



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • September 28, 2020

## THE ATHLETIC

### Who could be the next goalie to help the Hurricanes lift the Stanley Cup?

By Sara Civian

Sep 25, 2020

We concluded recently that if the Hurricanes are to make any big changes in this unusual free agency period, they'll probably revolve around goaltending. This conclusion was equal parts common sense — the Canes could use a top-end goalie to round out their top-end roster — and speculation based on what the insiders are saying.

Talk has been heating up ever since. Pierre LeBrun reported last week that the Hurricanes are fielding many calls about James Reimer, hot off his \$2.25 million signing bonus. Reimer's cap hit is still \$3.4 million next season (the last year on his contract), but after the bonus it's only \$850,000 salary on the books. You'll remember Reimer had a possibly better-than-expected season with the Canes, and a goalie making \$850,000 with a .914 save percentage and 2.66 goals-against average in 25 regular season games will spark some interest in teams worried about the pandemic's impact on future finances.

LeBrun also reported the Canes are getting calls on Petr Mrazek. Sources confirm they're willing to deal either Reimer or Mrazek for the right return (translation: a legit No. 1 goalie). What could that return look like? Not only are the aforementioned trades on the table, but the free agent goalie market is thriving this year. Widespread financial uncertainty begets some potentially unheard of front office creativity as well.

I am looking forward to all the loopholes and unprecedentedness this free agency period could hold. We could all use the drama. But for the sake of our brains, let's attempt to organize the moves the Hurricanes could make in net.

#### Trade targets

Darcy Kuemper

Age: 30

Contract: \$4.5 million AAV through 2022

LeBrun threw Kuemper's name out as one of many Hurricanes targets, and I completely agree with his logic.

"... Here's what's so interesting about that in my mind," he wrote. "Can you think of a team that's in more dire need of cheaper players than Arizona? Word out of the desert is ownership wants to cut payroll in a serious manner. You're not getting Kuemper for Reimer straight up. But if the Canes

add in another asset to the deal, it makes you wonder if there's not a fit there for Arizona."

LeBrun is right; let's not downplay Kuemper and expect a one-for-one trade, here. He was top 10 in the league in both save percentage and goals-against average last season. He's a consistent .918 save percentage spanning his eight-year NHL career, and most recently he's got a .923 save percentage and a 2.39 GAA in 94 games with the Coyotes. He'd be an upgrade for the Hurricanes in a reasonably affordable way, especially if they can keep Mrazek. The Canes have enough assets and eight picks in the upcoming draft to work with. Craig Custance reported that the Coyotes' ask for Kuemper is currently a first-round pick.

Marc-Andre Fleury

Age: 35 (36 on Nov. 28)

Contract: \$7 million AAV through 2022

If life were a fairy tale, what would make more sense than league favorite Marc-Andre Fleury finishing off his prime years in Carolina with the so-called Bunch of Jerks in their Cup window? Well, maybe a reunion with Pittsburgh. But you can't deny Fleury would be a great fit on a Hurricanes team that revolves around culture.

Sources around the league are not quick to dismiss a Fleury-to-the-Canes trade.

Jesse Granger reported that Fleury isn't asking for a trade despite spending most of the playoffs on the bench. But it looks like the Golden Knights plan to sign Robin Lehner long term and it doesn't make sense for a proven No. 1 goalie to sit on Vegas' bench for \$7 million a year if that's the case. Granger's story emphasizes that Fleury isn't the one initiating trade discussions; still he's aware the discussions are happening and that ultimately it's up to the front office. His hallmark good attitude shone through when he told Granger he wouldn't mind working in a rotation with Lehner if they both stayed in Vegas, but let's be real: he's still way too good to play backup even if he doesn't mind it. A team like the Canes should take advantage of a veteran goalie with a potential chip on his shoulder, especially on a short-term contract.

A trade for Fleury would probably get interesting — a potential third party to shed some contracts, random assets tossed in, etc. But if both sides could make this work I see it as a win-win.

Matt Murray

Age: 26

Contract: Restricted free agent



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In such a robust goalie market, Murray to the Canes seems like one of the least likely and/or favorable options. He had a weak 2019-20 amounting in a .899 save percentage and was benched before a postseason elimination game. There's a reason the Penguins are likely opting to trade Cup-winner Murray over Tristan Jarry, who posted a .921 save percentage behind the same team.

At the same time, this was decidedly Murray's worst season in the NHL and he's proved himself on the biggest stage twice. It's not fair to completely reduce him to last season's numbers. Josh Yohe believes Murray's return will be in the second-round pick-and-a-prospect realm. A relatively low ask with a projected \$5 million or under AAV makes taking a risk on Murray more palatable.

All that said, I doubt GMJR wants to deal Murray to a contender in the same division.

## Free agent targets

Shedding either Mrazek or Reimer would result in about \$3 million in cap space on top of the projected \$7.7 or so million the Canes will have to play with. It's most likely that happens in a trade with a valuable return in net. But you never know what could happen, especially in a free agency period that'll be extra creative. What if the Canes trade Mrazek, Reimer and/or whoever else to unload a bunch of cap space and go for someone in free agency?

Full disclosure: Don't get your hopes up about this. Front offices aren't exactly champing at the bit to take on big contracts, and you'll remember the Hurricanes want to save as much money as they can with Andrei Svechnikov and Dougie Hamilton's contract negotiations looming.

So we won't take the idea of a free agency acquisition nearly as seriously as the chance of a trade, but what's out there that makes sense for the Canes. You know, just in case?

## Jacob Markstrom

Age: 30

2019-20 cap hit: \$3.67 million

Markstrom will be looking for a raise. He's arguably the best goalie available and was top five in the league last season. His biggest knock is that he only became a starter three years ago, but you can't blame him for that. There's also a pretty good chance the Canucks will re-sign him, as detailed by our friends at The Athletic Vancouver.

"Letting Markstrom, labelled by Jim Benning as the team's MVP, walk would mean incurring significant risk for a

potential step back next season," they wrote. "That's quite simply something the Canucks can't afford at this stage. To this point, negotiations haven't been smooth between the two camps, but Benning reiterated that re-signing Markstrom is a top priority."

It's not just Markstrom. I've been hearing around the league lately that negotiations generally haven't been or aren't going to be the smoothest in the current state of our world and league comparison contracts will be extra important.

## Robin Lehner

Age: 29

2019-20 cap hit: \$5 million

Lehner's been an awesome story on and off the ice these past few seasons. According to sources, the Canes checked in with the Blackhawks regarding his availability after both Mrazek and Reimer went down that fateful night in Toronto. But Mrazek's injury proved less serious than initially assumed and the Canes rode it out.

Regardless, the Golden Knights reportedly plan to sign Lehner to a long-term contract. Even if he'd be a solid fit on the Canes, there's no point in thinking about it too hard.

## Braden Holtby

Age: 31

2019-20 cap hit: \$6.1 million

All right folks, bear with me.

It's not like Holtby needs much of a pitch regarding the potential of this Canes group — he had a front row seat to that first-round, seven-game battle in 2018-19. It really depends what Holtby is seeking out of his next contract.

Term? Maybe not the best option for him or the Hurricanes.

One more Cup? Why not at least consider it?

The robust goalie market with the financial uncertainty surrounding the pandemic means some contracts might surprise you. If the Canes could possibly convince Holtby to sign a contract comparable to his current \$6 million AAV, it's something they should at least consider. Granted, Holtby shouldn't be considered a no-brainer at that price. He's coming off one of his worst seasons with a 25-14-6 record in 48 games, amounting to the worst goals-against average (3.11) and save percentage (.897) of his NHL career. He was 2-5-1 with a 2.49 goals-against average and .906 save percentage in eight postseason starts.

## What are the Hurricanes' options in the NHL Draft at No. 13?

By Sara Civian Sep 22, 2020

The Athletic's very own prospect whisperer Corey Pronman said it himself upon our annual mock draft last week: You'll want to see what the Hurricanes do with their No. 13 pick.

"There's a lot of eyes in the industry on Carolina's pick at No. 13. Their owner Tom Dundon said they won't draft defensemen in the first round, but what about a goalie?," Pronman posed. "(Yaroslav) Askarov would make a lot of sense on talent and fit for the depth chart. Will they pull that



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trigger if he's there? Minnesota and Carolina are the two most interesting teams to watch in the upper half of the first round in terms of how they approach the draft."

If Askarov is there, I bet they go for it. If not, there will probably still be some options that make sense for the Hurricanes available. I picked my favorites then consulted The Athletic's other prospect whisperer Scott Wheeler and an Eastern Conference scout about my picks. Let's get into it.

Yaroslav Askarov, G, SKA-VHL

June 16, 2002 | 6-foot-3 | 176 pounds

The Hurricanes are in a unique situation right now, in a potential contending window with two NHL goalies on short-term deals. Logic says they'll either stick with the Petr Mrazek/James Reimer tandem or make a trade for an upgrade in net. Both Mrazek and Reimer (fresh off his \$2.25 million signing bonus) are fielding interest as potential trade bait. And the Canes are listening. Pierre LeBrun reported Thursday that Arizona's Darcy Kuemper is "among the many targets" – I tossed a few more out. In their recent history at least, the Canes have opted for lower-risk, lower-reward with their goalie selections and contracts. If they trade for a big name, there's a pretty good chance he'll be on the middle-to-end of his contract.

The Canes once thought they had their future starting goalie in Alex Nedeljkovic, and although no one's totally ruling that out, the 24-year-old has been just decent overall in the chances the Canes have given him at the NHL level. The Canes showed no fear in drafting Pyotr Kochetkov at No. 36 last year, so the taboo notion of drafting goalies high doesn't seem to faze them.

So should they go for Askarov, the draft's top goalie?

Corey Pronman has Askarov at No. 8 in this year's draft class, also stating Askarov is one of the best goalie prospects he's seen as a first-year draft-eligible. His extensive scouting report on Askarov shows why. TSN's Bob McKenzie has Askarov at No. 11 in his final rankings.

Askarov maintained around a .920 save percentage the past two seasons in the MHL and VHL, holding his own against older opponents. Therefore, the combination of NHL teams being hesitant to draft goalies too high (which is valid, it's a risk), and only certain teams ahead of the Canes needing a goalie could mean that Askarov drops out of the top 10.

You take a look at the Hurricanes' prospect pool full of promising skaters and young, emerging stars at the NHL level and using a high pick on a super enticing goalie seems like less of a gamble. Three NHL scouts told Sunaya Sapurji they believe Askarov will be going at No. 13, which doesn't seem coincidental.

Non-Hurricanes Eastern Conference scout said: "I'd love to have that kid. You might be set for the decade."

Wheeler: I think Askarov's the best-case scenario for the Canes. There are a couple of other teams that feel like they could be potential landing spots for him at the top of the draft, including the Wild at No. 9 and the Oilers with the pick after the Canes. And while in most years, I'd usually argue against taking the plunge on a goalie in the first half of the first round (which I did, maybe wrongly, with Spencer Knight a year ago), Askarov is special. The only way I would think twice in taking him at No. 13 is if one of the star-level forward prospects like Marco Rossi or Anton Lundell were to fall, which seems unlikely. Askarov's a bit of a quirky goalie prospect, but his athleticism and reflexes are off the charts, which gives him starter potential."

Jack Quinn, RW, Ottawa-OHL

Sept. 19, 2001 | six-foot | 176 pounds

OHL product Quinn has the type of skill potential that the Canes were clearly comfortable going for in last year's draft. He scored 52 goals and posted 89 points in 62 games on the top CHL team last season. He's known for his creativity and intelligence on the ice. NHL scouts seem to take him pretty seriously and Pronman to move Quinn up from No. 21 to No. 15 in his June draft rankings – don't take that lightly. McKenzie's got Quinn at No. 10.

He's also got a feel-good story.

Wheeler: If Askarov and the big names are gone, Quinn fits into that next tier where he's a natural fit in the Canes' 10-20 range. I think there's a chance he goes a pick or two earlier, but it could go either direction. His ability to score from mid-range and to find soft pockets of space in the offensive zone is pretty unique in this draft, and his game with and without the puck have both progressed to A-level qualities – or close.

Seth Jarvis, C, Portland-WHL

Feb. 1, 2002 | 5-foot-10 | 175 pounds

Jarvis was the second-leading scorer in the WHL last season with 42 goals and 98 points in 58 games. He's fast with an all-around solid game. It's rare Pronman is so confident about speed translating well to the NHL, but he describes Jarvis as a player with "legit NHL speed and very good edges. ... The high-end pace of his game is what makes him so dangerous and will translate to the higher levels." Pronman has Jarvis at No. 12 in his rankings, while McKenzie has Jarvis at No. 18.

The experts rave about his skill and hands to the extent that I will now urge you to watch a YouTube highlights compilation.

The Hurricanes weren't scared to go for 5-foot-7 defenseman Domenick Fensore in the third round last year, for one recent example of size not mattering to them. But in the first round?

Wheeler: If you want entertainment value, Jarvis is the guy in that range. He's also the exact kind of player the Canes have targeted at the draft in recent memory, so I'm confident his size won't be a deterrent for them. The Canes have, in my



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opinion, drafted as well as any team in the NHL of late and Jarvis' blend of skill, pace and flair fit the mold.

Rodion Amirov, LW, Ufa-KHL

Oct. 2, 2001 |/ six-foot | 167 pounds

Pronman's most telling blurb about Amirov, who he has at No. 16?: "He flashes high-end playmaking and shooting ability, but neither consistently. His game is more about his pure skill and driving play forward with a ton of clean entries."

McKenzie has the winger, who spent last season floating around the three major Russian leagues, at No. 19. Most of the experts project him as a potential top-six forward, but he needs to work on his speed. He doesn't project quite as highly as any of the aforementioned players, but I wanted to keep him in here because of how passionate the scout was about his potential.

Non-Hurricanes Eastern Conference scout: "I love him. I think he's such a good two-way winger. Incredible skater. I think he has much more skill than people give him credit for. It might take him a little bit but he could be great ...just my personal opinion."

Wheeler: Amirov probably wouldn't be one of my two or three preferred targets for 13th if I'm the Canes, but he also wouldn't be a reach. He belongs in the teens in this draft and his versatility is a major asset. Plus he has looked good since the restart in both the second-tier VHL and limited usage in the KHL, which doesn't hurt his case.

A trade?

Can't wait to see these happen via Zoom.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.23.2020

## THE NEWS & OBSERVER

### Hurricanes not expecting Justin Williams back, but still waiting to hear for sure

BY LUKE DECOCK

The Canes' Justin Williams (14) can't get the puck past the Rangers' Henrik Lundqvist (30) and John Gilmour (58) during the first period. The Rangers beat the Canes 2-1..

Two weeks away from the (belated) opening of NHL free agency, the Carolina Hurricanes are once again waiting on a decision from Justin Williams, and it doesn't appear to be forthcoming anytime soon.

The Hurricanes are leaving the door open for Williams but moving forward as if their former captain will retire, a year after he took the first few months of the season off before joining the team in January.

Williams turns 39 next week but was still effective both on the ice, where he had 12 points in 27 regular-season and playoff games this spring, and in the dressing room, where his presence played a stabilizing role after his return.

Waddell said the Hurricanes aren't expecting Williams back and are planning accordingly, but they aren't ruling it out, either.

"It's almost the same as last year," Hurricanes general manager Don Waddell said. "You tell us what you're going to do and when you're going to do it."

But Williams' agent, Thane Campbell, said this week there is no timetable for a decision.

"I haven't gone through that with Justin," Campbell said. "I'm leaving him alone right now."

Either way, Campbell said not to expect a decision by the start of free agency.

"He'll take as long as he can," Campbell said. "I'll talk to him at some point."

Efforts to reach Williams for comment were unsuccessful.

The NHL free-agent market opens October 9, just after the October 6-7 draft. The Hurricanes pick 13th and may have to decide whether to take the top-ranked goalie in the draft, Russian prospect Iaroslav Askarov.

Using a first-round pick on a goalie is a high-risk-high-reward move, but it's also a position of need for the Hurricanes, who have 24-year-old Alex Nedeljkovic in the AHL and 21-year-old Pyotr Kochetkov, a second-round pick last year, in the pipeline. The Hurricanes are high on Kochetkov but he's playing sparingly in Russia.

Askarov, meanwhile, is considered by some to be the best goalie prospect in more than a decade.

"We've talked about it and talked about it," Waddell said. "We talked about it this morning with our scouts. We've got three or four guys in that range. Everybody says there's nine or 10 guys in this draft and they're going to go in the top 10 and they'll probably all be gone. If any of our top 10 guys fell to us then I would say that's the direction we'd probably go. If not, this is where we have another meeting scheduled next week.

"We would not be opposed to taking the goalie at 13. It depends who else is available. If you're picking in that top



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nine or 10, it's probably a bigger risk because there are so many good players there. As you start to slide further in the first round, it's probably a pretty good gamble."

With the trade of impending free agent Joel Edmundson's rights to the Montreal Canadiens for a fifth-round pick, good business for a player the Hurricanes had decided not to resign, the Hurricanes have four unrestricted free agents who will hit the open market — Williams, defensemen Sami Vatanen and Trevor van Riemsdyk and goalie Anton Forsberg — and two restricted free agents, Warren Foegele and Hadyn Fleury.

The Hurricanes will make qualifying offers to both Foegele and Fleury to retain their rights. Foegele's qualifying offer is \$735,000 and Fleury's is \$892,500, but both players have arbitration rights and the Hurricanes will discuss longer-term deals with them to avoid that process. Last year, the team agreed to a \$2.1 million annual salary with Brock McGinn to

avoid arbitration — a 233 percent raise — and Forsberg was given an NHL-only contract by an arbitrator but spent all but three games of the season in the AHL.

If the Hurricanes can get Fleury and Foegele signed and assuming Jake Bean fills a roster spot, the Hurricanes would potentially have about \$3 million in cap space to upgrade through a cheap free agent or, more likely, a trade that adds salary.

"This is going to be an interesting year to see how this plays out," Waddell said. "I think there's going to be a lot of shorter-term deals. It's not a great crop of free agents. I think there will be a lot of shorter deals. I don't know how much money's going to be in the market for a lot of these guys."

## End of an era: Hurricanes give Maniscalco permanent TV job, cut ties with Forslund

BY LUKE DECOCK

SEPTEMBER 24, 2020 03:43 PM

It's OK to be happy for Mike Maniscalco, whose solid work in the playoffs on Fox Sports Carolinas earned him the full-time job.

It's also OK to be furious about how summarily John Forslund was disposed of, a master of the art at the top of his game and one of the Carolina Hurricanes' longest-serving employees, currently enbubbled in Edmonton where he's working for NBC Sports.

The Carolina Hurricanes have decided on Maniscalco as their play-by-play announcer, and while that isn't officially official quite yet as of Thursday afternoon — a few parties still have to sign off, among other minutia — but the famously open door for Forslund's potential return is now closed.

It's Maniscalco's booth alongside Tripp Tracy going forward, and presumably Abby Labar's host desk as well, after her playoff audition went equally well.

It's also the end of an era. An era that spans the entire history of the Hurricanes in North Carolina and beyond. Two years after Hall of Fame radio broadcaster Chuck Kaiton was shown the door, the Hurricanes' desultory contract offer to Forslund this summer left him in the uncomfortable position of being both unable and unwilling to accept, with no closure or valediction of any kind for a true professional. With no movement from the Hurricanes, he was left dangling for three months.

That's what makes this so difficult: Celebrating Maniscalco's elevation almost feels in conflict with lamenting Forslund's departure.

It's a conundrum that goes hand in hand with admiring how Tom Dundon has turned over the roster and pushed the Hurricanes to the edge of the salary cap — resulting in the first back-to-back playoff appearances in two decades — while also shunting aside two legendary broadcasters amid constant personnel churn that has extended to the front office and even the coaching staff.

That's the Dundon Doctrine, clear as crystal at this point: the money goes to the players on the ice. Everything and everyone else is a replaceable part.

It's hard to believe someone as talented and distinguished and beloved as Forslund would ever fall into that second category. A big part of what made Kaiton's departure tolerable for many fans was the knowledge Forslund's television call would be simulcast on radio instead. Forslund was honest in his appraisal of the team on the air and yet, at the same time, an indefatigable ambassador for it in public.

Forslund was an asset to the Hurricanes that didn't show up on the balance sheet. As he will be again wherever he ends up, with another NHL franchise if not NBC, where he's among the possible successors to Doc Emrick as the American television voice of the NHL.

Talk about tough shoes to fill.

But Maniscalco was solid in his temporary deputization during the playoffs this August — despite calling games from Raleigh on a monitor, no easy task — with Forslund working for NBC in the absence of a contract agreement with the Hurricanes, a situation billed as temporary at the time but permanent now.

There is, at least, some solace in Forslund's replacement coming from inside the family, so to speak, someone fans



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know and trust as opposed to an outsider who had to earn that respect.

Then again, no one is more respected, in the market or in the industry, than Forslund. He deserved better than this.



## 'I'll Never Get Over This:' John Forslund on life after the Canes

RALEIGH, N.C. (WTVD) -- John Forslund loved everything about being the voice of the Hurricanes.

"Every season has a story good or bad," Forslund said. "I also enjoy the community work that comes with it, and I did a ton of it, I did a ton of community work there, and missed a lot at home because of the community involvement that I had, but I felt it was important to grow the brand. Grow it and get it to a place where I think it is now."

Forslund's impact is reflected in people like Jared Ellis.

"I've never known another play-by-play announcer for the Hurricanes," Ellis said.

Ellis now blogs and runs a podcast about the Canes, inspired in part by a meeting with Forslund. It was during a tough patch in his life.

"I'm not doing anything. I'm trying and I'm going nowhere. And then, you know, meeting Forslund and all the other people that I've met, I really want to go for this." Ellis said.

It's those kinds of stories that Forslund cherishes most.

"The inner beauty of my connection and my role with the team is meeting people like Jared and others who love the

team but also just want to make a connection," he said. "You use the word inspiration, again, I'm taken aback by that."

For the past 29 years, Hartford and Hurricanes hockey has dictated the tempo of his life. With that now taken away, uncertainty looms about the next chapter in his life. He's got no landing spot as yet.

"Nothing. Nothing that pertains to the next season, nothing that pertains to a new organization," Forslund said. "There's nothing as of right now, so there's a little trepidation. I'm not in a good place that way."

There are potential opportunities in Tampa and Seattle and very likely with NBC, too. In his heart though, John is a team broadcaster.

"When you connect with one singular fan base, there is an energy that you gain from that as a pro," he said. "That helps you get through it and helps you do a good job. My heart and soul's with the Carolina Hurricanes, it always has been."

Forslund said he'd [never heard from the Canes front office](#) after contract talks broke down, not even just on a personal level. He and his family have come to terms with the situation but that doesn't make it any easier.

"I can't explain it. I really can't," he said. "I mean, I can explain it, which is unfortunate, but I'll never, I'll never get over this. I really, really won't."



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## SportScan

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

Sportsnet.ca / Quick Shifts: Why some compelling RFAs could become UFAs

Luke Fox | @lukefoxjukebox

September 26, 2020, 8:15 AM

A quick mix of the things we gleaned from the week of hockey, serious and less so, and rolling four lines deep. Alas, our final blog of the longest hockey season ever.

1. Can you ever recall such a flurry of off-ice action during the Stanley Cup Final?

This bizarre year has us pounding out a blog in the middle of a championship back-to-back as general managers sign off on trades, multi-year extensions and headline-making buyouts between the most important whistles of the season.

Commissioner Gary Bettman traditionally prefers teams not involved in the Final to stay quiet in the shadows and keep the spotlight on the games, but with a truncated off-season schedule and a tougher cap puzzle to solve, the other 29 GMs have no choice but to work.

Focus will soon zero in on the draft and free agency, but there is another key date to remember.

Qualifying offers for restricted free agents are due by Oct. 7 at 5 p.m. ET. Those offers can begin to be accepted on Oct. 9 and expire on Oct. 18.

Quick refresher: If an RFA is not qualified, he becomes an unrestricted free agent. Qualifying offers to players making a minimum of \$1 million must be equal to their current salary.

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It will be worth paying attention to see who does not get qualified this season, with teams pinching pennies to appease owners and fall in line with a flat salary cap.

The team might even like its player but not at his current salary and could try to strike a deal for less in advance.

We scanned the pending RFA crop for a few players that will at least raise questions before being handed a qualifying offer:

- Leafs GM Kyle Dubas likes the versatility of the recently acquired Evan Rodrigues. But does he like a single-digit-goal guy at \$2 million in his bottom six?

- Columbus only dressed forward Devin Shore twice in the post-season. Does a fringe forward on an offence-starved franchise deserve \$2.4 million?

- Calgary's Mark Jankowski isn't making a ton of money (\$1.75 million), but that price point is getting harder to justify.

- The bruising Brett Ritchie, 27, has essentially been a bust in his brief Boston tenure, but is it worth \$1 million to keep him for depth and hope he feels renewed at training camp?

- Jake Virtanen provided 18 goals for \$1.5 million, which looks like fine value on paper. Yet Jim Benning was not impressed by the 24-year-old's post-season. If cap-tight Vancouver can't locate a trading partner in the next couple of weeks, do they make an effort to at least retain Virtanen's negotiating rights?

This one is especially tricky because Virtanen has arbitration rights, and his offensive numbers should result in a raise, further stressing Benning's cap picture.

2. The Ottawa Senators had been trying to weasel out of Bobby Ryan's contract for a while. In the 2018 off-season, they tried their darnedest to package Ryan with superstar Erik Karlsson, their ultimate trade bait.

The trade buzz reached a point that Ryan asked Karlsson to give him a heads-up as soon as he heard anything. Karlsson was "gracious enough" to always keep Ryan in the loop.

"I thought a couple points this summer I was gone," Ryan told me when we sat down at training camp that September. As fate would have it, Karlsson was being traded to San Jose that very day, but like the Golden Knights and other suitors, the Sharks didn't have room for Ryan's contract either.

It's not the player. It's the paperwork.

During our chat two Septembers ago, the forthcoming, affable Ryan didn't agree when I asked if he felt the same way about his cumbersome contract (seven years, \$50.75 million) that Roberto Luongo once thought about his in Vancouver. That it sucked.

"People are free to say it. I didn't ask for the contract. That's why you pay an agent, and that's why they negotiate with people across the hall," Ryan said that day at camp.

"A lot of people probably feel that way. I don't. My contract is alright with me."

He smiled a smile worth a million bucks.

"I understand the ramifications of it, but that's the business side. I get to be pretty isolated. I go home. I turn my phone off and enjoy my time away," he went on.

"I just learned a long time ago to control what you can control."

Flash forward two autumns, and the Bill Masterton Trophy winner has never been in so much control as he will be this weekend. He's got the upper hand on his demons, and the whole hockey world is in his corner.

We needn't look any further than the Stanley Cup Final to see bought-out veterans contributing to contenders. Kevin Shattenkirk. Corey Perry. Zach Bogosian. Andrej Sekera.

Ryan is only 33. Last season he was a plus-player on a bad team. We can't wait to see what he can accomplish slotted properly and without the weight of a cap hit that was near-impossible to live up to.

He'll have some control over where that is.



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3. I did not include Ryan on my list of buyout candidates for the next two weeks because I figured the Senators would need a couple NHLers to go along with all those prospects and draft picks.

The line that so often accompanied Ryan's contract in Ottawa sports bars was, "Well, at least it gets us to the floor."

The Senators' projected cap hit Saturday morning is a league-low \$38.24 million. That is \$43.26 million below a 2020-21 ceiling they have no intention of sniffing and \$22 million below the \$60.24 million floor. Currently, the Sens have a grand total of three NHL forwards under contract.

By the time Pierre Dorion re-ups with his long line of RFAs — Anthony Duclair, Connor Brown, Chris Tierney, Rudolfs Balcers, et al. — and signs another goalie, he should be able to qualify his roster for play.

Eugene Melnyk is taking this thing right down to the wood.

A serious concern should be surrounding all those exciting kids with enough veterans. There is something to be said for earning a spot in the show, not just being handed one because, hey, entry-level deals are cheap.

Curious if the Senators use any of their extra space to take on other clubs' LTIR issues. Anaheim's Ryan Kesler is the biggie. Although the Ducks are still in rebuild mode themselves, they could use a little breathing room.

Another smart route would be finding useful pros in the final year of their deal that can be strong examples for the young group but flipped for futures at the 2021 deadline.

4. I recall reading about how, generally speaking, gold medallists and bronze medallists leave the Olympics with the greatest sense of accomplishment. Nothing beats gold, of course. And the bronze winners were excited to have reached the podium and fly home with a memento.

The silver medallists and fourth-place finishers have the toughest go, because they tend to agonize about how close they were to another level of recognition.

So, in that spirit, here's a little love for the fourth-place finishers for the major NHL awards, all of whom narrowly missed on the prestige and press of being a finalist:

Hart Trophy – David Pastrnak

Norris Trophy – Alex Pietrangelo

Vezina Trophy – Jacob Markstrom

Calder Trophy – Adam Fox

Selke Trophy – Anthony Cirelli

Jack Adams Award – Craig Berube

GM of the Year – Joe Sakic

Lady Byng Trophy – Jaccob Slavin

5. Connor McDavid rallied from the most complicated of knee injuries to score the second-most points (97 in 64 games) yet only finished fifth in Hart voting. He also failed to make the First — or Second — All-Star Team, ending a three-year streak.

McDavid is often referred to as the best hockey player on the planet, yet the trophy case (one Hart in five seasons; only twice a finalist) hardly reflects that notion.

We often talk about NHL parity in terms of teams, but the league's MVP award has been handed to 11 different players in the past 11 years. Incredible.

The Hart has been around since 1923-24. Never in its history has it enjoyed a hot-potato run like this.

6. Patric Hornqvist said he was "blindsided" by his trade to the Florida Panthers this week. After all, the 33-year-old negotiated a no-trade clause for a reason.

When you discover that one team wants you and one doesn't, waiving your no-trade suddenly makes sense. Sticking around out of spite isn't much fun.

"It was an easy choice for me and my family," Hornqvist said Friday, on his first Zoom call as a Panther. "You don't think this question is going to come up. When it came up, I took my time to go through every scenario."

The shake-up will have ripple effects for both Bill Zito and Jim Rutherford's clubs.

In Pittsburgh, Mike Matheson joins Marcus Pettersson as young left-shot defencemen under cost-certain deals through 2024-25. Rutherford has no interest in trading lefty Brian Dumoulin, who is on a reasonable deal through 2022-23. Can a cap team afford to pay a fourth LD — Jack Johnson — \$3.25 million for each of the next three seasons?

If he can't be traded, add Johnson to your buyout radar.

In Florida, Matheson's removal frees up some blueline money to give RFA MacKenzie Weegar a raise, and Hornqvist instantly becomes the oldest forward under contract.

This is a move as much to up the work ethic in Sunrise as it is for the 40-some points Hornqvist can contribute by crashing the crease.

"I know I bring a lot of energy," Hornqvist said. "I bring leadership. I play hard every shift. Nothing is going to change with whatever jersey I'm wearing. I'm super excited for this opportunity. I think they have a great group of young core players. [Aleksander] Barkov is probably the most underrated player in the league. I'm excited to play with them. With the coach we have, too, he knows what we need to win. That's a reason why they want me here."

Hornqvist's arrival is also insurance for the possible departure of wingers Mike Hoffman, Evgeni Dadonov and Erik Haula, all of whom are days away from UFA.

7. Paul MacLean was named an assistant coach of the Toronto Maple Leafs Friday and will serve in an eye-in-the-sky role.

A Jack Adams and Stanley Cup winner, MacLean, 62, balances a young coaching staff with some big-league experience. None of Sheldon Keefe, Manny Malhotra or Dave Hakstol have an NHL playoff series victory while standing on the bench.

MacLean has had a close eye on these Leafs for a while now, spotted at practices and games this past season. And his son, A.J., is an assistant with the Marlies.

8. Like so many annual customs, 2020 threw a wrench into the top prospects' visit to the Stanley Cup Final. It's always been cool to observe the young players about to be drafted in the top 10 mingle with established superstars, meet the press and take in a live game.

Instead, we settled for a virtual introduction from their respective homes this week.

Germany's Tim Stuetzle could go as early as No. 2 overall behind Alexis Lafreniere and set a new benchmark for his country. The Los Angeles Kings have a coin to flip between the NHL-ready Stuetzle and Newmarket, Ont.'s Quinton Byfield, who is said to need more development.

Stuetzle referenced Leon Draisaitl (third overall in 2014) as a motivating force for him and other budding stars in a German program that is on the uprise.

It's no small thing when the reigning Art Ross, Hart and Ted Lindsay champ reps the same flag.



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"Leon really showed everything off. He was an unbelievable role model last season and the year before as well," Stuetzle said. "Germany is definitely on the right way."

9. Our A-1 Quote of the Week goes to everyone's favourite 1B goalie.

When Anton Khudobin saw the Stanley Cup make a sparkling appearance prior to Game 1 of the final, he turned to his Stars teammates with an idea: "Maybe we just steal it and run?"

I'd go to a multiplex mid-pandemic to see Khudobin star in Safe Men sequel.

Seriously: I loved the theatre of having the greatest trophy in sports lording over the on-ice action. If it were for the popularity of the high flip, how great would it be to just hang the Cup like a disco ball from centre ice all series? A constant, glimmering reminder of what it's all for.

10. Jimmy Howard will turn 37 next season.

His save percentage has fallen in each of the past three years. Among all impending UFA goaltenders, he ranks last with a .883 mark in 2019-20 (minimum 18 appearances).

No doubt, taking the crease behind a tanking team has something to do with that. The market is so flooded with goalies, Howard feels like a tough add. That said, Howard's refusal to go out without a fight is admirable.

Add another team/player to the goalie market: DET and Jimmy Howard. Howard, 36, said he was "probably not" going to continue with the Red Wings, but squashed rumours he was retiring, saying, "Someone is going to have to tell me I can't play anymore"...

— Elliotte Friedman (@FriedgeHNIC) September 20, 2020

Teams looking to supplement their starter with a 35-plus veteran can also kick tires on Craig Anderson, Mike Smith, Ryan Miller, Brian Elliott and Corey Crawford. Thomas Greiss and Khudobin are 34.

Like Howard, Anderson isn't ready to call it quits either. He's working out to be ready to go for his first new team in a decade. The 39-year-old is a realist. The 34 games he played this past season is the type of workload he's looking for.

11. The 2020 Conn Smythe race feels a lot like the 2015 race — the last time the Lightning were in the final, and the last time a defenceman was crowned MVP of the playoffs.

Much like the '15 Chicago Blackhawks, the Lightning have reaped the rewards of an incredible 200-foot centreman (Jonathan Toews/Brayden Point), an all-world winger (Patrick Kane/Nikita Kucherov), and a stellar goalie who doesn't get a large enough slice of the credit pie (Corey Crawford/Andrei Vasilevskiy).

Yet their engine is a defenceman who does it all and plays roughly half a game.

If the Lightning triumph, here's betting Victor Hedman is correctly acknowledged with the Conn Smythe, just as Duncan Keith was when he helped crush Hedman's dream five years ago.

12. Goofy story from the New York Post.

Four Hillsborough County police officers rushed to a Florida man's house when it reported he was yelling, "Shoot! Shoot!" inside his home.

Turns out, Devon Garnett and his buddies were simply urging the Tampa Bay Lightning to fire the puck during Game 3.

"They came to the door and thought there were guns in the house. We're like, 'Nope, we're just screaming for Steven Stamkos,'" Garnett told the outlet. "[They] completely understood and just laughed it off."

The Athletic / Where could the NHL's top unrestricted free agents sign this offseason?

By Scott Burnside Sep 25, 2020

A Hart Trophy winner. A Vezina Trophy winner. Stanley Cup champions.

There are plenty of players with impressive pedigrees that look to hit the market as free agents at noon ET on Oct. 9. And that's to say nothing of the players who could be bought in an offseason full of uncertainty.

Here is a look at 19 unrestricted free agents and where they might be headed when the market opens.

Anton Khudobin, G, Dallas Stars

The effervescent Khudobin has played himself to near the top of the Conn Smythe consideration list, yet as a 34-year-old unrestricted free agent, a number of goaltending experts don't think he's destined for a big payday given his age and unorthodox style. NHL GMs are "still dumbfounded by his success – I hear it and see it all throughout hockey – but they shouldn't be," one NHL goaltending expert said. "He's been one of the elite goaltenders in the NHL the past two seasons. The fact he'd never played in playoffs didn't mean shit to me. He has so much experience in his career – and a lot of heartache – that playing in this setting is freeing. He's enjoying it. He inspires his teammates. Bottom line he's a winner." Maybe Khudobin stays in Dallas, although have to imagine his open market value is close to double his current \$2.5 million salary. And with the oft-injured Ben Bishop making almost \$5 million, is that too much to spend on goaltending in a flat cap landscape? The short answer is yes. We know Pittsburgh is looking to move Matt Murray and have to think that Khudobin on a short-term would be a nice tandem with Tristan Jarry, who is a restricted free agent. If, as expected, Jacob Markstrom, moves on from Vancouver, what about a Khudobin/Thatcher Demko duo?

Alex Pietrangelo, D, St. Louis Blues

With all due respect to Torey Krug and Taylor Hall and the million goaltenders on the market, the free agency dance begins and ends with the longtime St. Louis Blues captain. Alex Pietrangelo has the physical attributes, he's a right-hand shot, he's a leader and he's a winner (see: Stanley Cup, 2019). And he doesn't likely fit for the Blues. If he hits the market as expected, the asking price is likely going to be in the \$9 million neighborhood, so Pietrangelo won't be on everyone's radar, but if your Stanley Cup window is open for the next two or three years, he better be on your list. That means Toronto, where GM Kyle Dubas has been shedding salary in the hopes of adding a stud right-hand shot defender. One hockey person, though, going back to a conversation at All-Star weekend last year thought Pietrangelo would end up in Vegas. Alec Martinez was added after this chat and the left-hand shot defenseman who plays the right side still has one year left on his current deal, so that might complicate things. But with Vegas withering on the vine against Dallas in the playoffs, Golden Knights GM Kelly McCrimmon has to make a bold move or two and Pietrangelo would change the equation. Of course, a la Steven Stamkos of a couple of seasons ago, Pietrangelo may find the market isn't as enticing as he hoped and will remain a Blue.

Torey Krug, D, Boston Bruins

If there is a gap in terms of the impact of Pietrangelo and longtime Boston puck-mover Torey Krug, it's probably smaller than people think. Krug isn't as physically imposing as Pietrangelo and is a left-hand shot, but Krug's a proven playoff performer who can jumpstart an offense and revitalize a moribund power play averaging almost 27 power play points a season for the past four years. He has averaged 53 points over those four seasons and is sixth among NHL defensemen during that period in points produced. Would he be a boon to a team like the New York Islanders have an obvious need for a dynamic defensive presence? Asked and answered. And Islanders ownership is on record saying they



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believe their franchise can become a destination for free agents, something that hasn't been the case in a long time. Landing a gem like Krug would be a big-time statement. Look at the final four teams outside of the Islanders. Shea Theodore, Miro Heiskanen, John Klingberg, Mikhail Sergachev, Victor Hedman are all elite puck-moving defenders. Go further to include Cale Makar, Quinn Hughes and Roman Josi. The key to generating offense in this NHL is from the back end, and Krug is arguably the top free agent in that department.

Braden Holtby, G, Washington Capitals

It's not just the glut of high-end goaltenders who will hit the market this summer but where they're at in their careers that makes it so difficult to handicap who ends up where. Holtby is among the most confounding of players for just this reason. There has been a definite period of decline in Holtby's stats, if not his game, since he won the Vezina Trophy in 2015-16 and the William M. Jennings Trophy the following season. How much of that is a Washington team that at times was lackadaisical when it came to team defense and how much of that is a goaltender in decline? The answer will determine dollar and term for the 31-year-old Holtby, but there will definitely be interest for the 2018 Stanley Cup winner. Calgary would be a nice fit if GM Brad Treliving believes that Holtby would be an upgrade on Cam Talbot. Would Holtby, a Saskatchewan native, take a shorter term to tandem on an emerging club like Vancouver or Edmonton? One goaltending expert said he'd be wary of term when it comes to Holtby and sees his value at less than \$4 million per year. "I suspect there are GMs that far overvalue him and will offer way more but there's a chance they regret it," the source said.

Taylor Hall, F, Arizona Coyotes

Who doesn't want to see Taylor Hall repatriated to the team that drafted him No. 1 in 2010, the Edmonton Oilers? OK, Arizona fans hands down. Hall might be one of the most complicated of free agents on the market this fall. He's an elite talent who hasn't always shown it and is coming off a desultory season in Arizona where he had 10 goals and 27 points in 35 games and then added six points in nine postseason games. In total, the 28-year-old has played in just 14 postseason games in his career. Scouts we've spoken to see him as a complementary player, which would make him a great fit in Edmonton playing with either Connor McDavid or Leon Draisaitl. Can the Oilers make it fit? Tough call, especially if Hall is looking for a big dollar/long term deal. Another scout wondered about a fit with former coach John Hynes, whom Hall played during his Hart Trophy season in New Jersey in 2017-18. Hynes is, of course, in Nashville where GM David Poile has never been shy to swing for the fences and knows his Stanley Cup window is closing. It would also take some shuffling of big pieces, including a buyout of Kyle Turris, but one to keep your eye on.

Kevin Shattenkirk, D, Tampa Bay Lightning

Kevin Shattenkirk could have gotten more money and term after being bought out by the Rangers, but he gambled on his own renaissance and the gamble paid off in spades, as Tampa signed the smooth-skating defenseman to a one-year deal worth \$1.75 million. The right-shot Shattenkirk is a leader in the Lightning room and a productive member on the ice. And while he'll not likely climb back to the \$6 million level he signed with New York, the 31-year-old will be a nice alternative for teams that can't get in on Krug or Pietrangelo. Anaheim was interested last summer and, as noted, the Islanders could use some oomph on the back end; so will Vancouver, which will be looking to add on the right side.

Robin Lehner, G, Vegas Golden Knights

On paper you'd have to consider Lehner, along with Jacob Markstrom, one of the UFA goaltenders in a marketplace awash in goaltending options. Whether Lehner is truly "on the market" is another matter, as multiple sources have indicated Lehner has already agreed in principle to a deal that will keep him in Vegas. If that's the case, it's the fallout of such a signing that will be most interesting as it seems unlikely – if not impossible given the flat cap landscape – that incumbent Marc-Andre Fleury could stay given his \$7 million cap hit for the next two seasons. A number of sources think that Fleury, who has a 10-team no-trade list,

could end up in Minnesota given his connection to GM Bill Guerin and the Wild's desire to upgrade in goal, or back in Pittsburgh where GM Jim Rutherford is shopping Matt Murray. All of this would be predicated on the Golden Knights eating a big chunk of Fleury's remaining salary. If, for some reason, Lehner does truly hit the marketplace, look for Carolina, which showed interest last offseason before Lehner signed a one-year deal in Chicago, to circle back on the big netminder.

Tyler Toffoli, F, Vancouver Canucks

Toffoli is another pending UFA who may not be headed far once Oct. 9 rolls around. It would be a surprise if the Canucks, who acquired the winger at the trade deadline at no small expense (a second-round pick, a conditional fourth-rounder and two prospects), doesn't end up inking Toffoli to a long-term deal. Although it appeared as though Toffoli, 28, had gone into a period of decline in Los Angeles, he was a nice fit with the Canucks even though he battled injury and played in just seven postseason games. Still, his chemistry with the team's top offensive players should make him a priority for GM Jim Benning. If, as expected, Toffoli remains in Vancouver, it eliminates one of the top assets on the right side vis a vis free agency, putting a premium on players like Evgenii Dadonov and Craig Smith.

Jacob Markstrom, G, Vancouver Canucks

Talk to most goaltending experts and they set Robin Lehner and Jacob Markstrom above the rest of the fray in the crowded goaltending market. Fair enough. And if, as expected, Lehner settles into Vegas, that leaves Markstrom. He's worked doggedly to become an NHL starter and he was the Canucks' MVP this season (our vote, not theirs). A nice fit in Vancouver to be sure but does he fit long-term with Thatcher Demko, 24, who was sensational coming in relief of Markstrom in the playoffs? Given the cap limitations, Markstrom might have to find a new home, especially if he's looking for the security of term and a healthy raise on the \$3.66 million cap hit his expiring contract paid. And there are options. Carolina is one, but will it spend on the position having gone bargain-basement the past couple of years? We know the Canes kicked the tires on Lehner before he signed in Chicago last offseason, so maybe Markstrom appeals given his pedigree. Calgary and Edmonton both need stability between the pipes, but Edmonton can't afford Markstrom with Mikko Koskinen at \$4.5 million for two more years. The Flames are an interesting option given the rotating cast of netminders that have paraded through Calgary in recent years, which isn't the pattern most Stanley Cup winners follow. If I'm rookie Buffalo GM Kevyn Adams and just added a solid veteran presence in Eric Staal, I have a long chat with Markstrom's people about helping push the Sabres back into the fray with my available cap space.

Tyson Barrie, D, Toronto Maple Leafs

Let's be honest, sometimes playing in Toronto chews people up, with the daily swings from hockey god to bum. Tyson Barrie is one who got chewed up. Loved this deal when he was acquired by Toronto from Colorado for Nazem Kadri, but it was the Avs who won the deal. Now Barrie, 29, hits the free agent market with his value at a low ebb. That means some team is likely going to get a real bargain because Barrie is still a top-end talent. "A beast," was how one scout described Barrie during his time in Colorado, and no reason he can't be a beast for a team looking for a high-skill, right-hand shot that can't afford Torey Krug. Love Barrie in Vegas if Alex Pietrangelo isn't a fit. We know Anaheim will be looking for a player like Barrie and the Ducks aren't as far away as their performance last year would suggest. And as noted, the New York Islanders have to add an element on the blue line like Krug or Barrie to take the next step. While Barrie didn't mesh with Mike Babcock, playing for Barry Trotz wouldn't be a bad fit for the 29-year-old.

Mike Hoffman, F, Florida Panthers

Of all the pending unrestricted free agents, not one hit the 30-goal mark last season, so there's not an Artemi Panarin lurking in the weeds for GMs to try and lure to their market. But the one who is closest is Mike Hoffman, who had 65 goals in his two seasons as a member of the Panthers. He also collected more points last season (59) than any



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pending UFA. What's his top end? Let's say playing with Leon Draisaitl or Connor McDavid in Edmonton, 40 is within reach for sure. He's also the kind of offensive weapon that changes the dynamic in a place like Columbus. One source close to the Blue Jackets said that finding some outside offensive help is critical to rewarding a hard-working Columbus team and helps them take the next step.

Evgenii Dadonov, F, Florida Panthers

There's a reason these two players are together as they represent the highest-scoring potential UFAs on the market. The top two goal-scorers on the Panthers this season with Dadonov's 25 goals and Hoffman's 29. Given that he's a homegrown prospect it seemed Dadonov would be more likely to stay with the team if new GM Bill Zito was looking to re-sign one, but as The Athletic's Pierre LeBrun reported recently it looks like the plan is for both Hoffman and Dadonov to go to the market and then possibly circle back to the Panthers. Dadonov will fit right into a top-six role on a team looking for help on the right side, like San Jose or Montreal.

Thomas Greiss, G, New York Islanders

Of all the goaltenders on the market, is there one who has played better but has a lower profile than the 34-year-old Greiss? A year ago he and Robin Lehner split playing time pretty much equally, allowing the fewest goals in the NHL, although it was Lehner who earned a Vezina nomination. He's not a young man so term is likely going to be a factor in where Greiss ends up. And while he has starter stuff, he might not be regarded in that manner, which makes him a potentially economical Plan B or 1A option, especially if you're a team with a rising young goaltender like Vancouver or Pittsburgh, where Tristan Jarry will be the man if GM Jim Rutherford can find a home for Matt Murray. Washington will need to make sure it has an adequate backup for Ilya Samsonov, although Greiss might not fit the Caps' budget (see below). Bottom line, wherever Greiss lands fans are likely going to be very, very happy, but not as happy as his coaches and teammates.

Mikael Granlund, F, Nashville Predators

Granlund is certainly an interesting test case given how far his stock has fallen since being traded from Minnesota to Nashville at the 2019 trade deadline. The converted winger (he started as a center with the Wild) managed just 18 goals in 79 regular-season games with the Preds and one goal in 10 playoff games over two seasons. That kind of production suggests a pretty dramatic change in expectation from the \$5.75 million cap hit Granlund's last contract came in at. That means a team looking to perhaps capitalize on a motivated player on a more modest contract both in terms of dollar and term could find Granlund an attractive option. Anaheim, for instance, is hungry to improve its offense.

Sami Vatanen, D, Carolina Hurricanes

Vatanen is one of the more interesting blueliners available on the market because he gives you that nice blend of snarl with some offensive upside. He filled in nicely early in the playoffs for Carolina when Dougie Hamilton was hurt. His game dropped off in the Canes' series against the Bruins, but the entire team looked off. Lots of rumors about Carolina perhaps moving a defenseman to bolster the offense (check out the Patrik Laine rumors). Makes no sense to be trading Brett Pesce given his contract, but Hamilton? Maybe. And if you trade Hamilton, maybe you can bring back Vatanen whose last contract carried a \$4.875 million cap hit. He's a right-hand shot so there will be teams who are interested, perhaps including his old employers in New Jersey, although it needs help on the left side of the blue line more than the right. What if Toronto can't land the big fish in Pietrangelo? Vatanen would be a nice Plan B at a much lower cost. And Vancouver, if it doesn't spend big on Markstrom in goal, has a desire to upgrade the back end and Vatanen, 29, would seem to be a good fit with how Travis Green wants this team to play and its need to shore up the right side of the blue line.

T.J. Brodie, D, Calgary Flames

The Flames have about million UFA defensemen (OK, 5), but T.J. Brodie is probably the most attractive to both the Flames and other teams. He is a left-hand shot who has predominantly played on the right side with Calgary captain Mark Giordano. And while his point production took a dive this season – to 19 from 34 a year ago – he can still help out on a second power play unit and play top-four minutes as a solid contributor (he had nine goals in 2018-19). One scout praised Brodie's skating and presence. He is coming off a contract that carried a \$4.65 million cap hit and that might be difficult to replicate in this current economic landscape. That said, there will be suitors if he doesn't remain in Calgary. New Jersey is looking for some size and experience on the left side of its blue line, so Brodie might not be a perfect fit there, but he'd certainly be a stabilizing force for its puck-movers on the right side.

Craig Smith, F, Nashville Predators

As the Predators try and rediscover their lost organizational mojo, it looks like a mainstay of the squad for most of the past decade will be moving on. Craig Smith has scored at least 20 goals in five of the past seven seasons and would have undoubtedly hit that mark this season had the NHL played a full slate of games, finishing with 18 in 69 games. The 31-year-old right-winger is part of a small group of right-handed shot UFAs on the market and that makes him an interesting commodity. Smith is coming off a deal that carried a \$4.25 million cap hit and boasts high-end analytics, making him a nice fit for a competitive team looking to add mid-range cost scoring depth on a two- or three-year deal. Montreal could use some scoring punch on the right side, as could the San Jose Sharks.

Jesper Fast, F, New York Rangers

Things are about to get busy for Rangers GM Jeff Gorton. Not only do the Rangers have the first pick in the draft, but they have some decisions on key restricted free agents before the start of free agency. One casualty of the Rangers rebuild will likely be fan and team favorite Jesper Fast. The 28-year-old has consistently been one of the Rangers top penalty killers and most versatile forwards, and his grittiness should make him an attractive asset on the free agent market. Think Blake Coleman with a little less offensive upside. If this summer's playoff tournament has proven anything it's that a healthy dose of sand is critical to success, and Fast brings that important element. Have to think his work ethic would be appealing to an Ottawa team trying to create a culture of winning in the Canadian capital or perhaps Colorado, which could have used a bit more grit in its playoff loss to Dallas. San Jose has some holes on the right side when it comes to jam. Coming off a contract with a \$1.85 million cap hit, Fast should fit most team's economic models.

Mike Smith, G, Edmonton Oilers

Mike Smith is on this list because he's a gem. Yes, he's 38, and coming off an up and down season in Edmonton, playing behind an up and down Oiler defense. But Smith is part of a group of elder statesmen goaltenders who are on the market, a group that includes Jimmy Howard, 36, and Craig Anderson, 39. There are teams that are going to need veteran goaltending help. Maybe the market suppresses the amount paid to younger guys like Greiss or Khudobin or Cam Talbot. But if not, there might be a place for one or two of them on teams like Washington, where the Caps will be looking for a solid but economical backup behind youngster Ilya Samsonov, and in New Jersey, where the Devils will be looking for a mentor who can provide quality starts playing behind Mackenzie Blackwood.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.26.2020

Sportsnet.ca / 2020 NHL off-season primer: A small window for big moves?

Rory Boylen September 25, 2020, 11:00 AM



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Usually the NHL off-season has a few weeks of build up. When the Stanley Cup is wrapped up in early June the combine would have just happened, the draft would be a couple weeks away and free agency another week after that. There's time for rumours to build and trades to come together, but this off-season feels more like a sprint.

It's going to come fast and it's going to come all at once.

In fact, you might say we've partially started the off-season already. With 29 teams on the sidelines, a few have already made trades, while others are taking calls. Certain off-season activities have already begun so while we're not officially there yet, we've got one toe in the water.

As the longest season in NHL history nears a close, here are a few key dates to keep in mind:

From the Stanley Cup Qualifiers to the Stanley Cup Final, livestream every game of the 2020 Stanley Cup Playoffs, blackout-free, on Sportsnet NOW.

**BUYOUT WINDOW: OPENS SEPT. 25**

When the NHL and PA ratified a CBA extension just prior to returning to play, they had to take into account the uncertain financial picture. Lots of revenue was lost this season and it's unclear how long it'll be until any fans are allowed back in NHL arenas, let alone at full capacity. The cap is staying flat at \$81.5 million for at least next season and then, well, we'll see.

However, compliance buyouts were not part of this CBA agreement. It was suspected they could be, since it would allow teams to pay out contracts without having a leftover cap hit. The last time we had these amnesty buyouts was in 2014.

Regular buyouts remain, though, and the window for those opens on Friday, Sept. 25 and closes on Oct. 8 at 5:00 p.m. These buyouts can offer short-term cap space, but there is a bit of a penalty on the back end.

Barring any last minute changes, here is an overview of the upcoming important NHL Off-season dates.

The cost of a buyout is paid out over twice the number of remaining years on the contract and the rate is one-third of the remaining salary (not cap hit) for players younger than 26, and two-thirds for players 26 and older. But any player who is still recovering from an injury cannot be bought out and a buyout can only happen after a player clears unconditional waivers.

Any player who signed a contract at age 35 or older would not provide their team with any cap relief should they be bought out. Whatever the cap charge would be for that player remains exactly the same in the event they are bought out.

CapFriendly is a great resource for an explainer on how to calculate a cap hit for a buyout, and you can experiment with what a buyout may look like for any player in the league using their calculator.

To give you an idea of who could be targeted for a buyout, Sportsnet's Luke Fox ran down the top 14 candidates to keep an eye on.

"We could be flexible inside the marketplace for either free agents or for trades."

**NHL DRAFT: OCT. 6-7**

This will be a draft unlike any other, and not just because it's happening when a new season is usually starting up. This year's draft will be done virtually, so if you watched the NFL's draft a few months ago you'll have some idea of how it'll go. And, in fact, some of the players whose names will be called have already begun playing a new season themselves.

The QMJHL season gets underway on Oct. 2, though suspected No. 1 overall pick Alexis Lafreniere will not be reporting to the Rimouski Oceanic as he waits for the NHL to start back up. Some European leagues, including the KHL, have already started to play. Some players who will be picked in the first round have one last shot to slightly up their

stock. Lucas Raymond (Frolunda, SHL), Yaroslav Askarov (St. Petersburg, KHL), and Dawson Mercer (Chicoutimi, QMJHL) will all have played 2020-21 season games by the time the NHL Draft starts.

Lafreniere remains the top prospect after back-to-back CHL Player of the Year honours, but it's not clear who will go second overall. Quinton Byfield and Tim Stutzle are in the running, and it's likely whoever isn't picked by the LA Kings will go to the Ottawa Senators at No. 3.

The Senators will be the first and second Canadian team to pick, as they also hold the fifth-overall selection. The Winnipeg Jets are the only other Canadian team with a top-10 pick, but this is regarded as a draft deep in talent. Senators GM Pierre Dorion said in January that the top 20 players were "outstanding." Edmonton, Toronto, Montreal and Calgary all have picks in the teens and could walk away with a nice prospect...if they don't trade the pick first.

This is a forward-dominated draft at the top and we may only see one or two defencemen taken inside the top 10. But the order is not clear for anyone after the first pick. Which defenceman goes first is probably between Erie's Jamie Drysdale and Jake Sanderson of the USNTDP.

Round 1 of the draft will go on Tuesday, Oct. 6 beginning at 7:00 p.m. ET, and you can watch it on Sportsnet. Rounds 2-7 will go on Wednesday, Oct. 7 beginning at 11:30 a.m. ET.

Players of note:

**Yaroslav Askarov:** Goalies are not often taken in the first round anymore, and certainly not in the top half of it, but we could see that happen for the second year in a row. After Spencer Knight was chosen 13th overall in 2019 by Florida, Askarov could hear his name called in a similar range. The Russian has been outstanding at times and has a .974 save percentage in three KHL games this season, but was underwhelming on the big stage of the WJC last winter.

**Seth Jarvis:** Finished last season second in WHL scoring with 98 points in 58 games...63 of those points came in his last 26 games. Jarvis's stock was rising fast and he likely would have benefitted in draft rankings had there been a playoff season.

**Kaiden Guhle:** A fast riser in the rankings, Guhle was not ranked by Sportsnet's Sam Cosentino in October's top 31, but ended the season up at No. 13. His development in the WHL is exactly what you want to see — in Year 1 he played relatively minor minutes on an older team and didn't put up notable numbers, but in Year 2 he took on a more prominent role and thrived. A strong-skating defenceman and standing 6-foot-2, 186 pounds, Guhle improved year-over-year from 17 points to 40.

**DEADLINE FOR TEAMS TO SUBMIT QUALIFYING OFFERS FOR RFAs: OCT. 7**

Usually this date isn't so notable. If a team extends a qualifying offer to an RFA, they retain negotiating rights with them and can match any offer sheet presented by a rival team. A qualifying offer could then lead to arbitration, if that player is eligible. Any player who does not receive a qualifying offer by the deadline becomes an unrestricted free agent.

Teams more or less qualify all of their RFAs who have NHL potential and only sometimes is a player who raises an eyebrow left unqualified. There are a lot more financial considerations this year, however, so teams may consider releasing an RFA for cap reasons.

It's all related to the salary cap staying flat at \$81.5 million instead of rising, as was expected pre-COVID. Now many teams are in a tight spot.

"I think that teams are going to have to look at that a little bit more critically than they have in the past and maybe cut ties with 22-, 23-year-old players, rather than re-sign them at the number they're at and allow those players to become free agents," Sportsnet's Chris Johnston said recently on Hockey Central. "There's going to be a trickle-down effect of a flat cap. I mean, I know Alex Pietrangolo's negotiations aren't going well in St. Louis, but I'm reasonably confident he's going to be a well-paid player next season. He's going to get his deal...but there are going to be players who become free agents under these conditions and they're



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going to get squeezed. They're either going to have to take less term or less money than they would have in a normal time."

Hockey Central

Sept. 21: "I'm Here At Rogers Place And There's A Hint Of Normalcy"

September 21 2020

Your browser does not support the audio element.

So keep an eye on Oct. 7, which also happens to be Day 2 of the draft. There may be some surprise players left unqualified and some potential value added to the UFA pool, which will open just two days later...

FREE AGENCY: OPENS OCT. 9

Coming in just over three months later than usual, free agency will open on the Friday of the Canadian Thanksgiving weekend and there could be big moves, small moves, unusual moves and everything in between.

Here is where the league-wide cap crunch is going to be most measurable. We'd imagine the biggest names will still get their paydays, but how much will players lower in the pecking order be squeezed? Even those big names may be forced into an interesting decision if it's presented: sign a long-term deal that's maybe worth slightly less money than would've been offered under normal circumstances, or agree to something shorter that comes with a huge payout and try free agency again in short order? Would a team with Cup hopes and lots of cap space, like Colorado, attempt this with anyone?

Pietrangelo tops this year's group of UFAs as the Blues captain one year removed from winning the Stanley Cup is set to hit the open market at 30 years old. He's the headline name on the blue line, but far from the only notable defenceman available in free agency. Tyson Barrie, TJ Brodie, Torey Krug, Sami Vatanen, Chris Tanev and Travis Hamonic are all set to test the market and would be nice adds to a top four.

Taylor Hall, who the Arizona Coyotes traded a first-round pick plus for, is the top forward headed to free agency and the 2018 Hart Trophy winner is coming off a season in which he posted 16 goals and 52 points in 65 games. Hall has made the playoffs just twice in his 10-year career and hasn't gotten out of the first round yet, so what he prioritizes will be interesting to see.

"I think honestly it's probably all winning," Hall said about his free agency after the Coyotes were eliminated by Colorado. "Any player at this stage in their career who's had the career I've had, 10 seasons only making the playoffs twice, that's really what I'm after. We'll see what happens there.

"I don't think the money is going to be what it was before Covid or before this season, but that's fine. I think we get paid a lot of money to play a game and we'll see what happens."

There are various scorers available. Mike Hoffman and the underrated Evgenii Dadonov are set to leave the Panthers after they finished 1-2 on the team with 29 and 25 goals this season, respectively. Tyler Toffoli and the Vancouver Canucks may still come to terms, but they also have to figure out Jacob Markstrom and Tanev without much wiggle room.

If its sandpaper you want up front, Wayne Simmonds, Kyle Clifford, and perhaps Corey Perry will be available.

And what about 40-year-old Joe Thornton, who appears to be at the end of the line in San Jose? Will he come back for another season to chase the Stanley Cup in perhaps more of a third-line role? And what does he have left after a 31-point season?

In terms of depth of options, though, this is the year of the goalie market.

Whatever type of goalie your team needs may be attainable through free agency. Need a starter? Look no further than Markstrom, Braden Holtby or, if Vegas doesn't re-sign him first, Robin Lehner. Need a tandem option? Anton Khudobin, Thomas Greiss, Cam Talbot, Corey Crawford and maybe Ryan Miller will be available. How about a veteran backup,

who could possibly offer more? Craig Anderson, Jimmy Howard or Brian Elliott could be had.

And then there's the goalie trade market, which could include the likes of Marc-Andre Fleury, Frederik Andersen, Henrik Lundqvist (who could be bought out and become a UFA), Darcy Kuemper, or either of Pittsburgh's RFAs, Tristan Jarry and Matt Murray. With Seattle expansion a year away, this figures to be an interesting off-season for goalies as teams position themselves for next off-season, when one netminder on each roster has to be made available for the Kraken.

As it stands right now, before all RFAs have been dealt with or many UFAs possibly re-signed, 14 NHL teams have less than \$10 million in projected cap space. At the other end, six teams currently have more than \$20 million in projected room, with the Senators having the most space at \$39.5 million. Many of the teams with lots of cap space are rebuilding rosters and those GMs are in an interesting situation where it will be tempting to try and speed things up.

A lot of contenders are tight to the cap, though, and are in interesting situations for completely different reasons. How do you add and improve without much room to work with?

It's setting up to be an exciting off-season where plenty of possibilities are on the table. It's coming up fast, too, and will blow past us before you know it. Buckle up, because the next two weeks will be wild.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 09.26.2020

The Athletic / With lots of competition, TV ratings for the Stanley Cup Final struggle

By Sean Fitz-Gerald Sep 23, 2020 78

After millions of Canadian viewers opted to stay inside and watch the NHL playoffs instead of basking in the early August sunshine, Sportsnet president Bart Yabsley conceded it was no secret "that when the Canadian teams play well and advance in the playoffs, that our numbers reflect that."

Six of Canada's seven NHL teams were in the qualifying round, and with the Raptors resuming their NBA title defence, Sportsnet announced its programming reached 10.7 million viewers over just one weekend. Audiences for games featuring the Flames, Jets, Maple Leafs and Canadiens each swelled to more than one million.

What would happen, Yabsley was asked, if Canadian teams stumbled out of contention early?

"The pent-up demand, and the actual interest and the realities — you're not going (outside your home) like you used to go out — we hope we don't see that drop-off to the same extent," he said. "If we are in that circumstance."

The network has indeed found itself back in that familiar circumstance, and audiences have not been as resilient as hoped. Sportsnet has confirmed Game 1 of the Stanley Cup Final between the Stars and the Lightning drew an average audience of only 1.081 million on Saturday night.

In Game 2, on Monday night, the audience shrank to 841,000.

Fans who stream the games online are not included in the traditional measurement. One broadcast insider suggested those watching online could account for another five percent of actual viewership. (In that first weekend in August, Sportsnet reported fans started two million streams of its programming.)

The audiences have also been small in the United States, with Game 1 reportedly drawing its weakest rating in almost a decade.



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RATINGS: #STANLEYCUP FINAL OPENS WITH LOWEST RATED GAME 1 SINCE 2007 (SENS-DUCKS), LOWEST RATED GAME OVERALL SINCE 2012 (DEVILS-KINGS).

GAME 1 TIES SENS-DUCKS GAME 3 AS LOWEST RATED SCF GAME ON BROADCAST TV. [HTTPS://T.CO/UMTHBJX2CZ](https://t.co/UMTHBJX2CZ)

— SPORTS MEDIA WATCH (@PAULSEN\_SMW) SEPTEMBER 22, 2020

For Game 2, hockey was up against Monday Night Football as well as baseball.

Broadcast insiders laid out a handful of potential reasons for the weak numbers. The Stanley Cup is not usually awarded in the fall, and it is not typically contested in the middle of a pandemic. (It was called off during the third wave of an influenza pandemic in 1919.)

Ultimately, though, sources suggest the blame for low ratings in Canada falls on the teams themselves.

The Canucks were the only Canadian team to win a single round in the official section of the NHL's modified playoffs this summer. The Leafs did not even make it that far, losing their qualifying round series, alongside the Jets and Oilers.

Calgary and Montreal both lost in the first round.

Canadian teams are lucrative for Canadian broadcasters. Having a major market engaged deep into the postseason could have reshaped the narrative for Sportsnet. Instead, the network has been without any Canadian representation since Sept. 4, the night the Canucks lost Game 7 of their second-round series to the Golden Knights.

Yabsley was not available for comment on Wednesday.

Not only is all of this unfolding against the backdrop of a pandemic that has impacted advertising revenue across the industry, it is happening as the cost of doing business with the NHL keeps growing steeper. Rogers signed a 12-year deal worth \$5.232 billion with the league in 2013 — said to be the biggest Canadian rights deal in history — that included an escalating annual fee.

The company had a payment of \$150 million right away, followed by another payment of more than \$300 million the following year. In the final year of the deal, which runs through 2025-26, Rogers is scheduled to pay more than \$500 million for the rights.

Having the Leafs or Oilers play for more than a week per playoff appearance would help make that number seem less daunting. The fact no Canadian team has won a Stanley Cup since 1993 has been repeated often, and was even referenced during the 72nd Primetime Emmy Awards on Sunday.

SORRY CANADA, YOU STILL DON'T HAVE THIS.... #STANLEYCUP @SCHITTSCREEK #EMMYS PIC. [TWITTER.COM/ON1RJN9EIX](https://twitter.com/ON1RJN9EIX)

— JIMMY KIMMEL LIVE (@JIMMYKIMMELIVE) SEPTEMBER 21, 2020

"Would I love every single one of the Canadian teams to be in the playoffs, and the final four being four Canadian teams, and the Stanley Cup champion being Canadian? Absolutely," Yabsley told The Athletic in an interview last fall. "Would that be a positive impact on us financially? It would be."

Sportsnet drew an average audience of 1.78 million for Toronto's first qualifying-round game against Columbus last month. It drew 1.66 million for its first game between the Flames and the Jets. Another 1.6 million watched the Canadiens and the Penguins.

All of those audiences, in the middle of the summer, in a round that does not even qualify as an official postseason event, were larger than the first two games of the Stanley Cup Final.

There are signs that, even if Canadians are not fully invested in the outcome, many are curious enough to sneak a glance. According to Sportsnet, at least 3.8 million Canadians tuned in for at least part of its coverage of Game 1 on Saturday night, and that number grew to 4.3 million for Game 2.

In August, the network also reached its largest-ever share, at 10.4 percent of the total Canadian TV audience. That included help from its NBA and MLB coverage, where the Raptors and Blue Jays offered a bit more help than some of the Canadian NHL teams.

The Athletic / Mirtle: Ranking the NHL's top 22 buyout candidates

By James Mirtle Sep 22, 2020

The buyouts are coming.

The NHL's buyout window opens on Friday, Sept. 25, and runs for two weeks until Oct. 8, the day before free agency begins. With a flat salary cap and a lot of teams feeling squeezed by the results of the pandemic — and the prospect of a fan-less season next year — this could be the league's busiest buyout period yet.

Not every team has a buyout candidate. But most do, with more than half of the league making our list below.

Keep in mind that teams are not permitted to buy out injured players, so Ryan Kesler and others who spent a lot of time on LTIR are not listed here. And players who are on age 35-plus contracts will have their full salaries count against the cap, making their buyouts much less useful.

Not every player here is going to be bought out, but it's worth at least having a conversation for the teams involved given the player's performance, cap hit and their team's cap situation.

### 1. Henrik Lundqvist, NY Rangers

This will be the big one if, as expected, it happens. King Henrik has been the face of the franchise for the entire salary cap era, going back to his rookie season in 2005-06. But he's 38 years old and his \$8.5 million cap hit is a serious impediment to the Rangers rise in the standings, given his mediocre play the past few years. New York also has two top young goaltenders in Igor Shesterkin and Alexandar Georgiev to find starts for and the old guy has been blocking the crease. If Lundqvist does the franchise a huge favor, he will retire and walk away from the final year of his deal. But that's \$5.5 million out of pocket, which doesn't feel reasonable. And he may well want to try and be a backup or a tandem goaltender elsewhere, for a swan song. If Martin Brodeur can be a St. Louis Blue, why not Lundqvist in another team's colors? Even if his jersey is going up to the rafters soon, regardless of what comes next.

Existing cap hit: \$8.5 million for next season

Buyout cap hit: \$5.5 million next season and \$1.5 million for 2021-22

### 2. Brendan Smith, NY Rangers

The Rangers are on the precipice of something potentially really big. Their prospect pool is strong and they're about to add Alexis Lafreniere in two weeks with the first overall pick. They've got some great young players in goal, on D and up front. If they play their next few moves right, they could become the next powerhouse in the Eastern Conference. Both Smith and Marc Staal are seldom-used but high-paid veterans on a back end that needs a rethink. Dumping Smith opens up almost \$1.6 million that they can reallocate elsewhere. Adding Staal to the buyout pile would give them an additional \$2 million. Combined with a Lundqvist buyout, it could leave New York GM Jeff Gorton with another \$8 million or so to spend in free agency or trades this offseason.

Existing cap hit: \$4.35 million next season

Buyout cap hit: \$2.78 million next season and \$783,333 in 2021-22

### 3. Alex Steen, St. Louis



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The Blues are another team that needs cap space and has some overpriced veterans. If they re-sign captain Alex Pietrangolo, things definitely get very uncomfortable against the cap. Steen has been a good soldier for them for a long time, but he's 36 years old and had only 17 points this past season in a depth role. His contract is the most likely one to dump as part of the solution to the Petro problem.

Existing cap hit: \$5.75 million next season

Buyout cap hit: \$3.42 million next season and \$1.17 million in 2021-22

#### 4. Zach Smith, Chicago

The Blackhawks are another team that clearly needs some cap room, with the contracts they need to sign their young players to and with how much money their veterans make. This is not going to be an easy offseason for them. Moving on from Smith, who had four goals and played less than 12 minutes a game, should not be one of their harder decisions.

Existing cap hit: \$3.25 million next season

Buyout cap hit: \$1.08 million for the next two seasons

#### 5. David Backes, Anaheim

The Ducks are rebuilding, sort of. Except they've got some pretty strong pieces, like netminder John Gibson, who are in their prime. They're extremely tight to the cap due to Corey Perry's buyout eating up \$6.6 million so finding ways to add to a roster that struggled this past season won't be easy. Moving on from Backes, whose body has taken a beating in his career, slowing him down, makes a lot of sense.

Existing cap hit: \$4.5 million next season (not including the 25 percent of the deal Boston is retaining)

Buyout cap hit: \$3 million next season and \$750,000 in 2021-22

#### 6. Martin Jones, San Jose

Onto some more goalies. The Sharks had a brutal year last year and they're pretty tight against the cap if they want to make any additions. Jones has played poorly for two seasons now, has a big contract, and the buyout isn't egregious. It's definitely worth thinking about, given their window to win has to be right now with all their veterans on big deals. They can't afford a nearly \$6 million black hole in goal.

Existing cap hit: \$5.75 million for the next four seasons

Buyout cap hit: \$2.875 million for next season and Year 4 of the buyout; between \$1.6 and \$2.4 million the remaining six years

#### 7. Carter Hutton, Buffalo

The Sabres need to find some life again, and that's going to mean wholesale roster changes. Hutton is almost 35 and had an .898 save percentage last year. If you can find a trade partner for him, you do it. If not, this could be the best case, as it'll allow the Sabres to go for an upgrade in free agency.

Existing cap hit: \$2.75 million next season

Buyout cap hit: \$916,667 for the next two seasons

Devan Dubnyk

#### 8. Devan Dubnyk, Minnesota

Dubnyk has played a lot of good games for the Wild, but last season was tough. He had difficult circumstances personally, which was obviously a key factor. And the team in front of him struggled, too. Dubnyk could bounce back next season, and there's only one year left on his deal, but new GM Bill Guerin also seems hellbent on overhauling his roster. Changing the long-time starter would certainly fit. (And Dubnyk's name is out there in trade talks.)

Existing cap hit: \$4.33 million next season

Buyout cap hit: \$2.67 million next season and \$833,333 in 2021-22

#### 9. Steven Santini, Nashville

The Predators had to pick up Santini's contract as part of the PK Subban trade with New Jersey. He spent almost the entire season in the AHL last year with Milwaukee, as one of the highest-paid defensemen in the league. The small-market Preds can save \$1.1 million in real dollars by buying him out. It would be shocking if they did not.

Existing cap hit: \$1.42 million next season (when in NHL)

Buyout cap hit: \$41,667 next season and \$275,000 in 2021-22

#### 10. Justin Abdelkader, Detroit

Abdelkader had no goals and three points in 49 games last season while getting decent depth minutes. The Red Wings may be rebuilding and, as such, may not put a premium on having extra cap space right away, but surely there has to be a better use for these extra dollars they could free up than having him on the ice. Maybe they can take on some other bad contracts in exchange for getting assets? That would make sense. Unlike this deal.

Existing cap hit: \$4.25 million for the next three years

Buyout cap hit: \$1.81 million next season, \$2.31 million the following two years and \$1.06 million the subsequent three years

#### 11. Kyle Okposo, Buffalo

It's an inspirational story he's back playing at all, given some of the health issues he's had. But Okposo clearly isn't the player he was earlier in his career and he has a big ticket to live up to. The Sabres need to completely rethink their roster and this might be one area to start. Or, if they buyout Hutton, to carry on with the makeover. There's some buyout protection in his deal, so that limits the savings, but it may not matter at this point given how little production he's providing.

Existing cap hit: \$6 million the next three seasons

Buyout cap hit: \$4 million next season, \$5 million the year after, \$3 million in 2022-23 and then \$1 million a season for three more years

#### 12. James Neal, Edmonton

Why put together a big write-up when Jonathan Willis has already done the work for you? Check out his argument here.

Existing cap hit: \$5.75 million the next three seasons

Buyout cap hit: \$1.917 million the next six seasons

#### 13. John Moore, Boston

I know they may lose Zdeno Chara. And it appears very likely they'll lose Torey Krug, too. So the Bruins need defencemen. But I'm not sure they need ones making as much as Moore who has played as little as he has the past year. And Boston is the kind of team that could do real damage in free agency with some more money to spend, given how many players will want to play there to try and win. Dumping Moore gives them about \$8 million to be aggressive, assuming Chara and Krug don't return. Plus, this buyout would free up \$2 million in 2021-22, which could be key given some of the players who will need new contracts.

Existing cap hit: \$2.75 million for three more years

Buyout cap hit: \$1.3 million next season and in Year 3 of buyout; \$805,556 in 2021-22 and 2023-26

#### 14. Kyle Turris, Nashville

The Predators gave up good assets for Turris three years ago, dealing two of their top prospects and a second-round pick to the Avs. The deal hasn't worked out the way they hoped, as Turris has produced only 54 points over the past two seasons combined. His defensive play has become a significant issue, too. With no buyout protection, it's not a bad penalty here, either, if they decide to go this direction.

Existing cap hit: \$6 million for the next four seasons

Buyout cap hit: \$2 million for the next eight seasons

#### 15. Anton Stralman, Florida



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The Panthers need to shed payroll and Stralman, while still dependable, is overpriced. They can also afford to shed a defenseman and still have a solid top four, given the rise of MacKenzie Weegar.

Existing cap hit: \$5.5 million for the next two seasons

Buyout cap hit: \$2.5 million for the next two seasons and \$1.5 million for two seasons after that

16. Olli Maatta, Chicago

Desperate times, yadda yadda. Maatta's once-prominent star has faded the past couple of years and now he's kind of just "a guy" on the blue line. Chicago desperately needs to free up space, so this could be an avenue they go down. Maatta would catch on elsewhere in the league; his problem is his salary is just too high for what he brings. His buyout is also dirt cheap given it's less costly to buy players out at a young age.

Existing cap hit: \$4.083 million for the next two years

Buyout cap hit: \$680,600 for the next four years

17. Jay Beagle, Vancouver

The Canucks have way too much money tied up in their depth forwards. Everyone knows this. But what's less clear is which players they should try to punt — and how they should do the punting. Beagle's buyout isn't great, given there's a little bit of buyout protection built-in for 2021-22 with a small signing bonus, but he's also proven to be less useful than some of his contemporaries in Vancouver. Maybe they find a taker in trade in the next two weeks. But maybe not.

Existing cap hit: \$3 million for the next two years

Buyout cap hit: \$1.37 million next year, \$2.37 million in 2021-22 and \$566,667 for two additional seasons

18. Sven Baertschi, Vancouver

Baertschi has been buried for most of the past year and his contract isn't insignificant. The only question is if it's better to leave him in the AHL or going this route, given the savings aren't that different. And the fact that Vancouver's cap crunch could be most significant in 2021-22.

Existing cap hit: \$3.37 million for one more year

Buyout cap hit: \$1.77 million for next season and \$800,000 for 2021-22

19. Loui Eriksson, Vancouver

This contract is probably indestructible, like some of the others we'll get into below. The Canucks would save more by sending Eriksson to the minors than buying him out, at least for next season. Perhaps a buyout in the offseason of 2021 might make more sense, as the cap hit will be \$4 million for the following year, saving them \$2 million on the cap. Or why not a trade, if anyone will take him at half salary. They'll even throw in Beagle.

Existing cap hit: \$6 million for the next two seasons

Buyout cap hit: \$5.67 million next season, \$3.67 million in 2021-22 and \$666,667 for two years after that

20. Braydon Coburn, Tampa Bay

It's hard to know what the Lightning will do with their considerable cap crunch this offseason given they're still, you know, playing to win a Stanley Cup. Coburn's contract isn't cost-prohibitive, but it's more than you can bury in the minors, so they might want to look at different ways to move it. He hasn't played a lot and, at 35, isn't getting any more spry. We folks in our late 30s all know what that's like.

Existing cap hit: \$1.7 million for next season

Buyout cap hit: \$633,333 for next season and \$533,333 for 2021-22

21. Karl Alzner, Montreal

This one feels like a no-brainer at first glance — although it's really not. Alzner has played just 13 games for the Canadiens over the past two seasons combined and he's making \$4.625 million on the cap for another two years. But he has some buyout protection in his deal in the form of a signing bonus that means the Habs will actually get more cap relief this

year by putting him in the minors again (a \$1.075 million deduction) rather than wiping out his contract entirely. So he probably stays in Laval and gets the payout to disappear in offseason 2021.

Existing cap hit: \$4.625 million for the next two seasons

Buyout cap hit: \$3.958 million for next season, \$1.96 million in 2021-22 and \$833,333 in the two subsequent seasons

22. Andrew Ladd, NY Islanders

Again, on the face of it, Ladd would seem to be the perfect candidate. But this is another deeply buyout-protected contract. And another team that really needs some cap space. Ladd has hardly played in the NHL of late, so burying him is going to be the better option, from a cap standpoint. Lou Lamoriello might have to try and find a way to disappear half of his salary to another team by including another asset in a deal. (Johnny Boychuk is in a similar situation, albeit with more NHL games played recently.) Lamoriello did a nice job with all the bad money the Leafs had when he was GM; he now has another tall task here this offseason.

Existing cap hit: \$5.5 million a season for the next three seasons

Buyout cap hit: \$4.83 million for the next three years then \$333,333 for three years

The Athletic / Wheeler: Updated ranking for the 2020 NHL Draft's top 100 prospects

By Scott Wheeler Sep 21, 2020 100

When I released my 'final' 2020 NHL Draft ranking and its accompanying package of content at the beginning of June, it came with an asterisk.

My draft rankings normally drop in five stages annually: a way-too-early list of players to watch out for, a summer top 31, a preliminary top 62 in early November, a midseason top 62 in February and a final top 100 at the end of May or the beginning of June. When the time came to publish that final piece of the puzzle, sticking with that schedule felt like the right decision. We didn't know when the draft would take place or when hockey would return. And I'd just spent a quarantined spring going over tape in what might have even been a more exhaustive year-end evaluation process than usual. Even without additional playoff viewings, and even after cancelling trips to the Frozen Four, U18 worlds and the Memorial Cup, my list felt complete.

But a lot has changed in the three and a half months since. In a normal season, in the month that usually passes between the release of my final ranking and the draft itself, there are minor tweaks that I could make to it following the flow of post-publication messages from coaches, managers and agents. And this time around, I've had more than a quarter of a year to mull over my list, look for things sources have told me to look for in specific players, circle back to watch tape on prospects I saw play less than I would have liked and so on. On that basis alone, the list probably merited a minor update with some small movement. On top of that, though, many of these prospects have also begun to play again (wool!), commencing a second draft season of sorts.

With all that comes with that — new looks at players who just spent a full offseason training, new teams and new listed weights and heights, among other things — also came the need for a more comprehensive update to the ranking.

As always, my draft board includes commentary from coaches and managers on many of the prospects and tape on most others. Though my final top 100 typically only includes commentary and analysis on the top 50 prospects, I have used this extra time to expand the notes to all 100 players.

The updated list includes 68 forwards, 28 defencemen and four goalies.

And here's an updated look at my board's demographics, broken down by nationality and weighted across several tiers:



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Note: While I consult scouts, coaches and managers throughout the year on many of these players, these rankings represent my evaluations of each of the prospects listed. My draft board will vary widely from that of most NHL teams and scouts. This list does not attempt to predict the draft or account for team preference. Many of the players ranked in this top 100 will be available in the final rounds of the draft. Some may not be selected at all. For more insight into my process, check out my guide to scouting.

### 1. Alexis Lafreniere — LW, Rimouski Oceanic, 6-foot-1

Lafreniere wasn't just the most talented player in the CHL in his draft year, he was also probably the strongest on his skates (which says something considering underneath one of his skates was a taped ankle for most of that year). He can play through defenders with his touch and stickhandling ability. He can play around them with his speed and power. Or he can lean on them, leverage his strength, drop his shoulder and drive to his spot. And when he doesn't have the puck, he knows how to get open, where to go to get it and how to engage physically. He has all the tools he needs to be a dominant player with and without the puck at the NHL level.

And though we often hear Lafreniere talked about in terms of the way he facilitates for his linemates (making them look better than they are consistently in the QMJHL), Lafreniere also has a multi-faceted shot that has to be respected. He made waves when he scored 42 goals in his first of three QMJHL seasons but some scouts began to question how dangerous he was as a scorer when his goal pace dropped in each of the next two seasons. I've seen some nice growth there, though. When his production began to skew toward playmaking, it looked more like a choice than a necessity.

He can overpower goalies when he wants to lean into it:

But he also does a good job getting his shot off under pressure or releasing from an off-balance stance:

He could've broken the 50-goal mark across a full season if he wanted to. There were times this year where he looked downright bored out there:

Lafreniere's the real deal. He has been my clear-cut No. 1 prospect since the start of my process for this class and his draft year only worked to widen that gap if anything. In a class that runs nearly 10 star-level prospects deep, he's still a cut above. And though he's not in the generational echelon that Alex Ovechkin, Sidney Crosby and Connor McDavid were at the same age, and may not hit the tier that Nathan MacKinnon or Auston Matthews have hit, he's still a better prospect than many other recent top picks (including Nico Hischier, Aaron Ekblad, and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins), and he did have a better junior career than MacKinnon.

### 2. Quinton Byfield — C, Sudbury Wolves, 6-foot-4

Some scouts soured on Byfield in the second half of 2019-20. I was not one of them. I would chalk up most of that distaste to the creeping effects of overexposure. When a top prospect has been on the scene for years like Byfield has, there's a tendency to begin to look for things to nitpick in their games. For a while, Lafreniere's skating was one such so-called concern. With Byfield, the combination of his unremarkable world juniors, his at-times mediocre defensive play, his proximity to the NHL (he may not make the jump next year) and the strength of the rest of the draft resulted in debates about whether he should be the No. 2 pick.

On one hand, some of those concerns have at least some merit. Lucas Raymond, Alexander Holtz, Tim Stutzle and even Lukas Reichel and John-Jason Peterka all had more of an impact at the world juniors than Byfield did. Meanwhile, his defensive play has never been a highlight of his game, and despite winning more than 50 percent of his faceoffs this year, it's an admitted area of his game that he wants to work on — and that Sudbury staff want him to work on. On the other hand, the list of things I care about when evaluating Byfield has defensive acumen and world junior performance as a 17-year-old in limited minutes somewhere

near the bottom. He's huge, his skating has become enough of a strength that he can push the pace through the middle of the ice, he's got excellent puck skill with his length and he's surprisingly creative for his size. He's also one of the younger players in the draft, so he's got time to figure out the rest. Byfield plays the sport's most coveted position, only turned 18 at the end of August and paced for 124 points across a 68-game OHL season.

You have to go back a long way to find a forward prospect with the exciting physical and finesse tools that Byfield possesses — and should be able to hone on a steep trajectory. You probably have to go back to Evgeni Malkin in 2004 and Eric Staal in 2003 to find forward prospects of similar size and upside — and that includes players like Mikko Rantanen and Blake Wheeler.

### 3. Marco Rossi — C, Ottawa 67's, 5-foot-9

Rossi was busy this summer. He skated with the ZSC Lions. He skated privately with Rob Schremp. He got fully healthy for the first time in a while and worked harder than ever in the gym. And now he has decided against signing in Europe, despite considerable interest, because he, his family, and his agent Serge Payer believe he's going to make his NHL club this winter. Rossi has also reached agreements to practice with the EBEL's Graz99ers and their head coach Doug Mason, as well as the DEL's Straubing Tigers and their head coach Tom Pokel.

I don't know how much more I can say about Rossi. He's not far off from my idea of a perfect hockey player. He can break teams down through seams, he can beat defenders one-on-one both off the cycle (with strength) and the rush (with finesse and touch). He can score with his release or his hands and footwork. He plays in the middle of the ice but knows when to take the outside lane. And he's the best defensive forward in the draft. Some evaluators point to his height and question whether he'll stick at centre, his natural position. Others question his late birthday and dominant Ottawa 67's team for the effect they had on his remarkable production. And while the latter has some effect on my evaluation, the former is lazy and doesn't account for how strong he is or the way his low centre of gravity in his stance helps him fight off bigger defenders. He's also one of the most determined, focused prospects I've ever interacted with and is probably the most NHL-ready player in the draft after Lafreniere, so the team that selects him is potentially getting an impact player from Day 1.

I always come back to Ottawa 67's general manager James Boyd telling me this about Rossi:

"He's a phenomenal player. Phenomenal. A few teams that have picked up on it. I'm biased but I think he's the best player in our league. It's not often you've got a player on your team who is the best offensive player, the best defensive player, the best guy on faceoffs, the best guy on the power play, the best guy on the penalty kill and probably your No. 1 shootout shooter. And the thing is he doesn't cheat, so as the game goes along, he takes over. The No. 1 thing for me is his skating — which was a concern for some people — is phenomenal. Some guys are interested in getting better, he's obsessed. If I told him to eat a pound of sunflower seeds every day because it would help him get to the NHL, he'd be right on it. It's only going to continue. You hear this sort of stuff about Sidney Crosby or Shea Weber when they were juniors, it's almost like a disorder, the striving to get better. I see the same thing in Marco. Nothing's going to stop him."

### 4. Cole Perfetti — LW, Saginaw Spirit, 5-foot-10.5

There's this thing that seems to happen with players who are labelled "smart" where, like those who are labelled "two-way," their skill level doesn't get the love it deserves. But it doesn't have to be one or the other. Perfetti sees the game differently than everyone else in this class. He sees seams others don't. He recognizes the way opposing defenders are reading the zone before the defenders even recognize what they're seeing in that zone. And the more you watch him, the more so-called concerns of strength or speed begin to fade. He has an indescribable knack for finding pockets of space to get open into (or for giving the puck to a linemate just as he enters into one of them). He's one or two steps



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ahead of everyone else. Those things shouldn't discount the rest of his tools, though. Because he grades near the top of this draft class as a stickhandler, individual creator and shooter as well. He's also one of the best draft-eligible prospects off the rush that I've seen in recent memory. And he doesn't just make everyone else better, he can break open a game too. The reasons for ranking him a few spots lower have always been his skating or his strength. At this point, I'm going to keep standing by my evaluation.

He can cleanly beat goalies from the slot every other game:

But he will also spin off a defender and set up a goal from his knees:

People around Perfetti are so bullish about him that a quote like this from his head coach, Chris Lazary, didn't even make my feature about him (which you can read below):

"He's just scratching the surface, specifically with his body. If his body was more advanced, he'd be challenging for the first spot. When you look at this draft class 10 years from now, he'll be one of the top two or three guys."

Neither did this from his general manager, Dave Drinkill:

"In his eyes, the ice is huge and there's a lot of room out there when in reality it's not and he just sees everything different than everyone else."

### 5. Lucas Raymond — RW, Frölunda HC, 5-foot-11

Since the SHL's return, Raymond, finally playing in a role that suits him, has been sensational, frequently looking like one of Frölunda's best players. That play follows a draft year where he never played to that level or wasn't allowed to — or both. He now looks stronger on his feet and a step quicker, which is exactly what he needed to use the summer to work on. His blend of puck-hunting when he doesn't have it and crafty playmaking when he does make him a truly unique player in this class. Raymond is a fearless puck carrier who can pick apart teams in the offensive zone at even strength with a quick stutter or a surprising pass, or run a power play as the primary entry option and quarterback. He'll have to continue to work to get stronger to improve on his mid-level straightaway speed (his footwork is already high-end) and the threat of his shot (his release is deceptive as is), but the rest is there. And while he may be a little further away from his NHL peak than some of his peers, the long-term payoff may also surpass them.

Watch the way he plays through pressure with this little preseason bump pass for a secondary assist that started with him:

I asked Raymond's longtime linemate (with Team Sweden and Frölunda) Karl Henriksson for his scouting report.

"(He's) amazing to watch. Still, in practices you just can't help but go 'wow' at the things he does," Henriksson said. "He's so slick. He just turns defenders. His size is not a problem. My job is to get open. He waits for the perfect opportunity so just have your stick on the ice because it will come."

### 6. Alexander Holtz — RW/LW, Djurgårdens IF, 5-foot-11.5

After finishing the 2019-20 season strong, Holtz picked up where he left off in August and September and then some, looking like a star in most of my recent viewings. Holtz belongs in the conversation for the top five in this draft more than debate in the public and private spheres have given him. In recent months, I have considered ranking him as high as No. 4 here. There's a lot about Holtz's game I believe remains a tad disrespected. Everyone agrees he has power to his game and that he's got arguably the best wrist shot in the draft (his one-timer still needs some work). But some question his small area skill, his quickness, or his playmaking talent. And while he needs to continue to develop his touch in traffic and his first few steps, I would argue the third point is a lot better than he usually gets credit for. Does he need to tunnel vision a little less when he has the puck? Sometimes. But I've seen him feather backhand passes through unsuspecting seams, or feign shot before hitting the backdoor guy with a hard pass across the crease or use the attention his shot gets to hit the trailer off the rush. That will give his game more

dimension than people realize, I suspect. He has already shown he can make an impact at the pro level more than most others near the top of this draft, too. I was particularly impressed with the way he handled being asked to play a new role on the power play (after spending his entire junior career on the flank, Djurgårdens moved him to the slot).

More than the flashy power play goals that he has scored from the left-wing faceoff circle since returning, I've been most impressed by his control through tight quarters at 5-on-5:

When I asked Djurgårdens general manager Joakim Eriksson about Holtz, he too broke down why he thinks there's more to his top young player than just the good shot.

"He has had exceptional talent to score goals among older players his whole life," Eriksson said. "I mean, he has been doing that since he was 10. To be a good goal scorer you can be like Ovechkin and have a good shot, but you also need to be smart about where you position yourself, how you read the game, how you show up for rebounds or going to spots so playmakers can find you. He's a smart player. He's as ready to play the professional level as any young player."

### 7. Tim Stütze — LW, Adler Mannheim, 6-foot-1\*

Stütze is the quickest player in the draft through his acceleration, and maybe at his top speed too. He's also in competition with Jamie Drysdale for having the lightest stride in the class. He looks like he's floating out there and his feet never drag through his crossovers or his pushes. It makes him a threat to make something happen out of a foot race or to burn a defender in transition. He can also play at different tempos, which is a huge asset for a player with that kind of skating ability. Some players who can burn north-south really struggle to slow down the game and put themselves in bad spots with the puck as a result. Stütze isn't one of those players because he can turn a full-speed rush into a quick cut, or have the wherewithal to pull up and hit a secondary option. He's also deceptively strong on his stick and skates.

And while I think there's an argument for his as high as No. 3 in this draft, I think the conversations about him as an equal or better prospect to Byfield don't do a good enough job contextualizing some of the deficiencies in his game. Though he has an accurate shot and the hands needed to beat goalies in tight, he could stand to go to the front of the net more consistently. After an illness sidelined him near the end of the world juniors, he also faded a little in the second half of the season, which was evident in his play and his production down the stretch. When he returned to action this summer with the German national team, he didn't wow in their three-game series with the Swiss.

His transition game remains the most dynamic in the class, though, and the allure of that is understandable so I won't be too fussed about the actual picks on draft day if my top eight or nine prospects are taken in the top 10.

Stütze's got a highlight reel, to be sure, and his latest effort against the Swiss in under-20 action this summer was just another example of what makes him so enticing as a puck carrier:

\*I have used the measurements from NHL Central Scouting's final list for all of the players here but I think it's important to highlight that Adler Mannheim has Stütze listed at 5-foot-11 and that he is not among the players NHLCS said they measured themselves. The NHLCS measurement feels suspect.

### 8. Jamie Drysdale — RHD, Erie Otters, 5-foot-11

Drysdale is the best defenceman in the draft and will likely not be available at eighth overall as a result. I wouldn't fault a team for taking him as high as third (though the Senators won't), either. His lower ranking here has more to do with the impact I believe the forwards ahead of him could — and should — have at the NHL level than it does with any concerns I have about Drysdale's game. He's one of the more effortless skaters the draft has produced in recent memory, with top-tier four-way mobility that helps him close gaps, pivot away from pressure, weave through traffic, and play on his heels when he has to and create lanes for



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his passes or shots. His hands and heads-up vision also help him navigate in all three zones with the puck, run a power play and hit seams when they open up. And though he can occasionally lack power, both in his man-on-man defending and in his shot, he's stronger than he looks. Defensively, his game already has a lot of polish, too. He does a great job disrupting plays with his stick and making quick decisions to move the puck back up ice. He may not have the size or the powerful game needed to become a Norris Trophy-calibre defender but he's got other dynamic qualities that may help him become a No. 1 (if not a very good No. 2) regardless.

"Drysdale's got some fucking size on him," one source insisted to me during the pause.

### 9. Anton Lundell — C, HIFK, 6-foot-1

He has looked good since Liiga's August exhibition return. Good enough that I moved him from the front of a tier that began at No. 9 to the back of my tier that starts at No. 3. It shouldn't surprise anyone that HIFK named him, before his 19th birthday, as one of the team's assistant captains for the 2020-21 season, either. By all accounts, he's mature beyond his years, even considering his late birthday relative to his peers.

There are some misnomers out there about Lundell's talent level and skating as being major concerns in considering him a top-10 pick. I disagree, to varying degrees, on both of those positions. He doesn't have the dynamic qualities of the forwards listed ahead of him on my board, and he's never going to consistently burn defenders off the rush, but he's a better passer than he normally gets credit for, he's heavier on the cycle than most of his peers, he can play through the middle of the ice and he makes decisions and reads quickly, which is just as important (if not more important) as his actual foot speed. It always feels like Lundell is involved and impacting a game (with and without the puck). Throughout a game, that drives results. It shouldn't surprise anyone that as a teenager in a top pro league, Lundell had a positive impact on possession, played more than 15 minutes a night or won 53.5 percent of his draws while producing offence consistently.

In the video below you can see some of the visual cues that might prompt some negative takeaways in watching Lundell. He's got a hunch in his stride and a pitchfork skating stance that he will need to work to clean up.

But where is he through the sequence? He's involved and on the puck. And what is the outcome? Well, it's Lundell finishing high and short-side:

And it has been good to see him build through cuts and attack in transition with his feet more recently, too:

### 10. Noel Gunler — RW, Luleå HF, 6-foot-2

One of the more polarizing players in this draft, Gunler is an unquestionably talented creator who has drawn criticism internally and externally (as well as from Team Sweden) for his shift-to-shift consistency, skating and commitment off the puck. And while I won't dispute some of those concerns (though I would say they're all to various degrees overstated), he also shows regular flashes of high-end skill with the puck, he's got more room to fill out, he contributed as a teenager in a top pro league, he has always dominated his peers and his defensive results were pretty impressive 2019-20. He was a 53.9 CF% player. Luleå outscored their opponents 21-9 (70 percent) with Gunler on the ice at even strength. And he did all of his producing at even strength due to spotty power play usage (he was 17th on the team in average power play time per game at 0:47).

I would argue his straight-line skating is actually an asset. It looks a little weird. Like some others his age, he picks up his stick and pitchforks more than you would like. You'd prefer to see him extending his stick forward in one smooth north-south motion. His stride can look stunted, with his feet dragging through as well. But he creates quite a bit of his offence off the rush and his stride has improved in the last 12 months. His skating regularly helps him create partial breaks or win races as he does on this late-season goal:

He starts low in his defensive zone for this late-season goal off the rush as well (and that release in motion is dangerous):

Gunler could have real value if he falls (a lot like Arthur Kaliyev did) because his reputation gets away from him.

### 11. Yaroslav Askarov — G, SKA-Neva St. Petersburg, 6-foot-3

After bouncing between the KHL and the second-tier VHL to start the new year (due to SKA's depth in net with Alexander Samonov and Magnus Hellberg), Askarov grabbed the KHL reins in relief and a follow-up shutout.

Askarov has pretty much everything teams look for in a goalie. He's one of those rare prospects (along with 2021's Jesper Wallstedt, believe it or not) who is worth taking in the first round. He's big, he's athletic, he swallows rebounds, he can make those tough second-chance recovery saves, he does a good job staying centre, he has an extended domestic and international track record of success and he only turned 18 in June. If I have one concern with his game that kept him out of my top 10, it's the jitteriness I've talked about in his play before. He doesn't load up on his push-off leg like most goalies when he's going post-to-post. Instead, he bounces and hops around the net. And though it's a peculiar trait, he says it works for him in helping to keep him engaged and focused. He also catches right (rare on its own) and despite holding his glove high in his stance, occasionally gets frozen by good shooters. Still, when Askarov is dialled in, his agility — and the compact nature of it at that! — can make him borderline unflappable. Give him a year or two to earn starts in the KHL and I wouldn't be surprised if he comes over a little sooner than some other top Russian goalie prospects have in recent memory.

### 12. Jan Mysak — C, Hamilton Bulldogs/HC Litvinov, 5-foot-10.25

The more I watch Mysak, the more I fall in love with his skill set. He's got pop to his game that most of the players ranked after him here lack. After putting together some spectacular age-adjusted seasons in the Czech Republic, he stepped into the OHL and became a dynamic goal-scoring threat quickly, even if you account for his 22 percent shooting percentage as unsustainable. He plays a straight-line game that could probably use more of an east-west element (particularly in the way he involves his teammates) but he can crack open a shift with the puck on his stick, he's quick from a standstill and he does a wonderful job finding soft spots in the offensive zone to get open. Watch below how he rotates off his defender and swings from behind the net to the slot. He does a great job drifting away from pressure before sneaking back into it and finishing high off his backhand:

I've also come to admire his game away from the puck, which looked worse than it is on a Bulldogs team that had some glaring holes defensively all year. He also looked really good this summer, first with the Czech U20 team in their three-game series with the Slovaks (where he picked up four points and made several high-end plays at top speed) and then professionally with HC Litvinov, where he has been contributing consistently.

### 13. Connor Zary — C, Kamloops Blazers, 6-foot-0.25

Zary plays that middle-lane, tenacious, high-tempo game that every team covets in a centre. His feet are always moving, he pushes the pace, he's engaged on the forecheck and he has enough skill to create as a playmaker and a passer. His footwork through his crossovers and speed in transition (an improved quality) opens up just enough time and space for him to make those plays — and then when that space closes in on him he's a deft handler who can navigate in and out of traffic. Though some scouts are critical of his stride mechanics and there is a little bit of a hitch there, I don't think it impacts his ability to play face or attack from A to B at all. Zary doesn't have the flair of any of the forwards ahead of him or one dynamic quality that can break down defenders and split open a shift but he's a versatile, well-rounded creator who can drive a line. I see a player with a lot of the tools you look for in a second-line player — and I'm confident he's going to work as hard as anyone to get the most out of his game.



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### 14. Seth Jarvis — C/RW, Portland Winterhawks, 5-foot-9.75

For a while, Seth Jarvis looked like a very good prospect but he didn't look like a star prospect. I liked him as a 16-year-old. I liked him down the stretch in 2018-19 as a 17-year-old and into the international schedule last summer. I liked him at the start of his 17-year-old draft year, too. But I didn't love him. Then his second half happened, he became one of the five most dominant forwards in the CHL, and he has been one of the biggest risers on my board since the calendar turned to 2020. By the end of the year, he was an unstoppable force who played — and produced — above and beyond his linemates. I don't tend to like to make comparisons to other players but he's a slick playmaker who reminds me a little of a blend between Nick and Ryan Suzuki. He's got the well-roundedness across his toolbox and the three-zone work ethic that Nick possesses, with some of Ryan's flair for the dramatic. And though I saw the former skills a year ago, I either missed some of that flair or it progressed a little later than his peers. He's just flat out dangerous as a puck-carrier, and though I wouldn't describe him as explosive, he's light and agile, using his edges to create speed and burn defenders on cuts. Despite being a little on the smaller side, he's also an active defensive player who uses his three-stride acceleration to win races from a standstill or smartly escape scrums. His second half screamed star power.

### 15. Jack Quinn — RW, Ottawa 67's, 6-foot

There's nothing in Quinn's game to dislike. Add in dynamic ability as a mid-range shooter, impressive athleticism, and an eye for detail and anticipation, and it's no wonder he broke the 50-goal plateau. You have to consider the strength of his team when accounting for his excellent season, as well as his late birthday. The former, though, is at last slightly offset by his standout performance at the CHL Top Prospects Game and the small list of recent OHL 50-goal scorers in their draft years. Alex DeBrincat and Arthur Kaliyev are the only two draft-eligible OHL forwards to have broken 50 goals in recent memory and both were selected too low in hindsight because other factors snuck into play. And the latter (his age) is also offset by a late-blooming career arc that signals he's just now coming into his own. Quinn demonstrated enough versatility this year to suggest he's got more than just one standout dimension going for him, too. He's also got more room to fill out and get stronger than many of his peers, despite being older than most of them. He has turned a lot of people into believers and I count myself among them. Once he adds a little more muscle, 30-goal upside at the next level should be within reach.

### 16. Mavrik Bourque — C, Shawinigan Cataractes, 5-foot-10.25

If you've followed my work this season, you'll know that Bourque has been one of my favourites in this draft. And though I know some other evaluators who've grown quite fond of his game, this ranking is still probably in the minority (I'd expect him to be available into the late teens or maybe even the 20s). I debated having Bourque as high as No. 12 in recent weeks, so don't let his one-spot drop since June fool you. He's one of those players who just plays fast. He's quick from a standstill. He's agile in high traffic. He can play the puck into space and get to it through bodies and sticks. He reads and reacts before defenders do. And he'll hang onto the puck to beat a defender one-on-one on one shift before stopping up to throw a pass against the grain in the next. Bourque has also consistently made high-end plays without high-end players around him. And his production is in line with many of the CHL players who will likely be selected in front of him. He's not particularly explosive for his size and that may limit his NHL upside, but you don't have to be the fastest player on the ice to play like you're the fastest player on the ice.

### 17. Jake Sanderson — LHD, NTDP, 6-foot-1.5

Some teams have Jake Sanderson ranked in their top five, according to multiple sources, so this ranking stands as a bit of an anomaly. One source argued that he was the best defensive defender in the draft.

And there are things about Sanderson's game and season that can't be disputed. He was excellent in the second half, which is likely linked to his summer birthday and the added runway he had (and still has) to develop

as a result. He's an excellent skater. His ability to generate power through his straight-line push is better than I thought it was at the start of the year. He's a mature, polished defender for his age, not only in the way he defends the rush but also off the cycle with the decisions he makes on reads and pressure. And he plays a hard-nosed style that teams covet. I would, however, dispute his offensive upside. Where some scouts feel he has the potential to become a first-pairing defenceman, I have some reservations. Will Sanderson be able to run a power play as he progresses up levels as he has with the NTDP? In college, yes. In the NHL? I'm not sure he's so dynamic that he's going to be a game-breaking offensive threat or a PP1 guy.

There's no question he can open up his feet and create lanes for himself across the offensive zone blue line:

And there's no question he can lead the rush and pull away in transition:

But I don't see the small area skill that most top-pairing defencemen now have:

Sanderson projects more as a well-rounded second-pairing defender for me and I will track his collegiate career closely to see if he can change my mind. With Senators prospect Jonny Tychonick leaving North Dakota for Omaha next fall and captain Colton Poolman graduating, Sanderson will likely be asked to do a lot as a freshman (assuming UND can play a full season). If the first nine players on my board are gone, I wouldn't scoff at taking Sanderson as high as 10th-overall in this draft.

### 18. Dylan Holloway — LW, University of Wisconsin, 6-foot-0.5

I was high on Holloway a year ago, believing he had a chance at the top 10 in this draft after he looked too fast and strong for the AJHL as a 17-year-old. Then he didn't grab hold of me in my early viewings with the Badgers. And then I saw him play live at Team Canada's selection camp in December, where he was excellent and I followed that up by spending some time with him in Wisconsin and catching another two live viewings at the NCAA level. And when he impressed me in all of those live sessions and I dug deeper on his season at Wisconsin with more tape in recent months, some of the things I'd seen that concerned me out of the gate began to fade. He's a unique athlete in this class, an outstanding skater, a physical presence and a talented scorer with a hard wrist shot. I'd expect a breakout season as a sophomore. It wouldn't surprise me, either, if he quickly becomes an NHL player in the next couple of years, given his A-level skating and advanced physical maturity. He's different than his peers in the 10-20 range in this (in more good ways than bad) and I'm confident he projects safely as a second-line forward who gives a line some punch and pace.

### 19. Dawson Mercer — C/RW, Chicoutimi Saguenéens, 6-foot-0.25

Mercer has learned to maximize everything he has. This isn't to say he isn't talented. He is. But I don't see the typical A-level tools you see in the top 15 or 16 players on my board. Mercer's effective all over the ice by making a lot of little plays with pace and aggression. He attacks defenders when he has the puck. He attacks opposing carriers when he doesn't. He wins more 50/50 battles than he should by getting underneath his man and keeping his feet moving. And then he has enough skill to escape pressure, beat the first defender and make a play. All told, he's probably one of the safer bets to become an impactful NHL player. I would have liked to see him dictate play offensively a little more than he did after a trade to Chicoutimi, though, so that contributed to a bit of a fall over the course of the season and this summer as I continued my review. Players like Jarvis, Holloway, and Sanderson played their best hockey down the stretch, while Mercer plateaued more than you'd hope out of one of the draft's older players.

### 20. Rodion Amirov — LW, Salavat Yulaev Ufa, 6-foot

I had Amirov at No. 20 on my preliminary list, No. 22 at midseason, No. 20 on the first iteration of the final ranking and he's there again. That should probably tell you a couple of things:

I'm pretty confident this is the range he belongs in.



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He didn't exceed my expectations, nor did he fail to meet them. This has been true, again, as hockey has resumed.

The strength of Amirov's game is in his ability to protect the puck and change directions with control. This makes him particularly effective within the offensive zone because I wouldn't say his straightaway speed is all that high end. Amirov is dangerous because he takes what's given to him (he's not a pass-first player but he doesn't tunnel-vision the net as a shooter either), and he can carry the puck into the slot to draw pressure or create for himself.

Watch the way he cuts off the wall to spin his man around and get to a dangerous area on the ice here:

Or the way he changes directions to lose his man, in the same game, here:

Though Amirov struggled in spurts in limited minutes in 2019-20 (a little under 10 per game) in the KHL, his age-adjusted production across each of the last two years in the MHL is impressive and it's matched by an intriguing offensive toolkit. He's got a shot at being a multi-faceted second-line forward.

21. Emil Andrae — LHD, HV71, 5-foot-8.5

Andrae has most of the qualities I look for in a draft-eligible defenceman. He's calm under pressure. He can lead a rush in transition. He has the puck handling ability, east-west vision and four-way mobility needed to run a power play. He's strong on his feet, which he leverages effectively along the wall. He's physical for his size. And he's calculated enough with the puck to recognize when he needs to hang onto it and when he just needs to advance the play (though, like every young player with his talent, he can try to do too much). I have been surprised by the caution so many have about him. If he's available into the second round, I wouldn't hesitate in taking the swing. I also think we'd be having a different conversation about him as a first-round talent if the U18 worlds had taken place. His size and risk-taking approach are normally central to reservations some have with him. I don't see it as much of an issue, though. He's good defensively for his size and we shouldn't mistake his lack of height for a lack of sturdiness.

Plus he has been unbelievable since the restart. If anyone's play in the last two months has helped their draft stock, Andrae creating goals every time he touched the ice in the SHL preseason has to be at the top of that list.

This is NHL skill:

And how about the right-to-left tracking to walk into space and rip an NHL shot here?

I asked HV71 head coach Nicklas Rahm for his evaluation of Andrae's game at the SHL level this season. Here's what he said:

"He played his game. His game is a high-risk game. When he played under-20s, there was a lot of big risk in his game and the reward is always there. And we talked about it when he came up and he adjusted that. He still did his big things out there and the crowd loved him but he took down the risk level and when it wasn't there, he didn't take it. That's what I like most about him. And he could handle the physical game. When he's not ready for a hit, he's on his ass. But if he's ready for a battle, he's pretty strong actually. He's got a low balance. I think he can have a really good year (next) year."

And here's HV71 general manager Peter Ekelund on Andrae:

"Emil was not nervous at all (last season). He likes to keep the puck and he kept playing the way he played in juniors, even when he came up to the SHL. And even if he made some mistakes, he didn't change his game. He did what he was good at."

That confident play continued through HV71's preseason schedule after the restart, which included a three-assist game on Aug. 29.

22. Hendrix Lapierre — C, Chicoutimi Saguenéens, 5-foot-11.5

If the break benefited anyone, it might be Lapierre. Now, concerns over his missed time are concerns that we ought to have over ever player's missed time (especially when you consider that the QMJHL is back earlier than the OHL and WHL). Plus he has come back fully healthy, with even fewer concerns about re-injury. It has shown in preseason, including his four-point debut when he scored nearly identical goals by attacking the middle lane and adjusting the release point on his shot:

As I write this, Lapierre leads the QMJHL's preseason with seven points in three games.

Lapierre had previously lost his draft season due to an unresolved neck injury. Before injuries brought the future of his career into question, Lapierre was a top-15 talent in this draft, maybe even top 10. He's a puck-dominant carrier who can transport the puck up the ice (or across it) with a sharp pass through a seam as well as his feet and hands. He's the kind of player every team wants running their power play. And when he doesn't have the puck, he'll chase it down to get it back and keep offensive zone sequences alive. Concerns about his projection should be more about all of the development time he lost than his health, though (see my story below for more detail on why).

Here's Saguenéens head coach and general manager Yanick Jean's scouting report:

"He plays with speed and he makes plays. He's a playmaker. He makes everybody around him better. He can make a play out of nothing. He sees the ice as good as anyone. His vision is off the charts."

23. Jeremie Poirier — LHD, Saint John Sea Dogs, 6-foot-0.5

Poirier may be the most dynamic offensive defenceman in the draft. From the offensive zone blue line in, he can create in more ways than most forwards. He's got a better shot and more one-on-one skill. But he also takes more risks to create those chances, his game lacks defensive detail, his decision-making is often suspect and he can fade in and out of games without the puck. He's a boom-or-bust type. He is. But he also scored 20 goals as a late-birthday defender and that extra time could help iron out some of the D-zone kinks, which by all accounts he's committed to doing. I've also seen him defend well when he's surrounded by better players and the stakes are higher, whether that's with Team Canada or at the top prospects game.

Some sources have suggested Poirier's going to slip into the second round as teams begin to draft safer NHL bets in the 20s but I'm not those no-fuss players teams love to take in the late-first round are a worthwhile investment with that asset. Trust your development team to work with a player who has obvious, enviable skill. Be bold. Be the team that identifies a market inefficiency, takes the risk, and has the success story to tell for it. If the alternatives are such safe bets, they wouldn't be available in the 20s or 30s to begin with.

24. Lukas Reichel — LW, Eisbaren Berlin, 6-foot

Early on in 2019-20, I was more impressed in my first DEL viewings of countryman J.J. Peterka than I was of Reichel. But as the year progressed, Reichel just continued to take steps while Peterka's didn't. Peterka plays a heavier, more net-driven game (more on him later), while Reichel has a finesse and touch to his game that makes him more dangerous both off the rush and inside the offensive zone. The more I watch him, the more I appreciate the way his heads-up style allows him to impact the game as both a scoring threat and a creator for his linemates. There's a comfort level about his game that I admire. He doesn't rush plays under pressure. To have that assertiveness on the ice against professionals this early in his career is impressive. Reichel hasn't missed a beat since play began resuming this summer, either, and looked more dangerous than Stützle in Germany's under-20 games against Switzerland, even though he had to carry his own line while Germany's other two top draft-eligibles played together.

Add in standout skating (especially through his crossovers), a May birthday and room to add some muscle and there are a lot of reasons to believe he will continue to progress.



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### 25. Jacob Perreault — C, Sarnia Sting, 5-foot-11

Perreault has mystified me over the last two years. There are stretches in games where he can look slow from a standstill and a little heavy-footed. There are others where, once he gets moving, he shows some real speed and can burn defenders. There are shifts where he looks competitive and engaged off the puck and others where he gets caught looking a little too passive. On talent, he should be more than he is – and higher on my board, given the things I tend to look for in a player. He's got one of the better shots in the draft (behind Holtz and Quinn but few others). It pops off his stick and cleanly beats goalies consistently. It's also among the most accurate shots in the draft. Perreault is the king of finishing up high from tough angles like this one:

Or this one:

But he forces plays too often and I worry some of his junior hockey flashes won't translate. He just leaves me wanting more than he should and he can look off good options to try to get into scoring positions that aren't there. He could be a player I regret not having a few spots higher but I'll stand by this assessment.

### 26. Helge Grans — RHD, Malmö Redhawks, 6-foot-2.5

Grans' game still needs some refining but there's a lot to like about his raw tools. He's long, he can skate, he handles the puck well for his size, he can make plays as a passer on outlets or through seams in the offensive zone, and there's a confidence to his game that enables him to take risks and execute. It doesn't hurt that he's right-handed or that he dominated a top junior league as a 17-year-old, either. His skating will need to continue to progress as his feet can look heavy though. And I would like to see him clean up some of his mistakes with and without the puck (he turns it over a little too much for my liking and can get caught puck-watching defensively). But once he matures and tidies up some of that sloppiness, he's got a chance at serious upside. The combination of skill, production, size, age and handedness is worth betting on. He's just going to have to cut out sequences like this (Grans is No. 2 in white, turning the puck over below the goal line):

### 27. Kasper Simontaival — RW, Tappara, 5-foot-9

Simontaival's one of the prospects in this draft I'm most comfortable sticking my neck out to defend. After wowing me late last season and into the beginning of his draft year, I started to nitpick Simontaival's game in the middle section of the season because he didn't make the jump to Liiga. But he was so dominant down the stretch and into Finland's Jr. A playoffs that I still think he's a first-round talent in this class — or at the very least an early second. That isn't an opinion that's widely shared, though, and he's quite likely to fall much further than he should. The risk with Simontaival is that he doesn't have that extra straight-line gear you'd hope for in a smaller winger. The rest of his skill set is too high-end to ignore, though.

I'm particularly fond of his game along the wall and his low centre of gravity through the base of his stride, both of which help him absorb contact and make plays off the wall to the interior. Watch the way No. 38 in blue fights off stick checks and bumps to escape the wall with control, attack the net, draw pressure and then feed the point ahead of the goal below. Notice, too, the way he fights back to the front of the net (he scored a surprising number of goals on tips and redirects this season for someone who is 5-foot-9):

And watch the way he slices off the wall, cuts to the net and shows off some creativity with an unsuspecting backhand pass back against the grain to set up a tap-in here:

Or the way he darts off the boards to the middle of the ice at the start of this sequence, before creating a goal with a blind pass at the end of it:

It would be one thing if these plays were handpicked highlights throughout a season. They would still be impressive, but it would be easy to chalk them up to the level of his opposition. But all three of those sequences are from his final three games of 2019-20, in a playoff setting.

He makes these plays every game and he makes them often enough that I've come to believe he will eventually translate it at the pro level.

### 28. Lukas Cormier — LHD, Charlottetown Islanders, 5-foot-9.5

Cormier kicked off his QMJHL preseason with a four-assist game (all primary!). He was drafted into the QMJHL as a top prospect (fourth overall in 2018), he has played like that top prospect ever since, and yet I'm weirdly confident that he's going to be available well into the second round because he's perceived as small. If he were two inches taller, there's no question he's a first-round pick. Cormier's an excellent handler in transition and across the offensive zone blue line, where he rotates and pivots his way into lanes. He doesn't shy away from playing a physical style, despite being on the smaller side. He was a go-to option for the Islanders as a rookie, which earned him a spot on the QMJHL's all-rookie team. And he followed that up with consistency to his game as a sophomore that many of the other top D in this class lack. He's also a standout defender in his own zone, as well as off the rush and has shown he can drive results on a mediocre team at both ends. After missing six weeks with a lower-body injury that sidelined him from the middle of October until early December, Cormier came back and looked like one of the best defencemen in the QMJHL the rest of the way. I wasn't surprised when he was invited to Team Canada's virtual national development camp this summer (though once source told me he was).

### 29. Zion Nybeck — LW, HV71, 5-foot-6.5

Yes, that's Nybeck's listed height by NHL Central Scouting, who confirmed that's one of their measurements (he has been listed an inch or two taller elsewhere). And yes, I still have him ranked in my first round. He's that good. Nybeck now owns some of the most impressive age-adjusted numbers of the last decade in SuperElit, Sweden's top junior level. If this were a list ranked for the most fun viewing experiences, he's a top-five player. Though there will be more risk in a Nybeck pick than in many others I have ranked around him, I'd bet on the reward and take my chances. There aren't many players in this draft who could do whatever they wanted in their respective leagues. Lafreniere did in the QMJHL. Carter Savoie did in the AJHL. Veeti Miettinen did in Finland's junior ranks. But it's a small list. That's the level Nybeck got to in one of the top junior leagues in the world. And he does it without ever really looking small. I've seen him slide under or around enough big defender along to believe he'll be able to manage the pro game. Players his size need exceptional puck skills to get by at the next level. He has that. He can spend entire shifts with the puck on his stick. He's always going to be a little limited in the ways he can impact play in his own zone but he's so opportunistic in the other two zones that I'll take my chances.

My one concern with projecting Nybeck to the NHL is more about his top speed than his size. He'll have to get a little quicker to maximize his potential. But as I explain in my full evaluation of his game below, he manages that deficiency well — and there's no need to rush him to the NHL.

### 30. Roni Hirvonen — C/LW, Assat, 5-foot-9

After dominating Finland's top junior level in 2018-19, Hirvonen was one of the only players in this draft to spend the entire season at the pro level. Though his performances in my viewings throughout the season were mixed, Hirvonen has always dominated against his peers (domestically and internationally) and I saw enough in his play at the Liiga level down the stretch to believe in time there might be second-line upside to his game. Hirvonen's greatest asset has become his ability to find space in the offensive zone to get open. He does an excellent job rotating off defenders to keep his feet moving and slide into dangerous spots. And though I wouldn't say his shot is a major asset or that he has the lower body strength of a player like Simontaival, Hirvonen has the skill to finish off plays around the net when he gets open. And when he's not in a position to score, his skill comes to the forefront as a creator for his linemates. He will need to pick up a step and get a little stronger, but he plays a modern, crafty game, and his edge work is a strength.

Watch the way No. 22 in white opens up his hips and protects the puck on this assist in Liiga preseason action:



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### 31. Kaiden Guhle — LHD, Prince Albert Raiders, 6-foot-2.25

When I was doing the reporting for my story on Carter Savoie and Mike Benning, their trainer Barry Butt, who also works with the Guhle brothers and Blackhawks 2019 third overall pick Kirby Dach, went out of his way to highlight Kaiden Guhle's freakish athleticism in the gym. In a group of the world's top young players, he stands above the rest. If you've watched Guhle closely, this shouldn't surprise you. He's one of the smoothest-skating defencemen in the class and he pushes opposing players around along the wall (and occasionally the rush). Concerns about his skill level continue to keep him just outside my top 31 (he has a heavy shot but he's not a playmaker and his handling still needs a bit of work when he's working in small areas) but Guhle will be a first-rounder and I wouldn't fault a team for taking him in the early 20s. While I don't see power play upside, his defensive game is already pretty refined. Guhle's skating is going to be an asset at the NHL level too – he can probably stand to get even stronger without sacrificing it – and if he can build upon a decent but unspectacular foundation offensively, he could become a second-pairing guy.

"If you look at the guys who are NHL ready in this draft, I would say he's top five. Because physically he's already there," one source said of Guhle.

### 32. Carter Savoie — LW, Sherwood Park Crusaders, 5-foot-9.25

On pure, raw skill, most evaluators will agree that Savoie is a first-round talent. But, like a couple of the other players I have in this range, other concerns will likely contribute to his availability in the second or third round. Some question his commitment off the puck, his shift-to-shift effort levels and his defensive game. I don't disagree. Savoie can fade in games in a big way. He plays too high in his own zone. He drifts up ice ahead of the play looking for a pass. It can be frustrating to watch. But he's also one of the only players in the draft who can come out of an unremarkable game with two goals because all he needs is a split second. With the puck on his stick, Savoie's one of those players who can make defenders and goalies look silly. He regularly scores under the bar from some of the worst angles in the offensive zone. He's a lethal catch-and-release shooter who I expect will, in time, put up big numbers in college at Denver. He always seems to find ways to get the puck and make something happen with it. You can't teach that. You can teach some of the other stuff, though.

### 33. Thomas Bordeleau — C, NTDP, 5-foot-9.5

The most consistent offensive threat in his NTDP age group, Bordeleau is an imaginative creator who has learned to pick apart teams in the offensive zone with his blend of puck skill, cross-ice vision and ingenuity. I wouldn't say he's particularly dynamic as a scoring threat (his shot is accurate but I wouldn't label it as powerful) but he's a threat to make something out of nothing with the puck on his stick, he's capable of beating goalies 1-on-1 with his hands and he's deceptively strong on the puck for his size. I suspect it's going to take him a couple of years at the University of Michigan before he hits his stride and adds the strength he needs to take his game (and his speed) to the next level. He's got first-round talent, though, and he's probably a top-31 draft-eligible for me if he were a little bigger.

### 34. Tyson Foerster — C/RW, Barrie Colts, 6-foot-1.5

I watched Foerster play a few times in minor hockey, while reporting a story on Byfield, and he looked every bit the player his counterpart did (at least in those games). I'd decided, back then, that I was going to track him closely. And his stellar draft year fit in with the progression you would have hoped for back then. Foerster was a driver of offence on a team that needed it in Barrie in 2019-20 and he just kept getting better as the year went along. When it was all said and done, his 80 points ranked fifth among first-year draft eligibles in the OHL. I was particularly impressed by his second half when, after the Colts dealt the bulk of their core, he continued to produce. He was also impressive at the CHL Top Prospects Game, where he made a trio of superb plays off the rush. After the Colts traded Ryan Suzuki on Jan. 10, Foerster went on a 13-game point streak to close out the season with 33 points in his final 25 games. He's an

excellent shooter (the puck just rips off of his stick), particularly in catch-and-release scenarios in motion. There's also some physicality to his game that it's a little understated. I worry his skating and pace of play may not be high-end enough to reach his true potential, but if he can make some progress there, he's got the rest. He handled tough matchups beautifully after playing a depth role as a rookie. He reminds me a little of Connor McMichael during his draft year a year ago. And if Foerster can put together a post-draft season anywhere near McMichael's, he'll land even higher than this in a re-draft.

### 35. Brendan Brisson — C, Chicago Steel, 5-foot-10.75

I spent a decent amount of time this summer reviewing Chicago Steel games to try to make sense of where their various 2020 and 2021 prospects stand out in their own ways, and where they were a product of their team, and it became increasingly clear that Brisson, a player I've always liked but could never give a first-round ranking, was the driver there. Consistency is a hard thing to measure but it continues to come to mind when I think about Brisson. He's not the kind of player who controls a game with any one skill. He's not the kind of player who will rattle of five or six points in a junior hockey game — at least not as consistently as some top prospects do. Despite having an A-level one-timer, he's not a volume shooter (though some of that was driven by the way the Steel play, which isn't a pucks-on-net style). Still, at the end of his first year in the USHL, there he was, second in the league in scoring as arguably the best player on the best team. I suspect his adjustment to the college game may be a little slower than expected given where he's likely to be picked (which could be higher than where I have him ranked) but he's got a spatial awareness to his game that should help him blossom into a dominant college player in time. He reads and reacts to pressure at one of the highest levels in this draft with the puck on his stick, which helps him navigate in and out of trouble to make the small plays that drive results.

### 36. William Wallinder — LHD, MODO, 6-foot-4

When you're 6-foot-4 and your four-way mobility is a strength, you've got my attention. Wallinder still has some work to do to round out his game with the puck. He can look off-balance through his shot, which speaks to some technique that needs cleaning up because he's not getting the most out of his big frame. But he can make plays in transition, his head is always up, he's got enviable length and he's only going to get better. The combination of his late July birthday and his exciting combination of skills suggests he's just scratching the surface, too. There's more work to be done with Wallinder's game than there is with the other top D in this draft, though. He makes a lot of mistakes with the puck from the offensive zone blue line in and I've seen some boneheaded reads (though I would say he's more polished in his own zone than a player like Grans). Whichever team takes him will be trusting their player development program to tap into his obvious upside. Wallinder was impressive in Team Sweden's U20 schedule and it was good to see him asserting himself offensively (he executed a couple of tough backdoor passes) against his peers. If he can build on his offensive tools, then I won't be surprised if he's a first-round talent when I re-draft this class three years.

### 37. Veeti Miettinen — RW, Kiekko-Espoo, 5-foot-9

Miettinen might be the player I diverge on the most from the consensus. He was widely unranked in the public sphere for a while, finished 72nd among European players on NHL Central Scouting's list (a ranking that suggests they believe he may not even be worth picking) and has produced mixed reviews in some conversations I've had with other scouts. I don't get it, though. Were he not committed to St. Cloud State, he would've played – and had an impact, I'm convinced – in Finland's top pro-level in 2019-20. If I could name an SM-Liiga MVP, he'd be my easy choice. Not only did he lead the league in scoring by 12 points, but he also led his team in scoring by 24. And even if you consider the fact that he's a September birthday and you go back a year, he led his SM-Liiga team in scoring as a 17-year-old a year ago, outproducing Hirvonen on the Blues' under-20 team. He has also consistently performed well for Team Finland internationally. Miettinen needs to get stronger and he'll be a project but college will afford him that time and I expect him to have an



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immediate impact. He plays fast and hard and there's no denying his skill. He's going to change some minds. When I watch him play, I see one of the best releases in the draft.

He can also play in traffic and shoot off both feet:

Or with a snap shot in motion that surprises and regularly freezes goalies:

And a standstill wrist shot that has the same effect:

He's got the imagination, the puck skill, the poise and the shot to succeed at the NHL level. He's one of my favourites in this class and could well end up as a late-round steal.

38. Braden Schneider — RHD, Brandon Wheat Kings, 6-foot-2.25

In his own zone, Schneider's one of the better defensive defencemen in this draft. He uses his length and strength well off the rush, too, but his biggest asset is his ability to take away time and space in the defensive zone, close out the wall, win puck battles and advance the play back up ice with a quick outlet. After three full seasons in the WHL, I would've liked to see a little more out of his puck game to rank him in the first round (where he will likely be picked), though. He has a hard point shot when he uses it but I would like to see him attack off the line more than he does. He's closer to turning pro than most and will be a penalty killer at the pro level, which some of these other defencemen will not be, but next year will be big for his development and I'll be watching closely to see if he can create at a higher, more consistent level. His skating is fine for his size and won't hold him back, but I wouldn't say it's a huge asset either (I'm a little lower on his mobility than most that way). I fear that a lot of his success stems from his physical maturity, which will become less of an asset against pros.

39. William Villeneuve — RHD, Saint John Sea Dogs, 6-foot-1

Villeneuve, like Miettinen, is a player whose public and private consensus perplexes me relative to what I've seen. I suspect a lot of it comes back to his frame and his skating. He'll need to fill out to take advantage of his tools and be more than just a dominant offensive defenceman at the junior level. But despite lacking some muscle, I like his defensive game a lot. He reads and anticipates the play well, which helps him break up a lot of sequences and use his skill to make plays the other way. He doesn't have the pop of teammate Jeremie Poirier but he was a second overall pick in the QMJHL draft, excelled at U17s for Canada and just led his junior team in scoring as a defenceman (his 58 points also led all QMJHL D). He's comfortable and confident with the puck, uses his teammates better than Poirier does, possesses excellent edge work across the offensive zone blue line and is a zone-exit and entry machine (particularly as a passer, though also as a carrier). Once he gets stronger and adds some more power, it will only enhance some of his other skills, whether that's his shot (all nine of his goals were at even strength this year because he was a set-up man on the PP) or his man-on-man defending along the wall. There's a risk that strength never comes. Some never add it. But it's a gamble worth taking. His selection to the QMJHL's second all-star team speaks to the respect he has earned within his league. Lost on some, though, is that Villeneuve played much of his 16-year-old season with mononucleosis and missed just 10 games because the team wasn't aware of it. Sea Dogs staff believe that impacted six full months of his development relative to the rest of the draft class.

Sea Dogs assistant Stefan Legein believes Villeneuve shouldn't fall as far as his No. 99 NHL Central Scouting ranking (among North American skaters) suggests he might.

"I don't think he gets out of the second," Legein said. "It seems like there's way more upside than a hitch in the stride."

Sea Dogs general manager Trevor Georgie argues people who saw him early in the year probably didn't take into account that his slow start was due to a lost summer.

"I'm not an NHL GM or head scout but I don't think you're going to be mistaken on your assessment and I know some teams have Poirier and

Villeneuve a lot closer than other teams. I'm not even going to get into how underrated and how underappreciated William Villeneuve is. Villeneuve is captain material so any team that puts any stock in character, I think he's severely underrated," Georgie said. "He's not the strongest skater but his ability to read plays and make good decisions is very, very high. And because he's not the most beautiful skater, people don't give him the benefit of the doubt. Plus he's playing alongside Jeremie Poirier, who you can't take your eyes off of. He's smart, he's cerebral, he controls the puck well, he's got a great one-timer on the power play that hasn't been used yet as he gets stronger. I mean, he broke every record for a Sea Dogs defenceman apart from goals, which was Poirier. He's underappreciated. He wasn't a nominee for defenceman of the year by accident."

40. Daniil Gushchin — LW, Muskegon Lumberjacks, 5-foot-8.25

One of my favourite little balls of fire, Gushchin was named to the USHL's third All-Star team after a season as Muskegon's engine. He never stops moving, he's relentless on the forecheck, he plays bigger than he is and once he chases down loose pucks, he's got the skill and the agility to dart through traffic to make plays. I've never seen him play a bad game. He's one of those players who always brings energy and even when he's not scoring or setting up goals, he's normally creating chances and buzzing around the offensive zone to manufacture offence. He likely falls into the middle of the draft because of the risks associated with taking a small player who hasn't put up gaudy numbers but I see a lot of elements an NHL team could work with to craft a middle-six winger. I'm selfishly looking forward to having him a little closer to me base out of Toronto next season, too (COVID-permitting), after the Niagara IceDogs took him fourth overall in the CHL import draft. The OHL is the right path for him and gives him two full seasons to put up points, work to dominate a new level, and get stronger. He's a project, so there's no rush.

"Offensively and how he sees the game is unbelievable. He's got to improve a little in his defensive zone but he's a complete workaholic," said Lumberjacks head coach Mike Hamilton. "I think there are some big things to come for him. He's a really good kid and I'm excited for what he's going to become."

"Daniil has world-class skill. Russians get this stereotype that they don't like to play defence and he doesn't mind helping out in his own zone," said Lumberjacks assistant coach Ryan Kosecki. "I think Daniil's draft stock is just going to rise throughout the year and he's going to end up sneaking in the high second round or late first."

41. Michael Benning — RHD, Sherwood Park Crusaders, 5-foot-8.75

Benning can make hockey look effortless. Think Rasmus Sandin or Samuel Girard, players who've always produced while making it look easy. The puck just flows through him. There's an ease and comfort to the way he plays. He sees right through pressure when the puck is on his stick and makes a ton of small area plays. You have to keep his stacked team, his league and his size in context when you're evaluating him. There's no question about that. But even still, it's not hard to imagine him controlling a college game, leading the rush and running Denver's top power play unit. His athleticism also helps him compensate for the length that he lacks. He had two seasons for the ages at the Jr. A level and if he falls into Rounds 3 or 4, he could provide real value.

42. Sean Farrell — LW, Chicago Steel, 5-foot-8.5

Farrell was a tricky player to evaluate this year because he was a passer on one of the more loaded teams in recent junior hockey history. It's easier to identify talent in scorers on teams like the Steel than the other way around. You can question a player who racks up assists on a roster that's way more talented than the one on the other side of the ice. Then you consider that he's on the smaller side and it's no wonder some scouts have their doubts. I'm not one of them though. He impressed me in the two years that preceded his draft campaign with the NTDP and he was more of a driver than a passenger in my Steel viewings in 2019-20. He reminds me a little of his future Harvard teammate (and Steel alum) Nick Abruzzese for the way he navigates the offensive zone and finds teammates in soft pockets for scoring chances. I think you'll begin to see



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him attack more in a different role, too, which might massage some of the concerns scouts have with his game — as Abruzzese did as a freshman.

43. John-Jason Peterka — LW, EHC Munchen, 5-foot-11

Peterka's one of those players that just screams "complementary third-line forward." Early on this season, he was one of my favourite prospects in the draft for his ability to play with strength and pace all over the ice. He's a middle-lane driver who shoots a lot and works to get to the front of the net to finish off plays. He's just naturally athletic and it fits well with his up-tempo, north-south game. As the season progressed, though, he never really showed me he had the tools to be more than that. There are times when I want to see him slow down, or he needs to survey the ice and use his teammates better. His play, role and minutes all went cold late in the season. It can look like he's playing on instinct out there. That works for some players. It works for J.J. too but it may limit his upside.

He has the speed, the drive and the strength:

44. Ryan O'Rourke — LHD, Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds, 6-foot

I still worry about resetting this ranking. I agonized over where to rank O'Rourke. He's definitely in the same tier of D prospects as the handful of defenders who rank directly ahead of him here. He's got a real case as a late-first/early second-rounder. The strength of O'Rourke's game is his ability to defend players on the breakout and stretch the ice as a passer. I grew to appreciate the role physicality plays in his game defensively, too. He plays a hard game along the wall and if you can live with some of the penalties that come with it, it makes him an effective man-on-man option who can assert himself over the course of a game. He also became a big driver for the Greyhounds defensively, which can't be said of every CHL defenceman on my board.

Plus, he's got some underrated deception to his game (look for the shoulder fake below) from the blue line in:

I saw him make some great plays off the rush this year, too:

My ongoing concern with O'Rourke's game, if I have one, is that on a team with a trio of other defencemen with some offensive skill, he never managed to make himself the clear-cut go-to guy for offensive zone usage. To be comfortable in taking a player in the first round, I want to see them separate themselves from their teammates. We'll see.

45. Ty Smilanic — C, NTDP, 6-foot-1

Smilanic entered the year expected to lead this NTDP age group offensively. Unfortunately, a bout with mono, a high ankle sprain and a broken hand worked against some of those high hopes. After the BioSteel All-American Top Prospects Game, Smilanic spent the back half of the season with a cast on his top hand and the mitt of his glove cut out so that he could grip the knob. Eventually, NHL Central Scouting sent out a note to inform teams that he was playing injured. I was told that among his four outside fingers, only the index wasn't in the cast. When he's on, he's got four-way quickness, standout puck protection skill and a knack for finishing plays around the net. Watch the way he shields the puck, leans with his lead shoulder, attacks the front of the net and finishes his own rebound here:

Smilanic is one of those players who could take a pronounced step, build upon his skill set, and surprise some people.

46. Justin Barron — RHD, Halifax Mooseheads, 6-foot-1.5

It was hard to get a read on Barron this season. He played on a (rare) bad team in Halifax and battled injuries throughout. He has always been a top prospect and has long played with a maturity you don't often see in 16- and 17-year-olds. But he didn't really get the opportunity to progress like much of his peers, his game plateaued when he was in the lineup and I'm just a little hesitant to project him one way or the other these days. I'm just more confident in the players who are ahead of him here. He was excellent a year ago and I wouldn't fault a team for considering him late in the first round or early in the second. There's nothing about his game that will grab you but he does everything well. I'll be keeping a close eye on him next year. He's a Hockey Canada favourite, so if he

gets off to a strong start, he'll probably be on Team Canada for the world juniors.

47. Martin Chromiak — RW, Kingston Frontenacs, 5-foot-11.5

Outside of his international showings (which were impressive), I hadn't done a ton of homework on Chromiak before he made the move from his longtime Slovak club team to the OHL to join the Fronts, who'd taken him second overall in the import draft. He made an immediate impression, though. After a two-point debut, he became Kingston's second-most dangerous offensive threat behind rookie sensation Shane Wright. He's a multi-dimensional threat in the offensive zone, he showed he could create both in an instant and through the cycle, and I've been impressed in some more recent viewings with his craftiness through the neutral zone as a carrier. When he keeps his feet moving and plays to the inside, he's a ton of fun to watch.

Former Fronts head coach Kurtis Foster went into detail about Chromiak's transition to the OHL midway through the season.

"He showed right from the beginning his skill level is top-notch. His shot is elite, his hockey sense is elite, but it was a big adjustment, especially to the size of the rink and the schedule where you play three-in-three after coming from a league where you only play twice a week. But he's quiet and he works every day. It's almost like the three of them just played well together because they all kind of do their own thing. Shane makes plays, can skate, Chromiak's a skilled shooter, and then (Zayde Wisdom) is a relentless forechecker."

48. Marat Khusnutdinov — C, SKA-1946 St. Petersburg, 5-foot-11

On a loaded team that didn't play him on the top line or top power play unit for much of the season, Khusnutdinov put together an impressive rookie season in the MHL — and did it while spending the entire year as a 17-year-old. Khusnutdinov makes plays all over the ice. He's a responsible three-zone player, he doesn't shy away from playing to the interior, he's got enough skill to make plays from the exterior and he tracks the play exceptionally well. That last tool helps him intercept pucks or find space in the offensive zone. He's a long-term project but I see a player who continues to maximize his skillset and makes the most out of his career. The Erie Otters, who selected him in the 2019 import draft, elected to retain his rights this summer.

Khusnutdinov, however, spent some time as an extra forward for SKA to start the KHL season, which included some shifts in the third period of a few preseason games. SKA also didn't loan him to Russia's under-20 team for the Sochi Open, which suggests they're high on him and felt sticking with the team was better for his development. He's playing above a point per game to start the MHL season — now in a larger role — too.

49. Connor McClennon — RW, Winnipeg ICE/Karlskrona HK, 5-foot-7.75

McClennon made some waves at the beginning of September when he and fellow WHL prospect Ridly Greig signed together to play for Karlskrona HK in Hockey Ettan, Sweden's third tier of pro. This followed a strong second half to last season when I finally began to consistently see the high-end skill that made McClennon one of the top minor hockey players in the country a few years ago. The world saw it at U17s, but we'd never really seen it — at least not game-to-game — in the WHL. His size remains a concern. Making it at 5-foot-9 in today's game is one thing, making it at more than an inch shorter is still pretty rare. He looks smaller out there, too. But his skill with the puck is impressive. McClennon stickhandles through tough seams or around flatfooted defenders with ease. And he's got a unique ability to bounce off checks. When the puck's on his stick, he's one of the more dynamic players in this draft. He's a problem solver who finds ways to make things happen. There's enough NHL skill to his game that he might just be able to overcome his obvious size deficiency.

50. Justin Sourdif — RW, Vancouver Giants, 5-foot-10.75

After really impressing me late in the 2018-19 season and into the summer of before his draft year, I kept waiting for Sourdif to find another gear this year. He's a very good junior player as is. With enviable speed,



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he can make plays off the rush. You notice him when he's on the ice because he plays fast and loose. On a Giants team that lacked talent up front, Sourdif was a go-to player and relied-upon creator. In his best games, he was dominant and controlled shifts by coming at teams in waves. But he'll need to get stronger to reach his ceiling as there were games where teams swarmed him and he was neutralized, even though he's up to the physical challenge and has some snarl to his game. He was a third overall pick in the WHL's bantam draft, has shown flashes of NHL pop, but just hasn't fully sold me on how that game is going to fit in at the NHL level quite yet. It shouldn't surprise anyone if he's near the top of the WHL scoring race in 2020-21, though.

51. Jake Neighbours — LW, Edmonton Oil Kings, 5-foot-11.5

I wouldn't say that Neighbours is a particularly explosive or agile skater, nor does he have some of the dynamism in his handling required to earn first-round marks for me. But he's strong on the puck, I expect him to take a step as a goal scorer next season (he's pretty dangerous from mid-range), he gets to his spots as a shooter with ease at the junior level because he's physically mature and capable in puck protection out wide to his body and he does a good (maybe even great) job identifying pressure and playing through layers as a passer. If he can work to lighten his stride, it will go a long way to taking a well-rounded offensive game to the next level. I just want to see him pull away from back checkers a little faster from a standstill or cut through lanes without pushing himself off balance through his core because his footwork is a little clumsy. The rest of his skill, in line with his production, will result in him being picked higher than where I have him ranked.

52. Ozzy Wiesblatt — RW, Prince Albert Raiders 5-foot-9.75

Wiesblatt has impressed me since Day 1 in Prince Albert. He was a regular contributor on a stacked Raiders team last year and he stepped into a more prominent role with the team, in the absence of their five leading scorers of a year ago (Brett Leason, Noah Gregor, Parker Kelly, Sean Montgomery and Cole Fonstad, who was traded early in the season) and excelled against tough matchups. Wiesblatt is strong for his size, playing through contact to maintain control and keep plays alive when defenders are leaning on him. I like his ability to play in traffic, both when he finds himself in tough spots and has to navigate out of trouble and when he decided to take the play at opposing defenders to attack the slot for a shot (which he gets off quickly from his heel) or draw attention to open up his teammates.

53. Vasilii Ponomaryov — C, Shawinigan Cataractes, 5-foot-10.25

When I was embedding with Yu Sato, junior hockey's only Japanese player, I would often pick his brain about players he'd played with or against in Russia, Finland or the QMJHL. The one player he was most outspoken on was Ponomaryov, who he insisted was, after Alexis Lafreniere, the most purely talented player he'd ever played with or against. And as the season progressed, Ponomaryov, who has always played well internationally for Russia, began to show real flashes of that talent in the Q — of his ability create in an instant, dissect five-man units, and deceive. He's also a capable penalty killer who fights for loose pucks and wins more than his fair share of battles. As he continues to get stronger, picks up a step and gets comfortable with just how good he can be at the junior level, he's going to become one of the CHL's more exciting players.

Here's some of that skill in action with a fabulous post-and-in mid-range shot with Russia's under-20 team in August (the stunted pushes on his straightaway stride are a point of concern, though):

54. Topi Niemelä — RHD, Kärpät, 5-foot-10.5

Niemelä is one of those defenders who just makes the game look easy. You can describe it in whichever terms you'd like. Comfort. Poise. Calm. Cerebral. He sees the ice in front of him, he processes his options, and he usually makes the right play. That can mean executing a smart little five-foot bump pass when a forward tries to close him out along the wall. It can mean stretching the ice with a three-zone pass. It can mean using his footwork to walk the line and create a lane on net. It can mean using

his light edges to build speed through his crossovers or weave through the neutral zone. And his game is the same without the puck. He plays a tight gap when he needs to, he angles players out wide, his backwards recovery never really falters or looks flat-footed. He's not likely going to be a power play guy and he doesn't have the size you'd like in a penalty killer, which could limit him as more of a third-pairing option, but he still feels like an NHLer.

Niemelä's first assist of the new season with Kärpät's under-20 team was exactly what makes him so interesting. Head up. Show the defenders one thing. Do the other. No look. Bang. He's No. 11 in black:

55. Roby Jarventie — LW, Ilves, 6-foot-2.25

Jarventie is big and strong and his best asset is his ability to push past checks, protect the puck and get to his spots for a shot on net. I wouldn't say he's a particularly aware player in terms of his ability to facilitate for his linemates or to identify everything that's going on in his periphery, but his instincts and strength on the puck help him create for himself. After playing to 1.06 points per game and an even more impressive 0.64 goals per game in Mestis, Finland's second level of pro, last season, Jarventie impressed me in Finland's U20 intrasquad games this summer with his ability to impose himself against his peers.

Watch the way he keeps the defender on his hip on this lateral cut for a low, hard shot:

Jarventie is also a dangerous catch-and-release shooter, which helps him play in the middle of the ice on the power play or fight through sticks to overpower goalies with his wrist (which is heavy):

I'd like to see him play a little faster with the puck at times. He skates fine but he can look a little stilted at times or slow to react when a defender closes their gap on him. Otherwise, though, there's a lot to like about his upside as a potential third-line winger who can give a line a little more size, power and physicality, all three of which will only continue to develop given that he still has some room to bulk up.

56. Shakir Mukhamadullin — LHD, Salavat Yulaev Ufa, 6-foot-3.5

Mukhamadullin spent most of last season in the KHL, where he never played more than eight minutes in a game and his development was probably done a disservice. But in his 13 games in the MHL, against his peers, he was as dominant as any Russian defender his age that I can recall. He's a smooth north-south skater whose feet rarely drag through his extensions or his pick-up, which is a selling point for a player his size. But he's also a mobile east-west skater, who despite being long and lanky does an excellent job opening up his stride to go heel-to-heel. Offensively, he likes to use his one-timer but his follow through on his wrist lacks coordination and balance. He also does a good job anticipating the play with the puck, which helps him in the offensive zone to sneak off the blue line and on zone-exits as an outlet passer. He's not a particularly physical player for his size but some of that should come with some added strength and it's not particularly noticeable in the way he defends, which is disruptive and calculated. He has become a source of debate in the public sphere, but he's held in higher regard privately and I see a player who has room to continue to build on some standout raw tools, even if he never becomes a particularly dangerous O-zone player.

He looked comfortable playing a regular shift for Ufa in two appearances in the KHL's August preseason tournament and has (as I write this) two points in five games in the regular season, where he has thrice played between 11 and 16 minutes already — and where his team has outscored the opposition 4-0 with him on the ice at evens. Watch the way he recovers from a flatfooted position with his footwork defending the rush from his heels here (No. 85 in green):

57. Tristen Robins — C/RW, Saskatoon, 5-foot-10.25

Robins is a modern forward who can fool defenders with a quick stutter, play through traffic with his hands and core control and surprise goalies with a quick snap shot from a variety of spots off his body. But he's also sneaky strong, which helps him in board battles or on retrievals (where



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he works hard to get pucks back) and he's a reliable defensive player who can be counted on to win races, block shots and keep his feet moving to break up passes. Statistically-speaking, his even strength and primary point rates both also ranked behind only Jarvis and Zary in the WHL — and ahead of players like Neighbours, Wiesblatt, McClennon and Sourdif. My only concern with his projection is his late birthday, which may hold him back from taking the kind of step next season that some of his peers are likely poised to take. If he can challenge for 90-100 points next year, I'll be more than happy to slide him up even further.

58. Luke Evangelista — RW, London Knights, 5-foot-11

Evangelista is one of those players who is more than the sum of his individual tools. He's physically immature for his size and February birthday, he's not a pure scorer, nor a particularly dynamic surprise-you playmaker. But he does an excellent job moving with the puck to draw in defenders, shade away from them on the heel of his blade or his backhand, or carve into space to make an intentional play back against the grain. Despite his light physique, he's also a deceptively powerful skater. After a tough 16-year-old season, he became a go-to player for the Knights in 2019-20 and turned me into a real fan. I think he's capable of another big step forward next season.

59. Theodor Niederbach — C, Frölunda HC, 5-foot-11

Niederbach has looked a little passive in my viewings since the resumption, but every so often I got a glimpse of what made him one of the best forwards in SuperElit last year.

This neutral zone sequence is a prime example of that. When Niederbach is looking to make plays and layering fakes and deception into his game, he can shed past defenders and function as a primary carrier. I love his willingness to try again when his carry doesn't work the full time and the way he uses his vision to pull the opposing players away from his intended line here:

But there are other times, particularly in some of those early showings at the SHL level, where Niederbach has looked a little hesitant. Some of that is to be expected given that he lost his 2018-19 season to a knee injury and his age, but it's also reason for a little caution. I do love his creativity and he's got a better wrist shot than his 15 goals last season indicated.

60. Evan Vierling — C, Barrie Colts, 6-foot-0.25

For one reason or another, I find that players who are traded midway through their draft year tend to slip a little further than they should. That's likely particularly true when a player leaves his team, demands a trade, and sits at home for a month and a half while he awaits the move. Then there's less exposure with certain scouts that comes with two different geographies. Then there's the the dip in performance that can sometimes follow a trade, as adjustments are made on the fly to a new environment, systems and linemates. Even though Vierling's play and production both improved after a trade from Flint to Barrie, when he became his new team's No. 1 centre and thrived, he's one of the OHL players who never really comes up in the conversations I have with people around the league.

I've watched Vierling since he was 15 playing out a stellar draft-eligible season on the AAA York Simcoe Express. At the time, playing second-line centre behind Quinton Byfield, Vierling was so dominant offensively that he was still the OHL draft's second pick, immediately after Byfield. And though Vierling's game never rose to the level of fourth pick Jamie Drysdale or fifth pick Cole Perfetti, I still think he's in the same tier (and in some cases a tier above) as the other players picked at the top of that 2018 OHL draft, including Will Cuyllie, Ty Tullio, James Hardie, Luke Evangelista and Jean-Luc Foudy. Vierling isn't the most powerful skater or the most lethal scorer of that bunch but he may well end up being the most complete offensive player. He makes a lot of plays with the puck on his stick, he reads the offensive zone at a high level and he's got room on his frame to get stronger, which will make a big difference in his ability to dictate play. If he gets picked near the end of the draft, don't be surprised if he's one of the late-round selections that make it.

61. Anton Johannesson — LHD, HV71, 5-foot-9

He's short and light as a defenceman, he dealt with injuries throughout his draft year and it took him longer to get to Sweden's top junior level than most, which may have limited his exposure to some scouts. That's the trifecta of reasons a player falls at the draft.

Johannesson is an effortless four-way skater who flows up the ice, sidesteps pressure and walks the line with ease to create lanes for himself. When he has the puck, the game comes easy to him. He can play in transition or dictate in the offensive zone and you'll rarely see him bobble the puck. I also like some of his defensive qualities well enough to project him to the pro level as an adequate 5-on-5 defender. Johannesson gaps well and turns back on chipped pucks so effectively that he's able to neutralize opposing rushes before teams have the time to get set in the zone (where his strength deficiencies can be drawn into focus a little more). I can't wait to see what he does with a full season of uninterrupted growth. Johannesson's going to need a couple of years to find his footing at the pro level in Sweden before he gives the AHL a go but he can drive possession, make his teammates look good, run a power play and complement a more reserved D partner.

62. Jean-Luc Foudy — C, Windsor Spitfires, 5-foot-11.25

Spitfires head coach Trevor Letowski highlights the good and bad of Foudy's game best: "Foudy's issue is sometimes he holds onto the puck too long and carries the puck and then he doesn't carry it to the middle of the ice. But he's a competitor and I don't know if that's talked about enough. He has some bad habits in his game because he has always been faster than everybody else and he can hold onto the puck in minor hockey and do whatever he wants. And at our level at times he can still do that but at the next level what people are worried about is 'can he think the game at a high level to drive offence at the pro level?' That's why we're trying to get him to move the puck quicker, specifically in the defensive zone. Because he's just a self-breakout machine with us. He'll just win the puck and skate it right out but he won't distribute it and then people can angle him and he ends up entering on the outside."

For the better part of the first year of his junior career, I believed Foudy might develop into a better prospect than his brother, Liam. This year, though, the two brothers' projections did a bit of a 180. In 2018-19, Jean-Luc showed inklings of an ability to process the game and facilitate in ways that his brother, who looked more like a north-south skater with a good wrist shot and an ability to forecheck and penalty kill, ever could. In 2019-20, though, Jean-Luc developed some bad habits, fell into some of the problems that athletic skates like the McLeod brothers or Kasperii Kapanen, often do. The result, if it wasn't a step back, was a bit of a plateau. When a player can skate like he can, there's enough to keep me intrigued, especially with some of the occasional playmaking touch that he has displayed. He's one of those prospects where the floor might be a little higher than his peers, given the role he might be able to play, even if his ceiling is limited by his ability to get the most out of his skating.

63. Joni Jurmo — LHD, Jokerit/JYP, 6-foot-4

Given the sum of his skills and how confident and aggressive he is on the attack, I would've liked to have seen Jurmo even produce more last season than he did at Finland's top junior level. He's long and his skating is a major asset, particularly for a player his size, so his ability to play in transition and carry instead of pass on exits and entries makes him a fascinating prospect and potential project for an NHL club. There are some warts in his game, primarily in his decision-making with and without the puck, but the raw tools are exciting and he can take over a shift.

Watch No. 8 in white below in Finland's U20 exhibition games against Mestis team Ketterä at the end of August, below. The pitch-fork skating stride needs some cleaning up, but focus on his crossovers below the goal line and then the way he's able to power up the ice to join in transition:

64. Ridly Greig — C, Brandon Wheat Kings/Karlskrona HK, 5-foot-11.25



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Like McClennon, Greig decided he wasn't going to wait for the WHL's planned December restart and joined the third-division Karlskrona side instead. The son of Flyers scout Mark, Greig is a player I've always been a little lower on than most (he likely gets picked in the 20s or 30s) so I spent some time making sure I got him right this summer and while those viewings helped him slide up my list a few slots, I still have some reservations. One of Greig's defining qualities is his smart decision-making with the puck, which is particularly noteworthy given that he's also not shy to try things. He managed to produce above a point per game in 2019-20 — on a team that didn't surround him with a ton of high-end talent up front — without ever really playing beyond himself but while consistently taking risks, which is fine. Many scouts have fallen in love with his fiery, tenacious style. Greig never looks like he's disengaged and keeps his feet moving to play a physical style (though that fiery nature can sometimes get him into trouble). I like his skill enough. He can play in traffic without looking panicked or rushed. He's got a decent wrist shot, even if I wouldn't say he's a natural scorer. And he'll surprise defenders every so often with a deft pass. But he hasn't consistently shown me the dynamism I typically expect out of a first-round talent. I'll concede that Greig is a late birthday player who never lacks effort and should get the most out of himself, though, which could help him climb further up my board in 2020-21.

65. Emil Heineman — LW, Leksands IF, 6-foot-1

Heineman has never played on Sweden's top teams internationally, he struggled relative to his top Swedish peers in this class at the SuperElit level a year ago and his emergence this season is widely viewed as a bit of a surprise. That doesn't make it any less legitimate, though. Heineman's 0.90 goals per game rate tied Canucks prospect Arvid Costmar for first among SuperElit regulars this season. And though I don't think he's quite the scoring threat those numbers suggest, I also think he's a better passer than his numbers suggest.

In SuperElit, Heineman used his size, strength and puck skill to get into dangerous spots and create for himself. But after his promotion to the SHL level, I was impressed with Heineman's ability to create chances for his linemates. He still created chances for himself (in fact, he was probably owed a goal or two alongside his two assists in 11 games):

But he also demonstrated an excellent ability to identify and execute through tough, narrow seams.

This sequence is perhaps the best example of that:

When he pulls up, he has to put that pass through five sets of sticks and bodies. And he made plays like that as a teenaged rookie in one of the world's top pro leagues fairly consistently.

Watch him execute a no-look pass across his body from his feet (and through three more players) before getting it back for a scoring chance here:

Some can get away with faking a one-off great season that stands as a bit of an anomaly relative to the rest of their careers. Others are just late bloomers. If some teams are convinced of the former, a team that believes he fits into the latter group might get value out of selecting him.

66. Ryan Francis — RW, Cape Breton Eagles, 5-foot-9

Francis is to so-called underrated players in this draft class as Aleksander Barkov is to so-called underrated players in the NHL these days. If everyone thinks you're underrated, you're not actually underrated. But in talking to people around hockey in the lead-up to this draft, NHL clubs don't seem to view Francis as the draft darling that he is in some circles in the public sphere. He's a thin 5-foot-9, which pushes some teams away unless that player put up huge numbers in your draft year (which he didn't), especially when you're an early birthday (which he is). And while there's no debating he will need to get stronger on the puck, he was one of the best players on one of the best teams in junior hockey. Francis plays fast, both through his hands and decision-making as well as through his light, agile stride. He also doesn't play a small game and I've grown fond of his ability to pressure pucks and comes at

teams in waves with and without the puck. And though his goal totals don't leap off the page, I would argue Francis has a deceptive, dangerous shot. He has also proven to be a dangerous even strength player. He finished last season sixth in under-19 scoring in the QMJHL, with 72 points in 61 games. But he finished fourth in that same age group in even strength scoring, with 55 points, just behind Flames first-rounder Jakob Pelletier's 57.

67. Alexander Pashin — LW/RW, Salavat Yulaev Ufa, 5-foot-8

Pashin is tiny. Like he's tinier than most tiny players. That will likely contribute to his selection being lower than where his talent should otherwise dictate. There's no question a team is taking a risk by selecting Pashin. But he has enough of a track record at a young age, combined with some intriguing NHL qualities, that there could be real long-term value. He has always been a dominant player internationally for Team Russia. This year, he became a dominant player in Russia's top domestic junior league. Pashin's 1.05 points per game (17 G, 22 A, 39 PTS, 37 GP) rate led all under-18 MHL players this year. He's a slick, playmaking winger who impacts a game in two primary ways offensively.

The first is through his ability to play in traffic with the puck on his stick. Even though the shot gets blocked, watch the way Pashin cuts in and out of traffic to create for himself here:

The second is in the way he rotates in and out of space to make opportunistic plays on the puck. Watch here, how Pashin twice puts himself in a position to get the puck and make a play:

Add in a dedication without the puck to use his skating to chase it and you've got a player who finds ways to make things happen when he's on the ice. And though he's a bit of a project and it will likely take him some time to reach his full potential, Pashin is also on the younger side of this draft so there's more reason to believe he's got a steep upward trajectory coming than there is for many others. Pashin's exactly the kind of player I look at as a worthwhile swing in the draft's later rounds.

68. Brett Berard — LW, NTDP, 5-foot-9

Berard fascinated me. He's tiny and he didn't produce quite like I'd hope for a player that small to be ranked in the top 50. But he also has a September birthday, he was almost a 2021 prospect, he was a driver on an NTDP team that lacked them and he's not shy physically, nor is he shy to go to the front of the net to finish off plays, all of which endeared him to me over the year. I worry about projecting him to the pro level until he shows he can dominate a level but he's got a long runway. There's no need for him to play fewer than four years in college unless he convinces a team otherwise, and he'll get every opportunity to reach his potential at Providence. That he produced much better in the NTDP's USHL games than their NCAA games is of at least a little concern to me. But at this point in the ranking, when the list is starting to move past the players I'm comfortable with in this draft, the rest is also enough for me.

69. Ty Tullio — RW, Oshawa Generals, 5-foot-10

Tullio, whose father Rocco owns the Generals, has been a top prospect for some time now, dating back to his minor hockey days when he, Perfetti and O'Rourke turned the Vaughan Kings into a powerhouse. Though he has yet to consistently show he can take his game to the next level, his trajectory has followed that of a B-level NHL prospect since entering the league. He was a 0.70 points per game player as a 16-year-old (which earned him a place on the OHL's second all-rookie team) and above a point per game in his draft year. I thought he was consistent all season too (31 points in his first 31 games, 35 points in his last 31 games), so it wasn't as though he needed to rack up points after Philip Tomasino's arrival to put together the year that he did. His size gives him some limitations but he works to get pucks back and he's a superb perimeter player who can make things happen from the outside-in and play with a variety of linemates.

"Having his dad as the owner, people think he just gets given everything and that kid works for everything there," one source said. "That kid is awesome."



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70. Ian Moore — RHD, St. Mark's School, 6-foot-2.25

Moore's a player I have spent a lot of time digging in on in the last few months. His raw attributes have always been exciting. He's long, a right-handed shot, mobile in all four directions and he wants to make plays and attack when he has the puck. He's also in good hands heading to the Chicago Steel and later Harvard. But it's going to take 3-5 years before we know what he looks like against tougher competition, some teams are averse to waiting that long, and he needs to fill out. Stylistically, I like his ability to play and defend in transition through the neutral zone but I'd like to see more out of him in the defensive and offensive zones. In the D-zone, I've seen him panic under pressure a little too much for my liking. In the O-zone, it's the reverse, in that he can be prone to trying to be too cute. His puck skill is just high-end enough to make the length and the athleticism an enticing package, though.

71. James Hardie — LW, Mississauga Steelheads, 5-foot-11

The case for Hardie is less about skill set and more about, well, that he just keeps scoring goals. His skating is rightfully the source of a lot of criticism and some teams don't have him on their boards at all because of it. But he's a lethal catch-and-release scorer and when teams try to take away his shot he has proved again and again last season that he was capable of either adjust his angle to continue to get it through or use that attention to make a play through a seam. He was the Steelheads' most dangerous offensive-zone player and wowed me in a couple of my viewings. His 0.63 even strength primary points per game were better than no fewer than a dozen of the OHL forwards who will be picked ahead of him. His 0.39 even strength would have ranked third among draft year OHL prospects in 2019 (ahead of Connor McMichael's 0.37) and second in 2018 (behind only Andrei Svechnikov). He's exactly the kind of player I'd want to be targeting in the draft's later rounds so that my development team can try to get more out of his game.

72. Sam Colangelo — RW, Chicago Steel, 6-foot-1.5

Colangelo is big, strong, heavy and became a perfect complement to a team full of smaller, high-skill, puck-dominant players last season. He's got a dangerous snapshot, he's an excellent give-and-go player who is capable of playing through layers as a passer and he's dominant along the wall through his ability to protect the puck on his hip, play give-and-go and drop his shoulder to drive into defenders. His play internationally has left me worried that some of his impressive production last season was a byproduct of his environment on a virtually unstoppable Steel team. Mix in a choppy first few strides (he can move once he gets going) and I ultimately settle a little lower than most on his upside, though he has grown on me.

73. Zayde Wisdom — RW, Kingston Frontenacs, 5-foot-10.5

There are two things you'll consistently hear about Wisdom:

He's one of the most physical players in the draft.

He played with Shane Wright.

The former is true. Wisdom's ability to lean on players, finish every check and win battles is his calling card. But don't let the fact that he played that role for Wright, specifically that he was Wright's puck retrieval guy and protector, cloud that Wisdom emerged this season as a legitimate prospect in his own right. When you win races and board battles, you still have to be able to make the requisite plays with the puck to create to your linemates, no matter how talented they may be. Wisdom may project a little lower in an NHL lineup at his ceiling but his ability to make plays through contact is a real skill and he was an equal contributor on Kingston's stellar, young first line in the second half with Wright and Chromiak. He's also got the best story in the draft and I know he'll make the most of his opportunities.

74. Daniel Torgersson — LW, Frölunda HC, 6-foot-2.75

Torgersson's one of those players who has just proven to be bigger and stronger than his peers at the SuperElit level and spent the 2019-20 season dictating play along the wall, fighting his way to the front of the

net and making plays at the top of the crease with both net-front body positioning and some impressive small-area skill in tight for his size. And though I worry about whether that skill will translate up levels to the same degree once he's stripped of some of that size advantage, it's worth pointing out that he's not an overly physical player. So it's not like he spent the year scaring off his opponent. He's an above-average skater from a standstill and he's got some skill too. Plus, he's a penalty killer who works hard at 5-on-5 to win back possession and make the right play. He could well be a second-round pick on the back of those characteristics. I struggle ranking him in that kind of a range because of concerns, primarily, over the way he can tunnel-vision on the ice. I would have liked to see him use his linemates better than he did. As a result, I have reservations about projecting him into a top-six role at the next level. His skill set feels more like the complementary type in today's NHL.

I love his middle-lane drive (No. 71 in white, don't mind the terrible camera work), though:

I've liked what I've seen out of him since SuperElit's return, where he has looked unstoppable on some shifts, so that's a good development too.

75. Alex Laferriere — RW, Des Moines Buccaneers, 5-foot-11.75

Laferriere's season kind of existed in three parts. He got off to a torrid start in his first full USHL season, with a seven-shot showing on a scoreless opening night and 15 points in the seven games that followed, he hit a lull through the middle third of the season (including a lacklustre World Jr. A Challenge) where I began to worry about his pace of play, and then he was outstanding for the last month of the season, racking up a further 19 points in 13 games before the cancellation. The result was a point per game pace of 1.07, good for fifth among the USHL's first-year draft eligibles, behind the Steel's trio and Gushchin. He did it while playing on a Des Moines team that second-last in the eight-team Western Conference and 12th in the 16-team league in goals for. Laferriere's game isn't dissimilar to that of other recent Harvard recruits, almost all of whom have exceeded expectations. He's not an explosive skater, so he relies on playing at his own pace and dictating with control to wait for his moments to thread a pass or slide into a hole for a shot. Laferriere's late birthday and good but not great production could mean he's no more than a late-round pick, but his flashes were legitimate, I saw him manufacture offence on his own throughout an entire game, and if he can pick up a step in college he could emerge from the other side as a dominant NCAA playmaker.

76. Pavel Novák — RW, Kelowna Rockets/HC Stadion Litomerice, 5-foot-9

Novák's underlying numbers on a mediocre Rockets team were impressive as a first-year WHLer and now he has gone home to play on loan in the Czech Republic's second pro tier to start the 2020-21 season, after playing well in the Czech Republic's under-18 team's three-game series against the Slovaks. A lot like Hardie before him, Novák's a one-shot scorer who I've spent most of the year vouching for. He's small, and light and his raw counting stats weren't a cut above his peers, so some teams will steer clear because of that. He's also not an explosive straight-lines skater. But Novák moves well going laterally, using his inside edges on quick dashes from the outside in to change angles and release his wrist shot — which is one of the more accurate in the draft — from dangerous spots. He routinely takes a puck left-to-write 10 feet in a blur to open himself up for an intentional shot. Outside of Nolan Foote, he was consistently the Rockets' most dangerous game-to-game player. And each of his go-to moves feels translatable in quality and skill. Now it's just about getting stronger. The NHL club that drafts him will likely play a major role in what comes of his career. With the right trust and patience, and a willingness to sign him to an ELC and continue to work with him, there could be something there in a few years.

There's no question he can lean through a snap shot or shoot from tough spots:

77. Jacob Truscott — LHD, NTDP, 6-foot-0.75



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Truscott didn't get the limelight at the NTDP due to all of the shine afforded to Jake Sanderson, and he won't get the limelight in Michigan, where he'll be riding shotgun on the hype train to Owen Power and Cam York on defence. Hell, he may not even be picked ahead of NTDP defencemen Tyler Kleven, Brock Faber and Eamon Powell, who all feature later than him on my board. But he's a legitimate prospect in his own right. The challenge in evaluating Truscott side-by-side with his peers at the program is that they each did one or two things at a higher level than he did. The problem with approaching his evaluation that way, though, is that you're defaulting to a single-skill lens. We run into that trap as evaluators all of the time and it routinely lends itself to players who have one high-end tool going higher than they should, and well-rounded players who lack a dynamic quality falling further than they should. Evaluation of Truscott's game this season has been prone to those mistakes, in my opinion. He's a smart, heady player with the puck who does a good job keeping his shots low and on target and an even better job quickly moving the puck up ice from his own zone. Defensively, though his footwork and gap control could use some work, I like his ability to disrupt defensive zone sequences and make plays back the other way. The time that college will afford him to refine his game will be crucial to his development but I liked what I saw more often than not.

78. Oskar Magnusson — LW, Malmö Redhawks, 5-foot-9.5

Magnusson's production is in line with some of the Swedish prospects who will be taken in Rounds 2 and 3, even though he won't likely be one of them. He plays a slick and crafty game but he didn't make the most out of his Hlinka Gretzky Cup, he's on the smaller side for a forward both in height and weight and he didn't show particularly well in his four-game SHL stint. As a carrier, he's extremely dangerous, not only in transition as a one-on-one threat but also on the power play from the flanks or the cycle for his ability to sneak off the boards with possession and make plays through traffic. There's work to do. He needs to get stronger to avoid getting pushed around and to add another gear to his skating. He's not particularly dynamic as a scorer or as a seam passer. But there's something to be said for a player who makes things happen all over the ice and has the puck skill to drive a line. I wouldn't be surprised if he follows in the footsteps of 5-foot-10 2019 seventh-round pick Nikola Pasic and exceeds expectations next year. He's an elusive player.

And am I crazy in thinking that No. 58 in red looks taller than his central scouting height since the return to play (nice hands under pressure in the SHL there too)?

79. Luke Tuch — LW, NTDP, 6-foot-2

Tuch doesn't play with the same speed that his brother, Alex, does but he's also meaner and equally as strong despite being two inches shorter. And I think some of that skill may be miscast in part because he's constantly being compared to his brother and in part because of the role he played at the NTDP and the strength (or lack thereof) of their '02 class. Tuch can impose himself on a game through unrelenting pressure and net drive. I'd like to see him use his linemates better than he does. He's never going to wow you with his ability to play through seams as a passer or in traffic with the finesse required to navigate some of the pressure that comes with the NHL level, but if he can continue to build on what he does best, he's got the makings of a useful depth piece.

80. Jaromir Pytlík — C, Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds, 6-foot-2.25

There's a ton to like about Pytlík's game and composition. He projected as a top 50 pick at 16 and 17, he was excellent in the playoffs at the end of last season for the Greyhounds and I had high hopes for him this season. Then he was completely ineffective at the world juniors (not a big deal) and he didn't control play in the OHL as he should have in several of my viewings, which resulted in a souring of public and private opinion, including my own. There's no questioning his work ethic, nor his ability to make the little plays required of a player his size. He can score from mid-distance or get to the net to finish off plays but there's nothing special to his ability as a playmaker and he can drag his toes through his stride. I needed to see more from him offensively to project him as more than a

potential depth player at the next level, even if he does have the makings of a potential utility centre.

81. Drew Comesso — G, NTDP, 6-foot-2

My No. 2-ranked goalie, Comesso has this quiet excellence to his game that persisted for most of the season with USA Hockey. Outside of maybe being an inch or two taller, most of what you want in a modern goalie is there for Comesso. He stays centre to his line even as the play in front of him breaks down, he's a student of the game, he plays the angles and the percentages on his challenges, he reads the play effectively through traffic. He's also still really young and will be entering a BU program that has a clear opening in net for him to take and run with. He's also a sound technical goalie through his butterfly, where he rarely gets beat, and glove side, where he's not often frozen. He's also an above-average athlete, which helps him make difficult saves, even if that's not the hallmark of his game. I wouldn't fault a team for taking him in the mid-to-late second round.

82. Antonio Stranges — LW, London Knights, 5-foot-10.25

Stranges has an unconventional set of skills that make him a bit of a gamble. He's the kind of player that one team won't touch and another will be eager to work with. His heel-to-heel skating stride and the A-level stick handling talent (which is particularly impressive given he plays with a weirdly long stick for his size) unique in this class. He can do things with the puck that all but a few in this draft class can emulate. He's the kind of player who will swipe his stick over the puck on a breakaway and still fool the goalie:

His unique ability to open up his stride can help him make plays from the perimeter as a passer or sneak by pressure too:

But the data doesn't line up with some of that flair. He ranked 27th among draft year OHL players in primary points per game (0.51) behind some players who might not even get selected, for example.

And the more I watch him, the more the eye test doesn't quite pass. Because he also lacks defensive acumen, a willingness to consistently go to the inside with the puck, strength on the puck and a pro-level shot. For every time where his skating helps create a play, there's another where he reverts to it unnecessarily and it takes him out of the play altogether:

83. Theo Rochette — C, Quebec Remparts, 5-foot-10

Rochette didn't have the kind of year that I know he's capable of and the consensus on him as a legitimate prospect a year ago now isn't one at all. I don't think the trade from Chicoutimi to Quebec did him any favours, though, and I still saw signs of what made him so effective in the QMJHL's playoffs in 2019 and the U17 worlds for Canada a year ago. I don't love talking about consistency with teenagers because the focus should usually be more squarely on skill set and its translation to the next level, rather than some abstract thing that we can't know unless we're their coach, but the best of Rochette this season was fleeting. His touch with the puck is superb. When he has it in the offensive zone, he can break teams down through seams as a carrier or passer, showing off light footwork and core control that helps him navigate away from pressure. But he can also drift to the perimeter and he doesn't have the strength to get to the interior against better teams or players, especially when he's not surrounded by a ton of talent. I'd still have a hard time passing on his skill level in the draft's later rounds, though.

84. Ethan Edwards — LHD, Spruce Grove Saints, 5-foot-9.75

For much of the first half of 2019-20, Edwards never really impressed me. He looked pedestrian when I watched Spruce Grove a couple of times early on. Then he was good but not great at the World Jr. A Challenge. Something began to change down the stretch, though. After grabbing my attention at the CJHL Top Prospects Game, Edwards hit his stride. That much was evident in his play, where his superb skating and physical snarl helped him play bigger than he is and impact the game all over the ice.



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Edwards is one of the airiest-skating defencemen in this draft, particularly on his edges, where he can close gaps laterally, walk the line or evade pressure with the best players in this class. He will need to get stronger if he wants to add necessary power to his physical, tightly gapped brand or straight-line explosiveness to his already impressive skating technique. I guess it shouldn't surprise me that it took him a little longer to put it all together. It was his first full year at the junior level, he doesn't turn 18 until June and he won't join the University of Michigan until 2021 because he still needs some fine-tuning. But he was dominant when it all came together and he was given a larger role toward the end of the season. Edwards' 33 points in 50 games don't pop off a Tier II junior stat page (it was fourth in the AJHL among under-18 defencemen) but he had 12 points in his final 14 games. He also became a zone-exit machine late in the year, side-stepping pressure with ease to skate out of trouble.

Edwards can impact a game from the top of the offensive zone with his feet and heads-up decision-making:

He can impact a game from the top of the offensive zone with his one-timer (his technique and timing help him whip through the puck even though he lacks weight and strength):

And he does an excellent job head-manning the puck on outlets:

If Edwards' size and mediocre production contribute to a fall into the draft's later rounds, I'd bet on his age and tools, play the waiting game and see where he's at in three or four years.

85. Dylan Peterson — C, NTDP, 6-foot-4.25

I feel like I've been hearing Peterson's name forever at this point. He made waves in eastern Ontario in minor hockey and his blend of size, powerful straight-line speed and lighter than you'd expect hands make for an exciting package. As viewers, it can be easy to look at his height and weight and expect him to be a dominant physical player who gets to the net to score goals. But while he's not shy to do either of those things, Peterson is a decent passer too, a quality of his game that I came to admire in a recent review of last year's tape. He needs to show he can produce more, though, or he's going to end up typecast as a fourth-line player.

86. Kasper Puutio — RHD, Everett Silvertips/Kärpät, 5-foot-11.25

Midway through his first and only WHL season, Puutio was traded to a team that already had a defence that included Philadelphia's Wyatt Wylie, overage star Jake Christiansen (who has since signed with Columbus), Montreal's Gianni Fairbrother and fellow draft-eligible defenceman Ronan Seeley. As a result, his opportunities shrunk. In a different role, I thought he handled the adjustment fabulously. Puutio plays a simple game built around poise with the puck and quick decision-making. He's a smooth skater who always has his head up, relies on an active stick to do much of his defending and anticipates the play well with and without the puck. He's never going to be a top-of-the-lineup guy but I could see him becoming an everyday contributor who plays a calculated game and drives results. His progression will likely take some time but I think there's more offensive skill beneath the surface than we saw this year and I'm looking forward to tracking his progression in Finland now that he has decided to return home to play for Kärpät. He looked good with Team Finland's U20 team this summer.

87. Nico Daws — G, Guelph Storm, 6-foot-3.5

Daws was the Storm's most important player as an overager, with a .924 save percentage on a team that played pretty loose all year (as evidenced by the .881 save percentage his backup, Owen Bennett, posted). He plays more of a blocking style than an athletic one, using his size to fill the net and swallow the first save so that he doesn't have to bounce around his net or make a ton of recovery saves. I do worry about his positioning when teams get him going side-to-side, as the compactness of his game can break down a little when he has to move a lot. If he strays at the pro level when the game is moving faster, he may not have the athleticism to be able to recover.

88. Jack Thompson — RHD, Sudbury Wolves, 6-foot-0.25

I had high hopes for Thompson entering his draft year. His game has a contrast to it that a lot of coaches look for in defencemen. He's an aggressive player in the offensive zone, frequently attacking off of the line to use his dangerous shot and give his three forwards a secondary option. And he's a passive player defensively, relying on an active stick and careful approach in his own zone, preferring not to chase hits or physical engagements. Together, those things typically point to a defender's maturity as a teenager. But Thompson's careful approach away from the puck didn't help him become a shutdown guy because he gave opposing players too much this season. And his aggressive approach in the offensive zone didn't result in the kind of playmaking you also need to be more than just an active shot threat. The result was a bit of a plateau. I get the sense that confidence plays a major role in Thompson's game, so I wouldn't be surprised if he came into his own as an older player in the OHL in the next year or two, but he looks like more of a long shot than I hoped he would.

89. Brandon Coe — RW, North Bay Battalion, 6-foot-4.25

Coe is huge, has grown nearly two inches in the last and a half, and he can move and handle the puck at full speed like a smaller player. On one hand, he's a December 2001 birthdate, this was his third season in the OHL, his second season was uninspiring after a good rookie year and he still hasn't shown he can take over games offensively. On the other, he did a lot of his producing at even strength last season because North Bay's power play was atrocious, so maybe there's more to his production than meets the eye. The work he did on his game this summer helped his case. There aren't a lot of players his size who can weave through lanes like he does:

90. Joel Blomqvist — G, Kärpät/Hermes, 6-foot-2

Blomqvist isn't the tallest goalie but he looks bigger in the net than his height suggests. He relies on that size to challenge shooters and explode from his posts with a powerful push. I wouldn't say he's particularly quick in his net per se, in terms of his ability to adjust on the fly, but he can get to his spots when he loads up on one of his legs and he knows what's coming. He was frozen a couple of times in two ugly appearances in Liiga last season, and some of his stellar Jr. His numbers were a byproduct of the stingy team in front of him but he's strong enough and sound enough positionally to merit a mid-round pick.

91. Eemil Viro — LHD, TPS, 5-foot-11.5

Draft-eligible prospects almost always get a boost from playing their draft year at the pro level and Viro is one of just two draft-eligible Finnish defencemen who played regularly in Liiga in 2019-20. And while it's easy to see why in watching the other, Topi Niemela, I could never wrap my head around why Viro was rushed to Finland's top professional level this season. Viro plays a smooth game with the puck, he's a good outlet passer, he's got above average footwork laterally and he plays a predictable game with the puck that has shown real flashes against his peers when he has played at the Jr. A level. I remain a little lower on him than most though. That's because Viro also lacks strength on the puck and in man-on-man battles, he's not a particularly talented player offensively (though he will join the rush) and his head just isn't always in it without the puck. There were too many times in 2019-20 where he looked out of it in the defensive zone for him to merit being a top 62 prospect in this class.

92. Blake Biondi — C, Hermantown High, 6-foot-0.25

Biondi is a tough player to evaluate, not only because of how challenging it still is to evaluate high school prospects but also because he hasn't played particularly well against tougher competition. He looked lost for much of the Hlinka Gretzky Cup and a little behind the play at times with the NTDP and the Sioux City Musketeers. But he also scored 47 goals and 95 points in a combined 31 games on the high school circuit last season, which made his Mr. Hockey award as Minnesota's top high schooler a no-brainer. I've seen him make enough players look silly to include him here. When he keeps his feet moving and an attack mentality when he has the puck, he's a lot to handle and lethal around the slot. It might take him some time to find that at Minnesota-Duluth, though.



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93. Ruben Rafkin — RHD, Windsor Spitfires/TPS, 5-foot-11.25

Early on in 2019-20, Rafkin garnered some notoriety when he stepped onto the Spitfires' power play as a first-year import player and had an immediate impact. But as the season progressed some of that buzz began to fade. Though Rafkin has spent most of his hockey career in North America, he has signed a contract with TPS for 2020-21, where he will audition for time in Liiga. Rafkin is a poised three-zone defenceman who is comfortable with the puck on his stick, strong on his feet, physical in man-on-man battles, heavy for his size and calculated in his approach. He won't wow you but he plays a modern, puck-possession game that should translate well at the NHL level. Though his game lacks a truly dynamic quality, he's more well-rounded than many of his peers. He could have late-round value long term.

And though the Spitfires spent some time working on his mobility this season, head coach Trevor Letowski spoke quite highly of him.

"He's very poised with the puck and he's a dangerous player offensively. He can elude players on retrievals, whether that's on a breakout or in transition. Like he can beat F1, shake them off and turn up ice. In the neutral zone he's dangerous carrying and then in the offensive zone he's great," Letowski said. "I think he has to improve his shot to be a real good player offensively at the NHL level. And then defensively he has work to do with his skating and his pivoting from forwards to backwards. That's a weakness. He's a little bit rigid and not fluid like a small player."

94. Alexander Nikishin — KHD, Spartak Moskva, 6-foot-3

Nikishin's not typically the kind of defenceman I'm fond of, in that he doesn't have one high-end offensive tool and his footwork still needs a little refining if he's going to be able to play at NHL pace. But I do think there's more offence to his game than meets the eye. We didn't get to see it in his draft year because he spent most of the season in a depth role in the KHL due to his advanced physical maturity and November 2001 birthdate. But I saw some real signs in 2018-19 when he produced at a high age-adjusted clip for an MHL defenceman, especially one who is 6-foot-3, when he was an all-star in the under-20 league at 17. He'll be 19 on draft day and that has to colour any analysis of his early progression to the KHL, but I've been impressed with what I've seen defensively in terms of his ability to read the play, get into lanes, close off the wall and gap-up off the rush. At this point in my list, where most of the prospects have depth projections anyway, I'm comfortable with where Nikishin is at and where he might be able to get.

95. Brock Faber — RHD, NTDP, 6-foot

After Faber was one of the final cuts from the first iteration of my top 100, he's one of three honourable mentions to sneak into the tail end of the list for this final update. That's driven more by some souring on the players who slipped out, rather than some revelation on Faber that slid him up a few spots. He's a heady, calculated defender whose skating helps him play tight gaps, beat the first layer of pressure and use his passing to advance the puck up ice. There's a smoothness to his game that makes most of what he does look effortless on the ice. And while nothing about his offensive skillset pops, he'll have some time at the University of Minnesota to build on a decent foundation of above-average skills to take his well-rounded game to the next level. He projects as a serviceable depth option.

96. Ethan Cardwell — RW, Barrie Colts, 5-foot-10.75

Cardwell's a tough player to evaluate and there are only a handful of teams that I can imagine taking a plunge on in the middle rounds, which could make him a bit of a market inefficiency. He's not short, but he's slender, and if teams didn't give him a long look after his midseason trade from Saginaw to Barrie, they likely missed out on some real second-half growth. He's a slick, determined playmaker who isn't shy to play on the interior and has a sneaky release when he gets to his spots. In junior, he also has the puck skill to be able to navigate away from stronger defenders to get to those areas. The question is whether he can get stronger and if he can't whether his skill is high-end enough to

translate to the pro level effectively. There's more than meets the eye with Cardwell's game, though.

97. Rory Kerins — C, Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds, 5-foot-10

Kerins' 0.66 primary even strength points per game ranked ahead of players like Coe, Evangelista and even Foerster. His counting stats didn't look as shiny because he wasn't a major power play producer. Still, no matter how you slice it, he was a driver at 5-on-5 in line with some prospects who will be taken as high as the second round. Meanwhile, though, he is widely ranked in the public sphere. Some of that is because he's not our idea of a modern playmaker (similar to the way Hardie and the next player on this list, Logan Morrison, are perceived). Kerins plays a simple, predictable, straight-line game that looks to play give-and-go, get to the slot, and create high-danger chances on catch-and-release plays. The result was a 30-goal season to lead the Greyhounds. I won't be surprised if he got a little stronger and added a step this summer and comes back able to take a huge step because of that small athletic bump.

98. Logan Morrison — C, Hamilton Bulldogs, 5-foot-10.5

Morrison's one of those prospects who I wonder if I've watched only his best games over the last couple of years because most scouts see a player who is slow, doesn't read the play well enough to take the necessary steps forward in his progression as a passer and struggles defensively. And while his skating is a concern, I think some of the defensive worries are a byproduct of his environment in Hamilton and the big role he was asked to play as one of the team's alternate captains. Every time I've seen him play live he has created several high-danger chances over the course of a game. His 45 points in 59 games don't grab your attention but he never looked out of place alongside wingers like Arthur Kaliyev or Tag Bertuzzi. He has more to give and next season will take on a make-or-break quality to it if he goes undrafted, which is possible. There's very little drifting to his game, either. He plays in the middle lane:

99. Jacob Dion — LHD, Drummondville Voltigeurs, 5-foot-8.75

Dion was a revelation last season. After spending his post-QMJHL draft season back at the AAA level with the dynastic Magog Cantonniers under Felix Potvin, he won the prestigious Quebec Midget championship and was named the league's top defenceman. Then he made the leap to the Q as a rookie for his NHL draft year and excelled, finishing fifth among defencemen in points with 51 points in 63. There aren't a lot of 5-foot-9 or smaller defenders in the NHL these days but Dion is physically strong and holds his own in 50/50 battles. And when he wins possession, he's a dynamic shot threat who can handle the puck as well or better than some likely top 50 picks. Given his late-blooming trajectory, his November birthday, and the fact that he's not a name prospect, Dion will likely have to continue to prove he's a capable defender and a talented offensive playmaker. He has been unstoppable in the QMJHL's preseason, though, and it shouldn't surprise anyone if he challenges for defenceman of the year — in the Q this time — in 2020-21.

100. Charlie Desroches — RHD, Saint John Sea Dogs, 5-foot-10

After Desroches put together an excellent rookie season in the QMJHL, he has been on the cusp of the various iterations of this ranking all year. I'm particularly fond of the way he manages the game and the puck, which is efficient and controlled, without being reserved. Between the release of my last ranking (where he was one of the final cuts of the honourable mentions) and this one, I reached out to Sea Dogs staff to pick their brains. They talked me into his conclusion here, if only because they spoke much more highly of him than I even anticipated they would.

"Nobody seems to talk about Charlie Desroches but he had 10 goals at 16. (Desroches) took on a different role for us last year but he's an incredible, incredible defenceman as well and it's kind of unfair for him," assistant coach Stefan Legein said of Desroches having to play in the shadow of Poirier and Villeneuve. "He plays penalty kill and blocks shots that the other two don't."



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Sea Dogs general manager Trevor Georgie argues Desroches would be "the guy" on a different QMJHL team, too.

"There are very few players that on most teams would be a No. 1 defenceman but are willing to play third fiddle to the other two. He's a humble kid that is OK with it, is team first, had a really good first year with us," Georgie said. "The thing that most teams if they just saw him quickly probably didn't take into account is that his D partner was Jordan Spadafore, who had 16 QMJHL games under his belt coming into the year at 19 years old. And at 17 (Desroches) definitely made (Spadafore), the 19-year-old, a CHL player, not the other way around. I think if a team takes a flier on him they'll be rewarded."

As I write this, his four goals (including two in the Sea Dogs' first preseason game) and six points in six QMJHL tune-up games don't hurt his case, either.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.22.2020



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