



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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THE ATHLETIC

Ryan Suzuki won't let eye injury stop his world junior and NHL goals

By Scott Wheeler

Nov 12, 2020

In the blink of an eye, he almost lost his own.

Now, a year removed from the high stick that left him with a permanent blind spot at the centre of his right eye, Ryan Suzuki is out to prove he won't be defined by his vision.

He's changed. Forever. And it has been harder than anything he's ever been through before. But he has learned to live with his difference and he has set his sights just as high as they were before a stick sliced past his cheek and into his eye.

Up first: the world juniors. Up second: the Carolina Hurricanes.

It was November 1, 2019, and Suzuki's Barrie Colts were on the road for their once-a-year game in Saginaw against the Spirit.

The shift before it happened, before his eyesight changed, Suzuki had opened the scoring midway through the first period, driving the net to redirect a pass to the slot.

As he stepped back onto the ice, he felt invincible, like the puck was gravitating to him.

"It was one of those games where you just know it's your night," Suzuki said.

He'll never forget the play that followed. He remembers it in vivid detail.

There was a weird turnover in the offensive zone. Spirit defenceman Ilya Solovyov had thrown a cross-ice pass that landed directly on his stick. He quickly attacked, moving left-to-right across the top of the slot. Solovyov panicked, closing across the zone to meet him in the middle of the ice. When Solovyov tried to make a play on his stick, he successfully stepped past, avoiding him. As he did, Solovyov's stick swung sideways and then up.

The first thing that followed was pain. Then, as he realized he couldn't see, everything went away and he was back on his feet, two hands over his right eye, scrambling to the bench yelling the same three words over and over.

"I can't see! I can't see!" he shouted as he slid into Colts trainer Clayton Johns, who'd rushed onto the ice to meet him near the bench.

"You're OK, we've got to take a look at it," Johns said in an effort to comfort him.

But Suzuki knew he wasn't OK. He'd been hit in the eye before, even briefly losing his vision, but it had always quickly returned, spotting then making way for light. This was different.

It was just black — and he was freaking out.

"I had no idea what was going on," he said.

On the Spirit bench, head coach Chris Lazary didn't think much of the play at first. Suzuki's back was to his bench when it happened and it looked just like any other high stick. Suzuki didn't stay down for long and when he first got up the panic hadn't initially set in. It wasn't until Suzuki skated past the bench that Lazary's feeling shifted.

"I could see blood coming out of the area. And I'll be honest with you, I felt sick to my stomach," Lazary said. "The rest of that game it was real hard to focus and keep coaching, just because individually my mind was on Ryan. When he went by the bench it just didn't look good and I had this feeling. It was a scary moment."

That feeling was compounded by the fact he knew Suzuki. Lazary and Suzuki had developed a relationship through summer leagues and had crossed paths around the hockey world a number of other times. After the two teams' morning skates that day, they'd bumped into each other at the rink and spent some time chatting.

In the dressing room, Suzuki knew everyone was catching on when the teams' doctors told him he needed to go to the hospital.

At the hospital, he was then told he wasn't allowed to leave until he started seeing light. By then, his dad, Rob, had called his agent, former NHLer David Gagner, with the news.

"I played hockey a long time with a lot of guys who didn't wear face protection and it rarely happened. In this case, it was just more about Ryan's future and not just in hockey but wanting to get him back healthy. It was a very concerning thing. Everyone was just concerned about his well-being and making sure he could get back to normalcy," Gagner said.

It was, Suzuki guesses, seven or eight hours before he was released. He didn't arrive home after 4 a.m.

For a while, he also had to sleep sitting up so that the blood could drain out of his eye. Otherwise, the doctors feared that it could clot and cause even more long-term damage. It took



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a few days for him to get even blurry vision back, as his eye remained swollen shut.

"It was super scary, just mentally. It was tough. My whole body was fine, I just couldn't see. When you're trying to go to sleep at night, you think about everything. About my career. About if I was going to see again," Suzuki said. "The first reaction is always, 'Am I going to play again?' That's the toughest part as an athlete. Some nights you don't know what's going to happen and you just have to be positive and kind of stick with what you've done your whole life, hoping it will work out."

Even once his eye began to slowly open, he wasn't allowed to get his heart rate going for almost two months, which meant he couldn't even work out.

Doctors told him he'd torn his retina and that he was going to have long-lasting eyelid damage which may render it lax (a medical term for loose and malfunctioning).

Suzuki didn't know he would be OK until he was allowed back onto the ice in the middle of December.

He was a little rusty, but his stickhandling and shooting felt fine. By then, he had a scar just below his eye, and had come to the realization that he was going to have to play with one eye that was worse than the other. He tried to ignore it.

Eventually, doctors cleared him to return to the lineup so long as he wore a full face mask for the remainder of the season.

He got back into the Colts lineup for a pair of games just before the Christmas break.

In his return, he learned that he was going to have to teach himself to approach the game differently, given that his blind spot was almost dead centre.

"I have good peripheral vision still and that's almost what I need anyways to make plays," he said. "I'm always a player that's aware of everything that's going on around me so I think having the injury, I had to have my head up more and it almost made me a little bit more assertive because I always wanted to know what was going on. And playing with a full cage, you can be a little more gritty in the corners and not having to worry about sticks coming up into your chin and face. I'm just more aware of what's around me. I'm forced to pay attention more."

Then, on the morning of Jan. 10, with only a handful of games under his belt, he got a call from his best friend, Saginaw defenceman Mason Millman. He had known Millman since they were 6 years old, playing together with the London Jr. Knights.

Suzuki was supposed to have a game with the Colts that night but their morning skate had been cancelled. So he was planning on sleeping in and going into the rink later in the day to warm up when he got the FaceTime call.

Millman was flanked by Lazary.

"You're coming to Saginaw," Millman told him.

After two and half years with the Colts, the team that drafted him first overall in the 2017 OHL priority selection, Suzuki had been traded to the team that he'd been injured against two and a half months earlier.

In a flurry, his game that night became one with the Spirit, who were on the road in Flint, and he was saying goodbye to his billets and his teammates. By the time he'd made the five-hour drive to Flint to meet the team, it was game time.

"I got there like 30 minutes before the game. All the boys were warming up and I was just walking in, in street clothes," Suzuki said. "It was a wild day."

In the weeks before the trade, the Spirit had often checked in with Suzuki about his recovery. Lazary had texted. Millman had called. Solovyov felt terrible and had asked for updates, hopeful Suzuki would be all right.

And then the trade deadline came, the Spirit hoped to contend for an OHL title, and when they discussed how they might make a big splash, Suzuki's name kept coming up. They knew that he was going to be able to play through his new reality and they'd kept tabs on him since his OHL draft year, when they interviewed him a number of times, hoping he might be available when they picked fourth overall.

"We met with the family, we loved his character, we knew his brother (Montreal Canadiens forward Nick) and we saw what his brother did to us in the playoffs the year before. We thought it was a perfect fit with our culture," Spirit general manager Dave Drinkill said.

He was also the exact kind of player that Lazary and Drinkill coveted on the ice.

"He just ticks all of the boxes. He wants to possess the puck, he wants to make plays, he's so skilled and elusive. Some teams at the deadline want to add different things but we wanted to add an impact player that can really help make us a very dangerous offensive team and Ryan's that type of guy," Drinkill said.

So they pulled the trigger, swinging a 10-piece trade with Barrie to acquire him.

"Our group just instantly knew that we had just got one of the top players in the league and that gave us a real, real chance to make a push," Lazary said. "The energy from a coaching standpoint and all of the players, we were so, so excited to get him."

Suzuki, for his part, never mentioned the play that injured him.

"Guys normally don't like going back to the places where it happened. And here's this guy accepting a trade to Saginaw where he had a serious injury, and he didn't think twice about it, which I think speaks volumes to who he is," Lazary said.

That first night in Flint, Lazary paired Suzuki with the team's two leading scorers, Cole Perfetti and Cole Coskey. Suzuki rewarded him with two assists.

"It was like magic right away. I think in the first period Ryan dumped the puck in a couple of times and in the intermission



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(Perfetti) and (Lazary) went to him and were like, 'We don't dump pucks in here, we're making plays' and from the second period on it was unstoppable," Drinkill said. "Ryan's great because he just kind of raises the game."

Saginaw quickly became that perfect fit everyone hoped for, too. The Spirit even play a similar style to the Hurricanes — the team that picked Suzuki 28th overall in the 2019 NHL Draft — and Lazary uses a lot of their video in his teachings.

As the season progressed and Suzuki became one of the OHL's best players again, Lazary couldn't believe how easily Suzuki adjusted after his injury. In 23 games with the Spirit, he scored 13 goals and picked up 35 points (1.52 per game).

"If anything it has made him more cerebral and it has made him more aware of his surroundings," Lazary said. "It has actually made him in my opinion honestly a better player because he's got to track more information all the time."

Though Suzuki's chance to play for a championship with his new team was cut short in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, he entered the offseason feeling rejuvenated.

He knew that he was lucky, through it all, to be where he was, and that he could use the offseason to make up for time lost.

"I had close to three months off where I wasn't doing anything and I was just getting backtracked, so Carolina really pushed me to have a really big summer and get ready for a good training camp and a shot at the roster," Suzuki said. "I had to take advantage of this time off because I know other guys will be doing the same. In a usual summer you can do a little bit to get better but it's nothing compared to eight months. It's tough going through the same stuff every day for that extended a period of time but you have to find ways to push yourself. Working out with Nick and other pro guys, they really push you and you see firsthand what you have to do to make it."

Suzuki pushed himself back home in London, Ont., training under Dwayne Blais, who works with the Washington Capitals and London Knights.

He spent most of his days working in a small off-ice group with Nick, St. Louis Blues forward Jordan Kyrou, and Buffalo Sabres top prospect Dylan Cozens, who joined them in the middle of the summer. On the ice, they also skated with local NHLers Bo Horvat, Travis Konecny and Lawson Crouse, among others, at the Western Fair Sports Centre.

Though he attended the Hurricanes' training camp before the team entered the NHL's bubble, that training was otherwise uninterrupted.

"The one advantage that could come out of this is that players haven't had the opportunity to train to build strength like they have this time around. So we've told him this is a time to make significant gains in that area. Ryan's done a good job of that," Gagner said. "It helps to have a brother like Nick that Ryan looks up to. It's good to have that example close to you so you can see what the expectations are to

your daily approach to fitness and trying to be the best player you can be."

When the OHL and NHL seasons got pushed back, Suzuki's focus turned singular. A year after his eye injury kept him from fulfilling his invite to Team Canada's 2020 world junior selection camp, he wanted to make the 2021 roster.

At the end of October, that second invite came and he had to make plans to head to Red Deer, Alberta, as part of the 46-player roster that would compete for 25 spots in a month-long camp.

Having not seriously pursued opportunities to play elsewhere, the camp's extended schedule was a welcome opportunity to showcase himself.

"It's tough being out of competition and not having the high intensity games. I'm dying for that competition and competing against the top players in the world. I'm really excited and hopefully I can make the team," Suzuki said. "With everything that's gone on, it's been a crazy year. I'm just excited for the opportunity to make the team. I was feeling good about that camp last year too. It would've been good to go there and have a shot. It didn't work out but I've got another shot this year."

It's an opportunity Lazary knows Suzuki will make the most of.

"I think he has a real good shot at making that team last year but he got shivved a bit," Lazary said.

Drinkill argued that Suzuki's strong international track record — including an eight-point performance in five games at the Hlinka Gretzky Cup — speaks for itself. Though Canada's roster will be toughest to make at forward, he thinks Suzuki's up to the task too.

"He's one of those guys where he might get overlooked a little bit because of his injury. Maybe he gets put on the backburner a little bit, and people forget about him," Drinkill said. "But then when you watch him play, he's a first-round pick who arguably could have went way higher in the draft than he did. He was trending to be a superstar in our league. He's going to be a heck of a player and I think he'll be fine in camp, let's just say that."

Everyone is just relieved that Suzuki has a second chance.

"Ryan stayed positive throughout the whole process. The first thing you think about is that your dreams could be over," Gagner said. "Hopefully after the tournament those kids will have the chance to go pro camps and they'll be flying. It's just such an advantage. You really can't train as hard as you compete in a game."

Most importantly, Suzuki is at peace with the last year — and the injury that started it.

"There's not much that (the doctors) can do. There's still some lax (eyelid) damage. There's a lot of damage. It was pretty bad," Suzuki finished. "(But) honestly, I've gotten used to it to the point where I don't even notice it."



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Tripp Tracy reader Q&A, Round 2: Canes goaltending, Digging In, gordita crunch

By Sara Civian

Even in a time of uncertainty and a bizarre NHL offseason, the people could count on Hurricanes color commentator Tripp 'Frank Sinatra' Tracy.

Tracy started a podcast called Digging In with Tripp where he's already featured roughly half of the NHL and a handful of Canes regulars. Now it's close family friend and Ford CEO Jim Farley. Because of course.

OUR GRANDFATHER CUT HIS TEETH ON MODEL T PRODUCTION LINE AND NOW MY COUSIN @JIMFARLEY98 IS @FORD CEO. THRILLED TO RELEASE THIS EPISODE CELEBRATING JIMMY'S CORE FAMILY, FAITH, AND SERVICE BASED VALUES. LOVE YA JIMMY. LETS DIG IN!! @TRIPPTRACY [HTTPS://T.CO/TQYRKS9ORC](https://t.co/tqyrks9orc)

— DIGGING IN WITH TRIPP PODCAST (@DIGINTRIPP)
NOVEMBER 10, 2020

Tracy answered your best questions in what has become our annual reader Q&A.

(Editor's note: Questions have been edited for clarity.)

Describe the Andrei Svechnikov-Sebastian Aho-Teuvo Teravainen line as Taco Bell items.

Svech is a Gordita Crunch because he plays with such power and jam. Sebastian is a five-layer burrito because he has built more and more "layers" to his game to become complete. Teuvo is a steak soft taco because he is so grossly underrated and his sauce is comparable to the juice that makes this taco great.

What do you think is the most important thing in building a rapport with players?

Be yourself and be trusted. Actually something that Ryan Dzingel said to me on the mom's trip in the locker room in Nashville meant a great deal to me. He said, "Tripper, you tell the truth and point out when either a player and/or the team is struggling, but you do it in a way that doesn't throw that player or team under the bus." Hall of Famer John Davidson taught me that when he was color analyst for some struggling Rangers' teams. Ryan saying that in front of the boys meant a lot to me.

What is your Mount Rushmore of supposed Caniacs?

My mom because of her toughness. My sister Tiffany because of her unquestioned loyalty. Michael Jordan. George W. Bush because of his decency and character. Frank Sinatra. There are five there. I know there's only four presidents on Mount Rushmore.

Why should Hurricanes fans be excited about Mike Maniscalco taking over the call full-time whenever the next season begins?

With Mike, what you see is what you get. He is consistent in his genuine likeability with players, management, coaches and fans because that's who he is. I thought he got better every game in the Rangers and Bruins series. Called wins and losses. And had an appetite and willingness to grow, which is something we all try to do whether it's your first year or 20th. It's a progress, not perfection business. You will never have the perfect game even if you are Vin Scully.

Is the Canes' goaltending enough to get them to the next level?

It has the potential to be. Everybody knows I've always been and am a big believer when it comes to Petr Mrazek. And Curtis McElhinney and James Reimer have been excellent and timely the last two seasons. And their numbers reflected it. Petr still has the most upside but the time is now. He needs to be in the best shape of his life and manage his emotions to make sure he maximizes them advantageously. Canes have a top tier defensive team, which presents a mental challenge to whoever is in net to not overthink the game when they go stretches without seeing shots. Petr, James, Curtis and (Alex Nedeljkovic) are all extremely popular with their teammates, which is an important factor too! But like I said, time is now. I'm Digging In With The Boys and hoping they learn the hard lessons together, which is what Rod, I know, is banking on. And that includes the goaltending position.

What is something the 2006 squad had that the current squad doesn't quite have yet?

The 2006 team was a veteran team that never panicked, within a game or within a series. My hope is that this young team will develop more of this as they learn hard, invaluable lessons TOGETHER. Martin Gerber and Cam Ward — Gerber in the regular season and Cam in the playoffs — outplayed seemingly every opposing goaltender. As I stated earlier, I absolutely believe that Petr and James can get there, but that's the level that needs to be located. Allows a team to play differently when the belief is absolute that they will get the key saves.

What is something people might not know about your job?

I would say how much work our production crew does to prepare for the game and during the game. When I ride over to the arena on the team bus, they have been there for a 7 p.m. game since 11 or 11:30 a.m. And they go to the ends of the Earth to make sure the fiber is firing on all cylinders for my Fingerworks Telestrator to work!

How do you have so many connections and who is your dream Digging In guest?

Just being myself I think. And I'd like to think that guys know that they can trust me. The episode I just did with Ford CEO Jimmy Farley will be tough to beat because he is my dad's godson, and his mom was my godmother. And my grandfather, who I share a name with (Emmet Tracy — my dad, too) was on the Ford Model T Production Line.



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Incredibly special for my family. Beyond that, I think I'd say Michael Jordan would be the guy I'd love to Dig In with!

How do you think the reunion with Jeff Skinner and Eric Staal will go in Buffalo?

Eric Staal is a winner and Kevyn Adams knows that as well as anyone. Even in the latter stages of (Staal's) career he has the chance to impact real and potentially long-lasting positive cultural change with such a proud organization like Buffalo is. Jeff Skinner is a terrific human being. He always has been thoughtful and very, very smart. To get over the hump on the ice, he needs to learn that you can positively impact the game in other ways on the ice besides scoring goals and accumulating points. He has it in him just as never been able to prioritize it. Staal and Skinner never really fit as linemates in Carolina because Jeff has an "unpredictability" to his game that is very difficult to read off of. We will see.

Presuming a shortened season with a compressed schedule, what team characteristics should the Canes focus on in finalizing the roster?

Being the best conditioned team in the league from Game 1. Also, being harder to play against as a group up front and on the blue line. The Hurricanes' winning percentage in the entire NHL at the March COVID pause represented a step forward from the previous season in my view. There's still more room for a complete buy-in from the group to take yet another step. And every step is a harder one. Young stars continue to become more impactful and some relied upon players bounce back from off years in their roles. I really, really like this team. Knock on wood, they stay healthy. Go Canes!



Hurricanes hope Hamilton will sign extension before start of season

By Tom Guliti

Dougie Hamilton and the Carolina Hurricanes have yet to begin negotiations on a contract extension, but general manager Don Waddell said he hopes the defenseman will sign before the start of this season.

The 27-year-old is entering the final season of a six-year contract he signed June 30, 2015 and will be eligible to become an unrestricted free agent when it expires.

"We're getting close to talking about it," Waddell said Thursday. "Dougie's not back here, yet. He's still up in Toronto. He's coming back here I think at the end of the week. ... He is a UFA at the end of the year, so we'd like to get that one done sooner than later. That one, you would have doubts if you play out the season, so it makes sense to try to get something done before the start of the season."

The NHL is targeting Jan. 1 to begin the 2020-21 season. Hamilton scored 40 points (14 goals, 26 assists) in 47 regular-season games last season before fracturing his left fibula against the Columbus Blue Jackets on Jan. 16. He returned to score two points (one goal, one assist) in five postseason games.

The Hurricanes wanted to wait before beginning extension talks with Hamilton to see how the coronavirus pandemic and the NHL salary cap remaining at \$81.5 million impacted the 2020 unrestricted free agent market in October.

"You've got a flat cap for the next two years, we know that," Waddell said. "We also know that the market's changed. I'm not saying we're not going to do a long-term deal, but the long-term deals, if you look at free agency, you've only got a few guys that got more than three years in the whole market. ... So I think the market has changed and it should change because of the situation we're all in."

"Nobody asked to be in this situation, but we're in it and we've got to figure out the best way to do deal with it."

Although Waddell said he believes defenseman remains the Hurricanes' strength with Hamilton, Jacob Slavin, Brett Pesce, Brady Skjei, Jake Gardiner and Haydn Fleury signed for this season, the Hurricanes haven't closed the door on re-signing defenseman Sami Vatanen, who became an unrestricted free agent Oct. 9.

Vatanen had a lower-body injury when he was acquired in a trade with the New Jersey Devils on Feb. 24. He did not play any regular-season games for the Hurricanes and had three assists in seven playoff games.



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"He hasn't been a position that he felt he wanted to make a decision," Waddell said. "I talked to him again last week and we just said, 'Keep us posted. We think there's a good fit here for you.' So until he signs here or someplace else, we'll continue to talk to him."

Waddell said talks with forward [Andrei Svechnikov](#) on a contract extension have been paused since before the 2020 NHL Draft began Oct. 6, but he remains confident the sides will reach an agreement. Svechnikov, who was third on Carolina with 61 points (24 goals, 37 assists) last season, is entering the final season of his three-year, entry-level contract and will be eligible to become a restricted free agent when it expires.

Waddell said Oct. 1 a bridge deal of two years that would set up the 20-year-old for a longer-term deal afterward is most likely.

"We talked before the draft actually and said, 'Let's get through the draft. Let's get through free agency,'" Waddell said. "So we haven't had any more (negotiations). ... Nothing is easy, but this one will get done. Andrei wants to be here. His agents want him here. We want him here. Once we get down to some serious talks, I think it will get done fairly quickly."



Fans Name Andrei Svechnikov One of NHL's Top Wings

By Michael Smith

[Andrei Svechnikov](#) is the sixth-best winger in the National Hockey League, according to fans polled by the NHL Network.

Though the Canes' star forward was curiously absent from the NHL Network's list of Top 20 Wings Right Now, as [revealed on Sunday night](#), fans ranked Svechnikov behind only Artemi Panarin, Nikita Kucherov, Alex Ovechkin, Patrick Kane and David Pastrnak.

Pretty good company.

In his second NHL season, Svechnikov improved in every category from an already impressive rookie season, despite the 2019-20 campaign being trimmed short. At still just 19 years old, Svechnikov ranked second on the team in goals (24), second on the team in assists (37) and third on the team in points (61). Svechnikov recorded an 11-game point streak (5g, 8a) in February, the longest point streak by a teenager in franchise history, besting his nine-game point streak (5g, 8a) from November, the second-longest point streak by a teenager in franchise history. Svechnikov totaled 98 points (44g, 54a) in 150 career NHL games prior to his 20th birthday on March 26, marking the fourth-most goals and points by a teenager in franchise history.

The lasting memory from Svechnikov's sophomore season was, of course, The Svech, a lacrosse-style goal that had never before been scored in the NHL - and he did it twice.

Svechnikov made history on Oct. 29, 2019, when he scored his [first lacrosse-style goal](#). With the Canes trailing the Calgary Flames 1-0 in the third period, Svechnikov slammed on the brakes and reversed course behind the net, scooping the puck onto his blade so he could tuck it in above David Rittich's right shoulder.

The jaw-dropping moment - arguably the goal of the season scored not even a month into the season - was only the beginning.

Just 49 days later, [Svechnikov did it again](#).

This time, Svechnikov executed it in one fluid motion, not breaking his stride behind the net as he turned to face the back of the cage, scooped the puck onto his blade and rammed it in over Connor Hellebuyck's right shoulder.

"That's unbelievable," [Sebastian Aho](#) laughed. "That's unreal. Really impressive."

Svechnikov is, indeed, really impressive, and he's only going to continue to improve as one of the league's budding young stars whose name you will find on lists of top wingers - or, even top players - for years to come. TV's Mike Maniscalco and I opined on NHL Network's list on [episode 148 of CanesCast](#) (2:10 mark).

NHL Network will continue their weekly positional countdowns in November with their lists of 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 / NHL's 2020-21 plan: What we're hearing about the start date, hubs and format

Scott Burnside

Nov 13, 2020

It seems like most of 2020 had been spent planning for the return of hockey and/or debating what those games might look like when the NHL and its players settled on a plan.

The final weeks of 2020 seem destined to follow that onerous pattern.

But know this, the urgency is building for the league to once more confront the realities of a world laid waste by COVID-19 and with all due respect to "Saturday Night Live" — do that hockey.

The NHL's board of governors and senior executives met virtually late Thursday afternoon to update the league's owners and major power brokers on where the league is with its discussions with the NHL Players' Association on getting the 2020-21 season underway. At roughly the same time the NHLPA executive board was having a similar call.

Multiple sources on the NHL call indicated less news and more updating, but if the league is aiming for an early January return to hockey, the next two weeks loom large in not just revealing the details but ensuring games will be played.

So, what do we know? What do we believe? Follow along.

Hockey will be back, guaranteed right?

Sure. Maybe. Likely. There was a rumor circulating in the last couple of weeks that some owners were prepared to (or preferred to) scuttle the coming season and wait until a coronavirus vaccine is readily available. This would allow them to have fans filling their arenas for the 2021-22 season. That's almost certainly not going to happen. Multiple senior NHL executives have said taking a season off is not an option.

The NBA recently announced a bold plan to start its 2020-21 season in December. It's worth noting the NBA has a lucrative television deal — compared to the NHL — that getting fans back in their buildings is less of an issue for them. The NFL is dodging coronavirus cases but looks on its way to completing its current season in early February. Major League Baseball, like the NHL, named a champion out of season and are preparing for spring training in the new year. The NHL lost an entire season in 2004-05 to a labor dispute but the potential economic damage to folding on this coming season is hard to calculate.

"I think we're going to play," one NHL governor said after Thursday's call. "This whole, 'We're not going to play' is off the table."

Will owners need players to kick back even more in salary to make it work?

That's one of the key questions that needs answering in the coming weeks. The NHL has yet to make any kind of formal ask of the players. Top NHL and NHLPA executives, as well as the NHLPA's 16-member return to play committee talk almost daily about the many issues surrounding a new season. But it's possible such an ask is coming and it does have the potential to be contentious.

The reality is the two sides agreed on a new collective bargaining agreement in the summer as part of the creation of a return to play protocol that went seamlessly as Tampa won the NHL's first bubble Stanley Cup in late September. The new CBA calls for a 20 percent escrow on salaries and then a 10 percent deferral on the balance of the salaries to be paid back to players over time.

The agreement, in theory, factored in all the possibilities moving forward in 2020-21 including, not having fans in buildings to start the season, a shortened schedule and possible spikes in COVID-19 cases in parts of North America. Will the owners argue that if the league plays fewer than a normal 82-game regular season — a given now — that they can ask players to be paid on a pro-rated basis? Possibly.

This might be especially important to NHL owners looking for short-term financial relief. One source asked the following: If players came back to the table four months after agreeing to a new CBA and wanted concessions from the owners what would the response be? To paraphrase: It would be, take a hike.

If owners ask players to take a pro-rated salary given a shorter schedule, that ask would likely have to come with some sort of return for the players. Regardless one source indicated that this critical element of the return to play equation will have to be dealt with soon, perhaps within the next week.

Let's assume hockey will be played. When and how many games?

Great questions and the two are inexorably linked. The message on the NHL call Thursday was that Jan. 1 remains the preferred start date. However, commissioner Gary Bettman — for the first time — left the door open for a later start date.

National broadcast partner NBC is carrying the summer Olympics in Tokyo beginning July 23 after the Summer Games were postponed. That means the NHL playoffs would have to be completed by mid-July. So, back up the calendar and logic shows the later the NHL starts, the fewer games can be played. There was some discussion about pausing the NHL playoffs for the Olympics and then finishing after but that appears to be a non-starter. The NHL's ultimate goal is to get back to a normal schedule for the start of the 2021-22 season when Seattle joins as the league's 32nd team.

One longtime league executive said he thought the NHL would go for 48 games but other sources have said that number is too low. In order to fulfill responsibilities with broadcast partners both national and local, plus sponsors, multiple sources on Thursday's calls felt the number would have to be between 60 and 70 games.

The league will also want to build in a cushion of time for make-up dates between the end of the regular season and the start of the playoffs in the event games have to be postponed. That shouldn't be an issue given that building demand for things like concerts or other events outside the NBA would be marginal, as one longtime executive noted.

"We're going to start in January unless something (COVID-19 related) happens," one governor said. "The next couple of weeks are big."

So, players better get ready to get going, right?

Yes. Do the math. Training camps will need to run at least two weeks, so if you're targeting Jan. 1 as a start date training camps would open mid-December. And we know the NHL is hoping to give the seven teams that didn't make the playoffs an extra week or so of on-ice time to shake off the eight months of rust. So, now those teams are hitting the ice by the



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end of the first week of December. Players, especially those in Europe, have to make travel plans and consider whatever quarantine issues are in place in their respective markets. Players traveling to Canada, for instance, would presumably be expected to quarantine for two weeks before starting practice. So, yes, the clock is ticking.

Will there be an 'O Canada' Division?

Almost certainly the seven Canadian teams will form their own sprawling cross-country division. How much fun will that be? A lot.

With the Canadian border closed to non-essential travel and with the predicted seasonal spikes in the virus happening on both sides of the border, it seems unlikely Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will make allowances for NHL teams to travel under normal divisional alignment.

The Toronto Blue Jays played home games during their truncated 2020 season in Buffalo. The Toronto Raptors are looking for a place to play their home games unless the provincial and federal governments make allowances for them to play in a home they share with the Toronto Maple Leafs.

If that happens, the NHL would ask for a similar dispensation and one source on Thursday's calls said the league has had discussions with federal and respective provincial officials about the possibility of U.S. teams coming into Canada. Even if allowances are made to allow U.S. teams in and out of Canada to start the season, what if those regulations changed? It would be a disaster, which is why it's expected the NHL will go to a one-time Canadian division and three U.S.-based divisions for the coming season.

To cut down on travel regardless of which side of the border teams are playing on look for teams to play multiple games in cities like baseball. So, for instance, Montreal might fly to Vancouver and play two or three games, go to Calgary and Edmonton and do the same before returning home.

Bubbles or no bubbles?

Because the situation with COVID-19 is so fluid, several sources said the thinking has shifted dramatically on the bubble or hub theory in the last couple of weeks.

As we noted above with a Canadian division expected, the other expectation is that the NHL will regroup the 24 U.S. teams into three eight-team divisions more or less grouped geographically. The current expectation is that most U.S.-based teams will begin to play in their own arenas.

"I think Gary wants to do that as much as possible," one top NHL team executive said after Thursday's call.

Keeping teams grouped geographically will help reduce travel costs, which is not an insignificant thing. On Thursday's call executives were asked to consider whether they would prefer to play in their own buildings even though many would be empty, given local health regulations on group gatherings. It's expected the vast majority of NHL teams would vote to play at home.

Some NHL teams would likely be allowed a small number of fans given what we've seen happen in NFL markets where teams in Tennessee, Florida, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Colorado, Missouri, Maryland (Washington team), North Carolina, Arizona and Texas have been allowed varying percentages of fans to attend games. Most of those NFL events are outdoors or in stadiums with retractable roofs and are three times the size of NHL rinks, so it's unknown how that would impact NHL attendance. Suffice to say it would be a small percentage of capacity at best.

If COVID-19 issues force the NHL into a hub situation — at least temporarily — it's expected there would be one hub per division. Teams would travel to the hub city for a couple of weeks and play a series of games before returning home, while other teams would move in and so on. If you do that, as one longtime NHL executive noted, it's not really a bubble though, which is why he expects teams to play in their own cities.

The overriding hope is the issue with fan attendance will evolve over the course of the season. That starting with zero or a small percentage of fans in buildings will eventually evolve with the availability of a vaccine — and news on that front in the U.S. has been increasingly hopeful over recent days. The best-case scenario is that at some point the virus is under control enough to allow close to capacity attendance around the league.

Will we see another expanded playoff next spring?

It's unlikely. Bettman hates the idea of an expanded playoff even though the NHL's return to play in August included a 24-team tournament and a best-of-five play-in round for 16 of those teams. Multiple sources have indicated the current plan is to return to a traditional 16-team playoff with four rounds of best-of-seven. Assuming the divisional setup as described above (a Canadian division and three U.S.-based divisions) the expectation is that the playoffs would be division-based. It's possible pending the length of the schedule and the status of the virus that the regular season would be all in-division as well.

As for playoff travel, one concession to the one-time realignment of the divisions might be to modify the traditional 2-2-1-1-1 playoff schedule so that, for instance, Vancouver and Montreal, aren't crossing the country multiple times in a first-round series. Instead, a playoff series might take on a 2-3-2 format for that reason.

No Winter Classic. Will the NHL do something dramatic to launch the season?

Maybe and, for a time, seemed to be a preferred way to start. We talked to several sources who were scouring the landscape for potential locations on either side of the border for some sort of visually inspiring outdoor locations to start the season even though fans wouldn't have been allowed to attend.

Picturesque Lake Louise, Alta., was a possibility but the logistics of putting on a game or games in a Canadian national park made it a non-starter. It, however, led to discussions about other mountainous areas like Canmore, Alta. In the U.S., Utah and the Grand Teton area in Wyoming, east of Idaho, were also being considered but in recent days that idea seems to have lost momentum. Logistically it would seem a maximum of two such outdoor locations could be constructed, one in Canada and one in the U.S., and possibly several teams could play games at these locations in the opening days of the season.

"I wouldn't go too heavy on that," one source warned.

Fair enough.

Return to Play committee

Well, our good pal Pierre LeBrun has reported players such as Ian Cole, Zach Hyman, Claude Giroux and Ron Hainsey have been named to the expanded 16-player Return to Play committee.

That's more than three times the size of the five-player committee that helped construct the return to play in the summer. LeBrun noted that this committee is doing more work internally and that when it comes to dealing with the NHL, a handful of players are being asked to join those discussions.

Last Sunday, for instance, Cole and Hyman joined a call with NHL and NHLPA executives. But there remains daily communication between the players and the league.

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The Athletic / NHL agent survey: 21 reps talk star trades, bubble standouts, offseason winners

Craig Custance

Nov 13, 2020

The NHL calendar is at a fascinating point. There are active and serious discussions about how next season will look. There are still teams that need to make significant moves before the season starts. There's a U.S. TV deal being negotiated. What should be a dead portion of the schedule actually has a lot of activity.

To get more insight on all this and more, we surveyed 21 NHL player agents with seven pressing questions while giving them anonymity to encourage candid answers. And we certainly got candid answers.

Let's dive in:

1. Which player or coach changed your opinion the most during the playoff bubble?

Brayden Point

6

Rick Bowness

4

Jon Cooper

2

Anton Khudobin

2

Corey Perry

1

Kaapo Kakko

1

Adam Pelech

1

Thatcher Demko

1

Cale Makar

1

Kevin Shattenkirk

1

Barry Trotz

1

Brayden Point was the runaway winner here from a player perspective. And the reaction for agents who voted for Point was typically like this: I knew Point was good. I didn't know he was THAT good.

"Kaapo Kakko. Seeing him emerge and mature after that period off — I thought his maturity level and the way his approach to the game really improved."

"Adam Pelech is underrated in my opinion and one of the better defensemen in the NHL. Not my client, by the way."

"Cale Makar was unbelievable. I saw him in college hockey and I knew he was good. But he was REALLY good."

"Rick Bowness. I've got guys on Dallas and it got to the point where guys would say, 'If he's not coming back, I don't want to go back.' He's loved in the room. LOVED in the room. He's regarded by all the guys as being fair. He'll come in and give them shit but everything he does, he does with a dose of humanity. There's a lot of coaches who that chip is missing."

"Rick Bowness. To take on the team at this stage of the season in difficult circumstances and the team wasn't playing, there was some turmoil. To be able to put these people together and make it a cohesive unit ... to give Miro Heiskanen additional responsibility and not overreact to mistakes and to have patience with John Klingberg and allowing (Anton Khudobin) to flourish — there's an unending list of things to deal with. He was calm, it was never about him. It was about the team. I'm a big fan."

"Kevin Shattenkirk — people had a negative opinion whether or not they watched him with his time with the Rangers. He played, played a lot, played hard defensively, put up points and fit a great role there."

"Brayden Point was unbelievable. I don't get to watch Tampa a whole lot. He was something else."

"Brayden Point is for real. I don't know if that's a dramatic change of opinion but I just didn't pay as much attention to Tampa. And Seth Jones is the best defenseman in the NHL. I'll take him over anybody in the whole league. He played 65 minutes one night and it didn't even look like he was sweating."

"I don't know if it changed my mind but it affirmed my thoughts more — Barry Trotz. It's fair to say they exceeded expectations in the playoffs, making it to the conference finals and just the way he had them playing — we all thought Tampa was the best team, but the way the Islanders played leading up to the conference final gave the Islanders a shot to beat them."

2. Which team has had the best offseason so far?

Montreal

5

Ottawa

3

Colorado

3

Toronto

2

Washington

1

New Jersey

1

Edmonton

1

NY Rangers

1

Carolina

1

Calgary

1

Florida

1



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That this question got so many different answers suggests that there hasn't been a clear-cut winner to the offseason yet. But the trio of Montreal, Ottawa and Colorado accounted for more than half the votes.

"I actually like quietly what Washington has done. They re-signed Brenden Dillon, have a great coach in Peter Laviolette ... they're going to be like Tampa this year."

"New Jersey had smart pickups and draft picks."

"Montreal. I really liked the Josh Anderson addition although I thought (Marc) Bergevin (paid him) for too long."

"The New York Rangers — by getting the first overall pick, they were lucky. But by getting rid of (Marc) Staal's contract, which other teams would have loved to do — they were able to do it. They clarified the whole situation by (buying out) Henrik Lundqvist ... They're setting themselves up in a very good way. They got their guys in on decent contracts."

"Ottawa. I'm not saying they're ready to take another step but it wouldn't surprise me if in three years they were. I really like their core, their young group."

"Montreal filled the holes they needed to fill. They brought in at least one, maybe two additions to their top six. They added a centerman that they needed and they have more depth now in their bottom six."

"Nobody? I might lean towards Carolina. They added a good piece in Jesper Fast. He fits them perfectly in their lineup. They didn't tinker too much which I think is good because they have good cohesion among their players and coaching staff."

"Calgary. You now know who is in net. When you have a guy who is going to be there 80 percent of the nights, it makes life easier there. They didn't make any crazy trades or revamping their bigger players up front. I know a lot of people are disappointed with them but they're good players. When you trade the better player, it's not going to make the team better."

"Florida. I love what Bill Zito has done. The one thing he has done is brought in low risk and high upside. He was able to get rid of the (Mike) Matheson (contract) albatross. He brings in Patric Hornqvist, who has dealt with injuries, but he's high character and will help build that culture. He's made really nice, smart moves and he still has that (cap flexibility)."

"The runner-up is Detroit. I think they've done a lot of good things. Getting (Anthony) Mantha signed longer term is good ... I think the guys brought in at good values will make them more watchable. But I'm going to go with Colorado. I think for trading for Toews and (Brandon) Saad, I'm not sure how much Saad has left but it's not a bad gamble. He's in the last year of his contract. He's not old. He'll play with good players. Getting Devon Toews for what they got him for — those should be late draft picks in the second round and then they signed him to what I thought was a very good contract."

3. Which franchise still needs to make a significant move?

Boston

4

Tampa Bay

3

Edmonton

3

Florida

2

Nashville

1

Winnipeg

1

Calgary/Winnipeg tie

1

Vancouver

1

Columbus

1

Nashville

1

NY Islanders

1

Buffalo

1

The answers here typically fell into two categories — teams who need to move money (Lightning or Islanders) or teams with high hopes this season still needing a boost (Bruins).

"It's Boston. Tampa is the obvious answer. The Islanders still need to make a significant move because of the cap. The thing with Boston is they want to do a youth movement on the fly. You can't be a contending team where they're at. You either have to go for it or not. They're on the fence. Boston, what direction are you going to go?"

"Tampa is still in cap hell and needs to get out."

"Vancouver. They lost a bunch of players and essentially added one player, a real good player. Their top two lines were dependent on Tyler Toffoli taking up that space on the first line and they don't have anyone to play there, which means you're either taking someone off the first line which is important to make that team go or you're turning Bo Horvat into a third-line center who has to eat up minutes against the other team's top line without having offensive opportunities."

"Edmonton. With the two core players they have, they have to get better faster or they're going to run into a problem. Buffalo, you could say the same thing. If they don't get better, how much longer will (Jack) Eichel and (Connor) McDavid want to wait?"

"Columbus. They just can't continue to be a good team, a good story. They need to pick up someone like Mike Hoffman. The team needs some pizzazz, some firepower."

"The Islanders have some work to do with (Mathew) Barzal. I like what they're doing. I love Barry Trotz, I think they're going to be close. It's going to be a challenge."

"I'm going to go with Boston. I think Boston is a very legitimate Stanley Cup contender. The Craig Smith signing is very good. It boosts what could be the best top-six forward group in the league. Maybe even top nine once they get Jake DeBrusk signed ... But they lost Torey Krug, they need a defenseman. I do think their Stanley Cup window is open and will shut fairly soon. There is uncertainty with Tuukka Rask. They need to find a defenseman."

"Buffalo. I feel like Buffalo is treading water. I don't think Taylor Hall is the cure for what ails them. He's a good addition but they need to make a move for a goaltender."

4. Who ends up with the national U.S. television rights after the current one expires (following 2020-21 season)?

NBC

9

NBC/ESPN split

3

ESPN



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3

No idea

2

Shared but w/ESPN

1

Chopped to pieces

1

Amazon

1

NBC/ESPN/Amazon

1

According to a story from colleague Bill Shea, talks are ongoing between the NHL and NBC to extend the crucial U.S. television deal but the hope among many agents is that the league gets more than NBC involved in this one, even if they're the favorite.

"ESPN is definitely going to be a player in it."

"NBC keeps it but they have to get more people involved. If you could get an Amazon and Netflix involved for a couple of games that'd be ideal. It's just shitty timing with COVID. People aren't looking to invest huge amounts of money."

"I believe it'll be a shared split between NBC, NBC Sports and ESPN. I believe NBC will end up with the majority of the rights but there will be an ESPN carve-out."

"They just did an extension in the Nordic countries, I'm curious as to what they got. I think it's going to be chopped up. The worst part of the Stanley Cup playoffs was listening to the same people every day over and over and over. I think it's good to have competition among broadcasters."

"The ability to align with a non-traditional media market like Amazon or Netflix would be huge."

"I would love to see ESPN get in but my sense is it's NBC."

"I think the league wants to get back to ESPN. So if that's the case, then an ESPN/ABC result probably makes the most sense. And (ESPN) basically said as much when they let people go that they had to redeploy resources (for rights)."

"NBC, ESPN and Amazon. I don't think it's going to be like before. I think there's going to be more widespread availability. Even with the NFL, I go to check my fantasy scores and I can watch a game through the Yahoo fantasy app. That would have been unheard of two years ago. I think the big national games will still be on NBC but I think ESPN will pull in a bigger streaming component."

5. If we set the number of regular season games for the 2020-21 season at 55 1/2, are you taking the over or under?

Over

14

Under

7

As the NHL and NHLPA continue to have discussions about what next season looks like, the optimism about next season is changing by the day. The overwhelming sense from the agents was pretty universal: The players want to play.

"Under unless they get their act together in the next 5-10 days."

"Over but that's a good number."

"I think they'll have a 60-game season."

"Under. I think the disease is out of control. I think they're doing their best. I give them all the credit in the world for what they did with the bubble. They can't do it again. The disease is out of control right now and it only gets under control with a vaccine."

"I think it's 56 games. So I'm taking the over."

"Over. I'm not trying to guess here, I'm trying to be logical. Both sides need this season. Badly. The players owe money to the owners because now they have an artificial escrow cap."

"Under. I think we'll be lucky to start by mid-February. But at some point, you have to get back on track. You don't want to go too long into the summer."

"I was so impressed with what they were able to pull off in the bubble, they were able to do everything they said they were going to do in a safe way. This is a different set of circumstances. How much are the owners going to push back if they have no revenue? That's why I'm not as optimistic. I have faith in the league. I know the players want to play. I'll go optimistic and say over."

"I think we're going to play more than 48 games and less than 60 so of course you had to put the number right there. I think you hit the number on the head. I'll be optimistic and go over."

6. How do you see next season playing out?

More news continues to emerge on plans for next season, including regional divisions and the hope of an early January start. But there still remain a lot of questions.

"You can't have the NBA playing and us not. You can't cancel a season minus a lockout. The product needs to be out there."

"A regular season mid-January to mid-May. Playoffs through July 20."

"Once the vaccine is mass-produced and you show a card to get in the arenas, maybe you there's limited seating until you get to full capacity."

"With the NBA coming out and saying they're playing on Christmas, that puts pressure on the NHL. You don't want to be irrelevant if you're not playing. You don't want to wait too far with the Olympics."

"Playing intra-division games in home buildings with limited fans and then increasing over the course of the season, that would be the NHL's preferred way to start. I think the players would like that as well. I think the reality on the ground in January may not allow that to happen. If that doesn't happen, we'll have to do hybrid bubbles of teams going into a bubble for two weeks and then coming home for a week and at least starting like that. The question is, are you able to alter the schedule at midseason?"

"Without fans, I really don't know for sure. Some of the owners don't want to operate without fans. I can tell you, the values of franchises will go down and they will lose money in another way (without playing). What they need to do is start in bubbles and when everyone is vaccinated, go to fans. If you want to come to the game, you have to show proof of vaccination."

"I'm going to predict that before the season ends, you're going to see at least half-packed buildings."

"I think the league is going to start in January and I think that within a month and two months into the season, you'll be able to play almost to full capacity logic would dictate either with rapid testing or vaccine that this could potentially get under control by then. If it goes the other way, there's isn't going to be much to talk about."

"I think by and large we're going to have to have it be as normal as possible. It's logistically impossible to pull off any other way ... ultimately by the end of the season, it'll hopefully be normal in terms of the way games are played."

7. Name the highest-profile player you expect to change teams in the next year.

Patrik Laine



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4

Jack Eichel

4

Mitch Marner

3

William Nylander

2

Max Pacioretty

1

James van Riemsdyk

1

Marc-Andre Fleury

1

Zach Werenski

1

Ryan McDonagh

1

Jonathan Quick

1

Patrick Kane or Jonathan Toews

1

Because of the salary cap, agents tend to believe we'll see a lot of movement in the next year. Combine that with high pressure in Toronto and a franchise player in Jack Eichel eager to win and there are interesting names on the list.

"I'd say Mitch Marner. They shouldn't have signed John Tavares. His skating is declining every year. They should have just focused on the two younger kids and used the money elsewhere. I know it's great to have the two centers ... but you can't have three players making over \$10 million."

"Jonathan Quick comes to mind. Taylor Hall comes to mind. Taylor Hall or Jack Eichel will be out of Buffalo. I think Aaron Ekblad will be out of Florida and Max Pacioretty will be out of Vegas. Potentially Johnny Gaudreau based on how Calgary does. I'll take Jack Eichel."

"Taylor Hall? Actually, I'm going to go way off and say Mitch Marner."

"Jack Eichel. He's an interesting one. At some point, he's just going to say, enough. Buffalo and losing is not fun."

"I think there will be several because of the cap situation. The problem is with the no-move clauses and no-trade clauses — that is really a problem. But I understand it for the players, also. They get a long-term deal and they want to stay put. You've got to grow the business and you have to grow the cap or else these no-trade clauses will kill the organization forever."

"One of the big names on the Leafs. I'm not 100 percent sure ... They might trade one of the big three."

"Jonathan Quick. His contract drops down, the payout drops down. They're not trying to win. He's healthy."

"Patrick Kane or Jonathan Toews. It doesn't make sense for those guys to stay. I'm not sure I accept what they claim they're doing there. If you're in a rebuild ... you still have four guys part of their championship. I don't see how that stays. They're both good players that could go elsewhere and have an impact. I think it'd be good for the players too."

"Patrik Laine. Where there's smoke, there's fire."

The Athletic LOADED: 11.14.2020

The Athletic / DGB Grab Bag: Offseason winners and losers, Pavel Bure and a perfect goalie

Sean McIndoe

Nov 13, 2020

From the headlines

We're months into the offseason, with weeks or maybe months left to go, and there are still moves to be made and a handful of decent UFAs to be signed. But for the most part, teams have done what they're going to do. Which means that as per hockey writer bylaws, we need to start naming some winners and losers of the 2020 offseason.

Winners: Buffalo Sabres – GM Kevyn Adams' acquisitions of Taylor Hall and Eric Staal are exactly the sort of shrewd moves that will delight a scouting staff, if he's eventually allowed to rehire one.

Losers: Chicago Blackhawks – While analytics guys have been telling us for years that teams should be willing to pull their goaltenders sooner than they typically do, "before the first game of the season starts" might be a little too early.

Winners: Toronto Maple Leafs – Apparently got tired of watching young players look confused and uncertain while losing heartbreaking playoff series, so wisely brought in Joe Thornton to really teach them how it's done.

Winners: Edmonton Oilers – The single easiest and most obvious item on Ken Holland's offseason checklist was upgrading from Mike Smith in goal, and now he gets to do it next year too.

Losers: Vegas Golden Knights – The NHL's harsh and unforgiving salary cap is designed to make it impossible for the same team to be the front-runner to acquire each and every star player who becomes available, and some year it might even work against the Knights.

Winners: Colorado Avalanche – Joe Sakic had a reasonably solid offseason, although in fairness he does have an unfair advantage over his fellow GMs since he's the only one who doesn't have to worry about constantly getting ripped off by Joe Sakic.

Winners: Arizona Coyotes – Got to hand it to them, they continue to run laps around the rest of the league when it comes to finding creative ways to not have draft picks.

Losers: Florida Panthers – Will have to replace the consistent 30-goal scoring of Mike Hoffman with some bargain basement free agent making near the league minimum, like Mike Hoffman.

Winners: New York Rangers – Have stocked the roster with wide-eyed and enthusiastic youngsters who were thrilled to hear that Henrik Lundqvist had been sent to live on a big farm where he'd have lots of room to run around.

Winners: New Jersey Devils – Filled their need for a veteran head coach with their July hiring of ... uh ... look, man, that was like seven years ago, literally nobody remembers.

Losers: Tampa Bay Lightning – The thought of another team swooping in with an aggressive offer sheet for Anthony Cirelli probably keeps Julien BriseBois up at night, since it's hard to sleep when you're laughing that hard.

Winners: San Jose Sharks – They say that there's no worse way to end a miserable season than taking the wrong guy with a top-five pick, and they certainly didn't come close to doing that.



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Winners: Boston Bruins – With nearly \$7 million in cap space, will be well-positioned to make some major moves whenever free agency eventually starts.

The month's three stars of comedy

The third star: Joe Thornton heads to Toronto – OK, yes, it wasn't very funny for Sharks fans. That part was a little heartbreaking, to be honest. But this kind of nailed it:

SAW THIS AND JUST ABOUT SPIT UP MY COFFEE THIS MORNING !

ANY DAY YOU CAN SQUEEZE IN A YUKON CORNELIUS REFERENCE IS A GOOD DAY. LOL..
PIC.TWITTER.COM/NCCKPOPRRH

— JASON YORK (@JASONYORK33) OCTOBER 20, 2020

The second star: Jude Hull – If you've never heard of him, you're not alone. But you know his father Brett and his grandfather Bobby, because they were two of the NHL's greatest snipers. So why isn't Jude following in their footsteps? Because somebody made a terrible mistake somewhere along the way:

MY FATHER AND GRANDFATHER HAD OVER 1300 GOALS AND I WAS DUMB ENOUGH TO BE A GOALIE
HTTPS://T.CO/3UPRVQGWHH

— JUDE HULL (@HEY_JUDE35) OCTOBER 21, 2020

The first star: This kid – I'm not going to do the whole "Look at all these wacky NHL players and their super-detailed Halloween costumes" thing. We get it, you have money and too much time on your hands and an Instagram account. You nailed it.

Unfortunately, nailing it wasn't enough this year, because this kid just took Halloween perfection to a whole new level and ruined it for everyone else.

MOVE OVER @BURKIE2020, THERE'S A NEW HOCKEY ANALYST IN TOWN. 🤔👀 #HOCKEYHALLOWEEN

📷: @JENNAYCB PIC.TWITTER.COM/FVGYN54VNI

— SPORTSNET (@SPORTSNET) OCTOBER 31, 2020

Enjoy the accolades while they last, kid, but fair warning: There's no long-term future in impersonating Brian Burke on social media.

Trivial annoyance of the week

OK, this is less of an annoyance and more of a cry for help. Or at least, a request for somebody to tell me I'm not the only one.

Here's my problem: It turns out that my brain can apparently know what part of the hockey calendar it is, or it can know what part of the actual calendar it is, but it cannot do both at the same time. That isn't an issue most of the time, since the NHL and real-world calendars line up every year. Season opener = fall. Trade deadline = late winter. Playoffs = spring. Offseason = summer. Nice and simple.

But this year, for obvious reasons, everything is out of sync. And my brain can't handle it. I'm stuck in hockey calendar mode, and it's messing me up.

For example, I follow a bunch of Twitter accounts that tweet about hockey history, like Mike Commito and NHL History Girl. They'll often tweet out "this day in NHL history" stuff. Usually, it's right up my alley. But for the last month, they've been tweeting out stuff like this ...

ON THIS DATE IN 2005, #CANES ERIK COLE BECAME THE FIRST PLAYER IN #NHL HISTORY TO ATTEMPT 2 PENALTY SHOTS IN ONE GAME. HE SCORED ONCE.

— JEN (@NHLHISTORYGIRL) NOVEMBER 9, 2020

... and every single time my brain goes "What? Why were they playing during the offseason?" And then I'm confused for several seconds. Like, too many.

That's normal, right?

I should mention that this happens literally every time. Several times a day, in fact, including when Mike and Jen post back-to-back, within seconds of each other. I just go "Huh, what, oh right it's not supposed to be the offseason, I remember now (scrolls a bit) huh, what?" I did this last week even though there was snow on the ground that I could visibly see from where I was sitting. After decades of hockey fandom, my brain just refuses to accept that it can be the offseason in November.

Please tell me this is happening to you too.

Obscure former player of the week

This week's obscure former NHL player is Robbie Irons, who barely qualifies.

Not the obscure player part; he's definitely got that nailed down. It's the "NHL" piece of the equation that gives our pal Robbie some trouble. But 52 years ago today, he just barely checked that box, and it's kind of a cool story.

Irons was a goaltender whose pro career started in the 1960s and stretched all the way to 1981. He spent most of those years with the Fort Wayne Komets in the old IHL, serving as the team's starting goaltender for a decade. But before that, he was a kid trying to crack the NHL in the wild churn of the post-expansion years. He landed in the St. Louis Blues organization in the late-60s, but that made for a tough path to the big leagues – the Blues' goaltending was provided by two veterans you may have heard of, guys named Glenn Hall and Jacques Plante.

Irons didn't have much hope of seeing the ice. But he was part of the team, because while Hall and Plante were content to share the net with each other, neither veteran was especially fond of dressing for backup duty. So every now and then, Irons would dress as the Blues' backup goalie. Back then, the rules around backups were fairly vague, so the idea was that if the starter ever had to leave the game for some reason, the Blues would get their other veteran dressed quickly, before this Irons kid had to actually play.

Then came Nov. 13, 1968. The Blues were facing the Rangers at Madison Square Garden, and an early dispute over a goal lead to Hall getting ejected for going after the referee. Plante was nowhere to be found, so Irons had to take the ice. Not a problem, yet, because back then a new goalie got a few minutes to warm up. The Blues coach was a young Scotty Bowman, and as Ken Dryden tells it in his book "Scotty: A Hockey Life Like No Other", the team took its time warming up Irons while waiting for Plante to make his appearance. Only he didn't, at which point one of two things happened, depending on whose version of the story you believe: either Irons suffered a fluke injury during the warmup, or the Blues told him to fake one. Either way, the kid spent a few minutes writhing on the ice before it became apparent that Plante wasn't going to show up in time. The game had to go on.

And so, a maybe-or-maybe-not injured Irons rose to his feet and made his NHL debut. Three minutes of one, to be exact, before Plante finally arrived to take over. That spelled the end of the first, and as it turns out only, NHL action of Robbie Irons' career.

All told, Irons faced one shot and made one save, good for membership in the exclusive Lifetime 1.000 Save Percentage Club. He held the NHL record for the fewest minutes played in a career by a goaltender until Hurricanes equipment manager Jorge Alves got to see the ice for seven seconds in 2016.

(Thanks to reader Hany for suggesting the Irons story.)

Classic YouTube clip breakdown

Last week, I made a ranking of the best all-Canadian playoff series, and was somewhat surprised to find myself putting the 1994 Flames/Canucks series in the top spot. But maybe I shouldn't have been, since that was the Pavel Bure series, and longtime readers know that I've always been a big Bure fan. Outside of Mario Lemieux, the guy may have been the single most skilled and entertaining player I've ever seen.



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In fact, I'd like to learn more about him. I sure hope there's a painfully cringey interview out there that will allow us to do that ...

Oh good, our prayers have been answered thanks to NHL Cool Shots, a TV show that used to run on ESPN back when anyone was still trying to make hockey seem cool. If you enjoyed your hockey mixed with wacky 90s-style graphics, way-too-rapid cuts and zooms, and short bursts of rap-metal, this was the show for you. I very much did enjoy these things, and needless to say I thought the show was fantastic.

By the way, the title of this video is "20 Questions with Pavel Bure (1995)", despite it not being 20 questions and definitely not being from 1995. That second part is given away by the fact that Bure is a Panther here, and he wasn't traded to Florida until 1999. Also, Cool Shots didn't even exist in 1995; this episode is actually from March 2001. Still, I can confirm that this is indeed Pavel Bure, so one-out-of-three ain't bad, YouTube title guy.

We open with some Bure highlights, as well as a shot of him playing pond hockey on one of those frozen lakes that are so common in Florida. We also get a sneak preview of some of the hard-hitting questions Bure's about to be asked, like what books he reads. Can't wait.

"It's time ... (pause for cue card flip) ... to take off." Look, don't act like Connor McDavid could do any better today.

After a short burst of rocket imagery that was legally mandatory for any Pavel Bure story, we're into our interview, which will apparently be taking place while leaning against a car on a busy street. It will not be taking place in the sunshine, a fact that our interviewer immediately blames Bure for. This somehow leads into an awkward exchange about Bure being god, so we're off to a great start.

OK, look, I'm just going to pause here to acknowledge that you are currently confused about whether he's flirting with her, and I assure you that these feelings are valid and natural and about to continue for this entire interview. I don't know what to tell you, this is going to get weird.

After agreeing to give her his car(?), Bure describes a typical day for the NHL's biggest star in one of America's hottest markets. The answer: It's incredibly boring. He has breakfast, then lunch, and then he used to have a long nap but now he has a short nap. If you listen closely, you can hear the ESPN producers giving up on trying to market hockey.

She tries to get him to talk about golf, but he's not really into it, which leads to the following exchange that I've transcribed verbatim. "I like tennis." "You do?" "I do." "So you play a lot of tennis?" And they say the art of the follow-up question is dead.

By the way, our interviewer here is Danielle Robb. Years later, she'd go on to produce and host a travel show called A Place In The Sun that ran for one season. I couldn't find any old episodes, so I'm just going to assume that every one involved her going to a place where it was cloudy and asking the first person she saw if they could fix that because they were god.

To her credit, Robb has obviously done some homework here, as she breaks out a nice pull: Bure is some sort of backgammon savant. This leads to him modestly admitting that he's unbeatable, before telling Robb he might let her win "because you're the lady." This is followed by a clip of an announcer screaming about Bure scoring, because 2001-era ESPN did not do subtle.

(Don Cherry voice): Maybe if he'da spent less time on back-GAMMON and more time on back-CHECKIN' then the Canuck woulda won the Cup, am I right?

We move on to a discussion of Bure's breakaway prowess, including him saying that he likes to shoot between the legs, and we're going to skip right past that quote to talk about that skate-to-stick move that he broke out with the Canucks. I know this will sound weird to today's fans, but back when Bure first debuted it we all lost our minds. It was completely insane to us that somebody could do that at full speed. These days, every defensive defenseman can do stuff like that, but back then it felt like a cheat code. Anyway, keep this in mind for a decade from now when literally everyone is doing the lacrosse goal all the time.

We end with Bure unsuccessfully trying to get Robb to profess her love for him in Russian, and we're done. Well, not completely done – for some reason we cut to a clip of Adam Graves scoring against the Islanders in 1994. The Rangers held on for a 5-4 win, their first at the Coliseum in five years, in case you were wondering. Sergei Zubov scored the winner. I don't know if anyone told him they loved him in Russian, but I hope someone did.

Wait, we never found out what Bure's favorite book was! That's false advertising. Now I'll never know what he was reading instead of taking four-hour naps. Although based on the Florida Panthers record when he was there, I'm guessing he was buying this one for his teammates.

(Thanks to reader Ilan for sending in this week's clip.)

The Athletic LOADED: 11.14.2020

Sportsnet.ca / What science says about COVID-19 and bodychecking in hockey

Emily Sadler

November 13, 2020, 2:28 PM

Bodychecking in hockey has long been at the centre of safety-related debates, and the topic is once again in the news — this time, for an entirely different reason.

Last month, Ontario Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Minister Lisa MacLeod said a return to play for the Ontario Hockey League would mean a return without bodychecking — a stance that extends not just to hockey, but to all sports with body contact.

Our public health officials have been clear – prolonged or deliberate contact while playing sports is not permitted. We will continue to work with @OHLHockey on a safe return to play. <https://t.co/GO4BitTa0K> [pic.twitter.com/gKcnFDXHMM](https://twitter.com/gKcnFDXHMM)

— Lisa MacLeod (@MacLeodLisa) October 30, 2020

There's no doubt that contact sports are in a difficult position, especially as health officials continue to advocate physical distancing as the most effective weapon against COVID-19. But from a scientific perspective, the move to eliminate bodychecking begs the question: Does it actually increase a player's likelihood of contracting the virus?

According to one expert, bodychecking may be less of a risk factor in this regard than some would assume.

"We can debate about the risks of bodychecking and body contact for other things, but if we're talking about COVID risk? I think checking is pretty low on the level of things that are going to put players at risk," Dr. Stephen McGregor, an exercise physiologist and professor at Eastern Michigan University, told Sportsnet.

McGregor has spent the last several years measuring and quantifying impacts players experience at various levels of hockey as part of a study conducted in partnership with USA Hockey and funded by the USA Hockey Foundation. This past spring, as the world came to a screeching halt due to the COVID-19 pandemic, he found himself with three years' worth of impact data to examine in a different light.

"If two players impact each other on the ice, they are by virtue kind of the definition of in close proximity — they're in 'immediate proximity,' as we put it in the report," McGregor said of his findings, prepared for USA Hockey and published in May under the title, Report Regarding Immediate Proximity Associated with Body Contact in Ice Hockey. "The terminology, we wanted to try and make it clear that we were talking about people being very close to each other as being defined by the impacts that we're measuring."

According to McGregor's report, a U18 hockey player experiences, on average, 17.5 impacts per game, with 72 per cent of those impacts



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involving direct contact with another player (either a teammate or an opponent). The average duration of those impacts clocks in at just 0.098 seconds.

"If you think about what happens in a check," explained McGregor, "they're only in that immediate proximity for an exceedingly short amount of time, and if you take those number of impacts and add the amount of time they're in that proximity, it doesn't amount to very much time at all."

It amounts to an average of just 1.23 seconds per player per game, to be exact — a number so low, even McGregor himself found it hard to believe at first.

"When we prepared the report, I thought, 'Well, that seems really unbelievably short — almost unrealistic,'" he said. "People say all the time, as a scientist you're always questioning your own results.... You always try to cover all your bases and make sure that you've double-checked and triple-checked beforehand."

McGregor's data was collected using accelerometers — wearable sensors that are "much more sensitive than any camera could ever be," he says. Those sensors were worn by players age 12 through 18 from tier-two pre-checking and post-checking ages all the way up to the National Team Development Program's U18s, during practices and games over the course of about three years, for purposes of educating decisions around body contact in the game. All high-impact events, as McGregor referred to them, were cross-referenced with video of every recorded session to determine and confirm the cause — "Was it actually a board contact? Was it a player open-ice hit? Was it a player just falling on the ice because he fell down?" — as well as the duration of impacts.

"Based on this data that we have and the other proximity data from some of the other tracking organizations or groups, checking is not really a concern with regards to COVID risk. That's what it comes down to, in my opinion," said McGregor.

Hockey's classification as a contact sport, while accurate, may not necessarily tell the full story with respect to bodychecking being singled out as a COVID-19 risk-factor.

"That's the thing, is you're never in close relationship to players — for any one player — for any length of time either because it's so dynamic and so fast," said McGregor.

While his numbers paint a clear picture as far as proximity during bodychecking is concerned, that's just one of many complex questions being asked in efforts to mitigate risk in hockey's attempts to return during the COVID-19 era. Even though bodychecking, per McGregor's findings, can be ruled low-risk in terms of spread, other parts of the game — crowded benches and busy locker rooms, for example — have been among issues of much contemplation across all indoor sports, and will likely continue to be.

As far as the OHL is concerned, it feels likely that this debate has not seen its conclusion just yet. Shortly after MacLeod's public comments, Ontario premier Doug Ford tweeted out his desire for the OHL to return with full contact, while the league's commissioner, David Branch, said during a radio appearance on Sportsnet 590 The Fan that the league will follow related studies, but did not explicitly align his position with the province's mandate.

This fall, we've seen other junior leagues return to varied success. The QMJHL, currently the only major junior league playing in Canada, started up on Oct. 1 with a revised three-division setup to reduce travel among teams across its four provinces. But a pair of outbreaks among Quebec-based teams has forced stoppages and schedule revisions, and will see the league take a bubble approach later this month for what they're calling a "protected environment event" at the Videotron Centre in Quebec City for seven teams located in the province's red zones.

The BCHL, of the Canadian Junior Hockey League, also returned around the same time with an extended pre-season but has also been forced to postpone and cancel games in response to outbreaks and public health guidelines. Neither league banned bodychecking. Like the OHL (which has circled Feb. 4 as its start date), the WHL has yet to start up again, announcing recently that it has set Jan. 8 as its season opener.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 11.14.2020

Sportsnet.ca / Top prospects who have caught the attention of scouts overseas

Mike Shulman

November 13, 2020, 9:11 AM

It's been an unusual fall for hockey fans in North America.

Since the Tampa Bay Lightning were crowned Stanley Cup champs on Sept. 28, there's been no NHL, AHL, WHL or OHL action to speak of, and the QMJHL has been plagued by suspensions in play due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

But across the Atlantic, there's been some semblance of normalcy. Pro leagues such as the KHL, SHL and SM-liiga are well into their 2020-21 campaigns, despite outbreaks and postponements. And the four-nation Karjala Cup wrapped up last weekend.

With some actual hockey played, here's a look at a few of the prospects who have caught the attention of scouts overseas and could one day be playing their trade in North American arenas.

2021 draft-eligible prospects

Aatu Raty -- Karpat, SM-liiga

Aatu Raty is a known commodity. Pegged by many as an early favourite to be the No. 1 pick in the 2021 NHL Draft, Raty came into his season with Karpat burdened with expectations. And, so far, the six-foot-one, 177-pound pivot has struggled to meet them.

Raty, who turns 18 on the weekend, has sat out games and doesn't have a regular shift. In six appearances, he has two goals and he's averaging just 10:02 of ice time. Dan Marr, director of NHL Central Scouting, says he's appeared to lack confidence, but that isn't surprising given he's playing in a men's league on a strong Karpat team amid the pressure of his draft year.

"The skills and attributes that he showed last year, these are not things that you can fake, you're just not going to see them once or twice, you see them all the time with him," said Marr.

"So right now, he's finding his way to get into the lineup and he'll just have to work his way through it. But he definitely has the talent and the skills -- you can put him in the top five for this draft class."

In 2019-20, he scored 21 points in 30 games for Karpat's under-20 team in Finland's second division and added four points in 12 games for the big club. He also had three points in seven games for Finland at last year's world juniors.

Aatu Raty makes it for ! #WorldJuniors 4-1 @lejonat pic.twitter.com/a2Na154vyN

— IIHF (@IIHFHockey) December 29, 2019

"He's shown that he can score and be a playmaker. [He has] really good puck-handling skills -- he's the guy that you use the term 'soft hands' [for] -- he competes, he plays with a lot of energy, good speed and he can make those moves on the fly where it creates scoring possibilities," said Marr.

Samu Tuomaala -- Karpat Jr.

Another Karpat product, Tuomaala has impressed with its U20 squad, putting up five goals and 11 points in 13 games this season. Marr says the five-foot-10, 174-pound winger has speed to burn and can dazzle with his slippery moves and puck control at full throttle. He expects the 17-year-old will get a taste of action with the big club at some point, but he'll have to reign in some of his free-wheeling tendencies.



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"Sometimes he might try to do too much on his own, and that's something you just have to harness and channel because he wants to have the puck on his stick, he wants to do well, he wants to create chances, he wants to score, he wants to win," said Marr.

Remaining Time -3:36

Who could turn heads at 2021 World Juniors Championships?

Simon Edvinsson -- Frolunda Jr.

The comparisons to Victor Hedman are easy to see: A towering, smooth-skating Swedish defenceman with a heavy shot, who can dominate the play. Edvinsson, who checks in at six-foot-four and 198 pounds, is off to a strong start with Frolunda's J20 SuperElit team with six points in 14 games. Marr says it's too early to say whether he'll make a push into the first five of a draft loaded with defencemen, but the 17-year-old is a top-10 talent.

"Because he's such a big guy, he stands out with his skating, with his mobility and he's got the speed and quickness that when he combines them with his instincts, he can take over and control the play," he said.

Fabian Lysell -- Frolunda Jr.

Edvinsson's teammate at Frolunda is also making an early push to be among the first names off the board at the 2021 NHL Draft. The five-foot-10, 172-pound right-winger has rattled off 13 points in 11 games. Despite his small stature, Lysell, 17, is difficult to remove from the puck and strong on his skates. The playmaking winger uses his speed and creativity to set up plays. Although, he could stand to shoot the puck more, says Marr.

"When the puck's on his stick, he can create a scoring chance -- he sees the ice so well. But ... he's one of those kids who wants the puck on his stick and he wants to be the difference-maker in the game," said Marr.

Jesper Wallstedt -- Lulea, SHL

In an era where surefire No. 1 netminders are becoming increasingly rare, with goaltending results understood to be unpredictable, Wallstedt is seen to have the necessary talent to beat the odds. The lone goalie projected on Central Scouting's Players To Watch List to be a first-round pick, the six-foot-two, 214-pound Swede has put up a sterling 1.92 goals-against average and .929 save percentage in four starts this season. Not shying away from a lofty comparison, Marr says the soon-to-be 18-year-old is this year's Yaroslav Askarov, who was taken with the 11th pick in the 2020 draft.

"He's assertive the way he carries himself, the way he challenges, the way he moves to the point where he can be intimidating to shooters. And he likes to keep the door closed -- he's a competitor. But he has all the athletic tools, the goaltending skills," said Marr.

"This kid is the complete package right now. He's very, very impressive," he continued.

Jesper Wallstedt- Lulea (SHL)

Watch this sequence of saves, never once does Wallstedt fall into "scramble mode" he stays calm, holds his positioning, and uses his strong edges to stay square to the shooter three times. Wallstedt is down and a little deep, but because he's 6'4.. pic.twitter.com/sXugx52yPy

— Danny Tiffany (@dantiffany30) November 4, 2020

William Eklund -- Djurgarden, SHL

The smallest player considered a first-round candidate on Central Scouting's Players To Watch List (five-foot-nine, 170 pounds), Eklund has played a big game among men in the SHL. In nine games, the 18-year-old left-winger is fifth on Djurgarden in scoring with five points in nine games. Using his creativity, puck skills and speed, Eklund has made the most of his 16:05 in ice time.

"He's one of those guys that when the game's on the line and you need a goal, he's the person that you want to put on the ice," said Marr.

"He's not the biggest guy, but the fact that he has the smarts and the skills, he can be a very effective player."

Fyodor Svechkov -- Lada Togliatti, VHL

Svechkov has piqued the interest of scouts this season after making the jump from Lada Togliatti's junior (MHL) team, where he had three points in four games, to its second-tier pro league (VHL) club and has recorded four points in 16 games. The 18-year-old has stood out with his two-way play -- despite having not yet developed a "battle game," as Marr puts it -- hockey sense, quickness and playmaking.

Remaining Time -4:19

Any downside to letting players go to world juniors? | Tim and Sid

Ruslan Pechonkin, ISS Hockey's regional scout in Russia, says he's been impressed by his maturity and all-around game.

"He can play a good physical game and he plays on both ends. He is defensively aware and still he has a really good offensive mindset and skill," he said.

Nikita Chibrikov -- SKA St. Petersburg, VHL

Chibrikov, 17, has made his own impressive climb up the pro-league ladder in Russia, recording his first KHL goal on Oct. 2. Though that was his lone point in nine games with SKA St. Petersburg's big club, he averaged just 7:12 minutes of ice time. But when given the opportunity he has shined, notching four points in four VHL games and eight points in eight MHL appearances. Boasting strong speed, vision, skilled hands and an ability to find the back of the net, Pechonkin expects the five-foot-10, 161-pound right-winger will be a high pick in the 2021 draft.

"[He's] one of the guys that I really liked from last season and how he's developed this season," he said.

Prokhor Poltapov -- Red Army, MHL

Next to Chibrikov, the 17-year-old Poltapov is one of the top prospects in Russia right now, according to Pechonkin. The offensive dynamo has put up 14 points in 19 games with the Red Army team. Central Scouting pegs him as a second- or third-round candidate for the 2021 draft, but some mocks have the five-foot-10, 161-pound left winger going early in the first round thanks to his high-end skill and skating.

Drafted prospects

Rodion Amirov -- Toronto Maple Leafs

If Rodion Amirov was a relative unknown to Maple Leafs fans before the 2020 NHL Draft, they should be familiar with his name by now.

The 15th-overall pick has continued to open eyes this season, putting up six points in 19 games with the KHL's Salavat Yulaev Ufa and he's fresh off a starring role for Russia at the Karjala Cup. Amirov scored in all three games and helped Russia -- which sent its U20 squad to face pro-laden Finland, Sweden and the Czech Republic teams as a tuneup for the world juniors, claim gold. The left-winger was named best forward at the tournament for his performance.

Pechonkin says Amirov's full complement of skills were on display at the event: He's deceptive, he has a great hockey IQ, the vision to find open teammates, strong puck skills and a quick wrist shot.

"He has just about everything in his game -- he's a really smart player and his [biggest] weapon is his shot and accuracy. He's a really dangerous player around the net," he said.

WOW!

Rodion Amirov #LeafsForever

1-0 RUS pic.twitter.com/sANT6AWfvS

— Here's Your Replay (@HeresYourReplay) November 5, 2020

Yaroslav Askarov -- Nashville Predators



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Not to be overshadowed, the aforementioned Askarov won all three of his appearances at the Karjala Cup, posting a 0.98 GAA and .962 SV% and pitching a 29-save shutout against the Czech Republic to seal Russia's victory at the tournament. For his efforts, he was named top goaltender at the event.

"It was really impressive, to be honest," said Pechonkin.

"The young guys on this team had such confidence and I think it just came from [him through] to the whole team."

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In addition to his success at the Karjala Cup, Askarov has thrived with SKA St. Petersburg where he has a 1.10 GAA and .960 SV% in four games. His size (six-foot-three, 176 pounds) and quickness were already known qualities, but this year, Askarov is getting glowing reviews for his self-assuredness playing among men at just 18.

"He looks really mature as a player already. He plays like a veteran goalie. He's calm, he's confident, he's big. The positions he takes, how he chooses the positions, how he (moves) in the net -- everything that he does, he does with real confidence," said Pechonkin.

Yaroslav Askarov = hella fun to watch #KarjalaCup
pic.twitter.com/ZfeK4U5Avu

— Here's Your Replay (@HeresYourReplay) November 7, 2020

Yegor Chinakhov -- Columbus Blue Jackets

If Amirov's selection by the Maple Leafs at the 2020 draft was a surprise, Chinakhov's pick six players later was a straight-up stunner. Pegged to go in the second or third round, due to the unique October draft the right-winger drew late buzz after putting up five points in 12 KHL games with Avangard Omsk. And he's continued to defy those expectations, racking up another eight points in his next nine games. Chinakhov also pitched in with two goals and an assist at the Karjala Cup.

"It could turn out to be a very astute pick for Columbus, but on the surface, I wasn't surprised that they would step up for a player of that ilk, because he truly is a smart, skilled offensive player, and he shows up. He shows up every game, you don't have to look for him," said Marr.

Yegor Chinakhov

2-0 RUS #KarjalaCup pic.twitter.com/sG5oUnBRVm

— Here's Your Replay (@HeresYourReplay) November 8, 2020

Vasili Podkolzin -- Vancouver Canucks

Another standout for Russia at the Karjala Cup, the 10th pick in the 2019 NHL Draft captained the young squad to victory and led the tournament in scoring with five points in three games.

WHAT A BEAUTY

Vasili Podkolzin - Shootout winner #Canucks

2-1 RUS #KarjalaCup pic.twitter.com/NwQnj9cZFe

— Here's Your Replay (@HeresYourReplay) November 7, 2020

Despite his recent success, the 19-year-old hasn't had the breakout many expected from his second KHL season. He has four points in 19 contests and he's averaging just 11:58 in ice time per game on a deep SKA St. Petersburg team.

While the powerful two-way winger has the tools to become a good NHL player, Pechonkin says he needs to work on his skating and he has questions about his maturity after seeing him sulk when he was benched for the third period of a game against Avangard Omsk in September.

"He was just sitting there and didn't even watch the game," said Pechonkin.

"You have to control your emotions, control your feelings in a way and still be with the team," he continued.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 11.14.2020

With COVID-19 cases surging, Flames GM Treliving sees major challenges in scouting NHL prospects

CBC November 16, 2020

With COVID-19 cases surging, Flames GM Treliving sees major challenges in scouting NHL prospects
With COVID-19 cases surging, Flames GM Treliving sees major challenges in scouting NHL prospects

In a normal season some members of the Calgary Flames' scouting department attend well over 200 Western Hockey League games.

This year, with COVID-19 playing havoc with how the junior leagues operate, Calgary general manager Brad Treliving has no idea how many games Flames' scouts will watch in person. That will impact the decisions made by the Flames, and other teams, come the 2021 NHL Entry Draft.

"There's going to be less games played," said Treliving. "If there's less games, there's going to be less viewings. It's going to make it more difficult."

The three major junior leagues in Canada are currently "all over the map" when it comes to schedules and who might be allowed into buildings to watch games.

"It's made it more challenging, but you've got to find a way to get the job done as best you possibly can," Treliving said.

"If COVID has taught us anything, it's that you have to be flexible and you have to be prepared to pivot, weekly, daily, hourly as things change."

The Quebec Major Junior Hockey League began play Oct. 2, but saw some teams forced off the ice due to positive COVID tests. The league still plans on playing a 60-game schedule.

The WHL has set a Jan. 8 start date. The schedule hasn't been decided but up to 52 games is possible.

The Ontario Hockey League is looking at starting a 40-game season beginning Feb. 4.

WHL commissioner Ron Robison said the league plans "to do everything we can to accommodate" NHL scouts.

"The reality will be there's less games," he said.

Rewind the tape

Scouts hope to attend as many games as possible, but teams will have to rely heavily on video.

Treliving said video "is of great use and you get great mileage out of it," especially for players teams already have their eye on.

"It's more advantageous to watch video when you know the player a little bit," he said. "When you turn on a game, and you're trying to identify who the players are, it's your first viewing, it's more challenging."

Using video probably won't affect projected first-round picks like winger Dylan Guenther of the Edmonton Oil Kings or defenceman Brandt Clarke of the Barrie Colts. But scouts not being able to watch games live could result in some other players falling further back in the draft.

"It usually comes down to viewings," said Treliving. "Those guys, later round picks, you get a real good sense of them based upon the number of times you see them."

Playing less games also reduces a player's chances of impressing scouts.



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"There may be guys that aren't going to play as much," he said. "If you aren't going to be playing, you're not going to be seen."

Video has "come a long way," said Treliving, but scouts "are still a little bit of a slave to the quality."

"You could be the greatest talent evaluator as a scout, but if the quality is not very good, it's difficult to really dig into."

Silver lining

The Canadian Hockey League announced March 12 it was cancelling the remaining games in the 2020 regular season due to COVID-19. A few weeks later the Memorial Cup, scheduled for Kelowna, B.C., was cancelled.

While anxious to get back playing, some junior players like Colton Dach believe the long layoff will actually improve their draft potential.

"We've had six or seven months of training and to make ourselves better to get drafted," said Dach a 17-year-old winger with the Saskatoon Blades who is projected to be chosen anywhere from the fourth to sixth round.

"For me personally, I've already noticed myself being faster and stronger."

The extra time has also helped Zack Ostapchuk — a 17-year-old forward with the Vancouver Giants — rehab from a serious knee injury that shortened his season last year.

"I'm eight months into my recovery, so it helps for sure," said Ostapchuk.

Treliving agreed a long summer of training and recuperation will benefit many of the draft-eligible players.

"They've had that time to physically develop," he said. "It's offset by ... you're not playing as many games to be seen. But in the long run, it could be a very good thing for some of these kids that they've had this extra training time."

COVID-19 and Sports: Many Unanswered Questions Facing NHL, Golden Knights With Jan. 1 Targeted Season Start Date

By Alan Snel of LVSportsBiz.com

The National Hockey League wants to start the new new season Jan. 1, a mere month and a half away.

But there's only one problem.

Everything.

How to hold a new season during a COVID-19 pandemic that has claimed 245,000 lives in the USA.

NHL Gary Bettman does not plan to use coronavirus pandemic bubbles like the ones in Toronto and Edmonton that were implemented to finish the 2019-20 season.

But Bettman said the league is looking at everything from allowing teams to play in their own arenas to the idea of teams playing in a hub where they set up shop for 10-12 days to using a hybrid model with some teams playing the hub and some playing at their home venues with testing protocols in effect.

This is life during a pandemic, especially one where infection cases are increasing in Nevada and in many other NHL markets across the country. That's why the NHL is also looking at having an all-Canadian division to keep Canada-based teams north of the border in light of the spiking COVID-19 cases in the United States.

Besides facing possible temporary hubs and realignment, the Vegas Golden Knights will be playing with its biggest name and face of the

franchise — goaltender Marc-Andre Fleury — serving as a back-up to anointed starter Robin Lehner.

Before the pandemic halted the NHL and VGK seasons in March, the Golden Knights were doing well in attendance by filling T-Mobile Arena to 105.4 percent of capacity while also generating lots of revenue from selling licensed VGK logo gear.

But since then, Fleury has been tagged as a back-up and popular defensemen Deryk Engelland, Nate Schmidt, and Jon Merrill will not be returning to the team. Engelland gave the stirring and emotional speech before the Golden Knights played its first-ever home game Oct. 10, 2017, only nine days after the horrific mass shooting on the Strip, the deadliest shooting in U.S. history.

Traded Nate Schmidt

With so many unanswered questions facing the Vegas Golden Knights and their fans, at least the Henderson Silver Knights — the Golden Knights' American Hockey League affiliate — offered some tangible news with the release of their hockey sweaters and the opening of their training center, Lifeguard Arena in downtown Henderson.

The Athletic / NHL's video scouting debate forced to evolve as uncertainty surrounds 2021 Draft

By Corey Pronman

Nov 12, 2020

The value of scouting a player live in person versus on video has been debated in the NHL community for many years. There has been steady movement toward embracing video in recent years but still with significant hesitation.

In the year 2020, with leagues on pause, events canceled, schedules in chaos and scouts stuck at home for months on end, that steady crawl by NHL scouts toward utilizing video to evaluate players has turned into a leap.

The other main factors that fueled that change in the industry's mindset, according to NHL sources: 1) improvement in the quality and availability of video 2) improved distribution of video by third parties, and 3) increased willingness to use video.

The improvement in the quality of the broadcasts at the various levels of hockey has been very clear over the last 10 years. Asking for a high-definition stream in a major junior or USHL game was very tough years ago, and a lot of college and AHL games were SD-only, as well. There were a lot of games in various leagues and tournaments that simply weren't available no matter the quality of the broadcast. This was as recent as a few years ago.

In the 2019-20 season, the situation was a lot different. Almost any high-level hockey game can be found if you know where to look. CHL, USHL, AHL and college games are mostly broadcasted in HD. European junior games are streamed in high quality. A lot of high school level games can be found online. Most European tournaments are streamed in high quality.

"The days of having to sit around for an hour to download a game, or carry around disks and tapes are gone," said one NHL source. "The technology has improved, and the HD feeds now are excellent."

When I would debate the merits of using video with scouts five-to-10 years ago, a common and reasonable argument against it was that there isn't enough video out there to do comprehensive work and so much of what was available was so low quality that it made it impossible to properly evaluate players. That rationale does not hold as well today.

One of the biggest differences for NHL clubs in recent years has been how video files are aggregated and distributed to teams. This has



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typically been done by third-party companies, the most prominent ones being InStat and Sportslogiq. But there are a couple of other companies that have tried to compete in that space such as Iceberg and SportContract. These companies typically pitch themselves as video and analytics firms that provide clipped video and in-depth stats on players at all levels.

With these services, a lot of NHL teams can now access shift-clipped video on any player in the world with the click of a few buttons. This has allowed clubs to become much more efficient in their video scouting.

"The ability to push a few buttons and instantly be diving into a specific area of a player's game in a credible manner is something that's much different from five-to-10 years ago," said one NHL executive.

However, some see that as a risk to their process.

"You run the risk of improperly framing a guy's game through video. If you just pull up all the good or bad things they do, you run the risk of not getting the full picture and reinforcing a bias," said one NHL executive.

There is a large chunk of the scouting industry, at various levels of hockey, that firmly believes the value of watching players comes from seeing them live and that video wasn't a valuable way to evaluate players.

That idea has steadily changed, but evaluators who I would describe as progressive thinkers still do see significant flaws in video scouting.

"The biggest negative to me about using video is the speed of the player and overall pace of the game translates poorly to video. It's much harder to gauge skating ability on video compared to a live viewing," said an NHL scout.

"You miss things the cameras don't show. Their play away from the puck and how they're reacting to the game, their body language, how they interact with players and coaches," said a second scout.

"Even the best camera work will miss stuff we want to see. You won't get the whole rink view to see what the player is seeing. Plays that move quick and over long-distance are very hard to track," added another scout.

On the other hand, some feel you can miss a lot of things when you are live scouting, too.

"There's a lot of distractions in the rink. People are talking to you, people walking by you, there's all kinds of things going on the ice with the players and coaches. You can filter through the irrelevant or unimportant moments of the game and drill down on the core aspects of the player's game," said one NHL scout.

"You can miss things in games. The game is fast, you're watching multiple players, or your focus just isn't at 100 percent in a given moment. Video gives you the ability to go back and make sure you identified exactly what happened," said another scout.

Efficiency is the big argument that comes up in favor of using video. Often these files are cut shifts of an individual player, or an hour long tape with stoppages cut out.

"I've found making player-to-player comparisons, particularly those in different regions of the world, are a lot easier when you can go from watching them back-to-back in the same video session," said one NHL scout.

There is an efficiency argument too in terms of expenses. The cost to travel in both dollars and time is very significant. You can spend an entire day devoted to getting to a remote part of the world to watch one game live, or in the same time period you could watch 10-12 games of a given player on video.

"You need to see the players live, but there is a point I think where you need to balance the merits of seeing them live one more time versus how much more you could learn on video," said an executive.

Since March, scouts have been stuck at home watching video on prospects.

"Teams turned to video due to the necessity of the circumstances, and some who weren't dabbling much in video prior to the shutdown I think were finding it beneficial," said one NHL scout.

For a lot of them that resulted in a lot of long days of eyes getting watery from staring at screens. I talked to some scouts who said they watched every game for all the top prospects in their area.

A trend across teams was having scouts do crossover video scouting of regions and players they typically would not have seen in a normal season. In discussions with teams across the league, an environment where amateur scouts across the staff were providing reports on players throughout the team's list was much more common than in previous seasons, as NHL hockey operations employees had a lot of extra time and needed to find ways to use that time effectively. Some thought this was a useful way to bring more opinions into the process. Others thought this was a negative as it asked scouts to give opinions on players and leagues they were unfamiliar with.

For the 2020 NHL Draft, 80 percent of the season was business as usual. Scouts flew across the world, went to many games, tournaments and events, and interviewed most prospects in person. There were some major bumps at the end and the postseason was lost, but a lot of the work had already been done.

When we turn the page to the 2021 NHL Draft, there is a lot of uncertainty. Crossover scouts and scouting directors in the United States can't travel outside the country. There are many lost opportunities for mass viewings across leagues and countries that have been canceled or did not allow spectators. The WHL plans to start in January and the OHL in February. Teams won't be allowed to scout the world juniors. Leagues are starting and stopping constantly with various spectator restrictions and schedules constantly being re-arranged. In discussions with sources around the league, the main questions are whether various leagues or tournaments will play; the inevitable follow-up question is whether scouts will be let in.

One answer to these dilemmas is clear: Video scouting, and lots of it. Teams are already in the midst of using significant amounts of video to evaluate the next draft class. The 2021 NHL Draft will likely be the most scouted draft from afar in NHL history.

What happens going forward?

The NHL scouting business is changing.

"The efficiency and practical value of using video is something that all organizations are going to need to embrace at some point," said one NHL executive.

"The ability to adapt is very important" added another executive.

A majority of NHL sources think this is the beginning of a systemic shift, but a lot of respondents didn't agree.

"Video scouting is not the way of the future. This is a circumstantial thing, once we're allowed to go back to business as usual things will snap back to the way it's always been with a heavy emphasis on the live view," said one scout.

"For the executives and crossover scouts, I think the technological improvements will help them a lot. But for most scouts, the ones who need to know an area, the job won't change" said another scout.

The industry is not going to be massively overhauled. There have been plenty of NHL scouts in plenty of buildings already this season when permitted. The live view aspect of their job is still viewed as essential. What I think you are seeing though is a shift in mindset in the industry from "There is one right way to do this, and that other way is a secondary tool," to "There are two equally valuable ways to do this that are useful in their own ways."

"I don't think you'll ever eliminate the value of a live view. It's the foundation of scouting, but you should look to supplement the live views with as much information as possible, which includes video," said one executive. "People in other sports think it's weird that we're even having this debate."



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It's interesting to compare the perception of the value of video scouting in hockey compared to other sports. For a sport like football, video is such a giant component of how they do their job to prepare for the draft. Baseball seems more analogous in terms of the perceived value of the live view, and the significant transition some MLB teams needed to make incorporating a ton more video in their 2020 draft process.

The 2020 NHL Draft has helped launch the scouting community into the era of video scouting, and if early indicators hold, the 2021 NHL Draft will keep them there. Beyond that is less clear.

The Athletic LOADED: 11.13.2020

Sportsnet.ca / NHL return FAQ: What we know, and don't, about the coming season

Justin Bourne@jtbourne

November 12, 2020, 3:56 PM

At some indistinguishable point over the past however-many years, I became "an old," which I only acknowledge now because I need to make an Inspector Gadget reference. Here goes: Inspector Gadget used to be given his "missions" on notes that would self-destruct in a matter of seconds, which is essentially what you're reading here: an article on what hockey will look like when it returns ... that's almost certain to self-destruct in days (or less) as the NHL's board of governors are meeting today and new decisions are rolling in by the hour.

But that doesn't mean it's not helpful to start picturing the eventual shape of the coming 2020-21 NHL season, so let's try to get things in better focus with the information we've gathered this week:

When will the NHL be back?

This one seems least likely to self-destruct in a comically bad way, given that the estimates here seem pretty consistent wherever you look. It sounds like the league is pushing to return on Jan. 1, which means at worst (barring some dramatic event) we're starting by Jan. 10. I say that date, by the way, because if players insist they need Christmas at home with their families, I could see them coming back Boxing Day and having a two-week camp after that.

If Christmas is not an issue – and since the NBA has deemed it a non-issue, I'd imagine the NHL could do the same – then Jan. 1 seems perfectly viable.

Hockey Fights Cancer

Since its inception in 1998, the Hockey Fights Cancer initiative has resulted in millions of dollars in donations to support cancer research institutions, children's hospitals, and many player and local charities.

So when would training camps start?

Here's where fans can start to get a little excited, because if you start Jan. 1, you're probably bringing teams back by about Dec. 15, which you may note is only a month away.

Further to that, the seven teams who didn't get to come back and play after the season pause this past summer (as a result of being what experts call being "not good") may be granted an extra week to prepare. That means some NHL players could be reporting to actual camps as early as the second week of December. And that's exciting, because then you'd be looking at less than a month.

It's worth noting too that a quick return to action here would start to put pressure on teams like the Tampa Bay Lightning and New York Islanders, who have considerable roster decisions to make in the days in between. If you're someone who enjoys hockey action, this might push more into your timeline in the weeks to come.

But will they play in hubs or no?

There's a lot of incentive for them to not play in hubs. Teams have arena-naming rights that require a certain number of events per year. Teams want fans; they want the comforts of home; and they want normalcy. (There's another reason I'll note a little further down.)

But it sure looks like there's going to have to be hubs at first, at least for a little while.

COVID cases are on the rise pretty much everywhere in North America, and the last thing the league needs is to have swaths of cancelled games while certain players (or teams) go into isolation, which would push the season back, leaning up against their "done by the Olympics" deadline of around July 15. It's the safest way to start hockey up again, of course, but it's also the most reliable way to complete the "full" season.

My loose understanding of what's being assembled is a handful of hubs that will look quite a bit different from the versions we saw during the 2019-20 playoffs. They won't be permanent, and they'll see teams come for 10 to 12 days and play a half-dozen games or so, then head back to be with their families. One of the issues right now that the players and league seem to be talking about is that hubs take a little while to get set up (so Jan. 1 would be a hard date to hit), but the NHLPA wants to get going as soon as possible.

But the short answer here is yes, I think there will be hubs to start the season.

Where will those be?

I don't think the league even knows the answers here yet, but I'd imagine the decisions will come down to some mix of areas with low COVID numbers, and states with the most lenient restrictions.

Will there be fans?

I think there will be, yes, hence the "lenient restrictions" part. I doubt there would be many at first. Some of the fan protocols that will be adhered to when the NBA returns on Dec. 22 came out the other day, and they're about what you'd expect. Fans will need to have been tested a couple days prior to the game, or day-of (with a rapid-results test). They'll need to distance and wear masks. The buildings won't be full. There may even be plexiglass between the players and fans (which hey, the NHL has a head start on that front).

But if the NBA is going to have fans back in their buildings on Dec. 22, even just a few, I can't imagine the NHL going entirely fan-less.

How many games will they play?

The discussions around this seem to centre on the agreement that players are only to receive 72 per cent of their pay this upcoming season because there's a (capped) escrow agreement. The deal was originally made without any specifics on how many games have to be played, meaning the players think it's 72 per cent of their agreed-upon number regardless, and the owners can argue that it's 72 per cent ... assuming an 82 game schedule, implying the number would be pro-rated down from there were there fewer games. So, there's some ironing out to do between the players and league there.

But most estimates I've seen predict them playing somewhere in the 56-72 game range, and that lines up with what I've personally heard as well. (My take here is 56 would be really disappointing — I'd hope for at least north of 60.)

A hub issue to consider

One of the reasons the league doesn't love the idea of hubs, which I didn't mention above, is that it limits ice sheets. That means only a few teams can play in prime time, which means puck drops have to be staggered throughout the days (remember noon puck drops in the playoffs?). That isn't great for viewing if you keep regular business hours, or if you're a television network that would like decent ratings. Little insider tip here, too: most of them would.



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As a biased observer (I should say “super biased,” as I work from home and want day games), a return in any form would be amazing, even if it's less than ideal. To get where we want to get – back to those wonderful end-of-season playoff pushes and beyond, with the season's integrity still intact - we've got to start the journey in some fashion.

In the end, like so many people, the league and its players are just going to have to deal with “less than ideal” for a while, and plow ahead on our way back to whatever becomes our next normal. And however it ends up looking, you can find some excitement in the fact that hockey is coming, and coming reasonably soon.

The Athletic / 2020 NHL front office confidence rankings: Fans weigh in on every team

By Dom Luszczyzyn Nov 11, 2020 277

It's that time of year again, another edition of the annual front office confidence rankings. How much trust does each team's front office deserve? That's the question we try to answer here using the power of the fans to make their voices heard every offseason.

Each front office has its ability graded in six categories: roster building, cap management, drafting and development, trading, free agency and vision. The total score was based on how important respondents felt each category was in the first survey. (You can find the second and third surveys here and here).

This is the fifth annual version of the list and the third on The Athletic, and it's the biggest one yet featuring nearly 14,000 responses for those voting on just their favourite team and 500 for the full-team survey. The vast user-base here in each market has been really beneficial in figuring out where different fan bases stand with much more specificity than the public could muster on its own. It's always nice to see the dichotomy between the two judgements, but what the fans say about their own teams is definitely becoming a much bigger focal point.

In total there were eight teams with over 500 votes, 22 with over 250 and all but one, Florida, were over 100 votes. At those numbers, the confidence interval is generally pretty small, though that's also based on those participating in the survey, a majority of which are subscribers of The Athletic. That may not be the truest reflection of the entire hockey population, as it's selectively biased toward those dedicated enough to subscribe (and likely have a more analytical slant). But it should still be close enough to gauge the temperature of how strong each front office is, especially considering how well-informed the subscribers here are.

So what do those well-informed subscribers think about each team's front office? Here's how every team stacks up, starting from the bottom and working our way up.

Submitted responses were edited for style and clarity.

31. Arizona Coyotes

“I do not have the same trust in Armstrong as I did with Chayka. He seemed like a sharp-minded GM with a concrete plan to build around young core players. I liked seeing him go for it with the Taylor Hall trade with the team in the first place. This Mitchell Miller story has me really questioning the priorities and integrity of the new management group.”

“We finally make the playoffs for the first time in eight seasons and ownership forces out Chayka, brings in an inexperienced GM who makes no major moves and now we have this Mitchell Miller nonsense? Where are the priorities? If offseason distractions counted as wins then we would take the Presidents' Trophy next season in a landslide. Things were way better under Barroway/Chayka.”

“I see no vision coming from Armstrong and this Mitchell Miller debacle is a huge stain on the organization.”

“Total dysfunction in the ownership group, I have no faith in the new management group to keep this team in the playoff hunt and the Miller pick is another mistake in a long line of mistakes since the new ownership took over.”

Timing is everything. This is a fan-powered survey done in the offseason where the latest news will generally be the freshest thing on people's minds. A few weeks ago it would have been a surprise to see Arizona this low especially under new management, but the tide shifted to an extreme degree once news broke about 2020 draft pick Mitchell Miller's past legal issues. What Miller did was deplorable and Arizona drafting him despite its knowledge of it casts a dark shadow over the already dysfunctional organization. That the team would go on to renounce the pick only furthers what a colossal failure it was as it shows a team not performing their due diligence on a prospect's background. And no, the Coyotes don't get extra points for bending toward the right decision only after facing intense public scrutiny – it's something they should've gotten right from the get-go.

Before the news, the average Coyotes rating across the board from self-labelled Coyotes fans was 2.73 which is below average, but not terrible. After the news it was 1.21, propelling the team to this league-worst ranking. Given the team's current standing, its poor cap efficiency, and general lack of vision or direction, this spot isn't exactly unfair. The Miller debacle serves as the final straw and it'll likely be difficult for the new regime to regain the trust of the fan base in the aftermath.

30. Chicago Blackhawks

“The front office claims to have been rebuilding for the past three seasons but the trades and acquisitions over that time suggest otherwise. The team has not built up draft picks and has not developed young players. Instead, the team has acquired middling players while trading away talent and prospects.”

“There is a clear lack of vision moving forward, while still having Toews, Kane, Keith and Seabrook. They need to get as much as they can out of these four before they run out of time. Either commit to the teardown and make the hard moves, trading away the four, or commit to top nine guys who can come in and make an immediate impact.”

“I am happy that they finally came out and admitted they were rebuilding; however, I am not confident that the right people are in charge of said rebuild.”

“Stan has crippled himself with long term deals, has no direction and makes panic moves. Not who I want directing an overdue rebuild.”

The Blackhawks were not held in high esteem last season and things have only gotten worse since with a somewhat tumultuous offseason. The fans are significantly less confident as a result and only one other team saw a bigger drop in confidence by the public.

The biggest issue with the Blackhawks seems to be the management's lack of direction over the last few years. The team was not good enough to make the playoffs, but not bad enough to tank and that middle ground isn't where any fan wants to be. It's a hopeless position, one that shows a lack of vision.

Now that the Blackhawks have committed to a rebuilding path, it's the mismanagement in previous seasons that is still fresh in the minds of people. Is this really a front office that can be trusted to rebuild this team? Common sentiment right now seems to be a resounding no.

29. Buffalo Sabres

“Kevyn Adams' first offseason has been a mix of good moves (Hall & Staal), questionable moves (drafting Quinn over Rossi and Perfetti), and head-scratching moves (no real moves on D or in G so far).”

“There are both savvy trades and signings (Staal and Hall) and more baffling moves such as Girgs contract or drafting Quinn over Rossi. However he does, at very least, seem like he's willing to actually try and change the team rather than former GM Botts' strange obsession with seemingly aimless bottom-six signings that never moved any needles.”



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"They hired a GM with no front office experience. He claimed that he looks at the numbers, but signed guys like Rieder, Eakin, Irwin, etc. and let Larsson and Kahun walk. Additionally, they take Jack Quinn over Rossi and then trade up in the draft rather than trading down. Is there a reason I should "trust their process?" Here is to hoping the drought doesn't reach 17 years."

"While I think Kevyn Adams has had a decent start to his tenure in Buffalo with his relatively clear messaging to fans about the direction he wants to take the team, there is a significant amount of repair needed to fan base faith in the Pegulas. They seem to be well-intentioned, but constant changes to leadership do not allow for consistent sustained growth. I hope they can continue in a positive direction which will allow for a stretch of consistent success in the future."

The current sentiment around the Sabres is a mixed bag with many fans being more confident in Buffalo's front office compared to a year ago, but just as many fans being less confident. Perhaps the most telling thing is that Buffalo drops heavily in these rankings, from 22nd last season to 29th this year.

It's tough to gauge the impact of a new GM, but the Sabres were very busy this offseason giving fans a bit more to work with. The Taylor Hall signing was terrific, but most people would credit Ralph Kruger for that. The Eric Staal trade was a legitimate coup, but there were a lot of iffy signings aside from that. Losing Johan Larsson to sign an inferior and more expensive Cody Eakin wasn't ideal while the Zemgus Girgensons extension was a bit pricey for a fourth-line center. At the draft, taking Jack Quinn over Marco Rossi or Cole Perfetti wasn't very popular, which explains the team's lowest rating being drafting and developing. That's been a major problem for the franchise for a while now and that choice doesn't inspire much confidence.

There are obvious frustrations here given the last decade of playoff-less hockey in Buffalo and they're very much warranted. Much of it is about the serious lack of vision, with a lot of blame being pointed squarely at ownership. Sabres fans deserve a lot better and though the new regime hasn't been here long, it's hard not to feel like it might be more of the same.

28. Pittsburgh Penguins

"The amount of assets Rutherford has thrown away is truly remarkable."

"After back-to-back Cups in 16/17, it seems like Jim Rutherford has completely abandoned any vision whatsoever. He just goes after individual players he wants, fit or results be damned, since he figures he can just trade them for less value or buy them out if it doesn't work."

"Rutherford seemed to hit every note for a few years, but some of the decisions and players added have been difficult to understand. I don't see how his decision making in the last three years points to anything but a front office fading in its effectiveness."

It was only two years ago that the Penguins ranked in the top 10 on this list and they were even higher in the years before that, but no team has fallen harder over the last two seasons. The Penguins were 26th last year and fall even further this year to 28th, losing a lion's share of confidence along the way.

Since winning back-to-back Cups, the Penguins have been in a state of disarray and it seems like every offseason becomes an absolute circus of activity trying to get back to those heights. Pittsburgh was once again very busy this offseason trying desperately to fix mistakes made not too long ago, only to make new ones along the way. Trading for Mike Matheson, owner of one of the league's worst contracts, is one of them.

It's admirable that Jim Rutherford has the humility to admit when he's wrong and move on from a player quickly, but the sheer number of times it has happened is concerning. We can credit the Penguins for realizing a mistake and finally moving on from Jack Johnson with a buyout ... but that ignores how almost everyone knew what a bad mistake that was on Day 1. And then a week later he signs Cody Ceci anyway!

Being a Penguins fan is tough right now. The team is good, but you wonder how much better it might be if the front office didn't feel the need

to change everything every offseason because for the past few years they've been on the wrong side of that more often than not. There are some big wins (John Marino for a sixth!) but a lot more misses.

27. San Jose Sharks

"It is what it is. Can't really fault Doug Wilson for anything. He pushed for it and it didn't pan out. Time to pay the piper."

"No doubt Doug is in a pickle of his making. The bill has come for a decade and a half of competitive teams, which he's also responsible for. Sad it never resulted in a Cup like we all thought it would, freak injuries and whatnot. He deserves a chance to right the ship, which I think he can, and has been from scouting changes on down. Next season or two should be really really interesting. I think a GM change now would result in the team being bad for longer."

"I hope Doug Wilson gets the chance to rebuild. No one expected the collapse from WCF to last place. I'd like to give him some time before deciding he's the problem."

"As much as I admire Doug Wilson's work in keeping the Sharks as a contender nearly annually for a decade-and-a-half, I can't help but wonder if it's time for a new vision — a fresh perspective from someone who might be able to more honestly assess the current squad and its limited assets."

It's only natural that the Sharks take a big hit in these rankings after the tremendously disappointing season they just had. They drop 20 spots from seventh to 27th, and you have to imagine this might be their new home for the next little bit.

The public was much harsher on the Sharks, but even the fans had their team in the league's bottom 10. In any case, confidence dropped big time year-over-year, with 82 percent less confidence from the public being the highest of any team.

A lot of what happened to San Jose last year was bad luck, and that was a common sentiment expressed by the fan base that was a bit more lenient. The team pushed the chips in and it didn't pan out. Bad break. Still, it's hard to give the benefit of the doubt considering how some of the lengthy deals given out to ageing stars are blowing up in the team's face. The Sharks have by far the league's worst cap picture and will need several of their ageing vets to prove they've still got gas in the tank.

The most important will be Erik Karlsson, who not only costs the most on the payroll but also ended up costing a third overall pick. That stings and along with the Devan Dubnyk trade makes me wonder where the high confidence in trading from the fans is coming from, but from a process standpoint, I get it. Doug Wilson swung for the fences and it was very hard to envision at the time the deal would blow up to that degree.

After nearly two decades of contending, this is now the price the team has to pay. Wilson still has some support to find a way out of his own mess brought about trying to extend the window as long as possible, but there's growing sentiment that the team may need a fresh pair of eyes.

26. Florida Panthers

"Thank god I'm gone' — Dale Tallon"

"It can't get much worse so this summer was a step in the right direction for new management. Bonus points for not handing out big FA contracts and Matheson trade."

"After years of Dale Tallon, I'm excited to see what Bill Zito can do. So far, he's off to a pretty good start so for the first time in a while, there's some optimism."

The public opinion is rather harsh here and it feels like it stems from feelings toward the old regime led by Dale Tallon, one of the worst GM's in recent memory. The Panthers had the lowest number of survey-takers at just 39, but those that did answer are significantly more confident with Zito in and Tallon out of the picture.

Zito's tenure has been short, but what he has done in that time frame has been mostly good. Letting Mike Hoffman and Evgeny Dadonov walk isn't



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ideal, but the team found value elsewhere with shrewd depth signings and one home run of a trade. That they got a still useful Patric Hornqvist for Mike Matheson, a depth defenceman signed for too much and too long, is very admirable and speaks to the team's trading rating being among its highest.

It's too early to tell with Florida's new front office, but early results are promising and really – it can't get any worse than the previous regime, right?

25. Vancouver Canucks

"Great core Jim Benning has assembled. Cap mismanagement has unfortunately delayed this group's Stanley Cup window."

"I have no doubt that they have the best intentions and will hold onto our best players, but this salary cap scenario should have been blindingly obvious from a mile away."

"I think Benning should be the assistant GM as he has shown to be very good at drafting and identifying talent (or maybe that was Brackett). However, free agency over the years has been a complete disaster. The Canucks consistently overpay in dollars and term, resulting in their cap crunch today and now have the inability to make the necessary moves to put this team over the top."

Public sentiment is really shifting around the Canucks after an exciting run to the second round of the playoffs, but fans who participated aren't convinced that the current regime is the right one to take this promising team to the next step. The Canucks were one of the few teams with a noticeably lower score from its own fan base.

While both the public and fans have given out high marks for drafting and developing, there are three key sore spots when it comes to Vancouver's managing ability, all of which were on full display this offseason.

The biggest issue by far is cap management, and that ties together with free agency. After such a successful season, it was frustrating to see star goaltender Jacob Markstrom walk as well as deadline acquisition Tyler Toffoli. The Markstrom deal was probably smart to avoid, but if there's a mistake to make, it's probably that one compared to say, signing Loui Eriksson, Tyler Myers, Jay Beagle, Antoine Roussel, etc. to deals they would struggle to live up to. That created a situation where the Canucks moved on from Markstrom not out of caution, but out of necessity due to a shortage of cap space. The Markstrom deal isn't great (six years it's too long for a goalie), but it's a lot more palatable than any of those four deals on the books. It also meant the team couldn't afford Toffoli, who was given a very affordable deal and is exactly what the team needs in the top six. Those past mistakes have already proven costly and limit the team from taking a step toward contention next season.

That's the other problem with Vancouver: what exactly is the vision here? Why trade prospects for Toffoli if you were going to let him walk at such a reasonable price? Why trade a first-round pick for J.T. Miller that had the potential to be unprotected in 2021 if there wasn't a clear plan to contend that season? It's difficult to know what the plan is and it sort of feels like the front office is winging it as they go along. That's not exactly something that inspires much confidence.

24. Nashville Predators

"Ever since the Cup final run, every increasingly desperate move the Preds have made has backfired. Sometimes it feels like Peter Chiarelli is the GM."

"The Preds seem to be in a state of flux, with no clear movement forward. There's an uninspired/bland coaching staff, a seeming lack of passion from the players, an unclear/end-of-an-era goalie situation and a front office that is throwing things at the wall and seeing what sticks. As a longtime fan, my excitement is a long way from the Stanley Cup run a couple years ago."

"The last few years have severely damaged my confidence in David Poile to effectively build a roster that can consistently compete in the Western Conference. Awful trades, bad FA signings and poor drafts have left me feeling worried about the future of this team."

David Poile and company were once among the most confidence-inspiring front offices, but things have taken a drastic turn over the past year. The Predators tumble from 11th all the way down to 24th after an uninspired 2019-20 season was cut short in a year where they were supposed to still be contenders.

The team was right to unload the P.K. Subban deal, but the Matt Duchene signing panned out poorly, just like every other center contract they've given out. Ryan Johansen's deal is not ageing well and Kyle Turris' got so bad they had to buy him out. The team is decent at getting out of binds, but there's little trust in not being able to get into them in the first place after recent moves.

Trading and free agency is the team's lowest score and I would bet the Kevin Fiala for Mikael Granlund swap is fresh on people's minds. The trade backfired big time, and now with Granlund likely walking as a free agent, the team has nothing to show for it.

23. Anaheim Ducks

"My one main gripe was with the Vision, I'm no professional but my two cents is the team needs to rebuild GMBM seems pretty set on trying for playoffs, obviously he is a smarter guy than me when it comes to hockey but I don't see how the current Ducks core wins a Cup."

"Bob Murray is going against a lot of fans' wishes by pushing for a playoff spot this season. I think he is willing to deal a young player for an established player this year, and is serious about winning ... He knows his job is on the line now ... It's time to see how he does on the hot seat."

"Bob Murray is trying to skip over a rebuild we clearly needed. He's pushing to be a cusp playoff team, not a Cup contender. We're entering an era of not good enough to win a cup (or even make the playoffs) and not bad enough to get high draft selections we desperately need to impact the organization. We're basically a team of potential middle six forwards."

This isn't too far from where the Ducks landed last season on the fringes of the bottom 10. There's always a lot of faith in the team's ability to draft and develop, but everything else is mostly below average.

Perhaps the biggest issue is the team's vision, which has led to some strange trades and signings. The Ducks have signed some awful deals, though a lot of those were extensions to their own players.

I still don't understand the team trading Ondrej Kase, and while the Kevin Shattenkirk signing is a strong one, it makes little sense as to why the Ducks would be a team that makes it. Shouldn't the team be rebuilding? It feels more like they're sputtering just above the league's basement instead of committing to what the team desperately needs.

22. Edmonton Oilers

"They're stable with Holland in place, but they put too much faith in old school knowledge. The team is obviously not embracing new tools for player acquisition."

"Dumping Chiarelli was the best thing Edmonton has done in a decade. Jury is still out on how Holland does but it's starting to look promising. Not going to be overly optimistic yet, though."

"Holland's experience and patience are reassuring from a vision and team-building perspective. He's taking the time to do it right while Tippett coached the team to an impressive year-over-year improvement. Hopefully overpays like the Kassian contract and loyalty signings like Smith don't become habitual like they did in Detroit."

The Oilers find themselves in a higher spot than usual as a semblance of competence begins to emerge amidst the wreckage of the previous regime. The team's vision is getting much clearer and there's a path toward contention that became present last season in a year where the Oilers surely make the playoffs under normal circumstances. The public remains unconvinced, placing the Oilers well below average across the board, but the fan base appears much more optimistic.

For the first time in a long while, it felt like the Oilers had a strong offseason. They didn't overpay for players they didn't need and made



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some shrewd low-risk signings like Tyson Barrie and Kyle Turris. They're reclamation projects after down years, but there's plenty of potential there. That likely informs the team's higher standing in the free agency category.

There's still a lot of work to do in Edmonton, but for the first time in a while the team spearheading that work looks to have some promise. The Oilers' front office is a long way from the laughingstock it used to be, but the next step is always the hardest. A stronger embrace of more modern team-building initiatives would help and it's something a lot of fans were clamouring for.

21. Ottawa Senators

"Pierre Dorion's drafting ability and eye for scouting has helped the Sens, but they remain to be too focused on trading away key players or letting them walk. The team would have benefitted from players like Mark Stone or Mark Borowiecki sticking around, assuming they wanted to stay. Not much experienced leadership left on the team."

"The Sens definitely have a bright future and I think the front office has done very well with the hand they've been given in terms of drafting and developing prospects. The Sens rarely attract any free agents of note so the team has had to build through trades for prospects and through the draft. Some of the contracts the front office has given out have been a bit questionable but all in all, I'm confident in this front office to bring us closer to contention in the coming years."

"I'm confident in their ability to draft and develop players, but anyone working in this organization's front office has two hands tied behind their backs due to ownership. I believe decisions are made with more concern about cost than about putting the best team on the ice."

After finishing second last in this survey last year and near the bottom every other year, things are beginning to look up in Ottawa. Both the public and the team's fan base are much more optimistic about Ottawa's future and the hands guiding the team forward.

While there's still not a lot of confidence when it comes to trading and free agency – and there shouldn't be given the team's offseason spending a lot of money toward little discernible improvement – the Senators made strides elsewhere, mainly drafting and developing. Having two top five picks helps with that, but so does having the largest draft capital haul of the last two decades. It also helps that the Senators' current regime has been quite strong at finding NHL-calibre players at the draft table. Combine that with a ton of picks and it's plain to see why there's a lot of optimism surrounding the team's future.

For once there seems to be an actual vision in place with regards to where this team might go, and while there's still reserved caution in some areas, especially from the public, there's also hope. That's something that's been missing for a while in Ottawa, though the continued presence of owner Eugene Melnyk doesn't help those matters. Despite the cautious optimism, he was still a popular target in the comments.

20. New Jersey Devils

"Fitzy has shown a willingness to be patient, while still being committed to making the team better. Every trade he's made since being the GM has been a good one. Hopefully this translates into team success sooner rather than later!"

"Player drafting and development outside of the top 10 picks still needs serious work."

"With the front office reset, the organization seems aligned and willing to continue rebuilding, which is necessary after blowing their load prematurely last offseason."

"I was thrilled about Shero's moves last year — they were all good, despite Murphy's Law torpedoing expectations and sinking the season. Fitzgerald is making similarly good, though much more subtle. The team as of now is tangibly better at the cost of an OK prospect and some later draft picks. There are no bad long term contracts on the roster and lots of cap space, which Fitz has shown he can and will weaponize. The team is

well positioned to take advantage of the flat salary cap and upcoming expansion draft."

Talk about a fall back down to Earth. After what appeared to be a strong offseason in 2019, the Devils front office looked like one of the league's sharpest. They made sound moves and confidence was sky high in the team's vision to move quickly back toward contention. Last year they ranked second, mostly thanks to a very confident fan base.

And then the team had a wretched start and all of that went out the window. That was it for GM Ray Shero, who was replaced by Tom Fitzgerald and effectively ended Taylor Hall's tenure as a Devil, wasting the prime of an elite winger. Naturally, things have soured since and the Devils have dropped 18 spots in these rankings. Most of the ratings are closer to average now, but just average is below average in terms of fan confidence. The Devils get solid marks for cap management and they weaponized it well this offseason in trading for Andreas Johnsson and Ryan Murray, but the team still struggles at drafting and developing.

For a rebuilding team, that's a big concern, but it's still early in Fitzgerald's tenure to know if he'll be an improvement in that regard.

19. Calgary Flames

"The team drafts and develops well but Treliving can't seem to stop himself from overpaying in free agency every year."

"I wish they'd lock Brad Treliving away in some hidden alcove without his phone during free agency."

"Drafting has been impressive thanks to some major hits in the late rounds (Mangiapanne, Pettersson, Wolf, etc.), but early picks haven't always been impressive. In terms of vision, there seems to be a stagnation, and the roster seems to be basically the same construction with some downgrades compared to the last two seasons, despite disappointing results. The addition of Markstrom is great, but the length of his contract and the Tanev signing seem like unnecessary risks in a flat cap environment. Overall, the Flames are set up to be a solid but uninspiring team, with some great pieces but without a clear identity."

According to the public, the Flames possess by far the most ordinary front office, with ratings just barely above or below 3.0 across the board. There's basically no opinion there and frankly, I don't blame them. The fans are sort of on that wavelength too with one key difference being they're much higher on the team's ability to draft and develop and much lower on them in free agency.

The Flames committing a lot of term and cash to a goalie and overpaying Chris Tanev is concerning; I'm sure fans are still a bit gun shy about the recent James Neal and Troy Brouwer contracts. As for drafting, there's some nice homegrown talent on the team and fans seemed to love the team's most recent draft, specifically trading down in the first round multiple times and still snagging Connor Zary. That's a coup.

18. Minnesota Wild

"Everyone seems to love Guerin but to me, all his moves are just a rearranging of the deck chairs."

"Billy Guerin sure is a breath of fresh air, and it seems like he's got this quasi-rebuild thing down so far with the moves he's made this offseason. Can't wait for us to take a couple steps back from middling in order to actually field a competitive roster in a few years."

"After years (decades) of mediocre-ing our way into the playoffs, we finally have a GM who is willing to tear down the team, get rid of the good ol' country club boys and give us a chance of competing in a few years."

It's amazing what one scathing Michael Russo column can do. Though it was obvious to outsiders that things were bleak in Minnesota, Russo's deep dive behind the scenes painted an even grimmer picture than what could be imagined. That article dropped just as this survey came out last year and naturally it was fresh in many people's memories when voting. The Wild, the league's most dysfunctional franchise at the time, unsurprisingly came dead last.



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The public still isn't too high on the new regime, but the fan base is significantly more confident in Bill Guerin and company, leading to a 13-spot jump in the rankings. The 1.1-point gap between the fan's confidence and the public's is tied for the most in the league. Anything is an upgrade over Fenton and that's led to the 11th most confident fan base and 94 percent of fans being more confident than a year ago. That's the highest of any team.

Snagging Marco Rossi at the draft was terrific as was finally moving on from Devan Dubnyk and trading Luke Kunin for Nick Bonino. But there were some questionable moves in the mix too that give pause, like swapping Eric Staal for Marcus Johansson, giving up on Ryan Donato and paying a bit too much for Jonas Brodin. That's why the middle ground between the pessimistic public and optimistic fan base feels right in this instance.

17. Boston Bruins

"It's really hard to rate the Bruins. They're wasting cap space on guys like John Moore and Kevan Miller and miss on their draft picks way more than they hit. On the flip side, they've been one of the most successful teams over the last decade. I think once its "veteran core" is finally gone we'll see how effective the front office really is. Will Pasta and McAvoy be enough to carry the team?"

"I'm seriously starting to think Mat Barzal, Thomas Chabot, Kyle Connor and Brock Boeser are better than Jakub Zboril and Zach Senyshyn."

"Fellow Bruins fans are notoriously pessimistic (to put it mildly) but I think Sweeney and crew have done an excellent job fixing the cap issues and are very well positioned (especially in 2021) to keep contending while the core ages out, especially with COVID impacts expected to last beyond this year. Draft results have been pretty poor, but landing Pastrnak and McAvoy were huge wins."

There is an entire world of difference between how opposing fans feel about the Bruins' front office and how their own fans do. The 0.6-point negative difference is the largest non-Arizona difference between the public and the team's fans. The public sees a group that built a powerhouse that can contend annually thanks to excellent cap management and a strong vision with a terrific roster. The fan base sees a powerhouse team despite management, one that has struggled to develop its own talent in recent years and lost a key piece in Torey Krug in free agency.

That's led to a large drop in confidence year-over-year from the fans, and while some of it is warranted, it seems like fans in Tittle Town are acting a bit entitled here. The drafting concern is a real one for the Bruins who love to reach on picks, but the rest feels a bit overly harsh. Boston still has a very strong roster and an excellent cap picture, both worthy of higher grades. And though the team let Krug walk and have legitimate holes on the back end, the team has one of the strongest forward groups in the league after signing Craig Smith. That was arguably one of the best signings in free agency.

The grass isn't always greener on the other side and there is a reason the public rated the Bruins' front office as one of the league's five best – even if the concerns from the fan base are genuine.

16. New York Islanders

"Poor cap management has put them in a bad spot for years to come. Lack of prospects in their current system and lack of draft picks will complicate their problems"

"The poor contracts continue to speak for themselves everywhere LL goes. There is absolutely, positively lots to be said for the culture and professionalism that Lou brings. Full stop. And Trotz. But everything else is very, very poor and trending worse."

"I trust Lou and Trotz to make things work, but am concerned that the entire roster overperforming couldn't get them to the Cup, now with the cap crunch, seeing the roster greatly improve next season seems like a challenge."

"Obviously, I love what Lou and Barry have done with the organization as a whole. They brought much-needed structure and credibility that translated to immediate success. Still, I worry about their reluctance to start more young players. The league's getting younger and their overreliance on veterans will likely hurt them in a few years (especially if the cap crunch continues). That being said, the Islanders made the ECF this year so what do I know?"

"I trust Lamoriello to find coal that Trotz can turn into diamonds, and that he'll navigate the cap crunch to re-sign Barzal, Pullock and Greene. I'm less confident in his ability to find the top-line winger we have so desperately needed for years, either by trade or free agency, and our farm system doesn't inspire much hope now that Sorokin is here."

There seems to be a pretty wide chasm between the public and Islanders fans when it comes to rating the team's front office, but both parties are much more confident this year after the group made it to the conference finals. The vision for the Islanders has become much more clear with the team's playoff success as the front office that has built a roster to win the Islanders way. The fit is very strong, and that was apparent with deadline acquisitions Jean-Gabriel Pageau and Andy Greene fitting seamlessly during the playoffs.

Where there is healthy concern from the public is in the team's current cap situation where there doesn't seem to be enough room to sign Mathew Barzal and Ryan Pullock at the moment and has already forced the team to trade puck-moving defenceman Devon Toews. That's partially because of some other poor deals on the books, though not all were signed by Lou Lamoriello.

The biggest thing Islanders fans are confident in is the team's overall vision and I think that'll be the most interesting thing to watch for in the coming years. The true test of this management group is overcoming the difficult waters ahead with an ageing team and a tricky cap structure.

15. Winnipeg Jets

"Their over-commitment to ageing/declining veterans and corresponding lack of development in younger players has really made me apathetic toward the team. I was a season ticket holder from the time they came back until the end of this last season, but I just can't justify spending any more of my money or time on an organization that seems so committed to mediocrity."

"There doesn't seem to be a clear strategy to address that free agents won't sign here. It would seem to me if this is the case you need to utilize organizational assets to identify players you could acquire by trade (who don't have no-movement clauses). Management also hasn't addressed the need to team size (not necessarily toughness but edginess)."

"Most of the criticism that management takes can be directly linked to challenges that Winnipeg, as a market, faces. It is hard to make big trades as Winnipeg is usually on no-trade lists and big-name free agents are unlikely to want to sign (due to a variety of factors, including cold weather, small city and relatively high taxes) unless/until the team becomes a perennial Cup contender."

For the past two seasons, the Jets find themselves in the middle of the pack with some clear cut skill sets and weaknesses. The team's drafting and development continue to be lauded as one of the league's 10 best and the Jets do a good job of managing their cap too (enough to weaponize to land Paul Stastny at a very low price), but free agency remains a point of contention. Winnipeg is a tough city to sell so it's not entirely the team's fault, but you'd still hope for a bit more for a team that was in its contending window.

It's the step back the group took last season that has many fans feeling much less confident compared to one year ago. The degree of difficulty goes up when a team loses four regulars, including their entire right side, but the fact the team didn't really do much to fix it, still to this day, isn't ideal. That likely is part of what puts the team's roster building score in the league's lower half as it seems a contending window that looked wide open now appears closed.

14. Montreal Canadiens



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"Seems like a good offseason but a lot of bets that have to pay out for it to be a successful vision instead of shuffling the deck."

"Bergevin takes a lot of unnecessary heat. The majority of his deals have worked out for the Habs and he's had a very good offseason. The Anderson contract is a big question mark but I've learned to reserve judgement with any of Bergevin's moves."

"They've made a lot of bold moves so far this offseason, but I'm not sure that they've set themselves up to be significantly better. Some recent signings will make cap management challenging in the coming years."

The Canadiens have come a long way from their days at the bottom of this survey. The public sees a mostly average front office, but after a busy offseason, fans are all-in on the changes made by Marc Bergevin and company.

Where there seems to be the most faith is in Bergevin's trading ability. The man loves to trade and though some deals seem like head-scratchers at the time, they have a tendency to pan out for Montreal. Aside from dealing Mikhail Sergachev for Jonathan Drouin, Bergevin has been on the right side of deals involving Max Pacioretty, P.K. Subban and Alex Galchenyuk – plus he stole Phillip Danault away from Chicago. As a result, he deserves the benefit of the doubt on his latest deal, swapping Max Domi for Josh Anderson – even if the contract for the latter looks a bit pricey.

The overall vision still seems a bit average and there are questions about the team's draft record, but slowly and surely there's a strong team being built thanks to savvy cap management. Whether it'll be an elite contender remains to be seen, but the overall group does look playoff calibre and that's reason enough for optimism. The team's playoff run did a lot to inspire some of that confidence too.

13. Washington Capitals

"There will be pain in the years ahead, possibly sooner than some realize. But the front office has done an excellent job achieving it's one obvious goal: prolonging the window to win with Ovi/Backstrom for as long as possible."

"It's been tough watching guys like Burakovsky, Stephenson and Connolly flourish after leaving the team, so losing Holtby really, really stings right now. But it seems like they're putting the pieces in place for another run. But our pipeline feels pretty dry right now."

"GMBM has to be one of the most underrated GMs. Every offseason he has gone out and addressed the Capitals team needs. He maybe whiffed on the Reirden hire but look at how he addressed that this offseason. If the Capitals were in a larger market, he'd get far more praise for everything he has done."

"It's hard to fault them considering this core is locked into the rest of Ovi's career. I don't hate it, I respect it, and I expect a few very, very painful years at the end of it. Having watched the greatest goal scorer of all-time lift a Stanley Cup, it's worth whatever pain is coming."

The Capitals have followed up their first Cup win with two straight first-round exits, the last one not being very close at all. Washington has slipped out of the top 10 as a result and it's fair to ask whether the window is closing for this group and what the next steps are to avoid that.

The fan base itself appears pretty confident in management, giving strong marks in everything but drafting and developing. It's not the team's fault they're always picking near the bottom of each round but the thin prospect pool does make a transition period more difficult.

The public was a bit harsher, putting the Capitals closer to average ratings, though there is some love for the team's roster building and cap management, both in the top 10. It's the second category I find very interesting considering the team is over the cap just as much as Vegas, a team they score higher than despite having a worse team to show for their dollars.

12. Vegas Golden Knights

The Golden Knights front office is ruthless, stopping at nothing to get to the promised land. It's an admirable trait in a front office as they're doing their best to go all-in on this current window, from trading for Max Pacioretty and Mark Stone to signing free agent Alex Pietrangelo. They've had to step on a few toes along the way, but loyalty is a dangerous game in this business – just ask Chicago. The first season was magical, but they haven't stopped there because the team knew they still had to get much better.

That ruthlessness has led to a legitimate Cup contender being built, which has the public giving high marks for roster building as well as trading, free agency and vision. Vegas has their targets and waste little time getting them. The fan base has similar scores in each of those categories, but those scores rank a lot lower for fans who tend to skew toward optimism. It seems many fans aren't enamoured with the lack of loyalty displayed by the front office and how that might affect the dressing room and salary cap. Vegas is operating on a win at all costs mandate, but given some of the moves, things might get ugly if the team doesn't come through with a championship. There's some legitimate concern too whether Pietrangelo is worth giving up two strong players – Paul Stastny and Nate Schmidt – for peanuts.

The Golden Knights are tight against the cap and naturally, that led to lower rankings for cap management. I'll say it here and I'll say it for any other team spending to the cap: having good players and paying them is not a bad thing! The Golden Knights have a strong cap picture with very few bad contracts, just because they don't have space doesn't mean their cap management is below average – it's the price of having a strong team.

11. Philadelphia Flyers

"I liked that Fletcher came in and continued the spirit of what Hextall had developed. He didn't throw away all the assets to grab 'his own guy,' but held on to a lot of value while still making his mark with guys like Hayes, Niskanen, Braun and Pitlick."

"Still miss Hextall's drafting and patience, but Fletcher's signings and roster building last year were top-notch. This is still a group that takes the long view. Very refreshing for the Flyers. I'm a fan."

"I would give them a 5 in all categories if they promoted Gritty to GM."

Talking about the Flyers from year-to-year gives me whiplash. The team oscillates between good and bad and average like a yo-yo and once again their place in these rankings has flipped considerably, moving from 24th to 11th with the majority of fans being much more confident than this time a year ago.

The Flyers under Ron Hextall were far too patient and that's changed under Chuck Fletcher, who's been a bit more proactive with the roster. The Hextall era was necessary as it built a solid foundation and he deserves a lot of credit for the team's drafting success (though there's concern about a lack of "game-breakers" from fans) – but they needed someone new to tackle the next hill. Philadelphia deserves a lot of credit for realizing that and the team gets top marks for both its roster building and overall vision as a result. Fletcher didn't tear down what was in place like some might have — he enhanced it.

I'm a little surprised at the team's free agency score given recent deals to Kevin Hayes and James van Riemsdyk don't look especially great but contract aside those two are part of what gives the Flyers one of the league's deepest forward groups.

10. Dallas Stars

"Dallas has shown they can construct a roster that can go the distance, has made huge strides in player development and most recently, shown they know what they truly lack through the most recent draft. They drafted mostly for playmaking and offence over size and high floor/low ceiling-projected players for the first time in many years."

"The Stars' front office seems either really strong or really bad. The Roman Polak signing (and re-signing!), trade for Kris Russell, Esa Lindell's big contract, and poor development of Nichushkin, Honka, Oleksiak, and even Jack Campbell stand out as some negatives. They've



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done some great things, too, though — the Seguin trade, Gurianov and Hintz seemed to have panned out well and they are pretty consistently able to reel in big free agent signings while being cap conscious.”

“Although this season sort of served as vindication for Jim Nill and company, one can’t help but think he may be playing it too safe with success at times. These past two seasons are the only ones where they’ve made progress from one year to the next. Being in the final doesn’t mean your team can’t improve or doesn’t have weaknesses. One good thing is that this year’s draft at least shows they’re cognizant of organizational weaknesses.”

Making it all the way to the Stanley Cup Final goes a long way. During this exercise last year it seemed as if fans were sick of Dallas continuing to win offseasons only to have nothing to show for it come playoff time. The Stars are pretty big risers here, finishing just around the top 10 by both the public and the team’s fan base.

It’s taken a while for the team’s ever-evolving vision to get results, but it was worth the wait for a lengthy playoff run. The Stars have a strong team built on defence and there’s the utmost confidence in the front office in building out that roster. This is Jim Nill we’re talking about and he’s not afraid to make a splash when necessary, getting decently high marks in both free agency and trading. Dallas’ cap management received the highest marks from the fans, likely a product of a Cup finalist having ample cap space with only RFA Roope Hintz left to sign. They’re in a good position to add if necessary.

Where there has long been a concern for the Stars is drafting, but the tides are beginning to change there. There’s a decent stable of homegrown talent on the roster and the emergence of Denis Gurianov in the playoffs certainly helps with that. The 2015 12th overall pick was beginning to look like a bust, but was able to find his game this past season toward being a legitimate contributor for the Stars.

9. Los Angeles Kings

“Very encouraged by the team’s commitment to scouting and prospect development.”

“Rob Blake and company have generally done a good job of cleaning up the salary cap mess (and also just waiting for the years to tick by on bad contracts). The rebuild has been patient and deliberate but now appears ready to progress to the next stage. Now the test becomes whether they can convert this stockpile of prospects into legitimate NHLers, or whether they can leverage some of them in trades for established players to help the Kings get back to contending. I’m optimistic they’ll be in the playoff hunt in 2021-22 and contending soon after.”

“For a rebuild, the LA Kings are doing everything right, as far as I can tell. I’m excited for the future – which is much more than I can say for the past four years.”

“Really the biggest concern I see moving forward in LA is on the back end. If Cal Petersen isn’t the answer in goal, who is? And if Drew Doughty isn’t a true No. 1 by the time this team is ready to compete, who will be? There’s some real high-end talent up front, lots of great depth, but I don’t know if I see a top-pairing defender in the system who can help drive some offence.”

It’s funny what a strong rebuild, the second overall pick and a deep prospect pool can do toward fan confidence. That’s especially true in stark contrast to the Chicago Blackhawks at the bottom of the list, who were spinning their wheels in the mud trying to salvage any last drop of competitiveness. Those two teams had comparable runs and the difference between how each team approached the aftermath is what’s setting Los Angeles up to potentially get back to contention one last time with past core members Anze Kopitar and Drew Doughty.

No team is currently more confident in its own drafting and developing than the Kings, who have one of the strongest prospect pools in the league, if not the strongest. That category is weighed the heaviest here as it’s generally viewed to be the most important and that really helps the Kings make a big push up these rankings, going from bottom five to top 10 as the fruits of the rebuild begin to be realized.

The fans are a lot higher on roster building than they perhaps should be – the rebuild isn’t over yet – and cap management because of the Doughty deal, but they’re right to feel confident in Los Angeles’ overall vision. The Kings front office is doing it the right way.

8. Columbus Blue Jackets

“Jarmo’s strength (reflecting excellent organizational scouting) is finding talent in the draft and going against the grain in doing so. The organization is particularly adept at finding talent in Europe and Russia.”

“While I think Jarmo is a good GM sometimes his patience is maddening and other times you wish he had more! For example, he’s yet to solidify top end talent this year through FA or trades yet goes all-in on a team that was losing everything for nothing! I do like the moves made so far this offseason (Anderson shipped out) but ready for that big splash.”

“Might have the best club culture in the NHL which allows a slightly above average roster to compete with anyone. The team has been knocked out of the playoffs by the Cup champ three out of the last four years and the other time was the team that lost the Cup in Game 7. Drafting and development is strong with the likes of Werenski, PLD, Bjorkstrand and Texier all contributing big. Jarmo has squeezed every ounce of opportunity from the rock in Columbus.”

Both the public and the team’s fans agree that Columbus possesses a top 10 front office, a sizeable bump from a year ago. Part of the decrease in confidence at the time was the superstar free agent exodus and given the team made the playoffs the following season anyway, there’s reason to believe in the ultimate vision here. That the Sergei Bobrovsky and Matt Duchene deals are already not ageing well is the cherry on top, even if Artemi Panarin turned into a Hart contender. Can’t win them all.

Columbus’ best asset is its cap management, a previous source of ridicule that’s really turned around in recent seasons. I haven’t released my cap efficiency rankings yet, but the Blue Jackets score extremely well there by virtue of having virtually zero bad deals on the books (aside from Brandon Dubinsky, who’ll like just sit on LTIR until his deal is done). That’s hard to do and the team did well this summer clearing cap space as well.

The Blue Jackets rate pretty close to top 10 across the board, showing some strong drafting and developing (despite picking a guy no one has ever heard of in the first round), trading ability and general roster building. That they still look like a playoff team after losing a guy like Panarin is a testament to the entire program. The team’s one issue seems to be free agency, but I’m not sure if that’s residual voting based on last year. Anyway, losing that category can sometimes be a win in the big picture.

7. Toronto Maple Leafs

“Dubas takes a lot of unfair criticism, but he’s got the right vision for the team. I like the moves he’s made this offseason. Biggest question mark is starting goaltending, but I think Thornton and Simmonds are going to have a great impact on the room. A shame Kadri nixed the Brodie deal last year, but he’s a much better fit than Barrie was on the back end.”

“I’ve fully supported the team’s mandate of assembling maximum talent and adding around it. Fans have been impatient, but I continue to be on board with nearly all decisions in the Dubas era.”

“The Leafs get a lot of press (both good and bad), but if you step back and look at the team they built you will see one of the most talented teams in the league with zero terrible contracts.”

“The Dubas led front office has shown a willingness to adapt on the fly. Placing an emphasis on skill and surrounding that with intangibles, this is a team on the verge. They’ve had two very solid drafts under this regime and their development system has churned out many players over the years since Kyle assumed control. Do I love the contracts handed out to their stars? No. But I will die on the hill that you pay your stars NOT your depth. So if he overpaid his stars a bit that’s something I’m not going to overly critique. This is the most confidence I’ve ever had in a Leafs front office.”



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As usual, the Leafs are a contentious team when it comes to how they're viewed by their own fans and how they're viewed by the public. The latter opinion is shaped by a team spending to the cap, yet unable to cross the first round hurdle, viewing the management group closer to average. The fan's confidence has dropped a little bit since the last time but is mostly unshaken as a majority still believe in the team's long term vision.

Both parties agree the team's best strength is in free agency as Kyle Dubas and company have done a great job of luring talent in recent seasons, starting with the John Tavares deal two years ago. Both have the team's vision in the top 10, a lower score for trading (likely somewhat due to the Nazem Kadri for Tyson Barrie and Alexander Kerfoot swap), and a strong opinion of their ability to draft and develop.

The point of contention seems to be cap management and to a lesser extent roster building, with the two going hand-in-hand. The narrative around the Leafs is that they're paying too much for four forwards and the team won't find success with such a top-heavy salary structure. I'm of the mind that narrative is fairly overblown considering the Leafs are one of a few teams without a bad contract on the books. They have certainly overpaid some RFAs relative to the market, but by on-ice value, they're not losing many deals. This summer the Leafs were perceived by many to be in cap hell, but the front office got out of that bind rather easily. Shouldn't that elicit higher marks for cap management?

Nothing matters here until the Leafs start getting results relative to their over-inflated stature, but I do believe the fans are right to remain confident in the Shanaplan, at least for one more season.

6. St. Louis Blues

"The Faulk extension followed by losing Pietrangelo costs Doug Armstrong some goodwill, but he can afford it after a 2019 Cup win. Losing Bill Armstrong also costs the front office a little confidence; he did great for us and a replacement has yet to be named."

"I will go to my grave singing the praises of Doug Armstrong and company. I can't seem to think of one weakness he has, while also having the trust of ownership to spend money. It's a good time to be a Blues fan!"

"Pietrangelo negotiations shook my confidence a bit, but Krug signing showed that there was always a plan."

The Blues finished fourth last season on the heels of a Stanley Cup victory and only drop slightly to sixth this season, though there's a rather sizeable difference between ratings from the public and the fan base.

The public does tend to err toward average, likely a measure of their unfamiliarity with certain teams. In this case, though, the team's place in the ranking is also lower in certain areas and I would imagine the depleted sense of confidence stems from St. Louis' handling of the Alex Pietrangelo situation. That started a year ago with a sign and trade for Justin Faulk, a much worse defenceman who was gifted one of the league's worst contracts. That left no room to sign Pietrangelo and speaks to the team's lower ranking for cap management from the public and free agency.

The fan base seems less concerned about that – the Blues did end up with a nice consolation prize in Torey Krug – and is quite confident across the board, save for a more average score for draft and develop.

The Blues are still a well-managed and well-intentioned team, one positioned for another strong season next year, but the Pietrangelo decision does sting. The string of moves does make me question the overall vision, but it does go to show that even the best teams aren't immune to the odd blunder.

5. New York Rangers

"Some lotto luck mixed with good trades/FA signings have accelerated the rebuild. A little worried about how they value defence (see Jack Johnson, playing Marc Staal), probably another year or two away from the window fully opening, but trust what Gorton and JD are doing"

"The Rangers are maddening. For every good to great move they make, they immediately counter it by doing something silly. But they haven't

made any egregious long term mistakes, and have done very well at the draft the last few years, even beyond Kakko and Lafreniere. Overall, what they've been able to do since "the letter" is very encouraging, but there are still a few too many instances that make you scratch your head."

"Thanks to the outstanding job rebuilding, this team is in position to have a run of success like never before."

"Playoff dismantling by the Hurricanes showed how much more time is needed in the rebuild. Very happy with the strongest prospect pool but will need to see how they develop all of the prospects and build team chemistry."

A big thing that fans seem to value is transparency. It goes a long way into understanding the direction of the franchise and what the future holds for the team. The Rangers made a bold move a couple years ago with The Letter announcing a rebuild, and it's turned out to be a very savvy one in terms of creating good faith with fans. It showed an astute vision and that's reflected in the high marks here.

New York jumped into the top 10 last season and has now climbed into a top-five after a strong season that showed promise of the team's future as a contender. Signing Artemi Panarin was a slam-dunk as he ignited the team toward playing meaningful games down the stretch. The prospect cupboard is well-stocked now, which bodes well for the future of the franchise as does some strong lottery luck, but developing those prospects has proven a little tricky. That's still an issue here and may hold the Rangers back from reaching their full potential.

The biggest issue for the team though is its cap management, as it always seems to be in New York. Even in a rebuild, the salary cap is somehow still a problem and this year they have the most dead money I've ever seen on the books in one season at a shade under \$13 million. That's almost unfathomable and limits the team's upside this season. There's still some money the following two years when the team aims to be truly competitive and time will tell if they get smarter about their money by then.

4. Detroit Red Wings

"Trust the Yzerplan."

"He built Tampa into Stanley Cup winner. I can see the progress already. I like the first two drafts so far. I really like the Raymond pick, play-driving wing with the potential to be elite, plus a right shot. Smart moves in free agency and current roster turn over. I think is heading in the right direction, but we still need patience."

"The TB Cup this year has made me feel better about my team. I know Hedman was already there, but seeing how Yzerman built that core gave me way more patience with Detroit's rebuild."

"Stevie Y put in a master class on how to effectively cut the bad from the roster, add in smart ways, and draft for the future. I wasn't super clear on what the team identity would be going forward, but after a draft helmed by Stevie and Draper, it is clear this team values smart players who can make plays all over the ice. I know we are still going to be basement dwellers this year, but I can live with that because the future is looking bright."

My, oh my, what a climb for the Red Wings. It is very hard to get this kind of vote of confidence from a team that had such an abysmal season last year, but Red Wings fans are very high on the Yzerplan. Detroit got top five grades in every category except trading, where the Red Wings were sixth. Just 0.1 percent of Red Wings fans are less confident than they were a year ago, which ranks second to the top team on this list at zero percent.

This might be a case of relativity given how Ken Holland's tenure ended, but with Steve Yzerman there's a crystal clear vision in place, one Red Wings fans are on board with. The rebuild is in full swing and Yzerman has done well so far to accumulate picks and make good selections. He's cleared out a lot of bad money and made some shrewd free-agent signings that could pay off in the form of future draft pick capital.



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It's all very promising right now, but there's also a chance the fans are acting a bit overzealous at the moment with regards to their front office. The public is pretty high on Detroit, ranking them in the top five, but not nearly to the same degree that fans have, with the 1.1-point difference tied with Minnesota for the highest. The primary concern is roster building where it's a little implausible that the league's worst team in the middle of a rebuild should be third – 19th feels a lot more appropriate. It's reminiscent of the scores Devils fans gave Ray Shero last year a few months before he was fired after a spectacular offseason didn't lead to any on-ice success.

The lesson here for Red Wings fans is to approach with caution. The Yzerplan is off to a terrific start, but the teardown is the easy part. Building things back up is going to be much more difficult, and though Yzerman had a strong hand in Tampa Bay's Cup win, it doesn't necessarily mean lightning will strike twice.

3. Carolina Hurricanes

"The team has a bright future. Although the Metro is a meat grinder of a division, the team continues to build and develop well."

"Wasn't a fan of Don Waddell at first, but they have had a plan and have stuck to it. I think Eric Tulsky is the secret sauce, but important to have an organizational vision and for everyone to align to it."

"Love the current drafting style of targeting high-end skill guys. I think Waddell, Tulsky and company are building a perennial playoff contender, something that's been missing in Carolina for my entire lifetime. Excited to see what the future holds!"

"I was a little apprehensive about Don Waddell taking over as GM due to his past history, but the Hurricanes' front office has done a fantastic job from top to bottom. They draft a lot of players with high upside and make sure to not rely on free agency as the sole way to build the team. They've found a way to make the team competitive every year and it has brought new life to the fan base here."

I get the feeling that the Hurricanes are a lot of people's second favourite team. They're a darling in the hockey community for their fun and exciting brand of hockey brought on by a savvy management group.

The Hurricanes build on last year's surge into the top 10, this time moving up to third in the rankings with high marks in every category. It's a rare case where the public and fans align across the board.

Carolina isn't considered the very best at any one thing, but they appear very strong at all the things and that's driven the team's ascent up the standings in recent seasons. The next step is becoming a legitimate Cup contender and there seems to be full confidence in the team getting there. They have a strong vision, an excellent ability to draft and develop (never forget that Sebastian Aho was a second-rounder) and are very smart with their money. They're patient too and know when to pick their spots. Carolina is building a contender the right way and that should pay off soon.

2. Tampa Bay Lightning

"Trades made to bolster 2020 roster got them over the hump in the playoffs, not just on an on-ice basis, but also in the dressing room as well. It was an instant infusion of leadership, grit and a winning mentality."

"Tampa is built to contend for years to come. The right trades were made to reshape a skilled team that got swept out by Columbus last year into a champion. Drafts, trades, signings, no question this team remains elite."

"The cap situation is obviously hell, but it's amazing they put it off and held on to as much talent as long as they did. Plus, you know ... *glances over at Stanley Cup**

Last year's best front office went out and won the Stanley Cup and still found a way to drop a spot in these rankings. Tough crowd!

It was difficult to ignore the next team on the rise that usurped the Lightning, but really it doesn't matter who's first – the top two teams are in a league of their own in terms of front office confidence.

The best thing the Lightning did after last year's embarrassing first-round loss was not panic. They didn't dump any core players. Instead, they tweaked their formula and added some much-needed sandpaper around the edges to create a more complete team. There should be no surprise the team gets top marks for roster building given just how elite the Cup-winning team was and how well all the pieces fit together. It felt like they were a perfect team.

Some of that was thanks to astute drafting and developing and it's difficult to ignore just how many homegrown stars the team has throughout the lineup. That they got Brayden Point, Nikita Kucherov, Ondrej Palat, Anthony Cirelli and Alex Killorn all outside the top 50 at the draft is impressive (plus the undrafted Yanni Gourde and Tyler Johnson).

If there's an issue with the team it's cap management, considering the current bind the team is in, but that's the price you pay for building such an incredible team. It's left them without room to sign three key RFAs, and the lack of maneuverability from all the no-trade clauses is concerning, but this is the Lightning we're talking about – they'll find a way to get out of this jam. They always do.

1. Colorado Avalanche

"Joe Sakic is as savvy in the front office as he was on the ice. The owners, players and fans all have to have absolute 100 percent confidence in every move he makes. He definitely has the Midas touch, and Avs couldn't be excited. The team is at the cusp of greatness."

"Joe Sakic deserves GM of the century for building this team from worst of all-time to Stanley Cup contender for years to come in four years. With only Nathan MacKinnon as his number one overall pick."

"Sakic seems to be able to pick a trade the same way he picked a corner with his deadly wrist shot back in his playing days, and the Avs have a smart analytics team that has helped make some smart decisions. The only criticism has been drafting where outside of high picks the Avs have not found a lot of useful players."

"Very happy with the direction Sakic et al. are taking the team. They seem to be prioritizing speed and skill which is the way to go in today's NHL, in my opinion. Drafting/developing has left a bit to be desired outside of the first round, but seems like it's gotten better in recent years."

The Avalanche come out on top after finishing third a year ago. It was only a few years ago that Colorado was a laughingstock and the work done to transform the team into a Cup favourite is nothing short of remarkable. The team does not miss.

It feels like every transaction has hockey fans from opposing teams screaming for their GM to just hang up the phone whenever Joe Sakic calls. The team was tops in trading as a result, but also got top marks for cap management thanks to building a contender while maintaining a strong surplus of space to further shore up the team. That most contending teams were subtracting this offseason while the Avalanche were adding speaks to that salary cap wizardry.

The team's vision is tops according to the public, who ranked Colorado first or second in all six categories. No other team was top five. If there's any nitpick, it's in the team's drafting from the fans.

The Avalanche front office is the class of the league and it's only a matter of time before they add some hardware to their trophy shelf as a result of the incredible work they've done.

The Athletic / NHL player poll: Bubbles, schedules and more thoughts on the 2020-21 season

By The Athletic NHL Staff Nov 10, 2020

With the news that the NBA plans to start next season on Dec. 22, for a 72-game season, attention turns to the NHL to figure out its plan for the



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2020-21 season. NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly told The Athletic's Pierre LeBrun last week that Jan. 1 "remains our objective" for puck drop.

But the joint NHL-NHLPA Return to Play committee has not yet met, though a source said the top leaders of the two organizations have been in daily contact about the season.

As challenging as it was to put together the summer postseason tournament, there are even more issues to solve for a full season.

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

One option that seems to be gaining traction, as detailed by The Athletic's Michael Russo, includes starting next season in four hub locations, with modified bubbles that wouldn't be walled off or nearly as strict. This would require temporarily realigning the league (including an all-Canadian division if the Canadian teams can't cross the border) and hoping at some point all 31 arenas could open with some semblance of fans in the stands. The season would likely be shortened somewhere in the range of 48 to 60 games.

One other issue that may arise is player salaries.

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

But some teams that are bleeding money may scoff at that.

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

So after 24 teams lived in two bubbles last summer, what are they willing to put up with to complete the 2020-21 season?

The Athletic polled a small selection of players (34 from 12 different teams) to find out how long they are willing to be in a bubble, how many games are needed for a legitimate season and more.

How long would you be willing to be in a bubble?

While the 2020 postseason bubble was a huge success in terms of getting the season completed safely, the reviews from everyone inside were mixed. Players, coaches and staff inside the bubble were away from their family and friends, were taken out of their usual routines and there were even complaints about the different amenities between Edmonton and Toronto.

So it is not surprising to see here that players don't want to go into another prolonged bubble situation.

"I don't want to be locked up anymore," said an Eastern Conference player.

"The bubble in Edmonton wasn't great," said a Western Conference player. "If it was like the Toronto one then it wouldn't be so bad. I would say half the season max."

There was an obvious divide between players with families and single guys.

"I loved the bubble. I thought it was fun," said a Western Conference player. "That was my opinion — obviously, it's going to be different with families and everything, but I'm single. So I'd be willing to give it up to play hockey again with the guys."

"I think the only way to be doable would be with families this time. Too long to be gone from families again," said an Eastern Conference player from a team that went deep.

How many games minimum need to be played for a regular season?

The NHL is no stranger to abbreviated seasons thanks to two lockout-shortened seasons. The 2020-21 season will likely be reduced due to very different circumstances. It's believed the entire season needs to be wrapped up by the end of June before the Olympics begin in July.

But players seem to be OK with a short season if it means a less chaotic season.

"I don't want the schedule to be too tight," said an Eastern Conference player.

"I think if you try to jam too many games in, that's when games can get canceled," said a Western Conference player. "I think if we spread it out, 60 games would be perfect. The hockey might even be better — guys'll be rested a little more."

Are you comfortable playing in front of fans?

Even once the NHL settles on a plan for the new year, this is a question that will come up throughout the season. In the NFL, some teams are allowing fans at reduced capacity; some aren't.

And it's less a question about what players want, experience-wise, and more about the long-term financial health of the league. The NHL can't survive on TV contracts alone while buildings sit empty. But teams, the league and individual jurisdictions won't want to risk the health of fans and players.

"Depends on what's going on with the virus," an Eastern Conference player simply said.

Overall, though, players want to see and know they need fans in the stands.

"I believe it's the only way our league can financially survive," said a Western Conference player who wasn't part of the 2020 postseason.

"I'm good with full-blown, 100 percent (attendance), if they put a little bit of protection from the tunnel," said an Eastern Conference player. "If you're that much of a fan and you miss the game that much? It's your own choice coming to the games ... obviously, we want people to be safe, but things have to get back to normal here pretty soon."

"I am definitely comfortable playing in front of fans. Zero issues," echoed a Western player.

Which teams will be better or worse when the 2020-21 season begins?

Montreal (6 votes)

Chicago (4 votes)

Buffalo (4)

Arizona (2)

Colorado (4)

Vancouver (2)

Detroit (3)

Calgary

Toronto (3)

Edmonton

Vegas (3)

Rangers

Washington (2)

Calgary



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Minnesota

Vancouver

"Mine"

Finally, we asked players to look into their crystal balls and think about which teams will be most or least improved once the 2020-21 season begins. We received a wide range of selections on both sides. And you'll see teams show up on both lists. Of note, players like the changes made by the Canadiens and Red Wings.

"Still don't think they make the playoffs, but I think they improve the most based on last year's points," an Eastern Conference player said about the Red Wings.

"I think all the non-playoff teams got stronger," said a Western Conference player.

On the flip side, the Blackhawks made no secret about starting a rebuild, and players took notice.

"Pissing off their core franchise players never helps anyone," said a Pacific Division player.

Let's end it with some levity. This quote will remain completely anonymous.

"No one has signed me yet so the jury is out."