



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • July 18, 2019

THE NEWS & OBSERVER

Ron Francis, forced out by the Hurricanes in 2018, is heading back to the NHL

By Chip Alexander

Ron Francis began 2019 with a new business job in Raleigh, handling commercial real-estate investments, saying he had reinvented himself at age 55.

But hockey was never far away. And he's going back to it.

Francis, the Carolina Hurricanes' former general manager and executive vice president, will be the new general manager of the NHL's Seattle expansion franchise, the Seattle Times and other media outlets reported late Tuesday night. An official announcement is expected this week, the Times reported.

For Francis, who turned 56 on March 1, it will be taking on the ultimate hockey startup.

The Seattle team, which has yet to be named, will begin play in the 2021-22 season in remodeled KeyArena. Francis must hire a coaching staff and management team. He must prepare for an expansion draft of players in 2021 -- something he did as Carolina's GM, but on the other side, when the Vegas Golden Knights first came into the league in 2017-18.

When Francis began working for NAI Carolantic Realty in January at the behest of Carolantic chairman Steve Stroud, he acknowledged he could have "stayed in the game" and his name was being mentioned with various NHL GM jobs, including Seattle's. But that would mean moving his family from Raleigh, his home for more than 20 years, and he said he wasn't sure he wanted to do that.

"This is a new challenge. This is a new venture," Francis said in an interview of his Carolantic job.

But the Seattle opportunity is too good, too intriguing to pass up. It also should take away some of the sting from his forced departure from the Hurricanes in 2018 and bring him back into the NHL's power circles.

The coming of Tom Dundon as the Canes' new majority owner in January 2018 eventually resulted in Francis leaving. Dundon, quickly making changes in the franchise, mentioned personality differences in taking away Francis' GM duties in March 2018, then announced in April that Francis had left the franchise.

Not completely. Francis, in a January interview, said he would remain under contract with the Hurricanes until June 30, 2019. He said he would remain an investor in the team as a member of Hurricanes Holdings LLC until November 2019, although his job with Seattle should result in him divesting himself of that ownership share.

Francis, after winning two Stanley Cups with the Pittsburgh Penguins, came to Carolina in 1998 as a free agent and helped establish the franchise and the sport in the Triangle, in the state. As team captain he was the leader as the Canes reached the Stanley Cup final in 2002, and his playing career earned him a place in the Hockey Hall of Fame in 2007.

Moving into management under former general manager Jim Rutherford, Francis "wore many hats," as he liked to say. He was director of player development, vice president of hockey operations and also served as associate head coach before succeeding Rutherford as general manager on April 24, 2014.

"I appreciate everything Jim did for me," Francis said in a recent interview. "He gave me an opportunity to sign (with Carolina) as a free agent at the 'young' age of 35. Then working with him on the management side in a lot of different capacities."

As GM, Francis tried to patiently rebuild the Canes around the NHL Draft and player development. Firing Kirk Muller as coach, he gave Bill Peters his first opportunity to be an NHL head coach. He tried to put together competitive teams with one of the lowest payrolls in the NHL.

What was missing? The playoffs. The Canes did not qualify for the Stanley Cup playoffs in Francis' four years as GM.

Some of Francis' trades were successful -- obtaining forward Teuvo Teravainen from the Chicago Blackhawks was his best acquisition -- and some were bad. The trade for goalie Scott Darling, and then giving the former Blackhawks backup a four-year, \$16.6 million contract, backfired on Francis.

Since leaving Carolina, Francis served as co-general manager for Team Canada in the Spengler Cup competition in Switzerland. He was on the Hockey Canada management team for the 2019 IIHF World Championship.

He was never far away from the game and now is back in it.



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Prove them wrong, Ron Francis

By Greg Wyshynski

If I were one of the executives hiring Ron Francis as the first general manager of the Seattle Whatevers -- and I'm still all-in on the "Sasquatch" or "Kraken," for the record -- my first question would have been a simple one:

"How much of that was your fault?"

Under Francis, the Carolina Hurricanes had a record of 137-138-53 with Bill Peters behind the bench, the only coach Francis had the chance to hire in his four seasons as general manager. They were an aggressively average team, a source of constant befuddlement for the analytics community:

How could a team that was third in the NHL in expected goals at five-on-five during that stretch end up 26th in goals per 60 minutes (2.07)? How could a team that had the second-best percentage of shot attempts in the league (52.45%) during that time frame, behind only the Los Angeles Kings, fail to make the playoffs in all four seasons with Francis as GM? To put things in perspective: Six of the top seven teams in Corsi percentage during that stretch didn't just make the playoffs with frequency, they all played for the Stanley Cup since 2013.

How much of that was his fault?

Part of the problem was a lack of finishers on the roster. Francis, notably, made few player-for-player trades that forcefully improved his team's scoring. He made 24 trades in total while GM of the Hurricanes. The most beneficial one, by far, was when he acquired forwards Teuvo Teravainen and Bryan Bickell from a cap-strapped Chicago Blackhawks team in 2016. But the glut of the deals he made involved shipping out talent from Raleigh, rather than bringing some back. Part of that was his untangling of the cap mess Jim Rutherford left behind when he moved up and then out to Pittsburgh. Part of that was being a constant deadline seller.

There also were few solutions via free agency, where Justin Williams' return in 2017 was the only major win among value adds (Lee Stempniak) and outright disasters (Scott Darling).

How much of that was his fault?

The solutions didn't arrive at the draft table, either. The first-rounders his team selected:

- Defenseman Haydn Fleury (who has played 87 NHL games) at No. 7 overall in 2014, ahead of William Nylander and Nikolaj Ehlers
- Defenseman Noah Hanifin at No. 5 overall in 2015, ahead of Ivan Provorov, Zach Werenski, Timo Meier and Mikko Rantanen
- Defenseman Jake Bean at No. 13 and right wing Julien Gauthier at No. 21 in 2016, with the former having played two games and the latter zero games in the NHL thus far

- And the promising center Martin Necas No. 12 overall in 2017

In total, Francis oversaw 33 draft picks from 2014 to 2018, and 11 of them made the NHL. Yes, among the 11 were Sebastian Aho, an incredible find at No. 35 overall in 2015, and Lucas Wallmark, at No. 97 overall in 2014. But there were more whiffs than hits.

How much of that was his fault?

Ron Francis is a respected guy in the NHL, but as you can see, one who doesn't exactly have a record to run on. His hiring by Seattle already has met with some criticism -- "Hall of Fame player, yes. Hall of Fame GM, don't know about that," for example -- because of the aftertaste from his job in Carolina.

Look, no matter how much Listerine one gargles, it's hard to get rid of the rancidness of four losing seasons or seeing Scott Darling as his solution in goal -- a devastating story on a personal level, but an undeniable managerial misstep in handing the crease to an unproven commodity on a four-year deal with trade protection. He bet big, and lost, and that signing came to define Francis' tenure in Raleigh.

But if I'm a Seattle executive and I asked Ron Francis how much the rest of this was his fault, I might have heard this response: "Not as much as you'd think."

Where I think he can take the blame was at the draft table. Tony MacDonald, the Hurricanes' recently retired director of amateur scouting, ultimately made the majority of the picks, but Francis let it be known what kinds of players he was looking for and exerted influence. There's an All-Star team of offensive talent that the Hurricanes left on the board while selecting defensemen with their first picks in three straight seasons. Now with an expansion franchise that should have a plethora of picks, Francis can't oversee that many missed opportunities, especially in the lottery.

Otherwise, Francis did a solid job managing his cap. He made some nice, small moves, but without aggressive moves to get over the hump. The perception is that he lacked the audacity to make those moves; the reality is that he wasn't afraid to take risks, but rather never had the money to spend to take them during the majority of his tenure with Carolina. Playmaking centers cost money. Goal-scoring wingers cost money. Even with the trade assets the Hurricanes had, it was difficult to add that kind of payroll. And that financial reality certainly extended to the free-agent pool.

Money is not going to be an issue for Seattle. I've had multiple members of the NHL Board of Governors tell me they expect Seattle will be a top-10 revenue team. I think Seattle will resemble the Vegas Golden Knights in that regard: Money won't be an issue in trying to attract or retain talent. This certainly will be a new flex for him as a general manager.



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Vegas, of course, has set completely unreal expectations for Seattle, which isn't going to have the same ancillary catalysts for success off the ice that the Knights had, nor, one assumes, the abject stupidity of other GMs overplaying their expansion draft hands on which to prey. But Seattle will have a roster that, like the Golden Knights', will be a cut above the expansion team dreck we used to witness. And Seattle should have a quality coaching pool, as Gerard Gallant's Jack Adams Award for Vegas no doubt encourages.

For my money, Seattle has a terrific general manager now too. I've been waiting for a second act for Ronnie Franchise after the education he received with Carolina. Were mistakes made? Totally. Were the four years without a playoff berth his fault? Partially.

Is this a general manager I'd like to see paint on a clean canvas, with a palette that's not restricted in its spectrum? Completely.

The Hockey News

Six young players who could use a change of scenery ahead of next season

Stars defenseman Julius Honka is front-and-center in trade rumors after sitting on the sidelines for 48 consecutive games to end the campaign, but he's not the only once-promising prospect who could use a new opportunity elsewhere next season.

By Jared Clinton

There was a time when Julius Honka was considered a lock to become a fixture on the Dallas Stars' blueline. In fact, looking back through past editions of The Hockey News' Future Watch issue, scouts had high hopes for the rearguard.

Take the year after he was selected as the 14th overall selection in 2014, for instance. Honka was ranked as the 23rd-best prospect by a panel of scouts and topped the list of future Stars in Future Watch 2015. By the next season, he had risen, if only slightly, to 20th overall, again topping the list of the best of what was to come in Dallas. And what followed was his pinnacle. In Future Watch 2017, on the heels of a seven-goal, 31-point performance in the AHL across 50 games, the scouting panel made the blueliner the 17th-highest ranked prospect. He was ahead of rearguards such as Shea Theodore, Brandon Montour and Sam Girard, to name a few.

That feels like a distant memory right about now, though. Over the past two seasons, during which Honka has basically been a full-time NHLer, the 23-year-old rearguard has come to feel less like a once-promising prospect and more like dead weight on Dallas' roster. He skated in 42 games in 2017-18, registering one goal and four points, but followed that up with a campaign in which he mustered four assists in 29 games before falling out of favor with the coaching staff and finding himself a healthy scratch in the final 48 games of the Stars' season, including all 13 playoff outings. Combined, he's played 71 games over the past two campaigns, averaged little more than 13 minutes per outing and has one goal and eight points.

So, it should come as no surprise that all signs are pointing to Dallas doing what it can to find a new home for a defender who was once considered a potential defensive cornerstone. A change of scenery could do a world of wonders for Honka, too. Sure, he hasn't shown the expected offensive flair in the big league, but a specialized role with some guidance might be just what he needs to take a step forward and find his game. It has been clear at points, particularly during his time in the minors, that Honka can produce in the right situation. That's what he needs now.

But will anyone step up to take Honka, who is currently a restricted free agent, off the Stars' hands? Only time will tell, but given there's no room for him on the Dallas blueline, it seems likely he'll be rehomed before training camp. He's not the only youngster who could benefit from such a change, however. Here are five others under 24 who might be open to fresh starts:

Jesse Puljujarvi, Edmonton Oilers

He was bound for this list like a heat-seeking missile, so let's just lead with the obvious. Puljujarvi has made it fairly clear that he wants to find a new home, and who could blame him? It simply hasn't worked out for him in Edmonton. Not only has he bounced back-and-forth between the minors, but he's managed a mere 17 goals and 39 points in 139 games in the NHL thus far. Once projected to be in competition for the first-overall selection at the 2016 draft, Puljujarvi fell to fourth and the decision by the Columbus Blue Jackets to pass over the winger in favor of Pierre-Luc Dubois seems prescient at this point.

It's unlikely the 21-year-old starts next season in Edmonton. If he does, it's going to be a last-chance scenario, and if he flops early, it won't be long before he's sold to the highest bidder.

Josh Ho-Sang, New York Islanders

From one obvious choice to the next, because frankly, Puljujarvi is a newcomer to the change-of-scenery scene compared to Ho-Sang, whose name has been floated in talks of this kind for what feels like eons.

Ho-Sang, 23, has clear-cut offensive ability and he's showcased it at every turn. In 156 AHL games, he has 26 goals and 110 points, including a career-best 43 points this past season with the Bridgeport Sound Tigers. He's had a near-impossible time sticking with the Islanders, though, and he hasn't shied away from the talk of New York trading him. At this point, if the Islanders have no intention of using him in the lineup and are going to get anything of value for Ho-Sang, it's time for him to be moved along. An outfit with room for an offensive player who can be a power play specialist might be the perfect fit.

Sonny Milano, Columbus Blue Jackets

He was picked two spots after Honka in the 2014 draft and ended up one spot ahead of the Stars defenseman in Future Watch 2015, but their tenures with their respective clubs have been similarly disappointing. Milano has had moments where



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he's shone with the big club, including his 14-goal, 22-point performance in 55 games during the 2017-18 season, but he saw only eight NHL games last season, he's been passed on the depth chart and is in no way a lock for the roster despite the Blue Jackets' need to replace scoring up front.

His run-in with the law earlier this summer might scare some suitors off in any potential trade, which is concerning given he's entering make-or-break territory. The offensive upside is there, but it's a matter of a team finding the right way to bring it out of the 23-year-old consistently.

Sam Bennett, Calgary Flames

If we could go back and reorder the top-five prospects in Future Watch 2015, it goes without saying that we would do so in a heartbeat. Bennett, who hasn't been able to earn anything more than a bottom-six role with the Flames, was the second-ranked prospect behind Sam Reinhart and ahead of Leon Draisaitl. In fourth was Nikolaj Ehlers, while Max Domi was fifth. Again, the quintet could use some rejigging.

Nevertheless, Bennett, 23, finds himself on this list not because he's become disgruntled or has been mired in the minors but instead because he hasn't been able to rise above third- and fourth-line duty with the Flames and a cap crunch in Calgary might necessitate such a move. And maybe that's not the worst thing. In a new home, maybe Bennett could break

into the top-six and earn a steadier offensive role. He did score 18 goals and 36 points in his first full NHL campaign, so the offense is there. It's just a matter of finding a place where he can utilize those talents regularly.

Julien Gauthier, Carolina Hurricanes

Gauthier doesn't fit the bill in quite the same way as any of the aforementioned players. After a difficult debut in the AHL in 2017-18, Gauthier took a significant step forward with a 27-goal, 41-point output with the Charlotte Checkers last season. But the rub here is that 21-year-old is sliding down the depth chart and Carolina's own prospect rankings. He's been passed by Martin Necas, who is primed to start on the wing as early as next season, and there's something of a logjam ahead of him down the middle. Where he fits at this point is in question, and he's not expected to really crack the lineup as a full-timer for another couple seasons at best.

He's a good trade chip right now and one who showcased his upside last season. If Carolina needs to move someone in interest of improving their roster, Gauthier might be just the player.

Honorable Mentions: Pavel Zacha, New Jersey Devils; Michael Dal Colle, New York Islanders; Zach Senyshyn, Boston Bruins; Evgeny Svechnikov, Detroit Red Wings



By The Numbers: What to Expect from the Hurricanes' New Faces

The Hurricanes are welcoming new offensive talent to Raleigh this summer. We take a look at what to expect from the highest profile newcomers.

By Andrew Ahr

The Hurricanes have had a noisy offseason thus far, and two of the highest profile newcomers are Erik Haula and Ryan Dzingel. Both are forwards who can jump into the lineup and add primary and secondary offense immediately. Let's take a look at what we can expect from the new Hurricanes.

Erik Haula

Haula is a 28-year-old Finn who had success in a depth forward role in Minnesota prior to his selection by Vegas in the 2017 expansion draft. Like a lot of players on the Golden Knights in their first season, he had a career year. He tallied 29 points and 55 points and looked to be thriving in a bigger role. He unfortunately went down in November of last season and sustained what George McPhee described as an "atypical injury for hockey." Whatever it was, it required surgery and kept him out for the remainder of the season and playoffs.

There was some question about Haula's ability to repeat his career 2017-18 season again last year, but he appeared on track for another very solid showing before going down in November. Through nearly 200 minutes of time on ice, he posted a Corsi For Percentage of 61.79%, a Goals For

Percentage of 57.14%, and a Scoring Chances For Percentage of 62.30%.

The biggest question mark for Haula this season is how he will respond from a gruesome knee injury. It has the potential to seriously inhibit his play, which is part of the reason why the Hurricanes were able to pick him up at a relatively good price. Assuming he bounces back in serviceable condition, Haula will fill a desperately needed role as a middle six center in Carolina. His solid possession play makes him a good fit here in Raleigh, and he will likely be relied on to center the Hurricanes "second" line.

Ryan Dzingel

Dzingel is a middle six winger who quietly had 26 goals last season. The Hurricanes were able to pick him up on a team friendly, two year deal at \$3.25 million AAV. Justin Williams' future in Carolina still in question, so this signing gives the Hurricanes some scoring depth should the captain choose not to return next season.

As shown above, there is some question regarding his defensive game, but he has a career shooting percentage of 15 percent — that's significantly above league average. He's not a particularly strong possession guy, and he's not the type of winger who's going to be driving offensive play. John Tortorella was aware of this — the winger's offensive zone



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start percentage was above 66%. This speaks to his knack for scoring as well as his perceived defensive shortcomings.

Dzingel is the type of guy that has both speed and skill in bunches and should be good for 20 goals this season playing

on the second or third line. His defensive game appears to be a bit of a liability, so we shouldn't expect for him to be a workhorse in all situations. When used in an appropriate role, his presence in the lineup will bring necessary secondary scoring and improve matchups for the rest of the top nine.

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SportScan

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

1149791 Carolina Hurricanes

Ron Francis, forced out by the Hurricanes in 2018, is heading back to the NHL

BY CHIP ALEXANDER

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News Observer LOADED: 07.18.2019

1149815 NHL

You can't judge a GM hire on Day 1, but NHL Seattle makes a big splash with Ron Francis

Matt Calkins July 17, 2019 at 11:05 am Updated July 17, 2019 at 3:34 PM

If you think the most pointless thing in sports is evaluating a general manager's decision the day after he makes it, you're close.

Slightly more pointless is evaluating the general manager himself the day after he is hired.

On Tuesday night, news broke that Seattle's incoming NHL team has selected Hall of Famer Ron Francis as its new GM. The eight-time All-Star joins the organization after spending four years with the Carolina Hurricanes in the same role.

Francis is the kind of hire that generates instant intrigue. He's an all-time great with more points than all but four players to ever lace 'em up in the NHL.

But if you're convinced he's the guy that will turn Seattle into a flourishing franchise, you should be equally convinced that the next coin you toss will turn up heads.

Here's what we know about Francis as an executive: In 2015, he drafted forward Sebastian Aho with the 35th overall pick and watched him develop into one of the league's top players. The 21-year-old scored 83 points last season en route to finishing 10th in NHL MVP voting. In 2016, Francis acquired Teuvo Teravainen from Chicago for a second- and third-round draft pick. Teravainen scored 76 points last season to help the Hurricanes reach the postseason for the first time since 2009.

But here's what we also know about Francis as an executive: He didn't get to enjoy that postseason success. After missing the playoffs in each of his four seasons pulling the strings, Francis was let go in April 2018. The Hurricanes never won more than 36 games during his tenure, nor did they finish higher than 10th in their conference.

So does this mean Seattle settled for mediocrity? Not exactly.

In Francis' third-to-last season in Carolina, the Hurricanes had the NHL's second-lowest payroll. In his final two seasons there, they had the lowest. True, they had the second-lowest last season when they made the playoffs without him, but Francis' moves in prior years played a major role in that breakthrough.

The bottom line is that it's hard to make a judgment about his front-office acumen given the lack of information. In a little time, with little money, he made the Hurricanes a little better.

That doesn't say much as to what kind of dent Francis will make in the Emerald City. But I suppose the anticipation is half the fun.

If we're talking about stature, team president Tod Leiweke couldn't have done much better than Francis. If he wanted to announce to the league that Seattle is here to rumble with the big boys, luring a first-ballot Hall of Famer was his Michael Buffer moment.

Hiring an analytics geek with no playing experience wouldn't have resonated with folks around here (although Francis does have a reputation for being open to analytics). Then again, resonating with fans in July is pretty much meaningless.

George McPhee, for instance, didn't have the cachet of a Francis when he took over as GM of the Golden Knights three years ago. But his expansion-draft ingenuity was integral in Vegas reaching the Stanley Cup Final in its first NHL season.

It isn't fair to hold Francis to that standard when he starts building this team in Seattle, but now the whole world knows an expansion team can find early success.

There seems to be an element of panache attached to everything involving this NHL project in Seattle. You've got a renovated KeyArena that is expected to wow. You've got David Bonderman and Jerry Bruckheimer attached as partners. And now you have one of the game's great players in charge of building the team.

It all looks great at the moment. But this moment is irrelevant.

With the second-most assists in NHL history, Ron Francis has always been deft at finding people when he's on the ice. Can he do it from off the ice? His reputation in Seattle depends on it.

Seattle Times LOADED: 07.18.2019

1149833 Websites

The Athletic / Is it weird to wear the jersey of someone younger than you?

By Justin Bourne Jul 17, 2019

Over the past couple years I've had the pleasure of intermittently hosting radio shows on Sportsnet 590 The Fan which has been a fascinating learning experience, particularly in terms of what actually makes for good sports talk. One concept I've started to slowly grasp is that some of the best conversations aren't so much the ones about the game from last night, but are about the big-picture themes of sports fandom. This week I was co-hosting with the always entertaining George Rusic, and when it came to this type of argument, the man had the ability to walk the line between



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“outrageously wrong” and “wait, maybe he’s actually right?” better than anyone I’ve ever come across.

Along the lines of big-picture themes, I have a point to discuss, specifically how it pertains to us as hockey fans and less so to sports fans on the whole.

That theory in full is a simple one: as a fan, you shouldn’t wear the jersey of a player younger than you.

That’s it, full stop, no wiggle room.

That means if you’re 41 years old it’s acceptable to wear a Zdeno Chara jersey, but a teal sweater bearing the name of the ever-sprightly Joe Thornton is off-limits. Heaven forbid you decided to go even younger to someone like Patrick Marleau.

The overarching logic here on why this is unacceptable can be summed up with three words, “because it’s weird.”

So is wearing the jersey of a person younger than you weird?

It’s definitely not weird. It’s obviously not weird at all. Only...

IT IS WEIRD TO WEAR THE JERSEY OF A PLAYER THAT IS YOUNGER THAN YOU?#GOODSHOW

— SPORTSNET 590 THE FAN (@FAN590) JULY 16, 2019

However, under 30 percent of the people we polled that day agreed with George.

I argued against the theory as best I could on the air. My thinking was this: I’m rooting for people, specifically people who show personality. I don’t care where they’re from or how old they are or what gender or color or if they like cats or dogs (if the answer isn’t yes to both cats and dogs, I’m likely not a fan) or anything of the sort. If they seem likable and they’re fun to watch and are they’re on the team I’m rooting for, then hell yes, I consider that player jersey-worthy.

Some say that sports are just “games” or whatever, but sports and sports teams are woven into the fabric (how fitting) of who many of us are. Try saying “sports are just silly games” to the Blues fans who waited most of their lives before their exhilarating ride en route to their team winning the Cup this year or to Red Sox or Cubs fans after their long-awaited championships or to the 13-year-old fan who just went on that run with the Raptors. People invest years in teams and their players, their daily emotional states fluctuate based on wins and losses, some of us live and die by sports. People who think that’s silly just don’t get it, and dammit, I don’t care if they ever do. If you’re someone who pays to read sportswriting you probably feel as I do here. Sports are about more than just silly games. So yes, when there’s a player who has a big part in pulling your daily emotions in a positive direction, I understand why a fan would rock that player’s jersey.

But every time I let my heart go as I did in the paragraph above, I can’t help but see George smiling and shrugging. “Great! I agree. Sports are more than just silly games. But the jersey thing, y’know ... it is a little weird, right?”

I can’t deny the fact that I feel like it kind of is?

I have a personal glitch here, because having played hockey at the professional level, I could never wear anyone’s hockey jersey remotely around my own age or even within five years. In some weird way, I was competing against those guys. Since I type words on a laptop for a living, I guess it’s fair to say that I lost that competition. I don’t think there are many supervillains wearing the t-shirt of the superheroes who’ve vanquished them, or former

employees of now-dead computer companies wearing Apple hats. My involvement excludes me from wearing almost all hockey jerseys.

Still, it’s not like I ever competed against Mathew Barzal or Auston Matthews, and I do root for the Islanders (for reasons mostly personal) and the Leafs to some extent (for reasons mostly professional). Still, there’s no way I could bring myself to wear one of their jerseys. I guess part of it is that there’s an infinitesimal chance I’d end up meeting the guys just given my background and profession, and I’d be mortified to shake their hand while wearing their jersey. That in itself is a bit of a sign it’s maybe just not right for me (and I suppose my mountainous ego). But I wouldn’t begrudge anyone from a different background, with a more pure fan (non-media) interest, buying and wearing their jerseys. That makes complete and total sense to me.

Rusic himself is 40 years old and a Habs fan, and so has no problem wearing his retro Patrick Roy jersey to games. But there’s not a chance that he’d ever wear the sweater of the team’s starting goaltender and seven-time all-star Carey Price, given Price isn’t yet 32 years old.

An appealing part of this theory is that if everyone abided by it, on any given night the arena would show every era of the team represented. Parent-age Leafs fans would be in their Gilmour and Clark and Sundin jerseys, while those older may rep Sittler, Salming, Keon, Horton or Bower. It would then be just the younger generation wearing the Matthews, the Marners, the Nylanders and the Riellys. From where I sit, that holds some appeal.

What really puts me in the “wear the jersey of any age player you want” camp is when I take it across sports to where I have no involvement outside pure, unsullied fandom. When the Jays were the best team in baseball in 2015 (no further questions your honor) you couldn’t have produced a lick of logic that would have convinced me that I was too old to be wearing a Josh Donaldson jersey (he would’ve been 29 then, I would’ve been 32). Similarly, at age 36 now, the only sports jersey I truly want to own is a Vladdy Guerrero Jr. He’s young, huge, gregarious, upbeat and with an athletic ability to mash baseballs like few others, making him a no-brainer “I’m a fan of that player” jersey purchase for me. In basketball, the combination of hard-worker, family man and on-court accomplishments make Kyle Lowry a candidate too, and he’s just 33.

I think for myself, I get the point George is making. I get it. I just can’t believe there’s a hard and fast rule (one he believes has to exist) for this to work. I like to think there has to be some gray area around your own age, for one. It’s easy for me to have a ton of respect for a guy like Lowry, as not only do I want to show my support, I want to be associated with him and his qualities, too. I think that’s something of an unsaid part of what you’re doing when you choose and wear a jersey – you’re letting people know the type of player you connect with, as that person likely has qualities you’d like to emulate, or you at least admire from a distance. When it comes to things I’ve never really tried to do at all – like say, run a computer company – it’s not hard for me to openly admire people who’ve done it successfully, regardless of their age. That leaves my own ego out of it and allows me to just marvel that another human being’s body, or mind, or whatever, can function so differently from mine and in such an impressive way. For me, the idea of wearing a non-hockey jersey of a younger athlete fits more closely to that.

In the end, I don’t begrudge anyone, whatever decision they make. Inevitably, there will be comments about “shaming” or whatever here, but relax, George’s theory and this discussion are just in fun. Nobody’s suggesting that if you do wear the sweater of a player



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younger than you that you should be ejected from the arena. You've got the majority on your side here. In George's words, it's just a little ... it's just a little this guy → "_(ツ)_/ ", who just happens to be saying "It's just kinda weird."

Try as I might, I can't help but feel there's a little pang of truth somewhere in there.

If you care to hear George lay it out for me, you can do so below (a lot of the same points are made, of course). We start in talking about sports months and jersey numbers before he gets into the nitty-gritty of his argument five minutes in. Skip ahead to exactly that five-minute mark if you'd like to stick with just the conversation we're having here.

Now it's time we pose the same big question to our subscribers. This is a sports fan base that's as knowledgeable as any group of sports fans out there on the internet, and I mean that. The comment sections often highlight that fact.

So what say you? With "1" being "Not at all" and "5" being "Yeah it's fully weird", we want to know:

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The Athletic / By the numbers: Grading every team's contract efficiency

By Dom Luszczyszyn Jul 17, 2019

Last week we went over the league's best and worst contracts, ordered by how much surplus value the deal provides as well as the likelihood the player will be able to provide positive value. That was just a teaser. Today, we rank (almost) every contract on every team in the league based on the same methodology in an attempt to figure out which teams are the most efficient with the money they spend.

The contracts included in the exercise are every healthy, non-ELC skater that my model has a projection for, as well as any dead money a team has on their cap via buyouts, salary retention and cap recapture penalties. That means no RFAs without a deal, no players on an entry-level deal, no players without a significant NHL sample, no players on LTIR and no goalies. My model doesn't currently spit out future win projections for goaltenders or expected contract value either, so they were unfortunately omitted. Unused cap space is also not considered as there's no knowing how that space would be used. This is about the value of each contract currently on the books.

Teams will be graded empirically based on the surplus value they bring in per player contract (all dead money counts as one) as well as the average probability those deals will provide positive value. Both are based on a player's age-adjusted projected win output according to GSVA and the uncertainty in that projection for future seasons, along with the cost of a win on the open market. How much each team spends to obtain those wins will also be graded.

What's being assessed is the future value of the remainder of each contract, meaning what a player has already done holds no merit here. Future value means age is crucial in terms of grading each

contract, with players peaking between the ages of 22-26 and declining afterward.

Surplus value will depend on term, where more seasons give more opportunity to compound value. Positive value probability depends on the certainty of a player's projection which depends on how much variance there has been in the player's past numbers. Longer term means that uncertainty increases.

Each contract will be graded based on where their combined surplus value and positive value probability fall on the following percentile scale. All contract and roster data is as of July 15.

It goes without saying that you will probably not agree with everything that my model spits out and that's OK. GSVA is not infallible and is meant as a starting point for discussion, keeping in mind that there is no bias against any specific team or player and that everyone is being graded under the same scale. Questions and concerns asked respectfully in the comments will be answered.

Without further ado: analyzing, grading and ranking each team and the efficiency of all the contracts they currently have signed.

Considering the team has two of the league's best contracts in Sebastian Aho and Brett Pesce, went to the conference final last season, has an extremely talented young core and cap flexibility, it should come as no surprise that the Hurricanes rank as the league's most cap efficient team. It wasn't all that close either. Carolina ranks first in both average surplus value per player (\$300,000 more than the next best team) and positive value probability (eight percentage points more than the next best team). They're second in cost per win. There's a fair amount of dead money on the books, but that's mainly a receipt for how the team weaponized their cap flexibility, procuring a first-round pick in the process.

Carolina has five contracts on the books in the A-range, the most in the league, and zero in the D range. The league average for both is two. Carolina's advantage is that the team not only has some of the league's best deals on the books but also none that are in any way questionable either. Only two deals on their cap sheet carry a negative surplus value, and both are for under \$500,000 – basically, all their deals are market value or better. Emphasis on the better for their trio of top-pairing calibre defenders (all at under \$6 million) and their two best forwards too. That they also have former second-overall pick Andrei Svechnikov on an ELC is a terrific bonus to all of this too.

The Hurricanes are one of two teams that spend less than \$3 million per win, spending almost \$3 million less than the league average. The reason for that is likely twofold: less media-driven hype for a team that has generally flown under-the-radar, and most Canes earning their value through driving play which isn't generally a hot market commodity. Players being locked up for their peak years helps too.

Remember, this is about contract efficiency (and that goalie contracts don't count). The Golden Knights are completely capped out, yes, but they've still spent that money very wisely to get there. As a new team, they also don't have the same ELC advantage other teams have. The Golden Knights have what should be one of the league's strongest teams next season to show for it. There is some bad money on the books, but a slew of terrific contracts to offset that thanks to the team's strong depth.

Vegas got some of those deals by offering security in exchange for a discount on the AAV. The team has six players signed for five or more years and all six carry a surplus value north of \$10 million total. That's the most in the league. Consider what \$5 million gets on the open market, and whether it's even close to what Jonathan



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Marchessault provides. Look at recent signings of Kevin Hayes and Artemi Panarin and whether Vegas gets more for less with William Karlsson and Mark Stone. On the back end, the team gets two needle-movers for under \$6 million, or one Tyler Myers. And to top it all off, they've got Alex Tuch locked in for a song thanks to the power of RFA leverage. Even Reilly Smith looks like a bargain now, which is funny considering the Panthers offloaded him as a cap dump in the expansion draft in the first place.

Still, some of that bad money does linger and goes to show that almost every team – even the second most efficient – carries some type of cap burden on their books. Vegas is a good example that even the best-managed caps aren't without concerns. The team is paying nearly \$7 million combined for two fourth-line players (luckily for only one more season) – space that could be used on RFA Nikita Gusev. The team also committed four years to Max Pacioretty before he even played a game for them, a deal that has already backfired as he didn't exactly bounce back as expected in his first season in Vegas.

Toronto ranking so high may come as a surprise, but that's mostly because the local media juggernaut tends to blow everything out of proportion in the centre of the hockey universe.

The Auston Matthews deal looks pricey compared to McDavid's, but that's an unfair bar to be compared to as both players will be vastly underpaid for their services given their current projected value and trajectory. Matthews is one of the most efficient players in hockey and projects to be the league's second most valuable player during the life of his contract. The William Nylander deal is far from a problem – assuming he can bounce back with a proper training camp. Signing John Tavares, an obviously elite player, to a very fair deal is not the reason the team has cap issues. The grass is always greener on the other side. Spending to the cap is what contenders have to do.

What the Leafs have going for them is their youth. They're one of the youngest teams in the league and their core will only get better, meaning surplus value only grows in the coming seasons. The chance that they provide positive value collectively as a result is high. The average 65 percent rate is the second-highest in the league behind Carolina. That they have five forwards locked into positive value deals for four more seasons is a big plus, as is having Rielly on one of the league's best contracts for three. Those deals will only look better going forward.

The team wouldn't be here though without the efforts of the front office this summer, clearing most of the team's bad money off the books in dropping Patrick Marleau and exchanging seven years of a terrible defenceman for one. The Leafs are one of six teams in the league without a contract in the D-range and should see 83 percent of their deals provide positive value. That's the second-highest in the league. They also saved space where necessary by downgrading on Kadri, but gaining a capable right shot defenceman on a cheap deal, as well as allocating fourth-line resources to league minimum veterans rather than an expensive Connor Brown.

Like Toronto, the Blues rank so highly based on a high volume of good deals, and few albatrosses. The defending Stanley Cup champions have one bad deal on the books, Alex Steen's, but there are only two years left and it's not so bad compared to what other teams have to deal with. Most of the team's other contracts have a relatively high probability of providing positive value, with the 64 percent average ranking third in the league.

Go down the list and there's a bunch of terrific contracts starting at the top with Vladimir Tarasenko and Ryan O'Reilly, both of whom are players worthy of \$10 million deals. The Colton Parayko contract

is nearly just as big of a steal considering he's a legit No. 1 option making \$5.5 million. Jaden Schwartz, Brayden Schenn and Alex Pietrangolo all look good too, with each being underpaid by about \$3 million.

The Blues are also a strong defensive team and that's part of the reason the players are relatively underpaid – defence doesn't earn the big bucks. The Carl Gunnarsson deal says it all there as he's making Roman Polak money, while actually doing his job in his own end. Add the contributions of Robert Thomas and Vince Dunn on ELCs to the equation, and it's easy to see how the Blues squeeze so much value out of the cap. That they have no dead money is also a bonus.

The Bruins have two of the league's best contracts and another that was close to being an honourable mention making up their entire top line – three players projected to provide over 12 wins of value next season, locked up for under \$20 million for at least the next three seasons. That's a hefty advantage and reason enough for the Bruins to rank as high as they do. It's why the Bruins rank first in average cost per win at just \$2.7 million per. With that, the team has a lot of leeway in assembling a competitive roster. Add Jake DeBrusk on an ELC to that as well.

How they've used that advantage is mostly a mixed bag though, and it's why they don't rank higher. In total, the combination of Patrice Bergeron, Brad Marchand and David Pastrnak provides \$92 million of surplus value, providing 48 wins of value for \$84 million combined over the next three-to-six years. The rest of the team is at minus \$11 million in surplus value, though that might just be worth it considering they just went to the Cup final.

There are some good value deals beyond the top line, like the recently inked Danton Heinen contract and the entire left side of the defence corps, but the rest are market value (David Krejci holds the distinction of having the "fairest" contract according to my model) or worse. In two cases, significantly so.

Where Boston has issues is in its free agency spending. David Backes is still an effective player, but not one that deserves anywhere close to \$6 million. Luckily that deal is up in two years, but that same luck isn't afforded to John Moore who is basically \$2.8 million of dead cap space per year the way the team is using him.

Considering some of the sweetheart deals the team's superstars have signed, it may be a bit of a surprise that the Lightning rank outside the top five. Doing this experiment before Brayden Point signs for well below market value definitely hurts them. So too does excluding players on ELCs, as all four of Anthony Cirelli, Erik Cernak, Mathieu Joseph and Mikhail Sergachev provide big value at a fraction of their worth. That the team has found value through that avenue speaks more to their development than cap efficiency though.

When it comes to actual deals on the books, there's a pretty large dichotomy between the big guns and the rest. No player in the league provides more surplus value than Nikita Kucherov, who's signed for a pittance relative to his actual worth (around \$15 million), while Steven Stamkos and Victor Hedman's deals easily save the Lightning over \$3.5 million per season. The Yanni Gourde deal isn't bad either, but the rest don't really impress.

There's a lot of money and term tied up to forward depth, with Alex Killorn, Ondrej Palat and Tyler Johnson coming in over \$1 million too high relative to their worth over the remainder of the contracts. They may have been worth it at the beginning of their deals but not so much now. That's likely what will play out with Ryan McDonagh too, who is very much worth it for the first half of his deal but likely won't be as he approaches his mid-30s.



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Like the Bruins, the top dogs give the team a lot of leeway in allocating money and it's because of them that the team is third in average surplus value per player (their surplus value is a combined \$84 million). How they've spent it is mediocre, albeit understandable considering the team is in the middle of its championship window.

Keeping the band together is important in that goal, but it may not be long until the team suffers the consequences of that – especially if it means not being able to afford those players coming off ELCs. It is worth noting though that none of the deals are complete albatrosses and are very moveable as a result, something the team has been very adept at doing.

That the Penguins are in the top 10 despite their infamous escapades during free agency should say it all when it comes to team cap efficiency: every team has its problems.

For the Penguins, those problems have all come about recently. Last summer they signed Jack Johnson to a ludicrous contract he doesn't deserve, one my model rates as the 16th worst in hockey (for those wondering why he didn't make last week's list). This summer they learned nothing by signing Brandon Tanev, a third-liner at best, to an overpriced six-year deal. And to top things off, they traded for their two next worst contracts in Erik Gudbranson and Alex Galchenyuk. In those four players, the Penguins are spending \$15.7 million next season to likely subtract 0.4 wins from their bottom line.

So how are the Penguins this high? It's because the rest of the contracts on the books are solid, and like Boston and Tampa Bay, the team has a lot of leeway from huge value deals on three of their stars.

Sidney Crosby was auspiciously missing from last week's best contracts list, but by surplus value alone he would be fifth, while running mate Jake Guentzel is seventh. Crosby makes \$8.7 million per year, but he's arguably worth closer to \$14 million based on the value he provides – an insane number given his age, but not so insane considering his performance last season. On defence, Kris Letang's \$7.3 million contract looks like a steal too as he consistently provides high-level value on the back end for a fraction of what those services have recently gone for on the open market.

When I teased the worst contracts list was coming, many dejected Wild fans in the comments joked that it would be a list full of Wild contracts, and yet here the team is ranked seventh. Hmm.

Minnesota's biggest problem is in net, and if those contracts were factored in here they'd likely rank lower as a result. By expected goals saved, Dubnyk has been one of the league's worst goalies over the last couple years.

Aside from that though, the forward contracts on the books give plenty of reason for pessimism. It's a hodgepodge of bad value aside from the terrific (but short) Eric Staal deal and the bargain Jason Zucker deal that for some reason the team wanted to unload. Zach Parise had a resurgence last season that puts some extra life on his deal, but the last four years might get ugly. Neither of the new signees, Mats Zuccarello and Ryan Hartman, project to offer positive value. And of course there's the Victor Rask deal, the worst one here as the rehabilitation project hasn't exactly gone according to plan.

Defence is the team's bread and butter though (hence why Dubnyk looks so bad after accounting for context), and that's where the team finds value. Defence is often underrated and it's likely why my model (now after some improvements anyways) sees the Wild group providing more value than expected. Matt Dumba and Jared Spurgeon are the best deals here, but everyone on the back end looks like a good bet to provide positive value. The Wild are one of three teams without a single bad contract on the blue line.

All the defencemen have a pretty high chance of providing positive value, and aside from Rask, the forwards aren't bad in that regard either. The Wild rank seventh by that measure and it's the main reason they're ranked so highly.

The Predators have a pretty clean cap sheet and one of the best – if the centre position wasn't acknowledged at all. The team's two best wingers and two best defenders are on incredible value deals that could challenge for the league's best, with all four being underpaid by about \$4 million or so. There's also decent value for much of the Ryan Ellis deal, and good savings on one-year terms for the team's other top-six wingers, Mikael Granlund and Craig Smith. There's a lot of reason to like what Nashville has done as a majority of the deals are very reasonable.

But those, centres ... yikes. They're the team's four worst contracts on the books by far. Much has been made about the team's epic search for a top-flight centre as well as centre depth and though the team has put in a lot of effort to do so, the end result still isn't very pretty. The team added Nick Bonino to complement Ryan Johansen, but he's struggled for most of his Predators tenure. They traded for Kyle Turris to bridge the gap between the two, but he fell off a cliff last season. Now they've signed Matt Duchene to a pretty bloated deal on top of all that and while he is an upgrade, he still likely won't be the high-end first-line centre the team has been searching for.

The latest deal means the team has \$26.1 million in commitments at the position, the second-most in hockey, barely behind Toronto (depending on how one configures the Oilers lineup). By GSVAs, their centre core ranks 20th, though.

The Jets round out the top 10, but their cap picture remains unclear with some high profile RFAs remaining unsigned. There's still plenty of room for them, but their deals would alter how the rest is perceived.

Overall, it's not bad. Mark Scheifele is on one of the best deals in hockey and would easily be worth \$10 million on the open market. Nikolaj Ehlers is extremely underrated and is only getting better, while deals for Josh Morrissey, Adam Lowry and Dustin Byfuglien also look solid.

What hurts Winnipeg is a couple of bad contracts on the books as both Dmitry Kulikov and Bryan Little are earning far too much for what they bring to the table. Little having five years left on his deal is a huge hindrance.

John Klingberg deservedly made the best contracts list, but the team confusingly ended up using that surplus value on his main partner Esa Lindell. Klingberg is the main driving force of that pair and Lindell nearly eats up all the surplus value that Klingberg provides. Combined, the duo is still underpaid, but it's still not an ideal use of resources and a rare RFA deal that doesn't look strong.

Elsewhere it's a mixed bag. Alex Radulov wasn't far off the best contracts list himself as he's been a beast in Dallas; a rare UFA steal on a contract that did look scary when signed. Joe Pavelski's deal looks like it could be solid in that vein too. The two big-money deals for Tyler Seguin and Jamie Benn are OK in aggregate, but the latter doesn't look like one that'll age that well. The depth deals range from decent (Jason Dickinson, Corey Perry) to poor (Andrew Cogliano, Blake Comeau, Roman Polak). The Martin Hanzal contract remains one of the worst values for the team, but it thankfully will be off the books next season, and there's a good chance he ends up on LTIR anyway.

The four contracts in the A-range are the second highest only to Carolina (no other teams have four or more), with the top line and Mark Giordano all coming in at or close to \$4 million less than their



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worth. Those offer some big savings that can be used to complement talent well. The Flames falter though by having some ugly deals that mitigate that advantage. Calgary is top-10 in surplus value and cost per win, but 17th in positive value probability.

The James Neal one is, of course, the sketchiest deal after a dismal first season in Calgary. Without much power-play time to boost his value, Neal's stock plummeted and he's now being paid close to \$6 million to provide fourth-line value with little hope for a return to form. Michael Stone is added dead weight as someone being paid \$3.5 million to stay in the press box, though at least there's only one year left there.

The most surprising grade likely comes via Mikael Backlund, with my model pegging his deal as the team's second-worst contract. Backlund has long been a fancy stats darling and his contract looked like it could be a bargain as a result, but his impact on play-driving has lessened over the last few seasons (with the emergence of linemate Matthew Tkachuk softening the blow of his actual results) and at age 30 things likely only get worse from here. He's still a solid player, but I'm a little skeptical at how that deal ages.

With a 60 percent chance of the team's contracts panning out overall, the Sharks rank top five in positive value probability. That's thanks to incredibly strong deals for Timo Meier and Kevin Labanc on top of a high number of players on positive value deals. Two-thirds of the Sharks contracts fall into that category.

It's the deals that don't that bring the Sharks down in a big way (and this doesn't even include the hideous Martin Jones pact). Marc-Edouard Vlasic made the list of worst contracts (though a bounce-back is very possible with a new partner), but he's not alone in lengthy overpays for elder players in San Jose. Logan Couture is a great player (and this doesn't factor for his playoff clutch factor), but \$8 million per year is pretty steep for his ages 30-37 seasons. Evander Kane makes a million less for two fewer seasons and is a similarly bad bet. And while Erik Karlsson is still one of the league's best defencemen, recent injuries make me worry, after seeing how far Drew Doughty fell off last year. The Brent Burns deal at least still looks good though, so it's not all bad for the team's long-term commitments.

The Sharks are the highest-ranked team with a negative surplus value and I wouldn't be surprised to see them drop down this list once the window closes.

Montreal has four problem contracts amongst their skaters (seeing as the massive money allotted to Carey Price is the biggest one and not accounted for here). Up front, Jonathan Drouin was paid for his potential, but his lack of defensive acumen is holding him back from reaching that. The Karl Alzner deal was a mistake from Day 1 and the team is paying for it now. It seems they didn't really learn from that mistake seeing as they signed a comparably bad player in Ben Chiarot for the same term and \$1.1 million less. Then there's Shea Weber, who has been excellent of late and should have years left where he's worth it, but five years after that could be an issue.

The rest though? Not bad. Not bad at all. The Brett Kulak deal was a nice bit of work, and there's a nice stable of positive value up front in Max Domi, Phillip Danault, Artturi Lehkonen and Tomas Tatar. Brendan Gallagher carries the best deal for Montreal though, a steal at \$3.8 million per year and a contender for best value contract if only it was a bit longer.

The one issue here might be the lack of commitment up front. The team's forward depth is its biggest strength at the moment and there could be a lot of turnover and hefty raises in line to those guys.

Flexibility is a good thing as it'll allow the team to cut bait when necessary, but they'll have to pony up for the ones they do decide to keep. With 14 contracts for NHL-calibre forwards on the books, Charles Hudon left to sign and prospects knocking on the door, the forward group is getting mighty crowded. Maybe that internal competition and future flexibility will pay off.

The Capitals are the definition of average and are the highest-rated team without a single contract in the A-range. They come in 15th here and pretty much every player is relatively close to fair value. Nicklas Backstrom and Radko Gudas are the biggest bargains, but come in at one year. Evgeny Kuznetsov has one of the lowest surplus values due to poor defensive play, but over six years it's not much to haggle over considering his sublime offensive talent. Even criticized deals at the time of signing like T.J. Oshie's, Tom Wilson's and John Carlson's look decent now.

The one issue is with Dmitry Orlov who has provided top pair value commensurate of his paycheck in the past, but slipped tremendously last season. Perhaps that was more his partner, the departed Matt Niskanen, than him. We'll see if a fresh start with a new linemate will do him good.

The Avalanche have a mountain of cap space with only a couple of free agents left to sign, and if any team can weaponize that it's Colorado. We saw that once when they acquired starting goaltender Philipp Grubauer and they have the flexibility to do it again. In Nathan MacKinnon, the team has one of, if not, the best contracts in hockey, with Gabriel Landeskog and Nazem Kadri being solid bargains on top of that.

So why are they this low on the list? The team is ranked higher when it comes to surplus value and cost per win, but their average positive value probability is below average. That comes from a few overpayments on defence, mainly Erik Johnson and Ian Cole, both of whom are making a bit too much, and in Johnson's case for a bit too long. Aside from them, and the star players on the team, there's a lot of fair value deals here. Nothing wrong with that, but it explains why they're closer to the middle of the pack.

The other reason is that Colorado should see a lot of value coming from their trio of players currently on ELCS, especially defenders Samuel Girard and Cale Makar.

A little below average in surplus value, a little bit above when it comes to probability of adding value. The best deals belong to Josh Anderson and Seth Jones, but both pale in comparison to what other teams can offer. Jones had a bit of a down year last season after a Norris-worthy campaign the year prior which is why my model likes his contract but doesn't love it as much as others. Cam Atkinson provides the most surplus value due to his length, but that also means more uncertainty in how it'll turn out.

The Blue Jackets have two deals on the books in the D-range and those are the largest issues here. Alex Wennberg and Brandon Dubinsky are signed for a combined \$10.8 million and neither can really be counted on as top six players the way they're paid to be.

The Flyers are right near the middle, which is exactly where they almost always end up. If you do a list and the Flyers aren't painfully mediocre, you've probably messed up somewhere along the way.

The Flyers have a plethora of deals that appear to be bad value – three of which came onto the books this summer in Kevin Hayes, Justin Braun and Matt Niskanen – but four deals that save them from themselves. My model rated the Sean Couturier deal as the third-best in hockey and that alone gives the team a lot of leeway. Claude Giroux doesn't come as cheap, but \$8.3 million is still a discount for his services. On defence, Travis Sanheim's bridge deal is going to



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be a steal, while Shayne Gostisbehere, despite his warts, is still a great asset on his current contract.

I bet you're surprised that the Oilers aren't in the bottom five or even bottom 10. That's how good the contracts for Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl are with each deserving significantly more. Compared to the market, those two are a steal, and will likely remain so for the entirety of their lengthy contracts, especially as the cap rises. That's the beauty of locking in young players for their prime years. Large shifts in their underlying numbers caused lower certainties for positive probability keeping them off the best contracts list, but by surplus value alone, they both rank in the top 10, with McDavid behind only Kucherov.

Those two are also the team's only real lengthy commitments which greatly drops the team's cost per win allotment near the top of the league, and gives them positive surplus value overall. They're the lowest-ranked team with positive surplus value though.

It's the rest of the team that's the problem and why the Oilers average positive value probability is only 42 percent, the sixth-lowest mark in the league. A large majority of their other deals will likely bust with some exception. Their \$11 million in dead money is also one of the league's highest marks.

The good thing at least is the team does have flexibility going forward with many of the deals expiring soon – though the biggest problem, one of the worst contracts in the league in Milan Lucic's deal, remains for four more seasons. It probably also stings that the team's worst contract on defence belongs to Adam Larsson, considering what the team gave up to acquire him.

If goalie contracts were included, it's likely the Panthers would be much further down the list as spending that much for that long on a guy in his 30s is a huge gamble. That the team has two of the best contracts in hockey with Aleksander Barkov and Jonathan Huberdeau speaks volumes about the rest of the deals. Florida is one of 14 teams with multiple contracts in the A-range.

It's mostly thanks to the defence group commitments, with the team's top four being locked in at a very high price for at least the next three seasons. The Panthers are spending \$24.3 million for the services of Aaron Ekblad, Keith Yandle, Anton Stralman and Mike Matheson and you can argue not a single one is a legitimate No. 1 defenceman. That's a lot of money for a team that was one of the worst defensive outfits last season. Some of that was on the goaltending, but the team sure didn't make things easy back there.

The Panthers are allocating the fourth-highest amount of dollars on D-men (usually a bad sign to begin with since forwards drive the bus more), but rank 29th at the position according to GSVA. Over half of the team's deals are positive, especially at forward, but the high cost of the defence relative to its ability brings the team way down.

The Devils have a lot of cap space to play with and may be able to weaponize it, but for now, the deals they do have are mostly mediocre. Taylor Hall is an incredible value at \$6 million, but only has a single season left. Kyle Palmieri is up there too but only has two.

The rest of the deals on the books are really just average or worse, although it is worth mentioning the team doesn't have a huge albatross on the books either – not with Travis Zajac up in two seasons. Factor in that the team's top two centres, both of whom were first-overall picks, are on ELCs and the team's cap sheet is in a good spot, albeit unremarkable right now. The Hall factor is huge.

The Sabres rank 30th in positive value probability, but 22nd in surplus value and 21st in cost per win. The reason for that is due to

the flexibility of the team's cap sheet in relation to which players are signed long term and which aren't. Jack Eichel and Colin Miller bring the team the most surplus value while Jeff Skinner is signed for close to market value. Those players greatly reduce the price of a win every year they're on the books and offset the guys that drive it up, most of whom are only on one-year pacts. Aside from bad deals for Kyle Okposo and Rasmus Ristolainen, the future cap sheet looks pretty clean.

The immediate present isn't great though. The list goes on for the Sabres that are getting more than their worth, but they won't be here for long. Zemgus Girgensons, Johan Larsson, Jimmy Vesey, Vladimir Sobotka, Zach Bogosian and Marco Scandella are all replaceable talents and likely gone after next season. That they're only here for a year though is what drives the certainty that they won't be worth their contracts way up though. Combined, they'll be worth minus-2.1 wins next season, but somehow cost the team \$18.1 million. That's rough.

The Sabres have eight players with a positive value probability lower than 20 percent, the most in the league. The Sabres also rank dead last with only 24 percent of their contracts being above average value. One day things will be good in Buffalo, but that time isn't now. The team just doesn't have the right pieces surrounding its talented young core.

It'll be interesting to see how this team fares away from Randy Carlyle hockey and I'd imagine this cap sheet will look a lot better when that time comes. For now, it ranks near the bottom thanks in large part to Cam Fowler, as he drags the team's total surplus value down. He has one of the worst contracts in hockey. Adam Henrique isn't far off from that list either as he's making top-six centre money for far too long. It would've been much worse if Ryan Kesler's deal counted.

In Ondrej Kase though, the Ducks have one of the best contracts and that offsets some of the badness from the rest. It's only a two-year deal, but it's for pennies on the dollar. Rickard Rakell had a down season just like the rest of the Ducks, but he's a steal too.

Small victory: the Canucks aren't in the bottom five. They're extremely close though and it comes from their unfettered desire to be big players in free agency despite their contention window not being open yet. Through that avenue they acquired Loui Eriksson in 2016, then Antoine Roussel, Tim Schaller and Jay Beagle last summer, and this summer signed Tyler Myers, Micheal Ferland and Jordie Benn. In total, the team is spending \$86 million on those players. The return on investment: 6.7 wins over the life of the respective deals, a cost of \$12.8 million per win. Overall, the team is bottom five in how much money they spend per win and those deals are a big part of it. Almost all of that value comes from Roussel, Ferland and Benn too – the lone deals that look like they might be OK. The others are a disaster; dead cap space waiting to happen.

The Canucks already rate pretty high in that they have \$11.2 million of dead money on the books, but they add to that with the players they spend it on. You can add Brandon Sutter to that list too. He's one of four Vancouver contracts in the D-range, a distinction that ties the team for most such contracts in the league.

There are some good values here that mitigate some of the issues like Bo Horvat's sensible contract, J.T. Miller's courtesy of Tampa Bay and depth signings like Josh Leivo, Oscar Fantenberg and Alex Biega – but overall it's pretty bleak. It somehow leaves Vancouver – one of the worst teams last season – with a limited amount of cap space to sign Brock Boeser. If not for Elias Pettersson doing god's work on an ELC, this team wouldn't have much sense for optimism.



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Even with him, I'm not so sure thanks to their inexplicable lack of cap flexibility.

It's probably not a great sign when a team's best forward contract is for their fourth-line centre that makes \$3.4 million. Casey Cizikas isn't your typical fourth-line centre and is worth that, plus a little more, but it still speaks to the poor quality of the remainder of the team's deals up front. The Cizikas deal is the only that carries positive expected value among the forwards.

The newly inked Anders Lee deal should be fine for the next little bit, but the back half could be scary. The Jordan Eberle and Brock Nelson pacts are worse, although not inexplicable. Those three are added to a collection of deals that already look sketchy including Cal Clutterbuck and Leo Komarov somehow making \$6.5 million combined and Andrew Ladd still has four more seasons left. The sheer amount of term is difficult to ignore as the Islanders have locked into a forward group that struggles to score. There's seven forwards here still on the books for the 2021-22 season, the second-most in the league behind only Washington. Is this really the forward group to commit to?

The team's saving grace is on defence where all their best contracts lie. The Adam Pelech and Scott Mayfield contracts were largely questionable at the time due to their term, but the two have emerged into legitimate top four options under Barry Trotz and are a bargain at their current price. Same goes for Ryan Pulock and Devon Toews, though they only have one year left.

Having said that, the two worst contracts on the team after Ladd's are there on the back end with Nick Leddy and Johnny Boychuk both fading immensely over the last couple seasons. They're the highest paid there and have three years left. Add those commitments to the pile of forwards with term the Islanders have, and it's difficult to be too optimistic about the team's distant future, especially considering the age of some of those players.

There were a lot of Rangers fans clamouring for respect for Mika Zibanejad's deal, and while it's a massive bargain and easily the team's best, there are others that are stronger for longer on other clubs. Chris Kreider represents the team's only other good deal. After that, it's market value or worse.

Emphasis on worse when it comes to the team's defence corps. Big free-agent splash from a couple of years back, Kevin Shattenkirk, is the "best" contract here, but still not a very good one. The other three are that much worse. Brendan Smith should be making the league minimum, Brady Skjei took a step back and shouldn't be locked in for term and Marc Staal is massive hindrance providing well below replacement level value and carries almost no chance of being a positive asset.

There are some that believe an injection of youth plus the addition of Artemi Panarin can speed up the team's rebuild, but the team still looks a couple of years away, especially with some of the contracts left on the books.

I'm not entirely sure what the Coyotes are up to when it comes to giving out long-term deals. It seems as if they're locking into what they project from the player's future value and paying a premium on top of that. It's a commendable move given most RFAs are underpaid for their future services, but I'm not sure I get it for the players they did it for. It'll likely work for Jakob Chychrun, but I don't see it for Nick Schmaltz and Christian Dvorak. Both are fine, but they'll need to massively step up in order to be worth their cap hits, and they haven't shown enough to suggest they can – though pairing Schmaltz with Kessel should help. It's a better bet on players in their prime than with UFAs, but still a bad one with these two.

They also have Oliver Ekman-Larsson on the books for the full eight years, and it's hard to see him being worth his deal after the past few seasons he's had. He's being paid like an elite No. 1, and based on his ability to drive play at both ends of the ice the last few seasons, I'm not sure he's all that close to that level.

Maybe that's an issue with the supporting cast around him, but what's strange is the team is paying a lot of money for a roster that looks less than average. The Coyotes are somehow capped out and it's because they're paying sky-high prices for a win, the fifth-highest rate in the league. In fact, the Coyotes have the second-highest defence payroll but are nowhere close to earning on-ice value commensurate of that.

A team that once stressed the importance of cost per point is dead last in cost per projected win here. Go figure. The Senators have the least amount of money committed, but what they've committed to isn't all that great. Their two longest deals are spent on extremely replaceable players who make far too much, but perhaps that's not a huge problem for a team that needs to find a way to the cap floor. If Ottawa can use its cap space to buy assets, it might all be worth it, but in their current state, it's difficult to see them even doing that. The best deal here belongs to Christian Wolanin, but there's no guarantee the team will even use him anyways, which is a shame since he's likely an improvement over some of the other drudge the team is trotting out.

The Blackhawks are handcuffed by the de facto worst contract in hockey belonging to Brent Seabrook, who is somehow signed for \$6.875 million for five more seasons. The mind reels. But that's not their only issue. The Jonathan Toews deal hasn't aged well (though Patrick Kane should still be a market value commodity for the duration of his deal), Artem Anisimov is closer to a league minimum player than he is to a \$5 million one and Duncan Keith is firmly in the twilight of his career.

The defence is of big concern here as it was one of the league's worst outfits last year and is rather expensive for that service. Improvements have been made in the additions of Calvin de Haan and Olli Maatta, but they're neither the answer nor come cheap. The Blackhawks are spending the third most on defence (spending bad money on defence seems to be a recurring theme in this post), but are in the league's bottom five at the position (also a recurring theme).

Aside from Erik Gustafsson, who provided big value on the power play last season on an extremely cheap deal, the team is light on good value contracts other than Alex DeBrincat and Dylan Strome currently on their ELCs. It's all a mess and one of the worst cap situations in hockey.

They're not last, but it doesn't get much worse than the Kings. That's mostly due to their two cornerstone pieces not living up to expectations last season but have the potential to bounce back and lift the Kings out of this current predicament.

Drew Doughty made the worst contracts list and that's because his poor 2018-19 made his new contract an extremely high bar to clear for all eight seasons. Anze Kopitar, now 32, took a massive step back after an MVP-calibre season the year prior and has a similarly high bar to clear over the next five years. It's hard to be efficient with the cap when your two best players aren't earning their cut. It's the main reason the Kings are dead last by a lot when it comes to surplus value per player.

In their defence, it's hard to provide value when the rest of the roster is what they're working with. There's just not much to like here. The Kings have just a single contract at a "B" or higher, and that's for a near league-minimum defender. The supporting cast of Dustin



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Brown, Jeff Carter and Alec Martinez aren't providing much positive value either. Then there's Ilya Kovalchuk who was supposed to rejuvenate this offence, but instead was a shade of his past self and is a millstone on the team's cap at \$6.3 million for the next two seasons. The Kings also have the most dead money on their books in the league, making it even harder to remain competitive.

Last, and certainly least, it's Detroit. How could it be any other team? With four contracts in the D-range on the books, the Red Wings are in a four-way tie for the most bad deals in the league. Where Detroit differs is that the other teams have a few more above average deals to offset the pain. Not Detroit who have as many toxic deals as above-average ones. Those belong to Dylan Larkin, Anthony Mantha, Tyler Bertuzzi and Andreas Athanasiou – four forwards that provide the bulk of the team's on-ice value. Without them, this team would be cooked.

The biggest issue for Detroit is how much the team is spending for a marginal win over the remainder of their contracts. It's not just the alarming number of poor deals, or the certainty in how bad those deals are, but the fact that those deals are mostly for players that bring huge negative value. The team is spending \$14.5 million per win, the league's second-highest mark. That contributes to the team's 35 percent average for positive value probability which is the league's lowest mark, stemming from seven deals sitting at an under 20 percent success rate.

The team signed a replacement level forward to a two-year deal worth \$3 million per, and it's somehow not even close to being the worst deal on the books. That honour could go to Trevor Daley or Danny DeKeyser or Jonathan Ericsson or Darren Helm or Frans Nielsen or Justin Abdelkader and the fact the team has this many options is why they're ranked so low.

(Abdelkader made the honourable mentions list on last week's worst contracts, but through my own personal error should've actually been ... second. I wrote down that he only had three years left, but he actually has four somehow. My sincerest apologies).

None of them are that expensive, but those deals add up into death by a thousand cuts. Those seven deals are collectively worth \$69 million in financial commitment over the next several seasons, \$29 million of which is tied up in next year's cap. The Red Wings stand to lose just over five wins of value combined from those players over the entirety of their contract, with 40 percent of that coming in 2019-20. That's as bad as it gets.

Well, actually, it gets worse. The next five deals are worth \$17 million and are worth negative 0.1 wins on top of that. I just can't fathom that a professional hockey team is spending over \$80 million on players that are actively hurting the team's chances of winning. New GM Steve Yzerman has his work cut out for him.

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Sportsnet.ca / NHL's Top 10 UFAs remaining: Latest rumours, reports

Luke Fox | July 16, 2019, 7:32 PM

Two weeks after the madness, here we sit.

National Hockey League general managers will need to dig deeper, and jobless players may need to lower their asking prices, but there are still a few gems — or at least some worthy gambles and depth additions — to be unearthed from 2019's UFA class after the July 1 frenzy.

We round up the rumours and assess the value of the free agents who are taking a more patient approach this summer (in some cases, that's even by choice) and are still up for grabs a week in mid-July.

1. Jake Gardiner

Age: 28

Position: Defence

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$4.05 million

Gardiner, a Minnesota native, enjoyed being a Maple Leaf, and despite his defensive lapses — which can be magnified — the Leafs weren't happy to let him walk.

The Canada Day acquisition of Tyson Barrie, however, officially brings Gardiner's tenure in Toronto to a close. (Rumour had it, the defenceman was partly waiting to see if there was a way Kyle Dubas could make room for a return.)

That Gardiner's back ailed him during the post-season and he considered surgery should serve as a yellow flag for pursuant teams.

Yet he's a solid power-play quarterback, an excellent skater and passer, and a 50-point defender when healthy. He should be trying to fetch a long-term deal in the ballpark of \$6 million to \$7 million annually, using Tyler Myers' deal in Vancouver as his base.

The Chicago Blackhawks and Montreal Canadiens were rumoured to be interested in Gardiner, while the Toronto Sun's Steve Simmons reported Florida, L.A. and hometown Minnesota as some of the player's preferred destinations.

I made a case for Detroit's Steve Yzerman to inquire.

Now that Habs GM Marc Bergevin swung and missed on the Sebastian Aho offer sheet, does Gardiner become his next serious target? Or will lefty Ben Chiarot — signed last week — suffice?

The New Jersey Devils certainly have the cap and roster space to take a run here.

How much of the delay is based on Gardiner carefully selecting his next home versus clubs being wary of the puck-mover's injured back?

For our money, he's the best talent still unclaimed.

2. Joe Thornton

Age: 40

Position: Centre

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$5 million

When the ageless Jumbo Joe announced at the NHL Awards that he was keen to keep playing, GM Doug Wilson described the news as "a pleasant surprise."

The cap-crunched Wilson let UFAs Joonas Donskoi and captain Joe Pavelski walk for more money elsewhere on July 1 as he made re-signing RFAs Timo Meier and Kevin Labanc (a steal!) his priority.

A popular theory: Labanc was convinced to accept a \$1-million deal in part to save money for Thornton.



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"I think you know the relationship we have with Jumbo. He and I have had conversations and talk every couple days. We'll get that resolved in due time," Wilson said of Thornton's inevitable extension.

"Just getting Timo done as recently as we did was where most of my focus was. We'll start exploring whatever else we may do."

Question: If an active Jim Rutherford can be elected into the Hockey Hall of Fame, why can't we just slide Jumbo in there already?

It's the goats birthday today! Joe Thornton it's always an honor to watch you play it puts a smile on my face like a kid in a candy store! 40 years young and can't wait for the new season
pic.twitter.com/jcKmh5vPBi

— Harris (@RHarris_19) July 2, 2019

3. Ben Hutton

Age: 26

Position: Defence

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$2.8 million

Of all the UFAs still floating out there, none averaged more time on ice than Hutton (22:21). The left-shot defender is coming off a nice little bounce-back season after a dismal 2017-18 but was curiously not qualified by the Vancouver Canucks, and they lost a 26-year-old defenceman for nothing.

No doubt, Jordie Benn is a decent replacement for Hutton, and he should slide in as a third-pairing guy in Vancouver. So would Montreal (Benn's former club) take a look at Hutton, or is Ben Chiarot enough?

The L.A. Kings also reportedly expressed interest here.

We wonder if the Ottawa-area native would consider the Sens, who have plenty of cap space and could use more experienced NHLers.

If you're a believer in plus/minus, it doesn't paint a pretty picture here: Hutton has been a dash-21 or worse in three of his four NHL seasons. He's a fifth-rounder who took a step last season, and at 26 his best days should still lie ahead. Next to Gardiner, he's the most intriguing defenceman available.

Nothing imminent on Ben Hutton front. Don't expect anything to happen today. Several teams still in pursuit to varying degrees, including MTL & LA (@DennisTFP reported earlier LA initial offer was turned down, they could circle back).

— David Pagnotta (@TheFourthPeriod) July 1, 2019

The longer Ben Hutton stays on the market, the more I suspect the #Canucks are working on a Chris Tanev trade. That would allow Jordie Benn to slide to the right and open up a spot for Hutton to return.

— Stephan Roget (@StephanRoget) July 2, 2019

4. Justin Williams

Age: 37

Position: Right wing

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$4.5 million

Age ain't nothin' but a number. Mr. Game 7 enjoyed his most productive season (23 goals, 53 points) in seven years last winter with the Hurricanes, captaining Carolina to its best season in a decade. Teammate-turned-coach Rod Brind'Amour called Williams

the club's most important player, and not just because he invented the Storm Surge.

The three-time Stanley Cup winner will be 38 when the puck drops on 2019-20, so it's understandable that he's seriously weighing retirement. Incredibly, Williams has missed just three games total over his past eight seasons — that includes six deep playoff runs.

"We've been in contact with Justin here recently," Hurricanes general manager Don Waddell said on July 2. "He hasn't given us 100 per cent yet which way he's going to go. I think he potentially could be leaning toward playing, but I think in the next few weeks it will shake out."

Williams built a house in Raleigh and would prefer not to move his family again.

"I'm going to take my time and make sure I make the right one, right?" Williams said upon season's end.

"Because if I'm all in, I'm going to be all in. If I'm not quite all there, then I have to reassess the situation. I'm not going to be good if I'm 85 per cent all in. I've got to be all in. That's the only [thing] that's fair to me, fair to the teammates, fair to everybody."

Waddell: "I think Justin Williams could be leaning towards playing."

— Sara Civ (@SaraCivian) July 2, 2019

5. Derick Brassard

Age: 31

Position: Centre

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$5 million

Brassard put up a career-best 60 points with the Rangers in 2014-15. The following season, he rang up 27 goals. Since then, he's gradually been on a downward slide, playing with four franchises over the past two seasons and failing to stick.

Bad fits? Player in sharp decline?

Brassard is a centre who has shown in the past he can both check and score, and yet he's nowhere near a \$5-million asset anymore. Until he proves otherwise, he's a third-liner.

Available centremen are scarce, however. This feels like a case of a player needing to lower his asking price, and we wouldn't rule out a return to Columbus or New York, where Brassard enjoyed his most success.

The Oilers are also in the market for affordable veteran forwards.

Montreal has been aggressive in its hunt for centre depth. Would Bergevin give Brassard a look?

What sort of contract could Derick Brassard (and other NHL free agents still on the market) expect to receive?
<https://t.co/fC43ApxPL8>

— Taylor Haase (@TaylorHaasePGH) July 5, 2019

6. Pat Maroon

Age: 31

Position: Left wing / Right wing

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$1.75 million

Maroon took a one-year, bet-on-himself deal at this time last summer to be able to spend more time with his son, Anthony.



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(Hometown discounts still exist!) And he was rewarded with some quality family time and a Stanley freaking Cup.

Now, he's right back to square one.

Not the fleetest of foot, Maroon is a big body who can crash the crease and is well-suited to playoff hockey. The Edmonton Oilers and Calgary Flames are among the clubs who have expressed interest.

A return to the Blues — who have several key RFAs to sort out — cannot be completely ruled out but appears doubtful.

The Blues' top beat writer, Jeremy Rutherford, reports that Maroon's offers are all for one year, again.

Update on Maroon: a week into free agency, he remains unsigned. He has offers, but the belief is they're all for one year. He's looking for a couple years and the right fit and is willing to be patient. Several sources have said the Blues' interest remains limited. #stlblues

— Jeremy Rutherford (@jprutherford) July 8, 2019

Edmonton looking into returning Pat Maroon to the fold. Oilers among a few teams pitching for the big LW.

— Mark Spector (@SportsnetSpec) July 1, 2019

Meanwhile, Maroon spent the weekend coaching his son Anthony's roller hockey team, which won the @TORHS_2H4I in Tampa, Fla. They received a Cup and when players celebrated in the locker room, Maroon went to the concession stand, bought a few Powerades, came back and filled it up. pic.twitter.com/ThxC7IGEC3

— Jeremy Rutherford (@jprutherford) July 8, 2019

7. Brian Boyle

Age: 34

Position: Centre / Left wing

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$2.55 million

Mostly we wanted to include Boyle here because of his incredible July 1 tweet (see below), but it helps that the veteran role player is still an effective centreman who can do all the little things (kill penalties, win faceoffs, block shots, provide leadership) coaches and teammates respect.

Boyle would be a nice add for the Oilers' culture, so it's intriguing that Edmonton is one of the clubs reportedly on his list.

Brian Boyle is reviewing his options. Told 5 teams have serious interest in signing him. A decision could come later today, but he's not rushing things.

— David Pagnotta (@TheFourthPeriod) July 2, 2019

8. Deryk Engelland

Age: 37

Position: Defence

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$1.5 million

Two days prior to free agency's opening, it appeared Engelland's resigning with Vegas on a one-year deal was inevitable. So, it is a bit curious that by July 8 an announcement on the veteran has yet to be made. He's been remarkably durable in his mid-30s and, birth certificate be damned, is arguably the best right-shot defender still out there.

Yes, Engelland is getting up there in, um, experience and down there in foot speed, but on a cheap, one-year term, he can still munch a lot of blue-collar minutes (19:52) and provide the kind of hard defence that should make him worth every penny.

McPhee notes they're working on a contract with Deryk Engelland right now.

Based on his tone and mention of working out bonuses it sounds like he's very confident Engo will be back #VegasBorn

— Jesse Merrick (@JesseNews3LV) June 29, 2019

Deryk Engelland at \$1 million, Malcolm Subban at \$800K and a Nikita Gusev trade would give the Golden Knights a cap-compliant roster...with what's left of my car payment to spare #VegasBorn pic.twitter.com/CR0GURL5NX

— Justin Emerson (@J15Emerson) July 2, 2019

9. Jason Pominville

Age: 36

Position: Right wing

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$5.6 million

Welcome to Pominville, where the unemployment rate is 100 per cent... for now. The 1,060-game veteran certainly isn't worth the \$5.6 million he was raking in Buffalo last season, but he's put together consecutive 16-goal, 30-point seasons, could contribute on a second PP unit and won't take foolish penalties. If he wants to keep the dream alive, Pominville might have to earn a spot on a PTO or take a third-line role on a club in need of wing depth.

I know they didn't/don't have much money to play with but yikes. I feel like, at the very least, they should be in on a guy like Jason Pominville. Has averaged 1.71 points/60 at 5v5 over last two years and could give them a bit of pop on the wings at a cheap price.

— Todd Cordell (@ToddCordell) July 15, 2019

10. Ben Lovejoy

Age on July 1: 35

Position: Defence

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$2.67 million

As soon as Erik Karlsson re-signed in San Jose, right-shot defenders became the weakest position among this summer's free-agent class, and it's not even close. A stay-at-home veteran like Lovejoy could land a decent contract simply based on a lack of available talent. After Lovejoy, we're talking about names like Dan Girardi.

Buyers know what they're getting in Lovejoy: a stay-at-home, experienced, durable defender who can kill penalties and log minutes. Dallas liked the Reverend enough that they traded New Jersey the younger Connor Carrick plus a third-rounder to rent him for its 13-game playoff run.

If anyone knew Ben Lovejoy was this valuable, might've gotten more than a 3rd for him. Devs look lost.

— Arthur Staple (@StapeAthletic) February 23, 2019

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Sportsnet.ca / NHL's Top 15 RFAs of 2019: Latest rumours, reports

Luke Fox | @lukefoxjokebox July 16, 2019

Blame the centre of the hockey universe.

Over the past eight months, Toronto Maple Leafs restricted free agents William Nylander and Auston Matthews each played a role in rewriting the rules for stars coming out of their entry-level deals.

One pushed his rookie general manager to the final five minutes of the signing deadline and reaped a generous financial reward as a result. The other inked a massive bridge/commitment hybrid deal that will walk him to unrestricted free agency at the age of 26.

Carolina's star RFA centre, Sebastian Aho, signed a July 1 offer sheet with Montreal. The Hurricanes matched, walking another explosive talent to UFA status at 26.

San Jose's excellent RFA forwards, Timo Meier (four years) and Kevin Labanc (one year), also opted for shorter term.

The negotiating leverage has nudged toward the young stars ruling a faster, more skilled league. That's evident by the number of emerging stars who turned down in-season offers, opting instead to put up pinball numbers and cash in on the bets they made on themselves.

Here's a look at our top 15 RFAs, whose sluggish contract negotiations we're most intrigued to see play out based on their 2018-19 performance.

This summer's class — loaded with Canadian-team stars — will have an especially significant impact on the salary cap pictures in Toronto, Winnipeg, Tampa and Calgary.

Several of these restricted free agents have had the option of discussing offer sheets with opposing clubs since late June. Some have filed for arbitration, which will expedite the process.

For others? Well, the next true pressure point won't arrive until the first day of training camp.

1. Brayden Point

Age: 23

Position: Centre / Right wing

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$686,667

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: Established as one of the NHL's premier two-way centremen and earned some Selke votes. Can check top lines. Put up 41 goals and 92 points. NHL-best 20 power-play goals. Ranked top-10 in plus/minus (+27).

The latest: Point's agent, Gerry Johansson, had a plan to let his client's fabulous platform year play out before opening serious extension talks. In light of Tampa's impending cap crunch, The Athletic's Joe Smith reports that Point is open to wide range of term, anything from a two-year bridge deal to a five-year Auston Matthews-type deal to an eight-year lockup.

"He loves it in Tampa," Johansson told Smith.

Point's loyalty to Tampa reportedly factored into Montreal GM Marc Bergevin's decision to target Carolina's RFA centreman, Sebastian Aho, with his July 1 offer sheet (quickly matched).

Lightning GM Julien BriseBois maintains extending Point is top priority while also needing to find space for RFA Adam Erne and considering long-term extensions for goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy, defenceman Mikhail Sergachev and centre Anthony Cirelli — all of whom will need significant raises next summer.

To that end, BriseBois freed up funds by trading winger J.T. Miller to Vancouver for futures and placing alternate captain Ryan Callahan on long-term injured reserve.

With the salary ceiling set at \$81.5 million, the Lightning have just \$5.6 million to take care of Point and Erne.

That's, uh, not quite enough.

Other than Brayden Point (nothing new on that front yet), the other main rostered #tblightning RFA not yet signed is Adam Erne. Erne did not file for arbitration by last week's deadline. Am told both sides just still working on a deal. Paquette, Martel, Verhaeghe signed last week

— Joe Smith (@JoeSmithTB) July 9, 2019

Asked @mnwild coach Bruce Boudreau on #TBLightning Brayden Point: "The player in the league that no one knows how great he is. Come contract time next year, they'll know." Said he thinks Point is "the catalyst for that team."

— Joe Smith (@JoeSmithTB) October 20, 2018

2. Mitchell Marner

Age: 22

Position: Right wing

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$894,167

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: Maple Leafs scoring leader in 2017-18 and 2018-19. Quarterbacks power play. Kills penalties. Established wonderful chemistry with top centre John Tavares and improved as a shutdown winger. Put up career highs in goals (26), assists (68), points (94) while trimming his penalties to a career low (22). Local kid and fan favourite.

The latest: As the Maple Leafs split for the summer, Marner reiterated his desire to remain in blue and white for the foreseeable future and GM Kyle Dubas, facing one heck of a cap dilemma, said his top priority was locking up Marner prior to July 1, when he'd be eligible to sign an offer sheet.

Speculation has the Marner camp, led by agent Darren Ferris, looking for a contract comparable to Auston Matthews' five years at an \$11.6-million cap hit. The NHL's highest-paid winger is the newest New York Ranger, Artemi Panarin, at \$11.64 million a season.

Dubas, of course, would love to keep Marner's AAV to seven digits and sign his top scorer for term.

Originally vowing to match an offer sheet should these prickly negotiations reach that point, Dubas changed his tone at the draft, saying there's no guarantee he'd match.

"Without an answer on Mitch, we're going to be in a stalemate," Dubas said. "It is a top priority because we're not going to jump



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around and chew up our cap space we are going to need for Mitch... It's important. We just have to get right on it and get it done."

Dubas helped his own cause by trading away Patrick Marleau's hefty \$6.25-million cap hit to Carolina and Connor Brown and Nikita Zaitsev to Ottawa, as well as getting Colorado to take care of half of Tyson Barrie's salary.

The Marner camp appears to have dug in its heels.

"My understanding is that a very significant offer was made [by Dubas], a full eight-year term and \$10 million a year," Sportsnet's Brian Burke said on-air. "Now the issue is they don't want an eight-year term."

After signing new acquisitions Cody Ceci and Alexander Kerfoot, the Leafs have just \$3.8 million in projected cap space.

Rumours of a potential Marner offer sheet coming from Lou Lamoriello or Jarmo Kekalainen have circulated, but nothing has come to fruition.

The standoff continues. Wheee!

Marner's got moves.

(: @Marner93) pic.twitter.com/oUyvD0YA9i

— Sportsnet (@Sportsnet) July 8, 2019

"From what I understand it should happen today...I heard \$12.5M." @RadioVendetta confirms the report from @TheFourthPeriod that a team is "very seriously considering" presenting an offer sheet to Marner @gregbradyTO @hughwburill. #LeafsForever

: <https://t.co/G4dsL69kzk> pic.twitter.com/R55798Xf43

— Sportsnet 590 The FAN (@FAN590) July 5, 2019

3. Mikko Rantanen

Age: 22

Position: Right wing

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$894,167

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: Led club in playoff scoring (14 points) and is a career point-per-game performer in the post-season (18 in 18). Second only to Nathan MacKinnon in team assists (56) and points (87), despite playing just 74 games. Back-to-back 80-point seasons. Play-maker on the most dangerous line in the West. Invited to first All-Star Game. A big boy (six-foot-four, 215 pounds). Career-high plus-13.

The latest: Prior to opening night, Rantanen smartly chose to let the season play out in full before negotiating. Then he went out and had a career season on one of the best lines in hockey.

Colorado's highest-paid player, MacKinnon, carries a \$6.3-million cap hit. Rantanen has enough leverage to blow his centreman out of the water.

"It's not something we're worried about," GM Joe Sakic said of Rantanen's next deal. Cap space isn't an issue in Colorado. "He's going to be here a long time."

Despite a lack of resolution on the Rantanen front, Sakic actively pursuing free agents and traded for Nazem Kadri in effort to support his monster top line. The GM also made a significant offer to Artemi Panarin before the Russian star joined the Rangers.

NEW #AVS PODCAST: Colorado signs Andre Burakovsky and what's Mikko Rantanen's worth? (via @MikeChambers)

LISTEN <https://t.co/1gr8XxtDLc>

— Denver Post – Avs (@avsNews) July 16, 2019

4. Matthew Tkachuk

Age: 21

Position: Left wing

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$925,000

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: Sixth-overall pick. Career highs in games (80), goals (34), assists (43), points (77), while posting a career low in PIM per game. Good genes. Likely successor to Mark Giordano as captain. Gets under Drew Doughty's skin.

The latest: Tkachuk believes Matthews' five-year monster extension raised the bar, which is a scary thought for the Flames, who must make Tkachuk their highest-paid player.

"It sets that new bar for guys that are in a position to be up for a deal to be a restricted free agent this year," Tkachuk said on Feb. 6. "It kind of changes every year, it seems like. There's always that one guy or a couple guys who change the money, whether higher or lower.

"Auston changed it, too, just going with the approach of a five-year deal, too. Maybe people haven't seen it in a couple years, but it's not uncommon. Guys used to do that all the time. He definitely set the bar for this year."

Gulp.

GM Brad Treliving, who has a track record of locking up his RFAs, has maintained confidence that Tkachuk's negotiations will have a happy ending.

"We'll get him signed. I don't know when that's going to be," Treliving said on Jan. 15. "But we'll work away at that quietly and I can tell you we'll let you know as soon as it's done, whenever that is."

Because Tkachuk and fellow RFAs Sam Bennett and David Rittich need significant raises, Treliving has been rumoured to be entertaining trade offers for James Neal, T.J. Brodie, Michael Frolik, and possibly Travis Hamonic.

RFAs Bennett, Rittich, plus AHLers Ryan Lomberg and Rinat Valiev all filed for arbitration, assuring new contracts.

With less than \$10 million in cap space, the crunch is being felt in Calgary... but that didn't keep Tkachuk from attending the Stampede.

#Flames GM Brad Treliving on contract negotiations with Matthew Tkachuk: "Saw Mathew was riding a horse (at the @calgarystampede parade) the other day... I was trying to run behind him."

— Kristen Anderson (@KdotAnderson) July 6, 2019

5. Brock Boeser

Age: 22

Position: Right wing

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$925,000



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Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: 2018 Calder Trophy runner-up. 2018 All-Star Game MVP. Lethal shot. Great chemistry with franchise centre Elias Pettersson. Class act. Back-to-back 26-goal seasons despite never reaching the 70-game mark. Registered career highs in assists (30) and points (56). That flow.

The latest: While GM Jim Benning was active in both the UFA and trade markets, Boeser's camp and the Canucks have at least opened extension talks, which is a positive sign. It remains a matter of closing the gap, which Sportsnet's Irfaan Gaffar reported was still a significant one as of late May.

If Boeser is able to avoid a bridge deal, he should become the highest-paid member of the team.

Gaffar suggests Benning would be more comfortable with a six-year term, which is what he gave Bo Horvat when he came out of his entry-level deal, than an eight-year pact.

"Bo took a huge step in his third year, and I think I can do the same," Boeser said.

Since embarking on another UFA spending spree — Tyler Myers, Michael Ferland, Jordie Benn — and bringing in J.T Miller, Benning finds himself up against the cap. After the Roberto Luongo recapture penalty, he's left with just \$5 million in cap space to sign Boeser.

Disgruntled veteran Loui Eriksson looks like he could be the odd man out.

Count me surprised the #Canucks would sign Ferland (4 years and 3.5 million) before they signed Boeser. They have till opening night to figure it all out but will Ferlund contract effect Boeser deal and what that will look like.

— Rick Dhaliwal (@DhaliwalSports) July 10, 2019

Polled 10 agents about what Brock Boeser contract could look like.

Long term – some said 6.5 to 7 million – some said 7-8 million

Bridge deal of 3 years – 5 million range

2 years – 4 to 4.5 million

— Rick Dhaliwal (@DhaliwalSports) April 10, 2019

6. Charlie McAvoy

Age: 21

Position: Defence

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$916,667

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: A beast who led all Bruins in average ice time, both in the regular season and playoffs. Added years to Zdeno Chara's NHL career. Led all Boston D-men in even-strength points and game-winning goals. Shutdown guy. 2018 All-Rookie Team. First-round pick. Right shot. A playoff stud who came within one win of getting his name on the Cup.

The latest: The Athletic's Fluto Shinzawa reported in February that McAvoy turned down a long-term extension offer, citing the eight-year, \$7.5-million AAV contract that Florida Panthers defenceman Aaron Ekblad inked in the summer of 2016.

McAvoy has outpaced Ekblad offensively and has performed better in his own end of late. A \$7.5-million cap hit — the ballpark agent

Rick Curran is targeting — would make McAvoy the highest-paid player in Boston, ahead of David Krejci at \$7.25 million.

The Bruins' concern here is health: McAvoy has suffered heart and concussion issues and has yet to play more than 63 games in a season.

"The Bruins will try to dig in a little bit. They'll point to his games and they'll use [David] Pastrnak, who's a superstar. It'll be a tough deal to do, a tough deal to evaluate. It may end up that a solution is four years," an anonymous agent told Shinzawa.

In addition to McAvoy, Boston must also find raises for defenceman Brandon Carlo, who filed for arbitration. As of now, there is only \$8.1 million to accommodate both D for the upcoming season.

Since McAvoy is ineligible for an offer sheet, his only leverage is to withhold his services.

I just want the bruins to sign charlie mcavoy so i can start getting sleep again

— Sofia (@jakedebruhs) July 12, 2019

Charlie McAvoy on his future in Boston. He is an RFA this summer: "I want to be here forever. ... This is the best place on earth."

— Conor Ryan (@ConorRyan_93) June 14, 2019

Charlie McAvoy, Brandon Carlo and Marcus Johansson want to be back in Boston. David Backes' status is a little uncertain. The quartet spoke on media day on what lies ahead. pic.twitter.com/GBtqsAI3N7

— Bruins Daily (@BruinsDaily) June 15, 2019

7. Jacob Trouba

Age: 25

Position: Defence

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$5.5 million

Arbitration rights: Yes, and he filed

Bargaining chips: Top-10 first-round pick. No one played more hockey for the Jets this season. Co-led team in shorthanded points. Key penalty killer. Career highs in assists (42) and points (50). A plus defender six years running despite drawing difficult assignments. One year away from unrestricted free agency.

The latest: The relationship between Trouba and Winnipeg was always a tenuous one, so his off-season trade to the New York Rangers came as little surprise.

Trouba asked to be traded out of Winnipeg prior to the 2016-17 season. As an RFA last summer, Trouba and Cheveldayoff endured a marathon arbitration, with Trouba seeking upwards of \$7 million per season. He's worth it now.

Trouba was awarded a one-year, \$5.5-million deal for 2018-19 and needs another raise. He filed for arbitration and is scheduled to have his case heard on July 25.

Trouba is thrilled to be in a city where his fiancée can pursue her dreams as well, and the Rangers arguably made the greatest splash this summer, adding big-time talents Kaapo Kakko (draft) and Panarin (free agency) up front in addition to trading for Trouba and NCAA stud Adam Fox.

8. Kyle Connor



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Age on July 1: 22

Position: Left wing

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$925,000

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: Back-to-back 30-goal campaigns. First-round pick. Coming hot off career highs in goals (34), assists (32) and points (66). Bright spot (three goals, five points) in Jets' disappointing first-round exit. Can contribute to both special teams. Better two-way winger than fellow RFA Laine. Wonderful chemistry with Winnipeg's top players, Mark Scheifele and Blake Wheeler.

The latest: Now that Trouba and Kevin Hayes have been traded, the Jets only have 13 impending free agents to sort through. Godspeed, Kevin Cheveldayoff.

"It's not an easy time, so to speak, right now, to worry about anyone else but yourself. Everyone is just doing what they need to do within their own organizations," Cheveldayoff told the Winnipeg Free Press of the draft weekend's cost-cutting deals.

"Everyone has their own pressure points and jobs they need to do."

Connor, a relatively unsung star and the most complete young forward of the bunch, needs to stay put.

Pierre LeBrun of The Athletic reported that rival clubs have reached out to Connor's camp, but that doesn't guarantee an offer sheet is forthcoming.

If Nikolaj Ehlers is worth \$6 mill, what's Kyle Connor worth? Better player #gojetsgo

— Andy Strickland (@andystrickland) May 3, 2019

9. Patrik Laine

Age on July 1: 21

Position: Right wing

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$925,000

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: Second-overall pick. Otherworldly shot. World junior champion. 2017 NHL all-star. Three consecutive 30-goal seasons. Showed well in post-season (three goals, five points in six games). Beauty quote.

The latest: "Not worried about that right now," Laine told reporters, regarding his next contract, at season's end. "Right now, I want to forget everything that is involved with hockey."

Laine revealed he suffered a minor groin injury in the playoffs and was dealing with back problems during a season in which his year-over-year production dropped from 70 points to 50.

He's flashy, he's streaky, and his defensive game is under question, but the man can score in bunches.

A shorter-term deal might serve the player here, because Laine is better than 2018-19 showed.

Laine opted to skip the world championships. He flew back to Finland to golf and spend time with family and friends.

There was some smoke around the notion that Montreal considered trading for or offer-sheeting Laine.

Multiple teams have considered pursuing Marner, including the NY Islanders & Montreal. Hearing Islanders are serious about

pursuit, while Canadiens may be focused on Laine. Whether Isles, or another team, move forward with an offer sheet remains to be seen.

— David Pagnotta (@TheFourthPeriod) July 5, 2019

Still no talks yet between #gojetsgo and Patrik Laine

— Andy Strickland (@andystrickland) May 3, 2019

"It's still not written in stone that he is a big part of this future here on a long-term basis."

The #SigningSeason panel weighs in on what kind of contract we could see for Patrik Laine.

Have your say <https://t.co/ngME4iiKUB>
pic.twitter.com/BLVqQ7AWqR

— Sportsnet (@Sportsnet) July 1, 2019

10. Zachary Werenski

Age on July 1: 21

Position: Defence

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$925,000

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: Eighth-overall pick in 2015. Second only to all-star Seth Jones in Columbus ice time (22:54). Able to shutdown top forwards and contribute 40-plus points a season. Recorded a Gordie Howe hat trick in the second round of the playoffs. Only 21! Best years still ahead.

The latest: For all of the outgoing bodies this summer in Ohio, Werenski will not be one of them. He and Jones are a major reason the 2020 Blue Jackets won't suffer the drop-off you might think.

"I haven't thought about it, honestly," Werenski told reporters, following Columbus's ouster by the Bruins. "Obviously, that's something we're going to have to get done this summer. But I'm not worried about it at all. I guess it's something I'll have to start thinking about."

After losing a handful of stars to free agency and coming to terms with RFA defenceman Ryan Murray, GM Jarmo Kekalainen should have no issue finding the funds to give Werenski an appropriate raise.

One of the unwritten rules of playing the offer sheet game, is to make sure your own house is in order before you start looking through your neighbor's belongings.#CBJ still have D Zach Werenski as an unsigned RFA. Next year, Dubois will be RFA. And so on.

— Aaron Portzline (@Aportzline) July 12, 2019

11. David Rittich

Age on July 1: 26

Position: Goaltender

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$800,000

Arbitration rights: Yes, and he filed

Bargaining chips: Undrafted, late-blooming gem. Career-high 42 starts, 45 appearances, 27 wins, and .911 save percentage. Fun-loving team guy adored by teammates.

The latest: Big Save Dave has a golden opportunity to become the Flames' undisputed No. 1 goalie next season, considering veteran Mike Smith — who performed well but went 1-4 in the playoffs — is



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off to Edmonton while a struggling Cam Talbot joins Calgary as Plan B.

"Ritter is an unbelievable kid with a bright future," said coach Bill Peters, following exit meetings. "There are things he can do to allow himself to be able to play more games, too, as far as his ability to look after himself with nutrition, with everything that goes along with that, to make a real solid commitment to being a pro, a big-time NHL pro. And he's going to do that.

"He has a lot of confidence in himself, and that's earned. I thought he had a very good year. This is the most he's played in the NHL was this year, and he's looking to take that next step too."

The giant organizational debate here: Can Rittich handle a full NHL workload and return the Flames to the post-season?

"I think he has the ability to do that, yeah," Peters said. "But until you've done it and been there, everyone is going to question it, right?"

That Rittich filed for arbitration ensures at least a bridge deal will be reached and he'll be in attendance for Day 1 of training camp.

That Cup-winning RFA Jordan Binnington signed for a reasonable two years at \$4.4 million per season with the Blues should help keep Rittich's payday in check.

Four members of the #Flames have filed for salary arbitration: David Rittich, Sam Bennett, Ryan Lomberg, and Rinat Valiev.

With players filing for arb, Calgary is now eligible for the NHL's second buyout window in August.

— Pat Steinberg (@Fan960Steinberg) July 5, 2019

12. Travis Konecny

Age: 22

Position: Right wing / Left wing

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$894,167

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: First-round pick. World championships silver medalist. Increased production with every NHL season. Back-to-back 20-goal man. Career-best 24 goals and 49 points (plus career-low 40 penalty minutes) in 2018-19.

A late-round steal in 2017, Konecny has been a wonderful addition to the Flyers, and now it's time to pay him. The retooling Flyers must also find the dollars to award raises to forward Scott Laughton and defenceman Ivan Provorov this summer.

Serious extension talks with Konecny's camp reportedly did not begin until after GM Chuck Fletcher made a couple off-season trades and explored the UFA market.

Philly has started contract talks with RFAs Travis Konecny & Scott Laughton. Nothing close yet, but they literally just got started on talks.

— David Pagnotta (@TheFourthPeriod) July 3, 2019

13. Pavel Buchnevich

Age: 24

Position: Right wing / Left wing

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$925,000

Arbitration rights: Yes, and he filed

Bargaining chips: Young scorer on a team that needs them. Despite being relatively new to the NHL, he's entering his eighth year as a pro (KHL). Coming off career-best 21-goal season. Good for 40-plus points if healthy.

The latest: The cap flexibly Jeff Gorton granted himself is suddenly drying up in the wake of landing this summer's greatest UFA prize, Artemi Panarin.

While Jacob Trouba is now the top signing priority, RFAs Buchnevich, Brendan Lemieux and Anthony Deangelo also need deals. The Blueshirts have only a shade over \$8 million in cap space to work with, so with a second buyout window coming, an expensive defenceman like Brendan Smith or Kevin Shattenkirk could be at risk.

There is also the possibility of trading a winger like Chris Kreider (UFA 2020) or Buchnevich himself.

Buchnevich's arbitration is set to be heard July 29.

Arbitration-eligible RFAs can file for arbitration today. NHL will announce the names of players who have filed at 5 p.m. Pavel Buchnevich has filed. He had a career high 21 goals in 2018-19, in 64 games. This means the Rangers will be able to open a second buyout window.

— Colin Stephenson (@ColinAS Steph) July 5, 2019

14. Nikita Gusev

Age: 27

Position: Left wing

2018-19 salary cap hit: \$925,000

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: Posted league and career high of 82 points during his 2018-19 KHL campaign. 2018 Olympic gold medalist. Nine seasons of professional experience. Ranked 10th all-time in KHL scoring (332 points). Elite playmaker. Better than a point-per-game in 2019 KHL post-season. Did not make noise about being scratched in NHL playoffs.

The latest: The Golden Knights, who acquired Gusev's North American rights from Tampa during the expansion draft, are in cap hell and may need to shed some salary if they are to sign Gusev — the most dominant offensive player in the KHL last season.

In the middle of their first-round playoff series against San Jose, the Knights signed Gusev to an entry-level contract, making him a restricted free agent this summer. But they elected not to dress the Russian star.

"You don't know what transpires in the playoffs. We have some real good depth. Never had a problem having too many good players around," president George McPhee said in April.

According to The Athletic, Vegas and Gusev are as far as \$2 million apart in negotiations. The winger, whose contract with SKA has expired, is said to looking for \$4 million per season on a two-year commitment.

A trade is possible if the sides can't bridge the gap.

"We think he's a really good player. We'd like to work something out here," McPhee said on July 1. "If that doesn't work out, we'll look at options. But there's definitely interest in him. We've had people call us on him, and we'll see what develops. I can't tell you today what will develop, but we'll work on it.



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“He’s been very, very good on the international stage. He wants to play in the NHL. He worked hard to get over here, and we’re going to accommodate him one way or another, either here or with another club.”

A player who has been terrific everywhere he’s played. Gave up bonuses to come to Vegas. Didn’t get to play in the playoffs and didn’t say a word. Said amazing things about the city and the fan base. And a guy who is looking for a fair contract. That’s who Nikita Gusev is so far.

— SinBin.vegas (@SinBinVegas) July 7, 2019

More notable RFAs: Kevin Fiala, Ivan Provorov, Anthony Beauvillier, Brandon Carlo, Colin White, Sam Bennett, Pavel Zacha, Andrew Copp, Linus Ullmark, Joel Edmundson, Will Butcher, Colton Sissons, Jake McCabe, Brock McGinn, Charles Hudon, Colton Sissons, Zach Aston-Reese, Oskar Sundqvist, Neal Pionk

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Sportsnet.ca / Keith Kinkaid's arrival should help Canadiens manage Carey Price's load

Eric Engels July 16, 2019, 12:40 PM

There were a lot of numbers for the Montreal Canadiens to take into account before making their decision to give goaltender Keith Kinkaid a one-year, \$1.75-million contract on July 1, but the most important one was 82. That’s the number of games Kinkaid has appeared in over the last two seasons.

It was more relevant to the Canadiens that he played 41 matchups with the New Jersey Devils last season than his 15-18-6 record, disappointing 3.36 goals-against average and underwhelming .891 save percentage. Especially since they could balance those numbers against the ones he posted in 41 games a season prior, when he managed to go 26-10-3, with a 2.77 goals-against average and a .913 save percentage to push a weak Devils team into the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

But a combined 82 games told the Canadiens just about everything they needed to know, which is Kinkaid could help them do what they weren’t able to do last season when backup Antti Niemi faltered down the stretch and forced starter Carey Price into six more games than he was originally penciled in for. This is mostly about managing the soon-to-be 32-year-old Price’s workload, which is something Kinkaid says he’s prepared for.

The 30-year-old New Yorker, who arrived in Montreal on Sunday, met with media on Monday sporting his new Canadiens threads.

“I’m just happy to be here,” he said, wearing No. 37. “Happy to have another opportunity to play in the best league in the world. To work with a guy like Carey Price is going to be tremendous. If I can take his workload and lighten it up for him a little bit — I want to be a guy they can count on when they need somebody to win a game and give Carey a night off.”

That’s what they want, too.

The Canadiens are aware of the trend going around the NHL where starting goaltenders play fewer games than they have in any season over the last two decades. They’re also aware Price was forced to make 66 appearances last season — 12 fewer than Stanley Cup finalists Tuukka Rask and Jordan Binnington combined to play.

They know that if they’re going to keep Price playing at an elite level, if they’re going to preserve his best self over the seven seasons he remains under contract for, they’re going to have to lean a bit more on someone else.

It wasn’t going to be Charlie Lindgren, the 25-year-old who has accumulated just 18 games of NHL experience since signing with the Canadiens in 2016. It wasn’t going to be 22-year-old AHLer Michael McNiven, either. And Cayden Primeau, the 19-year-old college superstar who has yet to appear in a game as a professional, was out of the question.

But Kinkaid made a lot of sense for the Canadiens, not only because he could lighten Price’s load, but also because he’s a seasoned professional with 151 games of NHL experience under his belt. The value of his tenure, in the event that Price suffers an injury or misses some games due to illness, is considerable.

Price has missed games in every season since coming into the league including 133 due to injury or illness since 2008. This Canadiens team, which has missed the playoffs twice in a row and three times in the last four seasons, needed a proper insurance policy and found one in Kinkaid.

In an ideal world, the Canadiens won’t have to use him in that capacity, but they will have to use him much more than they used Niemi, who made just 17 appearances last year after making 19 in his first year with the team.

Knowing they could depend on Kinkaid for at least 30 games this coming season gave the Canadiens the peace of mind to offer him a contract. They may only want to use him for 22 to 25 games, but they don’t have to ask themselves whether or not he’s capable of playing more.

And Kinkaid believes he’s ready to handle the load. The fact he’s up for the challenge of playing in this hockey-mad city counts for something, too.

“The past few years, I’ve gotten the highs and lows of the NHL and the rigours of it. It’ll just help me going forward, especially in a place like Montreal where there’s a lot of pressure,” he said. “You have to perform.”

With a lifetime record of 64-55-17 on a sub-standard Devils team that’s only made the playoffs once in the last five seasons, there’s ample reason to believe Kinkaid can.

“I want to be that person that can help in any way,” he said. “I want to get the wins for the team when I’m in net. If they give me more games or less games, I’ll be there.”

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