



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 8, 2019

THE ATHLETIC

Hurricanes midseason awards: MVP, most interesting player, top teeth-rattling hitter and more

By Sara Civian

It's been a sometimes fun, sometimes frustrating rollercoaster of a season for the Carolina Hurricanes. Four games ago their losing record and playoff hopes were bleak, but now they're riding their biggest win-streak since the first games of the season and anything could happen.

The road ahead won't be easy — it features the Islanders (who the Canes just can't seem to beat), the scorching hot Lightning, the Sabres, Predators and Rangers. Before we move on to that, let's take a look back at the first half of the season via individual player awards.

Sebastian Aho: MVP

Turns out the people's All-Star can handle first-line center responsibilities after all.

As for his recent prowess on the penalty kill, including two shorthanded goals?

Clark Bishop: The Mario Lemieux award for best first goal.

It certainly didn't come on the first shot of his first shift, but 11 NHL games deep and his equalizer at Anaheim is still one for the grandkids.

"Was that a goal?"

Micheal Ferland: The "teeth-rattling hit of the game" award for making sure Dr. Thomas Long gets his money's worth out of that sponsorship.

There's a Raleigh dentist who sponsors the biggest hit of the game on each broadcast and you have to think he's a Micheal Ferland superfan at this point.

Calvin de Haan (105 hits) became the first Hurricane to reach 100 hits, but that's because Ferland missed time with a concussion. He got to 100 last game, and at 12 goals and 101 hits he's simply provided the exact physicality and killer instinct the Hurricanes were missing.

Warren Foegele: Least likely to sing "Breakaway" by Kelly Clarkson at karaoke.

In all seriousness, Foegele is tied for fifth in the league with 20 penalties drawn per Corsica Hockey. Only Aleksander Barkov (28), Nathan MacKinnon (24), David Pastrnak (23) and Johnny Gaudreau (21) have more. That's insane when you consider those are bona fide star players playing significantly more minutes with more targets on their backs (aka more opportunities to force opponents covering them to mess up). Not bad for a rookie who just got a scoring monkey off his back.

Saku Maenalanen: The Team Finland award for "Wow, another difficult Hurricane name that's actually worth memorizing."

Maenalanen's speed, size and work along the boards have been so noticeable in his four NHL games that he's making a case for an extended stint in Raleigh despite an abundance of fourth-line options.

Jordan Martinook: Most interesting player.

Not only did Martinook net his first career hat trick in a thriller for the Canes, but he's wearing a lot of unexpected hats. Andrei Svechnikov's mentor, Team Grit ambassador, near double-digit goal-scorer (9). He seems like an important voice in the locker room for a team trying to find a new, winning identity with younger stars.

Greg McKeeg: The Greg McKeeg award for being named Greg McKeeg and scoring a goal and an assist on \$5 Bud Light night in your Hurricanes debut.

Andrei Svechnikov: The DJ Pauly D award for leading the league in fist pumps.

He was never going to win the Calder with a generational talent in Elias Pettersson, and guess what? That's absolutely fine. No one should care. He and his goal celebration are exactly what this Canes team needed him to be and more.

Lucas Wallmark: The Murphy's Law award for worst luck imaginable.

As Murphy's Law suggests, anything that can go wrong has been going wrong for Lucas Wallmark this season. He's been at the top of the league's expected goals stat despite only cashing in on three of his 83 shots. He gets quality chances so it's not the shooting selection, it's genuinely bad luck with him. He's leading the entire league right now with a 66.02 expected goals percentage at 5v5.

Don't let that distract you from his matchup prowess, though. He routinely matches up against the best lines in the NHL — most noticeable to me in Jordan Staal's absence in general and against Patrice Bergeron in the Hurricanes' Whalers Night win.

Justin Williams: The Jaromir Jagr lifetime achievement "age is just a number" trophy.

Not only is Justin Williams still Actually Good at 37, but I'd venture at least half of the Hurricanes' power play goals so far (five of which are his) wouldn't have gone in without his net-front presence. He's third on the team in overall points with nine goals and 17 assists. We talk about his influence in the locker room — which actually does matter — but we should also talk about how Actually Good he is.

And, he created the Storm Surge! Old people hate that!

Calvin de Haan: The social media Purple Heart for shutting down ridiculous trade proposals.

Dougie Hamilton: The spring break award for insane shot streak.



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It's time for everyone's favorite stat: Dougie Hamilton has recorded at least one shot on goal in 206 consecutive games, the longest streak in the NHL. He's been putting it to good use lately, with goals in three consecutive games. Historically, it takes him a while to kick into gear on a new team, so here we go.

Jacob Slavin: The GEICO award for being so good and being signed for such a long time that your owner has absolutely no interest in drafting early-round defensemen.

Curtis McElhinney: Biggest surprise.

I mean, who among us expected this? It was a belief that all this team needed was league average goaltending. Now the Hurricanes have it, via a journeyman getting a shot and Petr Mrazek getting his one-year, prove-yourself shot. Will the rest of the team make it count?

Petr Mrazek: Best "I have no idea what's going on here, but I think I like it" play.

NHL Trade Big Board: 20 players who could move before the deadline

Craig Custance

We're at that point. Many of the NHL's general managers got together during the World Junior Championships, where trade talk is inevitably stoked. Most teams are hosting organizational scouting meetings this week, if they haven't already. After that input is received, trade season is open in earnest. Fun time for the fans. Stressful time for the players. And if you're a GM, it's as busy as it will be all year.

It's also an interesting market. Several conversations with GMs and league executives over the course of the past week or so have indicated that it's a strong buyers market right now. As one GM put it, there's already a lot of inventory out there and we're early on in the process.

"Half the league is a moderate to aggressive seller," said the GM.

It's good news for potential buyers like San Jose, Pittsburgh, Winnipeg, Nashville, Toronto and others. Not so great if you're trying to sell. But the high number of sellers also makes for a fascinating list of available players, one that will be ever expanding as we get closer to the Feb. 25 deadline.

1. Artemi Panarin, Blue Jackets: So, here's what we know. The Blue Jackets and Panarin's agent Dan Milstein are in fairly consistent communication. The lines of communication are still wide open and it's safe to say there will be at least one more meeting in the next month or so to discuss exactly where things are. As it stands right now, Columbus hasn't been completely, 100 percent ruled out as a long-term option for Panarin. But with that said, if he wanted to stay, it sure seems risky not to engage in serious talks to make it happen. Or better yet, already have a deal done. So yeah, it still seems like he's a goner. That makes things interesting for the Blue Jackets. If they remain in a top three spot in the Metropolitan, it's hard to justify trading him. He'd be like a rental addition, only one with chemistry and familiarity with the team.

But what happens if things slip?

"If they lost three in a row on Jan. 25 and they're out of the playoffs? Are they trading Panarin?" wondered one executive. But even then, this still has the makings of a good team.

"I still think they're a playoff team," said the executive.

We also know that GM Jarmo Kekalainen is fearless. The consensus is that Sergei Bobrovsky is definitely gone after this season. Are they really letting two elite players leave for nothing?

2. Matt Duchene, Senators: The Senators play in Los Angeles on Thursday and it's expected that Duchene will spend time with his representation at CAA to really get a sense of where things stand in terms of a long-term deal in Ottawa. Duchene hasn't been ruled out staying with the Senators but there's also no rush from him to make a decision. At some point in the next few weeks, there will be conversations between the Duchene camp and Senators GM Pierre Dorion that will provide more clarity.

If those talks aren't productive, the expectation is that Duchene shakes loose.

"If it doesn't get done, they'll move him," said one NHL source.

3. Mark Stone, Senators: Stone has publicly shared his opinion that he'd love to stay in Ottawa, despite the potential of being one of the top unrestricted free agents this summer. "This is the only place that I've ever played," he told TSN. "I've loved my time here, hopefully it can continue."

Public comments aside, if a deal doesn't get done he might be one of the best available players. He's having his best offensive season, averaging 1.09 points per game, as one of the games better 200-foot forwards. All things considered, he's having an unreal season. Ryan Dzingel, who has 31 points in 41 games is also a rental candidate and Cody Ceci's name is often brought up as a trade candidate.

"Ottawa is going to sell," said an executive. "One or both of Duchene and Stone."

4. Kevin Hayes, Rangers: He's big. He's a center. He's a rental. He's everything a contending team like the Bruins or the Jets would love to plug into their lineup for the stretch run. Hayes has 33 points in 39 games and will be one of the biggest targets before the trade deadline.

"He's a really good player," said one NHL source. "I think it's buyer beware when he's signing his next contract ... but as a rental? Awesome. He's not going to be a first-line center. Let's say it's the Bruins, he'll be their third center. Then he's really good."

5. Dougie Hamilton, Hurricanes: Multiple sources confirmed that the Hurricanes are open to trading Hamilton, not necessarily because they've soured on him but because they're trying to get the best possible offer for a defenseman not named Jacob Slavin. It would be surprising if the Hurricanes don't trade either Hamilton, Justin Faulk or Brett Pesce at some point, although the best deal might not be until the draft.



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Carolina wants to add scoring and also create a path for Adam Fox – the Harvard defenseman still needs to sign.

Hamilton is the bigger name and puts up more offense, but teams seem to like Pesce as much or more, in part because of questions about Hamilton's compete level on a consistent basis.

"I like Pesce," said an Eastern Conference executive. "I think he's a really good player. I bet him, Slavin, (Sebastian) Aho and (Andrei) Svechnikov are the guys they're trying to hold on to."

6. Wayne Simmonds, Flyers: GM Chuck Fletcher is still in evaluation mode but it's clear something is off in Philadelphia. The Flyers can't just run this team back again next season and signing Simmonds to an extension would cut into the flexibility to make improvements. Fletcher has a ton of respect for Simmonds and, when he was the GM in Minnesota, tried to acquire him multiple times. He also knows that cap space is finite and the Flyers already have significant cap space committed to one forward headed to his 30s in James van Riemsdyk.

It would likely have to be a pretty team-friendly deal to get it done in Philadelphia.

"Unless he's got a fair contract coming, how is he not going to trade him?" asked one executive. "He's the new GM of the team, he can't lose him for nothing."

Simmonds would certainly look good in Nashville, a team expected to be a buyer. Nashville coach Peter Laviolette recently called out his team for soft play, an area Simmonds would definitely address.

7. Chris Kreider, Rangers: It would have to take a significant offer to lure Kreider away from the Rangers. He's already hit 20 goals this season. He's got another year left on a team-friendly deal that has a cap hit of \$4.625 million. But Kreider may be the best example of what one GM was referring to when he pointed to the Rangers as a one-stop shop for buying teams. If you want a rental forward, they have one. If you want a veteran forward with a good contract, they have one of those too. Need help on defense? They have just about any kind of player you like there. "The New York Rangers – they have every flavor you can imagine," said the executive.

8. Brayden Schenn, Blues: It might be better for headline material to put Vladimir Tarasenko in this slot but the asking price there is sky high. "I know they'd move him," said one executive of Tarasenko. Still, that's not an easy midseason trade to pull off. A little more realistic could be a deal involving Schenn. On some level, he's similar to Derick Brassard last year because he'd give teams depth at center and also term beyond this season, with Schenn signed for one more year at \$5.125 million. Like every potentially available center, he'll be attached to the Bruins. His offensive production is down a touch from last season, averaging closer to his career totals of 0.62 points per game, a reasonable expectation for him.

On defense, Alex Pietrangolo's name has come up in the rumor mill but he has a no-trade so that's not an easy one. Colton Parayko is another target for teams looking at defense.

"St. Louis is always a team that is willing to make a deal," said an NHL source. "Quite a few players there (available). They will be interesting to watch."

9. Jake Muzzin, Kings: Nobody outside of Anze Kopitar and Drew Doughty is safe in Los Angeles, and Muzzin might be the most valuable realistic asset GM Rob Blake can move. Jeff Carter would be a great addition for contending teams but it sounds like he's going to have a say in the process, limiting options there. Muzzin has a good contract and trade talks would have to start with a first-round pick since he's not a pure rental.

10. Gustav Nyquist, Red Wings: Nyquist has a no-trade and hasn't been approached yet about waiving it, but it's still early on that front. Outside of Dylan Larkin, he's been the Red Wings' best forward this season, the final year of his contract that comes with a \$4.75 million cap hit. He's a legit top-six forward, who is more playmaker than goal scorer so needs the right players around him to capitalize on his skill set. The problem for Detroit is that Nyquist doesn't necessarily stand out compared to the other available wingers. "There are a number of pieces (available) that are the equivalent to Nyquist," said one GM. The Oilers might be a good fit for Nyquist.

11. Jesse Puljujarvi, Oilers: In the ideal world, your NHL coach is focused on winning every day and the GM has a long-term mentality, thinking about three years out. In Edmonton, there's a lot of pressure on everyone to win now and get in the playoffs, including the GM. That makes anything possible and that includes Edmonton moving Puljujarvi, selected with the No. 4 overall pick in 2016. The preference in Edmonton would be a young player with a similar pedigree, especially one who could help more in the short term. "You would think it would have to make their team better right now," said one executive. "(Peter Chiarelli has) got to be buying."

12. Timothy Liljegren, Maple Leafs: It would probably be more fun to put Kasper Kapanen in this slot but there was a bit of cold water thrown on that idea when floated to a few sources.

One executive said he thought a Kapanen deal was more likely in the summer, if at all, citing the fact that Kapanen has shown an ability to score in the playoffs, something the Maple Leafs will value.

Instead, a source suggested the Maple Leafs might prefer to use Liljegren to make a significant move, in part because of the emergence of Rasmus Sandin.

"Sandin has done a good enough job to justify keeping him over Liljegren," the source said.

The one consensus was that at some point, either now or in the summer, Toronto GM Kyle Dubas is very likely to move a young piece of the puzzle in Toronto.

"I don't care what Kyle Dubas says, there's no way they can keep them all," said an executive.

13. Micheal Ferland, Hurricanes: Carolina is already getting calls on Ferland, an unrestricted free agent who is due a big raise after this season. The Hurricanes like Ferland but not at the expected price he is likely to cost in his next deal. He's



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got size, playoff experience and a small cap number. It wouldn't be surprising at all if the Penguins, always aggressive to improve their team under GM Jim Rutherford, were interested.

14. Mats Zuccarello, Rangers: Zuccarello's numbers are down, with the winger averaging just 0.50 points per game, well below his career average of 0.67. But it was interesting to read his comments to Larry Brooks in the New York Post that his availability on the trade market may have something to do with his on-ice production.

"People can say that I'm making enough money that I shouldn't let any of this affect me, but I'm sorry, I have been here for nine years and I am human," Zuccarello told Brooks. "It's a tough situation but it's also no excuse for me."

15. Nino Niederreiter, Wild: Minnesota GM Paul Fenton is an interesting one to watch because he came in with the expectation that comes with any new GM – that changes will be made. But the team playing now is essentially the same one as previous versions. The consensus is that Niederreiter and Charlie Coyle can be had, but it likely will extend beyond that depending on how the Wild fare in the coming weeks. Eric Staal and Eric Fehr are traditional rentals who could hit the market if Minnesota remains outside the playoff race. One executive lamented the high prices being asked by Fenton for Wild players, which might explain the lack of movement right now with the Wild.

16. Jimmy Howard, Red Wings: At first glance, Howard is your traditional rental. Veteran player on an expiring contract from a rebuilding team that will soon be ready to sell. But starting goalies aren't easy trades to pull off near the deadline. The buyers are buyers because they're in a playoff spot and likely have been getting good goaltending to get there. Those teams won't pay a premium for insurance in goal. The Red Wings like Howard. They'd like to bring him back after this season. There isn't a lot of internal interest in trading him for a third-round pick or whatever a team looking for insurance might pay. So, really, the scenario where a Howard trade is most likely comes only if a contending team loses their starting goalie to injury and is willing to pay a premium (like, say, a first-round pick) to acquire Howard.

17. Andre Burakovsky, Capitals: Burakovsky is 23 years old, is set to be a restricted free agent after this season and is an intriguing name who is available. He's been passed in Washington by Jakub Vrana and scouts will tell you that they're not sure which Burakovsky is going to show up on a given night. But when he's going, he can be a difference maker. There's definitely some intrigue here. The Capitals, according to multiple sources, are looking for a similar aged young player in return at this point. If the best offer is for futures, that's a deal more likely to happen at the draft.

18. Trevor Daley, Red Wings: Daley is out with a broken foot but should be back in early February, plenty of time to be a target before the trade deadline. He has one year left on his contract that comes at a reasonable \$3.16 million cap hit per season, a number that could be sweetened even more with some salary retention. When healthy this season, Daley performed under his standard but that can be attributed, in part, to cycling through partners without a ton of NHL experience. He's still a great skater with multiple Stanley Cups who would fit seamlessly into any dressing room. A second-round pick and decent prospect probably gets it done.

19. Alec Martinez, Kings: Martinez is out with an upper body injury but he's closing in on a return. He's not flashy but he's consistent and comes on a reasonable contract worth \$4 million per season through 2020-21. The price point might be less than Muzzin too, with a second-round pick and good prospect the expected asking price here.

20. Nick Jensen, Red Wings: He might actually be the most appealing of the Red Wings' rentals. He probably isn't going to cost a ton but is the kind of player who can play a key part without giving up the farm. "I like him," said one contending GM. There's a lot to like. He's still just 28, he's a right-handed shot and is a great skater. He's a rock-solid addition to any team's bottom pair and the Red Wings haven't ruled out a contract extension, but The Athletic's Max Bultman reported last week that there have not been any significant talks yet.



Preview: Hurricanes at Islanders

Canes bring a four-game winning streak to Long Island

by Michael Smith

UNIONDALE, N.Y. - The Carolina Hurricanes, who are riding a four-game winning streak, make their return to Long Island to face off with the New York Islanders.

Tuesday's Metropolitan Division match-up marks the Canes' first game back at the old Nassau Coliseum complex since Feb. 28, 2015.

Riding the Streak



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The Hurricanes topped the Ottawa Senators, 5-4, in a Sunday matinee to extend their winning streak to four games.

"You win a few games, and that's what builds confidence. It doesn't really matter how you do it sometimes," head coach Rod Brind'Amour said after a Monday practice in New York. "We've gotten some pucks to go in for whatever reason. ... It's nice to see."

On Sunday, the Hurricanes scored a power-play goal and a shorthanded goal in the first five minutes of the game. A back-and-forth second period, punctuated for the Senators with two goals in a span of eight seconds in the final minute of the frame, brought a 4-4 score into the third period. That's when Justin Williams scored the team's second power-play goal of the day to put them ahead for good.

"I loved the third period. I loved that we finally said enough's enough, and the guys played a hard third period," head coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "I liked it even better when we got a lead."

Returning to the Coliseum

It's been almost four years since the Hurricanes last played a game against the Islanders in Long Island. On that Saturday in late February 2015, the Canes bested the Islanders, 5-3, with a four-goal second period.

Just two Canes who played in that game - Victor Rask and Justin Faulk - will dress tonight.

"They fixed it up. It actually looks really nice. Way better than I remember," Brind'Amour said. "It actually looks totally different. I'm sure it will be a fun game tomorrow."

Former Islander Calvin de Haan remembers the Coliseum well.

"This is an awesome building to play in. It was fun," he said. "It's loud in here and intimidating. When that crowd is going,

it can really send chills down your spine. It's a fun place to play. I really enjoyed it."

This match-up, his fourth and final of the regular season against his former team, will still be a bit different, then.

"Yeah, I think so. It was strange being on the other end of the Barclays rink," he said. "It's nostalgic. It brings back some good memories. I was able to start my career here, and I'm very fortunate for the opportunity I had."

The Last Meeting

Following a pair of 2-1 losses to the New York Islanders in October - one in overtime on Opening Night and the other in regulation later in the month - the Canes dropped a 4-1 decision at Barclays Center in late November. The Islanders scored on their first two shots of the game to take a 2-0 lead and never looked back, snapping the Canes' three-game winning streak.

The Opposition

As hot as the Canes currently are, the Islanders are hotter. They bring a six-game winning streak into tonight's game, and they've won nine of their last 10 games. Goaltender Robin Lehner was named the NHL's third star of the week on Monday after posting a 3-0-0 record, a 1.99 goals-against average and a .935 save percentage in three games.

"They capitalize every time you mess up. It's crazy," Brind'Amour said. "We've got to be really tight on that. We'll make them earn them. We don't want to give them odd-man rush chances because they've got talent to put it in the back of your net."

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Aho, Teravainen make selections for Last Men In at NHL All-Star Game

Hurricanes forwards pitch fellow Finns Laine, Barkov for trip to San Jose

by Shawn P. Roarke

NEW YORK -- Though some fans are meticulously breaking down the merits of who should earn selections for the 2019 NHL All-Star Last Men In presented by adidas, Carolina Hurricanes forward Sebastian Aho had no such qualms.

The Last Men In is a new initiative that allows fans to select a player from each division to join the 2019 Honda NHL All-Star Game rosters. The game will be played at SAP Center in San Jose on Jan. 26 (8 p.m. ET; NBC, CBC, SN, TVAS).

"I'll go all the Finns," said Aho, who was selected by NHL Hockey Operations to represent the Metropolitan Division. "This is easy: (Patrik) Laine, (Aleksander) Barkov, (Teuvo) Teravainen."



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That does knock off three of the four divisions, and each player is a worthwhile candidate.

Laine, a forward with the Winnipeg Jets in the Central Division, has 32 points (24 goals, eight assists) in 41 games. Barkov, a center and captain of the Florida Panthers from the Atlantic, has 42 points (16 goals, 26 assists) in 40 games. Teravainen, Aho's linemate with the Hurricanes in the Metropolitan, has 34 points (10 goals, 24 assists) in 41 games.

But what about the Pacific Division, which doesn't have a Finland-born player on its eight-man ballot?

"That's harder," Aho said during a visit to the NHL offices on Monday. "Who would I go with? (Ryan) Getzlaf, I guess. There are no Finns. He's a great player, tough to play against. I was thinking it was between him and (Anze) Kopitar."

Getzlaf, a forward and captain of the Anaheim Ducks, has 29 points (nine goals, 20 assists) in 37 games. Kopitar, a center and captain of the Los Angeles Kings, has 28 points (10 goals, 18 assists) in 42 games.

Aho, who has 45 points (16 goals, 29 assists) in 41 games, made the switch from wing to center this season, so it is not surprising there would be solid two-way centers on the top of his list from the Pacific.

Teravainen also played the Finnish card when asked about his Last Men In votes, but highlighted a few other deserving players.

In the Pacific, he went with Edmonton Oilers forward Leon Draisaitl, who has 52 points (23 goals, 29 assists) in 42 games and is tied for ninth in NHL scoring with Sean Monahan of the Calgary Flames and David Pastrnak of the Boston Bruins.

"I feel like he is a pretty good player," Teravainen said. "Fifty-two points; that's a lot of points. I feel like he should probably be in there."

In the Central, he stumped for Laine, citing his five-goal game against the St. Louis Blues on Nov. 24, 2018. But he also made a compelling argument for center Jonathan Toews, the captain of the Chicago Blackhawks.

In the Atlantic, it was Barkov.

"He's a really good player and the captain, so I feel like he deserves to be there," Teravainen said.

If not Barkov, he said it should be Buffalo Sabres forward Jeff Skinner, who played with the Hurricanes from 2010-17 before being traded on Aug. 2, 2018. Skinner has 28 goals this season, second in the NHL to Alex Ovechkin of the Washington Capitals (30). Ovechkin was selected as Metropolitan captain in a fan vote but announced last week he was not going to participate in the festivities.

"He's had a really good year and I know him from Carolina, it's nice to see him doing good," Teravainen said of Skinner. "He's scoring a lot of goals."

Does Teravainen think he has a chance to carry the vote in the Metropolitan, which also has Nick Foligno of the Columbus Blue Jackets, Kyle Palmieri of the New Jersey Devils, Anders Lee of the New York Islanders, Mats Zuccarello of the New York Rangers, Jakub Voracek of the Philadelphia Flyers and Nicklas Backstrom of the Capitals as the other options in the Last Men In vote?

He's not sure, but he is honored to be involved.

"It means a lot," he said. "It's a new spot for me to be in. Aho really deserves to go, he has had a great season. I didn't even know there was anything like this, so I was kind of surprised to see me in this kind of vote."

"It is kind of fun that the fans can vote someone in, so we'll see who has the most fans."

Voting for the Last Men in continues through 11:59 p.m. ET on Thursday. Fans can vote at NHL.com/Vote or on a mobile interactive ballot on the NHL app.



Hurricanes could deal Dougie Hamilton as they look to enter trade market

The Carolina Hurricanes are looking like they want to enter the trade market and could use defenceman Dougie Hamilton to do so.

"[A] name I'm curious about is Dougie Hamilton," Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman said during the Headlines segment of Hockey Night in Canada Saturday. "They have four right-shot defencemen, they've been asked about Hamilton. If you're willing to come back to them with a score I think that they would consider doing it."

Hamilton has 13 points and eight assists this season and as a right-shot defenceman who's only 25-years-old he could offer a fair bit of value, particularly because he's under contract until the end of the 2020-21 season.

It also looks like the Hurricanes want to trade forward Micheal Ferland, who will be an unrestricted free agent at the end of this season. Possible extension talks between him and Carolina, according to Friedman, are not close.

"[A] team that has said, 'We cannot be in a position to lose an unrestricted free agent for nothing' is Carolina and I believe that's why a lot of talks have heated up on Micheal Ferland," Friedman said. "I don't think they're anywhere close between the team and the player."

Ferland has 19 points and 12 goals for the Hurricanes this season, his first with the club after he was traded from the Calgary Flames last June.

The NHL trade deadline is Feb. 25.



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PHT Power Rankings: Reality strikes Ducks

By Adam Gretz

The Anaheim Ducks have held a playoff position for much of the 2018-19 season, but their place in the standings has been the biggest mirage in the NHL.

Their success this season has been driven almost entirely by the play of their goalies (John Gibson and Ryan Miller) and has masked the numerous flaws that exist on this team, from the lack of depth, to the injuries, to the fact their core players are getting older and declining, to the fact they get absolutely caved in almost every night on the shot and scoring chance charts.

Teams like this eventually crumble. They always crumble. Sometimes it takes a few weeks. Sometimes a few months. Sometimes it does not happen until the next season. But it eventually always happens because the goalies, no matter how good they are, can not continue to play that flawlessly for that long.

The dam always breaks, the bubble always bursts, or whatever other cliché you want to use to refer to it.

For the Ducks, that time has come.

After getting blown out by the Edmonton Oilers on Sunday, the Ducks have now dropped eight games in a row, find themselves barely hanging on to a playoff spot, and have been outscored by a jaw-dropping 23 goals on the season. That is one of the worst marks in the league and puts them with the NHL's worst teams.

It is almost impossible to be that bad when you're getting the level of goaltending they are getting this season (among the absolute best in the NHL!)

They are falling fast in the standings and in this week's PHT Power Rankings.

The elite

1. Tampa Bay Lightning — Their 5-2 loss in San Jose was their first loss in regulation since Nov. 27. It happened on Jan 5. That is a hell of a long time to go between regulation defeats. They are just on an unbelievable roll right now, thanks in large part to Nikita Kucherov's offensive dominance. They are on a tier all alone this week.

Contenders making their climb

2. Vegas Golden Knights — They have won six in a row, are 17-3-3 in their past 23 games, and they have the dominant underlying numbers to back up their record. They are good. Legitimately good.

3. Pittsburgh Penguins — Matt Murray is back to playing like the franchise goalie the Penguins need him to be. Combine that with the performance of stars like Sidney Crosby and Kris Letang (who has been Norris worthy this season) and you have a team that is 14-5-1 in its past 20 games and has caught up to the leaders in their division.

The rest of the contenders

4. Toronto Maple Leafs — Imagine how good the offense will be once William Nylander starts to get going.

5. Washington Capitals — Their power play has hit a pretty big slump lately but I am one million percent confident that is not something that is going to last.

6. Calgary Flames — Johnny Gaudreau just keeps getting better. He is on pace for 118 points this season and is the engine that drives this team.

7. San Jose Sharks — On Dec. 1 they lost their fourth game in a row to drop to 12-10-5 on the season. Since then they have gone 11-3-2 and their stars on the blue line are really starting to dominate like we expected. Do not sleep on this team in the Western Conference.

8. Columbus Blue Jackets — This is a really good team as it stands right now and I still feel like some of their best players (Seth Jones, Zach Werenski, Sergei Bobrovsky) haven't played their best hockey yet this season. What happens when they do?

9. Winnipeg Jets — Losing Nikolaj Ehlers will be a big loss, but they still have one of the best collections of forwards in the NHL. They have hit a bit of a wall recently, but they will be fine.

10. Nashville Predators — They are starting to get healthy (Welcome back, Filip Forsberg) so we will once again get to see what this team is capable of when it has all of its key players in the lineup.

Right on the edge

11. New York Islanders — Every team that outperforms its shot and scoring chance metrics thinks it has stumbled on the secret. They haven't. They just have great goaltending. The Islanders right now are getting great goaltending.

12. Boston Bruins — Patrice Bergeron has nine points in seven games since returning to the lineup. The Bruins have won five of those games. Getting key players back in the lineup helps.



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13. Montreal Canadiens — Shea Weber has really made a huge difference for this team since returning to the lineup.

14. Dallas Stars — Even with their ugly loss to Winnipeg on Sunday and all of the drama surrounding this team because of their CEO and owner, they are still 5-1-1 in their past seven games and hanging around in the playoff race. The top line is still carrying the offense.

15. Carolina Hurricanes — They are on one of those streaks where they start to play up to their potential and make you think they are about ready to turn the corner. Will this be the time it happens?

16. Minnesota Wild — That 13-game stretch where they lost 10 games really put them in a hole. They are trying to dig out of it with wins in three of their past four.

Falling back

17. Buffalo Sabres — That big cushion they built for themselves earlier in the year is really starting to slip away from them. They need to get more out of their forwards other than Jack Eichel and Jeff Skinner.

18. Colorado Avalanche — Speaking of a team that needs more out of players outside of their top line ... the Avalanche have lost 12 out of 15 and are now all of a sudden on the playoff bubble despite having three of the best offensive players in the league. Not a great sign!

19. Anaheim Ducks — This is, quite simply, not a very good hockey team.

The playoffs look like a long shot

20. Florida Panthers — It is looking like another wasted year of the Aleksander Barkov, Jonathan Huberdeau core. Unfortunate, because they are such outstanding players. Especially Barkov.

21. Vancouver Canucks — The standings say they open the week just one point out of a playoff spot, but they have already played 45 games this season, way more than everyone else around them in the standings. Their points percentage is in the bottom-six of the NHL. Once every one around them catches up in games played their playoff chances will look a lot worse.

22. New York Rangers — It should be another busy year for this team at the trade deadline. No playoffs in their immediate future and a few veteran players that could be attractive for contenders.

23. Edmonton Oilers — Just speaking in hypotheticals here, but how many more seasons like this before Connor McDavid gets fed up and demands his way out of Edmonton? It has to happen at some point, right? If this circus continues around him?

Lose For Hughes

24. New Jersey Devils — Rookie netminder Mackenzie Blackwood has been a pleasant development for a team that has had a constant hole in net this season.

25. Chicago Blackhawks — The Blackhawks should be highly encouraged by what they have seen from Dylan Strome so far. He is up to 14 points in 20 games and scored the game-winning goal in Pittsburgh on Sunday night.

26. Los Angeles Kings — Even Anze Kopitar is having a disappointing season for this team. It is almost as if they are prohibited from having good offensive players.

27. Arizona Coyotes — You can not question the effort, but the talent is just not there yet. It really hurts when they are down to backup goalies on top of that.

28. St. Louis Blues — They took a run with this core and it doesn't look like it is going to work. Like the Blackhawks and Kings, this is a team that looks like it might be in need of a teardown and rebuild.

29. Philadelphia Flyers — They've fired the coach, fired the general manager, fired assistants (coach, GM), called up the hot-shot goalie prospect, and had the players-only meeting after another loss. They have played every card a bad hockey team can play in a season.

30. Detroit Red Wings — Every year some rebuilding teams that are short on talent overachieve early in the year and then hit an extended slump that brings them back down to where everyone expected them to be. The Red Wings are in the middle of that slump right now.

31. Ottawa Senators — The problem with their spot in the "lose for Hughes" category is their 2019 first-round draft pick belongs to the Colorado Avalanche



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NHL burning questions: Revisiting every team's biggest issues at the halfway mark

Checking in on our preseason questions for every team in the NHL at the midseason mark

Before this NHL season got underway, we highlighted one big question every NHL team faced as they began a new campaign. With the halfway point here already, it's time to revisit those questions and see what answers we have.

Some answers appear much clearer than others, but it's important to remember that this is hockey -- a sport in which things can change rather quickly and, often times, for no discernible reason.

Stream regional and prime-time NHL games live on fuboTV (Try for free).

Anaheim Ducks

How healthy has Ryan Kesler been?

Kesler was a shell of himself last season (eight goals and 14 points in 44 games) as the result of some health issues, including a pretty significant hip surgery, and it was unknown how healthy he would be heading into this season. The 34-year-old forward has clearly not gotten back to the player he once was and his pace of production has been even worse this season than last. Through 39 games, Kesler has just four goals and six points. Now the question becomes whether he still needs more time to heal or if his best days are just behind him.

Arizona Coyotes

How has Alex Galchenyuk looked?

The Coyotes' biggest offseason splash was the blockbuster acquisition of Galchenyuk from Montreal and it was believed that a fresh start could significantly benefit the forward, especially if he was given steady minutes at center. He has still battled bouts of inconsistency in his first season in Arizona and was pretty quickly moved from center back to wing, but he has been decent. Despite missing a chunk of the first half with injury, he's second among Coyotes forwards in points with 18 (6-12).

Boston Bruins

Has depth been an issue?

Yes and no. The Bruins' offense has largely been carried by their top trio of David Pastrnak, Patrice Bergeron and Brad Marchand, who have accounted for 44 percent of Boston's goals thus far. The Bruins let a number of secondary pieces walk last offseason (Rick Nash, Riley Nash and Tim Schaller) in hopes that their younger players would be able to step into bigger roles, but the replacements have struggled to find consistency. A number of those younger guys -- including Danton Heinen, Ryan Donato and Jacob Forsbacka-Karlsson -- have struggled to provide steady

secondary help, and Boston will likely look to acquire some help in their top six in the second half. However, the Bruins have done well to stay in contention even with a slew of injuries suffered by several key players during the first few months.

Buffalo Sabres

Just how big has their jump been?

The Sabres were the worst team in the league last season, but they were expected to make some progress in their rebuild after adding some nice pieces -- including top overall pick Rasmus Dahlin, veteran winger Jeff Skinner and netminder Carter Hutton -- this summer. That jump has been bigger than many expected at this point, as the Sabres currently hold a playoff spot at fourth in the Atlantic division. Dahlin has been worth the hype, Skinner is near the top of the league in goals and Hutton has been very solid in net. The Sabres' may have jumped from "rebuilder" to "contender" quicker than we anticipated.

Calgary Flames

Has James Neal fixed their scoring woes?

After finishing last season 26th in goals scored, the Flames attempted to add a spark plug to their front six by signing James Neal to a big deal in free agency. The good news: Calgary is now suddenly an offensive juggernaut, ranked second in scoring behind only the Tampa Bay Lightning. The bad news: Neal isn't exactly a huge part of that. The 30-year-old has just four goals (and eight points) in 42 games. That's a surprise considering this would be the first time in his 11-year career that he didn't hit the 20-goal mark. Maybe he still gets there (he ranks sixth among Calgary forwards in shots but is only converting at a 4.4 percent clip) but he'd need to have a huge second half. As it stands now, he hasn't been the solution to Calgary's scoring woes, but they apparently didn't need him to be.

Carolina Hurricanes

Has their goaltending improved?

Yup, even if the improvement didn't come from the guy you expected. Surprisingly, it's been 35-year-old Curtis McElhinney who has been the Canes' savior between the pipes so far, posting a .923 save percentage in 15 starts during the first half. That's found gold for a guy the Hurricanes lucked into when the Maple Leafs waived him at the start of the season. Both Petr Mrazek (.902 in 17 GP) and Scott Darling (.884 in 8 GP) have been underwhelming behind McElhinney and the combined numbers between the three come out to about average, but the Canes seem to finally have a guy that they can rely on ... for now.

Chicago Blackhawks



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What has been of Corey Crawford?

After missing more than half of last season and the beginning of this season due to lingering concussion symptoms, Crawford finally returned to the Blackhawks' starting lineup in mid-October. He played in 23 games and had a modest .902 save percentage before suffering another concussion in December. Head injuries are always unpredictable but, at this point, it seems fair to not only wonder when the 34-year-old might return to the ice, but if he'll come back at all.

Colorado Avalanche

Can they get back to the playoffs?

It sure looks like it. The Avalanche had a surprising bounce-back season last season and they're on pace for a second-straight playoff appearance this season. They currently hold the third spot in a tough Central division behind two powerhouses in the Jets and Predators. Not shockingly, the Avs have been largely carried by their explosive top line in Nathan MacKinnon, Gabriel Landeskog and Mikko Rantanen and look relatively average on defense and in net. But they're not regressing and they may be just a bit more dangerous than they were a season ago, so that's a step in the right direction.

Columbus Blue Jackets

What's going to happen with Artemi Panarin?

We still don't know. The star winger is in the final year of his current contract and it's unknown if he wants to stay in Columbus beyond this season. He was reluctant to sign an extension with the Blue Jackets this summer and there's been no tangible progress there. What we do know, however, is that Panarin has been good (Columbus' leading scorer with 45 points in 39 games) and the Jackets are in the playoff picture, which makes it incredibly difficult for the front office to trade him during the season without shooting themselves in the foot, at least in the short term.

Dallas Stars

How has the team adjusted to Jim Montgomery?

It certainly hasn't been the smoothest of sailing so far under Montgomery, the Stars' third coach in as many years. There have been issues raised over on-ice mentality, and Dallas' two biggest stars got publicly blasted by the team's CEO for "not getting the job done," so that's not great. Maybe Montgomery is still just trying to work out the kinks while managing his players in his first NHL coaching gig, but things could also definitely be worse. Despite all their drama, the Stars are still currently on the right side of the playoff bubble. Let's hope they stay there or things could get (even more) ugly.

Detroit Red Wings

Has Dylan Larkin been a bona fide No. 1 center?

Larkin has been great in the role for a Red Wings team that is still trying to figure things out. The 22-year-old has been very productive and is on pace for a career-best season at the top of the lineup, leading the team in goals (18) and points (40) through 42 games. That's great news, as the Red

Wings desperately needed him to step up and provide some leadership down the middle, especially with the sudden retirement of Henrik Zetterberg before the season. He has answered the bell, and there doesn't really seem to be any debating that this is Larkin's team now.

Edmonton Oilers

Have they bounced back?

Not really. After falling back into mediocrity last season following a promising playoff run in '17, the Oilers are once again struggling this season. Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins have been very good for Edmonton throughout the first half but there's just not enough talent around them. McDavid and Draisaitl have combined for 40 percent of the Oilers' goals this season, while McDavid alone has direct involvement in 53 percent of Edmonton's scoring. As of right now they're only a few points out of the playoff picture, but they're very much a team that is going to have to be dragged into the postseason by a few star players.

Florida Panthers

Have they hung strong in the Atlantic?

Not quite. After a strong finish to last season and some nice additions this summer, it seemed the Panthers were primed for at least a wild card spot in the Atlantic if they were able to get enough out of Roberto Luongo and James Reimer in net. Well, as it turns out, they haven't gotten enough and they're much closer to the bottom of the division than the top. Between Luongo, Reimer and Michael Hutchinson, the Panthers are second-worst in the league when it comes to collective save percentage. The Panthers have a top 10 offensive unit in the league thus far, but it's pretty difficult to contend when you don't have a single goalie on the roster over a .900 save percentage.

Los Angeles Kings

How good has Ilya Kovalchuk been?

It's been a pretty underwhelming first season back in the NHL for Kovalchuk so far. After returning stateside following a stint in the KHL, Kovalchuk came into the season as one of the most intriguing players to watch because we didn't really know what to expect from the 35-year-old in Los Angeles. He's shown flashes of the high-end skill that once made him one of the NHL's elite wingers, but he hasn't exactly been a difference-maker in the City of Angels. He's got seven goals through 33 games and has battled injuries/demotions in the lineup through the first half. The sad thing is that still puts him top-five among Kings players in the league's worst offensive unit.

Minnesota Wild

Will their playoff streak be snapped?

When we initially posed that question, it had two different interpretations. The Wild have made the playoffs in each of the past six seasons. Will that continue? And if it does, will they be able to get past the first round for the first time in four years? As of right now, neither looks like a strong certainty. Minnesota has struggled offensively and is currently on the outside looking in, though they're close enough to still finish



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on the right side of the picture. However, in what seemed like a "put up or shut up" season, they're trending in the wrong direction.

Montreal Canadiens

Have they scored any goals?

Incredibly, yes ... and they've been quite decent overall. That's a shock to many considering the Habs finished 29th in scoring last season and then they turned around and traded two of their four leading goal-scorers (Alex Galchenyuk and Max Pacioretty) over the summer. They're not an offensive dynamo by any means, but they're in the top half of the league in scoring and offseason acquisition Max Domi (14-24-38 through 42 games) has looked strong down the middle at the top of their lineup. They've managed to stay in the playoff hunt to this point, which is incredibly surprising, especially given the fact that Carey Price hasn't been dominant in net.

Nashville Predators

What can we expect from Pekka Rinne?

The Predators' longtime goaltender is coming off a season in which he posted a regular season save percentage of .927 and took home his first Vezina Trophy in the spring. He's following that up with another very strong season in Nashville (.919 through 30 GP) and the Preds are looking predictably dangerous in front of him. Regular Season Pekka is still inspiring confidence, but the biggest question still lies with Postseason Pekka. Last season was the second straight season in which his performance took a dip during a crucial time in the postseason. Can he finish the season strong?

New Jersey Devils

Has Taylor Hall gotten more help?

Not quite. After almost single-handedly dragging the Devils to the postseason (and winning league MVP in the process) last season, Taylor Hall hasn't been able to double down on the one-man show this season. That's not to say he's not having a good campaign (11-26-37 in 33 GP) but he hasn't been incredible and the Devils aren't nearly deep enough to make up for that. As a result, they're back towards the bottom of the Metropolitan division and another playoff appearance is looking increasingly unlikely.

New York Islanders

How much has the loss of John Tavares hurt them?

Not as much as most expected, honestly! The biggest move of the offseason saw John Tavares depart Long Island in free agency to play for his hometown team in Toronto. It was a serious gut punch to the Islanders, who lost their best player, captain and face of the franchise. But the Islanders have been surprisingly competitive and if the season ended today, they'd be a playoff team. Obviously losing Tavares was a tough blow and it's hard to imagine they'd be a worse team with him on the roster, but new coach Barry Trotz seems to be getting the most out of his group this season. The new face of the franchise, Mat Barzal, is following up his Calder-winning season with a worthy sophomore campaign, so things aren't as bleak on the Island as we thought they might be.

New York Rangers

Who's next out of town?

The Rangers announced last season that they're entering into a rebuilding period, then traded some significant names from their roster -- including Rick Nash and Ryan McDonagh. Considering New York only has one forward under contract beyond this season and not in contending mode, there are going to be more guys shipped out of town. There haven't been any major moves yet, but that seems destined to change as we get closer to the trade deadline. Mats Zuccarello and Kevin Hayes both seem like they're prime candidates to be in another jersey soon.

Ottawa Senators

Do they even have a plan?

In their first post-Erik Karlsson season, things have been predictably shaky for the Senators. They got off to a decent start to open the season but have since fallen to the bottom of the league, where most people expected them to ultimately end up. That's bad, but it's so much worse when you remember they don't even own their own first-round pick this season -- Colorado does. Ottawa is attempting to rebuild over the coming years, so essentially gifting a potential franchise-changer in Jack Hughes to another team at the top of the draft is a brutally tough pill to swallow. That being said, we should have a better scope of Ottawa's long term plans as we get closer to the trade deadline, as they've got to figure out what they're doing with some players on expiring contracts, including Matt Duchene and Mark Stone.

Philadelphia Flyers

What kind of numbers has JVR put up?

It's been a very modest 2018-19 campaign thus far for James van Riemsdyk to kick off his second stint in Philly. The big free-agent splash battled a knee injury in the first half and has six goals and 14 points through 25 games. The Flyers were likely hoping he'd be closer to the 36-goal pace he had in Toronto last season but plenty of things haven't gone to plan for Philly and they currently sit in the basement of the Metro. We'll have to see if there's more stability in second half and whether that brings more comfort for JVR in his first year back in town. They've gotta hope that he picks up his production and starts commanding more ice time eventually, or else that five-year, \$35 million contract is going to look pretty rough outside their top-six.

Pittsburgh Penguins

Has Matt Murray bounced back?

Sort of. Murray came into this season having battled some health issues and inconsistency for Pittsburgh last season, and he's been moderately better this season -- though not as impressive as he was during his official rookie campaign a few years ago. In 18 games this season, Murray has a .913 save percentage and 2.89 GAA behind a Penguins team that has its defensive issues. Overall, not terrible, but also maybe not good enough. The Penguins may have another goalie controversy on their hands, as Casey DeSmith has been outstanding and has played his way into regular starting duties with a .924 SV% and 2.47 GAA through 26 games.



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However, the Penguins know more than anyone how important it can be to have two worthy goaltenders on the roster while heading down the stretch.

St. Louis Blues

Has Jake Allen dragged them down?

There have been a number of things that have dragged down the Blues to this point but, yes, Jake Allen has been one of them. After handing the reigns back to Allen following Carter Hutton's departure this summer, the veteran goaltender is struggling once again. He's sub .900 and the Blues don't have another great option behind him at the moment, so that's not ideal. But again, he's been far from the only issue on a bitterly disappointing Blues team that is among the worst in the league this season. Despite appearing to bolster their offensive attack with the offseason additions of Ryan O'Reilly, Tyler Bozak, David Perron and Patrick Maroon, St. Louis ranks near the bottom of the league in scoring through the first half.

San Jose Sharks

How much better has Erik Karlsson made them?

Karlsson has had a relatively understated first season in San Jose so far, at least in terms of goals and assists (3-32-35 in 41 GP). But the Sharks are certainly a better team with him on their blue line -- better than the standings and statistics show. Karlsson has been the Sharks' top possession driver and has the third-most shots on net behind Brent Burns and Evander Kane. The problem is he's shooting a career-low 2.2 percent right now; that number should rise in the second half. That being said, San Jose's offense has already gone from middle-of-the-pack last season to among the league's top five this season, and their power play unit has also made a jump into the top ten as well. That's not a coincidence. San Jose is third in the Pacific, but they're there with the league's worst goaltending averages, so that should be considered somewhat of an achievement.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Are they still the best team in the Atlantic?

Yes. Actually, more like "oh my God, yes." The Lightning have been the best team in the league through the first half and it's not particularly even close. They hit the official halfway point with a record of 32-7-2 putting them on pace for 64 wins and 132 points. If they keep up that pace, they'd break the NHL's single-season win record of 62 (1995-96 Detroit Red Wings) and tie the single-season points mark of 132 (1976-77 Montreal Canadiens). They've got the league's most prolific offense and are being led by tremendous years from Nikita Kucherov, Brayden Point and Steven Stamkos up front. So, yeah, sorry Toronto.

Toronto Maple Leafs

Has the blue line held them back?

Yes and no, I guess. We all knew the Leafs offense was going to be great when they added John Tavares to a unit that already finished second-best in scoring last season, and things have gone pretty well to plan. They're once again in the No. 2 spot in regards to offensive production (behind only Tampa) and they've been able to score enough and get good

enough goaltending to counter some weak spots on their blue line. They're still likely going to be in the market for some defensive help considering Nikita Zaitsev and Ron Hainsey are averaging nearly 20 minutes a game for them on the back end.

Vancouver Canucks

How good has Elias Pettersson been?

He's been incredible. Not only does the 20-year-old Swede lead the Canucks in points (20-22-42) despite missing a chunk of time to injury in the first half, but he's also been a human highlight reel in his first NHL Season. Pettersson is quickly establishing himself as one of the most electric young players in the game today, and that's saying something considering how many great young forwards there are in the game today. He's the real deal and he's almost single-handedly turning the Canucks into a must-see show on a nightly basis. Vancouver still has a ways to go before they can be considered a legitimate threat, but they've got some exciting young pieces to build around in the post-Sedin era -- none better than Pettersson.

Vegas Golden Knights

Has there been regression?

Yes, obviously. Given how improbable and insane Vegas' inaugural season was, I think we all expected them to take a step back in the sophomore campaign. They got off to a slow start this season but eventually recovered and found more consistency. They're not as remarkable as last season and their two biggest offseason acquisitions, Paul Stastny and Max Pacioretty, only made relatively modest contributions in the first half. (Stastny was injured for most of the first half.) With that being said, this is still a good team that has a legitimate shot to claim a second straight division title.

Washington Capitals

Has there been a Stanley Cup hangover?

Nope, not really. Even after a booze-fueled summer, the Capitals still appear to be the team to beat in the Metropolitan. They hold the division lead at the halfway point and have been led by an incredible first half from Alex Ovechkin, who is somehow better than ever at age 33. Ovechkin leads the league in goals with 30 through 41 games, which is just absurd -- even for him. They're top 10 in offense and top 15 in goals allowed, so things are going pretty well thus far. There wasn't a ton of turnover in Washington in terms of roster personnel but they do have a first-year coach in Todd Reirden behind the bench, so it was pretty important to have a good first half.

Winnipeg Jets

Will they need another second line center?

As expected, the Jets have been one of the best teams in the Western Conference to start this season, and it's no surprise that their top-end forwards (Mark Scheifele, Patrik Laine, Blake Wheeler) have led the way. Their top line has been extremely strong, but you can definitely make the case that they need another playmaker down the middle to help beef up their depth and secondary production, and possibly also help out on their PK. This is the way we saw things play



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out last season before the Jets went and acquired Paul Stastny at the trade deadline, so there's a decent chance they're going to look to upgrade at that spot once again.



Carolina Hurricanes vs. New York Islanders: Game Preview and Storm Advisory

The Carolina Hurricanes take on a red hot New York Islanders team in the historic Nassau Coliseum.

By Andrew Ahr

Carolina Hurricanes (19-17-5) vs. New York Islanders (23-13-4)

Tuesday, January 7, 2019 - 7:00 p.m. ET

NYCB Live at Nassau Coliseum - Uniondale, New York

TV: Fox Sports Carolinas

Radio: 99.9 The Fan

SBN Opponent: Lighthouse Hockey

Two streaking Metropolitan Division teams collide tonight as the Islanders host the Canes in their old barn.

Vital Statistics

Category	Hurricanes	Islanders
Record	19-17-5	23-13-4
Points	43	50
Division Rank	5 Metro	4 Metro
Conference Rank	T10 EC	T8 EC
Last 10 Games	6-4-0	9-1-0
Streak	Won 4	Won 6
Goals/Game	2.61	2.98
Goals Against/Game	2.83	2.60
Shots/Game	36.6	28.5
Shots Against/Game	28.1	31.5
Faceoff %	50.2%	48.1%

Category	Hurricanes	Islanders
Power Play % (Rank)	16.4% (23)	16.1% (24)
Penalty Kill % (Rank)	80.3% (T14)	78.0% (T22)
ES Corsi For %	55.67%	47.65%
ES PDO	97.5	103.3
PIM/Game	9:13	9:51

Goaltender #1

Category	Petr Mrazek	Thomas Greiss
Record	8-8-2	0-2-1
Save %	.900	.917
GAA	2.69	2.63

Goaltender #2

Category	Curtis McElhinney	Robin Lehner
Record	9-5-1	3-9-1
Save %	.923	.927
GAA	2.2	2.18

Game Notes

The Canes face off against the Islanders for the fourth and final time of the season. New York has won each of the first three meetings this season.



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The Islanders earned a 2-1 overtime win over Carolina in the season opener at PNC Arena. New York took the next two games in regulation.

Five of Jaccob Slavin's 19 career goals have come against the Islanders, including his only career hat trick, which came in the Barclays Center two seasons ago.

Tonight's matchup is one of 12 in Nassau Coliseum this season. They will play a total of 48 more at the historic arena over the next two seasons.

The Islanders have won six straight games and are 9-0-1 in their last 10. The Canes are also hot, winning their last four matchups after a depressing month of December.

Behind Enemy Lines: Previewing the Islanders, Lightning, Sabres and Predators

Another four game week awaits the suddenly hot Canes.

By Andy House

New York Islanders

Tuesday, 7:00 p.m. at Nassau Coliseum

In their fourth and final regular season matchup with the New York Islanders, the Carolina Hurricanes will be returning to the Isles' former — and now part-time temporary — home on Long Island. Tuesday night's game is one of 20 games this season the Isles are playing at the old Nassau Coliseum as they await their lease ending in Brooklyn and the construction of their new arena near Belmont Park. It also suddenly represents a clash between two of the hottest teams in the Eastern Conference as the Canes enter action having won four in a row and five of their previous six contests, while the Isles have won six consecutive and nine of their last ten games. With the Isles currently in a wild card spot and seven points ahead of Carolina, a win in this final matchup is critical for a Canes team in desperate need of closing ground.

Thought to be a rebuilding team after losing John Tavares, the Islanders have surprised many by remaining in the heat of the playoff race at the season's midpoint. Head coach Barry Trotz has brought an entirely different brand of play to an organization that was at the bottom of the league in goals against and shots against just a season ago. In a stunning turnaround, the Isles now sit atop the league with the fewest goals against (107). They are on pace to shave a remarkable 77 goals off their total from last season, mostly due to a complete overhaul in system that has paid immediate dividends.

The season has not been without health issues, as Andrew Ladd remains out (since mid-November) with a leg injury and defenseman Thomas Hickey is still healing from an upper body issue. It is unknown if Valtteri Filppula will be healthy enough to return to the lineup against the Canes on Tuesday, as he has been sidelined with an upper body injury.

While their scoring has gone down from the high-octane unit from last season, Mathew Barzal is still on a near point-per-game pace as he has become the offensive focal point in replacing Tavares. He has been helped this season by new captain Anders Lee and Josh Bailey who are each having fine seasons as well, and also by a full collection of role players who have added a physical presence to the Isles, but have chipped in just enough offensively to provide a potent enough attack. In net, the collective performance by Thomas Greiss and Robin Lehner has been wonderful, if unexpected. Their combined .922 save percentage and 2.41 goals

against average have provided just the kind of last line of defense that Trotz has come to expect in his defensive system.

If Carolina is going to jump back into possible contention, they must take advantage of their final shot against the Islanders. Solving Greiss has been an issue, as the Canes have been held to just one goal in each of the three previous contests this season (0-2-1).

What to Watch For

Expect Greiss back in net, as he has stymied the Canes thrice this season. Will Carolina counter with Petr Mrazek or Curtis McElhinney?

The Canes were out-physicaled in the previous meetings against an Islanders team and style that they were not expecting and less familiar with. With more film to review and experience against this version of the Isles, will the Canes be able to make the adjustments to get to the scoring areas?

Tampa Bay Lightning

Thursday, 7:30 p.m at Amalie Arena

Simply put, the Tampa Bay Lightning have been the best team in the NHL by a rather wide margin thus far in 2018-19. Despite coming off their first regulation defeat in over a month (yes, that is correct, November 27th was their last regulation loss before Saturday's defeat in San Jose), the Lightning are a scorching 32-8-2 on the season and a full 10 points ahead of the next challenger in what appears to be a President's Trophy season for the Bolts. In order for the Hurricanes to have any chance of knocking off the Lightning, they will have to put together the type of complete performance that they have not shown all too often this year.

What has been the catalyst for this sublime season in the Bay? Pure offensive firepower. Averaging over four goals per game, and leading the league with 176 total, the Bolts have simply vaporized opponents with a solid defense that immediately turns into a dangerous attack once the puck is retrieved. No team transitions better from defense to offense than do the Lightning, and with three players performing at better than a point-per-game pace (Nikita Kucherov - 69 points, Brayden Point - 54 points, and Steven Stamkos - 47 points), the offense can come from all facets of the lineup. Just as an example of their extraordinary depth, the Lightning have 19 different players who have achieved double digits in points. Compare that to 13 for the Hurricanes, and you can see how Carolina may be outgunned as they attempt to measure up to the Bolts.

On the other end of the ice, Andrei Vasilevskiy has proven that he is a netminder capable of leading a Stanley Cup



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contender. His terrific .920 save percentage in 22 games has shown this, but the ability of Louis Domingue to fill in at an acceptable level has allowed Vasilevskiy to get and hopefully remain healthy and fresh for a longer playoff run. Time will tell if this tremendous team is built to win a championship, and the trade deadline may see further additions, but expect this to be a team that is in the mix late into the Spring.

What to Watch For

How will the Canes go about attacking the Bolts? The pace and looseness of the game will be interesting to see, as the Lightning's transition from defense to offense typically gives them a chance to dictate pace better.

Staying out of the box is paramount for the Canes. The Lightning convert on the power play at a staggering 30% rate, the highest in the league.

Buffalo Sabres

Friday, 7:30 p.m. at PNC Arena

The return of Jeff Skinner to PNC Arena will take place on Friday night as the Buffalo Sabres and the Hurricanes get together for the first of three meetings. After pushing out to a very impressive 17-6-2 start, the Sabres have sputtered a bit since November 27th, turning in a 5-8-4 record since then to fall into a tie for the wild card spots with the Islanders at 50 points. Despite the recent struggles, the Sabres are poised to potentially end the eight-year postseason drought in Buffalo.

While the acquisition of Skinner is certainly the biggest move for the Sabres, due mostly to the spectacular 28 goals scored thus far by Skinner, the number one pick of the 2018 NHL draft, Rasmus Dahlin, has also been a boon to a team that struggled in keeping the puck out of their own net at times in the past. Those two, combined with the new goalie tandem of Carter Hutton (.917 save percentage) and Linus Ullmark (.924 save percentage in 15 games) have changed the dynamics of the roster.

A potentially key development currently is the current upper body ailment for captain and team points leader Jack Eichel. It is unknown if he will be re-entering the lineup this week, but in his absence, the effectiveness of Skinner could be somewhat minimized as the caliber of his linemates downgrades. Despite the great seasons from Eichel and Skinner, the Sabres have also received major contributions from Sam Reinhart (40 points) and from Dahlin and Rasmus Ristolainen on the blueline.

The one area that is of concern is the depth in scoring. A powerful top line has carried the scoring, but the Sabres sit at 21st in the league in goals because they have not been able to get consistent secondary scoring. For the Sabres to remain in contention, either improvement or acquisition of scoring depth is a key need. Unless they address that issue,

they may very well remain out in the bitter Western New York cold come playoff time.

What to Watch For

What will the crowd reaction be towards Skinner? And will he come back to haunt the Canes on Friday?

With the Canes in the back end of a back-to-back and the Sabres at the front end of one, what will the goalie matchup look like?

Nashville Predators

Sunday, 12:30 p.m. at PNC Arena

The Nashville Predators will head to Raleigh for their only trip of the season on Sunday for a matinee. With a bit of a banged up roster currently (Filip Forsberg, Colton Sissons and Kyle Turris are nursing ailments), the Preds have hit a bit of a rough patch in the past month as they cling to playoff position in the Central Division.

The key to success in the Music City this season has been solid scoring depth with moderate threats throughout the lineup, supplemented with a first class defensive core (Roman Josi, P.K. Subban, Matthias Ekholm and Ryan Ellis) and solid goaltending from Pekka Rinne and Juuse Saros. Currently second in goals against and 12th in goals for, the recipe for success has followed the path blazed by last season's President's Trophy-winning squad.

The Predators' attack, which has been dragged down to 12th in total goals from seven just a season ago, would expect to see some improvement that could put them in line with last year on the power play. Despite earning the man advantage at the second-highest rate in the NHL (10.2 opponent penalty minutes per game), the Preds have only converted at a 14.58% rate, good for 28th in the league. Compare that to 21.17% a season ago, and there is plenty of room for some regression to the mean for the Preds attack, if they continue to provide themselves with the power play opportunities at such a high rate.

For Carolina to have a chance at the two points on Sunday, they must convert the scoring opportunities they receive because the numbers indicate they may be fewer and further between against this tremendous defensive unit.

What to Watch For

Carolina has utilized a significant shuttle between Raleigh and Charlotte this season. If Jordan Staal cannot return this week from his concussion, will the Canes seek fresher legs for a matinee that will be the third game in four days for the team?

Both teams have defensemen that can activate offensively. Look for shots and opportunities for the D to join the rush. Which team will get the added offensive punch from the blueline that will make the difference?



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About Last Night: Finishing the First Half Strong

The Canes' fourth win in a row came thanks to converted power plays and defensemen scoring — two things they've lacked this season.

By Jake Crouse

After the ups and downs (mainly downs) for much of the first half of the season, the Carolina Hurricanes beat the Senators, 5-4, on the road to enter the second half on a four-game winning streak.

I know, I know — “they always get our hopes up then crush them,” “time is a flat circle,” etc., etc. But don't pretend like the brand of hockey that Carolina has played the last two weeks hasn't been exciting. You want goals? You got 'em: 17 of them in four games.

Do keep in mind that three of those wins during this streak have come against either the Flyers or the Senators. The win against Columbus was strong, but these two are teams the Canes should beat. Sure, even the easiest of wins aren't guaranteed (see: the Red Wings twice and a drubbing by the Blues). But heading into road games vs. the Islanders and Lightning, these are good steps, but the tests will likely come this week.

Here are a few things that stood out to me in Ottawa that the Canes can try to keep up:

First-period sprint

In the past four games, the Hurricanes have put up five goals in the first period. That may not sound like a lot, but consider that in the four games before this stretch, they put up exactly one goal in the first period.

There are many reasons to love first-period scoring, but a big part of it from my perspective is the fact that everyone is fresh. Take Brock McGinn. Many complaints leveled on him about not being to hang with Sebastian Aho and Teuvo Teravainen on the top line, understandably. But on his shorthanded goal off a turnover in the Canes' defensive zone, he was off in an instant and flew by the Senators.

It takes more and more to be able to finish those breaks with that kind of speed as the game wears on, especially if you're a grinder along the boards like McGinn. That takes a lot of energy from you, so use it well early.

Bring the power

The Hurricanes — yes, in fact, our Hurricanes, as hard as this may be to believe — went 100 percent on the power play on Sunday.

The first power play is a candidate for the Canes' best power play of the year, and it was only about 30 seconds long. But in that short time, the passing was incredibly crisp. There was a tic-tac-toe kind of chance near the crease before similarly quick passing set up Justin Faulk for his one-timer.

Then Justin Williams scored the game-winner on the power play, camping out in front of the net to allow Teravainen's shot to deflect off his leg and in. (Sidenote: Have to laugh at Zack “Definitely Not Mad” Smith's late shove.)

Defensemen attacking

Faulk's first goal was just one of three goals scored by three different Canes defensemen. It's the first time that's happened since 2009 (shoutout to Joni Pitkanen).

After Faulk came Slavin, the steady force of Carolina's defense. Slavin said in the intermission interview after the goal that he wasn't necessarily trying to just net the goal, but rather he was thinking more about the guys who could score on a rebound. He ended up putting it past Marcus Hogberg with a shot that was sharp and ended up taking Ottawa's starter out of the game.

Mr. Goal Streak netted the third by a defenseman. Dougie Hamilton hasn't been exactly golden since the trade brought him over, but now he's at six goals, which is pretty on par with his average, and building a ton of confidence. He also looks markedly more relaxed, and told Michael Smith after the game that he was struggling with an injury, now healed, that he suffered back in November. He also made his mark in the franchise record book with his third straight (see above tweet thread from NHL PR), a nice wrister that beat the glove of Anders Nilsson.

(And as Brett pointed out, though, he's gone on this streak despite season-low ice times during the stretch — quite odd.)

As we get into the thick of tougher opponents with stronger defenses, it may be necessary for the Canes blueliners to stay back a bit to prevent rushes rather than attack like they did in Ottawa. However, part of me wants to see that same “shoot first, recover later” mentality that helped the Canes pull off some big wins to start the year.



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Weekly Report: Jan. 7, 2019

Written by Nicholas Niedzielski

The Checkers started off 2019 with an impressive weekend sweep through Canada to remain atop the AHL standings.

Week in Review

Team Statistics

Overall record

27-8-3

Home record

10-3-1

Road record

17-5-2

Last week's record

3-0-1

Last 10 games

6-2-2

Division Standings

1st

Conference Standings

1st

League Standings

1st

Checkers 4, Toronto 5 (OT)

Charlotte's New Year's Eve matinee started out rough, with Toronto building a towering 4-1 lead through the first 20 minutes of play. The Checkers pushed back, however, chipping away with goals midway through the second and third periods before Greg McKegg knotted the contest late in the final frame with his second goal of the night to help the visitors force overtime and steal a point. But it was the Marlies who got the last laugh in the extra frame, with Chris Mueller finding the back of the net two minutes in to give Toronto a 5-4 victory. Full recap

Checkers 4, Belleville 1

The Checkers started 2019 with a bang, handing the Senators a lopsided loss on home ice. Belleville cut Charlotte's two-goal advantage in half midway through regulation, but tallies from Aleksi Saarela late in the middle frame and Nicolas Roy early in the second clinched the win for the visitors. Full recap

Checkers 6, Belleville 3

The next night's rematch was a wild one, with both teams scoring within the first 35 seconds of regulation and then scoring again minutes later, making it a 2-2 contest before the five-minute mark. Things tilted the visitors' way from there, though, as Charlotte notched three unanswered goals to blow the game wide open. Then an empty netter from Julien Gauthier, his second goal of the game, clinched the win for Scott Darling and the Checkers. Full recap

Checkers 5, Toronto 0

The Checkers wrapped up a busy three-in-three weekend with a return to Toronto to face the defending champs. The visitors struck early, building up a three-goal lead after one period, and kept rolling to a decisive 5-0 victory. Alex Nedeljkovic denied all 34 shots he faced and picked up his first shutout of the season. Full recap

Three Stars Of The Week

3rd Star

Alex Nedeljkovic

2-0-0, 1 SO, 1.79 GAA, .949 SV%

2nd Star

Julien Gauthier

4g, 0a

1st Star

Andrew Poturalski

2g, 5a

Notables

HALFWAY THERE

Sunday's win over Toronto was the 38th game for Charlotte, marking the halfway point of the 76-game season. The 57 points that the Checkers have racked up are the most through 38 games in franchise history, eight more than the 2012-13 campaign that previously held the record. The Checkers are the ninth AHL team since the 2008-09 season to record at least 57 points through the first 38 games.

BUSY WEEKEND

The Checkers completed their third of four three-in-threes over this past weekend, going 3-0-0 over two games in Belleville and one in Toronto. That marks the fourth time in franchise history that the team has pulled off a perfect three-



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in-three and the first time since 2013. The Checkers are now 5-4-0 in three-in-threes this season, having gone 1-2-0 in each of the first two instances.

This weekend also wrapped up the Checkers' lone trip north of the border, with Charlotte logging a 4-1-1 record on the road in Canada.

NED SAYS NO

Alex Nedeljkovic took the crease for two of the three contests over the weekend and turned in a pair of stellar performances. The netminder stopped 64 of the 65 shots he faced in wins over Belleville and Toronto, including picking up his first shutout of the season against the defending Calder Cup champions. That marked his seventh shutout in a Checkers sweater, moving him into a tie with Justin Peters and John Muse for the most in franchise history.

POTTING POINTS

Andrew Poturalski continues to tear up the scoresheet, recording five points over the three-game weekend. The forward has racked up 18 points over his last 15 games and has three multi-point games in his last four.

Poturalski leads the Checkers in goals, assists and points, holding a lead of four, five and nine over his next-ranked teammate, respectively.

GEEKIE LIGHTS IT UP

After a stretch that saw him record just one assist in 15 games, Morgan Geekie has been an offensive force as of late. The rookie picked up three points over the weekend to give him 10 points in his last 10 games.

Geekie's biggest weapon through the first half of his rookie campaign has been his shot – the forward leads all of the AHL in shooting percentage – but he has come into his own as a playmaker over his recent productive streak. Geekie has four assists over the last six games, the same he had through the first 29 contests.

DEPTH SCORING

After a big offensive weekend, the Checkers now have six skaters with double-digit goal totals, more than any other team in the AHL.

NECAS DOESN'T MISS A BEAT

Despite missing six games while representing the Czech Republic at the World Junior Championships, Martin Necas slipped back into the Checkers' lineup with ease this weekend. The 19-year-old recorded a goal and an assist in each of Charlotte's wins on Saturday and Sunday, running his point total to 26 (9g, 17a) through just 28 games. Necas now ranks fourth among AHL rookies in scoring despite having played between one and six games fewer than the players ahead of him.

Ranks

Andrew Poturalski is tied for 5th in the AHL in scoring (38), tied for 7th in assists (23), tied for second in game-winning goals (5) and tied for the league lead in overtime-winning goals (2)

Dan Renouf ranks fifth in the AHL in penalty minutes (76)

Saku Maenalanen is tied for the league lead in shorthanded goals (3) and points (4)

Morgan Geekie leads the AHL in shooting percentage (29.7)

Alex Nedeljkovic leads the league in wins (17) and minutes (1435:42) and ranks fourth in saves (593)

Martin Necas ranks fourth among AHL rookies in scoring (26) and is tied for seventh in assists (17)

Jake Bean leads all rookie defensemen and is tied for 10th overall in scoring (23), is tied for the rookie lead and tied for ninth overall in assists (18) and is tied for fifth among rookies blue liners in goals (5)

Trevor Carrick ranks second among league defensemen in game-winning goals (4) and is tied for third in power-play assists (10)

Roland McKeown ranks fifth among AHL blue liners and is tied for seventh overall in plus-minus (+16)

INJURIES

Josiah Didier - Missed 22 games starting 11/17

Spencer Smallman - Missed 25 games starting 11/11

Transactions

Incoming

Jan. 4: (D) Haydn Fleury - Assigned from Carolina (NHL)

Jan. 4: (C) Martin Necas - Returned from World Juniors

Jan. 1: (D) Bobby Sanguinetti - Signed to AHL contract

Jan. 1: (C) Janne Kuokkanen - Assigned from Carolina (NHL)

Outgoing

Jan. 4: (C) Greg McKeegg - Recalled by Carolina (NHL)

Jan. 1: (D) Josh Wesley - Assigned to Florida (ECHL)

Jan. 1: (RW) Saku Maenalanen - Recalled by Carolina (NHL)

CATEGORY	RECORD	AHL RANK	LAST WEEK
Power play	20.5%	10th	t-9th
Penalty kill	84.0%	7th	7th
Goals per game	3.50	t-8th	11th
Shots per game	29.55	17th	t-16th
Goals allowed per game	2.74	4th	t-3rd
Shots allowed per game	27.21	5th	4th



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Penalty minutes per game	14.71	7th	6th	Shorthanded goals	Saku Maenalanen (3), Patrick Brown, Nicolas Roy (1)
LEADERS				Game-winning goals	Andrew Poturalski (5), Nicolas Roy, Trevor Carrick (4)
CATEGORY	LEADER(S)			Shots on goal	Alexi Saarela (102), Andrew Poturalski (93), Nicolas Roy (82)
Points	Andrew Poturalski (38), Janne Kuokkanen (29), Aleksii Saarela (27)			Penalty minutes	Dan Renouf (76), Trevor Carrick (56), Julien Gauthier (43)
Goals	Andrew Poturalski (15), Five tied (11)			Plus/minus	Roland McKeown (+16), Martin Necas (+11), Aleksii Saarela (10)
Assists	Andrew Poturalski (23), Janne Kuokkanen, Jake Bean (18)			Wins	Alex Nedeljkovic (17)
Power play goals	Janne Kuokkanen (6), Nicolas Roy, Julien Gauthier (4)			Goals-against average	Alex Nedeljkovic (2.72)
				Save percentage	Alex Nedeljkovic (.901)

TODAY'S LINKS

- <https://theathletic.com/752568/2019/01/07/hurricanes-midseason-awards-mvp-most-interesting-player-top-teeth-rattling-hitter-and-more/>
- <https://theathletic.com/753896/2019/01/07/nhl-trade-big-board-20-players-who-could-move-before-the-deadline/>
- <https://www.nhl.com/hurricanes/news/gameday-preview-carolina-hurricanes-new-york-islanders/c-303667528>
- <https://www.nhl.com/news/carolina-hurricanes-sebastian-aho-teuvo-teravainen-make-push-for-last-men-in-all-star-game/c-303658498>
- <https://www.sportsnet.ca/hockey/nhl/hurricanes-deal-dougie-hamilton-look-enter-trade-market/>
- <https://nhl.nbcports.com/2019/01/07/pht-power-rankings-reality-strikes-anaheim-ducks/>
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- <https://www.canescountry.com/2019/1/8/18173295/carolina-hurricanes-new-york-islanders-game-preview-statistics-notes-links>
- <https://www.canescountry.com/2019/1/7/18171937/behind-enemy-lines-preview-new-york-islanders-tampa-bay-lightning-buffalo-sabres-nashville-predators>
- <https://www.canescountry.com/2019/1/7/18171544/about-last-night-finishing-the-first-half-strong-carolina-hurricanes-ottawa-senators-mcginns-dougie>
- <http://gocheckers.com/articles/features/weekly-report-jan-7-2019>



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SportScan

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

1124875 Carolina Hurricanes

Hurricanes midseason awards: MVP, most interesting player, top teeth-rattling hitter and more

By Sara Civian Jan 7, 2019

It's been a sometimes fun, sometimes frustrating rollercoaster of a season for the Carolina Hurricanes. Four games ago their losing record and playoff hopes were bleak, but now they're riding their biggest win-streak since the first games of the season and anything could happen.

The road ahead won't be easy — it features the Islanders (who the Canes just can't seem to beat), the scorching hot Lightning, the Sabres, Predators and Rangers. Before we move on to that, let's take a look back at the first half of the season via individual player awards.

Sebastian Aho: MVP

Turns out the people's All-Star can handle first-line center responsibilities after all.

As for his recent prowess on the penalty kill, including two shorthanded goals?

ASKED AHO IF HE'S BEEN WORKING ON THE PK "YOU KNOW...NOT REALLY" *LAUGHS* #SOMETIMESITBELIKETHAT

— SARA CIV (@SARACIVIAN) DECEMBER 8, 2018

Clark Bishop: The Mario Lemieux award for best first goal.

It certainly didn't come on the first shot of his first shift, but 11 NHL games deep and his equalizer at Anaheim is still one for the grandkids.

"Was that a goal?"

Micheal Ferland: The "teeth-rattling hit of the game" award for making sure Dr. Thomas Long gets his money's worth out of that sponsorship.

There's a Raleigh dentist who sponsors the biggest hit of the game on each broadcast and you have to think he's a Micheal Ferland superfan at this point.

Calvin de Haan (105 hits) became the first Hurricane to reach 100 hits, but that's because Ferland missed time with a concussion. He got to 100 last game, and at 12 goals and 101 hits he's simply provided the exact physicality and killer instinct the Hurricanes were missing.

Warren Foegele: Least likely to sing "Breakaway" by Kelly Clarkson at karaoke.

In all seriousness, Foegele is tied for fifth in the league with 20 penalties drawn per Corsica Hockey. Only Aleksander Barkov (28), Nathan MacKinnon (24), David Pastrnak (23) and Johnny Gaudreau (21) have more. That's insane when you consider those are bona fide star players playing significantly more minutes with more targets on their backs (aka more opportunities to force opponents covering them to mess up). Not bad for a rookie who just got a scoring monkey off his back.

Saku Maenalanen: The Team Finland award for "Wow, another difficult Hurricane name that's actually worth memorizing."

Maenalanen's speed, size and work along the boards have been so noticeable in his four NHL games that he's making a case for an extended stint in Raleigh despite an abundance of fourth-line options.

Jordan Martinook: Most interesting player.

Not only did Martinook net his first career hat trick in a thriller for the Canes, but he's wearing a lot of unexpected hats. Andrei Svechnikov's mentor, Team Grit ambassador, near double-digit goal-scorer (9). He seems like an important voice in the locker room for a team trying to find a new, winning identity with younger stars.

Greg McKeeg: The Greg McKeeg award for being named Greg McKeeg and scoring a goal and an assist on \$5 Bud Light night in your Hurricanes debut.

Andrei Svechnikov: The DJ Pauly D award for leading the league in fist pumps.

He was never going to win the Calder with a generational talent in Elias Pettersson, and guess what? That's absolutely fine. No one should care. He and his goal celebration are exactly what this Canes team needed him to be and more.

Lucas Wallmark: The Murphy's Law award for worst luck imaginable.

As Murphy's Law suggests, anything that can go wrong has been going wrong for Lucas Wallmark this season. He's been at the top of the league's expected goals stat despite only cashing in on three of his 83 shots. He gets quality chances so it's not the shooting selection, it's genuinely bad luck with him. He's leading the entire league right now with a 66.02 expected goals percentage at 5v5.

Don't let that distract you from his matchup prowess, though. He routinely matches up against the best lines in the NHL — most noticeable to me in Jordan Staal's absence in general and against Patrice Bergeron in the Hurricanes' Whalers Night win.

Justin Williams: The Jaromir Jagr lifetime achievement "age is just a number" trophy.

Not only is Justin Williams still Actually Good at 37, but I'd venture at least half of the Hurricanes' power play goals so far (five of which are his) wouldn't have gone in without his net-front presence. He's third on the team in overall points with nine goals and 17 assists. We talk about his influence in the locker room — which actually does matter — but we should also talk about how Actually Good he is.

And, he created the Storm Surge! Old people hate that!

Calvin de Haan: The social media Purple Heart for shutting down ridiculous trade proposals.

Dougie Hamilton: The spring break award for insane shot streak.

It's time for everyone's favorite stat: Dougie Hamilton has recorded at least one shot on goal in 206 consecutive games, the longest streak in the NHL. He's been putting it to good use lately, with goals in three consecutive games. Historically, it takes him a while to kick into gear on a new team, so here we go.



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Jacob Slavin: The GEICO award for being so good and being signed for such a long time that your owner has absolutely no interest in drafting early-round defensemen.

Curtis McElhinney: Biggest surprise.

I mean, who among us expected this? It was a belief that all this team needed was league average goaltending. Now the Hurricanes have it, via a journeyman getting a shot and Petr Mrazek getting his one-year, prove-yourself shot. Will the rest of the team make it count?

Petr Mrazek: Best "I have no idea what's going on here, but I think I like it" play.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.08.2019

1124955 New York Islanders

Hot streak is sign of how much has changed for Islanders

By Brett Cyrgalis January 7, 2019 | 10:34PM

There it was, that word that is so overused it has started to lose meaning. But the most encouraging thing for the Islanders is not just that they're the hottest team in the league but that the culture around the organization is changing — if not changed for good.

"The team, I think they're believing," coach Barry Trotz said after Monday's practice, his club having won six in a row and nine of 10 heading into Tuesday night's Coliseum match against the Hurricanes. "Let's stay current, if you will. Let's stay in the moment. And we have. I think for the most part, they believe they can win every game or go into every game and find a way to win. That's part of creating a winning culture. That's starting to take roots."

The game against Carolina will be the official halfway mark of the season, and the Islanders (23-13-4) were sitting in a wild-card position — either first or second, depending on the outcome of the Canadiens game with the Wild on Monday night. It should make for an interesting home-and-home with the Rangers this week, as well.

The turnaround has been drastic. Everyone knew Trotz was a great coach, having just won a Stanley Cup with the Capitals. But it would have been hard to predict him in the conversation for a mid-season Jack Adams Award. And everyone knew team president Lou Lamoriello ran a tight ship. But it would have been hard to predict just how precisely the players have taken to his buttoned-up leadership.

It has led to a team that plays systemically sound hockey and is committed just about every night. That is, except for Saturday night in St. Louis, when a 4-3 win over the Blues was stolen by way of another terrific performance from emerging No. 1 goalie Robin Lehner.

"I felt like we should have had ski masks getting on the plane," Trotz said. "But that's going to happen in this league. That's why your goaltender can be your difference-maker."

Lehner was named the league's No. 3 star of the week, having won all three games he started while putting up a 1.99 goals-against average and a .935 save percentage. The 27-year-old Swede has won seven straight decisions and has allowed 13 goals over his last 10 games, with a 1.34 goals-against average and .952 save percentage during that stretch.

"Team does good and individual success happens also," Lehner said. "I'm just happy we're winning right now, to be honest. Every win right now feels incredible, so we just have to keep winning."

Robin Lehner

Robin LehnerAnthony J. Causi

Lehner has been Lamoriello's biggest success story, having signed the veteran to a one-year, \$1.5 million deal this summer. Lehner was open about having dealt with mental health issues and substance abuse in his past, but he got help and is now joined with Thomas Greiss to give the Islanders some much-needed stability in nets. Their combined five-on-five save percentage of .935 is the third-best in the league.

"Going into the season, we didn't know where our goaltending would be," Trotz said. "We knew Robin, all the issues that he had in terms of what he was dealing with, we knew he could play. We knew both goaltenders could play, but could they play at a top level? And they have for us. Both of them. That's given us a chance most nights."

Defenseman Devon Toews has come up and been the stud they expected, while Josh Ho-Sang let his talent do the talking rather than his mouth once he got up here. Mat Barzal followed up his Calder Trophy-winning season with a deserved All-Star nod, while Josh Bailey is showing he was not just a product of being John Tavares' linemate.

Ah, but who remembers Tavares anyway? This team has moved on in as big a way as possible — through a new culture that is currently producing wins by the bushel.

"I think we're dealing with it — and it's my job to keep us current and realistic about how hard you have to work," Trotz said. "Winning is not easy."

Just so happens that right now, his team is making the opposite look true.

New York Post LOADED: 01.08.2019

1124956 New York Islanders

Islanders arena developers urged to hire local

By Jesse Coburn

Updated January 7, 2019 8:12 PM

Hempstead Town Supervisor Laura Gillen and local labor leaders appealed on Monday to the developers behind the proposed Islanders arena at Belmont Park to employ local residents in the thousands of temporary and permanent jobs that the \$1.2 billion project is expected to generate.

Some 12,000 construction jobs and 3,000 permanent jobs could be needed to build and run the 19,000-seat arena and the surrounding retail development — jobs that could be a boon to local trade workers and nearby residents seeking employment, Gillen said.

"We want to make sure that Long Islanders and people who know our communities best and take pride in our community are doing the work," she said.

"When we empower the people who live here to directly shape their future, while putting money into the communities that will live with this project, we create stronger families and brighter futures for our taxpayers."

Gillen, Long Island Federation of Labor president John Durso and Nassau-Suffolk Building Trades Council president Matthew Aracich called on New York Arena Partners, the Islanders' development team, to enter into a project labor agreement that would ensure that local union laborers are hired on the project.



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Representatives of New York Arena Partners and the Islanders did not respond to requests for comment.

In addition to the arena, the proposal calls for 435,000 square feet of retail space and a 250-room hotel on the state-owned land near Hempstead Turnpike and the Cross Island Parkway.

Public hearings on the environmental impact of the project will be held for three days beginning Tuesday.

Durso said striking a deal with local labor unions would help the massive development effort stay on schedule and within its budget.

"With a project labor agreement, this job will get done faster, better," he said.

Aracich said the project offers the chance in particular to attract workers from disadvantaged communities and from Long Island's large veterans population.

"There's a lot of opportunity for everybody here," he said.

Gillen noted that the developers behind the Nassau Hub project promised in November to sign a project labor agreement.

Asked whether she has spoken to the arena project's backers directly about hiring local labor, Gillen said she had "discussed it very briefly" with one of the developers, but she declined to say whether they have expressed support for the idea.

The public hearings will be held at the Elmont Memorial Library, 700 Hempstead Tpke., on Tuesday at 6 p.m., Wednesday at 4 and 6:30 p.m. and on Thursday at 6 p.m., according to the website of the Empire State Development Corporation.

Newsday LOADED: LOADED: 01.08.2019

1124957 New York Islanders

Islanders going for seven wins in a row for first time in 29 years

By Brian Heyman

Special to Newsday

Updated January 7, 2019 10:19 PM

Al Arbour was serving in his second stint behind the Islanders' bench in the 1989-90 season. They were starting to sizzle on the ice around this time, heading for a nine-game winning streak.

It seems like forever ago. Now the Islanders have a chance for their first single-season seven-game winning streak since then — 29 years later. They will face Carolina on Tuesday night at NYCB Live's Nassau Coliseum.

At the start of the season, expectations were not riding high.

"Certainly, you're never satisfied, no matter who you are," team president and general manager Lou Lamoriello said Monday. "But if I could have written down on a piece of paper, or somebody wrote [down on] a piece of paper and said you'd be where you are today, would you sign here, you'd sign."

The Islanders (23-13-4, 50 points) hold the Eastern Conference's first wild card. "I think, for the most part, they believe that we can win every game," coach Barry Trotz said.

They are in rare territory, and relishing it.

"It's one of those things where we haven't really strung a streak like this together very often," Anders Lee said after practice at Northwell Health Ice Center. "But we're looking at it as just another game. We want to keep it going just for the purposes of where we want to go in the season and keep climbing in the standings."

They had to climb out of a two-goal hole Saturday night in St. Louis. Trotz wasn't happy with the effort during the first two periods, but they stole one behind goalie Robin Lehner.

"I felt like we should have ski masks to get on the plane," Trotz said.

Overall, they're on an NHL-best 9-1 run. As Matt Martin put it: "Guys are really invested in each other and doing the right things on the ice."

Lehner has exceeded expectations. He has allowed only 13 goals in his last 10 appearances and led the league in goals-against average at 2.18 after Sunday's play. He was named the NHL's third star of the week Monday.

"The team does good, individual success happens also," Lehner said. "I'm just happy we're winning right now, to be honest."

Even with all this winning, the Islanders are in fourth in the Metropolitan Division, one point behind Columbus, two behind second-place Pittsburgh and four behind first-place Washington.

"We go on this great stretch and we don't necessarily gain ground as much as you'd think, right?" Lee said. "So it just goes to show how important every night is."

Notes & quotes: This will be Martin's 600th NHL game. The left wing called it "pretty special for myself and my family. Hopefully I'll have many more in the tank." . . . Valtteri Filppula (IR, upper body) practiced. Trotz will decide on Tuesday if the center will play . . . Trotz has decided on his goalie, but he wasn't saying. Lehner has won a career-high seven straight. Thomas Greiss, though, stopped 109 of 112 shots in going 3-0 against Carolina in October and November.

Newsday LOADED: LOADED: 01.08.2019

1125008 Tampa Bay Lightning

What do top hockey teams have in common? Chemistry and skill, for starters

By Nick Kelly

TAMPA — In case you haven't heard, the team that calls Amalie Arena home is pretty darn good.

The Lightning didn't lose a game in regulation in December. It leads the rest of the NHL in the standings by 10 points entering Monday. No injury to a significant player has made this talented Lightning team stumble or stall.

Most of the players in the Lightning's dressing room will tell you this is the best team of which they have been a part.

This isn't the only extremely successful team many of these skaters have played for, though. Far from it. After practice Monday, the Times asked several players the best team they have played for is, not including this year's Lightning team, and how that team compared with the Lightning team sprinting toward the President's Trophy.

Forwards Ondrej Palat, Tyler Johnson and Alex Killorn didn't have to think long. Their answer: the 2012 Norfolk Admirals. Yes, the AHL team that Lightning coach Jon Cooper led to 28 consecutive wins during the regular season and an eventual Calder Cup Trophy.



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Said Johnson: "We were firing on all cylinders. Everyone was working well together."

Said Killorn: "It had the feeling when we went on this run where we just felt like we couldn't lose, but we did it for two months."

Killorn added that they never felt as if they were out of any game, no matter the deficit.

RELATED: J.T. Miller returns to practice

Sound familiar? It should. Killorn said this Lightning team has the same mindset. The biggest difference comes in the versatility of players, if you ask Johnson.

"We had our roles and we knew exactly what we were going to do," Johnson said. "Everyone was just playing really good hockey and doing everything almost perfect. I think that way is a little different where you couldn't necessarily put people in different situations and do different things in Norfolk. At the same time, we knew exactly what we were going to do. Whereas here, really you can play in any spot and the team just keeps going."

The other difference that Johnson noted: Skill.

Forward Yannick Gourde also mentioned skill as the biggest difference between this year's Lightning team and his pick for other best team, the 2016-17 Syracuse Crunch.

"But grittier probably that year," Gourde said.

The Crunch lost in the finals to Grand Rapids.

That same year, rookie defenseman Erik Cernak was busy winning an OHL championship with the Erie Otters.

"We had a really good offense and skilled guys," Cernak said. "I think that is something similar."

That same formula helped Brayden Point and Team Canada during his first World Juniors tournament. It was an easy pick for Point. He couldn't recall that team trailing all tournament.

The biggest similarity to this Lightning team: An abundance of skill.

"I think both teams played a fast-paced, creative game," Point said. "I think that's what we do here."

NICK KELLY

Tampa Bay Times LOADED: 01.08.2019

1125009 Tampa Bay Lightning

Lightning journal: J.T. Miller returns to practice

By Nick Kelly

TAMPA — For the first time in 2019, J.T. Miller practiced with the Lightning.

Wearing a red no-contact sweater, Miller took part in a full team practice Monday for the first time since being placed on injured reserve Dec. 29. He has not played since sustaining an upper-body injury against Philadelphia on Dec. 27.

After practice, Miller said he is not sure how close he is to returning. "But I am feeling better every day," he said.

Monday was not Miller's first time stepping on the ice since the injury. He skated twice over the past three days.

"Skating pretty much as hard as I can," Miller said. "I just have to see how the pain is and kind of go from here."

Miller remains week-to-week, Lightning assistant coach Derek Lalonde said. He is, however, ahead of schedule.

"A lot of optimism with the way the last couple of skates have gone," Lalonde said.

The Lightning is not going to rush him back. There's no need. The team's forward depth remains strong. Adam Erne, who has played in 28 games, scored two goals in the third period to lead the Lightning to a win over the Canadiens on Dec. 29.

The Lightning wouldn't mind having Miller back, though. He has scored seven goals and tallied 19 assists this season.

"The team is playing really well," Miller said. I don't want to miss any time, but obviously, I have to make sure I am ready when I come back."

Coburn full participant in practice

D Braydon Coburn missed Saturday's game against San Jose with an upper-body injury, but he is not expected to miss much more time. He wore a normal practice sweater Monday as a full participant.

Coburn should be available for Tuesday's game vs. Columbus, Lalonde said.

"He is probably still day-to-day," Lalonde said. "I think they are going to see how he reacted from practice today."

Even if Coburn can't go, the Lightning still has six healthy defensemen in Victor Hedman, Anton Stralman, Ryan McDonagh, Erik Cernak, Dan Girardi Mikhail Sergachev. If Coburn is available, the Lightning will have to continue its nightly rotation of third-pair defensemen. Slater Koekoek remains in AHL Syracuse on a conditioning assignment.

New challenges at home

San Jose snapping Tampa Bay's 16-game point streak was not the way the Lightning wanted to cap its West Coast road trip. But the actual loss at face value meant little more than the Lightning missing out on two points like any other loss.

The Lightning, however, has to make sure any emotional letdown from the streak ending does not linger.

"There was a sense of urgency," Lalonde said. "Let's keep this going. I think there's a little human nature. Now that you get through that stretch, I think it's natural that there could be a letdown to it. The next game is a big challenge."

Not to mention, the first game back after long road trips can also present challenges. It's why Lightning coach Jon Cooper put together a quick, energetic practice, as Lalonde described it.

"I give the guys credit today," Lalonde said. "They had a little more energy than I would have expected."

Special lunch after practice

After the energetic practice Monday, the Lightning played host to a lunch for members of the military at Amalie Arena alongside Lightning players. The Lightning hopes to make it an annual event.

NICK KELLY

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1124868 Buffalo Sabres

Jack Eichel returns to Sabres practice, 'not a rush' to play

Jason Wolf | Published Mon, Jan 7, 2019

Jack Eichel returned to practice on a limited basis Monday after missing the previous two games with what's listed as an upper-body injury, raising the possibility the Buffalo Sabres' captain returns to the lineup for Tuesday night's game against the New Jersey Devils at KeyBank Center.

Whether that's likely is another matter.

"I'm a competitive guy," Eichel said. "I like to be out there every night and it kills me to not be out there. It kills me not to be playing. It kills me not to be hanging out with these guys every day and competing.

"I think the hardest part about it is just the mental aspect, and we've talked about this before the last few years, just not being able to get out there and do it. But it feels good to practice today. It feels good to make strides. I felt good. I'm feeling like myself again. So like I said, just want to try and see what (Tuesday) brings."

Eichel was absent from the ice for the first 20 minutes of practice, and once he skated onto the ice, he did not join a line. He participated in some team drills and spent some time with the top power play unit.

Sabres coach Phil Housley declined to provide much detail on Eichel's timetable but seemed optimistic about his progress.

"Him just coming back and getting the OK to get into practice was a good sign," Housley said, "so we'll know more (Tuesday) on that."

While Eichel is frustrated to miss time, he made it clear there's no rush for him to return.

"I think at this point it's sort of just taking it every day, seeing how I feel," Eichel said. "Obviously, it's not a rush. You don't want to put yourself in a bad position. You want to make sure you're comfortable in every situation that you put yourself in, myself and the team, so I think that's kind of been where it's at now. Just seeing how we are each day, trying to progress.

"I think if you can just get a little better every day, I think it's a positive. For me, it's been that sort of thing. Everything I can do to try and get back and help the team as soon as possible, I want to do. But with that being said, obviously you don't want to rush things and put yourself behind."

Vladimir Sobotka centered the top line Monday, alongside Jeff Skinner and Tage Thompson.

The Sabres have used Evan Rodrigues, Casey Mittelstadt and Sobotka to center the top line since Eichel was injured. The injury first surfaced when Eichel took a maintenance day from practice on Dec. 30, and he skated just four shifts in a home loss to the New York Islanders on New Year's Eve before leaving the game.

"I think anytime you lose a big piece, it's an opportunity for guys to step up and guys get some more opportunity to sort of show what they can do," Skinner said. "I think that's just part of being on a team. ... Teams run into injuries and guys have to respond. It's a long season. It's going to happen with the lineup and you just have to have guys step up."

Mittelstadt said there's no way to adequately replace Eichel's production.

"He's a big part of our engine, obviously," Mittelstadt said. "He does a lot for us and makes a lot of plays, one of the best players in the league. You can't really replace him. You've just got to get some scoring from everyone overall, and everyone's got to do their job a little bit better. That's what it comes down to."

Housley said there's at least some silver lining to Eichel's absence, in that it means more playing time and experience for other players. He pointed to the team's 4-3 victory against Florida on Thursday.

"I think you saw the result against Florida," Housley said. "If we play our team game, even when Jack's in the lineup, we have to play a team game. Some guys stepped up and played more minutes, more meaningful minutes with his absence. We know that, even in Boston, we looked really good at times. And that's a very good team. They're fighting for the same thing we are.

"The minutes are going to be spread around. There's going to be guys in different seats on the bus. But when we do play a meaningful 60-minute team game, we're going to have team success."

As for what Housley is looking for once Eichel returns?

"I think just getting back to his game," Housley said. "I loved the way he was playing the 200-foot game before this absence of him, whether it was D-zone coverage and his awareness at killing plays. But the way he was attacking, coming out of our end through the neutral zone, using his speed, and he was heavy down low in the offensive zone. He's able to protect pucks and fend guys off him and then get that separation he needs to get his eyes up and to make a play. I think just playing a solid 200-foot game."

Eichel said the team needs to play with "desperation" to succeed, regardless of whether he plays.

"Obviously, you need that desperation with or without me in the lineup," Eichel said. "Whoever is in the lineup at that time, you can see how tight of checking the games have become, and it's that second half of the year. Everyone's trying to push towards a spot, so I think for us it's just about every day coming in and trying to get better work and preparing ourselves for the next day.

"There's so many ups and downs in an NHL season, it's important for us to try and stay even-keeled and try to narrow our focus as much as we can, and for the group in here, obviously it's been pretty positive for us. The times where we've played desperate, we've respected the opponent, we've respected our own end, tried to keep the puck out of our end, and obviously worked to get in their zone and get the puck behind their goaltender. It's not an easy league to score in by any means.

"It's good that guys are chipping in. I guess you could say we need more from everyone every night, because every team is bringing more every night. It's getting more and more competitive, and that's just how the season goes. As the season amps up, I think we've got to amp ourselves up, too. I think we're ready for the challenge. We've just got to commit to it."

Player updates

Sabres forward Zemgus Girgensons returned to practice Monday. He's been listed as week to week with an upper body injury since least playing against St. Louis on Dec. 27.

His availability for Tuesday has not yet been determined.

Girgensons skated on the third line with Mittelstadt and C.J. Smith.

Top-line forward Sam Reinhart is sick, Housley said, explaining his absence from Monday's practice. Reinhart missed the team's Skills Challenge on Sunday after playing 19:14 over 22 shifts against Boston on Saturday.

Defenseman Zach Bogosian received a maintenance day, Housley said.

Glotov to All-Star Game

Cincinnati forward Vasily Glotov, the Sabres' seventh-round pick in 2017, has been named to the CCM/ECHL All-Star Classic and will represent the Western Conference. The game is at 7 p.m. Jan. 21 and will air on NHL Network.



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Glotov, in his first full pro season, has seven goals and 16 assists in 31 games for the Cyclones this season. He appeared in six games at the end of last season between Cincinnati and Rochester.

Story topics: Buffalo Sabres/ Jack Eichel/ Sam Reinhart

Buffalo News LOADED: 01.08.2019

1124869 Buffalo Sabres

Jack Eichel joins practice, Sam Reinhart out for Sabres

By Staff | Published Mon, Jan 7, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres were on the ice Monday for practice and there was no sign of Jack Eichel or Sam Reinhart in the early going, but Eichel later joined the team.

Eichel has missed the last two games with an upper-body injury. Coach Phil Housley said Eichel practicing was "a good sign" but said he would know more Tuesday in advance of the Sabres game against the New Jersey Devils.

Reinhart is sick, Housley said. He did not practice or participate in the Skills Challenge on Sunday, but played 19:14 over 22 shifts against the Bruins on Saturday night in TD Garden.

Zemgus Girgensons returned to practice. He had been listed as week to week with an upper body injury. Girgensons' status for Tuesday will be determined.

Zach Bogosian did not practice on a maintenance day.

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1124870 Buffalo Sabres

Victor Olofsson solidifies himself as one of Sabres' top prospects

Bill Hoppe | Published Mon, Jan 7, 2019

ROCHESTER – Things have a way of evening out in hockey. So when Sabres prospect Victor Olofsson scored five goals in his first six American Hockey League games with the Americans, few expected he would continue that torrid production.

"Sometimes it's hard to keep that pace up," Olofsson said last week.

But Olofsson, 23, roared into November. By the 11-game mark, the Swedish winger compiled six goals and 14 points. He even briefly led the AHL in scoring.

"I felt like I was getting that extra bounce," said Olofsson, whose 27 goals led the Swedish Hockey League last season.

That extra bounce hasn't materialized as much recently. Opponents have started paying closer attention to Olofsson, who possesses a lethal shot. He's also still adjusting to having less time and space to operate on the smaller North American ice surface.

"(He) has slowed in production somewhat due to people keying on him plus the adjustment phase," a pro scout who has watched Olofsson regularly this season said.

Olofsson has an eight-game goal drought and just two scores in the last 14 contests.

Of course, with 10 goals and 30 points overall, Olofsson's first AHL campaign has been stellar. He recorded six assists in four games before going pointless over the weekend.

Through 33 outings, Olofsson has solidified his place as one of the Sabres' top prospects.

"He's a big-time player," Amerks coach Chris Taylor said. "He wants to have the puck on his stick."

Olofsson, a seventh-round pick in 2014, 181st overall, seems destined to be recalled in the future. So far, the Sabres have only summoned one forward, C.J. Smith, from the Amerks this season.

"(Olofsson) has NHL shooting ability and NHL speed and quickness," said the scout, who believes Olofsson will play in the big leagues someday and provide scoring.

The scout also said Olofsson might need to spend a full season developing in the AHL and part of next season before he's ready.

"That's the dream I have and the next step in my career to be up there," Olofsson said of the NHL. "That's what I'm working for. I'm trying to be patient. Hopefully the chance will come eventually."

The 5-foot-11, 181-pound Olofsson said he has grown throughout his first three months in the AHL. He said he believes he's getting on the inside more regularly and moving to the front of the net, where he can score what he called "greasy goals."

Naturally, Olofsson said he wants to be an all-around guy "the team can trust." Early in Wednesday's victory, he illustrated that by racing from behind on a backcheck to stymie a play.

"I want to play in every situation out there, and that's the kind of thing you have to do," Olofsson said. "If it's break up a play or just get back to help out in the defense zone, it's the small things that matter in the long run."

Taylor said Olofsson has embraced playing away from the puck.

"It's hard for goal scorers to come over and learn that and think, 'Well, I have to score goals,'" Taylor said. "And you have to play away from the puck, defensive side of the puck, you have to be good on the walls, you got to hold up on faceoffs, and he's doing all those things. He's getting better at them, and that's all we can only ask for."

Nylander update

Sabres prospect Alexander Nylander quickly impacted the Amerks after an upper-body injury sidelined him two games.

On Wednesday, Nylander slickly created Rasmus Asplund's tying goal with 11.9 seconds left by finding the center beside the net from the point.

The winger sold the shot perfectly.

"The hockey sense on Alex, even to sell it, have two guys lay there (on the ice), to look for a player on the side of the net," Taylor said.

Nylander scored a goal and the shootout winner in Friday's 3-2 road win over the Laval Rocket.

MacWilliam tallies

On Wednesday, Amerks defenseman Andrew MacWilliam scored his first goal in 149 games, jamming in a rebound at the net to tie the game at 3.

MacWilliam hadn't scored since April 6, 2016, with the Manitoba Moose.

The veteran was credited with a goal earlier this season before it was awarded to a teammate.

They can't take this one back, right?

"Who knows?" a smiling MacWilliam said.



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Taylor said MacWilliam has “a huge heart.”

“It was a desperate play by him and ... you respect guys like that,” Taylor said.

MacWilliam has scored five goals in 336 career AHL appearances.

Closing in

Zach Redmond scored his career-high 16th goal in Saturday's 2-1 loss in Laval, leaving him two short of Rick Pagnutti's single-season record for Amerks defensemen set in 1972-73.

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1125037 Websites

The Athletic / Q&A: The architect of Finland's golden generation explains the reasons behind the rise of Finnish hockey

By Murat Ates

Jan 7, 2019

Finland has won gold, again – this time, its third at the World Junior Hockey Championships in the last six years.

It's hard to believe, given Finland's recent international results, its scorching hot NHL superstars like Mikko Rantanen, Sebastian Aho and Patrik Laine, or the emergence of its next generation of talent (Kaapo Kakko of TPS Turku is expected to go second in this summer's NHL draft) but, just a decade ago, Finland was desperate to revamp its national programs.

In 2009, the Finnish Ice Hockey Association (FIHA) was so disappointed in its recent results that it called a nationwide hockey summit. There hadn't been a gold medal at the World Junior Championship since 1998 or the Men's World Championships since 1995. There had never been a men's Olympic gold, an Ivan Hlinka gold, or a Women's gold medal at the Olympics or worlds.

Finland's NHL talent pool was also drying up. There were no Rantanens, Laines, or Aho at that time – in fact, of the 1,076 players selected in the five NHL drafts up to and including 2009, only 14 came from Finland's SM-liiga.

How did that change? How do you transform a small, under-resourced nation of five million people from international afterthought to a world superpower in just 10 years?

To change its course, Finland turned to a man named Erkkka Westerlund.

Westerlund, known throughout Finland simply as “The Professor,” had won an SM-liiga championship as the head coach of HIFK Helsinki in 1998 and a silver medal at the 2006 Olympics in Turin.

By 2009, Westerlund was the head of coaching and education for the Vierumäki Sports Institute and, when the FIHA realized it needed to make sweeping, systemic changes to its national program to catch up to – even or surpass – the rest of the world, it tasked Westerlund with convening the historic summit. Hundreds of people attended from all levels of Finnish hockey, gathered there by the FIHA in an attempt to transform its national program.

Westerlund organized it all and, as such, is the perfect person to explain Finland's rise towards international hockey supremacy. We are witnessing the rise of Finland's golden generation and Westerlund is, in many ways, its architect.

This fall, The Athletic sat down with Westerlund to find out how Finland built its road to gold.

Why was it necessary to change hockey in Finland?

We saw it. We didn't have so many first, second round picks in the National Hockey League drafts. Our junior national teams didn't succeed so well and we saw it – that we have to do something to see more talented players on the ice. Finland is a little country. The nation that we have is about five million people here. That is not the case that we can compete with the bigger countries. Of course the amount of ice rinks is one thing. We have about 200, 250 indoor rinks – it's not a big amount. The only thing we can compete in is the quality of leadership or the quality of coaching.

Our ice hockey association has had a very big role. They have invested money, big money for our hockey education. For example, after (the) world championships we organized here in Finland, our association invested the money to the grassroots level right away. That is, I think, the most important thing and why we have so many good players from this small nation.

In transforming your programs, did you prioritize hockey at its grassroots level, the elite level, or both?

From both. And I think the critical age is now about 18 and up. I think we have very good quality in coaching on the club level. The young children. We have a very good national team program. We start from about 14 years old and then up. But nowadays there are many different roads to the top. To play here, to go study in North America and play. I think we should reorganize things a little bit, that we can help in different ways to help the players to improve. Not only the national team program.

What was missing from those programs prior to 2009?

It's a very good question. Why that happened. One thing we have tried to compete has been to focus on team play. Maybe we concentrated on it too much. There is so much unused potential in the individual, what we can do to improve the physical things and skill, hockey sense – but also mental qualities – and I think maybe we forgot in that case that we concentrated too much on how we play as a team. Not so much on the individual player and that was the change.

It's very easy to say. It means many, many different things on a daily level. We changed the style of coaching, for example, (to) a player centred way. It's much easier as a coach when you have a team. You speak (to) them, you tell what we are doing and then you go to work. Because the European style has been more of that, we work also in the summertime together, we practice together and we work as a team. It's also a little bit (of an) old way to coach – from top to down.

When communication is more in one direction – it's a monologue. Change the monologue to a dialogue. It's a huge step to do, practically, so you are not anymore as a coach there like this. When we speak about the happening (in) 2009, many things that changed was only to concentrate on individual skills but it was also to concentrate on individuals as human beings. Really start to coach the individual, not the whole team. It means that the coach has really many things to do and create the trust with each player and after that, create the conversation and dialogue with the players.

That sounds like a massive change, involving a lot of important people. How do you convince leaders at all levels to change their paradigms?

It's big. It's a cultural change. How do we get the best out of a human being? By forcing him or by his or her own desire to do things? I believe that if you want to do something, it comes from inside. We have a lot of unused energy, mental energy. For example: motivation, attitude, self-confidence, responsibility, emotion. There is a lot of power inside (the) human being and our coaches' task is to get it out and help the players know the strengths and the weaknesses that they have. Sorry, this goes quite deep.

Please, go on.



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But I really mean it. As you said, too, it's a cultural change. Change the way of leading, coaching. Seeing differently. And in Finland, it has happened already (for) 30, 40 years but now it has happened a little bit faster and I hope that it would happen more and more.

As I said. (We're a) Little nation. Not so many facilities. We don't have that kind of, we say, skill in Finland but it's the excellence of working with people – that's what we are looking for. That we get more out of human beings. That we really help the human being to find the resources that he has.

Are you saying that you coach psychology – or maybe even spirituality?

I think the main part of coaching is psychological work. It's inside coaching. It's every day you meet (the) player. I think it's the first thing you should evaluate – a player's motivation – every day. When he is working. Or also outside the rink (laughs). How he behaves. The attitude. Self-confidence. Those things. I think that's the most important part of coaching. Then, of course, you have to know hockey and what does hockey require, what kind of qualities.

How does one person forge that kind of relationship with 20 people?

It's big. Of course, it's a big challenge, that kind of way of coaching. First, you have to know yourself. You have to have the experiences – how you can help the younger generation – but I think, in Finland, we have many good coaches. We have many, many coaches with the team and we can divide tasks.

For example, at the professional level, I can give responsibilities for goalie coach, for D coach, for a coach for the forwards – it's teamwork. And best is if all your staff members understand the same thing when they are (communicating that) messages or something like that and is also a good moment to speak and hear the thinking of players. The whole coaching team has the same aim. Helping the player.

It's not easy. But hey. If you want to be the best in the world, there are no easy ways. As I said. We don't have so many players, not so many good facilities. We have to do something, a different way that we can compete against the best countries and that we can produce good players, good individuals.

Is the ultimate goal to be the best?

I think the most important task is to help the player – what he wants, we should support. I think that's the most important task. It's – I think – more important than the result, for example. The result comes if the player is in good physical and mental condition. Concentrate on that.

Before I leave you, I have to ask. Why Finland? What is it about this country that makes your success possible?

I believe that there are many different things but, as I said, the biggest influencer has been our association. For example, the national team program. About 10 years ago, it was a big thing that they hired the full-time coaches to the national teams. The idea was that the national team coaches will be tutors or mentors of club team coaches. They could help the club team coaches to achieve the international level requirement – when they are working daily.

Very good cooperation from the club team coach who is coaching Patrik Laine for example, the national team coach, the club team coach, and then Patrik – so they really work together. It was a big thing. First, they said that "what are the national team coaches doing when there is no tournament?" But the idea was that they are coaching club team coaches for the international requirement level.

Long term, how will you measure the success of the 2009 summit?

As I said, this process has been happening already a long, long time but I think it was a good wake up call for all the people who are working with the young players. We're really trying to get – we had about 200 people there – so many as possible to get there and to also find the common language. Many times, we don't have the common language to discuss and improve things. It is very important. But it is impossible for me or for

somebody else to measure somehow the results of that meeting but I think many good things happened after the meeting.

It's not easy to do that kind of change right away. We don't have good players so we have to do this and this and this. It doesn't happen. There's many steps and it takes a long time to do but I think we got a little bit new direction and people to do the same things together. The same direction.

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The Athletic / A near-tragedy prompts questions about transportation safety in junior hockey

By Katie Strang

South Dakota state Trooper Jesse Holman was stationed in the eastbound lane of Highway 12, just shy of marker 312, outside of Webster, South Dakota, last Saturday. The roadways were approaching blizzard conditions and the ice was already causing a huge problem for several motorists. Holman was on the scene dealing with a semi-truck in the median of one of the state's main thoroughfares when he saw a terrifying scene unfold.

Heading toward him was an SUV carrying four young players from the North American Hockey League's Brookings Blizzard. One of them was driving, trying to get himself and his teammates to their game that night in Aberdeen, South Dakota, approximately 150 miles away. The vehicle in front of the SUV hit a patch of ice and the driver slammed on the brakes, causing the player driving the SUV to do the same. Holman watched in horror as the SUV flipped four times and landed in an embankment.

"I thought for sure there would be injuries, if not fatalities," Holman said of the crash, which he'd later describe as one of the most violent rollovers he'd ever witnessed.

Holman, a member of the state patrol's motor carrier division, approached the scene expecting it to be grave. He was shocked to see all four boys crawl out, seemingly unscathed. They were shaken up by what just happened but otherwise unharmed. Luckily, all were wearing seatbelts. They proceeded to get their hockey gear unloaded from the back of the vehicle, which was completely overturned. The damage was dramatic and the force of the crash caused one of the wheels to come off entirely. One of the players' cell phones was ejected some 50 feet from the scene.

When their teammates and coach arrived to pick them up, one of the passengers appeared to be in shock. Before the crash, he had taken his socks off while inside the vehicle. He didn't realize he was standing barefoot in the snow until a teammate pointed out that his feet had to be freezing.

The team's coach, Moe Mantha, approached his four players and tried to make sure he didn't squeeze them too hard, but he was relieved.

"I gave them a big fudging hug and told them, 'I'm so thankful. I'm so thankful nothing worse happened,'" Mantha told The Athletic in a recent conversation. "I let them know I was sorry. I still haven't gotten over it."

That those four players were unharmed in the accident is seen by some as a miracle. For others, it's a sobering reminder of the danger that awaits when traversing the treacherous roadways of that particular Midwestern corridor. And in the wake of this accident, there has been an abundance of questions about safety and whether these players' well-



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being was jeopardized, particularly at a time when the issue of transportation in hockey has become heavily scrutinized in the wake of the Humboldt tragedy last spring. In that incident, the Saskatchewan Junior Hockey League team bus had a horrific collision with a semi-trailer truck that resulted in the deaths of 16 passengers, many of them young hockey players, and injured 13 others.

This particular incident has sparked significant concerns about why those Brookings players, two of whom are minors, were in the car in the first place. More broadly, the accident is also prompting questions about other transportation safety issues with the team, including the safety of the team bus and the qualifications of at least one of the team's drivers.

The NAHL has launched an investigation into the incident, which was first reported on The Junior Hockey News website, and that investigation is ongoing, according to NAHL commissioner Mark Frankenfeld.

"Right now we're focused on why the decision was made, how exactly it was made and we're trying to figure out how to manage that," Frankenfeld said.

According to the 22 people interviewed for this story, including players, parents, league officials, former and current employees and members of the team's front office (several of whom requested anonymity for fear of retribution for speaking out), law enforcement officials and transportation officials, here is what we know, both about the incident and the broader question of safety with the Brookings Blizzard and the league itself:

The Blizzard players arrived at the rink that day at approximately 2 p.m. in advance of an away game that night in Aberdeen. The bus driver had not plugged in the diesel-engine bus over the Christmas break and the vehicle would not start.

Mantha immediately consulted team owner Chris Canavati.

"The timing was such and the location was such that there were two decisions to make — cancel and forfeit the game or have the boys drive. Those were our only two decisions," Canavati told The Athletic in a phone conversation on Friday. "So I made the decision to have the boys drive and it was a bad decision. We had no other alternatives to us available in Brookings."

Per league policy, players are not permitted to drive. And though multiple sources indicated that the owner's decision to have players transport themselves to the game was made to avoid incurring a fine if the game had to be rescheduled, Canavati said this did not factor into his decision and had no such knowledge of any fine.

The conditions on the roads were such that, according to state patrol units near the area, most troopers working that weekend attended to multiple crashes each day. One USHL team, the Sioux City Musketeers, turned around twice when trying to navigate those same roads earlier in the weekend as they attempted to make it to their game in Fargo, North Dakota. After making it as far as Watertown before turning back on Thursday evening, the Musketeers' bus tried again the next day. Once the team got 40 miles outside of Sioux City, head coach Luke Strand decided it would be too risky. He said the wind blowing the snow across the highway was as bad as the snow itself.

"Every parent hands their kid off to me to be in charge of them like I'm their father," Strand said. "Hockey aside, life is too precious. We put in too much time and effort not to do things the right way."

Canavati did not make that same decision and has taken accountability, both publicly and privately. He held a players-only meeting last week and expressed regret. Canavati did so earlier in the week when touching base with parents of those in the accident.

"Number one, I (told them) I was very sorry I put you in this position. Two, I was very thankful that your boys are OK and three, we will never make this decision again," Canavati said of his message during the meeting on Thursday.

He also addressed whether the Blizzard team bus is safe. And while he said he can never guarantee there won't be a breakdown, Canavati

assured players that the bus has been through the required Department of Transportation inspections every year, as well as the spot inspections done at various points during the season.

However, last weekend's incident — when the bus wouldn't start — was not an isolated one, according to those familiar with the team's travel. Earlier in the season, the vehicle ran out of gas en route to Minot, North Dakota. The Minot team bus had to come to fetch the Blizzard team, but Canavati said this was the only other time this season there was a breakdown. He did, however, acknowledge that players were asked to drive themselves to a game once last season as well.

According to Department of Transportation records provided by Canavati of the Blizzard team bus, several citations were issued to the 1988 MCI (with 685,667 on the odometer per its most recent annual inspection report in September 2018). A driver/vehicle examination inspection report from September cited six violations, including a "clamp or roto brake out-of-adjustment," an "oil leak under engine," and a "leaking" brake connection. Canavati said that three of these violations — an inoperable lamp, an improperly displayed DOT number and defective emergency exits — were fixed on the spot.

Yet people affiliated with the organization and at least one of the other two teams that Canavati owns in the NA3HL described team transportation as a longstanding issue — instances of bald tires, broken mirrors, engine fail lights coming on and shoddy seats that were unable to stay in the upright position that were not immediately fixed or given the appropriate attention.

Additionally, at least one of the drivers regularly used by Canavati has several criminal offenses on his driving record, according to records reviewed by The Athletic. They include a misdemeanor DUI conviction in 1990, a gross misdemeanor DWI conviction in 1996 and a misdemeanor conviction for possession of a controlled substance in 2002.

Canavati said the driver in question is a USA Hockey-certified Level 4 coach, which requires him to undergo the necessary background check to work with players. Canavati also said he cleared all necessary checks to receive both his commercial driver's license and passenger tag (a public information officer for Minnesota's Department of Public Safety confirmed that the driver's CDL and passenger endorsement are valid).

In interviews with several people currently and formerly affiliated with Canavati-owned teams, there was an undercurrent of concern about the cost-cutting seen in ways both big and small. For example: sticks not being ordered until the stock was almost completely depleted and proper replacement equipment not being available on road trips. The team does not travel with an athletic trainer and does not have an equipment manager; one of the players on the team is often tasked with sharpening skates.

There have been issues with reimbursements that are covered in a player's standard contract agreement for things like a player's food and gas, according to multiple people, though Canavati said this has never been brought to his attention.

"Not to my knowledge," he said.

Running a team in the NAHL, a Tier II junior hockey league with 24 teams in 13 states, is not cheap. According to the USA Hockey bylaws, a Tier II team must have a minimum operating budget of \$400,000, but NAHL teams do not generally yield the same financial returns as the marquee teams in the Ontario Hockey League, for example. Frugality is not uncommon.

One former employee said that cost-cutting was commonplace in the league but particularly pronounced in Brookings and the NA3HL's Willmar, one of the other two teams Canavati owns (he also owns the NA3HL's Alexandria Blizzard). But he did not believe that ownership would ever put a player in harm's way in an attempt to scrimp on money.

"I don't think he would," the former employee said.



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Mantha also defended Canavati, calling him a "great owner," who "loves the kids."

Frankenfeld, who is also the commissioner of the NA3HL, said he has never before received any complaints about Canavati:

"Chris has been an owner for 10 or 12 years. He's served on the executive committee. He's been a leader, a risk-taker, a very sharp-minded business guy. He's done a lot of good things for our league as a whole and individually and in terms of what his teams do for community. This by no means defines him as an owner in the North American Hockey League." (Editor's note: Frankenfeld contacted The Athletic to clarify his comments describing Canavati as a "risk-taker." Frankenfeld said he intended to convey that league owners take a financial risk to provide NAHL hockey to players in the community.)

Bill Chow, the commissioner of the Saskatchewan Junior Hockey League, is still dealing with the aftermath of Humboldt's horrific legacy. He remains constantly vigilant in reviewing safety policies and maintaining rigorous standards.

Chow, a retired police officer, said 11 of 12 teams in the SJHL are community-owned and do not operate their team buses privately; these teams contract the transportation out to charter services that are forced to undergo thorough and regular safety inspections.

Chow said there is a federal law that will make seat belts mandatory in highway passenger transport buses beginning in 2020, a piece of legislation that was already in the works before the Humboldt accident. Additionally, Chow said that many leagues and teams have made their own rules about wearing seat belts on buses (a former Brookings player said that players did not wear seat belts: "Half the seats are broken," he said.)

In the Western Hockey League, one that is known for long bus rides between some rugged outposts, players are not permitted to travel by car under any circumstances.

"Our bus service standards are best in class. We take every precaution with respect to travel conditions," WHL commissioner Ron Robison said. "If it requires canceling because of road conditions, we do that."

The Canadian Hockey League's three leagues all operate independently on these matters; however, all teams must provide, at minimum, a coach bus to and from their home arena for away games, a league spokesperson said.

The USHL, NAHL and NA3HL are all governed by USA Hockey bylaws. Per the respective policies, Tier II teams shall provide "adequate, supervised, group transportation for its players for all away games—bus, train, airline." Tier III teams are required to travel by bus for games over 200 miles in total distance. (USA Hockey spokesperson Dave Fischer said, in regards to the NAHL investigation, "the NAHL would handle matters within their league in general.")

There are other questions surrounding the incident as well: No ambulance was called for the players following the accident to ensure they hadn't experienced internal injuries (according to Holman, the state trooper, the players said they were fine and did not require an ambulance). All four players were examined by Aberdeen's medical staff upon arrival to the rink (Brookings does not travel with a trainer). All four players sought further medical attention once they returned home from the trip.

Three of the four players involved in the accident dressed for that night's game. One player, according to several sources, became extremely emotional during the game, as he appeared to be dealing with the aftershock of the events.

Multiple parents are worried about the psychological trauma the players endured. One player sitting in the front of the SUV kept his eyes closed while the four were upside down in the immediate wake of the accident. He asked his teammates in the back if they were OK, but couldn't bear to look out of fear for what he might see. Canavati, who put the team up in a

hotel that night, has offered to pay for professional help sought by any of his players.

Even members of the coaching staff remain shaken by the incident, racked with guilt about the events and replaying how it should have gone differently.

"Yeah, it bothers me. It hurts. It hurts," said Mantha, who is a father of three. "I do care about my players. I can be a tough son of a gun, but they know why. Because they're playing hockey and using hockey to try to get an education and trying to make their dreams come true and I'm trying to make that a reality."

He added: "We all thought we were doing the right thing. It turned out to be a bad decision."

Canavati said he has provided full details of what happened to the league as the NAHL conducts its investigation and Frankenfeld confirmed that Canavati has fully cooperated and been transparent throughout the inquiry. It is not immediately clear when the investigation will be completed, but when asked if the Blizzard will be subject to any fines or suspensions, Frankenfeld said:

"It's fair to say that if a team violates policy, sanctions will be levied for sure, either in the form of suspensions or monetary fines."

The Blizzard had another road trip this past weekend in Austin and ended up using a charter bus service for transportation. The alternator light of that charter bus came on, forcing the team to switch buses.

Said one parent reeling from the past week's events:

"If safety isn't the number one concern, we've got a problem."

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The Athletic / NHL Trade Big Board: 20 players who could move before the deadline

Craig Custance

Jan 7, 2019

We're at that point. Many of the NHL's general managers got together during the World Junior Championships, where trade talk is inevitably stoked. Most teams are hosting organizational scouting meetings this week, if they haven't already. After that input is received, trade season is open in earnest. Fun time for the fans. Stressful time for the players. And if you're a GM, it's as busy as it will be all year.

It's also an interesting market. Several conversations with GMs and league executives over the course of the past week or so have indicated that it's a strong buyers market right now. As one GM put it, there's already a lot of inventory out there and we're early on in the process.

"Half the league is a moderate to aggressive seller," said the GM.

It's good news for potential buyers like San Jose, Pittsburgh, Winnipeg, Nashville, Toronto and others. Not so great if you're trying to sell. But the high number of sellers also makes for a fascinating list of available players, one that will be ever expanding as we get closer to the Feb. 25 deadline.

1. Artemi Panarin, Blue Jackets: So, here's what we know. The Blue Jackets and Panarin's agent Dan Milstein are in fairly consistent communication. The lines of communication are still wide open and it's



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safe to say there will be at least one more meeting in the next month or so to discuss exactly where things are. As it stands right now, Columbus hasn't been completely, 100 percent ruled out as a long-term option for Panarin. But with that said, if he wanted to stay, it sure seems risky not to engage in serious talks to make it happen. Or better yet, already have a deal done. So yeah, it still seems like he's a goner. That makes things interesting for the Blue Jackets. If they remain in a top three spot in the Metropolitan, it's hard to justify trading him. He'd be like a rental addition, only one with chemistry and familiarity with the team.

But what happens if things slip?

"If they lost three in a row on Jan. 25 and they're out of the playoffs? Are they trading Panarin?" wondered one executive. But even then, this still has the makings of a good team.

"I still think they're a playoff team," said the executive.

We also know that GM Jarmo Kekalainen is fearless. The consensus is that Sergei Bobrovsky is definitely gone after this season. Are they really letting two elite players leave for nothing?

2. Matt Duchene, Senators: The Senators play in Los Angeles on Thursday and it's expected that Duchene will spend time with his representation at CAA to really get a sense of where things stand in terms of a long-term deal in Ottawa. Duchene hasn't been ruled out staying with the Senators but there's also no rush from him to make a decision. At some point in the next few weeks, there will be conversations between the Duchene camp and Senators GM Pierre Dorion that will provide more clarity.

If those talks aren't productive, the expectation is that Duchene shakes loose.

"If it doesn't get done, they'll move him," said one NHL source.

3. Mark Stone, Senators: Stone has publicly shared his opinion that he'd love to stay in Ottawa, despite the potential of being one of the top unrestricted free agents this summer. "This is the only place that I've ever played," he told TSN. "I've loved my time here, hopefully it can continue."

Public comments aside, if a deal doesn't get done he might be one of the best available players. He's having his best offensive season, averaging 1.09 points per game, as one of the games better 200-foot forwards. All things considered, he's having an unreal season. Ryan Dzingel, who has 31 points in 41 games is also a rental candidate and Cody Ceci's name is often brought up as a trade candidate.

"Ottawa is going to sell," said an executive. "One or both of Duchene and Stone."

4. Kevin Hayes, Rangers: He's big. He's a center. He's a rental. He's everything a contending team like the Bruins or the Jets would love to plug into their lineup for the stretch run. Hayes has 33 points in 39 games and will be one of the biggest targets before the trade deadline.

"He's a really good player," said one NHL source. "I think it's buyer beware when he's signing his next contract ... but as a rental? Awesome. He's not going to be a first-line center. Let's say it's the Bruins, he'll be their third center. Then he's really good."

5. Dougie Hamilton, Hurricanes: Multiple sources confirmed that the Hurricanes are open to trading Hamilton, not necessarily because they've soured on him but because they're trying to get the best possible offer for a defenseman not named Jacob Slavin. It would be surprising if the Hurricanes don't trade either Hamilton, Justin Faulk or Brett Pesce at some point, although the best deal might not be until the draft.

Carolina wants to add scoring and also create a path for Adam Fox – the Harvard defenseman still needs to sign.

Hamilton is the bigger name and puts up more offense, but teams seem to like Pesce as much or more, in part because of questions about Hamilton's compete level on a consistent basis.

"I like Pesce," said an Eastern Conference executive. "I think he's a really good player. I bet him, Slavin, (Sebastian) Aho and (Andrei) Svechnikov are the guys they're trying to hold on to."

6. Wayne Simmonds, Flyers: GM Chuck Fletcher is still in evaluation mode but it's clear something is off in Philadelphia. The Flyers can't just run this team back again next season and signing Simmonds to an extension would cut into the flexibility to make improvements. Fletcher has a ton of respect for Simmonds and, when he was the GM in Minnesota, tried to acquire him multiple times. He also knows that cap space is finite and the Flyers already have significant cap space committed to one forward headed to his 30s in James van Riemsdyk.

It would likely have to be a pretty team-friendly deal to get it done in Philadelphia.

"Unless he's got a fair contract coming, how is he not going to trade him?" asked one executive. "He's the new GM of the team, he can't lose him for nothing."

Simmonds would certainly look good in Nashville, a team expected to be a buyer. Nashville coach Peter Laviolette recently called out his team for soft play, an area Simmonds would definitely address.

7. Chris Kreider, Rangers: It would have to take a significant offer to lure Kreider away from the Rangers. He's already hit 20 goals this season. He's got another year left on a team-friendly deal that has a cap hit of \$4.625 million. But Kreider may be the best example of what one GM was referring to when he pointed to the Rangers as a one-stop shop for buying teams. If you want a rental forward, they have one. If you want a veteran forward with a good contract, they have one of those too. Need help on defense? They have just about any kind of player you like there. "The New York Rangers – they have every flavor you can imagine," said the executive.

8. Brayden Schenn, Blues: It might be better for headline material to put Vladimir Tarasenko in this slot but the asking price there is sky high. "I know they'd move him," said one executive of Tarasenko. Still, that's not an easy midseason trade to pull off. A little more realistic could be a deal involving Schenn. On some level, he's similar to Derick Brassard last year because he'd give teams depth at center and also term beyond this season, with Schenn signed for one more year at \$5.125 million. Like every potentially available center, he'll be attached to the Bruins. His offensive production is down a touch from last season, averaging closer to his career totals of 0.62 points per game, a reasonable expectation for him.

On defense, Alex Pietrangolo's name has come up in the rumor mill but he has a no-trade so that's not an easy one. Colton Parayko is another target for teams looking at defense.

"St. Louis is always a team that is willing to make a deal," said an NHL source. "Quite a few players there (available). They will be interesting to watch."

9. Jake Muzzin, Kings: Nobody outside of Anze Kopitar and Drew Doughty is safe in Los Angeles, and Muzzin might be the most valuable realistic asset GM Rob Blake can move. Jeff Carter would be a great addition for contending teams but it sounds like he's going to have a say in the process, limiting options there. Muzzin has a good contract and trade talks would have to start with a first-round pick since he's not a pure rental.

10. Gustav Nyquist, Red Wings: Nyquist has a no-trade and hasn't been approached yet about waiving it, but it's still early on that front. Outside of Dylan Larkin, he's been the Red Wings' best forward this season, the final year of his contract that comes with a \$4.75 million cap hit. He's a legit top-six forward, who is more playmaker than goal scorer so needs the right players around him to capitalize on his skill set. The problem for Detroit is that Nyquist doesn't necessarily stand out compared to the other available wingers. "There are a number of pieces (available) that are the equivalent to Nyquist," said one GM. The Oilers might be a good fit for Nyquist.



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11. Jesse Puljujarvi, Oilers: In the ideal world, your NHL coach is focused on winning every day and the GM has a long-term mentality, thinking about three years out. In Edmonton, there's a lot of pressure on everyone to win now and get in the playoffs, including the GM. That makes anything possible and that includes Edmonton moving Puljujarvi, selected with the No. 4 overall pick in 2016. The preference in Edmonton would be a young player with a similar pedigree, especially one who could help more in the short term. "You would think it would have to make their team better right now," said one executive. "(Peter Chiarelli has) got to be buying."

12. Timothy Liljegren, Maple Leafs: It would probably be more fun to put Kasperii Kapanen in this slot but there was a bit of cold water thrown on that idea when floated to a few sources.

One executive said he thought a Kapanen deal was more likely in the summer, if at all, citing the fact that Kapanen has shown an ability to score in the playoffs, something the Maple Leafs will value.

Instead, a source suggested the Maple Leafs might prefer to use Liljegren to make a significant move, in part because of the emergence of Rasmus Sandin.

"Sandin has done a good enough job to justify keeping him over Liljegren," the source said.

The one consensus was that at some point, either now or in the summer, Toronto GM Kyle Dubas is very likely to move a young piece of the puzzle in Toronto.

"I don't care what Kyle Dubas says, there's no way they can keep them all," said an executive.

13. Micheal Ferland, Hurricanes: Carolina is already getting calls on Ferland, an unrestricted free agent who is due a big raise after this season. The Hurricanes like Ferland but not at the expected price he is likely to cost in his next deal. He's got size, playoff experience and a small cap number. It wouldn't be surprising at all if the Penguins, always aggressive to improve their team under GM Jim Rutherford, were interested.

14. Mats Zuccarello, Rangers: Zuccarello's numbers are down, with the winger averaging just 0.50 points per game, well below his career average of 0.67. But it was interesting to read his comments to Larry Brooks in the New York Post that his availability on the trade market may have something to do with his on-ice production.

"People can say that I'm making enough money that I shouldn't let any of this affect me, but I'm sorry, I have been here for nine years and I am human," Zuccarello told Brooks. "It's a tough situation but it's also no excuse for me."

15. Nino Niederreiter, Wild: Minnesota GM Paul Fenton is an interesting one to watch because he came in with the expectation that comes with any new GM – that changes will be made. But the team playing now is essentially the same one as previous versions. The consensus is that Niederreiter and Charlie Coyle can be had, but it likely will extend beyond that depending on how the Wild fare in the coming weeks. Eric Staal and Eric Fehr are traditional rentals who could hit the market if Minnesota remains outside the playoff race. One executive lamented the high prices being asked by Fenton for Wild players, which might explain the lack of movement right now with the Wild.

16. Jimmy Howard, Red Wings: At first glance, Howard is your traditional rental. Veteran player on an expiring contract from a rebuilding team that will soon be ready to sell. But starting goalies aren't easy trades to pull off near the deadline. The buyers are buyers because they're in a playoff spot and likely have been getting good goaltending to get there. Those teams won't pay a premium for insurance in goal. The Red Wings like Howard. They'd like to bring him back after this season. There isn't a lot of internal interest in trading him for a third-round pick or whatever a team looking for insurance might pay. So, really, the scenario where a Howard trade is most likely comes only if a contending team loses their

starting goalie to injury and is willing to pay a premium (like, say, a first-round pick) to acquire Howard.

17. Andre Burakovsky, Capitals: Burakovsky is 23 years old, is set to be a restricted free agent after this season and is an intriguing name who is available. He's been passed in Washington by Jakub Vrana and scouts will tell you that they're not sure which Burakovsky is going to show up on a given night. But when he's going, he can be a difference maker. There's definitely some intrigue here. The Capitals, according to multiple sources, are looking for a similar aged young player in return at this point. If the best offer is for futures, that's a deal more likely to happen at the draft.

18. Trevor Daley, Red Wings: Daley is out with a broken foot but should be back in early February, plenty of time to be a target before the trade deadline. He has one year left on his contract that comes at a reasonable \$3.16 million cap hit per season, a number that could be sweetened even more with some salary retention. When healthy this season, Daley performed under his standard but that can be attributed, in part, to cycling through partners without a ton of NHL experience. He's still a great skater with multiple Stanley Cups who would fit seamlessly into any dressing room. A second-round pick and decent prospect probably gets it done.

19. Alec Martinez, Kings: Martinez is out with an upper body injury but he's closing in on a return. He's not flashy but he's consistent and comes on a reasonable contract worth \$4 million per season through 2020-21. The price point might be less than Muzzin too, with a second-round pick and good prospect the expected asking price here.

20. Nick Jensen, Red Wings: He might actually be the most appealing of the Red Wings' rentals. He probably isn't going to cost a ton but is the kind of player who can play a key part without giving up the farm. "I like him," said one contending GM. There's a lot to like. He's still just 28, he's a right-handed shot and is a great skater. He's a rock-solid addition to any team's bottom pair and the Red Wings haven't ruled out a contract extension, but The Athletic's Max Bultman reported last week that there have not been any significant talks yet.

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The Athletic / For hockey fans, variations of ministicks form a thread that binds us all

By Justin Bourne

Jan 7, 2019

Not every aspiring hockey player is born into a household like the Sutters or Staals, which provided enough built-in daily competition that they basically learned how to be talented grinders by age eight. Still, I was lucky to have one older brother, Jeff, who shared my passion for the love of hockey. Jeff won numerous medals at the BC disabled games when we were pretty young, one year winning a half-dozen gold medals for events in swimming, as well as various track and field events. The point there being, Jeff was a naturally talented athlete, but conditions like spina bifida, scoliosis and hydrocephalus held him back from doing even more. For the sake of simplicity and clarity here, he's cognitively great (I'd quibble with the "great" part at varying times, but that may be a brother thing), his upper body is fully functional, he just has very limited feeling/movement in his legs.

Because of those limitations, the games we could play together on the same playing field were few and far between. What we needed was



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something that was on the ground, ideally involving crawling at most in terms of mobility, ideally involving hockey, so well ... you probably know where I'm going with this. We often found ourselves playing some variation of ministicks, perhaps the single greatest game that has no pure form, just loose parameters: have something hockey-like to shoot, something to shoot it with (which includes hands) and something that could be loosely defined as a net. Game on.

Needless to say, the game conjures up some pretty emotional, special memories for me.

When you bring up ministicks to most hockey fans, it's like you've told them you've found their lost dog. They positively light up. I'm not sure there's any one topic that universally makes hockey people wax nostalgic like this great game, save for maybe the serenity of skating on a clear pond in the dead of winter. Not only was the game played by nearly everyone with even a passing interest in hockey, but it also seems that the shared experience was universally positive. It involved friends, playing, competing, but all without the pressures of coaches and practices and frankly, rules. You know, the stuff that ruins most children's sports. What more could a kid want?

The only real losers were the parents, who had to deal with the ensuing category-one-hurricane-level property destruction, low-level injuries, and settling arguments over whether the final goal went directly in the "net" that may have been defined by chair legs, or through the actual chair. You can't call-in to Toronto for those rulings, yet the competitors tended to get equally upset as their NHL heroes and were more difficult to calm down.

My own son turned two back in August, so he's now basically at peak "here's your first mini-hockey set, son" age, an opportunity I couldn't possibly pass up. December brings no shortage of opportunities to give gifts, so the second we returned home from our Christmas travel (which makes lugging gifts around a pain), we headed to Canadian Tire to get him – and myself – the proper equipment.

I'd be lying if I denied regularly playing on my own since the net has been in the house. I'd also be lying if I denied setting it up, taking a few shots, then instantly convincing (reminding?) myself that I'm the best ministicks player in the world.

ONE TAKE KIDS. COME AT ME.

(Honestly, I got so excited about playing again I started daydreaming about putting on a charitable event for spina bifida focused around the game in Toronto some day. Stay tuned while I work towards that.)

Ministicks in its more commercial form appears to have first been rolled out by the company Inglasco somewhere in the mid-80s to the early 90s. That would make the official product roughly thirty-years-old, but legitimate "knee-hockey," which is essentially the grandfather of ministicks, has been around for a far, far longer time. Kids back in the day simply used their hands as sticks (or cut down wood blades), used random objects as posts, and played the exact same way as kids today, presumably with more line brawls and less diving. (Kids today, pfft. Soft.)

The game has always been so near and dear to my heart that I reached out to Twitter to get some responses from those who shared that passion, and I was overwhelmed by the response, with over 300 people responding with their own experiences.

Here's the original tweet – if you're interested, the thread is a true testament to the passion of ministickers everywhere – and after going through all the comments, the below seems to be the common themes/memories most of us share.

First and foremost ...

Hotel hallway ministicks (and its sad, slow death)

One of the glories of ministicks is its lack of complications. It didn't matter how many players you had, what gear you had, you could always make

the game happen at the drop of a hat. But one of the few issues is that you're generally playing in someone's house, and the ball was generally small, so you'd lose it under the couch here, in the closet there, all of which meant unacceptable lapses in action. And since you want constant action but not too much physical movement in ministicks, a hallway – oh, that glorious hallway, was perfect. Everything was contained, players and equipment alike, so the game never had to stop so someone could dig the ball out of the cat's litter box. No whistles, you basically only stopped to argue if the ball went in or not.

When you went on the road for a tournament and stayed in a hotel with a bunch of kids your age, who not-so-coincidentally also loved hockey, who also had hours to kill while the parents holed up in their rooms and drank ... I assume club soda? Well, that was basically heaven.

Unfortunately, even back when I was participating in these games the hotel crackdowns were starting. Obviously, it's a nightmare for anyone staying in a nearby room listening to a pile of 12-year-olds screaming and smashing into the walls, so I understand the issue. The solution I've seen that works best for those parents who want their kids to have that experience? Pony up and rent one of the hotel ballrooms for a couple hours. Divided amongst all the parents the cost barely registers and the kids have free rein. (Of course, this is nowhere near as good as playing in the hallway, but some sacrifices have to be made to keep the game alive.)

Almost all hotels have these big open spaces meant for conferences today and it's rare there isn't one available for a quick couple hours. In many cases, the hotels will be accommodating and simply let the kids use the rooms without question.

Curving the blade

I feel like this is more of a feature of the younger generation's ministick experience (based on the avatars of those tweeting about it), but yes: a shared love of many of yours seems to be the art of curving the ministick. I only tried this once, but I used to do it with my wood blades during my teen years, so I understand the passion surrounding this practice.

For those of you with hobbies out there, the art of refining your tools is such a big part of the experience, no? My father-in-law loves to snowmobile. And by snowmobile, I mean search the Arctic Cat website looking for the next 'must have' feature he can attach to his machine. And finding something is a joy that's only superseded by the joy of taking the time to install whatever it is properly. Hockey players deal with more gear than players of any other sport, and I'm not sure it's even close. Naturally then, it's more attractive to those who like to tinker, tweak and tighten every little thing until it's exactly how they like them.

Playing goal in ministicks is a blast, as the ball – whatever it's make-up may be – rarely hurts. But I'm sure all the kids out there using Ovechkin curves have made things a little less dicey given the propensity of a big curve to fire an object neck high.

The perfect ball

The object used as the "puck" varies a great deal. It can be foam (probably preferred), it can be a purchased soft orange thing, or, it can be homemade. If I may weigh in with my perfect homemade ball recipe for those not looking to run out to the store:

Step 1: Tinfoil core – grab a handful of tinfoil and ball it up, ideally to the size of about a marble, maybe a little bigger. Really, it comes down to how fast you want to be able to shoot it and how much you want to protect the goalie.

Step 2: Toilet paper. I like a smaller second layer with a lot of tightly compact toilet paper. Don't chintz out here. Over time as you play, the toilet paper breaks down, the ball gets softer, and so not only does it become too squishy, the goalie starts to feel the tinfoil. Use lots of toilet paper, but keep in mind, the ball has to stay small – somewhere around the size of a golf ball is a good end point, I think.



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Step 3: Hockey tape. This is where you're going to define the consistency of your ball and this will come down to preference. A once-around with a roll of black tape is going to let you feel the squish of the toilet paper, which I never cared for. Add layer upon layer until the ball has the feel you really like.

Now, when you lose this ball, the dog eats it, it ends up in the toilet somehow or whatever, the game doesn't have to stop. They take about four minutes to make. Enjoy!

Shooting on yourself

Earlier when discussing the parameters of ministics, I mentioned that it doesn't matter if you're just playing one-on-one, or had bigger numbers, but that belies a sneaky truth about ministics. That being that it's a delight to play alone, not just because it's fun to work on picking corners and pretending time is running out in the third period in Game 7 of the Stanley Cup final. But also because if you set up in front of a wall, you can fire a decent ball off it and then have to react and make the save. Now you're both trying to score and getting to play goal. I can't even count how many games I watched while replicating the plays/saves that were happening on the screen in front of me. There is no shame nor joy for an 11-year-old quite like sniping one five-hole ... on yourself. Did I just do good, or bad there?

When you don't have the equipment, I'd argue that hand hockey isn't only a suitable replacement, but is damn near superior. If you've ever thought about the "feel" a stick offers, well let me tell you buddy, this is as high end as it gets. The best part with hands is fakes and change of directions – really fun when you can, you know, change your curve mid-shot/pass. It does cause some issues, what with the whole "closing the hand on the ball" option, but it's a small price to pay for getting to play despite not having any equipment.

The issues

One of the things I mentioned a bit earlier was the sheer destruction of property. You see, the problem is parents, kids don't give a shit about your stuff. I know, I know, that's a tough reality to come to grips with, but think back to when you were their age. You never paid a bill or covered the cost of a repair. If something was broken, it was always put back together again after a mild scolding. That's a small price to pay versus your buddy beating you to the puck and scoring. Now that hurts. Most kids will happily go through the drywall and take the tongue-lashing. Which leads us to our next issue ...

Injuries

Ministick injuries are rarely serious, which is a big plus for parents and another reason to push the game. Nobody's ever moving too fast, the ball isn't that hard, and barring a couple kids getting tangled up like Jesperi Kotkaniemi and Elias Pettersson (too soon, Canucks fans?), few players need hospital visits.

But man, those sticks – they're so light, and it's usually a bunch of humans in a small area after a small ball and all that is a recipe for finger disaster. Johnny Gaudreau should steer clear of ministics, as great as he'd be at it. The fingers were always getting whacked.

Of course, when the kids start getting big, and they start hitting and running the goalie (for some reason a staple of the game) other things can happen, but yeah – I'm placing fingers at the forefront of the injury concern list.

And finally ...

Did it go through the side or was it legit?

If you've ever played pick-up basketball where the players call their own fouls, you understand some of the difficulties of self-officiating. Most guys are good and honest about it, and most will err on the side of only calling the egregious stuff. It takes some maturity and discipline for this system to work.

Now have the same concept, but called by eight-year-olds.

Cheap plays and penalties aside, determining what's a goal and what isn't is difficult, particularly when you don't have a proper ministics net. That was common in my youth, where you'd just use table legs, or chairs, or shirts, or whatever to determine the goal. When it came down to next goal wins, and you can shoot that little ball awfully quick, the debates often got heated. My impression is more kids today have some semblance of a proper net where you can actually tickle the twine and end the game in proper fashion.

In all, you can see from the response to my initial tweet just how much ministics means to hockey fans everywhere. We love our nostalgia, our ponds, and the history of the game of hockey. It's interesting to really grasp just how strong a thread ministics has become to the fabric of the culture of hockey.

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The Athletic / DGB weekend power rankings: Crowning the most middle-of-the-pack team at the midway mark

By Sean McIndoe

Jan 7, 2019

By design, these power rankings focus on the league's best and worst. Those are the fun teams to talk about – the Cup contenders and the train wrecks. And if a handful of teams in between get largely forgotten about, oh well. Who wants to spend time arguing about the mushy middle?

But now that we've officially crossed the midway mark of the NHL season, it's a good time to tackle a question I like to break out every year around this time: Who's been the most middle-of-the-pack team in the league this season? Who's the reigning champion of being utterly average?

It's a tougher question than you might think. In most sports, "average" means .500, but we can't use that in the NHL thanks to the horrible, awful, embarrassing loser point. But we can look for teams that have won about as many games as they've lost, while also looking for a goal differential that's close to even. Maybe even dig into some advanced stats and look for someone hovering right around 50 percent in possession or expected goals.

And when we do that, one team stands out as the obvious choice. The Minnesota Wild are almost perfectly average right now. Through 40 games, they've won 20 and lost 20. They've won ten and lost ten at home, and they've won ten and lost ten on the road. Their goals differential is +5, which is a little higher than average but not by much. And they're just a shade over 50 percent as a possession team.

It's an easy call. The Wild are the league's most average team.

But are they? Being average would seem to imply some consistency and that's not Minnesota. They looked great over the first month or two, even sneaking into our top five list for multiple weeks. Since then, they've been awful, including a recent five-game losing streak, and last week I had Wild fans demanding to know why they haven't made their way down to the bottom five. But then they beat a pair of top-five teams in the Jets and Maple Leafs.

Take a step back, and the Wild look less like an average team and more like one that's wildly careening back and forth across the standings, and just happened to have been right in the middle when we took this



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midseason snapshot. Therefore, I don't think they can be our middle-of-the-pack champs after all.

But if not them, then who? A good place to start might be with the seven teams that haven't appeared in either our top five or bottom five all year long. Of those, Boston and Columbus are too good, Carolina is too bad and Edmonton is closer to the Wild's path of chaos than anything we'd call average. And I'm not picking the Islanders, because lord help me if those fans show up in the comments section again.

That narrows the list down to two teams: Dallas and Montreal. The Stars have 22 wins and 21 losses, a dead even goals differential and an expected goals differential hovering right around 50 percent. But I like the Canadiens' case just a little bit more. They've won 22 and lost 20, with splits of 11 wins and 10 losses both at home and on the road. They're close to even on goals differential, at -3. And they've been fairly consistent all year long; they had one five-game losing streak, but have only lost back-to-back games on two other occasions and haven't won more than three straight all year. Also, their CEO didn't go ballistic on them in an epic f-bomb tirade, which was a lot of things but didn't seem especially average.

Congratulations, Montreal. Through the first half of the season, you've been the most middle-of-the-pack NHL team. Given how most of us expected you to fare, there are worse places to be.

OK, enough mediocrity. On to the teams that are actually good and bad ...

Road to the Cup

The five teams that look like they're headed towards a summer of keg stands and fountain pool parties.

Speaking of winners, congratulations to Team Finland for their gold medal at the World Juniors. Fans in Vancouver were no doubt hoping to see Team Canada playing for a medal, but they can't say they didn't get their money's worth in that thrilling gold medal game.

5. Vegas Golden Knights (26-15-4, +17 true goals differential*) – Well well, look who finally decided to show up.

The Knights become the 13th team to appear in our top five this season. It's a return to the territory they owned for much of last year when they were in the top five for 12 of the season's final 13 weeks. This year they started slow, plodding along with a losing record until late-November. But lately, they've been unbeatable, winning six straight to catch the Flames at the top of the Pacific (although Calgary has games in hand).

We'll slip them into the top five for now, if only barely; the Flames could be here instead, and you could make a case for the Sharks too after they beat the Lightning on Saturday. I'm feeling just a little bit better about the Knights these days because their goaltending situation is more settled, but it's close. And it's going to make a fascinating finish in the Pacific. All three teams are basically playoff locks already, but two of them will play each other in the first round while the other gets a theoretically easier matchup with a wildcard. Every point is going to matter down the stretch.

4. Washington Capitals (25-12-4, +32) – Last week, we had the Caps all the way up at No. 2. They drop down a bit this week, not so much because they're playing any worse but rather because the Penguins look vaguely terrifying right now. The Metro might be more of a dogfight than we thought.

And if you're wondering why the Pens aren't holding down this spot ... well, yeah, maybe they should. We try not to overreact to streaks around these parts, but the Pens are a week away from being just about impossible to ignore.

3. Winnipeg Jets (26-13-2, +23) – They managed a good-but-not-great two-win week and are back in a Central battle with a Predators team that has regained its footing. Maybe more importantly, they've lost Nikolaj Ehlers for an extended period. Still, they lead the West in points percentage, so their top-five credentials are solid.

2. Toronto Maple Leafs (27-12-2, +39) – It wasn't a great week in Toronto, with two injured goalies and a lackluster loss to the Wild. But they looked good in a 5-0 win over the Canucks on Saturday, one highlighted by a nifty first career goal from Trevor Moore.

We'll nudge the Leafs up to number two this week because somebody has to be there, but the gap between here and the top spot just keeps getting wider. If anything these days, it feels like there's one team on top, a chasm, and then about a half-dozen who are all tied for fifth.

1. Tampa Bay Lightning (32-8-2, +49) – They finally lost on Saturday, snapping their seven-game win streak and leaving a game without a point for the first time since November. But they remain on pace for a historically great season and already have a double-digit lead in the Presidents' Trophy race. They're good.

Also good: Nikita Kucherov, who is in the middle of one of the craziest hot streaks we've seen in dead puck era. This time a year ago, he was the Hart Trophy front runner right up until we all decided that only players on wildcard teams could actually be valuable. This year, he may not give us much choice.

*Goals differential without counting shootout decisions like the NHL does for some reason.

Not ranked: Calgary Flames – The Flames are this week's team to get squeezed out of the top five. That doesn't mean much; they were fifth last week and would probably be sixth this week, and if you had them a spot or two higher than this on your list then we wouldn't have very much to argue about.

Either way, they mostly keep winning, even as some still aren't completely convinced that they're as good as their record says they are. Tyler Dellow had a deep dive on some of the numbers, including their bizarre run of success in situations where either net is empty. That's been distorting their goals differential, so the +32 you see there is deceiving and they're a top-heavy team. But Dellow still came away feeling relatively optimistic about their playoff chances.

Far more importantly, tonight's game in Chicago is a big one: It will determine whether avowed Flames doubter Justin Bourne has to pay off on this tweet:

Tonight is game number ten, and they're hovering just barely over that magic .650 mark. They need two points tonight to stay there. I'm not saying that makes this their most important game of the year, but it absolutely is.

The bottom five

The five teams that look like they're headed towards hoping the ping-pong balls deliver Jack Hughes.

There's still a lot of season left and I don't want to be that guy, but ... has anyone noticed that the wildcard race might be kind of awful this year?

The East is already basically down to nine teams fighting for the eight spots. There's always a chance that an underachiever like the Hurricanes or Panthers could go on a heater for a few weeks and get back in the race – the Hurricanes are still listed as around a 40 percent shot in models that value possession – but for the most part, the season is over for almost half the conference.

The West is in better shape, but it still has only three teams on the outside that are within five points of the last spot. The race is a bit closer than it looks, because the Western bubble's games in hand are all over the map right now. But it wouldn't take more than a bad week for any of the Oilers, Canucks or Wild to be in danger of dropping out of the race and the other four teams are close to being done.

It might not happen. Maybe everything falls into place for a pair of great wildcard races that go right down to the wire. But if it doesn't, get ready to hear a lot about races for home-ice advantage that doesn't tend to matter much.



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5. Chicago Blackhawks (16-21-7, -30) – After showing some life while winning five of six, the Hawks dropped their next two before rebounding with last night's impressive win over the Penguins. The good news is that now they're home all week. The bad news is that they'll be facing the Flames, Predators and Golden Knights.

4. Philadelphia Flyers (15-20-6, -34) – You know, I'm starting to think that maybe Dave Hakstol wasn't the problem. After winning their first two under Scott Gordon, the Flyers have gone 1-6-1 and are genuine contenders to finish dead last. Carter Hart has looked fine but doesn't seem ready to single-handedly save the season, and lately, they're not scoring much either. At this point, it's basically onto the Wayne Simmonds watch, plus monitoring the airport arrivals for anyone who looks like Joel Quenneville.

3. Los Angeles Kings (17-23-3, -30) – The Kings went back to the 1990s on Saturday by bringing back the glow puck. Meanwhile, we're going back to October by dropping the Kings out of the bottom two for the first time in ten weeks.

2. Detroit Red Wings (16-21-7, -24) – Friday's win over the Predators was a good sign. But last night's loss to the Caps means they still haven't managed back-to-back wins since Dec. 1 and they've won just four of eighteen since that mini-streak.

1. Ottawa Senators (15-23-5, -35) – I tried, Ottawa. I really did. I didn't start you off in the bottom spot to open the season even though everyone else thought you'd be terrible. And even as the Senators were the only team to stay in the bottom five all season long, I never once put them at No. 1. Four other teams got that honor, but never the Sens.

Until now. I held out as long as I could. But the Senators have lost eight straight, giving up four or more goals in all but one of those games and they have one regulation win in the last month. It's over. They're the worst. There's nothing left to do but trade Matt Duchene and Mark Stone, sell off the rest of the roster for scraps, and start sticking pins in a voodoo doll of Jack Hughes wearing an Avalanche jersey.

(Enjoy the now inevitable five-game winning streak Sens fans.)

Not ranked: St. Louis Blues – The Blues are sitting in last place in the West, and they're just one point up on the Senators for dead last overall, so you might be expecting to see them in the bottom five. If you're a Blues fan then you're definitely expecting it, and you're probably mad at me that they're not here – as I said in the Future Week piece on long-range Cup odds, the Blues are this year's "gets mad when they're not ranked poorly enough in power rankings" fan base.

And to be clear, the Blues certainly aren't good. Given expectations heading into the season, they're probably one of the most disappointing teams in the league.

But I've still got them just outside the bottom five, for a few reasons. For one, their low point total is misleading because they somehow have four or five games in hand on the rest of the league; by points percentage, they're ahead of a half-dozen teams. And their underlying numbers tell the story of a team that started off poorly but has been better lately, and all else being equal, we'd expect wins to follow that.

Of course, all else may not be equal, and if a frustrated Doug Armstrong decides to blow the whole thing up then all bets are off. But for now, I think the Blues are a below-average team getting somewhat worse results than they deserve. That still adds up to being bad. In a league with plenty of struggling teams, it's just not quite bottom-five bad.

Sorry to let you down, Blues fans. If it's any comfort, we'll always have the Saskatoon post.

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The Athletic / Pronman's 2019 World Junior Championship wrap: Standouts, disappointments and draft talk

By Corey Pronman

Jan 7, 2019

VANCOUVER — The 2019 World Junior Championship concluded with Finland taking gold. I watched all 30 games between a combination of live and video viewings in order to provide my thoughts on the drafted prospects who helped and hurt their stocks the most, as well as thoughts on draft-eligible players who intrigued me.

It was a tough tournament in regards to evaluations due to a bad bug that was going around both venues that left many players either out or not playing close to 100 percent.

I'm sure everyone will want to know about prospects of their favorite teams who I didn't mention. If you have further questions, I'll try to get to as many as I can in the comments section.

This column will serve as a lead-in to my upcoming midseason drafted prospect rankings.

Standouts

The Goalies: This was a tournament for goalie lovers. Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen (BUF), Lukas Dostal (ANA), Michael DiPietro (VAN), Pyotr Kochetkov (2019), Daniil Tarasov (CBJ), Samuel Ersson (PHI), Cayden Primeau (MTL), Kyle Keyser (BOS) and so many other goalies had good tournaments. This led to a lack of standout scoring at the event and questions about which forwards deserved recognition on the All-Star ballot – even for those that played well. All the goalies mentioned should be discussed in the best netminders outside the NHL conversation and would make a top 25 goalie prospect ranking for me.

Russia's top line: Grigori Denisenko, LW, (FLA); Vitaly Kravtsov, C, (NYP); and Klim Kostin, RW, (STL)

This was the best line in the tournament. Denisenko was my vote for MVP. He showed the same well-rounded and dynamic skill set that I saw consistently last season. He was a threat nearly every time he was on the ice. He hasn't produced as well in the pros but once he bulks up, this level of play will come versus men.

Kravtsov didn't have his best tournament but I still thought he played quite well and was one of the better forwards at the event. His skill and vision stood out. I would have liked to see a bit more pace from him but I'm not concerned, and per a source, he was playing sick so that may have slowed him down.

Kostin's AHL production worries me a bit, but what I saw at this tournament helped ease those concerns. He drove play with speed that I haven't seen from him in past years. When you add on a big, strong frame and a good skill level, Kostin could become a top-six guy one day. He was consistent for Russia and was a big part of its offense.

Emil Bemstrom, RW, Sweden (CBJ): Sweden didn't get much scoring from its forwards. In fact, it got seven goals total, with four coming from Bemstrom. In polling NHL scouts at the tournament, his name came up every time as someone who moved the needle. I don't know if he's going to be a top-six NHL forward, but he has speed, very good sense and has shown all season he can score. He didn't shy away from shooting either, getting pucks on net as much as anyone at the tournament. He's moved up for me as a prospect and I think he'll be a top-nine forward in the league.

Erik Brannstrom, D, Sweden (VGK): Brannstrom was very consistent for Sweden and logged a ton of minutes. He made an impact with his skating, his skill and his brain, making a lot of plays in both ends of the



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rink. I think he'll be a solid defender despite not being the biggest guy. The way he can jump into an attack or activate off the line with his skating is a standout attribute, especially with his ability to make a play. He was one of the best overall defensemen in the tournament.

Cody Glass, C, Canada (VGK): Glass was the center for Canada's top line, which was its most consistent producer of offense. His vision is fantastic, and he was often the guy who started offense at even strength and on the power play. With his size and skill, he projects as a guy who will drive play as a pro. There are things he'll need to work on as he advances to the NHL ranks, but few people can match his hockey sense.

Martin Fehervary, D, Slovakia (WSH): I've watched Fehervary a lot the past few years and he's never struck me as a real offensive defenseman. I saw good smarts, feet and a guy who competes, but not someone who put up points. That wasn't the guy who showed up in B.C. Fehervary was jumping up into plays, sliding pucks through legs and making plays. I don't think his skill is high-end, but it's better than I've seen previously and his showing here made me reconsider my previous evaluation of him.

Barrett Hayton, C, Canada (ARI): I wrote about Hayton earlier this season in my prospects I was wrong about piece and how he's been consistently elite when I've watched him. He continued that trend in this tournament. He wasn't dominant, but for an 18-year-old on Canada's U20 team, he played a huge role, and showed elite skill and playmaking ability. He has minor issues in his game that concern me, but in terms of his prospect stock, this affirmed that Hayton is a legit top-tier talent.

Quinn Hughes, D, USA (VAN): Hughes' play in the semifinal wasn't the best, but his play in every other game left little doubt he was one of the best players at the tournament. The point totals didn't show it, but when he was on the ice, USA had the puck. His feet are elite, as is his offensive creativity. He made so many plays on the breakout, zone entries and inside the offensive zone that there were times he looked a level above the competition. He needs to rein in the urge to make the cute extra play, as he was often the victim of a bad turnover, but his potential is clearly off the charts and, for the local Canucks fans, he gave a lot of reason to be excited.

Philipp Kurashev, C, Switzerland (CHI): Kurashev had a great tournament, being the anchor for Switzerland and leading a strong first power play unit. His even strength impact was hit-or-miss, but I really liked the skill and offensive instincts he showed to go along with an impressive shot. He'll need to continue to work on playing with pace and intensity with more consistency, as that's my biggest hesitation projecting him to the NHL, but he's got a ton of natural ability.

Ryan Poehling, C, USA (MTL): Poehling was named the MVP of the tournament by the media and top forward by the IIHF Directorate. He wouldn't have been my pick, but he still played well and his third-period hat trick versus Sweden was one of the most memorable parts of the tournament. He showed great IQ throughout the event, setting up his teammates consistently. It's hard to find a flaw in his skill set even though I wouldn't call him overly dynamic. He competed well, he showed good pace in his play and he created offense.

Alexander Romanov, D, Russia (MTL): In a poll of NHL scouts on guys who helped themselves at the tournament, Romanov's name came up from each scout, including those who were skeptics of him like I was coming out of the draft. When I saw Romanov last season, he showed good feet, some skill and physicality, but he was never consistent and often was Russia's third- or fourth-best U18 defenseman. He's really put together his game now. I don't know if he's ever going to be a power play guy in the NHL, but he made a lot of plays with his hands and vision to go along with his great feet and compete level. I can certainly see him projecting out as an NHL player now, which Montreal obviously did when they selected him at No. 38. The IIHF Directorate named him the tournament's best defenseman.

Owen Tippett, RW, Canada (FLA): Tippett has trended up for me all season and his showing with Canada's U20 team confirmed what I've seen in the OHL. He's been putting it together with more consistency

coming from his fantastic skill set. He's got elite skill to go along with good feet and a big shot. He didn't play well in the game versus Finland that knocked out Canada, but he was one of the best players in the round robin portion. He might never be the best player off the puck, but his offensive skill is tough to match and he showed that throughout the tournament.

Disappointments

Evan Bouchard, D, Canada (EDM): Bouchard entered the tournament as Canada's No. 1 but never really took that mantle. He didn't play poorly, I thought he defended decently and moved the puck well, but there were never moments – aside from the odd flashes – where he really stood out with his vision and offensive instincts. He will be a good NHL player, but I expected more of a guy who got as much time as he did on the first power play unit and has his offensive pedigree in junior. He and Markus Phillips (LAK) started the tournament as Canada's top pair, but by the end of the quarterfinal it was Ty Smith (NJD) and Noah Dobson (NYI) who took the reigns.

Martin Necas, C (CAR) and Filip Zadina, RW (DET), Czech Republic: Much was made about the performance of the Czechs' top players. Zadina had one point, and neither were dominant. I don't think they were that bad, but given what they did last year and what you expected of players of their caliber, they should have done more. I've heard Necas tagged as "best player outside the NHL" from some scouts who've watched him in Charlotte, and he didn't show that here. I didn't love Zadina's compete level at times. Both made plays. Necas was a good all-around center who showed speed and skill, and Zadina showed better vision than I've seen in junior before, but neither left you excited about their play.

Isac Lundestrom, C, Sweden (ANA): Lundestrom was one of Sweden's better forwards but that was a low bar. He centered the top line and for large portions of Sweden's games did not make much of an impact. As a returning player and someone with NHL games this season, he was a bit underwhelming. I like his toolkit, he's got speed, skill and vision, but this was yet another viewing of him where I left wondering if he was more than a third-line forward in the NHL (his great NHL camp was evidence to the contrary).

Eeli Tolvanen, RW, Finland (NSH): Tolvanen didn't play poorly, he had a lot of shots and was a good player, but given what he's done in the KHL, the Olympics, the Worlds, last year's tournament and in the NHL this season, I expected more. He didn't make a ton of plays to his teammates and scouts pointed to issues with his compete level through the tournament. One criticism I had before was his speed, but I thought he was skating more than fine and he created some offense. But he left with no goals and I continue to think that I might have overrated him last season.

Draft Talk

I'm not going to touch on every draft-eligible player if they didn't play much, such as Philip Broberg despite the fact he's highly touted, but here are some thoughts on guys at the tournament who are eligible to be selected this summer.

Ville Heinola, D, Finland, 2019: Heinola was very good for a 17-year-old defenseman before a brutal knee injury took him out. He was playing top-four minutes, and showing good feet, touch and great overall instincts. He moves the puck well for a double underage and showed that he knows how to make a play. His decisions weren't perfect, but for a guy his age, I have no concerns that as he matures he'll clean his game up. He looked like a top-two-rounds pick. My concern now is his health and whether he'll play again this season.

Anttoni Honka, D, Finland, 2019: Honka struggled with the U20 level. He's been up and down through the U20 tournaments this season. When he's up, he's dynamic, using his mobility, skill and sense to make high-end plays. However, he was on the wrong side of a lot of turnovers and defensive miscues. Talking to scouts, some like the potential a lot, and



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some are worried about the warts if you have to invest a top-40 pick in him.

Alexis Lafreniere, LW, Canada, 2020: Lafreniere didn't play much so it was hard to get much of a read on him. His play didn't warrant ice time, mind you, but as a late 2001 birthdate that was excusable. He didn't really get to showcase his elite skill and playmaking at this level, he was not quite ready to do so. My one concern was his footspeed, something that was easier to watch, and it looked very average at this pace, which was noticed by scouts I talked to as they look toward next season.

Anton Lundell, C, Finland, 2020: Lundell's play kept getting better as the tournament went along. For a late 2001, he played quite well, getting used in all situations. He wasn't a top player for Finland but he was close. He's got great overall instincts, good skills, and he looked quicker than I've seen from him in the past. He'll be a player who gets discussed a lot next season.

Jack Hughes, C, USA, 2019: Jack Hughes missed half of the tournament due to an injury, but when he was healthy he played well and USA's coach trusted him with plenty of ice time. His skating is off the charts and anytime he's around the play he adds an extra gear to the pace. He showed flashes of his playmaking ability but it wasn't consistent. He didn't hurt his draft stock but didn't do a ton to move the needle.

Kaapo Kakko, LW, Finland, 2019: Kakko scored the Golden Goal but also was an important player for Finland throughout the tournament. He showed a lot of skill and offensive creativity and made some unique plays. He combined that by showing he could overpower guys despite being a double underage, just as he's done versus men. His speed's never been great for me but he looked pro-average here. His strong tournament and great Liiga season combined with his skills have made me think the top of the draft is a 1A/1B situation.

Mads Soegaard, G, Denmark, 2019: Soegaard intrigued scouts with his massive frame, production in the WHL and decent athleticism. He had a tough tournament and showed some issues in his reads and positioning too often. Some scouts at the tournament were still very high on him but this was not his best two weeks.

Samuel Fagemo, RW, Sweden, 2019: Fagemo's stock has trended up all season after being passed over last year. He's got good speed and skill. "I really like how he attacks," said one scout, "he's always looking to take pucks to the net." Fagemo played a significant role for Sweden and got power play time. Compared to the other 2000s on Sweden who were already drafted, he stood out and is all but a lock to be drafted this summer.

Valentin Nussbaumer, LW, Switzerland, 2019: Nussbaumer showed the stuff that makes him intriguing. He's got great hands and a great hockey brain. Inside the offensive zone he made a lot of plays and showed how slippery he can be with the puck. The main concern for him is, at his size, he lacks a real next gear. Some scouts think he's a bad skater, some average. I lean to the latter camp but it's something in the back of my mind. I did see him break away from guys a few times at this event but his speed is nothing special. He's a third/fourth round pick for me.

Brett Leason, RW, Canada, 2019: Leason's season has generated a ton of interest as a third-year eligible who is tearing up the WHL this season. I've talked to NHL teams who consider him a late first-round pick. I'm not there yet and didn't see anything at this tournament to change my mind. He's big, has improved as a skater and has good hockey sense, but I think his soft skills are very average and his offensive upside seems more like a third-liner than top-six/power play guy in the NHL. He showed flashes of offensive instincts and competed well for Canada, but I didn't see very good offensive touch. I have him as a second-round pick currently.

Kirill Slepets, LW, Russia, 2019: Slepets was a touted prospect heading into his draft season two years ago. He hasn't been picked and when I've seen him over the years he hasn't really stood out. He was fantastic at this tournament, as well as at the Canada-Russia Series, showing good speed, very good skill, and the ability to make plays in the offensive zone

and off the rush. He was also a constant shorthanded threat. I have him rated in my top four rounds and think he will be drafted.

Vasili Podkolzin, RW, Russia, 2019: Podkolzin's ice time kept going up as the tournament went along, eventually playing on the first power play for Russia at the net area. His strong play continued over from the World Jr. A Challenge. He has all the tools. He's skilled, smart, quick and has an engine that never stops. He wasn't a top player at this level, but that he made any impact as a 17-year-old speaks volumes about how mature and consistent his game is. On talent he's a top-five pick in this draft.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.08.2019

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs left to rue missed opportunities in shutout loss

Chris Johnston

January 7, 2019, 9:39 PM

As Auston Matthews reviewed a night where he hit two posts and had a goal called back by an offside review he never saw coming, there was only one conclusion left to draw.

"It's a game of inches, for sure," Matthews said Monday.

For the Toronto Maple Leafs superstar and his teammates, that game is being played as much between the ears as on the ice.

It's been a grind here of late — a test of "the process" this group first talked about on Day 1 of training camp but only started living when the weather turned cold.

The Leafs have generated far greater underlying results in the month since William Nylander re-entered the lineup following his contract standoff, but are just 7-5-2 in those games after a 4-0 loss to the Nashville Predators.

They have controlled a healthy share of the even-strength shot attempts (53.4 per cent), scoring chances (53.6 per cent), high-danger chances (58.6 per cent) and goals scored (57.1 per cent) since Dec. 6.

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CHOOSE PLAN

Consider those dashboard indicators that suggest the car should be running fairly smoothly. And yet the Leafs haven't won at the same clip they did in October and November.

"I think certainly we have another level to our game and can find some more consistency," said John Tavares. "I think there's really good stretches every game and we do a lot of good things, but to do it in this league consistently and with where we want to get to, we know we can be a lot better and we've got a lot of work ahead of us and we've got to dig in.

"I think we know it's not going to be easy. We're playing some very good hockey teams, proven teams, teams fighting for their lives. We've just got to be prepared and go out there and execute a little bit more consistently."



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They had enough chances to make life more difficult on Nashville.

Matthews beat Pekka Rinne early but rang his rare slapshot off the post. Kasperii Kapanen struck iron with what looked like a tap-in. William Nylander was shown to be a quarter-stride offside on the zone entry before Matthews scored, seeing a potential 1-1 tie quickly become a 2-0 deficit when he then accidentally deflected a P.K. Subban shot behind his own goaltender while checking the point.

"A couple posts, a goal called back, but it's no excuse in this locker-room," said Matthews. "We've still got to bear down and do our best to capitalize on our opportunities. Definitely if a couple of those maybe go in or the roles are reversed then maybe we're looking at a different game. But it wasn't."

Big picture, it's pretty clear what details have slowed down the Leafs Express.

A once-scorching power play is suddenly in search of traction, clicking at a paltry 12.2 per cent (5-for-41) this last month. That includes an oh-for-three performance against Nashville, aided by a spinning puck from in-tight that saw Matthews hit his other post in the third period.

"It wasn't good enough," said Leafs coach Mike Babcock. "I mean Matty had the wide open net so if you get one, everyone thinks it's great. He didn't shoot it in the empty net. But I still didn't think both our plan and our execution [was] good enough. We weren't dangerous enough."

Toronto has also played without Frederik Andersen these last five games and had seen its No. 1 goaltender's performance dip a little before he went down with a groin injury.

None of these areas are yet larger-scale concerns, not with Toronto still second overall in points percentage (.667) and Andersen expected back soon. You'd also assume a power play featuring Matthews, Tavares, Mitch Marner, Nazem Kadri and Morgan Rielly is bound to rediscover its lethal form eventually.

In the meantime, Babcock hopes his team is picking up some "lessons." That's a phrase he used after a loss to Minnesota last week and again after the defeat to Nashville, which lost in the 2017 Stanley Cup final and won the Presidents' Trophy last season.

"They were heavy on the puck, heavy on their sticks, detailed, blocked shots, competed," Babcock said of the Predators. "I thought they were dialed in. I thought their players were playing a real game and it was a competitive game. We didn't hold our end up through 60 [minutes]."

They were in the general vicinity, just not all the way there.

The Leafs have 40 games left before they're playing for keeps. The challenge is to grind through the winter blahs and find another level on nights like this one.

"We're a pretty calm team in here," said Marner. "We've got a lot of belief in each other. We have no doubt that we can score in this room."

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Sportsnet.ca / Flames Takeaways: Everything's coming up Gaudreau

Eric Francis

January 8, 2019, 12:14 AM

It was symbolic of just how well things have been going for Johnny Gaudreau of late.

Opening the third period of a 2-2 game with his sixth breakaway of this four-game road trip, Gaudreau's shot seemed to be absorbed by Blackhawks goalie Collin Delia before it somehow squirted through his pads and into the net.

It came a few hours after Gaudreau opened the scoring with a gift of a rebound into an open net, and one day after attending the dramatic playoff win by his beloved Philadelphia Eagles at Soldier Field.

Everything is going Gaudreau's way, which makes sense given he's dominating games like that kid McDavid is accustomed to.

It's an appropriate comparison as Gaudreau's 13 points in his last five games put him two points ahead of the Oilers captain in a scoring race the fired-up Flame now sits third in.

He is, quite simply, the talk of the league.

Deservedly so.

Days after being named the NHL's second star of the month, Gaudreau was told Monday he was the league's player of the week with five goals and six assists.

Ho hum.

In a run that that started with back-to-back four-point efforts, Gaudreau now has goals in five straight.

Four of those efforts are multi-point jobs that have played huge roles in the Flames winning three of four on their latest road trip to uphold their lead over the rest of the Western Conference.

He's in serious jeopardy of ruining his reputation as a pure playmaker by scoring 13 goals in his last 10 outings.

He leads the team with 26, setting him on a pace that will have him threatening the coveted 50-goal mark.

Not too shabby for a guy who teammates often joke has a muffin for a shot.

The best player on the West's top squad is now getting almost as many Hart Trophy mentions as he is points, which says plenty.

How poetic the Flames' 4-3 win came against one of his idols, Patrick Kane, who knows plenty about turning franchises around, winning the Hart and claiming the Art Ross Trophy.

Both opened the scoring for their respective teams in the first, both finished with two points and both are considered amongst the game's most skilled and exciting players.

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LINE DANCING

Gaudreau is certainly the engine that drives the line, but linemates Sean Monahan and Elias Lindholm are certainly huge factors in No. 13's success all season.

The trio has combined for an astonishing 33 points in the club's last five games, which included a sweet power-play snipe by Monahan that tied the game late in the second.

It set up another third-period doozy from the Flames, who are now a league-best plus-32 in the final frame.

Those three players, combined with Matthew Tkachuk, are all over 50 points now – a significant bulge in stats given the Flames only had two players eclipse 50 all of last season.



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Thanks to Gaudreau and Lindholm's playmaking, Monahan had 10 shots on goal in a game that saw all three purple Gatorade guzzlers nab two points. Lindholm deserves to be included in Selke Trophy talk as he's not only been the defensive catalyst on the line, but a chief penalty killer for the team.

Lindholm, who is plus-27, is now projected to finish with 93 points, which would shatter the franchise record for points as a first-year Flame. Sergei Makarov had 86 in 1989-90, Doug Gilmour had 85 in 1988-89 and Mike Cammalleri had 82 in 2008-09.

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THIS & THAT

David Rittich has been so dependable this year that he'll hardly get mentions despite being stellar in a wide-open game that included an exorbitant number of Grade A chances at both ends. All told the Flames goalie had 32 saves, including several clutch stops while the Hawks looked to increase their lead to two ... Garnet Hathaway's empty-netter was the Flames' 14th short-handed goal of the year – another league-leading stat ... Mark Giordano's assist on Gaudreau's goal was the 300th of his career. Not bad for an undrafted dreamer who spent a year in Russia to try bolstering his stock ... The Flames return home where they'll play five in a row and six of seven before the all-star break. Their next game is Wednesday against Colorado.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canucks hoping other forwards will thrive without Pettersson

Iain MacIntyre

January 7, 2019, 8:18 PM

VANCOUVER – Even injured, Elias Pettersson continues to perform miracles as a Vancouver Canuck.

On Monday, four days after his knee bent like a cartoon figure when he was wrestled to the ice in Montreal, Pettersson jogged down some stairs on his way to a workout as the Canucks practised without him at the University of B.C.

It looked like Pettersson, the NHL's top rookie, would be out for weeks when he was trapped in Jesperi Kotkaniemi's leg hold as the Canadiens pulled him down last Thursday. Instead, the 20-year-old may miss only two or three games. The power of youth and flexibility.

"If you're going to sprain your knee, that's probably the best-case scenario," Canucks coach Travis Green told reporters. "He's not going to be as long as we've seen other knee injuries in the past.

"I've seen a lot of bad things over the years. I don't really get too worried about it until I actually know. The fact that he skated off, I thought was a good sign. I was pressing for him to come back in the game. That's how I think."

But Pettersson did not return for the final 34 minutes of the game, nor for the one two nights later in Toronto. Beaten 2-0 by the Canadiens and rolled 5-0 by the Maple Leafs, the Canucks have yet to generate a goal without Pettersson.

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Even missing six games in October with a concussion, the Swede still leads the Canucks in scoring with 22 goals and 42 points in 38 games. His seven game-winning goals are tied for the lead in the NHL. In Vancouver's last 10 wins, Pettersson has scored the deciding goal in six of them.

But unless the Canucks can find a way to win 0-0, someone else will need to score Thursday against the Arizona Coyotes. Pettersson is expected to miss that game. Any mortal would.

"We're not going to rush him back," Green said. "He'll be back when he's good and ready.

"When you lose your most offensive guy, it's going to take away a whole lot of your offence. (But) we're not going to ask guys to do stuff that they're not capable of. There's no magic (formula) for scoring in this league. Off your breakouts, off your neutral-zone play, if you can score on the rush, it's a good thing. And in the offensive zone, you've got to be hard, you've got to win puck battles, you've got to play quick."

After leading the NHL in games-played and road games, the Canucks finally have time to practise as they play only six games – all at Rogers Arena – in the next four weeks. So, on Monday, Green ran the team through a physical practice that featured a pile of battle drills. How else is a team supposed to score?

"The last two games we've been shut out," veteran centre Jay Beagle said. "We're talking about it. Today, the emphasis was going to the net and just battling. Battling to get in greasy areas, that's where you score those goals. Battling to get into those areas is not easy. It was a high-paced practice with a lot of battle drills. It's a simple message."

There is a psychological element to losing your best offensive player. The Canucks went 3-3 without Pettersson in October but scored just 11 goals in regulation in those six games.

They've fired 61 shots the last two games without scoring. Vancouver was also shut out in two of the last five games Pettersson played, so the offence was starting to struggle even before he was injured. The Canucks failed to score only twice in their first 38 games.

"If the top scorer goes out on any team, it takes a toll and other guys would be pressing maybe too hard," centre Bo Horvat said. "It does affect guys mentally. For us, we've just got to simplify our game and capitalize on our opportunities. If we weren't getting opportunities, we'd be a little more worried."

Winger Brock Boeser said: "When you're not scoring goals like we have the last couple of games, that's when you really need to get gritty and put pucks to the net and get bodies there. Once you bang home a couple, others will start coming."

That's the hope, which is what this season is really about for the Canucks.

"We're not battling harder right now than we were in November, than we were the first game when we played Calgary (opening night)," Green said. "The culture that we want is that will to win is high every night. It's not all of sudden, 'Hey, we're going to try harder because we're closer to .500 now.' If you're going to only play hard at certain times of the year, you're not going to be very a successful team and you're not going to have a very successful culture. We've kept the pedal down from Day 1 and that's the mindset that we want and the culture we want to build for years to come."



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Sportsnet.ca / Canadiens dodge major bullet despite loss to Wild

Eric Engels

January 8, 2019, 12:36 AM

MONTREAL — It was just under two hours before the puck dropped in the Montreal Canadiens' game against the visiting Minnesota Wild that Marc Bergevin explained why he was in such a good mood.

The general manager was asked what satisfied him most about his team's standing in the playoff race — sitting one point out of the Eastern Conference's second wild-card position after 42 games despite being labeled a draft-lottery favourite by most prognosticators to start the year. He was asked to explain his satisfaction in relation to the angst and disappointment he felt throughout a 2017-18 season that saw his Canadiens fizzle to a 28th-place finish in the standings.

Bergevin led with how pleasurable it's been to watch star defenceman Shea Weber back in action after he was sidelined for close to a full calendar year, saying, "I almost forgot what it was like having him on the ice." And he concluded with the joy he's taken from watching his team compete as hard as it has thus far in the face of adversity — coming back to erase deficits on several occasions.

And then, six minutes and change into the 1-0 loss the Canadiens suffered to the Wild, in some cruel twist of fate, Mikael Granlund shot a puck that rode up Weber's stick, sliced his face and left him doubled over in agony on Montreal's bench.

The big man played seven more shifts in the first period and left for the hospital at intermission. His teammates were left to wonder how serious the injury might be, and they were stuck without him and forward Kenny Agostino, who was tossed from the game for a late hit thrown at Wild forward Eric Fehr.

The Canadiens took 21 shots in the final two periods, tried everything they could to break through Minnesota's trap, and they ultimately came up short.

But it wasn't a loss to hang their heads about. Certainly not one like the 4-1 defeat to Nashville this past Saturday, when their effort was sub-standard. And afterwards, Canadiens coach Claude Julien gave a very positive update on Weber's status.

"The results are positive," Julien said. "He went and got examined to make sure there was no fracture. [There was none] so he's making the trip [to Detroit] with us."

Julien added that he expects Weber will play against the Red Wings on Tuesday, but stopped short of confirming his presence for the game.

In the grand scheme of things, it meant Bergevin could leave the Bell Centre on Monday night with the same smile he walked into the building wearing — even if the Canadiens came out on the wrong end of the scoresheet in the game.

You can imagine that contemplating having to play more games without Weber might have changed his mood at some point in the middle of the night.

Weber had been a force with the Canadiens since returning from off-season knee surgery on Nov. 24. The team went 11-7 with him patrolling their blue line for close to half of every game, and it routinely outshot the

opposition and limited the quality scoring chances against. The difference he made was night and day.

Sure, the Canadiens had survived in Weber's absence on the strength of their surprising 6-2-2 start to the season, but they were hurting for his return in a big way after going 5-6-2 just prior to Nov. 24.

They hung in as best they could against Minnesota without him, but an egregious turnover from Jeff Petry cost them a goal care of Granlund, and they were missing Weber as they pushed to tie the game up over the final 13 minutes of third period.

"It was just a mistake, I should've used the boards," Petry said of the play in question. "I thought I saw where [partner] Mike [Reilly] was and I put it right in the middle and should've just sucked the forechecker in a little bit more and used an indirect [pass] instead of trying to make a direct pass."

It was the kind of mistake he might not have made had he been taking shifts at the same pace he had since Weber returned to the lineup.

Instead, Petry was forced to pick up where he left off in the first two months of the season, playing over 25 minutes for the first time since Nov. 27. It was a challenge he said was that much harder to overcome on this night given that the Canadiens were down to five defencemen.

But Petry led with six shots and 12 attempts in the game, and he threw four hits to make up for Weber's absence in that department.

"I think we were in it the whole time, we even had better chances than they did," said Julien. "I thought we had more scoring chances. One mistake ended up being what cost us the game."

But a scary incident involving their most important skater won't cost them as much as it could have, and that's massive consolation as they push forward with their season.

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Sportsnet.ca / Q&A: Marc Bergevin on Carey Price, prospects, trade deadline

Eric Engels

January 7, 2019, 8:00 PM

On Monday, Montreal Canadiens general manager Marc Bergevin gave a 20-minute update on how he feels about his team's 22-15-5 record, on top prospects in the organization that he watched at the World Junior Championship, on Carey Price's absence from the upcoming All-Star Weekend, and on how he's approaching the 2019 NHL trade deadline.

Here are his answers.

Carey Price missing All-Star Weekend

Bergevin: I was at the World Junior Championship in Vancouver and I came back late on Sunday night. This morning, I met — it was important for me to meet with Carey and our group of doctors to find out exactly what's best for him short-term and long-term. Based on what we discussed, it was best for him and the organization that he take the time to rest an injury that's been nagging him a bit. The time off, certainly with the extra five days (for the bye week), should help him.

On Price having to miss a game before or after All-Star Weekend as a penalty for skipping



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Bergevin: It's not a suspension. I had a conversation with the league this morning and he either has to miss the game before or the game after All-Star Weekend. I know we have a back-to-back coming out of the bye week so it'll be one of those two games then.

Monday's decision to waive defenceman David Schlemko

Bergevin: Since he arrived in Montreal, he's been hurt. In his first training camp (last year), he got hurt in the first practice. A player who misses an entire camp — it's the hardest period of time for a player to miss. We saw it recently with a young, talented player like [Toronto Maple Leafs forward] William Nylander. It's taken a long time for him to get it back. I'm not comparing Schlemko to Nylander, but I'm just saying missing all of training camp is difficult.

This season, he had a good training camp and got hurt again. What's happened since is we have some young players who have performed well like Brett Kulak and Victor Mete, so I wanted to keep them in Montreal. And David is going to have to — if he doesn't get claimed — go to Laval and find his game. It's certain I lose a bit of control by putting him on waivers, but I'd like that he remain available to us because it's good to have depth in the organization.

Bergevin: If I was going to give an exact number, I'd say he's 87.3 per cent. Listen, at this moment probably a quarter of the team isn't at 100 per cent.

Goaltender is a very demanding position and, in Carey's case, obviously he's a big part of our team. At this moment he's performing well and in good health, but there's always things that could be better with rest. That's why we made the decision we made today.

How do you intend to approach the trade deadline as a team competing for the playoffs while trying to keep the focus primarily on the future?

Bergevin: From Day 1, I believed that if we did stay healthy, our goal was to fight for a playoff spot, and so far that's what we've done, and I expect the same for the second half.

Again, I'm always going to be listening to options, but the goal is to build for the future, and just to give up assets for a short-term [addition], I'm not going to do it. It would have to be very appealing. Again, if there's a young player available and there's assets that need to go [to acquire that player], I get it. But I don't think I'll be in the rental business.

Do you have your eye on any available players who you feel can help now and in the future?

Bergevin: Right now it's way too early to talk about that. Other general managers — nobody has started talking about trades. And that's usually 10 days before, a week before, so we have a long ways to go for that. Again, I'm going to listen. If I think it makes sense, I'll do it. But I'm not going to start mortgaging the future because I know what's coming with the World Junior — who they're going to be asking for — and I'm not moving these kids. So it's going to be a short conversation, I think.

Easy to convince Price to stay back from all-star weekend?

Bergevin: For Carey, it's an honour to be named. Every year he's been selected, he's participated. He probably wanted to go, but he understands very well that his team, the Montreal Canadiens, is the most important to him. That's why he accepted.

Would you move any veterans out ahead of the deadline to ensure a better future for the team?

Bergevin: It's a thing that, as we approach the trade deadline, we'll discuss seriously amongst the management group. It's a possibility, and one I've already considered.

Why are you in a good mood this year vs. last year?

Bergevin: Losing Shea for as long as we did hurt us last year. It was all part of a perfect storm. Hats off to the players and the coaches who started at zero this year, and I think we're heading in a good direction.

The route towards youth is very important for us, and with what I saw in Vancouver, the future of the Canadiens is very bright.

Prospects?

Bergevin: Obviously we're not going to start giving up young assets. But if we drafted these kids, it's because we believe they had some potential, and that came to the forefront in Vancouver with our prospects that really stepped up their games to a level.

I know last summer when we stepped up and drafted [Alex] Romanov at 38, we got critiqued. But I remember, at the table, I said to [assistant general manager] Trevor [Timmins], 'If we do like him, let's just not wait because if a pick before somebody grabs him and he's gone, we'll wish [he was there].'

So, when you like a player, you just step up and take them.

On Charles Hudon, who's sat 16 of the last 18 games after scoring 30 points in 72 games last season

Bergevin: Listen, Charles is going to have his chance to get into the lineup, and when he does, it's up to him to ensure he doesn't get bumped out.

Apart from his performance, we don't have any injuries up front except for [Andrew Shaw]. I've spoken to many GMs recently who have a lot of injured players. We're going to need all our players, and Charles Hudon is a young player who has potential and will stay in Montreal for the time being.

On WJC MVP Ryan Poehling, who's in his junior season at St. Cloud State, and whether or not he can be enticed to turn pro after this year

Bergevin: He's a centre. A young centre. It's a very important position. All teams that have quality centres keep them. You have to draft them, and we were lucky to take him at [25th overall in 2017].

His progression? He had a good WJC in Buffalo last year, and this year he reached another level. So we expect he's getting closer to being a pro, but we haven't discussed future plans with him yet. We're going to let him finish his university season and then talk to him when the time comes.

Owe it to the players to reward their good first half with a deadline acquisition?

Bergevin: I'm not going to give up a first-round pick for a rental. It's just not going to happen. So I want to be clear, today, it's not happening.

If there's something that makes sense short-term and long-term, I will do it. But giving up assets for short-term, it's not going to happen.

Mentality of always having a chance if you make the playoffs, and whether that factors into making a move prior to the deadline

Bergevin: I'm not sure what's going to be available at the time. It's so far away. I can't mention names, but there's names I'm hearing out there the cost is a first-round pick, and that player will not make a difference between winning a Stanley Cup and barely getting in, so that's not going to happen.

Most pleasant surprise so far

Bergevin: If you want to talk about players, I thought Tomas Tatar really ... he was a very good player in Detroit, there was some injury issues last year in Detroit, and then he went to Vegas. They were on a roll, and he never got his chance, never really got going, and he came here and he competes.

He never stops, he's always on the puck, and we didn't see that in Vegas. Was it because of his injuries? I don't know, but I think he's been pretty good for us.

But the way the team has performed even when they're down, the way they're coming back, they never seem to quit. To me that was something



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that was missing last year, and I'm proud it's back now. And they seem like they're having a lot of fun together, too.

Concerns?

Bergevin: It's always injuries. Injuries are a concern for every team.

I talked to a few GMs the last couple of days and there's some teams that are really banged up, and you dig down into your depth and you hope for the best.

For a while I know Nashville was struggling but they had a lot of guys out of their lineup, and there's not much you can do.

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs first half report: Confidence soaring in Toronto

Luke Fox

January 7, 2019, 1:17 PM

The Toronto Maple Leafs are on pace for a 112-point season, which would break the franchise record set just last year.

Pret-ty, pret-ty good.

Through 41 games, they are outscoring their opposition by an incredible 0.95 goals per game and have treated star-player injuries and contract disputes like minor speed bumps.

Not once have the Leafs lost three games in a row, which is a sign of a maturing contender, and a deep roster that can sustain adversity without letting it become a disease.

"It's just like life: you want your ups to be longer than you downs," says coach Mike Babcock, pleased if not satisfied with the improved consistency of his high-flying club.

Though far from flawless, the Maple Leafs have a litany of reasons to be encouraged that a strong first half bodes well for the stretch run.

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We could start with John Tavares, who is on pace for his best statistical campaign in the league, despite it being his 10th. Or we could look to the free agency windfall's right and discuss the exploding threat that is Mitchell Marner, who must be getting tired of leading the entire circuit in primary assists because now he's started scoring with regularity. (Oh, and he kills penalties now, too.)

Perhaps we should begin with Auston Matthews, who is producing points-per-60 at a rate that exceeds Connor McDavid, Mikko Rantanen, Nikita Kucherov and anyone else you can think of. The 21-year-old has again proven his uncanny ability to return from injury (in this case, another shoulder) without looking worse for wear.

Or we could build our case, like a franchise, from the net out. Goaltender Frederik Andersen, who led the NHL in wins before taking time to heal a lingering groin injury, has on so many nights been steady enough that Toronto's D-zone gaffes get overlooked.

The steady ascent of Morgan Rielly has kicked into overdrive as well, as the No. 1 defenceman has flipped from a minus-4 to a plus-27 and only leads all blueliners in goals and points per game and instances where he sloughs off his own prowess to make it all about the team.

Confidence is soaring in Leafs Nation. Maybe even high enough to meet your expectations.

THE BAD

The cap crunch is a-coming.

Usually a young powerhouse wins a Stanley Cup or, say, a playoff round before the painful task of shedding salary in the form of core players must commence. But with Tavares (\$11 million cap hit) and Nylander (\$6.97 million) locked up long-term and big RFA tickets Marner and Matthews needing to be ASAP, the notion of there being enough dough left over to properly compensate free agents Jake Gardiner, Kasperii Kapanen and Andreas Johnsson seems far-fetched at best.

Oh, and the quest for another defenceman continues.

As wonderful a blessing as the Nylander stalemate was for drama and pageviews, in retrospect both management and the player (who has been outscored by guys like Josh Leivo and Frederik Gauthier since his return) might have wished to handle their business earlier.

On ice, the penalty kill is simply average, and opponents are beginning to solve a stacked power play, dropping it to eighth overall (22.9 per cent).

The Leafs still have much room to improve on breakouts and "heavy" play, ranking ninth-worst in giveaways and delivering the second-fewest hits league-wide. They're getting outshot again, too, but Babcock pays that no mind.

"We don't worry about shots," he says. "We worry about scoring chances."

Toronto is a legitimate championship contender, but one that must get through the Tampa Bay Lightning — far and away the NHL's pace-setter — to even escape its own division.

The obvious edge Tampa has over Toronto is defensive depth, partly because the Bolts outbid the Leafs for a legitimate top-four defenceman, Ryan McDonagh, at the 2018 deadline.

Dubas is on record saying that if he doesn't see enough organic improvement in the D-zone (i.e., smoother breakouts; less time hemmed in), he'll go shopping.

"It is an area we can make great gains and continue to improve as a club," Dubas said. "If that isn't something that's happening as we get closer to the end of February, I think we'll certainly look to improve."

This is the rookie GM's first deadline, however, so it'll be fascinating to see just how much of the future he's willing to mortgage for this spring's window. A first-rounder? A promising young forward?

Dubas's dream rental is a trusted right-shot with playoff experience who can kill penalties and log top-four minutes. He might not exist.

St. Louis's Alex Pietrangolo fits that bill, and the teams have been linked in rumours. The Blues captain won't come cheap, however. This is blockbuster territory.

Carolina is selling, and the Leafs and Hurricanes were in dialogue during the Nylander saga. Brett Pesce and Dougie Hamilton are options here.

Cheaper, older options could be Vancouver's Alex Edler or Detroit's Niklas Kronwall — both find themselves on expiring deals and non-contending teams, although Edler and Vancouver have mutual interest in an extension.

Re-signing Matthews and Marner, it goes without saying, is priority No. 1 on the business side of things.



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Aside from the paperwork, catching Tampa is a tall order with the Bolts' 10-point lead in the standings, but securing second seed and home ice for Round 1 (best bet: a Boston rematch) will be key.

The Maple Leafs could benefit from digging down and discovering a little edge to go with all that talent.

"God touched you with the wand and gave you the skill, but he didn't necessarily give you that work ethic to grind every day to keep getting better," Babcock warned at the 41-game mark.

The most specific and immediate concern down the stretch is in the crease. Can Andersen — who threw up a .896 save percentage in last spring's post-season — be rested and in tip-top form when it matters?

"Let's get him healthy, let's get him back playing good, and then we can say at the end of the year he played the perfect amount of games," Babcock said.

"I don't believe that anyone is tired at playoff time. I just don't."

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Sportsnet.ca / Canadiens continue to make difficult but necessary roster decisions

Eric Engels

January 7, 2019, 3:42 PM

MONTREAL— Marc Bergevin and Claude Julien promised their Montreal Canadiens would be younger, faster and competitive enough to make this year's playoffs, and they've made all the necessary moves so far to guarantee it.

Monday's decision to place oft-injured and rarely effective defenceman David Schlemko on waivers is the latest one, and it affirms their commitment to running an authentic meritocracy.

There's nothing unfair about this decision. The Canadiens secured the 31-year-old's place on the roster after he beat out several depth players at the position in training camp. They afforded him time to find his best self in a three-game conditioning stint with the AHL's Laval Rocket after a knee injury sidelined him for their first 16 games. And they gave him every chance to show he could be an important member of the team, even pairing him with Shea Weber after the big man returned from a year on the sidelines with ankle and knee injuries on Nov. 24.

But Schlemko lasted just one game next to Weber on Montreal's top pair. His performance thereafter, lower down in the lineup, left much to be desired. And with one more year left on a contract that pays him \$2.1 million annually, he now seems destined for the AHL.

If the Canadiens want to remain in the hunt for a playoff position — they're currently one point out of the second wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference but were among the top eight for all but a few days in the first half of the season — these are the types of decisions they have to continue to make. If they want to exact a maximal effort from all of their players on a nightly basis, they have to continue to rule with an iron fist.

Uncomfortable as it may be to do this to a veteran of 11 NHL seasons like Schlemko, it is the most appropriate way to continue to fuel the internal competition that's driven the team to unexpected heights thus far. It's also consistent with what we've seen from general manager Bergevin and coach Julien since the 2018-19 campaign began.

There was the decision to keep the NHL's youngest player in Jesperi Kotkaniemi after he earned his way onto the roster with a remarkable performance through training camp. And then there was the one to scratch 35-year-old Tomas Plekanec (who was two games shy of 1,000 in the NHL) and defenceman Karl Alzner (who was beginning Year 2 of a five-year, \$23.1-million contract and set to play consecutive game no. 623 to maintain the NHL's fourth-longest ironman streak) on opening night in Toronto against the Maple Leafs.

"It tells you that we are expected to win games, and the coach is going to dress the guys who he believes give us the best chance to do that," said Canadiens centre Phillip Danault prior to Montreal's 3-2 overtime loss to the Maple Leafs on Oct. 3.

A month later, after Plekanec appeared in just three games and suffered a back injury, Bergevin reinforced the message, terminating the veteran's contract. And it was on Nov. 26, after eight sporadic and unconvincing appearances, that Alzner was waived.

The meritocracy wheel kept on spinning. Defenceman Xavier Ouellet had started strong but fizzled by the end of November before he was waived on Dec. 7. Defenceman Victor Mete's game needed sharpening, so off he went to Laval for a seven-game stint before being recalled to the Canadiens.

Noah Juulsen got the Mete treatment after his game slipped. The 21-year-old had a fine start to the season, suffered a facial fracture on Nov. 19, and struggled to regain his rhythm in four games prior to joining the Rocket on Dec. 17.

At different points, former first-round pick Nikita Scherbak and former second-round pick Jacob De La Rose were both exposed to waivers and lost to the Los Angeles Kings and Detroit Red Wings, respectively — with both players failing to wrestle away roster spots after the Canadiens invested heavily in their development.

And in the big picture, Matthew Peca, who signed a two-year, one-way, \$2.6-million contract, hasn't played well enough to secure his place for more than 26 of Montreal's 49 games. And Charles Hudon, 10 goals and 30 points in 72 games in his rookie season a year ago, has been scratched 26 times because he hasn't beat out the competition on the top three lines and isn't an ideal fit on the fourth.

Canucks and Habs are two of NHL's biggest surprises

Julien has said on multiple occasions that these decisions have been difficult to make, but you can't ignore their part in the Canadiens building a 22-15-5 record to date.

Good play has been rewarded just the same.

Brett Kulak, 25, came to the Canadiens as part of a minor-league trade with the Calgary Flames on Oct. 1. He worked his tail off with the Rocket for 19 games, came up to Montreal on Nov. 23, and has since been a mainstay.

Both Kenny Agostino and Michael Chaput were signed in the off-season to serve as AHL depth, but they put in their work at that level and have all but secured their roles on the Canadiens' fourth line by consistently providing the energy and strong play required. And look at Mete, whose strong play since returning to the Canadiens earned him his current spot next to Weber.

That type of fairness from the coach resonates with the players. Putting Schlemko (who has just one goal and seven assists in 55 games since coming to the Canadiens in the trade that sent a 2019 fifth-rounder to the Vegas Golden Knights) back in the rotation would have been a deviation from that.

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs, Predators game extra special for Par Lindholm, Viktor Arvidsson

Chris Johnston

January 7, 2019, 3:23 PM

TORONTO — “There’s the school,” says Par Lindholm, surveying a photo of the village in northern Sweden where he grew up. “And that’s the rink.”

It is here where two unlikely NHL dreams first started to take shape. In the evenings, on weekends, even on breaks between class, kids would frequently brave the winter air to skate outdoors in the middle of Kusmark, population 441.

Lindholm, the son of a local dairy farmer, was often there. Viktor Arvidsson, from a family of potato farmers, was, too.

“I lived across the water that runs through the whole village,” said Arvidsson. “We had like a bridge that hangs over the water and I just walked over. That’s where we skated almost every day.”

An aerial view of Kusmarks, Sweden. (Vivo Wallpaper)

On Monday night, some 6,134 kilometres away, they will skate in a considerably different environment when Arvidsson’s Nashville Predators face Lindholm’s Toronto Maple Leafs at Scotiabank Arena.

It may be just another game on the schedule for teams with Stanley Cup dreams, but it’s a significant moment back in a village nine hours north of Stockholm. Never before had Kusmark produced a NHL player before Arvidsson broke through with Nashville in March 2015. Lindholm arrived here in the fall after signing a free-agent contract with the Leafs.

“It’s kind of cool we both made it here,” said Lindholm.

“It’s pretty awesome,” said Arvidsson. “It’s like pretty surreal that it happened. It’s good for the little village at home, they’re proud of us. That’s good.”

The five-foot-nine winger took the more traditional path. He was so good as a kid that he played some organized youth hockey with Lindholm despite being 18 months younger, and eventually found his way down the road to Skelleftea AIK and the Swedish world junior team.

Nashville did a great job to pluck Arvidsson from the fourth round in 2014 — an absolute steal given that he’s developed into a 30-goal, 60-point player.

Lindholm wasn’t drafted by anybody. He was playing in the third tier of Swedish professional hockey only six seasons ago. But he continued to work at his game and climb the ranks and became an offensive threat for Skelleftea AIK while earning a spot on last year’s Swedish Olympic team.

It’s little wonder why the last place two sons of Kusmark ever thought they’d plan to meet up was in the hallway outside the Maple Leafs dressing room.

“It’s nuts,” said Arvidsson. “He has taken such a long way, too, and mine was kind of quicker. In the leagues back home, he’s been in almost every one of them and made it here. It’s unbelievable.”

The way they were raised in the game harkens back to an earlier era — one before specialized skills training.

Arvidsson was five when his family moved to Kusmark and figures he met Lindholm at school soon afterwards. He remembers their sessions on the outdoor rink next door simply as “fun with friends.” Formal practices and games were held at an indoor arena about five kilometres away.

The 25-year-old thinks his upbringing on the potato farm played a role in him realizing his NHL dream.

“We had to help out a lot,” said Arvidsson. “My work ethic comes from that — just doing whatever needed to be done. That’s about it. We had fun growing up, too, a big farm and we had a lot of room to play on.”

Lindholm frequently pitched in with chores at home, too.

He’s not sure if it’s simple coincidence that both he and Arvidsson found themselves here, but he sees a couple advantages to being raised in Kusmark.

“Good water,” he said. “And decent potatoes.”

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TSN.CA / Leafs pleased with response to injury issues

Kristen Shilton

The Maple Leafs have endured injuries to a superstar centre, one of their top-line wingers and their starting goaltender, among others this season. Still, they sit second overall in the NHL standings, far from feeling sorry for all the minor obstacles they’ve faced along the way.

“It hasn’t been too bad for us. We’ve been pretty lucky,” said defenceman Ron Hainsey after the Leafs’ optional morning skate on Monday before facing the Nashville Predators. “Obviously players are out here and there, but it’s not like we’ve dealt with a rash of injuries and we have plenty of guys who have the ability to step up. If we stick to our game plan when we’re missing a player or two, we’ll be fine.”

Including Monday, the Leafs will have lost 37 man-games to various injuries: Auston Matthews (14 games), Zach Hyman (eight), Tyler Ennis (seven), Frederik Andersen (six) and Garret Sparks (two). There were also the 28 games William Nylander missed during his contract holdout — another challenge the Leafs handled without looking much worse for wear.

Mike Babcock said on Monday he didn’t know when Andersen, Sparks or Hyman would be back, but they’re all much closer to a return than Ennis, who broke his ankle on Dec. 22. It’s been business as usual for the Leafs, regardless of who is available and who isn’t.

“Looking up and down our lineup we have so much talent,” said Matthews. “Any given night you can play with any player and you’re going to get a pretty good player on either side. So just try to develop chemistry with whoever is there, play fast and have the puck.”

“Obviously Fred being out, he’s a huge part of this team, you don’t want that. But we have good players here,” added Hainsey. “[Michael Hutchinson] came in, stepped up right away, did a great job for us. I think we’ve been pretty fortunate for the most part.”

The time away for some key pieces has forced Babcock to shuffle his lines more than in the past, jockeying wingers up and down the lineup regularly. In his eyes, that’s not necessarily a bad thing and won’t change when Toronto is at full health again.

“We’ll actually be able to change our lines quite a bit just due to matchups because we’ll have more people to do that with,” he said. “Every time we’ve lost a player, we’ve found another one, which has been real good for us because that shows we have good depth throughout the organization. Any time you get an injury, you can feel



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sorry for yourself; doesn't do much good. You just want to continue to find players and improve your depth."

For most players, the word "slump" wouldn't be tied to their production after going five games without a goal. But top offensive producers like Matthews don't always escape such designations.

When the third-year centre tallied his 20th goal of the season in the third period of Saturday's 5-0 win over Vancouver, it broke the longest goal-scoring "slump" of his campaign before it hit six games. Matthews finished Saturday with three points, bringing his total to 39 points in 27 outings this season, but he believes he's capable of more.

"Can always be better," Matthews said. "I think last Saturday was a good win for us and a good step for us moving forward. Another really good challenge here tonight...for us to take another step forward."

Matthews played with fairly consistent linemates in his first two NHL seasons, including Nylander and Hyman. This year he's had a more rotating crop of wingers, including current partners Andreas Johnsson and Nylander.

"I don't mind; sometimes stuff isn't clicking so you have to make a switch," he said. "But our line right now, we can continue to work well together and hopefully find some consistency in the next couple weeks or so. But then again, I'm not making the lines so we'll see what happens."

Matthews is over a month removed now from the shoulder injury that held him out for four weeks and Babcock thinks he's "in a good spot" but has to find that drive to be even better each day.

"The biggest challenge for him – just like John Tavares, just like Mitch Marner, just like Morgan Rielly, just like any of those guys who think they're the best at their position in the game – is it's every day. It's every shift," Babcock said. "You have to love it more than everybody else in the game because you have to keep getting better. You have to keep grinding to get better."

In fact, Babcock thinks Matthews doesn't have to look any further than his own dressing room to see what it takes to constantly be at his best.

"We have a real good example for our guys in [Patrick] Marleau and in Tavares and in the professionalism they have," Babcock said. "God touched you with the wand and gave you the skill, but he didn't necessarily give you the work ethic to grind every day and keep getting better. If you want to be the best of the best, it's a long career."

The Leafs have beaten the Predators in four straight matchups, but past success won't be enough to earn Toronto another victory against a perennial contender like Nashville.

"You have to bring your A-game against a team like this," Matthews said. "They take very few nights off. It'll be a good challenge for us. They have a very complete team, a lot of depth. They play well every night and they're fast, they have good goaltending, their top-four D, you can put them up there with [any] top D in the league."

Toronto's own defence corps – headed by Rielly, Hainsey and Jake Gardiner – has taken heat for not measuring up to that of other contenders like Nashville, but Hainsey doesn't think they'll be at too much of a disadvantage Monday night.

"Mo [is second in the] league in scoring by defencemen (with 45 points), so I don't think he's doing too shabby in that department," Hainsey noted. "But it takes all 20 guys to win; it takes the entire team. They have a great team. Obviously their D has been an exceptional top four for a number of years now and they have good forwards."

More than anything, Babcock hopes the Leafs can build on their most recent victory, starting with how they kept scoring chances low.

"I thought last game we were dialled in," he said. "We don't worry about shots, we worry about scoring chances. That's our focus here. To keep our scoring chances down, we have to spend time in the offensive zone.

We have to continue to work harder in the offensive zone, create chances, because when we do that we have success."

When discussing Travis Dermott last week, Babcock said the Leafs see potential in him to eventually take a top-four defensive role.

In his NHL career to date, Dermott has only ever been a third-pairing blueliner, one averaging 17:40 minutes per game this season and getting increased responsibility on the penalty kill.

Dermott has also found himself with the worst plus-minus among Toronto skaters (minus-4) this year, so there's more development needed before he's ready to be one of the team's top backend players.

"Dermott is a good player and has an opportunity to be a real good player," Babcock said. "Just has to continue to learn the game and read the game and the better he does that, the more he's going to play and the more efficient he's going to be for us."

No one understands that better than Dermott, and he's hoping a top-four position is something well within reach down the road.

"It's hockey. Nothing is promised," he said. "Could have a bad game tonight and not be in the lineup the next night. Every day and you have a game plan in place, and it's every player's individual goal to move up and be playing more. Personally I'd like to move into that spot. If they have it available for me, hopefully I can step in and grab it."

Maple Leafs projected lines vs. Predators:

Forwards

Brown-Tavares-Marner

Johnsson-Matthews-Nylander

Marleau-Kadri-Kapanen

Lindholm-Gauthier-Moore

Defence

Rielly-Hainsey

Gardiner-Zaitsev

Dermott-Ozhiganov

Goalies

Hutchinson starts

Kaskisuo

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TSN.CA / Division title offers Flames best path to deep playoff run

Travis Yost

The Calgary Flames have had a fantastic first half of the season. But the chances of them extending the life of their 2018-19 campaign may be contingent on whether or not they can win the Pacific Division.

The top of the Pacific Division has gone according to plan so far this season, with Calgary, Vegas and San Jose holding down three divisional seeds. The surprising piece has been the ordering, with the Flames



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taking full advantage of early season hiccups from their divisional competitors.

Not surprisingly, the heat has been dialed up. Despite playing at a 107-point pace (and 115-point pace over the last 25 games), the Flames have little breathing room atop the standings. That's because the Golden Knights have been on a tear, acting as the hottest team in the league not situated in the St. Petersburg, Fla., area. And the Sharks have been nearly as good.

If you look at a rolling 10-game point pace, you can see how Calgary – despite playing so well for much of the season – has seen its advantage in the standings erode. Although they've slowed of late, it's really been about the surge from their competitors:

There's nothing wrong with a great three-team race. Unless, of course, you remember that the NHL's current playoff format has a mandated two-versus-three scenario in every division. That's worth keeping in mind for every division, but it seems particularly noteworthy in a division where two legitimate Stanley Cup contenders sit behind division-leading Calgary. Fall to second, and you all but guarantee yourself a first-round matchup with one of those two teams.

But that's not all. Not only do you want to avoid one of Vegas or San Jose, but the one-versus-four matchup looks increasingly appetizing. Potential candidates include the Dallas Stars (+4 goals on the season), the Colorado Avalanche (+15 goals on the season), and the Anaheim Ducks (-19 goals on the season). Emphasis on the last team there, because they currently sit in the last wild-card spot and would draw into a potential matchup with the conference leading Flames, a team that's net 49 goals better.

Let's express this probabilistically. Right now we have Calgary in a head-to-head with Anaheim. If we look at relative goal advantage as a proxy for the probability of a team advancing, we can simulate a series thousands of times and look at the distribution of Flames advancement scenarios. Against Anaheim, they look phenomenal. They even look credible against other wild-card options. That advantage wanes against divisional opponents:

Your probabilities may vary depending on your input variables, but generally speaking any mathematical model is going to be really cool on Anaheim (and to a lesser extent Dallas). The key takeaway here is how significant the disparity is as it pertains to advancement. Against the Ducks, the Flames have a 3-in-4 chance of winning. Against the Stars or Avalanche, it's about a 2-in-3 chance of winning.

Against the Sharks and Golden Knights it's close to a coin flip. That's also operating under the premise that the Flames would hold onto the two seed and have home ice. It's certainly plausible that they could slide as far down as three considering the strength of both the Sharks and Golden Knights of late, and to that end we might start looking at them as a head-to-head underdog.

The good news is the Flames have played well most of the season and by most simulations appear to be a lock to reach the playoffs. Now the pressure is on to finish in the best possible position to make a deep run come April. That starts with winning the Pacific.