



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 23, 2018

THE NEWS & OBSERVER

'We're going to have a really, really good team.' Canes' Justin Williams expects better days.

By Chip Alexander

RALEIGH

Justin Williams experienced a full range of emotions in his first year back with the Carolina Hurricanes.

There was disappointment in not winning enough games, not reaching the Stanley Cup playoffs last season.

There was sadness in seeing a longtime friend and teammate, goalie Cam Ward, leave the team after the season in free agency.

There was satisfaction in seeing another friend and former teammate, Rod Brind'Amour, get his chance to be the Canes' head coach.

There also was happiness, he said, in seeing the Washington Capitals finally win the Cup.

"And I'm not going to lie, some jealousy," a smiling Williams said Tuesday about the Caps.

Williams is used to winning. His name is chiseled on the Stanley Cup three times -- the first after the Hurricanes won the Cup in 2006, then twice with the Los Angeles Kings.

After two seasons with the Caps, Williams returned to Carolina as a free agent in July 2017, the forward quickly proclaiming, "We're done losing." The Canes had missed the playoffs eight straight years and Williams was determined the streak would not reach nine.

It did reach nine. That did not sit well with new owner Tom Dundon and changes quickly came. Gone was general manager Ron Francis, then coach Bill Peters. Players being moved out included Ward, Elias Lindholm and Noah Hanifin, then Jeff Skinner.

All in all, a substantial makeover.

"A team that wins together usually stays together; a team that doesn't win together has changes," Williams said in an interview at Raleigh Center Ice. "This season there was just a lot more.

"That's the nature of the business we have. It's a success league and this team hasn't been successful. ... What's been happening hasn't been acceptable for us, certainly for new management and certainly the fans. And they deserve better. We deserve better. And we made changes because of it."

Brind'Amour, the Canes' captain in 2006, has been an assistant coach with the team the past seven years but never a head coach. One change Brind'Amour has said he will make is having one team captain, one player wearing the "C."

Peters went with Jordan Staal and Justin Faulk as co-captains last season, giving Skinner an "A" as the only alternate captain. Left out of the letter mix altogether was

Williams, who many assumed might be the captain given his history with the team, experience and hockey resume.

"It didn't hurt me but was I surprised? Yes," Williams said. "But coming in, and certainly throughout the year, my role was very defined. I know what I am. The players got to know me and what I'm about. Was I a leader on the team? Yes. Did I have a letter? No.

"So it really didn't matter how I approached things. I tried to help the young guys as best I can. I'm a realist, knowing I came here to do a lot of things, amongst them helping lead this team and by being a good role model."

Williams, 36, filled that role well, both in game preparation and in competing. When something needed to be said, he said it.

"He holds people accountable," Staal said.

While Brind'Amour has not announced who he will select as captain, many would be shocked if it's not Williams.

Williams is an easy fit on the ice and off it. On Tuesday, he put in an informal skate at RCI with a small group of players that included two newcomers -- forwards Micheal Ferland and Cliff Pu -- and later talked golf in the locker room with defenseman Haydn Fleury (Fleury plays to a 2-handicap and Williams is a 1-handicapper.)

Ferland's spot in the RCI locker room, near the back, belonged the past eight years to Skinner, who sat next to Williams last season in the room at PNC Arena. Skinner's trade to the Buffalo Sabres on Aug. 2 angered many Canes fans, given Skinner's popularity and offensive production, which must be replaced.

Asked his reaction to the trade, Williams said, "Surprised, maybe. Shocked, no. He'd been here a long time and maybe it was time for a mutual parting. I think that's what both sides thought.

"I think it might have been time for Jeff. I think he'll be tremendous in Buffalo. He might score 30, might score 40. He's a very talented player. Sometimes, in my experience, I needed a change of scenery a couple of times and it worked out for the best for me. He'll do great there."

Williams was traded to the Canes from Philadelphia in January 2004 and won a Cup. He was traded to the Kings in March 2009 and won two more.

Ward spent the first 13 years of his career with the Canes, setting franchise records. Allowed to leave in free agency, he'll be playing for the Chicago Blackhawks this season after agreeing to a one-year contract in July.

"Cam's one of the big reasons I came back here and it was tough," Williams said of Ward's departure. "Cam and I talked. I told him every change of scenery for me had been positive and to go give it a chance and see what happens."



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Williams, slowed by injuries early in his career, has proved to be durable as he has aged. Since turning 30 in October 2011, he has missed just three games in five seasons, playing 407 of 410. He was one of four Canes to play all 82 games in 2017-18.

Williams' offseason conditioning regimen includes yoga and has an emphasis on maintaining his core strength and flexibility. As he put it, "I'm at the point in my career I know I'm not going to get faster. The trick is I can't lose a step, not the way the game is played now."

A year ago, after signing his two-year, \$9 million deal with the Carolina, he said the goal was for the Hurricanes' to "climb the ladder and get relevant." That climb continues.

"You never want to set a ceiling," Williams said. "People are coming into this saying, 'We've got to make the playoffs, we've got to make the playoffs.' That doesn't whet anyone's appetite in here. That's a step but that's not where we want to be headed.

"You never know where this team is going to end up, how we're going to jell, how guys are going to improve over the summer, throughout the year. I don't want to set a ceiling for us because I don't know where it's going to be. All I know is we're going to have a really, really good team."

Hurricanes fans raise up, choose new goal song

By Luke DeCock

Carolina Hurricanes fans have voted to take off their shirts and spin them like helicopters.

That's the memorable chorus of Petey Pablo's North Carolina rap anthem "Raise Up," which the team announced Wednesday won out in fan voting for a new goal celebration song over seven other potential choices that included a techno remix of the Hartford Whalers song "Brass Bonanza" and others.

The team unveiled the choice with a video of Petey Pablo at center ice, thanking fans for choosing "our song" and causing "a chain of events that is about to be astronomical" before spinning his shirt over his head.

Unquestionably locally sourced – "This one's for North Carolina/C'mon and raise up" – "Raise Up" was the consensus choice of The N&O's panel of musicians, critics, fans and former players from among what was generally considered to be a pretty mundane group of choices -- the panel even endorsed an alternate, Durham rapper G. Yamazawa's "North Cack" -- even if some of the lyrics outside the chorus aren't exactly ideal for family consumption.

But the chorus itself has a catchy, sing-a-long hook and when the Hurricanes score, opponents will certainly be reminded of where they are.



Awards may not be out of reach for Hurricanes

Carolina players haven't won many individual awards, but they do have some candidates – even if many are long shots – in 2018-19

Cory Lavalette

RALEIGH — Online betting site Bovada released its odds last Thursday on who will win the NHL's 2018-19 Hart Memorial Trophy as league MVP. It's a not a surprise that a Carolina Hurricanes player was not among the 34 listed as having 100-1 or better odds at being named the league's top player. Edmonton's Connor McDavid is the favorite at 10-3, while four teams — Dallas, Pittsburgh, Washington and Winnipeg — have three players each on the board.

Last year, McDavid was the favorite as well, but noticeably missing from Bovada's list of 24 candidates was New Jersey

winger Taylor Hall. Hall, of course, guided New Jersey back to the postseason and went on to win the Hart back in June in Las Vegas.

While a Hurricanes player may be a long shot, Hall proved one can go from off-the-board to contender to favorite to winner over the course of 10 months.

Rather than limit any prognostication to just the Hart, here's a look at five of the NHL's major awards — the Hart, Vezina, Norris, Selke and Calder — and the possibility a Hurricanes player could be honored with one come next offseason.

Hart Trophy (MVP)

The candidates: Sebastian Aho, Scott Darling



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The Hurricanes have never had a Hart Trophy winner, and odds are (as illustrated above) they won't in 2018-19. But that doesn't mean there's zero chance. The top candidate is Aho, who followed up a 49-point rookie season with 65 points — including 29 goals — last season. Another 15- to 20-point jump could put him in the conversation, especially if he closes in on 40 goals. The key, of course, would be getting Carolina back to the postseason.

As for Darling, it may seem impossible to even consider a goalie who went 13-21-7 last year with an .888 save percentage and a goals-against average of more than three as the league's best player. Further hurting his chances is the fact just two goalies have won the Hart since the flip of the century — and both were with Montreal. But one of them is former Canadiens goalie Jose Theodore, who went from having a losing season in 2000-01 (20-29-5, .909, 2.57) to a 30-win campaign the next year that earned him both the Hart and Vezina trophies. Darling would have to be both dominant enough for everyone to forget about 2017-18 and probably lead Carolina to the Metropolitan Division title to have any kind of shot. Still, other than Aho he's the only logical possibility — regardless of how long those odds are.

Chance of winning: Aho (slim), Darling (nearly impossible)

Vezina Trophy (Top goalie)

The candidate: Darling

As mentioned above, Darling would probably need to be the story of the league in 2018-19 to win, but his odds are better at winning the Vezina than the Hart.

Chance of winning: Darling (slim)

Norris Trophy (Top defenseman)

The candidates: Justin Faulk, Dougie Hamilton, Jacob Slavin

The three Carolina defenders have all received Norris votes in the past. Both Hamilton (14th place last year, ninth the year before) and Slavin (18th, 20th) received votes each of the last two years, while Faulk was 22nd in voting back in 2014-15. That said, the Norris has become a bit of a "paid his dues" award in recent years. Still, the last six Norris winners have been different players, and the only repeat winner in the last decade is Ottawa's Erik Karlsson.

Hamilton, the newcomer, has the best shot. He had 44 points last season — including tying for the league-best in goals by a defenseman with 17 — despite not always being a featured weapon on the Flames power play, leading to just 12 special teams points. He'll be a focal point on the man-advantage in Carolina — like Faulk has been in recent years — and he should log the minutes at even strength to at least match his output from last year.

Slavin is an under-the-radar pick, but he's already a premier shutdown defender. To earn true Norris consideration, Slavin would need to put more points than the 30 he had in 2017-

18, but that's not totally out of the realm of possibility if he plays alongside Hamilton. Faulk's reputation has taken a hit in recent years, especially after he dipped to eight goals and 31 points last season. With the addition of Hamilton, his power play time will likely drop, making the task tougher.

Chance of winning: Faulk (very slim), Hamilton (possible), Slavin (very slim)

Selke (Top defensive forward)

The candidate: Jordan Staal

Like the Norris, the Selke is often given based on career merit. Rod Brind'Amour, long considered one of the NHL's best defensive forwards but never a finalist for the Selke, finally won the award in 2006 when the team he captained, the Hurricanes, became a league-wide force. He then won again in 2007.

Staal has had a similar path to Brind'Amour. In 10 of his 12 seasons, he's received votes for the Selke — he was a finalist, finishing third, in 2010 with Pittsburgh — and is recognized by pundits and peers as one of the league's best defensive stoppers. What he'll need to finally nab his first Selke is team success and, probably a 20-goal, 50-point season. One could beget the other — which could then cement Staal's spot as one of the game's best defensive forwards.

Chance of winning: Staal (possible)

Calder Trophy (top rookie)

The candidates: Warren Foegele, Martin Necas, Andrei Svechnikov, Valentin Zykov

The big problem Carolina has in the Calder race is its candidates could split the vote. Svechnikov may be the overall favorite: No. 1 pick Rasmus Dahlin of Buffalo has an uphill climb as just three defensemen have been named the top rookie in the 2000s, and Svechnikov will have more name recognition than most other forwards as the second pick back in June.

That said, don't sleep on Necas. Carolina's top pick in 2017 looked even better than Svechnikov at prospect development camp. Another year in the Czech Republic served the center well, and he should be ready to play in the middle this season with the Hurricanes.

Zykov, the AHL's top goal scorer last year, and Foegele both showed promise in brief stints in Raleigh, but you have to go all the way back to 1983 to find a Calder-winning forward who first spent a season in the AHL (Chicago's Steve Larmer) before lighting up the NHL. Zykov already has three seasons of AHL experience, and Foegele spent his first pro campaign with Charlotte last year.

Chance of winning: Foegele (nearly impossible), Necas (possible), Svechnikov (very possible), Zykov (nearly impossible)



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'Raise Up' Wins Goal Song Fan Vote

Petey Pablo's hit will be featured after Canes' goals

by Michael Smith

North Carolina, c'mon and raise up.

"Raise Up" will be the Carolina Hurricanes' new goal song, as announced Thursday by Petey Pablo himself at PNC Arena.

"First and foremost, I want to thank each and every one of you fans who went out and voted for my song," he said at center ice. "Did I say my song? Our song to be the anthem for the new Hurricanes goal song."

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"Raise Up" joined seven other goal song finalists in the fan vote, which garnered nearly 30,000 entries in a week. With more than 26 percent of the popular vote, "Raise Up" was the clear victor.

The first opportunity for fans to hear the new goal song in-arena will be Wednesday, Sept. 19, when the Hurricanes host the Tampa Bay Lightning in a preseason match-up.

The Hurricanes open the 2018-19 regular season at home on Thursday, Oct. 4 against the New York Islanders. Individual game tickets are now available.

Tweetmail No. 199: Traverse City, Upgrades & Rumors

by Michael Smith

Hello and welcome to Tweetmail, a weekly feature on CarolinaHurricanes.com in which I take your Twitter questions about the Carolina Hurricanes or other assorted topics and answer them in mailbag form. Hopefully the final product is insightful to some degree, and maybe we have some fun along the way.

Let's get to it.

What players/combos are you most looking forward to watching at the Traverse City tournament?

We're just about two weeks away from the NHL Prospect Tournament in Traverse City, Mich., one of my favorite times of the year because 1) Traverse City is an amazing place, and 2) It's essentially the unofficial start of hockey season, as the tournament leads right into the beginning of training camp.

I'm looking forward to seeing Martin Necas and Andrei Svechnikov together on the ice again. They were intriguing to watch as a duo in Prospects Development Camp, and I have to imagine they'll be paired together again in this tournament. Their performances in this tournament could also give us a more accurate barometer of their games, too; it makes sense they stood out among the Canes' prospects in development camp, but what happens when they match up against other top prospects in the league? It should be fun.

First-round selections Jake Bean and Julien Gauthier will each make their third appearance in the tournament. Bean will begin his professional career this season, and Gauthier is coming off his first season with Charlotte; both could potentially be difference-makers for the team, especially Bean with the defense featuring a number of tournament invitees. Nicolas Roy is the tournament veteran of the group

in his fourth appearance, and he could be a key piece down the middle.

The Canes undoubtedly have a stacked roster, especially up front, and could be in contention for their third tournament title. We'll have live coverage from Traverse City beginning Thursday, Sept. 6.

Any arena upgrades that can be mentioned?

Yes. In fact, there are upgrades being made in PNC Arena as I type this sentence.

One big project happening now is seat replacement in the upper bowl. All seats in the 300 level are being swapped out, and you'll notice the more black-heavy color scheme with the new seats. This project should be complete by the Canes' first preseason home game on Wednesday, Sept. 19.

Another ongoing project can be found on the south end of the main concourse outside section 126, what will be dubbed the "Game Day Marketplace." This new grab-and-go concept will offer fans an alternative to traditional concessions stands. Fresh-cut fruit and hummus will be among the healthy snackable items offered, in addition to your usual candy and gum and more sugary snacks. Plus, coolers will be stocked full of beverages, both non-alcoholic - juices, energy drinks, soda, Starbucks, flavored water and water - and alcoholic. And, if you happen to need some aspirin or earplugs, this stand will have it.

A new video board will not be installed this season, but it is in future arena plans.

And, it's not public-facing, but the Hurricanes' locker room has been undergoing renovation this summer. It's just a few weeks away from completion, and we've documented the process here and here.



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Is there any talk on moving another piece aka Jordan Staal?
Lots of talk up in Canada of canes moving him. #tweetmail

Sorry, Canada. Jordan Staal isn't going anywhere. He's a critical piece down the middle for the Hurricanes, and I don't think they'll be parting ways with him anytime soon.

Any update on a potential Faulk trade? I think Toronto (for Kadri) and Ottawa (for Duchene) would be good partners due to their need for d help and our need for a scoring center.

I don't get the sense that the team is in any rush to move Justin Faulk. I know his name, along with Jeff Skinner, was oft mentioned in trade rumors earlier this summer, but that didn't mean anything was imminent. That continues to be the case. Faulk is under contract for this season and next, and it's certainly not a detriment if he remains on the roster. In fact, the Hurricanes' defense becomes outright imposing with Faulk still in the mix.

Between Dougie Hamilton and Faulk, the Hurricanes' blue line has the potential to be potent offensively, and both could figure to be key pieces on the team's power play.

Plus, there's depth. With Haydn Fleury coming off his rookie season, the Hurricanes could potentially carry seven NHL defensemen. If an injury were to occur, there's an extra body that can transition seamlessly. If there's a match-up the coaching staff prefers, there are different pairs and options. It's a good problem to have.

"To have another guy with a big shot back there who can bring offense from the blue line is not so bad," Hurricanes President and General Manager Don Waddell told me in early July. "I don't feel any urgency or need to say we have to trade this player for sure."

What's our goal song! #tweetmail

Soon! Very soon!

I know I teased last week pretty much the same timeframe, but it will indeed be soon.

Whatcha think about those Bulls jerseys?

Dope, defined by Merriam-Webster, "Slang: excellent - used as a generalized term of approval."

You can potentially still get your hands on one, but demand for these has been very high.

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Thursday, Aug. 23 is Hockey Night at Durham Bulls Athletic Park. The Bulls will be outfitted in the jerseys and hats above; the game-worn jerseys will be auctioned off, and all proceeds will benefit the Kids 'N Community Foundation. Stormy will be hanging with Wool E. Bull, plus the Pepsi Storm Squad and Hurricanes' promotions team will be on hand. It should be a fun night, and limited tickets remain!

Anything special planned for #TweetMail200 ?

Great question. We should throw a party. Check back in September!

Join me in September for more questions and more answers!

If you have a question you'd like answered or you want to volunteer to bring balloons for #Tweetmail No. 200, you can find me on Twitter at @MSmithCanes or drop an email here.



SB NATION CANES COUNTRY

Petey Pablo's "Raise Up" Chosen as Hurricanes Goal Song

In the man's own words: if you don't know, now you know.

By Brian LeBlanc

Tom Dundon's many changes since purchasing the Carolina Hurricanes have included a renewed appreciation for all things Hartford Whalers, but at least in one instance, Whalers nostalgia is taking a back seat to North Carolina pride.

The Hurricanes announced Wednesday afternoon that following weeks of crowdsourcing and internal debate, Petey Pablo's "Raise Up" has been selected as the Canes' new goal song. And who else but the man himself would be appropriate to announce the news?

"Raise Up," Petey's anthemic 2001 salute to his home state, replaces Avicii's "The Nights," which had been used the past three years, as the celebration anthem for Hurricanes goals. In the crowd poll that the Canes conducted to gauge fan preference, "Raise Up" earned 26% of the vote, with the other six options trailing to varying degrees.

At press time, there was no word on whether shirts would be available at The Eye for the express purpose of taking off and twisting around one's head, spin it like a helicopter, nor do we have any word on whether Wade Minter's Avicii Cat has holed up in a piano studio learning his new assignment for the upcoming season.



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The Hockey News

Five NHL imports who could make an impact in 2018-19

By Jared Clinton

Several teams looked to the import market to shore up holes in their lineup this summer, with notable forwards, defensemen and goaltenders coming over from European leagues or the KHL. Here are five players signed from overseas who could make an impact in 2018-19.

Ahead of last season, Evgeni Dadonov and Vadim Shipachyov were expected to be the most high-impact import signings of the season. But the two couldn't have ended up on further ends of the spectrum.

At the time of their signings last season, the then-28-year-old Dadonov and then-30-year-old Shipachyov were considered two of the premier players taking their talents from the KHL to the NHL. Both had been steady, solid producers coming off of spectacular years in the primarily Russian circuit. Dadonov, signed by the Florida Panthers, had just scored 30 goals and 66 points the year prior with SKA St. Petersburg, while Shipachyov had chipped in with 26 goals and 76 points of his own for SKA when he inked a deal with the Vegas Golden Knights. Once they arrived in North America, though, that's where the similarities between the two players ended.

For Dadonov, he found an almost instant fit with the Panthers, with whom he had previously played 55 games between the 2009-10 and 2011-12 seasons. He slotted into a top-six role all season, averaged nearly 19 minutes per game and ended the campaign with 28 goals and 65 points, making him Florida's fourth-highest scoring player. Shipachyov, meanwhile, was a flop with Vegas. He failed to make the club out of camp and ended up in a bizarre middle ground between the AHL and NHL. When he finally skated with the Golden Knights, he played a mere three games before winding up out of the lineup again, at which point he decided to jet back to the KHL. Just like that, a season that was once considered so promising went up in smoke.

But the cautionary tale that was Shipachyov's signing hasn't stopped teams from dipping into the import free agent market as they seek to land someone who can contribute in much the same way Dadonov did for the Panthers. With that in mind, here are five players making the move to the NHL from overseas who could make noise in 2018-19:

MIKKO KOSKINEN, EDMONTON OILERS

Koskinen is the lone player on this list who actually has some NHL experience, though it's very limited. Drafted in the second round by the Islanders back in 2009, Koskinen wound up getting into four games with New York during the 2010-11 campaign. That's the extent of his NHL action, but Koskinen isn't eligible for the Calder Trophy this season. At 30, he's too old.

Koskinen has a better chance at making an impact this coming season than most players who have made the jump from overseas, and Edmonton is most certainly paying him to be a difference-maker, handing him a one-year, \$2.5-million

contract. That's not to say he's not worth the risk. Koskinen's play in the KHL over the past several seasons has been excellent. Since the 2014-15 campaign, the towering, 6-foot-7 netminder has posted a .929 save percentage and 1.86 goals-against average across regular season and post-season play.

Given Cam Talbot's play last season, too, the Oilers won't be opposed to Koskinen pushing for the No. 1 job, and if the former is shaky early, the latter may have an opportunity to swoop in and steal more than a handful of starts.

JAN KOVAR, NEW YORK ISLANDERS

Another KHL import, Kovar comes to the Islanders at a bizarre time in his career. Having risen through the ranks of the Czech League and into the KHL by 2013-14, Kovar proceeded to pick apart defenders and netminders en route to 90 goals and 251 points across his first four seasons in the league. Last year, however, Kovar's offense went missing for long stretches of the season. He managed just seven goals and 35 points, a 28-point decline from the year prior. But Kovar's track record in the KHL and his showing at the Olympics, where he scored three goals and five points in six games, was enough for the Islanders to bring the 28-year-old pivot in on a one-year, \$2-million deal.

Now, after last season's debacle with Shipachyov and the Golden Knights, it's probably worth tempering expectations about Kovar's output in New York. But given he could challenge for a middle-six role and earn some power-play time with the new-look Islanders, the creative center could have himself a nice debut season in the NHL. He might even be able to flirt with the 50-point plateau.

PAR LINDHOLM, TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS

Lindholm's game has grown by leaps and bounds over the past four seasons, but he's really exploded over the past two campaigns. After scoring 20 goals and 41 points across 106 outings in the 2014-15 and 2015-16 campaigns, Lindholm found his stride in the Swedish League come the 2016-17 season and put himself even further on the NHL radar with a breakout year last season. His 18-goal, 47-point performance made him the league's fourth-highest scorer, and he joins the Leafs for the coming campaign with a shot at landing a steady bottom-six role.

Lindholm's offensive output is the bonus here, though. More than anything, he's considered to be the type of heady, two-way player that coaches love. He can play in all situations, proving as much during the Olympics, where he skated in four games and chipped in a goal for Sweden.

SAKU MAENALANEN, CAROLINA HURRICANES

Talk about a progressive rise. Over the past three seasons, Maenalanen has grown to become a serious threat in the Finnish League. In his first season as a full-timer in the circuit, he scored six goals and 16 points in 46 games. That was followed, by an 11-goal, 21-point campaign. And last season, Maenalanen fired his way onto the NHL radar with



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17 goals and 46 points in 59 games, a season that came complete with a two-goal, three-point performance at the World Championship.

Maenalanen isn't exactly an unknown in NHL circles, however. He first drew interest when he was selected in the fifth round, 125th overall, by the Nashville Predators in the 2013 draft. At the time, he was fresh off of a standout season in Finland's top junior league. But a few so-so seasons resulted in Maenalanen remaining unsigned, which opened the door for the 24-year-old to ink a deal with Carolina. Given the Hurricanes' lack of depth, too, Maenalanen should have every chance to make a great first impression. It won't hurt, either, that he could find himself skating alongside countrymen Sebastian Aho and Teuvo Teravainen.

IGOR OZHIGANOV, TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS
In an attempt to bolster their blueline, the Maple Leafs again dipped into the KHL talent pool to pluck out Ozhiganov,

although it wasn't all too surprising to see him sign in Toronto. After all, rumors dating back to last summer connected Ozhiganov to the Leafs. It sure seems as though Toronto is going to give the 25-year-old, who will turn 26 shortly after the season begins, a chance to crack the lineup, too.

What Ozhiganov brings that should be of interest in Toronto is some offensive upside, a booming shot and a physical presence. Standing 6-foot-2 and 210 pounds, Ozhiganov isn't afraid to throw his weight around or put it behind a blast from the blueline. He won the KHL's hardest-shot competition with a 99 mile-an-hour bomb during the 2017 all-star weekend, and that could make him the perfect second-unit triggerman for the Leafs. Overall, though, the hope will be that Ozhiganov can have an impact similar to that of Nikita Zaitsev during his rookie season.

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1103117 Carolina Hurricanes

'We're going to have a really, really good team.' Canes' Justin Williams expects better days.

BY CHIP ALEXANDER

Justin Williams experienced a full range of emotions in his first year back with the Carolina Hurricanes.

There was disappointment in not winning enough games, not reaching the Stanley Cup playoffs last season.

There was sadness in seeing a longtime friend and teammate, goalie Cam Ward, leave the team after the season in free agency.

There was satisfaction in seeing another friend and former teammate, Rod Brind'Amour, get his chance to be the Canes' head coach.

There also was happiness, he said, in seeing the Washington Capitals finally win the Cup.

"And I'm not going to lie, some jealousy," a smiling Williams said Tuesday about the Caps.

Williams is used to winning. His name is chiseled on the Stanley Cup three times -- the first after the Hurricanes won the Cup in 2006, then twice with the Los Angeles Kings.

After two seasons with the Caps, Williams returned to Carolina as a free agent in July 2017, the forward quickly proclaiming, "We're done losing." The Canes had missed the playoffs eight straight years and Williams was determined the steak would not reach nine.

It did reach nine. That did not sit well with new owner Tom Dundon and changes quickly came. Gone was general manager Ron Francis, then coach Bill Peters. Players being moved out included Ward, Elias Lindholm and Noah Hanifin, then Jeff Skinner.

All in all, a substantial makeover.

"A team that wins together usually stays together; a team that doesn't win together has changes," Williams said in an interview at Raleigh Center Ice. "This season there was just a lot more.

"That's the nature of the business we have. It's a success league and this team hasn't been successful. ... What's been happening hasn't been acceptable for us, certainly for new management and certainly the fans. And they deserve better. We deserve better. And we made changes because of it."

Brind'Amour, the Canes' captain in 2006, has been an assistant coach with the team the past seven years but never a head coach. One change Brind'Amour has said he will make is having one team captain, one player wearing the "C."



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Peters went with Jordan Staal and Justin Faulk as co-captains last season, giving Skinner an "A" as the only alternate captain. Left out of the letter mix altogether was Williams, who many assumed might be the captain given his history with the team, experience and hockey resume.

"It didn't hurt me but was I surprised? Yes," Williams said. "But coming in, and certainly throughout the year, my role was very defined. I know what I am. The players got to know me and what I'm about. Was I a leader on the team? Yes. Did I have a letter? No.

"So it really didn't matter how I approached things. I tried to help the young guys as best I can. I'm a realist, knowing I came here to do a lot of things, amongst them helping lead this team and by being a good role model."

Williams, 36, filled that role well, both in game preparation and in competing. When something needed to be said, he said it.

"He holds people accountable," Staal said.

While Brind'Amour has not announced who he will select as captain, many would be shocked if it's not Williams.

Williams is an easy fit on the ice and off it. On Tuesday, he put in an informal skate at RCI with a small group of players that included two newcomers -- forwards Micheal Ferland and Cliff Pu -- and later talked golf in the locker room with defenseman Haydn Fleury (Fleury plays to a 2-handicap and Williams is a 1-handicapper.)

Ferland's spot in the RCI locker room, near the back, belonged the past eight years to Skinner, who sat next to Williams last season in the room at PNC Arena. Skinner's trade to the Buffalo Sabres on Aug. 2 angered many Canes fans, given Skinner's popularity and offensive production, which must be replaced.

Asked his reaction to the trade, Williams said, "Surprised, maybe. Shocked, no. He'd been here a long time and maybe it was time for a mutual parting. I think that's what both sides thought.

"I think it might have been time for Jeff. I think he'll be tremendous in Buffalo. He might score 30, might score 40. He's a very talented player. Sometimes, in my experience, I needed a change of scenery a couple of times and it worked out for the best for me. He'll do great there."

Williams was traded to the Canes from Philadelphia in January 2004 and won a Cup. He was traded to the Kings in March 2009 and won two more.

Ward spent the first 13 years of his career with the Canes, setting franchise records. Allowed to leave in free agency, he'll be playing for the Chicago Blackhawks this season after agreeing to a one-year contract in July.

"Cam's one of the big reasons I came back here and it was tough," Williams said of Ward's departure. "Cam and I talked. I told him every change of scenery for me had been positive and to go give it a chance and see what happens."

Williams, slowed by injuries early in his career, has proved to be durable as he has aged. Since turning 30 in October 2011, he has missed just three games in five seasons, playing 407 of 410. He was one of four Canes to play all 82 games in 2017-18.

Williams' offseason conditioning regimen includes yoga and has an emphasis on maintaining his core strength and flexibility. As he put it, "I'm at the point in my career I know I'm not going to get faster. The trick is I can't lose a step, not the way the game is played now."

A year ago, after signing his two-year, \$9 million deal with the Carolina, he said the goal was for the Hurricanes to "climb the ladder and get relevant." That climb continues.

"You never want to set a ceiling," Williams said. "People are coming into this saying, 'We've got to make the playoffs, we've got to make the playoffs.' That doesn't whet anyone's appetite in here. That's a step but that's not where we want to be headed.

"You never know where this team is going to end up, how we're going to jell, how guys are going to improve over the summer, throughout the year. I don't want to set a ceiling for us because I don't know where it's going to be. All I know is we're going to have a really, really good team."

News Observer LOADED: 08.23.2018

1103118 Carolina Hurricanes

Hurricanes fans raise up, choose new goal song

BY LUKE DECOCK

Carolina Hurricanes fans have voted to take off their shirts and spin them like helicopters.

That's the memorable chorus of Petey Pablo's North Carolina rap anthem "Raise Up," which the team announced Wednesday won out in fan voting for a new goal celebration song over seven other potential choices that included a techno remix of the Hartford Whalers song "Brass Bonanza" and others.

The team unveiled the choice with a video of Petey Pablo at center ice, thanking fans for choosing "our song" and causing "a chain of events that is about to be astronomical" before spinning his shirt over his head.

RAISE UP! @DaRealPetey has a special announcement for #Canes fans pic.twitter.com/oxxPiDsiun

— Carolina Hurricanes (@NHLCanes) August 22, 2018

Unquestionably locally sourced -- "This one's for North Carolina/C'mon and raise up" -- "Raise Up" was the consensus choice of The N&O's panel of musicians, critics, fans and former players from among what was generally considered to be a pretty mundane group of choices -- the panel even endorsed an alternate, Durham rapper G. Yamazawa's "North Cack" -- even if some of the lyrics outside the chorus aren't exactly ideal for family consumption.

But the chorus itself has a catchy, sing-a-long hook and when the Hurricanes score, opponents will certainly be reminded of where they are.

News Observer LOADED: 08.23.2018

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The Athletic / NHL farm system rankings: No. 8 Vegas Golden Knights

By Corey Pronman Aug 22, 2018

Corey Pronman's deep dive into the farm system of every NHL organization includes a ranking of all of the team's prospects, broken into tiers based on their projection; the impact on the upcoming season and an overall ranking of all players under 23. Further explanation of Pronman's system and the complete ranking of all 31 teams can be found here.

Vegas has only been a part of two drafts, but their 2017 draft year out looks like it could be quite exceptional. I like all three of their first rounders and they made a lot of savvy second-day picks that week, including Lucas Elvenes who was one of the biggest risers in the prospect world in the last year. Their system understandably isn't very deep but the top of their system is deep in top talent.



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Team's 2017 ranking*: No. 14

Prospect Rankings

HIGH-END NHL PROSPECT

1. Cody Glass, C, Portland-WHL

Glass had a second straight season where he was a dominant player in the WHL. He's a fantastic playmaker, as his vision is one of the best in the entire CHL. He's highly-skilled, can make some very imaginative offensive plays and be a guy who runs a power play with great effectiveness. He skates decent, but one of my main concerns with Glass is how much pace he has in his game. There are moments when the games get quicker and he can get lost in the speed/physicality. He has too much skill to be overly concerned and one reason I think for his issue with speed is how much he has grown in a short amount of time and has continued to grow even this season.

2. Lucas Elvenes, RW, Rogle-SHL

Elvenes had a breakout season, putting up fantastic numbers between Sweden's top division and second division pro league for a young 18-year-old. He's a player with a high skill level who can create a lot of offense. Elvenes is always looking to make a skilled play. He has very good offensive instincts, showing the ability to make incredible passes at a pro pace. Although when I watched him I saw a few too many overly risky plays/bad turnovers, you take a lot of the good with some of the bad. One big reason for his improvement was an addition to his foot-speed. He was an OK skater in his draft year, but he's added some more speed to his game.

VERY GOOD NHL PROSPECT

3. Nikita Gusev, LW, SKA-KHL

Gusev was the MVP of the KHL and the best forward at the Men's Olympic Tournament. Yes he's 26 years old, but he's still a very legitimate prospect on his talent if he chooses to cross the pond and has only continued to get better over the years. Skill is what makes Gusev so attractive. He has a ton of it. His individual creativity and vision are all high-end and his hands are bordering on elite. Gusev can control a shift and run a power play. He's not a very fast skater, but he has great edge work and can be very tough to check due to his shiftiness. He's small, and not great in battles, putting doubts into how he'll handle the NHL, but the talent level is too high.

4. Nick Suzuki, C, Owen Sound-OHL

Suzuki had his second straight 40-goal season and his first 100-point season in the OHL, being one of the league's top offensive threats yet again. He's a highly-skilled forward with very good if not elite hockey sense. The way he sees the ice and makes plays is distinct and he made some of the most creative plays I saw all season. Suzuki has a good shot too, but his strength is creating scoring chances for his teammates. His downsides are his size, and his mediocre-at-best foot-speed. Despite the fact he's small and not overly physical Suzuki has been a decent defensive forward at the OHL level due to his IQ.

5. Erik Brannstrom, D, HV71-SHL

Brannstrom was impressive all season between the SHL, Sweden's U20 team and Sweden's National team. He's an elite skater, one of the best outside the NHL. He has an explosive first step, evades pressure easily, and can lead an attack through the neutral zone with his speed. Brannstrom has good skills, but his offense comes less from his individual skill and more from his skating and hockey sense. He has great vision and can make some very imaginative plays. Despite being quite undersized, Brannstrom more than holds his own defensively due to his great gap control and intelligence.

LEGIT NHL PROSPECT

6. Nicolas Hague, D, Mississauga-OHL

Hague was named the top defenseman in the CHL this past season. He has intriguing tools for a 6-foot-6 defenseman. To start, he has a big-time shot from the point. He's got some offensive instincts, and he has some grind to his game as well, potentially making him an elite physical player as a pro. While he skates OK for a guy his size, I wouldn't call him a blazer nor would I call him a very gifted puckhandler but he has some offense in his game. My main concern with Hague is his sense. He's prone to a lot of blunders defensively and to bad turnovers and often when I watched him I was marking him down as the critical component to a scoring chance against.

7. Jack Dugan, LW, Chicago-USHL

I didn't know Dugan that well last season, as a second-year draft eligible prospect who played high school all season, but I was very impressed by Vegas' fifth-round pick from 2017 every time I watched him this past season. He's a big forward who is a great playmaker and was one of the best USHL players this past season. His vision is legit top grade, as he made some fantastic plays versus USHL players and at the World Jr. A Challenge. He has skill too and there were moments he took over the game due to his offensive creativity. Dugan is also a big body winger who is tough to deal with physically. His foot-speed is mediocre, and is my main concern, with his defensive play being a secondary concern. I'll be very interested in how he does at Providence next season.

8. Ivan Morozov, C, Khanty-Mansiysk-MHL

Morozov's a smart two-way center who can drive play fairly well. I don't think his skills are high-end, but he has good hands and can make plays in open ice. He's a good-to-very good playmaker who sees the ice well, moves the puck with pace and can be the type of player who quarterbacks a power play from the side-wall. Morozov also has a very good shot and can snipe goals from a distance. He's a reliable defensive player who wins battles, can PK and get the puck going back up the ice. He does have a lack of speed in his game to push defenders back.

HAVE A CHANCE

9. Malcolm Subban, G, Vegas-NHL

After it seemed like Subban may never get a real NHL opportunity in Boston, Vegas picked him up and he found his way into NHL minutes. He's not a perfect goalie by any means, but Subban has dynamic athletic qualities with the ability to make the tough save. In past years his main issue has been over-aggressiveness/poor positional awareness, and while I don't think he showed he's great in that regard yet, he was able to make reads at an NHL level to maintain a decent performance level.

10. Tomas Hyka, RW, Chicago-AHL

Hyka's been around the scene for a while. It's tempting to say a 25-year-old is no longer a real prospect, but I liked what I saw in the AHL, he was OK in his 10 NHL games, and I liked him a lot at the World Championships. He's a very good skater, who has pace to his game. Hyka has some skill, but at the NHL level he's likely not a power play type, and more of a 'can make the odd chance happen' player. But he makes his living by playing a fast, hard-working style of game. I have concerns with how well he wins puck battles.

11. Stanislav Demin, D, Wenatchee-BCHL

Demin was one of the best defensemen in the BCHL. He is 6-foot-2, skates well and can move the puck at a reasonably high level. He's not going to have an incredibly flashy shift, but he can lead the rush and QB a power play. Defensively he's OK. He has a fine stick, but his positioning and decisions aren't perfect, and I've seen him get beat on occasion.

DEPTH NOTES

12. Jonas Rondbjerg, RW, Vaxjo-SHL: Rondbjerg is a very smart two-way forward. He competes well but rarely takes penalties. His skill is average and he could use some more speed.



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13. Jake Leschyshyn, C, Regina-WHL: Jake is a good skater who works hard and has fine two-way instincts but I don't see a ton of skill to his game.

14. Zach Whitecloud, D, Bemidj State-WCHA: Whitecloud has size, is strong, plays hard, skates well and moves the puck OK. There's enough offense in his game as a puck-mover that he could be competent making a first pass in the NHL but he doesn't have a ton of upside.

15. Paul Cotter, C, Lincoln-USHL: Cotter has good speed and skills and a decent work ethic. I don't think his offense is dynamic enough for him to be a legit scorer as a pro, but he's capable around the puck.

16. Ben Jones, C, Niagara-OHL: I appreciate how hard Jones grinds, his hockey sense and his production. The overall talent level is mediocre and I don't think he scores much as a pro, but there is an upward development curve with him.

2018-19 Impact

Glass isn't a lock for the NHL but he should get a long look during Vegas' camp. He could possibly be a top-nine forward. Subban will in all likelihood be the backup to Fleury. Hyka is a depth call-up option at forward and Whitecloud on defense.

Organizational Top 10 (23 and Under)

Cody Glass, C

Shea Theodore, D

Lucas Elvenes, RW

Alex Tuch, RW

Nick Suzuki, C

Erik Brannstrom, D

Nicolas Hague, D

Jack Dugan, LW

Ivan Morozov, C

Stanislav Demin, D

Theodore was a go-to player for the Cup Finalists, being their power play QB. He's a good skater with skill who moves the puck very well even if he may never be the best defender. Tuch's development continues an upward trend. He's big, skilled and his skating has shown significant improvement over the years.

The Athletic LOADED: 08.23.2018

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The Athletic / How a hockey staff shares information, and why it's so important to do so seamlessly

By Justin Bourne Aug 22, 2018

When you're the coach of a youth hockey team, you generally know what's going on with your players. As a general example, if they're sick or just generally not feeling well, you're the person they tell. And with that information, you can make decisions. "Alright, Johnny's out tonight, let's whip up some new lines."

A funny thing happens as you rise through the ranks and staffs grow, though – the coach isn't always the person directly given the information anymore. If a player at the professional level isn't feeling well, they don't walk into the coaches' office and say they have a bellyache, they go to

the medical personnel and work on fixing the problem. More often than not, they'd actually prefer the staff not know that they're feeling off.

Now obviously, if a player isn't feeling well, that's relevant information for the coaching staff. If it's a gameday and they're setting up their lineup for the evening, maybe the staff is deciding between two players to dress that night, and that information would break the tie. And even if the decision isn't "in the lineup or not," it may push the staff to at least shuffle the lines, putting the sick player lower down so he wouldn't have to play as much.

So obviously it's important that after the medical staff helps that player out, they communicate what's going on with the coaching staff. This is basically one of the few ways to get fired as a medical person – not communicating enough with the staff. Coaches want every sliver of information they can get their hands on.

But it goes way deeper than just telling the coaches.

If a regular player is sick and not going to play that night, the equipment staff needs to know too. They need to know to clear out that player's stall in the main room to make room for the equipment of the player coming in that night (amongst other things). The play-by-play and colour guys need to know for their in-game preparation, and so that they're giving accurate information to the listeners. The media coordinators need to know for the programs, or simply media releases and press clippings. If it's bad enough, the team doctor will have to be informed so he can step in with the trainers. In the American League, anyway, the league needed to be informed, so those documenting time-on-ice on their computers have accurate rosters programmed so they can be on-point with their tracking. And all this is just if a player is sick.

Then throughout the year there's call-ups, trades, send-downs, tryouts and the rest, all of which means flights and cars and hotels and meals have to be arranged. Any time there's a slight roster change it sets off a chain of events that isn't unmanageable, but ends up being crucial. Everyone needs to know to properly do their jobs. If you're disorganized and that info doesn't flow through to the proper staff members, you can end up with some unhappy people. The most common of which I saw throughout my playing days was equipment managers getting screwed. You'd be on the road, and there'd be a call-up player there for his first day, and nobody had told the equipment guy. So he didn't bring sticks, or have a namebar sewn on for the kid, or even the right gear. He ends up looking bad because the info hadn't made it's way to the equipment room. Sometimes the higher ups forget how much needs to happen for things to operate seamlessly. The goal is for the players to just show up and only have to think about hockey.

There are a number of ways to combat this info-sharing battle, the most of important of which is probably having a group text with all relevant parties. As long as the people at the top of the chain of command remember to use it when anything changes, it's very effective. All it takes is "Monday May 9th we're calling up Sven Svensen from the Mississippi Mud Bugs," and a dozen different parties can make the appropriate changes.

The next method is just a lot (daily would be ideal) of all-parties meetings, from the top of hockey operations down to the masseuse. If you can meet before the players arrive, and have everyone share what's changed since you've all seen each other last, you can start with the same knowledge base, which allows everyone to be the best at their jobs. So often in big corporations the left hand doesn't know what the right is doing – that's not really an option when you're running a hockey team. You rely on each other to succeed in each of your individual jobs each day far too much.

At the NHL level, staff size is booming. It's not necessarily that it's much more work to run a club now than it used to be, it's that you want people who are specialists, and dialled into very specific tasks. You don't want your head coach to be worrying about medical issues or equipment or video or anything but coaching the hockey club. With the resources at the disposal of teams today, it makes sense to hire people to take those items off the coach's plate.



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Given my own specific job with the Marlies was kind of being a hub for everyone, I had one particular time of day that was the most stressful: between warm-ups and puck drop on game days. Basically every team in North America does the same thing in warmup. (This is something the Leafs may change up at some point, which would be cool to see.) But it's basically:

Cut laps and get loose and shoot pucks

Three lines shooting from the blue to let the goalie see it and feel it

Players in the corners, get a pass at the blue, get a shot

Two-on-ones

And thennn...

Line rushes (before half moon shooting)

It's during line rushes the action starts, as you see how the opposition plans on rolling out their lineup (unless they're being devious by mixing lines up, which does still happen). But the head coach wants to know ASAP to consider matchups. I had to enter the opposing lines into the program I used to log games for tracking purposes. The league wanted them for their TOI program. Our on-air guys wanted them to prepare, or media guy wanted to them, our front office wanted them, analytics people want them, I mean, you name it. The game starts about 18 minutes after warmup, and sharing info certainly wasn't the only task that needed completing in that time. Nobody could properly do their job until they were sent that night's lineups, so needless to say, plenty of texts and emails went out in that window.

Sharing information is a major – and somewhat frenzied – part of the behind the scenes world, particularly for people in roles like the one I had. It's the same in any business, but the speed at which a professional hockey season moves – from one opponent to the next city to the next flight – means people need that information, and they need it fast. The best organizations put their people in positions to succeed by giving them the information they need.

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The Athletic / Making sense of hockey's WAR debate, Part 2: Talking with model creator Brian Macdonald

By James Mirtle Aug 22, 2018

We are back by popular demand for a little stat chat.

Last Friday's post — designed to be a basic introduction to the WAR (Wins Above Replacement) debate in hockey — proved incredibly popular. And, yes, controversial.

I wasn't expecting that strong of a reaction, but then again, it's mid-August, and we do have a very passionate (and intelligent) base of hockey subscribers here. It's great there's demand for more.

The No. 1 request I received after that story was to hear from someone with more expertise in terms of the actual construction of these statistical models. I spoke with several analysts who have developed WAR models over the past few days — including some employed with NHL teams — and many pointed to Brian Macdonald as one voice of reason on the subject.

"He's done some of the best work in the area. No doubt about that," said one team analyst.

Macdonald spent the past four years working for the Florida Panthers. He recently left the organization and currently works as an analytics professor at both the University of Miami and Florida Atlantic University. He is also doing some consulting for a lacrosse team — the Atlanta Blaze — and is in the process of potentially getting back into hockey.

Macdonald has been creating WAR models going back to 2010 and has spent the last eight years perfecting them. An example of an early version (A Regression-Based Adjusted Plus-Minus) is available here for reading. Some of his later work is listed here.

What follows is a lightly edited version of our conversation on why he believes in using WAR models for hockey analysis.

Okay, this has obviously been a debate that has been going on for a long time, if we go back to Tom Awad's GVT (Goals Versus Threshold) and THoR and some of the others. Let's start with this: When did you start creating a model and why?

BM: It was one of the first things I ever did in analyzing hockey data: come up with adjusted plus-minus. Which is basically just another name for WAR. When I did it, it was basically goals above replacement (GAR), but that could easily be translated to wins above replacement.

I guess I started working on it because I wanted just one number that would summarize a player's contributions to his team. While accounting for the strength of his teammates and opponents. While I knew that it was going to be an imperfect measure, I thought it would be something that would be really useful as far as analyzing how good a player is or how much a player is contributing to his team.

What was the conversation around this stat like when you released it? Was it as heated as it is right now?

BM: No, I never really got a lot of push back from what I was doing. I think part of it was maybe fewer people were aware of it. The only people that were aware of it were into analytics. So maybe they didn't view it with as skeptical an eye. I got a lot of positive feedback from it.

Another thing that helps is anytime I do any of these things, I'm very careful to explain and just really go into detail about the things that I think are probably wrong with it. What are the weaknesses? So I don't just talk about the strengths and how great the new statistic is. I'll talk about here are the weaknesses as I see them of this particular statistic.

Were you using the model when you were working for an NHL team? Was what you created several years earlier still applicable and something you were looking at?

BM: Yes. It's not the same version that's available publicly, but I used it with the Panthers. Other folks like Andrew Thomas with the Wild and Sam (Ventura) with the Penguins use similar things.

Have you tried taking those WAR or WAR-like numbers to a GM or someone high in hockey operations? And do you get traction with them? Do you think they work in terms of giving information to a team?

BM: I think they can. Depending on the person. It doesn't work with everyone. It in part depends on how open they are to things. Sometimes I wouldn't give the actual WAR number to someone. I would give them the estimated dollar value that was completely based on WAR. Basically a linear translation to dollars. So it's more like "estimated salary based on WAR."

You mentioned strengths and weaknesses. What are the limitations of a model like this? Did you find it was telling you some things in terms of this estimated dollar figure that didn't pass the smell test and you had to look into it further? How would you use it given the potential limitations?

BM: There would be times when the numbers would be significantly different from what our scouts would say or management would say. Those are the times when it makes you question the model. But you might also question what your eye test is telling you about the player also. It's at that point where you're not sure. Most times, these things are in agreement. The eye test and the stats both agree.



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A lot of these advanced metrics, Sidney Crosby will come out at the top as far as offensive contributions. If you had some sort of method for evaluating players and he doesn't come out on top, it's probably not a very good method. I think if you have smart people in your hockey ops department and on the eye test — scouts and management — and if you have smart people doing your analytics and building good models, they're going to agree most of the time. So maybe 10 per cent of the time they don't agree or 20 per cent of the time they don't agree. And that's where you start questioning what's wrong with the model or maybe the eye test of a player should change a little bit.

I think the main weakness of the model is the quality of the data. There's a lot of — the fancy term is collinearity — where if certain teammates play with one another, most of the time, like Getzlaf and Perry or something like that, it's hard to separate the contributions of those two in these kinds of models. And so the model might not do a very good job of divvying up the contributions among teammates that player together very often.

Brian Macdonald demonstrating 'The Claw' technique for regression analysis.

What are the strengths of the model? That you have a lot of information in a very small package in that ranking?

BM: Yeah I think you have a lot of information and you're using all of the information about all of the teammates and opponents that a player plays with. You're kind of estimating the effect of everyone all at the same time using a fairly standard statistical model.

I think that's one advantage of the kind of stuff that I did over for example some of the relative stats like Corsi relative. They're not using regression, so it's more of an ad hoc type method. We're using more traditional statistical method, which has benefits like you're estimating all of the parameters at the same time while accounting for all other players in the league. It also has the benefit that you get error estimates. So you know what the uncertainty is in all of these estimates: What are the error bars around your adjusted plus-minus or your WAR values?

I think some of the other things that people write about in the public a lot of times, I don't think there are error estimates. You can't get them. So I would say that's sort of a thing that's maybe hard to talk about with hockey people, but it's important among analysts. You have that estimate of a player's ability, but you also want to know how much uncertainty is there.

One of the pieces of feedback we got from our chat last week was that if you don't understand regression analysis then you can't properly discuss the efficacy or the usefulness of these stats. What makes the regression analysis so complex and powerful to the extent that's true?

BM: It's a better way of determining a player's individual contributions to the team while accounting for all teammates and opponents. I mean I think the Corsi relative stats, I think they're good. They're not going to be completely different from the regression-based methods. But if a statistician was working on some other problem — whether it had to do with medicine, medical treatment or the environment, or basically anything else — and they had a bunch of predictors, say they have three, and they have an outcome, and they want to find what is the relationship between predictor No. 1 and the outcome independent of all the other predictors, they would use some sort of regression technique. They wouldn't do one of these metrics that's a relative rating type thing.

I guess one example that I use to explain this is some people are familiar with strength of schedule stuff in college football. So the computerized rankings take into account strength of schedule. You could think of it like, well, you have the team's record. But that depends on their strength of schedule. So maybe you want to take into account the record of their opponents. And so you could kind of do that and maybe do some sort of a Corsi relative type stat by just looking at that. But what also matters is who your opponents played. That affects their records also. And who your opponent's opponents played. For that (next level analysis), you'd use some sort of a regression model.

One of the criticisms of the criticism of using a WAR model is that you can't just look at the rankings and pick out the outlier players and say 'Look it says this crazy thing — that means it doesn't work.' How would you respond to that?

BM: I guess the question is what are you comparing it to and how are you determining why that rating is crazy? What information are you using to determine why this is wrong? What is the ground truth?

Okay, so, let's not pick on any one model here, but let's say theoretically you look at a model and some depth centre like Riley Nash is one of the top 20 players in the NHL and Sidney Crosby is down around 150th and some good defencemen are at the bottom — I think what people do is they look at those results, the list, and they say 'This doesn't make sense.' The natural reaction, for the uninitiated, is this isn't working. What I'm trying to outline is going from that point to where you're talking about how this is useful in a front office.

BM: I think when you see weird results, it's the time where you can start to have a discussion about a player. From a hockey person's perspective, if the results agree with what I think, then I feel a little bit better about that. If a stat totally disagrees with what I think, then that's a time where it might be good to sit down and talk about it among a bunch of scouts.

I think it's a way to initiate some discussion. Or narrow down some discussions. If everyone is in agreement — all the scouts and the statistics — you probably don't have to talk about them a whole lot. But if there's some big disagreements then maybe that's where you want to spend your time.

Do you think the model should be predictive of future success or do you like it when they're descriptive of what happen? How do you weigh in on that question?

BM: I think it needs to be predictive of future success in order to be useful for a team. In order to be most useful, I should say. I guess it's probably somewhat useful to look in the past, but ultimately anytime you do any data analysis you want it to eventually make some sort of decision about how a player's going to be in the future.

I remember there was a lot of work done on the predictive value of Corsi back in the day when they were trying to argue for its utility. Split-half correlations etc. Do you see something like adjusted plus-minus or some of the other models that are out there publicly surpassing Corsi in their predictiveness?

BM: Not an easy question. What a lot of people do is they'll say okay well the correlation between this stat this year and next year is 0.60. But if we look at this (other) stat, the correlation between this year and next year is 0.65. But that doesn't mean that second one is better. All it's saying is it's more consistent.

For example, hits are very consistent. The correlation is probably like 0.29. But that doesn't mean that's better at measuring how good a player is. It just means it's very consistent.

So the question is what do you want to predict? And this is difficult because we don't know what the ground truth is. I don't think there's a good answer to that question. I don't know how detailed and technical you want to get, but one thing you could do is take something that is hard to argue with like final team points or something like that. If this player stat, if you add it up for all players on a team, then maybe that's a better predictor of something.

One of the other advantages of the regression models is that you can do things like do out of sample predictions. The best thing you can do is say how good it is at predicting 5-on-5 matchups? That's probably as close as you can get to doing this for real. Because we don't have an objective ground truth for players. We only have the ground truth or what actually happened for 5-on-5 matchups, for example.

Have you seen a lot of progress in these models since you started doing them to where they are now? What do you think of the work being done



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in public? It's interesting because it seems like they're a lot more widely popular now — there's more people paying attention to what's going on.

BM: I think there's been advancements. I think they've slowed down since a few people got hired (by NHL teams). But after I did those few papers, Andrew, Sam and others wrote a really good paper. I would consider that a better version of what I did.

(Michael) Schuckers did THoR which is sort of different, so it's hard to compare and say it's better or worse, but I think the idea that he's using more events other than just goals or just shots is a good idea.

Some of the newer ones I'm not too up to speed on. I can't really talk about those. But I would definitely say some of the other work was definitely progress in the right direction.

Brian Macdonald is making things happen at this particular conference.

Do you think because of how complex these are that the average fan or the media should be using these models? Is it something we should be talking about and writing about? I'm curious if there's applications here beyond really high level discussions in front offices.

BM: I don't know that for public discussion a lot of the details need to be talked about. Certainly not the mathematical details. But if it were standard to have a player stats page that had a column for WAR — or even offensive and defensive and total WAR — I think that would be valuable for just discussions about hockey statistics.

I think it's valuable in baseball. Probably more common and more accepted. But they go through the same exact kind of issues with people thinking it's crap when they see some player with a high WAR that they think is a bad player, but they're sort of through those discussions a little bit (in MLB). But it adds to the discussion. It leaves something else to talk about and argue about on Twitter.

That is exactly what we need.

To go back to the outliers — and sorry for repeating myself, but this is kind of the crux of the argument for many on a basic level — if there's a wild one, like Riley Nash as one of the best players in the NHL, you're talking about how that expands the discussion. Should you then look at the component parts of what made up that finding, see where he excels and where he might be surprising, and maybe that gives you some insight into the player that you didn't have before?

BM: Yeah when you see something like that, you might want to look a little bit deeper into things. Either deeper into the WAR model or take another approach where you do another study to look at and estimate his impact on different aspects of the game.

I think we had a couple of these players with the Panthers. It's tough to make any argument and pound your fist on the table and just totally demand that everyone believe the model. It's tough for scouts I would say also to pound the table and demand that everyone believe their eyes.

One thing I would say with some of these guys — like Nash, who might be a third-liner or whatever — all of these models do a good job of accounting for how good their teammates and opponents are that they're playing with. But they don't do a perfect job of that. In theory, all of these models should be totally independent of how good their teammates and opponents are, but in reality they're not.

For a guy like that, if he's put in a different situation, ideally, his numbers would stay the same — (that is) his advanced metrics would stay the same if they're accounting for teammates and opponents. But in reality they're probably going to change. One thing most of these models ignore chemistry or synergy between players.

It's also most of what people talk about out in the open "Well, this guy is getting this amount of production in only 11 minutes of ice time per game at 5-on-5" and then they basically make the assumption that if you increase playing time that the production rate is going to stay the same. Which is almost certainly not true. There's no way. That's a huge assumption.

If a player gets more playing time, that doesn't mean their rate of production is going to stay the same.

That would be a flaw with using rate stats to build a model?

BM: Yes.

Is that something you tried to guard against when you were making yours?

BM: It's not something I could do while making the model. It would be something I could account for after. I didn't really do anything rigorous — it was just kind of eye-balling it and keeping that in mind all the time. Rate stats are not the be all and end all for all these things.

And it's the same thing for shots. If you start taking more shots, your shooting percentage is not going to stay the same. You don't necessarily score more goals because you start taking more shots. In fact, most likely if you're taking more shots, your shooting percentage is going to go down.

One of the arguments out there from some bright analytics people I've talked to that work for teams is that it's more useful potentially to just use the component stats because you can get a good idea of what individual strengths and weaknesses players have by drilling down instead of using an overall metric. Do you think that's accurate?

BM: Yes. I mean it's interesting to look at the overall metric, and that's how you sort players or something like that. But it's much more interesting to look at the components. At even strength especially (because sample sizes on special teams can be small). I think it's most valuable that way.

The other thing I was going to ask is if there's a particular player that your model found that you consider to be a success story? Is there someone it unearthed early on, saying this player's better than people think, and then that ultimately proved to be true?

BM: Hmm good question. I remember back in the day, in my early adjusted plus-minus models, Jakub Voracek was rated pretty highly. So when the Flyers made those trades (in 2011) — when they traded away Richards and Carter — what they were getting in return, I mean, if you ignore the picks and the prospects, and you just focus on the NHL players, I think it was a little bit of a downgrade, but it wasn't as much — at least according to the advanced stats — as you might think.

Just because Voracek had a pretty good rating relative to sort of his reputation in the league at that point. Since then, he's a guy who's come close to 90 points.

Do you remember what about Voracek stood out in the model more than a typical NHL stats sheet? (Voracek had only 46 points the year before he was dealt.)

BM: I think it was just his offensive rating. What happened when he was on the ice at even strength, offensively. The team did very well. I don't recall why that is.

Using the eye test, back then, Voracek was really good at carrying the puck from one end of the ice to the other. Particularly on the power play. Maybe if we had data about zone exits and zone entries or something like that — or pass accuracy — we might be able to explain his offensive rating. But it's tough to explain why his offensive rating was so high other than he and his teammates did well when he was on the ice relative to when he wasn't on the ice.

Do you think these kinds of discussions are really important in hockey given for so long it's been just about goals and assists and, unfortunately, non-adjusted plus-minus? It feels like there's so much of hockey we haven't been able to see statistically for a long period of time and that really the goal of all of these is to shine light on some of the other things that are happening on the ice that don't get talked about as much.

BM: I think it's an important discussion to have, but it's going to be tough for the people who aren't believers to convince them to believe. Even in



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baseball, you'll have World Series champions, who built their teams with huge analytics staffs, and still people in baseball hate WAR and hate sabermetrics. So it's going to be tough to convince people who are haters to stop hating.

But I think it's useful and insightful to use these statistics or things like them to analyze players. It might be better for the casual fan also if the NHL eventually has the tracking data. It'll be higher quality data, more granular data, but there's also the potential to show visualizations which could help the general public gain more of an appreciation for what can be done using data.

The more complicated the stats get, the harder it is to — I mean even Corsi there was such resistance to in hockey for so long even though it was just saying which team was at one end of the ice compared to the other. You start getting into regression analysis and you start getting results that people don't agree with and the barrier for entry seems like it keeps going up.

BM: I think actually part of the reason for that is the name Corsi. If it were named shot attempts the whole time, people wouldn't be so resistant to it.

Right. So we should blame Tim (Barnes) then?

BM: Yep. But actually I think most hockey people I talk with, they want to know where the shot was. What the quality of the shot was. That is much more interesting to them. They could care less whether or not that's more predictive (of future success). It makes more intuitive sense to them. That kind of thing.

I think that's the kind of thing that the general public could appreciate also. The scoring chances.

Okay, I've kept you long enough. Hopefully that proves interesting to a certain subset of our audience. What we're trying to do is bridge the gap between the people creating models and the individual fans — and it's not always easy. To find that middle ground.

BM: Part of why it's tough is because there's a bias. Every time you see something happen that agrees with what you think, you're going to remember that more than all the times you were wrong. This is what people talk about online.

To me it's almost like politics. There isn't actually always a ground truth. You can come up with arguments for different players that are reasonable. You can't prove them. But people will talk about them like they can prove them.

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The Athletic / State of the Franchise: Blues strengthen roster while holding on to prized prospects

By Jeremy Rutherford Aug 22, 2018

After trading for Buffalo's Ryan O'Reilly on July 1, Blues general manager Doug Armstrong was asked his vision of the team's opening-night line combinations, and his answer was more revealing than anticipated.

The Blues have been extremely hopeful that Robert Thomas — their 19-year-old, first-round pick from 2017 — can contribute as a rookie. But it was still surprising to hear that the Ontario Hockey League playoff MVP with the Hamilton Bulldogs could be centering the top line and bumping O'Reilly out of his natural position just three months into the season.

"Mike (Yeo) and I have had some conversations about it," Armstrong said back on July 1. "It does allow (Robert) Thomas to start deeper down the lineup. But in a perfect world, you get to Christmas and he can center a line that maybe has (Vladimir) Tarasenko on the right and Ryan O'Reilly on the left."

Just eight days after Armstrong's comment, though, the Blues signed free agent Pat Maroon, and while Maroon is a winger, he'll certainly take up a spot in the team's top-nine. That assured Thomas, assuming he makes the roster, of opening the year on the fourth line. But then in an interview with The Athletic, Armstrong back-skated a bit on how much the club would be counting on him this season.

"I think we probably created a little bit of a monster with Robert," Armstrong said. "He's 19 years old and it's a man's league and we want to bring him along now with the pace where he's going to be able to learn the league ... make his mistakes and get better and not be at a point where we're relying on him and if he fails, we fail."

The above scenario speaks exactly to where the Blues stand in 2018-19 — excited about their blue-chip prospects such as Thomas, Jordan Kyrou and Klim Kostin, but not confident enough they could be competitive the next couple of years without additions like O'Reilly, Maroon, David Perron and Tyler Bozak.

"When I look at our younger players right now, Thomas has never played in an NHL game, Kyrou has never played an NHL game, Kostin has never played an NHL game," Armstrong said. "So we want to have experienced players because, my belief is that if you want to rely on five or six guys with under 50 games, they are going to get better and they are going to learn. But you're also going to probably end the season up with about 60 points."

The Blues finished with 94 points last season and it was still one short of qualifying for a spot in the Western Conference playoffs. Changes were coming whether the club played in the postseason or not, and with a four-year extension that kicks in this season, Armstrong had the security to infuse some youth. But eight years into his St. Louis tenure, with one trip to the Western Conference final in 2016 to show for it, the GM couldn't afford to spoil the prime years of players like Tarasenko or have fans further questioning his ability to oversee the organization.

In recent years, Armstrong has signed a few contract extensions that have led to some second-guessing, but for the second straight summer, he wiggled himself out of one of those commitments. A year ago, it was unloading Jori Lehtera to Philadelphia for Brayden Schenn and this time it was packaging Patrik Berglund and Vladimir Sobotka in the deal with Buffalo for O'Reilly. The cost of moving those mistakes has been pricey, giving the Flyers two first-rounders and the Sabres a first- and second-rounder along with prospect Tage Thompson, but it has dramatically improved the immediate outlook of the franchise.

The arrival of O'Reilly, Perron, Bozak and Maroon, which came at a high cost too (\$85.75 million), should improve a Blues' offense that ranked No. 24 in the NHL last season with 2.72 goals per-game.

With the exception of O'Reilly, whose 5-on-5 goals and primary assists per-60 minutes were less than Paul Stastny's production, the players the Blues will swap into their lineup this season each represent an offensive upgrade, according to Naturalstattrick.com. Using the players' output from last season, Bozak (.81) topped Berglund (.23) in primary assists with Toronto; Maroon was better than Sobotka in goals (.62-.49) and primary assists (1.55-.43) with New Jersey; and Perron (.90) was far ahead of what the Blues got from Thompson (.27) and others in primary assists with Vegas.

Meanwhile, with respect to Thompson, the Blues didn't have to give up their top prospects to improve the roster. So now Thomas, who missed development camp with a lingering leg injury, can be brought along slowly, and Kyrou and Kostin can get some seasoning in the American Hockey League. That's the 'perfect world' for Armstrong and the Blues, who look like they could be strong contenders in the competitive Central Division.



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Biggest on-ice question facing the team

There are two – Jake Allen and Robby Fabbri – but the Blues' starting goaltender is without question the largest concern heading into October.

Allen's issues have been documented ad nauseam, so there's no reason to rehash them, except to point out for those who may not have read that he's taking a different approach this offseason. But we'd be remiss not to remind you that Allen's ability to put together a consistent campaign in 2018-19 will be vital considering that Carter Hutton is no longer a Blue.

After leading the NHL in goals-against average and save percentage last season, Hutton cashed in with a three-year, \$8.25 million contract with Buffalo. He's been way more than a backup the past two years, starting 26 games last season and it might have been more if not for a neck injury in March that kept him on the shelf for nine games.

Now if Allen gets pulled or falls into an extended funk, the Blues will be turning to journeyman Chad Johnson, whom the club signed to a one-year contract worth \$1.75 million. He went 10-16-3 with a 3.55 and an .891 save-percentage in Buffalo last year and the Blues will be his seventh team in the past eight seasons.

The Blues have had some pretty good fortune with backups the past few years – Hutton and Brian Elliott both produced league-leading numbers – but believing that Johnson could join that company would be pressing the team's luck.

Another question mark this season will be Fabbri. Remember him? The Blues selected the left winger in the first round of the 2014 draft and he appeared to be a steal as a rookie, netting 18 goals and 37 points in 72 regular season games and adding another four goals and 15 points in 20 playoff games.

But Fabbri has played in just 51 games since then, tearing his left ACL twice in a five-month span, keeping him out of the Blues' lineup since February 2017. The second time happened in training camp last September, sidelining the winger for the entire 2017-18 season and leading to concern that he'll ever again be the player the Blues drafted. If you're new to The Athletic in the last year, or would just like a refresher, here's a story I wrote last September on Fabbri's future.

All that said, if Fabbri can prove the naysayers wrong and show a skill-level even close to what he flashed in his first year, he could be quite an X-factor for the Blues playing in their group of top-nine forwards. But we can all agree that's getting pretty far ahead of ourselves, as Fabbri first has to get through training camp healthy.

Depth chart analysis

Center: The Blues didn't get John Tavares – actually they didn't even get an interview with the free agent who signed with Toronto – but they came out of the summer in really good shape at the position. In fact, with O'Reilly, Schenn, Bozak and Thomas, this is the team's best collection of centers since 2000-2001 with Pierre Turgeon, Pavol Demitra and Michal Handzus or even a year later when Turgeon left and Doug Weight arrived.

O'Reilly is an offensive contributor who is responsible defensively and was the NHL's best in faceoffs last year. He may not be the glitzy guy everybody wants for Tarasenko, but as the Blues found out first-hand, luring an elite-level centerman like Tavares to town is easier said than done. After limited chemistry between Tarasenko and Stastny, at least O'Reilly gives the Blues another look and at the very least, No. 90 to No. 91 has a nice ring to it.

Schenn couldn't have been a better pickup for the Blues last season, leading the team with a career-high 28 goals and 70 points. He'll form a nice 1-2 punch up the middle with O'Reilly, and Bozak. Although the club had to overpay for Bozak with a three-year, \$15 million deal, he is a solid third-line center. Again, the plan is to play Thomas on the fourth line, replacing Kyle Brodziak, but the Blues have other options who may better fit the characteristics of that role, such as Ivan Barbashev.

Left wing: The straw that stirs the Blues' drink, Jaden Schwartz, will likely be back with Schenn after the cohesion they showed last season. Schwartz had 24 goals and 59 points, but could have had career-highs in both categories if he didn't miss 20 games with a broken ankle. He's missed significant time in two of the last three seasons, albeit with fluky injuries, so he desperately needs to stay healthy in 2018-19.

Maroon will be a massive upgrade on the wing, both in size (6-foot-3, 225 pounds) and with the ability to provide a net-front presence the Blues haven't possessed since David Backes left in 2016. The plan at the start of the season is to play Maroon on a line with O'Reilly and Tarasenko, and he's excelled in the past with high-end players, registering 27 goals and 43 points playing alongside Edmonton's Connor McDavid in 2016-17.

Fabbri will be a welcomed return after missing the last 20 months, but if he's not ready to play, the Blues will have some options in Barbashev or Dmitrij Jaskin to play the left side in the top-nine. Nikita Soshnikov, who was acquired in a trade with Toronto last season, re-signed this summer and is expected to replace Scottie Upshall on the fourth line.

Right wing: The Blues have one of the top goal scorers in the NHL in Tarasenko, but it was a down year for him, relatively speaking, in 2017-18. After finishing in the top five of the league in goals each of three past seasons with 37, 40 and 39, respectively, Tarasenko wound up with 33 last season, ranking him 23rd, behind the likes of the New York Islanders' Anders Lee, Anaheim's Rickard Rakell and Minnesota's Jason Zucker. In addition, after three appearances at the NHL All-Star Game, Tarasenko was shunned as a representative. He'll have plenty of motivation this season, but he'll also be bouncing back from offseason shoulder surgery, so returning to his regular form could be a challenge early.

Behind Tarasenko, the Blues' other top-six spot on the right side was a revolving door last season. Perron was left unprotected in the NHL expansion draft and taken by the Vegas, and the Blues never replaced him. They tried at least a half-dozen players, including Jaskin, Sobotka and Thompson, but none produced consistently. Interestingly, it will be Perron himself trying to fill the void this season, after he signed a four-year, \$16 million free-agent contract to return for a third stint with the organization. Some may wonder 'Why Perron again?' but after putting up a career-high 50 assists and 66 points with the Golden Knights last season, he was as good, if not better, than any of the Blues' options in the open market.

Alexander Steen continued to see his offense slip last season, falling to 15 goals and 46 points, but part of that could be attributed to a hand injury he suffered after taking a slash from Dallas' Antoine Roussel in the preseason. He had just three goals in the first 31 games of the season and 12 in the final 45. Still not great, but if the 34-year-old who has three more seasons left on his contract (\$5.75 million AAV), can be relegated to the third line, the Blues could be doing a lot worse. The cerebral Steen could form a good unit with the hard-working Bozak and the skilled Fabbri. On the fourth line, Jaskin, Chris Thorburn or Zach Sanford, who missed last season with a shoulder injury, could be candidates.

Here's a look at the potential line combos, as constructed on the always reliable website, CapFriendly.com:

Left defense: The days of Jay Bouwmeester being penciled in as Alex Pietrangolo's automatic partner on the top defensive pair should be over. Bouwmeester missed the first part of last season with a broken foot and Joel Edmundson held his own in that spot with a 54.76 Expected Goals For percentage in 572 minutes with Pietrangolo. Edmundson became one of the NHL's premier shot blockers, finishing 28th in the league with 150, despite missing 13 games because of a blocked shot that broke his right forearm. The 25-year-old logged decent minutes (20:44 per game) last season as well, making him the most logical choice to be paired with the captain again.

Vince Dunn had a sensational rookie year in 2017-18, posting five goals and 24 points in 75 games and being promoted to quarterback the No. 1 power play unit. Dunn makes smart plays to keep pucks alive in the



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offensive zone, and despite his smaller stature (6-foot, 203 pounds), he is extremely effective in his own zone. The Ontario native showed good chemistry with Colton Parayko last season, and there's no reason why Dunn, even in just his second year, shouldn't be paired with Parayko again in 2018-19. That would leave Bouwmeester, 34, and Carl Gunnarsson, 31, fighting for one spot in the top-six, and with Bouwmeester (hip) and Gunnarsson (knee) both returning from surgery, it may come down to who's closer to 100 percent when the season gets underway.

Right defense: Pietrangelo finally earned the respect around the NHL that he's deserved for years, receiving his first invitation to the All-Star Game and some Norris Trophy consideration. The 28-year-old, who ranked sixth in the NHL with an average of 25:44 of ice time per game, was strong in both zones putting up a career-high 15 goals and 54 points and an Expected Goals For percentage of 55.45. The consistency and continued production of Pietrangelo, who has two years left on his seven-year contract (\$6.5 million AAV), will always be essential to the team's success.

The Blues were thrilled to get Parayko signed to a five-year, \$27.5 million contract last summer, and they still are, but the 6-foot-6, 230-pound defenseman will be looking to reward them with a better season than the first one on his new deal. His point production has been similar his first three years in the league, but as several NHL personnel noted in a recent article, he would enhance his value by taking more shots and playing a little more physical. In the third pairing, Robert Bortuzzo played a career-high 72 games last season, and with the edge that he brought the Blues, he was a bargain at \$1.15 million. Jordan Schmaltz, a first-round pick in 2012, showed a little something in the 13 games that he played last year, but once again there may not be enough room for the restricted free agent who remains unsigned.

Goal: There's not much we can add to what was written above, other than the fact that Allen should be better if he receives more goal support. But if the Blues are scoring and he still can't keep them in games, the club will have to make a move. That may mean trying to dump a contract that has three years (\$4.35 AAV) remaining in a trade, which is probably wishful thinking. Either way, in the immediate future, the Blues would have to go with Johnson or fast-track 23-year-old prospect Ville Husso. Husso was brilliant last season with the AHL's San Antonio Rampage, where he's expected to start this season.

Special Teams

Power play: Awful would be an understatement in describing the Blues' power play last season, when it ranked 30th in the NHL. There was a stretch from mid-December to mid-January in which the unit scored just two goals in a span of 14 games. The Blues didn't score nary a power play goal in 52 of their 82 regular-season games and netted just one in 23 of the remaining 30 games.

The addition of O'Reilly, whom @TheAthleticSTL contributor Evan Sporer wrote about recently, will undoubtedly help. He won nearly as many power play faceoffs (210), most in the NHL, as the entire Blues' roster (244) last season. The addition of Maroon should also make a difference. In 2016-17 with Edmonton, he averaged 1:56 of power play ice time per-game with the Oilers, who had the fifth-best unit in the league that year (22.9 percent).

Since Sporer already addressed O'Reilly's pluses, let's take a closer look at Maroon. The chart below from Hockeyviz.com illustrates that the bulk of the Blues' unblocked shots on the power play last season came from the perimeter.

Meanwhile, the chart below from Hockeyviz.com shows where New Jersey's unblocked shots originated with Maroon on the power play last season. He had one goal and three assists in 17 regular-season games on the Devils' man-advantage, which tied for 10th in the league (21.4 percent).

Penalty kill: After a run of six straight seasons among the top eight in the NHL (Nos. 2, 7, 2, 8, 8 and 3), the Blues' PK dropped to No. 18 last

season (79.7 percent) and the 47 power play goals against were the most allowed since 2010-11 (51). The fact the unit has had a different coach each of the last three years – Brad Shaw, Rick Wilson and Darryl Sydor – has likely had an effect. That run will continue this season, as former Blue Mike Van Ryn has been hired to replace Sydor.

The Blues will also have a different look with their top pair of PK forwards, after Brodziak (1:45 of average shorthanded ice time per game last season) signed a free-agent contract in Edmonton and Upshall (1:22) agreed to a professional tryout with the Oilers. The two brought grit to the unit, along with some offense, combining for six shorthanded goals in the past three years. O'Reilly will help fill the void, and Steen, perhaps with a limited 5-on-5 role this season, could chew up more PK time. Defensively, Pietrangelo and Edmundson will be the biggest minute-munchers.

In the Pipeline

The Blues will have experienced support ready in the minor leagues, including forwards Jordan Nolan (361 NHL games) and Oskar Sundqvist (70) and defenseman Chris Butler (394). But for our purposes here, let's focus on the prospects with some long-term upside:

Center: As mentioned, Thomas is expected to make the roster this season, but if not, he'll head back to Hamilton because he has another year of junior eligibility. The Blues believe he's done everything he can at that level (43 goals, 156 points in 155 games), and the fact he's not eligible to play in the AHL is a chief reason many believe they'll keep him in the NHL. Nolan Stevens, a fifth-round pick in 2016 and the son of L.A. Kings coach John Stevens, is underrated and someone to keep an eye on.

Left wing: Kostin had his ups and downs in the AHL last season, but keeping in mind that he had six goals and 28 points as a 19-year-old in that league is pretty impressive. He still needs some games in the minors, but the Russian will be getting antsy soon to get to St. Louis. Sanford, who was picked up from Washington two years ago in the trade for Kevin Shattenkirk, will be back in the lineup after missing last season with a shoulder injury. In addition, Erik Foley, acquired from Winnipeg last year in the Stastny deal, will be in the system after leaving Providence College.

Right wing: Kyrrou, who had 109 points in 56 games with the OHL's Sarnia Sting last season and won the Red Tilson Trophy as the league MVP, is the big name because of his speed and skill. Everyone is extremely excited about seeing how his game will translate professionally. Sammy Blais, the Blues' sixth-round surprise from 2014, played 11 NHL games last season, but he'll have to show more awareness on the ice after being injured twice. Alexey Toropchenko, a 6-foot-3, 200-pound Russian who was a fourth-rounder in 2017, shouldn't be flying under the radar anymore. And German-born Dominik Bokk, taken this summer with the first-rounder the Blues got in the Stastny swap, is one to watch in the future.

Defense: The Blues must make a decision on Schmaltz, who six years after being drafted has played just 22 NHL games. The 24-year-old, right-shot defenseman still has some upside, but how long can the club keep him in the minors? Jake Walman (left shot) was in the mix in training camp last year, but lost out to Dunn and wallowed with two minor-league affiliates. He should benefit from some stability playing in San Antonio this year. Mitch Reinke (right shot), who signed with the Blues as an NCAA free agent last season, will be high on the depth chart this year. And fans will get their first look at Niko Mikkola (left shot), a fifth-rounder from 2015, who has been in Finland the past three years.

Goal: In just his second season in North America, Husso confirmed his NHL potential by posting a 2.42 GAA, .922 save percentage and four shutouts with San Antonio last season. Jordan Binnington, a 25-year-old from the 2011 draft, had his best year in the organization playing with the AHL's Providence Bruins, but he doesn't project to anything more than a minor league backup. Luke Opilka is healthy again after multiple hip surgeries, but he's got a lot to prove. After Husso, the next-best prospect



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in the system is Evan Fitzpatrick, who led Acadie-Bathurst to a Memorial Cup this summer.

Salary Cap Watch

The Blues have the second-fewest salary-cap dollars available (\$284,845), according to CapFriendly.com, but boy did they make good use of their space. They got Edmundson, who was an RFA this summer, back in the fold on a one-year, \$3 million deal. That's good for him because he'll be able to negotiate a big extension next summer, but it's a really solid signing for the Blues. It wasn't even the team's best contract value this summer, however. That was Maroon, who could have doubled the one-year, \$1.75 million salary he got from the Blues elsewhere. But the St. Louis native wanted to be in his hometown, and the team was the beneficiary.

The cap situation will be tighter than the tape on Tarasenko's stick this season, but the Blues will be positioned pretty nicely moving forward with Bouwmeester's five-year, \$27 million contract (\$5.4 million AAV) and Gunnarsson's three-year, \$8.7 million deal (\$2.9 million AAV), coming off the books after the season. You've got to give credit to Armstrong, who has spent fairly responsibly, and when he hasn't, he's rid the organization of those bad contracts. Also credit Blues' ownership, which continues to spend to the cap ceiling and bucked up this year by giving the green light to pay O'Reilly's \$7.5 million bonus and make that trade possible.

Final assessment

Back in April, few Blues' fans would have believed the roster would look this promising a few weeks before the start of camp. Even in late June, the chances of landing O'Reilly appeared bleak, and when free agency opened, the odds of Maroon joining him here weren't high either. While the newest Blues, including Perron and Bozak, aren't superstar signings like Toronto's John Tavares, or even game-changers, they collectively give the team elements it was missing last season. Coupled with the underachieving players the Blues were able to ship out in the process, this should be a better lineup than the one that lost in Colorado on the final day of the regular season last April. To see what Armstrong has done in the past four months, you'd probably have to think that at least one of their top prospects would be calling someplace else home. But that's not the case, making the Blues' future still as promising as the present.

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Sportsnet.ca / Erik Karlsson trade to rebuilding Vancouver Canucks unlikely

Iain MacIntyre | August 22, 2018, 7:05 PM

VANCOUVER – In ordinary times, the possibility of acquiring the best offensive defenceman in hockey would generate excitement, bordering on jubilation, among the fan base of the player's new team.

On the West Coast, however, Wednesday's report that the Vancouver Canucks had "stepped in" to the Erik Karlsson sweepstakes generated consternation, bordering on anger. If the Ottawa Senators actually trade the 28-year-old to the Canucks – highly unlikely – Karlsson will be the most unpopular superstar in Vancouver since Mark Messier left nearly two decades ago.

It's not that anyone really dislikes Karlsson personally. After all, he is a two-time Norris Trophy winner who has averaged 71 points the last five National Hockey League seasons and is still at the height of his powers.

Sure, he seems to have been conditioned by the Senators to do whatever he wants on the ice and you wonder what responsibility he bears for the coaches who have been turnstiled through Ottawa. But if you ignore salary and age and simply ask any general manager in hockey if he'd like Erik Karlsson on his team, the answers would all be variations of "Oh, god, yes, thank you."

These, however, are extraordinary times for the rebuilding Canucks and the problem with a Karlsson trade – or at least the biggest problem – is what Vancouver would be expected to surrender in exchange for the Swede.

While being awful the last three seasons, the Canucks have built the deepest, most talented stockpile of prospects in franchise history. The group headlined by Elias Pettersson, Quinn Hughes, Thatcher Demko, Jonathan Dahlen and Kole Lind, backed by NHL incumbents Brock Boeser and Bo Horvat, is universally regarded as one of the best in the league.

Karlsson is exciting now. But Hughes, Pettersson and Boeser could be exciting for the next 12 years. They are the Canucks' future, the ever-brightening light at the end of what has been an awfully long, dark tunnel. The idea that the Canucks might sacrifice one or more of these potential stars, plus next year's first-round draft pick and other assets, for a short-term gain in Karlsson causes more than a little alarm.

Canuck general manager Jim Benning doesn't divulge trade discussions with other teams. But he told Sportsnet's John Shannon there is "no truth" to reports that the team is pursuing Karlsson.

Benning also reiterated to Sportsnet.ca: "I'm not trading the Quinn Hughes and Brock Boesers and Elias Petterssons. That's not happening."

That should be enough to quell the unrest, but it doesn't do so completely. As we said a month ago when team president of hockey operations Trevor Linden abruptly left the Canucks after an unspecified ideological clash with ownership, the biggest uncertainty in the new landscape is about the chain of command and what happens to the rebuild?

Benning is all-in on the rebuild, willing to wait for his talented prospects to learn and develop and grow into impact players in the NHL. But without Linden as a buffer, Benning's direct boss is now managing owner Francesco Aquilini, who may really like the idea of Karlsson coming to the Canucks' rescue and selling tickets next season.

Karlsson, of course, would have to agree to go to a team, another Canadian team, that has been hopelessly out of the playoffs. And the Canucks would have to be willing to pay Karlsson something very like the \$11-million-US per season that the Los Angeles Kings will pay Drew Doughty for the eight years near the end of his career.

That would be troublesome. But spending money isn't as dangerous for the Canucks as spending assets. Any Karlsson trade will be a huge one. Owners are often involved in deals like that.

Senators owner Eugene Melnyk, the arsonist behind the dumpster fire underway in Ottawa, is already the most unpopular owner in the NHL. If the Canucks make a deal for Karlsson, Aquilini could give Melnyk a run for his money.

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Sportsnet.ca / Vancouver Canucks GM Jim Benning talks Erik Karlsson trade rumours

Mike Johnston | August 22, 2018



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Trade rumours began to swirl on the Erik Karlsson front once again Wednesday afternoon and it appeared the Vancouver Canucks were among the teams showing interest in the coveted Ottawa Senators captain.

However, Canucks general manager Jim Benning, in a conversation with Sportsnet's John Shannon, has thrown cold water on that particular rumour.

Quick conversation with Canucks' GM Jim Benning, says there is no truth to the Canucks being in the Karlsson trade conversation.

— John Shannon (@JSportsnet) August 22, 2018

Earlier in the day, Sportsnet's Elliott Friedman tweeted that Karlsson talks had recently begun to heat back up and that there was a belief the Canucks were one of the teams in on the action.

Sportsnet's Iain MacIntyre believes it was merely due-diligence on the Canucks' part and that a rising star like Brock Boeser or blue chip prospects Quinn Hughes and Elias Pettersson would be pieces the Canucks would be highly unlikely to part with.

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Friedman, during an afternoon appearance on Prime Time Sports, said he tended to agree with MacIntyre's assessment.

"The one thing I would say about Vancouver is they were in on P.K. Subban and they had a chance to get that one done until they knew they weren't getting [Pierre-Luc Dubois in the No. 5 spot at the 2016 NHL draft], they made a plan internally to pitch [John] Tavares [in free agency but] didn't get a seat at the table," Friedman explained. "It's not out of the realm of possibility, for me, a team that has kind of been in on these players — and why wouldn't you be in on Erik Karlsson? — that they would maybe fish and take a look."

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Karlsson's name has been involved in trade rumours for months. Talks were rampant leading up to the 2018 trade deadline, then the draft and into free agency but nothing came to fruition.

Friedman added that he thinks the Dallas Stars, San Jose Sharks and Vegas Golden Knights remain among the frontrunners in the Karlsson sweepstakes.

The 28-year-old is entering the final year of his contract and the two-time Norris Trophy winner is set to become an unrestricted free agent on July 1, 2019. Drew Doughty of the Los Angeles Kings recently signed an eight-year contract extension worth an average of \$11 million per year and Karlsson is expected to fetch a similar cap hit and term on his next deal.

Karlsson managed 62 points in 71 games this past season, but finished outside the top 10 in Norris voting for the first time in five years.

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Sportsnet.ca / Vancouver Canucks GM Jim Benning talks Erik Karlsson trade rumours

Mike Johnston | August 22, 2018

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Sportsnet.ca / Coyotes' Alex Galchenyuk excited for fresh start, chance to play centre

Mike Johnston | August 22, 2018



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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If the Arizona Coyotes are going to regain a modicum of respectability around the NHL, new forward Alex Galchenyuk figures to play a key role in the franchise's turnaround.

Galchenyuk was acquired by the Coyotes from the Montreal Canadiens in June in exchange for Max Domi in one of the most notable transactions of the off-season. It's a fresh start both sides needed and Galchenyuk sees the upside in his situation.

"If you look around the league, the teams that are winning started from almost scratch and slowly made their way up through young players and developing young players, and also having a great veteran presence," Galchenyuk told Coyotes senior director of news content Dave Vest. "If you look at our roster, we have that. I feel as a team we're going to keep getting better and better, and I'm excited to be a part of it."

Arizona's win totals have decreased in each of the past three seasons and the franchise hasn't qualified for the post-season since its 2012 Western Conference Final appearance. Still, there are reasons to hold some optimism in regards to this team.

Galchenyuk mentioned leadership and the Coyotes blue line boasts that in spades with Niklas Hjalmarsson, Alex Goligoski, Jason Demers and Oliver Ekman-Larsson setting a strong example for a youngster like Jakob Chychrun.

In net, Antti Raanta led by example in 2017-18. He has the makings of a quality No. 1 goalie after posting some of the best numbers in the league thanks to his .930 save percentage and 2.24 goals-against average in 47 games.

Shane Doan left a leadership void up front but Derek Stepan is a player that can be relied upon, and Coyotes GM John Chayka has done an admirable job accumulating a wealth of young forward talent.

Clayton Keller showed all-star potential in his rookie campaign, finishing third in Calder Trophy voting. Christian Dvorak turned his first 156 NHL games into a six-year, \$26.7-million contract extension, while Brendan Perlini and Dylan Strome have shown gradual improvements. There could be more help coming in the near future, too, in the form of 2015 first-rounders Nick Merkley and Lawson Crouse.

"When you look at the roster for the Coyotes, there's a lot of great playmakers," Galchenyuk said. "I'm happy to come in here and fit in here."

Galchenyuk was taken third overall in 2012 and leads all players from that draft class in career assists with 147 and games played with 418. His 108 goals are second behind Filip Forsberg's 117 and those two players are tied for top spot with 255 career NHL points apiece (in fairness, Galchenyuk has played 87 more games than Forsberg).

What makes Galchenyuk's young career more impressive is that he's done it primarily as a winger despite a strong desire to play down the middle more frequently.

"I've communicated with Alex and he said he'd like to play centre," Coyotes head coach Rick Tocchet said. "I have no problem with a player who'd like to try something if he backs it up. So, I want to give him a chance at centre if he wants to play it, and our coaching staff will try to give him the best possible help to play that centre position. We'll see how that goes."

If a move to centre results in Galchenyuk having some extra pep in his step it'll benefit the Coyotes and make his transition to his new team that much smoother.

"That's where my head is and what my goal is," Galchenyuk added. "I'm training really hard and preparing myself for it. I can't wait to get it started."

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Sportsnet.ca / Nylander's contract talks could go down to wire (and that's OK)

Emily Sadler | August 22, 2018

Of the off-season questions hovering over the Toronto Maple Leafs this summer, the future earnings of the club's brightest young stars have been among the most intriguing.

Last month, fresh off signing John Tavares to a franchise-altering seven-year deal in free agency, Maple Leafs general manager Kyle Dubas confidently stated that the club will be keeping its young core intact.

"We can, and we will," Dubas told Sportsnet's Elliott Friedman and Jeff Marek on 31 Thoughts: The Podcast, when asked if the Leafs can really keep all four of Tavares, William Nylander, Mitch Marner and Auston Matthews. He also preached patience — and seven weeks and no contract updates later, he clearly meant it.

Tavares, of course, is locked up through 2024-25. The other three are eligible to sign long-term deals with the Maple Leafs this summer, but just one does not have a contract for 2018-19: Nylander.

The 22-year-old RFA told Sportsnet's Luke Fox earlier in August that he wants a long-term deal as opposed to the increasingly-common bridge contract young players often sign, and just last week, he told NHL.com's Mike Zeisberger that he's still not feeling the pressure.

"I've said all along that Kyle wanted to take things slow and I'm fine with that," he said. "They're going back and forth with my agent from what I hear. We'll see what happens. They said it would take a while and I'm still not worried. When it gets done, it gets done."

Sportsnet's Chris Johnston shared a few of his thoughts on the negotiation process during a conversation on The Steve Dangle Podcast on Tuesday, and added a bit of context to what typically goes on in situations like this.

"You're waiting for the other side to blink, and there's no deadline right now. I mean, the deadline — and it's an artificial deadline — is Sept. 13, when the players are due to arrive and take their medicals," Johnston said. "I wouldn't be surprised if it goes until 10th, 11th, 12th, 13th of September."

That would mean Nylander would be cutting it close to the start of camp, or perhaps missing a few days — not uncommon among young players, and not a reason for worry in Johnston's opinion. Just last year, Bruins then-RFA David Pastrnak missed a day of camp before signing a six-year, \$40-million pact. Leafs fans will recall Nazem Kadri cutting it close when he signed his first bridge deal back in September 2013.

Looking at this year's RFA class, there are several other notable RFAs still without contracts for the upcoming season, with Edmonton Oilers blueliner Darnell Nurse and newly-acquired Calgary Flames rearguard Noah Hanifin among them.

"I think it's very likely that this goes down to that kind of wire, and maybe he misses a day or two. I'd be surprised if it gets to missing games in the regular season," Johnston said of Nylander's negotiations. "I think both sides kind of know where each other is at. They know probably where the number is, deep down, but no one's making that first move on the dance floor to really try to get it done. It probably gets done in the middle of September, would be my guess."

Nylander, who is coming off back-to-back 61-point seasons in his first two complete campaigns with the club, could have more in common with Pastrnak other than just the length of negotiations. Pastrnak's \$6.66-million cap hit is a logical reference point for what Nylander could earn, as is Dylan Larkin's newly-signed five year pact which will see him earn \$6.1 million per year with the the Detroit Red Wings.



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As for Matthews, he's got plenty more time before he's due for a new deal — though it would make sense for the Maple Leafs to lock him up in advance. (He and Marner became eligible to ink extensions on July 1.)

Johnston is looking at the monster deals signed by Connor McDavid (eight years, \$12.5 million per) and Jack Eichel (eight years, \$10 million per) and believes Matthews could fall somewhere in the middle — perhaps with a cap hit to match his new teammates in Tavares.

"Eight times \$11 [million], to me, makes a ton of sense for Auston," said Johnston.

Will the Maple Leafs name a captain for 2018-19?

Another topic of discussion on the podcast — and another popular talking point among Leafs fans this summer — centred around the Maple Leafs' captaincy.

On Tuesday, Matthews told The Athletic's Jonas Siegel he'd "feel ready" if management asked him to serve as captain.

"Yeah, I would tell them yeah. I'd tell them I'd feel ready," Matthews told Siegel (subscription required). "I don't know what they're thinking about doing, what they want to do. Obviously John has been the captain in New York for a while. So I don't know what they're thinking or what their whole ideal situation is for that. But I don't think it really changes much, whether you have a letter or not, for myself or anybody. I go lead by example, on the ice, off the ice, and being a good teammate is a big part of that, too."

The case can be made for both Tavares and Matthews to wear the "C". Tavares has plenty of experience in the role from his time leading the New York Islanders, but Matthews has been the face of the rebuild since before he was even drafted first overall in 2016. It could easily be either — or maybe neither, said Johnston.

"I could definitely see no captain," Johnston said on Tuesday's podcast. "I think there's not a compelling reason to have to do it. There's certainly only the media that's talking about this, right? It's hard to make an argument that it's really impacted the team, not having a captain the last couple of years."

The Leafs went without a captain for more than two seasons since trading Dion Phaneuf to the Senators at the 2015-16 deadline. Instead, they've gone with a captain-by-committee approach and have had plenty of success doing so. They're not the only ones, either, as the Vegas Golden Knights also went without a "C" for their inaugural campaign, and got all the way to the Stanley Cup Final.

"I think they both would want it, with truth serum. I don't see it though as a friction issue," Johnston said.

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Sportsnet.ca / Flames' Tkachuk healthy, has high expectations for new season

Josh Beneteau | August 22, 2018

Matthew Tkachuk watched from the sidelines last season as his Calgary Flames imploded and missed the playoffs with a late losing streak.

But now he says he's healthy and ready to help the Flames return to the post-season.

"We need a great year," Tkachuk said in an interview with NHL.com. "We have to have one. I mean, it's time to really start dialing it in."

"It's time to expect great things out of ourselves and out of our team. We should all have high hopes, high expectations."

Tkachuk, 20, was on his way to a career year when his season abruptly ended on March 11 after a collision with New York Islanders forward Mathew Barzal. He missed the final 12 games of the season and revealed at the team's locker cleanout that he had suffered a concussion.

Still, in 68 games he had 24 goals and 25 assists, giving him 49 points, which was one more than in his rookie season. But the way the season ended meant it's been an extra long summer for Tkachuk, so he can't wait to get 2018-19 started.

"The summer's been good but I had a little bit of a later start than I would've liked or had planned, because of what I went through at the end of last year," he said. "I started gearing up in later May, started in on the training more, getting my base back."

"There's no worse feeling than being out of it. So everything I've done this summer is to be as healthy as possible."

The Flames only won three of those final 12 games Tkachuk missed and finished the season with 84 points, 11 behind Colorado for the second wild-card spot. Because of that late-season collapse, GM Brad Treliving has been aggressively reshaping much of his team this summer.

Out are head coach Glen Gulutzan, defenceman Dougie Hamilton, and forwards Micheal Ferland and Troy Brouwer. In their place, Treliving brought in forwards James Neal, Elias Lindholm, Derek Ryan and Auston Czarnik, along with defenceman Noah Hanifin and new head coach Bill Peters.

With so many changes, Tkachuk says the pressure is now on the players to deliver results on the ice.

"These guys expect to win," Tkachuk said. "Whether you signed on as a free agent or are here via trade, you're coming to Calgary because you see the team we have and can envision success."

"I'm not speaking from experience, of course, but a guy like James Neal, I assume, is even hungrier to get back to a final, and finish the job this time, after the past two years. And he chose Calgary as potentially the place to do that. That excites me. To have a guy who's been on hockey's ultimate stage, you can't put a price tag on that."

Of course the pressure isn't just on the new guys to deliver. Tkachuk and returning stars like Sean Monahan and Johnny Gaudreau will still need to contribute offensively if the Flames are going to return to the playoffs.

The addition of Neal gives the Flames options on the left wing, the same position Tkachuk plays. Tkachuk says he's open to any assignment and that he can't focus on individual success, only what's best for the team.

"If people are putting themselves ahead of the group this year, I don't want that around. And I know nobody else does, either," he said. "I know a lot of guys are sick about how the last couple years have gone. What are our goals as a team this year and what as an individual can you do to help achieve those goals (is the mission)."

"That's the only thing that matters."

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