



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • October 26, 2020

THE NEWS & OBSERVER

Hurricanes sign Gustav Forsling, avoid arbitration hearing

BY CHIP ALEXANDER

The Carolina Hurricanes avoided a scheduled salary arbitration hearing with Gustav Forsling, signing the defenseman on Friday to a one-year, two-way contract.

Forsling, 24, will receive \$700,000 in the NHL or \$250,000 in the American Hockey League for the 2020-21 season.

"Gustav is a dependable defenseman that fits our system at both the NHL and AHL level," president and general manager Don Waddell said in a statement. "Our organizational depth at defense is strong, and Gustav is a representation of that."

Forsling had 8 goals and 18 assists in 57 games with the AHL's Charlotte Checkers last season. He set AHL career highs in goals, assists, points and games played in 2019-20 and ranked fourth among Checkers defensemen in points and goals.

Forsling was a restricted free agent who was given a qualifying offer by the Canes but filed for arbitration. The hearing was set for Nov. 2.

Canes forward Warren Foegele and defenseman Haydn Fleury have arbitration hearings scheduled -- Foegele for Nov. 4 and Fleury for Nov. 8.

Hurricanes add to depth by signing Bibeau, Shore to one-year contracts

BY CHIP ALEXANDER

The Carolina Hurricanes continue to add to their depth signings in the offseason, agreeing with goaltender Antoine Bibeau and forward Drew Shore on one-year, two-way contracts.

Bibeau will receive \$700,000 on the NHL level or \$75,000 in the American Hockey League during the 2020-21 season. Shore will receive \$700,000 in the NHL or \$150,000 in the AHL.

Bibeau, 26, appeared in two games with the Colorado Avalanche in 2019-20, with a 1-0 record with a 3.27 goals-against average. He also played two games with the AHL's Colorado Eagles prior to missing most of the season following hip surgery.

"Antoine is coming off a hip injury, but is fully healthy now," Canes president and general manager Don Waddell said in a statement. "He's a veteran netminder with some NHL experience and adds to the depth of our organization at that position."

Bibeau made his NHL debut for the Toronto Maple Leafs during the 2016-17 season and has a career NHL record of 2-1 with a 2.54 GAA and .907 save percentage.

Shore, 29, split the 2019-20 season with Minsk and Nizhny Novgorod of the Kontinental Hockey League (KHL), finishing with four goals and 23 assists in 43 games. A second-round draft pick by the Florida Panthers in 2009, he has played in 94 career NHL games with Florida, Calgary and Vancouver.

"Drew is a veteran player who adds to our organization's depth down the middle," Waddell said in a statement.

THE ATHLETIC

Hurricanes free agency: What's been done, what's left to do, what it all means

By Sara Civian

As anticipated, Hurricanes president and GM Don Waddell hasn't made a gigantic splash at the beginning of the 2020 free agency period.

Justin Williams retired, the Canes scouted out the market on Day 1, signed Jesper Fast on Day 2 and added some depth to restock the farm. They're flying close to the cap, Dougie Hamilton and Andrei Svechnikov's contract negotiations

loom, we're living in a time of economic uncertainty. You know the drill. With all that under consideration, let's take a closer look at what the Canes have taken care of and what's left on the to-do list before the 2020-21 season.

What grade do the Hurricanes get so far?

Disclaimer: As Waddell has mentioned multiple times, this particular free agency will take place over the course of weeks, not days. There's a real possibility the Canes aren't



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done making moves, whether they happen via signing or trade. But if the season were to start tomorrow, I'd give the Canes a B.

Sometimes the best thing you can do in free agency is to not actively make your team worse just to do something, and the one semi-big signing (Fast) is extremely low risk at three years, \$6 million (\$2 million AAV) with third-line expectations. Still, a few key moves from opponents like the Caps snagging Henrik Lundqvist for cheap will probably make the division more competitive.

Both Rod Brind'Amour and Waddell have said they trust the team assembled exactly how it is to head into next season without changing. And again, it would be silly to make a move in this climate that doesn't objectively improve the team — especially in net. Neither Petr Mrazek nor James Reimer have been bad for the Hurricanes, so they shouldn't make a desperation move to replace them. But they should still be exploring any scenario in which they can reasonably improve the goaltending if possible.

How will Fast fit with the team?

Fast seems to figure in perfectly as a, well, fast complement to Jordan Staal on a defensively responsible third line. If it works out as anticipated, it also allows skill players like Martin Necas to stick with skill centers like Vincent Trocheck. The term and price are reasonable. The personality vibes are good. This was a win.

Who's the one that got away?

As I literally just wrote, I think adding anyone at all via free agency was a win for the Canes considering their financial situation and we don't know when the offseason will really end this year.

I will say the Marc-Andre Fleury situation has played out somewhat unexpectedly in Vegas, but I suppose it makes sense with Robin Lehner now expected to miss some time. I could've seen him coming to Carolina if the Golden Knights were willing to comply with their reported ask of at least half of Fleury's salary retained. I respect the Canes for not budging on that one, especially since they'd have to move either Mrazek or Reimer if they traded for Fleury and there's no guarantee that wouldn't be a process in itself.

If you asked me this again a few months into the season I might say Darcy Kuemper but we'll have to see what the return looks like if or when he gets traded.

What's the status with the RFAs and depth signings?

The Hurricanes have made a bunch of smaller moves that might've flown under your radar.

They extended qualifying offers to Clark Bishop, Warren Foegele, Steven Lorentz, Spencer Smallman, Haydn Fleury, Gustav Forsling, Oliwier Kaski and Roland McKeown before last Wednesday's deadline. This means minor leaguers Jacob Pritchard and Callum Booth became unrestricted free agents Friday, and the Hurricanes retained negotiation rights with NHLers Fleury and Foegele. As expected, both Fleury and Foegele filed for arbitration, with Foegele's date set for

Nov. 4 and Fleury's Nov. 8. They could still come to an agreement with the Canes beforehand, but either way, they'll remain Canes.

They signed depth defenseman Joakim Ryan to a one-year, two-way deal paying \$700,000 at the NHL level and \$150,000 at the AHL level. He's played in 141 NHL games between the Kings and Sharks and 20 NHL playoff games.

Bishop re-signed to a one-year contract, paying \$700,000 at the NHL level and \$100,000 at the AHL level. Smallman re-signed a one-year, two-way contract for \$735,000 at the NHL level and \$70,000 at the AHL level.

Lorentz, who got invited to the bubble after a breakout 2019-20 season is becoming a prospect to watch. The Canes re-signed him to a two-year, two-way contract. The deal will pay Lorentz \$700,000 at the NHL level and \$70,000 in the AHL, with a guarantee of at least \$100,000 in 2020-21, and \$750,000 in the NHL or \$100,000 in the AHL with a guarantee of at least \$200,000 in 2021-22. The extra term and conditions here show the Canes are keeping a closer eye on him as well.

Finally, late last week the Hurricanes made a trio of depth signings all at once: Jeremy Bracco, David Gust and Sheldon Rempal. Bracco and Rempal will get \$700,000 at the NHL level and \$100,000 at the AHL level, while Gust will get \$700,000 at the NHL level or \$80,000 at the AHL level.

How is Hamilton's next deal looking?

Waddell said via Zoom during the draft that the Hurricanes and Hamilton's camp had not yet started discussing a new contract (his contract is up at the end of the 2020-21 season). This was by design, as both sides want to see what this COVID-19 impacted market will look like for blockbuster defensemen. Speaking of Vegas, where there is apparently unlimited cap space, the Knights gave us our first taste of what that market might look like. They signed Alex Pietrangolo to a seven-year, \$61.6 million contract with an AAV of \$8.8 million and a full no-move clause.

We have a few more potential examples looming, but I'd consider that our first look at what Hamilton's contract might be modeled after.

What's Waddell's next move?

I'll quote our friend Pierre LeBrun's latest update on the Canes.

"So for now, I think the Canes are fine coming back with Mrazek and Reimer," he wrote, "which they always were if they couldn't significantly upgrade anyway."

It seems like Waddell's next move will be figuring out the cap space after signing RFAs Fleury and Foegele. Then if an opportunity for a legit upgrade in net presents itself, he'll explore it. There's also the growing Mike Hoffman chatter, but I feel like he's the last man standing this year, meaning every team will go after him and he'll become unaffordable for the Canes if they don't move a player like Ryan Dzingel or Nino Niederreiter, and that gets messy.



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Gold: What's Next for the Hurricanes

By Adam Gold

Welcome to the offseason Hurricanes Notebook. It's here that we'll keep you posted on the comings and goings of the Canes, things going on around the league and whatever else that impacts the club. We'll do mailbags, keep you up to date with #CanesCorner podcasts and post the occasional Q & A. So, with that said, here's some league news to get us started.

The National Hockey League has announced that this season's Winter Classic and the All Star Weekend have both been cancelled. The Minnesota Wild were scheduled to host the St Louis Blues at Target Field in Minneapolis on New Year's Day. Meanwhile, On January 29 and 30, Sunrise, Florida's BB&T Center, the home of the Panthers, was set to host the league's all star festivities. However, due to the uncertainties that remain thanks to the coronavirus pandemic, the league has opted to postpone each of these tent-pole events.

"Fan participation, both in arenas and stadiums as well as in the ancillary venues and events that we stage around the Winter Classic and All-Star Weekend, is integral to the success of our signature events," said NHL Senior Executive Vice President & Chief Content Officer Steve Mayer. "Because of the uncertainty as to when we will be able to welcome our fans back to our games, we felt that the prudent decision at this time was to postpone these celebrations until 2022 when our fans should be able to enjoy and celebrate these tentpole events in-person, as they were always intended.

Notably absent, especially as it pertains to the interests of Carolina fans, is any mention of the Stadium Series game the Canes were slated to host against a yet-to-be-announced opponent. When asked if this meant the league had still not reached a decision regarding the February 20, 2021 game set to be played at Carter-Finley Stadium on the campus of N.C. State, majority owner Tom Dundon said they had not. Dundon allowed that while it would be reasonable to assume that the NHL would push the game to the winter of 2022 he stressed that there was no indication what the plans were either way.

Based on the official statement attached to the postponement of the Winter Classic and All Star Weekend, it would be hard to imagine the league going on with the Stadium Series game if there would be limitations placed on fan attendance and participation. When I asked Dundon if he'd heard from the league as to whether they'd go on with the game at something less than capacity he said "we have not had that conversation."

A Fast start to free agency

It's been a while for me since I was on a boat out in the middle of the ocean. Actually, I'm not sure I've ever been on a boat out in the middle of the ocean. But, I used to watch Love Boat as a kid, so I can imagine what it's like.

No, I'm nothing like Doctor Adam Bricker, though there was a time that we shared similar reputations.

But, out at sea, as you approach the next port of call, there comes a time when land slowly starts coming into focus. I sort of feel as though that's where we are with the Carolina Hurricanes. We're not quite at Cabo San Lucas yet. Isaac still has time to mix up another daiquiri. So, before we head out on the town, we have time to head up to the Ledo Deck and assess where the Canes are as we head into the next phase of the offseason.

Carolina dipped their toe into the free agent pool signing former Rangers forward Jesper Fast. Three years and a total of \$6 million is an incredibly efficient deal for a player who should supply a ton of value for the dollar. And, the best part about what the Canes should expect from Fast is that point production is just a small part of the return.

Fast can play a physical game. His 125 hits would have placed him second on the Hurricanes a year ago. Only three Canes registered more than 100 hits and one of them, defenseman Joel Edmundson, signed a 4-year contract with the Montreal Canadiens. Only Jordan Staal, who led the team with 149, and Andrei Svechnikov got into triple digits. But, Fast is also a high character player and was incredibly popular among his former Rangers teammates. So much so that he was a 5-time winner of the Players Player Award. Given since the late 1950's, the award, selected by teammates, is given to the player who best exemplifies what it means to be a team player.

If you've spent more than a handful of minutes with Canes head coach Rod Brind'Amour, you'll know that character is the first quality he looks for in a Hurricane. Everything else is secondary to Rod. Fast is probably a 3rd line winger based on his skill level and point production -- 13 goals and 33 points are career bests in his 6 full NHL seasons. But, when you consider that he played the majority of last season with Artemi Panarin and Ryan Strome, you understand that he adds value to the top six, so if Brind'Amour wanted to use his 6'1, 195 lb frame to help create space on a scoring line, that option exists. He can also kill penalties, and it's always good to have more shorthanded options.



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What's next?

Last year the Hurricanes signed free agent forward Ryan Dzingel 12 days after free agency began. So, if Don Waddell and Tom Dundon opted for a free agent addition, even though we're a couple of weeks into the signing period, it's not out of the question. Former Minnesota and Nashville center Mikael Granlund is still out there, though he's coming off a rough season with the Predators and has almost no value if he can't skate in your top 6. Erik Haula is also unsigned, if you're interested. With that said, I doubt highly that Carolina is willing to go that route, preferring to tinker with the roster through trades, if they do anything at all.

And, to be honest, if Carolina opts to upgrade their forward group or change the goaltending mix, they'd almost certainly need to clear some salary room. Therefore, moving a contract out would have to be a part of that equation.

Both Haydn Fleury and Warren Foegele are in need of contracts. Each were extended their qualifying offers and each have arbitration rights. However, each player has a significant role to play in the immediate future of the organization so I would expect that each will agree to contracts over the next week or so. A rough guess is that Foegele, who scored 13 goals in a 30-point season a year ago, will slot in somewhere in the \$1.5-\$2 million annual range -- think \$3.5m/2 years -- while Fleury probably lands at about \$3m/2 years. That would leave the Canes about \$1.5 million of cap room before the season.

Earlier in the year, it looked like Foegele was headed for a bigger contract, but faded before the season paused in March and then was relatively invisible in Toronto. Fleury, did the most of almost any of their emerging players in terms of raising his profile and value. From the time Dougie Hamilton went down with his injury in January Fleury seized his opportunity and proved that he was an NHL defenseman and Rod Brind'Amour showed confidence in the 2013 1st round pick for the first time in his Hurricanes career. He was one of the team's best defenders during the playoffs.

With the retirement of Justin Williams and the departures of Edmundson and fellow blue liner Trevor van Rimesdyk it would appear that -- barring a trade or two -- the roster is set. In spite of his solid play in his 2-game March cameo and in the qualifying series against the Rangers, I'd expect Morgan Geekie to spend a good chunk of the season playing significant minutes in the American Hockey League. Against the Rangers, Geekie was an effective player in modest ice time. But, when the Bruins showed up, Geekie was pushed around and looked a bit overmatched.

No worries, he's got upside and will be part of the future once he adds a little bit more strength and further improves his skating ability. He already thinks the game at an NHL level. Minor league defenseman of the year, Jake Bean, will get every chance to make the NHL roster and possibly even unseat Jake Gardiner in directing one of the Canes' power play units.

Personally, I don't think Carolina is strong enough down the middle. Behind Sebastian Aho, Vincent Trocheck, Jordan Staal and Jordan Martinook aren't strong enough or productive enough to cause problems for the upper echelon clubs in the East. It might be different if Martin Necas was ready to slide over to his natural center position, but I doubt Brind'Amour has that as part of the plan for the 2nd year forward, so any change to the center position is going to have to be via player acquisition. While Martinook was okay in the middle, Rod would rather the energizer bunny be allowed to fly around the ice on the wing and not be burdened with the added responsibility of the center position.

Is it possible that one of the young players could make a training camp impact and be a surprise addition to the roster? Well, that describes Foegele two years ago, so, sure. Ryan Suzuki, last year's first round pick was on the supplemental roster in the bubble, as was late-blooming center Steven Lorentz. Could either impress enough to make the team? I guess anything is possible. Heck, the head coach loves the tenacity of Clark Bishop, a classic 4th line center, so I wouldn't rule him out. But, again, the odds are that any upgrades are more likely to come from outside the organization than from within.

The team has yet to agree to contracts with a trio of minor league defensemen, Oliwier Kaski, Gustav Forsling and Roland McKeown are all restricted free agents with arbitration rights.

Minor deals

Under the radar the Hurricanes have started the process of stocking the system with veteran options that will more than likely spend the entire season with the Chicago Wolves. Forwards Drew Shore, Jeremy Bracco, Sheldon Rampal and David Gust; defenseman Joakim Ryan and goaltender Antoine Bibeau have all agreed to 2-way deals as the club builds organizational depth.



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SportScan

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

Sportsnet.ca / 10 NHL teams living in salary cap hell (and how they may escape)

Luke Fox@lukefoxjukebox

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So, this is what a flat NHL salary cap looks like.

Taylor Hall taking a one-year flyer with the Buffalo Sabres, and scads of familiar names signing for less than seven figures.

Talented scorers in their prime (Mike Hoffman, Anthony Duclair) kicking around the open market more than two weeks after free agency opens.

Heartbreaking splits between Henrik Lundqvist and the New York Rangers, Braden Holtby and the Washington Capitals, and Alex Pietrangolo and the St. Louis Blues.

A major reason for the pinch is that literally a third of the league is mired in salary cap hell, with little to no room to make a significant addition without leaning into long-term injured reserve, burying an NHLer in the minors or trading off the roster.

Some of these clubs — the Tampa Bay Lightning and New York Islanders, in particular — need to prioritize locking up their own restricted players instead of looking elsewhere. (And certainly some franchises not on this list have internal caps set by ownership they must solve.)

Not only has a crowded cap hellscape left more UFAs on the board than normal and forced a surge in minimum-wage contracts, but in-season manoeuvres could also suffer with a lack of breathing room.

Without further ado, here's a look at 10 teams living in cap hell, and how and when they might climb out.

Anaheim Ducks

Cap space: \$0

Roster size: 22/23

It's one thing to be pressed against the cap ceiling if you're a contender. It's another if you're the Anaheim Ducks. Yet GM Bob Murray has positioned his club as one that is retooling — not rebuilding — three years removed from its last playoff victory.

"If we get improvement in some of the young guys, which it's time for, and you get a little bit more consistency from the middle-age guys, I think we can be right there fighting for a playoff spot. There's no reason we can't be," Murray said this off-season.

Jeff Marek and Elliotte Friedman talk to a lot of people around the hockey world, and then they tell listeners all about what they've heard and what they think about it.

Hence, the Kevin Shattenkirk and Derek Grant signings and rumours that Murray expressed interest in bringing back UFA Sami Vatanen.

The salary-dump deal of Erik Gudbranson to the Ottawa Senators and Ryan Kesler's LTIR placement have provided some cap relief, but Corey Perry's \$6.625-million buyout hit through 2022-23 is no joke.

With veterans like Ryan Getzlaf (\$8.25 million), Adam Henrique (\$5.825 million) and David Backes (\$4.5 million) all getting paid for what they've done instead of what they will do, it'll be tough to consider the Ducks a contender until some of this money comes off the books.

Scary thought: Murray is in the red without a backup goalie to John Gibson on the books.

Arizona Coyotes

Cap space: \$0

Roster size: 22/23

Bill Armstrong tops the list of GMs we do not envy.

What a situation to walk into: No high draft picks. An expensive captain with an ironclad no-move clause. And no wiggle room under the cap.

Under previous GM John Chayka, the Coyotes swung hard and missed (see: Hall, Taylor). So, Armstrong's hand was forced to attempt trades, buy out Michael Grabner, let a decent depth forward like Vinnie Hinostroza walk for nothing, and try (unsuccessfully, so far) to trade Oliver Ekman-Larsson to one of two teams.

A measure of relief will arrive at the end of 2021, when hefty contracts for vets Alex Gologoski, Niklas Hjalmarsson, Jason Demers and Derek Stepan all come off the books. (Desert legend Marian Hossa will finally be paid off in full, too.) Armstrong should be able to flip a couple of these guys for picks at the 2021 deadline to contenders in search of depth.

Perhaps the biggest long-term cap salve in Arizona would be youngsters Clayton Keller (\$7.15-million cap hit through 2028) and Jakub Chychrun (\$4.6 million through 2025) exceeding their paycheques.

Edmonton Oilers

Cap space: \$732,509

Roster size: 22/23

Among all the league's 50-plus unsigned RFAs, only one (the Islanders' Ryan Pulock) averaged more time on ice than the Edmonton Oilers' Ethan Bear. The defenceman built a heckuva case for a raise, and it won't currently fit under the team's cap without a little shuffling.

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The buyouts of Benoit Pouliot and Andrej Sekera and the salary-retention of Milan Lucic have tightened Ken Holland's purse strings by more than \$4.5 million. And even with a nice bounce-back campaign in 2019-20, James Neal is no longer a \$5.75-million asset.

Past mistakes continue to haunt.

So, Holland had to let some depth walk (Matt Benning, Andreas Athanasiou), and he could only spend so much on his goaltending (welcome back 38-year-old Mike Smith at \$1.5 million). The GM did a fine job filling gaps with short-term commitments (Kyle Turris, Tyson Barrie, Tyler Ennis, Jesse Puljujarvi), but the Oilers will have to move money out if they want to make a significant addition in-season. This is why Adam Larsson trade rumours pop up from time to time.



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Edmonton will have nine(!) UFAs in 2021, when Pouliot finally comes off the ledger, so expect Holland to aggressively start molding the roster he wants next off-season.

New York Islanders

Cap space: \$8.9 million

Roster size: 20/23

You don't barge your way to the Eastern Conference final, then turn around and give up on a young, top-four defenceman like Devon Toews (for a couple of second-rounders) if you're not feeling a few cap-hell flames.

Lou Lamoriello, that master negotiator and keeper of secrets, will try grinding down the league's most valuable unsigned RFA, Mathew Barzal, and keep another key RFA, Pulock, in the fold for a reasonable rate. Pulock's arbitration is set for Nov. 6.

The danger here is walking Barzal, one of the roster's few offensive engines, to UFA too early.

Remaining Time -8:27

Best bets to win the 2021 Stanley Cup | NHL Chatroom 'Drop The Gloves'

The Isles also had their eyes on bringing back UFAs Andy Greene and Matt Martin on bargain contracts, but getting all this work accomplished with expensive vets (Andrew Ladd, Leo Komarov, Johnny Boychuk, Cal Clutterbuck) sagging the ledger won't be easy.

We have to wonder if Lamoriello doesn't explore, say, a Komarov buyout in the next window to make it all fit.

St. Louis Blues

Cap space: \$0

Roster size: 21/23

So... Vince Dunn offer sheet, anyone?

Even with trading one of the best No. 2 goalies in the biz (Jake Allen), GM Doug Armstrong could not meet former captain Alex Pietrangolo's raise request or salary bonus wishes.

Instead, he snatched up power-play quarterback Torey Krug for \$2.3 million less cap hit than Pietrangolo and added bargain forward Kyle Clifford.

What Armstrong hasn't done yet is address the absence of top sniper Vladimir Tarasenko, also on IR, or inked Dunn — a coveted young defenceman entering his prime on a stacked blue line — to an extension.

The Blues are already at the cap, and a trade piece like, say, Tyler Bozak won't yield a great return in this climate.

The bet here is that Tarasenko's \$7.5 million and Alexander Steen's \$5.75 million will need to slide into LTIR for relief. Even then, there will be little room to wiggle or add more scoring punch.

It's hard to believe the 2019 champs haven't taken a small step backwards because of this financial bind.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Cap space: \$2.9 million

Roster size: 18/23

The difference between the Blues and Lightning and the rest of these franchises in a bind is about 14 karats. No doubt, it's easier to rationalize life in cap hell when you're wearing a Cup ring.

Tampa is the early Las Vegas favourite to go all the way again in 2021, but GM Julien BriseBois has some serious lifting to do yet. All three RFAs — Mikhail Sergachev, Anthony Cirelli and Erik Cernak — are players worth investing in. All three need raises.

Even with letting nice role players like Shattenkirk and Zach Bogosian walk, more money needs to be shipped out. That Tyler Johnson (\$5 million AAV) cleared waivers unclaimed — and that loyal captain Steven Stamkos's name was dared to be raised in trade rumours — illustrates just how difficult it'll be to get money off the books here.

BriseBois will either need to attach draft picks to tough contracts (Johnson, Alex Killorn) or ship out a player he'd rather keep (Ondrej Palat? Yanni Gourde?). This is one heckuva pickle, but banners hang forever.

Toronto Maple Leafs

Cap space: \$0

Roster size: 23/23

How tight is Toronto's head to the ceiling?

Tight enough that the Leafs' brass had to ask Ilya Mikheyev to trim a few thousand off his agreed deal at the last minute in order to help the roster be compliant for opening night.

Kyle Dubas has worked magic on the fringes of his roster. Friday's re-up of Travis Dermott for \$874,125 is a steal. Only depth forward Joey Anderson remains on Toronto's unsigned RFA list.

Cap czar and assistant GM Brandon Pridham will find a way to make the pieces fit, but the Leafs' tenuous cap situation won't make sustaining injuries or adding bodies in-season easy.

"Whether we have to go with 20 men on the roster to start, or on off-days sending guys down to play games for the Marlies... to accrue some savings that way will be key," Dubas explains.

"In working with Brandon on it daily, it does not appear that we will need to move anybody else out."

Vancouver Canucks

Cap space: \$0 million

Roster size: 23/23

In signing RFA Jake Virtanen to a bridge deal this week, Vancouver has reached its roster and spending maximum.

When the dust settled, a flat cap cost the Canucks a scoring winger (Tyler Toffoli), two solid right defencemen (Chris Tanev, Troy Stecher) and their regular-season MVP (Jacob Markstrom).

GM Jim Benning did well patching holes with Nate Schmidt and Holtby. Yet being forced to plan for the expensive futures of Elias Pettersson and Quinn Hughes has temporarily set the club a half-step backwards.

To be honest, we're a bit surprised the club didn't use a buyout option on Sven Baertschi (\$3.37 million cap hit) to purchase some breathing room.

Expensive fourth-liners, the Ryan Spooner buyout and Roberto Luongo's \$3-million cap recapture penalty are all restricting Benning's options in B.C.

Vegas Golden Knights

Cap space: \$0

Roster size: 21/23

The Golden Knights dealt away core players Paul Stastny and Nate Schmidt for futures are still over the cap.

Such is the price of high-stakes UFA pitches like the one Kelly McCrimmon made to land Pietrangolo, the biggest fish in the pond.

Important players like Jonathan Marchessault, Alec Martinez and Max Pacioretty have all heard their names chucked around the rumour mill, but the most obvious area of financial strain is in the crease.

Marc-Andre Fleury and Robin Lehner combine for \$12 million. McCrimmon tried hard to deal Fleury, willing to attach picks and retain salary... and yet, the Flower is still planted in the desert.



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Even with no RFAs to sign, the Knights are already up against it with only a 21-man roster.

They'll keep trying to shed salary before opening night.

Winnipeg Jets

Cap space: \$27,144

Roster size: 21/23

Two of the more intriguing names in the Winnipeg Jets' system — Jack Roslovic and Sami Niku — are still in need of new contracts, and GM Kevin Cheveldayoff has about enough cap space to buy a used Corolla.

Remaining Time -4:36

The possibility of the Jets trading Patrik Laine | NHL Chatroom

Relief should arrive by shifting injured centre Bryan Little to LTIR — and with 12 guys becoming free agents in the 2021 off-season, more wiggle room awaits — but the trade rumours hovering over Patrik Laine and Roslovic aren't vanishing anytime soon.

Barring the Laine blockbuster, the Jets could be handcuffed through the winter while still in go-for-it mode.

The Athletic / Inside NHL's plan for 2020-21 season: It's 'more challenging' than summer return

Michael Russo

Oct 23, 2020

The NHL spared no expense, spending an estimated \$75-90 million to isolate 24 teams and administer 33,394 COVID-19 tests (with zero positive results) to complete the 2019-20 season. The games were competitive and the Stanley Cup was awarded 201 days after the NHL suspended the season on March 12.

But as challenging as it was to plan and execute the summer's return to play, just imagine the immense number of steps involved in planning the 2020-21 season that's almost assuredly going to be unlike anything we've seen before.

"It's a totally different challenge and requires a whole bunch of different considerations that I think probably, in some respects, are more challenging than the return to play plans," NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly told The Athletic during a 20-minute phone conversation after Friday's two-hour GMs meeting. "You need to gather as much information as you can, you need to take as much time as you can, and you need to make the best decisions you can."

"It's going to be a challenge, but there are options that we can pursue, and hopefully we pick the right ones."

Is the Canada-U.S. border going to be open? What will the winter months bring in terms of COVID-19? What will the local authorities in each market allow? Will arenas eventually be allowed to open to at least some fans?

Here are the biggest obstacles.

First, the current COVID-19 numbers in North America make it so that, if the NHL truly expects to open next season "on or around Jan. 1," it's hard to imagine any way the league can open 31 arenas in two countries with fans in the stands.

Second, the NHL was able to complete last season because it essentially put 24 teams with 52-member traveling parties each plus hundreds of other staffers in two fenced-off bubbles in Edmonton and Toronto. It was expensive and thorough — and necessary to get it done. But that's not something that feasibly can be done for a regular season with 31 teams

made up of 700-plus players, not to mention the hundreds of staff also needed.

Third, the Canadian government doesn't seem ready to allow its seven NHL teams to travel freely back and forth over the border, although perhaps a positive step came Thursday when the Toronto Sun reported that international travelers can be tested for COVID-19 as a means to relax the country's mandatory 14-day quarantine as long as upon entry passengers who test negative agree to a second test within a week.

"The pilot program, at least on its face, if it goes well and it becomes more widespread, and that is the mechanism (for) health and safety, ... that could be very, very helpful to a return to play strategy next season for us," Daly said.

"We're in a situation where things are evolving every day. You're monitoring the evolution of the virus and the searches for answers on the virus. You're monitoring travel restrictions and how we can move clubs around, if we can move clubs around. And we're monitoring local restrictions with respect to spectators and fans. You've got to stay on top of everything and understand things, and they become a very relevant context for the ultimate decisions you make."

The NHL continues to gather information from the teams, particularly financials, to determine what's feasible for 31 owners who are going to have minimal revenue coming in next season if no fans are in the stands.

"I do think (the owners) are unified," Daly said. "We're going to work with them and the players in terms of coming up with the right solution for the league, for their clubs, and for the long-term value of their interests in the league. This is going to be challenging economically next year under any scenario. We understand that, they understand that. Ultimately, you're doing what's necessary to preserve the asset value of the asset you've purchased and you've invested in."

As The Athletic's Pierre LeBrun has reported, there will be another joint Return to Play committee, which will include about 10 players. An NHLPA source said it's critically important that the players have input in the process. The NHLPA must sign off on everything just like when the league and union in the spring and early summer jointly worked out the league's return to play details.

"The players' perspective and the Players' Association's perspective and their input on whatever plan we ultimately come up with is critical to our ability to be successful," Daly said. "I think you saw that in our return to play plan. If we didn't have the players' commitment and buy-in to all the health and safety protocols and how they approached their business and maintaining the security of the bubble on a regular basis, there's no way we could have pulled off what we pulled off in Toronto and Edmonton."

One other issue that may arise is player salaries.

In July, to get a flat cap and for both sides to get a collective bargaining extension, the players agreed to defer 10 percent of their 2020-21 salaries and put another 20 percent (of the remaining 90 percent) into escrow. That means they're expecting to play for 72 percent of their salaries. A union source said the players expect the owners to adhere to the terms of the CBA no matter how many games are played next season and whether there are fans or not.

But some teams that are bleeding may scoff at that.

"As with anything else, it's all on the fly, right?" Daly said. "We have to work with the Players' Association over what a return to play plan looks like for next year. And anything considered, talked about, discussed in the context of that ultimately has to be signed off on by both sides. Everybody has an interest in us having a season and awarding a Cup next year. And everybody will be pulling in the same direction in terms of getting there."

This is why it's difficult to forecast exactly what next season could look like, and commissioner Gary Bettman and Daly couldn't give general managers a lot of hard answers about next season during Friday's meeting.



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Bettman, Daly, NHLPA executive director Don Fehr and general counsel Don Zavelo are in regular contact and working hard behind the scenes coming up with multiple potential scenarios for next season. They've watched closely how the MLB navigated its season into the World Series, and they're eyeballing the NFL.

So there's probably nothing they haven't thought of or considered.

One option that seems to be gaining traction includes starting next season in four hub locations, with modified bubbles that wouldn't be walled off or nearly as strict. This would require temporarily realigning the league (including an all-Canadian division if the Canadian teams can't cross the border) and hoping at some point that all 31 arenas could open with some semblance of fans in the stands.

But, Daly, cautions, "I'm being honest when I say that there is no likely scenario. In other words, I couldn't pick one. I could identify 10 to 12 scenarios for you right now and I wouldn't be able to pick a likely scenario. While we have to make these decisions in a matter of weeks, I couldn't tell you that we're leaning any one over any other. It really is going to be a product of a whole bunch of considerations that have yet to materialize."

While the league is targeting around Jan. 1 to open the season, if there's a chance fans could be allowed to watch games at some point in the late wintertime or early spring, the league could conceivably hold off starting even longer.

That's why Bettman is expected to wait as long as he possibly can before unveiling the league's complete plans for next season.

Hey, it worked for him last time, and with COVID-19 numbers once again spiking in the United States with 60,000 positive tests per day, even the best and most ironed-out plans can change in a nanosecond.

Now, let's explore the scenario for next season that appears to be gaining traction and the potential hub cities that make sense. But remember, a frontrunner today could be crossed off tomorrow depending on COVID-19 numbers or what health authorities will allow.

Shortened season?

It's the likelihood. If so, 48 to 60 games is a good wager.

If the league starts in January, we've seen a 48-game model work in 1995 and 2013 after lockouts were settled. But because of the potential of round robins in hubs and a couple games per day, the league could probably play north of 50 but less than 60.

If the season really does start on or around Jan. 1, the NHL and NHLPA have agreed to a training camp of roughly 14 days. And, as LeBrun has reported, the seven teams that didn't take part in this summer's return to play (Anaheim, Los Angeles, San Jose, Ottawa, Buffalo, Detroit and New Jersey) would likely have an extended training camp.

There are two reasons why folks think next season could be shortened: 1) Both sides hope to get back to a normal 82-game schedule in 2021-22; 2) NBC, the NHL's U.S. national TV rightsholder in the final year of a 10-year, \$2 billion deal, and its other platforms are televising the Summer Olympics, so it's believed the league wants to award the Stanley Cup by June 30.

But Daly said, "I wouldn't say anything is set in stone. My guess are the Olympics to some extent is fairly conditional right now. Nobody knows what's going to happen that far out. So, I think, (ending by June 30) is a consideration. That's something we have to be focused on. But I don't think it's a wall or a barrier as opposed to just another obstacle."

Four hubs?

That's the scuttlebutt.

With the timeline the league is aiming for and the current COVID-19 numbers, it's impossible to see a scenario where the league can simply open up 31 arenas with fans. Local governments make the rules here, and every jurisdiction is different.

The goal is to get to a point where the hubs close and individual arenas open with at least some fans in attendance.

But if the Canadian border is still closed and teams can't return after crossing into the United States, the league will have no choice but to fulfill the lifelong dream of Canadians everywhere and create a seven-team all-Canadian division. This is creating the biggest mess for the NHL because, if the border never opens, those seven teams would have to play against each other all season or eventually travel to the United States and potentially stay.

Now, these are not going to be considered bubbles, like Edmonton and Toronto were.

The league is very sensitive to what it's willing to put the players through again. Players don't want to spend all season inside a bubble away from their families, and it doesn't sound like the league will ask them to.

So, let's call them hubs.

Like Toronto and Edmonton, the NHL would probably "own and operate" the hotels and there will be some level of testing, but they're not going to fence off the arena, hotels and restaurants. The league will do its best to control the environment, but players and staff should have more freedom (like going to dinner) and, alas, reporters should be able to cover the events in more of a normal capacity.

Realigned divisions?

There has to be if there's an all-Canadian division.

Allowing 24 teams to play north of the border was allowed during the summer because the NHL created two bubbles and controlled the environment in walled-off settings. The Canadian government allowed the league a dispensation because the players and staff were essentially satisfying a mandatory quarantine, staying in isolation while being tested constantly.

But as we saw with the Blue Jays (MLB) playing their home games in Buffalo and Toronto FC (MLS) playing home games in Hartford, the Canadian government is not showing any appetite to permit teams to travel in and out of Canada.

In essence, once teams cross, they'd be stuck in the U.S.

So if the seven Canadian teams make up one division, the league will need to temporarily realign the rest of the league into probably three eight-team divisions.

A scenario that may make sense?

Revamped Pacific: Anaheim, Arizona, Colorado, Dallas, Los Angeles, Minnesota, San Jose and Vegas.

Revamped Central: Carolina, Chicago, Columbus, Detroit, Florida, Nashville, St. Louis and Tampa Bay.

Revamped Atlantic/Metro: Boston, Buffalo, New Jersey, N.Y. Islanders, N.Y. Rangers, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Washington.

Possible division realignment

Calgary

Anaheim

Carolina

Boston

Edmonton

Arizona

Chicago

Buffalo

Montreal

Colorado



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Columbus
New Jersey
Ottawa
Dallas
Detroit
NY Islanders
Toronto
Los Angeles
Florida
NY Rangers
Vancouver
Minnesota
Nashville
Philadelphia
Winnipeg
San Jose
St. Louis
Pittsburgh
Vegas
Tampa Bay
Washington

Obviously, these could be tweaked for competitive balance or geographical reasons, but this seems to make sense.

Season format?

Because the NHL doesn't want to force teams away from their families indefinitely, there would likely be some sort of round robin of games going on in each hub.

One way to make this work that players could stomach since they travel throughout an 82-game schedule anyway is to create week- or two-week long road trips to the hub.

The league could have four to six teams at a time in the hub. Then, perhaps every week, rotate a team or two in and out. Those teams would return to their home markets to practice. Inside the hub, there could be two games a day, the idle teams on a given day would practice and teams would play four games a week.

Because of competitive balance, since the Canadian teams look like they'll only be able to play each other, it's possible each division in the United States would only play the other teams in its division.

Where are the hubs?

Any place the beat writers, uh, players and coaches can stay warm and get some sun.

Technically, since these are hubs, there wouldn't need to be one located in each division. Theoretically, the league could have all three U.S. hubs on the West Coast or other warmer weather locations like Arizona, Las Vegas, Dallas or Florida.

Now, while that might be welcomed by all in the middle of winter, that actually may not happen for every team.

In other words, does it make sense to force teams on the East Coast to play their games in California or somewhere out West?

One prerequisite surely has to be a location where a hotel (or two) that can accommodate four to six teams is either right next to the arena or practice facility.

The other is an arena that has four dressing rooms since there would be multiple games per day.

With those two things in mind, one frontrunner is likely Buffalo.

The Buffalo Marriott Harborcenter is attached to KeyBank Center and right in the heart of the Canalside district.

There are four dressing rooms at the arena and another nine in the connected Harborcenter, which has two NHL-sized rinks.

Frankly, depending what the rules are in New York at the time, it's exactly what the league would be looking for.

As for the Canada hubs, we know Toronto and Edmonton can pull it off. If the season starts Jan. 1, Edmonton would have a conflict due to the World Junior Championships. The league loves Vancouver and was so close to going there in July. The arena and hotel situation would be perfect, but there's a chance the provincial medical experts scoff again. Players would love Montreal, while Winnipeg is right in the middle of the country with a terrific arena and hotels right by the rink.

Others U.S. markets that make sense:

Columbus: If the Jackets move into the Central and the league feels it makes most sense for each division to have its own hub location, Columbus would be a logical choice. Lots of hotel options. There's the Hilton, where most teams stay, the Hyatt and Crowne Plaza down the block, and loads of restaurant options. But mostly, the practice facility is attached to the arena and there are four dressing rooms in Nationwide Arena.

Anaheim: The Ducks are pushing hard and putting on a compelling case. There are multiple hotels within three or four miles of Honda Center, including the recently-opened JW Marriott and the soon-to-be-opened Westin. But there's also a bunch of hotels about 12 miles up I-5 near the Ducks' brand-spanking-new practice facility (Great Park) in Irvine. So, perhaps it makes sense to host the teams there instead of in Anaheim. As for the Honda Center, it has held multiple multi-team events, so it should be able to accommodate four teams at the arena on an event level (including the home and visitors' dressing rooms) that's about to complete a total renovation.

Los Angeles: L.A.'s good, but not perfect. While the Staples Center is the perfect location because it's right across the street from L.A. Live (multiple restaurants and two high-end hotels that could easily accommodate four to six teams) and the arena has six dressing rooms, the practice facility in El Segundo would be excruciating to get to via bus because of heavy L.A. traffic.

Las Vegas: Remember, the NHL was heading there until COVID numbers in the area started to rise. T-Mobile Arena has four dressing rooms and is a short walk from New York New York Hotel and Park MGM Hotel. The Golden Knights' practice facility, City National Arena, has two sheets and two dressing rooms and is right across from Red Rock Resort Hotel.

Arizona: The lone problem here is the drive between the Coyotes' practice facility in Scottsdale and Gila River Arena in Glendale. But there are plenty of posh hotels in Scottsdale, or if teams were going to stay by the arena, the Renaissance is a stone's throw away and there are plenty of restaurant options in both cities.

Dallas: The Stars want it, and the W is right next to American Airlines Center, plus the always popular Ritz-Carlton or Crescent Court are right up the hill. Tons of restaurants. The arena has six auxiliary dressing rooms and two blown-out hockey setups: the Stars room and visiting room. The Stars also operate eight rinks (16 ice surfaces) in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area. Oh, and Texas seems to have an appetite to allow fans in the building. Most places are allowed to operate at 75 percent capacity indoors, according to The Athletic's Sean Shapiro, and the Cowboys are averaging 25,000 a game in a stadium that holds 90,000.



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Tampa: Tampa would be perfect because there's multiple hotels right down the street from Amalie Arena. The problem that may rule the city out? The Super Bowl is in Tampa on Feb. 7, and a quick Internet search shows that those hotels are mostly sold out in the few weeks leading up to the game.

Minnesota, Pittsburgh and Chicago: Grouping these three hockey hotbeds because they all would have interest but may not make sense. All three were finalists for the return to play this summer, especially Chicago. But this time around, Columbus makes more sense if the league's going to pick a team in the Central (as there is no hotel next to the United Center). Same, arguably, with Buffalo if Pittsburgh's in the Sabres' division. And, frankly, even though the St. Paul Hotel is across Rice Park from Xcel Energy Center and players and staff could actually take underground tunnels to the arena from the hotel, Anaheim, L.A., Vegas and Arizona make more sense if the Wild are in the Pacific simply from a travel and, yes, weather component. One can say the same thing about Colorado.

Bottom Line

Once more, this is just one of many scenarios, but the one that seems to have the most traction.

Regardless, again, the players would have to sign off on it and a lot can change between now and, well, whenever the eventual target date is.

It's impossible to forecast the future these days, which is why this is so difficult for the NHL and NHLPA to finalize.

The biggest goal is to figure out ways to bring in some sort of revenue in such a turbulent time.

So, bottom line, a lot of work still needs to be done and Bettman's probably going to wait as long as he can before announcing exactly what next season will look like and when it's officially starting.

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The Athletic / Duhatschek: The best UFA team almost no money can buy, All-Star Game alternatives

Eric Duhatschek

Oct 23, 2020

Connor Brown signed a three-year, \$10.8 million contract extension with the Ottawa Senators Thursday and my first thought was: That's a lot of money, at a time when money is getting increasingly tight around the NHL.

That kind of money would have bought you a Kyle Turris, a Lucas Wallmark and a Carter Verhaeghe on the unrestricted free-agent market this year.

That kind of money would have landed you a Wayne Simmonds, a Nick Cousins and a Mark Jankowski if you were willing to go an extra \$100,000 beyond Brown's AAV of \$3.6 million – and effectively, you'd get three players for the price of one. That kind of money would have gotten you almost a full year's worth of Tyson Barrie, just a single season after Barrie finished seventh overall in scoring among NHL defencemen.

Now we all know real NHL life isn't the same as trading bubblegum cards. Fit matters — and what a Joe Thornton was prepared to take to play for Toronto might have been different than what he'd be willing to take to place elsewhere.

Still, the first two weeks of the free-agent market saw a significant year-over-year shift in spending patterns. There were some extreme value buys, players who came cheaply because of the league's current unpredictable financial climate, where teams really have no real idea what next year's revenue streams will look like.

Brown was one of the fortunate few able to get a decent contract at a time when many of his NHL peers and contemporaries were scrambling to find work. The fear, for some, was if they didn't sign quickly, then the taps might eventually run dry and they'd be left squirming indefinitely on the offseason unemployment lines.

It meant a lot of serviceable NHL players took what was on offer, presumably in the hopes of weathering the current financial storm and proving their worth to their new teams with the thought of earning greater rewards down the road.

But after parsing the first two weeks of free-agent action, I wondered this: What sort of a team could you assemble if you focused solely on the cost-effective, low-priced reclamation projects that came on the market this summer?

Or to put it another way, if you had to choose 20 players — 12 forwards, six defencemen and two goalies — from among the players that switched teams and organizations (as opposed to ones that re-signed with their current squads), what might that team look like?

At first blush, the results bear a reasonable resemblance to the more traditional NHL expansion-draft teams, the kinds which were assembled pre-Vegas, back when expansion rules permitted existing teams to protect most of their desirable players and expose only fringe talents, or aging veterans.

For the 2020-21 season, the NHL's salary-cap ceiling has been frozen at \$81.5 million with the minimum spending threshold — or salary-cap floor — set at \$60.2 million.

How little could you actually spend and still ice a viable team?

As a theoretical exercise, I wondered if it were possible to cobble together a competitive roster in the \$27 million range — or about one-third of this year's salary cap — on the grounds that the imaginary owner of my imaginary team is probably feeling a real-life financial pinch.

Since very little hockey business actually got done this past week, let's venture down a hypothetical rabbit hole and see how that might look:

So the cost of my 20-player team comes in at exactly \$27.6 million and the only real splurges were for Barrie, so there'd be someone to quarterback the power play, and for a trio of forwards (Wennberg, Namestnikov and Fast) because scoring could be hard to come by (and all three have shown hints in the past that given enough offensive opportunities, they can make and finish plays).

If I'd decided to go a bit higher and spend to half the cap (\$40.75 million), I could have made a few more judicious buys and greatly improved my squad, beginning in goal, where I might have anteed up for Jacob Markstrom (\$6 million) or Thomas Greiss (\$3.6 million). On defence, there would have been a chance to upgrade to Troy Stecher (\$1.7 million), Radko Gudas (\$2.5 million) or even a mid-range buy such as TJ Brodie (\$5 million).

If you gave yourself permission to spend even to the salary-cap floor, of \$60.2 million, you could have been in the running for the big fish like Taylor Hall, Alex Pietrangelo or Torey Krug. And if you'd spent to the ceiling, you'd be excellent in goal and on defence, very good on the wings and the only thing separating you from being a genuine Stanley Cup contender is how thin you'd be down the middle.

Maybe there's a lesson there as to how teams value premium talent at centre and why so few of the very good ones ever spill onto the open market. You'll hear GMs repeat it over and over — if you're not strong down the middle, you probably have no shot at winning a championship. Presumably, that's also why, when this year's UFA market opened, there were so many attractive options at every position except centre, where arguably, the most intriguing commodity was the oft-injured Erik Haula,



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and as of Friday, hadn't found an NHL home yet. People: What are you waiting for?

Windy City blues

Sometimes, I just don't understand how NHL teams operate and by sometimes, I mean right this minute, and by NHL teams, I mean the Chicago Blackhawks.

On the one hand, I totally get why this past week, the Blackhawks issued an organizational mission statement in which they tried to clarify their plans going forward. When the Blackhawks permitted goaltender Corey Crawford to leave as a free agent (he signed with the Devils) and then traded away veterans such as Brandon Saad and Olli Maatta, it sent a pretty obvious signal: That next year, anyway, would be a transitional year for the franchise.

The Blackhawks' statement included the usual boilerplate about stockpiling emerging talent and blending that talent in with the holdovers – stuff you've heard before; words that pretty much every organization utters at some point or other.

So far, so good.

But then they made a promise that will be utterly impossible to deliver upon, which defeated the whole purpose of the exercise. The Blackhawks said their ultimate goal is "more than another window to win; we want to reach the summit again and stay there."

Reach the summit? Sure. Stay there? Forget it. How?

No one can manage that, not even if you had the second coming of Sam Pollock running your team. If you reach the summit, it means you get to draft 31st in the next draft and then in every subsequent draft if you're lucky enough to "stay there." A few teams have stayed competitive year after year – over the past quarter of a century, the Red Wings and Sharks bucked the odds and, against long odds, either won championships (in Detroit's case) or were competitive year after year, without actually ever celebrating a Stanley Cup (in San Jose's case).

But you can't stay there, at the summit, indefinitely. This past year, those two model franchises – Detroit and San Jose – were among the worst teams in the NHL. In Detroit's case, it looks as if the bottoming out is a deliberate strategy – a massive reset that goes far beyond what Chicago's trying, in the hopes that one day, they'll get to be a contender again.

I'm all for transparency with fans – and usually, the strategy of going public with a state-of-the-union declaration is smart, and mostly designed to buy your organization time. Remember Mike Babcock promising pain when he was first hired by the Leafs? Given that they'd been warned, Leafs fans found it wasn't too bad after all, especially once Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner arrived. Remember the Rangers, in 2018, announcing a plan to take a step back in order to take two steps forward? You win a lottery once or twice, you make an astute signing like Artemi Panarin, you see a Mika Zibanejic evolve and you put your trust in a kid goalie (Igor Shesterkin) and now you are on your way.

In Chicago's case, now, instead of just limiting expectations in the short term, they've also set themselves up with a goal that isn't really achievable. Ebb and flow are a natural part of professional sport and it's even more ingrained in a league such as the NHL, which has a strict salary-cap. Most teams try to stay as competitive as they can for as long as they can, but they know that eventually, the bottom feeders get reinforced with top prospects and the top teams eventually age out.

Here's what's even crazier.

Other than their recent decisions in goal, I like a lot of what the Blackhawks have done. Every time I watch Nikita Zadorov play, I'm impressed with his progression. In terms of free-agent acquisitions, both Wallmark and Mattias Janmark make a lot of sense. The Blackhawks do have some quality prospects coming down the pipeline too – I particularly like what I saw of Kirby Dach and Adam Boqvist this season. If you go back to last January, or before the NHL trade deadline, and examined

goalie tandems around the NHL, you would have been tempted to put Robin Lehner and Crawford in one of the higher tiers.

Me, I would have kept Lehner around at the deadline and then signed him to the same five-year extension that he eventually received from Vegas. With stability in goal, you really have a shot at helping those young kids develop. Nothing makes a young team evolve faster than certainty and stability in goal, the players confidently knowing that not every mistake they make necessarily ends up in the back of your net.

Some combination of Malcolm Subban, Colin Delia and way down the road, Drew Comesso, may eventually work out.

Personally, I would have been curious to see what a more aggressive strategy between the pipes might have done for their fortunes going forward. If you'd retained Lehner and Crawford — or simply pursued Greiss as a replacement for Crawford — that would be enough to keep them competitive and in a position to create a quality on-the-job training environment for younger players. Not to mention, improve the morale and outlook of Patrick Kane, Jonathan Toews and Duncan Keith.

The end of the All-Star Game

The NHL has been spooling out schedule news and updates little by little, and this week came the wholly unsurprising word that two January events – the Winter Classic in Minnesota and the All-Star Game in Sunrise, Fla. — were both cancelled because of the uncertainty over the upcoming season.

Minnesota will get a rain check on the Winter Classic – it's just too good a market, in too appropriate a climate, not to have an outdoor game at some point along the way. As a marketing tool, the Winter Classic is still an attractive property from an NHL perspective. Even if the novelty of the outdoor game concept has faded, scheduling one, once a year, on New Year's Day, will be part of their marketing efforts indefinitely going forward.

The All-Star Game is a separate matter.

It has been an irregular fixture on the NHL schedule since 2005, or since the league lost a full season as a result of the lockout in 2004-05. People forget sometimes that the first two instances when the NHL suspended play in the regular season to participate in the Winter Olympics – 1998 and 2002 – it also went ahead with the All-Star Game (1998 in Vancouver and 2002 in Los Angeles). It was only in 2006 when the NHL began to skip the All-Star Game in the years the league was competing in the Olympics.

It means that from 2005 until 2016, where you potentially could have played 12 All-Star Games, only six actually took place (2007, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012 and 2015).

Twice, the All-Star Game was a no-go because of work stoppages; the other four times because of the Olympics.

The NHL has tried many different ways of making the All-Star Game more appealing. Those years when the players were drafting their own teams, in fantasy-hockey fashion — and the last man standing received a car as a consolation prize — were amusing, though it didn't really improve the on-ice product.

The current format, which features a series of mini three-on-three tournaments, is better than the alternative — 60 minutes of hockey played lazily in three-quarter time, which became largely unwatchable. But really there is nothing compelling about it and a lot of veteran players would just as soon have a weekend off as being dragged to a league "showcase" event, where it's hard to measure just how much of a marketing boost it really gets.

In short, it might be time to bid the All-Star Game goodbye.

Consider that if the NHL does go to China for the 2022 Olympics, that'll then be two more years in which the All-Star Game won't be played, this coming year and the one after that.



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It may well be when the opportunity finally comes around again, in January or February of 2023, the league and the players' association will have negotiated an international hockey calendar going forward.

Two possibilities would be far more appealing than any previous version of the All-Star Game: One would be playing the World Cup then, instead of September, when the last couple of World Cups were played.

The other would be to follow up on a concept that's been batted around for a decade or more now: A Ryder Cup-style competition that would pit North American players against the World, and mimic the popular golf event.

Ideally, you would place the NHL's version of the Ryder Cup in Europe, as a means of increasing the league's footprint abroad, which will likely be a crucial plank in any program to get revenues heading in the right direction again. If you started playing World Cups and Ryder Cup-style events in mid-season, it would almost certainly spell the end of the All-Star Game as we know it.

It's hard to imagine too many people lamenting its passing.

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The Athletic / Sports viewership unplugged: the facts behind the numbers

Richard Deitsch

Oct 23, 2020

In all my years as a sports viewership nerd, both writing about the subject as well as reading about it, I've never lived in a time where there is more interest in that metric. Obviously, the coronavirus pandemic and a polarized electorate has prompted questions about what the decline in some of the jewel events of the sports calendar has meant. Sports Media Watch founder and editor Jon Lewis has done yeoman's work updating the sports viewership trend of some of the most famous properties, and the trend has pointed in one direction — down. If you want an example from this week, Game 2 of the World Series on Wednesday drew 8.95 million viewers on Fox, the smallest World Series audience on record. Game 1 of the World Series on Tuesday drew 9.195 million viewers on linear Fox. They are the first two World Series games to draw fewer than 10 million viewers since Game 3 of the 2008 Phillies-Rays World Series (9.836 million viewers on a Saturday night).

You've read a lot on this site and elsewhere about sports viewership. So this week I decided to let three of the country's foremost experts on the subject have an extended voice. For a long-form discussion on sports viewership in 2020 and beyond, I paneled Michael Mulvihill, the head of strategy and analytics and an executive vice president for Fox Sports; Flora Kelly, the senior director of Strategic and Brand Insights at ESPN and Austin Karp, the Managing Editor/Digital at Sports Business Journal and Sports Business Daily. If you want this in audio form, [Click here](#). The conversation has been lightly edited for space.

Where you think sports viewership is right now in the United States? I'm interested in a broad overview, a writ large kind of look.

Mulvihill: I think a couple of things are happening on a macro level: One is that we've seen for a couple years now that our business is separating into what I think of as two distinct marketplaces. There's a movement toward a live content marketplace which primarily exists on traditional linear TV and is defined mostly by premium live sports and news content. Then there's an on-demand marketplace that is increasingly being defined by streaming services like Netflix, Amazon, Hulu — and that's where more and more viewing of entertainment content is going. That

process has been in place for a number of years, but I think the conditions of the pandemic have just accelerated it.

So if we were on our way to two very distinct and separate businesses — a live video business and an on-demand video business — that now has become only even more true. You see it when you look at the most-watched shows in a given week, or the most-watched shows since the pandemic. I think since the start of the NFL season, 18 of the 20 most-watched shows were NFL games. The other two were presidential and vice presidential debates. If you look at the top 20 shows in most weeks, what you find is that they're all live sports and news. I think we're seeing an acceleration of that trend where live sports and news content is what the traditional TV business is all about and the entertainment viewing is going to those primarily subscription-driven on-demand platforms.

Within sports, obviously, we've been in an upside-down environment for the last couple of months. We've had a lot of jewel events that are typically part of the spring calendar postponed due to COVID and rescheduled for the fall. What it's created is kind of an oversupply of premium live sports in the fall. What that produces is an environment where total viewing of sports is pretty steady, and it's actually up depending on how you look at the data since the return of the NFL. So the total pool of sports viewership is really healthy and really stable. But because you have all these out of season players in the fall marketplace, the NBA playoffs, Stanley Cup playoffs, golf's U.S. Open, Triple Crown horse racing events, all these things that aren't typically there in the fall, they are taking a slice of that pie and it leaves less time for viewership of the NFL and Major League Baseball and college football, the things that are typically part of the fall landscape. The total sports viewership is basically steady, but you just have more players taking a piece of that pie and as a result the viewership for individual sports is mostly down. In the case of the NFL, it's down a little. In the case of some other properties, it's down quite a bit. But I think it's really just that there are only so many hours in the day. There's only so much time that the consumer has to devote to sports viewership. The limited amount of time is being squeezed among more events and the result is some viewership drops.

Kelly: I think Mike said it really well. What I would add is as you're trying to make sense of this environment, you almost have to bucket the sports that are out of season and sort them in an entirely different category. Just take a step back and ask yourself why do we look at year over year trends? We look at them to provide context. There is no context to how an NBA Finals should be doing in the fall against a presidential election when their season stopped. They had to restart in the summer when HUT (homes using television) levels are down. There is no context for the Stanley Cup. So what I would say is you have to break out all the sports that are out of season because there is no muscle memory. We all have an internal sports calendar, right? Fall is football. Spring is for the Masters. When you're looking at those year-over-year trends, I would say they're not really telling us a lot in terms of the health of those individual sports. We've been super focused on that total consumption piece because we're interested in the health of sports. We're not making a lot out of the out-of-season stuff.

But in terms of the health of sports, we're looking at that total number on a weekly basis and it's telling us that in this environment, an environment that none of us have faced before, sports is incredibly resilient. We've increased frequency. We've lost some casuals, which is to be expected in this environment. And we don't just look at TV. We've also looked at digital. Just this past month, the sports category reached 205 million users. That's the highest it's reached since 2017. So sports as a category is incredibly healthy. Now we can talk sport by sport, but the first thing I would tell people is bucket those out-of-season sports separately. The sports that are in season like the NFL, they're doing incredibly well. If you look at 2016, the NFL was down 11 percent. You look at the NFL this season, it's down 11 percent. It is also dealing with issues it's never faced before like the scheduling conflicts, like no preseason.

Karp: I agree. Normally in a given year I'm more concerned with the traditional measurement — average viewership versus average viewership. I'm trying to get that apples to apples comparison. The total consumption and total viewing hasn't really been my primary metric. But I have to agree with Mike and Flora here in that the metric is crucial here. People are watching a lot of sports. Some sports like MLB have created



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some innovative windows like during the wild-card round. Instead of just having two wild-card games this year, you had multiple series going three games. So while the average viewership may have been down, you had these new windows. Some of them were in the afternoon and you weren't getting the tonnage of viewers, but it's exposing more people to the baseball playoffs. NASCAR, they never had these Wednesday night races. When they came back, it was exposing people to primetime races in the middle of the week. That was something new that they were trying. So I credit the leagues and networks for trying some of these new things to see what might work and being flexible enough to move a football game to a Tuesday night. Is Tuesday Night Football something in the future? I doubt it. But it's interesting to think about.

Something else we have not talked about yet. People are very tired right now. There's a lot going on between politics, between having to go through COVID and not knowing where an end might be. People are homeschooling. People might not have the energy to sit down and watch a two-hour game at night after they've been helping their kids with school during the day. Things like that is normal life interfering with some of the sports viewing we have seen. But definitely on the tonnage, there's a lot going on right now and has cut into that viewership floor.

Kelly: I want to add on to the point that Austin made about a lot going on. If you kind of take a step back and look at sports consumption, I think you can almost look at it as something larger than that. Viewership trends I think a lot of times give us a mirror into the mood of the country. If you look at the start of the pandemic, I think a lot of us thought this would only last a couple weeks, maybe a month or two. So there was a lot of hope. We would ask fans like, "OK, what about the start of this sport, are you excited about it?" They were all excited. A ton said they would watch more because for them I think it marked the return of normalcy. We saw that in the initial ratings — the NFL Draft broke records. It wasn't a particularly in intrigued-filled Draft, but it marked that return of normalcy for people. We saw with "The Last Dance" and the viewership numbers we got there. I think as time has gone on, people have come to realize that the pandemic isn't going to end any time soon. I think as a country we are in the middle of this pandemic fatigue malaise, and I think sports right now isn't reflecting that return to normalcy that everyone has expected. I think against that backdrop, what I would say is sports ratings is incredibly resilient against the malaise we're in as a country. I think also when life returns to normal, sports will again mark that inflection point. I think people will come and celebrate. I think at the end of this, you will see that reflected in sports viewership.

Jon Lewis of Sports Media Watch has done yeoman's work tracking the major sports property averages. The average fan out there is not sure why the data is showing the Stanley Cup Finals down 61 percent or the NBA Finals with LeBron James down in the high 40s or the Kentucky Derby, Preakness and Indy 500 etc.. way down. What would be your response if someone said, "OK, I can understand the NBA Finals being down 20 percent, but how on earth is it down 49? How did the Kentucky Derby lose nearly half its audience?" What does your research show you when it comes to these traditional jewel events?

Mulvihill: I mean, what you're describing is exactly the job that we're tasked with doing. It's our job to put some of those numbers in a larger context to help people understand why looking at the single-year trend for a single property maybe isn't the most instructive way of looking at the data. I think what we have to try to do is frame up that data in a broader context that hopefully is a little bit more instructive. Part of that is trying to get people to pay attention to the total pie of viewership rather than focusing on a particular sport. You are right. If you look at things like the Stanley Cup Finals — I don't want to call out anybody else's properties — but there are certainly a number of examples out there where an average fan could see a story that says this event is down 50 percent and their response to that might be to think that we are a business in crisis. I think what we're trying to argue is that because total viewership of sports is steady and because the factors that are impacting our business right now I believe are temporary, it actually paints a picture of a more stable business and a business that I think is going to come out the other side of the pandemic and really good shape.

I feel like there are three things and they've sort of been brought up already in various contexts, but three things that are really driving the

business right now. One is the nature of the calendar and that the traditional sports calendar has been so disrupted. One is what Austin talked about, that news viewership and the intensity of the news cycle right now is so great that it's driving news viewership up dramatically. I think that has to have an impact on us. And third I think is partly what Flora was talking about, the idea that sports drives and is driven by social connection. A lot of what drives this business is that sports provides an environment that brings people together at a time when I would argue we are more separated than ever. That was true before the pandemic and it's only become more true under the circumstances of the pandemic. So you've got this whole business that's driven by its ability to bring fans closer to their family, closer to their friends, and make them feel more connected to their community. Right now the whole concept of social connection has just been completely turned on its head. I don't think we can overstate or ignore how important it is that we are living under such unusual circumstances. We're experiencing something that none of us have ever experienced before and that has to permeate the way that we consume media. It informs and influences the way that we live our lives in a kind of an infinite number of ways. It's not reasonable or realistic to expect sports media to be exempted from that. Our ability to bring people together is frankly a little bit undermined right now. And that is difficult. It's something that as an industry we just have to work through.

But I think the reason for optimism is that as we come out the other side of the pandemic, however long that takes, you're going to see that capability of sports to act as a social unifier. As people are able to come to the games again, as they're able to have that shared experience, that shared experience will drive renewed interest in sports, which will then be reflected in the viewership. I do think there are three primary drivers in play and I think we can see an end date to two of them. We can't necessarily know what the end date is of the pandemic, but we know it's out there somewhere. At some point, we are going to be able to get back to a more normal business environment and just a more normal life environment.

One of the factors that we always see come up, particularly with the NBA lately, is that people ascribe viewership drops to social justice messaging on and off the court. They're not the only league that's been tied to a larger culture war on why viewership dropped. The NFL got this a little bit, too. I think all of us for this conversation agree that sports viewership is never just one factor. As someone who traffics in this data every day, how do you approach this area or when you see in some circles an assertion that the NBA has dropped viewership because of social justice messaging?

Karp: Well, the first thing I'd say is that it's way too early to make any sort of long-term call on the NBA. We're just not even close to being able to make that sort of call. We have to get next season, maybe even the season after that to see what is going to be happening with the NBA. I'm still bullish on the NBA as a property long term just given its young demographics. But we had this sort of discussion four years ago when it was how much and why is the NFL down? Is it because of the kneeling? How much did the kneeling contribute to that? Of course there are going to be some people, but I don't think it's a major contributing factor. I think some of the people that are either offended or using it as a political soundbite may not have been watching the NBA before or weren't going to watch the NBA at any point anyways. I think the overwhelming reason why they are down is because of the placement on the calendar, because of the COVID disruption, because of shifts in linear television versus streaming. There may have been some casual sports fans who said there's just too much politics going on in general and maybe I'll either not watch the NBA or go watch another sport or just not watch sports right now. It has to be just part of the equation. But I don't think it's anywhere near the top.

Kelly: We've looked at it internally and we really aren't seeing any signs that that's something that's happening at scale. I mean we have registration data and Nielsen fuses that with voter registration data. It wasn't anything there that showed us this was a primary contributing factor to the ratings declines. I think also the more obvious points was the season was disrupted and the restart in the summer. They restarted in the summer when HUT levels are down 11 percent. A ton of their playoff games occurred in the afternoon window. If you look at those games,



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they rated 45 percent lower than the playoff and the average playoff. So that hurts your momentum. When we look at viewership what we saw was there was a drop off in casual fans. NBA Finals are down because casual fans dropped off.

But I'm with Austin. I'm feeling really bullish about the NBA. I think prior to COVID they were a league in a little bit of a transition. They didn't have a Golden State this year. They always ranked as a top 10 team. You had two of your top three players out. You had KD (Kevin Durant) out. You had Steph Curry out. The Eastern Conference when LeBron moved was shaky. But now we're starting a new season. KD and Steph will be back and Golden State will be back, I think what the Finals did is it reintroduced a lot of fans to Miami. Miami is a top 10 team, but they didn't play in a lot of national windows. I think that exposure will help them in the Eastern Conference. We saw it with OKC in 2012. Then there is Zion (Williamson). When he was playing in the regular season, those games on average rated 30 percent higher than other NBA games. I think what the NBA has shown throughout this entire time and nobody talks about is leadership. I mean, they were the first professional league to say, "We are not doing this. This is a pandemic. This is serious." They were the one of the first professional teams to come back. What they had to do to get that underway was tremendous. What they've done to support their players I think is tremendous. I think that helps in the long term as a brand.

Mulvihill: Well, I was going to take it to the NFL anyway because it's really not appropriate for me to comment on an NBA trend. But I think what we're seeing in our own NFL numbers probably affirms what Flora and Austin have already covered. We look at the composition of the NFL audience — what percentage is coming from large cities, small towns. We look at the income levels of our viewers, age and gender, and obviously political affiliation. We're not really seeing any dramatic movement in the type of person that's watching the NFL, whether that's on Fox or across the entire league. I think if there were a political backlash, you would expect to see that show up in a really sharp movement among some of those characteristics, whether it's reflected in party registration, which is really straightforward, or something that may be a little bit more roundabout like income level, education level, what you do for a living, do you live in a big city, do you live in a small town. None of those things are really moving. The audience is obviously a little bit smaller this year. But what we're seeing is movement among the most casual fans where they have dropped out a little bit. And those casual fans are Democrats, Republicans, white collar, blue collar, big city, small town that — they come from every walk of life and every part of the spectrum.

So there's no one characteristic that you point to and say, "Oh, my gosh, these guys are down 10 percent and that must be tied to politics." It's really more of an across the board movement. I will add one more point, which is true for our company, Flora's company, and every big media company — we all do consumer research. That's apart from the Nielsen sample. We're going out and talking to fans on a one-to-one level. When we talk to NFL fans, particularly in the franchise markets which are obviously big cities which tend to lean blue, we actually hear a lot of support for the broader social elements in our coverage. They're probably not cities that are going to be hotbeds of political backlash, at least for the kind of messaging that you're seeing in sports right now. So not only do I not feel like there's a backlash, I feel like in the most important markets to our business there's actually support for this kind of messaging. In the same way that the people who don't like the political messaging probably aren't watching any less, we also have to acknowledge that the people who like the messaging aren't watching more football because they like what they see in the end line or on the back of a player's helmet. It just sort of shows up as a nonfactor in the bigger picture.

Where do you see the college football viewership trends heading?

Kelly: We're not looking at year-over-year trends for college football. Obviously, it started slow. There was no Labor Day weekend, and that usually drives one of the biggest weekends in terms of college football viewership. The conferences are starting at different times now. With that said, it started slow but we feel like we're 7 out of 10 in terms of coming back. There's some markers in the data that are showing some positive

momentum. If you look at Week Six, it featured the top three games of the season and nearly early all the major networks were up week over week. That's a good sign. College football reached 59 million viewers in Week Six and that was up from 49 million viewers two weeks prior. So, again, you're looking at that overall momentum and that's prior to the Big Ten being back. Consistently what we see is it hits about 72 million viewers during the regular season. Those markers are telling me that it's headed in a good direction going into the Big Ten opening up.

Mulvihill: We have seen some ratings success there (in the noon ET window on Fox). A lot of the reason that we undertook that was because it was an acknowledgment of how strong ESPN, ABC and CBS are in college football. We really felt like we were having a hard time establishing an identity in college football because others have so much strength at 3:30 p.m. ET and primetime. We had to start thinking of ourselves a little bit more as counterpunchers. The way to do that was to take over the early part of the day and try to make that our identity. I think it has worked. We finally do sort of have an identity in college football. I think if we're being honest we didn't have one for the five years prior when we were trying to program the later part of the day and just not having the success that we wanted

The way we're looking at college football numbers this year is rooted in that regionality. We can look at the Nielsen ratings region by region and even though two of our three Power 5 conferences haven't begun play yet, we are looking pretty closely at what's happening on the other networks. I think what we're seeing is that the numbers in the Southeast are just fine. The numbers in the Southwest as Nielsen defines the Southwest, which is largely the state of Texas, plus Oklahoma, they're pretty good, too. That reflects the Big 12 being back. But when you look at the Big Ten footprint, which Nielsen defines as East Central and West Central and where you look at the West Coast, the regions of the country that are most affected by the Big Ten and Pac-12, they are really weak. That's not surprising at all. I think a college football fan wants to see their favorite team and then they want to see the biggest game of the day. Well, if your favorite team isn't playing, your interest in the biggest game of the day is really undermined. I think in markets like Detroit, Milwaukee, Columbus when the Big Ten comes back and a college football fan in Milwaukee can watch the Badgers at noon, they're also going to have a greater interest in watching Alabama at 3:30 and a greater interest in watching Clemson in primetime. We really need to just get the whole country back. I think what we're going to find is that those markets that are missing the Big Ten and missing the Pac-12, their interest in the SEC, Big 12 and ACC is going to rise a little bit once they have an opportunity to watch their own local team.

Karp: If you want to look at a year over year with the caveat that it's the topsy-turvy COVID football world, college football is down in the 30 percent range. But it's like Mike said, some of the biggest teams in the country, some of the most popular teams in the country and some of the most rabid markets across the country, particularly for college football, which can be small markets like Birmingham, while the South is up, the country is down. I've had this image in my head from early parts of the season of Mike and the rest of Fox Sports sitting with a carton of Tums given how unstable the Big 12 can be and hoping somebody emerges. Now they're getting into a part of the season where they're going to have the Big Ten, they're going to have some of these more popular teams to help drive some of their numbers. I agree with Mike that it is a rising tide for all boats in the college football world because you'll have some really highly-ranked teams including Ohio State on a few times at noon ET. It does flow throughout the day.

What has been the impact of social media on conversations of sports viewership?

Kelly: I think people are really interested in sports viewership because it is a marker of where our culture is today. When there's a big game or event you feel like, "I think that was a moment." The rating tells you if it was a moment. I think there's just general interest about ratings. In terms of what the storyline is, yeah, I get it. People are using data to try to get a fast headline. I think our job is to provide that context and to make sure people understand the nuance of it. But more than anything I'm just fascinated on how the general public is interested in sports ratings. I think



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it's because they're seeing that as like an arbiter of what's going on overall.

Mulvihill: I think it's a really fascinating topic and I recognize that it's a little bit inside baseball. But I am definitely interested in how social media has changed the way that our companies and the leagues that we do business with are perceived. I've been in this business long enough that I can remember the way that perception was formed around a league or around a network. You would put your commissioner or your chief executive on the phone with (former USA Today sports media columnist) Rudy Martzke and you armed the executive with a list of talking points and they would get on the phone for a half hour and then Rudy would write a story. That would basically form perception of the NBA or the NFL or Fox Sports. People like Dick Ebersol and David Stern were brilliant at that and they were able to shape perception of their business that way. It just feels like that has gone completely out the window. That model has just become way too slow. What we experience now is there's this never-ending dialog about our businesses, and it's largely a conversation about ratings and it's happening on social media. We're talking about Twitter. It's happening 24 hours a day every day and it's challenging, frankly, to keep up with the pace of that conversation.

When we premiere something like WWE Smackdown I know that Smackdown fans are going to be online dissecting our ratings before we even really have a chance to process them and come up with a narrative of our own. That conversation has become so fast and so powerful. I think what you are seeing is there are organizations in sports, whether they're conferences, leagues, networks, whatever, that have embraced that dialogue. Hopefully, we're one of them, and I think that's been beneficial to us. I think you've got companies that are embracing social media conversation and they're able to use it to enhance the perception of their success. But I think you've frankly got other organizations that have been slower to get involved and they're being caught a little flat-footed.

One of the questions I get all the time is about streaming and how streaming is counted in the landscape. How do you approach streaming numbers and where do you see its importance as we head forward? What should people know about it?

Kelly: For us, it is part of our currency. It is measured in Nielsen for us. It's still not the vast majority of the audience. The vast majority of the audience is still coming from that set-top box. Over-the-top television streaming includes digital and mobile. It is incredibly important. It's 16 percent of ESPN's audience and that gets bigger when you look at younger demographics. It rises to 1 in 4 among 18-to 49-year-olds and 1 in 3 among 18-to 34-year-olds. For Monday Night Football, what we're seeing is a streaming audience that has grown 38 percent. From an ESPN perspective, streaming is always important. We've worked with Nielsen to make sure that it is captured in our measurement. I will say as the world changes, we are in a direct-to-consumer world. We have 8.5 million subs for ESPN+ as of July, and that's growing.

As you think about the newer players, one of their biggest disadvantages and one that is not going to be a hurdle that they can easily pass is they don't have the brand in the space. What I mean by that is they are not established sports brands and I think there's a little bit of a cognitive dissonance when you think you can just buy a set of sports rights and clump it on your service and think the consumer will follow you. For us we've spent 41 years building and protecting our brand. Countless SportsCenters, 30 for 30s, countless GameDays, cutting-edge technology in our broadcast, high quality production, tinkering with the booth. That creates a relationship with the consumer. They trust us. You look at any brand metric, awareness, brand love, leadership, trusted, we've established that with the consumer. I think because of that we feel really confident that wherever the consumer wants to go, we can follow them. What we've seen so far with ESPN+ is that it is a younger and more diverse audience. We'll be there wherever they show up. I think for these technology players, I think their biggest hurdles is they have not yet established themselves as a (sports) brand. That takes time and that takes a lot of money.

What factor will sports gambling be in terms of bringing in new viewers over the next 5-10 years? Or are they already baked into the pie?

Karp: Some of it is baked in a little bit but I think there is growth potential there. One of the biggest things that will help is the growth of mobile phone adoption in a state. Just having a brick and mortar facility will not necessarily be the inflection point that really increases it. I think it will be as you see more states get to the adoption of mobile sports betting where people can do it from their couch or a park or when they are not tied to being in a specific location. I think it can help sports viewership in the long term.

Is there any property in the next five to 10 years that can cut into the viewership dominance of the NFL?

Mulvihill: No. It's probably not the most interesting answer but I think in that window, a window that might cover the term of the next round of NFL rights deals, I don't think there's anything that's going to make significant headway and challenge the NFL for leadership in American sports.

Can you leave people who are interested in sports viewership with some trends that they should pay attention to over the next 12 to 36 months.

Kelly: I think we're going to keep looking at total sports consumption because right now that is the most level metric we can monitor. Short term, even outside of COVID, we are going to look at gambling and the impact of gambling. We're constantly looking at digital and streaming because we are seeing growth. Monday Night Football growth on streaming may not offset what we are seeing on linear but ultimately you have to look at the entire pie. Right now there is no holy grail of platform measurement that gives you one number that gets you everything. So you're just going to have to look at all those parts and try to come to some conclusion.

Karp: It's two things I'm looking for and Flora just alluded to it. One is getting as accurate as possible a measurement of how strong sports really is. That has started with the quicker inclusion of out-of-home viewing such as bars, restaurants, and airports. While those aren't packed right now, when sports does come back, you're going to see a major uptake in how valuable sports is for brands who want to get their messages out to consumers. It is more important than ever as a vehicle for that. The other thing I'm watching is how cable news viewership in particular goes post-Nov. 3. It may not be Nov. 4 where you start seeing a decline, and it may not be until after Inauguration Day where you start seeing some sort of decline from those three major networks, CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC. If those start to come down, where are those viewers going? Will they go to entertainment programming or does a shift go to more sports viewing where you see that as a rising tide for sports?

Mulvihill: I'm really glad I got to go last on this question because that is a really difficult question and I get to spin off of what Flora and Austin have already said. I think a good thing to look at will be trends outside of sports themselves. What else is happening in television that either impacts sports or affects the value of sports? Austin talked about news viewership. I think that's a really good place to start. Are we going to see some kind of return to normalcy after Nov. 3 or on whatever day we have a conclusive result to the election? I think that's probably pretty likely. I think we're going to see continued erosion of primetime entertainment ratings, which will tighten the marketplace of rating points that are available to advertisers and we'll make the relative stature of sports even stronger. That's been an ongoing trend but I think that's likely to accelerate over the next couple of years.

Then thinking in the really long term and going a little bit beyond that 36-month window that you laid out, I am really bullish on the future of sports gambling and how it's going to affect our business. I feel like there's been some discussion that maybe the impact hasn't been as great as people expected, which to me feels a little bit like saying in 1978 that cable TV didn't work. We've barely even begun the process of building that business. I think a significant milestone that will come up pretty soon is that we need to get to a point where there are enough legal wagering states that we can take national advertising from wagering companies. Once that happens, I think it's really going to elevate that activity in the public consciousness and change the future direction of that business. I would finish that by saying that companies like Fox, Disney, Comcast, everybody that's engaged in sports, we fundamentally make money in two ways: We sell advertising and we collect affiliate fees from pay-TV



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distributors. I really think that in my working career we'll get to a point where this will go from being a two-revenue stream business to a three-revenue stream business. We'll all be making money from advertising, from affiliate fees, and from wagering revenue. That's the long term end game for the impact of wagering on the media business.

The Ink Report

1. Worth checking out regarding another thesis is this a new Marist Poll in conjunction with the Center for Sports Communication at Marist College regarding sports viewership and disruption. Marist found that 46% of self-described sports fans said they were spending less time watching live sports broadcasts than in the past. (Note: I used to teach with Jane McManus, the Director of the Center for Sports Communication at Marist College and a former ESPN writer and broadcaster).

2. Last week I spoke with four lead directors for NFL games because I was curious how the NFL's coronavirus protocols have impacted the work of those directing the top NFL games this year. All of the directors I spoke with agreed that the most impactful change from last year is that they have camera shots staying on the field far longer this year as opposed to any shot away from play such as crowd shots or shots of players and coaches on the sidelines. If you missed it, the piece is here.

3. This is one of the most powerful and honest things I have read in 2020. No overselling. It will make you think about your own place in the universe.

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The Athletic / Which NHL coaches are close to a contract extension?

Pierre LeBrun

Oct 23, 2020

Coaching your team to the Stanley Cup Final is some nice leverage before negotiating a new contract.

Negotiating a contract in pandemic times, not so much.

But it's nice to hear, sources confirm, that Rick Bowness is ironing out the final details on what will be a new contract with the Dallas Stars after leading them to their impressive playoff run.

Stars GM Jim Nill lifted the interim tag recently and what was needed next was negotiating a new deal for Bowness, who had been working on his associate coach's deal last season after replacing Jim Montgomery in December.

It will be a raise in pay, of course, but with the pandemic in mind, Bowness won't be breaking the bank, either. My sense is that his new deal will put him in line with the middle-of-the-pack head coach's salaries around the NHL, which is still pretty good.

So some good news for a good person.

In the meantime, there are six head coaches around the NHL entering the final year of their respective contracts. Let's take a whirl around those situations:

Travis Green, Vancouver Canucks

Status quo at the moment but once there's more clarity on what the season and the business of the game looks like, the Canucks will turn their attention to negotiating an extension for Green. No question that's their plan. The feeling is mutual. Green wants to stick around and continue to build on what he's started with one of the league's most exciting, young teams.

I would be shocked if there's no extension here eventually.

Rod Brind'Amour, Carolina Hurricanes

"Rod will be here, 100 percent, for a long time," Hurricanes owner Tom Dundon told me via text message Thursday.

Brind'Amour is one of the league's lower-paid coaches so doing well by him will be important here. On the flip side, Brind'Amour has never fancied himself coaching anywhere else. This should get done over time although I don't think anything is imminent.

Rick Tocchet, Arizona Coyotes

My understanding is that Coyotes GM Bill Armstrong wants to let the season start and examine how Tocchet performs and just as importantly needs to get to know his coach. It's a bit awkward, of course, to inherit a coach as a new GM. I would think it would be a late-season or post-season decision. I don't think Tocchet is stressed about it, either way. If for whatever reason Tocchet hits free agency next summer, he would be a hot commodity. But perhaps he will hit it off with his new boss in Arizona and stay put.

Jeremy Colliton, Chicago Blackhawks

The Blackhawks, I'm told, will turn their attention to Colliton's situation in the not-too-distant future and the plan would be to extend him before the season starts, which I've stated before. They view him as a big part of their rebuilding plan in helping develop young players.

John Tortorella, Columbus Blue Jackets

My understanding is that there's nothing planned anytime soon but that's more about the uncertainty of the season and the NHL financial landscape than anything else. But no question the Blue Jackets want to keep Torts around, a source confirmed. When the time is right, I think you'll see them address it.

Jeff Blashill, Detroit Red Wings

Blashill had his one-year option picked up by the rebuilding Red Wings after last season. I don't have any hard intel on this situation but my gut tells me not to expect anything on this front, either way, anytime soon.

Free agent coaches

In the meantime, there are also some name-brand commodities waiting in the coaching wings in Gerard Gallant and Bruce Boudreau.

Gallant, fired by Vegas last November, interviewed for both the New Jersey and Washington coaching openings. The Devils hired Lindy Ruff and the Capitals hired Peter Laviolette. It's also been rumored that Seattle had a conversation with Gallant 4-5 months ago but nobody will confirm that. He'd be a rather perfect hire by the Kraken for obvious reasons.

"Obviously it worked well, real well with Vegas with an expansion team and I was part of an expansion team in Columbus (assistant to Dave King) so I would definitely be interested in Seattle," Gallant told me Thursday, while not confirming that he had heard from Seattle.

Gallant is getting paid by the Golden Knights through June 30 (unless he gets hired by an NHL team before then).

The Kraken, as I've reported before, are in no hurry to hire their first head coach given the uncertainty of the season.

Boudreau, fired by the Wild in February, is still getting paid a consultant salary by Minnesota through June 30. But obviously he'd like to have found a new NHL job before then. He had a couple of conversations with Maple Leafs head coach Sheldon Keefe in September to perhaps join his staff as an associate but Toronto instead decided to add Manny Malhotra and Paul MacLean to the coaching staff.

And so, Boudreau, 65, is eager for his phone to ring.

"I'm so anxious to get behind the bench again," Boudreau told me Thursday. "There isn't a coach alive that wants to end his career by getting fired. You want to go out on your own terms, which I know is difficult. But I'm working pretty hard on staying up on the game."



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And of course, there's Mike Babcock, who did chat with Brian MacLellan last month before the Caps GM hired Laviolette. Babcock can afford to bide his time and be picky, the Leafs owing him \$5.875 million a year through the 2022-23 season.

The Athletic LOADED: 10.24.2020

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Sportsnet.ca / Still no certainties on 2020–21 NHL season after GM call

Elliotte Friedman

October 23, 2020, 4:29 PM

Like every hockey fan on the planet, the league's general managers have been waiting for some definitive details about the 2020–21 NHL season. However, there are still so many unknowns (border, recent COVID spikes across North America) that any certainties are way too premature. The league has re-iterated that Jan. 1 remains its "target date," but, again, no guarantees.

All the questions you have: How many games? How far will we play into the summer? There aren't concrete answers — yet.

There were multiple reports Friday that the NBA informed its Board of Governors it is targeting either Dec. 22 or Dec. 25 as the start of the 2020–21 season, with 72 games to be played. In a perfect world, the NHL would do something similar — playing as close to 82 games as possible, finishing before the Summer Olympics, returning to its "normal" schedule for 2021–22. But this is far from a perfect world, and getting ready for those dates will be a challenge for the NBA.

Two things we do know: The NHL and NHLPA are about to step up their conversations; and there is an appetite to start next season with something unique.

The NHLPA is finalizing its Return to Play Committee; the players on it will be submitted to its Executive Board sometime next week for approval. It won't be long afterwards that it engages with the NHL. As for the start of next season, the Toronto's Star's Mark Zvolinski reported two weeks ago that the league was in discussions about dropping the puck outdoors in beautiful Lake Louise, Alta.

That won't happen — one of the reasons is that sponsorship opportunities are limited in a federal park — but the idea remains.

A good chunk of the two-hour discussion was spent on the draft lottery. There are calls to change the format, to increase the odds for teams that finish lowest. While there's a recognition this was a unique year and not the norm, Detroit was incredibly upset with dropping to fourth after a season where it was clear the Red Wings were not tanking.

The league last tinkered with the odds in 2015, dropping the last-place finisher's chances of winning from 25 to 20 per cent. Detroit does have support for its position, but the league asked for specific proposals.

That's all for now. Enjoy your weekend.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 10.24.2020

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Sportsnet.ca / Blackhawks' letter to fans more about managing expectations than rebuilding

Justin Bourne

October 23, 2020, 1:36 PM

For sports fans, the results of games and seasons are viewed very much in the same way we perceive the rest of everyday life -- through the lens of expectation.

When you order a coffee you expect it hot; if it isn't, you're disappointed. That is, unless you expected it cold, in which case you aren't. Sports fans love to make predictions, because in a sense, that's what's happening -- we're shaping reasonable expectations for outcomes. There's a reason you regularly hear coaches at the podium clamouring for the coveted title of "underdog" preceding a game or series. If you can convince everyone it's your opponent who's supposed to win, you've created a scenario where you either meet expectations or exceed them.

By putting out a letter to the fans explaining they're "developing young players and rebuilding their roster," the Chicago Blackhawks seem to be doing a big picture version of that. They're probably smart to do so, too. If you squint, you could see fans believing that this is a team that just "made the playoffs," and has young talent on the rise (namely Kirby Dach and Adam Boqvist), and might be primed to start heading back up towards the summit.

Which they aren't, at least not in the immediate future. And since I suspect they recognize that internally, again, it's smart of the team to set the bar low here.

First I'll go into where I think the Blackhawks are at, before looking at what's actually important: what will that mean for their core of (now) four with Corey Crawford, and to a lesser degree Brandon Saad, having left town? Are they going to want to be with Chicago for some down years? ...Are we even sure there are down years ahead?

What are the Blackhawks of the immediate future?

They are a team utterly devoid of established goaltending, who seems to be -- and this is just an outsider's viewpoint on this -- saying "Either one of our goaltenders positively surprises us (which is always good in the big picture), or nobody does and we get a better draft pick for it."

They're going forward with Malcolm Subban (27 years old in December, 66 NHL games played with an .899 save percentage), Collin Delia (26 years old, three NHL games played, and a .912 in the AHL over three seasons), and Kevin Lankinen (25 years old, two NHL games, .909 in the AHL). Two of those guys will make up the Hawks battery when the NHL starts back up, with Delia looking like the most likely starter.

For context here, in the 2019-20 regular season the Blackhawks were dead last in shots-against-per-game, surrendering more than 35 per night. Their defence was not at all good, but was at least saved by having the NHL's sixth best total save percentage between Robin Lehner and Corey Crawford (they had a combined .925 save percentage at 5-on-5, .913 at all strengths).

So, I'm gonna use technical jargon here, but try to stay with me: the above is what we in the business call "bad." It has the potential to be really bad.

If you look at the goaltenders who were available this off-season -- and many of those who are still available -- you have to conclude that Blackhawks were led to my earlier assumption, that either it goes surprisingly good (yay) or unsurprisingly bad (yay for drafting) and either way they're cool with it. That would read like a very intentionally tanking team.

Only, their other moves don't really line up with that goal, likely because (or at least partially because) they have a pretty important core to keep happy.

*I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time.

They traded away Saad, which sure, they wanted to move out some salary. But if this is a rebuilding team, then you have to believe they're aiming at a few years down the road as a Cup window (with a guy like Dach by then the 1C-proper, and Boqvist as the PP1 QB), which makes you wonder why they'd target Nikita Zadorov, a guy going into his seventh NHL season, as the return.



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Regardless of what you think of Zadorov -- I think he's fine enough, and will be in his age prime in Chicago -- it would seem he's an odd fit for a team that could use picks and prospects to build toward an eventual next climb to the summit. He may still be fine enough whenever that climb is (not next year), but he's certainly not a significant needle mover, which this team is going to need. At least picks and prospects have the hope of becoming that.

That brings me to the other big issue. The Hawks were one of the teams that helped shape my belief that it's elite, top-end guys that drive championships.

Toews, Kane, and Keith are a part of cores going back some 15 straight years that boast an elite two or three players at the root of it all, generally a centre and top D-man. Are the Toews, Kane and Keith of the future going to be that again in 2022, 2023, or whenever you think the next realistic Cup shot is? The smart guess is no, meaning this is a team that needs to find a way to add a top-end guy or two, and I'm not sure they can do it with the types of moves they just made ... because those moves will prevent them from bottoming out.

Lucas Wallmark will help them next year, he's pretty damn smart and effective. Mattias Janmark will help them, too, as he's a great defensive forward. Honestly, between their smart UFA additions this off-season, and their still-quality core guys, they're just a little too good to be bad enough to get the type of Cup-driving core player I just referenced in the draft.

What I see here is a team being cast into the dregs of the mushy middle, something they've watched their division rival Minnesota Wild do for decades, floundering between kinda-better-than-average and kinda-worse-than-average, and never being good or bad enough to greatly affect the overall NHL landscape.

Will the core stick around to watch the once-mighty Blackhawks become the Wild of years past?

The core is made up of four individuals who all have different motivations and goals. (And yes, I'm aware of their no-move clauses, which in this conversation we'll treat as binding as NHL teams do, which is to say barely at all.) Here's what those motivations seem to be (and how they effect the likelihood of them asking out), as neatly as I can sum them up while just observing from the outside:

Jonathan Toews: Captain, three-time Cup winner, hyper-competitive and motivated. A Blackhawk-for-life type guy who says he wants to stay with no waffling. His pushback is against the idea of rebuilding at all, but I just don't see him going anywhere, regardless.

Patrick Kane: You never hear that he wants out, or that the team wants him gone. He's still a super-valuable player in the league, and his contract still looks pretty fair. I do wonder if at times he wouldn't want to leave if the team is bad-bad in the years to come, but then you have to consider: to leave you suspect it would be to play for a Cup contender, and what Cup contender can take on an additional \$10.5 million per-season salary? This is kind of a relevant note for the Toews section, too.

Duncan Keith: I think he's the most likely one to go strictly because he's 37, and two or three wasted seasons will be literally just that for him -- wasted good years -- in a career that seems logically closer to its end than beginning. Keith says he wants to play until he's 45, but let's not assume that's likely given almost nobody gets that far. Still, if the Blackhawks are bad, I can see him being asked to waive his no-move at the deadline and if the situation fits, saying yes. Blackhawks beat writer Mark Lazerus has noted that Keith also has a son out west to whom he might have interest being nearer.

Brent Seabrook: Like it or lump it, his deal is nearly impossible to move or buyout. After recovering from multiple surgeries in an attempt to rediscover his game, the team must surely hope he can find it. At least they should, since he's almost certainly going to be around.

31 Thoughts: The Podcast

Jeff Marek and Elliotte Friedman talk to a lot of people around the hockey world, and then they tell listeners all about what they've heard and what they think about it.

In conclusion

What may have been the best-case scenario post-2015-Cup is already gone for Chicago.

That would've been hanging on to Artemi Panarin for one more year before losing him to free agency, leading to a proper rebuild starting in 2019 (as opposed to whatever it was that started in 2017, the "re-tooling"). Moving Panarin cut the realistic Cup window shorter than it could've been and started them on this march to where they are now: with little prospect of being a top-end team in the immediate future, while being too good to draft all that high.

There's a funny thing about having won in the past with a franchise, in that you still have to protect the story of how the team pivoted out of those glory years. You don't want to sully the memory of the good times by burning up relationships on the way out the door. It's those obligations that will partially keep this team from doing anything overly drastic one way or another, and likely leads to a handful of seasons ahead wandering aimlessly, always looking to improve while also trying to draft high.

Brian Burke likes to say he believes teams should be trying to get better fast, or get worse fast, and I agree with that. Right now it's tough to tell which the Blackhawks are definitively aiming for, but either way, they benefit from doing the one thing they did this week: set expectations low for fans, so they can either claim to have met, or exceeded them.

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TSN.CA / Draft lottery, free agency dominate NHL GMs' meeting

Frank Seravalli

If there was any hope that Friday's virtual General Managers' meeting might shed light on the NHL's latest projected start date for the 2021 season, it was quickly quashed on the call.

The NHL's target - both publicly and privately - remains Jan. 1, 2021.

"We'd all like to know," one GM said following the call. "But it's almost impossible to ask for answers to questions that even the decision-makers don't have answers for right now."

Rather, the only thing confirmed on Friday was that whenever the puck drops, the NHL wants to do it with a bang. The league told its GMs that it anticipates starting next season in a unique setting - think picturesque backdrop, one that will be the brain child of NHL chief content officer Steve Mayer - something along the lines of the Lake Louise idea that was reported by the Toronto Star this week.

But even that planning will have to wait. The joint NHL-NHLPA committee that will help determine the next return to play format and scenario has yet to meet.

In the absence of concrete details, the GMs tabled a multitude of other agenda items during the two-hour call, ranging from the Draft Lottery to the Free Agent interview period to AHL and developmental league issues.

There was lengthy discussion on the Draft Lottery formula, which may be up for a tweak for the second time in six years. There is no question that the Detroit Red Wings left July's Draft Lottery with a sour taste in their mouth. Detroit finished with 24 fewer points than any other team and - like every last place team since 2015 - had an 80 per cent shot to fall to the fourth overall pick.



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Another manager spurred discussion on the reinstatement of an interview period for pending free agents. This off-season, for the first time since 2016, the five-day so-called "legal tampering period" was removed at the request of the NHLPA in collective bargaining.

The idea was to coax an actual Free Agent Frenzy on Oct. 9 - and it might have proven to be successful in any normal year. But the COVID-19 crunch - with a frozen salary cap and internal budget limitations - put a damper on the Frenzy. Nearly \$450 million fewer dollars were spent in the first six hours on Oct. 9 compared to the opening of free agency in 2019.

Alex Pietrangelo, No. 1 on TSN Hockey's Top 100 Free Agents list, waited more than five days until after he was able to tour and experience Vegas before inking a \$61.6 million deal.

The manager who tabled the idea for an interview period suggested a shorter interview period than the previous five days allowed - think 48 or 72 hours - and argued that it would be more beneficial for both teams and free agents to freely engage in conversation.

But that interview period - just like everything else, including when, where and how the NHL will return to the ice - will have to be bargained and agreed upon by the NHL Players' Association. Stay tuned.

TSN.CA LOADED: 10.24.2020

1195425 Websites

The Athletic / NHL postpones 2021 Winter Classic in Minnesota, All-Star Game in Florida

By Michael Russo

Oct 22, 2020

The inevitable finally occurred Thursday morning when the NHL officially announced the postponements of the 2021 Winter Classic in Minneapolis and the 2021 All-Star Game in Sunrise, Fla.

While the NHL didn't announce when the Winter Classic and All-Star Game will be rescheduled, sources tell The Athletic that the Winter Classic at Target Field between the Minnesota Wild and St. Louis Blues is expected to be pushed to Jan. 1, 2022.

"The NHL has given us every indication that the Winter Classic is coming to the State of Hockey and Target Field when it is safe to do so and our fans can fully embrace it," Wild president Matt Majka said. "We look forward to that day."

The All-Star Game in Florida is more complicated to reschedule because the NHL is expected to participate in the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing. That usually would mean there would be no All-Star Game during the 2021-22 season.

As of now, the Feb. 20, 2021, NHL Stadium Series Game featuring the Carolina Hurricanes at Carter-Finley Stadium remains as scheduled. In the springtime, the NHL announced the postponement of the 2020 Global Series. The Boston Bruins and Nashville Predators were supposed to open their 2020-21 seasons against each other in Prague, Czech Republic, while the Colorado Avalanche and Columbus Blue Jackets were supposed to play later in the fall in Helsinki, Finland.

As for the Winter Classic, the Wild had been pursuing the NHL's iconic nationally-televised New Year's Day outdoor game for years and finally were awarded the extravaganza last winter. The timing of the victorious bid coincided perfectly with the Wild's 20th anniversary season, one in which the organization is planning several things to embrace its two decades in the NHL.

But because of the pandemic and the unknown start date to the 2020-21 season, it was expected the game would be officially postponed.

As The Athletic has reported, the league had been in regular contact with the Wild, Twins and Sports Minneapolis the past several months. But the conversations were pretty much always to tell everybody to stand down. All preparations for the game were put on hold for multiple reasons.

First, how do you sell tickets for a game when you don't know how many fans, if any, would be allowed in Target Field?

Second, these are signature games, they cost a lot of money to put on and they're one-offs. For instance, every Winter Classic is unique based on its setting, so NHL chief content officer and executive vice president Steve Mayer planned to incorporate Minnesota's 10,000 lakes, its wintry weather and the state's adoration for the sport.

They're supposed to be special, so it just made no sense to hold a Winter Classic in an empty or half-empty stadium. So everybody seemed resigned to the fact that the league would eventually punt the game a year down the road.

"Fan participation, both in arenas and stadiums as well as in the ancillary venues and events that we stage around the Winter Classic and All-Star Weekend, is integral to the success of our signature events," Mayer said. "Because of the uncertainty as to when we will be able to welcome our fans back to our games, we felt that the prudent decision at this time was to postpone these celebrations until 2022 when our fans should be able to enjoy and celebrate these tentpole events in-person, as they were always intended. We are also considering several new and creative events that will allow our fans to engage with our games and teams during this upcoming season."

Earlier during the pandemic, commissioner Gary Bettman floated the idea of potentially opening the 2020-21 season with the Winter Classic, but there are too many unknowns regarding when next season will start, how next season will start and where. As The Athletic has reported, next season could potentially start in four modified bubble hubs — one in Canada, three in the United States — with divisional realignment.

The league is still shooting for on or around Jan. 1 as the start date for the upcoming season.

Now that the Winter Classic is postponed and the Wild's specially-designed Winter Classic jersey will be pushed a year, Wild fans can expect at least one new jersey from the team this year. That will at least be the retro jersey all NHL teams are expected to unveil. As The Athletic has previously reported, the Wild's retro jersey is expected to be a North Stars color scheme. One would think the league will want all the jerseys available before Christmas.

On Wednesday, the Wild, Fox Sports North and Minnesota Hockey announced that Hockey Day Minnesota 2021 in Mankato has been postponed to 2022.

The Athletic LOADED: 10.23.2020

The Athletic / Down Goes Brown: This is all your team's fault, Western Conference edition

By Sean McIndoe

Oct 22, 2020

Welcome to the conclusion of a two-part series in which I try to find a rule, tradition or other piece of the hockey world that each team can take the credit (or blame) for introducing.

On Tuesday, we looked at the 16 Eastern Conference teams, and thank them for giving us icing, the draft lottery, trade calls and the All-Star Game, among other things. Today, it's on to the West. As before, we'll be looking at changes that were big and small, good and bad, important and trivial, and everything in between. We just want to make sure all 15



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Western teams – sorry, Seattle, maybe next year – have some small piece of today's NHL that they can claim as their own.

Chicago Blackhawks

Thank them for: The limit on how curved a stick blade can be

For the first century or so of hockey, stick blades were flat. It wasn't until the 1960s that the curve blade fell into wide use, making it easier to lift the puck and occasionally producing unpredictable shots that were harder for goalies to stop.

There's some dispute over who actually came up with the curved stick; most versions of the story mention Bobby Hull and Stan Mikita of the Hawks, although New York's Andy Bathgate had claimed they got the idea from him and some sources credit the initial innovation 1920s star Cy Denneny. But either way, it was Hull and Mikita who took the idea to the next level, taking to the ice with ridiculous curves that became known as banana blades. The NHL eventually put a limit on how much curve was too much, a fact that still makes Kings fans cry.

Edmonton Oilers

We hadn't seen that before, and it was an undeniably cool moment – especially since it became Gretzky's last moment in an Oiler jersey.

Los Angeles Kings

Thank them for: Your current coach not being able to take a job with another team

Not your current coach in the sense of a guy you fired but who remains under contract. I mean the guy who's behind your bench, right now, for tonight's game. Other teams can't just show up and hire that guy for a different job.

Yeah, that doesn't seem like the sort of thing we should need a rule about. There's a story here.

It comes from December 1986, as the legendary Pat Quinn was halfway through his third season as Kings' coach. He stunned the league, and his employer, by announcing that he'd accepted a job as the new GM of the Canucks, with the intention of starting after the season ended.

Quinn, a former lawyer, argued that he was within his legal rights to negotiate with another team, even as he was still working for the Kings. The NHL didn't necessarily dispute that, but considered Quinn's attempt to coach one team while signing a contract with another a conflict of interest. They hammered everyone involved with heavy fines, and suspended Quinn from working anywhere for the rest of the season, and from coaching a team until 1990. Not surprisingly, various appeals, threats and lawsuits followed. It was kind of a mess.

So the next time you hear about a team needing to ask permission to talk to a coach that some other team already fired, you can trace it back to the Kings, the Canucks, and the lawyer/coach who knew an upgrade when he saw it.

Arizona Coyotes

Thank them for: Messing up all-star voting

This one wasn't really the Coyotes' fault, in the sense that they didn't want any of this to happen. But the fiasco around fan balloting for the 2016 all-star game that led to enforcer John Scott being voted into the game was not well-received by the NHL. It led to a revamp of the voting process, one that limited who fans could throw their support behind and basically eliminating the possibility to random trouble-makers messing with the process. The changes became known as the John Scott Rule, mainly because the Our Fans Have Displeased Us And This Is Why They Can't Have Nice Things Rule seemed kind of long.

Nashville Predators

Thank them for: The lack of compensation for losing a UFA

You hear it all the time from GMs, especially when they're shipping off some pending UFA at the trade deadline: Hey, we can't just lose this guy for nothing. But for a few years in the pre-cap world, that wasn't a

problem, at least for some teams. That's because smaller markets that lost UFAs received compensation from the league in the form of draft picks.

It was a neat idea, and it helped even the playing field for the have-nots back in the high-spending days. But then teams discovered a loophole: They could get compensation for UFAs even if they only acquired them right before free agency started. And so, teams started gaming the system. They'd trade a draft pick to a big market team for a pending UFA they had no intention of signing, "lose" him once the market opened, and get a better pick from the league. The Predators led the way, trading for UFAs like Ed Belfour and Tie Domi in 2002, the first deals to exploit the loophole. Other teams soon followed, giving us weird footnotes like Brian Leetch being an Oiler for a day, or Mark Messier spending a few hours as a Shark.

The league scrapped the concept shortly after, and it's never been revisited. But in case you're wondering, it all worked out pretty well for the Predators — the pick they got from the league in the Belfour deal turned into Shea Weber.

Calgary Flames

Thank them for: The age limit on Calder Trophy winners

The Calder Trophy, as every fan knows, goes to the league's best rookie. Great. But what's a rookie?

It's not always a simple question, and if you make a bunch of arbitrary cutoffs then you could end up with one player being eligible for the all-rookie team five times in his career. But maybe you keep it simple. A rookie is a guy in his first year in the NHL, right?

Well, yeah... until the 1989-90 season, when Calgary's Sergei Makarov took home the trophy. On one hand, he was a solid pick, having just racked up 86 points in his very first NHL season. On the other hand, he was 31 years old and had been one of hockey's most dominant stars for well over a decade. He had just done all of that in the Soviet Union, before coming to the NHL as an already seasoned pro. But still, according to the rules of the time, a rookie, much to the chagrin of teenaged Mike Modano, who finished second in that year's voting.

The NHL quickly changed the rule, and today a "rookie" must be 26 or younger.

Dallas Stars

Thank them for: The end of the skate-in-crease rule

Sabres fans, don't read this.

For the rest of us, let's offer up a hearty thanks to Brett Hull and the 1999 Stars. By scoring the Cup-winning overtime goal with his skate in the crease, Hull spelled the end of one of the most hated rules in modern NHL history. The skate-in-crease rule had haunted the league for much of the 1990s, resulting in endless goals being wiped off the board because a player had a toenail in the crease.

That ended pretty much instantly when Hull's winner found the back of the net. The NHL went into damage control, claiming that the goal was technically legal, and they may have been right (although if so, it was based on a tweak to the rule that they forgot to tell anyone about). But ultimately, that barely mattered – a league that had trained fans that skates in the crease negated goals had a disaster on its hands, and the rule was inevitably scrapped that offseason.

Colorado Avalanche

Thank them for: Offside review

Oh hey, speaking of dumb rules that overturn goals on minor technicalities...

Yes, it's the infamous Matt Duchene offside, the one that's widely credited with forcing endless nitpicky replay reviews onto a generation of frustrated fans. As I've written before, the narrative here doesn't quite match the reality. First, the linesman didn't let the play go because he thought Duchene was onside – he thought the Predators had knocked



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the puck back into their own zone, at which point Duchene's positioning wouldn't matter. And despite how a lot of fans remember it, this one didn't lead directly to offside review coming in, at least not right away. That took two more years, and was shoved over the finish line by an overtime controversy in the 2015 playoffs.

That said, this is the play everyone remembers, and it's very possible that if Duchene never scores this goal then we never get stuck with the horribly flawed review process we have now. So I feel like we can safely blame the Avs for this one, even if it's not entirely their fault. Should have just shot wide, Matt.

Vegas Golden Knights

Thank them for: Replay review for major penalties

Look, they've existed for three years, I can't go back that far. So we'll do last year, when a five-minute major that was sketchy to say the least flipped a Game 7 and ended their season. Sure, they could have killed off the penalty, and we'd all have forgotten it. They didn't, and now we have replay review for major penalties.

San Jose Sharks

Thank them for: Hand passes being reviewable

It's not easy to get the NHL to do anything about a shoddy rule, but as we've learned in a few other entries, scoring a playoff overtime winner that shouldn't have counted is one way to do it.

Luckily, the NHL stepped in and made hand passes reviewable starting last year, that led to... uh... wait, were there any hand pass challenges last year? There must have been. If not, we may have found the only replay review situation nobody's been mad about. Yet.

Between this and the Pavelski major, the 2019 Sharks really did a number on the league's replay policies during their playoff run. They felt so badly about it, they apparently decided never to go back.

Minnesota Wild

Thank them for: The seven-year limit on UFA contract length

Maybe we were headed to a length limit of some sort in the 2013 CBA no matter how the 2012 offseason went. But it became inevitable once the Wild were done handing out matching 13-year deals to Ryan Suter and Zach Parise on July 4, 2012.

They weren't the only double-digit UFA deals in NHL history – Marian Hossa got 12 years with the Hawks in 2010, and Ilya Kovalchuk got 15 years from the Devils a few months later – but seeing one team commit to 24 years in one day with a lockout just months away set the stage of the issue to become the league's "hill we die on". To make matters worse, Wild owner Craig Leipold was one of the loudest voices pushing for the limit, a fact that Suter certainly noticed at the time.

Anaheim Ducks

Thank them for: Limits on how big a goalie's pads can be

As with a few of these, the Ducks can't claim exclusive credit here. And it's not like this is a solved problem; we're still arguing about goalie equipment to this day. But there was an inflection point in the mid-00s, as the league's netminders saw their equipment go from the familiar to something that looked more like lacrosse goalie gear to full-on inflatable sumo suits. It became a bit of a joke. And while plenty of goalies stood out, including Roberto Luongo and (especially) Garth Snow, none were having the success of Anaheim's Jean-Sebastien Giguere.

Giguere had bounced around a bit before getting an opportunity to start for the Ducks, and he made the most of it with a breakout 2001-02 season. But it was the next year that saw him almost single-handedly win a Stanley Cup, leading a so-so Ducks squad to within a game of a championship and becoming the last player from a losing team to win the Conn Smythe. And he did it all while wearing comically large leg and shoulder pads.

Fans and media took note. And sure, some of that was no doubt sour grapes after yet another shutout against their team. But fair or not, Giguere became the poster child for runaway goalie gear. The NHL started cracking down for the 2003-04 season and made more pronounced changes coming out of the lockout, and they're still tinkering with the rules to this day. And the goalies haven't stopped complaining about it.

Oh, and while we're on the subject of what goalies can do with their equipment...

Vancouver Canucks

Thank them for: Goalies having to bring their sticks with them when they get pulled for an extra attacker

Wait, what?

That seems oddly specific, right? As in, it's the sort of thing you shouldn't even need to have in a rulebook. The kind of thing that wouldn't be an issue at all, unless a complete and total evil genius showed up and started trying to intentionally break things.

And then you remember it's the Canucks section, and you realize: It must be time for some Roger Neilson stories.

Neilson was the absolute best, and his constant quest to find and exploit weird loopholes in the rulebook are responsible for all sorts of extra sub-rules and clarifications. For example, no, you can't take out your goalie and use a defenseman against a penalty shot. And no, you can't keep sending extra guys out and intentionally taking too-many-men penalties when you're already down 5-on-3 at the end of a game.

Neilson broke out some of those in the minors. But one that he apparently did try with the Canucks: Instructing his goalies to "accidentally" leave their sticks laying across the goal line when they came to the bench for an extra attacker. He'd also suggest that they scrape up a nice pile of snow along the way. It's pretty brilliant when you think about it. And now, it's illegal, thanks to rule 67.5, which calls for an automatic goal if a team tries it.

St. Louis Blues

Thank them for: Draft pick compensation for offer sheets

Offer sheets in today's NHL are broken. They're rarely signed, they never work, and they revolve around a bland table of mandated draft pick compensation. Is there a better way? There sure is, as I've told you before, and it would involve going back to the old way: Player-for-player compensation. Basically, forced trades.

In the 80s and 90s, a successful offer sheet meant that each team would propose a fair trade involving players, and an arbitrator would pick the winner. That added a whole other layer of strategy to the process, as teams that were victimized by an offer sheet could allow the player to leave and then try to extract value with a big compensation ask. If you signed a guy, how much would you offer in return? Did you risk losing out on the exchange? It was a fun game of chicken that two teams would have to play, and it led to interesting swaps like Adam Graves for Troy Mallette or Mike Craig for Peter Zezel.

There was one problem: The Blues. Like that one guy in your fantasy football league who takes the whole thing way too seriously, the Blues kind of ruined it for everyone.

The Blues were by far the most active team in those old offer sheet days, and it always seemed to cause trouble. They signed Scott Stevens away from the Capitals in 1990. That worked great, so a year later they signed Brendan Shanahan away from the Devils, offering Curtis Joseph and Rod Brind'Amour as compensation. Oops. The Devils asked for Stevens, and won. The Blues were furious, feeling (not completely unreasonably) that they were being punished for aggressively targeting other team's players.

Most fans know that story, since it's a key part of how all those Devils championships came to be. What some forget is that Stevens initially refused to report to New Jersey. And after the 1993-94 season, he



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signed an offer sheet with the Blues yet again. That one backfired badly, as the Devils matched and then accused the Blues of tampering, a case they eventually won.

So just the Scott Stevens-related drama alone was probably enough to get the NHL thinking about scrapping the whole thing. But we haven't even mentioned the Blues' attempt to sign Dave Christian, or Michel Goulet, or Marty McSorley, or Shayne Corson, or the whole Petr Nedved/Craig Janney debacle.

On the one hand, full credit to the Blues for actually trying to use all the tools at their disposal to make their team better. Ron Caron was the best. But you can see why the NHL eventually ran out of patience, and switched to a system where everything was set in stone. (And also, where no offer sheet would ever work. That was probably a nice side benefit.)

Winnipeg Jets

Thank them for: The replay war room

When the NHL first introduced replay review in 1991, it was used only for determining whether a goal should count. And the list of things that could be reviewed was pretty comprehensive, including "if the puck crossed the goal line; if it was kicked or thrown into the net or went off an official or if the puck crossed the goal line before the net was dislodged or before the end of a period occurred."

That's pretty much the same list of things that get reviewed on every goal today. But back then, we didn't have a single centralized war room. Each game was pretty much on its own, with the referee able to call up to a replay official in the building if he thought he needed help.

It usually worked. Sometimes, it really didn't.

That's Nelson Emerson, winning a game for the Jets in overtime by just straight up throwing the puck into the Blackhawks' net. Referee Denis Morel was blocked out and didn't see how the puck ended up in the net, but that was OK, because we had replay to fix these sorts of obvious mistakes.

Except it didn't, leading to one of the great teamwide post-call meltdowns you'll ever see. It turns out that Morel had only gone upstairs to find out if the puck had crossed the goal line; he was never told that Emerson had shaken off three signs and gone knuckle-curve on the play. Once they decided that the goal line question was inconclusive, Morel had heard enough and the goal was allowed to stand.

That didn't lead directly to the NHL adopting the current approach of a war room that reviews every goal for every reason; we had to wait for a few years and plenty of advances in technology before that could happen. But once it was possible, the memory of Nelson Emerson made it a slam dunk.

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The Athletic / NHL free agency: The 10 best players still unsigned

By Harman Dayal

Oct 22, 2020

The financial distress caused by the pandemic has forced the NHL into a flat cap environment. That, in turn, has completely transformed the dynamic of free agency.

Typically a mad dash that leads to impulsive, extravagant signings, the UFA scene is instead an unprecedented buyer's market. Rather than inking contracts that look inefficient from Day 1, teams are mostly mining reasonable value on the open market.

Another consequence of the leaguewide cash crunch is that the names are coming off the board slower than usual. It's been nearly two weeks since opening day and there are plenty of quality depth options and even a couple of impact contributors still available.

After scouring the market, here are the 10 players that should look most intriguing to teams.

1. Mike Hoffman

Mike Hoffman is a top-six forward with highly specialized skills. He's a one-dimensional scorer (albeit an excellent one) and that makes the fit of the utmost importance.

Hoffman has one of the most accurate shots in the league, especially from the right circle on the power play. He's an elite power play scorer who ranks ninth in the league with 36 man-advantage goals over the past three years. The 30-year-old left winger can translate that same finishing ability to 5-on-5 play but he's a flawed player beyond that.

One can reasonably expect 30-goal, 60-point upside from Hoffman but the point totals will always flatter his overall impact. In fact, one could argue the soon to be 31-year-old is a bit of an even strength liability. He's a significant defensive drag and doesn't contribute in driving play forward. Hoffman can get his own offensively but that doesn't matter a whole lot because his team has been outscored at 5-on-5 when he's been on the ice in three consecutive seasons.

Hoffman should be very attractive for clubs interested in an elite sniper to jumpstart their power play but he's unlikely to yield much value beyond the man advantage.

2. Mikael Granlund

Prospective buyers interested in Mikael Granlund have to figure out what version of the player they're getting. Granlund in Minnesota reflected a top-line winger, a crafty playmaker who drove play and produced at a 69-point pace prorated over 82 games in his last three seasons with the Wild.

Granlund's profile during the last year and a quarter with Nashville, however, looks the part of a middle-six contributor. He's scored just 38 points in 89 games, which includes the playoffs, and there are signs in his individual microstats that suggest his dynamic traits are in decline.

The 5-foot-10 forward was among the upper-echelon of NHL forwards at creating offensive zone entries with possession in Minnesota but found himself in just the 35th percentile this past year, as per the data Corey Sznajder tracked. Granlund's shot assists rate (how often his passes lead to shots) also suffered a modest decline and indicates that he's been less effective as a setup man.

Viz via CJ Turtoro

Linemate quality can't be used as an excuse either as his two most common 5-on-5 teammates were Matt Duchene and Filip Forsberg.

That raises the question — how much of Granlund's falling production can be attributed to poor fit compared to individual decay? Nashville's woeful power play is at least one facet that points to potential team effects. The Predators have ranked 25th or lower in power play efficiency for three consecutive seasons. It's not an easy environment to rack up points in and has muted the offensive numbers of other players.

Consider that Kevin Fiala, who Granlund was traded for, scored just 3.88 points per hour on the man advantage in Nashville but nearly doubled that rate to 7.06 points per 60 minutes in Minnesota this year. New arrival Duchene produced power play points at one of the lowest rates of his career upon arriving in Nashville as well.

Granlund, meanwhile, has managed just eight power play points in 78 regular season games with the Predators. That's one part of his game that should bounce back in a more favourable environment.

Weighing all these factors, it would appear that Granlund's cratering offensive results are a combination of atrophying individual ability and a



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poor fit. He's still someone a team can count on as a top-six piece but he's unlikely to be the same calibre of player he was in Minnesota.

3. Anthony Duclair

The first name on our list, Hoffman, was a lethal scorer with warts surrounding his all-around game. That also happens to be an apt description for the third name on our list, Anthony Duclair.

Duclair's notched 31 goals and 54 points in 87 games since being traded last season to the Senators. He has lots of flashy tools with a quick-release shot, strong wheels to facilitate transition play and nimble hands. His playmaking ability is limited — he's a shoot-first player — but next to a setup man he could do lots of offensive damage.

What holds him back is that he's one of the league's worst defensive players. Duclair's propensity to float and not commit to details away from the puck frustrates coaches and is a reason why he's already suited up for five NHL organizations despite being just 25.

Just like with Hoffman, the fit is key. A team is going to need to live with Duclair's defensive inconsistencies if they want to reap the rewards of his high-end offensive ability.

4. Dominik Kahun

Dominik Kahun can be an effective middle-six presence much in the same way that Duclair can but he garners that value in a very different way. What he lacks compared to Duclair in flash and scintillating offensive tools he makes up for with two-way substance and versatility.

Kahun has scored at a 40-point pace prorated over 82 games in his two NHL seasons. That's remarkably efficient considering virtually all of that production comes at even strength. In fact, his 5-on-5 points per 60 rate ranks top 75 among all forwards in the last two years.

The forward is on the smaller side at 5-foot-11, 175 pounds but he plays a responsible, well-rounded game with respectable two-way numbers against top competition. He can also play all three forward positions, making him a versatile Swiss Army knife that can fill a lot of roles in a top nine. That he just turned 25 a few months ago is attractive too.

Teams can't count on Kahun being a bona fide top-six solution but he's a reliable, consistent third-liner who can step up the lineup in a pinch.

5. Carl Soderberg

This year's UFA class was weak on centres, as evidenced by the fact that Carl Soderberg was arguably the best pivot available. It's a little surprising then, considering the premium teams place on strength down the middle, that he's still left on the market.

At this stage in his career, Soderberg has the potential to be a competent, if unspectacular third-line centre. The 35-year-old is the proverbial jack-of-all-trades, master of none. He can score, is a decent two-way option, can kill penalties and is average at helping transport the puck up the ice. At 6-foot-3, 210 pounds he can leverage his frame to create some havoc in front of the net.

The fact that Soderberg managed 17 goals and 35 points on an offensively weak Coyotes certainly bodes well, though you wonder how much longer he can sustain his form as a quality depth piece given his age. On the right short-term deal, Soderberg is worth a look for a club lacking centre depth.

6. Josh Leivo

Miscast and underutilized in Toronto, Josh Leivo was well on his way to establishing himself as a quality middle-six forward in Vancouver.

Leivo was counted on as a strong two-way presence who could play both wings while shuffling up and down every line in the top nine. The 27-year-old isn't dynamic enough to help in transition — he's very much a complementary winger — but he's a beast at winning board battles and was really effective on the forecheck which quietly helped him drive excellent 5-on-5 results. Since joining the Canucks in the middle of the 2018-19 campaign, he ranks behind only J.T. Miller and Elias Pettersson

with a 51.1 percent expected goal differential, with Vancouver controlling 55.6 percent of actual goals with him on the ice.

Leivo's offensive numbers don't jump off the page but that's because he isn't much of a power play threat. At 5-on-5, he's put up 1.61 points per hour over the last two years, which is a credible middle-six pace.

The only concern (and it's a major one) with Leivo is health. He took a brutal season-ending hit from Vegas' Nick Holden in December that broke his kneecap and wasn't fit to play more than seven months later for Vancouver in the playoffs. Canucks general manager Jim Benning confirmed that Leivo would have returned if the team made it to the Stanley Cup Final so he'll certainly play again, it's just a matter of if he'll be able to pick up where he left off. That's a valid concern when you consider the effect that a major knee injury could have on a forward who's already a below-average skater.

For that reason, Leivo is probably in the market to sign a one-year deal that should come close to \$1 million. He could prove to be a bargain, a capable third-line winger for that type of price, but a team would have to be confident he can put this injury behind him.

7. Zdeno Chara

If Zdeno Chara returns for the 2020-21 season, it'll probably be for the Bruins. Chara's camp is said to be looking at all their options, however, and as we've seen with Joe Thornton's departure, it's not impossible for a franchise icon to switch teams if a better opportunity comes along.

If Chara does open himself to teams outside of Boston, the question will become how much he has left in the tank. The 43-year-old is the oldest player in the NHL, though he held up fairly well for the Bruins this past year. Chara averaged a tick above 21 minutes per night, continued to take on extremely tough matchups against elite competition and mostly held his own. His underlying numbers took a nosedive compared to 2018-19, however, and he did have the benefit of playing with an elite partner in Charlie McAvoy so the longtime Bruins captain really can't be seen as a bona fide top pairing workhorse anymore.

Chara's foot speed becomes a bigger issue every year (particularly in transition) but his hulking frame and defensive intelligence still making him a fringe top-four calibre defenceman. In a more sheltered role next to an aggressive, mobile puck transporter it's reasonable to think Chara could still deliver favourable results.

8. Erik Haula

Some will quibble with how low Erik Haula is on this list — the truth is that you could slot the players ranked fifth to eighth in the order you prefer. So while there are a few names separating them, it's fully reasonable to think Haula has every bit as good of a chance to be a decent third-line centre as Soderberg.

There are a lot of reasons to like his game. Haula skates really well, can play centre or wing, offers tenacity and bite and can kill penalties. He probably can't match the 29-goal, 55-point output he produced in a breakout campaign with the 2017-18 Vegas Golden Knights but it's not unreasonable to think he could score at a half-a-point per game clip. Since that career year, however, he's run into inconsistency and injury concerns.

Haula missed essentially the entire 2018-19 season with injury and couldn't find his footing in Carolina this past season. Perhaps most concerning, his defensive impact took a massive hit in the process. The 29-year-old would be an intriguing bet for a team in the market for a versatile top-nine forward who can provide an offensive boost on the third line, though his decaying defensive profile is something to watch out for.

9. Sami Vatanen

Sami Vatanen was once a marquee top-four defenceman but now profiles closer to the level of a No. 4/5. Vatanen's strong puck-moving numbers are closer to average at this stage of his career and while he's still effective offensively, he simply doesn't control play in tough minutes anymore. His two-way numbers are down across the board, though it's sensible to think that he could perform better in a more sheltered role.



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The biggest concern is health. Vatanen has played fewer than 60 games in four consecutive seasons. For this reason, handing out any term would be a mistake.

NHL teams can never have enough right-handed defencemen, though. At the right price point, Vatanen makes sense as a viable No. 4/5 who can play in the top-four if injuries strike.

10. Andy Greene

There were many candidates that could have taken this 10th spot. Corey Perry, Travis Hamonic and Slater Koekkoek are just a few of the players who could provide comparable value (and perhaps even a bit more) than Andy Greene.

Greene's past his best-before-date as a top-four defenceman but could provide utility on a third pair. The 37-year-old remains one of the league's top shot blockers, isn't a liability in transition and retains considerable defensive value in helping limit shots and chances against. He's been thrown to the wolves matchup-wise with a ton of defensive zone starts, so it's possible that he can flourish in a reduced role with the right partner. Greene was also steady for much of his time with the Islanders following a midseason trade.

There are a lot of intangibles Greene would offer as well.

He's always been a team-first leader, has 14 years of NHL experience and was captain for the Devils. Greene could be a worthwhile veteran mentor to play alongside a young defenceman on the bottom pair.

Honourable mentions: Corey Perry, Travis Hamonic, Conor Sheary, Slater Koekkoek, Colin Wilson, Alex Galchenyuk

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The Athletic / Ranking the best NHL players under 23: Corey Pronman's top 155

Corey Pronman

Oct 22, 2020

I've ranked the best young players in every NHL organization. I've ranked all 31 players based on those groups of players — and then re-ranked them after the 2020 NHL Draft.

Now I finish this package with a look at the best under-23 players within NHL organizations. This incorporates the players drafted between 2016 and 2020. It is a projection of who will have the best careers, not who is the best player today.

Despite the NHL schedule adjustment this year, I am still using Sept. 15 as the cut-off for eligibility since that is the date for the NHL Draft. Thus, it keeps some players eligible in a somewhat awkward manner. Ideally, a year from now, we're in more of a normal cycle and this will post again in September.

You will also notice that there are some prospects who were included in the organizational rankings but miss the age cutoff. To give you an idea of how they compare to the rest of the league's young talent, Minnesota's Kirill Kaprizov would be between Jakob Chychrun and Yaroslav Askarov, Alex Barre-Boulet would be between Ryan Merkley and Alex Turcotte, Ilya Sorokin would be between Mathias Emilio Pettersen and Kevin Bahl, and Kyle Capobianco would be between John-Jason Peterka and Jack Dugan.

1. Auston Matthews, C, Toronto

Sept. 17, 1997 | 6-foot-3 | 220 pounds

Tier: Generational/Special bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 80

Matthews is one of the best players in the NHL. He has every attribute you want in an NHL player. He's a center with size. He has exceptional puck skills. He shows a ton of creativity as a handler and passer to create chances for himself and his teammates. While he's a great passer, his shot drives a ton of his value. He's a career 16 percent shooter whose mid-range wrist shot is one of if not the best in the league due to how quick and accurate it is. Matthews isn't a super physical player, but he's strong on pucks, using his bulky frame to maintain possession. He's a good skater, not a blazer, but he has enough speed to turn the corner on defenders and create offense through his skating.

2. Rasmus Dahlin, D, Buffalo

April 13, 2000 | 6-foot-2 | 205 pounds

Tier: Special NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 70

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 65

Dahlin has been one of the top teenage defensemen in modern NHL history, with 0.68 points per game (projecting to 56 points in 82 games) as a 19-year-old this past season. His skill level is incredible. You see any time he touches the puck that he is a threat with the way he can stickhandle through traffic. The spectacular flashes haven't been there in the NHL as often as the SHL, but he can still dazzle. He's an incredibly imaginative offensive player who has the potential to be a top-scoring defenseman for many years. Dahlin is a good but not explosive skater, relying more on great edgework and good top speed to be elusive. I don't know if he's ever going to be truly elite defensively since he's not this big, hard, extremely mobile defender. I do think with his 6-foot-2 frame, good feet and great IQ, he will be good enough defensively to get the most out of his special offensive gifts. I'd like to see Buffalo take the reins off him a bit, and have him attack with the skill and confidence he did when he was younger.

3. Elias Pettersson, C, Vancouver

Nov. 12, 1998 | 6-foot-2 | 176 pounds

Tier: Special NHL Player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 70

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 65

Shot: 70

Pettersson has emerged as a star player in the NHL through his first two seasons, as a principal reason for the Canucks' turnaround. He is a dynamic offensive player. When he has the puck on his stick inside the offensive zone, and especially on the power play, he can strike fear into opponents with his elite puck skills, vision and shot. He has incredibly loose and quick hands, showing tremendous in-tight coordination and creativity with the puck. Pettersson has the poise and vision to make high-end passes consistently, finding seams with pace and holding onto pucks to create options at a top-level. His wrist shot and one-timers are also elite, shooting a near freak-ish 18 percent in his first two NHL seasons. His mid-range wrist shot is an easy 80 grade, but I lean against giving his shot a pure 80 since he doesn't show an incredible long-range shot consistently. He's a bit of an odd skater with a very deep knee bend, but he's quick enough to skate at an NHL pace. He isn't a very physical player, but he competes hard and isn't taken out of games physically.

4. Alexis Lafreniere, LW, New York Rangers

Oct. 11, 2001 | 6-foot-1 | 193 pounds

Tier: Special NHL Player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 70

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 65

Shot Grade: 60

Lafreniere is a unique prospect who projects to become a foundational player in the NHL. He dominated the QMJHL, scoring more than two points per game last season. He was the MVP of the world juniors and was great at other international events. He has truly elite skill and some of the best hands I've ever seen. Lafreniere has made some of the most creative plays I've seen in the past few years, and with his skill, he's always a second away from a scoring chance. He beats defenders in unique ways and catches them off guard with the moves he makes. He's also a very good passer who makes quick, crisp passes, and his elite creativity translates to his playmaking. He has a great shot, too, with the ability to score from mid-distance. On the power play he's a menace because he can beat defenders one-on-one, find seams or pick corners. Lafreniere is a highly competitive player who plays well in the hard areas of the ice, is solid defensively and plays physical. He sometimes pulls up



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a bit too much to use his skill and playmaking, but he shows no fear driving the net. His skating and pace is the area to point out if you were to pick a weakness. I debated between a 50 or 55 for his skating. I see good flashes from him, but I see a lot of shifts where his game lacks speed and pace. He doesn't seem to have truly explosive quickness, but he is quick enough and, when he wants to go, he has enough speed to look like he can be an average NHL skater.

5. Matthew Tkachuk, LW, Calgary

Dec. 11, 1997 | 6-foot-2 | 203 pounds

Tier: Special/elite bubble

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 60

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Tkachuk is one of the best young players in the NHL, emerging as a true star in the league the last two seasons. He is extremely skilled, makes highly-creative plays with the puck routinely and has the one-on-one ability to beat some of the better NHL defensemen. He's a high-end playmaker and shooter. He makes creative passes at the top level and can find seams well. Tkachuk also has the shot to beat NHL goalies from mid-distance. He's strong on pucks and in front of the net, and can very effectively get under opponents' skin. The only hole in Tkachuk's game is his average quickness and lack of ability to pull away from checks.

6. Andrei Svechnikov, RW, Carolina

March 26, 2000 | 6-foot-2 | 194 pounds

Tier: Special/Elite bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 60

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Svechnikov looks like a legit second-overall pick and shows the promise that has excited scouts with since he was a young teenager. He's a complete hockey player. He is an extremely skilled forward who can beat NHL defensemen clean with his hands. He's a very creative handler and passer who can make elite plays with the puck. He's a great passer and finisher, with a shot that can score goals from the dots. He's a good skater with NHL caliber speed, but lacks the explosiveness to pull away from guys, using his strength and frame to power his way to the net rather than jet around defenders. He attacks the middle of the ice effectively, shows no fear of playing a physical game and can overpower opponents. He looks like a true star.

7. Patrik Laine, RW, Winnipeg

April 19, 1998 | 6-foot-4 | 205 pounds

Tier: Special/elite bubble

Skating: 45

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 80

Laine, much debate in recent weeks due to various trade rumors, is one of the top young players in the NHL, with a 40-goal campaign to his name and nearly 250 points by his 22nd birthday. He's dynamic with the

puck. He has such loose hands, and with his large wingspan and great creativity, he's able to manipulate the puck at an elite level in open ice. He can dangle and make great passes, often making a ton of plays, but his moneymaker is his shot. His wrist shot and his one-timer are rifles, and he can hit crossbars and posts from range with consistency, showing the ability to beat even the best NHL goalies with a clean shot. Laine is a big, bulky forward, but I wouldn't call him a mean or overly-physical player. While he is big, he lacks quickness and he can be eliminated by big, mobile defenders.

8. Jack Hughes, C, New Jersey

May 14, 2001 | 5-foot-10 | 170 pounds

Tier: Special/elite bubble

Skating: 70

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 40

Hockey Sense: 60

There's no getting around the fact Hughes had a tough rookie NHL season. Just 21 points in 61 games is one of the more underwhelming debuts by a top pick in recent memory, even if I think he looked better than the points suggest. I still rate Hughes extremely high, though, because of his elite skating ability and elite skill. His straight-line speed is very good, not special, but his fantastic edgework takes his skating to the top tier. He has the hands to make highly-skilled plays and beat NHL defenders in unique ways. He has the great vision to run a power play and find seams at a high level. Did he do all of that stuff consistently last season? I'd argue in flashes, but not consistently. I do know it's in him and am willing to say there's a breakout coming, as he's a competitor who, despite his 5-foot-10 frame, attacks the net and shows no fear of playing inside.

9. Kaapo Kakko, RW, New York Rangers

Feb. 13, 2001 | 6-foot-3 | 198 pounds

Tier: Special/elite bubble

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 65

Kakko's rookie NHL season went through some bumps, and while he didn't put up huge numbers, I still see a lot to be optimistic about. Inside the offensive zone, Kakko showed he could impact a game. He's a very skilled and intelligent forward with size and power. Off the flank he's able to find seams at a high rate and create a lot of offense with his playmaking. He has the stick skills to beat defenders one-on-one and make tough plays in small areas. He will run a top power-play unit very effectively at his peak. Kakko's foot speed is average, and versus NHL forwards he wasn't able to drive the net to create offense or dangle past defenders. But he was only 18 and with physical maturity, that aspect of his game should come even if he may never be the quickest. He also played on a very deep Rangers offense (fifth in the league in goals) so I'm not overly concerned about the lack of offense, but his speed will need to come. I still see a player who can grow into a true star.

10. Quinton Byfield, C, Los Angeles

Aug. 19, 2002 | 6-foot-4 | 215 pounds

Tier: Special/elite bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 65

Hockey Sense: 60



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Shot Grade: 60

Byfield had an incredible 17-year-old season in the OHL, as one of the best players in the modern era at that age in that league. He's an exciting and very well-rounded player. He's 6-foot-4, he's a very good skater for such a large player and his hands are right up there with the best in the draft. He can break a shift open with his ability to power past or dangle through defenders. His creativity is great, and his large wingspan combined with his elite hands allow him to stickhandle around defenders with ease. Byfield's playmaking has been an area I've questioned – and some scouts do as well – but last season he showed high-level vision. It's not the greatest, but it's very good and he'll be able to make NHL caliber plays. His shot is also very good, and he can score from the dots. Byfield is a very competitive player who uses his large frame to power his way to chances and win battles along the walls. He projects as an all-situations center. When the pace increased at the higher levels on the international stage, like the Hlinka Gretzky or the world juniors, he faded a bit, but I remain a huge believer because of his toolkit and his performance with his club team. He looks like a foundational No. 1 center in the NHL.

11. Quinn Hughes, D, Vancouver

Oct. 14, 1999 | 5-foot-10 | 170 pounds

Tier: Elite NHL player

Skating: 70

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 30

Hockey Sense: 65

Hughes entered the NHL as a rookie with a bang, posting 50 points and looking like one of the most dynamic young players in the league. He's an exceptional skater. His speed is very good, not elite, but he has some of the best edgework I've ever seen. He darts and maneuvers so well around the ice, eluding checks consistently. He stands out with the puck on his stick. He has great stick skills and always has his head up, looking to make a play. He makes a ton of great zone exits and entries with his mobility and vision, while also being a very creative player and making plays inside the offensive zone. Hughes improved his shot and it's now a useful component of his game. He's undersized, and it will limit him defensively. His skating makes up for a lot on that front, but very big, powerful and fast players can give him trouble.

12. Brady Tkachuk, LW, Ottawa

Sept. 16, 1999 | 6-foot-3 | 192 pounds

Tier: Elite NHL Player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 65

Hockey Sense: 60

Tkachuk repeated his scoring numbers from his rookie season and was one of the leading shot generators in the league. He's a world-class player with his net-front play. He is tremendous at tipping in point shots, knocking in rebounds, powering past checks to tip in passes and overall making himself known when he gets set up in the crease. He makes a ton of great plays around the crease and net, showing great small-area skills and creativity as a passer in tight areas. He has the skill to beat defenders but due to average foot speed he's not a huge threat off the rush. He has a lot of talent, but a lot of people know him for his physicality. Tkachuk is a pain for opponents to deal with and physically imposes himself on a game in several ways.

13. Cale Makar, D, Colorado

Oct. 30, 1998 | 5-foot-11 | 187 pounds

Tier: Elite NHL player

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 35

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Makar is an offensive dynamo and as a rookie showed he is going to be a force to deal with for many years. His puck skills are tremendous, showing very pure handles whenever he has control of the puck. He's not going through two-to-three defenders at a time, but he has very quick touches and is tough to strip of possession. He's a high-end skater who can lead attacks and walk the blue line very well. Makar sees the ice at a very high level and is able to pick apart defenses with his vision. Over the last two years, I've grown to appreciate how good his shot is, giving his offense so many dimensions. Makar isn't the biggest defenseman and his defense has never been a selling point, but his skating will help keep him stable enough in that area given how much value he gets offensively.

14. Miro Heiskanen, D, Dallas

July 18, 1999 | 6-foot-1 | 190 pounds

Tier: Elite NHL player

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 65

Heiskanen has been a major minutes-eater for the Stars, playing in all situations. His game isn't like Quinn Hughes or Makar where Heiskanen is going to dazzle with highlight-reel skill, but he's very efficient and well-rounded. He is an excellent skater, showing the mobility to close gaps and jump up into attacks. His transition game is excellent because of his feet and how well he sees the ice on his exits. He's a creative passer who can find seams and make great plays under pressure. He does have quick-twitch hands to make plays in small areas and maintain control. I don't know if his offensive numbers will ever be elite, but he's going to be a star-caliber, top-pairing, tough-minutes defenseman for a long time due to how mobile and smart he is.

15. Tim Stutzle, C, Ottawa

Jan. 15, 2002 | 6-foot-1 | 187 pounds

Tier: Elite NHL player

Skating: 65

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

Stutzle was very impressive for a U18 player competing against men, as an important piece of one of the best teams in the German pro league. Stutzle is a dynamic offensive player who has a lot of NHL caliber components to his game. He's a great skater. His speed is just above-average; his stride can look a bit sloppy in a straight line but he can challenge with speed. His edgework is elite, which is why he gets a high skating grade. He is fantastic at spinning off pressure and evading checks with his edges. Stutzle also has great hands. His ability to play high-end skill plays at quick speeds has made him so successful as a pro and distinguishes him as a prospect. He's a very good passer who makes tough plays on the move, like with his stick handling. This should allow him to be an impactful NHL forward. Stutzle's not very physical, but he has a great compete level, often using his quickness to hunt down pucks. Even versus much bigger players in the DEL he won a surprising number of battles. Stutzle is officially listed as a winger, but he's played center before, such as at the U18 worlds B pool as an underage where



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he won 58 percent of his draws, and he says he feels comfortable playing center.

16. Kirby Dach, C, Chicago

Jan. 21, 2001 | 6-foot-4 | 198 pounds

Tier: Elite/high-end bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 65

Hockey Sense: 60

Dach is the prototype of what you think of in a first-line center. He's tall, he can play in front of the net, he's a great skater for his size, he is skilled and he makes a lot of plays to his wingers. When you see Dach coming up the ice with his speed, size and skill, it's easy to see why he was a No. 3 pick. I found his effort more consistent in the NHL than it was in the WHL, showing he can handle the physicality of the level and still make his dazzling skill plays. He had ebbs and flows through his rookie NHL season as an 18-year-old and his overall production was good, not amazing — albeit with a strong postseason. But it's clear the sky-high potential he has as he matures.

17. Lucas Raymond, LW, Detroit

March 28, 2002 | 5-foot-10 | 170 pounds

Tier: Elite/high-end bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 70

Physical Game: 35

Hockey Sense: 65

Raymond has incredible talent and hockey sense. With the puck on his stick he's incredibly dangerous. His hands are elite and his ability to beat defenders one-on-one clean in ways unlike other players can create a lot of highlight reel moments. He will be a true PP1 quarterback in the NHL because of the unique plays he can make. He has a unique way of navigating with the puck in the offensive zone, showing the patience and vision of a top NHL playmaker in how he picks apart defenses and find seams. Raymond isn't the biggest guy and isn't a guy you will tab to kill penalties, but he competes well and gets to the net. While he's more of a passer, he does have a good shot when he looks to shoot. My one concern is his just average foot speed, particularly as a 5-foot-10 forward. He has good edgework and a powerful first step, with a wide stance he employs when trying to protect pucks, but lacks an NHL caliber separation gear.

18. Pierre-Luc Dubois, C, Columbus

June 24, 1998 | 6-foot-3 | 207 pounds

Tier: Elite/High-end NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 60

Hockey Sense: 60

Dubois was very productive in his first three years in the league, and emerged as a first-line center for the Blue Jackets and a top young player in the league. He isn't a very flashy player, but he's very smart, moving the puck into good spots with pace and showing the vision to find seams in the offensive zone and help an NHL power play. He's a highly-competitive player, who is strong on pucks and doesn't mind getting his nose dirty in the high-traffic areas, scoring a lot of goals around the crease. His skill pops at a high level every now and then, but his hands and speed are not the selling point, as he can get stopped by mobile

defensemen with the same level of physicality. The skill set doesn't resemble a lot of top players, but the combination of his hockey IQ and work ethic gets him to that level.

19. Cole Perfetti, C, Winnipeg

Jan. 1, 2002 | 5-foot-11 | 177 pounds

Tier: Elite/high-end bubble

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 40

Hockey Sense: 65

Perfetti burst onto the scene as a U17, scoring the most goals by a player that age since John Tavares, Taylor Hall and Steven Stamkos. Perfetti followed it up with a brilliant U18 season and a dominating Hlinka Gretzky performance. He is incredibly skilled and was one of the best passers in the draft. He is so creative with the puck, finding unique ways to fool defenders, manipulate the puck in tight spaces and make plays through defenders. He makes things happen off the half-wall at an elite level, makes very creative passes frequently, and projects to be a top passer in the NHL due to his vision and pace. Perfetti isn't the biggest or the quickest forward so some scouts aren't over the moon about him. I think he skates fine but does lack ability to separate from checks. His compete level is fine, he gets his nose dirty enough and works hard off the puck to get it back. He killed penalties last season and played center for stretches, showing he can be a versatile player, as well.

20. Robert Thomas, C, St. Louis

July 2, 1999 | six-foot | 187 pounds

Tier: Elite/high-end bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

Thomas had a successful second season, posting 40 points in 66 games and playing significant minutes for a top team as a 20-year-old. He is a dynamic player, with the confidence and skill to break open a shift with his puckhandling. He can make skilled plays at full speed, showing good skating ability to go with his great hands. Thomas is a highly-creative playmaker who played the flank on the power play and showed the ability to hit tough passing lanes. He can make quick plays under pressure. He's not that bulky or tall and isn't a top two-way option, but he is highly competitive, gets after pucks and gets to the net. As he matures he will be a strong all-around NHL forward, although you'd like to see him put a few more pucks in the net.

21. Nico Hischier, C, New Jersey

Jan. 4, 1999 | 6-foot-1 | 174 pounds

Tier: Elite/high-end bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

Hischier has a lot of elements in his game. He's extremely skilled, showing the ability to beat NHL defenders one-on-one and break a shift open with his skill. He's a very good passer who has the patience and vision to make plays at the top level. Hischier is a good skater. I wouldn't call him explosive, but he moves well and makes plays at NHL speed. He competes well off the puck and plays in the tough areas. Is he going to live up to the hype of his No. 1 draft slot? I wouldn't rule it out, but it



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seems unlikely as I wouldn't call him a game breaker. Is he an awesome player who can be a legit top of the lineup option, though? Absolutely.

22. Mikhail Sergachev, D, Tampa Bay

June 25, 1998 | 6-foot-3 | 216 pounds

Tier: Elite/high-end bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Sergachev has developed steadily the last few years, but in 2019-20 he took some big steps and looked like one of the top young players in the league. He ticks all the boxes. He's a big, mobile defenseman with great offensive tools. He can stretch the ice and find seams in the offensive end. He has a good shot that can beat goalies from the blue line. He can activate off the line and lead rushes with his skating. Defensively, Sergachev took on more responsibility from prior seasons where elite Tampa teams allowed his usage to be more sparse. He killed penalties consistently for the first time and showed he can use his size and skating to disrupt plays. I've taken a while to come around on Sergachev, but he looks like a true top of the lineup caliber defenseman.

23. Trevor Zegras, C, Anaheim

March 20, 2001 | six-foot | 174 pounds

Tier: Elite/high-end NHL player bubble

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 75

Zegras had a very good freshman season, although for a prospect rated this high he didn't blow people away with his production. He was fantastic at the world juniors and gets a high rating mostly due to his incredible skill set. Zegras can dazzle with his puck skills and offensive creativity, and he has the potential to be one of the best passers in the NHL. He makes some of the most creative offensive plays I've seen with regularity. He can shoot the puck well, but he is a pass-first type who could run a power play off the flank in the NHL. Zegras needs an extra step in his skating, and while he doesn't shy away from physical play, he will need to be better off the puck, and improve his discipline and consistency. He has a lot of work to do when he turns pro next season, but there is no doubting the elite talent.

24. Charlie McAvoy, D, Boston

Dec. 21, 1997 | six-foot | 207 pounds

Tier: Elite/high-end NHL player

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

McAvoy has become a leading player on a top NHL team, leading the Bruins in ice time and continuing a sharp upward trajectory in his development. He's a well-rounded defenseman. He is an excellent skater who gets into the attack often with his quickness. He is great defensively because of how quickly he closes on guys and how hard he plays a hard, which allows him to make a lot of stops with his feet and body. Offensively he's not a dynamo, but he's a very clever puck-mover who can find seams. His skating and IQ allow him to generate a lot of clean exits and entries, and make some plays in the offensive zone. McAvoy

may not land on a lot of offensive highlight reels, but he's a very good two-way defenseman who can be an important component of a contending team.

25. Barrett Hayton, C, Arizona

June 9, 2000 | 6-foot-1 | 190 pounds

Tier: Elite/high-end bubble

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Hayton was just OK at the NHL level. He is an incredibly skilled player. He beats players one-on-one consistently and can create chances out of nothing with his skill. He makes a lot of plays at a pro pace, and has a very good shot. His passing and shooting skills make him a threat on the power play. He's a skilled player, but he competes well, he's hard on pucks and he gets to the middle of the ice. Hayton's one real flaw is his average foot speed and lack of ability to create separation at the NHL level. Gaining speed and strength will be important for him to improve at the NHL level.

26. Dylan Cozens, C, Buffalo

Feb. 9, 2001 | 6-foot-3 | 185 pounds

Tier: Elite/high-end bubble

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 60

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Cozens is a complete player. His skating jumps out instantly, especially for someone who is 6-foot-3. He can gain the zone with ease due to his speed, size and skill, and is able to circle the zone with the puck. He's not a true top playmaking-type, but he can show top-end flashes. Cozens has a great shot and can score from mid-distance. He has great power in his game and, when he uses his speed and frame to get to the net, he's a force. But he drifts to the perimeter trying to use his shot. Off the puck, he works hard, kills penalties and shows he could be a top two-way center in the NHL.

27. Nick Suzuki, C, Montreal

Aug. 10, 1999 | 5-foot-11 | 183 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 40

Hockey Sense: 65

Suzuki is a very creative playmaker with a ton of skill. He has a deceptive element with the puck to pull through and around defenders with ease, and despite not having great foot speed he is able to get around checkers because of how good his hands are. He's an elite passer, showing great vision, pace and improvising ability with the puck. He can run an NHL power play off the flank because of his great vision. He can shoot the puck too, but it's his playmaking that defines him. Suzuki's size and skating have always been in question, and they might limit him from reaching the highest tiers of production, but as he showed last season, he can make a lot happen with what he has. He's not physical but he does work hard.



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28. Adam Fox, D, New York Rangers
Feb. 17, 1998 | 5-foot-11 | 181 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 30

Hockey Sense: 70

With the puck on his stick, Fox distinguishes himself. He's an elite puck-mover, displaying exceptional poise and intelligence. He walks the line very well and makes so many plays under pressure due to his elite brain and his vision. He also has the great stick skills to get himself out of trouble even without great top-end speed. His skating is good in terms of his edges and elusiveness, but he lacks rink-length quickness. That lack of quickness and his 5-foot-11 frame lead to him not being the best defensively. He breaks up plays because of how well he anticipates the game, but he lacks the ability to kill rushes like a defenseman I would typically rate in this range.

29. Alexander Holtz, RW, New Jersey

Jan. 23, 2002 | six-foot | 192 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot Grade: 70

Holtz got a regular shift and power play time in the SHL last season for Djurgarden, as one of the most productive U18 players that league has seen. He is also off to a hot start this season. He has a lot of exciting dimensions to his game, but his goal-scoring ability stands out. He has a truly elite shot. He can pick corners from any spot in the offensive zone, with a very hard and accurate wrist shot. His hands are elite, which allows him to beat defenders clean with his one-on-one moves and pull off the occasional highlight reel play. While he is known for his goal-scoring, Holtz is also a very good passer. He won't be a top playmaker in the NHL, but he can find the seams and has the high offensive IQ to let plays develop and find his teammates. His skating is somewhere between average to above-average, but I find his game lacks pace. Off the puck he's fine; he competes well enough but he's not an overly physical player and can be a bit of a perimeter player due to how much he leans on his shot.

30. Alex DeBrincat, RW, Chicago

Dec. 18, 1997 | 5-foot-7 | 165 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 20

Hockey Sense: 65

Shot: 70

DeBrincat had a down year after his 40-goal season in 2018-19. He remains a great player and you could argue he was unlucky in 2019-20. He has a very quick stick and can make skilled plays through defenders. His shot is elite, with the ability to pick corners and hit iron from long range. He's a big-time goal-scorer, but sees the ice very well and is able to make plays through seams. He's a strong, elusive skater but lacks true explosiveness, which is concerning at 5-foot-7. He competes well but

isn't an interior player, as he gets a lot of his shots and chances from the slot and mid-range. His true value lies between the last two seasons.

31. Bowen Byram, D, Colorado

June 13, 2001 | 6-foot-1 | 194 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 65

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Byram didn't dominate the WHL like I thought the No. 4 pick would, but he was still awesome in most games. He is a unique and fantastic skater. He has great speed to lead a rush, and exceptional agility and edgework to evade checks and dance around the offensive zone. He's a skilled player who moves the puck very well, but the skill doesn't jump off the page like his skating does. Byram has a very good wrist shot, and often tries to use his skating to open up lanes to make a play or pick a corner. Defensively some scouts criticize him, but I've always found him to be a solid defender who is physical and uses his skating to contain rushes.

32. Samuel Fagemo, LW, Los Angeles

March 14, 2000 | six-foot | 194 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Fagemo skates well and can attack with pace. He uses his speed and skill to drive the net and makes plays in hard areas. He also shows great vision and a big shot to be dangerous off the perimeter. He can beat defenders with his one-on-one play. On the power play he's a threat, especially due to his one-timer and wrist shot. He's developed a lot since being passed over in the 2018 draft and is now a player coaches can trust who projects as a strong two-way forward. I think he's a complete player and could significantly outperform his draft slot as an important player for the Kings.

33. Jesperi Kotkaniemi, C, Montreal

July 6, 2000 | 6-foot-2 | 194 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 60

After a tougher go in his second NHL season, Kotkaniemi had a solid showing in the postseason. I still see a lot to like. He's a 6-foot-2 center with high-end skill and vision. He always has his head up looking to make a play. He's a very creative passer who can hit the seams and improvise. He can make plays through defenders and has good one-on-one ability. He competes well enough, but the major transition for Kotkaniemi has been the speed of the NHL. His speed is average, and he can't pull away from checks that well. He was still just a teenager, and I think with time and development he will become a great NHL player, and a potential first-line forward.

34. Jamie Drysdale, D, Anaheim



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April 8, 2002 | 5-foot-11 | 175 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 65

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 40

Hockey Sense: 65

Drysdale was one of the best skaters in the draft. He has very good speed and can lead a rush at the higher levels. His speed isn't what defines his skating, though, it's his elite edgework. He's so good at evading pressure, and walking the blue line with his crossovers and spinning off checks. Even though he's not the biggest defenseman, Drysdale shuts down a lot of rushes because of how quickly he closes on his checks. Offensively he's very good, but not flashy. He's not going to go end to end through three defenders, but he's an excellent puck-mover. He sees the ice at a very high level, and is creative with his exits and blue-line play. His elite skating and vision are what make him dangerous and will allow him to QB an NHL power play.

35. Martin Necas, RW, Carolina

Jan. 15, 1999 | 6-foot-2 | 190 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Necas is easy to spot on the ice as he has speed and skill. His skating stride is easy and explosive with the ability to turn around NHL defenders. He can make highly-skilled plays at full speed. He is a great passer and shooter, which is why Carolina used him on the flank on the power play. All these elements make him a dynamic player with the ability to break open a game on any given shift. His main weakness would be that he can be a bit of a perimeter player, instead of using his skating to get to the net, and he could improve his play off the puck.

36. Josh Norris, C, Ottawa

May 5, 1999 | 6-foot-2 | 192 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Norris is a well-rounded player who made a seamless transition to the pro game. He has the skill and speed to make plays at the NHL level. His hands show flashes of high-end skill, but it's his playmaking and goal-scoring ability that stand out. He's a threat off the perimeter with his ability to find openings and score from mid-distance. Norris isn't a perimeter player, though, as he gets inside and competes for pucks. It's the sense, combined with his compete and speed, that make him such a threat at the highest levels and makes me think he's going to be a great top-six forward for a long time.

37. Samuel Girard, D, Colorado

May 12, 1998 | 5-foot-10 | 161 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 65

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 30

Hockey Sense: 60

Girard has developed into a very good top-four defenseman in the NHL. He's a fantastic skater. His straight-line speed is very good, but it's his elite edgework that makes him stand out. He can spin off checks, walk and spin off the offensive blue line and fake checkers out with his feet and skill. Girard is very skilled and makes a lot of great plays to his teammates. He is a creative passer in the offensive zone and makes great D-zone outlets. He's small, not overly physical and, even though he's a great skater who closes gaps well, his defense is not what gets you excited.

38. Moritz Seider, D, Detroit

April 6, 2001 | 6-foot-4 | 207 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 70

Hockey Sense: 55

Seider isn't a flashy player but he's very well-rounded. He's a 6-foot-4 defenseman who is highly mobile for his size, can move the puck well and is a top-end defender. His wingspan, great mobility and elite physicality allow him to make so many stops and project as a tough minutes defenseman in the NHL. Seider can move the puck, although I don't ever see him as a big offensive player, as there will be stretches he can be quite bland with the puck. There are stretches he makes a very nice outlet pass with pace, as well.

39. Vasilii Podkolzin, RW, Vancouver

June 24, 2001 | 6-foot-1 | 192 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 65

Podkolzin is a handful to deal with as he's skilled and works very hard. When he's barreling down the wing, he has one objective: getting to the net. He's not a narrow-minded player with the puck, as he makes a ton of great plays and shows tremendous creativity with the puck. Podkolzin is a weird skater, with a hunch in his stride, but his stride looked powerful enough to give it a 50 grade, although I debated a 45. Similarly to last season, he is getting limited opportunity with SKA this season.

40. Alex Formenton, LW, Ottawa

Sept. 13, 1999 | 6-foot-3 | 190 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 60

Hockey Sense: 60

Formenton's tremendous speed allowed for an easy transition to the pro game. His skating makes him dangerous every time he's on the ice with the ability to turn around defenders. He combines great speed with an equally great work ethic, leading him to buzz around the rink. Formenton has skill and playmaking ability. I wouldn't say it's great, but his skill pops occasionally, and I see him being able to play on an NHL power play and



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in a top-six. He continues to get better as the years go by and looks like he will be a very good two-way forward at the top level.

41. Joel Farabee, LW, Philadelphia

Feb. 25, 2000 | six-foot | 163 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 65

Farabee is a fun player to watch. He has a high skill level and makes a lot of plays, but is also a very competitive player who pressures opponents well and gets to the net. He doesn't lean on his skill consistently, but it's a big part of his game, and he can dazzle at a given moment. He's a great playmaker who makes creative passes often and can improvise well under pressure to create chances. The main issue in Farabee's game is his average foot speed. Given his lack of speed, he likely won't become a top NHLer until he physically matures, but I think given his IQ and competitiveness he projects to become a top-line winger in the league.

42. Drake Batherson, RW, Ottawa

April 27, 1998 | 6-foot-3 | 196 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

Batherson has a lot of skill and hockey sense. He's a dynamo when he touches the puck, showing the skill to beat AHL and NHL defenders consistently and pull off the odd highlight-caliber play. His passing is crisp and quick. Batherson will be able to play the flank on an NHL power play. He has all the skill for the top level but lacks NHL speed. He struggles to get around NHL defenders and will need to learn how to play his style at a much quicker pace, but he showed adjustments as the year went along.

43. Grigori Denisenko, LW, Florida

June 24, 2000 | 5-foot-11 | 181 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

In recent years, Denisenko has been just fine with his club team, but fantastic with Russia's national team. Despite his so-so production he's a top prospect because of his fantastic toolkit, one that looks like it will translate into being a top-six NHL forward. He's a dynamic player with great skill, playmaking and skating. He's not a blazing-fast skater, but he has good speed and great edge work. His edges, combined with his hands, make him very elusive. He makes a lot of plays and can score from mid-range. Denisenko isn't the biggest, but he's very competitive and doesn't shy away from the physical aspects. He has all the tools and the work ethic, and I've seen him get it done many times, but he needs to be more consistent versus men. Gaining strength will likely help a lot.

44. Filip Chytil, C, New York Rangers

Sept. 5, 1999 | 6-foot-2 | 203 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 55

Chytil can be a dynamic player. He's a forward with size, great speed and great skill. On his best shift, where he's flying up the ice and dangling through opponents, he can break open a game. With his reach, speed and skill he can protect pucks well and make controlled zone entries. I think he sees the ice well, with flashes of very good vision, but I wouldn't call him a natural playmaker. He's not an overly physical player who is great off the puck, but he uses his body well enough. I think his brain and compete are good enough that, combined with his other tools, he can be a top scorer on an NHL team at his peak.

45. Jakob Chychrun, D, Arizona

March 31, 1998 | 6-foot-2 | 209 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Chychrun isn't a flashy player but he's well-rounded. He's a big, mobile defenseman who can make stops with his stick and physicality. He's not a high-end skill type, but he moves the puck quickly and effectively. His breakouts are excellent, he finds seams well, and he has some offensive blue-line creativity. Chychrun also has a very hard shot with the ability to beat goalies clean. Chychrun is emerging as a top young defenseman in the NHL, coming through on the potential that made such a highly-touted player back in his OHL days.

46. Yaroslav Askarov, G, Nashville

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

Tier: High-end NHL player

Athleticism: 60

Hockey Sense: 65

Askarov is one of the best goalie prospects I've seen as a first-year draft-eligible. He was unusually successful versus men as a 17-year-old, including a brief KHL appearance. He helped take down a very talented Canada U18 team almost single-handedly, same for a powerhouse USA U18 team as the best goalie at the U18 worlds in 2019. He has elite attributes in terms of his athleticism, in how he reads the game and in how aggressive he is. His quickness allows him to make the tough saves, although I don't find him scrambling and diving around the net a lot given how well he anticipates the play. He's a little jumpy in the net just due to how quick he is, but he's in control most of the time, staying with the play even when the puck is moving quickly. Askarov is often challenging shooters even in unorthodox situations, but he isn't often beat when he is aggressive, which speaks to his hockey IQ. He was terrible at the world juniors, letting in a lot of soft goals, but that is not the player I've seen for most of the past two years in international play at various levels. He will need to work on making sure fewer mid-distance shots go in, but his home plate play is elite. I think he will become an upper-echelon goalie in the NHL.

47. Carter Hart, G, Philadelphia

Aug. 13, 1998 | 6-foot-2 | 181 pounds



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Tier: High-end NHL player

Athleticism: 60

Hockey Sense: 65

Hart was a solid NHL goalie in 2019-20, but very impressive for one of the youngest regular starting goalies in recent years in the NHL. Hart's value primarily comes from his great hockey sense. He's always impressed with how quickly and efficiently he processes the game. Even at the highest level, there isn't a lot of panic. He tracks and anticipates passing plays very well and moves to the right spot efficiently. He isn't conservative, though, as he challenges high when he needs to and has an active stick to break up plays. For a slightly undersized goalie, Hart doesn't have truly elite lateral quickness, but he does have a powerful lower body and can explode across his crease quickly. NHL scouts praise his competitiveness and how well he's handled the role for such a young goalie in the league. He looks like he will be a quality starting goalie in the league for a long time.

48. Alexander Romanov, D, Montreal

Jan. 6, 2000 | 5-foot-11 | 185 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 60

Romanov's boxcars don't do justice to his talent. He is an excellent skater, with good speed and great edgework. He's able to get up into attacks well, is great at eluding forechecks and closing on checks. He lands a lot of big hits even as a 5-foot-11 defender because of how quickly he closes his gaps. His skating and physicality project him to be a quality defender in the NHL. He's not a flashy offensive player, who likely isn't a top power-play type in the NHL, but Romanov is a very smart puck-mover. He makes a ton of great exits, with his head up all the time looking to create chances. His outlets and skating allow him to be impactful in transition.

49. Cole Caufield, RW, Montreal

Jan. 2, 2001 | 5-foot-7 | 163 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 20

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 70

Caufield's talent level is obvious when he has the puck on his stick. He has extremely quick-twitch hands, showing the ability to manipulate the puck at a high level in terms of his one-on-one play, and he can create space for his shot. He's an elite shooter, with the ability to pick corners from almost anywhere on the ice with his wrist shot. He didn't show as much of a long-distance threat as I thought he would last season, but his mid-range shot is elite. Caufield is also an excellent passer who can make plays almost as well as he can finish them. The physical tools don't jump off the page. He's 5-foot-7, and while a very shifty skater, he's not the elite speedster you'd like at that size. He competes well enough, but scouts have questions about his size and skating, and if his style will translate. I think it will but there may be some adjustments for him as he heads to higher levels.

50. Marco Rossi, C, Minnesota

Sept. 23, 2001 | 5-foot-9 | 183 pounds

Tier: High-end NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 35

Hockey Sense: 60

Rossi is an exciting player because of his skill and IQ. He has tremendous stick handling ability in tight areas and can slide off checks. He's a great passer with a high level of offensive creativity who projects to play the half-wall on an NHL power play. Rossi's skating is good, but he's more of a skill player than a speedy player. He's not the quickest small player you'll ever see, but he has a powerful stride and good edge work to elude checks. While Rossi is undersized, he's a very competitive player. He drives the net consistently, he can kill penalties very well and he can be used in tough defensive situations. His great skill and production are very appealing. He didn't rise to the top tier of the draft due to his size and speed combination, but he projects to be a top-line NHL forward because of how smart, skilled and competitive he is.

Owen Tippett (AP Photo / Wilfredo Lee)

51. Owen Tippett, RW, Florida

Feb. 16, 1999 | 6-foot-1 | 201 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Tippett's skill is apparent whenever the puck is on his stick. He has such quick hands and is so creative maneuvering through checks. He has the dangles to make unique plays as a handler, but is also a great passer who makes creative feeds. He can pass it, but Tippett is known as a goal scorer and can beat pro goalies from the dots. His skating is good, not a main strength, but good enough for the NHL. He's never been known as a well-rounded player, but I thought Tippett's compete was much more consistent as a pro than he was as a junior.

52. Philip Broberg, D, Edmonton

June 25, 2001 | 6-foot-3 | 203 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 60

Hockey Sense: 55

Broberg's evaluation is a tough one. His role with Skelleftea was limited last season. He didn't put up many points in the SHL or the world juniors. NHL scouts have strong opinions about him in both directions. You see the talent jump out at you when he plays. He's this 6-foot-3 defenseman who is a tremendous skater and has legit offensive skill. His puck-rushing skills are exceptional because of how quickly he can turn the puck up ice. He has the hands to dangle opponents and can make a good first pass. His puck-moving skills are not great. He can be a bit risky with the puck and his transition is more from his rushes than passes, but he can move it. Because of his mobility and wingspan, he projects to be a very solid defender who impacts possession with his stops and rushes. He's been playing more this season in the SHL and looking more impactful.

53. Alex Newhook, C, Colorado

Jan. 28, 2001 | 5-foot-11 | 192 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble



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Skating: 65

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 40

Hockey Sense: 60

Newhook skates like he just got shot out of a cannon. His stride has an extra quick-twitch and he barrels down on defenders rapidly coming through the neutral zone. He has extremely quick, fluid puck skills and ability to beat defenders clean one-on-one. Newhook is a great playmaker but it's how he makes tough plays on the move, through traffic, that will make him a great NHL player. He's undersized, but very competitive and projects as a two-way forward at the pro level.

54. Clayton Keller, LW, Arizona

July 29, 1998 | 5-foot-10 | 170 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 30

Hockey Sense: 65

Shot: 60

Keller has yet to have that true breakthrough season after his 65-point rookie pro season. With the puck on his stick, he can make a lot happen. He has very quick hands and a tremendous hockey brain. He sees options very well, making quick, creative plays. His playmaking is a strength, but he has a good mid-distance shot, too. The challenges for Keller have been the fact he's undersized and a good, but not amazing skater. He can get pushed to the outside and can struggle to get around big, quick NHL defensemen. I still see a big-time player due to all the talent, but maybe not the star I thought he could be when he was 17.

55. Adam Boqvist, D, Chicago

Aug. 15, 2000 | six-foot | 181 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 35

Hockey Sense: 65

Shot: 60

Boqvist played most of the season up in the NHL as a 19-year-old, and he held his own, although I wouldn't say he stood out. Boqvist is an excellent puck-moving defenseman. His offensive IQ stands out whenever he has the puck, showing great vision and awareness of how to attack defenses with his passes, skill and skating. He's often joining attacks in the right way and has the skill to improvise and create chances. He only scored five goals last season but he has a big shot and will score goals in the league. His defense isn't his selling point because of his size and lack of elite mobility, but I thought he was sufficient defensively in the NHL. He's going to be a top-four defenseman and a big part of Chicago's power play for the foreseeable future.

56. Victor Soderstrom, D, Arizona

Feb. 26, 2001 | six-foot | 196 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 40

Hockey Sense: 60

Soderstrom's great skill and puck-moving ability were on display versus men last season. He is a confident, creative player with elite skill who can beat pro defenders with consistency. He shows great poise with the puck, having his head up and making plays at both ends of the rink. Soderstrom is a good skater, not a burner, but has enough quickness to evade pressure, spin off checks and get up the ice. Defensively he's fine due to how smart he is, but with his size and skating that's not going to be his strength relative to his offense.

57. Arthur Kaliyev, RW, Los Angeles

June 26, 2001 | 6-foot-2 | 190 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 65

Shot: 70

Kaliyev had another great season in the OHL with a full-season pace of 52 goals and 117 points, but there's a lot he doesn't do that well. He's not an NHL-quality speedster. He's big but not overly physical, and although he killed penalties for Hamilton, that's not his projected role as a big leaguer. The two things he does exceptionally well, though, are moving the puck and scoring goals. Kaliyev has an elite shot, showing the ability to ring bars from a long way away due to a very hard and accurate shot. He's so dangerous inside the offensive zone because of that shot, and the creativity and passing skill he has. He finds seams at a high rate, shows great touch with the puck and sees lanes others don't. Kaliyev will need help getting the puck into the zone due to his lack of speed, but once there he will make a lot of NHL caliber plays.

58. Jake Sanderson, D, Ottawa

July 8, 2002 | 6-foot-2 | 185 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 60

Hockey Sense: 60

Sanderson is a great skating defenseman in all directions with size that allows him to make a ton of stops. His gap control is excellent, and he killed so many rushes with how well he closed on opponents. He's also a physical player who shows no hesitancy to close on checks with his body. Sanderson's top speed is very good, not elite, but he can lead rushes well and isn't afraid to jump into the play. His edges are excellent, allowing him to spin off pressure, to pivot and walk the offensive blue line very well. He was the PP1 guy for USA, but the main question on him is his offensive upside. He has skill and can make a very good first pass, but I wouldn't call him a dynamic playmaker. His production may not wow you, but he had a strong U.S. NTDP campaign points-wise relative to other top defensemen at his age historically, especially since he didn't have a U18 World Championship to compete in and he's a very young 2002 birth date.

59. Erik Brannstrom, D, Ottawa

Sept. 2, 1999 | 5-foot-10 | 181 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 65

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 30



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Hockey Sense: 60

Brannstrom's a fantastic skater, showing the speed and edgework to evade checkers, get up the ice and walk the blue line at a clear NHL level. He's an offensive threat with great skill and offensive instincts to make a lot of plays and put up points versus men. With his combination of speed and intelligence, his transition game is excellent. He didn't make a big offensive dent in his first NHL stint, and I don't think his skill is truly elite, but it's very good and with time he will develop into a point producer at the top level. Brannstrom is undersized, and while very mobile, he can struggle to defend bigger players who can skate at his level. He wasn't a PK guy for Belleville.

60. Connor Zary, C, Calgary

Sept. 25, 2001 | six-foot | 178 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

Zary is a very entertaining player, as he's one of the most skilled players in the draft. His touches with the puck are very quick, he's extremely creative and he can beat defenders clean consistently. He had numerous moments this past season where he pulled off a highlight real-caliber play. Zary is a very smart offensive player. He can make the seam passes and find teammates very well, but also makes plays happen through unconventional ways. He scored a lot of bad angle goals this season, and he finds teammates in situations where there doesn't seem to be a play. Zary is a highly competitive player. He doesn't just dangle on the perimeter, he attacks the net, he pressures defenders and he is in the face of his opponents constantly. He can kill penalties and run your power play. The major knock on Zary is his skating. Some scouts think it'll be pro average; some think below-average. I lean to the former camp. It's not great, and the stride breaks down at times, but I think the stride is good enough that he'll be able to skate at the NHL pace.

61. Filip Hronek, D, Detroit

Nov. 2, 1997 | six-foot | 170 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

Hronek has been very impressive the last two seasons, as a 40-point-pace, big-minutes defenseman in the NHL. His skill set doesn't jump off the page as a six-foot, quick but not amazingly quick defenseman, which is partly why he went 53rd in the 2016 draft. But he's a very smart and competitive player. Hronek makes a ton of great passes from both ends in terms of making the right decisions and showing a high level of creativity. He has enough quickness to play at an NHL pace and jump into attacks. He defends very well due to his IQ, feet and physicality. On a contending team he may not be playing more than 25 minutes a game, but he wouldn't be far off.

62. Nick Robertson, LW, Toronto

Sept. 11, 2001 | 5-foot-9 | 161 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 35

Hockey Sense: 65

Shot: 70

Robertson is a dynamic player due to his skill, vision and shot. He can score from anywhere in the offensive zone due to how good his one-timer and wrist shots are. He can also pick apart defenses with his quick stickhandling. He has the patience and IQ to find lanes and make unique passes with consistency. Robertson is undersized, but he's hard on pucks and forces a lot of turnovers with his hustle. His main drawback is his skating. He has good edgework, but his skating stride is unorthodox and he won't burn past guys at the pro level, which combined with his size is why he fell to the second round. I see a player who can help a top-six in the NHL due to how elite his varying attributes are.

63. Dillon Dube, LW, Calgary

July 20, 1998 | 5-foot-11 | 183 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 40

Hockey Sense: 60

Dube is a great skater, able to play at the NHL pace and push defenders with his speed. He flies around the ice with his quickness and his energy. He isn't a dynamic offensive player who will dazzle with skill, but he makes a lot of plays due to his IQ, and does so at a pro pace. He's small but competes well, he gets to the net, he comes back hard on defense and he endears himself to coaches.

64. Ty Smith, D, New Jersey

March 24, 2000 | 5-foot-11 | 179 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 40

Hockey Sense: 60

Smith has grown on me the more I've watched him. I see exceptional poise, skill and elusiveness. When Smith has the puck on his stick, there is no panic in his game. He is looking to make a play and often finds seams to create offense. He weaves his way through traffic, making high-skill plays with the puck and showing great small-area skill and patience. Smith's top speed is good, not great, but his edgework is fantastic. He dances on the blue line and his turns are great. He's small, but defends well due to his feet and IQ, often being trusted by coaches to play big minutes.

65. Dawson Mercer, C, New Jersey

Oct. 27, 2001 | six-foot | 180 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

Mercer is a versatile player. Offensively, he's an exciting player. He has high-end skill with the soft hands and creativity to beat a lot of defenders. He has the quick-twitch in his hands to be unpredictable and make a lot of great plays in tight areas. He's a very smart player who moves the puck well inside the zone, finding seams and looking off defenders like a pro. Mercer can also score from a distance if given space, but I think his playmaking is more impressive. He's a competitive two-way center who



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can be effective in a lot of situations. He plays in the interior third of the ice a lot and can kill penalties. His main drawbacks are his average feet and lack of NHL caliber explosiveness, as well as the minor fact of how he slowed down following a trade to Chicoutimi.

66. Connor McMichael, C, Washington

Jan. 15, 2001 | six-foot | 181 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 40

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 70

Inside the offensive zone McMichael has so many ways he can beat a team. He has great in-tight hands and ability to improvise with the puck. He's a creative passer who makes the routine and unique passes to create chances. He can make plays under pressure and off the flank on the power play. He also has a fantastic shot, with the ability to pick corners from distance with consistency. McMichael isn't that big or quick, which gives some scouts questions on how his game will translate especially given his lack of speed. He does compete hard and has shown the ability to continue to develop himself, as his game has gotten significantly better year over year.

67. Thomas Harley, D, Dallas

Aug. 19, 2001 | 6-foot-3 | 192 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 60

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Harley seems to have it all. He's a 6-foot-3 defenseman who is mobile in all directions. He has big-time offensive elements. He can lead a rush with speed and skill, showing great stickhandling ability off the rush or from the blue line. He can make great passes at both ends of the rink. He has a big shot that led to 18 goals last season. Harley isn't a bruiser, but he's a solid defender due to his skating, intelligence and wingspan. When he's gone to the higher paces of the international level he hasn't stood out as much as in junior, which gives mild concerns. His combination of athletic tools and hockey sense look like a player with the potential to become an impactful NHL player if he develops well.

68. Nolan Patrick, C, Philadelphia

Sept. 19, 1998 | 6-foot-2 | 198 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 60

Patrick is an extremely tough evaluation case. When healthy, Patrick's toolkit is one that looks like a top-line forward all day long. The former No. 2 pick is a well-rounded player. He's a right-handed center who skates at a quality NHL level. He has quick-twitch hands and a lot of creativity, with the ability to make skilled plays at full speed making him a dangerous player off entries. I wouldn't say there's any one aspect of his game that blows you away. He's very smart but it's not elite smarts, nor is his skill or speed, but he does all of those things very well. He's also a

competitive player who makes a lot of plays around the net. Patrick also missed the entire season due to migraine issues, which is why slotting his value is so tough for me as calibrating that risk seems almost impossible with the information I have. I incorporated some risk into his grading but I was conservative in how much I knocked him for the injury concerns until I know more.

69. Kirill Marchenko, LW, Columbus

July 21, 2000 | 6-foot-2 | 181 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 60

Marchenko is big, is a powerful skater and is very skilled. He can make top defenders miss consistently with his puckhandling. His playmaking stood out to me more than ever this past season. Marchenko showed an ability to make plays with pace, find seams and create a lot of chances versus good teams. He's not a perfectly well-rounded player off the puck, but he is powerful and can win battles versus men. He has a tremendous toolkit and continues to develop well, looking like an excellent second-round pick. Columbus fans will have to wait on him as he is signed with SKA through the 2021-22 season. He's started this season well and looks to be a go-to player for a top KHL team.

70. Cody Glass, C, Vegas

April 1, 1999 | 6-foot-2 | 185 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 65

Glass had an up-and-down rookie NHL season, which ended after a knee injury ended his campaign. You could see great flashes of offensive talent. He's a very skilled puckhandler and a better passer. Inside the offensive zone and on the power play he knows what to do and can make NHL caliber plays, showing the instincts and pace to move pucks like a pro. Scouts I've talked to thought the pace would be an adjustment for him because he's not an explosive skater. He competes well but he's not an overly physical player who will need to learn how to play inside at the top level. I still see a top-six center for Vegas who will put up significant numbers.

71. Filip Zadina, RW, Detroit

Nov. 27, 1999 | six-foot | 196 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Zadina is a tough evaluation case, as I've seen the highs and lows of his game over the last five years. He's extremely skilled and has the ability to beat pro defenders clean with his puckhandling. Zadina is known as a goal-scorer, possessing a high-end wrist and slap shot to beat goalies from range. He's also a very good passer, though, and makes creative feeds often. He's a good, not great skater, but can make very skilled plays on the move. In his first pro season I thought he was a very perimeter player, and while I still wouldn't call him hard-nosed, he wasn't



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as perimeter I felt last season. I do feel he is quite inconsistent though, from watching him over the years. I still think he'll be a top-six NHL forward and I still see top-line talent if he maxes out.

72. Matthew Boldy, LW, Minnesota

April 5, 2001 | 6-foot-2 | 194 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 60

Boldy didn't put up big numbers as a freshman, but I still thought he looked very promising and was a driver on one of the best teams in college hockey. He's dangerous whenever he has the puck on his stick. Boldy has tremendous creativity to go along with loose, quick-twitch hands and the ability to pull pucks around and through checkers with ease. He's a great playmaker who makes creative plays and does so with pace. He's a big forward who is not overly physical, but does not shy away from making a hard drive to the net and can use his frame to maintain possession. Boldy's only issue is his average footspeed, which will be a challenge as he advances to the NHL but he's so skilled that I think he can be a very good NHL player in spite of his skating.

73. Morgan Frost, C, Philadelphia

May 14, 1999 | 5-foot-11 | 170 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 35

Hockey Sense: 65

Frost played a lengthy number of games with the Flyers last season and looked like he belonged. Frost's game is pure skill. In the AHL and NHL he showed immense confidence with the puck to attempt elite skill plays and can break open a shift with how he can deke through opponents. He's also an extremely creative and intelligent playmaker who can make tough plays in small areas and run a power-play unit off the flank. He has the puck game to be a big-time scorer. Frost's challenges will be on the physical side. He's not that fast nor big, and versus men he had trouble getting around players and to the middle of the ice like he could in junior. I think he's going to be a great NHL player, but he will need time to develop.

74. Noah Dobson, D, New York Islanders

Jan. 7, 2000 | 6-foot-4 | 183 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 60

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Dobson had a tough first NHL season as his playing time was sporadic, but he was just a teenager and remains a very promising young player. He's a 6-foot-4 right-handed defenseman who can skate and move the puck, which is easily an assembly of attributes that projects to play in the league for a while. Dobson is a very smart and poised player. He has the ability to hold pucks for an extra few seconds to find passing lanes under pressure and make crafty plays from both ends of the rink. His vision and skating help him transition pucks very well and quickly. He wasn't used in tough defensive situations as a 19 year old, but his frame and skating

project him to be a good NHL defender who can make a lot of stops as he matures physically.

75. Seth Jarvis, C, Carolina

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

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 60

Jarvis is a dynamic player who ticks a lot of boxes. He is a highly skilled and intelligent with a lot of quickness. He has the skill to beat defenders one-on-one, but more importantly, he does so with speed. The high-end pace of his game is what makes him so dangerous and will translate to the higher levels. He has legit NHL speed and very good edges, allowing him to pressure defenders at the highest level with speed and cutbacks. I wouldn't call his hands elite or call him an elite passer, but he has flashes of the highest level with both and both attributes are very good. Jarvis isn't the biggest forward, but he is a very hard working player. He attacks the middle of the ice consistently, he's hard on pucks and wins far more battles than you'd think a 5-foot-10 forward would. His game is very direct and he will be both a coach and fan-favorite due to the way he plays the game. His combination of skill, speed, production and work ethic make him a player that projects to play high in an NHL lineup.

76. Rasmus Sandin, D, Toronto

March 7, 2000 | 5-foot-11 | 187 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 40

Hockey Sense: 65

Sandin had a successful second pro season, showing he could handle the NHL as a teenager and being a top defenseman at the world juniors. Sandin's toolkit is not one that typically projects out as a top-four defenseman at 5-foot-11 and just fine mobility. However, he has that projection because of how smart a player he is. His puck-movement is creative and efficient. He outlets pucks up the ice very quickly. He makes creative plays on entries and finds seams at a high rate. He shows poise from the offensive blue line to wait out options. I don't see Sandin landing on a lot of highlight reels but he's going to help his team maintain possession. Defensively he's solid due to his brain plus he's competitive and doesn't shy away from the physical aspects. His size and mobility may prevent him from playing tough NHL matchups like he has at other levels though.

77. Nils Lundkvist, D, New York Rangers

July 27, 2000 | 5-foot-11 | 174 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 40

Hockey Sense: 65

Lundkvist had a great 19-year-old season in the SHL, setting the record for most points by a teenage defenseman in that league. Lundkvist's offensive explosion was a mild surprise even to his biggest advocates in the NHL scouting community, but speaks to how good a puck-mover he is. His brain is fantastic. Lundkvist's head is always up looking to make a play, often finding seams at a high rate, and making excellent outlet



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passes. He can run a power play due to his great vision, but his shot popped last season as well, more than I've seen before, making him a threat inside the blue line. Lundkvist is not the biggest defenseman, but he defends well due to good, albeit not great, feet and his great brain allowing him to kill a lot of rushes. The straight forward skating stride is powerful, but the stride technique in itself is unorthodox.

78. Jake Bean, D, Carolina

June 9, 1998 | 6-foot-1 | 187 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

Bean is a very smart puck-mover who makes great outlets and shows a high level of poise from the offensive blue line. He is a good, not amazing skater who will be able to skate at the NHL level. He has the speed and edgework to make a lot of the plays defensemen need to make. Defensively Bean took on a lot more responsibility in 2019-20, playing big minutes for Charlotte and showing he could kill penalties at the pro level. He's taken time but the 2016 13th-overall pick looks on track to become a top-four defenseman in the NHL.

79. Jesper Bratt, RW, New Jersey

July 30, 1998 | 5-foot-10 | 174 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 35

Hockey Sense: 60

Bratt's skill level is very high. His hands are quick, he's creative with the puck and he can beat NHL defenders clean. He sees the ice at a high level, showing the ability to find seams and hold pucks for an extra second to create lanes. Bratt isn't the biggest or quickest though. His stops and starts and edgework overall are very good, but he lacks the rink-length speed for his size that you'd ideally like. He's small but he competes fine and doesn't shy away from the tough areas of the ice. The hype probably got away from him when he made the NHL at 19, but he's a very good player who has the tools to be a legit top-six forward.

80. Henri Jokiharju, D, Buffalo

June 17, 1999 | six-foot | 192 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 65

Jokiharju isn't a spectacular player but he does a lot well. He's mobile, he has skill and he's a very smart puck-mover. His outlets are excellent and he shows great poise with the puck. He makes a lot of tough plays under pressure. Even though he's not the biggest, he can hold his own defensively due to his mobility and brain and killed penalties for the Sabres. I have a question on whether his offensive upside is all that exciting, but he's always found a way to produce over the years and earn the trust of coaches.

81. Rodion Amirov, LW, Toronto

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

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 55

Amirov is easy to spot on the ice when he has the puck because he's very quick and skilled. He has quick-twitch hands and can inside-out defenders while skating at full speed. He has the ability to pull off a highlight reel play. He can set up and finish plays well. He flashes high-end playmaking and shooting ability, but neither consistently. His game is more about his pure skill and driving play forward with a ton of clean entries. His speed isn't amazing, more just good; but his edges and cutbacks are excellent. Amirov has a slight frame, which led to struggles versus men who could knock him off pucks, but he does work hard and when he puts on muscle I could see him get inside easier.

82. Spencer Knight, G, Florida

April 19, 2001 | 6-foot-3 | 192 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Athleticism: 60

Hockey Sense: 60

Knight is a 6-foot-3 goalie with great quickness and sense. He has the athleticism to push off and make the tough lateral saves, but he often doesn't need to because of his smarts. Knight reads the play at a high level, with his head on a swivel and tracking pucks very well. His movement in the net is efficient and it never seems like he has to scramble. He plays pucks very well, showing the skill and athleticism to help his team outside the crease.

83. Hendrix Lapierre, C, Washington

Feb. 9, 2002 | six-foot | 179 pounds

Tier: High-end/very good bubble

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 40

Hockey Sense: 65

Lapierre is an extremely difficult player to slot. He was a top player at 16. He had one of the best Hlinka Gretzky tournaments ever. Then the season started and he was good, but not great with only two goals on the season when healthy. Then the next QMJHL season started as he looked excellent, a lot like the player we saw a year earlier. He's a highly skilled and intelligent player. He makes a lot of tough plays, projects to run a pro power play due to very high hockey IQ and has the great individual skill to be slippery in open ice. He's a fine skater but his game could use more speed. Some scouts agree on the pace of his game, but some like his quickness. Lapierre was initially diagnosed with three concussions in a 10-month span, but Lapierre told The Athletic a specialist diagnosed him with twisted vertebrae in his neck that he thinks caused concussion-like symptoms. His game was just OK off the puck, and he didn't attack the net that much, but it's hard to know whether that's how he plays or whether the injuries caused hesitancy.

84. Jesse Puljujarvi, RW, Edmonton

May 7, 1998 | 6-foot-4 | 201 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 60



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Hockey Sense: 55

Shot: 60

Puljujarvi left the NHL to play in Finland where he was one of the top players in Liiga. He had 100 more shot attempts than the next-best player in the league — as a 21-year-old. Puljujarvi has the physical tools that stand out immediately. He's 6-foot-4, a great skater for his size, and has the skill level to make creative plays. He also has a great shot and scores a lot of goals from range. He's an imperfect player, leading to his bumps in North America and criticism from scouts about his NHL projection. He makes plays, but he's not an elite passer. He can be a perimeter player and isn't really a "tough to play against" type when he doesn't have the puck despite his size and strength. The toolkit is way too good for him not to find a way to help an NHL team even if he may not materialize on his fourth-overall slot.

85. Casey Mittelstadt, C, Buffalo

Nov. 22, 1998 | 6-foot-1 | 203 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

Mittelstadt is a difficult player to figure out. In terms of his skill level, he looks like a no-doubt top-six forward. His hands are elite, showing the in-tight ability to beat pro defensemen and make highly-creative plays routine. He's a great playmaker with the ability to find seams, improvise well and create chances at an NHL level. He has a sneaky-good shot but didn't show it much at the NHL level. The stat sheet does not line up with the talent. In college, the AHL and NHL, his production has not really dazzled even though I thought he was a top player for Rochester. Part of that might be due to his foot speed, which is fine with flashes of above-average but closer-to-average. I don't think he's soft. I do think he competes fine and even was on the PK in the AHL. He's a puzzle for me, but still a player I think will become an NHL scorer, even if his stock is down from his days as a top-10 pick.

86. Jordan Kyrrou, RW, St. Louis

May 5, 1998 | six-foot | 174 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 60

Kyrrou looks like he should be a player. He's a tremendous skater, he has a lot of skill, he can make and finish plays, he's not undersized and he's been highly productive for years. On his best shift, where he's barreling down the wing with speed and making skilled plays with pace, he looks like a for-sure top-six forward. He has a half-wall game where he can find lanes too. The compete level in his game has been come and gone over the years but I thought he did a better job this past season of showing effort off the puck, and getting to the middle of the ice. I still see a player who is going to score in the NHL and help a team's power play.

87. Nicolas Hague, D, Vegas

Dec. 5, 1998 | 6-foot-6 | 214 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 40

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 80

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Hague has an interesting toolkit as a 6-foot-6 defenseman who can move and shoot the puck. I wouldn't call him an exceptional puck-mover, but he can make a first pass and has poise at the offensive line. His shot is his best offensive weapon, and even though he only had two goals last season he has the potential to score 10-15 regularly in the NHL. Hague's biggest adjustment was on the defensive side, especially given his skating got tested at the NHL pace, even though he has the physicality to make stops. His skating will never be a selling point, but he'll have to learn to use his size and reach and maintain gaps versus the quicker NHL players.

88. Ryan Merkley, D, San Jose

Aug. 14, 2000 | 5-foot-11 | 176 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 35

Hockey Sense: 70

Merkley's playmaking is exceptional. He has a unique ability to hold pucks and find backdoor options to hit teammate's sticks from the point and to make tough exits. He also has a high skill level and can break open games with his puckhandling. Merkley skates well. He's not a burner, but it's good quickness combined with his skill and elite vision that makes him a truly dangerous offensive weapon. He has the ability to run a PP1 in the NHL. Merkley is undersized though, and while he made progress defensively, frequently killing penalties for London, his defensive game is not what gets you excited about him and his effort in that aspect can come and go.

89. Alex Turcotte, C, Los Angeles

Feb. 26, 2001 | 5-foot-11 | 185 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 60

Turcotte may not have had the big freshman season you were hoping for from a No. 5 pick, but I still saw a lot of great things from him that showed NHL promise. Like in junior, Turcotte showed a ton of speed and energy in his game. He flies up the ice, attacking with or without the puck, and like a bull, he quickly gets engaged in the high-traffic areas. He combines his quick feet with very quick hands that allow him to beat checks clean. Turcotte is a great passer, being put in a bigger playmaker role with Wisconsin than he was with Team USA where his vision and creativity were on display. The skill may not be elite enough to become a top scorer in the NHL, but he's a complete hockey player who should be a great pro starting next season.

90. Vitaly Kravtsov, RW, New York Rangers

Dec. 23, 1999 | 6-foot-4 | 183 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60



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Kravtsov is a very tough evaluation because he's very talented. He's a big forward with elite hands who can make high-end plays through defenders or to his teammates. He projects to run an NHL power-play unit due to his vision and on his best shift Kravtsov can take over. Those best shifts are spread out though, as Kravtsov's lack of speed and physicality led to a significant adjustment period to the AHL level but he showed progress as the season went on. He needs some stability, to be able to dominate a level for a significant period of time and make the most of his tremendous skill.

91. Sam Steel, C, Anaheim

Feb. 3, 1998 | 5-foot-11 | 185 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 40

Hockey Sense: 65

Steel had a fine first full season in the NHL. You can see the skill and especially his hockey sense. When he gets the puck with some time in the offensive zone he can find seams, wait out options and set up a lot of plays. Watching him with some of the Ducks' highly-skilled players like Ryan Getzlaf on the power play together, it was clear he can create some very high-end plays. For the NHL level he does lack pull-away speed which isn't ideal for his size. He competes fine and earned regular minutes. If his skating never takes a step he'll need to find ways to use his skill more consistently at the NHL pace if he can't get around NHL defensemen.

92. Maxime Comtois, LW, Anaheim

Jan. 8, 1999 | 6-foot-2 | 207 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 60

Hockey Sense: 60

Comtois was a quality AHL player and was fine in his NHL time up with the Ducks. After a very impressive 19-year-old season versus pros, he didn't continue on that same trajectory but remains a very good prospect. He's a big, strong winger who can play a physical or a skill game. His skill won't dazzle, but he's a creative playmaker who finds teammates very well and can set up chances at the top levels. He shoots the puck well, too, with a very hard wrist shot that can beat NHL goalies. Comtois' biggest flaw is his lack of NHL quickness, which will be his biggest challenge at the pace of that level. His brain works quick enough that combined with his compete I think he'll be a good player without great speed, but it will be a hurdle for him.

93. Brett Howden, C, New York Rangers

March 29, 1998 | 6-foot-2 | 194 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 60

Hockey Sense: 60

Even with the mild decreases in production last season, Howden still shows a lot to like about his game and projection. His hockey sense is great, showing great vision with the puck and ability to set up chances at an NHL level. He's a smart defensive player too, and overall a player a coach can trust because of his IQ and great compete level. Howden

plays hard, getting to the net, killing penalties and winning a lot of battles. His game lacks flash. He's not that quick or that skilled a puckhandler, so I could see him just be a third-line center, but I see enough playmaking in his game to think he may have another level even if he may be a boring player when he reaches that level.

94. Eeli Tolvanen, LW, Nashville

April 22, 1999 | 5-foot-10 | 192 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 35

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 70

Tolvanen's talent is clear when he has the puck. He has a high skill level and has the hands to beat defenders clean with his one-on-one play. He has an elite shot, with a very heavy wrist and slap shot that can beat goalies from range. His shot is a weapon, but he also moves pucks very well and it makes him very dangerous on the power play. Tolvanen has great talent, but he has physical limitations. He's undersized and while he skates fine he lacks great rink length speed and his skill plays get stopped a lot when he can't get around a defender. He also gets pushed out to the perimeter a lot. I still see so much talent, and he's a player who drives shots at a very high level that I think he will make it.

95. Gabriel Vilardi, C, Los Angeles

Aug. 16, 1999 | 6-foot-3 | 201 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 60

After a lengthy absence spanning about a year, Vilardi looked great between the AHL and NHL levels last season. When healthy, Vilardi is a powerful center with a high skill level. He shows great in-tight hands and made NHL players miss with his skill. He's a great playmaker who makes creative passes in small areas. He can run a power play and find seams in the defense. Vilardi has a 6-foot-3 frame and can be strong on pucks, competes well off the puck and killed penalties in the AHL. His skating isn't the best, but the stride is fine. It just lacks power and overall quickness. When healthy, Vilardi looks like a no doubt top-six forward, but now he needs to stay healthy.

96. Brendan Brisson, C, Vegas

Oct. 22, 2001 | 5-foot-11 | 179 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 65

Brisson, the son of NHL agent Pat Brisson, was one of the best players in the USHL and had a great World Jr. A Challenge, tying the tournament record for scoring. Brisson is a very skilled player. He has the slick one-on-one skill to beat defenders consistently and make plays in small areas. He's an extremely creative playmaker who can make a lot of plays off the perimeter and make plays with pace. He improvises very well, making high-end plays under pressure. Brisson is a great passer, but also a great goal-scorer, who scored numerous goals off his one-timer. That combination makes him very dangerous on the power play. Brisson



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has limitations in his size and speed, which is why some scouts still question how his game will translate. He does compete well, attacking the middle third of the ice; and he isn't a perimeter player, although I wouldn't call him very physical.

97. Jack Quinn, RW, Buffalo

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

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 60

Quinn had a massive 18-year-old season in the OHL, scoring 50 goals as a leading player on the best CHL team and breaking out into a legitimate top prospect. He scored a ton of goals, but I wouldn't really call him an elite sniper. Rather Quinn is just a super skilled and smart player who scored a lot of goals around the net. He has very quick-twitch hands and the ability to embarrass defenders one-on-one. He sees the ice at a top-end level even though he didn't have nearly as many assists as goals. It's not just his vision, but his overall creativity and patience. He often saw plays on the ice that I couldn't see materialize. The main reason for his sudden rise in stock was the continued improvement in his skating. It's not a strength of his, it's no longer a weakness, but it will be his main hurdle for the NHL level. Quinn is solid off the puck, playing PK for Ottawa, although I wouldn't call him a physical player.

98. Jan Jenik, RW, Arizona

Sept. 15, 2000 | 6-foot-1 | 181 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 60

Jenik was having a great season as one of the top players in major junior before a knee injury at the world juniors knocked him out long-term. When healthy he's a highly-skilled and competitive player. Jenik can make plays through defenders or power his way to the net. He has great vision and shows the patience to slow the play down and find lanes. Off the puck he's reliable, showing an edge in battles and an effort defensively. Jenik's main weakness is his skating, which lacks any real explosiveness, and it remains to be seen how his already average quickness will be coming off a major knee injury.

99. Nolan Foote, LW, New Jersey

Nov. 29, 2000 | 6-foot-4 | 201 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 60

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Foote generally impressed me last season, especially with Canada's U20 team, and reports from NHL scouts are positive. He's a 6-foot-4 forward with very good hockey sense and a cannon of a shot. He's not just a perimeter player though, but someone who competes well and can use his big frame to drive the net. His skating isn't the best, but I think he'll be able to handle NHL speed, and I like his skating more than a year ago. He hasn't been overly productive in the WHL, which is a concern, but he was very good with Canada's U20 team in the summer and winter when

he had better players to play with rather than when he was with Kelowna, which was near the bottom of the WHL in goals for.

100. Ryan Suzuki, C, Carolina

May 28, 2001 | six-foot | 181 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 60

Suzuki's talent stands out whenever he has the puck on his stick. He's a highly-skilled player who can beat defenders with his hands and is a better passer than he is a puckhandler. He makes quick, creative passes with consistency and can run a power play off the flank. He makes high-difficulty plays while moving quickly, showing a good skating stride that will translate to the next level. Suzuki isn't a physical player but he works hard and is responsible defensively.

101. Dylan Holloway, C, Edmonton

Sept. 23, 2001 | 6-foot-1 | 203 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 55

Holloway had a fine freshman season, as a top player for Wisconsin, although he didn't put up huge scoring numbers after dominating the AJHL the season prior. Holloway is a good skater who has a lot of energy to his game. When he gets a full head of steam, his frame he can be a handful to stop. He's hard on pucks and isn't afraid to get his nose dirty. His offensive upside is the main point of debate surrounding him when talking to NHL scouts. I think he's very skilled. Holloway inside outs opponents consistently and can make plays through checks in motion. Over the years I've seen flashes of top-end playmaking, but I didn't see that consistently enough this season, with Holloway showing more of a direct style of play than a true driver of offense. Even if he's not a truly dynamic offensive player, there's enough skill in his game to be a quality NHL player.

102. Calen Addison, D, Minnesota

April 11, 2000 | 5-foot-10 | 181 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 65

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 30

Hockey Sense: 65

Addison has a lot of offensive talent, particularly his great skating and playmaking abilities, which are both among the very best for defensemen in junior. His skating is both explosive and elusive allowing him to make checks miss with his quickness. He gets the puck up the ice quickly due to his great speed and vision. Addison is a very creative passer who can make unique plays and does so with pace. He's not the biggest defenseman at 5-foot-10 and scouts question how good a defender he'll be in the NHL due to his so-so ability to win battles versus bigger players.

103. Alexandre Texier, LW, Columbus

Sept. 13, 1999 | six-foot | 194 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player



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Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

Texier had a fine rookie season, although a late December injury kept him out through the pause. He returned in the postseason and looked strong. Texier is a highly-skilled playmaker. He has very quick hands and ability to make plays through NHL defenders. He's a creative passer who can find seams in the offensive zone and make tough plays. Texier has a good shot but it wasn't on display as much as it was in previous seasons. His puck game has never been in question. Texier does lack dangerous NHL speed. His skating is fine but he won't turn defenders around. He competes well and looks faster than he is due to his work ethic.

104. Anton Lundell, C, Florida

Oct. 3, 2001 | 6-foot-1 | 185 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

I watched Lundell a ton the past three years, with at least 15 live views and many others on video, and I still struggle with what to make of him. He has played up versus men at a young age so effectively and he has played years ahead of his age group, sometimes in significant roles. When you watch him, though, his game can look bland. His speed is average, and while I see flashes of great creativity from him as a handler and passer, I wouldn't say that's consistent. I respect that he competes well, he's strong on pucks and is responsible defensively with the ability to play on both special teams. I also understand that he plays at the Liiga level so his skill won't pop as easily as someone who plays in the CHL.

105. Oliver Wahlstrom, RW, New York Islanders

June 13, 2000 | 5-foot-11 | 187 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Wahlstrom had a good 19-year-old season after a rocky freshman campaign at Boston College. He had a strong camp with the Islanders, looked promising for a teenager in the AHL, generating a ton of shots for a young player, and had a fine albeit unspectacular world juniors. Inside the offensive zone Wahlstrom is dangerous. He has great hands, and is always a second away from undressing an opponent with his skill. He is a shooter who can score from range with a hard, accurate shot. He can pick corners, but also passes the puck very well, and this makes him a great power-play weapon. Wahlstrom's compete level has been a point of concern over the years, but I thought he was much more consistent in that respect last season. His skating still isn't great, as he can struggle to make his skill plays at the quicker paces.

106. Julien Gauthier, RW, New York Rangers

Oct. 15, 1997 | 6-foot-4 | 227 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 60

Hockey Sense: 55

Gauthier was dealt from Carolina to the Rangers at the deadline after three successful years in the AHL, and he played limited minutes with the big club following the deal. He's a bit of a divisive prospect when you talk to scouts because he has a tremendous toolkit but also is an inconsistent player. I like the player because I see someone who is a great skater for someone who is 6-foot-4. He has a high skill level and the ability to score goals. Gauthier can make plays, but can get tunnel-vision at times. He can play a powerful style of game, but not always. I really like the toolkit, but I know I'm sticking my neck out a bit on him by continuing to rate him so highly given he's 22 without much NHL success to date.

107. John Leonard, LW, San Jose

Aug. 7, 1998 | 5-foot-11 | 185 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 40

Hockey Sense: 60

Leonard's skill level is where his value comes from. He's extremely coordinated with the puck in tight spaces and extremely creative with the puck overall. He didn't have a ton of assists, but he's a clever playmaker who has great patience and skill as a passer. There are no doubts that Leonard has a puck game that's NHL level. The question will be can he handle the speed and physicality of the level? He has average quickness and he's a 5-foot-11 forward who can get pushed to the outside. I think he competes well enough and is fast enough to make it and score in the NHL, but the pro level will push him because of his limitations.

108. Dante Fabbro, D, Nashville

June 20, 1998 | six-foot | 190 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 60

Fabbro is a very good player but he doesn't stand out in the typical way a top player does. He's not that big, he skates fine but not super quick and he's not full of offensive skill. Fabbro's value comes from how smart and efficient a puck-mover he is. He gets the puck in the D-zone, his head is up looking to make a play, and he usually makes the right one whether under pressure or if he takes a second. His great sense allows him to defend well too despite not being that quick or having a long wingspan. Fabbro earns the trust of his coach wherever he goes.

109. Scott Perunovich, D, St. Louis

Aug. 18, 1998 | 5-foot-10 | 174 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 25

Hockey Sense: 65

Perunovich won the Hobey Baker Award as the best player in college hockey. He stands out whenever he has the puck on his stick. His offensive instincts are elite. He's able to make exit passes with the best of them, and has great creativity and vision from the blue line. His ability to find seams and hold pucks for extra seconds are clear NHL-level skills.



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Perunovich has advanced as a prospect as his skating has gotten better, and it's at a point where I think he'll be able to handle the NHL level without a major issue. He's able to pull away from pressure when needed and walk the line with his skating. The four-way quickness isn't elite and given he's 5-foot-10, some NHL scouts question if he'll be able to defend in the show. He may need to be used carefully, but the puck game and power-play ability will translate.

110. Tage Thompson, RW, Buffalo

Oct. 30, 1997 | 6-foot-6 | 205 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 45

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 70

Hockey Sense: 55

Shot: 70

Thompson was off to an excellent start to the 2019-20 season, looking like one of the best players in the AHL. Then he injured his shoulder in his first NHL game, which ended his season. When healthy Thompson's toolkit looks very interesting from an NHL perspective. He's 6-foot-6, can power his way past opponents and to the net as well as having a high skill level to dangle around them. He combines his skill and good hockey IQ with an elite wrist shot that pro goalies have a very hard time picking up. His stride looks fine for a guy his size, with flashes of good power, but for the NHL he does lack the ability to separate and push defenders back. I liked Thompson's progression a lot prior to the injury but he does need to get it done at the NHL level at some point.

111. Jacob Perreault, RW, Anaheim

April 15, 2002 | 5-foot-11 | 192 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 40

Hockey Sense: 65

Shot Grade: 70

Perreault is a dynamic player. He makes elite plays and had one of the best shots in this draft. He can be so dangerous on a power play with his shot and pick corners from a distance, but he's also a tremendous passer who makes unique plays. His hands are top of the line, and he shows a ton of confidence with the puck, attacking defenders consistently with his skill and looking to make things happen. Inside the offensive zone there are no questions about what he can do. Scouts have questions on his foot speed and whether he will provide enough off the puck to continue to score at the higher levels. I don't see him killing penalties in the NHL, but I think there's enough compete in his game to maximize his scoring potential as I've seen him win battles versus bigger players and make plays in the hard areas. His foot speed is certainly average, but given his tremendous skill, vision and finishing ability, he can be 5-foot-11 with average feet and still be a very good NHL player.

112. Juuso Valimaki, D, Calgary

Oct. 6, 1998 | 6-foot-2 | 205 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 60

After an impressive 20-year-old season, Valimaki looked like he was on the fast track to becoming a solid top-four NHL defenseman. An ACL injury robbed him of the entire 2019-20 campaign, though. When healthy, Valimaki is a very well-rounded defenseman. He's a great skater, and when healthy his mobility allows him to kill a lot of plays, activate off the line and jump into plays at a quality NHL level. He uses his feet, physicality and sense to break up a lot of plays. Offensively he lacks flash and likely isn't a big points guy in the league, but he moves the puck well enough to play solid minutes given his defensive value. He's back playing now and has looked promising in Finland.

113. Peyton Krebs, C, Vegas

Jan. 26, 2001 | 5-foot-11 | 181 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 65

Krebs missed a chunk of the season while recovering from a partially-torn Achilles. When he came back he was one of the top forwards in the WHL and a driving force for Winnipeg. He's easy to spot on the ice, because he's full of skill and imposes himself on any given shift with his talent and competitiveness. Krebs can create so many chances by deking through defenders, making very creative passes, or by willing himself to the tough areas of the ice. The injury did not derail how he played. If anything he competed harder, which is how he will succeed versus men at his size. Krebs is a good skater. He's not explosive, but he'll be able to skate in the NHL. He's definitely an elite playmaker, but it would be nice to see him score a few more.

114. Mathias Emilio Pettersen, C, Calgary

April 3, 2000 | 5-foot-10 | 187 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 65

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 30

Hockey Sense: 65

Pettersen was one of the better forwards in the NCHC and a big reason for why Denver was a top-10 team. The main reason I can attribute to why the sixth-round pick is a top prospect is the jump in his skating. In junior it looked good, not great; but in college he looked among the quicker players on the ice. His edgework is excellent and his first few steps are very good. He often pressured defenders with speed. Pettersen's playmaking is also excellent. He's a very creative player with the puck who makes high-end plays at pace and displays a great skill level. His shot is good but he's more of a pass-first guy. He's undersized, a bit perimeter at times and not great defensively, but the offense makes up for the shortcomings.

115. Kevin Bahl, D, New Jersey

June 27, 2000 | 6-foot-7 | 240 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 45

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 80

Hockey Sense: 60

Part of me is very hesitant to rate a player like Bahl highly given his real lack of significant scoring through his junior career. His career-high in the OHL is 34 points, which typically does not project as a quality NHL



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player. When I watch Bahl, though, I see a lot of boxes being checked. He's a 6-foot-7 defenseman who skates very well for a man that size. He shows some puck skills. He makes a good first pass, with flashes of creativity and high-level pace as a passer. Defensively he's a rock due to his size, mobility and physicality, projecting to be a top physical player in the NHL. I could be way off on this one, and my opinion on Bahl has changed significantly in two years but I've liked a lot of what I've seen lately. He was a key piece in the Taylor Hall trade from Arizona.

116. Kailer Yamamoto, RW, Edmonton

Sept. 29, 1998 | 5-foot-8 | 159 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 65

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 30

Hockey Sense: 60

Yamamoto is an interesting evaluation case. His 34 points in 50 AHL games doesn't reflect the amount of talent he brings to the table. But I would argue his 26 points in 27 NHL games last season arguably overstates it too. Yamamoto brings a lot of speed and energy to shifts. He's 5-foot-8, but he doesn't shy from physical contact, being hard on pucks and winning battles. He shows no fear of going to the middle-third of the offensive zone to create offense. Yamamoto has quick hands and makes a lot of plays. I wouldn't call him a "game breaker" with his skill but he's a very crafty passer who creates a lot of offense. He's versatile and a competitor, which endears him to coaches.

117. Lukas Reichel, LW, Chicago

May 17, 2002 | six-foot | 170 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 60

Reichel had an impressive season playing versus men and getting regular minutes in the DEL for a good club in Eisbaren Berlin. I always saw some skill and speed in his game, but last season I saw a high level of creativity with the puck, making difficult plays through defenders and to his teammates. He has the skill and the pace to score in the NHL. I wouldn't call him the true playmaker you want running a power play, but he sees the ice well and gets a high IQ grade due to how well he creates in small areas. The last time he recorded a penalty was two seasons ago in junior club play, but I don't think he's soft. I've seen him be hard on his puck pursuits, drive the net frequently and win battles versus bigger players. But it would be fair to say he's not a very physical or edgy player.

118. Philip Tomasino, C, Nashville

July 28, 2001 | six-foot | 181 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 60

Tomasino is an exciting player to watch who is very talented. His high-end speed and skill make him very dangerous off the rush. He can push the pace and make skilled plays at full speed, traits that will translate to the NHL. He can play a fast-paced game, but is also a great playmaker who can hold pucks and find seams in the defense. His playmaking is his

strength, but I appreciated his shot and goal-scoring more last season and his ability to finish in close. Tomasino doesn't have a big, bulky frame so against physical players he can struggle a bit but I thought his consistency in his effort was better than a year ago.

119. Egor Zamula, D, Philadelphia

March 30, 2000 | 6-foot-3 | 176 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 60

Hockey Sense: 60

Zamula has trended up significantly after being a free-agent signing out of junior. He was great at the world juniors where he was Russia's No. 1 defenseman. Following the tournament, it was announced he would have season-ending back surgery, but he returned for Philly's camp in the restart. When he's on the ice, Zamula is a very smart and poised puck-mover. The offensive parts of his game have continued to develop, and last season I saw truly dynamic skill from him. You add onto that he's a 6-foot-3 defenseman who can kill rushes and win battles and it's a very interesting package. His skating is not the best, and you don't like hearing the words "back surgery" for a teenager but his health seems to be trending in a very positive manner.

120. Alexander Nylander, LW, Chicago

March 2, 1998 | 6-foot-1 | 192 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Nylander is a highly-skilled player. He showed in the league this season that he was able to move the puck and make skilled plays at the top level. He has the ability to run an NHL power play. He only scored 10 goals, but he has a good mid-range wrist shot and can finish and create plays at a top-end level. Nylander struggles to turn defenders with speed and given he is a perimeter player by nature he can get taken out of games by strong, mobile defensemen. The skill, playmaking and scoring ability will make him a valuable piece but you will have to live with the limitations.

121. Jack Studnicka, C, Boston

Feb. 18, 1999 | 6-foot-1 | 172 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

Studnicka is a highly-skilled forward with the ability to beat defenders clean and create chances versus men with his skill. He's creative inside the offensive zone, showing great playmaking ability and the ability to make plays in small areas. Studnicka's foot speed is average, which will be his main obstacle for the NHL level, but he has size and he competes well, showing the ability to make drives around defenders and get to the net.

122. Liam Foudy, C, Columbus



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Feb. 4, 2000 | 6-foot-1 | 181 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 60

Foudy had his best offensive season in his four OHL campaigns and was one of Canada's best players at the world juniors. He then joined Columbus for the postseason and looked like he belonged right away. His speed defines his game. Foudy has an explosive stride and will be able to pressure NHL defensemen with his speed. I've grown to appreciate his offensive skills. He may not be a true high-end skill and power-play type in the NHL, but I see top-level skill and playmaking in flashes. He's way smarter of a player than I thought he was back during his draft season. He can make creative plays and create chances while on the move. Foudy is a highly-competitive player who will kill penalties versus men and be a player coaches will rely on.

123. Noel Gunler, RW, Carolina

Oct. 7, 2001 | 6-foot-2 | 176 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot Grade: 60

Gunler is a high-end passer and shooter. He shows great vision and patience, holding pucks and finding teammates through seams. He shows good creativity on his entries with flashes of top-end skill. He has a very hard shot and projects as a legit mid-distance shooter. The combination of his shot and vision makes him a threat inside the offensive zone and on the power play. Off the puck, his game is just OK. He is a physical player who regularly throws his weight around and can win battles versus men, however, scouts criticize his compete level and discipline at times, which led to him getting to the second round, along with the fact his skating is average. His stride looks good but lacks any real power.

124. Tobias Bjornfot, D, Los Angeles

April 6, 2001 | six-foot | 203 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 60

Bjornfot had a great first season in North America. He made the Kings briefly out of camp, before being sent to the AHL where he was very good for an 18 year old. He played on both special teams for Ontario and looked like a pro defenseman. Bjornfot isn't going to land on a lot of highlight reels, but he's a very smooth and efficient defenseman. He's a great skater, with a powerful stride and great edgework to get up into attacks, evade pressure and close gaps very well. His hands are fine, but his brain and vision allow him to create offense. He can find seams in the zone and make great outlet passes, but he likely won't be a big-time power-play type in the NHL.

125. Shakir Mukhamadullin, D, New Jersey

Jan. 10, 2002 | 6-foot-3 | 178 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 60

Hockey Sense: 60

Mukhamadullin didn't get much ice time at the KHL level last season, so the evaluation of him is based on the little junior time he saw at the club level and his international appearances the past two seasons. He is off to a tremendous start this season, though, in a larger role. Mukhamadullin is a 6-foot-3 defenseman who can move the puck, which makes him appealing. He's not very flashy, but he can handle the puck very well and can make crisp passes out of his zone. He's not a top-end playmaker, but I've seen him stretch the ice and make highly creative offensive plays. Defensively he uses his length and brain well to make stops, and is a reliable two-way defender. His skating is good for a player his size, he can join a rush and close a gap well, but his quickness isn't a selling point. He's a tough evaluation. I could buy a very optimistic projection given the tools and the way he's handled himself at the KHL and U20 international levels. But I could buy that he lacks great offensive upside as well.

126. Mario Ferraro, D, San Jose

Sept. 17, 1998 | 5-foot-11 | 185 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 65

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 60

Ferraro's game is full of speed and energy. He's an excellent skater, with quick-twitch feet that allow him to gain speed quickly. He has excellent footwork, walks the line at a high level and is able to evade pressure very well. He closes gaps quickly and with force, showing the ability to win puck battles versus men, even with his 5-foot-11 frame. The main question on Ferraro's game is his offensive upside. I think he makes a good first pass and sees the ice well, but his stick skills and overall offensive creativity will never dazzle.

127. Mavrik Bourque, C, Dallas

Jan. 8, 2002 | 5-foot-10 | 178 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 35

Hockey Sense: 65

Shot Grade: 60

Bourque gets a lot of praise for his skill and especially his hockey sense. He is an elite passer. He has tremendous patience and anticipation to let plays develop, hold the puck for an extra second and find his teammates. He makes difficult plays that most other players don't see. While his passing is his clear best strength, he also has a great shot and can score from tough positions on the ice. His hands are high-end, but he has a pass-first mentality with the puck. I find instead of making a skilled move and making a hard play to the net, he likes to slow it down and look for his passing options – something that will need to improve at the quicker paces. Bourque isn't that big, but I like his compete level and that he can penalty kill. His skating is fine, but not great. He has enough quickness to get around and is agile in tight areas, but he lacks the ability to create true separation at the NHL level.

128. Ty Dellandrea, C, Dallas



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July 21, 2000 | 6-foot-1 | 190 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Dellandrea is a tough evaluation. He looks like he should be a top player. He's got quick feet and hands. He can dangle in small areas and on the move. He makes great plays to his teammates and has a great shot that can pick corners from around the offensive zone. He hustles for pucks, can kill penalties, and is a reliable all-around center. I've seen him be dominant some games, but then you look at his junior career and the numbers don't line up with the player I see. He's played on some bad Flint teams, but Flint was good in 2019-20, and he was very good but not a top player in the OHL. If he became a top-six forward in the NHL I wouldn't blink because my eye sees that, but it would be nice to see him truly dominate a level.

129. Luke Kunin, C, Nashville

Dec. 4, 1997 | six-foot | 192 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

Kunin played his first full season up with the Wild, showing he could be a good NHL player who can help at both ends of the rink. There's nothing flashy about Kunin's game, but he's a very well-rounded player. He's a good skater with skill but won't dazzle in either area. He's just a very smart and competitive player. He gets into the high-traffic areas, he can PK, and endears himself to coaches. He has the great vision to make a lot of plays. He can set up and finish plays at NHL level. He may never be a top player on a NHL team, but I could see Kunin being a steady second-line forward for years to come.

130. Rasmus Kupari, C, Los Angeles

March 15, 2000 | 6-foot-1 | 185 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 55

I don't know what to make of Kupari. I see a player with a tremendous skill set. He has great speed and skill. He's not small. He's not a "hard to play against" type of player, but I wouldn't call him soft either. As a 19-year-old in the AHL he put up six goals and eight points in 27 games, not exactly great numbers and he didn't get a chance for a second-half rebound when an injury at the world juniors ended his season. When you watched him though you saw flashes of the great talent, of the ability to make highly-skilled plays on the move and to play at a pro pace. He'll need to learn how to make plays on the smaller ice and to be more consistent, but even with the iffy numbers I think too much of the skill set and what I've seen from him over the last few years.

131. Max Jones, LW, Anaheim

Feb. 17, 1998 | 6-foot-3 | 220 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 60

Hockey Sense: 55

In his first full season up with the Ducks, Jones didn't excel, but he held his own and looked like a big leaguer. He is a big, strong forward who can be quick and hard on pucks. He's good in front of the net and can win battles versus NHL'ers. He's big, but quick and has the skating required to win foot races in the NHL and make drives to the middle of the ice. The question on Jones is how much offense he has. He has skill, but he's not a true play-driver or playmaker I think at the top level, but someone you hope is a nice up-and-down winger who plays in the middle of your lineup.

132. John-Jason Peterka, RW, Buffalo

Jan. 14, 2002 | 5-foot-11 | 192 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 40

Hockey Sense: 60

Peterka was a tough player to evaluate last season, as he played very limited minutes on the top team in the DEL. I've seen him at other levels over the years, so I believe in the talent, but the lack of playing time in his draft season makes his projection more uncertain in both directions. I see a great toolkit. I see a player with quick-twitch hands and ability to beat pro defenders. He's a strong skater who can make highly skilled plays at a quick pace. He moves the puck well, although Peterka's 60 IQ comes more from how creative he is offensively, as opposed to being a truly great playmaker. He's not that big and I wouldn't call him a great two-way forward, but he does work to win puck battles, and he's not a perimeter forward.

133. Jack Dugan, RW, Vegas

March 24, 1998 | 6-foot-2 | 185 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 60

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 40

Dugan was the leading scorer in college, continuing his sharp upward trajectory of the last few years. He's a tremendous playmaker who, especially on the power play, can pick defenses apart like a pro in how often and effectively he finds seams in the offensive zone. He is a creative passer who makes plays with pace. You could argue Dugan overpasses and doesn't shoot that much. He has great hands and can beat defenders one-on-one often. Dugan lacks great quickness, but his skill and competitiveness allow him to create at even strength. He uses his size well and doesn't shy away from the physical aspects of the game.

134. Evan Bouchard, D, Edmonton

Oct. 20, 1999 | 6-foot-3 | 194 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 55



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Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 65

Shot: 60

Bouchard is a tremendous puck-mover. He has slick stick skills, but it's his great vision and poise with the puck that drives a lot of his offense and makes him a positive possession player. Inside the offensive zone he can pick defenses apart with his playmaking, but also has a great shot that can beat pro goalies from range. Bouchard's skating is decent, but it's not a selling point. Given he's not that fast or a physical defender, the defensive aspects of the game were an adjustment for him in the AHL. That was the case in junior too but that picked up with time and it's possible it will at the higher levels as well.

135. Justin Barron, D, Colorado

Nov. 15, 2001 | 6-foot-2 | 195 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 60

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

Barron has been hyped for a few years, playing well for Canada and Halifax. He had a tough season with a blood clot keeping him out for a while. He came back in late February, but it was still mostly a lost season with so-so production. On the ice, Barron is a fantastic skater who can lead a rush and close a gap very well, and he projects to be able to handle the NHL speed easily. When he hooks the net and is able to rush with speed, he's very difficult to stop with his size. The question on his game among scouts is whether he has enough skill and offensive IQ to move the puck at the higher levels. I think he does, but I understand the concerns and debated between putting a 55 or 60 on his hockey sense. He may not be a top puck-mover on your blue line, but rather someone who is solid defensively and makes enough plays to take even strength shifts.

136. Nils Hoglander, LW, Vancouver

Dec. 20, 2000 | 5-foot-9 | 190 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 70

Physical Game: 35

Hockey Sense: 55

Hoglander is easy to identify on the ice when he has the puck. His skill level is special, and he gives defenders a very hard time with how elusive he is with the puck and how he easily dekes through sticks and legs. He's a competitive player, who attacks so well due to his skill and how he competes for pucks even as a 5-foot-9 player. He arguably gets too chippy and needs to learn how to play that way as a small guy, but not go over the line. He's a good skater, not that fast, but he is very slippery with his edgework and skill.

137. Klim Kostin, RW, St. Louis

May 5, 1999 | 6-foot-3 | 212 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 65

Hockey Sense: 55

As an evaluation, Kostin's a difficult one. He looks like a big-time player. He's 6-foot-3, he skates well, he can get inside and play a powerful style, and he has skill. The skill and playmaking pops here or there, but what makes him tough to get a handle on is the offense is inconsistent versus men. I would see shifts this past season where he'd dangle a defenseman while skating at full speed, or pull up and make a cute pass through a tough passing lane. But I'd also see shifts where he'd look basic with the puck or tunnel-visioned. I've seen enough good moments from him over the years to know he has offense in him, and could see him become an NHL scorer, but if you told me he ended up a bottom-six forward, I think that's a very reasonable outcome, too.

138. Braden Schneider, D, New York Rangers

Sept. 20, 2001 | 6-foot-2 | 202 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 60

Schneider may not overly excite you upon an initial look at his stats, and it's taken me a while, but he's grown on me a lot over the past two seasons. I see a player with a lot of assets and few holes in his skill set. He's a 6-foot-2, right-handed defenseman who can skate well. He can rush pucks and close gaps well. Schneider moves the puck very well out of the defensive zone, showing great vision and patience on his outlets. He defends well due to his feet, but also doesn't shy away from playing the body and knocking players off pucks. He has some offensive blue line touch, but he's probably not going to be a power play guy in the NHL. He moves it at a clear NHL level, though, to where I think he could take a regular even strength shift and help his team's possession game without needing to be sheltered by his coach.

139. Dylan Samberg, D, Winnipeg

Jan. 14, 1999 | 6-foot-4 | 216 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 65

Hockey Sense: 55

Samberg doesn't post huge point totals or have flashy high-end skill, but he looks like a player who is going to transition into a good pro. He's a big, mobile defenseman who can move the puck well and makes a lot of stops. With his easy four-way mobility, long reach, and physical play, he breaks up a lot of rushes. His skating allows him to help his team in transition, and he has enough skill to make plays at both ends of the rink. He likely won't be a power-play type in the NHL, but his outlets are good enough to be trusted to play significant minutes and keep the play flowing in the right direction. He signed at the end of his junior season and looks ready to make the jump.

140. Dominik Bokk, RW, Carolina

Feb. 3, 2000 | 6-foot-2 | 187 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 40

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60



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Bokk's talent jumps out when you watch him. He is highly skilled and quick, and he makes difficult offensive plays at a pro pace. He's a highly creative playmaker who makes unique plays with the puck. He's a great passer and shooter who can score from range with a hard, accurate shot. Bokk's talent has never been in doubt, but he plays on the perimeter a bit too much, needs to be better off the puck and needs to improve his overall consistency. He's had a new SHL club in each of the past three seasons too, so some stability on that front would be ideal.

141. Tyson Jost, C, Colorado

March 14, 1998 | 5-foot-11 | 192 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 35

Hockey Sense: 60

Jost has had roughly the same scoring rate for his first three seasons in the NHL, albeit he was a part of a top team this past season. He has a high skill level, showing very quick hands and great coordination in small areas to make skilled plays. He's a creative playmaker who can see the ice at a high level. When he was an amateur, I thought Jost could become a very good two-way center in the NHL. He's a good skater but I underrated how much the speed and physicality of the league would push him. While Jost has been in the league for three years, it was just his 21-year-old season, and even if it seems like he's stagnated he has time to grow.

142. Emil Bemstrom, RW, Columbus

June 1, 1999 | 5-foot-10 | 181 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 40

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Bemstrom is a player I continue to appreciate and elevate his rating as time has gone on. He has a lot of offensive dimensions to his game. He has slick skill and NHL quality speed. I wouldn't call the speed elite for his size, but he can move at the required pace. He can move pucks very well and create off the perimeter. His shot is his best weapon, with the ability to beat NHL goalies from mid-range. Bemstrom is a small player and physically he'll be limited at the top level. There are concerns from scouts about whether he'll just be a perimeter scorer but I see flashes of good compete from him. I think he has the potential to be a 20-goal scorer in the league but he will need to bulk up and ideally add a tad more to his skating.

143. Victor Mete, D, Montreal

June 7, 1998 | 5-foot-9 | 183 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 65

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 30

Hockey Sense: 60

Mete has played three full NHL seasons where he's been a modest-scoring defenseman playing third-pair minutes. His skating is clearly the best aspect of his game. His edgework, and especially his speed, are elite and allow him to push the pace when leading attacks up the ice. There isn't a lot about his game that dazzles outside his skating. He's a

smart passer who makes good outlets and has some blue line creativity, but I don't think his puck game wows and as a 5-foot-9 defender it's hard to see him as a "tough matchups" type. I think there's enough to his skill set that he could progress into a league-average defenseman but it would be nice to see his game take a big step soon.

144. Tyler Madden, C, Los Angeles

Nov. 9, 1999 | 5-foot-11 | 152 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 65

Physical Game: 40

Hockey Sense: 60

Madden is extremely skilled and confident with the puck. He attacks defensemen like he can beat anyone one-on-one and often he can, showing tremendous small-area skills. Madden is also a great playmaker who can find seams and improvise to make plays just like how he improvises with his stickhandling. He's undersized, but competitive. He kills penalties, he works for pucks and has shown over the years he can be relied on by coaches in all situations. Madden's main weakness is his average foot speed, which at his size will be a challenge in the NHL, but he's so skilled that I think he will still succeed.

145. Alexander Khovanov, C, Minnesota

April 12, 2000 | 5-foot-11 | 198 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 45

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 60

Khovanov is a fantastic playmaker who had the puck skills, and especially the vision, to make tough plays in the NHL. He has great patience to let plays develop, but also has the NHL-level pace in how quickly he can read the game and move pucks to create chances. He's a great passer, but Khovanov also has a very good shot and can score from range. The main concerns on Khovanov are his size and skating, which is why some scouts are skeptical his game will translate to the higher levels. But he competes very hard and despite being 5-foot-11 has some pushback in his game physically.

146. Samuel Poulin, RW, Pittsburgh

Feb. 25, 2001 | 6-foot-1 | 216 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

Poulin is a very creative offensive player with high-end hands who can flash elite caliber puckhandling. He can beat defenders one-on-one with ease and has the ability to break open a shift with his skill. He also makes a ton of great plays to his teammates in the offensive zone, showing vision and patience with the puck. Poulin has a strong frame and shows the ability to make plays around the net. His main drawback is his average foot speed and, given how physically developed he is, scouts have some concerns about whether this is as quick as he'll ever be. Even without great quickness Poulin has so much offensive talent that he'll be able to be a good NHL player.



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147. Adam Beckman, LW, Minnesota

May 10, 2001 | 6-foot-1 | 179 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

Shot: 70

Beckman's calling card is his shot, leading to 48 goals in 63 games. His wrist shot is elite with the ability to zip pucks past goalies quickly and accurately from mid-range. Despite his massive offensive totals, I wouldn't call Beckman a very flashy player. He's not the type who is going to take the puck and go end-to-end, mostly due to his average foot speed. You see flashes of great hands and playmaking off the rush, but his game is mostly about what happens when he's in the offensive zone and gets chances to use his shot and skill. Even though he's not that fast, he competes well enough for me to think he'll be a good NHLer and overcome his foot speed.

148. Joel Hofer, G, St. Louis

July 30, 2000 | 6-foot-5 | 172 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Athleticism: 55

Hockey Sense: 65

Hofer has grown as a player and person since his draft in 2018, where he went in the fourth round. He measured in at 6-foot-3 in his draft season, but now he's closer to 6-foot-5. While he's big, he's not incredibly quick in terms of his edges and push-offs. His hockey sense, though, is fantastic. Hofer rarely seems out of position, and anticipates the play at a high level. He moves efficiently, uses his stick well to block lanes, and when he does get caught flat-footed he reacts quickly enough to scramble and make the tough save. I do worry a bit when he gets to the NHL and pucks are zipping across the zone if he'll be quick enough, but I think his lateral ability is just good enough given his other attributes to be a quality NHL player.

149. Jason Robertson, LW, Dallas

July 22, 1999 | 6-foot-2 | 201 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 45

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 60

Robertson is a tricky case. He's a 6-foot-2 player with skill and very good hockey sense. He can set up plays and score versus men. He's highly competitive and can make plays both off the perimeter and in the tough areas. He puts up a lot of goals and points wherever he goes, between the OHL, world juniors and the AHL. He was on pace for a 30-goal season in the AHL as a rookie pro. He looks like he has it all, except for his skating stride. His stride can get very upright and lacks any real explosiveness. When he can wind up in the defensive zone there is decent quickness, though. Some NHL scouts remain skeptical of him due to his skating, but I just see so many positives in his game and he continues to produce at a high level. I continue to bet on him figuring it out.

150. Raphael Lavoie, RW, Edmonton

Sept. 25, 2000 | 6-foot-4 | 198 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 45

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 65

Hockey Sense: 55

Shot: 60

Lavoie's size and skill stand out immediately when you hime. He has the ability to dangle defensemen easily with his large wingspan and make plays. He's not that quick so he struggles to make a lot of cute plays off the rush but he has the skill to break open a shift. Lavoie isn't a true top playmaker, but he can move the puck well. His shot is more of a weapon, as he's a legit mid-range threat. I wouldn't call him a physical force, but he uses his size to protect pucks well, and I thought he showed improvements off the puck last season, earning large responsibilities in Chicoutimi and Halifax.

151. Cam York, D, Philadelphia

Jan. 5, 2001 | 5-foot-11 | 174 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 40

Hockey Sense: 60

York's poise with the puck is evident whenever he's on the ice. He's a heads-up passer who makes great exits consistently. He's confident enough and talented enough with the puck to make highly-skilled plays and look for tough passes in the offensive zone. York's skating is good enough to pull away from checkers and create off the blue line. He can pull away from guys but his skating won't be his main selling point. Given his brain and skating combo he can defend well enough at his 5-foot-11 size to project to hold his own at the higher levels, although scouts think in the NHL his value will come more from his offense.

152. Ian Mitchell, D, Chicago

Jan. 18, 1999 | 5-foot-11 | 174 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 40

Hockey Sense: 60

Mitchell is a skilled puck-mover. He has the high IQ to find seams, stretch the ice and hold pucks to let lanes develop. He has quick-twitch hands to make skilled plays but prefers to make a good pass as opposed to make the flashy skill play. He's not super quick but is a good skater and will be able to skate at the top level. Mitchell is undersized, but defends fine due to his smarts and mobility. He may not be your team's best scoring defenseman or top defender, but he will be a useful NHL player.

153. Ridly Greig, C, Ottawa

Aug. 8, 2002 | 5-foot-11 | 163 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 50

Hockey Sense: 60

Greig is the type of player who you will to love to watch on your team and will drive opposing fans crazy. He's a highly skilled player who shows a



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ton of confidence with the puck. He can beat defenders clean with consistency. He's not a truly elite passer – although he does pass quite well – but I love his offensive creativity. He tries to make things happen and attempts plays you rarely see. He's got a lot of edge to his game, too. Greig knocks opponents around, he scraps off the puck, he attacks the net and gets under people's skin. The only true issue in his game is average skating ability. I think he has a powerful lower body so he has quickness, but the stride in itself is not technically smooth.

154. Ryan Poehling, C, Montreal

Jan. 3, 1999 | 6-foot-2 | 185 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 50

Puck Skills: 55

Physical Game: 55

Hockey Sense: 60

Poehling had a tough rookie pro season. He played a significant role in the AHL but struggled to score, and he didn't make much of an impact in 27 NHL games. His strengths are his hockey sense and competitiveness. He makes a lot happen with his passing, both his ability to make plays on the move and from a standstill. He's not that quick, but looks quicker than he is due to his effort. He can PK and play tougher minutes. I see flashes of speed and skill of higher grades than I've given him, but not consistently. His season does not reflect the grade I'm giving him of a projected good NHL player. I still give him a good projection because of the track record and what I've seen from him over the years but if he doesn't have a better second pro season it will be tougher to stand by him as a potential second-line forward.

155. Bobby Brink, RW, Philadelphia

July 8, 2001 | 5-foot-8 | 163 pounds

Tier: Very good NHL player

Skating: 55

Puck Skills: 60

Physical Game: 25

Hockey Sense: 65

Brink stands out with the puck on his stick. He is skilled and creative on offense. He makes tough plays off the flank with space and in tight areas when he needs to improvise. He's a fantastic passer who can create chances in bunches and projects to run a power play at the pro level. Brink has a good shot too and can beat goalies from mid-range if given space. He prefers to make a play or shoot the puck, but he has slippery skill to make plays through defenders. The puck game is unquestionable, but Brink's detractors point to his 5-foot-8 frame and wonky skating stride. I thought his skating looked more powerful this season and he showed an ability to pull away and get around the ice well. The technique is still not great and his stride can break down and flail as often as he is able to turn defenders around. I think he's quick enough and competes well enough to make it but debates about him rage on in NHL scouting circles.

Breaking the list down by team, the Rangers and the Devils lead the league with nine player each on the ranking. The Kings and Senators each have eight.

On the other end of the spectrum, the Penguins and Lightning each only have one player on the list. And the Bruins and Capitals each have two.

Tool grades:

Tool grades are based on the 20-80 scale. In this scale, 50 projects as pro average, 55 as above-average, 60 top third, 70 as elite and 80 as among the very best; 45 is below-average and 40 is fringe pro quality. The shot is only graded if it is notably good.

Tier Definitions:

Generational player: One of the best players ever to play in the NHL.

Special NHL player: Projects as a true NHL star, someone who is among the best players in the league.

Elite NHL player: Projects as an impact player, someone who is top 10-15 percent in the NHL at his position.

High-end NHL player: Projects as a first-line forward or a top-pair defenseman.

Very good NHL player: Projects as a top-six forward, top-four defenseman or starting goaltender in the NHL.

The Athletic LOADED: 10.23.2020

Sportsnet.ca / Canucks give polarizing Virtanen another chance to prove himself

Iain MacIntyre@imacSportsnet

October 22, 2020, 6:43 PM

VANCOUVER – It was either a wonderful coincidence or wry brilliance that for the video press conference announcing his new two-year contract with the Vancouver Canucks, Jake Virtanen wore a fashion hoodie with the word "Loveless" across the chest.

Whether a statement or an accusation, it was a power move.

The 24-year-old winger isn't loveless, of course.

He's from Abbotsford, which makes the amiable Virtanen a hometown kid on the Canucks. Lots of fans love him. But some do not, and this is probably the way it's going to stay for a while.

Few current players split the fan base as much as Virtanen – not because he isn't good, but because he hasn't been good enough so far for a player who was drafted sixth-overall by Jim Benning not long after the general manager took over the Canucks in 2014.

Virtanen scored 18 goals and 27 even-strength points last season with third-line ice time of 13:05 per game. That is impressive. In his fifth season, Virtanen probably would have eclipsed his stated goal of scoring 20 had the regular campaign not been shortened to 69 games. It has taken a lot of baby steps to get this far.

But the coronavirus shutdown gave Virtanen the chance to disappoint the team with his training-camp conditioning twice in one season. And when the Canucks began their surprising playoff run in Edmonton, the 18-goal scorer was healthy-scratched by coach Travis Green.

His timeout lasted only one game, but in the 16 playoff games he played, Virtanen managed just two goals and one assist and only sporadically delivered the physical presence he is capable of for someone who weighs 220 pounds and is arguably the most powerful skater on the team.

If playoff elimination were high school graduation, Virtanen would have been voted the non-unrestricted free agent least likely to return to the Canucks. He looked like he needed a change and the team badly needed some salary-cap relief.

And then there he was Thursday, under contract for two more years at an average of \$2.55 million US.

"With him, it's that consistency you're looking for shift in and shift out," Benning explained to Sportsnet. "I think Jake's come a long way these last couple of years. We've seen glimpses of what he can be.



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"It can be frustrating. But I've just seen too many examples where if you're not patient with those guys and move them on, he ends up being that power forward that scores 25 goals for somebody else. We've put a lot of time in his development and we're hoping he can continue to mature and get better and be that player for us."

*I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time.

The two-year contract came as Virtanen and the team were scheduled to go to arbitration next week. His average salary is probably less than what an arbitrator would have awarded him on a one-year deal, but includes a back-loaded salary of \$3.4 million in 2021-22.

Virtanen has been auditioned several times as a top-six winger, but has never seized that role under Green. But he became more important to the Canucks when Tyler Toffoli, acquired in a February trade from Los Angeles, left Vancouver as an unrestricted free agent this month.

Virtanen will get another chance to play in the top six, even if it puts Benning under even more pressure to shed payroll elsewhere to make it happen. Thursday's contract puts the Canucks about \$1.5 million over the limit, and the team still hopes to re-sign injured winger Josh Leivo and fill out the bottom of its defence with minor-league graduates.

"I feel like I can kind of go up and down the lineup," Virtanen said. "But if that top-six right side is open, it's definitely a goal of mine to get there, but stay there. I want to make sure I can contribute, and I think I can do that for sure. I want to show that to teammates and management and myself.

"I'm making sure that I'm ready to go. I think Travis will see that. I want to turn some heads coming into camp and making sure I'm feeling good about myself and my confidence is high. Travis knows what kind of player I am."

31 Thoughts: The Podcast

Jeff Marek and Elliotte Friedman talk to a lot of people around the hockey world, and then they tell listeners all about what they've heard and what they think about it.

And Benning knows what kind of player he'd like Virtanen to become.

"When we watched Alex Tuch play against us for Vegas (in the playoffs), he used his size and speed and had a really good series against us," Benning said of the Knights' power forward. "We think that's what Jake can get to. We've been patient with him. It's been incremental steps for him to get there. But he's a guy that can take another step."

It was only six weeks ago when Benning said he had "expected more" from Virtanen in the playoffs.

"When the GM says that about you, you kind of go back home and you think about it a lot," Virtanen, who is spending the off-season training with teammate Tyler Myers in Kelowna, said Thursday. "For me, that was my first playoff experience. . . and obviously not normal playoffs circumstances being in the bubble and everything. At least I have that experience now."

And as for what others say about him?

"The media and Twitter stuff, I don't really want to comment," Virtanen told Sportsnet 650 radio host Scott Rintoul. "Everyone always wants to say something. Obviously, I have Twitter and Instagram and a lot of people send me stuff. But you know, it doesn't really bother me. It used to bother me when I was younger. People have their own opinions and that's just how it is. That's what Twitter is.

"For me, it's just focussing on myself and my team and how we're going to make that next round of the playoffs, how we're going to win the Cup, how we're going to come into camp ready to go. People can think what they want."

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 10.23.2020

Sportsnet.ca / Flames' focus on character and fit to build roster is evident

Eric Francis@EricFrancis

October 22, 2020, 2:04 PM

Joakim Nordstrom might not be a familiar name to most Flames fans, but to a good chunk of the current roster, he's known as a friend.

Estimating he knows roughly half the players on the team he signed a one-year deal with on Monday to kill penalties and patrol the fourth line, Nordstrom is quick to point out there's one in particular he may be a little bit too familiar with.

"Elias Lindholm is an absolute sandbagger," deadpanned the 28-year-old winger who golfs regularly with the Flames star in their native Sweden.

"I don't think he's adjusted his handicap in four years. He usually beats me, he's a good golfer. So, the friendship fees are high enough – he can't charge me anymore."

Becoming the sixth Swede on the Flames roster, it should come as no surprise Nordstrom works out regularly with Oliver Kyllington and is so tight with Lindholm that the two went on a golf trip a few years back to Portugal with another new Flame, Jacob Markstrom.

The trio has also travelled to see Champions League games in Spain and went on fishing expeditions, like the one this summer that still has them talking about the whopper they giddily posted online.

"It's kind of funny how things work out," chuckled Nordstrom, who hoisted a Stanley Cup with Chicago and won 2012 world-junior gold in the Saddledome, of all places.

"Being really good friends with Elias, I've talked to him on a daily basis and I keep track of the Flames and I was aware there were multiple connections there. I also know Noah Hanifin and Derek Ryan from playing in Carolina. When I had a chance to sign (with the Flames) I asked (Lindholm) a little bit about the organization, the team and the city. He always talks about how much he likes it there, but he wasn't too pushy. It's just a good fit."

As minor a signing as Nordstrom is, it's symbolic of what the Calgary Flames have focused heavily on ever since they jettisoned James Neal: acquiring character pieces that fit into the fabric of a tight core.

The Neal trade itself demonstrated exactly that, as Milan Lucic replaced the disgruntled winger with leadership and grit the team was short on.

Although general manager Brad Treliving grabbed a considerable amount of attention for seizing the opportunity to snag the most attractive free-agent goaltender available earlier this month, the Flames have seen very little change to their roster.

In fact, the open debate in Calgary revolves around whether the GM has done enough to improve the team's fortunes.

Chris Tanev was signed to fill the fleet-footed boots of T.J. Brodie with a more defensive-minded skillset, putting the onus on significant internal growth throughout the lineup to fuel the club in what will likely be an all-Canadian division whenever the season starts.

The rest of the moves are all about filling tiny holes in the team's depth, including forward Dominik Simon, who was signed on Thursday.

But even those additions must come with the makeup, personality and psyche that fits into a room in which there is a belief something special is being built.

"You need the player first, but, yes, we think character is important to have," said Treliving.

"We have a really strong room. Having a room full of character people who are willing to do what you have to do is important. Joakim is another example of that. He does things that take courage. You want to have



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character people because when things are going the wrong way they'll dig in and do the things that are necessary."

Extensive conversations with people who played with Nordstrom in Boston, Carolina and Chicago convinced Treliving the shot-blocking workhorse was the type of person and player that would complement a group that will have its top three lines from the playoff intact next season.

"He's not a sexy signing, but he does a lot of the grunt work that's important," said Treliving, who will pay Nordstrom \$700,000.

"He's a penalty killer and a strong, physical guy who is an unbelievable teammate who plays an important role at important times. Guys who played with him rave about him."

Similar research was obviously done on Tanev and Markstrom, who were universally applauded as respected and appreciated teammates in Vancouver who are seen as good fits in Calgary.

One of the hallmarks of this Flames bunch is how close the lads are, prompting several of them to go out of their way to discuss how much closer they became in the bubble and how much they hoped to get another shot together next season.

Disrupting that group, no matter how many are clamouring for a significant change or two, doesn't appear to be in the cards.

It took time for skeptics to see the true merits of a Lucic deal that was made largely because of the intangibles the hulking winger brought.

And while every team in the league certainly looks for character and fit with every acquisition, the Flames' focus on it is evident.

Sportsnet.ca / Canadiens' Claude Julien under pressure to help team meet lofty expectations

Eric Engels@EricEngels

October 22, 2020, 4:39 PM

MONTREAL— It's all in Claude Julien's hands now, and he knows it.

The 60-year-old coach of the Montreal Canadiens, appearing healthy and happy just two months into his convalescence from heart surgery, spent 57 minutes talking with reporters via Zoom Thursday. He spoke at length on the depth of his roster in the wake of several additions general manager Marc Bergevin recently made during the off-season, and he expanded on his desire to get back behind the bench in short order and on how he views the puzzle and where the pieces fit within it.

But it took Julien just 42 seconds to make his most salient point of the day, one that shows to what extent he understands that the team's success is riding on him.

"I think right now what we've done is that we've made our team that much better that we should expect to make the playoffs," Julien started. "And if people think that it's putting pressure on ourselves, pressure's what you make of it. For me, I don't look at it as pressure but as an opportunity, and we should be good enough to make the playoffs and we should thrive on the opportunity to accomplish that. It's as simple as that. Marc has done a good job of giving us a team that should make the playoffs..."

"If by mid-season I've lost half my team to injuries, I guess those things change. Other than that, we should definitely be a competitive team that should be able to make the playoffs."

Remaining Time -1:37

Is it playoffs or bust for Julien's Canadiens after productive offseason?

Understanding that it's a dime short of declaring yourself a Stanley Cup contender, it's still a considerable departure from saying, "We hope we can make it," which is what Julien and Bergevin have repeatedly said over the last three seasons of icing a roster that pales in comparison to the one they have on their hands right now.

The expectations have risen, and Julien has to put the Canadiens on the right path from Day 1 of the 2020-21 season. And the margin for error will be much slimmer than it's been through his last three-and-a-half seasons behind their bench.

The coach referenced a more condensed 2020-21 schedule to explain the importance of adding a quality goaltender in Jake Allen behind 33-year-old starter Carey Price, but a condensed schedule—and one that's probably going to be at least 20 games shorter than commissioner Gary Bettman was hoping it would be—has just as much bearing on him as it does his goaltenders. It means there's little to no time to recover from any sort of extended slump.

This won't be like last season when the Canadiens had two eight-game skids from October through January but were still within striking distance of a playoff spot in the weeks leading up to the February trade deadline.

Jeff Marek and Elliotte Friedman talk to a lot of people around the hockey world, and then they tell listeners all about what they've heard and what they think about it.

Granted, the season will still be more of a marathon than it will be a sprint, but any deviations far off course will prove much more costly, and that ramps the pressure up considerably.

It was high to begin with, because the Canadiens have failed to earn their way into the playoffs in four of the last five seasons. But it's even higher now—especially since Bergevin added pieces at every position and ones that specifically offset the deficiencies of Montreal's most recent roster.

As Julien acknowledged, having a seasoned goaltender in Allen is going to afford Price the rest the coaching staff couldn't give him in front of Keith Kinkaid and Charlie Lindgren last season. The coach said he felt trading for and then signing Joel Edmundson and adding rookie Alexander Romanov to the mix gives his defence more size and versatility, and he noted that newcomers Josh Anderson and Tyler Toffoli will bring goals and a level of balance to his forward group that wasn't previously there.

"It's easy enough to look at the names of our forwards and see we have four lines that should be very competitive," Julien said. "I'd say right away, with the number of players we have up front who can score and do good work, that we can easily eliminate the idea of a first line, a second line, a third line; I think it'll be a question of the line playing best during a given game playing as the top line that night.

"We have a good depth and balance in our lines. I can make the lines right now, but they can change tomorrow. That's the beauty of what we have right now—we can move players here and there and still have good lines..."

But it'll still be up to Julien to make the right decisions at the right times, and to have the right read on the chemistry and a proper feel for the moment.

And the coach has to hope he's right about sticking with the system he implemented three years ago.

"Right now what I would tell you, I don't know that a tonne has to change from the way we play more than we've got more depth to make the things we've been working on becoming even more successful," Julien said. "We talked about being a little bit bigger, so maybe now we get a little bit better along the walls. As you know, you guys watch hockey enough and you know where those issues are, and there were times where we got caught against those teams that really battle along the walls [and] we really struggled, we couldn't get on the inside. So now we're bigger, with the addition of guys like Anderson... we're able to get a little bit better in those areas."



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Julien's hopeful that with Anderson and Toffoli, the Canadiens can finish more of the chances they generate at five-on-five—they ranked second in the NHL in shot-attempt differential, second in scoring-chance differential, but 25th in shooting percentage last season.

"I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time.

And even if neither player answers all of the Canadiens' problems on the power play, he feels they'll help in that department.

Guys like Toffoli—we know he can score and he's going to add something there," Julien said. "When you look at a guy like Josh Anderson—a big guy who does good work around the net—we have elements that we can certainly put in certain positions and help our power play. We brought players who can help us there and we're going to look to use them there."

But Julien's not depending on that, and he said that even though he'll continue to lean on associate coach Kirk Muller and assistant Dominique Ducharme in that department, the buck stops with him.

It does in every department.

"It's certain that with the additions we made we've become a team that's much more competitive," Julien said. "We feel confident, and it's our work as a coaching staff to bring this team up to match the expectation level. I'm confident with the group we have, I'm excited and anxious to get started and to work with our group."