



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • July 24, 2019



## NHL RFA buzz: Signings, arbitrations and those pesky offer sheets

By Greg Wyshynski

We finally got one. After years of threats, teases, rumors and innuendo, the NHL saw an actual offer sheet handed to an actual young star player when the Montreal Canadiens got Carolina Hurricanes center Sebastian Aho to sign one on July 1.

What a thrilling few moments those were, when the hockey world scrambled to comprehend the mechanics of that deal ... until it became quickly apparent that the deal wasn't large enough, and maybe never would have been, to deter the Hurricanes from matching.

"You're never surprised when there's enough chatter that it's going to happen," one NHL general manager recently told ESPN. "But no one wants to be in a position of weakness."

What the Aho contract did, however, was set a benchmark for the restricted free-agent market. So did Jacob Trouba's deal with the New York Rangers, and Timo Meier's deal with the San Jose Sharks. These are deals that RFAs and their agents will point to and proclaim as comparable to what they're seeking.

But NHL teams don't always see them the same way.

"It's hard to call it a 'market.' Some teams are going to do something totally different than what you'd do, so how can you be held accountable for that?" an Eastern Conference general manager wondered aloud. "How does one bad contract become the market? That's what we're all up against sometimes."

As we hit midsummer, here's a look at the big names still seeking contracts (and potentially more offer sheets), those on the arbitration docket, and the restricted free agents who have signed. Thanks to Evolving Hockey, Natural Stat Trick and Cap Friendly for the resources.

The unsigned, big-ticket RFAs

Brock Boeser, RW, Vancouver Canucks  
Previous AAV: \$1,491,667

Timo Meier of the Sharks has 54 goals and 54 assists in 193 games. Boeser has 59 goals and 57 assists in 140 games. Meier was given a contract for four years, worth \$6 million annually from the Sharks, with a salary that jumps to \$10 million in the final season, which means a blockbuster qualifying offer after it expires. There's talk Boeser wants a four-year term, but at around \$7 million AAV. Would he go for that grand finale of a final season, too?

Kyle Connor, LW, Winnipeg Jets  
Previous AAV: \$1,775M

Is six years and around \$6.8 million in AAV, which is the Evolving Wild projection, in the cards for Connor? There has

been offer-sheet scuttlebutt regarding Connor, who was second only to Mark Scheifele on the Jets in goals above average. But GM Kevin Cheveldayoff has made it clear the Jets intend to match any offer he might consider signing.

Brandon Carlo, D, Boston Bruins  
Previous AAV: \$894,167

A steady presence on the Boston blue line, and arguably its second-best defenseman behind Charlie McAvoy at this point. If the Bruins can get him in at around six years and \$4.5 million annually, that would be a coup.

Travis Konecny, LW/RW, Philadelphia Flyers  
Previous AAV: \$1,106,667

A bridge contract would appear to be the right move for both parties. Konecny had had two solid seasons of 24 goals for the Flyers, establishing himself in a top-six role. He's the third-best forward on the team in terms of goals above average, making his mark on the power play as well. A couple of more seasons like this, and he could really earn some term and dough.

Patrik Laine, LW/RW, Winnipeg Jets  
Previous AAV: \$3.575M

Only five players have scored more goals than Laine in the past three seasons. Of the five, Nikita Kucherov of the Tampa Bay Lightning has the smallest AAV at ... \$9.5 million. So that's what the Jets are looking at here, as Laine seeks his next contract, even as Evolving Wild sees Laine's deal at around \$7 million over seven seasons. Will the term resemble that of draftmate Auston Matthews, whose five years walk him up to unrestricted free agency? Or will he sign a max deal with the Jets? (And why hasn't there been more smoke about a Laine offer sheet? Isn't this the kind of player you poach?)

Mitch Marner, RW, Toronto Maple Leafs  
Previous AAV: \$1,744,167

There was nothing more awkward than watching the 23-year-old Leafs star making the media rounds recently, trying to pump up interest in his Marner All-Star Invitational charity event while ducking questions about his contentious contract talks with Toronto. "I'm just trying to stay away from the talk," he said, adding that his agent has "been dealing with everything and has done a great job."

What has his agent been dealing with? Shopping for an offer sheet that has yet to materialize, for one. An offer sheet that GM Kyle Dubas has said the Maple Leafs might not necessarily match if the compensation is too enticing; a warning shot to Marner, whose ultimate desire is to remain in Toronto.



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On an eight-year term, Evolving Wild projects a cap hit of \$9.613 million for Marner. But Auston Matthews makes \$11.634 million against the cap. John Tavares makes \$11 million against the cap. These are the comparables that Marner is reportedly eyeing on a contract that would make him the highest-paid winger (via the cap) in NHL history. The Leafs currently have \$3.7 million in cap space.

What term could the contract end up being? Matthews took five years. The Leafs are reportedly seeking to bridge Marner at three years. Marner said he'd like to attend Leafs training camp, but would "probably not" without a contract. Oh, this is going to be fun to watch.

Is Marner the thread that'll unravel the rest of the market? "I don't know if they're waiting for one guy, but Marner is a significant piece. I'm not sure if he's the one holding it up because he seems to be the one out looking for an offer sheet," one NHL GM said.

Charlie McAvoy, D, Boston Bruins  
Previous AAV: \$1,258,333

There's probably a contract McAvoy is looking for that he won't yet find with the Bruins. Yes, he's one of the better all-around young defensemen in the NHL. But those mega-deals usually go to players who score a little more than McAvoy does, especially on the power play, and are on the ice a little more than McAvoy has been in his two-year NHL career. D.J. Bean of NBC Sports Boston cautioned against a bridge deal, however, citing what happened with Montreal and P.K. Subban. Since McAvoy doesn't have the games played to get an offer sheet, the Bruins have a lot of leverage. How long do they want to go? Could it be eight years and \$7.5 million annually, like Aaron Ekblad signed with Florida?

Brayden Point, C, Tampa Bay Lightning  
Previous AAV: \$919,167

One of the summer's biggest revelations is that despite the precarious cap situation with the Lightning, where a targeted offer sheet would have either pried Point loose or caused major roster restructuring to for them keep him, the 23-year-old center apparently fancies Tampa so much that he had no desire to sign one. Maybe, because of that, other executives expect he'll sign sooner than later.

"Point seems like he's going to be the first to go. Once he falls, maybe the other ones start falling," one general manager said. Point didn't sign an offer sheet with Montreal. The intrigue here is how the RFA that did sign one - Sebastian Aho -- will affect the price of Point for the Lightning, with the caveat that the tax situation in Tampa is far different than that in Montreal.

Ivan Provorov, D, Philadelphia Flyers  
Previous AAV: \$1,744,167

The 22-year-old defenseman had an underwhelming third NHL season, but that probably won't deter GM Chuck Fletcher from tendering a contract that gobbles up some UFA time. Fletcher said the Flyers and Provorov are waiting for other RFA defensemen to sign before they figure out their deal. With Jacob Trouba off the board, one assumes they mean Zach Werenski and Charlie McAvoy.

Mikko Rantanen, RW, Colorado Avalanche  
Previous AAV: \$1,627,500

The phenomenal Finn is poised to become the Avs' highest paid player -- the current leader is Nathan MacKinnon's bargain-of-the-decade \$6.3 million AAV -- on this next contract. Colorado has oodles of cap space with which to work, so GM Joe Sakic is confident it'll get done. "Sit back and relax and wait for him to get back to me. Nothing urgent. Training camp's not until Sept. 12 or 13," Sakic told the Denver Post. "I think the more guys that get signed and you see the comparable numbers, the easier it's going to get."

Matthew Tkachuk, LW, Calgary Flames  
Previous AAV: \$1.775M

The Calgary Sun predicts that Tkachuk, the pugnacious forward who hit 34 goals and 77 points last season, will become the highest-paid player on the Flames. Evolving Wild sees a six-year deal with an AAV that crests over \$7.8 million annually. Calgary has just over \$9 million in open cap space for Tkachuk, Dave Rittich and Sam Bennett.

Zach Werenski, D, Columbus Blue Jackets  
Previous AAV: \$1.775M

We imagine it would be a welcome change for Blue Jackets fans to see a free agent from last year's roster actually sign on to return. Werenski had an average year last season, taking a step back at even strength. But as a top-pairing defenseman, the Jackets are going to sign him up long term. The question is whether they help set that market. One thing is clear: With the threat of a potential offer sheet, and with Columbus needing a win, Werenski has some leverage.

Players who are arbitration-eligible

Of the 40 players who elected for salary arbitration, a handful have a hearing on the docket. Here are some of the most prominent ones:

Sam Bennett, C, Calgary Flames  
Previous AAV: \$1.95 million | Hearing on July 27

Danton Heinen's \$2.8 million AAV didn't help the Flames in trying to keep Bennett's cap hit down in this next contract, sparking speculation they could move the 23-year-old forward who has yet to match the heights of his rookie season in 2015-16.

Pavel Buchnevich, LW/RW, New York Rangers  
Previous AAV: \$925,000 | Hearing on July 29

There always has been a zealotry among Rangers fans about Buchnevich, a 24-year-old forward whose prowess on the power play helps buoy some less-than-ideal results at 5-on-5. The Rangers are in a cap crunch, but the expectation is that Buchnevich won't be a casualty from it.

Will Butcher, D, New Jersey Devils  
Previous AAV: \$3.775M | Hearing on Aug. 2

While Butcher didn't match his rookie season in his sophomore campaign, his underlying numbers (third on the team in goals above average) were strong, especially on the power play. What that's worth to the Devils is a mystery, considering the incentive-laden first contract he signed that pumped up his average annual value. Neal Pionk signed at



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\$3 million AAV with Winnipeg. That might be the floor for Butcher.

Joel Edmundson, D, St. Louis Blues  
Previous AAV: \$3M | Hearing on Aug. 4

This would seem like a spot for a long-term deal between the Cup champions and their 26-year-old defenseman, with Jay Bouwmeester probably coming off the books next summer. Evolving Wild projects a six-year term at \$4.6 million AAV.

David Rittich, G, Calgary Flames  
Previous AAV: \$800,000 | Hearing on July 29

This has "two-year bridge contract" written all over it. Of the 25 goalies who played more than his 45 games last season, only five made less than \$3.5 million against the cap. One assumes that's the floor for Big Save Dave.

Evan Rodrigues, C, Buffalo Sabres  
Previous AAV: \$605,000 | Hearing on July 23

Memo to NHL teams: This is the kind of player that you should be considering for an offer sheet. The 25-year-old is coming off his best NHL season (29 points), was outstanding on the penalty kill and above average at 5-on-5. He wanted about \$2.65 million.

### Players with new deals

Many RFAs have already signed new deals this summer, and here are the most notable among them:

Sebastian Aho, C, Carolina Hurricanes  
The deal: Five years, \$8.454M AAV

The Canes' hands were forced by the offer sheet that Aho signed with the Montreal Canadiens. The cap hit is right around what you'd expect for a contract that doesn't eat up any unrestricted free agency years, and therein lies to problem with it: The deal walks him right up to UFA status. It also pays him over \$22.5 million in the first two years, with over \$21 million of that in signing bonuses. Not ideal, but also not a contract that was going to dissuade the Canes from matching.

Joel Armia, C, Montreal Canadiens  
The deal: Two years, \$2.6M AAV

He's a good two-way forward (1.96 expected goals against per 60 even-strength minutes) and this deal could look good if he leaves the Finnish Line (with Artturi Lehkonen and Jesperi Kotkaniemi) and plays up with Max Domi next season as an Andrew Shaw replacement. Although that would mean breaking up a very good line.

Jordan Binnington, G, St. Louis Blues  
The deal: Two years, \$4.4M AAV

One of the most fascinating contract negotiations of the summer: How does one find comparables for a rookie who played himself into the Calder Trophy finalists in 32 games and then backstopped his team to the Stanley Cup? This deal would seem to greatly benefit Binnington, as it gets him an AAV he probably doesn't get in arbitration and walks him up to unrestricted free agency where, if he's not just a trivia question two years after the Cup win, he will break the bank. Meanwhile, the Blues get Binnington at a reasonable annual cap hit, and don't go long term in case he's not what he

appeared to be last season. It's still hard to believe they're committing \$8.85 million to their goaltending next season between Binnington and Jake Allen, but here we are.

J.T. Compher, RW/C, Colorado Avalanche  
The deal: Four years, \$3.5M AAV

Compher, 24, checks a lot of boxes for the Avalanche. He's a right-handed shooting forward. He can put the puck in the net at a rate few players in their bottom six can. He can kill penalties. And his versatility at forward will allow him to fit on the wing or, most likely, at center. This is one of those signings where, around four years from now, we'll be asking "Joe Sakic got that guy for that contract?"

Danton Heinen, F, Boston Bruins  
The deal: Two years, \$2.8M AAV

Smart signing for both sides. The Bruins know what they have in Heinen: a 24-year-old defensive whiz with solid offense (1.64 points per 60 minutes at even strength) with the potential to be even better. Heinen knew his stats last season were off his rookie campaign rates across the board, so it's best to sign and avoid that arbitration hearing.

Alex Iafallo, LW Los Angeles Kings  
The deal: Two years, \$2.425 million AAV

A bridge deal that connects him with UFA status at the end of it. There are things to love about Iafallo (his forechecking and puck possession) and some things that give you pause about him (a lack of power-play production), but that money for a winger that Anze Kopitar loves having on his line is good value.

Artturi Lehkonen, LW/RW, Montreal Canadiens  
The deal: Two years, \$2.4M AAV

The surprise here is that the Canadiens didn't want to do something longer term with the productive 24-year-old, who had 31 points last season and was fourth among Habs forwards in even-strength goals above average (9.7). But he's still an RFA at the end of this bridge deal.

Timo Meier, RW, San Jose Sharks  
The deal: Four years, \$6M AAV

The Sharks needed to get the 22-year-old in at a cap-friendly deal in the near term, due to their current financial obligations on the veteran-laden roster. His production, and his consistent improvement, make that cap number a stellar one for the team. To get it, they had to raise his salary to \$10 million in the final season, meaning that a qualifying offer for him in his last year of RFA status would be \$10 million. Essentially, this is a five-year deal worth \$34 million ... although the cap implications in that fifth year will be interesting.

Cedric Paquette, C/LW, Tampa Bay Lightning  
The deal: Two years, \$1.65M AAV

A gritty fourth-liner who takes too many penalties (1.22 minor penalties per 60 even-strength minutes, the 10th-highest rate in the NHL) and shot a rather unsustainable 14.9% to get to 13 goals last season. This contract was a shade higher than you'd expect the Bolts to go here, considering their cap situation, but he has been a good defensive fourth-liner and a better penalty killer for them.



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Neal Pionk, D, Winnipeg Jets  
The deal: Two years, \$3M AAV

Pionk was the player who moved along with a first-rounder to Winnipeg for Jacob Trouba. He's demonstrably a sub-replacement level player at even strength, but an exceptional player on the power play (7.14 points per 60 minutes, by far the best for any player on the Rangers last season). At the very least, he can help make up that difference with Trouba gone, if not much else for a suddenly suspect Winnipeg back line. But let's be real: Points and ice time are the bread and butter for defensemen in arbitration, so he would've probably gotten this anyway.

Colton Sissons, C, Nashville Predators  
The deal: Seven years, \$2.857M AAV

GM David Poile loves his long-term contracts, doesn't he? Eight years for Ryan Johansen and Ryan Ellis, seven for Matt Duchene, six for Kyle Turris, Mattias Ekholm and Calle Jarnkrok. That last contract is most applicable to this one for Sissons, as Poile locks up a depth forward with a miniscule cap figure in perpetuity. He's 25 and developing into a really solid two-way pivot who was second on the team in goals above average (9) among forwards.

Oskar Sundqvist, C/RW, St. Louis Blues  
The deal: Four years, \$2.75M AAV

He waited four seasons to get a crack as a regular and took full advantage of it in a revelatory season with the Blues. There are some concerns about his breakout -- that 12.4 shooting percentage might not be the norm, and that faceoff percentage (42.0) is less than optimal -- but a \$2.75 million cap hit for a fourth-line stalwart with upside on a Cup team is solid.

Jacob Trouba, D, New York Rangers  
The deal: Seven years, \$8M AAV

I hate the "he would have gotten this as an unrestricted free agent anyway" argument but ... he would have gotten this as an unrestricted free agent anyway next summer. He's also younger than every other defenseman at this cap number. I'm not the biggest Trouba cheerleader -- I think he's a touch overrated and want to see his chops as a power-play QB before really buying in -- but his underlying numbers, age and that 50-point campaign last season point to this being around the value he'd end up with, especially with four years of a no-movement clause and \$22 million in signing bonus money up front in the first three years.

## The Hockey News

Five second-string goaltenders who could steal the starting job next season

Last season, there were a few veteran keepers pushed out of their starting gigs by up-and-comers, and there are a handful of backups who could unseat current No. 1 netminders next season.

By Jared Clinton

Forget about being a backup netminder, when the 2018-19 campaign started, Jordan Binnington was expected to be nothing more than a split-timer in the minor league. In fact, in The Hockey News' Yearbook prior to the campaign, Binnington wasn't even listed as one of the top three netminders on the St. Louis Blues. Those honors went to Jake Allen, Chad Johnson and Ville Husso, in that order.

That said, we couldn't have known then what we know now, that Binnington would burst onto the scene midway through the campaign, take center stage, save St. Louis' season and play a considerable role in leading the Blues to the franchise's first Stanley Cup. Quite frankly, no one did. And if you are trying to assert that you had some sort of inkling that was bound to happen, you're kidding yourself.

Binnington wasn't the only depth chart dweller to shoot into the spotlight. In Calgary, where incumbent veteran stater was on an admittedly short leash, David Rittich managed to pry the Flames starting gig away for stretches, though eventually surrendered it again in the post-season. Before he was handed his inadvisable contract, Mikko Koskinen assumed the No. 1 spot with the Edmonton Oilers, who eventually sent Cam Talbot packing. And before the season was through, Philadelphia Flyers prospect Carter Hart, who wasn't expected to see NHL action last season, was thrust into the

top job due to injury and held it down for the back half of the season.

So, who are the keepers who will do the same this coming season? There are several potential split-time starters who could earn the lion's share of the work, such as new Chicago Blackhawks netminder Robin Lehner or Thomas Greiss, who could unseat New York Islanders off-season signing Semyon Varlamov. But here are five goaltenders who stand to enter the season as clear-cut second stringers but could very well be the first choice by next April:

Darcy Kuemper, Arizona Coyotes

Maybe not an awfully bold suggestion given the 29-year-old finished fifth in Vezina Trophy voting last season thanks to his play down the stretch, but with Coyotes No. 1 netminder Antti Raanta set to return from injury, Kuemper is likely to start the season second on Arizona's depth chart. But given his success last season, would anyone be all that surprised if he were to start winning the bulk of his starts and give coach Rick Tocchet something to think about moving forward?

Goaltending can be what makes or breaks the Coyotes next season as they look to snap their post-season drought, and riding the hot hand is going to be a necessity. If last season was a sign of things to come, it might only be a matter of time before Kuemper and Raanta switch spots on a much more permanent basis.

James Reimer, Carolina Hurricanes

Reimer, 31, was always an odd fit in Florida. Stuck behind Roberto Luongo on the depth chart, he maxed out at 44 starts



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in the Panthers' crease during his three seasons with the franchise and when the top job finally opened up following Luongo's retirement, the Cats had their sights set on Sergei Bobrovsky, signing him and thus keeping Reimer second in command. Thus, he was shipped to the Hurricanes, where he now assumes the No. 2 role behind returning hero Petr Mrazek, who backstopped Carolina to their first playoff berth in a decade.

But here's the thing: In 338 career games, Reimer has a .914 save percentage. Mrazek, meanwhile, has a .911 SP in 223 career games. The former has also been far more consistent across his career than the latter, and if Mrazek's past inconsistency is any indication, there will be an opening at some point this coming season for Reimer to swoop in and take over.

Elvis Merzlikins, Columbus Blue Jackets

In some ways, Merzlikins is only the prospective No. 2 netminder in Columbus because he doesn't have much in the way of NHL experience. Actually, scratch that. He doesn't have anything in the way of NHL experience. He signed with the Blue Jackets late last season but didn't see a single second of ice time in North America during the 2018-19 season. So, given last season's backup, Joonas Korpisalo, has 90 games under his belt with a career .907 save percentage, we're going to assume he's the starter for now. How long that lasts is up for debate, though.

During his time with the Swiss League's HC Lugano, Merzlikins, 25, was the circuit's goaltender of the year twice and he was named a top-three player on the Latvian national team at three consecutive World Championship tournaments from 2016 to 2018. There are high hopes for Merzlikins, and he could fulfill those by replacing Korpisalo as the starter by season's end.

Jack Campbell, Los Angeles Kings

A bold choice? Maybe, but if we're taking last season's numbers into consideration, it might not be one that is all that surprising. Longtime Kings starter Jonathan Quick battled injury last season, but even when healthy, his numbers were ugly. He sported a career-worst .888 SP by the time the campaign closed and his 3.38 GAA was the highest of his career.

But Los Angeles' poor overall play didn't impact Campbell, 27, in the same way. In fact, he was maybe one of the most surprising netminders in the NHL last season despite a subpar 10-14-1 record. In the 31 game she played, Campbell posted a .928 SP, 2.30 GAA and measured against the 56 netminders who played at least 1,000 minutes at 5-on-5, his .46 goals-saved above average per 60 minutes was tied – with Robin Lehner, no less – for the sixth-best mark in the league.

The 2010 first-round pick struggled to find a fit early in his career, but he might be rounding into form in his late-20s.

Mackenzie Blackwood, New Jersey Devils

Since an outstanding run of play as the Devils' last line of defense over his first three seasons with the organization, Cory Schneider has had difficulties remaining the starter. That is, of course, due in part to injury, but his numbers when healthy also haven't supported his case. To wit, his SP has declined in each of the past three seasons and he has a .907 SP across his past 126 games played. So, that's where Blackwood comes in.

In the past, it was Keith Kinkaid who supplanted Schneider, but backup duty now falls on Blackwood, who played well in his 23 appearances last season. He finished with a 10-10-0 record, boasted a .918 SP at season's end and his 2.61 GAA was nearly half a goal better than Schneider's 3.06 mark. The kicker here is that Blackwood's GSAA was .24 per 60 minutes in 1,011 minutes of action at five-a-side. In 1,082 minutes at the same strength, Schneider had a negative-.30 GSAA per 60 minutes. Only seven 1,000-minute goaltenders were worse.

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## SportScan

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The Athletic / Why GMs going 'galaxy brain' on depth deals could lead to death by a thousand contract papercuts

By Justin Bourne Jul 23, 2019

The term "galaxy-brain," for those who haven't come across it yet, refers to all the variations of the meme below. The idea is just that sometimes we have a good, simple idea and we take it too far, to the point it becomes ridiculous. As in:

Too far!

To some extent, that seems to be what's happening with NHL GMs. In the NHL's salary cap era, teams are always looking for the next best way to extract more value out of a player than he's paid to provide. Everyone can only spend so much, so you have to do it more efficiently than the next guy – figuring out that concept isn't hard.

In the early days of the salary cap, the way to do that was to give players comically long contracts they had little intention of playing out. If nothing else, it kicked the problem-rock down the metaphorical dusty road while teams enjoyed legitimate All-Star players at ridiculously low cap hits.

Once that salary cap deke was eliminated, teams started prioritizing young players given that the CBA forces them to play for comparable peanuts for three seasons, and gives them few rights immediately after that. At some point, you started to see some teams roll the dice on longer deals for unproven players in the hopes that they'd fulfill their potential and end up being bargains. When I played in the Islanders organization, Frans Nielsen was given a four-year contract for \$525,000 per season. This came after playing just 22 games for the team over two seasons. Nielsen ended up scoring over 150 points over that deal, he killed penalties, became a shootout and defensive specialist and was just an all-around great player for the team. Regardless of how Flyers fans remember Andrew MacDonald, the Islanders did the same thing with him. They gave four years at the league minimum to an unproven guy who became their TOI leader on the back end. (Like everyone always says, Garth Snow was a flawless GM, wasn't he? Excuse me while I duck these Long Island-grown tomatoes.)

As teams are built now, UFAs still come with more caution, but they're always going to get paid. The reason for that is they cost zero assets to acquire and they can add to your team. Meanwhile, agents and players have become better informed about where along NHL players' aging curves they really contribute the most. They've seen the league get younger, they've seen young players become more important and so they've seen a shift in which players are the

most coveted. And guess what, when it's the players they represent being coveted, agents want them to get paid too.

If UFAs are getting paid, and RFAs are getting paid, and back-diving deals aren't an option anymore, GMs are left searching for new ways to find more value than cost.

Partly it seems like teams are hoping to do something not too dissimilar from what the Islanders did (it's been done a bunch of times and places, that example is always just front-of-mind for me), and they're taking some longer-term chances on "maybe" players. That's trading security to those that may be concerned about keeping themselves in NHL jobs, for what GMs hope is again, more value than cost. And sure, that's great in theory. That plan might not just be the small brain on the meme, but the next frame down. The situation is still on track.

Where it gets galaxy brain, is when you end up giving wild term to depth, sort of middle-six-type players. On Tuesday, Colton Sissons signed with the Nashville Predators for seven years at \$2.85-million per. A few weeks back the Penguins signed their "No. 1 target in free agency," Brandon Tanev – here's me raising my eyebrows at you, saying nothing and holding for effect – for six years at \$3.5-million per.

These are not examples of locking up players who've yet to prove they can play in the NHL in exchange for some term and security, as in the examples referenced above. This is locking up fine enough players (I quite like Sissons as a depth guy) who are certainly NHLers but definitely not integral parts of your roster, in exchange for your future cap and roster flexibility. Depth players are always, always findable and you'd always, always like to be signing them for their peak years and ideally for even cheaper than the dollars we're talking about here. You cannot convince me Tanev's "wins above replacement" – if hockey had that stat to a degree I trusted – is going to be high enough to give him \$3.5 million for 15 minutes a night in each of the next six seasons. I think you could probably find a player to contribute like that each summer, and maybe someone more tailored to your specific needs those years. Furthermore, it should be for less term and certainly no more money.

Lou Lamoriello always uses the expression "if you have time, use it," because you never really know how things are going to unfold and what your needs are going to be a few years down the road (or even a few months). I believe term is going to be looked at as a rigidity that limits teams near the cusp of being elite from ever reaching their potential, particularly now, as the salary cap hasn't risen with the swiftness GMs around the league had hoped. Flexibility is crucial, as we've seen here in Toronto over this past summer. The team has given up assets to gain it, and has had to move off players they actually liked a la Connor Brown and his \$2.1-million hit, as top teams are always at or near the cap ceiling and have to find ways to limbo under that immovable bar.

I also question if this type of move is the smartest decision from the players' perspective and I wonder if their agents have done a good



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job. Yes, Sissons just signed a deal for \$20 million. That's so so much much money. But Sissons isn't a fringe NHL player. And I don't believe that just because on average NHL players offensive peaks are somewhere in their early-to-mid-20s that players can't get better through their 20s. I had the privilege to speak with Dom Moore today in an interview, and he weighed in on ageism, rightly pointing out that the NHL's youth movement is partially just contract-based (as I mentioned, they're cheap so they're coveted) and that in every sport great players are playing longer and more effectively into later years.

To further my point, here's how Adam Vingan, The Athletic's Predators writer, described Sissons while considering his case if he went to arbitration this summer. The guy's a nice player.

Sissons' case: Since becoming the Predators' impromptu No. 1 center during the 2017 playoffs, Sissons has proven he's the team's most indispensable depth forward. He is capable of playing each forward position on every line and has improved his point total in each season of his career, reaching 15 goals and 30 points last season.

Over the past three seasons, only two NHL players who have appeared in a minimum of 200 games have started a lower percentage of their shifts in the offensive zone than Sissons (31.61 percent). Within that context, Sissons has managed to post respectable possession numbers over that span (48.88 shot-attempt percentage) as well as a plus-33 rating.

Sissons is a regular on the league's ninth-ranked penalty kill since 2016, and he has won at least 50 percent of his faceoffs in each of the past four seasons. He's the ultimate utility player.

Sissons is just 25. Let's say he stays the same player for two more seasons, then goes into unrestricted free agency in just over 23 months. What would he be worth to one of the then-32 teams in the NHL? In this would-never-happen hypothetical, say the Preds signed him for the next two years at \$2-million per. Are you telling me that the then-27-year-old UFA wouldn't be offered more than \$16-million on a five-year deal when the cap is even higher? (Even writing that is hard not to think, "Boy, five years in an awfully long time to sign a guy like Sissons.") But also, what about if he gets even better — which is very possible — and improves upon his 15-goal, 30-point 2018-19? What's a center like that worth around the league? Over \$4-million a year?

Of course, there are no guarantee things go swimmingly, but I think as the player I'd be pretty comfortable with the security of a four-year deal or so, with the chance at least to cash in on another contract while still young, if things go well. Further to that, sometimes people just want to move on from a situation and make their own choice about where they play. Individual flexibility should also have some value to a player.

All I know is I just can't shake the vibe that whether it's buyout or player frustration (were I a betting man, the "buyout" option is probably the more likely of those two), a deal like the one Sissons signed is unlikely to end well.

These deals (lumping in Tanev now) strike me as the ones that don't move the needle in terms of attention from fans, because they won't single-handedly bleed the team dry of cap space. They can't be held up as unmitigated disasters either, because really the standards for the performance of the players involved are basically "be a regular player who can at least keep up." At that low contribution level, teams can feel that they didn't get crushed by the contracts, and anything better than that offers them the chance to recoup excess value on the deals. But they're the type of deals that can end up being "death by 1,000 paper cuts" for a team, even though they may

be able to hand-wave away these deals if they don't go well because they aren't for huge dollars or involve household names.

It comes down to flexibility. Who were the Penguins bidding against that Tanev needed six years? Do the Preds think age-31 Sissons is going to provide more value than the next guy they could've signed for \$2.85 million in 2025? If not, why bother with all that term? As I said, these deals aren't crises. They just look like overthinking at the cost of flexibility for all involved. Colton Sissons at \$3-million per season for four, or even five years makes sense to me. Colton Sissons for seven years feels like galaxy brain.

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The Athletic / What happens when an NHL team goes for it ... every single season?

By Sean Gentile Jul 23, 2019

The Penguins wouldn't have won their past two Stanley Cups if they didn't use draft picks as trade fodder. It was the correct process, and it led to the desired result. We need to get that out of the way before we dive down a rabbit hole deep enough to crack the groundwater table.

Where we're going may shock you. Depending on your fandom, it may sicken you. Just remember: Ray Shero and Jim Rutherford spent the last decade trying to maximize the Sidney Crosby/Evgeni Malkin window. When you have those guys, the future is less important than the present. We talked about this ahead of the draft: If you can get better today at the expense of tomorrow, you have a borderline moral obligation to follow through.

That said, it seems worthwhile to explore the cost of those two Cups. And that's what we're doing. The Penguins bought some hardware. This is the invoice. It is considerable.

Starting with the 2009-10 season, Shero and Rutherford combined to make 17 trades that we can classify as "pick for player." Sometimes, they included other players for cap purposes, but these guys were never the focal point of the deals. Other times, more relevant players changed hands in addition to the picks. That means we're eliminating, most importantly, the original Phil Kessel trade. A 2016 first-rounder was one element — but it was far from the most important.

We're also not counting the Ryan Reaves-Oscar Sundqvist trade, given that the draft-pick element cost the Penguins only 19 spots. It was a roster player-centric deal. A problematic one, for some, but still — the picks weren't the point.

Working under those conditions, we're going to build three teams based on the picks the Penguins moved out. One is made up of the exact players selected in each spot. This is the realistic group of assets. The second expands that to the following 30 selections; players valued in the overall ballpark. This is the semi-realistic group of assets. The third expands that to every player selected for the remainder of the draft. This is the insane, fantasyland group of assets.

Away we go.



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2010 — No. 50 overall

D Jordan Leopold from Florida

Trading for Leopold made sense at the time — and honestly, you can say that about most, if not all, of the moves we're going to talk about. The Penguins were trying to repeat as champs, and they started the season without Rob Scuderi and Hal Gill. That led to situations like Jay McKee and Martin Skoula combining to start 95 games. Leopold was a good puck-mover averaging more than 22 minutes a game with the Panthers. He kept eating minutes with the Penguins but saw his season end in the first round of the playoffs against Ottawa, when he was concussed on a hit by Andy Sutton, and he signed with Buffalo in free agency.

Scenario 1 (exact player selected): Connor Brickley, C. In 81 career NHL games, including 14 last season with the Rangers, Brickley has 21 points (6G, 15 A). He's a classic fringe NHL player who brings energy and rough possession numbers to a fourth line.

Scenario 2 (best player within 30 selections): Jason Zucker, RW. You're probably aware of Zucker. He would've been the principle return for Phil Kessel, had Kessel approved a deal with the Wild. He's fast and solid defensively, with at least 21 goals in four of his past five seasons (including 33 in 2017-18). All things considered, Rutherford would rather have him. Shoutout to No 80, Bryan Rust.

Scenario 3 (best player selected for the rest of the draft): Mark Stone, RW. Stone, when you consider the totality of his work, is one of the few best hockey players on Earth. He was taken at 178. Honorable mentions to Stars defenseman John Klingberg (No. 131) — who'd be the lights-out pick in almost every other situation — and Maple Leafs goalie Frederik Andersson (No 187).

2010 — No. 177 overall

G Mattias Modig from Anaheim

Modig was the sort of player you add for organizational depth in net. He was the Ducks' fourth-round pick in 2007 and had started for his team in the Swedish Elite League for two seasons. He was hurt in his first season with the Penguins organization and was back in Sweden by 2010.

Scenario 1 (exact player selected): Kevin Lind, D. Lind played for Notre Dame from 2010-2014 and never made it to the NHL. He last played in the ECHL in 2016.

Scenario 2 (best player within 30 selections): Stone. He was taken with the very next pick, and oh boy, we're off to quite a start with Team 2.

Scenario 3 (best player selected for the rest of the draft), Andersen. That said, overall, in our supreme fantasy land scenario, the Penguins would've taken Klingberg at No. 50 and Stone at No. 177. Bumping Klingberg from 131 to 50 violates our arbitrary set of rules, though.

2011 — No. 84 overall

D Dan Hamhuis from Nashville

Who didn't want Hamhuis in 2011? He was the best defenseman on the market after several excellent seasons with Nashville, and the Flyers had already acquired (and failed to capitalize on) his negotiation rights. The Penguins did the same, and Hamhuis ended up playing in Vancouver.

Scenario 1 (exact player selected): Harrison Ruopp, D. The Coyotes wound up making this pick. Ironically, the Penguins acquired Ruopp in 2012 as part of the package they received for Zbynek Michalek

who — drumroll — signed in 2011 after Hamhuis walked. Ruopp never played an NHL game.

Scenario 2 (best player within 30 selections): Johnny Gaudreau, LW. The Flames took him 104th overall. He had 36 goals and 63 assists last season, and 24/60 in 2017-18. Lucky for the Penguins, he plays left wing; right wing, with Stone and Zucker, is starting to get crowded.

Scenario 3 (best player selected for the rest of the draft): The correct answer is Gaudreau, but Ondrej Palat is useful, as are most elite defensive wingers with a few 50-point seasons on their resume. He's had injury issues the last two years, but still ... it's Ondrej Palat.

2011 — No. 204 overall

W Alexei Kovalev from Ottawa

Acquiring Kovalev in The Year 2011 seemed fun at the time. It didn't lead to much, though. So it goes when Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin are hurt, and your first line is Mark Letestu, James Neal and a 38-year-old Kovalev. Nice sentiment, though — and really, what is a conditional seventh-rounder going to turn into?

Scenario 1 (exact player selected): Ryan Dzingel, C. Whoops. Dzingel might've been overpaid earlier this summer by Carolina, but he's still, at worst, a top-9 forward with two consecutive 20-plus goal seasons.

Scenario 2 (best player within 30 selections): Palat.

Scenario 3 (best player selected for the rest of the draft): Palat.

2012 — No. 203 overall

G Tomas Vokoun from Washington

Vokoun was a valuable player. With a few goals against Boston in 2013, he might've been the starter in a Stanley Cup final. This one falls, unequivocally, into the "you even do it in hindsight" category.

Scenario 1 (exact player selected): Sergei Costenko, G. He briefly played in the Capitals' organization, then returned to Russia in 2014. We were one pick away from another bizarre, ironic twist: Nikita Gusev went 202nd overall. He's one of the best players outside North America, and Vegas — against the salary cap — is shopping his rights. The Penguins would be a real possibility for him, were they to have cap space of their own.

Scenario 2 (best player within 30 selections): Jaycob Megna, D. Pickins' are slim when there are only nine picks left in a draft. Megna (210th pick) played 43 games with the Ducks and captained their AHL team. He signed a two-way deal with Vegas earlier this month. The Penguins could use some organizational depth at defensemen, and they already have employed Jaycob's brother Jayson. Shoutout to Viktor Loov, though.

Scenario 3 (best player selected for the rest of the draft): Megna.

2013 — No. 28 overall

W Jarome Iginla from Calgary

Trading for Iginla was (and remains) a no-brainer. It didn't work out for plenty of reasons — not the least of which being the fact that he played mainly with Brandon Sutter and Matt Cooke.

Scenario 1 (exact player selected): Morgan Klimchuk, LW. He was coming off a 76-point draft season in the WHL and has a pair of 19-goal AHL seasons, but played just one game with the Flames. He re-signed with Ottawa earlier this month.



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Scenario 2 (best player within 30 selections): Tyler Bertuzzi, LW. Let's go with the guy who just had 21 goals in his first full NHL season. Detroit took him at 58. Versatile Avs center J.T. Compher and new Wild forward Ryan Hartman are both options here, though.

Scenario 3 (best player selected for the rest of the draft): It's Jake Guentzel, but he's already on the team — so come on down, Brett Pesce (No. 66). He's really good defensively, works well with Jaccob Slavin and got a fifth-place Norris vote last season.

2013 — No. 58 overall

D Douglas Murray from San Jose

Murray was an entertaining guy and a fan favorite. Let's move on.

Scenario 1 (exact player selected): Bertuzzi. Ah. Well. Nevertheless.

Scenario 2 (best player within 30 selections): Might as well go with Pesce. This is starting to derail.

Scenario 3 (best player selected for the rest of the draft): Since Pesce is already part of our Scenario 3 squad, let's add Will Butcher to the mix. The Avs took him at 123, then watched him win a Hobey Baker with the University of Denver and, in 2017, sign with the Devils as a free agent. He's had 36- and 29-point seasons in the NHL and looks useful across the board, particularly on the power play.

2014 — No. 53 overall

Murray from San Jose

Again, Murray was an entertaining guy and a fan favorite.

Scenario 1 (exact player selected): Noah Rod, RW. He left Switzerland in 2017 to play a handful of games with the Sharks AHL affiliate, then went back.

Scenario 2 (best player within 30 selections): Brayden Point, C. He had 41 goals and 51 assists this season for the Lightning. That's pretty good! Let's go with him. Kind of short, though. High risk at, uh, 79th overall.

Scenario 3 (best player selected for the rest of the draft): Point.

2014 — No. 83 overall

W Lee Stempniak from Calgary

Stempniak had his mandatory stint in Pittsburgh during the last season of the Shero/Dan Bylsma regime. He had 11 points in 21 regular-season games, then three in the playoffs. That was the year they blew a 3-1 series lead against the Rangers, for the record. What a time.

Scenario 1 (exact player selected): Matt Iacopelli, RW. He has 14 goals and 13 assists in 85 AHL games and split last season between Rockford and the ECHL.

Scenario 2 (best player within 30 selections): Viktor Arvidsson, LW. Consecutive seasons of 31, 29 and 34 goals — the last of which game in just 58 games. Not bad for the 112th pick.

Scenario 3 (best player selected for the rest of the draft): Arvidsson.

2014 — No. 143 overall

C Marcel Goc from Florida

Goc made sense at the time; he'd carved out a niche as a defensive responsibly bottom-six center with good possession numbers. In 55 games with the Penguins across two seasons, though, he didn't do

much — eight total points — and was eventually traded to St. Louis for Max Lapierre.

Scenario 1 (exact player selected): Miguel Fidler, LW. He'll be a senior at Ohio State in the fall and had five points in 22 games last season. The Panthers took him out of a Minnesota high school. Great name.

Scenario 2 (best player within 30 selections): Kevin Labanc, RW. Labanc (No. 171) has totaled 40 and 56 points with the Sharks in each of the last two seasons. That puts him at No. 10 in scoring in his class.

Scenario 3 (best player selected for the rest of the draft): Labanc. Shoutout to Ondrej Kase, though. Pick 205 had 20 goals in 66 games with Anaheim last season.

2015 — No. 16 overall

W David Perron from Edmonton

This, along with cap fodder Rob Klinkhammer, is what got the Penguins Perron. He never quite fit here, partially due to The Mike Johnston Era, and was one of the first moves of The Mike Sullivan Era. His exit made way for Carl Hagelin. The Penguins probably are stuck on one Stanley Cup since 1992 without that guy, so it was eminently worth it overall but ...

Scenario 1 (exact player selected): Mat Barzal, C. ... this happened. It's not the Penguins' fault. Barzal's draft-day fall was nuts, even in the moment. The series of events that led to the Islanders taking him is (and was) one of the most bizarre confluences in the recent history of the league. It took the Bruins passing on him three times, and the Oilers subsequently trading the No. 16 pick for Griffin Reinhart, for it to end this way. Now, the Islanders are stuck with a 21-year-old who started his career with 85- and 62-point seasons. He's one of the five or six best players in a draft with Connor McDavid, Jack Eichel and Mitch Marner. Truly amazing.

Scenario 2 (best player within 30 selections): Barzal. Sebastian Aho (No. 35 to Carolina) is tempting, but come on.

Scenario 3 (best player selected for the rest of the draft): Joren van Pottelberghe. Just kidding. It's Barzal.

2015 — No. 77 overall

Goc from Florida

Scenario 1 (exact player selected): Sam Montembeault, G. He put up an .894 save percentage in his first 11 games with the Panthers in 2018-19, and he'll back up Sergei Bobrovsky in the fall. Not a bad young guy to have around.

Scenario 2 (best player within 30 selections): Jens Looke, RW. Full disclosure: I didn't know much of anything about the guys taken 78-107, so I asked Jesse Marshall. He went with Looke, the 10th-rated European skater that year. He went 83rd, had 15 point with Arizona's AHL team last season and, like Jesse noted, was just bought out. So ... not a lot here.

Scenario 3 (best player selected for the rest of the draft): Kirill Kaprizov, LW. Other than Gusev, he might be the best player outside North America; last season, as a 21-year-old, he had 30 goals and 21 assists for CSKA Moscow. The Wild taking him at 135 seems like a steal.

2015 — No. 107 overall

F Daniel Winnik from Toronto



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The Penguins used this (and added Zach Sill for salary reasons) to acquire Winnik. Like Goc, he was a useful bottom-six forward elsewhere. Like Goc, he didn't do much in Pittsburgh.

Scenario 1 (exact player selected): Christian Wolanin, D. He seems to have had a decent 30 games with the Senators last season; 12 points and good relative possession numbers on a bad team. He signed a new contract earlier this month.

Scenario 2 (best player within 30 selections): Kaprizov.

Scenario 3 (best player selected for the rest of the draft): Kaprizov. Since we already added him to team "Scenario 3" with the last pick, though, throw in Caleb Jones (117). Seth is his brother, and he played a little in the NHL last season ... even if it was in Edmonton.

2016 — No. 91 overall

D Justin Schultz from Edmonton

Justin Schultz carried the Penguins defense when Kris Letang missed the 2017 Stanley Cup playoffs. (Charles LeClaire / USA Today)

Can't cherry-pick any more than we already are, so goodbye, Justin Schultz. Also, goodbye 2017 Stanley Cup. Gotta keep it honest, though.

Scenario 1 (exact player selected): Filip Berglund, D. He's 6-foot-3 with 33 points in 148 career games in the Swedish league.

Scenario 2 (best player within 30 selections): Victor Mete, D. The Canadiens took him at 100, and he played 71 games for them in in 2018-19, averaging a little less than 18 minutes a game and totaling 13 points, all assists. He's 5-foot-9, but a good skater.

Scenario 3 (best player selected for the rest of the draft): Jesper Bratt, LW. The Devils took him at 162. As a rookie in 2017-18, he had 13 goals and 22 assists. Last season, in 51 games after fracturing his jaw, he had eight goals and 25 assists. That's a useful player.

2017 — No. 62 overall

D Ron Hainsey from Carolina

Say what you will about Hainsey, but someone needed to play those minutes during the 2017 playoffs. This was the cost.

Scenario 1 (exact player selected): Jake Leschyshyn, C. Curtis' son, taken by Vegas, had 81 points as an overage player in the WHL last season and played three games in the AHL.

Scenario 2 (best player within 30 selections): Leschyshyn. That's what Jesse told me to say, at least.

Scenario 3 (best player selected for the rest of the draft): Sebastian Aho, D. The other one. After 22 games with the Islanders in 2017-18, the 139th pick made an AHL All-Star team in 2019 and wound up totaling nine points and 37 assists with Bridgeport.

2018 — No. 115 overall

D Mark Streit from Tampa Bay

Trading for Streit was a funny moment, if only because the Penguins basically laundered him through the Lightning. Philadelphia traded him to Tampa Bay, and then Tampa Bay traded him here. He got a Cup out of it. Not bad.

And this, friends, is where our exercise must stop. Superficially re-evaluating prospects one season out from the draft is a bridge too

far, and my head hurts from staring at my laptop screen for the last eight hours. The point is made.

The end result

- Scenario 1 is, generally, what you'd expect; lots of guys you haven't heard of, mixed in with nice players like Bertuzzi and Dzingel, plus a couple guys with interesting futures like Wolanin and Montembeault. Barzal is the outlier here, but you shouldn't be inclined to rake Rutherford over the coals for that. The circumstances are too ridiculous, and Hagelin's contributions were too important. This is, overwhelmingly, the most likely way things would've played out; the bones of a mediocre first line but not much else.

- Scenario 2 is where things descend into true psychosis. Forget the salary cap; just from a raw-material standpoint, at some point over the last few years, they'd have assembled a right-wing group from Stone, Kessel, Zucker, Patric Hornqvist, Bryan Rust and Leban. Their left wings: Gaudreau, Guentzel (though he's played both sides), Arvidsson and Palat. Barzal and Point would fight it out for third-line center — maybe the loser would move to right wing. Maybe he'd center the fourth line. Crosby-Malkin-Barzal-Point. That seems like it would work. (Playing the what-if game with Point is particularly easy — but then, you can do that regarding every other NHL team, and some of them thrice.) Meanwhile, Pesce slides in Schultz's spot on the right side of the second pair. Jared McCann and Nick Bjugstad ... uh ... are somewhere else. If 25 percent of that came to pass, the nature of the NHL would be considerably altered.

- Scenario 3 takes nearly all that, then adds Butcher on the left side of the defense and Schultz's spot on the second power-play unit. Also, Zucker is gone, so the wing logjam gets a little simpler to suss out. Given Andersen's presence, this team might win a playoff round. Yes, they have four defensemen. So what? Teach Kaprizov gap control and pull a reverse-Orpik.

Odds are you're lost in the what-if game now, too, so we'll leave you to it. This is all a fun, silly, late-July dead-period experiment. Still, that doesn't mean it's not worthwhile to undertake, as some means of quantifying — ridiculous as it seems — what "going for it" for 10 years looks like, at least conceptually. It's not reality for the Penguins, though. Owing the Stanley Cup for 20 percent of the last decade will have to do. It's a bill worth paying.

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The Athletic / The NHL's top 10 breakout candidates for 2019-20

By Ian Tulloch Jul 23, 2019

It's always fun trying to predict which players are going to break out next season. Most of the time, we'll end up wrong on these assessments (as the Vegas Golden Knights have proven, it's not always easy predicting future results in hockey), but we do it anyway because of how vindicated we feel the odd time we get one right. Much like that popular band or artist you loved before they became famous, it's fun to be all-in on someone before they become a household name.



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Our goal today is to identify which players fit that description. Whether it's a bottom-six forward who showcases first-line upside, or a borderline star who blossoms into a superstar, we want to break down which players are likely to take a huge leap from 2018-19 to 2019-20. As a rule of thumb, we're going to say that rookies (players eligible for the Calder Trophy) are not allowed to be considered for this list – since they've yet to play their first official season in the NHL.

One of the interesting things I noticed is that almost all of the players I identified as potential breakout candidates were on the younger side (under the age of 24). That makes sense when you consider what the latest research suggests about age curves (forwards and defencemen peak around age 23-24 when you adjust for context), but it also speaks to the fact that a lot of younger players have yet to be moved up the lineup despite dominating in a lower role.

After hours of going through video and numbers trying to find the best predictors of future success, I ended up with a list of ten players that I'm still not quite happy with (hence the long list of honorable mentions you'll see at the end). There are plenty of other names I wanted to include, so please feel free to discuss them in the comments section (I would have loved to make this a list of 50, but I think my editor would have a heart attack).

Without further ado, let's dive into my list (which will almost surely differ from yours – and that's OK!)

## 1. Ondrej Kase, RW, Anaheim Ducks

Still one of the best kept secrets in the league, I have a feeling Kase is going to have a big-time breakout performance in 2019-20. He's been scoring at an elite rate over the past two seasons (ranking 36th in the NHL in points per 60 minutes at 5-on-5), but we haven't seen him put up monster totals yet, largely due to the fact that he hasn't been given opportunities higher in the lineup.

Now that Anaheim has moved on from Corey Perry, it looks like Kase is going to get significantly more minutes in high-leverage situations (first line at even strength and potentially top unit PP as well).

Image from Daily Faceoff

Even though Ryan Getzlaf isn't quite what he was a few years ago, I love the thought of playing him alongside a shooter like Kase, who generated the second most shots per 60 in the league at 5-on-5 last season (behind Brendan Gallagher). Kase can also help shoulder the load in transition for his line thanks to his phenomenal puck-carrying ability.

You're not reading that wrong; over the last three seasons, Kase ranks in the 99th percentile of clean zone exits and zone entries per 60 minutes, not to mention the 98th percentile of shots per 60. If he gets the boost in ice time he deserves, I expect him to have a dominant 2019-20 season.

## 2. Andrei Svechnikov, RW, Carolina Hurricanes

His rookie season in Carolina may have flown under the radar and I think most people just don't realize just how impressive it is for an 18-year-old to score 20 goals in his first NHL season. Here's a list of players in the past decade who have accomplished that:

2008-09: Steven Stamkos

2010-11: Jeff Skinner

2013-14: Nathan MacKinnon

2016-17: Patrik Laine

2017-18: Nico Hischier

2018-19: Andrei Svechnikov

The four players preceding Svechnikov and Nico Hischier on this list have all gone on to have 40-goal seasons and I expect Svechnikov to follow a similar trajectory. He's generated scoring chances at an elite rate in every league he's played in (the USHL at 16, the OHL at 17 and now the NHL at 18). To help visualize his value on offense, here's a look at how well the Hurricanes generated offence with him on the ice.

Red: Team generates more shots than league average from that location

Blue: Team generates fewer shots than league average from that location

After accounting for context, Svechnikov had the largest impact on 5-on-5 scoring chances in 2018-19 (which is pretty shocking in a league with offensive weapons like Connor McDavid and Auston Matthews). The fact that he did it at age 18 is even more frightening. With some shooting percentage regression and extra ice time, I wouldn't be shocked if Svechnikov scored well over 30 goals next year (especially if Carolina finds a way to make him a feature on PP1).

## 3. Rasmus Dahlin, LD, Buffalo Sabres

It's pretty hard to justify putting a No. 1 overall pick on this list considering the fact most hockey fans realize how talented Dahlin is. With that being said, I think there's a chance he gets legitimate Norris consideration in 2019-20, which would make him a "breakout" performer in my opinion.

That may seem a bit bullish, but it's worth noting that he's already one of the best puck-movers in the game (getting out of the defensive zone with possession 46.3 percent of the time in 2018-19, which ranked third right behind Erik Karlsson – who he's often compared to). Defensemen typically don't get worse from age 18 to 19; they improve dramatically, meaning we should probably expect to see Dahlin at the top of that list next season.

It's also worth considering just how much his defense partners held him back last season. He spent most of his ice time with Zach Bogosian and Rasmus Ristolainen, who have both historically negatively impacted their team at 5-on-5.

When he finally got a chance to play alongside a strong puck-mover in Brandon Montour, Dahlin dominated play (controlling over 55 percent of the shots at even strength). He should get that opportunity again in 2019-20, with Buffalo adding a few other right-handed defensemen in Colin Miller and Henri Jokiharju, both of whom are excellent puck-movers.

If the Sabres move on from Ristolainen and make Dahlin the quarterback on the power play, would it be crazy to suggest he could put up 60 points while dominating play at even strength? I don't think it is, which is why I've included him on this list. After three decades of Swedish defensemen dominating this league, Dahlin looks like he's the next in line to be handed the torch – and that could come as early as 2019-20.

## 4. Samuel Girard, LD, Colorado Avalanche

Remember when I said Dahlin ranked third in defensive zone exits with possession last season? Samuel Girard was actually first on that list.

Data from Corey Sznajder



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The weird part about Girard is that his phenomenal puck-moving hasn't translated to strong 5-on-5 metrics at the team level. The Avalanche have been outshot and out-chanced with him on the ice at even strength, but I have a feeling that's going to change next season with him getting more minutes alongside Cale Makar.

These two dominated together in the playoffs (controlling over 57 percent of the shots at 5-on-5). Although I'm hesitant of relying too heavily on a small sample, we can see from the eye-test that these two can dominate puck possession when they're playing off of each other. Girard might not get PP1 time (that will probably go to Makar), but I expect him to have a very strong 2019-20 season on one of the best young blue lines in the NHL.

## 5. Kevin Fiala, LW, Minnesota Wild

It feels like we've been waiting for Fiala's breakout season for a few years now (which is probably some realistic cause for concern at this point), but I'm of the opinion that he's just too talented to not become a 50-plus point player. When you watch him play, you see a fast skater with great edges, high-end skill and excellent vision.

Those attributes have helped make him one of the league's best puck transporters early in his career.

The frustrating part with Fiala is that it's never led to the point production we would expect (39 points last season, 48 the year before). He probably would have been on my list last year for a player we would expect to "break out," but after a disappointing 2018-19 campaign, it feels like we're in a "fool me once" scenario with him.

The reason I haven't sold my stock on him just yet is his playmaking ability. He isn't one of those speedsters who just gains the zone and fires a low percentage shot from the outside (e.g. Kasperi Kapanen or Jake Virtanen). He's consistently been one of the better players in the league at making a pass after gaining the zone, which Harman Dayal helped show is an extremely important aspect of generating offence in the modern game.

When you combine that with his elite transition game, I can't help but feel there's a 50-point player somewhere in there. If he gets his opportunity higher in the lineup (in the top six alongside some strong shooters and PP1 time), I could see Fiala having the breakout season we've all been waiting for.

## 6. Ryan Donato, C, Minnesota Wild

Speaking of breakout candidates on Minnesota, I'm really excited to see what Donato can do with a full season of top-six minutes. He was one of my favorite players to watch back in Boston despite not getting much of an opportunity to prove himself higher in the lineup. After getting traded to the Wild, we got to see him put up 16 points in 22 games to end the season, giving fans high hopes for 2019-20.

Now, it's worth noting that 60-point pace probably isn't sustainable (he racked up a bunch of secondary assists, which we know aren't as repeatable). However, when you look at his ability to generate offense, he feels like a player who could sustainably produce in the 45-50 point range. One of my favorite stats for forwards is shot generation; if you're firing pucks toward the net at a high rate, it's a great sign.

Once he starts converting on more of his chances, we're probably looking at a first-line point producer at 5-on-5. Throw in some power play time and you can start to see why Donato's a player you should keep your eye on next season.

## 7. Andre Burakovsky, LW, Colorado Avalanche

I was a huge fan of Colorado's offseason. They used their cap space (and Tyson Barrie) to help fill out their middle-six with some much-needed depth and Burakovsky is a big part of that. As Harman Dayal broke down in detail earlier this season, the point totals don't tell the whole story with Burakovsky.

Much like the other forwards on this list, Burakovsky is excellent at transitioning the puck from the defensive zone to the offensive zone with possession. This doesn't show up in the box score, but it's a key component to controlling the game at 5-on-5. Burakovsky has also generated shots and passes (shot assists) at an elite rate over the past few years, which begs the question: why hasn't he been producing?

Looking at the evidence, I think a lot of it comes down to opportunity. Here's a great visual from Dayal's piece on Burakovsky to help demonstrate the difference between Burakovsky's numbers alongside Lars Eller compared to Nicklas Backstrom.

As you can see, when Burakovsky got a chance to play in Washington's top six, he performed admirably. We've seen similar trends with players like Jonathan Marchessault, who struggled to produce in a bottom-six role (in Tampa Bay with Brian Boyle or in Florida with Nick Bjugstad and Colton Sceviour).

In a similar vein, we should probably expect Burakovsky to be more productive alongside talented linemates. It looks like Colorado is going to play him on their second line next season alongside Nazem Kadri (one of the most underrated play-drivers in the league), which should be a great combination. Both players are excellent at getting the puck up the ice and generating offense at 5-on-5, which should help Burakovsky put up career highs if he can stay healthy.

## 8. Mathieu Joseph, RW, Tampa Bay Lightning

I had trouble deciding which Tampa Bay forward to put on this list – it was between Joseph and Anthony Cirelli. I ended up going with the former based on the fact that most hockey fans probably realize how strong Cirelli is defensively (he got a few Selke votes in his rookie season), whereas Joseph flew under the radar.

I think that's going to change in 2019-20 thanks largely to the J.T. Miller trade. With him out of the lineup, it's going to open up a spot for Joseph to play alongside Stamkos in the top six (or potentially Brayden Point and Nikita Kucherov, although it's unlikely since Kucherov tends to play right wing, Joseph's natural position). As we discussed with Burakovsky, opportunity can often dictate whether or not a player is going to have a productive season, and there appears to be an opening for Joseph to play alongside one of the best point producers in the world (not to mention an open spot on the best power-play unit in hockey).

It's unlikely he gets the net-front role on PP1, but I still expect him to rack up the points at even strength. He finished last season with more 5-on-5 points per 60 than Mark Scheifele, Blake Wheeler and Sebastian Aho (with very few secondary assists), so I'd imagine he continues to score at a high rate next season alongside more talented linemates.

## 9. Mikhail Sergachev, LD, Tampa Bay Lightning

Tampa Bay has an embarrassment of riches that they're able to move up their lineup without missing a beat. It feels like every year they have someone thrust into a bigger role in their top half and dominate in those minutes. I'd argue that Sergachev is likely to be that player next season.

It's hard to consider him a "breakout" candidate considering we've already seen him put up 40 points in his rookie season back in 2017-18, but I have a few qualms with that reasoning. Much like Colin



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Miller's 40-point season, Sergachev played that year on a sheltered third pairing and generated a lot of those points on the power play. Personally, I care much more about a defenceman's ability to drive play at 5-on-5 in big minutes, and we haven't actually got to see that yet from Sergachev.

It sounds crazy, but he's actually spent his last two years stuck on the Lightning's bottom pairing (with Anton Stralman, Dan Girardi and Erik Cernak getting minutes in the top four alongside Hedman or McDonagh). With Tampa Bay moving on from Stralman and Girardi this offseason, it feels like they have to play Sergachev in the top four, where I expect him to dominate.

I think it's fair to say that Sergachev has been one of the most overqualified bottom pairing defencemen in the league over the past two seasons, and I fully expect him to have success alongside a talented defense partner in Hedman or McDonagh. It might take a bit of an adjustment phase facing tougher competition, not to mention playing on his wrong side, but when you're as talented as Sergachev, you tend to figure it out.

10. Travis Dermott, LD, Toronto Maple Leafs

Anyone who's read my stuff (or listened to me ramble on my podcast) probably knows how much I love Travis Dermott by now, but I still think it's worth explaining just how well he controls the game in transition.

He's so aggressive in the neutral zone, jumping up on players before they have a chance to react.

OZHIGANOV ALSO STRUGGLES DEFENDING IN TRANSITION BUT LUCKILY FOR THE LEAFS, TRAVIS DERMOTT THRIVES IN THIS AREA. THE AMOUNT OF TIMES WE SEE DERMOTT STEP UP IN THE NEUTRAL ZONE TO DISRUPT PLAY IS CRAZY

BELOW, OZ MAKES A NICE PASS RIGHT AFTER DERMOTT STOPS THE INCOMING PUCK-CARRIER  
PIC.TWITTER.COM/3ZKLXCFX3V

— NICK DESOUZA (@NICKDESOUZA\_) OCTOBER 1, 2018

He makes plays like these with consistency, which helps explain why he allowed the fourth-fewest carry-ins against when targeted last season.

Data from Corey Sznajder

Now, it's obviously easier to prevent zone entries against bottom six forwards than it is against top six forwards, so that's an important factor to keep in mind. With that being said, we've seen him do the same thing against some of the best forwards in the league.

Much like Hampus Lindholm, Dermott is extremely effective at controlling his gaps in transition and moving the puck out of the defensive zone with possession. There aren't too many defencemen who can do both at an elite rate (Dermott and Lindholm are the only two defencemen who ranked in the top 10 of Carry-In Against percentage and Possession Exit percentage last season).

When you combine Dermott's phenomenal gap control with his strong puck-moving ability, I think he has all the makings of a play-driving defenseman in the modern game. Much like Sergachev, he's played his last two seasons on the third pairing despite being a significantly better play-driver than the players ahead of him in the lineup (Nikita Zaitsev, Ron Hainsey and most likely Cody Ceci to start next season).

Dermott should get a chance to play a top four role this season alongside Morgan Rielly when he returns from his shoulder injury,

and I think he's going to take full advantage of that opportunity. It's an opportunity that he's proven time and again that he deserves.

Honorable Mentions

Carter Hart, G, Philadelphia Flyers: It feels like he's poised to be the next star goaltender in this league, but after looking at the list of 20-year-old goaltenders who performed well in their first season, I learned that all of them took a significant step back in their 21-year-old season. Maybe it's a fluke (goaltending is voodoo) or maybe there is a real "sophomore slump" that young goaltenders experience after joining the league at such a young age. It's tough to say for certain, which is why I have Hart just on the outside of my top 10.

Miro Heiskanen, LD, Dallas Stars: It killed me not including him on this list, but after taking the league by storm on his first NHL shift and finishing the year with almost as many Calder votes as Dahlin, I think most fans realize how great of a player he is. Technically, that means he probably can't be considered a "breakout" candidate (unless he forces himself into the Norris conversation, which isn't completely outside the realm of possibility).

Pierre Luc Dubois, C, Columbus Blue Jackets: The list of players who scored over 60 points at age 20 is pretty short (much like Sebastian Aho, they tend to go on to become superstars). My only concern is whether or not Dubois can take that next step without Artemi Panarin on his line; he's been outshot and out-chanced at 5-on-5 over the past two seasons when he plays apart from Panarin.

Nico Hischier, C, New Jersey Devils: Much like Dubois, there aren't too many 20-year-olds with his resume. It sounds like Hischier is going to play with Taylor Hall next season (which doesn't hurt) and when you throw in some power-play time with Jack Hughes, it could be a big year for him. The issue I have with putting him in my list is that it's tough for a first overall pick to be considered a true "breakout" candidate (Dahlin could be in contention for a major award next year, whereas Hischier is still probably a few years away from that).

Jack Roslovic, C, Winnipeg Jets: He generated OZ passes and assists at an elite rate last season, which could lead to some big-time production in 2019-20 if he plays with some better finishers. As of right now, he appears to be penciled in for the third-line, but Bryan Little's history suggests that there's a good chance that he'll miss time due to an injury and I'd imagine that Roslovic moves up in the lineup and produces well.

Thatcher Demko, G, Vancouver Canucks: I never like making bets on goalies, especially one with a 10-game sample at the NHL level, but Demko is one of the few voodoo practitioners I genuinely believe in moving forward. He's thrived at every level and has a track record of consistently getting better after adapting to a league. We might still be another year away from seeing his true "breakout" performance, but it wouldn't surprise me if he established himself as Vancouver's starting goaltender before the end of the season.

Filip Hronek, RD, Detroit Red Wings: I've been a huge fan of Hronek's game for a while now. After dominating the AHL over the last couple years, he was brought up by Detroit in 2018-19 and put up 23 points in 46 games while driving play at 5-on-5. I think it's safe to say he's the Red Wings' best right-handed defenseman heading into next season, which isn't saying much, but it should give him plenty of opportunities to prove himself in an expanded role.

Filip Chytil, C, New York Rangers: One of my other favorite Filipis! His adjusted points per game over the last few years are excellent when you consider his age and league difficulty (producing well in the Czech league as a 17-year-old, following it up with a strong AHL



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season at age-18 and then becoming a zone-entry machine in the NHL at age 20). All signs point to the Rangers competing for the playoffs in 2019-20 with the improvements to their roster, but I think that internal growth from players like Chytil is also going to be a major factor.

Henri Jokiharju, RD, Buffalo Sabres: I'm still having trouble trying to wrap my head around the Jokiharju for Alex Nylander trade, mainly because I'm so high on the right-handed defenseman's talent. At age 19, he proved that he was able to move the puck well at the NHL level. When you combine that with everything else we know about the young Finn (who's dominated at international tournaments in recent years), I think it's a safe bet that he's going to become a top-four defenseman in the near future – and it could happen as early as next season.

The Athletic LOADED: 07.24.2019

1150100 Websites

The Athletic / Unresolved situations around the NHL that could force further trades

By Jonathan Willis Jul 23, 2019

The NHL should be at the height of its offseason inactivity. Yet the calm (thankfully) has been repeatedly disrupted by trades. It's understandable; the league is rife with situations either undesirable or untenable, for which the only outlet is a deal.

At some point, those pressures will break. Some already have; more will over the course of the summer and into training camp. All will be resolved, satisfactorily or otherwise, by the time teams submit cap compliant opening night rosters.

The pressures vary in nature.

The most common, by far, is of the positional variety: teams that would like to upgrade their rosters. Not all of these issues will be resolved. The NHL compels teams to comply with the salary cap on opening night; it does not demand that they have an adequate third-line pivot or a second-pair right-shot defenceman.

Financial pressures are less elastic. Every team has to slide in between the NHL's upper and lower cap limits. On the budget side, every general manager has to submit a roster for which his owner is willing and able to pay.

Somewhere in-between those sorts of demands are contract issues. Restricted free agents do not need to be signed by opening night, but failure to agree to a contract by that point puts serious pressures on player and team alike. Players on expiring deals, meanwhile, are often dealt in the summer so as to avoid will they/won't they drama at the trade deadline and also to resolve cap or budget issues in the least painful manner possible.

Which teams fall within those categories?

Vegas has been in a bad spot all summer. It's why the Golden Knights traded Erik Haula and Colin Miller at discount prices. They aren't done doing other teams favours just yet.

The Athletic NHL's offseason Slack chat is basically just hockey writers complaining that their readers won't stop talking about Nikita

Gusev, the KHL star who is technically ineligible for an offer sheet but who looks to be worth about \$4 million.

Vegas, as Jesse Granger explains, doesn't have that much money, meaning it either needs to trade Gusev or trade someone else. Other candidates include the overpaid (Ryan Reaves and Nick Holden) and the somewhat expendable (Cody Eakin). Eakin checks another box as a player a year away from free agency.

The rest of the Western teams in similar positions are there because they have big-ticket RFA contracts to sign.

The Canucks have to get Brock Boeser under contract, and probably need to shed a pricey forward (or perhaps Chris Tanev) to do it. The Flames have to deal with Matthew Tkachuk, Sam Bennett and David Rittich and have a mess of players a year away from free agency (which is partially why Michael Frolik, T.J. Brodie and Travis Hamonic figure prominently in trade rumours).

Then there are the Jets, a team with serious positional issues and an RFA list which includes 21-year-old Patrik Laine – a year removed from a 44-goal campaign – and 22-year-old 34-goal man Kyle Connor.

Of that quartet, only Vegas is truly stuck, but all four would presumably be amenable to a deal in which they would shed talent if it allowed them to shed cap hit.

The Rangers and Penguins both belong in this category, too.

New York has a whole mess of overpaid defencemen, a Chris Kreider decision to make (he'll be a free agent in 2020), and still have some RFAs to figure out after paying Jacob Trouba. There is some wiggle room there, particularly if they head down the buyout path, but a trade would be optimal. Vladislav Namestnikov seems an obvious candidate if they don't terminate a defender's contract.

Pittsburgh is the closest thing the East has to a Vegas analogue. The Pens will need to shed some money to be cap compliant on opening night, and Josh Yohe rattled off a list of possibilities off the top of his piece last week, including Jack Johnson, Nick Bjugstad, Bryan Rust and Erik Gudbranson "or someone else."

Presumably the Pens would like to take the same tack the Golden Knights have in making these trades: since the players are being moved at a loss, it's best to move them as far away as possible. Vegas has made deals with Buffalo and Carolina; the Pens have already made one deal with Arizona and may continue to look westward.

NHL teams understandably don't advertise their internal budgets. Even so, it's not too difficult to come up with a short list of plausible candidates for cost-cutting.

Ottawa is the team most hockey fans think of in this category, and there is an interesting little piece of unfinished business on their books: goalie Mike Condon, who carries a \$2.4-million cap hit and \$3-million salary.

After a rough 2017-18 season, Condon was limited to just three contests last year and perhaps he's bound for injured reserve. Yet he's also an excellent hypothetical trade chip in a deal for a cap team's bad contract, if that contract is heavy on cap hit and lower on actual salary.

Carolina is coming off an outstanding year in the market which included three rounds of playoff revenue. Yet the Hurricanes also had to match an offer sheet which included a \$12-million first-year salary for Sebastian Aho.



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Of particular interest in this regard is Justin Faulk. Carolina has reasonable depth on the right side, Faulk carries a salary (\$6 million) far in excess of his \$4.83-million cap hit and he's just a year away from unrestricted free agency.

Anaheim is more of a stretch, but they have a pile of good young forwards coming and it would be unsurprising if the team had interest in shedding a middle-tier contract.

It has been a busy year for restricted free agents, and three of the biggest are still on the board: Mikko Rantanen in Colorado, Brayden Point in Tampa Bay and Mitch Marner in Toronto.

The Avs shouldn't have much trouble; they have a lot of money to play with. The other two teams are looking at narrower margins, but with some judicious use of injured reserve can probably make extensions work, though both are at the point where every dollar matters.

Other teams are looking at classes of unsigned young players, some of whom are eligible for RFA offer sheets, others of whom are not.

The Bruins have some history of playing hardball with their kids, and they'll need to use that leverage again to get both Charlie McAvoy and Brandon Carlo signed. Our Fluto Shinzawa quoted GM Don Sweeney as describing Dec. 1 as the real deadline (after that point they can't play next season), a comment which feels telling.

The McAvoy negotiation might be particularly tough in that, on the one hand, he isn't eligible for an offer sheet. On the other hand, he was the No. 1 defenceman on the Eastern Conference champions.

If Boston could clear the David Backes contract life would be a lot easier, but that's a hard thing to do. If the team trims anywhere else, it risks cutting into important parts of its roster – especially since the opening night blueline might be wobbly. The Bruins also have to make decisions on pending free agents Torey Krug and Charlie Coyle.

It's a position that Calgary, Vancouver and Winnipeg all understand. Each team will be flirting with the cap's upper limit by the time it gets its key players re-signed. The Canucks in particular have the opportunity to play hardball with Boeser if they so desire, given that like McAvoy he has no ability to sign elsewhere.

All three teams have some possibilities, including buyout options. The Canucks are loaded with expensive expendables, while we've already listed Calgary's pending UFAs. Rumours continue to surround Winnipeg's Nikolaj Ehlers, though Mathieu Perreault would be a better trade choice.

Philadelphia has two notable RFAs in Ivan Provorov and Travis Konecny, but unlike the four teams just considered has the money to get deals done. Contracts with those two should not necessitate moves elsewhere.

Vegas is basically down to trade rumour staple Nikita Gusev, while the Oilers are in a different position with fellow speculation magnet Jesse Puljujarvi. Vegas would undoubtedly love to sign Gusev but lacks the money; Edmonton meanwhile has already gone out and signed a replacement for Puljujarvi, who wants a trade to a team which hasn't spent the last three years mishandling him.

For teams with roster issues, the pressures outlined above serve as opportunities. These are the teams that will be checking in with the Penguins and Golden Knights and Rangers and Canucks, asking about players that wouldn't be available if money wasn't an issue.

It's harder to get a read on these teams, since virtually every club in the league has some kind of roster need or want, and cap space isn't a prerequisite for having a roster need. Tampa Bay, for

example, has a good team and not much money but also has three signed goalies and a rumoured desire to add a right-shot defenceman.

Two teams with differing issues can occasionally help each other out; we saw that on Friday when the Flames traded Edmonton something it needed (scoring, maybe) for something it wanted (a better bottom-six player, maybe) in the James Neal-for-Milan Lucic trade. Both contracts are regrettable but might be better fits for their new cities.

The practice in the past has been to wait until the fall to resolve these situations. That allows arbitration to run its course, and since teams don't have to be cap compliant until opening night there is no real deadline pressure this early.

That seems to be changing, though.

Last year teams made four trades between mid-July and the end of August, equalling the total for the previous three years combined. This season we've already seen four deals in that window before August even starts: Neal for Lucic, Artem Anisimov for Zack Smith, Dakota Joshua and Henri Jokiharju for Alex Nylander.

The number of difficult, unresolved financial situations around the league is a powerful argument that more trades are yet to come.

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1150101 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs send Sparks to Golden Knights for Clarkson, pick

Sportsnet Staff | July 23, 2019, 6:22 PM

David Clarkson is headed back to Toronto.

The Toronto Maple Leafs acquired Clarkson's contract and a fourth-round pick in the 2020 NHL Draft from the Vegas Golden Knights in exchange for goaltender Garret Sparks, the team announced Tuesday.

The Leafs are projected to have a cap hit of \$82,234,699 — \$734,699 above the \$81.5-million ceiling — according to CapFriendly, but can potentially exceed the threshold by as much as \$10.55 million if they place injured forwards Nathan Horton and Clarkson on LTIR.

Clarkson signed a seven-year, \$36.75-million deal with the Leafs in the summer of 2013, but only recorded 26 points across 118 games for his hometown club. Clarkson was traded to the Blue Jackets in exchange for Horton in 2015. He suited up in just 26 games in two seasons in Columbus.

Clarkson was acquired by the Golden Knights ahead of the 2017 expansion draft.

Clarkson and Horton — who carries a seven-year, \$37.1-million contract — are both in the final years of their deals.

Sparks, 26, posted 3.15 goals-against average and .902 save percentage as the Leafs backup last season.

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1150102 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Laine, Connor in focus as Winnipeg Jets' salary cap picture becomes clear

Sean Reynolds July 23, 2019, 6:45 PM

With the signing of Neal Pionk and Andrew Copp's arbitration decision rendered, you can ring the bell to begin the main event of the Winnipeg Jets' off-season.

Frustrated fans who don't understand why one established Jet after another left the team this summer should know those decisions came down to one thing: leaving enough money on the table to re-sign restricted free agents Patrik Laine and Kyle Connor. Both players are set for massive pay raises so allowing the likes of Tyler Myers, Brandon Tanev, Ben Chiarot and Jacob Trouba to leave was a must to free up the kind of money it will take to lock those two players down.

So with Connor and Laine now the last two Jets remaining at the bargaining table, the waters surrounding Winnipeg's cap space have become quite clear. Unfortunately for the Jets there are sharks circling in those waters, threatening to turn this situation into a feeding frenzy.

We know other teams have contacted Connor's agent with interest in his client. Those calls started on the opening day of the RFA speaking period back on June 26 and Sportsnet has learned that contact has continued past July 1. Those teams interested in Connor now have a solid handle on the financial constraints Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff is facing and how that situation could be used against him.

It's bad enough having one highly attractive RFA left to sign with defined cap space. Having two is double trouble.

Let's use Connor as the example. Should a rival GM produce an offer sheet, every dollar it takes to keep Connor is a dollar taken away from re-signing Laine. So overpaying for one through an offer sheet simply makes it easier to follow up with an offer sheet on the other (should the Jets match).

Call it the San Jose Sharks blueprint. Back in 2010 the Chicago Blackhawks came off winning the Stanley Cup only to be greeted with an off-season cap crunch that included RFAs Niklas Hjalmarsson and Antti Niemi. The San Jose Sharks recognized the pinch Chicago was in and extended an offer sheet to Hjalmarsson. The Hawks matched and it looked like Sharks GM Doug Wilson's strategy had failed.

But it didn't.

The Hjalmarsson contract Wilson orchestrated ran the Hawks out of the money they needed to re-sign Niemi. So when Niemi was awarded a one-year, \$2.75 million contract in arbitration that the Hawks couldn't fit under the cap, they walked away from the ruling and made Niemi a UFA. Shortly after, the goalie signed with San Jose.

Fast forward to the present and any GM looking to add a high-powered scorer could use a similar blueprint against the Jets. Neither Laine or Connor are heading to arbitration this summer, but

a big offer sheet on either could force Winnipeg's hand and put them in a one-or-the-other position.

Ryan Dixon and Rory Boylen go deep on pucks with a mix of facts and fun, leaning on a varied group of hockey voices to give their take on the country's most beloved game.

BY THE NUMBERS

With the potential for that strategy hanging in the air, the numbers become vitally important.

After Copp's arbitration award the Jets now find themselves with \$17,592,503 remaining in cap space, accounting for 10 forwards, seven defencemen and two goalies, per CapFriendly. Should they fill out their roster with 13 forwards (and they don't have to, which gives them some cap flexibility) the three players the Jets would use to do that would probably cost roughly \$750,000 per man. That leaves about \$15.25 million to re-sign both Connor and Laine.

That's not a small number, but it does leave rival GMs with plenty of room to apply the San Jose Sharks blueprint.

A WAY OUT

While the numbers do make the Jets look vulnerable, they have options. Three days following the resolution of Copp's arbitration a 48-hour buyout window will open which would allow the Jets an opportunity to increase their cap space in 2019-20.

Common wisdom suggests defenceman Dmitry Kulikov could be a candidate for a buyout, should it come to that. With one year left on his contract at \$4.33 million, Kulikov hasn't provided good value in the third pairing role he's occupied. Buying him out would save the Jets some cash, but more importantly free up an extra \$2.88 million in cap space.

If that's still not enough, Cheveldayoff could also shed salary via trade, although making moves while backed into a corner hardly allows him to deal from a position of strength.

In all it means the Jets still have some flexibility in this situation, though probably not as much as Cheveldayoff would like. Allowing other GMs to do your negotiating for you is a good way to lose control over salary structure and that issue would be compounded should an offer sheet walk Laine or Connor to early unrestricted free agency.

One thing is certain: if a team is searching for a dynamic young talent with the ability to fill the net, Winnipeg is a good place to look right now.

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1150103 Websites

TSN.CA / Leafs deal backup Sparks to Vegas, get cap flexibility

Kristen Shilton

TORONTO — The Toronto Maple Leafs parted ways with goaltender Garret Sparks on Tuesday, trading the backup netminder to the Vegas Golden Knights in exchange for a fourth-round draft pick in the 2020 NHL Entry Draft and the contract of forward David Clarkson.



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Clarkson, who previously played 118 games for Toronto from 2013-15, has one season left on his contract but hasn't skated in a game since suffering a career-ending injury in 2016. Toronto will be eligible to move him and his \$5.2 million cap hit onto Long-Term Injured Reserve before the season starts, providing cap flexibility for a team currently lacking cap space.

According to Cap Friendly, with the addition of Clarkson's contract, Toronto can use up to approximately \$92 million in cap space on player signings and then move Clarkson and Nathan Horton (\$5.3 million cap hit) to LTIR for a combined total of \$10.55 million in cap relief. Toronto is still working to get restricted free agent Mitch Marner under contract for next season, a task that could require \$10 million or more per season.

What's the motivation behind the Sparks-for-Clarkson trade?

OverDrive host Bryan Hayes and Mike Johnson react to the breaking news of the Leafs trading Garret Sparks to the Golden Knights for David Clarkson and a fourth round pick in 2020.

On top of receiving the much-needed reprieve cap-wise, Toronto also came away with a draft pick in exchange for a player they'd been shopping for weeks. And the trade completes a stunning fall for Sparks, who just last fall was the Leafs' pick over Curtis McElhinney and Calvin Pickard to be Frederik Andersen's backup to play his first full NHL season after earning his way up through the ranks for nearly six years.

Sparks had been playing in Toronto's organization since they drafted him in the seventh round, 190th overall, in 2011. He leaves now with a career 3.15 goals-against average and .898 save percentage over 37 NHL games, on the heels of a disappointing 2018-19 campaign that ended with his removal from the Leafs prior to the start of the playoffs.

Initially, the Elmhurst, Illinois native had won his spot behind Andersen after a two-year absence from NHL appearances, having first suited up in 17 NHL contests for Toronto during the 2015-16 season. Sparks posted a 3.02 GAA and .893 save percentage as the Leafs finished the year 30th overall in the NHL, and won the NHL draft lottery.

Sparks returned to the AHL after that and went on to have a breakout season in 2017-18, posting a 1.79 GAA and .936 save percentage in 43 starts to win the AHL's Aldege "Baz" Bastien Memorial Award as the league's best goaltender and backstopping the Marlies to the franchise's first-ever Calder Cup win.

It was those credentials that ultimately led Leafs' general manager Kyle Dubas – previously the Marlies' general manager from 2015-18 – and head coach Mike Babcock to go with Sparks over more experienced netminders in McElhinney and Pickard to back up Andersen. And at first, the decision seemed sound, as Sparks got off to a 4-1-0 start. After that, Sparks won just four starts the rest of the season, finishing with a 4-10-1 record.

After one particularly bad loss, a 6-2 drubbing by the Ottawa Senators on March 16, frustration boiled over for Sparks when he publicly chided his teammates for their lack of "emotion" and implored them all to do better. But despite his call to action, Sparks' performances on the ice for Toronto didn't improve, and before its first-round Stanley Cup playoff series against Boston began in April, Sparks was dismissed from the club in favour of Michael Hutchinson, working on his own with Toronto's goalie coaches instead of with the rest of the team.

Sparks briefly returned during the playoff run while Hutchinson and his wife welcomed their first child, and he told reporters that the

increased media spotlight in the NHL versus the AHL, the NHL's better competition and the tighter schedule all contributed to his tough season.

Now Sparks will have a chance to redeem himself elsewhere, far from Toronto's shadow.

Meanwhile, the Leafs have signed goaltender Michal Neuvirth to a Professional Tryout; he'll compete with Hutchinson in training camp to be Andersen's backup in 2019-20.

Should there be greater concern about the Leafs' backup goalie position?

OverDrive host Bryan Hayes and Mike Johnson discuss their concerns of the Leafs' uncertain backup goalie position and what the PTO contract for Michal Neuvirth says about the direction the team is going.

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