



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 26, 2020

THE NEWS & OBSERVER

Hurricanes clarify email to full-time employees about pay

By Chip Alexander

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"The reason why we're going week by week is because there's a stimulus plan and no one has seen the final version of it yet," Waddell said. "We're trying to figure out what benefits there are, for employees and employers."

The News & Observer received copies of the email sent to employees. Team owner Tom Dundon contacted Wednesday, referred all questions to Waddell.

"Tom's goal through this whole process has been not to harm anyone or lay anyone off," Waddell said in the interview.

The Hurricanes on March 17 announced they would cover the lost wages of their PNC Arena staff and part-time events staff for the seven final home games of the regular-season.

Waddell's email to employees said the Hurricanes had decided to "close all components of our business next week and require employees to take PTO (vacation first, then

personal days off). Sick time cannot be used. Employees that have used all of their vacation and personal time will be off without pay. All employees must enter their vacation or personal time off request into the time off system. If a request is not entered, vacation or personal time will not be paid. If an employee has remaining vacation or personal time it must be used."

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The email said: "We have been exploring multiple options on how best to take care of our employees while being mindful of the business challenges we face. This extra week gives us the time to understand the new legislation as well as time to make the best decisions on how to proceed as an organization."

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THE ATHLETIC

While in quarantine together, David Cotton and his brother sign with Carolina

By Sara Civian

Headed into his senior season at Boston College, soon-to-be captain David Cotton, 22, was starting to attract more attention at the professional level.

The Hurricanes' 2015 sixth-round pick maintained consistency throughout his tenure on an uncharacteristically inconsistent BC team, and improved on the scoresheet each year as a plus.

When Hurricanes development camp rolled around last July, it was fair to wonder if he would return to college for a senior season. NCAA sources had said that the second he was named captain, though, he was all in on righting the wronged ship in Chestnut Hill. He was still committed to eventually signing with the Canes, but he knew what he had to do.

"I kinda took a step back (from signing an NHL contract) with the Checkers going deep and the Canes doing so well," he'd said at the time. "I just kind of weighed my options, talked to my family and my advisor. A lot of it was 'Am I ready for this?' and it was a difficult decision. But I feel like we've had three mediocre years at BC when it's an institution built on success. Having (an opportunity to change that), especially as captain, is a big part of my decision."

Boston Herald legend John Connolly's chronicle of Cotton's decision stings to read in retrospect.

If nothing else, the captain, Hall-Of-Fame coach Jerry York and the rest of the 2019-20 Eagles can walk away from this season knowing they did exactly what they had to do.

Cotton, who led the team in points for stretches of the season, ended up No. 3 with 15-24—39. Boston College's 24-8-2 record, featuring its fewest losses since 2015-16, was good enough for its first bid to the NCAA tourney in four seasons. It would've been Cotton's first appearance. The final USCHO Poll of the season had the Eagles ranked No. 4 in the country.

"I think we established ourselves as one of the best teams in the country," he said in a phone interview Wednesday. "I am extremely happy and proud of the work we accomplished throughout the year. For example, the (Hockey East) regular-season title was one of the goals we had. There's still a lot to be proud of."

He knows it all still counts for something, but it's going to be hard to focus on that for a while. The abrupt end of the NCAA season due to the coronavirus crisis meant no tournament run. In a way, for now, success stings even harder than failure would have.

"It still hurts, obviously especially with the situation I was in and the position our team was in," he said. "We strongly felt that we were poised to make a long tournament run, but we are also understanding of the fact that all teams are going through the same thing. I think it's just gonna be an adjustment that not only I'll have to go through, but all other players had to go through the same thing."

There wasn't much time to think at first — Boston College mandated all students leave campus. So Cotton, a native of Parker, Texas, decided to drive to his older brother's apartment in Connecticut.

Jason Cotton, 25, was a senior captain at Sacred Heart, dealing with the same abrupt ending to his NCAA career — maybe his whole hockey career. It was likely a few professional organizations' sights were on the undrafted Atlantic Hockey player of the year. He finished strong, leading the Pioneers with 20-17—37 in 34 games.

But a free agent never knows for sure. Besides, no player in Sacred Heart history had ever signed an NHL contract.

Individual futures uncertain, worldwide futures uncertain, almost everything uncertain, the Cotton brothers were just happy to have each other. As measures to stop the spread of coronavirus seemed to change by the hour, they self-quarantined together in Jason's apartment.

David has maintained a strong relationship with the Hurricanes since they drafted him in 2015, so he'd been checking in with his agent about signing his ELC every day since the end of the NCAA season. A few days into self-quarantine, David found out he wasn't the only one in a certain Connecticut apartment who the Hurricanes wanted to sign.

"So we were in Connecticut with each other in his apartment, and a couple days later it got brought to our attention that Carolina wanted both of us," David said. "We were obviously both pretty happy — we called our parents and our mom almost blew out the speakers she was so excited."

Obviously being with each other, they were able to coordinate their signings and Carolina's announcement. The Canes did a joint press release March 24, snagging their drafted player and the first Sacred Heart alum to sign an NHL contract in program history all at once.

David's on a two-year ELC worth \$700,000 in 2020-21 and \$832,500 in 2021-22 at the NHL level and \$70,000 at the AHL level in both seasons. He will also receive a \$185,000 signing bonus. Jason signed a one-year contract for the 2020-21 season that will pay \$700,000 at the NHL level and \$50,000 at the AHL level, and he will receive a \$25,000 signing bonus.

"Having this opportunity — especially with the team that drafted me and invested a lot of faith in my progression as a player — then being able to do that with my brother?" David said. "That's something I will never forget."

Maybe the best part of this feel-good quarantine saga? Hurricanes strength coach Bill Burniston is already on their case.

"Yeah, we talked to Bill earlier today," David laughed. "We're both quarantined doing the social distancing thing, trying our best to stay healthy and safe — not too much access to the weights or anything like that. (Burniston) said it's actually not a bad thing to try to get rest and recovery after the season."



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But he's gonna try to set us up with a program that will get us back into the (swing of things) soon."



Dundon says Hurricanes layoffs 'Absolutely not true'

By Adam Gold

As the novel coronavirus pandemic continues to adversely impact every aspect of our day-to-day there is really only one sure thing. Things are going to get worse before they get better. The only element yet to be determined is how much worse.

For lack of a better term, the Carolina Hurricanes are not immune to the effects of an economy that is headed for massive upheaval. Without a game in the last four weeks and none visible on the horizon, an organization that lost millions of dollars over the last several years is feeling the pinch. However, a published report, based on a company-wide email, that appears to signal mass layoffs was loudly refuted by management and majority owner Tom Dundon.

"Absolutely not true", claims Dundon. "Not even close."

Based on that internal e-mail, which I have read, it would appear that full-time employees not under contract — in other words, not players or select team upper management — will be forced to take all of their remaining vacation and personal days. The email then went on to say "employees that have used all of their vacation and personal time will be off without pay."

The email continues, explaining that if "you lose wages, you may be eligible for benefits" and refers employees to the federal government's Covid-19 relief unemployment website.

It's worth noting here that a week ago, and in direct contrast to what is being suggested in that email, Dundon, along with the team's foundation and a group of players, pledged to pay, in full, every part-time employee scheduled to work the remaining seven games.

Does that mean following the completion of the mandatory vacation and personal time that all employees would be without a paycheck. According to Dundon, that's where the disconnect comes in. "All we've done is told our staff to take all of their vacation time because when we resume play, whenever that is, I don't want anyone to say 'hey, this is when I normally take vacation.'"

When posed with a hypothetical question regarding an employee who completes two weeks of paid time off (PTO) and would that person continue to be paid after that time, Dundon emphatically answered "yes". The only caveat to that was in how the recently passed stimulus bill would potentially provide monies for businesses impacted by the shut down and those employees forced out of work.

"If unemployment benefits guarantee those people their full salaries for three months then fine", Dundon said. "If it doesn't then I'll make up the difference".

Dundon went on to say that there are no plans in the near future to lay off any of their full time staff, but he cautioned that this is where we are now. If there is a prolonged postponement of the league's schedule that plan could change, but was quick to add that "we aren't anywhere close to that being the case".

Thursday is two weeks since the NHL put their season on pause. The league went from business as usual to the sport completely on ice in less than 24 hours. While it seems like life has ground to a halt, events have a way of happening very fast, so I would suggest that no one be surprised if everything was subject to change at the blink of an eye.

Or the drop of a puck.



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Justin Williams tells The OG how and if a canceled NHL season might impact his future in the league

By Lauren Brownlow

Like the rest of the world at large, the hockey world has been put on pause as well. The NHL announced Wednesday that it is extending the period it's asking its players and staff to self-quarantine before the earliest facilities can reopen to April 6.

And Justin Williams, who came out of retirement to play in 20 games with the Carolina Hurricanes before the COVID-19 outbreak stopped the season in its tracks, is just rolling with whatever comes his way.

Williams joined The OG on 99.9 the Fan to talk about the potential future of this NHL season and more, including trying to find something to do.

"I'd like to say I've been busy, but that would be a lie, so," Williams said. "Basically not too much - like everybody else in the world, right? Just trying to grasp ahold and see what our new normal is these days. I'm trying to keep busy within the house. Thankfully, golf courses are still open so I'm able to get out there and hit the tennis ball around as much as I can. Now, I've become somewhat of a teacher also. Kids are home too, so. A lot of time on my hands, but making the best use of it."

Carolina Hurricanes' strength coach Bill Burniston has been sending the players workouts based on what they have available to them. Some have their own gyms. Some have just their body weight at their disposal.

But staying in shape is only so effective, Williams said, without actual ice time.

"There's only so much you can go when you're not getting on the ice though, and that's the problem. We don't have access to the ice. We can't get on the ice. Now it's been two weeks," Williams said. "Usually around the two-week mark is when you start to kind of lose the in shape, when you start to go on the ice and you feel a little bit less than what the cardio should be. We really want to get back here soon and get ourselves going. We don't want to fall too much out of shape."

Williams, 38, is in his 18th season of hockey now and it was uncertain whether he'd come back at all this year.

At times, there was frustration from fans regarding Williams' indecision but for him, he just took it day by day - and that's what he continues to do.

"The later on in your career that you get, you're a little bit more at ease with what you can do because you've played a certain

amount of time. I've played a long time in the NHL," Williams said.

"As time marches on, sometimes you get the urge and you get the opportunity to do it again, and that's certainly what happened in my situation. I'm just trying to create some more memories. Unfortunately I'm not able to do that right now. We did it for a little bit for 20 games when I came back and I hope to make a few more because that's what I came back for."

There are plenty of scenarios on the table right now for the NHL, none more likely than another because there's so much unknown about how long this outbreak will affect the nation and much of the world.

They could resume the season and play into July and August. They could just start the Playoffs, which the Hurricanes would be in as of right now. They could just scrap it altogether and cancel the whole season, moving on to the next one.

So how will that impact Williams' decision to come back again for a potential 19th season in 2020-21?

"I just don't know. Everybody is kind of having that same rhetoric: 'I don't know'. No sports league knows what's going on," Williams said. "You ask someone how they're feeling or what they think is going to happen - nobody knows."

"I think the attitude that I have is that I'm just going to roll with whatever comes our way, and that's really the attitude that you have to have. ... We're in a strange one right now and I don't know how it's going to end. I don't know how our lives are going to look in a week, in a month. I'm not sure. We're going to keep ourselves ready as best we can and do what we can to hopefully finish this season."

But of course, Williams' preference would be to finish the season.

He felt like the Hurricanes were playing well when the season came to a premature end, though, and he hopes they'll have a chance to see it through.

"We were trending in the right direction when things came to an abrupt halt, and I expect us to pick right back up and do what we set out at the start of the season for, and that's to win a championship, that's to play meaningful hockey games, that's to compete for a Stanley Cup," Williams said. "I hope we'll get an opportunity to do that."



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Ayres in Net for Canes vs. Maple Leafs in NHL 20

Simulation to feature Dave Ayres as Canes' goaltender

by Michael Smith

The legend of Dave Ayres continues to grow.

Ayres made history as an emergency back-up goaltender for the Carolina Hurricanes when he made eight saves and recorded the victory in his National Hockey League debut on Feb. 22 in Toronto.22, 2020

Ayres will make a triumphant, non-emergency return to the crease when the Canes virtually host the Toronto Maple Leafs on Thursday, March 26.

Ayres' digital representation, still sporting his blue and white equipment set and the No. 90, will get the start in net for the

Canes in a computer simulated game of NHL 20, which will be live streamed on multiple social media platforms.

He's already become one of hockey's biggest stories this season. What's next in the legend of Dave Ayres? Will the Leafs avenge their loss to a goaltender they regularly face in practice? Or will Ayres once again stand tall for the Canes and come away with his second career W?

TUNE IN

Date & Time: Thursday, March 26, 7 p.m. ET

Channel: Twitter, Facebook, YouTube

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SportScan

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

1172943 Carolina Hurricanes

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BY CHIP ALEXANDER MARCH 25, 2020 06:04 PM

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1172944 Carolina Hurricanes

The 2019-20 Hurricanes: 10 things we shouldn't forget about this team

By Sara Civian Mar 25, 2020

What if I told you the Dave Ayres game happened just over one month ago?

I guess we'd first have to determine what day it is, and that is a challenge difficult enough in itself right now.

It's Wednesday, I think, and that means the Ayres game happened just over one month ago, and way less than two months ago.

When we look back on this 2019-20 regular season that's most likely dunzo, we will obviously remember that game. We will also remember that Andrei Svechnikov became the first in NHL history to do the Michigan — then "Oops! (He) did it again."

We all obviously understand why this had to happen, but we will also remember how much we missed hockey when it was abruptly taken away from us.

There's so much to remember here that I'm worried about what we might forget. I already chronicled the lost files. Now it's time for the might-get-lost files.



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Here are 10 things we shouldn't forget about the 2019-20 regular season Carolina Hurricanes.

Haydn Fleury proved himself

This was the year Haydn Fleury could no longer pass through waivers without getting snagged. This was the year the Hurricanes' 2014, seventh overall pick had to put up or shut up, and he knew it.

I wouldn't have blamed him for showing a level of resentment for things out of his control, like the amount of NHL-caliber defensemen the Hurricanes had in their arsenal for the past few seasons, or that time coach Rod Brind'Amour played him for literally one shift then benched him. Mind you, that was the game after his first NHL goal. I get that it's all about winning games, but that scenario isn't exactly a breeding ground of confidence — and he didn't do anything wrong.

Regardless, the self-proclaimed "happy-go-lucky kid" tried to control what he could control and add a little more snarl to his game all season. As unfortunate as the losses of Dougie Hamilton and Brett Pesce were for the Canes overall, the depleted blue line forced Brind'Amour to play Fleury more.

It was a silver lining.

The — our — one and only Dom Luszczyszyn finally weighed in on this topic after months of deafening silence.

I FOUND IT PIC.TWITTER.COM/IEFSNBBVCW

— DOM LUSZCZYSZYN (@DOMLUSZCZYSZYN) MARCH 15, 2020

Luszczyszyn: "So, Fleury has 10 games where his 5-on-5 ice time is greater than 15 minutes. In those games he has: 6 points, a 55% xG rate, and is +7 at 5on5 (12 gf 5 ga). His average game score is 1.14. In his 35 other games he has: 8 points, a 48% xG, and is -9 (9 gf, 18 ga). His average game score is 0.11. So obviously it's a very small sample, but you're onto something here. He's looked better, he's getting better results, better chances and producing more in the games he's earned more ice time."

Justin Williams was worth the money — duh

The one and only "Mambo No. 5" was blasting in the LCA dressing room after what would (probably) be the last Hurricanes game of the regular season. I didn't think it had a meaning at the time — they've played this one a few times before. Someone in the Hurricanes locker room loves this song, and I have a sneaking suspicion that it is Jordan Martinook.

Anyway, I tweeted about it and one of you suggested the glorious song played because Justin Williams was riding a five-game goal streak. Makes sense, then I was like, "Woah, let's stop and think about this for a second — Justin Williams is on a five-game goal streak."

And not just any five-game goal streak, that's six goals in five games to you, partner.

The Canes were maddeningly inconsistent after Williams' storybook return. Two wins, one loss, one win, one loss, two wins, one loss, one win, one loss, one win, one loss, one win. Then four straight losses. Often in Williams' career, he seems to emerge to fix whatever is ailing the team around him during these stretches. His five-game goal streak started during that third loss, and went strong as the Hurricanes ended the regular season on a three-game win streak.

There was a running joke in the Hurricanes locker room that the hot water ran out peculiarly close to Williams returning. "Thanks, Justin," etc. they'd joke.

I'd venture the cold showers paid off.

Of course, it wasn't just about the goal streak, but how it was happening — ugly tip-ins, deflections, vaguely standing in front of the net. While this can seem random, it usually isn't. The Canes were trying too hard to be too cute at this time of year, and I doubt they'd have ended in a playoff

spot without the reminder that ugly makes things happen during the playoff push.

"I'm not really scoring them, did you see how when I have empty nets, I don't really shoot at them?" Williams joked at PPG Paints Arena after scoring two goals, and yes, missing an empty net. "I just kind of tip them in. That's how I like to do it. Nah, after I missed that one I really had to atone ... This time of year, that's what it is. It's dirty, it's grind, it's rebounds, it's all over the place. It's pretty rare to get the Tic-Tac-Toe goals — that hasn't really worked the last 15 games, I feel."

He ended up performing exactly as necessary for the Hurricanes after signing his mid-season contract. Whatever comes next, he did his thing.

Morgan Geekie rode off into the sunset as a franchise legend

Three goals and one assist (so generous) for four points in two total NHL games played. People don't forget.

Dougie Hamilton had a Norris-caliber start

A week before what was almost Dougie Hamilton's first All-Star appearance of his eight-season NHL career, just as the 26-year-old was on pace for a career season in goals, points and plus/minus, the Hurricanes defenseman suffered a broken left fibula in Carolina's 3-2 loss at Columbus on Jan 17.

He had Brind'Amour calling him the "most important player" on his team, which means a lot coming from Brind'Amour considering Hamilton had been branded an offensive defenseman while Brind'Amour was a defensive defenseman.

Those two were really figuring it out — Hamilton was proud to log minutes on the penalty kill because he knew that's a badge of honor to Brind'Amour. He'd also been crushing it on the power play and the entire unit took a hit when he went down.

The good news?

First off, it was a clean break, so the injury won't physically change him.

Second, Hurricanes GM Don Waddell told me there's a good chance he'll be ready to go when all of our quarantines finally end.

First-line Svech

Obviously, when we think about 2019-20 Andrei Svechnikov, we will think about multiple Michigans. But this was the season he really earned Brind'Amour's trust as a first-line player.

Yeah, he still messed up with the stick infractions — his 54 PIMs were second on the team to noted tough guy Joel Edmundson. But as Brind'Amour finally unleashed Svechnikov alongside Sebastian Aho and Teuvo Teravainen, he'd always give you a look as to say: "What else did you want me to do?"

It seriously reminded me of when you used to pick Pablo Sanchez in the Backyard Baseball video game and the announcer would be like, "The kid can play!"

As Svechnikov chronicled after just missing a hat trick in Arizona a few days after Brind'Amour took the first-line Svech plunge:

Svechnikov, after two goals and almost a hat trick: "What's up, guys?"

The Athletic: "How are ya?"

Svechnikov: "Unbelievable, you?"

The Athletic: "You, Aho and Teravainen really have some chemistry, huh?"

Svechnikov: "I feel they are the best in the world of Finnish, it's very enjoyable to play with those guys, and like you see we score a couple goals. It's great for us."

Coyotes reporter: "Just to be clear, you said those two Finnish guys are the best?"



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Svechnikov: "The best, yeah."

Coyotes reporter: "You said that, right?"

Svechnikov: "I mean, yeah."

(I'll never get tired of this.)

Sebastian Aho probably would've become the third player in franchise history to hit the 40-goal mark

Two goals away.

Unbelievable but true — Eric Staal and Jeff O'Neil are the two Hurricanes to have done it.

Aho will do it eventually.

Teuvo Teravainen was consistently a beast

I want every single person reading this to remember the time Teravainen messed up for the first time in maybe decades by not shooting the puck. He doesn't shoot the puck often, and you usually wince then get over it. We cut him a lot of slack around here for that, because he sauces it with the best of them in the league. But man, that empty net against the Avalanche on Feb. 28 was an all-timer.

Though the Canes would lose 3-2, Teravainen promptly made up for his own mistake with two, third-period goals — then it was right back to business as usual.

The Athletic: "Did you kind of think in the third, 'OK, I'm just gonna shoot it now'?"

Teravainen: "I don't know. If I see someone open, I'll still try to pass. But I'll probably shoot a couple, too."

OK, fine.

Teravainen finished right behind Aho in points, with 15 goals and 48 assists for 63 points (three behind Aho). What's more is he pulled weight when Aho went on negative streaks, and it's clear these two work with each other.

Aho and Teravainen were best together, and maybe that's best of all. This was the season of the power kill.

I walked out of the Scotiabank Saddledome after Warren Foegele scored two shorthanded goals, feeling like I had scored them myself.

The day prior I'd written about how effective the Hurricanes penalty kill is. It was a crazy game regardless, so as I was walking out of the arena the security guard said "Guess you won't struggle for a storyline tonight, eh (for real, eh)?"

I winked (when else will I be this correct), and said "Pal, I already did."

The Hurricanes penalty kill has been my favorite storyline of the season for a few reasons. No. 1, being right is awesome. But also — I appreciate the retro, Pavel Bure vibes. I respect playing your best players as much as you can and challenging them to do some full-court press and maybe snag a puck — because they do. I appreciate Brind'Amour's guts in all of this, and I appreciate Aho's and Teravainen's willingness to comply. I also appreciate the conditioning it takes to be them.

The tandem of Aho and Teravainen on the penalty kill had been brewing since 2017-18, but it flourished this season. It made the act of the Hurricanes committing a minor penalty actually fun. That would prove important, as the Canes took the second-most minor penalties in the league.

The Hurricanes ended up No. 4 in the league with an 84 percent penalty kill percentage, and No. 2 in shorthanded goals with 10.

None of this quite captures the electricity that is the Aho-Teravainen penalty kill tandem, though.

Aho totaled 122:44 shorthanded time on ice this season and Teravainen got 120:37. They were shifted together almost constantly.

Aho's last goal of the season was a shorthy, mind you.

Brind'Amour: "You gotta give (Aho credit), but you gotta give 86 credit. They're a little bit of a tandem. You talk about special teams — they were a huge part of that."

Aho: "We play pretty well together, we can read each other. That's how we do it. We don't even need to talk that much — I kinda know where he's going to put pressure and he knows where I'm going to put the pressure."

Rod Brind'Amour seemed to be evolving as a coach

I saw this in aforementioned things, like first-line Svech. But it was also in his honesty when things went wrong. Scott Burnside really captured this for me.

Hockey will be back

And maybe we will appreciate it more than we ever have.

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The Athletic / LeBrun: Timeline for NHL return impossible to predict until pandemic plays out

By Pierre LeBrun

Mar 25, 2020

If there is a recurring question that I've had from friends, family and readers alike, it's this one: what is the world supposed to look like if and when the NHL feels it can resume play?

We can talk about summer hockey and all the different scheduling/playoff format scenarios that we know the NHL and NHL Players' Association continue to examine all we want, but what will North American society have to look like for the NHL to even think about dropping the puck come July or August?

I asked that very question to the NHL's chief medical officer on Wednesday during a media call.

"I think we need to have a number of criteria," Dr. Willem Meeuwisse responded. "The specific circumstances are obviously going to depend on the pattern of the disease and specific risks at that time. That's one of the difficulties, this thing is changing daily. And guidance from health authorities is changing daily based on the changing circumstances. I mean if we think of bringing people back together, we'd want to have some confidence that the players and the staff themselves are healthy, some confidence the players are not infectious at that time and that bringing them back together even in small groups would not increase the risk of contracting or transmitting the coronavirus."

"And then we'd have to place that in the context of the larger society and the fact that we have people in 31 different market cities. And they're likely to differ one city to the next."

The shorter answer is even he doesn't know at this point whether the NHL can salvage its season or when. Nobody does.



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While the NHL plans many different scenarios for a season resumption, as it should be, the league also knows from talking to its medical experts that there may not be hockey again until next season.

But before even taking questions during the media call, Dr. Meeuwisse provided his current view of the crisis.

"I'll be brief and just maybe start by saying that if we look where we are with this pandemic, it's really just entering the rapid acceleration phase, certainly in North America, and if we look at our league, really we place our league in the context of the larger society, and we want to be doing our part to not only protect our players but also our staff and our fans as the disease unfolds," he said. "It's difficult to predict where the pandemic is going and what the timeline will be, but we do expect this is going to get worse before it gets better."

This is why the recommendation was made, as I reported Tuesday, to extend the current period of self-quarantine for teams and players. Eventually, the hope is to reach Phase 2 where players start to train at team facilities in small groups.

"The first step that we anticipate maybe taking place is bringing people together in small groups," Dr. Meeuwisse said. "But the timeline for that at this point is very difficult to articulate. While it's rapidly accelerating, the risk in the general population is probably increasing rather than decreasing, so until we see where the peak is going to be, and how high that peak is going to be, it's very difficult to give a definitive timeline."

The original self-quarantine guidelines sent out March 13 were in effect through this Friday, March 27, and now that's been extended to April 4, NHL Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly confirmed on the same media call on Wednesday.

"A memo has already gone out to the clubs on that," Daly said. "The new date is April 4, but again as Dr. Meuwisse said already, that's a meaningless date really at this point in time. As we get closer to the date, we're going to have to make decisions as to what to do then. We're biting this off in chunks."

In the meantime, it is somewhat surprising that only two NHL players have tested positive, although very likely there will be more at some point.

I asked the doctor if that number surprised him?

"I don't know if surprised is a better word or thankful is a better word," he said. "I think we were fortunate in making the decision on March 12 when we did to not only pause play but actually have players go into self-quarantine, including staff and coaches so that we have a pretty good idea now – because we're almost at the two-week mark – that the likelihood of them being affected prior to that period is pretty low. It doesn't mean that somebody can't be exposed now, and I would expect that as this disease progresses and becomes more endemic, that we're going to see more tests in players into the future, but probably not related to them having played hockey prior to the 12th."

Another popular question since we started reporting the possibility of summer playoffs concerns the health risk it poses for the players who would be going from approximately four months of not playing to high-octane hockey. Is the injury risk higher?

One way to help minimize the chances of that happening, the doctor said, is for players to stay in the best shape possible. Which is admittedly difficult, under the current self-isolation constraints.

"It is important that they try and maintain their conditioning so that we could resume play if the conditions changed substantially, but obviously it's very difficult to do," Dr. Meuwisse said. "One thing we know in sports medicine is that conditioning and training are highly sport-specific, both from an injury prevention perspective but also from a conditioning perspective. And it's next to impossible for somebody to be skating at intensity under the circumstances that we're in right now, so it's more of a 'do what you can do approach,' where if players can work out at home in an isolated environment that would be ideal. We do allow them – and

maybe even them encourage them – to get outside and get some fresh air because I think that's one thing that's probably going to be an emerging public health message for everyone. That it's really good that people are practicing social isolation and staying at home because that's really important society-wise to flatten the curve, but also that it's probably in people's self-interest and get a little bit of fresh air as long as they can do it six feet away from other people. So we do allow players to exercise outdoors, so they could be running or doing other things as long as they're not in proximity to other people.

"If they can maintain some base conditioning that way, then when they do come back together, we do anticipate they'll go through some phases like conditioning first and practicing second, or some type of a training camp that will allow them to get into game shape again before the resumption of play. But when that's going to happen, what the timeframe of that will be, is really difficult to predict."

Another good question, the challenge that arises in the fact some cities and areas are more affected than others and do you keep players away from those higher-risk areas?

"Regional differences are likely going to persist," Dr. Meuwisse said. "But probably the larger risk is really similar everywhere, at least will be. And that's why it's a pandemic. The spread is going to be wide enough that people should be practicing social distancing, they probably should be doing it everywhere because either it's going to control an outbreak in an area that's a hotspot and certainly protect a healthy individual, but even in areas where the infection rates are lower, you want to keep them lower. And the risk can change very rapidly as we've seen it switch from the West Coast to New York within the U.S. And that kind of shifting around is likely to continue to happen, at least in the early phases of this pandemic. And therefore, probably we're not looking, at least right now, at very much market-specific guidance, it's really guidance for the league."

How does the NHL handle the fact some of its markets will be more affected than others when it comes time to figure out the return to work for players?

"Obviously, it'll be a consideration," Daly said. "We have to try to do what is competitively fair to all the clubs and the players, quite frankly, as we continue to hold out hope that at some point we'll be able to resume play. I don't have any hard and fast answers for you. As with everything else, we're going to have to kind of see how it all develops, and if there are anomalies such as that, we're going to have to try to work our way around that in ways that are sensible."

This again leads to the question no one has a real answer for yet. What do things have to look like for the NHL to feel comfortable in getting players back reporting to teams?

"I think we're going to need to know where we are with the pandemic," Dr. Meuwisse said. "We'd need to have some knowledge and confidence around the trajectory of the disease because if it's on a trajectory of getting worse and worse, it makes a lot less sense getting people together. Once we get to the tail end of this pandemic where hopefully the curve has been flattened and the healthcare resources are not overloaded and the disease rates start to fall, at that point obviously the risk of getting people back together – not just our players but our staff and everybody – is going to be a lot lower. And depending on what the time frame is, depending on the shape of that curve and depending on the remaining risk and transmission rates, that I think is going to help guide us in terms of the timing."

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The Athletic / Q&A: NHLPA's Donald Fehr on possibility of resuming the NHL season this summer

By Pierre LeBrun and Scott Burnside

Mar 25, 2020

The NHL Players' Association and the NHL are working in lockstep with each other to navigate the uncharted waters presented by the COVID-19 pandemic that forced the stoppage of league play.

NHLPA executive director Donald Fehr said Wednesday in an appearance on the podcast Two-Man Advantage that, like the league, the players believe that whatever steps are taken to try and salvage what remains of the 2019-20 season and/or having a 2020 Stanley Cup playoff tournament, having a full 82-game schedule in place for the 2020-21 season is critical.

Fehr described the unprecedented working relationship as "practical and businesslike."

"There is no posturing, there is no attempt, so far, to take advantage of this or that or the other," Fehr said. "It's just, alright, what can we do when? And the backdrop, of course, being that you want to maintain to the greatest extent you can, or to put it another way, you don't want to put in jeopardy the health and safety of the players, the NHL employees, the arena staff, fans and all the rest of that. But practical and businesslike is the way that I would put it and, at this point, I would expect that to continue. We talk at one level or another to NHL people several times a day every day."

And while Fehr confirmed that talks aimed at hammering out a new collective bargaining agreement have been put aside as "there are more immediate things on the agenda," he did suggest that this journey into the unknown with the league may help pave the way to not just a new labor agreement but could help forge a new relationship with the league.

"I hope it all impacts it positively. We'll have to see," Fehr said Wednesday. "The old joke about labor relations is that you're in a marriage but you can't get a divorce and sometimes what that means is that you can feel free a little bit to fight harder because you know the other party's still going to be there when you're done. On the other hand, when you go through trying and difficult times maybe it can create bonds that weren't there before."

Here is part of that conversation (Listen to the full podcast here):

Scott Burnside: Let's dive right in. The last report we had there were two NHL players who tested positive for the coronavirus, both members of the Ottawa Senators. Is there an update on that number and can you describe where you're at in terms of players getting tested or wanting to get tested?

Don Fehr: Basically it's pretty simple. I don't know of more than two. But you should understand that my knowledge will, in many cases, will lag (behind) something that happens. Because if somebody tests positive, they go through the medical protocols. They notify family, they do all that, and then eventually the reports come back to the league and then us. It doesn't take very long but it's not instantaneous. In terms of players being tested, I think we're in pretty much the same boat everybody else is which is if you become symptomatic or there are other reasons discovered during a medical evaluation that you should be tested, you get tested. Otherwise that is not the case. And we can just hope that the self-quarantine and other measures that have been taken will be sufficient so that we'll have a relatively low and hopefully very low incidence of positives as this thing progresses. But no one in our society, no group, is going to be immune from it that is clear.

Pierre LeBrun: Don, you've seen a lot in your day between your long tenure at the head of the baseball union and, of course, your time now in hockey, in the same role. There've been strikes, there've been lockouts,

a lot of tense moments in your career. How could you even compare what you're living right now to all that?

Fehr: Well, you can't. To do it is an exercise in comparing not apples to oranges but sort of apples to tractors. It's that much different. We're living through something that nobody in the western world has seen for at least 100 years with the Spanish Flu. The societies we live in are vastly different now. They're much more affluent. There's much more ease of communication, much more interpersonal contact, vastly less of an agricultural sector, plus we have instantaneous communication and so as you can see when something like this starts and spreads – and it can spread worldwide – all you can do is take the appropriate measures as directed and explained by the public health authorities and try to contain and limit and then get back to normal as soon as that can be done. What perhaps is the most different about it is that throughout my career when something has happened somebody would always say there is something we can do about it. You can do. Or the people on the other side can do. Or you can do together. Or the government can get involved and help with the negotiations or something like that. This isn't that. This is different.

Burnside: Don, you mentioned communication, I'm curious what it's been like for you to keep players involved and engaged in the discussions you're having with the league and medical officials, to keep them up to date and maybe what you're hearing from players in terms of their ideas on how things could unfold or should unfold? Can you walk us through how you're staying in contact with a group, what, about 720 strong?

Fehr: When you count people that are hurt it's a little larger than that and we're also in contact with some former players and NHL players who were temporarily in the minor leagues and all of their agents and so forth. It's pretty easy to describe. It's what I think all of your listeners would expect. Everybody's got cell phones. Everybody's got email. Everybody's got text messages. So we start with that. We, along with every other institution in North America, are burning up the wires with conference calls. I, the former players on staff and a number of the other people are literally in constant contact with players. I'm on the phone anywhere from eight to 10 to 12 hours a day between conference calls, calls with staff, talking to Gary (Bettman, NHL commissioner) or people at the league office and obviously with players. And you want to make sure people are up to date. You want to make sure that you get questions answered, to the extent that you can identify a problem or a question before it becomes acute. You try to take care of it that way. In terms of the kinds of things players are asking they're really at two places, I think. The first one I think is somebody has a question that relates to his individual situation. One of the ones we most frequently had was "can I travel?" and "what happens if the borders close?" particularly with players who don't live in North America permanently. So you have a lot of those kinds of questions. The second one is the impossible one to answer which is, is there a timetable pursuant to which decisions will be made regarding if we're going to resume the season, if so, when? And in what format and what would that mean for next season if we play late into the summer? And the problem is there are no answers for that. We can play again when the public health authorities tell us we can do that. And then at that point what I suspect will happen, what I'm pretty sure will happen, is we will look at all of the possibilities of a schedule, come hopefully to a quick agreement with the NHL as to what we can do and what we should do and go from there. But that's not likely to happen in the next one or two or three weeks. It'll be sometime after that.

LeBrun: Just to follow up on that vein, Don, I know that yesterday the league asked the 31 clubs for their building availabilities through the month of August. What's your view of potential August hockey as we've been speculating here for a bit?

Fehr: The question is not July or August hockey in the abstract. Is that a good time of the year to play it? The question is, if that's when the time becomes available, does it make sense to play it? I was not aware before the press reports that all of the teams were being asked for their availability, but I certainly would have expected that in the ordinary course. That's one of the things that the league would always do so that you have the most current information available. What changed in the



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last couple of days, of course, was the decision to postpone the Tokyo Olympics, and when that happened that created, from a fan perspective and a broadcast perspective, some opportunities that might not have been there before. Whether we'll be able to exercise those opportunities remains to be seen.

Burnside: You talk about some of the questions players have had for you, many of which don't have answers, but my sense is that players have also offered their own thoughts and suggestions perhaps on how things might look if the game is able to resume, whether to play regular season games, what a playoff grid might look like. Is there any way to tell right now whether there's any type of consensus on what the players favor in terms of how a playoff grid might look like?

Fehr: The answer is yes but it's not very specific. There's a lot of speculation players are engaging in. What would it look like if we were able to resume on this date or 10 days later or 21 days after that? What would it look like if we had to eliminate the rest of the regular season so that you didn't have the normal number of games played to determine who the playoff teams are? How do you treat the teams that were not, as of the date we stopped playing, in the top 16, they wouldn't have qualified for the playoffs but yet they still had a chance to do it and, as we all know, things change a lot in the last few games of the year in many seasons. And so you would try and figure out a way to adapt to that. I guess the best answer I can give you is that most players would want to complete it, would want to have a Stanley Cup awarded provided that it can be a tournament which is fair under all the circumstances and that everybody can be proud of participating in.

LeBrun: Don, to follow up, I assume and I know it's dangerous to assume, but just like Bill Daly said, having a full season next year is very important to the league, I can't imagine it wouldn't be to your side as well given that, just to be blunt, the players get paid during the regular season and not the playoffs.

Fehr: Well, yes and no. Yes, in that sense that obviously you want a complete return to normalcy if you can get it next year. It doesn't mean that you couldn't alter the dates of next year's season a little bit in order to accommodate playing late this year going forward. But remember, while players get paychecks over the course of the regular season, their salaries include revenue that's earned during the postseason, so the two are not divorced.

LeBrun: Just to clarify on the cap – but I think we're already at the point where whatever the cap number's going to be next year it's going to have to be something that the PA and the league basically pull out of, just agree on, as opposed to using the authenticated formula at this point. Is that fair?

Fehr: Yeah, I thought you were about to say pull out of thin air.

LeBrun: No, no.

Fehr: I hope we don't do that. Put it differently, yeah, I think it's likely to be a negotiated number and if there are any special rules that we had to apply because of the unfortunate circumstances of this year we would try and tackle those, sure.

Burnside: One of the things I know Pierre mentioned in a piece today, even things like the standard player contract ends June 30, free agency begins July 1, those are benchmarks on the NHL calendar, but if we're talking about playing hockey in July and August, obviously those kinds of issues are going to have to be dealt with. Are you in a position where you can start to talk about those now or does that all have to wait until you get a better sense of the framework?

Fehr: When we get to that point I think it's fair to say that if you're going to play the season or the postseason and that extends past June 30, there are a whole series of accommodations you have to look at. Starting with when do you do the draft? When would you do the normal June buyouts? When would free agency and salary arbitration happen and all the rest of that? My assumption has been and continues to be that those things will sort of tend to define themselves and people will have to adjust

to them. That's a problem quite frankly I'd like to have because that would mean that we are able to resume before next year.

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The Athletic / NHL and team executives sharing ideas for adjusting the draft lottery

By Craig Custance

Mar 25, 2020

While so much of the conversation on what an eventual NHL season might look like focuses on potential playoff formats for the teams at the top of the standings, those at the bottom might have a different focus. For those outside the playoff bubble, it's all about the NHL Draft. And the eventual draft lottery. As it stands right now, it's very possible the lottery looks different than what fans (and executives) are currently refreshing on Tankathon.

According to an NHL source, the draft lottery format will likely be linked to whatever decisions are made regarding the schedule and playoff system. It's still too early to get a full idea of what those solutions might look like, but a source said the league would consult with general managers and the board of governors before making a final call on any adjusted draft lottery process. Right now, the league is currently kicking around various concepts.

"They've requested ideas on a number of things," said an Eastern Conference executive of the league. "They're looking for ideas about anything and everything."

Teams and executives have been brainstorming playoff format ideas, some of which have been debated publicly as reported by The Athletic's Pierre LeBrun. But there are also conversations about how a tweaked lottery format might look. To some, there's no reason to do anything massively different than the current format where there are three different drawings – one for each of the top three picks. After those drawings, the remaining teams are sorted based on inverse order of standings, which means the league's worst team has a better chance of picking fourth than first.

"I don't think you can materially change too much because teams have relied on this and made plans under this format," said another NHL team executive.

If the season is completely wiped out, it would be fairly easy to determine the lottery teams by points percentage and proceed with the current system. If there is a, say, 24-team playoff tournament, there's also an easy way to restructure the draft lottery without changing things too much.

"You just have to allocate the lottery balls differently," said another executive. "The fairest way to do in that situation – if there's a 30 percent change with those other teams in the playoffs, give that 30 percent and share it equally in the lottery."

That's fine. It's logical. It's probably the most likely path for the NHL. But there are some who feel like the lottery could be an opportunity to re-engage fanbases and recoup some of the financial losses teams have incurred this season.

According to an NHL source, at least one team has submitted a lottery proposal that would include a tournament in which lottery teams play for



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the first-overall pick. At its face, the idea sounds radical but structured the right way this has the potential to be a real asset for the league.

Without knowing the exact details of the proposal, there would have to be some assurances for the teams at the bottom of the standings that their odds of winning a lottery tournament resemble their odds of winning the lottery drawing now. That would mean home games for Ottawa and Detroit, with a fairly easy path to the championship. And likewise, a bubble team would have to go on an all-time run of games to win the lottery.

This proposal would accomplish a couple of things. It would get all players back playing, rather than just playoff teams, which would help level the playing field for next season in terms of rest and time off between games.

It would also engage fans of both playoff teams and lottery teams alike if games return. Imagine for a moment a lottery tournament final between the Red Wings and Chicago Blackhawks for the rights to draft Alexis Lafreniere. Or a final between the Senators and Montreal Canadiens for the same thing. The television ratings in those markets would be off the charts.

It would also give the NHL and NHLPA another property to sell to a network outside its current television deal. In the U.S., a tournament like this on ESPN in a summer in which there is less competition for the interest of sports fans would likely be very successful. If it works, the NHL might have something to build on moving forward. If it doesn't? Never do it again.

"Radical times call for radical measures," said one NHL source.

It's fun to imagine. Even if it's hard to imagine it actually happening. But right now, these are the kind of ideas being thrown around. People have the time and motivation for creativity. At this point, nothing should be off the table. From playoff format to lottery ideas.

"The whole thing is the wild, wild West, man," concluded an executive.

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The Athletic / And the NHL's GM of the Year could be ... Joe Sakic? It very well looks that way

By Ryan S. Clark

Mar 25, 2020

The man owns two Stanley Cups, a Hart Memorial Trophy, a Conn Smythe Trophy, a Lester B. Pearson Award, an Olympic gold medal and he has a street named after him back home.

Joe Sakic is a Hockey Hall of Fame member who carries a status as an all-time great regardless of the era. His playing career allowed him to collect numerous accolades but he has yet to add to such a stellar haul in his second act as the general manager of the Colorado Avalanche.

But is that about to change?

Everything the Avalanche have done so far has led to a discussion about them claiming the third Stanley Cup in franchise history. That, of course, is the primary goal but there is a chance it could lead to Sakic claiming another personal honor in winning the Jim Gregory General Manager of the Year Award. Sakic appears to be a front-runner given The Athletic's beat writers voted that the former superstar center is currently the

league's best executive. He captured 39 percent of the vote with Boston Bruins GM Don Sweeney, who is the reigning winner, finishing second with 12.2 percent.

Fully understanding why Sakic is receiving this level of acclaim means examining what he has accomplished. Every decision he and his front office staff make is viewed through a particular set of prisms. Is this a move that can help the team both now and in the future? Will this be a choice that provides the Avalanche with a dimension they previously did not have? And will all these resolutions lead to a Stanley Cup all while ensuring the salary cap blueprint remains intact knowing winning comes with a price tag?

Already having Gabriel Landeskog, Nathan MacKinnon and Mikko Rantanen on the roster helped when it came to unexpectedly pushing the San Jose Sharks in a seven-game Western Conference semifinal series last year. But that postseason encounter also reinforced what areas Sakic and his front office staff needed to address while also reaffirming what assets could be parlayed to make that happen.

The Avalanche needed more forward depth. Creating a second unit capable of supplementing the top line featuring Landeskog, MacKinnon and Rantanen was a priority. So was bolstering their bottom-six options. Then-defensive prospects Ryan Graves and Hobey Baker Award winner Cale Makar showed the organization they were ready. Graves' audition came late in the regular season while Makar showcased what he could provide throughout 10 playoff games that saw him finish with six points.

Plus, the emergence of Philipp Grubauer meant Sakic and his staff had to assess both the financial and on-ice implications of whether to return or move on from goaltender Semyon Varlamov.

Varlamov, in retrospect, became the first domino to fall. Pavel Francouz did enough with the Colorado Eagles in the AHL to earn a one-year, one-way contract with the Avs as Grubauer's backup. Sakic could have opted to keep all three goaltenders but at what cost? Grubauer outright earned the starting job and he came at a cheaper cost by comparison. A little more than \$9 million of the cap was dedicated toward goaltending in 2018-19 but going with a Grubauer-Francouz tandem — while unproven at the time — cost \$4.25 million combined. Varlamov would sign a four-year deal with the New York Islanders worth \$5 million annually.

Carl Soderberg and his \$4.75 million cap hit were next. He was traded to the Arizona Coyotes for a depth defenseman in Kevin Connauton while also getting money off the books. It was another cost-saving decision that gave the team more financial flexibility in free agency while signaling Soderberg's ice time could be used to give younger players J.T. Compher or Tyson Jost potentially more ice time.

Three days later, it became clear having such a cushion opened the door to trade with the Washington Capitals to get forward Andre Burakovsky.

July 1 arrived and it proved to be a landscape-changing day for Sakic and the franchise. The Avs signed forwards Pierre-Edouard Bellemare and Joonas Donskoi while getting a new one-year deal completed that allowed Colin Wilson to return. It appeared the day was over until Sakic struck a trade with the Toronto Maple Leafs to get proven veteran center Nazem Kadri and defenseman Calle Rosen in exchange for defenseman Tyson Barrie and forward Alexander Kerfoot.

Suddenly, the Avalanche were beginning to look a lot different from the team that lost to the Sharks. Barrie was expendable because of Makar and it provided Sakic with a green light to acquire Kadri to give them the bonafide second-line center they had long sought.

What Sakic did within a handful of days took the Avalanche from promising overachievers to a potential Stanley Cup favorite. The immediate belief was Kadri would anchor a second-line unit featuring some combination of Burakovsky, Donskoi or Jost on the wing. Whoever was the odd man out would presumably be slotted onto the third line alongside Compher and Wilson. That meant a veteran center in Bellemare would be paired with wingers Matt Calvert and Matt Nieto to



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create a two-way, fourth line that would provide potential consistency in an area that was a troublesome spot the year before.

Former high school geometry classmates Ian Cole and Erik Johnson had nearly 1,200 games of NHL experience between them. That was more than the combined totals of Mark Barberio, Connauton, Samuel Girard, Graves, Makar and Nikita Zadorov. Barrie's departure meant the Avalanche's defense got younger but it appeared the unit had the opportunity to be most versatile throughout Sakic's tenure at the helm.

Grubauer showed he could win important games and provide consistency in the most critical time of year. Francouz achieved all that in the AHL. But seeing how they would each fare under new roles, however, remained one of the larger questions facing the Avalanche heading into the preseason.

Then came the shocking decision to sign winger Valeri Nichushkin. The one-time No. 10 pick was released by the Dallas Stars after going goalless in 59 games. He was signed to a one-year contract in a move that was initially viewed as the Avalanche adding more forward depth and size on the edge.

Keep in mind, Sakic and the front office were also working toward getting a new contract completed for Rantanen in an offseason that witnessed the market for high-end restricted free agents become rather expensive. But there were the deals that also needed to get done for other RFAs Burakovsky, Compher and Zadorov, among others. They even made it a priority to get Girard under a new long-term pact a full year before his entry-level contract ended.

All of these decisions are the foundation for how the Avalanche were having one of the best seasons in the NHL before the league suspended play because of Coronavirus and the disease it causes, COVID-19, for the foreseeable future.

But here is why it has worked out.

Each one of the players Sakic and his staff brought in via trade or free agency was given greater roles compared to their previous situations. Nearly all of them are having the best seasons of their careers. Bellemare is still a fourth-line center but the system employed by fourth-year coach Jared Bednar allowed him to set personal-bests in goals, assists and points, all while being one of the oldest players in the NHL.

What Burakovsky, Donskoi and Kadri have done — when healthy — gave them the runway to be one of the league's more formidable second lines. It is a combination that can generate and capitalize on scoring chances while Donskoi and Kadri were able to impart some of their two-way knowledge onto Burakovsky. That has seen Burakovsky go from a logjam of forwards in D.C. to being a top-six option who had his first 20-goal season and stands to receive a substantial payday for what he has done. Donskoi was on pace for his first 20-goal season but still set a career-high in goals while remaining four points shy of an apex in that department. Kadri has gone through injuries but he is averaging 0.71 points per game over 51 games and that is one of the strongest marks of his career.

Yet Nichushkin remains the most notable surprise of all the players the Avalanche signed over the summer. He has played in 65 of the team's 70 games and is having the sort of renaissance few saw coming. The 6-foot-4 hulking forward has used his speed and size to become a two-way forward who can be trusted in late-game situations or when the team is in a short-handed sequence. His 13 goals are the second-most of his career while his 27 assists are the third-most he has accrued.

Cole and Johnson have continued serving as mentors for what is one of the youngest defenses in the NHL. Girard, 21, established a career-high in points plus he has improved defensively when it comes to how many high-danger chances and high-danger goals he has allowed. The 24-year-old Graves came over in a trade with the New York Rangers two years ago and has developed into a first-pairing partner for Makar. How Graves has developed further highlighted the methods used by Eagles coach Greg Cronin in developing the 6-foot-5 defenseman and prospects

awaiting their turn. This was still Graves' first full NHL campaign yet he became an all-around option in that his nine goals remain the most he has scored at any professional level. Plus, Bednar trusts him in key defensive situations. Graves also leads the NHL in plus/minus with a plus-40 rating.

Makar has emerged into a budding superstar given his trajectory after being the most dominant player in college hockey last season. He has attracted the attention of a number of the league's premier defensemen. The 21-year-old former University of Massachusetts star has taken over for Barrie in being the team's primary puck-moving defenseman and is charged with running a first-team power-play unit featuring Kadri, Landeskog, MacKinnon and Rantanen. All of this has led to him being in a battle for the Calder Memorial Trophy with Vancouver Canucks star rookie defenseman Quinn Hughes.

Francouz has answered those questions about if he could translate his European success to the NHL. His 21 wins, 2.41 goals-against average and .923 save percentage have immensely helped the Avalanche when inconsistent play or injuries hindered Grubauer. Both Grubauer and the Aves were starting to hit their stride in early February before he sustained an injury in the Stadium Series loss to the Los Angeles Kings at the Air Force Academy. Francouz has since been installed as the starting goaltender by winning six straight starts and going 8-2-2 in that time. The injuries to Grubauer and others in the lineup led to the team calling up rookies in goaltender Hunter Miska and right winger Martin Kaut. Francouz tutored Miska while continuing to serve as a father figure to Kaut, a role he had when they were both with the Eagles. So it should come as no surprise Sakic recently locked up the 29-year-old goaltender to a two-year contract.

Sakic's decisions have led to the Avalanche going from 10th in goals scored in 2018-19 to fourth as of the time of the stoppage. Last year's team finished with 10 players who scored more than 10 goals while 13 skaters ended the season with more than 20 points. This year's edition has 10 players who hit double digits but four players are within two goals of the 10-goal plateau. In total, there are 16 players with more than 20 points and it could grow to 17 with Johnson being four points shy.

Being an offensive juggernaut is how the Avalanche attracted attention. Being one of the NHL's best defensive units, however, has led to the Avalanche further cementing their status as a Stanley Cup contender. Adding forwards Bellemare, Donskoi, Kadri and Nichushkin helped institute the five-man approach Bednar demands. But the rise of Francouz, Graves and Makar also played a role in the team's defensive success.

These are the immediate, on-ice examples of what Sakic has done but there are other choices he has made that have proven to be vital in their own right.

He has made trips to Boston College to watch and check in with prospects Drew Helleeson and Alex Newhook. Sakic made a point to reach out to Kaut earlier in the season when the 20-year-old winger was struggling. Kaut was worried about his future when Sakic drove up to Loveland and told the team's 2018 first-round pick that he believes in him. That, in turn, was soon followed by Kaut getting healthy and finding the consistency that led to him being called up to the NHL. Having that inclusive feel with prospects is how the organization has further strengthened relationships with Justus Annunen, Bowen Byram and Conor Timmins.

Prospects including Annunen, Shane Bowers, Byram, Kaut, Newhook and Timmins have added to the narrative of why the Avalanche possess one of the best farm systems in the NHL. The corresponding decisions made by Sakic and his staff over recent years have taken the organization from being one that needed its young crop to play right away into one that can let them develop without feeling rushed.

Such a touted collection of prospects along with watchfully managing the salary cap is what made many believe Sakic had everything needed in the event a significant deal present itself at the NHL trade deadline. He held firm with the edict of not mortgaging the future or blowing up the cap



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by trading for Vladislav Namestnikov and Michael Hutchinson. Getting Hutchinson provided the team with more goaltending depth. Namestnikov has scored four goals and has six points in just nine games to give the club another two-way forward who adds that dimension of scoring at the net front all while being able to move throughout the top nine.

An element of Sakic's management approach is to not micromanage. He had made a point of allowing his staff — ranging from his assistant general managers to those who work in the analytics and scouting departments — to do their jobs with his trust and not require constant supervision. Those gains have shown in how assistant general managers Craig Billington and Chris MacFarland have played key roles in helping the organization in different ways. Billington, MacFarland and Sakic have frequent meetings where they will discuss what is going on with the club and offer their advice in a variety of areas.

Using those methods is how the Avalanche have become one of the NHL's best clubs and why the Eagles are able to constantly promote players to the NHL while they also chase a consecutive AHL playoff berth.

Will all those things be enough for Sakic to be considered the best general manager in the NHL?

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The Athletic / Inside the week junior hockey went dark to combat COVID-19

By Scott Wheeler

Mar 25, 2020

The junior hockey season is over. The CHL, USHL, NAHL and CJHL have all announced that their playoffs and year-end tournaments will not take place. Leagues across Europe have begun to do the same.

On March 12, leagues began announcing suspensions due to COVID-19. By March 23, pauses turned into outright cancellation. Eleven days since the first significant action was taken to combat the virus, the 2019-2020 season was over.

Over those 11 days, The Athletic spoke to people from across junior hockey, from the day after the pause as coaches and managers hurried to get their players home, to the day it all went dark and the Kelowna Rockets learned they weren't going to host the Memorial Cup.

Friday, March 13, 2:57 p.m.

The first two thoughts that came into Oshawa Generals general manager Roger Hunt's head when he heard that the OHL season had been put on hold were "Brett Neumann's on 45 goals" and "thank goodness Philp Tomasino got his 100th point."

To others, those things feel superficial. To Hunt, he knew that milestones matter and players like Neumann probably wouldn't get a chance to achieve their goals for the season.

Then he thought of his draft-eligible kids, of which the Generals have many. He hoped, for their sake, that the scouting fraternity had seen enough and built enough of a book on them, knowing they may not get to showcase themselves in the months that followed like they might have hoped.

Then he thought of the fans, who felt the team, fourth in the Eastern Conference, was poised for a run.

When his mind was done racing, he knew he needed to drop everything and do three things.

The first thing he did was arrange to talk to his players. They needed to know, from the top of the organization, that the situation is worse than they thought, that their health comes first and that they're not giving up hope.

"Our message to the players was that as this has become a world situation, we're going to hold onto our league right now and we're very hopeful that it settles and then it becomes clear as to what next steps are," Hunt said.

"At the end of the day, everything was done for society's safety. It was a weird feeling yesterday with everything coming down. It was kind of like 'Are we at war with this?' I think our league has done the right thing."

The second thing he did was gather all of his office staff. He wanted them to know, at the time, that it was "business as usual" for the front office. And though he told his coaches that there was no need to come in on Saturday, he didn't think his coaching staff would be home for long.

The final thing he did was inform parents and billet parents of the latest news in an effort to keep them updated.

By Friday morning, as Hunt returned to Oshawa's Tribute Communities Centre, his players had begun to return home. Only the import players and Floridian Kyle MacLean remained.

"I think (home's) the best place for them to be. As much as we're looking at it as a team thing, these kids' parents want them home. We'll make more educated decisions once we know and certainly, everyone's holding their breath that we'll be playing hockey again this year," Hunt said.

"It's a strange type of feeling right now, to be honest with you. It's the unknown. I hope by Monday that there's more info floating around out there. The coaches got a well-deserved break today and hopefully, it's not too long of a break."

Most of all, he wasn't ready to give up. He didn't want to throw in the towel.

"We're all hopeful that play will resume for playoffs and then we end up with a Memorial Cup," Hunt said.

Monday, March 16, 1:14 p.m.

Two days later, Kingston Frontenacs general manager Darren Keily is still trying to get his import players home. They have arranged Wednesday flights for Slovak Martin Chromiak and Belorussian Vitali Pinchuk but things are changing so fast that Keily is fearful they may not be able to board.

He's got his fingers crossed because that's all he can do.

"I'll be taking them to the airport. Who knows. That's 48 hours from now. If we can't get them on the flights, they'll be here in Kingston and be well looked after," Keily said.

"Everything changed. We have no idea where we're going and at the end of the day, we just have to get everybody home safe and we can worry about what will happen later. Everyone's glued to their TVs and watching the world. I just want to get the import players back to their parents and make sure everyone's safe."

In a perfect world, Keily admitted he would be at the now-canceled OHL Cup, scouting for the upcoming draft as he continued to construct his rebuilding team. The OHL Cup would be followed by year-end scouting meetings and a constant dialogue with agents to learn as much as possible about the best young 15-year-olds available.

That's not exactly top of mind these days, though.



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"It's so fresh, I don't even know what to make of it all. What was initially going to be maybe a short pause to 'we don't know where we're going' to all of the players have gone home now," Keily said.

"It's an anxious time for them and hockey is on the back burner."

Tuesday, March 17, 11:35 a.m.

Chicago Steel general manager Ryan Hardy knows that the human side of the pandemic takes precedence. He knows his players aren't those that are most at risk but that they have to do their part to keep their communities safe.

Still, five days after the postponement of the USHL season, it stings knowing that a cancellation may be around the corner.

When the season paused, his Steel were 15 points up on the nearest team in the standings, with an astonishing 41-7-1 record and a 13-game win streak.

"It's a tough pill to swallow," Hardy said. "It's heartbreaking to some degree to be where we were at, so far ahead, and so many of the league records were right there for the taking."

His players would routinely tell him about their belief that they could be the greatest team in the history of the USHL – and he thought they were probably right.

As he monitors the updates, he thinks of top 2021 NHL Draft prospect Owen Power, who is bound for the University of Michigan in the fall, of veteran assistant captains Jimmy Dowd and Mathieu De St. Phalle, both off to college as well and of 2020 draft-eligible prospects like Brendan Brisson and Sean Farrell.

"As the season has gone along, the noise around our team in a much larger hockey space was really growing and the light was really shining on our draft-eligible players. They were gaining a lot of momentum, and I think if we were able to have a deep playoff run, that would be a positive reflection on those kids and it would help to boost their brand," he said.

It hit Hardy, when NBA player Rudy Gobert contracted the virus, that his Steel — and the USHL — were in trouble. He said that night, where everyone had to play the waiting game, was the hardest of the bunch. He religiously refreshed Twitter, hoping for the best and expecting the worst as he communicated with players and staff over group chats.

But when he said goodbye to his players, they all thought they would be back in two or three weeks and that they'd be able to accomplish everything they set out to. Now, Hardy recognizes that's probably not in the cards.

"The hardest part right now is assuming it does get cancelled, we didn't get closure," Hardy said. "We didn't say goodbye to those kids and thank them for their contributions, for the kids who grew up here and came in boys and left men, to get to hug those guys and tell them you love them."

After a morning call with the league's general managers, he feels the inevitable is coming.

"Everything seems to be moving towards it being very grim that we will go on," Hardy said.

"The executive committee will make the decisions when the time comes. And obviously, the government at some point could make the determination for all of us. We just sit and wait and try not to live and die on all of it. I'm just trying to keep some normalcy."

For Steel staff, that normalcy means working remotely to follow through on social distancing recommendations while recruiting over the phone for 2020-2021. Hardy spends his days on calls with potential players (and their parents) for next year and he's anxiously awaiting USA Hockey's decisions on the national development program cuts, hopeful that he can recruit those who don't make it. Like the rest of the hockey world, he's trying to get his European players home and worried about borders closing.

But he'll never forget the 2019-2020 Steel, even if their season didn't end like they all expected it would.

"It is what it is," Hardy said. "The memories, nobody can take that away from them."

Monday, March 23, 6:00 p.m.

Moments before the OHL releases its statement on cancellation, players and their parents receive a message from OHL commissioner David Branch.

The letter, obtained by The Athletic, reads as follows:

Dear Players, Parents and Billet Families,

Earlier today the Canadian Hockey League and the three regional leagues the Ontario Hockey League (OHL), Quebec Major Junior Hockey League (QMJHL) and Western Hockey League (WHL) announced that we have made the decision to cancel the playoffs and for the first time in its 102-year history, the Memorial Cup will be cancelled.

This was not an easy decision and one that was not made lightly. We looked at a number of options for both the playoffs and the Memorial Cup including changing the dates, neutral locations and games with no fans. In the end, based on the advice of public health agencies and medical experts, and we have concluded that while disappointing, this is the right thing to do.

In terms of schooling and education, although schools remain closed in Ontario and many States, the League encourages all players to reach out to your team and academic advisor in terms of transitioning to your "home school" and completing your current academic year.

These are unprecedented times, both in sport and throughout the world. We want to remind you of our Talk Today program in conjunction with the Canadian Mental Health Association. As always, players are encouraged to reach out to their CMHA should they need to talk. You can reach the CMHA through the team's Talk Today liaison, the CMHA website cmha.ca or 1-833-456-4566.

On behalf of the OHL, I want to thank you for your patience and perseverance during these difficult times. I wish you and your family good health and safety.

Regards,

Kelowna Rockets head coach Kris Mallette is heartbroken.

Just yesterday, he learned that his town, his team and its organizing committee won't get to put on the Memorial Cup. The phone calls with his three 20-year-old players were some of the toughest he has ever had to make.

He has coached veteran Kyle Topping for four years. After losing half of his season to ankle surgery, Topping had returned to action at the end of January to close out his final year in junior hockey.

The other two overagers were trade deadline acquisitions the midding Rockets made to go all-in and remain competitive for the Memorial Cup. The Rockets let go of a first-round pick, a second-round pick and a fifth-round pick to pry Matthew Wedman, a 2019 seventh-round pick of the Florida Panthers, away from the Seattle Thunderbirds, where he was the team's captain.

Defenceman Conner McDonald left the Edmonton Oil Kings in November because he wanted to be closer to home, somewhere in British Columbia, while he finished out his WHL career. After demanding a trade, he approached the Rockets personally, knowing they would give him a guaranteed shot at the CHL title. The Rockets took the plunge, moving another first-round pick and a third-round pick to acquire him.

"This would have been a great stage for all three of them to show the world what they can do," Mallette said. "They were choked up. I've been reaching out to contacts in the NHL, AHL and ECHL for those guys."



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Before those calls, though Rockets staff felt that cancellation was likely, they agreed not to let that show to the players.

"You want to think that the timelines would have all added up for us to still be able to host the Memorial Cup but as you watch the news every morning, numbers just keep rising and those timelines just keep shrinking and it becomes more unrealistic. There are a lot bigger things at stake," Mallette said. "We saw the writing on the wall but we kept that close to the chest and when we were in contact with our players, we wanted to keep them believing that there is hope."

Leading up to the announcement on cancellation, the Rockets were also informed that they wouldn't be awarded hosting duties for 2021 and that the schedule put in place by the CHL, which rotates between the three leagues, would continue. Next year, it was the OHL's turn.

Mallette said he understood the decision, even if it was hard.

"You put so much into making those trades and planning accordingly for those years and we just don't have the team (to host again next year)," he said. "We've got a great young team, so maybe in a few years, but who even knows then."

Still, Mallette, who was brought back to Kelowna as an alumnus during its 2004 Memorial Cup, knows firsthand what the city would have been like, and the anticipation that had been building all year for an event that would never take place.

"I remember very fondly what it was like and the excitement in the town. Kelowna is a beautiful place to begin with but Kelowna in May and early June is fantastic," he said.

"The time that people put into this and seeing the committee around the office, you feel absolutely gutted for those people that have put in countless hours to make sure that they were going to throw one of the best Memorial Cups. Each committee wants to throw one better than the last and there's no doubt in my mind that we were going to put on a hell of a show."

According to Mallette, the organizing committee also estimated that the Memorial Cup would bring more than \$15 million in revenue to the area. That's not including the losses the town and the team will incur from everything they'd already invested in preparation for the event. When the news broke, Mallette didn't just think of the players and the committee, he also thought of his owner and general manager, Bruce Hamilton.

"The bid, the process, the amount of money the team puts in, there's a lot that goes into it. The Hamilton family did everything they could to get it," Mallette said.

"I feel absolutely terrible for everybody involved. It would've been crazy."

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The Athletic / Five coaches discuss how times have changed behind the NHL bench

By Eric Duhatschek and Craig Custance

Mar 25, 2020

When Peter DeBoer was fired as San Jose's coach back in December, the Sharks felt compelled to explain the decision was made for performance issues alone; that they believed the team could play better and that a new voice behind the bench might turn around their season.

What a revolutionary concept. But that messaging also neatly summarized how dramatically the NHL coaching landscape shifted during the tempestuous 2019-20 season, which is now on pause due to the coronavirus outbreak.

Suddenly, teams believed they needed to clarify exactly why a coach had been relieved of his duties – and if the decision was related to personal conduct issues off the ice, or simply unsatisfactory results on the ice.

The sea change stemmed, first, from developments in Calgary, where Bill Peters officially resigned from his post after acknowledging that he made inappropriate racial slurs against Akim Aliu when the two were in the minor leagues together in the Chicago organization a decade ago. In Dallas, Jim Montgomery was fired, officially for "unprofessional conduct." Montgomery later issued a statement saying that he was going into rehab to deal with an alcohol issue that impaired his judgment in years past. In Toronto, the Leafs dismissed Mike Babcock because the team was in a slump and showing no signs of getting out of it. But Babcock got caught up in a separate firestorm when it was revealed that he had asked Mitch Marner, then an NHL rookie, to assess the commitment levels of his teammates. Babcock later apologized for trying a motivational tactic that backfired and may have been inappropriate.

In a year when eight NHL coaches were replaced for one reason or another, we thought it was time to discuss the state of the profession and how it was evolving, as awareness of workplace conduct became an increasingly important societal concern.

Accordingly, we asked four current NHL coaches – and one former – for their thoughts. Our panel included Mike Sullivan (Pittsburgh Penguins), Todd McLellan (Los Angeles Kings), Paul Maurice (Winnipeg Jets), John Hynes (Nashville Predators) and Dave King (formerly with the Columbus Blue Jackets and Calgary Flames). All have experience at multiple levels of coaching aside from the NHL: in Russia, Europe and at the college, major junior, minor pro and international-team levels.

Hynes was one of two coaches (DeBoer was the other) to be fired by one team and subsequently hired by another. We asked five questions to each coach and all interviews were conducted before NHL suspended play for the season. Here's a lightly edited account of what they had to say.

What's been the biggest change from your perspective over the past few months?

McLellan: If a coach lost his position in the past – for whatever reason – immediately, everyone wanted to know why. It used to be a given that the explanation would be something like: "The coach has lost the room." Or there'd been a conflict with star players. Now, there's a new avenue: Did somebody cross a line? So that's certainly changed. But there's also a whole bunch of coaches who haven't been fired, and their worlds are a little different now too. You are way more sensitive to emotion. Yours. The people around you. Coaches know the difference between right and wrong – and if we cross the right/wrong line, we should be punished. It's the grey areas we're trying to figure out. It's the speech between periods, where you're trying to wake your team up and get them going. How far can you take that? It's the work in practice. Growing up playing, we had punishment practices. Coaches had us run in our equipment. We don't do any of that stuff. But if you take a practice up a notch – following a bad performance – how far can you take it up before you're crossing a line? If you bark at a player on the bench, the emotion and firmness we use in the moment is maybe different than you'd encounter in the workplace. All of that has created a conversation. It's forced everybody to reflect on the past and to plan for the future – where maybe we didn't do enough of that before.

Maurice: I would say 95, no 99 – a very high percentage of all our tactics are fine. These couple of incidents are not a great indicator of the way coaches go about their business on a daily basis. It's usually a very positive environment. If there's anything that's changed over the past 20 years, it's when I'm in my locker room, I'm saying positive things 10 times more than I once did. There was a time when you just coached mistakes. Now you're reinforcing the positive. That would be the biggest change



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with players. Even positive psychology is kind of a new concept. When I was first in the NHL, you didn't think like that.

Sullivan: The biggest challenge for coaching at the NHL level is just managing personalities. It's interpersonal skills. It's building relationships and finding ways to get the most out of guys and trying to get guys to jell together as a group. It's managing the personalities on a day-to-day basis, so you can create the optimum frame of mind so that players can be at their best. But if I really reflected on it and thought about it, if you asked coaches from 20 years ago, they might give you a similar answer. I don't think that's changed. I think maybe how coaches go about it has changed in today's game versus a prior generation's athletes. That's just part of understanding the athletes of today. This generation of players grew up in a different environment than my generation grew up in. Recognizing and understanding that and acknowledging that helps you as a coach to utilize better strategies in order to manage them the right way.

King: There was a time when coaches might bully their players or use profanities or threats or anything under the sun to get them to compete harder. That's being taken out of the game. Coaches have to be smarter with their motivation and not just go to all caveman, where they're just yelling and screaming at a guy. Because it's not right and it's not respectful and it's not the way you have to act. It doesn't mean you can't get angry with your team. You can. The key always is not what you say, but how you say it. The delivery of your message has to be so good. You've got to choose your words correctly. You've got to stay away from profanity. You can have a very strong message with pro players – but if you do it the right way, it can still resonate with guys – and it's respectful. But I do also believe if you can't raise your voice and raise your displeasure with the players, then there's something fundamentally wrong – and we're going to have a hard time coaching. Because there are lulls in every season, and times when your team needs a kickstart. Those things, done the right way, can be effective.

Where is the line when trying to motivate NHL players?

McLellan: When you ask that question, we immediately think of it in terms of a negative. The whole hockey world, the whole sporting world, the whole world thinks: "You're motivating because things aren't going well." The reality is, we motivate a lot of times when things are going well. We acknowledge that we've asked you to do something six times and you've done it correctly five out of six times. That's great. So, I might tap a player on the bench to say "good job." Motivation isn't always negative. Pulling somebody out of the doldrums and getting them going and waking them up, yeah, there's a little verbal poking and prodding that goes on there. But then there's the other part of motivation, the positive side. I believe in catching people doing it right. It's a way more powerful message when you tell a player: "Hey, you did a good job. That was excellent." Because now the rest of them go: "Hey, I want to hear that too. I hope he catches me doing it the right way."

Sullivan: I got this advice from my college coach Jack Parker a long time ago. When I first got into coaching, Jack said to me, "Mike, before players want to know what you know, they want to know that you care." And so, my experience in coaching players is you build relationships with these guys. They know you have their sincere interest at heart. You can push players hard. They know you're doing it for the right reasons and it's in their best interests and in the team's best interest. Every coach has their own motivational and coaching style. For me, I've made a commitment to my players that I will be honest with them as a group and as individuals. Sometimes those messages aren't always positive, right? Hopefully, more often than not, they are. We believe as a coaching staff in seeing things for what they are. That's the only way we believe we can make progress. We've got to understand where our weaknesses are and how we can get better, as a group and as individuals. I just don't think it should ever be personal. I try to ensure this with our staff as well. It's never personal. We have the utmost respect for all of our players and what they bring to the table.

Hynes: It's never about the person. It's always about the performance. When you're dealing with the players, there's the player and there's the

person. When you're talking with them or motivating them as the player, it shouldn't be demeaning to them as people. It's about "this is what's going on, this is what needs to be better, this is what we need more of." Even if you have a stern meeting with a player, it's about the performance. How do we get the performance better? It's by laying out the standards, the rules and the expectations – and 'if these things don't get better, this is what possibly could happen.' I think after you can have that stern meeting with the player or with the team, you can see them in the hallway or the breakfast room or go on the ice to practice and it's done. It's on to the next thing. That's important. That was that. This is now.

Maurice: We've got a simple rule in the coach's office here: You're not allowed to bitch about anything that you're not actually trying to fix. So, you can't go back into the dressing room and say, "this guy's not been good" – you're only allowed to do that if you're cutting video and sitting down with the guy to help him fix the problem. What we talk about here is how things are changing. These players have changed. Our job is to adjust in some ways to a player. Twenty years ago, a player had to adjust to a coach and a team. Now, we have to be aware this is all changing. In some ways, you now have 23 independent contractors and they're all getting information – because they can – outside of your dressing room.

What does the next evolution look like?

King: I think, Pete Carroll, the football coach for the Seattle Seahawks is going to be the new model. If you watch him on the sidelines, Pete Carroll doesn't coach. Oh, I know he knows the systems and they go over all that at the start of the year. I know when the defence makes adjustments for a game, the changes go through him. But primarily, Pete Carroll is a cheerleader. He's a hell of a nice guy – and it's so smart. All he wants to do as the head coach is to create environment, atmosphere, positivity. He wants the assistant coaches to handle tactics and instruction. It's brilliant. That may be the next way we're going to coach hockey – that model. He knows the game and he can give the players feedback. But he's got guys to handle the technical side of things, and so he has time for the players. Time to talk. Time to listen. He's like their grandfather figure. They want to talk to him. They don't avoid him. That's the way it may go. There may be a restructuring of the job description, where the head coach is just free to be the communicator. I mean, he's still got to win – so he has to deal with the pressure of winning. But there's far less pressure because he's not ground down by constantly being the singular voice all the time. Because nowadays, most of the head coaches have delivered all the messages – and that's a problem.

Maurice: My father used to always say: You have to accept change. If you can't change, you die – so be prepared to change. So, what's changed the most? When a player came on the team, he needed his teammates and he needed his coach, right? Free agency wasn't what it is today. You could throw guys on irrevocable waivers. If they lost their place on the team, they'd have to go and get jobs in the summer. So now we've got players who, from a very young age, don't need the team anymore. They've got a place to go if they have an issue. They can call their agent. They can call their handlers. They can call their skills coach. They can call 15 different people who will tell them: "You're right and the coach is wrong." So, finding a way to make that connection with the team is part of the evolution. We've had a lot of changeover here in Winnipeg. We had something like 13 different guys up for contracts last year. They are more mobile and they communicate more with people outside your circle. Anybody who is playing on any team is still connected to the 10 friends they made on their last team. The days when you didn't talk to somebody on the other team are so far gone. So, finding a way to get your player connected to this team – that's challenge No. 1.

Sullivan: It's a really good question because there are so many different aspects to coaching. There's the technical side, which is the game itself, which has changed dramatically over the last five, six, seven years. There are so many smart coaches who work hard to stay on top of best practices, and the strategies and the evolution of the game. So that's one aspect of it. But I think there's a competitive advantage for the elite coaches, who have the interpersonal skills to manage the players in a



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way to get the most out of them. It involves so many different things because human nature is hard to predict sometimes. There are things you can see and predict as a coaching staff and there are things that are spontaneous that you can't possibly predict. As a coaching staff, it's important that you react the right way to maximize the group that you have. I think it boils down to relationships, interpersonal skills and your ability to communicate with your athletes.

King: A lot of teams now are starting to get these players committees within the team – so the coach gets five or six influential guys in the room together and then the coaching staff will meet with those guys on a regular basis to talk about where we are, and what we've done in the past seven or eight games, and what did they think? So now, the players have a voice with the coaching staff. And I think that's the way to go. Coaching is not a dictatorship anymore. It's a partnership. We have to find ways to partner with the players – and these player committees are good things. They represent the team in meetings with the coaching staff. They air things out. Sometimes, it prevents a small problem from becoming a bigger problem. It gives players the feeling they are being listened to. We need to do more of those sorts of things to indicate that it's more of a democracy than it was before. But I also think coaches have to be able to bottom-line it with a player sometimes – and there is an art to doing that the right way.

Hynes: It's challenging as coaches, to find ways to keep their attention – whether it's with speakers or certain types of videos, or short, quick meetings. It's keeping them on edge or interested in different ways, but not through fear. You thought the meeting was going to be long? It's five minutes. We thought we were going to get hammered today? He came with this or that. It's a challenge to keep it short, keep it concise. It's different messaging – one-on-one meetings, small group meetings, a team meeting. I think you have to vary how you meet. Some days they come in and it can be one assistant coach meets with every line, D coach meets with the D and there's no team meeting. And then the team meets the next day. It's varying how you get the message across. It's varying the voices and also varying the content.

McLellan: When I first came in the league, being a players' coach wasn't always thought of as a good thing. Now? You better be a players' coach – with balance. And if you can figure out the balance, then you'll be OK.

What's been the impact on you personally?

McLellan: Not anything significant, to tell you the truth. That doesn't mean I'm a saint or an angel, or that I didn't yell and scream at points. When I take inventory of my career, I don't believe there are moments at all – where, understanding what's right and what's wrong – I crossed that line. So, nothing's changed for me, other than deeper reflection and understanding that I'm responsible for a lot of people, not just my own act, but also how the assistant coaches and the trainers behave. So, I'm more aware of that. One of the things the Kings do an outstanding job with is diversity training – and workplace environment training throughout the year, just modules that we do that's part of our job description now. We're on computers, finding time to do these all the time. Those modules are set up from the general work world. Now we're trying to figure out how it affects the sports world – which shouldn't be that different, but sometimes it is.

Maurice: In this year's environment, the effect it may have is that you have to take stock and you have to think: Is this the right way? Where in the past, you never thought about it much. Everybody just coached with their own style. Now, you do a bit of internal accounting about your motivational tactics – and that's a good thing. Maybe it's just broadened awareness – where you do a little inventory as a coach and say: "All right, over the career, have things changed and do you need to change?" But I also say to you: All the coaches I know don't need to change their approach or tactics. I think it's been pretty good – and it's been pretty good for a while.

Sullivan: I just think we're in a very hypersensitive world. From my standpoint, I guess we're a little bit more vigilant in how we interact with the media, how we interact with the players. I can only speak for myself,

but for me, that's probably with all of what's transpired over the last few months, we're all a little bit more sensitive to that.

Hynes: It's raised awareness. As a coach, you have to be able to communicate with your general manager 100 percent of the time – about the information he's getting from the outside and if there are things he's seeing and things you're seeing. I think you need to communicate those things together. To me, that's one of the biggest things, you have to have that communication and be on top of it together.

King: There's an old expression: Coaching is a great career but a hard life – and that's an accurate description, because now more than ever, when you're a coach, you've got a lot on your plate. At one time, in the NHL, we used to coach a player. Now, we coach a company. We've got the agent calling us. Or they don't call us, they call the general manager or the owner. The lines of communication have changed so much. Now, you've got so many third parties involved, and it's just so much more complicated. Because not many agents want to tell their players to smarten up or that they're not doing the job. They are reluctant to say that, so that becomes your job. It's hard.

What are the lessons you've learned about handling players over your career?

McLellan: Coaching is a little like parenting. Players need to know you care about them – that you really care about them. If they know that and they get a sense of that, then you can talk to them. It's like speaking to your son or daughter. If they don't believe you care for them, then they're not listening. They're tuning you out. But if my boys believe my wife and I really care about them, then we can talk about anything. It won't always be comfortable. It won't always be fun. Sometimes, somebody's feelings are going to get hurt – mine or theirs. But at the end of the day, we're all in this together and we're all trying to do the right things for the right reasons.

Maurice: Epiphany is too strong a word, but I had – let's call it a seminal moment – coaching a player when I was in Russia. He was very young – 19 – and he had a very challenging personal life. Both his parents had passed away and he was taking care of a special-needs brother, and there's not a lot of services available at the time there for his situation. So, I'm really pulling for this kid. I'm really hoping he can become a full-time KHL player – and I wanted to tell him that. I wanted to tell him that his last three games were really good and I couldn't – because I didn't speak the language. It really dawned on me in that moment that I didn't talk to my players nearly enough. That's the thing that I have most needed to work on because early on, I really thought there had to be a divide between a head coach and his players. That's also a function of how young I was when I started (28) – I wanted to make sure I drew a line. But then as you get older, you realize: That's not the most effective way to talk to players. Every coach is different. But my challenge is to make sure I don't spend too much time on the computer, editing hockey games and thinking big picture all the time – and instead, try to get out and have more one-on-one connections with the players. But that's not a function of this year's events. It's more a function of every coach has to know himself and what he's good at and where he needs to improve and where he needs to have his staff help him out.

Hynes: I would say, give the player the benefit of the doubt first. Try to understand his side first – what his thought process is, what his reasoning is, what he sees – rather than coming in and saying "this is what needs to happen." In my experience, a lot of times you can sit with all your coaches, and your general manager and talk about this guy or this guy and this guy and then you walk out of that meeting and meet with three players on your team and get totally different (perspective) than what you got in the coaches room or from the GM. You realize something (new) about the player – "He is a great teammate but he doesn't train that hard or he doesn't practice that hard or his life away from the rink isn't that great and that's what concerns us as players." So it's really trying to get a feel and give the player the benefit of the doubt first and work from there. That's been something I've really learned.



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Sullivan: I talk a lot with some of my friends in coaching, some guys I admire, guys like Torts (John Tortorella) who have been in the game and coaching a long time. I get asked a lot, "am I a different coach today than I was when I was a head coach 15 years ago when I was the coach of the Boston Bruins?" My answer to that is I'm a drastically different coach today. I think what I've learned is that it's really about building a partnership with your group of players. They need to know you're in it with them. That's what I think. There's always that give and take, and a coach's responsibility is to establish a level of accountability. That's important because you won't win if you don't have it. But there's also that fine line – of allowing some latitude and allowing players to grow and develop and express themselves with their talents. I use the phrase all the time with my guys, "Just meet me halfway." What's halfway mean? Halfway is very different for me today than it was 15 years ago.

King: The pressure on coaches has never been greater than this year – and it erodes a little bit our ability to do our jobs. You still need some authority or respect, because coaches can be changed so quickly now for so many various reasons – and some of them, not very good reasons. Is this the way it's going to be? Because if that's what's going to happen, that's not good for our profession and that's not good for the sport. The players play the game but every army has a general and every country has a leader. Somewhere, leadership has to play a role here. You have to be an enlightened leader. You have to be the right type of leader. But you have to have the ability to lead – and our ability to lead is being eroded with players. If things aren't going well, they now think: "When's this clown going to go? When's this guy going to be fired?" Pretty soon, are we going to all be like robots? Because if you look behind the bench these days, there is so little activity or interaction now. They're almost like statues. Four coaches are standing there. Nobody's talking to the players. It's like they're almost afraid to do anything.

McLellan: One of the best things that was instilled in our home – myself, my brother and my sister – was we didn't ever want to let our mum and dad down. We didn't have a curfew. We could go out as late as we wanted as long as we came home at a reasonable hour. But if we pushed it too far, the lawnmower would get going early the next day or the garage needed cleaning first thing in the morning. There were just ways my dad had of showing us we pushed it too far. It wasn't like we lost our allowances. We didn't have any money, so there was no allowance to lose. Report cards were always great because if you didn't do your homework, you couldn't play hockey. We knew the line there. But everything else was about us not letting them down. Now, I like to ask a player, did you meet your own standards? Or your own expectations? Sometimes, it's just important to choose the right words and ask them the right questions.

King: This may be a little off-topic, but what I've learned with coaching, and especially when coaching kids, you've got to be really careful because you want young players to develop instincts. I always love it when a kid plays impulsively. Those are the players that right away interest me. Because that's a doer. That's a player who reads things quickly and, boom, he's gone. That impulsiveness is good. Then there is the other side – the kids who are afraid to make a mistake. Sometimes, coaches are too hard on kids that make mistakes – and when you are, they won't want to make mistakes. And when they don't make mistakes, they don't think – and when they don't think, they don't become the player they possibly could become. The other thing I would say is: Far too often, with kids, we assign them a position too early. So, for example, my grandson is 13 and he's never played a position other than left wing. I think he might be a good defenceman – but he's never had the chance to play defence. So, in coaching, we do things where our intentions are good. It's just sometimes, our methods are wrong.

McLellan: I would just say this: Tomorrow will not be the same as today. Every day changes. Individuals change. Situations change – and it's never the same game twice. It's never the same emotional level twice. In our family, growing up, one of the lessons we were always taught was, when God created us, he gave us five senses. Of the five senses, you have multiple tools with four – touch, smell, sight and sound – but you only had one tongue with which to taste and talk. My dad always said:

Use the multiple tools before you use the single one. In other words, listen and see and smell and touch before you speak. And that was some of the best advice I've ever been given.

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The Athletic / How do players view coaches at the NHL level? It's complicated

By Scott Burnside

Mar 25, 2020

On one hand, the player-coach dynamic in the NHL is built on a complicated, nuanced relationship dependent on an understanding of roles and the art of effective communication.

On the other hand, it's pretty simple.

"Figure it out," said 35-year-old Wild center Eric Staal, a veteran of more than 1,200 regular-season games and a member of teams that have won a Stanley Cup, a world championship and an Olympic gold medal.

The coach holds the keys and that means as a player you have to learn what they're about, how they communicate and how you fit into their world.

Figuring it out early makes the adjustments you'll have to make later much easier, he said.

And players had to adjust to a lot this year. Before the season was suspended, eight coaches were fired. Some decisions were based on team performance while others were based on things that happened off the ice – some incidents were recent, others went back years. All of that added a layer of complexity to the challenging dynamic that binds players and coaches together.

But players we spoke to talked about those gray areas that do exist when a group of athletes is expected to perform at the absolute highest level and how the coaches charged with getting them to that level must find ways to coax that out of them.

Just as each coach is different in their approach to the game and how they motivate players, each player is different, too.

Los Angeles captain Anze Kopitar had a distinct view of the line between hockey life and "normal" life because his father, Matjaz, coached him for many years, including as an adult when Slovenia earned its first Olympic berth for the 2014 Sochi Games.

"I think it just kind of set me up on what the coaching in general is all about really," Kopitar said. "And there's obviously very different types of coaches. So my old man was more of a fiery guy. He's yelling, screaming and kicking trash cans sometimes. I'm not saying you should do it all the time, but there's certainly times when it needs to be done."

In fact, Kopitar and his father, who continues to coach the Slovenian national team, have discussed what is seemingly an intensified focus on coaching behavior.

"Yeah, we've talked about it. You just realize that it's not ... 1985 anymore," Kopitar said. "Whether you have to adapt to a different game on the ice, you've got to adapt your coaching style."

Kopitar, as many players do, believes each coach helps the player form an identity. Whether it was the "fiery" Marc Crawford, the "even-keeled"



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Terry Murray or Darryl Sutter, “we all know what Darryl was all about, always,” they all help shape players in subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

And now, Kopitar says, with Todd McLellan, “It’s a completely different situation again because Todd is way more of a teacher.”

One of the keys to developing a strong coach/player relationship, Kopitar suggested, is in understanding that the coach and the player share the burden in shaping that relationship.

“First of all, you’ve got to get the feel for the coach,” Kopitar said, acknowledging that at the same time, “he is trying to figure out what you’re all about.

“It’s a two-way street. And I’m not saying by any means you’ve got to be friends or best buddy with the coach, but there is a certain relationship that’s there and you just got to make the most of it.”

Jacob Slavin, an emerging star defender with the Carolina Hurricanes, played youth hockey in Colorado and two seasons at Colorado College before joining the Hurricanes organization.

Although he was with the Hurricanes during Bill Peters’ controversial tenure as head coach – Peters was forced to resign from the Calgary Flames this fall after an investigation confirmed allegations that he used racial epithets toward former player Akim Aliu and was physically abusive of players while coaching the Hurricanes – Slavin has for the most part enjoyed positive relationships with coaches going back to his earliest hockey memories.

“I still talk to one of my coaches that coached me when I was 8 years old,” Slavin said. “I think (those) relationships have always been huge. Just whether it’s coaches, off-ice, whatever it is, relationships ... have always been a huge part of my life.”

Jacob Slavin has had two vastly different coach experiences in his career so far. (James Guillory / USA Today)

Of course at the NHL level, developing those relationships can be more challenging because the stakes are so different.

“You get some coaches that are just not as personable as other coaches are,” Slavin said. “And then some coaches are the complete opposite where they’re like, all right, if I have great relationships with my players and I know their personal lives, I can talk to them about stuff other than hockey and that’s going to help me get the most out of them.”

A player has to figure it out, Slavin said.

“I can go with a coach that yells and screams and doesn’t have a personal relationship with you; I get up for every game regardless,” Slavin said. “But for me, personally, I like the coach that does take interest in your life outside of hockey. That does have that mutual respect.”

Slavin learned early on that the player/coach relationship was going to be different than his other relationships with adults, even the adults in his family.

“When I was younger, my dad coached me for a little bit and I told him to shut up one time on the bench and he’s like, all right, I’m done coaching you,” Slavin said. “I think I was like 10 or 11.”

The memory of what precipitated the altercation has faded over time although it does occasionally come up in conversation with his father.

“Oh, we talk about it every once in a while,” Slavin said, adding his dad isn’t “mad at me for it.”

Still, it’s a lesson learned.

“I don’t think I could ever look at Roddy and tell him to shut up,” Slavin said about Carolina’s current head coach Rod Brind’Amour.

The only two NHL coaches the 25-year-old Slavin has played for are Brind’Amour and Peters.

“They operate in two different ways and that’s nothing against Bill,” Slavin said. “He was a very good hockey coach. But you know, Roddy’s just ... a different type of person.”

The interesting thing is that when Peters left to coach Calgary before the start of the 2018-19 season and Brind’Amour took over, there wasn’t too much adjustment in terms of the systems employed. That made the transition easier, especially for younger players, Slavin said.

“In our situation, there wasn’t too big of a change ... Roddy just approached it from a different mindset,” Slavin said. “We all know the type of person that Roddy is so it was refreshing.”

Sometimes the coach/player relationship hinges on the stage of a player’s career.

“When you’re younger, you talk more about you all the time,” Dallas Stars center Tyler Seguin said. “And the meetings are all about you. And as you get older, your meetings are more about, they’re still you and the coach wants you to do things differently, and then it’s so, what about the team? And where does this go? There’s a change that happens at a certain point.”

Seguin, of course, arrived in Boston with much fanfare as the second-overall pick in the 2010 draft. He won a Stanley Cup in his rookie season in Boston in 2011, and went to a final in his third and final season with the Bruins before he was dealt to Dallas.

Seguin evolved under head coach Ken Hitchcock into a bona fide elite center who could play in any situation anywhere on the ice during the 2017-18 season. That doesn’t happen without an understanding on both sides of how this is going to work and the sacrifices or changes that need to be made to effect that change.

“I’m not sure what year it was for me but there was something that changed in one of the years and it was now more about the team,” Seguin said. “There’s expectations of me but there’s more trust when you get to a certain level and age and then the communications are more about; do we travel this day? Do we stay in this hotel? How’s the room? What do we need to change? How is pregame skate? So things vary the older you get and that’s kind of where the coach/player relationship has evolved. Which I love.”

Sometimes it’s not all cherries and whipped cream.

“It takes a long time. You’ve got to earn your way,” Seguin said. “It was my goal to become a leader and be in on that leadership. It’s a lot more than just the letter (on your jersey).”

Seguin lists his coaches: Claude Julien, Lindy Ruff, Hitchcock, Jim Montgomery and now interim coach Rick Bowness.

This season marked the first time Seguin had to adjust to an in-season coaching change when Montgomery was fired for non-hockey-related behavior early in the season and he later checked himself into a facility to aid in his battle with alcohol.

“It’s different for us,” Seguin said. “When you have a coaching change in the middle of a season, it’s usually because your team’s not doing well. We were doing well.

“So it’s not traditional. It’s trickier to discuss. It sucks. I loved Monty.”

As for the lines in the sand being redrawn when it comes to how coaches and players interact, Seguin isn’t so sure where those lines are even if there is much more discussion about what is acceptable now in the coach/player dynamic.

“Everyone’s different and has their own philosophies and has their own ways of making guys tick,” Seguin said. “I’ve kind of seen it all. I mean, I haven’t seen Mike Babcock, tough to say. Yeah. I don’t know where the line is.”

Seth Jones is in his seventh NHL season. He has played for Barry Trotz and then Peter Laviolette and alongside guys like Shea Weber and Pekka Rinne. When Jones was traded to Columbus in 2016, he learned



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what it was like to play for John Tortorella as a top-four defender who was being asked to become a leader on and off the ice.

One thing all three coaches had in common, Jones said, was an open-door policy.

"Junior coaches and NHL coaches, the relationships are a little different I think," he said. "Junior coach it's more development, that sort of thing. You're still a kid. There's a lot of 16-year-olds in junior and everyone's still kind of scared of the coach. And then when you get to the NHL, it's more of a relationship based on systems and you need to trust each other.

"It evolves. It evolves. When you're younger, you're scared of the coach's office. You don't want to go in the coach's office."

But as an NHLer, going to the coach's office may mean many things and not necessarily negative things.

Jones said all of his NHL coaches have allowed him to speak his mind. "Whether it was hockey or whatever," he said. "Torts even now preaches that. He pushes you, but at the same time you respect each other."

That doesn't mean that all coaches react the same way to an outspoken player.

"So my first year, Trotz ... had no problem calling out the team for not playing well," Jones said. "We had great leadership in that room, of course, with Weber and we (had) a lot of veterans on that team. And then Laviolette came and he's just a very intense guy. Wouldn't mind calling a guy out, but for the most part it may have been in his office, taking him aside one on one depending on who it was."

Tortorella? Well that's a whole other story.

"Torts, everything's in the open," Jones said. "There's not going to be an elephant in the room that he's not going to discuss and get it out there. Whether it's about a player or about anything else that has anything to do with our team. He's called me out multiple times in front of the guys. He's called everybody else out multiple times, but at the end of the day he is trying to push you and you can't take it personally because he wants to win just as bad as we do."

Jones said he doesn't take it personally and that "some guys have to get over" any hurt feelings they might have. "Some guys will say 'he's out to get me' or 'he's always on my back' or 'can't let me get away with anything,'" Jones said. "When he comes in and tells me you played like shit that period, I know. You know what I mean?"

Jones has never experienced an in-season coaching change on a team he played for, but he did change coaches and teams when he was dealt to Columbus for Ryan Johansen in January of 2016.

"It was a little strange," he said. "It was a completely different role I was playing as well. I was a third-line (pair), second power play but I was still playing 18 minutes a night in Nashville. But there were a lot of other great D who had more of the brunt of the loss or the win on their shoulders. When I got to Columbus, the first meeting I had with Torts he was 'I'm throwing you in the fire. You're going to be playing a shit-ton here.'"

And that's how it went, as Jones was immediately thrust into a top-four role and saw his ice time jump about five minutes a night.

"So when I would play bad, he would be on me," Jones said. "And he wouldn't do it behind the closed door, he'd do it in front of everybody. But it's not personal. It's probably made me better."

Do players talk about coaching now in terms of what is acceptable and what isn't? Sure, Staal said. In the summer, when he and his brothers, NHL veterans Marc and Jordan, are working out or relaxing together in Thunder Bay, those topics come up.

Jones' younger brother, Caleb, is in the Edmonton Oilers system so he sometimes asks his older brother about coaches.

"Even when you see guys on other teams, you'll ask, how's your coach and they'll say he's a players' coach, he never gets mad, or he does this and this and yells all the time," Jones said. "We're always comparing each other's coaches."

So, does Jones ever wonder what kind of coach he would be, given his experiences?

"Yeah. I do. I do," he said. "Because as a player, it's easy to say 'oh, why is he always yelling at us? Why is he doing this at practice? Why is he doing this at intermission?' But you don't realize probably what they're going through, what's being said back in the coaches' room, what they're seeing, how they're seeing us play. So it's hard for me to say what kind of coach I'd be because sometimes I'm sure I would just be fuming. And sometimes you have to go off, which I think coaches do."

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The Athletic / Down Goes Brown: Ranking all 67 hat tricks from the 2019-20 season

By Sean McIndoe

Mar 25, 2020

It's been a while since I've done a way-too-in-depth ranking of some random subject. And since we all miss hockey, I thought it would be fun to remember some of the good times. What about hat tricks? Everybody loves a good hat trick. Let's rank every hat trick from the 2019-20 season, I thought. That would be fun.

Then I found out there were 67 of them. That's, um, more than I thought. Damn you, dead puck era, where are you when I need you?

Ah well, it's not like any of us have anything better to do right now. So here we go. Each of the 67 hat tricks from the 2019-20 season, ranked from worst to best, based on a rigorous scientific methodology of me just deciding I liked some better than others. You're free to disagree. You'll be wrong, but you're free to do so.

No. 67: Blake Coleman (Devils vs. Maple Leafs, Jan. 14)

Every hat trick is at least kind of cool, and it feels a little weird to pick one as the season's very worst. But Coleman is as good a choice as any because his hat trick was unique in two ways. First, the Devils lost the game in regulation, making Coleman the only player on this entire list whose team didn't even get so much as a point out of his hat trick game. And it's also the only entry where another player in the same game also had a hat trick – in this case, Auston Matthews. Factor in that all three of Coleman's goals came with his team trailing by four goals or more, and yeah, this one really didn't matter. It apparently impressed the Lightning scouts, though.

No. 66: Evander Kane (Sharks vs. Capitals, Jan. 5)

Like Coleman, Kane got his trick in a loss. Unlike Coleman, he at least saw his team earn a point. But this was the infamous game in which the Sharks collapsed with a minute left, allowing two goals to tie the game before losing two minutes into overtime. When your hat trick comes in your team's most gut-wrenching loss of a gut-wrenching season, that's not great.

No. 65: Nicolas Deslauriers (Ducks vs. Senators, March 10)



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Deslauriers' first-period blitz was the last hat trick of the season, coming on the penultimate night. It happened two weeks ago. It feels like two years.

No. 64: Tyson Jost (Avalanche vs. Lightning, Oct. 19)

This early-season hat trick accounted for 37.5 percent of Jost's offensive output for the entire season; he scored just five other goals in 66 games. But he'll go down as the youngest player to have a hat trick in 2019-20, and the one to do it with the least ice time (just 10:58).

No. 63: Dustin Brown (Kings vs. Wild, March 7)

And here's the oldest player on our list, as 35-year-old Brown became the third Kings player to manage the feat in a five-week stretch.

No. 62: Craig Smith (Predators vs. Islanders, Feb. 13)

No. 61: Carter Verhaeghe (Lightning vs. Canucks, Jan. 7)

No. 60: Andrew Mangiapane (Flames vs. Ducks, Feb. 17)

No. 59: Joonas Donskoi (Avalanche vs. Predators, Nov. 7)

No. 58: Derek Grant (Ducks vs. Blues, Nov. 16)

Hat tricks by guys you don't expect are always at least a little bit sneaky-fun. These five guys are all pretty similar stories – they're not considered big scorers, they finished with fewer than 20 goals on the year, and these were their first and so far only career hat tricks. Grant takes the top spot in the group because of this.

No. 57: Frank Vatrano (Panthers vs. Blackhawks, January 21)

I kind of assumed Vatrano would fit into that same "plugger scoring his first career hat trick" category as that last group, but no – he also had one as a rookie with the Bruins way back in 2015. You learn something new every day. Not something remotely useful, but something.

No. 56: Mika Zibanejad (Rangers vs. Senators, Oct. 5)

This was the season's first hat trick, as well as the first of two Zibanejad would have on the year. Spoiler: The second one was better.

No. 55: Mikko Rantanen (Avalanche vs. Devils, Jan. 4)

Start strong, finish strong. It's one of the rules of comedy. Apparently, Rantanen is also a believer, at least on this night – he capped the hat trick with a pair of third-period goals, one eight seconds in and the other with 16 seconds left.

No. 54: William Karlsson (Golden Knights vs. Ducks, Feb. 23)

Karlsson's goal-scoring has dropped a ton since he had 43 two years ago, but he rediscovered his touch for one night in Anaheim. No hats please, his hair's too nice.

No. 53: Mike Hoffman (Panthers vs. Lightning, Oct. 5)

It wasn't the first hat trick of the new season – Zibanejad beat him by about an hour – but it did produce the first wins as a Panther for both Joel Quenneville and Sergei Bobrovsky.

No. 52: Kyle Palmieri (Devils vs. Lightning, Oct. 30)

Along with Coleman, this was the Devils' only other hat trick of the season, and amazingly they lost this one too. It's subtle, but I think when you're winless in hat trick games you're probably not having a fantastic season. But Palmieri's at least delivered a point, with the third goal tying the score with eight seconds left in regulation.

No. 51: James Neal (Oilers vs. Rangers, Dec. 31)

No. 50: James Neal (Oilers vs. Islanders, Oct. 8)

The list of players who had multiple hat tricks on the season includes several names you'd expect. It also includes James Neal. His four-goal game against the Islanders came in the season's first week and may

have marked the earliest in a season that everyone unanimously declared a winner in an offseason trade.

No. 49: Gustav Nyquist (Blue Jackets vs. Penguins, Nov. 29)

No. 48: Jean-Gabriel Pageau (Senators vs. Devils, Nov. 13)

No. 47: David Perron (Blues vs. Avalanche, Dec. 16)

No. 46: Bryan Rust (Penguins vs. Senators, March 3)

No. 45: Bo Horvat (Canucks vs. Red Wings, Oct. 22)

No. 44: Nick Bonino (Predators vs. Blackhawks, Oct. 29)

No. 43: Jakub Vrana (Capitals vs. Flames, Nov. 3)

No. 42: Jonathan Marchessault (Golden Knights vs. Devils, Dec. 3)

We're officially into the "Yeah, I could see that guy getting a hat trick" territory. It's a decent group, but Marchessault takes the top spot by getting all three of his goals in a nine-minute stretch of the third period.

No. 41: Dominik Kubalik (Blackhawks vs. Lightning, Feb. 27)

There were only two hat tricks by rookies this season, and both involved the Lightning. Verhaeghe was the first. This was the second, as Kubalik potted three third period goals as part of a frantic comeback that temporarily kept the Hawks' flatlining playoff hopes alive.

No. 40: Evander Kane (Sharks vs. Hurricanes, Oct. 16)

Kane's first-period hat trick powered the Sharks to their third straight win, and we all breathed a sigh of relief that they'd shaken off their tough start and were ready to contend as we all expected. They lost seven of their next eight.

No. 39: Patrick Kane (Blackhawks vs. Wild, Dec. 15)

No. 38: Jamie Benn (Stars vs. Hurricanes, Feb. 11)

Two former Art Ross winners in their 30s who play for Central Division teams. They both open the scoring seven minutes in. They both get their second goal on the powerplay. And they both cap off the hat trick with an empty netter with just over a minute to go. The NHL's scriptwriters are getting lazy.

No. 37: Patrice Bergeron (Bruins vs. Rangers, Oct. 27)

It's not often you can get a hat trick and be arguably the third-best player on your own line that night. But Bergeron may have managed it, as linemates Brad Marchand and David Pastrnak both had five-point nights.

No. 36: Artemi Panarin (Rangers vs. Sharks, Dec. 12)

You certainly can't say Panarin didn't live up to his big UFA contract, at least in year one. New York fans who stayed up for this one probably enjoyed seeing Panarin score a hat trick for the Rangers instead of against them for a change.

No. 35: Alexander Ovechkin (Capitals vs. Red Wings, Nov. 30)

As he closes in on Wayne Gretzky's goal record, every Ovechkin hat trick is awesome. But this one came against the Red Wings and featured two empty netters, so we can't get it any higher than this.

No. 34: Noel Acciari (Panthers vs. Senators, Dec. 16)

No. 33: Noel Acciari (Panthers vs. Stars, Dec. 20)

Remember when Acciari briefly turned into Mike Bossy? That was a fun week.

No. 32: Jordan Eberle (Islanders vs. Red Wings, Febr. 21)

Sometimes the "when" is almost as important as the "how many." The Islanders had gone pointless during a four-game road trip on which they'd managed just two goals. Eberle beat that total all by himself in their return home, at least temporarily getting the team back in the win column.



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No. 31: Mark Scheifele (Jets vs. Senators, Feb. 20)

No. 30: Patrik Laine (Jets vs. Senators, Feb. 8)

Hat tricks are relatively rare; hat tricks where all three goals come on the powerplay are rarer. But the Jets pulled it off twice in the same month, against the same team.

No. 29: Zach Werenski (Blue Jackets vs. Panthers, Dec. 31)

No. 28: Tony DeAngelo (Rangers vs. Devils, Jan. 9)

No. 27: Jared Spurgeon (Wild vs. Oilers, Feb. 21)

Hat tricks by defensemen are just cool, and these were the only three of the season. (Well, sort of ... we'll get to one more a bit further down.) Spurgeon's was a natural hat trick, making him just the 12th defenseman to ever do that in NHL history.

No. 26: Zach Sanford (Blues vs. Golden Knights, Feb. 13)

Sanford's four-goal performance was one of seven we saw this year. This one was the most unlikely, as well as the only one that came in a loss. It also accounted for 25 percent of his season total and 14 percent of his career output.

No. 25: Anthony Cirelli (Lightning vs. Jets, Jan. 17)

No. 24: Kyle Connor (Jets vs. Avalanche, Dec. 31)

No. 23: Timo Meier (Sharks vs. Flyers, Dec. 28)

No. 22: Auston Matthews (Maple Leafs vs. Devils, Jan. 14)

No. 21: Sebastian Aho (Hurricanes vs. Wild, Dec. 7)

No. 20: Brock Boeser (Canucks vs. Kings, Oct. 30)

It's almost embarrassing how much young offensive talent the NHL can boast these days, as all six of these guys were 23 or younger when they had their hat tricks.

No. 19: Alex Lafallo (Kings vs. Coyotes, Jan. 30)

The game itself didn't matter all that much, but Lafallo's hat trick gets some bonus points for coming in a 3-2 win. Even better, he scored the opener, tied it with three minutes left in regulation, then won it in overtime.

No. 18: Anthony Mantha (Red Wings vs. Stars, Oct. 6)

The good news: Mantha had all four goals in a 4-3 victory, including the winner with a minute left in regulation. The bad news: This was the last good thing that happened to the Red Wings in the 2019-20 season, and it happened in their second game.

No. 17: Mark Pysyk (Panthers vs. Maple Leafs, Feb. 2)

Pysyk is a defensive defenseman who'd scored 17 goals in eight seasons before being asked to play forward and getting a hat trick against the Leafs in a crucial showdown with playoff implications. Ah well, said Leaf fans, at least this will be the most unlikely player to beat us this month.

No. 16: Anthony Duclair (Senators vs. Blue Jackets, Dec. 14)

Duclair's early-season comeback was a great story, one that included this hat trick that he capped with an overtime winner. Even better: It came against his former team and the coach who once said he didn't know how to play.

No. 15: Tyler Toffoli (Kings vs. Avalanche, Feb. 15)

Two of the three goals came in the final minute of what turned out to be Toffoli's last game as a King; he was traded to the Canucks two days later. That's called knowing how to make an exit.

No. 14: Connor McDavid (Oilers vs. Ducks, Nov. 10)

No. 13: Connor McDavid (Oilers vs. Avalanche, Nov. 14)

Ho-hum. The best player in the league was even more unstoppable than usual for a week in November. That was especially true against the Avalanche, as he added three assists to his hat trick for a season-high six-point night.

No. 12: David Pastrnak (Bruins vs. Canadiens, Nov. 26)

No. 11: David Pastrnak (Bruins vs. Jets, Jan. 9)

No. 10: David Pastrnak (Bruins vs. Canadiens, Feb. 12)

No. 9: David Pastrnak (Bruins vs. Ducks, Oct. 14)

This was the season that Pastrnak went from respected but maybe underrated sniper to an unstoppable monster, and hat tricks in four of the season's five full months made it seem like he was periodically leveling up right before our eyes. Doing it twice against the Habs was a nice touch, but his four-goal game against the Ducks was the real jaw-dropper.

No. 8: Jack Eichel (Sabres vs. Senators, Nov. 16)

Hockey fans love the idea of a star player putting his team on his back and dragging them to a win. That's pretty much what Eichel did, scoring all four goals in a 4-2 win that snapped a six-game losing streak that was threatening to derail the Sabres season. In hindsight, it didn't really matter – the Sabres lost six of their next eight – but in the moment, it felt like a heroic season-saver.

No. 7: Alex Radulov (Stars vs. Wild, Oct. 29)

This was one of the most entertaining games of the year, as two 18-wheelers collided in mid-air on their way down the cliff. The Wild led 3-0, but Radulov sparked the comeback as the Stars pumped home six straight to win 6-3. It may have saved the Stars' season, as they won 10 of their next 11.

No. 6: Leon Draisaitl (Oilers vs. Predators, March 2)

It was fascinating to watch the narrative around Draisaitl shift as the season went on, as he went from Connor McDavid's understudy to co-star to dark-horse MVP candidate to outright favorite. If we're right and Draisaitl ends up taking the Hart, this four-goal outburst will be remembered as the exclamation mark.

No. 5: Alexander Ovechkin (Capitals vs. Devils, Jan. 16)

No. 4: Alexander Ovechkin (Capitals vs. Islanders, Jan. 18)

No. 3: Alexander Ovechkin (Capitals vs. Kings, Feb. 4)

One of the very best memories of the season was the three-week stretch where Ovechkin entered a cheat code and just ran over the entire league, racking up 14 goals in seven games that included three hat tricks. Each one was better than the last, as you were left shaking your head that he had actually done it again.

No. 2: Bobby Ryan (Senators vs. Canucks, Feb. 27)

In terms of what it meant to his team's playoff chances, there weren't many hat tricks this season that were less important; the Senators had been out of the race for months. But in terms of what it meant to a player, and to the teammates, fans and organization that had supported him through a difficult time, it was hard to imagine a better scene than Ryan scoring three times in his first game in Ottawa since entering the player assistance program in November due to his issues with alcohol. Sometimes even a lost season can provide a reminder of what matters, as Ryan's reaction to the fans chanting his name told us.

No. 1: Mike Zibanejad (Rangers vs. Capitals, March 5)

Hat tricks are fun. Four-goal games are great. But five-goal games are their own special category because you reach a point where you stop being amazed and just start expecting the player to get the next goal. On this night, Zibanejad's fourth goal gave the Rangers a 5-4 lead with two minutes left, but Ovechkin tied it up a minute later. That sent the game to



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overtime, and when Zibanejad broke in on a partial breakaway just seconds in, everyone knew what was coming.

It was the 62nd five-goal game in NHL history and just the fourth in the last 23 years. Doing it on home ice in a showcase game against the division's top team only cemented its status as perhaps the season's most memorable individual performance.

Next year, let's see somebody hit six.

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Sportsnet.ca / 31 Thoughts: Checking in with McDavid, Matthews, Eichel and more

Elliott Friedman | @FriedgeHNIC

March 25, 2020, 1:28 PM

- When did McDavid, Draisaitl know Oilers were for real?
- Does anyone work out harder than Eichel?
- How much did Matthews enjoy chasing Vaive's record?

First and foremost, hope everyone who reads this is hanging in (friends and families, too). Don't be inert — meditate 10 minutes a day, reconnect with someone, enjoy the gift of time with people we care about. Look out for anyone who seems "off." We're only going to get through this together. There are so many great hockey fans and people in the New York area, and we're with them as their city gets hit hardest.

Also, I really hope no one is as bad a Grade 3 math teacher as I am.

Just a quick summary of where we are:

This week, the NHL asked teams to submit home arena dates for August. The postponement of the Olympics erases the concern of going head-to-head with them. Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban told WFAA's Mark Leslie on Tuesday that, for him, the over-under on the NBA returning was June 1, and he's "taking the under."

I love Cuban's optimism, and I love to gamble — but I don't see that. The NHL had an infectious-diseases specialist on its Board of Governors call on Monday, and from what I understand, they painted a picture that was interpreted as closer to July. So that's where we are, although I stick to my original prediction that we won't have a true idea until at least May.

From a business point of view, it's tough in hockey, just like everywhere else. The Canadiens announced layoffs and salary cuts, albeit with a plan to ease the financial pain. The ownership group of the Devils and the NBA's 76ers — widely praised for leading the way in protecting part-time workers — stepped in it when asking employees to take pay cuts. They backed off, and it will be interesting to see what that means for everyone else. More has been discussed, although I'm not sure teams will announce. (That doesn't mean the news won't get out.) At the NHL offices, anyone making north of \$75,000 took a hit.

Amongst all of this came an interesting development. According to several sources, the players considered not taking their final paycheque. That one would be paid on April 15, but cover only the final four days of the regular-season, April 1-4. I understood the idea from several perspectives. It might ease the players' overall escrow, and some of the lower-revenue teams would definitely be happy with fewer costs.

I was told Tuesday not to go with that any more — that a decision had been made to proceed as normal. On Wednesday, I was told not to make any firm statements either way. I guess we'll see.

No business will escape the pandemic unscathed. We know the players are expecting huge escrow holdbacks, especially if no playoffs occur. We know the league is worried about approximately \$1 billion in revenue. We know the 2020-21 cap is going to have to be negotiated by the league and players. There's a lot to do.

We've heard the NHL and NHLPA are bending over backwards to work together in difficult times. So allow me a theory:

Everything is uncertain now, I get it. But there are at least two positive things on the NHL's radar. One is Seattle. The other is the potential U.S. television deal — which is why you're going to see a lot of work put in towards creating the best possible playoff system whenever we return.

But to really make everything work, the league needs certainty. A long CBA. No labour trouble on the horizon.

Ten days ago, the NFL/NFLPA signed a 10-year deal. The final vote was far from unanimous, and it wasn't easy. But it got done.

Commissioner Gary Bettman is pretty good with his TV contracts. If he can get that done, are the players willing to vote for a 10-year deal? In return, they should get Olympics and some kind of escrow relief — not in terms of avoiding paying it, which isn't realistic. But maybe spreading it out over two or three years to escape a one-season 35 per cent figure. (Maybe the league goes after big signing bonuses, too. Who knows?)

Just a theory, but I wonder if that's where we are going.

31 THOUGHTS

1. One of the things I wish there'd be more of in the weekly blog is player perspective. They're busy; I don't travel as much as I used to; it is clearly a worldwide conspiracy against me. So I tried to hit up one player per team with three questions about their season. In these unusual times, not every club could be represented, unfortunately. Hope you enjoy what we could curate — forwards first, then defence and goalies.

We start with future Hall of Famer Patrice Bergeron. Months after going to Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final, Boston is the NHL's No. 1 team at the pause.

"For me, the best thing about being a Bruin is the friendship that we've been able to establish," he wrote in an email. "In a cap world, rarely do you see teams keeping lots of guys long term. We have been so lucky in Boston. Growing up together (almost), it's a special bond. I think it helps with our culture — keeping guys accountable, understanding how we do things. We know what is expected of each other. Everybody is included and has a voice. We are all only a small piece to the puzzle."

I'm an optimist. I believe the best will occur — even now — but admit, that, turning 50 this year, I don't know how many more Cups I'll get to cover. Tuukka Rask confirmed one rumour to the Boston Globe's Matt Porter that he may retire after his contract expires next season.

As a group, is there any added frustration because some of Bergeron's key teammates are older by NHL standards and simply don't know how many more opportunities there will be?

"I think as you get older you realize that you need to make the most of every opportunity since they might not come by often. That being said, this is out of our control. What should be on our minds right now is everyone's safety. Still, it is hard knowing that we have a great team, not certain if there will be a playoff and a Stanley Cup to compete for."

Finally, what is your favourite Zdeno Chara story?

"Man, that's a tough one. I've known Zee for so long now. He's the ultimate competitor. What will always impress me is his competitive drive and work ethic in every practice. In every drill of every practice, he wants to be the guy to start it. He has been doing that since I've known him. His way of leading the way."



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2. Two teams have two representatives. One is Edmonton. When we finally get around to figuring out trophy voting, will both Leon Draisaitl and Connor McDavid be Hart finalists? Draisaitl leads the league in scoring, and all forwards in time-on-ice per game (22:37). He's had some huge-minute games this year.

What was the most exhausted he was after any game this season?

"I think the hardest one was probably the 29-minute one in Arizona," he wrote.

That was Nov. 24. Exactly 29:00, on a night when he played 4:10 of overtime — 10 seconds more than McDavid. The Oilers won 4–3 in a shootout.

"I remember sitting in the dressing room after and not being able to move because it took me so long to catch my breath."

At what point in the season did he realize that the team was going in the right direction? What did he see that made him believe?

"It was after that bad month of December. In January, we really started to turn it around, went on a solid run. That's when I knew that we had a good group and a good team."

Edmonton was 5-8-1 in December, 6-1-2 in January. More importantly, what is it like as an Oiler to have meaningful, nasty games against Calgary? The fans love it, the media loves it — do you love it?

"Yes, it's a lot of fun. Games are important — two good teams going at it, both in the playoff race. It's heated. It's so much fun to be a part of."

3. When you're sending out the questions, there are always one or two that you look at and say, "Uh, am I sure about this one?" Exhibit A was to Connor McDavid. He was coming off a major injury. As great a player as he is, I thought pushing his way back set a different kind of tone for Edmonton's season, a very important reminder of how even the best have to grind to succeed.

How much had he exceeded expectations for himself and for the team?

"The expectations coming in this year, not only for the team but myself, were not high from a media standpoint," he texted. "There were more questions than answers with the team and with my injury — would I even be playing, and, if I was, how would my game be? Team-wise, everyone has done a great job exceeding those expectations. From management to the coaching staff down to the players, everyone has done a great job getting to this point. But there is lots of work left to be done this season. Personally, I always try to believe in myself. But it was hard for sure. Coming into training camp, I hadn't battled against another player on the ice all summer long, so it was hard to be sure where my game would be. But with lots of help from my teammates, trainers and everyone around me, my game has been able to stay where it's been at in years previous."

Sure has.

Same question that I posed to Draisaitl: At what point in the season did he realize the team was going in the right direction? What did he see that made him believe?

"I think I started to feel good about our team after the first month. I liked where everyone's heads were. We were saying all the right stuff, but not only saying it — doing it on and off the ice. Our game had a big slip in late November and December. That raised a lot of questions again, but I liked how we responded. We were very solid in the second half."

Jeff Marek and Elliotte Friedman talk to a lot of people around the hockey world, and then they tell listeners all about what they've heard and what they think about it.

4. Right with the two Oilers in the Hart race is the 2018 runner-up, Colorado's Nathan MacKinnon. He has enormous standards for himself. Does he feel he's played to the level he demands?

"For sure the standards I have for myself are high," he said via text. "I always feel there's room for growth. The challenge is to maintain a high

level of play for any top-end player in the NHL. The season is a grind and there's lots that goes into it behind the scenes to be consistent every night."

The Avalanche's 92 points are tied with Tampa Bay, two points back of second-overall St. Louis. Has the turnaround from 2016-17 happened quicker than he thought?

"For me, I wasn't so much worried about how long the turnaround (would take) — just that I had to do my part in becoming the player I was capable of becoming. Looking back, it's amazing how fast we turned things around as a franchise."

Then MacKinnon paid one of his young teammates a huge compliment: "2016–17 did get us Cale Makar, so it was worth it."

5. At what point does MacKinnon say, "Sorry, Sid — I'm now the best player from Nova Scotia in the NHL"?

"I'll be better than Sid when I have 4 cups and 3 Olympic gold medals 😊"

6. Auston Matthews rejected one of my questions like Dikembe Mutombo sending some weak layup into the 20th row. Was there ever any real fear in the Toronto room about the team missing the playoffs?

"No. No one in our group plays with fear, and that will continue to be the case."

I liked that one. You can imagine that this year's been a total whirlwind for Matthews and the rest of the Maple Leafs. What stands out to him when thinking of the season so far?

"It's hard to think of anything right now except for the people who have been affected by the pandemic. I wish the best to all of them and their families. I miss my teammates, Leaf Nation and the chance to compete every day."

Matthews was chasing Rick Vaive's franchise-record 54 goals, and was on pace to beat it by one. How much did he enjoy the chase?

"I have a tremendous amount of respect for Rick Vaive. He was a tremendous Leaf and a great player. I like scoring goals, of course, but I'm here to help my teammates win."

7. One of the great stories of this year is Winnipeg. Every player hopes for the best. But when they were starting camp, how concerned was captain Blake Wheeler that being in a playoff position wouldn't be possible?

"Going into training camp, I knew it was going to be a challenge to repeat some of the success we had the last couple years," he wrote. "In 2018–19 we had a young team and we were still expected to compete for a Stanley Cup. We lost a lot of key guys from that team and with our salary cap situation, we were going to get even younger coming into this year. This was all WITH Bryan Little and Dustin Byfuglien in the mix. I would say there was definitely some concern knowing that we had a very young team. It left a lot more questions than sure things. What I did know is we have some firepower up front, the best goaltender in the league, and a great dressing room of guys that are willing to battle for each other. In training camp our group developed a bit of a chip on our shoulder because everyone that was in love with our team a few years ago was now picking us to finish last in our division. We used that and battled every day in camp and it carried over to the regular season. So even when our lineup was depleted with injuries, we gave ourselves a chance. That's why I was so bummed we were put on hold because we were really starting to fire on all cylinders. Our defence was playing great and our goalie was out of his mind. Add that to some of the offensive weapons we have and the battle in our room and you never know what could happen."

Wheeler was very honest and blunt about how he felt he had to change the way he led. How has he changed?



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"I would say that I know myself a lot better today than I did a year or two years ago. I know that there are days when I come to the rink and I'm a little on edge. The combination of pressure from my job and having three small children makes me a little ornery sometimes. I wish it didn't, but it does. So I know on those days how to carry myself a lot better. I can hide my scowl better than I used to because I really don't like being the grumpy old guy — at least not yet! Another focus I had this year is trying to empower as many of my teammates as I can. It's impossible to make over 20 guys happy on the same team, so instead, you try to empower as many guys as possible. You do that by making the guys feel important to the team. That's all anyone wants, is to feel like their job is important. Putting guys in those situations is obviously (coach Paul Maurice's) job, but as teammates we can make sure the guy blocking a one-timer on the penalty kill FEELS equally as important as the guy quarterbacking the first power play."

Very, very impressive answer. I wondered what Wheeler considered the most impressive Winnipeg win of this season? "A couple stand out. Our second game of the season was against New Jersey. We were down 4—0 before coming back to win 5-4 in a shootout. Another was at home against Edmonton on Oct. 20. We had some injuries to an already depleted lineup. Connor and Leon were averaging about four points a night through the first month of the season. I remember being really worried about that game, but our team fought hard and snuck out a 1—0 shootout win."

8. There was a great profile of Jack Eichel in Sports Illustrated during his rookie season where he talked about not liking people "kissing his ass," and his great respect for his father Bob's willingness to tell him the truth. It is hard to talk about personal success during a hard team year. So I tried this approach: What did your dad say about your season?

"My dad's always been my toughest critic," Buffalo's captain wrote. "He measures success with winning, so in that sense it was a tough season to swallow. I think when you look at our competitiveness from a night-in and night-out basis, and playing to our identity, our team did make a lot of strides this season, which was something to be positive about. In terms of my personal year, my dad gave me a huge compliment around the New Year when he told me how proud he was of the player that I had become. He thought I made a lot of strides as a complete centre, meaning I was much more responsible in our defensive zone. The hard minutes took a toll in his mind, but overall he was very complimentary of the year."

Eichel added that one of his targets was to score more, and he'd already hit a career-high 36.

"We worked very hard at that in the summer, so that was also rewarding."

At the NHL/NHLPA pre-season media tour, he talked at great length about his newly formed relationship with Ralph Krueger. There was a lot of optimism and a strong bond. How did that evolve?

"Getting to play and learn from Ralph this season was a real pleasure. He's someone that comes into the rink every day with the best possible attitude no matter what happened the day before. He's able to reset the group back into the right frame of mind so well. Obviously as the year we went we became more comfortable with each other. Not saying we weren't at the start — it just was easier to go to him with things as we got to know each other better. With his background in leadership, it was great to be able to learn from him every day. He taught me a lot about myself, which I'm very thankful for."

Eichel is a workout fiend. Did any of his teammates "beat" his determination?

"Working out and off-ice training is something I've always enjoyed. With the long season and tough schedule we are always trying to find time to fit in workouts. We have a lot of great athletes in our room that push each other in the gym every day which is great. We do a bike test at the beginning of the year. They use your weight and bike results to find an endurance score. I posted a really good score that I was happy with until I saw Sam Reinhart's score. He blew everyone out of the water."

9. I wanted to hear from someone who'd been traded during the year, and Taylor Hall was a perfect fit. I don't know if anyone can predict what's going to happen in one season, but did this year unfold in any way as you thought it might?

"When I drove to New Jersey in September, I envisioned a scenario where we were going to fight for a playoff spot all year, and a contract would or wouldn't get figured out around the trade deadline," he wrote. "I was really excited for what we had going on there. But I also knew there was a chance that I could be on a different team by the end of the year. Hockey's a business and you are reminded of that always. And, obviously, [the pandemic] is something that no one would ever predict."

Hall came up with a great answer about what we are all going through. His future is going to be determined during a unique time. How much does he think about how things may or not happen as he chooses his long-term NHL home?

"It is definitely a weird time to possibly be a free agent, but there's so much uncertainty throughout the league... throughout the world, really. So I'm not as worried about free agency as I am about getting back to hockey and hoping that we can somehow get into the playoffs. I think everyone just wants some normalcy back in their lives."

What ideas did he have about playing in Arizona that turned out to be true or not true?

"The one thing I've been pleasantly surprised about was our attendance and support from fans. We've had numerous sellouts. I didn't think it was going to be like that. There's been nights where the atmosphere has been awesome in the arena."

10. Anze Kopitar bent the rules for his first question. When asked if there was one young King who took big steps this year, he said he was going to name one forward and one defenceman. It's not like I was going to argue with him.

"At forward, Alex Lafallo took the next step this year. A couple of years ago, you're a rookie, and you don't really understand what's going on. Now, he's consistent, he's scoring goals, he's putting up points, he's doing the things you are expected to do when you're on the top line."

"On defence, I will take Matt Roy. He's done a tremendous job. Being on a team where we are losing more often than not — which sucks — he's a plus player. That's impressive."

Los Angeles reminds me a lot of Ottawa. The results aren't there yet, but they play really hard. How do Kopitar and the other veterans prevent the young players from getting discouraged?

"That's the hard part. You can start cheating when you don't get the results. But our effort has been very good this year. There's been very few games where we've been blown up. It's been encouraging to see many of our guys doing the right stuff. The thing we try to tell them is that there might only be five (or) 10 minutes where you didn't do it in a game, and that's when you get scored on. But we've done a really good job of staying positive. I tell them that even for me, the toughest thing is that you're not going to be at your best for 82 games. It's not possible. So you have to work on limiting the low points. How good can you be when you're not at your best, so you don't get blown up?"

That's a great attitude. We talked about my respect for Henrik Lundqvist, and how he refused to be a negative force as the Rangers rebuilt and then carried three goalies. Kopitar said it was easier for him to do that this year, as opposed to 2018-19.

"Last year, we didn't see it coming. This year, we knew it was coming. We signed up for it, and the good thing is we are starting to see our trend go upwards. Sure, at times it gets frustrating. But the hard work and the effort, that's the encouraging part."

11. How much quieter is life without Drew Doughty around you on a daily basis?



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"It's a little quieter, but it's uneventful," Kopitar laughed. "Ninety per cent of what comes out of his mouth is funny. You're not laughing as much without him around."

12. Another great answer came from Jonathan Huberdeau. Everything is uncertain now, but Florida traded Vincent Trocheck and there was a sense more could come if the Panthers don't find their way. How much does the group of Aleksander Barkov, Aaron Ekblad and Huberdeau discuss what could happen?

"We all know we can't control what the GM wants to do, but we sure know one thing we can control is to win. We tell ourselves that if we win, we will all stay together. It's not complicated, and that's what we need to do in the near future."

What is Joel Quenneville like to play for?

"Joel is a great coach with a lot of energy, loves to win and knows what it takes to win. Practices are hard and intense! He wants you to work hard and earn your ice time."

Big accomplishment this season for Huberdeau, who became the all-time leading scorer in Panthers' history. Every season, his totals increase, as he was on pace for 93 points, which would have edged his career high of 92 from last year. How close is he to the player he expected to be?

"For me, I got better every year since the beginning of my career. Consistency is a big thing in this league and I feel I've come a long way since I was 19. I still think I have more to give to my team to have a chance to win a Stanley Cup."

13. What a huge jump for Tampa Bay's Anthony Cirelli, who will battle with Philadelphia's Sean Couturier for Selke Trophy supremacy. Only Nikita Kucherov and Brayden Point play more at even-strength than he does among the Lightning. Was he expecting that? Has he surprised himself at all?

"No, not at all," he wrote via email. (I like the understated confidence.) "I just tried to have a good off-season, work on my skills, get stronger and be ready for training camp. I think you're always looking to grow as a player — not just every season, but every day. Heading into this year I just wanted to concentrate on playing my role. Focus on playing well defensively and contributing when I could on the offensive side. I certainly wasn't expecting to be playing that many minutes. We have such a deep and talented team that it really doesn't matter who you're playing with — they're going to be great players. So I'm fortunate."

After last year's playoff defeat, 2019-20 seemed like nothing more than an 82-game trial run for the post-season. Was it hard to concentrate on the regular season, knowing, as a group, you just wanted to get to the playoffs?

"Quite the opposite, actually. It wasn't hard at all. It was an extremely disappointing ending, obviously. Guys came back motivated and knew it was going to be a fight just to get back into the playoffs. It gave us an opportunity to come together as a team and find our identity. The season didn't start the way we wanted, but as it moved along, I think we really started to find it."

On March 7, the Lightning faced Boston in one of this year's best games — an intense, chippy 5-3 win for Tampa. What was it like to play in that one? The Lightning don't have that kind of nasty reputation — at least not until recently.

"It was an emotion-filled game. We see them a lot, with playoffs and a couple times during the regular season, so there is some familiarity. I think it was just two good teams going at it and neither being willing to back down. Both teams wanted the two points. It was a playoff atmosphere that is great to play in as you prepare for more intense games down the stretch and in the post-season. It was a good test for us. Those types of games are a ton of fun to play in."

And watch.

14. Also with the big leap is Andrew Mangiapane. After eight goals in his first 54 NHL games, he was poised to break 20 — playing a big role as Calgary found its legs. I wonder when a talented young player feels comfortable that, "Yes, I am an NHLer."

"I would say that I started gaining confidence around last year when [Derek Ryan, Garnet Hathaway] and I were a line. I felt that they let me play my game. I wasn't nervous to play, and we ended up connecting really well. When I first came into the league, everyone tells you to play your game and not to think about it, but this was kind of hard for me to do — I was almost starstruck, for lack of words. Once I was able to get over this, I think my confidence started coming out. You definitely need some confidence to play in this league."

Selected 166th in the 2015 draft, what advice would he give to a young player so he can know being taken a little later is not the end of the world?

"Whether you're drafted or not, you always still need to put in the work afterwards. That's the beginning of the whole process. So if you're a late draft or not drafted at all, never give up. Just keep working hard, and keep fighting to get to where you want to be."

Finally, for Mangiapane, the same kind of question I sent to Draisaitl: Do the current Flames hate the Oilers as much as their fans and 1980s alumni do?

"I think there is always going to be a rivalry there. I don't know if we hate Edmonton as much as the '80s alumni did — hard to tell. But this year alone, it has been two good teams fighting for a playoff spot and we've been battling all year. In recent years there's been a strong team and a weak team. Now you have these two good teams fighting for a spot and it really makes the rivalry that much more intense."

15. One of the things I've wondered this year is how much Steve Yzerman discusses his early years in Detroit with Dylan Larkin. Yzerman went through tough times in Detroit and eventually was rewarded. What advice does he give Larkin on how to handle things?

"I have had very positive talks with Steve throughout the season," Larkin wrote via email. "He has been very helpful and a mentor to me as someone who has been in this situation a few times as a player and manager. His advice has been to make sure my level of professionalism — in mindset, work ethic and leadership — is setting the tone and example for the rest of the team all the time."

I thought that was really interesting. No matter how tough a season, there are always fun moments. What are the moments of this season that did make you smile?

"There have been a lot of bright spots. This season has had a lot of downs, but we have a great group of young players that have made it very enjoyable coming to the rink every day. I look back at our opening-night win against Nashville on the road and our home opener the next night against Dallas when Anthony Mantha scored four goals. We have played very well against top opponents in our division and that makes me excited for the future. We've also played better in buildings where we have struggled in the past."

16. Larkin made me laugh with this next one. Him, Connor McDavid and Mathew Barzal. Goal line to goal line. Standing start. Who wins, and by how much?

"First, I would say thank you for not putting a puck and defenders in this contest because that would quickly eliminate me. Both are in the category of the most elite skaters this league has ever seen. I would have to go with Connor in a straight-line goal-line-to-goal-line race."

17. Philadelphia's Scott Laughton loves to get under opponents' skin. Who is the opponent he most loves to annoy?

"Brady Tkachuk. Me and him have had some good battles the past two years."



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There's probably no team more disappointed in the current recess than Philly. The Flyers were scorching hot, one point behind Washington for first in the Metropolitan. When did Laughton and teammates believe they could be at this level?

"Around November everything started coming together and we started creating an identity," he wrote. "I think the past month we've been playing our best hockey overall and we've been better on the road. Our goalies have been huge as well."

Which Flyer has taken the biggest jump, and why? Like Kopitar, he found it too hard to narrow it down.

"I can't really pinpoint it on one guy. I would say Travis Konecny has had a really strong year and has led the way offensively. [Carter Hart] in his first full year in the NHL has been really solid and gives us confidence."

You'll be stunned to hear Hart's nickname is "Hartsy."

18. Andrei Svechnikov was responsible for one of the most fun storylines this season, scoring two lacrosse goals. Has he noticed a change in how he is defended around the net? Not surprisingly, the answer is yes.

"NHL teams thoroughly prepare for each opponent. After my second, both defenders and goalies were ready for me. I'm not sure whether I'll be able to score another one, but I have other things up my sleeve."

I'm very interested in seeing what that could be, especially if Evander Holyfield is involved. Svechnikov was an even-strength titan last season. He scored 20 goals, and was up to 24 (and counting, we hope) this year. Bigger role, some power-play time. Does he see himself as a 40-goal scorer someday? 50?

"I don't have a specific number of goals in mind. I'd like to score as many as I can, but my main goal is to win games and raise the Stanley Cup."

And he says not to discount his playmaking ability: "I also enjoy setting up my teammates. The more they score, the more games we'll win."

What is Svechnikov's favourite Rod Brind'Amour post-game speech?

"The most memorable post-game experience was when we beat Toronto with David Ayres in relief. Everyone was cheering, and Rod was so happy as a kid can only be."

19. Another impressive comeback? Minnesota. Kevin Fiala mirrors that turnaround. One point in his first eight games, with healthy scratches along the way. Now he leads the Wild in scoring, with 54 points in 64 games. What was the turning point in the season? Were players affected by the rumours early in the year?

"It was a crazy start," he emailed. "We were not doing well at all, and we knew it couldn't continue like that. We knew that there was still a lot of time left and that we could do it. Inside of our room there was never a doubt. We got better and better every day. I don't think anybody cared in our group what other people were saying. We always believed and knew that we could do this."

Fiala always had great self-confidence, going back to his arrival in Nashville. Jeff Marek was the first to tell me about it, and when I asked some of the Predators if that was true, they smiled knowingly. Did that ever change as Fiala fought to regain his role?

"I mean, there were good days and bad days, but at the end of the day I knew how good I am. Honestly, last year, the confidence wasn't always very high. But this year it's been very high, especially the last few months."

You can see it. Whenever someone is traded to a new team, I wonder if there's a player they absolutely could not stand on the ice who they get to know and say, "Not such a bad guy after all."

Fiala wasn't biting on that one.

"Haha, I don't know. It has never happened in my experience."

20. John Carlson's had a monster season. The Norris Trophy frontrunner, he was on pace for 89 points — which would have been the most for a blueliner since Ray Bourque's 91 in 1993–94. Only eight other defencemen have hit that total — Bobby Orr, Paul Coffey, Al MacInnis, Denis Potvin, Brian Leetch, Phil Housley, Gary Suter and Bourque. Not too shabby.

Any disappointment at not seeing how high he could have reached?

"I think there is just a general disappointment in not playing," he wrote in an email. "A lot of my success on the ice is attributed to the guys who I play with. That's what I miss the most. Time will tell. Hopefully, we'll resume at some point here and I'll be able to finish what I started."

The Capitals went through some rough waters before play was halted. Was there any concern amongst the players about the way it was going?

"I don't believe we ever hit a panic button. But, at the same time, we weren't happy with the way we were playing. There definitely was a sense of urgency for us to get back to a level that we expect of ourselves. We knew full well that it's not a switch you can just turn on and off come playoff time. It's a process. That's where our focus was, and I'm confident in our team, our guys, to right the ship if we get an opportunity here."

From a purely entertainment point of view, one of the rough things about the current stoppage is it throws a wrench into Alexander Ovechkin's chase of Wayne Gretzky's goal record. Does Carlson think The Great Eight plays long enough to beat it?

"That's a tough one. I think he will keep playing as long as he is healthy. Being around him, I think you see first-hand the joy he has for the game. Will he break Wayne's record? That's tough to say, but he definitely has an opportunity to do so if he remains healthy."

Does number 895 come on a power-play one-timer Carlson puts on Ovechkin's tape? The production machine wasn't biting on that one.

"He has the right players around him in Backstrom and Kuznetsov to create chances for him."

21. Carlson's biggest Norris challenger is Nashville's Roman Josi. One thing I love about Drew Doughty is he was unafraid to admit he wanted to win the Norris. He didn't care who knew. Is it something that is important to Josi?

"Yes. Winning the Norris is definitely a dream of mine. I would be lying if I said it wasn't. Personally, I think it is good for every player to set individual goals. The closer everyone gets to those goals, the better the team success will be. That's the most important thing."

It can be a tough question to answer, but does Josi believe this is the best he's ever played?

"I think, as a player, every year, you are trying to get better and work on things you think you can improve. The longer you play in the league, the more you know what you have to work on. It's hard to say if this is my best season. But I do think it is my most consistent. Hopefully, once everyone is safe, there will be more coming for me and the Predators."

After an incredibly inconsistent season, the Predators appeared to have righted themselves, taking advantage of games in hand to move into Western Conference playoff position. When Josi looks back on it, why does he think it took longer than expected for the Predators to consistently be at their best?

"It's hard to say. I think we got off to a very good start and then inconsistency set in. A lot of the time, we were inconsistent within games, too. Before the pause, we had made progress playing more consistently and the 'right way' as a team — something you have to do to be more successful."

22. In the past, players who have won the Stanley Cup for the first time in the middle of their careers looked back and said they realized later how much it changed them for the better. They are still driven to win, but they



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relax, are more confident. With some time to think about it, how has winning the Cup changed Alex Pietrangelo?

"I would say the biggest difference for me as a player would be to understand that it's a long season and to trust the process of what it takes to win. The season has plenty of ups and downs, and it's important to not get too high or low. It's easy to say, and I've always thought that, but now that I have been through it I understand it. As a group, no doubt we feel more confident in tight games — win or lose, we know we have a chance in every game. Winning certainly can relax you as a player. I definitely feel more relaxed knowing we have checked a championship off our list. It's the one thing we all dream of as a kid — to finally fulfill it is hard to put into words. At the same time though, after winning, you want to win again. You want to keep the trophy for yourself."

Can't tell you how many players in all sports have said something similar after that first taste. The Blues went through a very difficult situation with Jay Bouwmeester. Thankfully, he's doing well. How are the players doing and how much do you keep in contact with Jay?

"Almost all of us have kept in touch. He was coming to the rink almost every day before we got shut down. Guys are stopping by his house, doing as much as we can to help. It was certainly a scare for us all to get through it... a blur for most of us. Without realizing it at the time I think it brought us closer together, especially with us being on our dads trip. It was really an opportunity to bond together and with our dads."

Like Taylor Hall, Pietrangelo will have to decide his hockey future at some point over the next few months. How much does he think about it?

"Unfortunately, we all have a lot of time to think right now. If you imply moving to Hawaii and living on an island? Then, yeah, we do all time!"

That's pretty good, and I'm jealous. The Blues' captain continues: "Business-wise, we try not to discuss it too much, although it's hard to ignore. We don't stress about it, our three little ones keep us busy enough."

Senior Writer Ryan Dixon and NHL Editor Rory Boylen always give it 110%, but never rely on clichés when it comes to podcasting. Instead, they use a mix of facts, fun and a varied group of hockey voices to cover Canada's most beloved game.

23. If things had gone according to plan, Shea Weber's 1,000th game would have been April 1 — in Nashville, of all places. He really isn't interested in personal goals, but considering how hard he has worked to get through some tough injuries, how much would that mean?

"It would definitely be a pretty special moment. There has been a lot of hard work and dedication to this point (with a lot more to go). A player doesn't really know what the future holds, but hopefully there will be a lot more good memories along the road."

That "a lot more to go" won't escape anyone's notice. Marc Bergevin has made it quite clear that he believes in this group of Canadiens, and the prospects coming. What does Weber see for the future?

"I definitely believe in the future of our team. As hard as this season and the last few have been, there have been some positive things, and some exciting signs in our young players as well. Going through tough times should be a good learning experience for everyone and make us all better from it."

Obviously, we don't know what is going to happen. But I've heard rumours that if there is an expanded playoffs, Montreal could be included. Do you think about that possibility at all?

"I don't think anyone really knows what is going to happen with the uncertainty right now. Needless to say, players live for the playoffs, and until you have been in it you don't really realize how exciting and intense it is."

24. BONUS: I had to put Tom Brady somewhere in this blog. Weber is the NHL's fantasy-football king. Blake Wheeler is a Brady disciple. How do they think he'll be as a Buccaneer?

Weber: "Oh man, I think he's going to do really well. Bruce Arians is the quarterback whisperer. Two elite receivers, hopefully get OJ Howard going again — and warm weather. I like it for him and fantasy."

Wheeler: "Definitely going to be weird seeing TB12 in anything but a Patriots uniform. I think after last year he was going to find the best QB vacancy in the league in terms of weapons around him. Mike Evans and Chris Godwin might be the best WR duo in the league, and the Tampa heat will probably be good for that old body of his. I think he could have huge year."

25. When I asked Quinn Hughes about the most memorable exchange he's had with Canuck fans, I could tell he likes the passion there.

"There were a few early in the year," he said. "They would come up to me and say, 'We love you, Huggy Bear.' At the beginning, I didn't like that nickname, and it would piss me off."

He's laughing.

"Now I think it's funny. At one of our last games, a fan showed up in a full bear costume. It was all over the internet. That was great."

Hughes is my Calder pick, and he realized early some of his off-ice habits had to change.

"There were a couple of off-days early in the year where I just sat on the couch for a couple of hours, alone. I was lazy. You can't do that. You've got to get the right meals, but take care of yourself in other ways. Go out, walk. Don't get stiff. Take care of yourself."

He saw a big change in the way other teams played him. It started with Vancouver's 22nd game, a 6-1 loss in Dallas.

"That game was 3-1 going into the third, and then they crushed us. I was hit a lot that game. In our first game against Toronto (a 4-1 Leafs win three weeks later), they were cheating on some moves I use at the offensive blueline. But that's okay. We looked at what Matthews, Willie Nylander and Mitch Marner do, too."

Last year, Elias Pettersson set the Canucks rookie record with 66 points. Hughes's pace was right at that number. Will he tell Pettersson that he would've beaten it and just claim the title anyways?

"No, I'm not going to. I had Petey, but Petey didn't have Petey, if you understand what I'm saying. Besides, it's all about winning — not about that."

26. Hughes is home with brother Jack. What are they doing to pass the time?

"We both love hockey. We'll text each other during the season, 'This guy's unbelievable... Watch what this guy did.' Right now, we're relaxing, getting away from that a bit. I'm thinking about having a great next 13 games and an even better playoff. Then, for both of us, having a good summer, putting on a couple of pounds and killing it next year."

The future is bright for the Hughes brothers.

27. Number one among all defencemen in goals — and tied for 79th overall — is Zachary Werenski. We travelled back to the spring of 2016. He's turning pro from Michigan. Someone says, "In four years, you will be a 20-goal scorer in the NHL." What would Werenski have said?

"Wow... I don't know. I'd say 'I hope so.' You never really know how things are going to go. So much was unknown. That's pretty awesome. But there's more work to do."

At the 2018 All-Star Game in Tampa Bay, he explained that John Tortorella allows him freedom, that he can go where he needs offensively, and others have to cover. As time has gone by, has Tortorella added/changed any on-ice rules for him?

"Not really. 'Go, be aggressive.' But he wanted me to be harder defensively, and I needed that. For the last year and a half, we've spent a lot of time learning the defensive side. When he says 'harder to play



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against,' he's not talking about fighting guys or hitting guys, but to improve my effort. Not getting beaten to the net or one-on-one. He doesn't care about mistakes, which I really like about him. He knows they're going to happen. But when you go at a guy one-on-one, be aggressive. Make the effort."

Columbus proved a lot this year. A lot of fans and media wrote them off. The Blue Jackets are right there, even with injury upon injury. How much was proving everyone wrong motivation for you?

"One hundred per cent it was. We lost four key players. We had something to prove to ourselves, our city and the NHL. On day one of camp, we had that dreaded John Tortorella two-mile run. On the second day, we had a 6:00 a.m. meeting. He told us people thought we were going to be a lottery team, no playoffs."

How many words of that speech began with an "F"?

"Too many to count, to be honest," he laughed. "But it works — he knows how to get the guys going."

28. Let's move to the goalies, starting with the perpetually happy Marc-Andre Fleury. If you follow him on social media, you know he's trying his luck as a handyman to pass the time. Is he any good at it?

"It's a work in progress. My skillset is pretty low. So fixing a few little things at home during lifts my spirit during these tough times," he laughs.

The Golden Knights are where many of us thought they'd be, atop the Pacific Division. What was critical for getting the team going in the right direction?

"Our consistency to play the way we wanted, especially defensively. Giving up less quality scoring chances."

What's the biggest thing you've noticed about Peter DeBoer?

"Very detailed in his game preparation."

Perhaps the greatest tribute to Fleury's career is the fact that more and more goalies are adopting his method of play. Your technique has to be good, but if technique can't make the save, find a desperate way to do it.

"I love it. Those saves are the ones that make me smile, even watching other goalies make them. That makes me have fun playing the games."

It's always sunny in Fleury's world, an important trait in these times.

29. When I was looking up Ben Bishop's statistical information, I did a double-take at the fact this is his 12th pro season. I wouldn't have guessed he'd been around that long. He still laughs about his big-league debut.

"I was 21 when I played my first NHL game," he said. "At that age, you think you are ready. As I look back, I know I was not anywhere close. Two weeks into my first season, I played my first game. It's pretty funny, it was the one where Sarah Palin dropped the puck in St. Louis."

"Manny Legace hurt his groin in the pre-game," Bishop continued, "and they told me, 'You better be ready here.' I was like, 'What?'"

Bishop entered after the first period. The Blues were down 2-0 to Los Angeles. He stopped 15 of 17 in a 4-0 loss.

"I'm thinking, 'I can do this, yes!' I was naive at that age; reality sets in pretty quick. Now I feel like I'm getting better every year. I'm more confident every season, with the knowledge I gain about the little things you need to play this position and be successful."

Dallas is tied with Colorado for the second-best five-on-five save percentage in the NHL, at .932. That's .001 behind Boston's .933. The Stars' 2.52 goals against average is second behind the Bruins' 2.39. Dallas allows 1.6 more shots per game, though, so I asked Bishop to make the case for he and Anton Khudobin as the best goalie tandem in the NHL.

"Well, it's a bunch of different things. Khudobin's been unbelievable this year. (Goalie coach) Jeff Reese has done an excellent job with us, making sure we are both ready to play. As a team, we take care of the defensive end; protect our net-front and work our way out from there."

Bishop's played 44 games, 14 more than Khudobin — but he circled back to praise his partner once again.

"It's a lot of fun playing with him."

Dallas was my pre-season pick to win the Stanley Cup. And, while I think they are definitely built for the post-season, they haven't been scoring much lately, just nine goals in their last six games. How tough is it to play when the margins are so thin?

"I wouldn't say it is tougher. I've been around long enough to know that you can't play every game perfectly. You just have to play your way through it. If we don't score, I don't even worry about it. It's a long season — there are droughts. We have a lot of talent and we know our guys are going to score. I don't feel any pressure; (Khudobin) doesn't, either. You can't go into a game thinking, 'I've got to be perfect,' because you can't be that way every game. We've got a good team."

30. When Bishop played in Tampa, he took batting practice with the MLB Rays and hit four home runs. If he played for the Astros, and knew what pitches were coming, how many homers could he hit?

"I'd be lucky to hit the ball," he laughed. "I'm not going to be greedy enough to say I'd hit a home run. I'd just be happy enough to hit it."

Bishop added he once got the opportunity to stand next to the bullpen plate when a Houston pitcher threw some pre-game warmup. When he saw what was coming, he realized the difference between batting-practice fastballs and the real thing.

31. Very quietly, MacKenzie Blackwood's had a big year: 47 appearances, his second-most behind the 51 he made as a 19-year-old with the OHL's Barrie Colts. He's got a .915 save percentage, nicely above the NHL's .910 average.

At the beginning of the season, what hopes did he have?

"I wanted to prove to myself and my team that I can play at this level and play well," he wrote by email. "I wanted to have a solid year and improve every day. I didn't have specific statistical goals, but more of an approach that I wanted to keep getting better and play well whenever I got the chance."

That's happened. If there was any doubt he'd be New Jersey's goalie of the future, it is erased. Every young player has that "holy smokes" moment, where they truly discover what it takes to be successful. What was Blackwood's biggest "holy smokes" moment this year?

"When I started to play a heavy workload and get many starts in a row. I was enjoying playing and all the hockey, but it was more than I had ever done consecutively in such a short period of time. I realized how hard the grind of the season was, and that it's a hard league to be successful in day in and day out. If you had a good game last night, today is a new day, and that if you want to have success tomorrow, you have to keep pushing every day to try and keep improving."

It's the old saying: You're only as good as your last game. But he's found a higher level. People have noticed. Does Blackwood say to himself, "I know now I will be a starter in this league?"

"I feel happy about how my game is progressing, but I have levels I can get to that I'm not quite at just yet. You always need to keep pushing to keep your game up and try to improve each day. I think this year I proved to myself and others that I can play in this league and play well, but I know I'm just starting, and it's going to be a fun experience trying to get better and push our team forward. I definitely have belief in myself that I can be a starting goalie, but the most important thing to me is that whenever I'm getting a chance to start I want to give my team the best chance to win, and play my game with all the little details to the best of my abilities."



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32. If Darcy Kuemper hadn't been hurt, he'd have the inside track on the Vezina. The injury was rough timing for him and the Coyotes. What did the first half of the year mean to him?

"Before I got hurt, it was a lot of fun to be playing lots and contributing. As a team we were battling for first place in the division. It was a lot of fun to be a part of that."

What did you notice about the Coyotes while watching?

"It was not fun watching being out. What I really noticed about our team, I kind of already knew.... The strength of our team is our depth. When we get all of the lines going, it's really hard for teams to match up with us. We're not really counting on one line to score. That's hard to defend against."

I wanted to specifically ask about Phil Kessel and Hall. What do you see from them up close and in practice?

"They were really well-received in the locker room. They fit in right away and the guys loved being around them."

Not surprisingly, Kuemper liked the challenge of practising against them.

"They're both elite shooters... unbelievable shots. I get to face them all the time and they keep me sharp."

One final lesson there from a goalie having a big year: practise the way you want to play and things will be just fine.

33. Disappointed this week for all the CHL and NCAA players whose junior/college careers ended without a final attempt at a championship. (And, really, that goes for players of all ages around the world.) Some of those players will go on to the next level. For many others, it is game over and that absolutely sucks. For next week, I'd like to highlight some of them. My DMs are open, and I'm willing to listen to suggestions.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 03.26.2020

1173044 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / NHL instructs players, team staff to extend self-quarantine another 10 days

Chris Johnston | @reporterchris

March 24, 2020, 6:54 PM

The NHL has instructed players and team staff to extend their period of self-quarantine by another 10 days amid the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

That message was shared with general managers during Tuesday's call with senior league officials. Clubs had originally been asked to observe self-quarantine through Friday, but will now remain in isolation at home until April 6.

With the season on pause, the goal is to allow enough time for symptoms to present themselves — so far only two NHL players, both Ottawa Senators, have tested positive for coronavirus — and to keep the community as free from the fast-spreading virus as possible before next steps can be taken.

The league has said that it would like to eventually reopen team facilities to small groups for voluntary workouts if conditions allow. That would precede a training camp period before any resumption of play.

In a March 16 memo, the league said its objective was to "provide high-level guidance on the potential of opening a training camp period roughly 45 days" into a 60-day window provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, where it advised against holding gatherings larger than 50 people.

That 45-day marker arrives on April 30 and will still be used as a check-in time to see if there is enough information to determine a timeline for training camp, according to deputy commissioner Bill Daly.

Players have spread across North America and Europe since the NHL was forced to halt its season on March 12. There were still 189 games remaining in a regular season that was 85 per cent completed at that point.

The league has since established two competitive priorities — doing whatever it can to award a Stanley Cup this season, while not compromising its ability to hold a full campaign next year — and could potentially play into August now that the Tokyo Olympics have been postponed until 2021.

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1173045 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / NHL's path to return still unclear as COVID-19 shows no signs of slowing

Chris Johnston | @reporterchris

March 25, 2020, 4:06 PM

As the NHL tries to hold out hope for a resumption of play on the other side of the COVID-19 pandemic, its chief medical officer provided a sobering reminder of where we are right now.

"It's difficult to predict where the pandemic is going and what the timeline will be, but we do expect this is going to get worse before it gets better," Dr. Winne Meuwisse said Wednesday.

That's significant because it means there's no end in sight to the first phase of the three-phase process the league needs to complete before this paused season can be resumed.

All that's been accomplished with players in self-quarantine since March 12 is to establish that very few of them contracted the virus during their work-related travels around North America. As much as it's good news that there have only been two positive tests among NHLers so far — "I don't know if surprised is a better word or thankful is a better word," said Meuwisse — it doesn't necessarily mean that the path to playing games has gotten any clearer.

With the pandemic still only "just entering the rapid acceleration phase," in the words of Meuwisse, the league decided Tuesday to push back the period of self-quarantine for players and team staff to April 4.

And they're very likely to push it back even further before facilities can be reopened for players to start skating and working out in small groups.

"That's a meaningless date really at this point in time," deputy commissioner Bill Daly said on Wednesday's conference call with a handful of reporters.

"As we get closer to this date, we're going to have to make decisions as to what to do then. But we're biting this off in chunks."

They are at the mercy of higher authorities and the spread of the virus itself.



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The guidance being given to Meuwisse is changing daily. He's in constant communication with Dr. Bruce Farber — an infectious disease consultant who was retained by the NHL a couple weeks ago — and his medical counterparts in the NBA, NFL and MLB.

He's also closely tracking the spread of COVID-19 and indicated that there would need to be evidence of a significant slowing before players would be granted permission to resume training together.

"While it's rapidly accelerating, the risk in the general population's probably increasing rather than decreasing, so until we see where the peak is going to be and how high that peak is going to be, it's really difficult to give a definitive timeline," he said.

"I mean, if we think about bringing people back, we'd want to have some confidence that the players and the staff themselves are healthy, some confidence the players were not infectious at that time and that bringing them back together — even in small groups — would not increase the risk of contracting or transmitting the coronavirus," Meuwisse added.

It's not something under any degree of consideration now.

The league included Dr. Farber, its infectious disease consultant, on Monday's teleconference with the board of governors. He was able to provide a clear-eyed view of the challenges the NHL will face to complete this season with several jurisdictions around the continent having declared a state of emergency or enacted a lockdown for its citizens.

The coronavirus lives on surfaces and can be spread easily in the close confines of the team environment. It's not a coincidence that both positive tests came from the Ottawa Senators following a trip through California, one of the early hotspots for the outbreak in the United States.

While the NHL already has stringent policies in place when it comes to disinfecting and cleaning shared dressing room areas — having experienced previous outbreaks of the mumps and H1N1 — Meuwisse said those standards will be reviewed because of COVID-19.

But there's only so much that can be done.

"If you take that environment, you can see why disease transmission can occur very quickly within a team," said Meuwisse.

The window for the NHL to stage the Stanley Cup playoffs now stretches into August, but it will need to see the spread of coronavirus curtailed well beforehand. The league hopes to eventually have players progress from self-quarantine to working out in small groups to a training camp-like setting before it can resume games.

In the meantime, all it can do is wait.

"Once we get to the tail end of this pandemic, where hopefully the curve has been flattened and the health care resources are not overloaded and the disease rates start to fall, at that point obviously the risk of getting people back together — not just our players, but our staff and everybody — is going to be a lot lower," said Meuwisse.

"Depending on what the timeframe is, depending on the shape of that curve and depending on the remaining risk and transmission rates, that's I think going to help guide us in terms of the timing."

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1173046 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Canucks announcer helps fans get through shutdown with personal goal calls

Iain MacIntyre | @imacSportsnet

March 25, 2020, 9:35 PM

VANCOUVER – With the Vancouver Canucks shut down and everyone worrying about far bigger things than hockey, Al Murdoch wanted to help and offered the most valuable things he could: his voice and a little happiness.

The National Hockey League team's in-arena announcer started taking goal-call requests from fans and posting videos of those calls online. He had no idea what he was getting into.

"We're getting into hundreds and hundreds of requests," Murdoch said Wednesday in a telephone interview from his home studio in Port Moody, east of Vancouver. "And not only from people in B.C., but all over Canada, the States, Mexico, Australia, Croatia. This has literally gone worldwide.

"I'm getting requests from other parts of the country asking me to do Oilers calls and Leafs calls. As much as I'd like to, that's not going to happen."

He isn't even doing Canucks calls, really.

After starting with a few fictitious Vancouver goal calls to mark the first home game fans would miss, March 15 against the Winnipeg Jets, Murdoch decided the calls should be personalized.

A kid who is missing out on his own hockey season, for instance, can score with assists from his dad and grandpa.

"People wanted to hear Jake Virtanen's 19th and 20th goals," Murdoch, 54, explained. "They wanted to hear more points for Quinn Hughes, so he would break more rookie records. But I didn't want to take away goal announcements that are eventually going to happen. Every goal and every point is a milestone to these guys, and I didn't want to take those away from current Canuck players.

"I asked people to personalize them. If you'd like to have your name, or your kid's name, your family name, a neighbour or co-worker's name on a goal call, you'll never get to hear that ever in your life. So I just put it out there and the response has been just massive.

"I got one (request) from a guy in Saskatchewan who has multiple sclerosis and so the game of hockey was taken away from him. But I could announce a goal with his name and the name of his older brother, who is still playing hockey. Those are the ones that make me think: Maybe I'm doing a good thing here."

Murdoch began his career as a radio broadcaster, and had a morning show on CKLG in Vancouver when basketball's Vancouver Grizzlies arrived in 1995. He auditioned to be the NBA team's announcer and got the job on the spot.

"Their one and only announcer; never missed a game," he said.

By the time the Grizzlies abandoned Vancouver in 2001, Murdoch had left radio to focus fulltime on his voice business.

In recent years, he has voiced film trailers for Star Wars' The Last Jedi and The Avenger movies, did commercials for Budweiser that ran during the Super Bowl, and been the announcer voice for numerous video games, some of them produced by EA Sports here.

He did his first Canucks game in 2011, and became the full-time announcer at Rogers Arena in 2018 when his friend and mentor, the iconic John Ashbridge, passed away. This season, the NHL hired Murdoch to work its Stadium Series and announce the Winter Classic.

His said his favourite goal call was Daniel Sedin's overtime winner, on an assist by Henrik, in the brothers' final game in Vancouver on April 5, 2018.

"I don't know if the crowd even heard it because they were cheering so loud," Murdoch said. "I knew that was the last goal we were ever going to



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see from the Sedins at Rogers Arena, and we also announced the three stars and made Daniel and Henrik the first star. That was pretty cool for sure.”

His personalized goal calls – and the fans’ reaction to them — have inspired NHL announcers in Detroit, New Jersey and Toronto to do something similar.

Murdoch has been posting one goal call per day on Twitter (@ALMURDOCH) but does three on “hat-trick Thursdays.”

Murdoch said: “Some of the comments I’m getting... I’ll read you one: ‘My kids are going stir crazy and are emotional about what’s going on in the world. We’re loving these videos and appreciating what you’re doing because it’s bringing a little bit of hope and happiness to Canucks fans everywhere.’”

“You just want to make people think about something a little bit different than all of the other stuff we’re thinking about right now.”

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 03.26.2020

1173047 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / A look at the NHL’s most efficient power-play forwards

Andrew Berkshire | @AndrewBerkshire

March 25, 2020, 2:00 PM

Whether it’s shooters, playmakers, or the defensive-zone breakout kings, we’ve taken some good looks at even-strength offence in the NHL this season, re-visiting three examinations we started in pre-season using data from 2018-19.

With our venture into previously examined territory and updates for this season complete, it’s time to do something new, but in the same style of analysis. Let’s look at the power play.

My first instinct when looking at power plays was to see if there was a way to give a full view of which forwards create the most offence with the man advantage, but the trouble with power plays is that they’re very tied to strategy more than simply just a talented player breaking through an opponent’s defence. Often this means players have extremely specific roles in which they can excel, but not necessarily rack up the numbers in the underlying offensive metrics.

For example, a net-front presence will get lots of shots from the inner slot, but they won’t look great from the high slot, they won’t get many one-timers, and they won’t make many great passes either. That doesn’t mean they aren’t vitally important and highly impactful, but with the man advantage we may need to start out in the general sense and then compartmentalize to show specific strengths, rather than say one player is ‘the best.’

Starting out in the general sense, let’s take a look at which forwards have the strongest on-ice impact on their teams’ power plays in creating the highest quality plays relative to when they’re not on the ice. There’s much less power-play time than 5-vs-5 time obviously, so we’ll limit the sample to forwards who have played at least 80 minutes while up a man.

Looking at things this way, there are some advantages and disadvantages. On the good side, you get to control for how strong a team’s power play is overall and avoid just having all the players from the league’s top power play-unit at the top. On the bad side, you do see some issues like one very good power-play unit on a team standing head and shoulders above another not very good unit.

You can see in San Jose, for example, that the Sharks’ entire top unit is rated crazy well on a relative scale, which is helped by the injuries the team has suffered, with a second unit before the season was suspended consisting of Stefan Noesen, Marcus Sorensen, and Noah Gregor. Easier to stand out in that situation.

Overall, the highest impact player for on-ice offence is Sidney Crosby, which is a name that makes sense, and a top-end net-front presence in Patric Hornqvist is right there with him.

Taylor Hall also comes across extremely well both in New Jersey and in Arizona, with the biggest impact on slot passes relative to teammates of any forward in the league. Hall is both an incredible playmaker and someone who draws defenders towards him to create space for others, so that makes a lot of sense.

On the other hand, there’s some weird stuff that pops up, like Alex Chiasson having among the best on-ice impacts on the power play this season, but despite what you may think he’s been pretty good there. Still, there’s likely a lot of noise in there from Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl that throws everything off.

Wayne Simmonds remains an incredible driver of net-front shots, though his teams tend to struggle on passing plays with him on the ice as well, which isn’t necessarily his fault but could be an indication that his teammates are looking for tips or rebounds instead of puck movement while he’s on the ice.

As expected, in a general look we haven’t solved anything, so let’s compartmentalize and look at shooters.

I did something a little different this time in order to show more data, with the usual setup of two metrics on the two axes set at the league average for each, but this time each player’s data point is in bubble form, with the size of the bubble representing the percentage of their shots on goal that are one-timers.

Doing this, we can see how certain players can beat their expected goals based on either volume or shot location selection. Alex Ovechkin for example, does not produce the shot volume on the power play that he does at even strength. He doesn’t pinch into the net front like he does at 5-vs-5 either, preferring to stick to his ‘Ovi spot’ or even drift up to the point in swapping spots with John Carlson.

Ovi gets a fair amount of shots from the high slot, but the biggest factor in his scoring is that a whopping 62.4 per cent of his shots are one-timers, three times the league average.

Steven Stamkos is the league leader in that area, with 64.3 per cent of his shots being one-timers, and he also leads all players in shot attempts from the high slot per 20 minutes of power-play time. As scary as Tampa Bay has looked in the second half of this season, Stamkos has been startlingly unlucky in his power-play shooting.

From the inner slot, you can see there are fewer one-timers as a natural function of it being more difficult to complete passes to that area and more difficult to wind up with the limited space available to shoot from. Evander Kane and Hornqvist lead the pack in inner slot shots, and Simmonds is that tiny dot with the third-most inner slot shot attempts, but only two per cent of his shots on goal are one-timers.

There aren’t many players who can take a truly balanced approach at shooting from the slot on the power play because of how defined roles are, but the best among them is Patrice Bergeron. Bergeron is able to cover the whole slot area, attacking from the high slot with a strong 43 per cent of his shots being one-timers, and pinching into the net front to bang home chances often, as I’m sure Leafs fans can attest to.

Mark Scheifele and Anthony Beauvillier play similar styles to Bergeron on the power play, though neither are able to equal his shot volume.

Next up, let’s look at the playmakers.

With the same idea in mind that we used for shooters, with the axes set at league averages, we can contrast slot passes with east-west passes



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for forwards, with the size of the bubbles for each player representing the number of completed one-timer passes they make every 20 minutes.

McDavid is the league's best forward at completing slot passes, which isn't a huge surprise, but just like when we looked at his own one-timers at even strength, his team is letting him down at releasing those shots quickly.

Vancouver's Elias Pettersson is the reverse McDavid, with just a slightly above league average number of slot passes, but leading all forwards in full, cross-ice East-West passes. Like McDavid though, his team is letting him down and not releasing those pucks quickly enough to create tons of one-timers.

Between those two players you have the most versatile group that's able to complete both slot passes and East-West passes in about equal measure, with the best of all of them being Nikita Kucherov. What makes Kucherov such a weapon on the power play is that he can hit those dangerous passes to any space, and he's dangerous shooter on top of it all.

Behind Kucherov you have a group of elite playmakers all bunched together in Evgeni Malkin, Nathan MacKinnon, Max Domi, Patrick Kane, Mitch Marner, Draisaitl, Jonathan Huberdeau, and Blake Wheeler.

The one that stands out the most to me, though, is Wheeler. He is a versatile playmaker anyway, and has been a top-two presence in scoring-chance creation on the power play with Claude Giroux over the last four seasons, but it's how well Wheeler has his passes converted into one-timers that's truly impressive.

Wheeler's passes turn into one-timers on net 7.4 times every 20 minutes, which is nearly five times the league average. Whether it's the right cast of supporting players to convert them or a special quality to Wheeler's vision or pass placement, that's incredible.

Who is 'the best' is going to be highly subjective here, but seeing how the data can visualize different playing styles and isolate those who are effective within them is always interesting.

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1173048 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Stanley Cup odds: Where do Canadian teams sit?

OddsShark Staff

March 25, 2020, 10:43 PM

As the NHL shutdown enters its third week, with the resumption date of the season and playoffs still in question, the Toronto Maple Leafs continue to lead all Canadian teams as a +1800 wager on the Stanley Cup odds at sportsbooks monitored by OddsShark.com.

Winners of just one of their last four games before the NHL suspended play on March 12 due to the widening COVID-19 pandemic, the Maple Leafs were holding a tenuous grip on third place in the Atlantic Division standings, and remained far from assured of a playoff spot.

However, with a lineup that has been plagued by injury all season long the Maple Leafs could benefit from the unexpected break, and they have enjoyed a slight boost of late in their Stanley Cup odds, which sat a step back at +2000 going into the league shutdown.

Facing injury troubles of their own, the Edmonton Oilers sit second to Toronto among Canadian teams at +2200 on the latest Stanley Cup odds

at online sports betting sites, ahead of the Vancouver Canucks at +2800, and the Calgary Flames at +3300.

Sitting just three points back of the first-place Vegas Golden Knights in the Pacific Division, Edmonton had looked poised to return to the NHL playoffs for the first time since 2017. However, like Toronto, the Oilers have endured a recent rash of injuries that sidelined several regulars including Connor McDavid, James Neal, Mike Green, and Kris Russell.

For the Flames and Canucks, the shutdown has clouded where, and if, they would start postseason play. The Flames sit in third place in the Pacific Division, four points back of Edmonton. But if the NHL elects to jump right into the playoffs upon a return to action, and bases seeding on points percentage rather than total points, Calgary could find itself facing a tougher playoff road as the second wild card in the Western Conference.

As for the Canucks, they entered the shutdown deadlocked with Nashville in the hunt for the second wild card in the West, with tiebreakers giving the final playoff spot to the Predators. However, Vancouver's points percentage would move it past Calgary into third place in the Pacific Division, and hand the Canucks their first playoff berth in five years.

Winners of four straight games before play was suspended, the Winnipeg Jets currently own the top wild card in the Western Conference but lag at +5500 on the Stanley Cup betting futures, while the Montreal Canadiens trail at a distant +100000 on those NHL odds.

The league-leading Boston Bruins continue to maintain their perch as +600 Stanley Cup favourites, just ahead of the Tampa Bay Lightning and Vegas Golden Knights at +700, and the Colorado Avalanche at +800, with the Philadelphia Flyers and St. Louis Blues both at +900.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 03.26.2020

1173049 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs all-time Dream Team for Game 7 of Stanley Cup Final

Luke Fox | @lukefoxjokebox

March 25, 2020, 12:08 PM

Until we hear "hockey's back!" the two most glorious words in sport remain "Game 7."

For a fun exercise — because, really, what else is left? — we spun through history and selected the ultimate, all-time Toronto Maple Leafs' lineup we'd dress in a Stanley Cup final Game 7.

Heart and grit, hands and experience, leadership and skill... these 20 serial winners have the right balance to take the prize.

Naturally, you will disagree with almost all of our choices (sorry, Charlie Conacher; deepest apologies, Phil Kessel), so we will socially distance ourselves from the comments.

Forwards

First line: Darryl Sittler, Dave Keon, George Armstrong

Yep, we're kicking it old school for puck drop. Imagine the thunderous tone set by Keon as he glides to the dot for the opening draw, a potential 10-point night to the greatest Maple Leafs left, the final goal-scorer of the Original Six era to his right. Three Hall of Famers, three long-serving Toronto captains, three sure-fire talents.



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Second line: Auston Matthews-, Mats Sundin, Mitch Marner

Lefty Matthews slides to wing so he and Sundin take draws on their strong sides, and Marner gets to work his magic and set up the big boys for tap-ins and one-timers. Because the Keon line draws the harder matchups, this deadly second unit feasts on the opposition and is primarily given offensive-zone starts.

Third line: Frank Mahovlich, Syl Apps, Lanny McDonald

Yes, Mahovlich is the highest-scoring left winger in franchise history, a six-time Cup champ, a Summit Series winner, and one of the 100 Greatest NHL Players in history. But he's also a big body with soft hands.

Apps — another former captain renowned for his character as well as his strength and athleticism — acts as the unit's chief puck-distributor and shutdown guy. (Legends Milt Schmidt and Ted Lindsay both dubbed Apps the greatest centre they ever went head-to-head with.) McDonald injects heart, leadership and the high possibility of a clutch goal.

Fourth line: Doug Gilmour, Ted Kennedy, Wendel Clark

Featuring another trio of captains, the ultimate all-time Leafs fourth line brings snarl and heart and the threat of depth scoring. Any coach would feel comfortable rolling all four lines with this group. The feisty Gilmour is happy to inject energy farther down the bench, just as he did with the golden 1987 Canada Cup squad, and the onetime Selke champ would have no issue defend the best in the biz.

Kennedy — the Leafs' most recent Hart winner and cornerstone of the NHL's first dynasty — made a fierce forecheck his calling card. And Clark? Well, when the whistles get tucked in Game 7, a little toughness can go a long way. (Bonus: If one of the six defencemen gets injured, Clark can slide back to the position he grew up playing.)

Defence

First pairing: Borje Salming-, Tim Horton

With a thinner crop to choose from on the blue line, the top defensive pairing is nearly a no-brainer. And considering they'll have all summer to rest, we might just throw Salming and Horton over the boards for 40 minutes. Salming — one of the 100 greatest players and the best Leafs defender or fight me — can drive offence, control pace and inject fear. The sturdy Horton is calm under pressure, and his elite vision and hands allow him to carry the puck out of the zone.

Second pairing: Tomas Kaberle, Ian Turnbull

As the second-highest-scoring Leafs defenceman, Kaberle can run one of the power-play units all day and spark the rush 5-on-5. The six-foot, 200-pound Turnbull slides in as the duo's anchor, while still capable of blasting the puck past goaltenders. He still holds the league record for goals by a defenceman, which he set in 1977 by firing five (on five shots!) past the Red Wings.

Third pairing: Morgan Rielly-, Allan Stanley

Slick-skating Rielly, so often the fourth man in the rush, should thrive in a sheltered third-pairing role. To his side, knowing where to stand, is stay-at-home Stanley. A four-time Cup champ and Hall of Famer, Stanley earned the nicknames "Snowshoes" and "Silent Sam" for his slow feet, but that's OK. Rielly can fly; Stanley can guard the fort, kill penalties and clear out the crease.

Goalies

Starting goalie: Johnny Bower

No. 1 in your program, No. 1 in your heart, No. 1 on our depth chart. When everything's on the line, sources say you go with the four-time Cup champ and two-time Vezina winner. Beware the poke check.

Backup goalie: Turk Broda

If Bower is having an off night, we can always turn to the Leafs' other two-time Vezina winner. A five-time Cup hoister coming off the bench? Yes, please.

Emergency backup goalie: David Ayres

Undefeated.

Coaching staff

Head coach: Pat Quinn

Assistants: Pat Burns, Punch Imlach

If this group can't motivate the players, no one can. Sure, these vibrant A-type personalities would inevitably clash over time, but three elite hockey minds can come together for 60 minutes of magic.

Healthy scratches: King Clancy, Hap Day, Red Kelly.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 03.26.2020

1173050 Websites

TSN.CA / Projected No. 1 pick Alexis Lafreniere content to play waiting game

Frank Seravalli

For Alexis Lafreniere, June 26 was more than just a date circled on the calendar.

It was slated to be his moment — the projected No. 1 overall prodigy with franchise-changing ability stepping onto the stage, slipping on his new sweater for the first time.

Not just any stage, either.

The planned arrival of the next Great Quebec Hope inside a roaring Bell Centre was either a stroke of luck or a stroke of choreographed genius by the NHL to host the 2020 Draft in Montreal — a stone's throw from the suburb where he grew up in Saint-Eustache, Quebec.

Draft week was quickly coming into focus. A dinner reservation was set for his family and the proud agency representing him in the Old Port. Key sponsor events were lined up. Family and friends were ready to snap up tickets.

And now ...?

The NHL officially postponed the 2020 Draft and Draft Lottery on Wednesday. With the season's end undetermined, it is unclear when either will take place, or if a scaled-down version will be required — like the one held in late July of 2005 in a downtown Ottawa hotel where the Pittsburgh Penguins picked Sidney Crosby coming out of the 2004-05 lockout-cancelled season. It is also unclear whether Montreal would still host the Draft, whether it would be open to fans, or whether it might be conducted via video conference online.

There is no doubt that would bring disappointment, but it's a brave new world since the COVID-19 outbreak and Lafreniere says he isn't sweating the details.

"You know, for sure, it would be a little bit different," Lafreniere said on Wednesday on a conference call with reporters when asked about a Draft different than he might've envisioned. "I think it's still an honour to get drafted by an NHL team. It's really special."



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"Maybe it's going to be different, we don't know yet. But day-by-day, we'll see what happens."

Just about the only certainty is that Lafreniere will be the first player chosen in the NHL Draft, whenever and wherever that occurs. He emerged from the World Junior Championship in January with a gold medal and as the undisputed No. 1 overall prospect.

Since the Canadian Hockey League announced last week the cancellation of the remainder of the major junior seasons, league playoffs and Memorial Cup tournament, coupled with the IIHF's previous cancellation of the World Under-18 tournament, no one else will be able to mount a challenge.

Lafreniere, 18, finished his final season of junior hockey with a staggering 35 goals and 112 points in just 52 games. His number 11 will one day be hanging in the rafters among the other Oceanic greats, including Crosby and Vincent Lecavalier – in a veritable No. 1 pick factory in Rimouski.

When asked whether he thought he'd done enough to carry on that tradition, Lafreniere responded: "I tried my best to play as good as I could in every game I was in. There's some really good players around the world. You never know who is going to go No. 1, but I tried my best to play as good as I could."

The tougher pill to swallow, Lafreniere said, was not being able to mount a challenge for the Memorial Cup. The Oceanic had been building towards this season for three years.

"For sure, it was tough news for me. We all understand and it's serious," Lafreniere said. "It's a little bit sad that the season came to an end quickly like this. We had a great team this year and we believed we could do something special."

"It went by really quick. It's sad that I won't get to play with these guys again, but it's hockey and you've got to move on at some point."

Really, the COVID-19 outbreak and resulting cancellations were a cap for Lafreniere's rather strange draft-eligible campaign. He was suspended twice in the QMJHL for illegal checks and also suffered a knee injury while playing for Team Canada that kept him out of two games at the World Junior Championship.

He also showed scouts an impressive physical edge in the Czech Republic that helped cement his status, notching 10 points in five tournament games, along with a gritty return from what appeared to be a gruesome knee injury.

Lafreniere was looking forward to translating that win on the world stage to a win on the Memorial Cup stage.

"It was a really big moment for me," Lafreniere said of the World Juniors. "Growing up, you dream about it and last year [2019] we didn't get the result we wanted. To be able to win that, that was for sure one of the big moments in my career so far."

So now, Lafreniere waits – like the rest of the hockey world. He believes he can be ready to step into the NHL next season with the help of the exercise equipment at home in Saint-Eustache.

"I think I can get stronger even if I train at my house," Lafreniere said. "I stay in shape, you know, just work as hard as I can to try and gain some strength so when [hockey] is going to come back, I'm going to be ready."

He is getting reacquainted with his family, familiar faces that he hasn't had much time with since he's been living with a billet family in Rimouski for the last three seasons. And he is cracking the books. Lafreniere is hunkered down and studying to complete his high school courses on time.

Most importantly, Lafreniere is handling everything with the proper dose of perspective.

Whether he ends up with the Ottawa Senators or Detroit Red Wings, or the Draft is held at a packed Bell Centre or via teleconference, it's all out of his hands.

"I really live it day-by-day and try to control what I can control. If the Draft is online, it will be different for us, but we'll still enjoy our time and be happy," Lafreniere said. "The most important thing is that everyone stays healthy."

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USA TODAY / Dallas Stars executives Jim Lites and Jim Nill take 50% pay cut to help team employees

Mike Brehm

USA TODAY

As NHL teams begin laying off workers or cutting pay because of the uncertainty of the length of the coronavirus shutdown, one team's management corps is taking another strategy.

Dallas Stars president Jim Lites and general manager Jim Nill took a voluntary 50% pay cut, according to ESPN.

"We're just looking to help somebody else," Nill told the network. "Jim and I are very fortunate. The game's been great to us. But within our organization, we have a lot of younger people working who live paycheck to paycheck. We hope this is something that can help them down the road."

Pittsburgh Penguins executives David Morehouse and Jim Rutherford earlier took undisclosed pay cuts, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reported.

Stars owner Tom Gaglardi and billionaire father Bob run Northland Properties, but Nill noted that the business is involved in hotels and restaurants, which have been hit hard by the pandemic.

"The Gaglardis have been really good to us, they've always said yes to us on things we've needed to do to build the franchise," Lites told The Dallas Morning News. "I feel a personal thanks to them, they've been really good to both of us."

Uncertainty remains about when sports can resume as coronavirus cases increase.

The NHL paused the season on March 12 and recently told players and staff to remain in self-isolation until April 6. Wednesday, the NHL postponed the scouting combine, draft and NHL Awards show, which were scheduled for June.

The Boston Bruins are among teams with cutbacks, with Delaware North announcing that starting April 1, 68 full-time salaried employees at the team and TD Garden will go on temporary leave and another 82 will have their pay cut.

The Montreal Canadiens are doing temporary layoffs, too, and have set up an assistance fund for affected workers.

Nill told ESPN that the Stars are still discussing finances and staffing.

"But we felt that if we got ahead of this ourselves, maybe that helps out that part of it," he said.

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USA TODAY / TD Garden, home of Bruins and Celtics, cutting staff, pay during coronavirus shutdown

Chris Bumbaca

USA TODAY

Ushers at TD Garden, home of the Boston Celtics and Boston Bruins, have been laid off while events have been shut down during the coronavirus pandemic.

Employees received a letter Tuesday from Delaware North, owner of TD Garden, stating that the workers, who are employed part-time, "will not be scheduled until the conditions at our unit allows us to resume normal operations." The letter said workers "may be eligible" for unemployment benefits, per the Boston Globe.

Delaware North also said Wednesday that 150 full-time employees would be affected by cuts.

"Effective April 1, 2020, 68 of our full-time salaried associates will be placed on temporary leave, receiving one week of paid leave and eight weeks of full benefits," Delaware North said in a statement. "Additionally, as of April 1, 2020, 82 of our full-time salaried associates will receive an indefinite salary reduction. Those associates not impacted by the temporary leave or salary reduction have employment contracts."

No timetable has been set for the return of the NBA or NHL season. One affected employee, who spoke to the Globe on the condition of anonymity, said the letter was the first form of communication he had with the company in the last two weeks despite the mounting uncertainty of the situation.

"The coronavirus has had significant implications across all of Delaware North's lines of business, including at your unit," the letter read. "All the major sports leagues suspended their seasons, governments are requiring closures and reduction of capacity at certain venues, tourism has declined, events have been canceled, and more people are simply staying home. Due to this, the company has no choice but to ensure that we are appropriately staffed."

Over the weekend, Bruins owner Jeremy Jacobs, who is worth \$3.1 billion, said it was putting \$1.5 million aside to compensate employees for missed home games, but not until the games were officially canceled.

"As relayed to our associates today, none of these decisions were reached without difficult and painful deliberations," Delaware North's statement said. "These measures are intended to be temporary with associate employment and compensation returning once our business resumes to its normal state from this unprecedented stoppage."

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USA TODAY / Need a refund on those tickets to NBA, NHL or baseball games? Hold that thought

Brent Schrottenboer

USA TODAY

Tensions are starting to simmer between professional sports teams and some of their best customers.

After postponing games indefinitely because of the COVID-19 pandemic, teams from the NBA, NHL and major league baseball are effectively keeping the money of customers who bought tickets to those games. Instead of giving cash refunds, these businesses have operated under their normal ticket policies for postponed or rained-out games – holding the money as credit to be used whenever their games resume.

But these aren't normal times, and these are not normal postponements. And with the nation's economy continuing to crater, ticket holders want their money back in cash, even if those games haven't yet been officially canceled.

"It's a disaster," said Tony Knopp, CEO of TicketManager, which helps companies manage tickets for entertaining clients.

More than \$1 billion in consumer capital is tied up in tickets to games that are stuck in limbo because of the pandemic, according to conservative estimates. It affects ticket holders of all stripes and trickles downstream to the secondary markets, such as StubHub, which faces its own financial reckoning if games are canceled.

Many fans have shared their complaints on social media.

"Absolutely ridiculous tickets can't be refunded because there might be 'make up' games," a Twitter user identified as Mitchell Coleman wrote to the NHL. "Come off it. Not everyone can just jump on a plane and travel to the location to see a make up game. Wake up and refund me for my tickets purchased for Vegas."

Knopp, whose company works with several large businesses, said that even large companies who bought tickets to entertain clients are losing patience. "People are losing their jobs and they've got money tied up in these tickets, for games we don't know when they're going to happen," Knopp said.

Ticket holders also are banging on the virtual doors of Ticketmaster and StubHub, which has a policy of not refunding games that haven't been officially canceled.

"If the event is postponed, ticket buyers can choose to either attend the event on the new date or resell the ticket," StubHub said in a statement. "If the event is postponed to a future, undetermined date, StubHub will email the ticket holder as soon as the details are announced."

If an event has been canceled, StubHub will provide a full refund, the company said. Other ticket sellers also are expected to offer refunds if events are officially canceled. The problem for ticket holders is these events have not been canceled. They're postponed indefinitely as part of the national effort to keep the coronavirus pandemic from spreading and spiking beyond the capacity of the U.S. healthcare system.

Growing concerns over the economy have changed consumers' needs in the meantime.

"People are out here unable to get basic necessities and @StubHub refuses to issue refunds until @MLB 'cancels' games that tickets have been purchased for," a Twitter user identified as Adam Erickson wrote last week. "I'm not getting what I paid for and in times like these, your companies need to do better. Do the right thing!"

StubHub's Twitter account responded to this complaint by saying it was sorry for his frustration but noted that tickets remain valid for a later date when the games are rescheduled. This reply didn't go over well with the customer.

"People can't get water, toilet paper, daycare and your (sic) keeping millions of consumers dollars over a technicality," Erickson responded back to StubHub.

The teams and ticket marketplaces have their own financial obligations and staffing issues and aren't always eager to give back cash until it's necessary. StubHub, for example, makes money from transaction fees



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and could lose that revenue if games are officially canceled and they have to give it back to customers.

StubHub and other re-sellers are "rooting for postponement" and rescheduled games because of this, Knopp said.

The tension stems from teams and ticket marketplaces engaging in a business-as-usual postponement policy at a time that is decidedly not business as usual for consumers.

Refund policies can vary by team, but many team websites and messages essentially tell fans to "hold onto your tickets" for possible future use.

"NBA (you're) losing a lot of fans who need their ticket refund money," a Twitter user identified as Jimmie Huddleston wrote last week.

The Los Angeles Lakers have a slightly different message, stating that tickets will be refunded at the point of purchase "if you have travel or health concerns related to any of the upcoming games."

Other season-ticket holders bristled when their accounts were charged as normal by teams that collect money from them on payment plans, including this month by the Cleveland Indians.

"Our season-ticket holders who are on a payment plan had their March payment processed because Major League Baseball is currently still planning to play a full season of games," team spokesman Bart Swain wrote in an e-mail. "We will not be charging any additional payments unless MLB provides guidance at that time that we plan to play a full season of games. As soon as we learn a game is cancelled and not rescheduled by MLB, we will offer fan-friendly value options to season-ticket holders to either exchange cancelled games or receive a refund."

Likewise, NFL teams have deferred payment schedules on season tickets, including the New York Giants and Miami Dolphins.

"Games and concerts have always been a break from daily life," said Patrick Ryan, co-founder of Eventellect, a ticket sales strategy company. "I think people miss them badly. And therefore with the uncertainty around live events they are wanting new dates to get set or the ability to get their money back."

The indefinite wait is the big issue until then. And even if games are canceled, many of these teams and ticket sellers are still going to try to hang onto the money through enticements, such as offering credit for next season with perks thrown in, Knopp said. StubHub said that "given the current environment, if an event is canceled, customers can opt to receive a StubHub coupon valued at 120% of the original purchase. This coupon can be applied toward a future event of their choosing."

In previous years, teams addressed mass cancellations of games by offering refunds plus interest, including for the NHL lockout of 2004-05. The NBA, NHL and MLB didn't respond to requests for comment or referred questions on refund policies to individual teams.

The Chicago White Sox, as one example, sent a message to fans recently. Baseball's opening day had been scheduled for March 26 but is on hold until at least May.

"To date, no games have been canceled," the letter said. "Please hold onto your tickets until an official policy is announced."

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USA TODAY / Sixers, Devils back down on temporary salary cuts for employees

Steve Gardner

USA TODAY

Bowing to public pressure Tuesday afternoon, the parent company of the NBA's Philadelphia 76ers and NHL's New Jersey Devils reversed a planned 20% pay cut for the teams' salaried employees announced earlier in the day.

"Our commitment has been to do our best to keep all of our employees working through this very difficult situation," Josh Harris, founder of Harris Blitzer Sports Entertainment, said in a statement.

"After listening to our staff and players, it's clear that was the wrong decision. We have reversed it and will be paying these employees their full salaries. This is an extraordinary time in our world - unlike any most of us have ever lived through before - and ordinary business decisions are not enough to meet the moment. To our staff and fans, I apologize for getting this wrong."

Upon learning of the planned salary cuts, Sixers star Joel Embiid -- who had already pledged \$500,000 to coronavirus medical relief -- committed to helping team employees who would have suffered financial hardships.

After the announcement, Embiid was one of the first to praise the team for "doing a 180."

The NHL and NBA have suspended operations indefinitely amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and all events at Prudential Center, which is owned and operated by HBSE, have been canceled or postponed through March.

As part of an effort to do that we asked salaried employees to take a temporary 20% pay cut while preserving everyone's full benefits -- and keeping our 1500 hourly workers paid throughout the regular season.

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USA TODAY / Report: NHL is slashing salaries of league office employees

Chris Bumbaca

USA TODAY

The NHL is temporarily slashing the salaries of league office employees by 25 percent, according to ESPN.

With regular-season games suspended since March 12 due to the coronavirus pandemic, the league is taking the measure to hopefully prevent layoffs, per ESPN, beginning April 1.

While the NHL has not yet punted on finishing the 2019-20 season in some capacity, it has placed a priority on maintaining a full 82-game schedule in 2020-21.

The ramifications of the suspended season will not only be felt in the league office. On Monday, it was revealed the New Jersey Devils (and the NBA's Philadelphia 76ers, which operate under the same ownership group) were temporarily reducing pay by 20 percent for its "at-will" employees -- those making \$50,000 or more -- from April 15 through June.



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However a few hours later, 76ers managing partner Josh Harris said in a statement:

"After listening to our staff and players, it's clear that was the wrong decision. We have reversed it and will be paying these employees their full salaries."

So far, two NHL players – both unnamed members of the Ottawa Senators – have tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

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