



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 30, 2018



Checkers, Charlotte City Officials Break Ground On “The Link”

The new facility will be attached to Bojangles Coliseum and will be complete by Fall 2019.

By Justin Lape

CHARLOTTE — Ground was broken Tuesday on land between Bojangles Coliseum and Ovens Auditorium in Charlotte where a new connector facility will be built to “link” the two venues. The connector facility, referred to as “The Link,” will add additional concession space, offices and storage as well as artist corridors for performers to move quickly and easily before and after shows. The facility was approved by Charlotte City Council in July of last year by a 6-3 vote.

The facility will cost an estimated \$18.5 million, which will be paid for by the city’s community investment plan that was set aside in 2014. The original plan, for \$25 million to be used on an amateur sports complex next to the coliseum, fell through and some of that money has been used for improvements around Bojangles Coliseum, including demolishing a nearby hotel and making improvements on parking. The renovations cost \$18 million to upgrade Bojangles Coliseum when the Checkers moved from the then-Time Warner Cable Arena to the historic venue.

Charlotte Checkers Chief Operating Officer Tera Black said she is “very excited” for the project and says it will increase the fan experience. The team’s offices, currently located in the Epicentre entertainment complex in uptown Charlotte, will be relocated to the new “Link” facility, which Black says will save the team money.

Black remains optimistic, with most of the young core still intact, that the Checkers will have a good season. “I think we’re going to be a really good team...it was a great season last year and just a really great group of guys who had great chemistry. I’m anticipating another great year,” says Black.

Black expressed her trust in Charlotte Checkers head coach Mike Vellucci, who will return for a second season. “Mike understands the business from every angle. From the building side, from the coaching side, from the business side. He’s an advocate for everything we are trying to do in the city of Charlotte in addition to growing young hockey players into professional NHL guys. He’s an absolute asset,” says Black. The coaching position has been a carousel since Jeff Daniels left at the end of the 2014-15 season. Coaches Mark Morris and Ulf Samuelsson each left after one season apiece for other opportunities.

Fans will not be able to utilize the facility during the 2018-19 season as it will not be completed until fall of 2019.

TODAY'S LINKS

<https://www.canescountry.com/2018/8/29/17795928/checkers-charlotte-city-officials-break-ground-on-the-link>

SportScan

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

1103427 Websites

The Athletic / Yohe: Jack Johnson is a happy man in Pittsburgh after unhappy end in Columbus

By Josh Yohe Aug 29, 2018

CRANBERRY TOWNSHIP, Pa. — I don’t know what happened in Jack Johnson’s final days with the Blue Jackets. Stories are out there, but those are just stories.

Johnson knows. John Tortorella knows. Some things will probably always remain private. Johnson was a healthy scratch as the Blue Jackets blew

a 2-0 series lead on their way to a first-round loss against the Capitals during the 2018 Stanley Cup playoffs.

In Johnson’s final 12 games with the Blue Jackets, he was a plus-8. Penguins coaches watched a handful of those games, focusing exclusively on Johnson, and determined the defenseman played exceptionally well. Tortorella’s decision to banish Johnson to the press box didn’t make sense to Mike Sullivan, Jacques Martin or Sergei Gonchar.

Moments after he signed Johnson on July 1, Jim Rutherford infamously commented about the curious Columbus decision to sit the defenseman.

“I know the reason why,” Rutherford said. “It wasn’t because of how he was playing.”

This comment triggered Tortorella’s temper, resulting in a legendary tirade from the NHL’s most combustible personality.



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We may never know the whole story. There presumably will always be two versions.

But know this: Johnson is happy to be out of Columbus, he's even happier to be in Pittsburgh and he's noticeably eager to prove naysayers wrong and earn every penny of that \$16.25 million contract he signed in July.

Two months later, emotions have calmed as hostility between the Penguins and Blue Jackets has at least been delayed until they meet in November. Through it all, something has become exceedingly clear: Johnson comes across as a man who has been freed from the weight of the world. Maybe it isn't Andy Dufresne escaping from Shawshank State Penitentiary, but it's somewhere in the neighborhood.

In my decade of covering the Penguins, I've never witnessed a human being happier to be in Pittsburgh. Not by a long shot. Players almost always like playing here. Good facility, good team, good city, good place to raise a family. But this feels borderline euphoric.

Johnson is so eager for the season to begin that he joined two teammates who are already in town — Jake Guentzel and Chad Ruhwedel — for some practice work, with Jay Caufield in charge of the on-ice action at the UMPC Lemieux Sports Complex on Wednesday.

Johnson held court with the media for 15 minutes, the smile never leaving his face. One-on-one requests with reporters, left and right? No problem. A team official asked him to offer his assistance in an event with season ticket holders. No problem, the ear-to-ear grin still present.

An hour after the workout, Johnson was mingling with Penguins fans while ordering his lunch at the public cafe adjacent to the Penguins' practice rink. He could have privately ordered his food and slipped out the back door. But he wants to absorb his new home.

"I'm really excited about this," he said. "I'm coming to a team that's been the top team, or one of the top teams, for a really long time now."

Johnson, 31, exudes the excitement of a rookie when speaking of his new surroundings.

"I don't think of myself as an old guy," he said. "I still think I have a lot of room to grow, a lot to improve on. I feel like I'm just getting started. I'm really excited about it."

The grin only departs Johnson's face when Tortorella's comments are mentioned.

"I was very surprised by it," he said. "But I haven't thought about it since."

Johnson's life story has been one of success and betrayal. He is by nature a people pleaser and, for much of his time in Columbus, possessed a very close relationship with Tortorella. Johnson's loyalty never wavers, either. Even when he was teenager, it was on display.

When Sidney Crosby and Johnson were 15 and participating in a baseball game at Shattuck St. Mary's in 2002, a pitcher threw a fastball at Crosby. Johnson and Crosby were close friends. Not long after Crosby was nearly hit by the pitch, Johnson rushed the pitcher from the dugout.

He's a people pleaser, and there's nothing wrong with that, so long as he's surrounded by the right people.

Perhaps he is now.

Johnson has already worked out with Crosby this month. His wife, Kelly, received pointers from Crosby's girlfriend, Kathy, about Pittsburgh.

In fact, Johnson has been reunited with a lot of old friends, including his old Team USA teammate Phil Kessel.

"I've known Phil since high school," Johnson said.

Does he have good Kessel stories?

"Yeah."

Would he care to share any of them?

"No. I'm sure I won't tell you guys anything you don't already know."

What we don't know, of course, is how the story ends for Johnson. A number of hockey people — including a portion of the fanbase — were surprised that the Penguins made such a significant commitment to a player who has, by certain measurements, struggled in recent years.

Johnson, however, does offer physical gifts. The Penguins are convinced he'll thrive under this coaching staff.

And if attitude is good for anything, Johnson's couldn't be better. There is an undeniable feeling that he's found his home.

"I love it here already," he said.

When Johnson received his lunch order, he tucked his food under his right arm, nodded at the Penguins fans sitting nearby and opened the door back into the practice area, as though he didn't want to leave. He was back to work and, quite clearly, feels at home.

NOTE — Players will be trickling into Pittsburgh between now and the beginning of training camp on Sept. 14. The Penguins' prospects will participate in a tournament in Buffalo beginning on Sept. 7.

The Athletic LOADED: 08.30.2018

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The Athletic / Pronman: Best prospects at the 4 Nations U20 Tournament

By Corey Pronman Aug 29, 2018

This past weekend in Örnsköldsvik, Sweden, there was a U20 tournament featuring the Czech Republic, Finland, Russia and Sweden. This serves as yet another evaluation opportunity for the World Junior Championship. And for both Finland and Sweden, it is a chance to test out some players who weren't invited to the tournament in Kamloops. Here are some of the NHL prospects I liked a lot at the tournament, which I watched by way of video. Vitali Kravtsov (NYR) was named the top forward in the tournament, with Simon Johansson (MIN) named top defenseman and Jesper Eliasson (DET) top goaltender.

CZECH REPUBLIC

Jan Jenik, LW, Arizona

Jenik was good for the Czechs, even if he wasn't a top player. He showed flashes of high-end playmaking ability. He's skilled and sees the ice well, and also showed some nice hustle trying to win back or coming back on defense, although in his last game, he delivered what could be argued as a cheap hit. My main concern with him continues to be whether he'll be quick enough for the NHL.

Jachym Kondelik, C, Nashville

I saw Kondelik play a lot last season and he often left me wanting, but I did see some good flashes from him with the Czech U20 team. He showed nice vision making some plays, and was strong down low and in front of the net using his massive frame to get second chances. His skating and hands will never blow you away, but he's got a little touch. He also did some quality penalty killing.

FINLAND

Justus Annunen, G, Colorado

This was some of the best hockey I've seen from Annunen, particularly in the first game against the Czech Republic where he was an absolute



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rock in the net. He's such a smart goalie with size, but I also saw some aggressive positional play that I hadn't seen from him in the past. Finland's goalie situation is a little crowded for the world juniors, but he's put himself into the conversation to be the No. 2.

Henri Jokiharju, D, Chicago

Jokiharju didn't really need to compete in these given he's a lock if available, but he played in two of the three games and was fantastic. His skating stood out consistently, being one of the best players at transporting the puck up the ice. He also read the play very well, stepping up when needed and making a ton of great feeds. I don't think he's NHL ready just yet, but this was some of the best hockey I've seen from him.

Santtu Kinnunen, D, Florida

Kinnunen was Finland's second-best defenseman, showing above-average puck-moving skill and the ability to run a power play. Plus, he's 6-foot-3. I don't love his defensive play, particularly since he's not very mobile, but he's got some skill and good overall instincts. In brief viewings prior to this, he never stood out to me, but I've given him a bump up as a prospect.

Otto Kivenmaki, RW, Detroit

I saw Kivenmaki last season and thought he looked good but wasn't wowed by him. He was then drafted in the seventh round, turned heads at Detroit's development camp and was quite impressive at this tournament. His skill level and playmaking looked high-end and he made a ton of plays. He skates well but maybe not exceptionally well for 5-foot-8. I didn't have him on my Wings prospect list, but he'd be there now, and I think he's in the mix for the WJC team even as a 2000 birth date.

Jesper Kotkaniemi, C, Montreal

Kotkaniemi played in two games and was very good in both, arguably dominant in the first one. He was clearly the most skilled player on the ice and showed great offensive instincts. One play wasn't incredibly flashy but showed me a glimpse of his IQ:

He's behind the net in this clip on the power play. His teammate Kristian Tanus doesn't have a direct lane with Jacob Ragnarsson (NYR) blocking it. You can see him signaling to Tanus to bank it off the wall to get around the stick of Ragnarsson. He doesn't do that and still gets the pass through, but I thought that was very clever. Kotkaniemi then one-touches the puck to a teammate in front for a great chance that was robbed by Jesper Eliasson (DET).

I'm still debating Kotkaniemi's feet. Some shifts he looks like an average skater, other times below-average.

RUSSIA

Vitali Kravtsov, RW, New York Rangers

Kravtsov is one of the most interesting prospects I've seen in the past few years. He was a massive riser, who played well as a 17-year-old in Russia but not at a top 10 pick level. He then had one of the best ends to a season I've ever seen from a first-year draft-eligible prospect.

I watched a ton of him last season. Some games in the KHL, he barely played; other games, he played well. His junior games were good, but he never blew me away. His international appearances were forgettable. I saw a good player, someone with size, speed and skill who can score but who played in straight lines and didn't create a ton.

That wasn't the Kravtsov who showed up in Sweden this past weekend. He was as dominant as I've ever seen him. He showed high-end skill and pace to his game. He was everywhere when he was on the ice, pressuring opponents with speed and his ability to create, and for the first time in the times I've seen him, he was consistently making plays to his teammates. This was an impressive performance, and he looked like a top 10 pick.

Daniil Tarasov, G, Columbus

Tarasov is a very interesting prospect who was considered one of the best goalies in his age group a few years ago and missed his entire draft season due to injury. More than a year later, he seems primed to be the starting goalie for Russia at the world juniors. He played well at this tournament, with a few moments of brilliance. I like a lot about his game. He's big, moves very well, has above-average hockey sense and can make the tough saves.

SWEDEN

Victor Berglund, D, Boston

When I watched Berglund, I didn't see much from him, but he looked a tad more intriguing at this event. He's got some puck moving ability, decent mobility and the ability to create some offense. I think given his six-foot frame and lack of dynamic ability, he's still a fringy prospect, but he had some good moments and showed flashes of significant hockey sense. At the very least, he's on my radar now.

Jesper Eliasson, G, Detroit

It was hard to get a great read on Eliasson last season. For the U18 team, he was often the No. 2 behind Rangers' pick Olof Lindbom, so I only saw him in limited time. It was gutsy of the Wings to use a third-round pick on him, but based on what he did last weekend, it may be an OK investment. Eliasson was dominant at times, making tough saves consistently. He showed great athleticism for his size, a good glove hand and the ability to stay square to pucks that required him to move. He was probably fourth-fifth on the depth chart a month ago for the world juniors, but his strong performance will likely stay in Sweden's mind when it comes time to make the next camp invites.

Pontus Holmberg, LW, Toronto

When I watched Holmberg last season, I thought he was a good playmaker, but at this tournament, he showed me another level. He has a lot of skill, but his vision is high-end. He showed the ability to make a lot of plays and run a power play from the half-wall. I didn't see a ton of speed in his game and for a small guy that's not ideal, but he's got offensive talent for sure and I'm interested to see how he plays in Vaxjo, a club team that gives players like him room to be creative.

Simon Johansson, D, Minnesota

Johansson played at the Kamloops tournament but the Swedish staff wanted to get another look at him and he didn't disappoint. He showed great puck-moving instincts, a big shot from the point and was often the starting point for offense by the Swedish team. If Timothy Liljegren (TOR) and Erik Brannstrom (VGK) are both available, and Adam Boqvist (CHI) makes the team, Johansson might have limited ice time or not be on the team at all. But if Sweden needs a power play guy, he's shown this summer he's up to the task.

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The Athletic / NHL farm system rankings: No. 3 St. Louis Blues

By Corey Pronman Aug 29, 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.



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In terms of the quality vs. quantity argument, no system tests that debate more than the Blues. This is a thin system depth-wise, but the prospects they do have are among some of the most talented players outside the NHL. No other system can line up their forward group with Robert Thomas, Jordan Kyrrou, Dominik Bokk, Klim Kostin and Samuel Blais. Ville Husso is a top goalie prospect and Scott Perunovich tore up the college ranks last season. That core right there is worth a lot to me, and could form a base of talent to jumpstart the Blues' rebuild/retooling, even if it falls off quickly after.

Team's 2017 ranking*: 8

Prospect Rankings

ELITE NHL PROSPECT

1. Robert Thomas, C, Hamilton-OHL

Thomas was the most dangerous player I saw in the OHL last season and was the MVP of the OHL Playoffs. He's a fantastic do-it-all type of forward with no clear weakness. His puck skills are fantastic, and he has near elite level hockey sense. Thomas drives play due to his skill and offensive instincts, as he's always dangerous, sees the ice very well and is always finding a way to create a scoring chance. His speed isn't at the same level as those other traits but he skates well and has a powerful first few steps. He's not the biggest guy, but Thomas is a reliable defensive center who can kill penalties and take tough minutes. He has the potential to be a No. 1 center.

HIGH-END NHL PROSPECT

2. Jordan Kyrrou, RW, Sarnia-OHL

Kyrrou was named the Most Outstanding Player in the OHL after scoring at a near two points per-game rate. He has dynamic qualities in his game. He's a great skater and puckhandler who can push the pace and make highlight-reel rushes. Kyrrou's decision making used to worry me, but he's getting better in that regard and his playmaking looked very good this season. He's averaged about an assist per-game for the last two years. He can be prone still to the odd bad turnover, but you take a lot of the good with some of the bad. His shot is solid as well. His play off the puck can still be better, particularly physically, but with the puck he can change a shift. He could be an impactful scorer in the NHL.

3. Dominik Bokk, RW, Vaxjo-J20 SuperElit

Bokk's pure puck skill is up there with the very best in his draft class. He dances with the puck on his stick and can make flashy dekes seem routine. His hands also translate to making him one of the best pickpockets (of pucks) I've seen at his age. He's a good playmaker who looks to makes plays to his teammates and has the patience and skill to hold the puck and let an option develop. He can finish chances, too, and when he's played internationally, the German team has looked to him as a trigger man. His skating is fine, not explosive, but good. The main criticism of him is off the puck. He's not a very intense physical player nor is he great defensively.

VERY GOOD NHL PROSPECT

4. Klim Kostin, RW, San Antonio-AHL

Kostin was one of the better players at the World Juniors, but was just so-so in his first AHL season as an 18-year-old. He has a unique combination of attributes because he's 6-foot-3, can play a power forward style of game, but also has the skill to make plays. I'm consistently impressed by Kostin's vision and ability to create from the perimeter due to his hands and IQ. He gets to the net well and can be tough to dislodge from pucks due to his frame. His skating isn't a standout tool, but it's about average. Kostin will need to up his pace for the pro game. He also had some consistency issues in the AHL with his reads.

LEGIT NHL PROSPECT

5. Samuel Blais, LW, San Antonio-AHL

Blais has been a significant riser in recent years. He sat around a point per-game in his second pro season and had a strong training camp with the Blues. Blais' calling card is his offensive ability. He's a highly skilled playmaker with high-end hockey sense. He can make things happen on the power play, and has the vision to make difficult passes. Blais is not the quickest or most engaged player off the puck, and working on rounding out his game in terms of improving his speed and conditioning will go a long way to solidifying himself in the Blues' lineup.

6. Ville Husso, G, San Antonio-AHL

Husso was one of the better goalies in the AHL, and looks on the cusp of making the jump to the NHL. He thinks the game at a very high level, showing great anticipation in his positioning with his big frame and looks unique with some of the creative ways he stops pucks. He's not a dynamic athlete, but he moves more than adequately in the net and competes for loose pucks. Husso is more at home being calm and outsmarting the opponent than flying all over his crease. He has all the tools to be a NHL goalie.

7. Scott Perunovich, D, Minnesota-Duluth-NCHC

Perunovich's main asset is his high-end hockey IQ. He displays great vision and offensive instincts with the puck. He has the patience to wait out options and find guys through tight lanes, and the creativity to try things others players won't. Perunovich also possesses very good puck skills to create space in order to make plays. His feet aren't great for his size, but they're good, and he can evade pressure well. On the defensive side of the puck, Perunovich has taken big strides. He won't be a premier shutdown guy due to his size and lack of elite skating.

8. Erik Foley, LW, Providence-Hockey East

Foley was one of the best forwards in Hockey East, and was traded at the deadline from the Jets. He has a lot of skill. Foley is not going to dance around every defender, but he has the hands to make a standout deke and create a chance. He makes plays to his teammates well, but most of his chances come from his individual skill and how hard he gets to the net. Foley has average size but is a tough guy to handle physically and plays a hard game without taking bad penalties. His feet are decent, not slow, but he's not a burner.

HAVE A CHANCE

9. Jake Walman, D, Binghamton-AHL

Walman's first full pro season was a tough one, as he struggled at times, saw his ice time go down with the Vegas affiliated Chicago Wolves, and was re-assigned to the New Jersey affiliated Binghamton Devils who played him more. He's a great skater who moves the puck well and has a big shot from the point. He didn't stand out a ton when I watched him last season, and his defense was just OK, but you could tell there is offense in his game. Hopefully next season, with the Blues having the ability to be hands-on with his development it goes better for him.

10. Nolan Stevens, C, Northeastern-Hockey East

Stevens had a good final college season, and was the third-best player on the best line in the country. Stevens is known for his physical play and ability as a two-way center. This past season I was impressed by some of the skill he showed though. There were quite a few moments where I'd be watching Northeastern, keying in on his more prominent teammates, Dylan Sikura and Adam Gaudette, where Stevens would draw your attention with his skill and vision. His main drawback are his very heavy feet, and if he can get quicker he could be a player.

11. Alexei Toropchenko, RW, Guelph-OHL

Toropchenko's first season in North America was just OK and after a hot start he trailed off afterwards. He has moments of brilliance as he's a 6-foot-3 forward who can really skate and has decent skills too. He can get down the wing and to the net well enough that you can see how he'll score as a pro. However, his offensive touch is just OK and I don't think he's much of a playmaker. He excels more going in straight lines than playing an east-west game.



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12. Evan Fitzpatrick, G, Acadie-Bathurst-QMJHL

Fitzpatrick looked like he was on his way to sizzling out as a prospect, but a midseason trade from Sherbrooke to Bathurst reignited his prospect stock, being a rock for the eventual QMJHL and Memorial Cup Champions. He's a big goalie with good hockey sense who, when he's on, has the positional play to cover up a lot of net and square up pucks consistently. He's gotten quicker, but what's helped him is nullifying the bad games where he tends to snowball, as he tends to lose focus and let in soft goals.

DEPTH NOTES

13. Niko Mikkola, D, Tapaara-Liiga: Mikkola doesn't have much offensive skill to his game, but he's big, skates well, and is a fierce competitor who throws his big frame around with consistency. He could be a low-end of the roster/PK type.

14. Jordan Schmalz, D: He has skill and can move the puck very well, but he's not a good defender in terms of handling speed or physicality.

2018-19 Impact

I expect Thomas at the least to start the season with the big club and play a notable role, and I think Kyrrou could do the same with Tage Thompson dealt to Buffalo. Blais and Husso are close, with both banging on the door to get a call-up at any point. Husso, if he gets regular starts, could push Jake Allen.

Organizational Top 10 (23 and Under)

Robert Thomas, C

Jordan Kyrrou, RW

Robby Fabbri, LW

Dominik Bokk, RW

Vince Dunn, D

Klim Kostin, RW

Samuel Blais, LW

Ville Husso, G

Ivan Barbashev, C

Scott Perunovich, D

Fabbri has a lot of offensive elements to his game. He has skill, makes a lot of plays and has a very good work ethic. I don't know if he's ever going to become a true impact player and staying healthy will be important for him, but he could be a quality top six guy for a while. Dunn had a decent first NHL season. He was carefully deployed, but his skating can break open a shift, and he has the offensive ability to be a reliable transition guy and power play asset for years. If he can improve his defense enough to take a regular shift, he could be a big part of the Blues' future. Barbashev may never be the big scorer once envisioned when he was a teenager, but he's smart, can make some plays, and has two-way ability. Zach Sanford would have been the 11th player here. He's got size, speed and decent skills but I'm not sold his instincts are good enough to be a legit NHL scorer.

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The Athletic / State of the Franchise: Lightning feel urgency to hoist elusive Stanley Cup

By Joe Smith Aug 29, 2018

TAMPA, Fla. – Lightning goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy said he'd be decompressing after summer workouts when clips of the Capitals' Stanley Cup celebration will pop on the television screen at the Ice Sports Forum.

"It's motivation," Vasilevskiy said.

"We're so close," winger Nikita Kucherov said.

Close.

That's the state of the Lightning franchise, which has made deep playoff runs in three of the past four seasons, only to fall to the eventual champions. They lost to the Blackhawks in the Cup final in 2015, fell in Game 7 of the Eastern Conference final to the Penguins in 2016 and the Capitals in May's Eastern Conference final.

But not all defeats are the same. And this one might be the most frustrating, veteran defenseman Anton Stralman said.

"When we lost Game 7 against Pittsburgh and lost that series, you reflect on it and realize that we got beat by a better team," Stralman told The Athletic. "We were cheating the system a little bit somehow getting that series to a Game 7. Much depended on 'Vasy.' When you look at the Washington series, they're a good team and don't want to (discredit) them. They deserved it. But I don't think that we came out and played to the level where we could be. In some ways, we beat ourselves. And that really sucks. Because you really blew an opportunity. Who knows? We might not have won that series if we played at a high level, but you at least got to give yourself a chance."

The Lightning, once again, are one of the Stanley Cup favorites at 9 to 1, behind only the Maple Leafs (7 to 1), according to Bovada. And Tampa Bay's championship window is still wide open, especially with a Vezina Trophy-caliber goalie in Vasilevskiy, the Norris Trophy-winning defenseman in Victor Hedman and superstar scorers like Kucherov and Steven Stamkos.

The Lightning have a model owner in Jeff Vinik. Their general manager, Steve Yzerman, is one of the best in the game and is likely to get an extension sometime this season. While our Corey Pronman ranked the Lightning prospect pool 30th due to lack of elite level prospects, scouting director Al Murray has done a great job finding mid-round gems like Brayden Point (third round, 2014) and Anthony Cirelli (third round, 2015).

But there's a sense of urgency surrounding the Lightning about finally hoisting the ultimate prize instead of watching someone else do it on TV.

Biggest on-ice issue

The biggest question for the Lightning is how they're going to improve their porous penalty kill and defense, which Yzerman admitted "was not good enough" last season.

The penalty kill ranked 27th at 76.1 percent. Our Evan Sporer did a great job breaking down the unit's issues and how they were improved in the playoffs. And while the goals allowed per game was middle of the pack (13th at 2.85), it could have been a lot worse had it not been for some herculean efforts by Vasilevskiy in net, especially early in the season.

There weren't really many personnel changes this offseason, but there could be a slight philosophical shift. Yzerman shook up the coaching staff, saying the bench needed "new" and "fresh" voices. Veteran associate coach Rick Bowness (who ran the defense and penalty kill) was let go, with fellow assistant Brad Lauer mutually parting ways.

Former Lightning forward (and AHL Syracuse assistant) Jeff Halpern was added to the staff, and he'll work with the forwards, no doubt adding some of his experience to the penalty kill. Derek Lalonde, formerly of the Wild's AHL affiliate, was also hired. Lalonde has a personal relationship with Cooper, with those close to both saying they have the kind of trust where he could tell the Lightning head coach when he's wrong. Lalonde also brings a background in analytics.



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What's clear is something has to change. The penalty kill was too passive (especially up top) and the forwards were not good enough in terms of getting in shooting lanes. With the defense, the focus was so much on creating turnovers and sparking the transition game. And that's great for a puck possession team. But what resulted, sometimes, were lapses in awareness and structure.

The Lightning learned from what the Capitals did to them in the conference final. And it would serve them well to take a page from the Cup champs' playbook.

"They played suffocating defense," defenseman Braydon Coburn said. "If you talk to a lot of our forwards, they were frustrated and they played really tight. Their system enabled them to have five guys always playing dense. They're just very patient, they waited for their chances and had high-end players that put puck in net when they got the chances. It's one of those case studies of sticking to your guns and playing a team game for full 60 minutes. They did that really well against us and did that even better in the final. I think that's something you always want to try to build towards."

Depth Chart Analysis

Center: This is by far the Lightning's deepest position up front. You have two legit No. 1 centers in Steven Stamkos and Brayden Point, which is why former All-Star center Tyler Johnson was used at right wing for a good chunk of last season and the playoffs. Rookie Anthony Cirelli smoothly slid into the No. 3 center spot after his March call-up, which shouldn't be surprising considering his improbable ascent from undrafted in OHL. Center Cedric Paquette was re-signed to a one-year deal this summer and will likely anchor the fourth line.

You can argue that Stamkos could eventually be moved to the wing, but he and Nikita Kucherov played so well together last season that it makes sense to keep the two All-Stars together. It'll be interesting to see how a full summer focused on training rather than rehab will impact Stamkos' play on the ice, but the Lightning would certainly take another 27-goal, 86-point season from their captain.

Point, just 22, emerged as the anchor to the Lightning's shutdown line last season, routinely drawing the toughest matchups. He showed why in the playoffs. The Lightning have the option of tweaking their lines and moving Johnson back to center, if need be. Yannick Gourde also has experience at center, which provides some versatility.

Right wing: The Lightning might have the best right wing in the game in Kucherov, whom we profiled in the playoffs. Kucherov was admittedly "off" in the conference final loss to the Capitals, but is still one of the most dynamic scorers in the league; only Connor McDavid has more points the past two seasons. Johnson seamlessly transitioned from center to right wing to keep him in the top-six after Point's emergence.

There's not as much depth in terms of natural right wings, especially with Ryan Callahan out until early November following June shoulder surgery. But Alex Killorn has shown the ability to play on both wings, bringing his power forward style and size. So has Gourde and Cory Conacher.

Left wing: Ondrej Palat is one of the more underrated wingers in the league, a 200-foot player who is often the engine of any line he plays on; he's able to play in all situations too, from power play to penalty kill, and on the team's shutdown line. The Lightning re-signed winger J.T. Miller to a five-year deal this summer after acquiring him from the Rangers in the Ryan McDonagh deal at the deadline. Miller, at 6-foot-1, 218 pounds, gave Tampa Bay an element they lacked for a few years: size and style around the net (working well with Stamkos and Kucherov, for the most part). No Lightning player had more goals from the deadline until the end of the regular season, though Miller's play fell off a little bit (like many others) late in the playoffs.

Adam Erne should get a shot to stick at left wing on the fourth line, bringing his own power forward game. The former second-round pick seemed to come into his own in the middle of last year before an injury sidelined him the final month of the regular season and playoffs.

Left Defense: The Lightning are stacked on the left side, led by Victor Hedman, who was welcomed into the Norris Trophy winner club in June. Tampa Bay also locked up McDonagh to a seven-year extension this July (at a hefty \$6.75 annual million cap hit). Cooper called McDonagh's acquisition at the deadline a "game-changer" for the Lightning, allowing them to take pressure and minutes off Hedman.

You'd think that promising rookie Mikhail Sergachev is someone the Lightning could slot on the left side for the next decade, but the left-shot made such a smooth transition to the right side in the second half of the season that he gives them options. Sergachev really helped Coburn, who is better on his left side. But it's not a stretch to think Sergachev gets a bump in minutes to a top-four role this season, and McDonagh wouldn't be a bad partner.

Also on the left side is Slater Koekoek, the former first-round pick who re-signed to another one-year, "show-me" deal this summer. Koekoek is expected to be a depth defenseman this season unless he can play himself into the top-six. Coburn is under contract for just one more season.

Right defense: Anton Stralman is as consistent as they come, a stabilizing Swede on the right side. As Cooper often says, Stralman may never win a Norris Trophy, but his partner probably will. He's under contract for just one more year, but should find himself in the top-four, either paired with Hedman or McDonagh (Stralman helped mentor Sergachev the first half of last season).

Dan Girardi had a solid overall season in the first of a two-year deal with the Lightning. He's at his best when put in the right situations, logging around 15 minutes and a staple on the penalty kill. He was often paired with Hedman in the playoffs, but that was mostly just to start the game as Hedman logged monster minutes and played with everyone.

Would think Jake Dotchin will get more of a chance coming into camp. He played well on Hedman's right side as a rookie in 2016-17 but surprisingly became a routine healthy scratch the second half of the season. The fact Sergachev was so good on the right side was probably part of that.

Goaltenders: Andrei Vasilevskiy is the workhorse who was a Vezina Trophy finalist in just his first full season as the Lightning's No. 1. He'll be leaned on heavily again, but re-signing backup Louis Domingue gives Tampa Bay a good option to allow Vasilevskiy a breather. Vasilevskiy should start between 55-65 games, but Domingue — who won seven of 11 starts last season with the Lightning — could get around 20-plus. Here's our deep dive on what Vasilevskiy's workload might be.

Special teams

Power play: The Lightning power play is one of the team's top strengths, finishing third in the league last season at 23.9 percent. There's an embarrassment of riches, especially on the first unit, with Stamkos and Kucherov spread out in each of the circles, and Hedman running point.

Stamkos scored 15 of his 27 goals while on the power play, mostly from his "office" (the right circle) on a slap shot. Sean Tierney at @ChartingHockey illustrates this perfectly here.

With both Stamkos and Kucherov drawing attention, it opens up space for others, like this goal by Alex Killorn.

The second power play unit is stout, too, with Sergachev typically running point and a stable of forwards (Johnson, Palat, Point, Killorn or Gourde).

Penalty kill: See above at biggest on-ice issue.

In the pipeline

Right Wing: The Lightning's two most NHL-ready forward prospects are on the right wing, with Alex Volkov and Mathieu Joseph having a chance to make a push for a spot out of training camp. Volkov had an impressive pro debut last season for the Crunch in his first year in North America after being one of the final cuts in Lightning camp. Joseph, the versatile and quick forward, can play all situations and brings a tenacity on the



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forecheck that Tampa Bay will be missing without Callahan for the first month. "They both have deception in their game, and for me, that's a gift," Crunch coach Ben Groulx said. "When you have that combined with speed, skill and agility, and all that, it's like 'Boom.'"

There's also touted prospect Taylor Raddysh, a pure goal scorer who will head into his first pro season with Syracuse.

TAYLOR RADDYSH WITH THE SNIPE AT DEVELOPMENT CAMP. "PURE GOAL SCORER," SAID FELLOW #TBLIGHTNING PROSPECT BORIS KATCHOUK, HIS TEAMMATE THIS YEAR. PIC.TWITTER.COM/G4HZB5CHOM

— JOE SMITH (@JOESMITHTB) JUNE 28, 2018

Left wing: Boris Katchouk is also an intriguing prospect, one who may be somehow slipping under the radar. He racked up 42 goals last season for Sault Ste. Marie in the OHL, teaming up with Raddysh; Katchouk will be a first-year pro this season. Dennis Yan showed at June's development camp he's past all the injuries that deterred him last season. He could make a push for a call-up at some point this season.

#TBLIGHTNING PROSPECT DENNIS YAN, NOW HEALTHY AND LOOKING TO MAKE IMPRESSION IN CAMP PIC.TWITTER.COM/SILUN4JUT3

— JOE SMITH (@JOESMITHTB) JUNE 29, 2018

Center: Mitchell Stephens may be the closest to the NHL, a two-way grinder in the Callahan mold. He was steady last season for the Crunch and a leader. He'll probably make a push in camp. Don't sleep on Carter Verhaeghe, either, as the 23-year-old turned some heads in scoring 17 goals with 48 points in 58 games for the Crunch last season. There are some other interesting names to watch in the future, such as Alex Barre-Boulet, the CHL Player of the Year who signed with the Lightning this summer.

ALEX BARRE-BOULET, THE @CHLHOCKEY PLAYER OF THE YEAR, SHOWING SOME MOVES AT #TBLIGHTNING DEV CAMP. "HE'S A DANGEROUS PLAYER," SAYS GABE FORTIER, TB'S SECOND ROUNDER PIC.TWITTER.COM/RETXF4ADX6

— JOE SMITH (@JOESMITHTB) JUNE 29, 2018

Right defense: Cal Foote, the former first-round pick and son of NHLer Adam Foote, is the most prized defense prospect in the system. He's a future NHL defenseman, but needs some seasoning at the AHL level. He impressed coaches with his first foray during last year's Crunch playoff run. The closest defenseman to a call-up may be right-shot Erik Cernak, who was acquired from the Kings in the Ben Bishop trade two seasons ago.

Left defense: Dominik Masin was a steady partner for Cernak last season with Syracuse and is getting closer. The Lightning took another left shot in Radim Salda (Czech Republic, Saint John, QMJHL) in the seventh round of June's draft. Oleg Sosunov, a 6-foot-8 Russian, is still a bit of a project but intriguing as he heads into his first pro season in Syracuse.

QUICK FEET OLEG SOSUNOV #TBLIGHTNING PIC.TWITTER.COM/BSF93VCWYS

— JOE SMITH (@JOESMITHTB) JUNE 28, 2018

Salary Cap Watch

The Lightning are up against the cap this season, with around \$2 million of space, according to CapFriendly. So it would take a lot of maneuvering to add a major piece like Erik Karlsson, who has long been a subject of trade rumors.

What's more intriguing/troubling is the next couple years, when all the huge extensions handed out will start stacking up. The Lightning already have \$65 million committed for the 2019-20 season to just 12 players. Kucherov's extension (a bump from \$4.76 million cap hit to \$9.5 million) kicks in, as will McDonagh's seven-year extension (from \$4.7 million cap hit to \$6.75 million).

The Lightning will have three of their veteran defensemen come off the books next summer as unrestricted free agents — Stralman (\$4.5 million), Coburn (\$3.7 million) and Girardi (\$3 million). But you'll still have to replace them. Callahan (\$5.8 million cap hit) is under contract for two more seasons, making him a potential buyout candidate next summer if Tampa Bay is squeezed for space.

And the Lightning likely will be squeezed, especially with two more sizable contracts coming up. Point is going to be a restricted free agent next summer, and Vasilevskiy has just two years left on his current team-friendly deal with a \$3.5 million cap hit. We polled some agents on what Point and Vasilevskiy's next deals might look like. While Point may end up with a deal similar to Kucherov's bridge contract in 2016 (three years, \$4.76 million cap hit), Vasilevskiy could warrant a mega raise.

"If (Vasilevskiy) wins the Cup and MVP, then he'll get (Carey) Price money," said one agent, who does not represent Vasilevskiy. "Otherwise, between \$8-8.5 million AAV."

What gets tricky for Tampa Bay is they don't have as much flexibility to make moves thanks to 10 players having some sort of no-trade/no-move clause. You'll likely see players like Yanni Gourde (one year left at \$1 million AAV) price themselves out of the Lightning's cap, with the need for younger prospects on entry level deals to step in (Joseph, Volkov, Raddysh, Foote, etc).

Final Assessment

The Lightning are in a good spot, both for this year and coming years.

But when it comes to winning the Stanley Cup, Yzerman admitted "we weren't good enough" last season.

As much as Yzerman tried to make a major move this summer, pursuing star center John Tavares and Senators defenseman Karlsson, Tampa Bay's roster will be pretty much the same as the one that skated off the Amalie Arena ice for the final time after their Game 7 loss to Washington.

The Lightning believe they have the pieces to get the job done. But they realize that some of the familiar faces won't be able to stay forever with the pending salary cap crunch.

"You only get so many shots with a team this skilled, this talented," Callahan said. "So that urgency has to be there."

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The Athletic / 2018-19 NHL Season Preview: Detroit Red Wings

By Dom Luszczyszyn Aug 29, 2018

Read this to learn more about how these projections work and this to understand the uncertainty each projection carries.

Once viewed as the class of the NHL, it's been a precipitous decline for the Detroit Red Wings, falling from the league's perch all the way to the basement. After back-to-back bottom five-ish finishes, things only look worse from here on out into the immediate future – good news for a team in desperate need of a proper rebuild. Another poor season could see Detroit rewarded with a foundational piece at the end of it, a key stepping stone towards the next competitive era of the franchise.

Lucky for them, the odds are in their favour to do just that as the Red Wings enter 2018-19 with the lowest projected point total (by nearly three points, though that can change if the next worst team trades the significant piece of their roster they've been rumoured to), and thus the best chance of securing a top pick in next year's draft. It's very likely that



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the Red Wings are a bottom five team next season – they finish there 75 per cent of the time, based on my model – with dead last being their most likely landing spot at 29 per cent. It goes without saying that their chances of making the playoffs are extremely slim.

The playoffs shouldn't be the goal for Detroit anyway, but unfortunately for fans hoping for a full-blown rebuild, it doesn't exactly seem like the franchise is on the same page. After seeing what the Devils and Avalanche pulled off last season, the organization seems to believe they can pull off a similar feat with the team as currently constructed.

"It's such a tight league. It's so crazy," says Dylan Larkin. "You see Washington and Pittsburgh and they have the superstar guys, the guys that ultimately win them games and bring them to that ultimate goal. We want to be Colorado and play in playoff games."

It's not just Larkin either as it seems to be a mostly unified message from top to bottom of a team that recognizes where it is in the pecking order, but believes they can surprise despite that. While Larkin is right that the league is tight and unpredictable – that was the main message from our Season Previews Preview on Monday – it'll take absolutely everything going right for Detroit to make it back into the playoffs this season after a two-year absence. It's possible about two per cent of the time, but that's far from probable. Of course, that was the same story for last season's projected 31st place team, so maybe lightning strikes twice, though it is an extreme long-shot.

In a tough division with three elite teams at the top, there just isn't much room for a team of Detroit's calibre and it's difficult to see how the Red Wings can pull off the playoff run they're hoping for. Kudos on the (unsurprising) optimism, but they'll need a lot of luck on their side to pull it off.

What the Red Wings will also need is someone on the team to somehow emerge as a superstar. While Detroit can point to the perception surrounding Colorado and New Jersey before last season as a reason for optimism, the two appeared stronger on paper than the Red Wings currently do. It also ignores the fact that the two teams both had elite talent capable of carrying their respective teams much farther than most expected. It took two Hart-calibre seasons from two incredible players (and former first overall picks) for those two clubs to achieve what they did. Is there any Red Wing that could potentially do the same? I'm skeptical.

Detroit has just a single player worth over two wins in value, and just barely at that. Only one other team in the league has just a single player at that level: the Vancouver Canucks, another team that's unlikely to compete next season. At 2.05 projected wins, Anthony Mantha rates as the "worst" best player any team has.

It's a bleak situation at the top and it's the biggest hurdle facing the Red Wings going forward. Championship teams are built around elite players and the Red Wings are currently one of five teams without a single one according to this model. It's why their top line grades out closer to a good second line.

Larkin, 22, and Mantha, 23, are the team's best hopes to reach that height, but they're still a ways away. The duo is young and will soon be entering their prime, so there's still hope they can get there one day.

Larkin looks to be on his way there after a breakout 2017-18 season where he scored 63 points despite a low shooting percentage and a lack of time on the top power play. My projections believe he's a 60-point player, but it wouldn't surprise me if he was able to build on last season's totals, though it is worth noting he did have a high concentration of secondary assists. His elite speed makes him one of the league's best at entering the zone with the puck on his stick, but his play without it still needs work. He was one of the team's worst shot and scoring chance suppressors last season, and while his offensive efforts more than make up for his defensive blemishes, it's still something that needs to improve in order for him to become a more complete player.

Mantha is much stronger in that regard and his ability to drive possession should complement Larkin well on the top line, especially since he doesn't have to be the primary puck carrier to be effective (one of Larkin's best attributes). The two produced much better when playing together last season and it'll be interesting to see the duo build on that chemistry. In their 472 minutes together at 5-on-5, Larkin scored 2.66 points-per-60 while Mantha was at 2.03, sizeable increases from their respective 2.01 and 1.78 marks when playing apart.

Mantha hitting 55 or 60 points alongside Larkin this season wouldn't be a surprise, especially if the two get more time on the top power-play unit. Having said that, both players will need to significantly up their game on the power play as neither has shown a knack for scoring with the man advantage.

Aside from those two players, there isn't much else to like about a Detroit forward group that is largely underwhelming, especially now that it seems increasingly unlikely that Henrik Zetterberg will be able to return to action this season. At this stage of his career, his value alone wouldn't have been enough to vault the Red Wings past the 30th or 29th place team, but it would've moved them closer.

His absence does leave a large hole at centre, a position of weakness. His value projects at second-line calibre, something this team is currently missing. That forces Frans Nielsen up the lineup, a player better suited for a third-line job. At age 34, Nielsen's offensive ability is in decline and he enters the season as one of the weakest second-line centre options in the league. His transition and passing stats took a hit across the board last season.

While Nielsen is likely a sub-par option for the second line, Andreas Athanasiou might be able to earn some value back on the third line. He's a one trick pony, but scoring goals is a pretty good trick and it's why he's rated surprisingly high here. Athanasiou carries second-line value but likely lacks the defensive responsibility to actually fill that role – a sheltered third line built to score is probably a better fit for him. At 24, he can certainly grow into that though, and his further development will be an important storyline this season.

With the offensively gifted Thomas Vanek on his left and sublime rookie Filip Zadina on his right, Athanasiou would be anchoring one of the league's most valuable third lines, though it likely comes at the cost of Jeff Blashill's sleep. It won't be pretty on defence.

What you see with most great teams is they have players playing lower on the depth chart than their ability dictates they belong. Evgeni Malkin and Nicklas Backstrom manning the second lines of the most recent Stanley Cup champions is a prime example. With Zetterberg in the fold, the Red Wings would have everyone "in their place" so-to-speak (with Athanasiou on the wing with a more defensively responsible centre) and while that obviously wouldn't be enough to contend, it would be enough to at least hang with most teams. As the Red Wings stand now, they have Larkin being told to sink or swim against the opponent's best, Nielsen struggling to keep up offensively in the top six, Athanasiou likely needing shelter (that the top two centres may not adequately provide) to succeed, and Luke Glendening being Luke Glendening.

At wing, recent first-round picks Michael Rasmussen and Zadina are two wildcards thanks to the difficulty of projecting rookies. All indications are that they have an inside track towards making the team barring a terrible training camp. They could be surprisingly effective in their first season, providing the team with solid depth in the middle six, or they could look lost in the big leagues, showing why many coaches have a difficult time trusting first-year players. Either option and anything in between is possible, but if they can adapt to the NHL quickly it creates a slightly more likely playoff path for Detroit. Slightly.

Tyler Bertuzzi figures into that equation as well and may start the season with a cushy spot next to the team's two best forwards. If he sticks there, he might be able to build on his 41-point pace from last season, bolstering the forward group into something a bit more respectable.



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Even if the best case scenario happens up front though, it's very difficult to look past a truly awful backend. Detroit's defence group is by far the biggest reason to be pessimistic about the team's chances next season. The lack of star power is an obvious issue, but there's at least some potential for it to be addressed with internal growth at forward. No such luck on the backend, where "disastrous" and "worst in the league" might still be too generous a descriptor. We're a long way from the Nicklas Lidstrom era, folks.

At 0.8 projected combined wins, they're almost a full win behind the next worst team and nearly two behind the team after that. This team is in a league of its own when it comes to defensive futility. Craig Custance likened it to the team having "three third pairs" and that's a pretty spot-on descriptor according to my model's ranking of each pair in the league.

Mike Green is arguably the best of the bunch here, a painful sentence to type in 2018 now that he's 32 years old (and 33 by the start of the season) and no longer a 50-point threat. Green is still a strong puck-mover, but his defensive struggles have been exacerbated by his role in Detroit. He's at his best when he doesn't have to do the heavy-lifting, something that's become very clear during his time as a Red Wing where he's been forced to do just that far too often. Again, the team lacks the star power at the top of the lineup to put players in a role where they can succeed. In terms of shutting down the opposition's best, the Red Wings have virtually zero options. If Green is the top dog on your blueline, especially at this stage of his career, you're in trouble.

The funny thing about Green's time in Detroit is that the team hasn't fully allowed him to do what he does best: quarterback the top powerplay. The Red Wings tend to split the power-play duties evenly between Green and Niklas Kronwall, despite Green outperforming him in nearly every facet since arriving in Detroit. It's worth noting that since Green became a Red Wing, the team has the league's third-worst power-play efficiency. A few more minutes to Green over Kronwall probably doesn't change that much, but it might have helped.

As for the rest of the group, well, it's somehow uglier than Green being the No. 1 defender. Nick Jensen is intriguing as the only defender my model expects to bring a positive impact with regards to 5-on-5 shot share. He has a knack for getting the puck up ice and creating offence by finding guys in shooting positions, but some caution should always be reserved for third-pairing defenders that put up cushy numbers. He's also the youngest defender here, which is nightmare fuel for Red Wings fans considering he's going to be 28 by the time the season starts.

The others? Woof.

Detroit has what my model considers to be four sub-replacement level defenders. Out of six. They're close enough that you can argue whether they actually belong in that category or not, but the fact that it's even debatable is not a good sign. All four are one-dimensional defenders who struggle with the puck, specifically getting it out of the zone, and whose varying levels of defensive acumen aren't enough to offset how barren their contributions are on offence. It's very difficult to imagine Detroit going anywhere with this current group of defencemen.

In net, the Red Wings added Jonathan Bernier, who at the very least should be an upgrade on Petr Mrazek and Jared Coreau, and may even be able to fight with Jimmy Howard for the starting job. I'd consider them near equals at this point, but goaltending is always tricky to forecast, which should make the battle between the pipes very interesting this season. Goaltending likely won't be a source of strength this season, but at the very least the Red Wings have two capable goalies that provide stability in net. That's much more than some teams, even hopeful playoff teams, can say.

Overall there's not a lot to like about the Red Wings on paper going into the 2018-19 season. The forwards lack star power up top and the depth behind the top guys is largely below average. With Zetterberg likely retiring, things might be even worse than expected unless one or two of the kids step up in a major way.

The situation on defence is even worse. There really isn't any area on this team that you can point to as a strength that the team can lean on during a surprising run toward the postseason.

Unless someone has a large and unexpected breakout, the defence figures things out and the goalies stand on their heads – all at the same time – it's extremely hard to envision a successful season on the ice for Detroit. A lot of things have to go right and while that's not impossible, it's just downright unlikely. Considering the current direction of the franchise, being one of the worst may be for the best.

What Other Models Say

Emmanuel Perry, Corsica: 82.9 points, 24th

Rob Pizzola, Semi-Professional Sports Bettor: 77.2 points, 29th

Andy MacNeil, Vegas Stats & Information Network: 77.1 points, 30th

Over/Under Point Total, Bodog: 75.5 points, T-29th

I'm on an island in thinking the Red Wings start the year off as the league's worst team, but they're still a near consensus bottom-three team. The most optimistic projection goes to Perry (who was the most accurate last season), and even he only gives the Red Wings a 16 per cent chance at making the postseason. Still a long shot, but much more optimistic than my model.

What Fans Expect

Public Sample: 1,956

Fan Sample: 390

The organization has playoff hopes and dreams, but it doesn't seem like anyone else is on board – not even their own fans. Only 14 per cent see them earning 85 points or more, and just six per cent see them making the playoffs. That's the second lowest of any team. Fans are generally much more optimistic than public opinion, but that's not the case here. It seems like pretty much everyone agrees the Red Wings are in tough this season.

What The Athletic Insider Thinks

Max Bultman: "Hard to argue here — though I'd be a little surprised if Detroit did actually end up finishing dead last in the standings, if for no other reason than they seem genuine in their desire to compete. That's only worth so much, though, and the numbers are pretty clear, especially when it comes to the defensive makeup. The numbers can't precisely account for whatever the young wave brings in, and I think that's the only major thing to keep in mind. As noted, while the clear likelihood is that this team will lose a lot of games, that's not the worst outcome in the long haul.

And at this point, it makes the most sense to look primarily at development when assessing Detroit's season. One young defenceman should get the call to start the year, but it wouldn't be a stretch to see two, or maybe even three, over the course of the year. There's an energy there that should keep it interesting for fans, although the ultimate results seem destined to be discouraging. Ditto for contributions by the last two first-round picks, Rasmussen and Zadina. You pretty much know what you're getting from the veterans at this stage, and the numbers are probably correct about how that translates to the standings. The young players — whether it be growth from Mantha, Larkin or Athanasiou, or breakouts by Rasmussen or Zadina — are the best hope to outperform."

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The Athletic / State of the Franchise: Predators in win-now mode, remain Stanley Cup favorites



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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By Adam Vingan Aug 29, 2018

The Predators' 53-win, 117-point season had fans dreaming of a Stanley Cup parade down Broadway. It probably would've been epic, too.

That didn't happen, but it still could. The Predators are in win-now mode and firmly in the Stanley Cup conversation as this season approaches.

Players implored general manager David Poile to keep the team together, and he did. The same group that fell well short of expectations in a second-round loss last season will give it another shot.

"Last year's in the past now," Predators center Ryan Johansen said. "We just need to work each day and every day at taking the next step as a group. If all of us are on that same page, there's no reason we won't be successful this year."

Biggest On-Ice Question

Can the Predators replicate their Presidents' Trophy-winning play?

The short answer is probably not. There's going to be some regression. The Predators, for example, probably won't compile a .936 save percentage at even strength this season. The bounces won't favor them as often.

That said, the Predators are primed to finish near the top of the NHL standings again. Few teams are deeper, which should prevent that regression from being too severe.

Depth Chart Analysis

Center: Over the past two postseasons, Johansen is a point-per-game player (27 points in 27 games). In his own words, "if I can show up in (the) playoffs and elevate my game at that time of the year to be producing more, then there shouldn't be a reason why I can't do that all season long." The Predators need more than 15 goals and 54 points from their No. 1, \$64 million center during the regular season.

The acquisition of Kyle Turris from the Ottawa Senators made a significant impact during the regular season, but he was a no-show in the playoffs (three assists in 13 games). Turris' six-year, \$36 million contract begins this season, and he'll need to bounce back to solidify the second line.

With Nick Bonino and Colton Sissons expected to center the bottom-six lines (with Calle Jarnkrok another possibility), the Predators have championship-caliber depth down the middle.

Wingers: The Predators are the only NHL franchise that's never had a 40-goal scorer. If there's someone who can change that, it's Filip Forsberg. One player has more hat tricks than Forsberg's five over the past four seasons (Alex Ovechkin) and 12 have more goals. Forsberg played at a 78-point pace last season despite missing 15 games because of injury and suspension. Don't be surprised if Forsberg challenges Paul Kariya's single-season team record of 85 points.

Forsberg's linemate Viktor Arvidsson has a team-high 60 combined goals over the past two years. Kevin Fiala and Craig Smith each had career highs in goals last season with 23 and 25, respectively. They benefited from skating on the most sheltered line in the league (minimum 500 minutes) with Turris, starting 69.25 percent of their shifts as a unit in the offensive zone.

The Predators' biggest X-factor is Eeli Tolvanen. The 19-year-old phenom has game-breaking skill that the team needs, but there will be an adjustment period.

Tolvanen's 36 points in 49 KHL games last season translate to about 48 points in 82 NHL games, according to Rob Vollman. A 35- to 40-point rookie season probably would suffice. The best fit for Tolvanen might be on Turris' line, where he'd receive a heavy dose of offensive-zone starts.

Ryan Hartman's greatest attribute is his versatility. If he uses it effectively, then he should be able to recapture his 19-goal form from his rookie season with the Chicago Blackhawks.

The league's investigation regarding Austin Watson, who pleaded no contest to domestic assault last month, should conclude soon. It seems likely he'll be suspended to start the season. Miikka Salomaki and Freddy Gaudreau come to mind as replacements. The Predators also signed troublemaker Zac Rinaldo for some reason.

Here is a potential lineup, assuming Watson is suspended:

Defense: The Predators' top two pairs — Roman Josi–Ryan Ellis and Mattias Ekholm–P.K. Subban — are arguably without equal. Josi and Ellis are more offensively inclined as a pair (56.8 offensive-zone start percentage last season), though they combined for zero goals in the playoffs. Ekholm and Subban, the latter of whom was a Norris Trophy finalist last season for the third time in his career, typically handle the toughest matchups.

The third pair will be strengthened by the return of veteran Dan Hamhuis in free agency. He and Yannick Weber were partners with the Vancouver Canucks and should be reunited in Nashville. Matt Irwin and Anthony Bitetto round out the Predators' defensive depth.

Even with the immense talent, the Predators' defense this season will cost \$22.5 million, a discounted rate that ranks 16th in the league.

Goaltender: Pekka Rinne, whose tremendous regular season led to his first Vezina Trophy in June, is entering the final year of his contract. It's time for the Predators to prepare for life without Rinne, who turns 36 on Nov. 3.

That starts with giving 23-year-old Juuse Saros more playing time to see if he's a viable successor. Saros, who signed a three-year contract (\$1.5 million AAV) this summer, started 23 games and earned all-rookie honors last season. He probably needs at least 30 starts this season to make a proper impression.

Don't expect Saros to supplant Rinne this season. Yes, Rinne's postseason was nightmarish, but the Predators' crease is still his.

In The Pipeline

Other than Tolvanen, the Predators' farm system is lacking in impact prospects.

The team's top defensive prospect, 20-year-old Dante Fabbro, is preparing for his junior year at Boston University. Predators management feels he's ready to turn pro, which they hope will happen this season. Fabbro, the No. 17 pick in the 2016 draft, has said all the right things about joining the Predators, but skepticism will remain until he actually does after forward Jimmy Vesey spurned the team two years ago.

The Milwaukee Admirals have a few players who could be serviceable in spot duty. Emil Pettersson, who led the Admirals with 46 points last season, is a solid two-way center. Frederic Allard and Alexandre Carrier each have upside on defense.

Salary Cap Watch

Poile's shrewd cap management has propped open the Predators' Stanley Cup window for the next several years. The Predators have \$7,625,834 in projected cap space, more than enough to bolster the roster if necessary.

Many of the Predators' top players are locked up for at least the next four seasons: Ellis (\$2.5 million AAV this season and \$6.25 million AAV through 2027 when his new contract begins next season), Johansen (\$8 million AAV through 2025), Arvidsson (\$4.25 million AAV through 2024), Turris (\$6 million AAV through 2024), Forsberg (\$6 million AAV through 2022), Subban (\$9 million AAV through 2022) and Ekholm (\$3.75 million AAV through 2022).



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The Predators have flexibility because they don't give out no-trade/no-move clauses. They have one player (Rinne) with trade protection, the fewest in the league.

Final Assessment

The Predators remain a Stanley Cup favorite.

The key is consistency. They lacked it down the stretch last season, and it bled into the playoffs. As long as the Predators avoid those lapses this season, they'll challenge for a championship.

The Athletic LOADED: 08.30.2018

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The Athletic / How full-bodied Blue Jacket Pierre-Luc Dubois spent his summer (Spoiler alert: He got even stronger)

By Tom Reed Aug 29, 2018

CHATEAUGUAY, Quebec — Kenny McCudden arrived in Montreal on Sunday to the sight of a bigger, stronger Blue Jackets man-child.

Waiting for the club's skills coach at the airport was 20-year-old Pierre-Luc Dubois — all 6-foot-3 and 220 pounds of him. McCudden was immediately struck by the thickness of the Blue Jackets center, who grew in a variety of ways during his rookie season.

His size and willingness to use it against savvier opponents was a major asset for Dubois en route to contributing 20 goals and 28 assists in 82 games. Now, his young frame appears even sturdier. Just a glance at Dubois' thighs had the Blue Jackets assistant wondering how the added muscle would reveal itself in on-ice training.

It took McCudden less than an hour inside a suburban Montreal rink to see Dubois' work in the gym had served him well.

"He does things as a bigger player so well in small areas," the assistant coach told The Athletic. "He'll shorten up on the stick to receive a pass. He's good with knee bends to pick pucks up out of his feet.

"You can just see him getting quicker in accelerating out of tight areas. ... He's just a gifted player as a big man in that way. It's pretty neat to see because we know there are a lot of big guys in this league who need a lot of road to get going. He's not one of those players."

Dubois isn't satisfied with showing he can play against the NHL's best players as he did a year ago. He wants to become one of them.

If the Blue Jackets are to finally advance beyond the postseason's first round, they will need a first-line center to play on a level at least approaching that of Sidney Crosby and Evgeny Kuznetsov. Such is the challenge for Dubois and the Blue Jackets in the Metro Division, where the Stanley Cup has resided for the past three years.

"I don't necessarily listen to what people say and their opinions," Dubois told The Athletic. "But I want to help the team win and be a top player. To do that, you have to go against top players every night and play well against them.

"I think I did a good job of gaining people's respect last year, but I still have a long way to go — a lot of respect to gain. I'm still a young player with a lot of things to accomplish."

Dubois' decision to gather a group of regional players to train with McCudden reflects his commitment to the task. They hired the coach to run them through 80 to 100 drills over a three-day period. The Blue Jackets assistant spends his summers traveling the continent, working with players of all ages and skill levels.

Dubois could have waited a few more weeks and received the coach's instruction for free. Instead, he's using the five hour-long sessions as a springboard into training camp. Dubois said he cannot afford to start slowly for a second consecutive season. He tallied only one point in his first 12 games last year and five points over the first 23 games.

"I love Kenny's drills and the pace he sets," said Dubois, who Tuesday was joined on the ice by Lightning forward Alex Killorn. "When you have a guy like Kenny in your organization, if you don't try to use him as much as you can, you're missing out."

"I'm working on getting my shots off as fast as possible. Finding those little pockets of space and finding ways to get in those little areas. I think I'm smart enough to find those areas, but Kenny is great at helping you get to them faster."

Blue Jackets skills coach Kenny McCudden worked with a group of players in suburban Montreal this week including Columbus center Pierre-Luc Dubois. (Tom Reed/The Athletic)

Dubois, who's gained 6 pounds since April, hasn't devoted this much time to offseason training since he began working with personal strength coach Sebastian Lagrange at age 16. His previous summer workouts were disrupted by development camps and world junior camps and draft preparations.

Lagrange said Dubois will finish the offseason with nearly 15 weeks of off-ice work. The second-year pro will return to Columbus with about 11 percent body fat.

The staff at Axxeleration — the gym is adjacent to the arena — breaks down training into three-week segments with a different emphasis on each period. Because Dubois has five years of strength-training experience, Lagrange said, trainers can contour his body and nervous system with advanced techniques.

The strength coach said one of the biggest misconceptions is that putting on weight hurts a hockey player's speed. Lagrange believes adding lean muscle supplies force to enhance it.

Dubois gained about 40 pounds from ages 16 to 18, the strength coach said. The Blue Jackets center won't need to bulk up any longer, however. Lagrange could see Dubois topping out around 225 pounds over the next few years.

The summer was not all about lifting weights and skating. Dubois rented a downtown apartment, where he spent part of the offseason watching video from his rookie year. He viewed some select regular-season games and sat through almost the entire first-round playoff series against the Capitals. The Blue Jackets were a Game 3 overtime goal away from taking a 3-0 series lead only to see Washington roar back to win in six games.

"It's never fun to watch your team lose, but it's good to look for things you could have done better," Dubois said. "I looked at mistakes I made and for the reasons I lost faceoffs. ... In the playoffs, everything is so tight. We played six games and four went to overtime. Every detail counts, every shift counts, every little mistake could lead to the game-winning goal.

"I remember making one mistake and the puck was in the back of our net five seconds later."

Without Dubois' midseason emergence, the Blue Jackets wouldn't have qualified for the postseason. He developed a terrific partnership with Artemi Panarin, the team's leading scorer and best player. The two were on the ice together for nearly 793 regular-season minutes at 5v5, according to NaturalStatTrick.com. Dubois earned more ice time with the dynamic winger than any other Blue Jacket.

So what happens to his game if Panarin is elsewhere at the start of the regular season? The biggest story of the Blue Jackets' offseason has been the uncertainty surrounding the Russian forward, who hasn't signed a contract extension and can become an unrestricted free agent next summer.



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Dubois said he's not spoken to Panarin since the end of last season.

"I try not to think about it too much," Dubois said of Panarin's situation. "I don't know what's going on in his mind and I don't know what's going on in Jarmo (Kekalainen's) mind and I don't know what's going on behind closed doors. So it's hard to have an opinion.

"Cam (Atkinson) and I were talking the other day and we love playing with him. Everyone on the team loves him as a person and a teammate. What he does on the ice speaks for itself. We'd love to have him for a long, long time."

As last season unfurled and Dubois' confidence grew, McCudden saw the big center starting to emulate a few of Panarin's moves. On Tuesday, the assistant coach was reminding him to extend his arms and make use of his reach advantage, especially around the net.

Although many focus on the youngster's size and fearlessness, McCudden said his skill set is developing nicely. The zip Dubois puts on his backhand passes, the assistant coach said, is similar to that of Joe Thornton.

"There's not going to be as much of a learning curve this year, but I'm coming to camp with the mindset that I need to get better," Dubois said. "I want to show I can continue to keep playing on the first line. There's still much to prove."

And there's more of Dubois to prove it.

The Athletic LOADED: 08.30.2018

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Sportsnet.ca / NHLers weigh in on video game culture, all that Fortnite rage

Luke Fox | @lukefoxjokebox August 29, 2018

"It's absolutely sweeping the nation." — Auston Matthews, on the dreaded Fortnite

That video games, particularly the current rage, Fortnite, are a popular time-killer for young people, including hockey players, is not news.

That playing Fortnite — or, more specifically, broadcasting your fondness for Epic Games' award-winning cooperative shooter-survival title — could harm your chances of landing an NHL gig is.

Go ahead and get a tattoo, just don't let it peek out from whatever you wear to that job interview.

"An OHL team employee tells me some players have been advised to scrub Fortnite references from social media accounts. Some NHL teams consider the video game a major distraction/obsession," sportswriter Rick Westhead tweeted Tuesday, to the tune of a thousand likes and twice that many debates.

Another hockey reporter, TVA's Renaud Lavoie, told Sportsnet 590 that he ran into an unnamed NHL general manager last week (not Montreal's Marc Bergevin, he specified) and the game came up.

"That GM told me it's an issue," Lavoie said on-air. "Before, the athletes were going to bars. Now, they're staying in hotel rooms or at home and playing video games for hours."

We've been reminded of Red Sox pitcher David Price's bout with controller-induced carpal tunnel syndrome.

DAVID PRICE — 2018

W-L ERA WHIP K/9 BB/9

With Fortnite: 2-4 5.11 1.41 7.8 3.9

Post Fortnite: 9-2 3.45 1.14 9.2 2.3

— Sean Grande (@SeanGrandePBP) August 6, 2018

And, of course, there was Jeff Marek's report this past spring on the 31 Thoughts podcast of an anonymous first-round draft pick whose video-game compulsion is so serious that his NHL future is now in doubt.

"Oh, it's definitely addictive," Erik Gudbranson said Wednesday at BioSteel Camp when we asked about the Canucks' video game culture. "A lot of the young guys are gamers, big time. They all play Fortnite, which doesn't come as a shock, for sure."

The 26-year-old defenceman said he used to invest some hours into Call of Duty back in the day, and still owns an Xbox, but crawled out of the rabbit hole unscathed.

"To be honest with you, these kids are too good with this game. I go on there and I get roasted. I get sick of it," Gudbranson said. "I'm more of a golfer. I like to go out there and get in the sun."

Jordan Subban is a 23-year-old prospect who's spent time in the Canucks, Los Angeles Kings, and now the Maple Leafs systems. Games like Fortnite, NHL and NBA 2K, he agrees, are a prominent way to soak up downtime.

"It's been pretty big. Even when I was in California last year with the sun all year round, a lot of guys still go home and play video games. I try to not play it as much, but it's hard," Subban said Wednesday.

"I just feel I can do more productive things with my time — try and read or something. Not too much video games, but I love it. I could play video games all day."

Subban says he's never been asked by a manager or coach to limit his gaming time, however.

"I don't think guys mind because it keeps guys at home," Subban reasons. "It keeps them out of the bars and stuff, so it's good."

All the most popular games among NHLers — Fortnite, Call of Duty, NHL, NBA 2K, FIFA — are team-oriented and strategic.

In Las Vegas, the Washington Capitals caved themselves in a hotel suite and duked it out on MarioKart before going out and hoisting a Stanley Cup.

The 2017-18 Maple Leafs, for instance, would hold regular group Fortnite sessions that strengthened team bonds.

"I've been playing a lot lately," Auston Matthews said mid-season. "Off days, I don't really leave my apartment too much, just because you want to relax, so I've been trying to get better every day in Fortnite, and it's been going pretty well."

Asked how he'd spend the hours between the morning skate and puck drop before April's Game 7 in Boston, Mitch Marner said, "Go home, eat, sit on my phone, probably look at Twitter, look at video games, watch people playin' Fortnite, to be honest.

"Just get my mind off hockey, not think about it at all."

Finnish f(r)iends Patrik Laine and Aleksander Barkov have not allowed their notorious gaming habit to interfere with their awesomeness on the ice. Both exploded with career years.

"I don't usually even have to shoot him a text," Laine told the Florida Sun-Sentinel last winter before a real-life Jets-Panthers game. "He's always online."

The NHL is purposely growing its relationship to the lucrative esports world, hosting its inaugural world championship this past June.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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As I type this article, a press release from the Arizona Coyotes EA Sports release party just popped up in my inbox. (After this, I will go pick up my seven-year-old from hockey camp; there's a 94 per cent change he'll floss between the rink and car, and the kid has never even played Fortnite.)

Heck, the Carolina Hurricanes even arranged a team-building field trip to Epic Games headquarters during development camp this summer:

Anaheim's Adam Henrique engaged in Call of Duty when he skated for OHL Windsor. He's OK with junior teams keeping an eye on just how much their players play.

"To see how much this has taken over, how much guys talk about it, how much they play it ... Everybody's doing the dances here. It's on social media. You almost can't get away from it," Henrique said on a Wednesday radio appearance.

"As a player, those are things you have to learn — that modesty is probably better, and you have to be careful how much you get stuck on those things. Next thing you know, you're gonna be up till 1 or 2 a.m. and you got a game the next day. That's always gotta be the first priority."

Yes, Fortnite is sweeping the nation, and gaming — like so many delicious vices out there — can absolutely be addictive. But it's dangerous to condemn something outright, or rush to label an activity problematic just because you don't understand it.

"Everybody has to do themselves, as long as they're ready to go come game day," Gudbranson says.

"Seven o'clock at night? It doesn't matter what you do home."

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Sportsnet.ca / Esports notebook: NHL wants 'grander things' with competitive gaming

Steven Loung | July 10, 2018

After dipping a toe in the space this past season, the NHL is looking to do bigger and better things within the realm of esports.

Speaking to ESPN's Arash Markazi, NHL commissioner Gary Bettman promised a much larger, more ambitious NHL esports plan is on the way.

A grand prize of \$50,000 was handed out to 18-year-old Finn Erik "Eki" Tammenpaa at the inaugural NHL Gaming World Championship held in Las Vegas in June.

In total, \$100,000 in prize money was handed out to the event's finalists, and particularly encouraging to the NHL, according to the ESPN report, the Twitch streaming numbers of the NHL's esports initiative matched and occasionally exceed that of the NBA and NFL.

"This was an incredible rollout," Bettman told Markazi. "But this is just the beginning of us doing bigger and grander things with esports."

The first "grander thing" is likely full six-on-six team competition similar to what's seen in the NBA's 2K League.

"In Year 1, we wanted to be prudent and approach this cautiously. We needed to test and learn, and we did that in a number of different scenarios from the content and promotion," NHL vice president of business development Chris Golier told ESPN.

"In Year 2, we're going to invite our clubs in. It's not going to be a full-blown league, but we're going to have teams participate in some way,

shape or form. We're going to have locally activated tournaments that will be part of the overall construct of the league. The clubs are excited."

Since the initial announcement of the league's foray into professional esports, the EA Sports NHL community have clamoured for the integration of the popular EA Sports Hockey League mode to be made the main mode in competition as it most closely simulates the real game and because team competitions have proven to be among the most popular in games like League of Legends and Counter-Strike.

Now the community may finally be getting its wish, with more support than ever from the NHL itself.

"We want to use esports to build more interest and a greater connectivity to our game through the hockey video game," said Bettman.

Here are a few other things of note from around the esports world:

Overwatch League Playoffs begin Wednesday

The Overwatch League playoffs kick off with a pair of quarter-final matchups. At 8:00 p.m. ET the Philadelphia Fusion will take on the Boston Uprising. The London Spitfire will face the Los Angeles Gladiators at 10:00 p.m..

In total, six of the league's 12 teams will be participating in the post-season. The league-best New York Excelsior and second-place Los Angeles Valiant both receive automatic byes to the semifinals.

Of note to Canadian fans, the playoffs will feature four Canucks: Lucas "NotE" Meissner playing for the Uprising, Joe "Joemeister" Gramano for the Fusion, Brady "Agilities" Girardi for the Valiant and Lane "Surefour" Roberts for the Gladiators.

With the opening match pitting Meissner's Uprising against Gramano's Fusion, it's become a point of pride for each young man.

"I think Canada has a lot of talent in Overwatch, which doesn't seem to be the case and a lot of other esports," Gramano told Sportsnet. "So the fact that I'm able to participate in the first playoffs of the inaugural season is pretty amazing."

Said Meissner: "It makes me feel proud that I've done so much from what you could consider a smaller country [in terms of participation in esports]."

The playoffs will run from to July 28, with the Grand Finals taking place at the Barclay's Center in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Team Canada announced for Overwatch World Cup

In other Overwatch news, the Canadian roster for the Overwatch World Cup has been announced.

Introducing our Canucks representing Team Canada at the @PlayOverwatch World Cup! #NorthStrong

Join our Discord Server at: <https://t.co/uJIBfcsZrpic>.
twitter.com/L34cW85uFB

— Team Canada OW \ (@TeamCanadaOW) July 5, 2018

All four Canadians participating in the OWL playoffs have been selected for the squad, which begins group play on Sept. 7 against Brazil.

Canada's been placed into the "United States" group where it will compete against the U.S., Brazil, Austria, Switzerland and Norway. The team will aim to finish within the group's top two to reach the event's final at BlizzCon in November.

Team Canada reached the final of last year's World Cup where they fell to South Korea.

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Sportsnet.ca / Report: Toronto Overwatch League franchise being finalized

Steven Loung | August 13, 2018

Esports is coming to Toronto in a major way.

Video game publisher Activision Blizzard is finalizing a deal to sell a Toronto franchise in the company's Overwatch League (OWL) to an ownership group led by Canadian entrepreneur Michael Kimel and multi-game esports organization Splyce, ESPN's Jacob Wolf is reporting.

The expansion slot will cost this ownership group approximately \$35 million, the Sports Business Journal reports.

According to Wolf, this Toronto ownership group will receive funding from Kimel and his family, including his real estate mogul uncle Ron, and Splyce investor OverActive Media Group, an apparently Toronto-based company focused on "excellence in esports ownership."

While pretty new to esports, Kimel is no stranger to the world of professional sports as he owns a minority stake in the Pittsburgh Penguins. Additionally, he's the co-founder of Toronto restaurant group Chase Hospitality Group.

Splyce is a multi-game professional esports organization that's currently backed, ironically if you're a fan of the Toronto Maple Leafs, by Boston Bruins owner Jeremy Jacobs' Delaware North hospitality company.

Splyce, as the ESPN report says, will own 10 per cent of this forthcoming Toronto-based OWL team, and will be at the helm of the operation.

Having just finished its inaugural season, the OWL, which originally consisted of 12 teams, is reportedly looking to expand to 18 for its second season, with two coming from the North American region.

The league has already confirmed Atlanta and Guangzhou, China as two teams joining the league, meaning Toronto would be the only other North American city to receive a franchise in this round of expansion.

The inaugural season of the OWL concluded on July 28, with the London Spitfire defeating the Philadelphia Fusion during the Grand Finals at a sold-out Barclays Center in Brooklyn.

There's been nothing official named about a Toronto team yet, but should these reports end up being true, fans can likely expect to see regulation play beginning in January. However, actually seeing the team play live and in-person may prove to be a little challenging as every team – including ones representing cities in China and South Korea – played in Los Angeles at Activision Blizzard's Blizzard Arena.

And this Toronto OWL club would, technically, be the second major pro Overwatch team in the city because OWL minor league Overwatch Contenders has the team Toronto Esports – affiliated to the Boston Uprising.

A Toronto-based OWL team is further evidence of Canada's push into the burgeoning space of esports with such highlights as Toronto hosting the 2016 North American League of Legends Championship Series summer finals, the Toronto Raptors' NBA 2K League team Raptors Uprising GC and the forthcoming The International 2018 DOTA 2 tournament that will take over Rogers Place in Vancouver from Aug. 20-25.

Next up for Overwatch-specific Canadian esports will be the Overwatch World Cup and Team Canada, which will be trying to qualify for the tournament's finals at BlizzCon in a September qualifier.

Overwatch is a popular first-person shooter video game from publisher/developer Activision Blizzard that pits a team of six against each other.

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Sportsnet.ca / Capitals' Brett Connolly says he won't visit White House

Luke Fox | August 29, 2018

TORONTO – If President Trump invites the Washington Capitals around the corner to pose for photographs with the Stanley Cup, don't expect full attendance.

Multiple members of the first D.C.-based pro championship team in 26 years have already decided they won't go.

"Personally, I don't think I'm going to go," forward Brett Connolly, who is white and Canadian, said Wednesday at BioSteel Camp in Toronto. "There's a few guys. It has nothing to do with politics."

"For me, I just don't think it's the right thing to do. Everyone is entitled to their opinion. I think there'll be a few guys not going, too. Like I said, it has nothing to do with politics. It's about what's right and wrong. And we'll leave it at that."

Fellow forward and training partner Devante Smith-Pelly, who is black and Canadian, announced back in June, prior to the Capitals Cup-clinching game, that he would pass on such an invite. He called Trump's words racist and sexist.

"I said what I said: I'm not going," Smith-Pelly reiterated this week. "I'm kinda tired of talking about it, to be honest.... I made my decision."

Going against the grain of protests in the NBA and NFL, the majority of the 2017 champion Pittsburgh Penguins did accept Trump's invitation last October.

Captain Sidney Crosby maintained the decision was not a political one, yet Trump called the multinational team "incredible patriots."

Trump announced he would not be inviting the Cleveland Cavaliers nor the Golden State Warriors prior to the conclusion of the 2018 NBA Finals.

"I think we'll have the Caps. We'll see. You know, my attitude is if they want to be here on the greatest place on Earth, I'm here. If they don't want to be here, I don't want them," Trump said in early June.

Capitals owner Ted Leonsis hosted a fundraiser for Democrat presidential candidate Hillary Clinton in 2016.

Several Capitals are already on record saying they would like to attend the White House. Captain Alex Ovechkin said he "can't wait."

Smith-Pelly explained there is no internal pressure from the Capitals office nor from his teammates either way.

"I think that's what a lot of people don't understand. They're not like, 'Maybe you should do it.' Not that they don't care, but they're like, 'Hey, do whatever you want,'" Smith-Pelly said.

"If some guys are like, 'We wanna go because we wanna see the White House, cool.' I'm not going to look at anyone differently because they want to see the White House. Me, personally, I don't want to go."

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Sportsnet.ca / Why the '76 Canucks were among the most mediocre NHL teams in history

Sonny Sachdeva | August 29, 2018,

As we count down the most impressive NHLers currently plying their trade in the big leagues, here's a change of pace to mull over — which collection of players would you guess put forth the most statistically mediocre campaign in league history?

The statistical gurus over at FiveThirtyEight crunched the numbers and came up with a few answers, pinning down the most average squads to do their thing in the NHL, as well as those in each of the other major sports.

As it turns out, the 1976 Vancouver Canucks — led by the likes of Dennis Ververgaert, Don Lever and Chris Oddleifson — rank as the most statistically average NHL team among all those measured by FiveThirtyEight's Neil Paine. Luckily, that doesn't encompass the entirety of the league's history — 1971 is as far back as detailed opponent stats are available for all four major sports, thus serving as the cutoff for the stats collected.

So, the '76 Canucks are only the most mediocre club to take the ice in the NHL in the past 47 years. Not bad, I guess.

Paine used four categories, each weighted differently, to work out his mediocrity algorithm: the highest-weighted was points differential (weighted at 10); followed by goal differential (8); goals per game, both for and against, versus the league's average (6); as well as shots per game and shooting percentage, both for and against, versus the league's average (4).

"The weights are somewhat arbitrary," Paine wrote. "But hopefully they make sense: A record close to .500 is the essence of average-ness — and worthy of the strongest weight — but we can also give bonus points for being average at every level as we dig deeper into a team's statistical portfolio."

So, which clubs rounded out the list of the most average teams to compete over the past half-century of NHL action?

The '76 Canucks, who posted a 33-32 record with 15 ties, and scored just one fewer goal than they allowed, only narrowly beat out the 2008 Nashville Predators, who came up with a 41-32-9 record, scoring three more goals than they allowed.

Here were the rest of Paine's top 10 average squads (with their records in brackets) — three 2000-era clubs managed to crack the list, while the Canucks and Red Wings each featured twice, Vancouver's '83 squad breaking through as just average enough, too:

1. 1976 Vancouver Canucks (33-32-15)
2. 2008 Nashville Predators (41-32-9)
3. 1997 Phoenix Coyotes (38-37-7)
4. 1975 St. Louis Blues (35-31-14)
5. 2009 Anaheim Ducks (42-33-7)
6. 1979 Los Angeles Kings (34-34-12)
7. 2014 Detroit Red Wings (39-28-15)
8. 1989 Hartford Whalers (37-38-5)
9. 1983 Vancouver Canucks (30-35-15)
10. 1978 Detroit Red Wings (32-34-14)

As for professional sports' current landscape of mediocrity, Paine found the Pittsburgh Pirates to be the most statistically average club as of this moment.

Elsewhere, the New Jersey Devils ranked as the most currently mediocre team in the NHL, while the Washington Wizards earned that distinction in the NBA and the Seattle Seahawks did so in the NFL.

Long-term, though, it's another NHL club taking the very average cake over the rest of the professional leagues — but rest easy, Vancouver, this one goes to the Broad Street Bullies.

Landing between 39 and 42 wins in four of their past five seasons, the Philadelphia Flyers earned a not-so-glorious distinction from Paine for their past half-decade of work.

"According to our algorithm, no team in major pro sports has been more consistently mediocre over the past five seasons than the Flyers," he wrote.

Canada did manage to crack the average-ness rankings in one other category, courtesy of the 2001 Toronto Blue Jays — the same team that, interestingly enough, featured the six-game home run streak by Jose Cruz Jr. that was just recently surpassed by present-day Jay Kencys Morales.

Though that group had Cruz's notable streak in the fold, the 2001 Jays ranked as the ninth-most mediocre MLB team in nearly five decades, according to Paine — not the most illustrious distinction, but perhaps a welcome sight given the 2018 squad currently sits 12 games below .500.

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Sportsnet.ca / Fatherhood has matured ever-thoughtful Travis Hamonic even further

Eric Francis | @EricFrancis August 29, 2018

It has been a dramatic, emotional summer of change for Travis Hamonic.

Oh sure, the trading of Dougie Hamilton re-shuffled the Calgary Flames blue line pairings, landing him with newbie Noah Hanifin moving forward.

But for those who know anything about the 28-year-old product of a Manitoba farm, he's defined by so much more than the game he plays.

In the spring he became a father.

And life as he knew it turned on May 2 in a fashion far more dramatic than he ever thought possible.

"It changed my life 100 per cent," said Hamonic.

"My biggest fear in life is to not be there to walk Charlie down the aisle. That little girl is my life. To not be there to watch her graduate, and not be there to watch her have kids ... it makes me emotional to talk about because I went through it. What I went through as a young man without my father makes me scared to not be there for her."

A weekly deep dive into the biggest hockey news in the world with hosts Elliotte Friedman and Jeff Marek. New episodes every Thursday.

Hamonic's life has been shaped, in large part, by the fatal heart attack his father suffered when Hamonic was just 10 years old. As part of his journey of healing he runs a program that sees him host and counsel young children who have lost a parent after every home game.



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He also started a program this year called the Northern Project that saw the Metis native and wife Stephanie fly in indigenous children from remote Canadian territories for a game and an all-expenses paid weekend in Calgary.

So inspired by his summer of diaper changes and sleep deprivation, he was motivated to start another goodwill program that will soon be unveiled, making him a natural to eventually win the Muhammad Ali Sports Humanitarian Award Mark Giordano won last summer.

"I've only been a parent for four months but when you become a parent you're living for someone else completely – my outlook is to appreciate all the moments I have with her," said Hamonic while standing in the midst of fans celebrating Humboldt Hockey Day late last week.

"Coming to something like this as a parent now I could never fathom what some of these parents had to go through. It's here you really realize how fragile life is.

"By far the best thing I'll ever do in my life, is be Charlie's dad. It's been the highlight of my summer and the highlight of my life."

Clearly a man of tremendous emotion, passion and drive, Hamonic has channeled it all in a way you wish every athlete would.

In uniform, he's the ultimate team player.

Off the ice he's the ultimate humanitarian, earning him last season's award in honour of late Flames owner Ralph T. Scurfield, presented to the Flame combining determination, perseverance and leadership with community service.

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

A previous winner of the NHL's Foundation Players Award based on similar values, Hamonic is showing no sign of abating his desire to use his time as a player to make a difference.

To leave a legacy.

He humbly suggests his inspiration is drawn from the strength and compassion of others, like those who've wrapped their arms around Humboldt.

"It just shows you how good people can be and it makes you want to do more," said Hamonic, who lives in Calgary year-round and made the recent trip one hour east of Saskatoon with teammates Mark Jankowski and Brett Kulak.

"When you see people chipping in and doing their part it's contagious. You want to be here and it's great to see the (19) current and former players here. I'm honoured, truthfully.

"To see the impact you can have with young kids – the way they smile and light up, it's something that makes you feel young again."

The lessons Hamonic said he's learned from tragedies like his father's death, the Humboldt bus crash and the sad situations he deals with alongside youngsters after every game, is that when times are good they need to be cherished.

"What I've learned is when you're happy, be happy," said the longtime Islanders blueliner.

"When you have an opportunity to smile and enjoy yourself and laugh you need those opportunities because they don't come along all the time. With grief there's a lot of time when it doesn't. Events like this make you happy to see the good in people."

Although never one to post big numbers from the back end, Hamonic came under fire last year when his second pairing alongside T.J. Brodie struggled to find chemistry.

Given how pricey it was to land Hamonic (a first-rounder in 2018 and two seconds), fans expected much more from the native of St. Malo, Man. It

puts increasing pressure on him to perform with Hanifin now that Brodie will start the season on the first pairing with Giordano.

"I've never met Noah but we've texted and talked on the phone and he seems like a great kid," said Hamonic who had one goal, 11 points and was minus-9 last year.

"I know him as a hockey player and he's obviously a tremendous talent. I played against him for a couple years in New York and thought he was a hell of a player. He skates so smooth and has a head for the game. He's big and he's only 21 years old. I'm excited."

Given the Flames' moves to add depth up front and up the compete level, expectations are so high The Hockey News predicted the Flames would win the Pacific Division and make it to the West final.

"We have a group that didn't make it (to the playoffs) last year – the message is understandably that we have to be better, to a man and as a team. The challenge is there – it's on us to be better. I think we have the group to do it."

Given his life path and his character, there's no fear of failure.

"I didn't really have any fears before becoming a dad," he said.

"Faith is a huge part of my life and I'm a firm believer everyone has a plan. But just to know how hard it was for me to grow up. I had the best mom in the world, but still, being a teenager without a dad was hard.

"I never want to see my daughter have to go through that."

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Sportsnet.ca / Flyers' Simmonds on final year of contract: 'Whatever happens, happens'

Mike Johnston | @MikeyJ_MMA August 29, 2018, 2:20 PM

When you hear of all the injuries Wayne Simmonds played through one season ago, it's no wonder his numbers took a slight dip.

As he enters a contract year, the 30-year-old is looking to show the hockey world last season's modest output was an anomaly.

"It was an unfortunate year for me," Simmonds told The Starting Lineup on Sportsnet 590 Wednesday. "I battled through and I think that's the mind of a hockey player. If you can put on your skates you're going to contribute in some sort of way for the team. I'm just looking to get 100 per cent, contribute and be a better player than I was last year because usually I am a much better player than I was and I'm going to show that this year."

Simmonds, despite admitting he only felt great in seven or eight games all year, still finished the season with 24 goals and 46 points — his worst goal and point totals since the shortened 2012-13 season — while averaging 18:05 of ice time per game.

"It's frustrating but at the same time you gotta do what you gotta do and I thought I could help my team in different types of ways and that's what I tried to do," Simmonds explained. "It's definitely frustrating when you think you should be doing something and you could be doing it better. It's just the way it was. I think everyone, at some point in their career, goes through years like that so I'm definitely not the only guy to have done it. That's for sure."

Simmonds gave a synopsis of his injury woes to reporters in April after his Flyers were eliminated from the post-season. The Scarborough, Ont., native explained that he entered training camp with a torn pelvis then



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pulled his groin on Oct. 17 while compensating for his pelvic ailment. Two days later on Oct. 19 is when he lost some chiclets thanks to a Mattias Ekholm high stick. Later that month he broke his ankle when hit with a Shayne Gostisbehere shot.

Believe it or not, though, Simmonds didn't miss any time until February when he tore a ligament in his right thumb and wasn't able to grip his stick.

"It's pretty crazy," his Flyers teammate Sean Couturier said following the season. "We all knew he was hurt, but he's a guy who lays it all out there every night and gives his all. He'll do whatever he can for his teammates."

Simmonds, with his \$3.975-million annual salary cap hit, has been on one of the most team-friendly deals in the league for the past five seasons. In his first four years of the deal, prior to his 2017-18 dip in production, he was averaging 30 goals, 56 points and 110.25 penalty minutes per season.

Only 14 players have scored more goals than Simmonds since his current deal kicked in in 2013 and in theory he should be due a significant raise — especially if he can regain his 30-goal form.

The Flyers don't have a tremendous amount of cap space, and with Ivan Provorov and Travis Konecny among the team's pending RFAs in need of new contracts before 2019-20 it could become a difficult task to lock Simmonds up long-term.

A June report even suggested the Flyers were gearing up to potentially trade Simmonds.

"Whatever happens, happens," Simmonds said in regards to entering the final year of his deal. "That's the way I look at it. I'm just going to come in and play the way I play the game and everything will be fine for me."

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TSN.CA / McElhinney ready for crease competition

Kristen Shilton

Curtis McElhinney hasn't made a habit out of getting to his team's summer skates early. But with three goalies projected to vie for one job as the Maple Leafs backup this season, it couldn't hurt to be overly punctual this August.

It's already been a few weeks since the journeyman backup returned from his off-season home in Colorado, taking full advantage of increased reps ahead of what could be a heated roster battle at training camp. While Frederik Andersen is entrenched as the Leafs' starter, McElhinney's position behind him will be tested by Garret Sparks, the reigning American Hockey League goalie of the year, and former NHL starter Calvin Pickard.

"Really it's the same situation for me every year," McElhinney said between on-ice sessions at MasterCard Centre on Wednesday. "Those two guys are knocking on the door. One of them [Pickard] has played a lot of [NHL] games and Sparks has played a few, so it's just the reality of the situation right now."

Taking nothing for granted has propelled McElhinney's professional life. Since 2005, the 35-year-old has played for six NHL teams (plus four AHL clubs) over 186 games, with his longest tenure clocking in at three-and-a-half years with the Columbus Blue Jackets.

Columbus put McElhinney on waivers in January of 2017 and the Leafs pounced. He's been an exceptionally good fit in Toronto ever since. While Andersen carried the lion's share of work with 64 starts last season, McElhinney played in 18 games and posted a career-best .934 save percentage, also the best save percentage in the NHL among goalies with at least 10 starts.

Leafs' head coach Mike Babcock has clearly preferred McElhinney as Andersen's reliever over other options before. But even the most reliable backup goalie can't rest easy on favour earned in the past.

"You just have to get used to it. [Young guys] need their shot and want to move things along," McElhinney said. "Obviously there's a comfort level with the team now. But as a backup — and a career backup at that — it's hard to stay anywhere for any length of time, just based on the situation within the organization."

Toronto's depth at the minor-league level hasn't been this good in years. Sparks (as the starter) and Pickard backstopped the Marlies to the franchise's first Calder Cup championship in June, and before that playoff run began Sparks won the Aldege "Baz" Bastien Memorial Award as the AHL's top regular-season goaltender (.936 save percentage, 1.79 goals-against average).

McElhinney wasn't oblivious to Sparks' success during the Leafs' season, and kept periodically in touch with the 25-year-old during the playoffs. But when training camp begins again, their relationship will inevitably shift.

"I don't know if we'll have a lot of conversations now," McElhinney said with a laugh. "We'll [make some] small talk, but once we hit the ice, it's all business. I like him a lot. I think he's a great kid. He's worked hard and done everything he can at the American League level."

In the past, Sparks has cleared waivers after training camp and been re-assigned to the Marlies. But it seems unlikely that Sparks' combined youth and recent success would allow for that this year, and Pickard could be a hot waivers commodity as well. That and a slew of other factors might create a complicated goalie situation with McElhinney right in the middle.

In the meantime, McElhinney can lean on something Sparks and Pickard can't — a wealth of experience winning NHL jobs.

"Mentally he's really strong. He's always been in different situations but he's a true pro who can handle it," said Leafs' goalie prospect Kasimir Kaskisuo. "I was paired with him at last year's training camp. I followed him around learning the ropes. He's just a calm guy, always under control. He gave me a lot of good little tips."

At the moment, McElhinney is looking for a few tips of his own. After Wednesday's team scrimmage, he went back on the ice for a one-on-one session with the Marlies' newly hired goaltending assistant Jon Elkin. With none of his fellow goaltenders around regularly, McElhinney was happy for the chance to hone in on a few details and keep sharpening his edge.

"It's tough, you come back and just skate with the guys and it's all 3-on-3 and shooting drills so it's not an ideal goalie situation in the summer," McElhinney said. "[Last season] I found a stability on my skates I'd been looking for, made a couple minor tweaks with my skates and things have just taken off."

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USA TODAY / Brett Connolly won't attend White House visit if President Trump invites Capitals



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Kevin Allen, Aug. 29, 2018

Forward Brett Connolly, a Canadian, has indicated he will be the second member of the Washington Capitals to decline an invitation to the White House if the team is invited to celebrate their Stanley Cup championship.

"For me, I just don't think it's the right thing to do," Connolly said at BioSteel Camp in Toronto, according to Sportsnet.ca. Everyone is entitled to their opinion. I think there'll be a few guys not going, too. Like I said, it has nothing to do with politics. It's about what's right and wrong. And we'll leave it at that."

Forward Devante Smith-Pelly, one of the NHL's few black players, had previously said he would not attend if the Capitals were invited, calling Trump's comments "straight-up racist and sexist."

The 2017 Stanley Cup champion Pittsburgh Penguins all attended the trip last year, though Trump canceled it for the Super Bowl LII champion Philadelphia Eagles and uninvited the 2017 champion Golden State Warriors after several said they wouldn't go anyway.

Protesting this event didn't start in the Trump White House. In 2012, Boston Bruins goalie Tim Thomas chose to skip the event when Barack Obama was in office. He said he didn't vote for Obama and disagreed with him on almost every social and economic issue.

The Capitals beat the Vegas Golden Knights in five games to capture their first Stanley Cup.

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