



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • September 30, 2018

THE NEWS & OBSERVER

Hurricanes get closer to opening night roster

By Chip Alexander

The Carolina Hurricanes trimmed their training camp roster to 23 on Saturday, sending eight players to the Charlotte Checkers of the AHL.

Rookie forwards Warren Foegele, Martin Necas and Valentin Zykov remain on the Canes roster. Andrei Svechnikov, the Canes' first-round draft pick this year, also remains in camp.

Those assigned to the Checkers were: forwards Janne Kuokkanen, Nicolas Roy and Saku Maenalanen; defensemen Roland McKeown and Michal Cajkovsky, and goalie Alex Nedeljkovic. Forwards Patrick Brown and Greg McKegg will be sent to Charlotte, pending waivers.

"Now we've got to make sure we've got the combos right, the power play right, the penalty kill right," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "Everything we've kind of had thrown all over the place has to be solidified.

News moves fast. So do we.

The Canes, 5-0 in preseason, host the Nashville Predators in their final preseason game Sunday at PNC Arena as part of the annual Caniac Carnival.

"We're still looking at a couple of guys and how they fit," Brind'Amour said.

The Canes, a day after a 5-4 overtime road win against Washington, practiced Saturday at PNC Arena.

Foegele makes team as Carolina Hurricanes send right message

By Luke DeCock

There's still one game to go in the preseason, but the Carolina Hurricanes have their roster and there's one surprise, a lot of positive reinforcement and still a few gambles that will, most likely, decide whether this season is a success or failure.

Saturday's cuts of Janne Kuokkanen and Saku Maenalanen, among others, established that Warren Foegele had upset the odds and won a spot on the roster, and deservedly so. He came into training camp pretty far down the list of forwards contending for a spot despite solid all-around numbers in Charlotte (AHL) last season, but his stellar preseason performance not only won him a job, but perhaps a spot on what may be the Hurricanes' top line with Sebastian Aho and Teuvo Teravainen.

This is the group of 22, with the injured Victor Rask a 23rd on paper for now – leaving room to add a waiver claim if anyone who can help the Hurricanes goes on the wire before Thursdaysay.

In a preseason that, so far, has represented everything Rod Brind'Amour wanted to bring to the team – the commitment and accountability that had been missing under the previous regime(s) – the decision to keep Foegele, along with the

early departure to Charlotte of Aleksii Saarela previously in training camp, establishes a baseline that effort and performance will be regarded regardless of draft position, contract or reputation.

Now, there's a caveat to that: Neither Andrei Svechnikov and Martin Necas has had the kind of training camp the Hurricanes would have wanted to see from either rookie, but they're still here because there's no other option the way this team is built. Svechnikov has to score goals and Necas has to hold down a top-six center role or this team is going to struggle. That's just the way it is.

Other than that, there's plenty to be happy about. The goaltending, from both Scott Darling and Petr Mrazek, has easily cleared the low bar of basic competence that's been lacking in recent years. Aho has struggled at center but looked better when reunited with Teravainen – and the reverse was true as well. The defense looks as advertised. And while it's hard to put too much stock into preseason power-play results, the Hurricanes shouldn't lack for confidence, at least.

Regardless of what happens Sunday, the Hurricanes will head into the season full of belief and optimism for the first time in years. They have done everything they could to put themselves in position. Now, it'll come down to talent.



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Canes Whittle Roster Down Before Preseason Finale

Roster reduced to 23 players prior to Sunday's exhibition matinee

by Michael Smith

Before hitting the ice for practice on Saturday morning, the Carolina Hurricanes trimmed their roster by eight to get their roster down to 23 players.

That's essentially the team's Opening Night group, but an important week is ahead. It begins with Sunday's preseason finale against the Nashville Predators and culminates with Opening Night on Thursday against the New York Islanders.

"It's real important. It's probably the most important week of training camp. Now, we've got to make sure we've got the combos right, the power-play units right, the penalty kill units right - everything that we've kind of been throwing all over the place, now it has to start to get solidified," head coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "All that has to formulate before we open up."

Among the names in the final 23 is Warren Foegele, who, after playing in two games with the Canes in late March of last season, came into camp and earned a stall in the Hurricanes' locker room.

"It's pretty exciting, but the work is just about to begin," he said. "I have to make sure I try to stay here. That's working hard every day and doing the little things right."

Foegele has certainly done that thus far. He's tied for the team lead in preseason points with seven (1g, 6a) in four games. Now it's about maintaining that commitment and drive.

"I wanted to come into camp with an open mindset, work hard and try to play my game. Playing last year gave me that confidence that I think I can play here," he said. "I've just got to work hard and be consistent. Come to the rink and prove myself every single day."

Canes to Assign Eight Players to Charlotte

Roster trimmed to 23 players

by Michael Brown

Don Waddell, President and General Manager of the National Hockey League's Carolina Hurricanes, today announced that the team has assigned forwards Janne Kuokkanen, Saku Maenalanen and Nicolas Roy, defensemen Michal Cajkovsky and Roland McKeown, and

Sunday afternoon's tilt against the Predators is, essentially, a dress rehearsal for the Hurricanes before Thursday's season opener.

"We're still looking at a couple - I don't want to say spots - but a couple guys and how they fit. It's about the line combos. We're going to experiment again with some new stuff and just get one more look at things. The group is essentially here, for the most part, but how they all mingle will be decided after tomorrow," Brind'Amour said. "We knew who was playing tomorrow, and Charlotte's not that far away if we need a different piece."

Based on lines in practice on Saturday, Foegele will get another look on a line with Sebastian Aho and Teuvo Teravainen. That trio combined for nine points (3g, 6a) in a 5-4 overtime win in Washington on Friday.

"Pretty incredible. Those are two elite, special players. You saw last night, it made my job pretty easy," Foegele said. "Just do the little things and try to get them the puck."

Micheal Ferland, who originally was going to miss the remainder of the preseason with a lower-body concern, might draw into the lineup on Sunday.

"I believe he is. We're waiting to see how he made out after this morning," Brind'Amour said. "He wants to play and get some rust off, which would be great."

The Hurricanes enter Sunday's exhibition finale with a perfect 5-0-0 record in the preseason.

"We have worked hard in the games. To a man, I appreciate that," Brind'Amour said. "I expected it because we're a younger group playing against veteran teams that know preseason games mean nothing, but they've earned that right to think that way and we haven't. We've played pretty hard."

goaltender Alex Nedeljkovic to the Charlotte Checkers (AHL). The Hurricanes will also assign forwards Patrick Brown and Greg McKeeg to Charlotte, pending waivers.

The Hurricanes' training camp roster now stands at 23 players and can be found here. Carolina will play their final preseason game tomorrow vs. Nashville at PNC Arena at 1:30 p.m.



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The Hurricanes open their 2018-19 regular season against the New York Islanders on Oct. 4 at PNC Arena at 7 p.m. For information about Hurricanes ticket packages, please visit

Hurricanes.com/tickets, or call 1-866-NHL-CANES (1-866-645-2263).

TriangleSportsNetwork

Right Here, Right Now – A leaner Haydn Fleury continues to make the cut with Hurricanes

Podcast: Carolina's 2014 first-round pick talks fitness, nutrition, and training in Dumba's basement

By Peter Koutroumpis

A week ago, Carolina Hurricanes defenseman Haydn Fleury said he felt good about how things were going for him during training camp.

"A little bit of an adjustment with some new drills and some subtle changes to the systems we want to play," Fleury pointed out.

"I thought I picked up on it well and I thought the first game against Tampa went well."

After finishing the 2017-2018 season with eight assists in 67 games played to go with a minus-2 rating and 14 PIM while contributing 86 shots on goal, he's played three preseason games highlighted with putting six shots on goal, blocking six shots, and handing out five hits.

Carrying a load

Coming off the Hurricanes' 4-1 win over the Lightning on Sept. 18, during which he logged 23:30 in ice time, including nine minutes-plus almost equally split on special teams at both ends, he played an effective enough game with three shots, a hit and two blocked shots.

Playing in games against Washington and Nashville, the Carlyle, Saskatchewan native has worked hard to improve his preparation and play in order to get a chance to make the team's opening night roster.

Following a recent round of cuts announced on Saturday that moved eight more players to Carolina's AHL affiliate training camp roster with the Charlotte Checkers, it looks as though Fleury's hard work has paid off.

He currently sits among the remaining group of 23 heading into Sunday's final preseason game at PNC Arena against the Nashville Predators.

"It's probably the most important week of training camp," Hurricanes head coach Rod Brind'Amour said.

"We'll get one more look at things. The group is potentially all here. We're still looking at where some guys fit. The roster is not set yet. Obviously, by Tuesday, we'll know where we're at."

Whether Fleury makes it to the starting lineup later in the week on opening night to face the New York Islanders on Thursday remains to be seen.

But, for all intents and purposes, the work he's put in during the offseason has enabled him to play during the preseason at the level expected of him.

Getting cut to not get cut

His secret to success?

No 'pop' – aka 'soda' for American beverage consumers – coupled with little-to-no fast food consumption and working out in Minnesota Wild defenseman Matt Dumba's basement.

Simple adjustments that seem to have the 22-year-old blueliner continuing in the right direction to earning a regular NHL roster spot and hopefully provide more offensive production and defensive consistency for the Hurricanes this season.

"I think it was just something stressed to me at the end of last year, that I needed to come in leaner and faster," Fleury concluded.

"It was just something I worked on over the summer, and I think it's paid off – it ended up being something like 13 to 15 pounds (difference), I think. I'm definitely noticing it on the ice."



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Introducing the 2018-19 Carolina Hurricanes

Eight players are headed to Charlotte, leaving the Hurricanes with their opening night roster ahead of the final preseason game tomorrow.

By Brian LeBlanc and Jake Crouse

Welcome to the show, Warren Foegele.

After a superb training camp, the second-year pro has made the Carolina Hurricanes' opening night roster. Foegele is one of four rookies to make the team, joining Andrei Svechnikov, Martin Necas and Valentin Zykov.

Rod Brind'Amour said a handful of guys had a lot riding on last night's 5-4 victory over the Capitals. Necas was one of those guys, and despite his youth and a few stumbles through training camp, last night he was able to make some nice moves, tally an assist and lay some hard checks.

Everyone in unison asked for more of Valentin Zykov last year. He played in 10 games for the Canes and scored seven points (3 G, 4 A), but spent much of the season down in Charlotte, where he became the league's top goal scorer in 2017-2018.

They also asked for Lucas Wallmark, who earned his spot on the roster after going back and forth between the NHL and AHL last year. He scored one goal in 11 games for the Canes, but came to training camp with a clear desire to make the starting group.

And Svechnikov? Ha! Who had any doubts?

With that, here's the Opening Night roster for your Carolina Hurricanes:

Forwards (14)

Phil Di Giuseppe, Jordan Staal, Warren Foegele, Justin Williams, Sebastian Aho, Brock McGinn, Andrei Svechnikov, Jordan Martinook, Victor Rask, Lucas Wallmark, Valentin Zykov, Micheal Ferland, Teuvo Teravainen, Martin Necas.

Defensemen (7)

Haydn Fleury, Dougie Hamilton, Brett Pesce, Justin Faulk, Calvin de Haan, Trevor van Riemsdyk, Jaccob Slavin

Goaltenders (2)

Scott Darling, Petr Mrazek

Their roster spots were ensured on Saturday as the Canes trimmed their training camp roster a final time, by eight. The most notable cuts were Janne Kuokkanen, the former second-rounder who scored a goal in the second preseason game but went fairly quiet otherwise, and Roland McKeown, who spent 10 games with the Hurricanes last year.

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The Hurricanes' training camp roster now stands at 23 players and is attached to this release. Carolina will play their final preseason game tomorrow vs. Nashville at PNC Arena at 1:30 p.m.



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Carolina Sends Six To Charlotte, Place Two On Waivers

The Hurricanes made another round of cuts to their roster Saturday, with eight players heading for Charlotte.

Forwards Janne Kuokkanen, Nicolas Roy and Saku Maenalanen, defensemen Michal Cajkovsky and Roland McKeown and goalie Alex Nedeljkovic were all assigned to the Checkers, while forward Patrick Brown and Greg McKegg were placed on waivers and will be assigned to Charlotte should they clear at noon tomorrow.

Kuokkanen and Roy are both preparing to kick off their second pro seasons after finishing fourth and tied for fifth on the team in helpers, respectively. McKeown, who ranked third in the AHL in plus-minus last season, and Nedeljkovic, who tied for the league lead in wins, are both returning for

their third pro seasons, while reigning captain Patrick Brown would be back for his fifth year in a Checkers sweater and veteran McKegg is slated to go through his first full campaign with the team.

The two new faces come to Charlotte from overseas. A fifth-round pick by Nashville in 2013, the 24-year-old Maenalanen is making the jump to North America for the first time and spending five seasons in his native Finland, while the Slovakia-born Cajkovsky, who earned a contract from Carolina after joining the team for training camp on a tryout, has spent the last three seasons in the KHL and the top Czech league.

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<http://trianglesportsnet.com/carolina-hockey-network/right-here-right-now-a-leaner-haydn-fleury-continues-to-make-the-cut-with-hurricanes/>

<https://www.canescountry.com/2018/9/29/17917364/carolina-hurricanes-2018-19-opening-night-roster-charlotte-checkers-waivers>

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SportScan

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

1107119 Carolina Hurricanes

September 29, 2018 01:41 PM

Foegele makes team as Carolina Hurricanes send right message

BY LUKE DECOCK

ldecock@newsobserver.com

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1107120 Carolina Hurricanes

Hurricanes get closer to opening night roster

BY CHIP ALEXANDER

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September 29, 2018 01:10 PM

RALEIGH

The Carolina Hurricanes trimmed their training camp roster to 23 on Saturday, sending eight players to the Charlotte Checkers of the AHL.

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Those assigned to the Checkers were: forwards Janne Kuokkanen, Nicolas Roy and Saku Maenalanen; defenseman Roland McKeown and Michal Cajkovsky, and goalie Alex Nedeljkovic. Forwards Patrick Brown and Greg McKegg will be sent to Charlotte, pending waivers.

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The Canes, 5-0 in preseason, host the Nashville Predators in their final preseason game Sunday at PNC Arena as part of the annual Caniac Carnival.

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The Canes, a day after a 5-4 overtime road win against Washington, practiced Saturday at PNC Arena.

News Observer LOADED: 09.30.2018

1107161 New York Islanders

Five things to watch for ahead of the Islanders' 2018-19 season

By Andrew Gross

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Updated September 29, 2018 9:08 PM

Islanders beat reporter Andrew Gross breaks down five things to keep an eye on this season:

1. THE POST-JOHN TAVERAS ERA: Have the Islanders really moved on? They better have. President/GM Lou Lamoriello, coach Barry Trotz and the players have all said that there's no looking back on their former captain's free agency departure to Toronto. But actions will prove louder than words and multiple players need to improve their game to fill the void.
2. MATHEW BARZAL'S SECOND SEASON: No player is being looked at more to compensate for Tavares' loss than last season's Calder Trophy winner. Barzal has the potential to be one of the league's elite offensive players but will face tougher defensive matchups as a top-line center and log more ice time against the opponent's most skilled players.
3. LOOMING FREE AGENCY: The Islanders cannot afford to repeat the mistake of letting Tavares walk out the door without compensation. So, Lamoriello may be forced into some tough decisions come the trade deadline with top-six forwards Anders Lee, Jordan Eberle and Brock Nelson, all headed toward unrestricted free agency. The Islanders can't have this storyline loom over this season as Tavares' contract situation did last season.
4. THE GOALIES: Yes, defense is everybody's responsibility and goalies Jaroslav Halak and Thomas Greiss were not the only guilty parties as the Islanders allowed a league-worst 293 goals and their penalty kill was the worst in the NHL in nearly 30 years. Halak is gone and now former Sabre Robin Lehner and Greiss are working with noted goalie coach Mitch Korn. Still, no goalie improvement, no overall improvement.
5. THE BARRY TROTZ EFFECT: Lamoriello rules the Islanders with his iron fist but Trotz will set the tone behind the bench. Coming off a Stanley Cup win with the Capitals, Trotz is the Islanders' most accomplished coach since Al Arbour retired for a second time in 1994.

Newsday LOADED: LOADED: 09.30.2018

1107129 Columbus Blue Jackets

Injuries give Dean Kukan opportunity

Mark Znidar

Sep 29, 2018 at 11:30 PM Sep 29, 2018 at 11:30 PM



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Those not knowing whether Dean Kukan is a defenseman, center or forward, his country of origin or if he's a left- or right-handed shot had better get on a search engine and do a quick study of him. They might be seeing a lot of him with the Blue Jackets this season.

Kukan could be on the team's opening-night roster Thursday in Detroit because of injuries to defensemen Seth Jones and Ryan Murray.

Even if Kukan is sent back to the Cleveland Monsters, it's a good bet that he'll eventually be hopping on the Columbus shuttle a few times. The team lost longtime pillar Jack Johnson and rental Ian Cole to Pittsburgh and Colorado, respectively.

It's understandable that Kukan, 25, isn't thinking that far ahead. His NHL experience consists of 11 games with the Blue Jackets last season and eight in 2015-16.

"Of course, there is a lot more responsibility because of the injuries," he said. "But we're just trying to do our best and fill the spots for the injured players. You play your best because that's all you can do."

Murray was struck by a skate in a preseason game and still wasn't listed as day to day going into Friday's morning skate. Jones is expected to be out four to six weeks with a sprained medial collateral ligament in his right knee.

Kukan scored a third-period goal when coach John Tortorella paired him with David Savard in the next-to-last preseason game, against Pittsburgh on Friday night.

"But I don't know what's going to happen after that," Kukan said. "I've played two preseason games with David and a couple of games last season, and things worked really well, I thought."

Tortorella wanted to watch all eight preseason games before making decisions about his lines. The gist of the regular-season roster played against Pittsburgh, but 11 players were called up from Cleveland for the final game Saturday at Chicago.

"I'm not sure what the lines are going to be yet," Tortorella said. "I'm still trying to make some decisions. We're going to let it play out."

Columbus signed Kukan as a free agent in June 2015 after he played six seasons professionally in his native Switzerland and Sweden. His final stop was three seasons with Lulea in Sweden.

It has been a huge adjustment for Kukan playing in North America.

"For players who come from Europe, there is a different style of hockey," he said. "The systems are different over here. It takes a while to get used to the game over here, and it was the same for me. The rinks are larger in Europe and there is more skating, but it's not as physical as here. I needed 2½ years in the AHL. Now, I am trying to make the next step."

Kukan had three goals and 10 assists in 33 games for Cleveland when it won the Calder Cup in 2015-16. The following season, he played 72 games and scored four goals and had 25 assists. Last season, he totaled one goal and 14 assists and made the all-star team.

A grin broke on Kukan's face when he was asked about how much being on Switzerland's silver medal-winning team at the IIHF World Championships in June helped him going into this season.

"It was big because we're a small country and hockey isn't that big," he said. "But hockey in North America is far bigger than in Europe. I don't think it helped that much."

Jackets lose finale

Cam Ward made 16 saves, and host Chicago beat the Blue Jackets 4-1 in the final exhibition game.

Brent Seabrook, Artem Anisimov, Brandon Saad and Patrick Kane scored for the Blackhawks.

Jonathan Davidsson scored for the Blue Jackets, and Joonas Korpiälä made 23 saves.

Columbus Dispatch LOADED: 09.30.2018

1107130 Columbus Blue Jackets

Blue Jackets roster forecast, No. 3

By Aaron Portzline

Sep 29, 2018

CHICAGO — The Blue Jackets play their final preseason game Saturday night against the Blackhawks in United Center. The final preseason game is always reason to celebrate. The "meaningless" games are done, and the regular season beckons.

The lineup for Saturday night has been stocked with a large number of AHL Cleveland players, but there are a few players in the lineup who appear to be in a fight for the final roster spots.

Jonathan Davidsson, Markus Hannikainen and Lukas Sedlak will get a chance to make their final statement. Those three, along with Sonny Milano and Kevin Stenlund, are in the hunt for the final two or three spots at forward.

Meanwhile, with all the injuries piling up on defense — Scott Harrington (undisclosed) has joined Seth Jones and Ryan Murray on the shelf — the Blue Jackets will need a No. 7 defenseman to start the season.

Maybe Ryan Murray (groin) is able to play Oct. 4 versus Detroit. Maybe Harrington's injury isn't so bad. (There was no update available on Harrington from the Blue Jackets as of 10:30 a.m. Saturday.)

Here's our third installment of the roster forecast, as the clock ticks toward roster cutdown day. The roster must be set by 5 p.m. Tuesday, meaning the last chance to put a player on waivers is noon Monday.

FORWARDS (17)

Roster locks (11): Josh Anderson, Cam Atkinson, Oliver Bjorkstrand, Brandon Dubinsky, Pierre-Luc Dubois, Anthony Duclair, Nick Foligno, Boone Jenner, Riley Nash, Artemi Panarin, Alexander Wennberg.

Bubble (3): Markus Hannikainen, Sonny Milano, Lukas Sedlak.

Last cut (2): Jonathan Davidsson, Kevin Stenlund.

Injured (1): Alex Broadhurst (undisclosed).

Insights: Since our last forecast, we've moved Duclair up into the "roster locks" category. He's had the camp everybody wanted him to have, looking fast and skilled and hungry. Don't know where he fits in the lineup, but it looks like he'll start on the fourth line. ... The fact that Milano dressed Friday but isn't dressing Saturday night could be an indication that he's in good standing with the NHL roster. No idea where he's going to play, but if he skates on the fourth line with Duclair and Riley Nash — that's what coach John Tortorella has shown repeatedly in camp — that's an interesting trio. It could be a fourth line by default. Or it could be second or third line, depending on how everybody else is playing. ... The fact that Wennberg is being sent to Chicago to play — one of the few established vets in the lineup — is a hint that maybe Tortorella was referencing him Thursday when he spoke about making changes quickly and without notice if certain players aren't up to speed. ... It's hard to imagine the Blue Jackets demoting Milano or risking waivers with Hannikainen or Sedlak just to keep Davidsson (21) or Stenlund (22) in the NHL as extra forwards. Those guys need to play, even if that means Sweden for Davidsson (Djurgardens) or the AHL for Stenlund (Cleveland). ... The Blue Jackets signed Mark Letestu to a two-way deal and passed him through waivers Friday. But there's no indication he's going to stick with the Blue Jackets to start the season. It looks like he'll start in Cleveland, but quite obviously be on a short list for a recall. ... Seriously, how good should Cleveland be this year? ... It's not out of the question that the Blue Jackets will "bury" one or more NHL contracts in the minor leagues. That's not something we've seen around these parts.

DEFENSE (9)



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Roster locks (6): Gabriel Carlsson, Adam Clendening, Dean Kukan, Markus Nutivaara, David Savard, Zach Werenski.

Injured (3): Scott Harrington (undisclosed), Seth Jones (knee), Ryan Murray (groin).

Insights: OK, this is getting ridiculous. After letting Ian Cole and Jack Johnson walk via free agency, the Blue Jackets' defense was already untested past the top three or four on the depth chart. Then came a wave of injuries. ... The Jackets, as of noon Saturday, have six healthy defensemen outside the players recalled from Cleveland for the game Saturday night. As a result, the Blue Jackets might spend the early part of next week making recalls for the blue line, not roster cuts. ... Among the players who might be considered for a call-up are Ryan Collins, Tommy Cross, Michael Prapavessis and Dillon Simpson. ... But deciding who makes the team might be the easy part. Who will slot next to Werenski on the top pairing in Jones' absence? Who will play alongside David Savard in Murray's absence? Is the third pair going to be able to play significant minutes? ... It's possible the Blue Jackets arrive in Detroit for the Oct. 4 opener with three pairs all playing together for the first time.

GOALTENDER (3)

Roster locks (2): Sergei Bobrovsky, Joonas Korpisalo.

Injured (1): Matiss Kivlenieks*

Insights: No dramas here. It's Bobrovsky and Korpisalo, just as it's been for the past two seasons. Korpisalo, who has had a better camp than Bobrovsky, is on the playing roster tonight in Chicago. ... Kivlenieks has been slowed by an injury since early in camp, so expect Brad Thiessen to get more playing time with AHL Cleveland than expected.

* free-agent invitee

CAMP TRANSACTIONS

Sept. 19: F Trey Fix-Wolansky returned to his junior club. F Yegor Sokolov and D Jordan Sambrook released from tryout agreements.

Sept. 24: F Zac Dalpe, F Nathan Gerbe, D Tommy Cross and D Dillon Simpson placed on waivers. G Joseph Raaymakers released from tryout agreement. F Vitaly Abramov, F Paul Bittner, F Dan DeSalvo, F Maxime Fortier, F Brett Gallant, F Nikita Korostelev, F Miles Koules, F Ryan MacInnis, F Justin Scott, F Kole Sherwood, F Calvin Thurkauf, F Trent Vogelhuber, D Brady Austin, D Garret Cockerill, D Ryan Collins, D Blake Siebenaler, D Doyle Somerby, D Justin Wade and G Brad Thiessen assigned to AHL Cleveland.

Sept. 25: Dalpe, Gerbe, Cross and Simpson assigned to AHL Cleveland.

Sept. 26: G Jean-Francois Berube placed on waivers. F Sam Vigneault, F Eric Robinson and D Michael Prapavessis assigned to AHL Cleveland. F Liam Foudy returned to his junior club.

Sept. 27: Signed F Mark Letestu to a one-year, two-way contract and placed him on waivers. Signed D Michael Prapavessis to a two-year entry level contract.

Sept. 28: F Mark Letestu cleared waivers. F Zac Dalpe, F Dan DeSalvo, F Nathan Gerbe, F Miles Koules, F Ryan MacInnis, F Sam Vigneault, D Tommy Cross, D Michael Prapavessis, D Dillon Simpson, D Justin Wade and G Jean-Francois Berube from AHL Cleveland.

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1107131 Columbus Blue Jackets

Zach Werenski dazzles in his long-awaited return to Blue Jackets' lineup

By Tom Reed

Sep 29, 2018

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The past five months for the Blue Jackets have been mostly joyless, a playoff-eliminating handshake line without end.

Uncertainty clouds the future of their two biggest stars. Injuries hobble their defensive corps, the team's top Norris Trophy candidate lost for four to six weeks with a knee sprain.

Sure, the Blue Jackets resemble contenders on paper, but how will the lineup look after the trade deadline?

The club and its fan base needed an injection of good news. On Friday night in Nationwide Arena there was Zach Werenski to provide it. With one rush across the attacking blue line and two healthy shoulders, the young defenseman reminded everyone what a gifted player he is.

Making his long-awaited preseason debut, Werenski dazzled in a rollicking 7-6 win over the Penguins. He set up a goal on his first shift and had three assists before the game was 13 minutes old. Werenski finished the night with four assists and five shots in 25 minutes while playing primarily against the Penguins top line of Sidney Crosby, Jake Guentzel and Patric Hornqvist.

Most importantly, his surgically repaired left shoulder came through the game pain free. The hardest hits he absorbed were pats on the back from teammates and coaches.

"It didn't take him long to join a rush, did it," said John Tortorella, referencing the Artemi Panarin goal that Werenski helped set up at 0:31. "Yeah, I thought he played well. I thought he was aggressive offensively. I thought he competed hard defensively. Didn't get overly banged up as far as the hitting, but he played in the corners.

"Yeah, he's a really good player. He dictates a lot of things that happen for us."

The game served as a dress rehearsal for both teams. The Penguins know where their best players will be at season's end. The Blue Jackets cannot make that claim. Panarin and Sergei Bobrovsky have yet to sign contract extensions, and neither seems a safe bet to be here at the start of next season.

So watching Panarin carve the Penguins for two goals and a pair of assists must leave fans feeling conflicted. How much longer do they get to call the diminutive dynamo their own? His outrageous third-period dangle around Crosby, which drew a penalty, punctuated an enthralling performance.

In a perfect world for Blue Jackets supporters, Panarin grows old together with Cam Atkinson (goal and three assists) and Pierre-Luc Dubois. But nothing about the organization has felt perfect since they lost a 2-0 series lead to the Capitals in April. Even a nationally televised win over the Sabres on Monday night in bucolic Clinton, N.Y., was marred by the knee injury to Seth Jones.

That's why Werenski's return was such a boost. He's a terrific player, one who's only going to get better with age.

"Everyone knows what Z-man brings to the table when he's healthy," Atkinson said. "It's no secret. We're going to need him to be the engine back there while Jonesy is gone. ... When he's up the ice, it's a deadly threat."

Everyone was pleased for the kid. Nobody was happier than Werenski. He scored 16 goals last season while playing all but the first 12 games in discomfort. He wore a brace wrapped around his chest that prevented his left arm from elevating more than 45 degrees to minimize the risk of separation.

There were no such limitations Friday. His five shots on goal led the Blue Jackets and were tied for a game high with Hornqvist.

"I don't have any restrictions," Werenski said. "I have no brace. I have no injuries. Tonight, just showed I feel 100 percent confident going into the season."

Asked to identify one thing that felt better than last season, Werenski didn't overthink it.



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"My shoulder," he said.

During his postgame media scrum, Werenski must have used the phrase, "I was just having fun out there" about a half-dozen times.

Like everybody involved in a contest that Tortorella termed "a slop fest," Werenski had a few mistakes. He was caught flat-footed late in the third period, allowing Bryan Rust to blow past him for a glorious scoring chance. Bobrovsky maintained the one-goal lead with a sparkling left-pad save.

Overall, Werenski was strong throughout in his only preseason appearance. (Tortorella confirmed he would not play in the exhibition finale at Chicago on Saturday.)

The chart below from HockeyViz.com illustrates all the shots taken by the Blue Jackets (top half of each rink diagram) and against them (bottom half). The left side signifies even strength. The right side shows special teams play.

Each mark indicates the location of a shot attempt, and red marks reflect goals. You can see here how Werenski was part of a team-leading five goals for and finished plus-7 in shot attempts in all situations. He was third in the latter category, trailing only Panarin (plus-9) and Atkinson (plus-6).

Translation: Werenski was a big part of driving play in the Jackets' offensive favor.

Notes

- Werenski opened the game paired with Markus Nutivaara, but the Blue Jackets were forced to alter their plans after an injury to Scott Harrington. The defenseman suffered an upper-body injury on his only shift after getting hammered by Dominik Simon.

The Jackets played virtually the entire game with five defensemen, denying them a good look at possible pairings for the season opener at Detroit.

Tortorella said Harrington would be re-evaluated Saturday. The blue line is already thin without Jones and Ryan Murray (groin).

"I feel terrible for the kid," the coach said. "With Jonesey and Murr out, he's fighting for a spot to play. I feel bad for him."

- Tortorella declined to offer an assessment of Bobrovsky's preseason.

In three appearances, the goalie registered a 4.33 GAA, and an .822 save percentage. Among goaltenders who played at least 100 preseason minutes, Bobrovsky ranked 37th in save percentage. His 73 shots against were the 13th-most faced by any goaltender. The 64 scoring chances against were 11th-most faced by a netminder.

The Blue Jackets were often careless with the puck Friday night, resulting in several breakaways and a host of great chances. The Penguins were credited with 29 shots and beat Bobrovsky a couple of times high to the glove side. He did his best work in the final minutes to preserve the win.

"I'm not going to make assessments on exhibition (games) and all that stuff," Tortorella said. "It's really not fair to the players. I'll just leave it alone."

"He made some really good saves tonight. It was a slop fest. That's what it was. It certainly gives both teams tape to look at."

- Tortorella said beyond the top unit of Panarin, Dubois and Atkinson, who demonstrated great chemistry, he's not sure how the other three lines will come together for Thursday's opener.

- The Penguins dressed a strong lineup. One player who didn't make the trip was former Blue Jackets defenseman Jack Johnson.

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1107219 Websites

The Athletic / Ates: Saturday hot takes, travel notebook, and the importance of taking your best shot

By Murat Ates

Sep 29, 2018

In a life before The Athletic, I stumbled upon a scene in Galway, Ireland, that I will never forget.

It was a rainy afternoon and despite the rain I'd decided to go swimming in Galway Bay. I dove off a play structure and into the water, I climbed back up, I dove again, I climbed back up, I tried a flip into the water, I climbed back up.

I had the ocean to myself so it goes on like this for a while.

When I finally got out of the water and sat, toweling myself off on the shore, an old man approached the empty sea I'd left behind. He stuck his toe in. He splashed his face a little. He was easily in his 70s, he had only patches of what was once white hair left on his head, and he clearly fancied a swim.

"The water's surprisingly warm!" I called to him from afar.

"Thanks, kindly," he replied, "And now where might you be from?"

I was (and am) from Canada and he was (and is) from Galway, Ireland. We got to talking and soon it came out that he was a photographer — now retired — that had made his entire life and career out of a chance event in Galway, way back in 1963.

It was his first job, he said. He was 19 years old. He had a camera that you had to crank by hand and only gave you one good photograph before you had to crank it around another time. He was one of several photographers, he told me, tasked with a particularly famous job.

John F Kennedy visited Galway, Ireland, in 1963. And when he visited Galway, President Kennedy visited it in style.

Kennedy was to approach Eyre Square, Galway's central park, in an open concept limo. One by one, giant camera in hand, Galway's local photographers were made to carry their gear to the front of their group, set up their equipment, take their photograph, and then clear out of the way such that their colleagues could follow suit.

Back when he was 19 years old, the old man told me, this was his first big gig. John F Kennedy was thoroughly famous by this point in world history and although the photographer's boss was set up on a hill with a better vantage point of the proceedings than anyone, the rookie journalist wanted to make an impression.

His opportunity came. JFK's limo approached. JFK smiled at the crowd. JFK waved. And the photographer, as scripted, carried his gear to the front of the pack of his colleagues, set up his camera, and took his best shot.

He failed.

He was unhappy with his photograph.

He was so unhappy with his photograph that he took his camera to the end of the line of photographers, set it up all over again, and then, when it was his "turn" to take a second picture, he tucked his camera under one arm and leaped right into the limo itself.

JFK's bodyguards screamed at him. They pinned him down in the back seat, cursing at him and bending his arms behind his back. He worried that he'd lose his camera off the edge of the car.

"All I want is a feckin' picture!" the Irish photographer screamed.

"Get the fuck off this car!" the American bodyguards screamed back.

And then, with a power and grace befitting of his presidency, John F Kennedy himself called out.

"Relax!" Kennedy yelled. "He's a friend!"



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And that was it. The bodyguards let go. The photographer sat up. And then, in a moment that would change his life and his career forever, he would take the iconic photograph of John F Kennedy on his 1963 trip to Ireland.

When I heard this story at Galway Bay, I didn't know what to make of it. It sounded too good to be true. And then, when I found my way back to an internet connection, I Googled the name he gave me.

To my permanent amazement, the story that Stan Shields told me that rainy day was real. He was a raw rookie, he nailed his second shot, and his life was forever changed by it.

*

The Winnipeg Jets announced their first major swath of cuts on Friday afternoon, trimming their roster to 27 players. Highly touted defenseman Sami Niku was among those sent to the Manitoba Moose, meaning any life-altering success he is to have with the Jets this season will require him to seize a second opportunity somewhere down the road.

Meanwhile, Kristian Vesalainen and Brendan Lemieux are still fighting for a forward job while Tucker Poolman hangs around as Winnipeg's eighth (and only waiver exempt) defenseman.

Michael Spacek and Logan Stanley are believed to be dinged up and will certainly be sent to join Moose camp this week. As such, there are two true cuts left for Paul Maurice to make to get down to a traditional 23-player roster.

It's time for some Saturday hot takes.

Kristian Vesalainen is ready for the NHL and will make the NHL.

Every year there is a story somewhere in the league wherein a young, highly touted guy buries a few goals against minor-league opposition and expectations climb beyond what's reasonable. Often, when teams fill out their rosters with NHL players and the battles intensify, those players fade away.

Kristian Vesalainen was not that player. He is nailing his first shot.

Despite playing back-to-back games on Wednesday and Thursday, it was Vesalainen who was intercepting passes at the blue line and pushing them forward for chances against New Jersey, while his d-zone positioning looked like that of a professional winger to me. Vesalainen's only problem? His contract status makes it tempting to cut him.

If Vesalainen plays less than 10 games in the NHL this season, his three-year entry level contract will "slide," meaning that it would begin next season instead of this one. For Winnipeg, that's an extra year of a useful player on a cheap, affordable contract while they'd be getting a more impressive rookie when Vesalainen is 20, than he is today. A cap-space strapped team could certainly take advantage of that.

Winnipeg won't do that — or at least, not yet.

Of note, Winnipeg's two games against Florida in Helsinki this November are the Jets' 13th and 14th games of the regular season. If the team were so inclined, it wouldn't take much juggling at all to stretch out Vesalainen's nine-game audition such that he plays in Helsinki. If he's earned his spot by then, it's his. If not, activating the European out clause in his contract is an easy move — the SM-liiga is right there.

To make this even easier for Winnipeg to manage: the Jets play an absurdly condensed eight games in 14 days from Oct. 14-27. Rotating Vesalainen in and out of the playing roster would keep other players fresh while ensuring he plays fewer than 10 games heading into Helsinki.

It's all speculation, but I told you — today is about opinions, not facts. And my opinion is Vesalainen has earned a spot on merit while being an easy logistical selection at the same time.

Sami Niku is ready for the NHL and will nail his second shot.

To a certain extent, of course I think Sami Niku is ready for the NHL.

I'm the one who looked at his offensive production as a 21-year-old in the AHL, compared it to his historical peers, consulted research and scouts, and proclaimed that Niku would get at least 40 games in the NHL this season. There are biases at play here.

Still, I don't think it's a controversial statement to say Niku is already Winnipeg's second-best puck mover on the left side. He may even be a better pure passer than Josh Morrissey is, even if Niku's gaps in coverage and Morrissey's all-around excellence make the overall comparison a landslide win for #44.

So what is my opinion of Niku's AHL demotion?

If you read my training camp preview, you know I saw this coming. Niku is waiver exempt. The easiest and most conservative thing for Winnipeg to do is send him down and protect their veterans.

That doesn't make it the right move.

Winnipeg's left-side problems persist. None of Ben Chiarot, Joe Morrow, Dmitry Kulikov, or Tyler Myers represent an obvious solution now or in the future.

Meanwhile, I'm not sure that Niku's gaps in coverage are better solved at the slower pace of the AHL or adapted to at the highest level. The old-school thinking is to send the player down, let him ripen, and promote him in stages. I'm not sure that's how the NHL works anymore. Tyler Dellow and Namita Nandakumar's research at The Athletic have shown that a defenseman's 21-year-old season is a pivotal year — for a lot of highly touted d-men, if they're not playing at least half a season by now, then they never make it to an NHL top four.

Despite all this, I don't think this is the end of the road for Niku. Winnipeg's d-corps has a terrible track record when it comes to staying healthy — of the seven, non-waiver-exempt veterans in Niku's way, only Morrissey hasn't missed large swaths of games in recent years.

For Winnipeg, that's a scary thought. For Niku, it's a sure sign that his second shot will come.

When it does, I think he's going to run with it.

The Athletic LOADED: 09.30.2018

1107220 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs, Carrick await hard cuts: 'Success is too fleeting'

Luke Fox | @lukefoxjukebox

September 29, 2018, 9:59 PM

DETROIT — Even with a wedding to throw and a three-island-hopping Hawaiian honeymoon to plan, the busy brain of Connor Carrick would keep circling back to that one thing all summer.

"I didn't really take my mind off of hockey," the Toronto Maple Leafs defenceman-on-the-bubble told Sportsnet during a recent interview.

So, long after being eliminated in a playoff series he'd been scratched for, he'd flick on the TV and watch the Washington Capitals, the club that drafted and dealt him, battle a batch of misfits from Vegas for the Stanley Cup.

He'd see a little of himself in both those sides, and it would get him amped up, restless to go for a skate.

"[Vegas] had a whole team of guys looking for chances. They got them and were able to do really well. As a player, I was able to draw some inspiration off that," Carrick explained.

"The Capitals, too: Michal Kempny was of no use in Chicago. They were pretty happy to get rid of him [at the trade deadline], and he took off in Washington.

"There's enough success stories to keep positive in this game."



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Carrick, normally a glass-half-full type, will need to channel that positivity in the coming hours after logging heavy but forgettable minutes in Saturday's 5-1 pre-season loss to the Detroit Red Wings as a member of Toronto's B squad.

Despite putting his work ethic before his skill, and gaining a cap-friendly, one-year contract for the coming season, Carrick is still searching for an NHL niche.

The routine this summer was to follow team skates and gym reps with a second solo skate, where he'd dive deep into his shot, or his positioning, or his stride. He'd compound that with persistent analysis. That busy mind.

"It's something I've always done, and it's something I've found really helps my game," Carrick said. "Self-reflection has been a strong part of my game and helped me add over the years. I think if you have an awareness that day, you know what to throw at yourself to be your best. I think that's an important skill."

More so than summers past, Carrick drilled into why, what and how he wanted to ready himself for camp: evolve into a more sound defensive skater with a smarter plan.

"What I mean by that is, I found overcompensation in my game. Super active in the neutral zone. Very loopy. Trying to pick off every pass, every guy. I needed to make sure I don't get scored on and stay in the lineup. It was a fear-based model," he admitted.

"In terms of D-zone, too circular, too much spinning, not enough commanding neutral ice and being able to pick pucks off and get 'em back. This is my ice. You can go where you want but still staying tight to your check."

As is the Babcock way, the Leafs coach was dropping a life lesson about another player entirely Saturday when he broadened his scope.

"In life, I believe things come at an earned basis. I don't think you just give kids stuff; they've got to earn it," Babcock preached. "That's in all things. If they earn it, they appreciate it more, and they end up doing a better job."

No one among the cluster of prospective Leafs defencemen hunting for the Nos. 6 and 7 spots earned the job, judging solely by the Maple Leafs eight exhibition games — which, paradoxically, is both a tiny sample size and way too much sample size for a pre-season that dragged on till its merciful demise in Motown.

The safest bet, then, is that the big unknown Russian, Igor Ozhiganov, gets an extended look beside Travis Dermott on the third pairing's right side when the meaningful action starts Wednesday.

And the seventh defenceman will be one of Carrick, Calle Rosen (waivers exempt), or Justin Holl — all of whom are on light contracts, all of whom could be called back up mid-season as anyone outside the top four will start running on a short leash, and none of whom have grabbed hold of Babcock's trust in the D-zone and on the penalty kill.

Just because the league is installing a hard deadline for roster submissions at 5 p.m. ET Tuesday doesn't mean the tryouts for the hazy fringes of Toronto's lineup will cease.

"If you remember, Roman Polak was signed during the season last year," Carrick said. "My goal has been to elevate my role on this team and grab some more of the pie, so I can make this team better and push the guys that have it and make sure they're not taking it for granted. Hopefully I'm able to."

There's accuracy to the buzz that the Leafs are shopping righty Carrick, the 24-year-old who was out-battled for a spot in the lineup by off-the-glass-and-out Polak last time the playoffs rolled around.

"We have to talk about what we're going to do with our roster, and we will do that prior to the game and after the game, like we've been doing every day," Babcock said Saturday before chartering to his old stomping grounds. "I don't know when the announcement is, but we'll know what's going on by the end of the day, I would assume."

Watch that waiver wire Sunday and Monday, folks.

Two of three backup goaltenders — Curtis McElhinney, Garret Sparks, and Calvin Pickard — need to pass through as well, and there's no guarantee they will. (As long as William Nylander remains jobless, a temporary bonus spot will be open.)

"I don't really know where the organization is at in terms of their decision," said McElhinney, 35, the starter and finisher in Saturday's defeat. "I've been around for a little while, so I've played a bit, and my skin has got pretty thick over the years."

Carrick may only be 167 games into his big-league life, but he too is stiffening his skin.

Regarding the fact Babcock hasn't given him much feedback over the past couple weeks, he reasoned, "I'm not sure there is a ton to talk about."

Exceedingly generous with his own time, there is concern Carrick's may be running out in Toronto.

"I don't think there's really any one time where you can say, 'I've made it.' That's not a thing in our game," he told us during that longer chat at camp.

"Success is too fleeting. Confidence is too hard to earn. You have to stay with it every day. It's a beautiful sport we're in — how honest it keeps you."

Indeed, there is beauty in honesty. But, boy, can it pack a lot of pain.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 09.30.2018

1107221 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Oilers impressive in pre-season, but not swaying opinions just yet

Mark Spector | @sportsnetspec

September 29, 2018, 7:33 PM

EDMONTON — The Edmonton Oilers went 6-1 in their pre-season. So did Detroit and Toronto, and it makes one wonder: Does 6-1 feel as meaningless in those two cities as it does in Edmonton?

Sure, you'd rather win than lose. Duh. But after what occurred here last season, a bunch of superior exhibition efforts may pique some interest locally, but it isn't going to sway any betting lines.

What does 6-1 mean to head coach Todd McLellan?

"It's over," he said of the pre-season, which actually includes one more tilt in Cologne, Germany this Wednesday.

Connor McDavid?

"I liked camp. Guys came in ready to work, ready to listen," said McDavid, who notched a goal and an assist in a 4-3 win over the Calgary Flames Saturday afternoon. "But the hard work is only getting started. The pace of the play and the intensity of the games is only going to go up from here."

So, how real is it? Is an Oilers team that has been better than most every opponent during camp ready for an impossibly wicked start to their season, one that goes New Jersey (in Gothenburg, Sweden), Boston, New York Rangers, Winnipeg, Boston, Nashville, Pittsburgh, Washington, Nashville?

Let's break down the Oilers camp, and see how many boxes they actually checked off:



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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• Of all the things that have to happen for the Oilers to be a playoff team again, none of them will be impactful without Cam Talbot reacquiring his 'A' game.

Talbot entered Saturday's game with a .951 save percentage and proceeded to stop 39 of 42 shots. He was sabre-sharp throughout the pre-season, allowing the Oilers to check off the most important box they had — their nets.

"Cam was tremendous," McLellan said. "There's a check mark there."

• The right wing was supposed to be an area of weakness, but as camp winds down, Ty Rattie, Kailer Yamamoto and Jesse Puljujarvi have turned it into a pre-season strength, combining for 17 goals. On his 20th birthday Saturday, Yamamoto had two more goals to finish his North American pre-season with 6-3-9.

Look, no one expects this level of production to last, and with three younger players, you know there will be some slumps along the way. But the fact there are three of them — four if you count Tobias Rieder — suggests that there should always be at least one or two guys going well to use in the top six.

Depth and internal competition are two terms we never thought we'd be using about the Oilers' right side.

"The right wing position was challenged," McLellan acknowledged, "and they accepted that challenge."

• Two young, right-shot, offensive-minded defencemen emerged this September, on a blue line that lacked both righties and guys who can put up some points. Now, the fact that Evan Bouchard and Ethan Bear have perhaps both earned spots inside the top seven is extremely promising, even if it is also facilitated by the fact folks here aren't so sure if Jakub Jerabek is an NHL defenceman.

Whether they play here for all of this season, or just part, Bear (21 years old) and Bouchard (18) give Edmonton a promising pair of power-play D-men for years to come.

• Perhaps it's worthy of mention that McDavid, the two-time reigning Art Ross Trophy winner, appears to be about to launch an assault on the NHL scoring race not yet seen in his young career. In four pre-season games, he had four goals and 11 points.

He has talked about wanting to score more, and this season he gets the crafty Ryan Nugent-Hopkins on his left side, and will open with Rattie (7-4-11 in the pre-season) on his right. It is as if the Oilers captain has found an extra step, despite already being far and away the fastest skater in the NHL.

All signs point to a historic season for McDavid, which by itself should make Edmonton a playoff contender.

• The Flames led this game 3-1 in the first period, before Edmonton took it back to win 4-3. But it's pre-season, right? It doesn't matter, right?

Well, it does here. This fall, it matters.

"Think back to last year," McDavid said of an early 3-1 deficit. "Next thing you know, we're down 4- or 5-1, and the game's over."

So far, so good.

They're winning their games. It's not the Oilers' fault they don't count yet.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 09.30.2018

1107222 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Canucks relying on hope once again as results remain elusive

Iain MacIntyre | @imacSportsnet

September 30, 2018, 2:01 AM

KELOWNA, B.C. — The Vancouver Canucks were unable to score, unable to keep the puck out of their net, and nobody other than Elias Pettersson definitively played his way on to the National Hockey League team desperate for help. Other than that, their pre-season was a success.

Now, go get 'em!

Widely picked to be one of the worst teams in the NHL this season, the Canucks finished their September warmups at 1-6 and were outscored 30-10. Given a chance to build momentum and launch themselves into Wednesday's regular season opener with at least a glimmer of positivity, the Canucks instead were beaten 4-1 Saturday by the Arizona Coyotes, the only team some Vegas oddsmakers believe is worse than Vancouver.

The Canucks finished their seven-game pre-season with just five even-strength goals and were outscored 12-0 during an eight-period stretch encompassing most of their last three games. They were last in the NHL in both shooting percentage (4.5) and save percentage (85.2).

"It just gets frustrating," Canuck centre Bo Horvat said of the offensive blackout. "But at the same time, you can't get too discouraged. We've just got to treat (the regular season) as a clean slate. We can't dwell on this. These games don't count right now and we're going to have to come to play the ones that matter. We're going to have to start putting the puck in the net come Wednesday."

The Canucks open their season against the Calgary Flames at Rogers Arena.

They'll say the pre-season games didn't matter. And in the standings, they didn't. But if the rebuilding Canucks had gone, say, 6-1, they'd be talking about a fresh outlook and renewed confidence and hopefulness.

Now, they'll have to try to manufacture those feelings over a couple of practices.

Their bleak September merely piled on what has been three dismal seasons and, despite a media guide of new faces the last couple of years, open the regular season at a dead standstill. Pettersson, the Swedish teenager drafted fifth-overall in 2017, was probably the best Canuck of the pre-season. But there wasn't much else that went right for the team the last two weeks.

"Now it's go time," winger Brock Boeser, goal-less in five pre-season games, told reporters. "Now we have to start building chemistry with whatever team we have. It's a clean slate going into the real season ... and we've got to make sure we show up to work every day wanting to get better, and work as a five-man unit on the ice."

Of all the uneasy signs on the Canucks, the most disconcerting may be Boeser's inability to score on any of the 30-plus shots he attempted during the pre-season. He led the team with 29 goals last year and finished second on Calder Trophy balloting despite missing the last month of the season with a back injury.

Rehab on his back and an injured wrist prevented Boeser from training fully until July, and when he reported to training camp he was noticeably more muscular after adding 8-10 pounds in the off-season.

"Obviously, it's tough when you aren't scoring goals," he said. "(But) I'm not worried about not scoring in the pre-season. Like I told you guys, I'm coming off injury, trying to get the rhythm back. I felt a lot better out there tonight. I felt I was moving the puck, moving better, and we were getting chances when I was out there. I feel like I took a step in the right direction."

With limited stats available at the Canucks' home game in the Okanagan Valley, Boeser was not credited with a shot on net Saturday.

Nikolay Goldobin had one, and the winger scored on it in the third period when Vancouver was behind 3-0.



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Goldobin and Brendan Leipsic, another fifth-year pro with a make-it-or-break-it opportunity to stick in the NHL in an offensive role, didn't exactly seize the chances given to them by the Canucks in the pre-season.

But they'll probably start on coach Travis Green's team anyway, so anxious are the Canucks for offensive help after the retirement last spring of Hall-of-Fame scorers Daniel and Hank Sedin.

Vancouver is expected to trim two forwards Sunday to get down to the 23-player limit for opening night.

"I think I had a pretty good camp," Goldobin, 22, said. "I could have done better, of course. Hopefully, the coach decides to keep me. I've done everything ... given my best."

To be fair, Vancouver's lack of saves and offensive finish — they hit three posts against the Coyotes — overshadowed pretty good efforts in two or three of their losses. But their dress-rehearsal performance against the Coyotes was not encouraging after the Canucks fell behind 2-0 in the first period and did not much trouble Arizona after that.

"It's hard, you know?" Goldobin said. "But that's what exhibition is for: you learn from your mistakes. Hopefully we'll start the season good with a win."

Yet again, hope is mainly what they have to go on.

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Sportsnet.ca / The best and worst case scenario for each NHL team in 2018-19

Rory Boylen | @RoryBoylen

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When the puck is dropped on the 2018-19 NHL season next Wednesday, every team and its fanbase will head in with some kind of optimism. Some have Stanley Cup hopes, others just want to get to the playoffs, while the rebuilders just want to see some promise from their kids.

But even the best laid plans often go awry.

Each team has a range of outcomes in a league full of parity. Here is our look at the best, and worst, case scenario for each team.

METROPOLITAN DIVISION

Carolina

Best case: Scott Darling returns to form and posts a save percentage far closer to his career average when he was a backup for three years in Chicago (.923) than what he mustered last season with the Hurricanes (.888). Sebastian Aho blows up as a star, rookies Valentin Zykov and Andrei Svechnikov are at least in semi-contention for the Calder Trophy to help offset the loss of Jeff Skinner and improve last season's 23rd-ranked offence. Canes get to the playoffs for the first time in a decade.

Worst case: Darling struggles again and confirms he's a backup goalie counting for \$4.15 million against the cap. Backup Petr Mrazek also continues to struggle in his first year with the team and is no safety net. Goals continue to be hard to come by, Carolina can't hang with the top four teams in their division, and miss the playoffs yet again.

Columbus

Best case: Alexander Wennberg and Cam Atkinson bounce back from down years and return to form as 60-point players. Artemi Panarin and Sergei Bobrovsky sign long-term deals, or at least aren't traded by the deadline, and continue to post award-worthy numbers. Seth Jones

returns healthy after missing the start of the season and is in the running for the Norris Trophy. The team's power play operates as a top-12 unit as it did from Jan. 1 onwards rather than as the 25th-best unit it finished over the full season. They win the division and take a run at the Stanley Cup.

Worst case: The pending UFA situations for Panarin and Bobrovsky become a distraction and, when it becomes apparent neither will sign, they are dealt before the deadline and the players or pieces coming back are sharp downgrades in the immediate future. No bounceback seasons mean Washington, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia excel to finish ahead of Columbus, while plucky New Jersey, Carolina, Montreal or Buffalo stay in the picture long enough to nab wild-card spots, leaving the Jackets on the outside looking in.

New Jersey

Best case: Now fully healthy after playing through a hand injury in his rookie year, Nico Hischier improves and has a Mat Barzal-type season as a sophomore, helped at least partially by Taylor Hall producing at a similar career-best level. Also healthy, Marcus Johansson returns to a level where he scores north of 50 points, and helps secure a passable secondary scoring unit. More importantly, Cory Schneider works his way back to full health from hip surgery and returns to form as a top-10 goalie in the league.

Worst case: Schneider struggles or misses a large chunk of the season, and Keith Kinkaid's save percentage falls back even a little from the .913 he posted in 41 games last season, which was good enough for 18th in the league. Hall's 2017-18 shooting percentage (14) falls back closer to his career average of 10.9 and he drops off by 25-30 points. This has a ripple effect through the rest of the lineup, especially on the top unit. Sophomores Jesper Bratt and Will Butcher can't match their first-year totals. The Devils miss the playoffs and actually challenge the New York teams for last place in the Metro.

NY Islanders

Best case: Barzal experiences no second-year setback and actually improves by a couple points to be among the league leaders. Josh Bailey maintains close to his 71-point performance even without John Tavares as his centre and Anders Lee scores 40 times again. Meanwhile, Ryan Pullock breaks out as a PP star, while kids such as Kieffer Bellows, Josh Ho-Sang and defenceman Sebastian Aho — none of whom will start the season with the team — earn call-ups and perform at a level that doesn't allow GM Lou Lamoriello to send them back down. Robin Lehner secures the starter's job so well he gets a multi-year extension and the Islanders hang around the playoff race until the very end.

Worst case: After allowing the most shots and goals against last season, the Islanders defence remains just as porous and the offence takes hits all over with the absence of Tavares and even a minor second-year decline from Barzal. The bottom six, with additions Leo Komarov, Matt Martin and Valtteri Filppula is built for a different era and can't keep up with the pace of the modern game. The Isles bottom out, finish last in the league, and lose the lottery to end up picking fourth overall.

NY Rangers

Best case: At 36, Henrik Lundqvist puts together one more incredible season and is in the Vezina Trophy discussion, setting the table for the Rangers to overachieve. Kevin Shattenkirk doesn't experience any setbacks from knee surgery and plays close to a full slate, giving a boost to a power play that already finished 14th last season.

New coach Dan Quinn increases Pavel Buchnevich's role and he crosses 20 goals and 50 points, while at least one of the rookie centres — Lias Andersson (sent down) or Filip Chytil (still up) — play and contribute key top-six minutes. Chris Kreider sees an increase in minutes and bounces back from his blood clot scare last year to score 30 goals. The Rangers become the Avalanche-type surprise team and sneak into the playoffs.

Worst case: After allowing the second-most shots against last season, the defence gets no better and Lundqvist, who hasn't been a top-15 goalie by save percentage the past two years, really is on the downslope. Pending UFAs Mats Zuccarello and Kevin Hayes are traded for futures,



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which is a big negative to this year's team and the kids just aren't ready. The Rangers could bottom right out and finish last in the division.

Philadelphia

Best case: Not only does the first-line stay on track, but a second unit led by Nolan Patrick rises to elite relevance. Ivan Provorov blows up and arrives as a No. 1 NHL defenceman, while the addition of James van Riemsdyk to the net-front role on the power play vastly improves last season's 15th-best unit. One of the goalies — even if it's rookie Carter Hart, takes the reins and doesn't look back, stabilizing the position.

Worst case: After being such a great story in 2017-18, the Flyers' first line falls off a cliff: Couturier returns to the sub-40-point offensive levels we had come to expect from him at this level, and Claude Giroux recoils to the 60-70 point level he had been at in each of the three seasons prior. After a relatively healthy rookie season (73 games) Patrick has the same problems staying on the ice he had in junior. Neither Brian Elliott nor Michal Neuvirth find consistency and the ever-present goalie concerns in Philly linger to pull them out of the playoffs.

Pittsburgh

Best case: Sidney Crosby is amped up and motivated following a summer of watching Alex Ovechkin party with the Stanley Cup. Matt Murray's glove hand is improved and he returns to a .920 save percentage and the Penguins ice a top-three offence again, but also finish among the 10 best teams in goals against.

Worst case: The Penguins made a mistake keeping Murray and his shortcomings become a target for the league that he can't answer to. Phil Kessel doesn't come especially close to matching his career-best numbers from 2017-18 and none of the cheap wingers — Daniel Sprong, Dominik Simon, Jake Guentzel — end up securing a top-six role season-long. The Pens still have the star power to reach the playoffs, though, but a first-round loss is a step back from their 2018 finish.

Washington

Best case: After losing his job by playoff time, Braden Holtby bounces all the way back to Vezina form. Alex Ovechkin scores 50 goals for the eighth time and Evgeny Kuznetsov stays on track as an elite scorer and goes even higher than last season's 83 points. Michal Kempny's playoff effectiveness is not a mirage and he becomes a defender whom coach Todd Riederer can play near 20 minutes a night with confidence. Jakub Vrana, a 22-year-old first-round pick who has shown flashes, fully arrives as a top-six player and the Capitals, with no pressure at all, match the rival Penguins as repeat champions.

Worst case: The Stanley Cup hangover is a thing. No longer in a contract year, John Carlson's play tails off and he doesn't touch the Norris conversation at \$8 million a season. Holtby slips, but rather than have an elite backup behind him, Pheonix Copley with his two career games played isn't able to play well enough to spell Holtby for long. Losing Barry Trotz has a greater impact than first thought and the Capitals fall down towards the playoff bubble. The worst outcome for the Capitals? Reaching the playoffs, and being eliminated by the Penguins again as they head on a path to reclaim the Stanley Cup.

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

ATLANTIC DIVISION

Boston

Best case: The first line is as good or better than it was in 2017-18, while Ryan Donato takes a run at the Calder Trophy following his nine-point performance in 12 late-season games. Zdeno Chara has another monstrous season in him at 41 and they finish as the best defensive team in the league, making for a hard matchup against their division's highest-scoring squads.

Worst case: The one major advantage the Bruins had on division rival Toronto and Tampa Bay, their stifling defence, isn't able to measure up to what it was a season ago. Patrice Bergeron's nagging back issues linger all season, either forcing him out for a long period of time, at multiple junctures, or just negatively impacts his performance as he fights

through. Danton Heinen was a flash in the pan, Jake DeBrusk doesn't score in seemingly every Saturday game and the secondary scoring vanishes. Boston is passed by not only Toronto, but Florida too and becomes a fringe playoff team.

Buffalo

Best case: The Jack Eichel-Jeff Skinner combo is a match made in heaven — Eichel scores 100 points and Skinner approaches 40 goals again as he did two seasons ago. The secondary scoring is led by Sam Reinhart, who continues the great pace he finished last season with: 39 points in his final 44 games. Rasmus Dahlin is not only NHL-ready, but becomes an instant star. Playoffs, here we come.

Worst case: A career backup, Hutton is a shaky starter and the Sabres have to use Linus Ullmark in more games than they planned. Dahlin struggles against top competition and the Sabres defence that was bottom-10 in shot suppression last season doesn't improve at all. It becomes clear Skinner won't sign an extension before July 1 and has to be traded. Another hyped-up pre-season leads to the disappointment of another playoff whiff.

Detroit

Best case: Each of the under-25 forwards breaks through with career years. Andreas Athanasiou scores 20 goals and 50 points with another increase in opportunity. Dylan Larkin takes yet another step up from 63 points, and Anthony Mantha becomes a 30-goal scorer. Meanwhile, Filip Zadina makes the team and makes each team that passed him over at the draft feel instant regret by winning the Calder. A Jimmy Howard-Jonathan Bernier tandem is good enough to not sink Detroit's season and Ken Holland's "don't call it a rebuild" is ahead of schedule.

Worst case: Already without Mike Green to start the season, Detroit's blue line becomes a black hole in front of an iffy goaltending duo. The scoring depth doesn't extend beyond one line, if that, and the Wings actually head into full-rebuild mode by hitting rock bottom in the standings.

Florida

Best case: There are zero problems off the ice with Mike Hoffman in the room and he hits 30 goals for the first time — put him next to Vincent Trocheck and the Panthers' top-two lines become two of the best, hardest to play against units in the league. Meanwhile, the third line is a skill unit with Henrik Borgstrom and Denis Malgin that provides above-average offence. Roberto Luongo stays healthy and follows up last season's .929 save percentage with a similar number to hang around the Vezina conversation.

Worst case: Neither goalie stays healthy for long, which sinks them in a division loaded with offensive teams. Florida finished third-worst in shot suppression last season and gets no better in 2018-19, making a dire goalie situation even worse. They end up playing closer to the 17-16-5 start they had a year ago than the wild 24-8-2 finish and are overtaken by other bounceback stories in Montreal and Buffalo.

Montreal

Best case: Carey Price takes back the "best goalie in the world" mantle and his play creates a high-level baseline the Habs won't fall below. Jesperi Kotkaniemi sticks and continues to look as good as he has in the pre-season, allowing Max Domi to move back to his natural spot on the wing. Brendan Gallagher and Tomas Tatar are the primary and secondary snipers to complement playmakers in Domi and Jonathan Drouin. The Habs are a tough team to play against and hang around the playoff bubble until the very end.

Worst case: Kotkaniemi doesn't stay for the season, Domi plays centre and has similar challenges to what Alex Galchenyuk had there. The defence, which allowed 32.3 shots against last season, starts even worse without Shea Weber for the first few months, and this creates too heavy a workload for the 31-year-old Price. Injuries are bound to hit, exposing a lack of depth, and it's another long, playoff-less season in Montreal.

Ottawa

Best case: All the negative press and expectations around the team has a positive impact on the players as they play the written-off underdog role



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Vegas assumed last season. Playing for big contracts, Matt Duchene and Mark Stone have career years, while Brady Tkachuk comes in and has an even bigger impact on offence and emotion than his brother Matthew had as a Flames rookie. Following a down season, Craig Anderson yo-yos back as he has many times before and the Senators shock everyone the same way they did two years ago, and make the playoffs.

Worst case: This is obvious isn't it? Everything comes crumbling down. Stone and Duchene have to be traded and don't return a winning amount. The projected problems come through and Ottawa crashes to the bottom of the standings, win the lottery, and have to hand Jack Hughes to Colorado.

Tampa Bay

Best case: Everything on offence is just as good as a season ago, but a full 82-game slate with Ryan McDonagh on the back end improves the shots against totals, which were bottom-third in the league. Danick Martel, an undrafted late-bloomer waiver pickup, finds his way into the lineup and becomes the latest great diamond in the rough find. Everything clicks and they win the Stanley Cup.

Worst case: After finishing as a Vezina Trophy finalist, Andrei Vasilevskiy is less than awesome in 2018-19. The .905 save percentage he posted from Jan. 1 to the end of the season is closer to the norm for him, which exacerbates their shot suppression issues. They still make the playoffs — it's hard to see them falling short — but exit quickly against one of the more complete teams.

Toronto

Best case: Not only does Frederik Andersen start off strong, but he maintains a high level into the post-season and steals a series or two for the Leafs. The power play, led by an absurd top unit, improves on an already high 25 per cent conversion rate Toronto scored at on the man advantage last season. Nikita Zaitsev returns to his first-year form and the overall defensive play from the forwards improves. A parade is planned — and marched in June.

Worst case: It becomes apparent that Andersen is overworked as coach Mike Babcock starts him in 66-plus games again and he tires down the stretch and into the playoffs. The blue line really does become an issue, allowing a ton of shots against and the Leafs give up three goals a game, just as last season's Penguins did. William Nylander goes unsigned until Dec. 1 and doesn't play this season. Toronto still makes the playoffs, but only in a wild-card spot, and gets booted in Round 1 again. The ensuing cap crunch ends the Leafs' best shot at the Cup.

CENTRAL DIVISION

Chicago

Best case: A healthy Corey Crawford changes the whole equation. If he can play a full season or close to it, the Hawks return to playoff relevance. Duncan Keith, 35, doesn't take until Feb. 15 to score his first goal, and gets on the board more than twice all season, which helps Chicago's power play to recover from its 28th-place finish. Nick Schmaltz stays on course as solid No. 2 centre.

Worst case: Crawford can't stay healthy, forcing the Hawks to lean on Cam Ward who hasn't seen a playoff game since 2009. No bouncebacks on the way for either Patrick Kane or Jonathan Toews, who turn 30 and 31 this season. They continue to lose ground in a tough division and finish well off the pace for last place two years in a row.

Colorado

Best case: Philipp Grubauer quickly wins the starting job from Semyon Varlamov and doesn't relinquish it, securing the spot now and for the future. Nathan MacKinnon maintains a high level of output and easily crosses 100 points, elevating others on his line. Tyson Jost, 20, earns the second-line centre spot out of camp and becomes a solid secondary producer — Jost was better than a point-per-game player in his only NCAA season two years ago. This moves Carl Soderberg back to the third line, where he better fits as a checker.

Worst case: Last season was a mirage. MacKinnon still scores, but not at such an elite level and this impacts everyone else. The secondary scoring struggles and they don't improve at all on their 33.3 shots against

per game from last season, which was bottom-five in the league. The Avalanche are somewhere in between what they were last season and two years ago, and are a firmly "mushy middle" team. Ottawa makes the playoffs, so the Avs don't get a lottery pick.

Dallas

Best case: New coach Jim Montgomery, who wants to play a fast-paced game that leans on his horses, finds the sweet middle ground between Lindy Ruff's river hockey and Ken Hitchcock's clamped-down defence to bring out the best in a team full of potential. Valeri Nichushkin returns from the KHL and tops his NHL-best 14 goals and 34 points. Radek Faksa becomes a Selke finalist, Miro Heiskanen makes everyone realize why GM Jim Nill was reticent to put him in an Erik Karlsson trade and the Stars take a run at the division title.

Worst case: They just get buried in a division full of Stanley Cup contenders and fringe contenders desperate to break through. Nashville and Winnipeg will claim two playoff spots here. St. Louis upgraded at the important centre position, while Minnesota and its front office are as motivated as any team to do something to ensure progress. Outside of the top line, the highest-scoring Dallas forward last season had 34 points — and if that doesn't improve, Dallas gets left behind.

Minnesota

Best case: There is almost no fallback from last season's best producers (Eric Staal, Mikael Granlund, Jason Zucker) and there is bounceback from those who have been key contributors before (Nino Niederreiter, Zach Parise, Charlie Coyle). At the same time, we start to see some young players such as Joel Eriksson-Ek, who had a terribly unlucky 4.8 shooting percentage last season, and Jordan Greenway, a second-round pick in 2015. An already deep team on paper gets deeper and finally goes on the long playoff run it hasn't had since 2003.

Worst case: Ryan Suter, coming off a broken ankle, just isn't the same. Staal and Parise, both 34, and Mikko Koivu, 35, start declining down the stretch of their careers. The old core isn't as effective as it's been in recent years. The summer hiring of new GM Paul Fenton is just the start, and as the team struggles, he decides it's time to re-tool and the Wild miss the playoffs for the first time since 2012.

Nashville

Best case: Not only does Pekka Rinne stay in Vezina form, but young backup Juuse Saros plays at a high level that allows the soon-to-be 36-year-old to rest a bit and be fresh for playoffs. Not much has changed with the Predators, it's no secret what the goal is here, so the best-case scenario is clear: Win the Stanley Cup.

Worst case: The Predators were 21st in the NHL last season averaging 32.4 shots against per game and that doesn't improve while, at the same time, Rinne plays average and Saros can't fill in with consistent play. The highest-scoring blue line falls back a few spots and last season proves to be Nashville's best regular season. The Predators won't miss the playoffs, but failing to go further than Winnipeg in the post-season again would be frustrating.

St. Louis

Best case: Ryan O'Reilly is a massive upgrade on the second line, becomes a Selke Trophy finalist or winner and the Blues' forward depth rivals the best teams in the league. The power play improves from last year's 30th-place finish, their collection of blueliners score the most from the position league-wide, and the Blues get back to the playoffs, where they prove a tough out and go on a run.

Worst case: Jake Allen, who has struggled with consistency and seen his numbers fall off two years in a row, doesn't recover and backup Chad Johnson doesn't provide nearly the same safety net as Carter Hutton last season. After finishing 24th in goals scored last season, the Blues don't improve there and so both sides of the puck stay in neutral. Everyone around them in the division maintains pace or improves and, like Minnesota, St. Louis is left in the dust.

Winnipeg

Best case: Last season was the start of something special and these Jets return better, deeper, more experienced and with a chip on their



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shoulder. Jack Roslovic sticks on the roster and works his way into a permanent centre role, perhaps even pushing Bryan Little back to the third-line role he occupied when Paul Stastny arrived. The Jets' depth is absurd and even when injuries hit, young fill-ins such as Sami Niku, Brendan Lemieux or Mason Appleton don't miss a beat. The Jets win the Presidents' Trophy and the Stanley Cup.

Worst case: No longer in a contract year, Connor Hellebuyck's season isn't as smooth as it was when he was a Vezina finalist and he reverts back to something similar to what he was in 2016-17. Regression hits Kyle Connor (16.1 shooting percentage) and Mark Scheifele (18.4) and no one fills the loss of Stastny well enough, leaving questions at second- and third-line centre. Instead of building on last year's playoff run, the Jets are ejected in Round 1 or 2 and the cap crunch closes the door on their best chance to win it all.

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

PACIFIC DIVISION

Anaheim

Best case: John Gibson stays healthy, wins the Vezina, and is crowned the best goalie in the world. Ondrej Kase moves up the lineup and scores 25-30 goals, an improvement over what Corey Perry has offered in recent seasons. Coach Randy Carlyle gets his team playing a faster game which, coupled with the heavy hockey the Ducks can play, makes them a beast to match up against. Ryan Kesler doesn't suffer any setbacks to his health and the Ducks take a run at the Cup.

Worst case: Rather than adapt, the Ducks double down on their "heavy" style and end up closer to the team that was 16th in the NHL through Jan. 1 than the one that was 26-11-5 in the second half. They miss the playoffs altogether and the entire organization has to consider what the best path forward is.

Arizona

Best case: Antti Raanta plays all season like the guy who was top-two in GAA and save percentage for the last three months, while Alex Galchenyuk isn't out too long and returns to being a 30-goal player again. Vinnie Hinostroza comes to fruition as a breakout player, giving some real pop outside of the top line. Arizona proves its start last season was indeed due to getting used to a new coach and the Coyotes stay in the playoff picture until the bitter end — and make it.

Worst case: The reason why all their second-half numbers looked so strong is because there was no pressure and they faced many backup goalies, so there's no real growth here. Galchenyuk's "week-to-week" injury nags all season, both special teams finish bottom-third in the league and goal scoring is hard to come by. The Coyotes yet again finish low in the standings with high lottery odds.

Calgary

Best case: James Neal is the perfect addition and gives the Flames two solid scoring lines, while Michael Frolik excels on the third line. This, in turn, vastly improves last season's 29th-ranked power play, which becomes a top-15 unit. The breakup of the failed T.J. Brodie-Travis Hamonic pair is best for the both of them, who fully reach the potential for which they were acquired. Calgary returns to the playoffs and finishes the regular season looking like a contender.

Worst case: At 36 years old, Mike Smith's play begins to tail off, nullifying any other improvements in the lineup. Without Dougie Hamilton, Mark Giordano's effectiveness starts to wane at 35 years old, while Elias Lindholm doesn't match the offence put up by Micheal Ferland on the top line. The Flames watch Edmonton recover to relevance, but stay put themselves and miss the playoffs again.

Edmonton

Best case: Connor McDavid scores 130 points and Ty Rattie is a beautiful fit on his right side, while Ryan Nugent-Hopkins has a career year on his left. At the same time, Jesse Puljujarvi arrives as a 20-25-goal scorer next to Leon Draisaitl and coach Todd McLellan never feels enough pressure to have to turn back to pairing Draisaitl and McDavid on a 5-on-5 unit. Cam Talbot returns to .919 save percentage form in a

contract season, Darnell Nurse breaks out as a productive top-pair defender and the Oilers win the division.

Worst case: God forbid anything happen to McDavid like it did in his rookie season. Basically, none of the above comes to fruition and the team is forced into making another trade under the gun (perhaps involving RNH) that doesn't help matters. Beyond McDavid they prove too slow for the modern pace, miss the playoffs, and a new GM and coach have to find a way forward in the summer.

Los Angeles

Best case: Ilya Kovalchuk joins Anze Kopitar's line and looks just like the player he was the last time he played a full NHL season, scoring 37 goals. A full season of Jeff Carter brings another 30-goal scorer, while even Tyler Toffoli has the potential to hit that mark following back-to-back sub-10 shooting percentage seasons. Los Angeles, 16th in goals last season, becomes a top-10 offence, and Jonathan Quick makes it impossible to score. The Kings win the division and look like a contender again.

Worst case: They're just too slow and built for the NHL of five years ago. Kovalchuk looks like a 35-year-old who hasn't played in the NHL in five years and his \$6.25-million contract becomes another troublesome cap hit. The Kings get passed by younger, quicker teams in the Pacific and some hard questions have to be asked next summer after their third playoff miss in five seasons.

San Jose

Best case: With Erik Karlsson and Brent Burns paired with some great scorers up front, San Jose's power play passes Toronto and Pittsburgh from last season and becomes historically great. Both of their top defencemen end up point-per-game players. The top line excels, while at least two of Timo Meier, Joonas Donskoi and Kevin Labanc have standout seasons of their own. Joe Thornton stays healthy all season and playoffs and he follows Alex Ovechkin's footsteps to his first Stanley Cup.

Worst case: Remember the 2003-04 Colorado Avalanche? Not every team that appears stacked on paper works out. Without Chris Tierney the centre depth takes at least a bit of a hit and Thornton remains an injury risk, so there is a potential issue there. Martin Jones is a fine starting goalie but say the Sharks — with their newfound toys and a need to play faster to adapt to last year's playoff loss to Vegas — lean too much on offence at the expense of defence? That could put too much on the goalie and the Sharks finish off as a disappointment.

Vancouver

Best case: The kids all excel: Brock Boeser keeps ascending and scores 40 times, Elias Pettersson steps seamlessly into the league and performs at a Barzal level as a second-line centre and Thatcher Demko works his way back to the NHL, where he plays so well he takes over No. 1 duties. Does all this mean they make the playoffs? Likely not, but it could give some optimism, bring people to the rink, and put them on track for success sooner than later.

Worst case: Pettersson's slight body just isn't ready for the rigours of an 82-game NHL schedule and he doesn't stay up for the entire thing. Offence is a real problem so they bottom out in 31st-place, forcing coach Travis Green into a defensive shell that is almost unwatchable. The rebuild stays on track, but it's a long, slow, boring season that no one feels good about.

Vegas

Best case: William Karlsson actually is a 40-goal scorer and shoe-in Selke candidate centring an explosive top line. Meanwhile, the Stastny-Max Pacioretty stack turns into a highly productive unit that rivals the best complementary lines in the league. Shea Theodore instantly becomes a No. 1 defenceman who approaches 50 points in his first 82-game season and the Golden Knights, even if they don't win the division, are a better team in Year 2. The Stanley Cup is a possibility.

Worst case: Marc-Andre Fleury is just one season removed from a .909 save percentage and turning 34 years old he shows signs of slowing down. This time, he's not saved by miraculous efforts from backups and it becomes a real problem for Vegas to keep the puck out of the net.



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Karlsson's production does collapse, so the top line becomes a de facto second unit that struggles to produce — Reilly Smith himself managed only 37 points in 2016-17. Vegas misses the playoffs and the honeymoon period comes to a screeching halt.

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Sportsnet.ca / Early days yet, but Maple Leafs' power plays proving lethal

Chris Johnston | @reporterchris

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TORONTO — Quick, someone get on this: A red-zone inspired channel reserved just for Toronto Maple Leafs power plays.

It's a can't-miss concept in a league that can always use more goals.

We are on the precipice of a season where very few NHL teams appear capable of scoring at a rate like the Leafs can. Winnipeg, Tampa and Pittsburgh are in that mix. Perhaps Boston or Nashville will join them. Toronto looks destined to inflict much of its damage with the man advantage — what with John Tavares now in the fold and Auston Matthews elevated to a punishing PP1.

Those players only dressed in two pre-season games together and the Leafs scored five power-play goals, including one on a pretty Matthews-to-Tavares feed in Friday's 6-2 victory over the Detroit Red Wings.

"Really it was easy," said Tavares of his strike during a 5-on-3.

The Red Wings put on a clinic in what not to do — as in, don't put yourself down two men against an opponent that can throw Matthews, Tavares, Mitch Marner, Nazem Kadri and Morgan Rielly over the boards.

Given his lethal release, the penalty killers had no choice but to shade Matthews as he skated towards the slot with the puck on his stick. He made the job even tougher by looking them off before sliding the puck down to a wide-open Tavares.

"Any time Matts gets that kind of time and space, I think you know he's going to make the right play and find the open man," said Tavares. "It's not just finding the guy, but I think it's the ability to get the goalie and get the opponent to be drawn into what he's doing.

"Then he puts it on a tee for me and it's at the right pace and the right spot."

"Credit to him: He got in a really good lane," added Matthews. "I mean I had all day. I knew he was there and he got open."

It's not a coincidence that they sound like the newest members of the mutual admiration society. There is still a general giddiness emanating from the Leafs' dressing room after head coach Mike Babcock bucked his past practice and loaded up the top unit.

Now, context is important here. It's still just pre-season, of course, and the 5-for-12 success rate was built against Montreal and Detroit teams that will probably be closer to the Atlantic Division basement than its penthouse.

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Sportsnet.ca / Curtis McElhinney expects to make Leafs' final roster

Luke Fox | @lukefoxjukebox

September 29, 2018, 11:17 PM

DETROIT — Nothing is official just yet as far as the Toronto Maple Leafs' opening night roster goes, but coach Mike Babcock has spread out the tea leaves for you to read.

"I pretty much had the roster in practice. It's right there," Babcock said following Saturday's 5-1 pre-season loss in Detroit.

"You're talking about seventh and eighth D, and you're talking about the second goalie, and the 13th or 14th forward."

Trying to fend off AHL champ Garret Sparks and hold on to his role as Frederik Andersen's backup this season, veteran Curtis McElhinney began practising with Babcock's NHL-ready group this week. The 35-year-old cracked a joke as he entered Saturday's scrum and looked at ease for a man who just gave up five.

McElhinney was asked if he expects to be holding the Leafs clipboard when the dust settles — and it must by 5 p.m. ET on Tuesday.

"Yeah, I think so. I felt pretty good all camp," McElhinney said. "This game, I'll chock it up to an anomaly. I'll say it was one-time thing. That's in their hands now, and they need to make that decision."

In 5-1 losses behind AHL defences, neither McElhinney nor Sparks stole the job outright in their most recent 60-minute outings, but Sparks was much harder on himself after his.

"I don't know if there'll be much reflection," McElhinney shrugged. "It's just one of those games we're going to toss in the trash. Individually, as



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far as my performance, I'm not too happy with it. The other two periods I got in [versus Buffalo] were good."

As the Leafs finish their pre-season with a 6-2 record and a welcomed day off Sunday, Babcock said no decisions on bubble players were made based on Saturday's action, which featured contending fringe defencemen Justin Holl, Calle Rosen and Connor Carrick.

Holl said there were a few shifts he'd like to execute better but that he's optimistic his performance over the past 16 days gave him a chance to stick.

"I hope that's the case, but it's a crazy business," Holl said. "So you're prepared for anything."

Of the three defencemen, only Rosen doesn't require waivers to be assigned to the AHL Marlies. All three goalies must pass, and there is a belief that due to his age and ceiling, McElhinney would have an easier time clearing the process than Sparks, a 25-year-old AHL goaltender of the year, giving GM Kyle Dubas & Co. more time to evaluate Sparks as a big-leaguer.

The small upside to William Nylander's unsigned contract is that it could buy the Leafs an extended tryout at forward, too.

"There's lots of things that are very obvious, and there are other things that are not quite as clear. You can use the rules with the roster and that to buy yourself time if need be," Babcock said. "If there's something that can buy you time, then you take the time so you make the best decision.

"The beauty of that is, I just get to provide by input and Kyle will decide when he tells you."

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Sportsnet.ca / Early days yet, but Maple Leafs' power plays proving lethal

Chris Johnston | @reporterchris

September 29, 2018, 1:12 AM

TORONTO – Quick, someone get on this: A red-zone inspired channel reserved just for Toronto Maple Leafs power plays.

It's a can't-miss concept in a league that can always use more goals.

We are on the precipice of a season where very few NHL teams appear capable of scoring at a rate like the Leafs can. Winnipeg, Tampa and Pittsburgh are in that mix. Perhaps Boston or Nashville will join them. Toronto looks destined to inflict much of its damage with the man advantage – what with John Tavares now in the fold and Auston Matthews elevated to a punishing PP1.

Those players only dressed in two pre-season games together and the Leafs scored five power-play goals, including one on a pretty Matthews-to-Tavares feed in Friday's 6-2 victory over the Detroit Red Wings.

"Really it was easy," said Tavares of his strike during a 5-on-3.

The Red Wings put on a clinic in what not to do – as in, don't put yourself down two men against an opponent that can throw Matthews, Tavares, Mitch Marner, Nazem Kadri and Morgan Rielly over the boards.

Given his lethal release, the penalty killers had no choice but to shade Matthews as he skated towards the slot with the puck on his stick. He made the job even tougher by looking them off before sliding the puck down to a wide-open Tavares.

"Any time Matts gets that kind of time and space, I think you know he's going to make the right play and find the open man," said Tavares. "It's

not just finding the guy, but I think it's the ability to get the goalie and get the opponent to be drawn into what he's doing.

"Then he puts it on a tee for me and it's at the right pace and the right spot."

"Credit to him: He got in a really good lane," added Matthews. "I mean I had all day. I knew he was there and he got open."

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Sportsnet.ca / Who benefits most from six blockbuster NHL summer acquisitions?

Sonny Sachdeva



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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In less than a week, the puck will drop on the NHL's 2018-19 campaign, that moment of rubber-on-ice impact signalling the official end of the league's silly season.

After a summer of roster chaos the time has come to see hypotheticals give way to highlight reels. We've seen the early inklings of chemistry take shape in the pre-season — now the question turns to the long-term impact of these marquee moves.

That said, as we get set for the start of the season, let's take a look at who stands to benefit most from this NHL off-season's most significant acquisitions:

John Tavares, Toronto Maple Leafs

There may be no way to truly prognosticate the impact of John Tavares joining this already-ascending Leafs squad until we see how it all play out. This isn't so much adding a complementary piece to a flourishing core as it is altering the very makeup of this organization's DNA.

Tavares will impact every corner of the Leafs' roster. But, if there's one player who's set to benefit most, there's no question it'll be Mitch Marner. That much has become clear in the pre-season — but to what extent?

The quick-footed, slick-handed winger put up 69 points last season while barely getting a sniff with his club's No. 1 centreman. In fact, the number of times Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner appeared beside each other on the box score can be counted on one hand — and you'll have a finger to spare.

Rather, Nazem Kadri factored in on a hefty amount of Marner's points (30.4 per cent), while Tyler Bozak contributed on 23.2 per cent of Marner's total production.

Now he'll get Tavares, who notched 84 points last season and made good (but not great) players such as Josh Bailey and Anders Lee elite scorers. Bailey put up a career-best 71 points on Tavares' wing (more than any Leaf has totalled in four years), with No. 91 factoring in on more than 50.7 per cent of those points. Lee hit the 40-goal plateau for the first time, with Tavares in on an even higher percentage of that production (53.2 per cent of Lee's total points).

Here's betting Toronto's newest superstar has enough playmaking juice to similarly help Marner maximize the full weight of his offensive potential, and that Marner's ceiling rises higher than expected.

And, as a bonus, we'll see how Matthews fares spending less time against top defensive units — with Tavares' line absorbing some of those matchups — and how Kadri exploits his newfound freedom below that potent top six.

Erik Karlsson, San Jose Sharks

Here's one number that sums up pretty much all you need to know about how offensively dominant the Sharks' blue line will be this year: seven.

That's the number of consecutive years that one or both of Brent Burns and Erik Karlsson have ranked among the top two highest-scoring NHL defencemen. It's a combination bordering on unprecedented, made all the more absurd by the presence of one of the game's best defensive-minded talents in Marc-Edouard Vlasic.

While it's sure to be a fun ride for the club's top three blueliners, there's one forward in particular who could see a boost come his way: Joe Pavelski.

The captain has been San Jose's top-scoring forward for the past two seasons, but there's one area in which both he, and the Sharks overall, could improve. Only 23 of Pavelski's 66 points last season came on the man-advantage, and only 22 of his 68 points the year before that. Even so, he's been San Jose's highest-scoring forward on the power play both years for a unit that ranked 16th in 2017-18, and 25th the year prior.

Enter, Karlsson.

Here's the layout of the man-advantage unit San Jose has experimented with: Burns, Karlsson, Pavelski, Logan Couture, and Joe Thornton. That gives Pavelski the game's best offensive-minded blue liners anchoring the points, one of history's best playmakers in Thornton, and an all-around offensive threat in Couture.

That upgrade should be significant enough to lift the captain's special teams numbers by a considerable margin. Even-strength play should bring a boost as well. Burns factored in on 36.4 per cent of Pavelski's 66 points last season — this time around, the veteran sniper should have even more time at even-strength with an elite distributor moving play forward from the back end, with Karlsson and Burns looking likely to suit up on separate pairings.

Max Pacioretty/Paul Stastny, Vegas Golden Knights

The Golden Knights get a double-billing on this list as they went out and nabbed two key additions in the summer — because of course they did. Their latest string of miracles brings former Canadiens captain Max Pacioretty to the fold alongside Paul Stastny, the second-best pivot on the market this summer after Tavares, in a formidable attempt to mitigate the team's free agency losses.

And, because this is the Golden Knights, Pacioretty and Stastny have already struck up a fair bit of potent chemistry together on Vegas' second line. The two do have some history together as linemates for Team USA in the past — Stastny said recently he and Pacioretty even spoke this summer about potential plans to end up on the same squad. Given that chemistry and head coach Gerard Gallant's comments about not tinkering with his dominant top line (William Karlsson, Jonathan Marchessault and Reilly Smith), it's a near certainty the team's new stars stick together this coming season.

That's good news for whoever gets to line up opposite Pacioretty on Stastny's wing — likely Erik Haula or Alex Tuch — but it's exceptional news for Vegas' leading scorer last season, Karlsson.

Of all the names being watched with hawk eyes for a hint of regression, Karlsson's is likely atop the pile. We all know the story: the sky-rocketing 43-goal, 78-point stat line, the wild between-the-legs tallies and the Stanley Cup Final foray. All this after being a bubble player in Columbus. The pressure is on the 25-year-old to do it all again and prove it wasn't a fluke — even more so given he bet on himself with a one-year, \$5.25-million deal rather than cashing in on a longer term.

Vegas had a solid, productive second line last year, with Haula, David Perron and James Neal doing some consistent damage. But the line's 26 goals together rang in as nearly half the total (46) posted by Karlsson's line, according to Corsica. This time around, it could be a different story.

With Pacioretty looking for his sixth 30-goal effort, the Golden Knights should be a far less top-heavy team, which would ease the pressure on Karlsson to perform and pull a bit of the defensive attention away. Whether that's enough to bring another 40-goal season is up in the air, but there's no question the sophomore squad should be able to do it more by committee.

Ilya Kovalchuk, Los Angeles Kings

Kings captain Anze Kopitar finds himself in a similar situation as Toronto's Marner — except with a much, much higher ceiling and an already-established body of work suggesting he's among the sport's top tier. The Slovenian dynamo is coming off a dominant, career-best campaign for L.A., posting 35 goals, 92 points and bagging the Selke Trophy.

And, unless you're a Kings fan, Kopitar achieved this with linemates you may not expect.

On the right side was the unexpectedly resurgent Dustin Brown, who nearly doubled his previous year's total with a 28-goal, 61-point season. On Kopitar's left was rookie Alex Iafallo, who earned a top-line assignment through his coach-pleasing attention to detail and reliable defensive play.

It was a winning trio, but not necessarily one you'd bank on coming up with another year of success.

Luckily, the Kings won't need to count on that repeat performance, as former Rocket Richard Trophy winner Ilya Kovalchuk is back in the NHL, with eyes on giving Kopitar the type of supporting talent he deserves.

Kovalchuk is a lock to line up on No. 11's left side, and there's a very real chance the recent KHL champion and Olympic gold medallist could be the most talented pure scorer to ever slot in beside Kopitar. The veteran



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has had some effective linemates throughout his time in the big leagues — Marian Gaborik, Justin Williams, and Brown have all found success in that spot — but Kovalchuk is a different breed, a bona fide, all-world talent. He's been near or above the 40-goal plateau eight times in his career — all but three of his 11 NHL seasons — with two 50-goal efforts on his resumé.

And there's ample evidence to suggest the talented Russian has, in fact, been playing his best hockey in the half-decade he's been away from the NHL. If the numbers weren't convincing enough, though, Kovalchuk dispensed with the waiting game and quickly showed the NHL he can still dominate on this side of the globe, too. Safe to say that bodes well for Kopitar's chances of remaining in the 90-point club in 2019.

James Neal, Calgary Flames

Aside from the obviously league-altering additions of Tavares and Karlsson, the Flames' acquisition of James Neal might just go down as one of this summer's most impactful signings when all is said and done.

It's not just that Johnny Gaudreau and Sean Monahan haven't had a genuinely dangerous linemate since Jiri Hudler was in the mix, or that Neal brings the type of goal-scoring pedigree the Flames don't usually add in the summer. It's simply how his arrival shifts around the different pieces on an impressively deep forward unit.

As it currently stands, Neal seems likely to go over the boards on the top unit with Gaudreau and Monahan, one of the West's most consistently effective duos. The alternative is to slot in Elias Lindholm — acquired in Calgary's blockbuster trade that sent Dougie Hamilton to Carolina — in the top-line spot, and move Neal down to the second unit with Mikael Backlund.

That flexibility is, of course, a luxury only brought on by adding a player of Neal's calibre, which allows head coach Bill Peters to spread the wealth. Either way, it seems the key beneficiary will be the club's No. 1 middle-man, Monahan.

Neal — a proven scorer who's a lock for 25-30 goals with 40-goal potential — completely changes the complexion of Calgary's attack. Should Neal indeed line up on that top trio, Monahan would, for the first time in his career, have two elite options to work with. Key to consider: up until this point, defending that top unit has been fairly clear-cut — the play moves through Gaudreau, with Monahan always ready as a finisher, and their rotating cast of linemates doing what they could to support that strategy.

Neal changes the equation. He's more than capable of both finishing and distributing, meaning some more room to work for both Monahan and Gaudreau. Considering Monahan amassed 31 goals in 74 games last year with, essentially, one working wrist, a year of full health and that little bit of extra space should amount to some timely offensive progress for Calgary's star pivot.

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Sportsnet.ca / The best and worst case scenario for each NHL team in 2018-19

Rory Boylen | @RoryBoylen

September 29, 2018, 10:13 AM

When the puck is dropped on the 2018-19 NHL season next Wednesday, every team and its fanbase will head in with some kind of optimism. Some have Stanley Cup hopes, others just want to get to the playoffs, while the rebuilders just want to see some promise from their kids.

But even the best laid plans often go awry.

Each team has a range of outcomes in a league full of parity. Here is our look at the best, and worst, case scenario for each team.

METROPOLITAN DIVISION

Carolina

Best case: Scott Darling returns to form and posts a save percentage far closer to his career average when he was a backup for three years in Chicago (.923) than what he mustered last season with the Hurricanes (.888). Sebastian Aho blows up as a star, rookies Valentin Zykov and Andrei Svechnikov are at least in semi-contention for the Calder Trophy to help offset the loss of Jeff Skinner and improve last season's 23rd-ranked offence. Canes get to the playoffs for the first time in a decade.

Worst case: Darling struggles again and confirms he's a backup goalie counting for \$4.15 million against the cap. Backup Petr Mrazek also continues to struggle in his first year with the team and is no safety net. Goals continue to be hard to come by, Carolina can't hang with the top four teams in their division, and miss the playoffs yet again.

Columbus

Best case: Alexander Wennberg and Cam Atkinson bounce back from down years and return to form as 60-point players. Artemi Panarin and Sergei Bobrovsky sign long-term deals, or at least aren't traded by the deadline, and continue to post award-worthy numbers. Seth Jones returns healthy after missing the start of the season and is in the running for the Norris Trophy. The team's power play operates as a top-12 unit as it did from Jan. 1 onwards rather than as the 25th-best unit it finished over the full season. They win the division and take a run at the Stanley Cup.

Worst case: The pending UFA situations for Panarin and Bobrovsky become a distraction and, when it becomes apparent neither will sign, they are dealt before the deadline and the players or pieces coming back are sharp downgrades in the immediate future. No bounceback seasons mean Washington, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia excel to finish ahead of Columbus, while plucky New Jersey, Carolina, Montreal or Buffalo stay in the picture long enough to nab wild-card spots, leaving the Jackets on the outside looking in.

New Jersey

Best case: Now fully healthy after playing through a hand injury in his rookie year, Nico Hischier improves and has a Mat Barzal-type season as a sophomore, helped at least partially by Taylor Hall producing at a similar career-best level. Also healthy, Marcus Johansson returns to a level where he scores north of 50 points, and helps secure a passable secondary scoring unit. More importantly, Cory Schneider works his way back to full health from hip surgery and returns to form as a top-10 goalie in the league.

Worst case: Schneider struggles or misses a large chunk of the season, and Keith Kinkaid's save percentage falls back even a little from the .913 he posted in 41 games last season, which was good enough for 18th in the league. Hall's 2017-18 shooting percentage (14) falls back closer to his career average of 10.9 and he drops off by 25-30 points. This has a ripple effect through the rest of the lineup, especially on the top unit. Sophomores Jesper Bratt and Will Butcher can't match their first-year totals. The Devils miss the playoffs and actually challenge the New York teams for last place in the Metro.

NY Islanders

Best case: Barzal experiences no second-year setback and actually improves by a couple points to be among the league leaders. Josh Bailey maintains close to his 71-point performance even without John Tavares as his centre and Anders Lee scores 40 times again. Meanwhile, Ryan Pulock breaks out as a PP star, while kids such as Kieffer Bellows, Josh Ho-Sang and defenceman Sebastian Aho — none of whom will start the season with the team — earn call-ups and perform at a level that doesn't allow GM Lou Lamoriello to send them back down. Robin Lehner secures the starter's job so well he gets a multi-year extension and the Islanders hang around the playoff race until the very end.

Worst case: After allowing the most shots and goals against last season, the Islanders defence remains just as porous and the offence takes hits all over with the absence of Tavares and even a minor second-year



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decline from Barzal. The bottom six, with additions Leo Komarov, Matt Martin and Valtteri Filppula is built for a different era and can't keep up with the pace of the modern game. The Isles bottom out, finish last in the league, and lose the lottery to end up picking fourth overall.

NY Rangers

Best case: At 36, Henrik Lundqvist puts together one more incredible season and is in the Vezina Trophy discussion, setting the table for the Rangers to overachieve. Kevin Shattenkirk doesn't experience any setbacks from knee surgery and plays close to a full slate, giving a boost to a power play that already finished 14th last season.

New coach Dan Quinn increases Pavel Buchnevich's role and he crosses 20 goals and 50 points, while at least one of the rookie centres — Lias Andersson (sent down) or Filip Chytil (still up) — play and contribute key top-six minutes. Chris Kreider sees an increase in minutes and bounces back from his blood clot scare last year to score 30 goals. The Rangers become the Avalanche-type surprise team and sneak into the playoffs.

Worst case: After allowing the second-most shots against last season, the defence gets no better and Lundqvist, who hasn't been a top-15 goalie by save percentage the past two years, really is on the downslope. Pending UFAs Mats Zuccarello and Kevin Hayes are traded for futures, which is a big negative to this year's team and the kids just aren't ready. The Rangers could bottom right out and finish last in the division.

Philadelphia

Best case: Not only does the first-line stay on track, but a second unit led by Nolan Patrick rises to elite relevance. Ivan Provorov blows up and arrives as a No. 1 NHL defenceman, while the addition of James van Riemsdyk to the net-front role on the power play vastly improves last season's 15th-best unit. One of the goalies — even if it's rookie Carter Hart, takes the reins and doesn't look back, stabilizing the position.

Worst case: After being such a great story in 2017-18, the Flyers' first line falls off a cliff: Couturier returns to the sub-40-point offensive levels we had come to expect from him at this level, and Claude Giroux recoils to the 60-70 point level he had been at in each of the three seasons prior. After a relatively healthy rookie season (73 games) Patrick has the same problems staying on the ice he had in junior. Neither Brian Elliott nor Michal Neuvirth find consistency and the ever-present goalie concerns in Philly linger to pull them out of the playoffs.

Pittsburgh

Best case: Sidney Crosby is amped up and motivated following a summer of watching Alex Ovechkin party with the Stanley Cup. Matt Murray's glove hand is improved and he returns to a .920 save percentage and the Penguins ice a top-three offence again, but also finish among the 10 best teams in goals against.

Worst case: The Penguins made a mistake keeping Murray and his shortcomings become a target for the league that he can't answer to. Phil Kessel doesn't come especially close to matching his career-best numbers from 2017-18 and none of the cheap wingers — Daniel Sprong, Dominik Simon, Jake Guentzel — end up securing a top-six role season-long. The Pens still have the star power to reach the playoffs, though, but a first-round loss is a step back from their 2018 finish.

Washington

Best case: After losing his job by playoff time, Braden Holtby bounces all the way back to Vezina form. Alex Ovechkin scores 50 goals for the eighth time and Evgeny Kuznetsov stays on track as an elite scorer and goes even higher than last season's 83 points. Michal Kempny's playoff effectiveness is not a mirage and he becomes a defender whom coach Todd Riederer can play near 20 minutes a night with confidence. Jakub Vrana, a 22-year-old first-round pick who has shown flashes, fully arrives as a top-six player and the Capitals, with no pressure at all, match the rival Penguins as repeat champions.

Worst case: The Stanley Cup hangover is a thing. No longer in a contract year, John Carlson's play tails off and he doesn't touch the Norris conversation at \$8 million a season. Holtby slips, but rather than have an elite backup behind him, Phoenix Copley with his two career games played isn't able to play well enough to spell Holtby for long. Losing Barry

Trotz has a greater impact than first thought and the Capitals fall down towards the playoff bubble. The worst outcome for the Capitals? Reaching the playoffs, and being eliminated by the Penguins again as they head on a path to reclaim the Stanley Cup.

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

ATLANTIC DIVISION

Boston

Best case: The first line is as good or better than it was in 2017-18, while Ryan Donato takes a run at the Calder Trophy following his nine-point performance in 12 late-season games. Zdeno Chara has another monstrous season in him at 41 and they finish as the best defensive team in the league, making for a hard matchup against their division's highest-scoring squads.

Worst case: The one major advantage the Bruins had on division rival Toronto and Tampa Bay, their stifling defence, isn't able to measure up to what it was a season ago. Patrice Bergeron's nagging back issues linger all season, either forcing him out for a long period of time, at multiple junctures, or just negatively impacts his performance as he fights through. Danton Heinen was a flash in the pan, Jake DeBrusk doesn't score in seemingly every Saturday game and the secondary scoring vanishes. Boston is passed by not only Toronto, but Florida too and becomes a fringe playoff team.

Buffalo

Best case: The Jack Eichel-Jeff Skinner combo is a match made in heaven — Eichel scores 100 points and Skinner approaches 40 goals again as he did two seasons ago. The secondary scoring is led by Sam Reinhart, who continues the great pace he finished last season with: 39 points in his final 44 games. Rasmus Dahlin is not only NHL-ready, but becomes an instant star. Playoffs, here we come.

Worst case: A career backup, Hutton is a shaky starter and the Sabres have to use Linus Ullmark in more games than they planned. Dahlin struggles against top competition and the Sabres defence that was bottom-10 in shot suppression last season doesn't improve at all. It becomes clear Skinner won't sign an extension before July 1 and has to be traded. Another hyped-up pre-season leads to the disappointment of another playoff whiff.

Detroit

Best case: Each of the under-25 forwards breaks through with career years. Andreas Athanasiou scores 20 goals and 50 points with another increase in opportunity. Dylan Larkin takes yet another step up from 63 points, and Anthony Mantha becomes a 30-goal scorer. Meanwhile, Filip Zadina makes the team and makes each team that passed him over at the draft feel instant regret by winning the Calder. A Jimmy Howard-Jonathan Bernier tandem is good enough to not sink Detroit's season and Ken Holland's "don't call it a rebuild" is ahead of schedule.

Worst case: Already without Mike Green to start the season, Detroit's blue line becomes a black hole in front of an iffy goaltending duo. The scoring depth doesn't extend beyond one line, if that, and the Wings actually head into full-rebuild mode by hitting rock bottom in the standings.

Florida

Best case: There are zero problems off the ice with Mike Hoffman in the room and he hits 30 goals for the first time — put him next to Vincent Trocheck and the Panthers' top-two lines become two of the best, hardest to play against units in the league. Meanwhile, the third line is a skill unit with Henrik Borgstrom and Denis Malgin that provides above-average offence. Roberto Luongo stays healthy and follows up last season's .929 save percentage with a similar number to hang around the Vezina conversation.

Worst case: Neither goalie stays healthy for long, which sinks them in a division loaded with offensive teams. Florida finished third-worst in shot suppression last season and gets no better in 2018-19, making a dire goalie situation even worse. They end up playing closer to the 17-16-5



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start they had a year ago than the wild 24-8-2 finish and are overtaken by other bounceback stories in Montreal and Buffalo.

Montreal

Best case: Carey Price takes back the “best goalie in the world” mantle and his play creates a high-level baseline the Habs won’t fall below. Jesperi Kotkaniemi sticks and continues to look as good as he has in the pre-season, allowing Max Domi to move back to his natural spot on the wing. Brendan Gallagher and Tomas Tatar are the primary and secondary snipers to complement playmakers in Domi and Jonathan Drouin. The Habs are a tough team to play against and hang around the playoff bubble until the very end.

Worst case: Kotkaniemi doesn’t stay for the season, Domi plays centre and has similar challenges to what Alex Galchenyuk had there. The defence, which allowed 32.3 shots against last season, starts even worse without Shea Weber for the first few months, and this creates too heavy a workload for the 31-year-old Price. Injuries are bound to hit, exposing a lack of depth, and it’s another long, playoff-less season in Montreal.

Ottawa

Best case: All the negative press and expectations around the team has a positive impact on the players as they play the written-off underdog role Vegas assumed last season. Playing for big contracts, Matt Duchene and Mark Stone have career years, while Brady Tkachuk comes in and has an even bigger impact on offence and emotion than his brother Matthew had as a Flames rookie. Following a down season, Craig Anderson yo-yos back as he has many times before and the Senators shock everyone the same way they did two years ago, and make the playoffs.

Worst case: This is obvious isn’t it? Everything comes crumbling down. Stone and Duchene have to be traded and don’t return a winning amount. The projected problems come through and Ottawa crashes to the bottom of the standings, win the lottery, and have to hand Jack Hughes to Colorado.

Tampa Bay

Best case: Everything on offence is just as good as a season ago, but a full 82-game slate with Ryan McDonagh on the back end improves the shots against totals, which were bottom-third in the league. Danick Martel, an undrafted late-bloomer waiver pickup, finds his way into the lineup and becomes the latest great diamond in the rough find. Everything clicks and they win the Stanley Cup.

Worst case: After finishing as a Vezina Trophy finalist, Andrei Vasilevskiy is less than awesome in 2018-19. The .905 save percentage he posted from Jan. 1 to the end of the season is closer to the norm for him, which exacerbates their shot suppression issues. They still make the playoffs — it’s hard to see them falling short — but exit quickly against one of the more complete teams.

Toronto

Best case: Not only does Frederik Andersen start off strong, but he maintains a high level into the post-season and steals a series or two for the Leafs. The power play, led by an absurd top unit, improves on an already high 25 per cent conversion rate Toronto scored at on the man advantage last season. Nikita Zaitsev returns to his first-year form and the overall defensive play from the forwards improves. A parade is planned — and marched in June.

Worst case: It becomes apparent that Andersen is overworked as coach Mike Babcock starts him in 66-plus games again and he tires down the stretch and into the playoffs. The blue line really does become an issue, allowing a ton of shots against and the Leafs give up three goals a game, just as last season’s Penguins did. William Nylander goes unsigned until Dec. 1 and doesn’t play this season. Toronto still makes the playoffs, but only in a wild-card spot, and gets booted in Round 1 again. The ensuing cap crunch ends the Leafs’ best shot at the Cup.

CENTRAL DIVISION

Chicago

Best case: A healthy Corey Crawford changes the whole equation. If he can play a full season or close to it, the Hawks return to playoff

relevance. Duncan Keith, 35, doesn’t take until Feb. 15 to score his first goal, and gets on the board more than twice all season, which helps Chicago’s power play to recover from its 28th-place finish. Nick Schmaltz stays on course as solid No. 2 centre.

Worst case: Crawford can’t stay healthy, forcing the Hawks to lean on Cam Ward who hasn’t seen a playoff game since 2009. No bouncebacks on the way for either Patrick Kane or Jonathan Toews, who turn 30 and 31 this season. They continue to lose ground in a tough division and finish well off the pace for last place two years in a row.

Colorado

Best case: Philipp Grubauer quickly wins the starting job from Semyon Varlamov and doesn’t relinquish it, securing the spot now and for the future. Nathan MacKinnon maintains a high level of output and easily crosses 100 points, elevating others on his line. Tyson Jost, 20, earns the second-line centre spot out of camp and becomes a solid secondary producer — Jost was better than a point-per-game player in his only NCAA season two years ago. This moves Carl Soderberg back to the third line, where he better fits as a checker.

Worst case: Last season was a mirage. MacKinnon still scores, but not at such an elite level and this impacts everyone else. The secondary scoring struggles and they don’t improve at all on their 33.3 shots against per game from last season, which was bottom-five in the league. The Avalanche are somewhere in between what they were last season and two years ago, and are a firmly “mushy middle” team. Ottawa makes the playoffs, so the Avs don’t get a lottery pick.

Dallas

Best case: New coach Jim Montgomery, who wants to play a fast-paced game that leans on his horses, finds the sweet middle ground between Lindy Ruff’s river hockey and Ken Hitchcock’s clamped-down defence to bring out the best in a team full of potential. Valeri Nichushkin returns from the KHL and tops his NHL-best 14 goals and 34 points. Radek Faksa becomes a Selke finalist, Miro Heiskanen makes everyone realize why GM Jim Nill was reticent to put him in an Erik Karlsson trade and the Stars take a run at the division title.

Worst case: They just get buried in a division full of Stanley Cup contenders and fringe contenders desperate to break through. Nashville and Winnipeg will claim two playoff spots here. St. Louis upgraded at the important centre position, while Minnesota and its front office are as motivated as any team to do something to ensure progress. Outside of the top line, the highest-scoring Dallas forward last season had 34 points — and if that doesn’t improve, Dallas gets left behind.

Minnesota

Best case: There is almost no fallback from last season’s best producers (Eric Staal, Mikael Granlund, Jason Zucker) and there is bounceback from those who have been key contributors before (Nino Niederreiter, Zach Parise, Charlie Coyle). At the same time, we start to see some young players such as Joel Eriksson-Ek, who had a terribly unlucky 4.8 shooting percentage last season, and Jordan Greenway, a second-round pick in 2015. An already deep team on paper gets deeper and finally goes on the long playoff run it hasn’t had since 2003.

Worst case: Ryan Suter, coming off a broken ankle, just isn’t the same. Staal and Parise, both 34, and Mikko Koivu, 35, start declining down the stretch of their careers. The old core isn’t as effective as it’s been in recent years. The summer hiring of new GM Paul Fenton is just the start, and as the team struggles, he decides it’s time to re-tool and the Wild miss the playoffs for the first time since 2012.

Nashville

Best case: Not only does Pekka Rinne stay in Vezina form, but young backup Juuse Saros plays at a high level that allows the soon-to-be 36-year-old to rest a bit and be fresh for playoffs. Not much has changed with the Predators, it’s no secret what the goal is here, so the best-case scenario is clear: Win the Stanley Cup.

Worst case: The Predators were 21st in the NHL last season averaging 32.4 shots against per game and that doesn’t improve while, at the same time, Rinne plays average and Saros can’t fill in with consistent play. The highest-scoring blue line falls back a few spots and last season proves to



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be Nashville's best regular season. The Predators won't miss the playoffs, but failing to go further than Winnipeg in the post-season again would be frustrating.

St. Louis

Best case: Ryan O'Reilly is a massive upgrade on the second line, becomes a Selke Trophy finalist or winner and the Blues' forward depth rivals the best teams in the league. The power play improves from last year's 30th-place finish, their collection of blueliners score the most from the position league-wide, and the Blues get back to the playoffs, where they prove a tough out and go on a run.

Worst case: Jake Allen, who has struggled with consistency and seen his numbers fall off two years in a row, doesn't recover and backup Chad Johnson doesn't provide nearly the same safety net as Carter Hutton last season. After finishing 24th in goals scored last season, the Blues don't improve there and so both sides of the puck stay in neutral. Everyone around them in the division maintains pace or improves and, like Minnesota, St. Louis is left in the dust.

Winnipeg

Best case: Last season was the start of something special and these Jets return better, deeper, more experienced and with a chip on their shoulder. Jack Roslovic sticks on the roster and works his way into a permanent centre role, perhaps even pushing Bryan Little back to the third-line role he occupied when Paul Stastny arrived. The Jets' depth is absurd and even when injuries hit, young fill-ins such as Sami Niku, Brendan Lemieux or Mason Appleton don't miss a beat. The Jets win the Presidents' Trophy and the Stanley Cup.

Worst case: No longer in a contract year, Connor Hellebuyck's season isn't as smooth as it was when he was a Vezina finalist and he reverts back to something similar to what he was in 2016-17. Regression hits Kyle Connor (16.1 shooting percentage) and Mark Scheifele (18.4) and no one fills the loss of Stastny well enough, leaving questions at second- and third-line centre. Instead of building on last year's playoff run, the Jets are ejected in Round 1 or 2 and the cap crunch closes the door on their best chance to win it all.

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

PACIFIC DIVISION

Anaheim

Best case: John Gibson stays healthy, wins the Vezina, and is crowned the best goalie in the world. Ondrej Kase moves up the lineup and scores 25-30 goals, an improvement over what Corey Perry has offered in recent seasons. Coach Randy Carlyle gets his team playing a faster game which, coupled with the heavy hockey the Ducks can play, makes them a beast to match up against. Ryan Kesler doesn't suffer any setbacks to his health and the Ducks take a run at the Cup.

Worst case: Rather than adapt, the Ducks double down on their "heavy" style and end up closer to the team that was 16th in the NHL through Jan. 1 than the one that was 26-11-5 in the second half. They miss the playoffs altogether and the entire organization has to consider what the best path forward is.

Arizona

Best case: Antti Raanta plays all season like the guy who was top-two in GAA and save percentage for the last three months, while Alex Galchenyuk isn't out too long and returns to being a 30-goal player again. Vinnie Hinostroza comes to fruition as a breakout player, giving some real pop outside of the top line. Arizona proves its start last season was indeed due to getting used to a new coach and the Coyotes stay in the playoff picture until the bitter end — and make it.

Worst case: The reason why all their second-half numbers looked so strong is because there was no pressure and they faced many backup goalies, so there's no real growth here. Galchenyuk's "week-to-week" injury nags all season, both special teams finish bottom-third in the league and goal scoring is hard to come by. The Coyotes yet again finish low in the standings with high lottery odds.

Calgary

Best case: James Neal is the perfect addition and gives the Flames two solid scoring lines, while Michael Frolik excels on the third line. This, in turn, vastly improves last season's 29th-ranked power play, which becomes a top-15 unit. The breakup of the failed T.J. Brodie-Travis Hamonic pair is best for the both of them, who fully reach the potential for which they were acquired. Calgary returns to the playoffs and finishes the regular season looking like a contender.

Worst case: At 36 years old, Mike Smith's play begins to tail off, nullifying any other improvements in the lineup. Without Dougie Hamilton, Mark Giordano's effectiveness starts to wane at 35 years old, while Elias Lindholm doesn't match the offence put up by Micheal Ferland on the top line. The Flames watch Edmonton recover to relevance, but stay put themselves and miss the playoffs again.

Edmonton

Best case: Connor McDavid scores 130 points and Ty Rattie is a beautiful fit on his right side, while Ryan Nugent-Hopkins has a career year on his left. At the same time, Jesse Puljujarvi arrives as a 20-25-goal scorer next to Leon Draisaitl and coach Todd McLellan never feels enough pressure to have to turn back to pairing Draisaitl and McDavid on a 5-on-5 unit. Cam Talbot returns to .919 save percentage form in a contract season, Darnell Nurse breaks out as a productive top-pair defender and the Oilers win the division.

Worst case: God forbid anything happen to McDavid like it did in his rookie season. Basically, none of the above comes to fruition and the team is forced into making another trade under the gun (perhaps involving RNH) that doesn't help matters. Beyond McDavid they prove too slow for the modern pace, miss the playoffs, and a new GM and coach have to find a way forward in the summer.

Los Angeles

Best case: Ilya Kovalchuk joins Anze Kopitar's line and looks just like the player he was the last time he played a full NHL season, scoring 37 goals. A full season of Jeff Carter brings another 30-goal scorer, while even Tyler Toffoli has the potential to hit that mark following back-to-back sub-10 shooting percentage seasons. Los Angeles, 16th in goals last season, becomes a top-10 offence, and Jonathan Quick makes it impossible to score. The Kings win the division and look like a contender again.

Worst case: They're just too slow and built for the NHL of five years ago. Kovalchuk looks like a 35-year-old who hasn't played in the NHL in five years and his \$6.25-million contract becomes another troublesome cap hit. The Kings get passed by younger, quicker teams in the Pacific and some hard questions have to be asked next summer after their third playoff miss in five seasons.

San Jose

Best case: With Erik Karlsson and Brent Burns paired with some great scorers up front, San Jose's power play passes Toronto and Pittsburgh from last season and becomes historically great. Both of their top defencemen end up point-per-game players. The top line excels, while at least two of Timo Meier, Joonas Donskoi and Kevin Labanc have standout seasons of their own. Joe Thornton stays healthy all season and playoffs and he follows Alex Ovechkin's footsteps to his first Stanley Cup.

Worst case: Remember the 2003-04 Colorado Avalanche? Not every team that appears stacked on paper works out. Without Chris Tierney the centre depth takes at least a bit of a hit and Thornton remains an injury risk, so there is a potential issue there. Martin Jones is a fine starting goalie but say the Sharks — with their newfound toys and a need to play faster to adapt to last year's playoff loss to Vegas — lean too much on offence at the expense of defence? That could put too much on the goalie and the Sharks finish off as a disappointment.

Vancouver

Best case: The kids all excel: Brock Boeser keeps ascending and scores 40 times, Elias Pettersson steps seamlessly into the league and performs at a Barzal level as a second-line centre and Thatcher Demko works his way back to the NHL, where he plays so well he takes over No. 1 duties.



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Does all this mean they make the playoffs? Likely not, but it could give some optimism, bring people to the rink, and put them on track for success sooner than later.

Worst case: Pettersson's slight body just isn't ready for the rigours of an 82-game NHL schedule and he doesn't stay up for the entire thing. Offence is a real problem so they bottom out in 31st-place, forcing coach Travis Green into a defensive shell that is almost unwatchable. The rebuild stays on track, but it's a long, slow, boring season that no one feels good about.

Vegas

Best case: William Karlsson actually is a 40-goal scorer and shoe-in Selke candidate centring an explosive top line. Meanwhile, the Stastny-Max Pacioretty stack turns into a highly productive unit that rivals the best complementary lines in the league. Shea Theodore instantly becomes a No. 1 defenceman who approaches 50 points in his first 82-game season and the Golden Knights, even if they don't win the division, are a better team in Year 2. The Stanley Cup is a possibility.

Worst case: Marc-Andre Fleury is just one season removed from a .909 save percentage and turning 34 years old he shows signs of slowing down. This time, he's not saved by miraculous efforts from backups and it becomes a real problem for Vegas to keep the puck out of the net. Karlsson's production does collapse, so the top line becomes a de facto second unit that struggles to produce — Reilly Smith himself managed only 37 points in 2016-17. Vegas misses the playoffs and the honeymoon period comes to a screeching halt.

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TSN.CA / Leafs' high-octane power play just getting warmed up

Mark Masters

The Maple Leafs held their final practice of training camp on Saturday at the MasterCard Centre.

Head coach Mike Babcock expects a decision on the last cuts to be finalized following tonight's game in Detroit although a formal announcement likely won't come until Sunday.

Toronto's high-octane power play has lived up to the hype so far in the pre-season.

"It's fun to be out there," said Nazem Kadri, the man in the slot on the top unit. "It's really fun. Everyone's a threat to score. Everyone's a threat to shoot or pass and that's what's tough for the opposition. If they take one option away there's always another."

The units have worked together in two games this week connecting on five of 12 opportunities against the Red Wings and Canadiens.

"You don't want to do too much," said John Tavares, who scored on the man advantage on Friday. "I think that sometimes that can be the tendency when you got a lot of guys that can make a lot of different types of plays that are creative. At the end of the day, you kind of work for what you get and take what's given to you."

Despite the early success there's still room for improvement.

"We can be a little smoother coming up the ice and working our way into the offensive zone," Tavares pointed out, "but the attention to detail and guys working off one another has been pretty good to start."

Tavares and Auston Matthews linked up on a goal for the first time on Friday with the 21-year-old setting up the ex-Islander with a beautiful no-look pass during a two-man advantage.

"Any time Mats gets that time and space he's going to make the right play and find the open man," said Tavares. "And it's not just finding the guy, it's his ability to get the goalie and the opponent to be drawn into what he's doing and he puts it on a tee for me at the right pace and the right spot so, really, it was easy. That's when you know you have a guy who's a special player, it's not just finding the open man, it's how he delivers it and gets it there."

"Credit goes to him," Matthews said. "He got into a really good lane. I had all day and I knew he was there and he got open. I tried to fake a shot and got it to him."

And while the top group is rolling, they were actually outscored by the second group on Friday, which is what had Babcock excited afterwards.

"In the early going we had no structure and they (top unit) had no results and then it was real good to see the other group go out there and bury it and then suddenly the structure got better so it's great how that works," Babcock noted. "It was good to see (Patrick) Marleau's unit get two tonight. I think that's important. You got to have two units."

Toronto's regular power play units have been together for two pre-season games so far connecting on five of 12 opportunities against the Canadiens and Red Wings. And the group believes it can be even better moving forward. The key, John Tavares says, is trusting your instincts and not thinking too much.

Marner killed penalties during his junior career in London and has been impressive in his first NHL look in that role during the pre-season. After Saturday's practice, Babcock was asked why he made the decision to give the shifty winger the opportunity this season.

"We could've done it a lot earlier," the coach revealed, "but in life I believe things come on an earned basis and I don't think you just give kids stuff. They have to earn it. And that's in all things. If they earn it, they appreciate it more and end up doing a better job. The other thing is he had lots to learn in other areas on his regular shift and the power play before he did this."

Last year, Toronto's goal song at home games with "The Enforcer" by Monster Truck, but this year, if the pre-season is any indication, the team is turning back the clock. The tune playing at Scotiabank Arena after Leafs goals has been "You Make My Dreams" by Hall & Oates, a group that rose to prominence before the current Leafs players were born.

"I don't mind it," said Kadri, who handles the pre-game music in the dressing room. "I like it. I think, collectively, a lot of the guys like it. But, obviously, it's the pre-season and we're still feeling it out."

With an electric offence, the Leafs players and fans could be hearing the goal song a lot so it's crucial to find the right fit.

"It's a pretty good tune," said Marner, 21, who admitted he doesn't know much about Daryl Hall and John Oates. "I like it. The fans seemed to like it and that's all that matters. I think our whole team kind of likes every genre so we're good with any kind of song."

Last year, Toronto's goal song at home games was "The Enforcer" by Monster Truck, but this year, if the pre-season is any indication, the team is turning back the clock. The ballad playing at Scotiabank Arena after Leafs goals has been "You Make My Dreams" by Hall & Oates, a group that rose to prominence before most current Leafs were born. Resident team DJ Nazem Kadri says early reviews are mostly positive.

Among the position players suiting up in the pre-season finale tonight in Detroit, Connor Carrick is the only one who was on the Leafs roster all of last season. Whether the defenceman makes the team this season remains very much in question. Earlier this week, Babcock split training camp into two groups and Carrick found himself in the one featuring players destined for the AHL.

How is Carrick handling the uncertainty?

"It's not easy by any means," the 24-year-old admitted. "But my head's going to be where my body is and my body's playing for the Leafs tonight so that's my focus."

How much feedback has he received from Babcock?



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"We haven't talked much. You know, I'm not sure there's a ton to talk about."

With Roman Polak leaving in free agency, Carrick appeared to have a good chance to seize a job on the right side of Toronto's blue line, but training camp hasn't worked out that way as he's slipped behind newcomer Igor Ozhiganov on the depth chart.

Curtis McElhinney is used to uncertainty. As a 35-year-old journeyman that's just the way it goes in the NHL. At this year's training camp, he's been pushed by reigning AHL goalie of the year Garret Sparks, who's 10 years younger.

"It's good," said McElhinney, who posted a career high .934 save percentage in 18 games last season. "A lot of times when you have success in a situation you have a tendency to get complacent and you can relax a little bit so that's certainly not the case with this situation and the other goalies that are at camp. It's a good thing to have."

So far the cagey veteran has outplayed his would-be replacement and on Saturday night in Detroit, McElhinney will start against the Wings and make his closing pre-season argument. The battle scars gained from bouncing around teams in the past has helped him be at his best.

"I guess it doesn't make you as concerned about doing it all over again, if anything," he said. "Obviously, I've been around for a little while, seen quite a bit and my skin's gotten pretty thick over the years. This is just another opportunity right now."

McElhinney has played for six NHL teams and three AHL teams since 2007 so he's a survivor, but missing out on a chance to take part in what's happening with the Leafs would sting.

"The players they've been able to draft and bring in the last couple of years have been phenomenal so just to be able to take in the general excitement around the team is something I've never been a part of before."

'Thick skin' helps McElhinney stay focused amid back-up battle

Curtis McElhinney is used to uncertainty. As a 35-year-old journeyman that's just the way it goes in the NHL. At this year's training camp, he's been pushed by AHL goalie of the year Garret Sparks, who's 10 years younger. But so far the cagey veteran has outplayed his would-be replacement. On Saturday night in Detroit, McElhinney will start against the Wings and make his closing pre-season argument.

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TSN.CA / Carrick, McElhinney battle for roster spots in Leafs preseason finale

Kristen Shilton

TORONTO – In his two-and-a-half seasons with the Maple Leafs, Connor Carrick has emerged as one of the most communicative, verbose players in the team's dressing room. But on Saturday night, in Toronto's preseason finale against Detroit, Carrick can only let his play do the talking.

The 24-year-old defenceman is on the bubble to make Toronto's roster out of training camp, and cuts are looming as early as Sunday. The noise around Carrick and his status has grown increasingly shrill, while the man himself has fought to stay centered.

"You have to take care of your play, that's the best way to do it," Carrick said after morning skate at MasterCard Centre. "It's not easy by any means, but my head is going to be where my body is and my body is playing for the Leafs tonight. So that's my focus."

He's not the only one. Goaltender Curtis McElhinney is expected to play all of Saturday's game in a final effort to prove he deserves to beat out Garret Sparks and Calvin Pickard to retain his job as Frederik Andersen's back-up this season. Over three periods of action in the preseason, McElhinney has done everything right, allowing only one goal on 32 shots.

But unlike Carrick, McElhinney's future isn't hinging as much on individual performance as long-term success for Toronto at the goalie position. McElhinney has been a back-up for most of his 186-game NHL career, and at 35-years-old, is entering the final season of his two-year, \$1.7 million contract. Yet he's kept on improving in Toronto, and last year boasted the best save percentage (.934) among NHL back-ups in 18 games played.

All things considered, McElhinney might be the right man for the job this season, but Sparks, 25, and Pickard, 26, both have NHL experience too and would need waivers to reach the American Hockey League.

Losing either one or both of them could handicap the Leafs at the back-up spot down the road.

"I don't really know where the organization is at in terms of their decision," McElhinney said. "I've been around for a little while, seen quite a bit and my skin has gotten pretty thick over the years. I'm just looking at tonight as another opportunity to showcase what I can bring and that's all I'm focusing on."

Over the 11 years he's dressed for six different NHL teams, McElhinney has become familiar with some healthy competition and the pressure associated with winning his spot back year after year. By now he's even come to genuinely embrace it.

"It's not like I don't break eye contact with Sparksy or anything like that. We have a good relationship," he said of Sparks, who will be his back-up in Detroit. "He understands he's here to push me and I'm here to push him and the bottom line is we're all trying to put our best foot forward right now and make a case for it."

For Carrick, the chance to make his case for an NHL spot may have already passed. Earlier this week, head coach Mike Babcock changed his practice groups into one with players bound for the NHL and one for those bound for the AHL. Carrick was in the latter category, while newcomer Igor Ozhiganov established the inside track for Toronto's third-pairing spot on the right side.

At the time, Carrick claimed not to be reading into Babcock's decision, but from the sounds of it, he hasn't gone in search of many answers from his coach either.

"We haven't talked much," Carrick said. "I'm not sure there's a ton to talk about."

It may have been that way for a while. Carrick was a healthy scratch in favour of Roman Polak for 15 of the Leafs' final 30 regular season games last season and didn't dress in their first-round playoff series against Boston. Carrick doesn't kill penalties, which put him at a disadvantage when Polak patrolled the blue line, and does again now with Ozhiganov stepping in.

Babcock said Carrick evolving into an important player on the kill would help him re-take an NHL job, as would more consistency in his overall play. Those are fine goals for the future, but with only one evaluation left right now, Carrick will have to rely on that which he already does well.

"I've got a bunch of guys counting on me tonight to make good plays and that's what it's all about," Carrick said. "You always want to represent yourself well. I'm always grateful to pull on the blue and white and I have an opportunity to do that tonight."

The same goes for McElhinney. While he's an old hand at beginning again somewhere new, there no desire for a fresh start outside Toronto any time soon.

"I'm not too sure...where the organization wants to go, he said. "As of today, I'm here and I'll just have fun with the game tonight."



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