



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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THE ATHLETIC

Hurricanes projections: How much did they improve this offseason, and where?

By Sara Civian Nov 6, 2020

While the unusual 2020 NHL offseason isn't over yet — and it was expected to be more of a slow burn than a deadline frenzy to begin with — it's safe to say the thick of it has passed.

A few big names like Mike Hoffman are still up for grabs, but most significant signings are done and dominoes have fallen. There's also the unfortunate reality that teams are especially strapped for cash, and the Hurricanes are no exception.

After they signed restricted free agents Haydn Fleury and Warren Foegele last week, they're left hovering around \$1 million in cap space for 2020-21. Hurricanes GM and president Don Waddell and coach Rod Brind'Amour have both essentially said they're fine with the same core group from 2019-20, and their offseason moves thus far echo that sentiment.

But where have they changed, and are there any glaring areas that still need improvement?

League comparison

Every NHL team is on its own path, with its own cap space and its own problems. It's also easier for bad teams to improve (remember how it wasn't even cool to win Most Improved at your high school sports banquet? May or may not be speaking from experience.)

Keep in mind this isn't a power ranking based on how good teams are, but The Athletic's Dom Luszczyszyn put together a look at how each team improved during free agency based on his Game Score projection model. This is based on Game Score Value Added, which he can use to project what level of production each player will provide.

The Hurricanes are 20th most improved in the NHL, according to Dom.

From the article:

Carolina Hurricanes

Wins Added: -0.7 wins

Salary Added: -\$2.3 million

In: Jesper Fast

Out: Justin Williams, Sami Vatanen, Joel Edmundson, Trevor van Riemsdyk

The defensive losses aren't a huge deal and Carolina already has strong depth there. The bigger question is how much of Justin Williams' on-ice value can Jesper Fast reasonably replace? Williams' off-ice value and intangible element is untouchable but on-ice the retired winger did take a step back last season at 5-on-5 where his play-driving ability wasn't up to his usual rate. Fast is average in that regard and looks like a solid third-liner but still a step below Williams' projection.

This is fair. Overall, minus-0.7 wins is pretty negligible, and you should read that whole article if you want to feel better about the Canes. But yeah, losing Williams is a morale issue we got a preview of in the weeks before his return in 2019-20. At the same time, I think management and coaches are confident that a young core got more mature through the bubble playoff run and the need to rally the troops is less urgent. And as much as I love Dom and his model, he said himself Williams took a step back and it would be unreasonable to assume that would improve or even remain stagnant.

So, with context, the Canes stayed about the same. There's no way to tell if that'll be enough, but sometimes the best thing you can do is not make your team actively worse, especially if Brind'Amour is the one telling you to trust the process.

However, a sneaky problem is when a team basically stays the same but other teams improve around it. According to Dom's model, here's the movement in the Metro:

Islanders:

Wins Added: -1.7 wins

Salary Added: -\$3.6 million

In: None

Out: Devon Toews, Thomas Greiss, Derrick Brassard, Andy Greene, Matt Martin

Blue Jackets:

Wins Added: -1.6 wins

In: Max Domi, Mikko Koivu

Out: Josh Anderson, Ryan Murray, Markus Nutivaara, Alex Wennberg

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Rangers:



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Wins Added: -0.2 wins

Salary Added: -\$8.1 million

In: Jack Johnson

Out: Henrik Lundqvist, Jesper Fast, Marc Staal, Greg McKeeg

Flyers:

Wins Added: -0.1 wins

Salary Added: -\$6.75 million

In: Erik Gustafsson

Out: Matt Niskanen, Derek Grant, Tyler Pitlick, Nate Thompson

Capitals:

Wins Added: 0.0 wins

Salary Added: -\$1.2 million

In: Justin Schultz, Henrik Lundqvist, Trevor van Riemsdyk

Out: Braden Holtby, Radko Gudas, Travis Boyd, Ilya Kovalchuk

Penguins:

Wins Added: 0.2 wins

Salary Added: -\$8.2 million

In: Mike Matheson, Kasperii Kapanen, Cody Ceci, Colton Sceviour, Mark Jankowski

Out: Matt Murray, Patric Hornqvist, Nick Bjugstad, Justin Schultz, Jack Johnson, Patrick Marleau, Conor Sheary, Dominik Simon

Devils:

Wins Added: 4.8 wins

Salary Added: \$11.2 million

In: Ryan Murray, Corey Crawford, Andreas Johnsson

Out: John Hayden, Joey Anderson, Mirco Mueller

Take from that what you will. My first thought is the Islanders need to, like, do something and the general pack of contenders is separated by decimals. I thought it was funny

that the model projected what my brain already thought: For Washington, essentially trading Holtby for Lundqvist is a really good net zero.

What might have been

Sometimes the best thing you can do in free agency is absolutely nothing. Sometimes that's just a cop-out.

When you think about how the Canes could have improved on their offseason, you think about goaltending. I'll be diving into the Petr Mrazek-James Reimer tandem later this month (with the help of those much smarter), but it truly is smack dab in the middle between goaltending being a key strength and goaltending being the death sentence for this Hurricanes roster.

The Canes front office had to keep in mind that making a move wouldn't necessarily make sense while navigating a robust goalie market. They also wanted to get their RFAs signed and show Fleury and Foegele their value before jumping over the cap. The door hasn't officially closed on anything — does it ever, really, in Waddell's world? — but the Canes are prepared to start the 2020-21 season with the current tandem.

I still think the Darcy Kuemper situation is too perfect to not explore, but again, I believe the Canes wanted to sign the RFAs first and foremost and they're confident in the Mrazek-Reimer tandem.

In conclusion

The Hurricanes are relying on their youthful core of Sebastian Aho, Dougie Hamilton, Teuvo Teravainen, Andrei Svechnikov, Jaccob Slavin, Martin Necas, etc., to provide in-house next steps. They also spent the past two seasons making tons of moves and spending to the cap for the first time in forever to get to where they are now. The Hurricanes front office feels like the biggest pieces are already in place and they shouldn't fix anything that ain't broke — and it's tough to argue against that when you look at the names I just wrote.

But wouldn't all that be so much prettier with an ... elite goalie?

Sigh.

The Athletic / By the numbers: Grading every NHL team's contract efficiency, 2020 edition

By Dom Luszczyszyn Nov 6, 2020

This week, we've gone over the league's best and worst contracts, determined by how much surplus value the deal is expected to provide and the likelihood the player will provide it. Now it's time to look at everybody else, grading each team's total contract efficiency.

Like last year, each team is graded based on the same methodology in an attempt to measure which teams are most efficient with the money they spend. The contracts being graded are every healthy, non-ELC skater that my model has a projection for, as well as any dead money a team has on their cap via buyouts, salary retention and cap recapture penalties. That means no RFAs without a deal, no players on an entry-level contract, no players without significant NHL-



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playing time, no players on LTIR and no goalies. My model currently doesn't have win projections for goaltenders beyond one season or expected contract value, so they were omitted. Unused cap space is also not part of the equation as there's no telling exactly how that space would be used. This is just about the value of each contract currently on the books, signed as of Nov. 3.

Each team was graded based on the surplus value they bring in per player (all dead money counts as one) as well as the average probability those deals will provide positive value. Both are based on a player's age-adjusted projected win output according to GSVA and the uncertainty in that projection for future seasons, along with the cost of a win on the open market. How much each team spends to obtain those wins will also be graded.

The main goal is looking at what teams have on the books. What a player has already done holds no merit. They may have been worth their deal as a whole and been excellent value prior, but that may not matter going forward. Future value means age is exceptionally important in terms of grading each contract, with players peaking between the ages of 22-26 and declining afterward.

Surplus value will depend on term, where more years left offer a larger opportunity to compound value, good or bad. Positive value probability depends on the certainty of a player's projection, which depends on the size of the sample the projection. Longer term means that uncertainty increases too.

Each contract was graded based on where a player's combined surplus value and positive value probability fall on the following percentile scale. All contract and roster data is as of Nov. 3.

Here's how each team stacks up in regard to the efficiency of all the contracts they currently have signed.

1. Boston Bruins

Last year: 5th

The team with the two best deals in the league naturally comes out on top. It wasn't all that close. David Pastrnak and Brad Marchand provide Boston with immense surplus value, but the team has three other deals in the "A" range that help too. Patrice Bergeron's deal is right there in value and only in a lesser standing due to a shorter term. Ditto Charlie McAvoy, the team's top defender. Matt Grzelcyk isn't a household name, but he can provide immense value if he's moved up the lineup, especially if he gets a crack on the top power play in the absence of Torey Krug. Add Craig Smith's excellent deal to that and the Bruins are getting a lot for a low price.

After moving David Backes, the team is also low on millstones, with only a couple of problematic contracts. That's something nearly every team has, and when a team is getting such immense surplus value at the top of the lineup it certainly matters a lot less. The Bruins were best in surplus value and cost per win and second in positive value probability. Elite.

2. Colorado Avalanche

Last year: 16th

The biggest riser from last season is unsurprisingly the Colorado Avalanche, who were close to top five in every category, finishing sixth in cost per win and top five in the other two. They're the only other team in the "A" range, though they're still arguably closer to the next tier than they are to Boston.

The knock on Colorado last season was that the team had more "fair" deals than "good" deals. That's changed with a slew of contracts signed with all of Mikko Rantanen, Ryan Graves, Devon Toews and Samuel Girard getting B+ grade contracts. The revamped defence helps a lot and doesn't even include the immense value the team gets from having Cale Makar on an ELC. Add solid deals for Valeri Nichushkin and Tyson Jost, plus internal improvement after a strong season from the rest of the depth and the team's cap picture looks strong despite the one potential headache with Erik Johnson.

The team's excellent cap structure is obviously highlighted by the guy at the top, Nathan MacKinnon, on one of the best contracts in the league. He's the main reason the team ranks second, but the biggest reason for the jump is that the rest of the team is reasonably priced. This exercise doesn't account for unused cap space and that hurt the Avalanche last year. They've shown since just how savvy they are at using it.

3. Pittsburgh Penguins

Last year: 7th

The Penguins acquired one of the league's worst contracts in Mike Matheson and somehow moved up on this list compared to last season. That's hard to do, but it's partially because at this time last season the team had two defenders under contract with deals just as poor in Jack Johnson and Erik Gudbranson. The outlook there looks a lot better now, especially with the emergence of Marcus Pettersson as a legitimate top-four option on a fair deal (he was an RFA at this time last year).

Up front, the Penguins still hold excellent value with Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin, but it's the duo's sidekicks that are bringing in the most value. Jake Guentzel has evolved into one of the game's best wingers and now has one of the league's best contracts himself after proving he's a legitimate point-per-game threat. As for Bryan Rust, he exploded last year and while it's hard to imagine he can stay at that level, any regression should still find him well north of the \$3.5 million he's being paid. He's a great player.

The Penguins are a very deep team and while there isn't an abundance of slam dunk deals, they're mostly above average and that's enough to rank highly in a league littered with lesser deals. Even the Brandon Tanev deal doesn't look as awful after a strong first season in Pittsburgh.

4. Columbus Blue Jackets

Last year: 17th



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It was really shocking to see Columbus this high and it's mostly because only one other team, Boston, pays less per win than Columbus. It helps having no negative value players on the roster as well as losing the two worst deals on the books from last year in Alex Wennberg (bought out) and Brandon Dubinsky (LTIR). It's also worth noting that Zach Werenski was an RFA at this time last year and his contract is graded as the second-best here behind Oliver Bjorkstrand's bargain one-year deal. Keep that in mind with Pierre-Luc Dubois, who is still an unsigned RFA and likely to provide north of \$8 million worth of value per season over the next seven years.

What was noticeable even at the top of the list is that even the best teams had some bad deals on the books and that's true of every team, except Columbus. That's the reason the Blue Jackets rank so high as every single deal is at least average or better at this present time. That's really hard to do.

5. Toronto Maple Leafs

Last year: 3rd

Similar to the Blue Jackets, the Leafs don't have many below-average deals. Their worst one is John Tavares, who's slated to slip below \$11 million in annual value starting in 2021. Considering his last season was mired with injuries, there's plenty of room for him to bounce back and live up to his deal. Aside from Tavares, every other deal is above average or better, but the other reason Toronto grades out so highly is that the team's average 65 percent probability of positive value is best in the league.

There is plenty of talk about how Toronto overpaid its three young stars and while that may be very true relative to the RFA market, it's false relative to their projected on-ice value. Auston Matthews is one of the league's best players, a tier where salaries are generally depressed. Based on his surplus value, he's actually one of the better values in the league. William Nylander showed last season he was a bargain at \$7 million after scoring 30 goals. David Pastrnak's cheap contract shouldn't be the standard.

The most contentious deal of the three belongs to Mitch Marner, whose comparable RFAs were closer to \$9 million than \$11 million. He would've been a steal at that price, but he's still solid value at even his inflated price-point where the expectation is three wins per season. He projects to bring closer to 3.4 wins on average over the next five years.

6. Tampa Bay Lightning

Last year: 6th

The Lightning are in a salary cap bind so this outlook has the potential to look very different soon. For starters, the team has three high quality RFAs that are very likely to only add to the team's surplus value. That's simply the Lightning way with the team's best players all on bargain deals. Nikita Kucherov, Steven Stamkos, Brayden Point and Victor Cirelli are on A-level deals and it's safe to figure Anthony Cirelli and Mikhail Sergachev likely add to that – especially if they take bridge deals.

Those signings have the potential to shoot the Lightning up these rankings and it's the reason the team doesn't rank higher right now. The team may not have any cap space, but that's because they have a great team with players on mostly good deals. It's safe to expect one of the team's lesser deals – say Tyler Johnson or Yanni Gourde – won't be on the books by the time the season starts.

The one black mark on the Lightning's cap sheet is Ryan McDonagh's deal. It may have seemed necessary at the time, but it's beginning to look a lot more like an albatross as McDonagh ages and Sergachev continues to blossom. McDonagh is not a \$7 million player now and definitely won't be in six years.

7. Vegas Golden Knights

Last year: 2nd

The Golden Knights had to do a lot of wrangling in order to add Alex Pietrangolo, but they managed to make it work and got him at a fair price. The team itself has a lot of fair money deals with only Ryan Reaves falling below average. It's not ideal paying an enforcer \$1.8 million per for two more seasons in today's cap climate, but there are worse problems leaguewide.

Vegas' best deals are to its best players, with playoff stud Shea Theodore on one of the league's best contracts at \$5.2 million per and the team's five bonafide top-six forwards all grading out as a B+, as all are providing surplus value.

The most interesting name near the top is Max Pacioretty, who is a fun exception to the rule when it comes to contract efficiency. In last year's version, his contract was rated a D+ with an 18 percent chance of providing positive value. Here he is now, upgrading that to a B+ after an excellent comeback season riding shotgun with Mark Stone. While Pacioretty looked unlikely to provide positive value on his deal, it's important to remember that unlikely doesn't mean impossible and 18 percent isn't zero percent. Contracts can be fluid, but it's worth reiterating that Pacioretty is indeed an exception to the rule and 18 percent may in fact have been a little generous. Last year there were 30 players between 15 and 25 percent positive value probability and only four – Pacioretty, Christian Dvorak, Nick Bonino and Noel Acciari – find themselves above 50 percent this season.

8. Florida Panthers

Last year: 20th

Goalie contracts are not included here and that would be enough to have Florida ranked below average. The Sergei Bobrovsky deal is bad. The skaters are a very different story, though, especially after the Panthers somehow found a way to offload one of the league's worst contracts in exchange for Patric Hornqvist, who may still provide positive value over the next three seasons.

The defence is still definitely overpaid here as a whole – UFA experiments gone wrong Keith Yandle and Anton Stralman providing most of the negative value – but the forward deals look decent as a whole. That's mostly thanks to the team's



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two stars, Jonathan Huberdeau and Aleksander Barkov providing massive value on sweetheart deals. Those deals are about to be up though and Florida has very little to show for it.

9. Edmonton Oilers

Last year: 19th

It's a lot easier to be near the top of this list when a team has two of the league's best contracts. Boston and Tampa Bay are the only other teams with two A+ contracts, prestigious company that show what an incredible advantage the Oilers have with Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl on their current deals.

Edmonton was outside the top 10 initially, but the team's latest signing of Dominik Kahun at a bargain bin price was enough to push them over the edge into ninth, 10 spots higher than last year. There are still some problematic contracts on the books keeping the Oilers away from the top five though and hurting the overall value. James Neal is the worst of the worst here, but the Zack Kassian extension isn't great, nor are the deals for Adam Larsson or Darnell Nurse.

There's a lot more good than bad here – I really like the Tyson Barrie addition at his price-point, assuming he eats up a lot of PP1 time – but the Oilers aren't completely out of the woods yet cap-wise. There's still some stuff that needs to be cleaned up in order to properly surround the two superstars with enough talent to be a true contender. They're getting much closer, though.

10. Calgary Flames

Last year: 12th

The Chris Tanev deal looks like a Day 1 dud and the team still has Milan Lucic on the books for three more seasons. Mikael Backlund isn't living up to his deal, either. That's the bad news. The good news is there's a lot more to like here overall.

Johnny Gaudreau looked like one of the league's best deals once and though he's arguably lost his elite status, he's still a bargain at his price. Same for Sean Monahan, though to a lesser extent. Mark Giordano can still bring the heat and Matthew Tkachuk is excellent value on a short bridge. The core looks good here, especially if Andrew Mangiapane can build on last year's breakout. He looks like a legitimate top-six player and that's a steal at his price point. There's more good than bad here.

11. Carolina Hurricanes

Last year: 1st

Last year's top team drops all the way outside the top 10 as surplus value and positive value probability both dropped heavily from \$6 million and 73 percent, respectively. Trading for Brady Skjei is a big part of that as he grades out as having one of the league's worst contracts. Perhaps a change of scenery will help, but it's tough to see him at the one-win rate expected of him.

The other major issue is a decline in value for Brett Pesce, who was projected to be worth 1.6 wins at the start of last season, but is at half of that this year. That's the difference between a high-end No. 2 defender and a decent No. 3. At \$4 million AAV, now he finds himself closer to average.

Carolina still has four A-level deals with Teuvo Teravainen leading the way and Jaccob Slavin looking excellent, but there's not enough value after the team's main four guys.

12. Philadelphia Flyers

Last year: 18th

Despite the Kevin Hayes contract looking even worse than expected, the Flyers improve their year-over-year standing. The team has had some really strong signings starting with the excellent Travis Konecny extension, which now grades above the former best deal, Sean Couturier's (mostly because Couturier only has two years left). Konecny has proven to be a legitimate first-line talent with potential for even more and that's a steal at \$5.5 million. Oskar Lindblom's deal also looks good if he can continue the trajectory he was on before his cancer diagnosis. Franchise defender Ivan Provorov was also signed in that time frame in what looks like the league's fairest deal.

But that Hayes deal still looms large over the team's entire cap picture. At the time of signing, Hayes looked like a high-end second-line centre, with the contract having a 38 percent chance of positive value. That's down all the way to 11 percent now as Hayes's 2018-19 projection looks more like a one-year flash than anything. His current projection is back to where he was the prior two seasons and that makes his \$7 million deal far too pricey. It's among the league's worst, but the rest of the team's cap is efficient enough to rank in the league's upper half.

13. Montreal Canadiens

Last year: 14th

The Canadiens are always an interesting team due to how wide the range of outcomes is for any deal

This offseason the Canadiens made a few big splashes ranging from amazing to good to downright awful. Naturally, the team is somewhere around the middle as a result. Montreal's best deal on the books is a recent extension. Brendan Gallagher is the team's best player and one of the game's most underrated wingers. He essentially got the Chris Kreider deal, but he's a lot more effective than Kreider, creating a much higher likelihood of positive value. I'm a big fan and that extension, coupled with one more year at \$3.75 million makes Gallagher's contract situation one of the league's best. To add to the good, the Tyler Toffoli signing was great given the unusual circumstances surrounding free agency and the Jeff Petry extension was decent.

Now for the bad.

Josh Anderson has the potential to be a very good player if he's closer to the guy he was in 2018-19. The trade for Max Domi was fine, but a seven-year extension at \$5.5 million is a really tough look. That's an overpay even if Anderson



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bounces back to that level and there's a chance he doesn't. He hasn't played a game for the Habs yet, but it's already one of the weaker contracts in the league.

The Joel Edmundson pact isn't too far behind, though it's much shorter. Edmundson projects to be worse now than Karl Alzner was when he signed with Montreal and while Ben Chiarot worked fine in Year 1, much of that was by way of being carried by Shea Weber. Maybe Petry helps Edmundson the same way, but that's not worth the price tag and the team already had a capable defender in Brett Kulak playing that role. Edmundson likely isn't an upgrade.

14. St. Louis Blues

Last year: 4th

This is a dramatic drop off for the Blues and the blame for that can be squarely pointed at the absurd deal given to Justin Faulk, one year away from free agency before he played a single game for the team. That deal projects to be one of the league's worst, costing the Blues \$33 million in surplus value. Without Faulk's deal, the Blues would be up \$15 million.

The Faulk deal is a microcosm of the importance of smart cap spending and efficiently allocating resources. With former captain Alex Pietrangolo one year away from free agency as well and significantly more likely to live up to any deal, it made very little sense to sign the insurance plan first. That's especially true when the insurance plan is nowhere worth the price of his new deal. If the Faulk deal wasn't on the books, the Blues would rank eighth.

The Torey Krug signing looks promising and the Blues have some other decent deals on the books featuring some core players like Ryan O'Reilly, David Perron and Jaden Schwartz, but not much in the way of a steal. It's mostly a lot of fair money, one more year of an overpaid Alex Steen and of course the Faulk albatross.

Aside from the Faulk deal, the Brayden Schenn extension isn't looking great, but a lot of that has to do with the economics brought about by the pandemic. When it was signed it was a fair market deal based on the assumption that the cap would go up. A flat cap takes some value off and it's why there are more negative value deals this time around.

15. Nashville Predators

Last year: 9th

It's a tale of two teams here as the Predators are excellent in handing out value to their defenders but not so much to their forwards. In total, the team's forwards are giving up \$35.6 million in surplus value while the defence gains \$34.5 million. Funny how that works.

The Roman Josi extension looks strong for now given his play last season, but it's the Ryan Ellis one that looks even better, rating as one of the league's best. He has health issues, but when he's playing his total value can approach Josi's on the league's best pair, and he gets paid nearly \$3

million less. That's a bargain, as are both Matt Benning and Mattias Ekholm.

Up front, the team does have some solid deals with depth players like Nick Cousins, Rocco Grimaldi and Calle Jarnkrok. The best deal is with Filip Forsberg, the team's best forward. But those four pacts are all two-year deals. It's the longer ones that are a much bigger concern, with the team's two marquee centres earning the most ire. Matt Duchene's deal looked like an overpay on Day 1 and that's proving prescient after just one season with the likelihood of providing positive value dropping. The 28 percent chance is nearly 10 times as much as Ryan Johansen's paltry 3 percent, though, as Johansen now possesses one of the league's five worst contracts. Before this Nashville also had Kyle Turris's awful deal on the books and now has \$14.3 million of dead money instead. And who decided giving Colton Sissons a seven-year deal was a good call?

16. Detroit Red Wings

Last year: 31st

No team had a bigger year-over-year glow up than the Red Wings, who ranked dead last the previous season, but come in at 16th this time around. It's a monumental leap. The big difference is how much the team is paying per win, going from one of the league's worst to one of the best at third overall. That's thanks mostly to most of the roster being on very short term deals, but also trimming a lot of negative value off the roster. The biggest subtraction is Justin Abdelkader, owner of one of the league's worst contracts who was mercifully bought out this offseason. With Jonathan Ericsson's deal expiring and Darren Helm only having one year left, only Frans Nielsen has a contract in the "D" range compared to the four the Red Wings had last season. One of the ugliest salary cap pictures is finally clearing up.

This is still a bad team filled with players unlikely to live up to their deals, but the short commitments make things much more palatable. That's especially true for new additions Bobby Ryan, Jon Merrill and Troy Stecher, who all bring positive value.

The biggest pluses are the two newest deals for Anthony Mantha and Tyler Bertuzzi. RFA deals usually come in below market price and the team got a great deal for both, especially Mantha, whose deal instantly becomes one of the league's best. Those contracts were enough to push Detroit up a few spots in these rankings.

17. New Jersey Devils

Last year: 21st

The P.K. Subban deal has aged horribly and a change of scenery only furthered his downfall. That was unexpected and leaves the Devils with one of the league's worst deals. It's a similar plight with Travis Zajac, but both deals expire within the next two seasons and the Devils are flush with cap space anyway.

There isn't a lot on the books here, but the team's two most important forwards both have strong deals, with Nico



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Hischier's having big potential to be a steal. The best deal here happens to be Andreas Johnsson's, acquired as a cap dump. He can be an underrated scorer and has the potential to fit in well on the top six next to either of the team's first overall pick centres. One of his best comparables? How about Kyle Palmieri as a Duck at the age of 23, who went on to score 30 goals and 57 points in the following season, his first as a Devil. Maybe lightning strikes twice in New Jersey.

18. Minnesota Wild

Last year: 8th

Finally, we're reaching the endpoint of the utility of Zach Parise's and Ryan Suter's contracts. Both players have been worth it for the first eight years of their deals, but the last five would always be the toughest. It's a \$7.5 million hit that will now become increasingly hard to live up to, making both contracts among the league's worst.

That the team's longest deals are its worst (with the exception of analytics darling Jared Spurgeon) is the main reason the Wild rate so low. Up front, the team has seven deals with a B or B- grade, but six of those are just one-year pacts. The longest non-Parise deal belongs to Mats Zuccarello and that's already looking like it'll be a problem. Marcus Johansson is only signed for one year, but he looks like he'll be grossly overpaid for it, sitting on a much worse deal than Eric Staal, who went to Buffalo in this offseason's trade.

On the back end, Carson Soucy's deal is solid and Matt Dumba's can be too if he manages to bounce back but the Jonas Brodin extension looks a bit too pricey.

19. Anaheim Ducks

Last year: 23rd

The only reason Anaheim ranks this high is because the team is top 10 in cost per win and I'm not sure how the Ducks get there considering some of the deals on the books. They do have some really strong deals with the trifecta of Rickard Rakell, Troy Terry and Danton Heinen up front, plus Kevin Shattenkirk on the back end, but there are a lot more low-value deals. Cam Fowler was much improved last year but is still not worth his massive deal while big extensions to Jakob Silfverberg and Adam Henrique also don't look great.

20. Winnipeg Jets

Last year: 10th

The Jets cap situation is mostly solid, especially if the team's better players can start playing better defence. It would make the Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor contracts look much stronger and maybe even salvage some remaining value in Blake Wheeler's final years.

What would help a lot in that endeavour is if Josh Morrissey bounced back to the player he was next to Jacob Trouba. The Jets defence was a trainwreck last year and a big part of that was Morrissey's game falling off to a very large degree. He couldn't do it on his own, and that contributes to his

contract now looking like the league's worst – he's not a true top-pairing option.

That might change with some help and the additions of Dylan DeMelo and Derek Forbort solidify the defence corps, it just may not be enough to reopen the team's contending window.

21. New York Islanders

Last year: 25th

This is an ugly cap sheet that isn't even at its full potential considering Andrew Ladd is omitted due to a lack of playing time last season. He still has three years left at \$5.5 million.

The Islanders made it to the Eastern Conference final, but that may be where the team peaks considering their current cap picture features a lot of money tied up for a lot of years to players unlikely to live up to their contracts. It has left the team without enough cap space to sign star RFA Mathew Barzal and already forced the team to move on from Devon Toews, one of the team's best defencemen last season. However, Ryan Pullock's two-year, \$10 million deal as an RFA gets an A- and bumped the Islanders up three spots.

Toews ended up signing for \$4.1 million AAV, a pittance compared to how much the team is paying Ladd, Ross Johnston, Leo Komarov, Cal Clutterbuck, Nick Leddy and Johnny Boychuk. Those six players combined project to cost the team half a win of value at a price of \$24.5 million. And they're all signed for next season.

Neither Anders Lee nor Josh Bailey looks especially likely to live up to their deals, while Jean-Gabriel Pageau is costing a hefty price to be the team's third pivot. He was excellent in the playoffs but six years at \$5 million AAV is tough to swallow for what will be his worst seasons.

The deals for Anthony Beauvillier, Adam Pelech and Scott Mayfield are all good and there's little doubt Barzal will provide positive value, but overall this is a very grim outlook.

22. Vancouver Canucks

Last year: 24th

The Canucks are very fortunate to have two of the league's best players on ELCs – with all contracts factored in, arguably the league's two best assets, period – providing massive surplus value. Elias Pettersson and Quinn Hughes need to do a lot of legwork to make up for the mess at the bottom of the roster. Antoine Roussel, Micheal Ferland, Jay Beagle, Loui Eriksson, Jordie Benn and Tyler Myers account for \$23.5 million of the team's expenditure and project to cost Vancouver half a win next season. That is horrific accounting that may have cost the team a good free agent this offseason in Tyler Toffoli. Of that group, only Benn's deal expires next year.

The biggest albatross used to be Eriksson, but with just two years left his deal looks a bit more palatable than Myers's pact, which has four years left. Myers is fine as a No. 4, but he's not a top-pairing defender. Vancouver will get a nice glimpse of what a \$6 million defender should look like with



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the acquisition of Nate Schmidt, whose contract is right in line with his performance.

While there are a lot of rough spots here, there are two very strong deals worth mentioning. Brock Boeser should provide ample value on his bridge deal as he's closer to an \$8 million player, while J.T. Miller looked elite last season next to Pettersson. His \$5.3 million is one of the league's best deals.

23. Washington Capitals

Last year: 15th

John Carlson's deal looks nice and Jakub Vrana's bridge deal will provide excellent value for one more season, but there's a lot more trouble than meets the eye for this aging group. There's a high volume of C-grade contracts from recent signings like Justin Schultz and Brenden Dillon to core pieces T.J. Oshie, Tom Wilson and Dmitry Orlov. Oshie was worth every penny in the front half of his extension but is now entering the back half where he'll likely be less valuable.

That's perhaps an even bigger issue for the team's two worst contracts belonging to its top two centres, Evgeny Kuznetsov and Nicklas Backstrom. Kuznetsov's defence has become a real issue, one that his sublime offence can't reconcile enough to be worth nearly \$8 million. The Backstrom deal is even worse. Freshly minted, it's hard to argue he's still a \$9 million centre at 32 and that's only going to get worse. Backstrom uncharacteristically struggled at 5-on-5 last season and that's a rough sign for the years to come.

24. Dallas Stars

Last year: 11th

The Stars made it to the Stanley Cup Final and had a strong season overall, yet see a sizeable drop in contract efficiency year-over-year. What gives?

Remember, this is about future value and though the team was strong in 2019-20, the years beyond don't have the rosier projection in terms of cap efficiency. The biggest reason for the drop-off is the decline of the team's two strongest forwards, Tyler Seguin and Jamie Benn. Last season, Seguin's deal looked like one of the team's best with just one negative value year. Benn's looked average with two out of six years looking positive. Now, both are in the D-range with every upcoming year looking negative. That's the power of age and a down year. In order for Dallas to reverse its fortunes here, the duo needs a serious bounce-back. At their respective ages, I'm not so sure about it happening, though I'm more optimistic regarding Seguin.

Aside from those two and Esa Lindell's strange \$5.8 million deal (the expectation there is about 1.2 wins, which is well above Lindell's wheelhouse), the other major concern is Radek Faksa. His deal is a little rich, although it is partially made up by the team's other RFA signing this offseason, Denis Gurianov. He has the best deal among the team's forwards.

Among the whole team that honour still goes to John Klingberg, even though his play dropped off a bit last season. Having only two years left though does hurt.

25. Buffalo Sabres

Last year: 22nd

Jack Eichel is blossoming into one of the league's best players and has easily been worth his massive deal. He was the team's best bargain before the team got Victor Olofsson on a very palatable two-year pact – of course, Eichel is probably the main reason Olofsson was so productive. Those are the team's two best deals followed by a couple of players with one year left brought in this offseason in Eric Staal and Taylor Hall. Add Sam Reinhart's one-year deal and the Sabres have done some tidy work recently.

Of course, that has to make up for the massive drag from the last offseason when the Sabres signed Jeff Skinner to a massive extension that looked a little rich then and is looking very rich now. At the time, Skinner's deal was given a C+, but that was before a season from hell where he dropped off completely. It's hard to see him recuperating much value and with seven years left it now looks like one of the league's worst contracts. Combine that with Kyle Okposo's rough deal that's still on the books, plus \$4.5 million dedicated to fourth-line calibre players in Cody Eakin and Zemgus Girgensons and it becomes clear why Buffalo ranks so low.

26. Arizona Coyotes

Last year: 27th

The best news here is that Christian Dvorak has grown into his deal, something that seemed unlikely a year ago. He had a nice breakout season and now grades out as one of the team's better deals behind only Jakob Chychrun's bargain \$4.6 million annual average and Conor Garland's one-year pact.

It's a shame that the same can't be said about Nick Schmaltz, who has one of the team's worst contracts, but it does offer hope for the younger Clayton Keller. I haven't seen enough from him to give him a raise at that price, but the talent is there for it to be possible. He's a second-liner being paid like a first-liner and though reaching that pinnacle isn't outside the realm of possibility for the 22-year-old, it's just unlikely for now based on what he's shown to date. He really struggles to drive play.

It's a bad deal, but one Arizona can live with because of the potential. The Oliver Ekman-Larsson one is a different story, rating as one of the league's worst. That's the common ground with a lot of the teams at the bottom of the list is the possession of an absolute albatross deal. Ekman-Larsson's qualifies as he's being paid to be a legit No. 1 while not having looked the part for any of the last three seasons. It's very unlikely he reaches that height again, hence the poor positive value probability. He's the team's biggest detriment and it's amazing the Coyotes were almost able to trade it.

27. Chicago Blackhawks

Last year: 29th

With Chicago intending to rebuild, there was some talk about the team's three core stars – Patrick Kane, Jonathan Toews and Duncan Keith – potentially wanting out or that the



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Blackhawks would need to move them for assets. There's probably a market for Kane considering he still scores a boatload of points, but what team out there in this flat-cap world is going to trade for Toews and Keith, holders of two of the league's worst contracts? Well, I may be overestimating some teams, but at this stage of their careers those two simply aren't worth the money. They're the biggest reason Chicago falls so low with Kane not being too far off himself. If there's a market for any of them, the Blackhawks should take it and run.

Having said that, the rest of the contracts here aren't pretty. Only Dominik Kubalik's fresh pact is above average, and while it's a great deal for what he showcased in his rookie season, it doesn't make up for the rest being either average or below.

28. New York Rangers

Last year: 26th

There aren't many non-ELC deals on the books for the Rangers, but those that are here offer a huge range between great (Mika Zibanejad) and awful (Jacob Trouba). The latter looks to be a big problem for New York as he's being paid to be a No. 1 defenceman and proved last year that it's very unlikely he can be that. It's one of the worst deals in the league. Chris Kreider is near the bottom as well, almost entirely due to how he's going to age. He's worth \$6.5 million now, but it's unlikely he'll continue to be as soon as 2021 – especially with top pick Alexis Lafreniere usurping him in the near future on the left side.

To add insult to injury, the Rangers rid themselves of Marc Staal, only to sign Jack Johnson to a \$1.2 million deal that is by my math \$3.1 million too much. Not a typo – he hurts the team that bad.

A final note on the Rangers: At \$19.6 million, no team has more dead money on the books.

29. Ottawa Senators

Last year: 28th

For a team that's known for penny-pinching, you'd think they would do a better job of being efficient with the dollars they spend. But that's not the case in Ottawa. Evgenii Dadonov was surprisingly nice value in free agency, but there's not much else to love here with a lot of the moves being made within the past year.

Trading one year of Cody Ceci for five years of Nikita Zaitsev was misguided at the time and looks even worse now after Zaitsev's first season in Ottawa. As if one severe negative value defender wasn't enough, the team also traded for Erik Gudbranson this offseason, though he only has one year left. Add Austin Watson to that mix, and it gives Ottawa three players where the negative surplus value is more than the salary being owed. That's not good! Even the two recent deals to RFAs Connor Brown and Chris Tierney weren't ideal as both were paid for what they were on a bad team rather than what they actually are – third-liners.

As for the two long-term deals, Thomas Chabot is the big-ticket here and while the big block of red isn't alluring, he's not far off from reaching value in the back half of the deal and may grow into it further. Colin White, on the other hand, is a different story, as he was likely propped up by Mark Stone and Brady Tkachuk in 2018-19 and is unlikely to be a \$5 million player.

30. Los Angeles Kings

Last year: 30th

The former class of the league finds itself at the bottom in recent seasons and it's precisely because the players they paid to deliver big value aren't living up to their end of the bargain. Anze Kopitar and Drew Doughty are the team's two best players but are being paid eight figures to deliver elite value, something they haven't done the past two seasons. That's the team's biggest issue and it leads to both players being among the league's worst contracts. In fact, Doughty's was ranked as the worst, with little hope he can turn things around.

Having a projected negative surplus value of \$59 million is tough to manage and as long as Doughty fails to deliver, the Kings will likely stay near the bottom of this list. Matt Roy's deal is nice, though.

31. San Jose Sharks

Last year: 13th

The Sharks unexpectedly collapsed last season and their new placement on this list is the consequence of that. No team has fallen further in terms of cap efficiency as the team's long-term commitments are all looking to age very poorly.

Marc-Edouard Vlasic's deal already looked awful last season and it looks even worse now, but the bigger issue is the steep drop in value for the other two behemoths on the back end. Brent Burns and Erik Karlsson were the keys to San Jose being a contender and it's no coincidence the two falling off a cliff last season plays a big role in the team's drop off. Burns' deal looked like solid value last season, but he's dropped into the "D" range thanks to an off-year coupled with his age. Karlsson's deal looked close to fair market last season, but he too experienced a dramatic drop-off and is right there with Vlasic among the worst contracts in the league. Add Logan Couture's long and pricey deal and the Sharks' four largest contracts all rate among the worst in the league. No other team has four contracts in the "D" range and the fact the three other contracts with four or more years left adds to the problem.

That right there is the biggest problem and adds up substantially. The team is overpaying each player by almost \$9 million on average. The Sharks have two good deals on the books in Tomas Hertl and Timo Meier and some solid one-year bets, but the long-term deals are a mess that will take a long time to fix barring an epic bounce-back across the board. That's not impossible, but given their collective ages, it's very unlikely. This is where they belong now – and it doesn't even include that the team is paying almost \$8



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million for one of the worst goaltending duos in the league. It's ugly.



Hamilton, Slavin Named Two of NHL's Top Defensemen

By Michael Smith

The Carolina Hurricanes boast one of the National Hockey League's best blue lines, and both players on the top pair rank among the league's top 20 defensemen, according to NHL Network.

Dougie Hamilton and Jacob Slavin rank 7th and 17th, respectively, on NHL Network's list of Top 20 NHL Defensemen Right Now, as revealed on Sunday night.

NHL Network also polled fans, who ranked Slavin 9th and Hamilton 11th.

Hamilton was compiling a career season before a freak injury in Columbus unfortunately cut his regular season short in mid-January. Still, in 47 games, Hamilton led all Canes defensemen in goals (14) and points (40). He ranked fourth on the team in points and eighth among all NHL defensemen in goals. Had he not missed the last 21 games of the eventually pandemic-shortened regular season, Hamilton likely would have put up career high numbers across the board (he was already a career-best plus-30) and would have had a strong case for Norris Trophy consideration (he finished seventh in voting). He also would have participated in his first career NHL All-Star Game.

In 129 career games with the Canes, Hamilton has tallied 32 goals and 47 assists (79 points), and over the last three seasons, no NHL defenseman has scored more goals than he has (49).

"Dougie Hamilton has figured it all out," NHL Network analyst and former NHL defenseman Ken Daneyko said. "He has become a stud, a force on the back-end."

Slavin has long been considered one of the league's best-kept secrets, though as the Canes continue to attract

national exposure, it isn't much of a secret anymore. Slavin finished fifth in Norris Trophy voting, attracting one second-place vote and five third-place votes in appearing on 82 Professional Hockey Writers Association ballots.

Slavin set career highs in assists (30), points (36) and plus-minus (plus-30) in 68 games in 2019-20. He paced the team in average time on ice (23:24) and ranked sixth in the league in total shorthanded time on ice (210:55). Slavin recorded just 10 penalty minutes and finished fourth in Lady Byng voting with 31 first-place votes, second most among all players.

In Hamilton's stead, Slavin represented the Canes in his first NHL All-Star appearance. He won the Accuracy Shooting event at NHL All-Star Skills, hitting all five targets in 9.505 seconds.

In the 2020 postseason, Slavin became the first player to score an NHL goal in the month of August, his first career postseason goal and the fourth-fastest game-opening goal in franchise postseason history (1:01 of Game 1 vs. New York).

"You look at the depth of our defense, and I'd put it right up there with the top of the league," Slavin said after the season. "Going into next year, I'm super excited about it."

What are your thoughts on the NHL Network list? Are there 16 defensemen in the NHL who are better than Slavin? I don't think so, and I think you'd be hard-pressed to name six, even. Is the fan list more accurate? It may well be. TV's Mike Maniscalco and I broke down the list (and re-ordered it) on episode 147 of CanesCast (35:40 mark).

NHL Network will continue their weekly positional countdowns in November with their lists of top 10 wingers, top 20 centers and top 10 goaltenders. Then in December, NHL Network will reveal its list of top 50 players.



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SportScan

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

The Athletic / Down Goes Brown: 6 NHL teams that have me stumped right now

By Sean McIndoe

Nov 5, 2020

It's been a confusing year. There are a lot of things in the world I'm not sure about these days, including what month it is and whether I'm actually muted on this Zoom call. If you ask me a direct question these days, I will look you straight in the eye and flat-out guess, followed by immediately forgetting what I just told you.

But when it comes to the NHL, there are at least a few teams I feel ... well, not sure about, but at least vaguely confident. The Lightning are good. The Avalanche and Golden Knights should be, too. The Red Wings are not good, and the Senators and Kings are still a year or two away from breaking through. The Oilers have Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl but not enough depth or goaltending, and will stay that way until the end of time. And a whole bunch of teams are stuck in the middle, close enough to the playoff race but not really scaring anyone, just the way the league likes it.

But every year, there are a few teams that I just can't figure out. So as we all wander around in a haze of confusion, let's break out my annual attempt to argue with myself about the half-dozen teams that have me stumped heading into the (whatever year it is next year) season.

Philadelphia Flyers

They'll be good because: They were good last year. Like, really good. They were on pace for 105 points if we'd played a full season, and even that might be underselling it. In early January, the Flyers were muddling along with about as many wins as losses. They were fine. But over what turned out to be the last 26 games of the season, the Flyers went 19-6-1, earning a playoff bye and planting their flag as a legitimate contender.

That was last year. So what's changed heading into a new season? Not much. The retirement of Matt Niskanen was a surprise, but you could argue that helped more in terms of cap space than it hurt in terms of blue line quality. They lost a few depth pieces, like every team does. But all the key names are back, so there's no reason to expect a dropoff.

They'll be bad because: Virtually nobody had the Flyers pegged as an elite team last year; they'd missed the playoffs in 2019. That doesn't mean they were a mirage, since we're wrong about plenty of teams all the time, but you'd probably like to see it for more than one season before you nudge anyone into the sure thing column.

Beyond that, the Flyers didn't look all that great in the postseason. They struggled with a Canadiens team that, on paper, they should have rolled over. And they lost to an Islanders team that imposed their will on the series. It's hard to know what to make of that whole deeply weird playoff tournament, and maybe the answer is that we shouldn't draw any conclusions at all. But at the very least, you could piece together an argument that the Flyers are an above-average team that got hot for two months in the second half, but don't deserve top-contender status yet.

But they'll probably be fine because: The most important player on the team is Carter Hart, and he's 22. Goaltending is impossible to predict, especially younger guys, but if you had to make a bet you'd think Hart is

going to be even better over the next few years. He's also on the last year of his entry-level deal, which means the Flyers have a nice window here with some extra cap space to work with.

Unless they're not because: So far, they haven't really done anything with that space. They were quiet in free agency, and while they've been rumored to be in on a few names on the trade market, nothing has happened yet. And that cap space window only lasts for this year, because both Hart and Travis Sanheim will need new deals.

Meanwhile, they're on the hook for over \$16 million in annual cap hit to Claude Giroux and Jakub Voracek, who have been good, plus another \$7 million to James van Riemsdyk, who hasn't, and all three of those guys are over 30. The Flyers aren't an old team by any stretch, with Hart, Travis Konecny and Ivan Provorov all entering their prime. But if the older guys take even a small step back and/or Hart has the sort of rough year that good young goalies sometimes endure, it's not hard to imagine the Flyers falling back to the middle-of-the-pack.

The verdict: In theory, the Metro Division features two perennial contenders (Caps and Pens), one good team that's especially tough in the playoffs (Islanders) and two teams on their way up (Hurricanes and Rangers). There aren't enough playoff spots for everyone, and that's before factoring in a temporary realignment that might shuffle things around and drop someone like the Bruins into the mix. I still think the Flyers will be good, but I'm not sure they'll be any better, and they might not have as room to work with as they'd like.

Calgary Flames

They'll be good because: They aggressively addressed their most-discussed weakness in the offseason, paying up to land Jacob Markstrom in free agency. We can debate whether that was a smart contract, and maybe it looks bad in a few years. But today, it should be a nice upgrade over Cam Talbot (who's now in Minnesota) and David Rittich.

They'll be bad because: Talbot and Rittich weren't actually a bad combo; they were pretty much a middle-of-the-pack duo, so it's not like goaltending was the reason the Flames took a step back. And even if they've upgraded the position, losing two top-four defenseman in T.J. Brodie and (probably) Travis Hamonic will cancel some of that out. The Markstrom signing made headlines, but it's no sure thing that the offseason has made the Flames any better.

But they'll probably be at least OK because: As easy as it is to forget now, this was a 107-point team only one year ago. Granted, they followed that up with a disappointing season, but it's proof that the core is capable of contending. And remember, last year's team had to deal with a bizarre midseason coaching switch from Bill Peters to Geoff Ward, one that nobody saw coming based on performance. Ward did a good job under tough circumstances, but like most coaches, you'd expect him to do a better job with a full season (including a training camp) to put his system in place.

Unless they're not because: Hmm, a Canadian team that has a breakthrough season followed by a letdown, where we're wondering if they should get credit for how they looked at their best. If that sounds familiar, it's a lot like what we went through last year with the Jets, another team that confused me. And it turned out that the recent, mediocre season was a more accurate predictor than the 100-plus point days. Sometimes, you don't need to overthink it when a good team takes a step back to mediocrity. That's just what they are now.



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The verdict: I'm lost. And to make things even more complicated, we don't even know what division the Flames will be in. Home ice in the Pacific seems up for grabs, with the Golden Knights looking strong but nobody else really looking unbeatable. But would a temporary all-Canadian division present an easier path, or a tougher one?

San Jose Sharks

They won't be completely terrible (again) because: As bad as last year was, they've still got some pretty good players. That includes a pair of 30-something Norris winners on the blue line in Brent Burns and Erik Karlsson, plus a mix of forwards that lacks top-tier star power but has more than a few guys who can play big roles on a contender. They looked to address their weakness in goal by bringing in Devan Dubnyk. And with roughly nine months off between games, everyone should be rested and healthy, which is important for a team with a few key guys over 30.

Their days of being elite contenders are almost certainly over, but this team went to the conference final in 2019. Make the goaltending a bit better, let that extra rest give us the old Karlsson back, and mix in a few other guys having solid seasons, and the Sharks can at least be a playoff team, and maybe even a good one.

They'll be awful because: "As bad as last year was" kind of undersells it, no? Last year was very, very bad. It was one of the worst years in recent memory by a team that wasn't openly rebuilding – and it didn't even land them a top prospect, because they'd traded away their first-round pick. That's key, because the pipeline isn't in especially great shape. There are no reinforcements coming. They lost their heart and soul in Joe Thornton and added a new starting goalie who might not be any better than what they had, and other than that they're basically the same team as last year. And that team, again, was incredibly bad.

But they'll probably at least be respectable because: Lots of good teams have a surprising off-year that everyone overreacts to, only to get right back on track. Remember the Lightning missing the playoffs in 2017? The Caps had a playoff miss in the middle of a long string of 100-plus point seasons. The Bruins missed the playoffs twice in a row right after winning the Presidents' Trophy. It happens, and every time it does, we get a bunch of panicked think pieces about how the window has slammed shut. Then the good team turns out to still be good, and we all just agree to not mention it again.

Isn't it possible that last year was just one of those perfect storms? Put differently, is it really that hard to imagine the Sharks getting right back into the playoff hunt while we all go "Oh right, teams with two star defensemen each playing 25 minutes a night tend to be OK"?

Unless they're not because: Those contenders in the last section that had short-term stumbles were still 90-point teams. The 2016-17 Lightning's "bad" season featured 97 points and saw them miss the playoffs on the final weekend. Last year's Sharks were on pace to barely crack 70. There's no comparison. Where's the list of teams that went from this bad back to contending in one year? Maybe the Flyers in 2007. Other than that, really bad teams tend to stay bad.

The verdict: I'm pretty sure the Sharks are bad now and will be for a while, but if they make it back to the playoffs this year I'm going to pretend that I called it.

Montreal Canadiens

They'll be good enough because: They can build on last year's postseason, when they beat the Penguins and gave the Flyers a tough fight. No, they didn't make a deep run. But they surpassed expectations, and that's the sort of thing a good, young team can build on. Nobody is going to be calling them Cup favorites, but this will be the year to take the next step on their way there.

They'll fall short because: Wait, "a good, young team"? Are we sure the Canadiens are either of those things?

First of all, good teams usually don't finish .500 in the loser-point era. Yes, the Habs made the playoffs, thanks to a once-in-a-lifetime format that let 24 teams into the bubble. Montreal was that 24th and final team.

Full credit to them for making it count once they got there, but most teams don't congratulate themselves for finishing with the eighth-worst record in the league.

As for being young, that's an easier case to make. The Canadiens do have some good young talent, both on the roster and on the way through the system. None of those guys project as sure-thing franchise players, but the talent is there. But this is also a team with a 33-year-old goalie, a 35-year-old captain/blue line workhorse, and a leading scorer who'll be 30 on opening night. Their second-best defenseman will be 33. Even their new backup goalie just turned 30. The core is old, or at least old enough that they are what they are. And what they are, again, is 24th.

But they'll probably be fine because: Having a veteran core surrounded by youth elsewhere in the lineup isn't a bad way to go. In fact, it's what most teams want. Marc Bergevin has looked like a guy with a plan, and he's had a busy offseason. If you think last year's team wasn't good enough, well, the GM agrees. And if his moves work out, they'll be better.

Unless they're not because: That plan seemed to involve turning a lot of cap space into an expensive backup goalie and a \$38.5 million winger coming off a season where he had one goal, then pinching pennies in a public feud with Brendan Gallagher. They're different, sure, and they should be deeper. But are we confident that this actually got significantly better in the offseason? I mentioned they were 24th, right?

The verdict: Like the Flames, the 2020-21 division structure will matter here. The Atlantic is owned by the Lightning and Bruins, limiting Montreal's upside even in a best-case. Put them in an all-Canadian division, though, and the playoffs feel like a good bet, and first place isn't inconceivable. And once they're in the postseason, we know they can pull off an upset or two.

Oh hey, speaking of that...

Pittsburgh Penguins

They'll be contenders because: They're the Penguins. They're always contenders.

No, really, that's it. The Penguins missed the playoffs in the first year of the Sidney Crosby era, and have been in every season since. That's 14 years in a row. And it's not like they're sneaking in – they've had at last 98 points (or a prorated equivalent) every year.

That includes last season, when they were on pace for 102 points despite all sorts of injuries that took Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and others out of the lineup for long stretches. They were really good.

They'll struggle to make the playoffs because: And then what happened?

Oh right, they had everyone healthy for the playoffs and still lost to Montreal. Full credit to Carey Price and the Habs, but Cup contenders don't lose to 12-seeds. And they especially don't lose to 12-seeds while managing just 22 shots in a shutout loss with their season on the line. The Penguins were a very good team for the first half of last season, but they cooled off down the stretch, including a six-game losing streak in February. Then they got exposed in the postseason. All the trend arrows are pointing in the same direction here.

But they'll probably be fine because: What should we make of that playoff disaster? Here's a theory: Nothing. The 2020 postseason was just weird, especially early on when everyone was rusty and getting used to the bubble format. We expected to see some surprises, and we reminded ourselves not to overreact. A 100-point team losing to a hot goalie in an empty arena in August shouldn't make us reevaluate everything we've learned about them in the previous decade.

Unless they're not because: Somebody might want to tell Jim Rutherford that, because he sure seems to be reevaluating. He's spent the last few weeks shaking up the roster, the front office, and the coaching staff. He traded away a two-time Cup-winning goalie and handed the starting job to a guy who's never had more than 31 starts. He's traded away veterans in salary dumps, but also his first-round pick for immediate help. Does this sound like a guy who thinks this team just needs to stay the course?



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The verdict: Sometimes, windows close gradually. Sometimes, they slam shut, 2019-20 Sharks style, and it only seems obvious after it's already happened. The Penguins sure do give off that vibe right now. Then again, if we get to the end of the season and they've got 100 points and a playoff spot yet again, nobody will be surprised.

And on the subject of closing windows, let's end off with one that's already locked. I think. Maybe.

Chicago Blackhawks

They'll be in the mix because: They still have Patrick Kane, Jonathan Toews and Duncan Keith, not to mention Alex DeBrincat just entering his prime and some other solid pieces. Their days of being Cup favorites are long gone — they haven't won an official playoff series in five years — but they should be good enough to do what they did last year, which is hang around the playoff picture longer than you think they should.

They'll finish dead last because: They have no goaltending. Like, zero. They traded Robin Lehner at the deadline and let Corey Crawford walk in free agency, and didn't replace them even though half the goaltenders in the league were switching teams.

Why would they do that? Stan Bowman suggested it was about positioning themselves for the expansion draft. There's a simpler explanation: They're tanking. Or, if you want to be polite, they're rebuilding in an aggressive way that includes a very high draft pick next year.

But they probably won't because: Are they rebuilding? They haven't exactly been trading veterans for picks and prospects. They moved Brandon Saad for Nikita Zadorov, who isn't old but also isn't some young up-and-comer. Other than that, Bowman has tinkered, but he isn't stripping down. There have been no rumors of any of the big names being on the block, and maybe there couldn't be with everyone locked into no-movement clauses. But shoot or get off the point, right? So far, the approach in Chicago has been contender in the streets, rebuild in the crease. That might not be the right long-term strategy, but for now it adds up to a team that should be OK, even if it's not what they want to be.

Unless they're terrible because: "If you have no goaltending, you have no chance." That's a scout talking about the Hawks, and he's right. The question of what Bowman actually wants his team to do this year is interesting, but it's kind of moot. They're going to be bad, whether that's the plan or not. Case closed.

The verdict: I now look forward to Kevin Lankinen emerging as a Vezina contender because nothing makes sense.

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Sportsnet.ca / 4 NHL players who should benefit from their long layoffs

Ryan Dixon@dixononsports

November 5, 2020, 9:59 AM

A decade into his NHL career, the "Finnish Flash" was flickering.

Teemu Selanne completed the 2003-04 season — the last of the Dead Puck Era — with 16 goals in 78 games for the Colorado Avalanche. That summer he represented Finland at the World Cup of Hockey and scored one goal for the tournament bridesmaids. At 34, the first-ever Rocket Richard Trophy winner was skating with a left knee made of slush.

That World Cup final contest between Finland and Canada was the last high-level game many NHLers took part in for about 13 months thanks to an owners lockout that torpedoed the 2004-05 season. When the NHL resumed in October, 2005, Selanne was playing like he was 23 again,

having used the time off to undergo reconstructive surgery and put in 10 months of rehab.

What a difference a forced break can make.

Seven NHL teams haven't played a game since early March, meaning even if the league fires back up on Jan. 1, 2021, a whole bunch of players will go roughly 10 months without real action. Another eight clubs played a few qualification-round contests before getting bounced from the amended 2020 playoffs, creating another glut of guys who got a whole lot of downtime to rest and recover.

While it's hard to imagine any night-and-day situations like Selanne's — the resurgent right winger scored 40 goals the first year after the lockout, 48 the next and played until he was 43 — a few players spring to mind as candidates to discover a sporting silver lining in this otherwise awful pandemic experience.

Here, then, are four guys who could pop in 2021 — whenever we drop the puck.

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

Erik Karlsson, San Jose Sharks

Karlsson's last game was on Valentine's Day versus the Winnipeg Jets, when he broke his thumb. Two years ago, during his first campaign in San Jose, Karlsson missed nearly 20 games with a groin issue that lingered throughout the 2019 playoffs. The last time he lined up for 82 contests was 2015-16, when he was a 25-year-old Ottawa Senator.

Now 30, the offensive-minded Swede seems like somebody who could use a long period away from the rink to rest his relatively slight frame. In fact, if you were to identify a team that probably needed to collectively catch its breath, it would be the Sharks. Last season was miserable for San Jose and its veteran core — from Brent Burns to Marc-Edouard Vlasic to Logan Couture — might all be better off for the long pause.

Tape to Tape

Senior Writer Ryan Dixon and NHL Editor Rory Boylen always give it 110%, but never rely on clichés when it comes to podcasting. Instead, they use a mix of facts, fun and a varied group of hockey voices to cover Canada's most beloved game.

Frederik Andersen, Toronto Maple Leafs

Andersen has started 244 games since joining the Leafs in 2016, more than every NHL stopper during that four-season span. Last year — the worst of Andersen's four in Toronto — was the second straight campaign he operated without a suitable backup, until the team acquired Jack Campbell at the trade deadline.

Though plagued by more questions about ill-timed goals against, Andersen posted a .936 save percentage in Toronto's five-game preliminary-round loss to the Columbus Blue Jackets after five months off. The combination of playing just a handful of games in the span of nearly a year, and entering the season with a capable No. 2 behind him, could result in a strong season for the big Dane — just as he's about to become an unrestricted free agent.

Evgeni Malkin, Pittsburgh Penguins

To be clear, there's no issue with Malkin when he's playing. The stud centre has registered 1.20 points per game during the past four seasons and the only two players to exceed that total league-wide — Connor McDavid and Nikita Kucherov — have some pretty serious hardware to show for it.

The problem, of course, is the pesky GP category. The lanky Russian has routinely missed big chunks of seasons for the majority of this decade thanks to various ailments. In fact, he's appeared in 70 games just once — once! — in the past eight years (Malkin missed 17 contests in the 48-game 2012-13 season).

Pittsburgh succumbed to Montreal in four preliminary-round games, so 'Steeltown' is going a long stretch without much action. Combine a big break for the 34-year-old Malkin with a sprint of a season — maybe even



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sprinkle in some load management — and you wonder if he could be a force come playoff time for a Pittsburgh squad trying to squeeze all it can out of the Sid and Geno era.

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.

We're talking about the benefits of a layoff here, but there might not be a player on the planet more anxious for a good game of hockey than Patrick. The 22-year-old Flyers centre missed all of last season and the playoffs with migraine issues. Now he has a few more months to recover without the anxiety of knowing his team is playing without him.

Patrick has been on the ice this fall and inked a one-year deal with the Flyers coming off his entry-level contract. Here's hoping the second overall pick from 2017 is ready to roll whenever the next season begins.

Sportsnet.ca / Alex Ovechkin wants to end pro hockey career with KHL's Dynamo Moscow

Emily Sadler@EmmySadler

November 5, 2020, 4:29 PM

Washington Capitals star Alex Ovechkin said this week he hopes to end his professional hockey career where it began: at home, with Dynamo Moscow of the KHL.

"There are certain goals that I want to achieve after my career," Ovechkin said in Russian during an interview with Russian Television International. "But my career is not over yet. I'm still in my prime. I think I will definitely play for a few more years, God grant that my health is good. I would finish in Russia at Dynamo Moscow."

At 35, Ovechkin is certainly playing like he's still in his prime, as one of the greatest goal-scorers the NHL has ever seen and showing no signs of slowing down. Washington's captain is coming off a 48-goal, 67-point season that was cut short at just 68 games -- this, after back-to-back seasons with point tallies just shy of 90 points each.

Asked for confirmation of his plans, Ovechkin reiterated:

"I really want to come back and end my career at Dynamo Moscow. After a certain number of years that I will spend, God willing, in Washington," he said.

That last part is really important -- Ovechkin made it clear he's not looking to cut his time in Washington short. That point is particularly notable considering he's approaching the final season of the 13-year, \$124-million pact he signed with the Capitals back in 2008. Asked about the possibility of receiving a big-money offer from another club, Ovechkin made it clear he intends to stay put in Washington.

"It's not a question of money. It's a matter of principle: I played for only two teams -- Dynamo and Washington," he said.

Ovechkin, a native of Moscow, played with the KHL club before coming over to North America, and returned for a short stint during the 2012-13 NHL lockout. He has also been passionate about representing Russia internationally, suiting up with the national team during world championships and Olympic tournaments.

"It is clear, in two, three, four years, maybe five, I will end my career in Washington," he said. "I want to end on a beautiful note -- to play my last match for Dynamo Moscow."

What can be learned from a teenage player's first NHL season?

By Travis Yost

One of the most interesting statistical nuggets from the National Hockey League's last regular season is that despite a younger-than-ever talent pool, the 2019 draft class was not a particularly effective one. Not yet, anyway.

You might think I am a difficult grader. After all, we are generally talking about 18- and 19-year old teenagers who are trying to jump to the highest professional level of competition with little preparation.

The handful of players making the jump each year are usually selected at the top of the class. This past season we saw 18-year-olds in New Jersey's Jack Hughes, New York's Kaapo Kakko, Chicago's Kirby Dach and Winnipeg's Ville Heinola make the jump. (On average, we see about seven teenagers make a same-season jump from their draft class to the NHL per year.)

While Dach looked impressive in 64 regular-season games and a cup of coffee during the NHL playoffs, the rest of the group left a little to be desired.

Kakko amassed 23 points in 66 games, but was routinely shelled at even strength, with the Rangers outscored 45 to 21 with him on the ice. Hughes had a similar story, with the Devils were outscored 39 to 18 with him deployed at even strength. Heinola was used sparingly, dressing for just eight games.

Development, of course, is not linear. Remember the Boston Bruins' version of Tyler Seguin? His 2010-11 regular season was unspectacular, followed by a blistering second year -- his development, especially on the defensive side of the ice, taking a bit longer to materialize.

Seguin's career has been sterling since, and he isn't alone. Buffalo's Sam Reinhart had a short, underwhelming 18-year-old season followed by a second-year breakout. More recently, Carolina's Andrei Svechnikov's second-year explosion has already pushed him into star territory.

Being a teenager at the NHL level, especially one who gets three months from his draft day to his first game, is the most difficult of tasks. Coaches and scouts calibrate expectations accordingly. But there is a similar trap to avoid or ignore what we have learned from a player's first professional season. We may be far off from rendering a player as a hit or a miss, a boom or a bust. But the data isn't meaningless, either.

I mentioned a few examples of players who took big jumps in their second year after a so-so first year. There are, unfortunately, a laundry list of names who under-delivered in both seasons. Buffalo's Rasmus Ristolainen is probably the best example of that, but he isn't alone.

One thing is clear from the data, though: teenage players who had strong rookie seasons tended to have comparatively strong second seasons, whereas teenage players with weak rookie seasons were much more of a coin flip to improve in year two:

The key takeaway here is that merely throwing away a player's draft year season on the merit of simply being exceptionally young may not be appropriate. Players develop at different speeds and we have plenty of examples of prospects developing into stars in their second, third, or even fourth professional seasons. Each player's strengths are unique and their limitations -- be it size, skating speed, skill -- are all critical variables to understand and can impact how quickly a player develops at the NHL level.

Superstars tend to manifest themselves immediately, though -- some of the best draft-year seasons we have seen from players have come from names like Connor McDavid, Auston Matthews, Nathan MacKinnon and Aaron Ekblad, all of whom made seamless transitions. And even players a step or two below in talent level who had strong rookie seasons tended to have strong sophomore seasons, unlike their struggling first-year counterparts.

In other words, there is plenty of time for players like Hughes and Kakko to develop into the NHLers the hockey community expected them to



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become. But chalking up challenging rookie seasons like the ones they had merely to age is a gamble – if only because we know that strong first seasons do mean something for the trajectory of a player going forward.

The Athletic / By the numbers: The NHL's 10 worst contracts, 2020 edition

By Dom Luszczyszyn Nov 4, 2020

There's a point in each offseason where most hockey fans will peruse CapFriendly and say "it's just not fair." That statement can go both ways, as it could mean an amazing contract on a rival team or a terrible one on their favourite team.

Last year we looked at the 10 best and worst contracts in the league, as well as the efficiency of every contract in the league and we're back at it again this year. The goal is to grade contracts empirically with the same context being applied to each player across the league. It's looking at how much value each player brings to the table and how likely they'll provide positive value over the life of the contract. It's just math, no subjectivity here.

The way that's measured comes from comparing a player's GSVa and the expected salary that comes with it to the current contract a player possesses. Surplus value compares what they make with what my model believes they should be making, while positive value probability measures the certainty that a player will perform above his cap hit. The list of best and worst contracts is based on those two factors (with twice as much weight being placed on surplus value) looking outwards. What players have already done holds no merit, this is about the future value of the deal. Contract clauses and bonus structure are important, but not considered with this assessment. Players on LTIR were not considered.

So here it is, a look at the 10 worst contracts in the league, along with some honourable mentions.

1. Drew Doughty, LAK

Contract: \$11M x seven years

Surplus Value: -\$58.7M

Positive Value Probability: 0.4 percent

When I did this exercise last year, having Drew Doughty on the list, let alone at No. 2, felt like it would be controversial. He was only a year removed from a 60-point season and had finished second in Norris Trophy voting. But he hasn't been the same since. In 2018-19, he was worth 0.1 wins, and it's what caused his standing to plummet. There was hope for a bounce-back the following season and while he was better, it wasn't by enough; he was worth 0.5 wins per 82 games, still only second pairing quality.

Doughty simply doesn't push play anymore. Some might argue it's because the team around him stinks, and that's fair, but part of the reason it stinks is because the best players aren't looking the part when they're on the ice. With a 47.7 percent expected goals rate, Doughty was only better than Kurtis MacDermid among regular defenders ... and the rest were above 50 percent. That's a sizeable gap and it was a similar story the year prior when Doughty was a 44.3 percent, last among Kings regulars.

It's now two straight seasons Doughty hasn't played like a legitimate top pairing option and it's fair to wonder if that version is ever coming back. But what makes his contract the league's worst is not that he's not projected to be a top pairing defender, or even a true No. 1, it's that he's paid to be one of the league's very best defencemen. At \$11 million AAV, the expectation is 2.6 wins on average over the next seven seasons and 2.75 wins this upcoming season. There are only five defenders projected to perform above that mark next year and Doughty isn't one of them. So

say what you will about the model being wrong or about Doughty still being good – the issue is that it takes a lot of suspension of disbelief to say he's anywhere close to being a top five defender. He's only getting worse going into his 30s, so that negative surplus value compounds further as the years go on.

2. Marc-Edouard Vlasic, SJS

Contract: \$7M x six years

Surplus Value: -\$47.7M

Positive Value Probability: 0.5 percent

This was another controversial call last season but it also looks more prescient one season later. Like Doughty, Marc-Edouard Vlasic had a long history of being a top pairing defender. But that changed the moment he started making big money. In 2018-19, he was the Sharks' worst defender at 5-on-5 at driving play and that's continued to be the case. Vlasic plays some of the league's toughest minutes, but he also used to win those matchups. That's not the case anymore as he was epically caved in this past year. Vlasic's value comes from his defensive ability and at his best he would've been able to live up to the contract's expectations. At \$7 million AAV, the goal is a borderline No. 1 defender who can provide around 1.6 wins. Vlasic was at or above that level for most of his career. But age comes for every player at some point. Vlasic's rather steep decline the last two seasons has him projected to be below replacement level next season. Ouch.

3. Jeff Skinner, BUF

Contract: \$9M x seven years

Surplus Value: -\$43.7M

Positive Value Probability: 1.9 percent

This is a tough one to stomach for Sabres fan. The team has been spurned by free agents in the past and Jeff Skinner looked truly electric in his walk year, scoring 40 goals next to Jack Eichel. They had to keep him, and they did! Finally! At the time, my model viewed it as a slight overpay, placing him closer to an \$8 million player over the life of the deal, but when a team loses out on players often they have to take what they can get. The contract was projected to provide positive value about 40 percent of the time. Not great, but not bad.

And then the 2019-20 season happened.

I can't recall a player falling off quite as fast and as hard as Skinner and it brings up questions about his usage over those two seasons. The biggest issue: Why would Buffalo play him exclusively with Eichel before free agency, propping up his value, only to not play him there at all the following season once he got paid? As the old adage goes ... buy high, sell low or something ...

Skinner went from a 40-goal scorer with limited defence to a guy who scored 14 in 59 games, played at a 32-point pace and still couldn't play defence. It was rough to watch as the team's \$9 million per year investment went up in flames in the very first year. Part of that is on his surroundings as Buffalo didn't exactly have anyone to play with him that wasn't Eichel. That changes this year with the addition of Eric Staal, but it's still difficult to see Skinner getting back to the level his contract expects of him.

A \$9 million player over seven years averages 2.4 wins per season and while he was at three wins in 2018-19, he dropped all the way to a 0.2-win pace. Skinner is currently projected to provide one win next season, maybe more if he gets top power play time (which I doubt with the addition of Taylor Hall), but that's still well off from where he needs to be to earn his deal.

4. Ryan Johansen, NSH

Contract: \$8M x five years

Surplus Value: -\$26.5M

Positive Value Probability: 2.9 percent



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At this point last year, Ryan Johansen's contract wasn't looking ideal, but he still played like a capable top six centre. It was a bad deal, but one that was manageable. But as Johansen's decline continues, he's now being rated closer to a strong third-line centre. And that's not a player teams want to pay \$8 million per year.

In fairness to Johansen, my model struggles with pure passing types. It accounts for goal scoring and scoring chance creation via individual expected goals, but there's no equivalent for creating chances with passing. A lack of data is to blame for that, but it means a player like Johansen is likely underrated. However, Johansen's assist rate went down last season and that ended up being the primary reason he only scored at a 43-point pace.

That would be somewhat understandable if he was driving play at a level expected of a top six centre, but that was also not the case as the Predators were outchanced with Johansen on the ice for the first time in his tenure. At \$8 million AAV the expectation is just over two wins, which is not impossible, but it's also a mark Johansen hasn't crossed in three seasons. At this point, it's fair to wonder if that was his peak and the Predators are on the hook for his decline for five more seasons.

(Sergei Belski / USA Today)

5. Oliver Ekman-Larsson, ARI

Contract: \$8.25M x seven years

Surplus Value: -\$36.2M

Positive Value Probability: 5.2 percent

One of the craziest things that happened this offseason was that in a flat-cap world there was somehow a market for Oliver Ekman-Larsson, one where Arizona would receive assets for his services. Ekman-Larsson did not appear on this list last season, but he was an honourable mention and after another lacklustre season he's now prominently featured. It makes possibly trading for him puzzling. Maybe there was hope he had the talent to make a leap on a stronger team, but that feels like something teams shouldn't worry about with a player being paid \$8.25 million per year.

I don't get the Ekman-Larsson hype. Yes he plays a lot of minutes, yes those minutes are hard, but that doesn't change the fact that he doesn't really move the needle much in those minutes. For four straight seasons, the Coyotes have been outscored and outchanced with Ekman-Larsson on the ice. In the past two seasons, the situation was worse with him on the ice compared to on the bench. Yes, he doesn't have much help, but that doesn't excuse the fact the team plays worse with him on the ice. Offensively, the power play has always been weak with Ekman-Larsson and adding legit weapons last season didn't change that.

It just doesn't seem like Ekman-Larsson is a driver and at \$8.25 million isn't that what you're paying for? That's legitimate No. 1 defenceman money with an average win rate of 1.8 per season. Ekman-Larsson is projected to deliver just 2.8 wins over the entirety of his contract because he isn't a No. 1 defender at this point of his career. I would struggle to even call him top pairing calibre and at 29 it's only going to get worse.

6. Nikita Zaitsev, OTT

Contract: \$4.5M x four years

Surplus Value: -\$23.2M

Positive Value Probability: 2.6 percent

Kyle Dubas doesn't get enough credit for dodging this landmine of a deal. Yes, the team had to take on one year of Cody Ceci, but that's a small price to pay to clear \$4.5 million for four more seasons to an equally poor player.

And that was before Nikita Zaitsev's first year in Ottawa, where his projected value dropped from replacement level to well below. He was a legitimate 5-on-5 anchor, earning 45 percent of the expected goals and getting outscored by a 3-2 margin on average. Despite playing for a wretched Ottawa team, his relative impacts actually went down with the

Senators, placing him in similar territory to some of the league's worst defencemen. At \$4.5 million per year, the hope is the player adds value as a top four defender, about 3.34 wins over the next four seasons. In Zaitsev's case, he's coincidentally projected to cost the Senators 3.34 wins over that time period.

7. Jacob Trouba, NYR

Contract: \$8M x six years

Surplus Value: -\$29.0M

Positive Value Probability: 6.3 percent

Like the Skinner deal, this is another one signed just over a year ago that already isn't aging well. I thought this one could be fine if Trouba was used like a legitimate top defender and got ample power play time, but he didn't really fit well as a power play QB. That job goes to Tony DeAngelo now and it makes it harder for Trouba to provide full value on an \$8 million AAV deal where the expectation is around 1.8 wins per season. After an unsuccessful first season with the Rangers, I have him closer to one-third of that next season with a decline as he ages only making things worse.

Trouba plays tough minutes and came out marginally ahead in Winnipeg relative to his team, but the concern was whether he would be able to continue that on his own. He had a lot of help with Josh Morrissey on the Jets and the question was whether he could be a driver in his own right. His first year with the Rangers makes it seem like that's unlikely and while he can probably recoup value if paired with a stronger partner, that kind of caveat isn't what you want to see from a guy getting paid so much.

8. Justin Faulk, STL

Contract: \$6.5M x seven years

Surplus Value: -\$33.1M

Positive Value Probability: 6.9 percent

Of all the contracts on this list, this one is by far the most unfathomable. With almost every other one, you could at least see the general idea for it when it was signed. The Justin Faulk deal? It was Day 1 bad for multiple reasons.

For starters, he was superfluous on the Blues as a right-handed shot behind Alex Pietrangolo and Colton Parayko who earned some of his value on the power play but wouldn't be that guy in St. Louis. His value would automatically drop due to that lost usage. He was also a full year out from free agency, meaning a deal didn't have to be made yet and on top of that, his contract expired at the same time as Pietrangolo, obviously a far more pressing concern. All of that should have been enough to say "hey, maybe don't sign Faulk!" But alas the Blues did anyway before he even played a game for them. It was not wise.

The kicker was the deal itself, though: \$6.5 million per year for seven seasons. What a team is looking for at that price is a solid No. 2 defenceman. Faulk is definitely not that right now, was not at the time and would not be in the later years of the deal. The Blues paid for 9.4 wins with that contract and Faulk projects to deliver 0.3. I would be shocked if he even made it halfway through the deal.

9. Mike Matheson, PIT

Contract: \$4.875M x six years

Surplus Value: -\$25.8M

Positive Value Probability: 8.5 percent

Ekman-Larsson being shopped for legitimate assets was a bit of a shock to me, but nothing was more shocking than Mike Matheson getting moved. He was sixth on this list a season ago and his play since didn't exactly inspire much confidence. He was still a big drag on the team's possession rates, and while I know using goals-against rates are an analytics faux pas, over three years they can be illuminating. In that time frame, Matheson's RAPM for goals against is the 13th worst in the



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league among defenders and I would guess that's the result of costly turnovers. He's currently graded to be below replacement level, a third pairing defenceman at best and is being paid almost \$5 million per year for six more seasons.

10. Josh Morrissey, WPG

Contract: \$6.25M x eight years

Surplus Value: -\$34.9M

Positive Value Probability: 9.7 percent

If Trouba stayed in Winnipeg, it's possible that neither he nor Josh Morrissey would be on this list. The two had undeniable chemistry and the first year apart for both was rough. Morrissey gets paid less so the expectation for him is lower, but he looked like he struggled a lot more without Trouba, though he too had to face tough minutes without a competent partner by his side. For the year he had an ugly 42 percent expected goals rate, a far cry from where he was in prior seasons, which led to an epic drop in his value. Morrissey's deal is more forgivable than Trouba's given the lower price-tag, but ideally teams still want a player to be able to survive on his own at that price. Morrissey proved last season he needs help. A lot of it.

Honourable Mentions: Erik Karlsson, Brady Skjei, Kevin Hayes, Logan Couture, Tyler Myers

The Athletic / By the numbers: The NHL's 10 best contracts, 2020 edition

By Dom Luszczyszyn Nov 3, 2020

There's a point in each offseason where most hockey fans will peruse CapFriendly and say "it's just not fair." That statement can go both ways, it could mean an amazing contract on a rival team or a terrible one on your favourite team.

Last year we looked at the 10 best and worst contracts in the league, as well as the efficiency of every contract in the league and we're back at it again this year. The goal is to grade contracts empirically with the same context being applied to each player across the league. It's looking at how much value each player brings to the table and how likely they'll provide positive value over the life of the contract. It's just math, no subjectivity here.

The way that's measured comes from comparing a player's GSWA and the expected salary that comes with it to the current contract a player possesses. Surplus value compares what they make with what my model believes they should be making, while positive value probability measures the certainty that a player will perform above his cap hit. The list of best and worst contracts is based on those two factors (with twice as much weight being placed on surplus value) looking outwards. What players have already done holds no merit, this is about the future value of the deal. Contract clauses and bonus structure are important, but not considered with this assessment.

So here it is, a look at the 10 best contracts in the league, along with some honourable mentions.

1. David Pastrnak, BOS

Contract: \$6.67M x three years

Surplus Value: +\$26.4M

Positive Value Probability: 100.0 percent

First last year. First this year. But with just three years left on his bargain bin deal, it'll be difficult for David Pastrnak to keep his spot at the top for much longer.

Pastrnak is one of the league's best wingers and his deal is a pittance compared to what he's worth. The expected win rate for \$6.67 million is

around 1.75 wins, or a strong second liner. Pastrnak projects to provide nearly three times that amount at 4.5 wins per year, one of the highest marks in the league. That massive gap is the reason he's this high despite not having much term left on his contract. He's an elite scorer and one of the best power play weapons in the league.

2. Brad Marchand, BOS

Contract: \$6.13M x five years

Surplus Value: +\$31.8M

Positive Value Probability: 98.9 percent

It's the exact same top two from last season as Brad Marchand remains second to his linemate Pastrnak. Marchand has two extra years at a lower price than Pastrnak which helps him create a larger surplus value but Pastrnak has a slight edge in the likelihood of providing positive value. That's thanks to the shorter term, but also age. Marchand is projected to be worth 4.1 wins this season, but that drops all the way down to 2.8 in his fifth year. That's still well ahead of what's expected of him at 1.5 wins, but toward the end of the deal, it's not nearly as large as the gap Pastrnak has. Still, Marchand gives Boston the two best contracts in the league as the elite play-making and play-driving winger projects to be worth twice as much as his slight \$6.125 million cap hit over the duration of his deal.

3. Nathan MacKinnon, COL

Contract: \$6.3M x three years

Surplus Value: +\$24.6M

Positive Value Probability: 99.9 percent

There was a bit of controversy last season when Nathan MacKinnon wasn't ranked first and I imagine it'll be the same this year as he's ranked third again (I promise the rest of the list is different). The truth is there's almost no separation between any members of the top three and the three contracts look interchangeable by the model in terms of how great they are.

The sticking point comes from most observers, me included, viewing MacKinnon as a better player than Pastrnak. At a cheaper price, he should have the better contract, right? I'd agree, but with the list being strictly empirical, the model favours Pastrnak's future over MacKinnon's so it's worth digging into why. The one year age difference helps in terms of ageing, but it's mostly Pastrnak's efficiency playing a role providing similar value while playing fewer minutes. The model views both as true talent 100-point players a year after both were on pace for 110, with similar 5-on-5 impacts. The difference is Pastrnak does that playing 19 minutes per night, while MacKinnon does it at 21. The model views the former more favourably (and also doesn't have the knowledge of MacKinnon's spectacular playoff run either).

Regardless, it's two top-five players in the league with contracts under \$7 million. That really isn't fair and it's why Colorado and Boston are projected to be Stanley Cup contenders this season. If either player were to hit the open market, how much could they command? I don't think more than the league's highest salary is out of the question for either. That's how much they're worth anyways, though the flat cap obviously puts a wrinkle in that.

4. Leon Draisaitl, EDM

Contract: \$8.5M x five years

Surplus Value: +\$25.1M

Positive Value Probability: 96.5 percent

Finally, a new addition and it's a player many felt should've been on last year's list. That error has been fixed after Draisaitl won the Hart Trophy last season with a spectacular offensive season, leading the league in points with 110, a 127-point pace. Draisaitl was close to making last year's list, but there was some concern that his 50-goal, 105-point season wouldn't be repeatable. That's not the case anymore after producing at an even higher clip the very next season.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • November 9, 2020

Players being paid \$8.5 million – that’s \$500,000 more than Matt Duchene for those counting at home – are generally expected to be worth around 2.3 wins, a solid first line rate. Draisaitl is closer to four wins, an elite mark that ranks as one of the highest in the league. It’s funny that the discourse around his deal at the time was that of a huge overpay, one that set the market for RFAs way too high. The thing about RFAs is that they’re young players entering their prime and it’s those guys who can usually maintain steady value and even surpass what’s expected of their deal as they blossom. That’s exactly what happened with Draisaitl, who would still be underpaid relative to his on-ice value if he had the same deal as teammate Connor McDavid. That’s how good he’s been the last two seasons and projects to be over the remaining five years of his deal.

5. Shea Theodore, VGK

Contract: \$5.2M x five years

Surplus Value: +\$25.8M

Positive Value Probability: 95.6 percent

Shea Theodore is entering his third year of a seven-year pact and though he’s been great value to date, the next five seasons should be even sweeter if he can maintain his elite impact. For a defender, the expectation on a \$5.2 million contract is a low-end top-pairing defender – a number two guy on the depth chart, worth about one win. Theodore is a number two in terms of role, an offensively-utilized play-driver that isn’t burdened with tougher minutes, but he’s arguably the league’s best defenceman in that role. He provides enormous value as the team’s offensive catalyst from the back-end, projecting to be worth closer to 2.5 wins. That’s one of the highest impacts in the league and a steal at \$5.2 million. Vegas has a reputation as one of the league’s best possession teams and Theodore is a massive part of that, showcasing as much with an incredible playoff run where he frequently looked like one of the best players on the ice. He tilts the ice better than almost any defenceman in the league and that’s worth a lot more than what he’s paid.

6. Nikita Kucherov, TBL

Contract: \$9.5M x seven years

Surplus Value: +\$28.9M

Positive Value Probability: 92.1 percent

It’s still pretty amazing that the Lightning were able to sign Kucherov to an eight-year deal that pays him under \$10 million the season before he won the Hart Trophy. Like Pastrnak and MacKinnon, my model also projects Kucherov to be a top-five player this season (spoiler alert: The other two also make this list) which puts him above the four-win threshold. That value is primarily from putting up big point totals, but it’s also because of Kucherov’s ability to dictate the pace of a game. That was on full display last season where Kucherov’s possession game took a big step, turning into a more complete player. That translated to the playoffs when the Lightning carried over 60 percent of the scoring chances with him on the ice. That’s an absurd number and not usually what a team gets for \$9.5 million. In 2020-21 terms, that’s reserved for a high-end first liner worth around 2.7 wins. That’s well below Kucherov’s projected output and why he has a high positive value probability. Even in the last year of his deal, he should be a three-win player with a 78 percent chance of providing surplus value. There’s very little concern for the entire life of this deal.

7. Jake Guentzel, PIT

Contract: \$6M x four years

Surplus Value: +\$18.6M

Positive Value Probability: 95.3 percent

For \$6 million, what teams usually get is a really good second liner. Over the last two seasons, Guentzel has proven to be a lot more than that, scoring at a 40-goal pace and playing close to point-per-game hockey. Next to Sidney Crosby, he’s quietly emerged as a legitimate elite winger in his own right worth about three wins, double what’s expected of his

contract. The big thing with Guentzel, aside from his dazzling production, is that he’s a great possession driver. He’s been magnificent in that regard over the last two seasons with either Crosby or Evgeni Malkin both benefitting whenever Guentzel is on their respective wings. He leads the team in expected goals during that time frame and while it’s likely playing with two elite centers plays a role in that, that’s not the whole story when both centres perform much better with him than without.

8. Victor Hedman, TBL

Contract: \$7.875M x five years

Surplus Value: +\$20.0M

Positive Value Probability: 90.7 percent

In general, it’s difficult for defenders to out-perform their deals as there’s a lot less certainty at the position and my model believes teams tend to overpay relative to their on-ice value. It’s why this list has just two defencemen while the worst contracts list is littered with them.

It’s that context that makes Hedman’s place on this list so impressive, but what else can be expected from the Conn Smythe Trophy winner and one of the league’s best defencemen. Hedman is currently being paid a shade under \$8 million over the next five years, but his true worth is something closer to \$12 million putting up close to three wins of value. There are only two other defenders in that range and Hedman earns his place there with his ability to control play at 5-on-5 while also being a strong point producer. He’s consistently been one of the league’s best defencemen over the past few seasons and that shows up in the numbers where he’s projected to score around 65 points while being a force at both ends of the ice, in tough minutes to boot.

9. Auston Matthews, TOR

Contract: \$11.634M x four years

Surplus Value: +\$17.1M

Positive Value Probability: 93.8 percent

Earlier I teased that the other two players projected to provide top-five value were also on this list, so here they are. Most people probably expected Connor McDavid first, not Matthews who’s being paid under a million less for two fewer years. That shouldn’t make for a more valuable contract, but the model currently believes the gap between the two isn’t as wide as it may seem for next year – a spicy take worth explaining.

Remember, this is about on-ice impact and not talent. There is no doubt who the more talented player is, it’s McDavid, full-stop. But in terms of on-ice impact, Matthews has developed into a more well-rounded player while McDavid’s defensive struggles have been well documented. My model projects McDavid to outscore Matthews by 25 points next season, but Matthews’s defensive ability makes up that ground to the point where both players are projected to be worth 4.6 wins next season. For Matthews, the expectation at his price is a 3.3-win player, and he looks likely to be well above that over the next four seasons.

There was some sticker shock when he signed his deal due to its proximity to McDavid’s (an underpay from day one), but his impact has inched closer to the league’s best player as he’s become a more complete player.

10. Connor McDavid, EDM

Contract: \$12.5M x six years

Surplus Value: +\$18.7M

Positive Value Probability: 85.9 percent

It may seem strange to have the highest-paid player in the league on such a list, but based on what players are paid on the open market, a player of McDavid’s current stature is worth closer to \$15-to-16 million, making his current deal a relative bargain. And that’s based on his current stature which is a very important caveat because McDavid arguably deserves to be higher.



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At the end of the 2017-18 season, my model had McDavid rated at around 5.3 wins, far and away better than any other player. Not even close. At that valuation, McDavid would be worth closer to \$18 million (not a typo), good for a surplus of \$37 million with a 98 percent chance of out-performing his contract. He'd be much higher on the list if that was indeed the case. But over the last two seasons, McDavid's defensive impacts have really hampered his on-ice value to the point where the gap between him and the rest of the league has closed significantly now that he's at 4.6 wins. If his defence was merely average, he'd be right there at a projected win rate of 5.3 and I have no doubts he can get there. But for now, based on his last few years of work in his own end, this is where he lands instead. Either way, he's a bargain, but becoming a more responsible player is the difference between him being at the bottom of this list or near the top.

Honourable Mentions: Teuvo Teravainen, Travis Konecny, Charlie McAvoy, Ryan Ellis, Steven Stamkos

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Sportsnet.ca / 10 statistical oddities from super-weird 2019–20 NHL season

Justin Bourne

If your social media feeds are anything like mine right now, they're littered with data ... data that many of us need explained to us like we're five. With the U.S. presidential election still undecided (though it may be by the time you read this), there's a lot to take in. Who voted for whom and by what percentage, how much of the vote is in, where in each state those votes come from — you get the idea.

Long story short: I'm seeing more "%" signs these days than I ever hoped I would after I completed my final college stats class with a letter grade that can be found in the word "passed" and wasn't an "A." (I blame hockey-related attendance issues.)

But stats don't have to be exhausting — they can often be fun and illuminating — so I thought we'd stick to the theme of the day and look at some of those from the past NHL season, with the aim of keeping your eyes from glazing over. For example, did you know Quinn Hughes and Cale Makar finished first and second in rookie scoring, marking the first time in the modern era (since 1943-44) that defencemen held those ranks at the end of a season? No? Well now you do.

Shoutout to the folks at @SNStats, who are great at their jobs and who you should follow and probably Venmo money to (or just follow — your call), and who did literally all of the legwork on this stuff.

There will be zero themes to this whatsoever, beyond "hey, here are some cool stats to enjoy." Need there be more to it than that?

1) The Edmonton Oilers had a franchise-record 29.5 PP%. It was over 4.2% better than the next-closest team this past season (Boston Bruins).

The Oilers also had the second-best penalty kill in the league, which is a pretty wild special-teams season. But yeah, they operated at an insane, nearly 30-per cent success rate over 71 games in 2019–20, obviously with peak Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl directing the traffic out there.

In another universe of hockey, the 1977-78 Montreal Canadiens put up a 31.88% success rate, while the 1976 New York Islanders eclipsed 30% as well. What the Oilers did on the PP this past season, though, at least in this iteration of NHL hockey, was staggering.

While we're talking about the Oilers...

2) Draisaitl became just the second player in NHL history to lead the league in points (110) and have a minus rating (-7), joining Wayne Gretzky in 1993-94 (130 points, -25 rating).

This could be linked to the Oilers' success on the power play, where Draisaitl had a league-high 44 power play points.

At this point we know the gig is pretty much up with plus/minus as a stat. We know it's noisy; we know it's greatly affected by team and teammate; we know it's not much of a measure of an individual player.

Buuuuuuut...

If you had the best season in the league and won the Hart Trophy while playing on a team that nearly won its division, you'd expect your team to score more with you on the ice at even strength, would you not? For context, that rough Gretzky plus/minus year there, the Kings were awful — second last in their Division (only above the Oilers!) and third worst in their Conference. It's a bit of a weird glitch with Draisaitl's stats, is all, and maybe not nothing.

3) The Washington Capitals had the sixth-best PK% (82.6) ... despite having the 11th-worst shorthanded SV% (.858).

In more conversational terms, only five team in hockey were better on the penalty kill than the Caps — even though they couldn't get saves while short-handed. That's pretty good! Is it possible that the way they killed penalties allowed for fewer chances but more dangerous ones? Sure. But I'd say it's more likely that with some better goaltending, Washington would've been even better on the PK, which should be encouraging for Caps fans heading into next season.

4) It had been 58 years since the last season in which one player 23 or younger and another age 34 or older finished among the top two in goals (tied or outright). This past season saw David Pastrnak (age 23) and Alex Ovechkin (34) accomplish that feat. (Previous: Bobby Hull 23 and Gordie Howe 34 in 1961-62.)

"It's a young man's league," we're told ... unless the "olds" in question are all-time greats.

Staying with goal scoring...

5) Pastrnak recorded four hat tricks this season after recording four in his first five seasons in the league.

Four hat tricks! He's one of those guys who deserves NBA JAM "He's heating up!"-style commentary every time he scores.

Remaining Time -7:37

Every David Pastrnak Goal From The 2019-20 NHL Season... So Far

Also this past season:

6) Ovechkin recorded four hat tricks in a season for the first time in his career.

In conclusion, Pastrnak is a better goal-scorer than Ovechkin, and will inevitably lead the NHL in all-time goals scored.*

(*That is not a conclusion anyone on Earth would actually reach.)

7) Pastrnak scored the first goal of the game 15 times this season (seven more than any other player). The only player to ever score more first goals in a season was Brett Hull (19 in 1990-91 and 16 in 1991-92).

Sometimes stats like this look funny just by random chance and variance, particularly when a guy just flat-out scores a lot of goals. But I don't think that's the case here. I've seen some players who consistently come out strong and push for goals early (or just happen to be "on"), and either get energized by scoring (four hattys!), or go quiet when denied. Other players take a bit longer to get into the game — these are legit player traits.

There could be some defensive planning pulled from this — focus on him early, shut him down in the first, and avoid stoking those early embers. But against "The Perfection Line," I'm guessing teams have tried the old "simply shut down Pastrnak" plan in the past to little success.

8) Anton Khudobin led the NHL with a .930 SV% this season. His career SV% going into the season was .917.



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First off, I didn't realize his career save percentage heading into the season was that good, but yeah: The man earned himself that three-year contract extension. Enjoy that 10 shmill, chum.

9) There were 125 multi-goal comeback wins, the most in NHL history through 1,082 games (the amount of games played this season instead of 1,271).

This is my favourite stat here today because I came across some commentary this season about "hockey today" being less entertaining (less physical, too fast to follow, copycat styles), yet the game itself gave us great drama. The most multi-goal comeback wins EVER. When your team is down in today's NHL, they aren't necessarily out.

10) There were five instances of a team overcoming a deficit of 4+ goals to win a game, tied for the most ever in a single season (1983-84 and 1986-86).

Case in point! This is kind of a bonkers stat, 'cause it's not like it's just "came back to tie the score" or anything. These teams that were down four actually won their games. The league has to like that more focus on skill has led to a greater ability to bounce back in games than ever before.

While we're entertaining ourselves looking at fun stats from the 2019-20 season, we welcome yours. Add them to the comments section below, and we can collectively compile a little virtual scrapbook from a super-weird season that gave us a few super-weird stats.

See? Stats aren't ALL bad.

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