-injury and post-injury. He wasn't the same player, physically or mentally, after a puck cracked his wrist.

Simmonds had just popped off for five goals in a six-game span only to get sidelined for six weeks of recovery and rehab. And when he did return to the lineup, neither the confidence nor the joint was quite the same.

He scored only twice in 33 games post-injury.

"If you've ever broken your wrist, I think you probably know how hard it is to come back and still have the same hands and do the same stuff in tight," Simmonds said upon re-signing for two more years.

"My game in tight, you need quick hands, and if you're not fully healthy with your wrists and your hands, it's a little bit tougher. I tried to adjust my game obviously to the (checking) role that I was given."

With a summer to recuperate and the thought of playing in front of hometown fans (including his young daughter) to motivate him, we're placing Simmonds' over/under on games played at 70.

Hindsight tells us there is certainly more than one mulligan worth taking.

But in my mind, much of the Leafs' self-inflicted cap constraints stem from the John Tavares deal — which, of course, felt like a grand slam at the time. This is no knock on the captain; he's been excellent. Brendan Shanahan and Dubas likely thought their roster was closer to winning than they were, that they might make hay with Matthews and Marnier on entry-level deals.



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But what Tavares's \$11-million AAV did was set an internal bar Matthews had to clear. Then Marner needed to be in Matthews' ballpark. No one took a discount, as is their right. The unforeseen flattening of the cap ceiling only exacerbated the issue, making it difficult (if not impossible) to build a supporting cast worthy of a ring.

Internal team caps probably don't get enough shine. But when you look at how contenders like Tampa, Boston, New York and Colorado have structured their pay scale, it proves that driving a hard bargain with your superstars is risky but can pay off.

The best example is Steve Yzerman playing chicken with pending UFA Steven Stamkos in the summer of '16, which had a trickle-down effect on Hedman, Kucherov, Point and Vasilevskiy.

Funny how expectations have changed. Lowered.

The one-off Canadian Division had seemingly clear-cut a path to the semifinals for a believed contender like Toronto. Now, another fumbled chance to advance has shaded everyone from the superstars to the club president under a cloud of doubt.

Fans now need hard proof to believe. A 3-1 series lead over a manageable opponent won't even cut it.

In my mind, winning Round 1 would be a low bar in Year 6 of the William Nylander-Matthews-Marner era.

Anything less than winning two playoff rounds and a competitive showing in the Eastern Conference final isn't a success — and there should be repercussions.

Anything more, and the city might explode.

No.

"I can definitively say that we have not thought a single thing about any player that's going to be a free agent a year from now," Dubas told McCown on Thursday, when asked about this rumour.

Subban is a free agent in 2022 who carries a \$9-million cap hit.

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Sportsnet.ca / Meet the Senators' most endearing and intriguing forward prospect: Egor Sokolov

Wayne Scanlan September 13, 2021, 10:27 AM

Pierre Dorion was visibly giddy at the return of hockey to the Canadian Tire Centre.

Never mind that this was just Day 1 of a scaled-back development camp with fewer than 25 skaters and goalies on the ice and none of the NCAA prospects, who are already at school.

The Senators general manager walked clear across an empty section in the stands to greet a handful of media in section 107, where we were penned in behind yellow police tape, like the questionable suspects that we are.

COVID restrictions, still, but at least the staff and reporters, camera operators, could watch from ice level. Dorion, no doubt energized by his recent contract extension, turned playful: "Who was the best player on the ice?" he asked.

Unanimously, if not simultaneously, we answered: "No 75. Sokolov."

(In retrospect we should have answered in unison: "Sharkalov!")

"Absolutely," Dorion replied, beaming. "And it wasn't even close."

Now, these weren't the Tampa Bay Lightning that Egor Sokolov was dancing around. There will be bigger, more important tests for this intriguing 21-year-old as Dev Camp morphs into rookie camp and then main camp on Sept. 22. But keep in mind he was out on the ice with the likes of Shane Pinto and Ridly Greig and shooting on a highly regarded goaltending prospect in Mads Sogaard. And, to paraphrase Dorion, it wasn't even close.

Sokolov took the most shots, scored the most goals, had the best hands and set up his two-on-two partners for tap-ins. When development coaches Shean Donovan and Jesse Winchester prematurely ended one of the two-on-two, small ice games, Sokolov was screaming in mock rage, gesticulating wildly: "You said FIVE!!!" In other words, the game was supposed to be up to five, not three or four. The kid's not shy.

Donovan relented to the Shark attack. The game ensued. And guess who scored the game-winner, another low hard shot to the stick side, his bread-and-butter this day, before raising his arms to the sky?

"I was working hard for it," Sokolov said following the first skate of camp. "I was a little bit hyped up, had some fun out there and tried to really establish myself out there, that I worked over the summer and have gotten better."

Those summer workouts included precious ice time with Drake Batherson, Sidney Crosby, Brad Marchand, Nathan MacKinnon and friends in Nova Scotia, perhaps Canada's most famous summer hockey camp. If Sokolov was playing keep-away with Sid, Nate and the boys, it shows.

Back in Ottawa, for one day, at least, Sokolov turned the CTC ice into his own personal shark tank.

Fame precedes him

Get ready for Sharkalov Mania, should this dark-horse, longshot actually make the Senators out of camp. It's less of a longshot if Dorion doesn't acquire a veteran prior to camp to replace the departing Evgenii Dadonov on right wing. Even if Sokolov misses this time, he can go back to the AHL where he led the Belleville Senators in scoring, despite hardly touching the puck in his first four AHL games last season.

"I just wanted to score one goal," said Sokolov, recalling the difficult transition, after the COVID-delayed start to the AHL season.

After making adjustments, including a lot of video time with Belleville assistant coach Ben Sexton, Sokolov came back with a vengeance, scoring 15 goals and 25 points in 35 games.

His online fan base in Ottawa howled with glee. How they love Egor and his scoring exploits — they follow his entertaining discourses on podcasts and the stories about him delivering groceries to shut-ins in Halifax (Sokolov's billets, Ashley and Kyle Ryan, own a grocery store). It was with the QMJHL's Cape Breton Eagles that Batherson, now a Senators teammate, took him under his wing, helped him learn English while team president Gerard Shaw taught Egor the importance of pro-level fitness. That 6-4, 240-something lug is now a svelte 210.

And yes, Gerard Shaw is the father of B-Sens captain Logan Shaw. Senators' connections have the fingerprints of a guiding hand all over the Sokolov story.

How is it that this Russian-born late bloomer, passed over by every single NHL team at 18, and then again at 19, before being selected by Ottawa 61st overall in 2020, has become a cult figure and fan favourite before he has played a single game for the Senators?

Credit social media. And Egor himself.

In the Cold War era of politics and hockey, this "Sharkalov" personality could not have emerged. There was no Twitter during the 1972 Summit Series and we were told that Soviet players were like robots. Zombies. Devoid of personality and emotion.



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It wasn't until Russian players came to the NHL, excelled and showed their human side that North Americans came to appreciate the brilliance of Sergei Fedorov, the flash of Pavel Bure, the fun-loving boy in Alex Ovechkin and the cerebral insights of Igor Larianov.

I teasingly ask Sokolov how it is that he emits so much personality, in a second language, no less. Did he not get the memo that Russians are supposed to be inaccessible (a myth that dies hard)?

"I guess you can call me maybe half a Russian, half-Canadian," he said. "I spent most of the last five years in Nova Scotia, so, being around Nova Scotia people — they're pretty friendly, right? So I guess that is that side of me."

Delivering groceries, doing school visits, posing for photos, signing autographs and doing podcasts "is part of our job," Sokolov said.

"It's something I love to do and I'm looking forward to being able to do it in the near future as we get a little bit of normal life back. I'm looking forward to interacting with fans and seeing them in the stands."

In nearly 30 years of Senators hockey, a lot of impactful Russian players have come through Ottawa, from Alexei Yashin to Igor Kravchuk, Sergei Gonchar and Nikita Zaitsev among others. But who saw the day when two Russians would have a cult following in the community fan base: Artem Zub, who arrived from the KHL last season and won fans over with his rock-solid play and surprising offensive flair (cue the video of the breakaway deke on Frederik Andersen for his first NHL goal). And now Sokolov.

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.

Ross Levitan, who co-hosts the Locked on Senators podcast with Brandon Piller, explained Sokolov's popularity this way: "I think that even the most die-hard fan looks at Egor and feels he cares about the team as much as they do."

"Egor's awesome. From the first time he joined us right after the draft he was so appreciative of the Senators for taking a chance on him — he's made it his life goal to make the organization look back proudly on that pick — I'm pretty sure he's worn some form of Sens merch every day since, hahaha," Levitan added.

"Then you look at what that off-ice commitment has translated to when it comes to addressing his biggest weakness on-ice (skating). It's so impressive. Not to mention he's such an engaging and likeable personality."

At least one scouting report on Sokolov listed him as a "one-trick pony." Although, it was quite a trick: a shot that came off the stick so fast, goalies could not react. Senators chief amateur scout Trent Mann admits the organization took a chance on Sokolov, third time through the draft, largely because he scored so many goals at the major junior level — 97 in three seasons.

Sokolov's skating was rated sub-par. The same kind of reports that kept Mark Stone from being a high draft pick. Like Stone, Sokolov finds a way. And he's driven to get better, whether it's pestering coaches for insights or learning skating tips from Jill Plandowski in Halifax and Shelley Kettles and Donovan/Winchester in Ottawa.

"He was a kid who came over to North America because he wanted to play in the NHL," Mann said. "And everyone sees his abilities ... the puck skills and ability to shoot the puck, get pucks out quickly and break up plays. ...

"It's the other piece that makes him a bit special right now — in the fact he doesn't let anything set him back. He hears something, you know, that constructive criticism, and then he pounds on it until it's better. That's what makes his development curve exciting.

"You kind of look at, why wasn't he taken earlier? All kinds of scenarios play out, but sometimes it's about proving yourself. And sometimes you

have to prove yourself a bit more than the next guy. Is that fair? Maybe not, but that's life. And the nice thing about Egor and his personality is that he doesn't let anyone discourage him — he wants to be an NHL player and he's going to continue working on that."

Donovan, who could probably still outskate a lot of NHL prospects, loves the demeanour of Sokolov.

"Since Day 1 when he got here, he's wanted to play so badly," Donovan said. "He would call Jesse after every skate in camp last year and ask how he was doing. This summer, he got after it and you can see it. He dropped some weight, and he's built himself into a real good body.

"He just reminds me, and you don't want to make a comparison, but it's just like when Mark Stone came in and it was like — 'I'm here for a job.' To me, that's what Sokolov looks like."

Oddly, Sokolov and hockey were not a love at first sight situation. He tells stories of how, at age five, he hated skating — his mother, a school teacher, had to push him off the boards, his fingers clinging to the edges of the boards in resistance. By seven or eight, he felt the improvement in his skating and knew he had found a calling. By 13, he moved away from his hometown of Yekaterinburg to pursue his hockey dream.

This summer, Sokolov was able to return home for the first time in two years. Suddenly, it was the Russian language he struggled with, after two-plus years of speaking and thinking in English.

But it was a welcome trip. He did a short video eating his dad's homemade Borscht soup. He took shots on his kid brother, Max, who turned into a goalie because Egor was always ripping shots at him, needing a goalie to shoot on.

"It's my mistake, and I regret it," Sokolov said of the fact his little brother is not a sniper like him but a puck stopper. At one point, Max said to him: "You made me. What did you expect?"

Egor Sokolov made himself, too. And for that, Senators fans are both grateful and eager for their first in-person Sharkalov sighting.

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TSN.CA / Grading the wingers on Canada's NHL teams

After handing out grades for the centre and defensive positions across the seven Canadian clubs, Travis Yost's focus turns to the wings.

By Travis Yost

After handing out grades for the centre and defensive positions across the seven Canadian clubs, our focus turns to the wings.

Of all the positional groups, the wing is the trickiest because it's also the most fluid. Most teams will use a dozen or more different wingers over the course of the season — some of that via promotion from developmental clubs and some of that from moving positional centres to the wing. But we do have reasonable expectations of what opening night should look like for each team.

The good news for the Canadian clubs is that the winger position is generally one of strength, with several impressive prospect pipelines to boot.

To the teams!

Vancouver Canucks (A-)

The Canucks have a tremendous luxury in the form of J.T. Miller, a player who can seamlessly move between centre and wing for head



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coach Travis Green. Not only does it allow Miller to move around the lineup, but it also affords Green the option of pairing Miller with Elias Pettersson on the team's top line.

That's important for a few reasons. First, the chemistry between Miller and Pettersson has been notable in the offensive zone. Over the past two seasons, the Canucks are averaging 4.3 goals per 60 minutes on the attack with the Miller/Pettersson duo on the ice. For context, the Edmonton Oilers have averaged 3.8 goals per 60 minutes at even-strength with Connor McDavid on the ice.

Second, Miller on Pettersson's line allows Green to have some flexibility when it comes to the faceoff circle and defensive responsibilities. There has been a lot of talk about Pettersson's skill in the circle, an area he has struggled in over the past few seasons. How much weight you put into the value of winning faceoffs may vary, but Miller winning 54 per cent of his draws – to say nothing of the point-per-game pace he has managed in Vancouver – makes it difficult to drop him in the lineup.

Beyond Miller and his position classification, the Canucks have a healthy number of options at the wing position. Brock Boeser and Conor Garland have been top-six-calibre scorers for years now, and additional help may be on the way.

Nils Hoglander, 20, was electric at times during his rookie season, with 27 points in his 56-game debut. And another big prospect is on the way in 20-year-old Vasilii Podkolzin. The 10th overall pick in the 2019 draft is on his way over from SKA St. Petersburg of the KHL. The development of these two young players should ultimately shape what the Canucks end up doing with Miller and, more importantly, gives the Canucks more scoring options away from their first line.

There is an awful lot to like with this group. It is the opposite of what looks like a dire situation on the blueline; they are already teeming with talent, and more help is on the way.

Calgary Flames (A-)

The Flames have been loaded at the wing position for some time, in large part because they hit on two key picks – the Flames grabbed Johnny Gaudreau in the fourth round of the 2011 draft, then Matthew Tkachuk in the first round in 2016.

Gaudreau and Tkachuk have anchored this team for years and are tremendously difficult to deal with – if Gaudreau's playmaking and on-ice vision from the outside-in is the fuel, then Tkachuk's frenetic and hyper-aggressive play working the interior of defences is the tinder.

That's what made Calgary's approach to the summer doubly interesting. For years Calgary has tried to find the right centres to complement their winger talent, to varying degrees of success.

This year, they opted to use a sizable amount of cap space to add Blake Coleman, signed to a \$4.9-million AAV contract through the 2026-27 season. Coleman's been a capable middle-six scorer for a few years now, highlighted by a 22-goal season with the New Jersey Devils in 2018-19, and a 31-point season with the Tampa Bay Lightning a year ago. If we assume the Flames will preserve the Gaudreau and Tkachuk tandem on the top line, it's likely Coleman will slide into second-line duty with names like Sean Monahan and Dillon Dube.

The one player I think deserves a bit more attention outside of the local market is Andrew Mangiapane. Advanced statistics love Mangiapane, and so do traditional stats: no player has driven a more favourable goal differential (+0.3 per 60 minutes) over the past two seasons, and that's on a base of a middling 90.9 save percentage behind him.

I remain intrigued by the shot profiles of the Flames with Mangiapane on the ice – he's played an ample number of minutes with the now-departed Mark Giordano behind him, but it's clear the Flames are effective at minimizing defensive-zone pressure with him deployed in a way they are not in most other situations:

If Mangiapane sustains this for another season, I suspect we will be talking about him as one of the league's premier defensive forwards. Perhaps we already should be.

Toronto Maple Leafs (B+)

It seems by design that the Toronto Maple Leafs targeted several versatile forwards to fill out their roster – players who can play centre minutes and seamlessly slide out to the wing if the situation calls for it. That's true for Alex Kerfoot (who should see time in both spots this year), Jason Spezza, and Pierre Engvall.

Between the playmaking ability of Mitch Marner and the two-way play of William Nylander, the Maple Leafs know their top six – always centered by one of Auston Matthews or John Tavares – is going to be tough to match up against for most teams.

We expect to see a healthy serving of Marner once again on Matthews' line; similarly, Nylander seems ripe for second-line duty with Tavares. And those wingers can be flipped seamlessly when the moment calls for it.

Where the intriguing part of the roster competition will come into play is for the other two winger spots. Head coach Sheldon Keefe seems to like a complementary player (especially for forechecking and board work) on the Matthews line, and that's why you are seeing names like Michael Bunting and Nick Ritchie identified as top-six options. Ilya Mikheyev also seems a candidate for top-six minutes, but a recent trade request may cloud those waters.

I'll also be paying close attention to Spezza. He has unequivocally defied the aging curve for a moment of time here – Spezza didn't look any part of 37-years-old last season, in large part because the Maple Leafs figured out a way to manage his minutes and put him in positions where he can make plays against lesser competition and in spot minutes on the second power-play unit.

Winnipeg Jets (B+)

At one point, the Winnipeg Jets were deep at the wing position. That's not the case heading into next season. On the heels of trading Patrik Laine for centre Pierre-Luc Dubois and likely losing Bryan Little to long-term injured reserve, the Jets have had to rebuild the position on the fly.

The good news is the top half of the lineup remains intact, and that's where a lot of Winnipeg's firepower comes from.

Nikolaj Ehlers and Kyle Connor are entrenched top-six wingers and were exceptionally productive on the attack last season – Ehlers managing 46 points in 47 games, Connor with 50 over the full season. Perhaps the most interesting part of their production last season is it came despite a down season from Dubois, who was a common fixture on both lines (37 and 30 per cent, respectively).

How head coach Paul Maurice fits these pieces together will be worth watching. If we assume Maurice keeps the Ehlers and Mark Scheifele tandem together, and we assume the preference is to keep Dubois as a second-line centre, then there are three pieces – including the aforementioned Connor, as well as Blake Wheeler and former centre Paul Stastny – to flow in the remaining positions. No matter what way you slice that group, they should be formidable.

The bottom six is where things are going to get dicey. Andrew Copp has become a heavy-usage weapon for Maurice, in large part because no player has driven more favourable goal differentials than Copp (+17) over the past three seasons. Beyond Copp, the Jets will look to depth veterans and Kristian Vesalainen, a 22-year-old Finnish rookie who saw 12 games of action last season, for big step-up efforts.

At any rate, it's a very unproven bottom six, and may put more of a burden on the big guns in the Jets lineup to deliver.

Edmonton Oilers (B+)



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Similar to the Vancouver Canucks and the positional versatility of Miller, the Oilers can do an awful lot with the top half of their lineup.

Both Leon Draisaitl and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins can play on the wing, and with Connor McDavid assured to anchor the team's top line for the foreseeable future, the Oilers can build out a deadly first or second line by merely moving one of their centres outside, as they have done for a couple of years now. For the sake of consistency, we will consider Nugent-Hopkins the winger here.

The most notable change at the wing position for the Oilers is Zach Hyman, signed to a lucrative seven-year deal this off-season. There remains ample debate about the length and magnitude of the contract Hyman signed – it's quite frankly rare to see a player with a muted track record of goal-scoring at the age of 29 sign a contract this sizable, but Hyman is also a unique player.

Few forwards around the league are as strong away from the puck on both ends of the ice. He's an elite puck-retriever, a forechecking dynamo, and has the size and tenacity to break attackers away from the puck in the defensive zone. Hyman, particularly if he plays on the top line with McDavid as expected, will significantly improve this team's outlook in the short term.

Hyman's spot in the lineup also has a compounding effect. In the last two seasons, Kailer Yamamoto and Jesse Puljujarvi (post-return from Karpat in SM-liiga) both showed they could handle middle-six minutes. The McDavid/Puljujarvi duo last season outscored opponents 42 to 33 (+9) at even strength; the Draisaitl/Yamamoto tandem outscored opponents 32 to 16 (+16) in their second-line duty. There's little doubt which players are driving the bus here, but it's good to see Puljujarvi's defensive touch and Yamamoto's ability to set up shooters in the offensive zone act as important complementary attributes.

The big question, as it always tends to be in Edmonton, is what the third and fourth lines will look like. The Oilers need to sort out some competition for the fourth-line centre position before they can build out the rest of the combinations, but I'll be paying careful attention to Warren Foegele, a wrecking ball on the ice when he's healthy.

Foegele brings sheer tenacity and straight-line play you want to see further down the lineup – the archetype of a player the Oilers haven't had in years.

Montreal Canadiens (B)

The Canadiens enter next season with an impressive rotation of top nine-calibre wingers. But ultimately this position will be defined by two players: Brendan Gallagher, and Cole Caufield.

Gallagher has been the heart and soul of this organization for quite some time, and an effective one at that. In Gallagher's prime years, he was incapable of being pushed out of the net-front, generating heaps of scoring chances off rebound opportunities and causing general chaos in front.

Gallagher's ability to frustrate interior defenders and goaltenders still exists in spades, but durability concerns are starting to appear. He has missed time in the last two seasons (concussion; broken thumb) and played through a groin injury in the playoffs.

The good news for Gallagher? So far, production hasn't slowed. Gallagher has played at a 30-goal-per-82-game pace for most of his career, and last year's 14-goal campaign would have been good for 33 over a full season. If Gallagher can stay healthy, there's no reason to think his game will taper off right now.

But Gallagher is 29 years old. If he is the present, Cole Caufield is the future. We caught a glimpse of Caufield in the postseason and he was as advertised – an undersized attacker who is a threat in transition and may already be the best sniper on the team.

Caufield managed 12 points in 20 playoff games last season, and most importantly, found instant chemistry with centre Nick Suzuki. Expect head

coach Dominique Ducharme to keep this duo together and underestimate their scoring potential at your own risk.

One other note of interest: Paul Byron, a very effective bottom-six winger and penalty killer, is out long-term following hip surgery.

Ottawa Senators (B-)

Absent Brady Tkachuk and Connor Brown, the group is largely unproven at the NHL level. And yet, like most positional groups in Ottawa, the potential for big upside with a number of these players – considering their draft pedigree, how they have produced at junior or other professional levels as they attempt to transition to the NHL – is encouraging.

Two contract situations are worth mentioning here. The Senators were able to ink the speedy Drake Batherson to a six-year deal, locking him in through his age-29 season. Batherson just wrapped up his first professional season and was a big bright spot on an otherwise awful team. His 34 points in 56 games was just two in trail of the team lead (Tkachuk), and his rate goal scoring (1.1 per-60 minutes) was second on the team to Brown (1.2).

Any time you have a gifted first-year prospect near the top of your scoring list, it's a significant development, and I think Ottawa was reasonably willing to gamble that future trajectory would similarly be positive.

Less encouraging is the contractual stalemate between the Senators and Tkachuk, who is the face of the franchise at this point of his career. The Senators may have a lot of players with promising futures, but the immediate outlook for this team based on the talent is still poor, and only a few rostered players are surefire bets to produce next year. Tkachuk needs a new contract immediately, and the longer this goes on, the larger the ramifications are for the team next year.

One closing point here: 21-year-old Egor Sokolov is a name that garnered a lot of attention last week. Sokolov is fresh off an impressive development camp and spent stretches of the off-season training with the likes of Sidney Crosby and Nathan MacKinnon. This follows up some blistering scoring with the Cape Breton Eagles in the QMJHL from 2017-20. If there is a player with an outside shot of stealing a roster spot, it's probably him.

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TSN.CA / Taking stock of five Leafs prospects after rookie camp

Kristen Shilton looks at three players who saw their stock rise during development camp, and a couple who showed there is still work still to do.

By Kristen Shilton

TORONTO — It's Hayley Wickenheiser's job to prepare Maple Leafs prospects for what comes next. At the conclusion of her first rookie camp as the team's senior director of player development on Monday, Wickenheiser felt confident that goal is being achieved.

"The feedback from players was that it was hard," Wickenheiser told reporters. "And it's a message that we wanted to send to [them], that if you come to an NHL development camp, you have to be ready to compete and play every single day. The practices were demanding. The games were demanding. Their bodies were sore. [But] I was really impressed with the level of intensity, knowing that it's been a hard four or five days."

The camp consisted of two days devoted to on-ice skills development and two days of scrimmages. Wickenheiser and her staff were focused



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on not just teaching the prospects, but seeing how they reacted to, and competed in, different situations.

At the conclusion of Monday's scrimmage, Wickenheiser was putting together the Leafs' final roster for this week's rookie tournament in Traverse City, Mich., where Toronto will take on prospects from Columbus, St. Louis and Dallas.

In the meantime, we look at three players who saw their stock rise during development camp, and a couple who showed there is still work still to do.

Three Up

Nick Robertson (Drafted in the second round, 53 overall, in 2019 NHL Entry Draft)

Wickenheiser said on Thursday that it would help Toronto's top prospect to "dial back" his intensity and let the game come to him a bit more. Robertson countered that he won't be taking anything down a notch – at least not until his professional career is established.

The camp was Robertson's latest chance to put that commitment on display, and he was the opposite of mellow all weekend. Robertson was the most skilled player on the ice, and led with authority in each drill. When the winger wasn't actively participating, he was checking in with skill coaches and watching clips on their iPads. His entire camp felt laced with a clear purpose to put his best game on display.

Robertson followed up solid drills work with a dominant performance in Saturday's scrimmage. He tallied three of Team Blue's four goals, making plays from in tight and above the circles. But beyond just scoring prowess, Robertson was relentless at both ends of the ice. On one sequence, Robertson's stick broke in the offensive zone, so he raced to the bench, grabbed another and got back in position, only to flub his next scoring attempt and become visibly frustrated.

In the second scrimmage on Monday, Robertson was equally engaged, treating every shift like an audition for the assembled executives (including head coach Sheldon Keefe and general manager Kyle Dubas) to judge. He and linemate Alex Steeves stole the show, generating four goals between them and showing off some burgeoning chemistry.

"I thought he had a really dominant camp," said Wickenheiser on Monday. "He was able to distribute the puck and was taking the play that was there and the consistency he showed from practice one to the final scrimmage today...was good to see."

Where all Robertson's hard work at development camp takes him remains to be seen. He said on Friday he's still looking to build confidence after an injury-plagued season last year limited him to six NHL games with the Leafs and 21 contests with the American Hockey League's Toronto Marlies.

Robertson will use the rookie tournament in Traverse City to get as close to 100 per cent as possible – physically and mentally – before NHL camp opens on Sept. 22.

Alex Steeves (Signed three-year, entry-level contract as a college free agent out of Notre Dame in March)

There was a man among boys at camp, and that man was Steeves. The 21-year-old got off to a quiet start on the first day of drills, but by Saturday's scrimmage, he was coming to life.

The centre is only listed as 5-foot-11 and 185 pounds, but Steeves had no trouble overpowering players off pucks or shoving opponents into corners. He also complemented that physical game with some impressive offensive work.

Steeves was a top-notch playmaker during Saturday's scrimmage, getting on the rush and dishing out passes for his linemates. He also showed off good instincts around the net, displayed good puck movement and even buried a goal of his own off a few blistering shot attempts.

On Monday, Steeves picked up where he left off offensively. He scored once off an early second-period rush, and then, after keeping the play down low, Steeves sent a quick wrister into the net off a pass from Robertson. It often felt like Steeves was one step ahead of everyone else, able to anticipate and react fast enough to give his team an edge.

"To me, he looks like a pro player on the ice," said Wickenheiser. "He's a man, and the way he's built his off-ice conditioning is quite far down the line and he's continued to put in the work. He's got a good shot and he's very powerful."

Steeves was a point-per-game player for Notre Dame last season (15 goals and 32 points in 29 games) and it was clear as the weekend went on why Toronto wanted him in the fold. He's an intelligent skater who can play at both ends of the ice, with grit and physicality to boot.

But doing that in rookie camp is one thing - the true test for Steeves will be whether he can bring those same strengths to Traverse City, and then into the Leafs' and Marlies' camps.

Mikhail Abramov (Drafted in the fourth round, 115th overall, in 2019)

Abramov has proven in the past he can score goals, most notably notching 35 in 63 games with the QMJHL's Victoriaville Tigers in 2019-20.

And the 20-year-old centre put out plenty of that high-powered offensive ability during scrimmages - he scored a terrific penalty-shot goal on Saturday and generated more opportunities for himself at 5-on-5. Abramov separated himself in part with good skating and edge work; on Monday he also seemed to use his shot more often and with increased confidence.

What also stood out in this camp was Abramov's defensive side. At times it felt like Abramov played bigger than his 6-foot, 185-pound frame, showing off a combination of skill and smarts to win puck battles and assert himself.

He also got better as the weekend went on, allowing his intelligence to take over and maintaining those good positions in the offensive zone. He seems primed to get on with the Marlies' this season in a top-nine role.

Two Down

Semyon Der-Arguchintsev (Drafted in the second round, 76th overall, in 2018)

Der-Arguchintsev didn't show particularly well at this camp, and he knows it. The forward admitted as much prior to Saturday's scrimmage, saying "I did look pretty bad," over the first few days.

Der-Arguchintsev did get a little better from there, but it was still a rough weekend.

In Saturday's action, Der-Arguchintsev had his pocket picked a few times, and was easily pushed off pucks early on.

The 5-foot-10 forward claimed to have added some weight onto his 163-pound frame this summer and didn't show the same speed he had putting up 75 points in 55 games with the Ontario Hockey League's Peterborough Petes in 2019-20.

But Der-Arguchintsev elevated his play a bit in the latter half of the scrimmage and seemed to find more of a rhythm, without ever finding the back of the net.

On Monday, Der-Arguchintsev badly missed on his penalty shot attempt and couldn't get much offence going for his team. He did control the puck better though and wasn't as easily brushed aside.

Wickenheiser noted that the Leafs need to see more of a "shot-first mentality" from Der-Arguchintsev, but that didn't materialize in the scrimmages.

The 20-year-old came into this camp following his first extended professional experience, with the KHL's Torpedo (notching six goals in



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17 games) and the Marlies (four assists in six games). Wickenheiser put Der-Arguchintsev in the same veteran category as Robertson going into the weekend, seemingly expecting to see more than what ultimately transpired.

"It's got to be a question of consistency every day [for him]," said Wickenheiser. "And then being able to compete every day that he's on the ice and elevate not only his game, but the players around him."

Filip Kral (Drafted in the fifth round, 149th overall, in 2018)

Wickenheiser identified before camp that Kral needed to work on his off-ice conditioning, and the 21-year-old blueliner showed why in his play throughout the weekend.

While Kral used his body well protecting pucks, he had a difficult time keeping up with the opposition and was too slow getting shots and passes off. That said, Kral did show some improvement on that front later in Saturday's scrimmage, when he seemed to read the ice a bit better and find his intended targets more quickly.

But that lack of consistency Kral displayed is a bit concerning, particularly on the defensive side. He might have shown better in Monday's scrimmage, but did not participate for reasons unknown.

Kral had a 10-game stint with the Marlies last season after finishing a 48-game stretch with Kometa of the Czech League, and the Leafs will be looking for him to take hold of a spot in the AHL for the coming season.

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TSN.CA / Advocacy group wants Bowman suspended from U.S. Olympic team

By Rick Westhead

An American think tank that studies child sexual abuse and prevention is asking the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC) to suspend Stan Bowman from his position as general manager of the U.S. Olympic men's hockey team while he faces allegations that he helped cover up the sexual abuse of two Chicago Blackhawks players.

In a Sept. 10 letter to USOPC chief executive Sarah Hirshland, Marci Hamilton, founder of the advocacy group Child USA, wrote that Bowman, who is also the current GM of the Blackhawks, should be suspended by USA Hockey.

"I write to you today to request the suspension of Stan Bowman from his position as general manager of the U.S. Olympic men's hockey team and that an independent investigation into Bowman's behavior in his role as general manager of hockey operations of the Blackhawks NHL team be conducted," Hamilton wrote.

Child USA provided TSN with a copy of Hamilton's letter, which was also addressed to USOPC chair Susanne Lyons, its board members, and Elizabeth Ramsey, executive director of the USOPC's Athletes' Advisory Council.

Hamilton said in a phone interview on Saturday that she decided to engage in the Blackhawks' scandal because she sees it as evidence of a repeated pattern.

"This is the paradigm we keep seeing," Hamilton said. "Not only do we have a perpetrator, but powerful institutions are essentially ignoring the fact that they have an abuser in their midst. This isn't just a church or a boy scout problem. It's a societal problem and this is a great example of that."

Spokesmen for the Blackhawks and USA Hockey did not respond to requests for comment. A USOPC spokesman said he was unaware if the committee's leadership had received the correspondence.

Copies of Hamilton's three-page letter were also sent to U.S. senators Richard Blumenthal and Jerry Moran.

Blumenthal and Moran led an 18-month investigation into systemic abuse within the U.S. Olympic movement and advocated for the passage of the Empowering Olympic, Paralympic, and Amateur Athletes Act, which was passed in October 2020 and imposed reforms in the Olympic world, forcing more oversight of the coaches and executives who control the sports.

The act permits Congress to dissolve the board of directors of the Olympic committee and to decertify offending national governing bodies.

"What we're seeing now with the Blackhawks and USA Hockey is shocking not because of the behaviour of the predator," Hamilton said in an interview. "What's shocking is that it's been 19 years since we learned, thanks to the Boston Globe journalists, how the bishops in the Catholic church repeatedly covered up sexual abuse by priests. This hockey case is shocking because by now people should know the proper way to respond to allegations like this."

The Boston Globe's team of investigative journalists in 2002 published a series of stories detailing a pattern of sexual abuse of minors by priests and a widespread culture of cover-up.

Congressional hearings to discuss reforms of the USOPC are scheduled for Wednesday and Hamilton said that her staff has scheduled time with Blumenthal and Moran's staff before then to make sure they are briefed on the Blackhawks case.

"I know that the senators are going to be interested in this," Hamilton said in an interview.

Hamilton's letter recounts allegations made against Bowman and his Blackhawks management colleagues in a pair of lawsuits filed earlier this year in Chicago against the team.

One lawsuit, filed by a former Blackhawks player referred to as "John Doe 1" in court documents, alleges that after the team's management was informed that former video coach Brad Aldrich had allegedly sexually assaulted two players during the 2009-10 season, the team allowed him to remain employed through the end of that season, and refused to report the allegations to police.

A second lawsuit filed by a former high school hockey player in Houghton, Mich., who is referred to as "John Doe 2" in court documents, alleges that the Blackhawks gave Aldrich a positive job reference that allowed him to secure positions within the hockey department of Miami University in Ohio and later as a high school coach in Houghton, where in 2013 he was convicted of sexually assaulting the then-16-year-old player.

The Blackhawks have claimed in court documents that the team investigated the allegations and found them to be meritless. The team said in a court filing on Friday that the former Blackhawks player's lawsuit should be dismissed because of limitation periods, The Chicago Sun-Times reported.

The Blackhawks also said the former high school player's lawsuit should be dismissed because there was a lack of evidence to support the claim the team provided Aldrich with a job reference, The Sun-Times reported. The newspaper reported that the NHL team has asked the former high school player's attorney to withdraw that lawsuit.

With media scrutiny over the scandal increasing, the Blackhawks in June hired Chicago lawyer Reid Schar to look into the claims. The Blackhawks say the investigation is independent and that they will make Schar's findings public. The NHL has said it's awaiting the results of Schar's investigation before taking any possible action.



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"This investigation is not neutral," Hamilton wrote in her letter to the USOPC. "A truly independent investigation cannot be funded by the organization whose executives reportedly covered up Aldrich's abuse. Miami University has opened an internal investigation, but the scope is limited to the four months he was employed at the University.

"Bowman is still the general manager of the Blackhawks and earlier this year he was appointed as the general manager of the U.S. Olympic men's hockey team for the 2022 Beijing Games. How could Bowman, who has been publicly accused of covering up the abuse of a serial predator, be allowed to lead USA Hockey and represent our country at the international level?"

Based at the University of Pennsylvania, Child USA has lobbied federal and state governments in recent years over issues including expanding statutes of limitations to provide victims of childhood sexual abuse with more time to file lawsuits related to their abuse.

Hamilton wrote the first draft of the Child Victims Act, which was passed in January 2019 by New York state. Accusers in the state can now file lawsuits until they are 55. Before the new law was approved, victims of childhood sexual abuse had until they were 21 to sue the institution where the abuse took place, and until 23 to sue their attacker.

Hamilton also referred in her letter to the USOPC to disgraced USA Gymnastics and Michigan State University doctor Larry Nassar, who was sentenced in 2018 to 40 to 175 years in prison after more than 150

women and girls said in court that he sexually abused them over two decades.

"Just as there is a public demand for accountability and transparency from USA Gymnastics in light of the Nassar abuse case, I ask for accountability from USOPC regarding Bowman's alleged role in covering up Aldrich's abuse," Hamilton wrote. "It is unacceptable to allow Bowman to serve in his role as General Manager of the U.S. Olympic men's hockey team while an investigation is ongoing.

"...I request that Bowman be removed from USA Hockey, or at the very least be put on leave while a truly independent investigation considers his response to Aldrich's abuse. How many more cases and cover ups of abuse need to occur for USOPC to finally take sexual abuse seriously?"

It's unclear whether the USOPC has the legal ability to force USA Hockey to place Bowman on administrative leave, said a person familiar with the matter.

At the least, the USOPC could refuse to provide him with a credential to attend the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, the person said. Given the Olympic reforms passed in congress, if any elected officials show an interest in the case, it would be more likely the USOPC would pressure USA Hockey to address the allegations against Bowman, the person said.

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