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THE   
**GOALIE**  
ISSUE

**A LEGACY DEFINED:**

**MARC-ANDRE  
FLEURY**



**LINUS ULLMARK | JOSEPH WOLL | YAROSLAV ASKAROV | UKKO-PEKKA LUUKKONEN | CHARLIE LINDGREN**

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# The Hockey News

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"All those memories in all those buildings." From being drafted No. 1 to collecting the second-most wins in NHL history to earning three Stanley Cups, Marc-Andre Fleury has had a wild NHL ride. And as he enters his 21st and final big-league season, he wants to remember it all – and, of course, keep winning. **BY KEN CAMPBELL**

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PHOTO BY BRACE HEMMELGARN-USA TODAY SPORTS





SERGEI BELSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS

# TO FLEURY, THE FIRST AND LAST

**T**O SAY THAT MARC-ANDRE Fleury is one of a kind is not a controversial statement. The Minnesota Wild goaltender enters his self-imposed final season in the NHL as a future Hall of Famer, three-time Stanley Cup champion and one of the most beloved personalities in the game.

With this being our Goalie Issue, we had to seize one last chance to get 'Flower' on the cover and celebrate his career with a feature by Ken Campbell (pg. 20), where our veteran scribe sets the table for what will be an historical – and, no doubt, mirthful – final campaign for Fleury. In Campbell's cover story, you'll get everything you've grown to expect from Fleury: tales of mischief, glowing testimonials from hockey folks and the details of a prolific legacy that's still being written.

So, what I'd like to focus on here is a footnote that will most likely belong to Fleury forever – or at least for a very, very long time.

As Campbell notes in his story, Fleury was drafted in 2003, part of a class considered one of the greatest of all-time. The affable netminder was joined by Patrice Bergeron, Shea Weber, Eric Staal, Ryan Getzlaf, Corey Perry and many other stars. The Hall of Fame will one day be filled with players from that cohort, with Weber getting his enshrinement as part of the 2024 class of honorees. The first player picked back in 2003 was, of course, Fleury. When Pittsburgh tabbed him with that initial selection, it marked just the third time in NHL history that a goalie was taken first overall, with Fleury joining blue-paint brethren Michel Plasse (Montreal in 1968) and Rick DiPietro (New York Islanders in 2000). Plasse finished his NHL career with a 92-136-53 record and 3.79 goals-against average. DiPietro found a bit more success with the Isles, but he was beset by injuries and an infamous 15-year contract that seemed to burden both the player and the franchise.

So, even though we're talking about Fleury's Hall of Fame career, it has become practically unfathomable that a goaltender will ever again be drafted first overall. No matter what, Fleury will hold the distinction as the last – unless something drastic changes in the sport.



As we have pontificated many times in this magazine, the goaltending position is incredibly difficult to predict. For every Carey Price or Dominik Hasek who dazzled for years, we have a Jim Carey or Andrew Hammond, who took us on wild but short rides of glory. Drafting goalies is even more fraught. Price went fifth overall, while Hasek went 199th. Pekka Rinne was taken so low (258th overall) that the round he went in (the eighth) doesn't exist anymore. Andrei Vasilevskiy was indeed the first goalie picked in 2012, but Mason McDonald was the first in 2014 – two spots before Vancouver tabbed Thatcher Demko.

Because of the volatility of the position, it's understandable that teams don't want to use a high pick on a netminder anymore. In some draft years, we don't see a goaltender selected until the second round. It's just way more probable that a power forward or a puck-moving defenseman will turn into the gem they're projected to be. The fact that teams can just "find" goalies these days – Vegas hitting paydirt with Adin Hill and Logan Thompson, for example – only exacerbates this axiom.

So, Fleury will be the last of his kind for a long, long time. There's something fitting about that, too. Because what we've seen in the past two decades is a personality who broke the mold and a player who rose to the occasion on many important nights. **H**

  
**Ryan Kennedy**  
 Editor in chief  
 X @THNRyanKennedy

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**ROUSTAN MEDIA LTD.**  
 W. Graeme Roustan

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**PUBLISHER'S NOTE**

# Customer Care

**M**Y MOM OFTEN SAID that if you wanted to get something done correctly, then do it yourself. Because no one will ever match my determination and pride of a job well done. Once again, Mom was right.

From Day 1 of my ownership, improving The Hockey News' customer-care service, which took way too long, has been on my list of things to improve. Effective Oct. 1, 2024, we have brought customer-care operations in-house.

The Hockey News has outsourced its customer care to third-party "call centers" for decades to manage subscribers' questions and concerns. When I arrived on the scene and asked why The Hockey News outsourced its most important part of a business, serving its customers, I was told that all magazine publishers did this and that was just the way things are done. If I had a dollar every time someone told me that "... this is just the way things are done," well,



I would have a few thousand extra dollars, which would go toward paying for the high-blood-pressure medication that I need to take after hearing these words.

Since 2018, we have tried several contracted customer-service providers due to a variety of issues. Each time there is a transition from one provider to another, you have to move all of the data from one system to another, and that is when all the problems happen because these different systems

## [ PUBLISHER'S NOTE ]

WITH W. GRAEME ROUSTAN | [LINKEDIN.COM/IN/ROUSTAN](https://www.linkedin.com/in/roustan)

don't like to talk with one another. It is so disruptive that we lose subscribers over missing issues, delays and just plain bad customer care. So I decided the best course of action was to provide service directly to our customers.

First, I invested in a "customer relations management" software system that could manage all of the email, chat and phone calls to support all of our subscribers. Next, I hired and trained our own teammates who know The Hockey News magazines better than anyone in any call center since they are not answering the phone for any other magazine. Finally, I had to create a new toll-free number and email address, which you can find in our masthead.

Like my mom said, if you want something done right, do it yourself. Well, Mom, your advice has always guided me throughout my life, and it keeps paying dividends, this time in better customer care for tens of thousands of subscribers of The Hockey News. **H**

**W. Graeme Roustan**

Executive Chairman & Publisher, Roustan Media Ltd.  
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## NHL

# REVERSE COURSE?

The 'RVH' is widely criticized and has been called a 'pandemic.' But is the fervent flak fair, or does it go too far? **BY JARED CLINTON**

**T**RUE AS IT MIGHT be that everyone's a critic, there are those whose words carry a touch more weight. Chastised by an armchair quarterback? Easy enough to shoulder shrug and move along.

Scrutinized by no less an authority than 'The King' himself, though? Perhaps it's time to sit up and consider the criticism. So, when Hall of Fame netminder Henrik Lundqvist took to his pulpit during the post-season

and joined the ever-increasing referendum on the persistent use of the shot-stopping technique known as the Reverse VH, or RVH, the goaltending fraternity took notice.

What had ruffled Lundqvist's well-kept plumage – and what led the New York Rangers legend to call the RVH a pandemic among modern keepers – was an ugly second-period tally in Game 2 of the second-round series between Edmonton and Vancouver. With the game tied,

Canucks blueliner Nikita Zadorov let loose a harmless-looking wrister from the left-wing wall that beat Edmonton's Stuart Skinner over his short-side shoulder. "We have a pandemic, guys," said Lundqvist on the TNT broadcast. "We have another pandemic in this hockey league, and it's the Reverse VH Pandemic."

Distilled to its basics, the technique itself is simple to





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### BLAME GAME

Skinner became the face of the RVH debate during last year's playoffs after allowing a 'bad' goal in Round 2.

understand. Even the name is intuitive. An evolution of the vertical-horizontal method employed by goaltenders, which sees the short-side pad used to seal the post vertically and the opposite pad laid horizontally to seal the ice, the RVH sees the

pads positioned in the reverse order. Thus, the trailing leg is positioned vertically, with the goaltender placing his inside leg horizontally and using his body to seal the post.

More often than not, too, it's the seal – or lack thereof – created by body positioning that's been the cause for most of the handwringing, as even the biggest and burliest keepers will often leave a tantalizing target over their short-side shoulder. "Skinner was just using his size and saying, 'OK, if you can pick that spot, have at it,'" said former NHL stopper and current TSN analyst Jamie McLennan. "But guys are now good enough that they pick that spot. That's kind of what I've seen in the transition to the Reverse VH compared to the VH."

McLennan and Lundqvist aren't the only ones noticing that particular issue. A search for footage of the RVH renders minutes-long lowlight reels of keepers surrendering goals at the near post, whether over the shoulder or stuffed in at the near-post pad. In fact, less than two weeks before he scored the goal that raised Lundqvist's ire, Zadorov scored a carbon copy, putting one high over the shoulder of Nashville Predators netminder Juuse Saros in the playoffs' opening round. That examples of the RVH's shortcomings are so abundant is enough to question why the use of the technique persists.

But ask Boston University goalie coach Brian Daccord, who is also president and founder of Stop It Goaltending, and he takes umbrage with the premise the RVH, or any save selection for that matter, is inherently flawed. "Typically, if there's a goal scored on an RVH, it's either from a poor execution of the RVH – so, technically or mechanically, it's being used incorrectly – or it's used at the wrong time," Daccord said. "This is a human error. There's nothing wrong with the technique. It has a time and a place, like all techniques."

That time and place, said Daccord, is generally when



shooters cross what netminders refer to as the "transition line." Put simply, it's the point at which a player crosses the lowest hashmark and moves from what is considered a higher-percentage to a lower-percentage shooting area. In a well-executed RVH, goalies can then cut off the shooting angle while preparing to dart across their crease in the event of a

### THRONE SPEECH

When 'The King' speaks, people listen. So when Lundqvist called the RVH a 'pandemic,' the debate heated up.

make stopping those inch-high blasts look routine thanks in part to the RVH. That wasn't the case for goaltenders of his vintage, who could often be un-

## THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH THE TECHNIQUE. IT HAS A TIME AND A PLACE, LIKE ALL TECHNIQUES

– Brian Daccord

cross-ice pass. Not only that, the RVH reduces the likelihood of a low, hard shot creating chaos in and around the crease.

McLennan explained that modern goaltenders often

done by an unfriendly bounce. "When I was playing, for example, if I'm staying on my feet and the puck gets thrown towards the net and hits my defenseman's skate, it goes in



the net," McLennan said. "Nowadays, it'll hit a defenseman's skate and the goalie is in the Reverse VH, and it just hits him in the pad. So, everything in tight, it's now taken away."

Despite the RVH's benefits, neither Daccord nor McLennan refute the growing chorus of pundits suggesting the technique has become overused. But this is nothing new. As goaltending has progressed from stand-up style to butterfly to paddle-down and onward, each new positional innovation has had its share of overuse. Eventually, shooters will solve the latest puzzle. That, in turn, leads to more innovation.

Right now, the RVH is at a natural point in its life cycle. "Everybody is excited," Daccord said. "Here's a new tool – a new toy to play with. And then you're going to overuse it until it nestles into that spot that you find the right spot for it. We had the exact same conversation about the VH, and then the VH ended up, 'OK, here's the right spot. Here's when you use the VH.' It stopped being overused, and it settled into now exactly when to use it. The RVH, overused at first, and now the RVH is settling in."



Where there should be more concern when talking about the RVH, said Daccord, is the toll it takes on the body. The stress the RVH puts on hips and knees creates what could be considered an unnecessary amount of wear and tear on the joints. And Daccord explained the "epidemic" of netminders – even those in their mid-teens – needing hip surgery isn't altogether surprising given the

constant up-and-down and in-and-out of the position.

But if the RVH is here to stay, what's the solution to the concerns about injury and overuse? Daccord believes in the natural and continued evolution of shot-stopping. And new tools have already begun to emerge. In some cases, goaltenders are staying upright longer. In others, stoppers are overlapping their post to eliminate some of

### PREDATOR 'PANDA'

As the position evolves, smaller goalies, like Saros, will incorporate new techniques alongside the RVH.

the daylight presented by dropping into the RVH too early.

Already, he pointed out, the league is starting to see a separation between those who continue to heavily utilize the RVH and those who are embracing new save selections. Generally speaking, the bigger the goaltender, the more likely they are to stick with the RVH; their size seals most gaps. But the more diminutive netminders are beginning to incorporate more newfangled styles, such as the 'Panda,' which sees goaltenders keep their strong-side foot outside the post and their body turned up ice.

Ultimately, though, Daccord and McLennan believe the RVH will find its place. As for now, the criticism simply boils down to optics. "The bottom line is

**GUYS ARE NOW GOOD ENOUGH THAT THEY PICK THAT SPOT. THAT'S KIND OF WHAT I'VE SEEN IN THE TRANSITION**

– Jamie McLennan

that for every time a guy rifles one over the goalie's shoulder in an RVH, there are so many more saves that outweigh that one goal that goes in," Daccord said. "It's just (the goal) looks bad. But if you think about how many saves are actually made through an RVH? You'd never question that one goal. The math doesn't work. But it's a fun topic to talk about, because it's just an ugly-looking goal." **H**



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# Behind the MASK



## LINUS ULLMARK | OTTAWA SENATORS

**ARRIVING IN OTTAWA AS** one of the NHL's best goalies over the past few seasons, Linus Ullmark didn't need to do much to ingratiate himself with fans. But the 2023 Vezina winner couldn't help himself as his first Senators mask pays tribute to Patrick Lalime, one of the franchise's most beloved goaltenders. Front and center on Ullmark's helmet is Marvin the Martian, who adorned Lalime's masks throughout his career. But Ullmark – whose mask was designed by DaveArt's Dave Gunnarsson – added his own spin by adding Sweden's Tre Kronor to the classic *Looney Tunes* character's galea. The mask also includes Viking runes and ships, likewise a nod to his home country, and pays tribute to his family with silhouettes of four polar bears on the back panel – two for his kids and two for Ullmark and his wife. – **JARED CLINTON**



## Jersey HOUND

### DJURGARDEN | 2024-25

**FOR THE PAST FEW** seasons, Sweden's Djurgarden has had some fun with its pre-season jerseys by trotting out different looks than its regular uniforms, and this year's edition was awesome. The legendary Stockholm club, currently playing in the second-tier Allsvenskan, stripped down its usual color scheme – which includes two shades of blue plus red and gold – and rocked these double-blue beauties on a cream base. The logo also modifies the team's usual shield and adds some flair with emanating lines emerging from all four corners. The fact that Djurgarden made home and away versions of this pre-season banger makes it all the more fun. Of course, with the regular season underway, the team's mission now is to earn promotion back to the top-tier SHL. – **RYAN KENNEDY**



# MICHELIN-O-METER

With 28,928 career saves, Martin Brodeur is the NHL's all-time puck-stopping leader. But which active netminders are closest to him? **BY JARED CLINTON**

## CHANCE OF FLEURY'S

### > MARC-ANDRE FLEURY 26,586 SAVES

Brodeur's total is safe, but Fleury has an outside shot at making history. He's 1,414 saves from reaching the 28,000-stop plateau, which would make 'Flower' the third netminder to reach the mark, following Brodeur and Roberto Luongo. Fleury will need to play 50-plus games to do it, though.

## BOB-ROB-SKY

### > SERGEI BOBROVSKY 18,681 SAVES

He now has a Stanley Cup to go along with his two Vezinas, but Bobrovsky should be held in even higher esteem. There are 28 NHL goalies who are recorded as facing 20,000-plus shots. Only five of them have a better save percentage than Bobrovsky.

## HELLE OF A WORKLOAD

### > CONNOR HELLEBUYCK 14,121 SAVES

The workhorse has averaged 1,687 saves over his past eight full seasons. Setting aside age – which, of course, will be factor – that puts him on pace to stop nearly 12,000 more pucks by the time his new seven-year pact expires. Joining the 28,000 Club isn't unrealistic.

## JOHN BE NIMBLE

### > JONATHAN QUICK 19,144 SAVES

The NHL has tracked shot and save data since 1955-56, and since then, 17 goalies have made 20,000-plus stops. Quick would've already been the 18th if not for injury issues in his prime. He's settled into life as a second-stringer and will see about 25 games this year. That could get him there.

## WIN SEM, LOSE FEWER

### > SEMYON VARLAMOV 16,820 SAVES

Despite just one top-three Vezina finish, Varlamov has been commendably consistent. His career SP is roughly four points better than the league average across his 15 full NHL campaigns, and he's only twice posted numbers notably worse than the single-season average.

## REIM ON HIS SIDE

### > JAMES REIMER 13,383 SAVES

There's something to be said for longevity. While Reimer's career hasn't reached soaring heights, he's the definition of serviceable. Entering his 15th season, he has a chance of reaching 14,000 saves. Only 63 NHL goalies have stopped that much rubber.

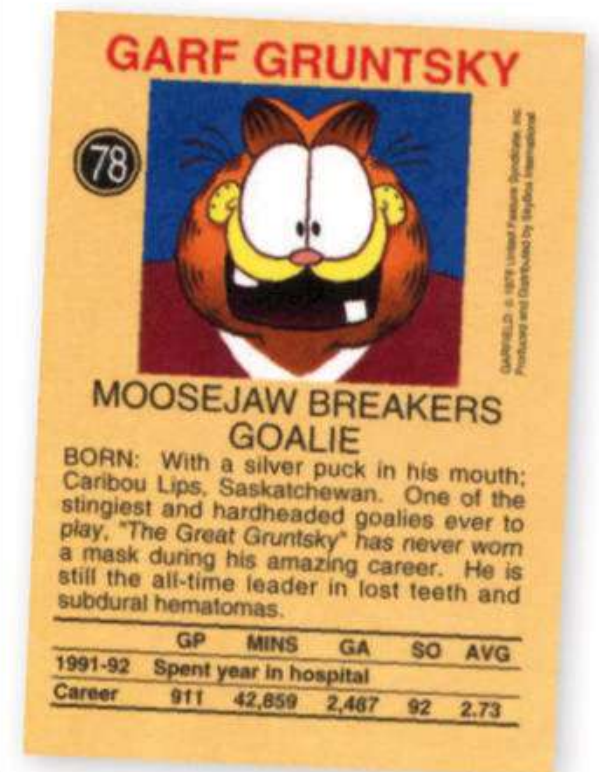
## Moosejaw BREAKERS



# In the CARDS

**GARFIELD, THE CHUBBY CAT** from the eponymous comic strip and cartoon series, has been featured on tons of merchandise over the past 45 years – from clothing to video games and seemingly everything else in between. Garfield's creator, Jim Davis, is a hockey fan, so, naturally, the orange feline has found his way onto jerseys, pucks and even a hockey card.

The 1992 Garfield Premier Edition set by Skybox has 100 cards that recap some of his most popular stories. A few fun cards also depict the rotund tabby playing different sports. This card pictures Garfield as Moosejaw Breakers goaltender Garf Gruntsky – a clever mash-up of Garfield with Hall of Fame goalie Gump Worsley's nickname and Wayne Gretzky's surname. The back of the card humorously states that 'The Great Gruntsky' has never worn a mask during his 911-game career and is the all-time leader in lost teeth. – **SAL BARRY**



FLEURY: BOB FRID-IMAGN IMAGES; QUICK: PERRY NELSON-USA TODAY SPORTS; BOBROVSKY: DAVID KIROUAC-USA TODAY SPORTS; VARLAMOV: SERGEI BELSKI-IMAGN IMAGES; HELLEBUYCK: JAMES CAREY LAUDER-IMAGN IMAGES; REIMER: DAN HAMILTON-IMAGN IMAGES

# THE COUNTDOWN

## GOALIE DUOS

There's a goaltending boom in New York these days, as the Islanders and Rangers head into 2024-25 with the league's top-tier tandems **BY JARED CLINTON**

**I**F NOT SCIENTIFICALLY verifiable, it feels anecdotally accurate that, more than just about any other position in sports, NHL goalies are among the athletes most prone to experiencing vast swings in success from one season to the next. And it's absolutely true that their individual performances don't always jive with their clubs' success.

Take, for instance, Alexandar Georgiev. For two straight seasons, the Colorado Avalanche netminder has led the NHL in victories, posting 40 wins in 2022-23 and 38 last year. How he arrived at those totals, however, is a tale of two keepers.

The 40-win season was the best of his career. Beyond leading the league in wins, Georgiev finished tied for second in shutouts, tied for sixth in save percentage, and his goals saved above average at all strengths – a statistical measure of shot stopping when compared to league averages – ranked sixth. But last season? Georgiev's win total masked a sub-.900 SP and GSAA total that was worse than all but 10 other netminders.

This is all to say that when gauging the NHL's best net tandems, there's more to weigh than where their team ends up in the standings. We have to consider the average of their individual talents and their potential to shine this coming season. With that in mind, here are the NHL's best crease duos as we look ahead to 2024-25.

**1**  **NEW YORK ISLANDERS**  
**ILYA SOROKIN/SEMYON VARLAMOV**  
The Isles' tandem is the only returning duo who each finished with a GSAA of at least nine-plus last season.

**2**  **NEW YORK RANGERS**  
**IGOR SHESTERKIN/JONATHAN QUICK**  
Shesterkin is a true game-stealing goalie, and Quick maintains his status as an excellent backup despite his age.

**3**  **NASHVILLE PREDATORS**  
**JUUSE SAROS/SCOTT WEDGEWOOD**  
The crease is strengthened by Wedgewood, but Saros is tasked with powering the Preds into the playoffs and beyond.

**4**  **OTTAWA SENATORS**  
**LINUS ULLMARK/ANTON FORSBERG**  
Adding Ullmark, a Vezina winner, provides a big boost, and Forsberg isn't far removed from his own stellar season.

**5**  **FLORIDA PANTHERS**  
**SERGEI BOBROVSKY/SPENCER KNIGHT**  
Heir apparent Knight is back providing cover for Cup-winning Bobrovsky, who was a Vezina finalist last year.

**6**  **CAROLINA HURRICANES**  
**FREDERIK ANDERSEN/PYOTR KOCHETKOV**  
Health is a concern for Andersen, but Canes' one-two punch has potential. Kochetkov could sneak into the top job.





**7**  **DALLAS STARS**  
**JAKE OETTINGER/CASEY DESMITH**  
A down year for 'Otter' was still above average. Stars pair a top-tier keeper with an experienced, reliable backup.

**8**  **WINNIPEG JETS**  
**CONNOR HELLEBUYCK/KAAPO KAHKONEN**  
Hellebuyck is a two-time Vezina winner and four-time finalist. But the Jets are one injury away from disaster.

**9**  **TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING**  
**ANDREI VASILEVSKIY/JONAS JOHANSSON**  
We've seen this duo's limitations. Vasilevskiy's health is paramount to Bolts' status as a legitimate playoff threat.

**10**  **BOSTON BRUINS**  
**JEREMY SWAYMAN/JOONAS KORPISALO**  
Assuming he signs, Swayman will be tested with Ullmark gone. Korpisalo is coming off a dreadful season in Ottawa.

**11**  **VANCOUVER CANUCKS**  
**THATCHER DEMKO/ARTURS SILOVS**  
Demko is a stud when healthy, but injuries keep adding up. Playoff hero Silovs impressed in a small sample size.

**12**  **EDMONTON OILERS**  
**STUART SKINNER/CALVIN PICKARD**  
Sophomore Skinner helped the Oilers to within one win of Cup. With Pickard as No. 2, Edmonton has a reliable pair.



**13** **ST. LOUIS BLUES**  
**JORDAN BINNINGTON/JOEL HOFER**  
 Consistency is a concern. Binnington was great in '23-24 but poor in the two prior seasons. Good news? Hofer looks legit.

**18** **VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS**  
**ADIN HILL/ILYA SAMSONOV**  
 Samsonov is a downgrade at No. 2, and Hill hasn't started more than 35 games in a season. This duo isn't rock-solid.

**14** **MINNESOTA WILD**  
**FILIP GUSTAVSSON/MARC-ANDRE FLEURY**  
 Both desperate for mulligan after subpar showings last year. A repeat performance and they plummet down the list.

**19** **DETROIT RED WINGS**  
**CAM TALBOT/ALEX LYON**  
 Talbot fizzled after hot start last year, and Lyon was average. But steady net-minding puts Wings in the playoff race.

**15** **NEW JERSEY DEVILS**  
**JACOB MARKSTROM/JAKE ALLEN**  
 Markstrom recovered after bad start and represents new hope in New Jersey net. Allen didn't get much help in Montreal.

**20** **LOS ANGELES KINGS**  
**DARCY KUEMPER/DAVID RITTICH**  
 Kuemper returns to L.A. after career-worst season, while Rittich looks to build on his best big-league campaign.

**16** **WASHINGTON CAPITALS**  
**CHARLIE LINDGREN/LOGAN THOMPSON**  
 Lindgren, a fringe Vezina contender, will be pushed by former Vegas No. 1 Thompson. Caps have a crease battle.

**21** **COLORADO AVALANCHE**  
**ALEXANDAR GEORGIEV/JUSTUS ANNUNEN**  
 Georgiev won 38 games but otherwise had replacement-level stats. Untested Annunen has realistic shot at No. 1 job.

**17** **TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS**  
**JOSEPH WOLL/ANTHONY STOLARZ**  
 Big pressure on Woll, but Stolarz's showing last year has Leafs hopeful he can act as safety net for young keeper.

**22** **PITTSBURGH PENGUINS**  
**TRISTAN JARRY/ALEX NEDELJKOVIC**  
 Jarry was great when he was on last season – and awful when he wasn't. For his part, 'Ned' hasn't fulfilled potential.

**23** **ANAHEIM DUCKS**  
**JOHN GIBSON/LUKAS DOSTAL**  
 Only two goalies had a worse GSAA than Gibson last season. Being usurped by Dostal is more than a remote possibility.

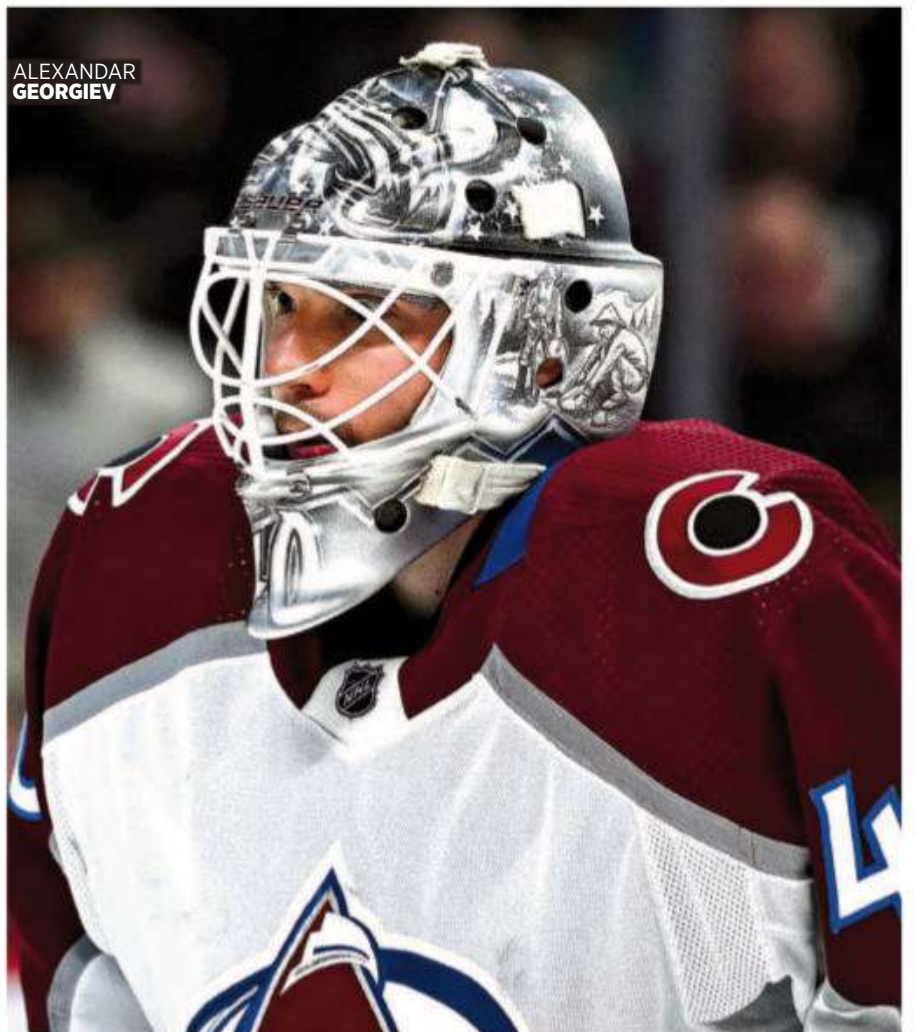
**28** **MONTREAL CANADIENS**  
**SAM MONTEBEAULT/CAYDEN PRIMEAU**  
 It wasn't always rosy, but Habs goalies were better than win-loss records last season. Primeau holds some promise.

**24** **BUFFALO SABRES**  
**UKKO-PEKKA LUUKKONEN/JAMES REIMER**  
 'UPL' pieced together a good year that Sabres hope will serve as launch pad. Reimer will have to cling to No. 2 job.

**29** **SAN JOSE SHARKS**  
**YAROSLAV ASKAROV/MACKENZIE BLACKWOOD**  
 Is Askarov the real deal? Sharks will find out, with Blackwood a solid fallback option as San Jose's split starter.

**25** **CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS**  
**PETR MRAZEK/LAURENT BROSSOIT**  
 Mrazek was fine last year, truly, but the lingering question is how Brossoit will fare in his quest to push for starting job.

**30** **CALGARY FLAMES**  
**DAN VLADAR/DUSTIN WOLF**  
 Vladar has been woeful, and Wolf has had 16 NHL starts. There's hope for the latter, but he needs to prove himself.



**26** **UTAH HOCKEY CLUB**  
**CONNOR INGRAM/KAREL VEJMLKA**  
 Ingram flipped the script and stole the top job last season. Can either elevate and push reshaped squad into playoffs?

**31** **COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS**  
**ELVIS MERZLIKINS/DANIIL TARASOV**  
 For both the team and player, Merzlikins needs a new home. Tarasov fared much better last season, but the bar was low.

**27** **SEATTLE KRAKEN**  
**JOEY DACCORD/PHILIPP GRUBAUER**  
 Kraken hoping for repeat performance of Daccord's breakout season. Grubauer's run in Seattle has been nightmarish.

**32** **PHILADELPHIA FLYERS**  
**IVAN FEDOTOV/SAMUEL ERSSON**  
 With 60 total starts, Flyers have NHL's least experienced crease. Fedotov is an unknown quantity, at least for now. **H**

HILL: PERRY NELSON-USA TODAY SPORTS; GEORGIEV: DAVID KIROUAC-USA TODAY SPORTS

# PWHL



PROFESSIONAL WOMEN'S HOCKEY LEAGUE

## PWHL

# NAME OF THE GAME

PWHL teams have nicknames and logos at last. Meet the Fleet, Frost, Sirens, Sceptres, Victoire and Charge **BY IAN KENNEDY**

**AFTER A DEBUT SEASON** without team names or logos, the PWHL unveiled the new looks and monikers of its Original Six clubs. Those names were revealed to be the

Boston Fleet, Montreal Victoire, New York Sirens, Ottawa Charge, Toronto Sceptres and the reigning Walter Cup-champion Minnesota Frost. The league sought unique names that had specific

ties to each market. As PWHL senior vice-president of business operations Amy Scheer said, the PWHL is “excited for these new identities to deepen the connection between the teams and their local communities.” After fans had a year to build anticipation for names and logos, the new PWHL merchandise is now for sale, and fans can chant nicknames heading into Season 2. Here’s a look at each of the six new team identities. **H**

NATALIE SPOONER



## BOSTON FLEET

**‘FLEET’ IS MEANT TO** tell Bostonians they are tougher together while also acknowledging Boston Harbor’s maritime history. The logo is a slanted ‘B’ formed from the shape of an anchor. The nautical connections to Boston take on new meaning in the deep green of the Fleet’s color scheme.



## MINNESOTA FROST

**THE PWHL’S ‘STATE OF** Hockey’ team embraced its cold winters as the Frost. The identity represents Minnesota’s “deep-rooted love for the ice.” The stylized ‘F’ logo has jagged edges that look like icicles, and a dimensional shape that’s meant to show “the harsh beauties of Minnesota’s winters.”



## MONTREAL VICTOIRE

**LEANING INTO ITS** French identity, the PWHL’s Quebec-based club became the Victoire, a name that will not be translated to English. The logo features a *fleur-de-lis* atop wing-like shapes. The league says the wings “subtly allude to the Goddess of victory,” capable of inspiring both players and fans.



## NEW YORK SIRENS

**THE LEAGUE CALLED** the name “an ode to New York City’s one-of-a-kind energy, pace and rhythm,” from the sirens heard in New York’s cityscape to the horn following a goal. The logo features the name prominently, with each ‘S’ reverberating from New York’s “full volume hockey.”



## OTTAWA CHARGE

**THE ‘O’ AND ‘C’** hybrid logo is “crafted to resemble a spinning object brimming with electrical current, representing the power that the fans bring to every game.” The Charge’s identity aims to convey forward motion and pay homage to the city of Ottawa’s motto: “advance – Ottawa – en avant.”



## TORONTO SCEPTRES

**TORONTO, NICKNAMED** ‘the Queen City,’ has a team identity full of royal connections. The Sceptres symbolize the “power and strength found in courts and palaces,” according to the PWHL. The intertwined yellow ‘T’ and ‘S’ with an orb on top turn Toronto’s logo into an ornamental image.





# BUY NOW, PAY LATER

Seth Jarvis' contract put the spotlight on a salary-cap loophole. But is deferred compensation really the next big thing or merely a blip on the CBA radar? **BY JARED CLINTON**

**I**F THERE'S ONE WAY to get the attention of the bigwigs in the NHL's head office, it's finding ways to get creative with the salary cap. And in the tradition of the since-restricted front-loaded pacts and laughably long long-term deals, it appears there's a new loophole the league could seek to address: deferred compensation.

What has raised alarm bells among the cap-minded crowd is Seth Jarvis' eight-year, \$63.2-million contract with the Carolina Hurricanes, which in-

cludes \$15.67 million that will be paid out at the end of the contract. In essence, Jarvis will be paid – with interest – at a later date for services rendered during the lifetime of his deal with the Hurricanes. At issue, though, is how present-day cap savings will be passed on to Carolina. Effectively, through the use of deferred compensation, Jarvis' cap hit has been lowered by nearly \$500,000 per season.

Confused? Don't sweat it. Jarvis was, too. "When it came across to me, I had no idea what it meant," he said at his post-signing press conference. "I

## TEAM-FRIENDLY DEAL

By paying Jarvis \$15.67 million at the end of his contract, Carolina frees up \$500,000 per season in cap space.

read into it, and they explained it to me a little more, and it started to make more sense."

Of course, while the dollars and cents here are important for both team and player, the exact machinations of deferred compensation aren't the greatest concern. Instead, it is whether Jarvis' contract will set a dangerous precedent as teams seek to re-sign their own stars or make a big splash in the NHL's annual off-season arms race known as unrestricted free agency. And rest assured, even if the NHL did certify the Jarvis contract, those in power are paying attention.

At the NHL's Player Media Tour in Las Vegas in September, NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly spoke to reporters about the use of deferred salary. While the provision does exist and has been in the collective bargaining agreement for some time – Article 11.21, for those interested – Daly noted there is potentially a point where use of the mechanism could be considered cap circumvention. Further, he hinted changes could be coming. "The original deferred-comp rules were developed in a non-cap world as opposed to in the cap world, so they kind of were inherited," Daly said. "They probably need adjustment on some basis going forward."

**IT'S ALMOST LIKE THE OFFER SHEET. IT'S IN (THE CBA), BUT YOU DON'T SEE IT VERY OFTEN** – Player agent Ryan Barnes

It is worth noting that while Jarvis' contract has caused the most hubbub, it isn't the first time deferred compensation has been leveraged. In July, the Hurricanes used it to reduce Jacob Slavin's cap hit on his eight-year, \$51.17-million extension by \$70,000 per season,

with the modest savings almost allowing it to fly under the radar. Before that, Shane Doan was signed to a deferred-compensation deal in 2016-17 that kicked a signing bonus down the road. And prior to his signing with the Nashville Predators, it was speculated the Vegas Golden Knights attempted to sign Jonathan Marchessault to a deferred-money contract.

Whether Jarvis' deal is the beginning of a trend, however, is impossible to say. While player agent Ryan Barnes feels certain deferred compensation "will be a talking point" when the current CBA expires – which it's set to do after the 2025-26 season – he's less sure it's the next big thing. After all, those who believe that a dollar today is worth more than a dollar tomorrow might not be interested in waiting for their pay. "It's almost like the offer sheet," Barnes said. "It's in (the CBA), but you don't see it often. We'll see where it fits in the order of importance in the next CBA negotiations."

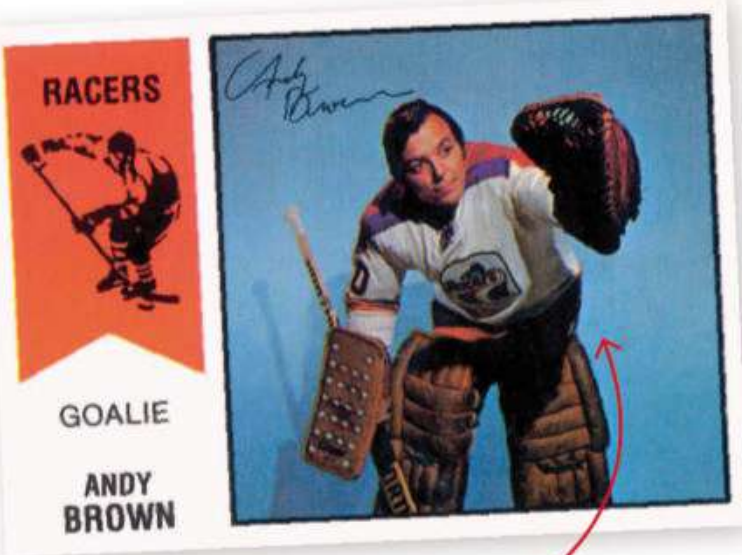
At the same time, The Hockey Wealth Group founder and certified financial planner Johann Kroll sees potential for players to begin at least exploring deferred-compensation options during times when the implied interest rate is elevated, not only as a way to plan for life after hockey but to pave a path to on-ice success. Ask Kroll, who played pro hockey and won a Calder Cup with the Hershey Bears in 2010, and you'll learn winning is a benefit that's hard to put a price on.

"If they're opening up another half-million dollars a year or a million in extra cap space, that can be the difference between bringing in a teammate that can really help," he said. "And I can tell you from my own experience, hockey is a lot more fun when you're winning." **H**

# Puck CULTURE

## HOCKEY CARDS OF **SIX** GREAT GOALTENDING 'LASTS'

From the last goalie to play without a mask to the last goalie to play every minute of a season, here are six stoppers who hold a unique place in hockey lore **BY SAL BARRY**



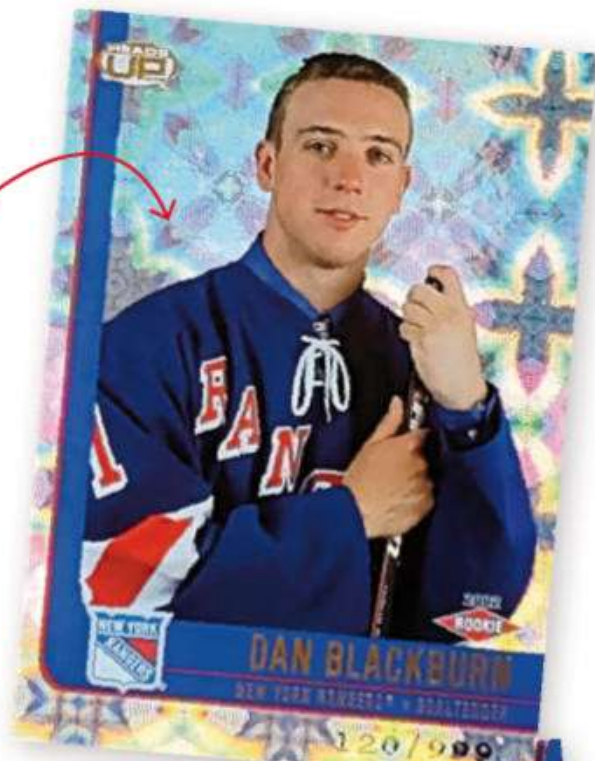
### 1 > LAST GOALIE TO PLAY WITHOUT A MASK *Andy Brown (1977)*

Jacques Plante was the first goalie to wear a mask regularly in the NHL, beginning when he donned one in a game in 1959. Fifteen years later, every goalie in the league was wearing a mask – except the Pittsburgh Penguins' Andy Brown. Brown's last NHL game was April 7, 1974, a 6-3 loss to the Atlanta Flames. He went on to play three more seasons in the WHA with the Indianapolis Racers – all without a mask – before retiring in 1977. Brown had only one hockey card during his career, in the 1974-75 O-Pee-Chee WHA set.

### 3 > LAST GOALIE TO WEAR TWO BLOCKERS *Dan Blackburn (2005)*

Dan Blackburn played 63 NHL games during two seasons with the New York Rangers and looked poised to take over from longtime starter Mike Richter. Unfortunately, a nerve injury caused by a weightlifting accident in 2003 left him unable to rotate his left (catching) hand. He sat out 2003-04, then attempted a comeback by wearing a modified blocker on his left hand. The special blocker had webbing and a pocket added to the underside so he could catch low shots without needing to rotate his hand, while still using the upper part of the blocker to

deflect shots. Blackburn played 12 games in the latter half of 2004-05 with the ECHL's Victoria Salmon Kings, then retired for good. Years later, he again donned two blockers when he played for the Rangers against the Philadelphia Flyers in the 2012 Winter Classic alumni game. No cards exist of Blackburn using two blockers, but he has over 30 rookie cards, such as this serial-numbered card in the 2001-02 Pacific Heads Up set.



### 2 > LAST GOALIE TO WEAR A FIBERGLASS MASK *Sam St-Laurent (1991)*

The fiberglass goalie mask introduced by Plante was a game-changer for the position, but it had its share of problems. Both Gerry Desjardins and Bernie Parent sustained career-ending eye injuries in the late 1970s due to the fiberglass mask's lack of eye protection. Gradually throughout the 1980s, NHL goalies switched from fiberglass masks to helmet-and-cage combos or hybrid masks. Yet, one goalie hung on to his old-school mask until the 1990s. Career backup Sam St-Laurent played his final NHL game for the Detroit Red Wings on Feb. 8, 1990. His last pro game was with the AHL's Binghamton Rangers at the start of 1991-92. After that, he retired his "Jason-style" mask for a modern one when he joined the Canadian national team in 1991. St-Laurent's 1986-87 Wings team-issued card is the only one that pictures him in a fiberglass mask.





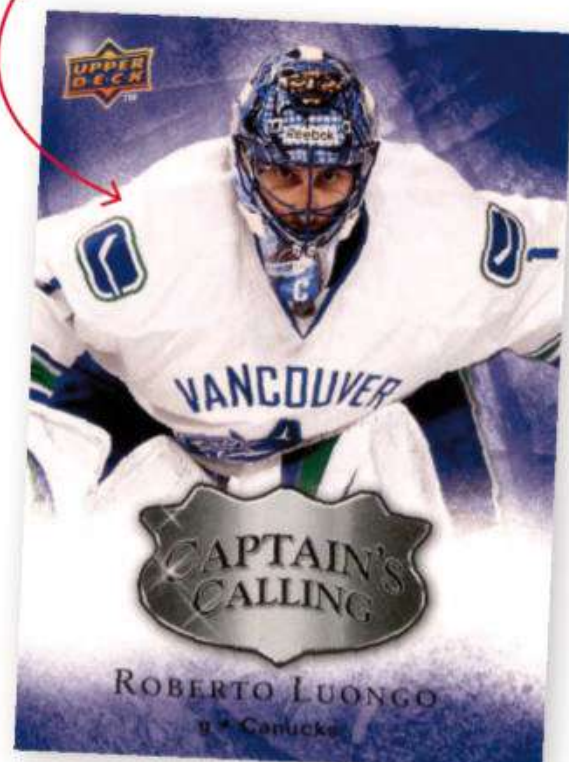
**4 > LAST GOALIE TO WEAR TWO TRAPPERS**  
**Bill Durnan (1950)**

In his seven-season NHL career, Montreal Canadiens goalie Bill Durnan won the Vezina Trophy six times and the Stanley Cup twice. He was also ambidextrous and wore two special padded gloves instead of the traditional trapper and blocker. This allowed him to hold his stick or catch the puck with either hand, as seen on his 1955-56 Parkhurst rookie card, which was issued as an "Oldtime Great" card five years after he retired. Durnan was also the Habs' captain in 1947-48. However, he left the crease to argue with the referee so often that the NHL banned goalies from serving as captain starting the next season. While Durnan was the last goalie with a 'C' on his sweater, he wasn't the last goalie to be a captain.

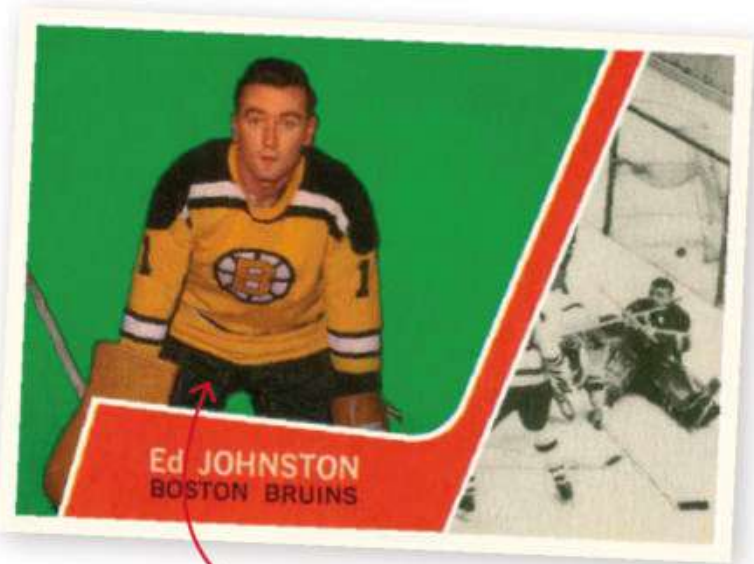


**5 > LAST GOALIE TO BE A TEAM CAPTAIN**  
**Roberto Luongo (2010)**

The NHL may have had a rule that prohibited goaltenders from serving as a team captain, but that didn't stop the Vancouver Canucks from naming Roberto Luongo as their captain for the 2008-09 and 2009-10 seasons. Luongo didn't wear a letter on his jersey, but he did have a 'C' painted on the chin of his goalie mask. And while he didn't perform any of the on-ice duties that a team captain normally would, such as communicating with the referees or taking part in ceremonial faceoffs, Luongo did routinely speak with the media before games until near the end of his tenure as captain. Upper Deck included a card of Luongo donning the 'C' in its 2009-10 Captain's Calling insert set, which featured nine of the league's most popular team captains.

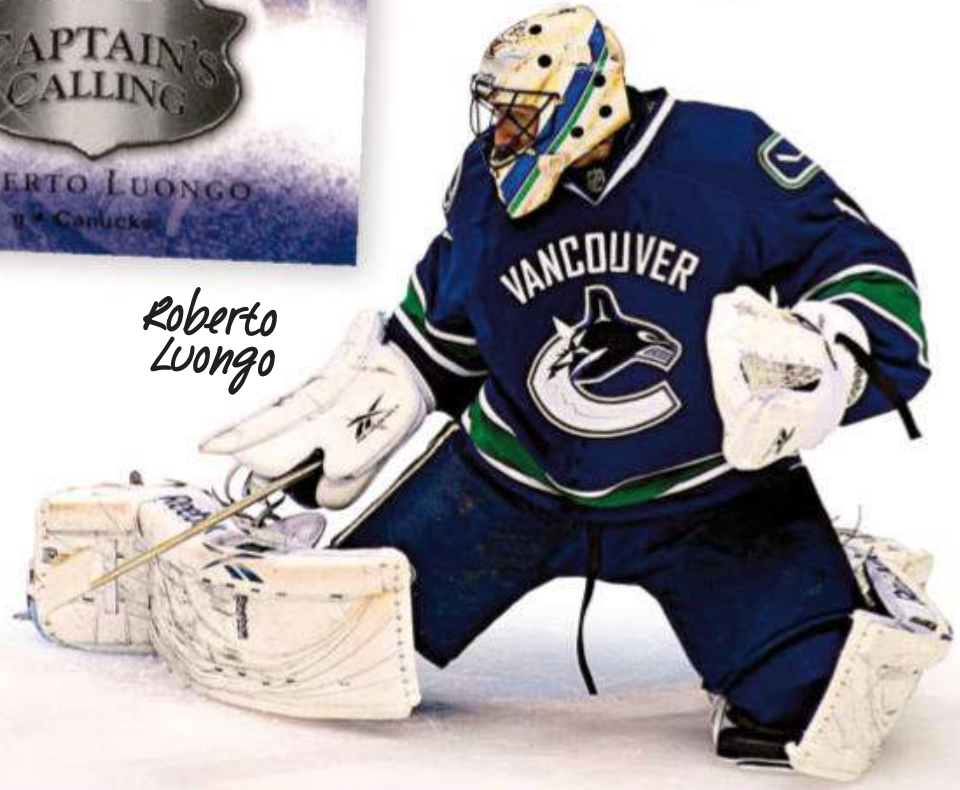


Roberto Luongo



**6 > LAST GOALIE TO PLAY EVERY MINUTE OF A SEASON**  
**Ed Johnston (1964)**

The last time a goalie played in every minute of every game for his team was during 1963-64, when Ed Johnston played all 70 games for the Boston Bruins. He probably could've used a night or two off, though, as he compiled an 18-40-12 record, and the Bruins finished in last place. Coincidentally, Johnston's rookie card is in the 1963-64 Topps set. Midway through the next season, the NHL required teams to dress two netminders, making it possible to replace a goalie who was having a bad game, or easier to give a workhorse netminder a night off every now and then. As the number of regular-season games increased over the years, more than 50 goalies have since played 70 or more games in a season – but none since Johnston can say that they've played every single minute of every single game in a season. **H**



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MARC-ANDRE FLEURY



# FINAL

# FLEURY



**NICE GUYS FINISH LAST? NOT ALWAYS. MARC-ANDRE FLEURY ENTERS THE 21ST AND FINAL SEASON OF HIS NHL CAREER AS ONE OF THE LEAGUE'S ALL-TIME GOOD GUYS. BUT DON'T LET THE FRIENDLY SMILE FOOL YOU – THE COMPETITIVE FIRE STILL BURNS, AND HE'S HERE TO WIN** BY KEN CAMPBELL

**IT'S THE NOT KNOWING** that's the worst part. Yeah, it's definitely the not knowing. Welcome to the hell-cape that is Marc-Andre Fleury's final season in the NHL. His teammates, both present and past, are operating on the assumption that they'll have to spend the 2024-25 season on constant high alert. I mean, look what Fleury did to Brandon Duhaime last year, and all the poor guy did was toilet-paper

Fleury's car and joke during a television interview that Fleury was doing impressive things at the age of 50. Next thing you know, Duhaime's tires are removed and chained together in the parking garage, his car is on cinder blocks, and there's a small garden on his hood.

'The Kid' has to be crapping his pants right about now. All Sidney Crosby did was fill Fleury's gear with gum one time, and then he shows up at the NHL Media Tour



BOB FRID-USA TODAY SPORTS



# MARC-ANDRE FLEURY

two years ago and all his equipment is hanging in his stall taped together. You see, they know Fleury could strike at any time, but they don't know when or how. If they've wronged him in any way, they can be pretty sure he's going to use an XL18 flamethrower to wipe out an ant hill.

And after everything Fleury has done in the 21 years he's been in the NHL, he has to have one epic, all-time, go-out-in-a-blaze-of-glory, Lloyd-Christmas-level prank in him, right?

"To be honest, I haven't thought much about it," Fleury said, "but now that you mention it..."

See what we mean? How can anyone trust that? For his part, Fleury maintains that, "I'm pretty sure all the scores have been settled," brilliantly capped by the demented chef's kiss that was the Duhaime prank last April in Colorado, with Fleury waiting in the background and giggling.

As Fleury embarks on the final season of an NHL career that will undoubtedly result in a call to the Hockey Hall of Fame in 2028, it will be about what it has always been about – competing against the best players in the world and trying to beat them in every outing. But as he makes his way through the league one last time, he'll allow himself to take it all in, to soak up the memories he has created over the years.

And beneath it all will be a deep sense of gratitude for everything the game has given him the past two decades. During the season, everything happens so quickly, and you might spend a day or two in St. Louis and move on to the next place, all on autopilot. Fleury doesn't want that in his last go-round. He wants it to also be a time of reflection. About what he has done, what he has and how incredibly fortunate he has been to make a living out of playing hockey. "Maybe take a few more minutes in every building, to take the time to appreciate that I'm still doing this," Fleury said. "There will be memories. All those memories in all those buildings."

They go all the way back to 2003, considered one of the strongest draft crops ever, when the Pittsburgh Penguins traded up to take Fleury first overall. If he appears in 20 games this season, he'll eclipse Roberto Lu-



ongo for second place on the all-time games-played list behind Martin Brodeur. His fifth game will move him past Patrick Roy, who he eclipsed for second on the all-time wins list, also behind Brodeur, last season.

## HALL OF A CAREER

With three Cups and the second-most wins in NHL history, Fleury is bound for the Hall of Fame.

**THERE WILL BE MEMORIES. ALL THOSE MEMORIES IN ALL THOSE BUILDINGS** – MARC-ANDRE FLEURY

Brodeur, Fleury, Roy and Luongo account for the top four spots. (Remember when Quebec used to be a goalie factory?) The fifth time Fleury starts a game for the Wild this season, he will register his 1,000th career start. With the retirements of Joe Pavelski and Jeff Carter in the summer, that leaves only Fleury, Brent Burns, Corey Perry

Wild crease situation to be sorted out. To be fair, goaltending was a bit of a black hole for Minnesota in 2023-24, with Fleury posting just 17 wins and the worst save percentage of his career (.895). Filip Gustavsson followed up a brilliant 2022-23 with an equally disastrous '23-24. The wild card is Jesper Wallstedt, a first-round pick of the Wild in

and Ryan Suter still playing from that 2003 draft. (Fun fact: Fleury's 22 career assists have him tied for 69th in NHL scoring – with Paul Bissonnette and others – among the 292 players drafted that year.)

Three Stanley Cups, with the first one coming on one of the most clutch saves in NHL history, an unlikely Vezina Trophy late in his career, a trip to the Cup final with 'The Golden Misfits' and an unblemished off- and on-ice reputation have Fleury breathing the rarefied air among some of the most respected players in the game.

He has had bad days, to be sure, but it's difficult to tell since Fleury spends most of the time showing off the whitest and straightest teeth in NHL history. He brings joy to every crease and every dressing room he steps into, and it will continue to be that way as he tries to get in the path of as many pucks as he can in his last season.

Of course, he has some of the big games circled on his calendar, or at least digitally bookmarked. Oct. 29 in Pittsburgh, man, that's going to be a tear-jerker. Jan. 12 in Vegas, too. The games in Montreal are always special, and the Wild will be there Jan. 30. Even Chicago, where Fleury played part of one season, will give him the feels when he visits there Nov. 10 and Jan. 26. And in late November, Fleury will celebrate his 40th birthday, making him one of only 25 goalies – 23 if you throw out one-game won-

ders Lester Patrick and David Ayres – to play an NHL game after their 40th birthday. Of that group, 12 are in the Hall of Fame, and Fleury will join them there.

But before all that can happen, there is a rather crowded



BILL GUERIN & MARC-ANDRE FLEURY

2021 and the franchise's goalie of the future. After two solid but unspectacular seasons in the AHL, the feeling is Wallstedt, who turns 22 two weeks before Fleury hits 40, could be ready for NHL work. The consensus is Gustavsson is probably on the least stable ground, but there's no sense trying to untangle this thing too early, because who knows with goalies from one year to the next, anyway?

One thing both the Wild and Fleury are adamant about is that this will not be The Marc-Andre Fleury Farewell Tour, where they keep trotting out a 40-year-old just for the sake of having him wave to the crowd after the game. If you had to describe the Wild in one word – and this goes for almost

him still being a good player in the league and being competitive as hell.”

That's what it is all about for Fleury, too. Behind the effulgent smile, calm exterior and pleasant demeanor is a guy who hates losing almost as much as he loves winning. Anyone who has played with or dealt with Fleury will attest to the fact that from the time he first appeared wearing braces in THN's 2003 Draft Preview issue, the competitive fires have burned hot and bright. You don't last in the NHL for as long as Fleury has without an unyielding desire to win. "It's probably stronger than ever," said Fleury of his will to win. "That feeling you get when you play against the best players in the world and win against them, there's nothing like it. And then you want to win again, and then you want to win again."



Nine years ago, the Penguins were playing a pre-season game at the Cambria County War Memorial Arena to commemorate Johnstown, Pa., winning the Kraft Hockeyville contest. The fictional home of the Charlestown Chiefs of *Slap Shot* fame, the city leans big-time into its cinematic lore. A marketing genius with the Penguins came up with the idea for Fleury and local broadcaster Dan Potash to play Denis Lemieux and Jim Carr and recreate the opening scene of the movie. Fleury nails Lemieux's words and mannerisms almost as well as Yvon Barrette did in the movie, not even cracking a smile when he talks about how, "you go to the box, two minutes by yourself and you feel shame. And then you get free."

You can probably count on one hand, with a finger or two left over, the number of players who would agree to do something like that, particularly in this day and age. But it was classic Fleury, a guy who isn't afraid to put himself out there and doesn't take himself too seriously. It's all part of the sheer joy he has playing the game, and it's why nobody in the hockey world seems to have a disparaging

every season they've been in the league – it would probably be "meh." Not terrible. Not great. Kind of in the mushy middle, and not likely to be able to really build themselves into a contender until they shed the \$14.7 million in salary retention on the Zach Parise and Ryan Suter buyouts after this season. If one of the Wild goalies grabs the crease and pulls a Devan Dubnyk circa 2015, he'll be the one who plays. The Wild missed the playoffs last year and haven't advanced past the first round in a decade. They were in the bottom half of the league

in goals against and lost nine overtime games last season. Improved goaltending will have to be part of the equation if the Wild hope to return to the post-season, with or without Fleury in goal.

"It will be business as usual because that's what 'Flower' wants," said Wild GM Bill Guerin. "He doesn't want any of that stuff. He's never wanted it. We want to have a good year. We want to make the playoffs. This is not a farewell tour. This is about

### WILD FINISH

Fleury is focused on taking it all in during his final NHL season – and his will to win is stronger than ever.

eric Fleury, a guy who isn't afraid to put himself out there and doesn't take himself too seriously. It's all part of the sheer joy he has playing the game, and it's why nobody in the hockey world seems to have a disparaging

# MARC-ANDRE FLEURY



word to say about him. Former Penguins GM Jim Rutherford, who has been around the game for more than a half-century, once referred to Fleury as, “the best team player in sports,” for good reason.

And that is why teams will almost certainly line up to hire Fleury if he decides he wants a future in the game. The plan for now is to spend the winters and school years in

Vegas, where he has built a home, and the summers in suburban Montreal. If he can find a way to make hockey work while he puts his family first, there might be a fit. He’d like to play a little beer-league hockey, but not as a goalie, because every goalie who ever lived has this notion that he’s also a great position player. “I like the idea of trying to make plays and score and dangle the

stick, skate around, get a good sweat,” Fleury said. “And just to sit on the bench and have somebody to talk to. That would be fun.”

But Fleury is adamant that, at least for the first couple of years after his retirement, his family will be the top priority. He’s missed too many Christmas pageants, Halloween and birthdays over the years, and he wants to be there for those. He wants

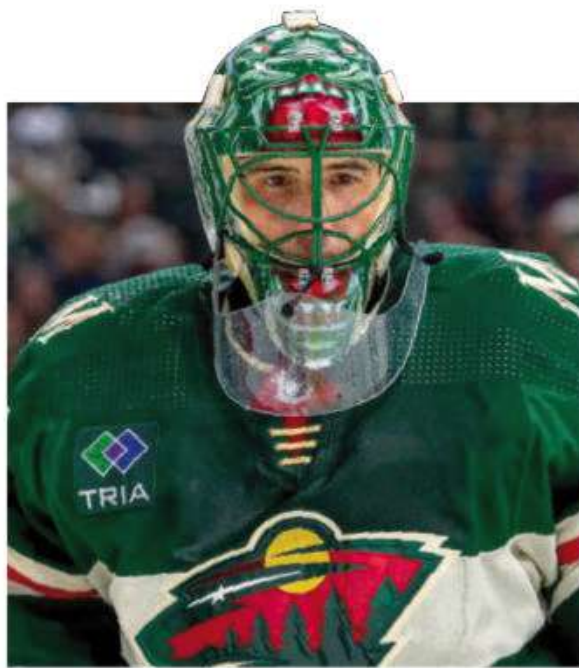
PERRY NELSON-USA TODAY SPORTS





TOP: MATT BLEWETT/USA TODAY SPORTS; MIDDLE: PER HALJESTAM/USA TODAY SPORTS

to watch his daughters, 11-year-old Estelle and nine-year-old Scarlett, play soccer. Five-year-old James is just beginning his hockey journey, and Fleury is looking forward to where that will take him. "He just learned to skate last year, but for the games, he always wants to go back into the net," Fleury said. "I'm like, 'Go score some goals.'" Fleury hasn't thought much about his



GM. When Guerin went to see then-GM Ray Shero about a job, Shero told him his biggest nightmare was having to give jobs to former players who wanted the title, the office and the paycheck but weren't willing to travel to Grand Rapids to watch the farm team.

"Let's see how hard he wants to work," said Guerin of Fleury's post-playing prospects. "Being in hockey operations is not easy, and it's not the glamorous life people think it is. But, that being said, he has everything it would take to be successful. 'Flower' is smart, he's charismatic, and he's got great relationships around the league. There's no reason he couldn't have success on the other side. He's got all the intangibles and the

**“ THIS IS NOT A FAREWELL TOUR. THIS IS ABOUT HIM STILL BEING A GOOD PLAYER IN THE LEAGUE AND BEING COMPETITIVE AS HELL**

— BILL GUERIN

post-playing life, but if he were to stay involved in the game, it would probably be at the management level. And that makes sense for a guy who has made a career building relationships. If he needs a roadmap, he need look no further than his former teammate and boss, who took a year off after he retired, then joined Pittsburgh's front office, first as a development coach, then assistant

ingredients of a guy who could do it."

Until then, Fleury will make sure to enjoy the last leg of his playing journey. On the exterior, it doesn't look as though Fleury has aged all that much over the years. Sure, he no longer tints his hair, but really, who does that anymore? He's still in outstanding physical shape. And even he marvels at the fact that time has gone by so quickly.

# MARC-ANDRE FLEURY



M





## ONE FOR THE ROAD

"I know I'm on my last miles here," Fleury says. "I love the feeling and want to enjoy it as long as I can."

Like every other player who retires, he'll miss the games and his teammates in the dressing room, but not so much the grind it requires in

the summer to prepare for the next season. Nor will he miss waking up with at least one part of his body hurting, which has been the case for the past couple of seasons. He won't hike his pants up to his chest and complain that he seems to be busier in retirement than when he was working, because he doesn't plan on replacing the chaos of playing in the NHL with doing something else at a chaotic pace. He acknowledges he doesn't know much of anything about the hockey-ops side of the game, and the ability to play at the highest level doesn't translate into an ability to build a team as much as people think.

**THAT FEELING YOU GET WHEN YOU PLAY AGAINST THE BEST PLAYERS IN THE WORLD AND WIN AGAINST THEM, THERE'S NOTHING LIKE IT**

— **MARC-ANDRE FLEURY**

Once the puck drops, for Fleury, it will be all about winning games and capturing all the great things about playing and hanging on to them. He still can't believe playing hockey is a job that will have paid him almost \$100 million by the time his career ends. All he wanted to do as a teenager was play one game in the NHL, and he's played more than a thousand. Regardless of how this season ends, he'll leave the game with no regrets. "I know I'm on my last miles here," Fleury said. "I love the feeling, and I want to enjoy it as long as I can as much as I can while I can." **H**

## MOVING ON UP

**HOW MUCH HAS MARC-ANDRE FLEURY IMPROVED HIS STOCK SINCE THN RANKED THE NHL'S BEST GOALIES SIX YEARS AGO?** BY **BRIAN COSTELLO**

IN 2018, THE HOCKEY News put together the game's most comprehensive list of the top 100 goaltenders in NHL history in a special collector's edition magazine. Coming in at No. 40 was Marc-Andre Fleury, who was 14 seasons into an NHL career that will span 21 seasons.

By today's standards, that ranking seems shockingly low. After all, he'll finish his career second in all-time NHL wins behind only Martin Brodeur (691).

So, how high would Fleury rise if the all-time goalie rankings were revised today? Top 20? Top 10? Top five?

Let's review how the top-100 goalie list was created.

In 1997, when The Hockey News turned 50, we selected a revered committee of 50 hockey experts to vote on the top 100 players of all-time. The depth of knowledge on the panel was beyond reproach, and that list is considered authoritative. The quantity and quality of the 50 voters included panellists who played or watched the game as far back as the 1930s. That was the starting point for the 19 goalies who played up to that point in time and made 1997's list of top 100 players.

THN commissioned a panel to update the goalie rankings in 2010, then again with the special issue in 2018. The 2010 ranking was particularly interesting because three goalies who peaked at the turn of the century (Patrick Roy, Dominik Hasek and Brodeur) forged themselves alongside three stoppers from the Original Six era (Terry Sawchuk, Jacques Plante and Glenn Hall) to create a top six who are in a class of their own. In fact, a compelling case can be made that each of the six deserves positioning at the head of that class.

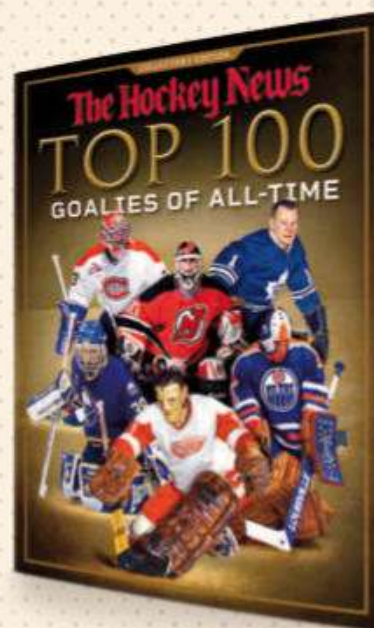
Does it stand to reason that Fleury deserves to join that six-man group? Especially when you consider his one Vezina win (2021) came after our 2018 ranking that had him 40th. And Fleury's next-best season in terms of Vezina consideration was a fourth-place finish in 2019.

But not so fast. Fleury did win three Cups, but only once was he named to an NHL all-star team (the second team in 2020-21, the year he won the Vezina). Compare his career to the No. 11 goalie on our 2018 list. Bernie Parent won two Cups, two Vezinas, two Conn Smythes and was a first-team all-star twice. Sure, Parent's 271 wins are less than half of Fleury's total, but Parent had a longer stretch of sustained elite excellence.

A reasonable landing spot for Fleury is in the 25-to-30 range. Those spots were occupied on our 2018 list by Gump Worsley, Tom Barrasso, Carey Price, Harry Lumley, Roberto Luongo and Ed Giacomin.

Don't be seduced by Fleury's standing as the second-winningest goalie of all-time. Yes, his outlandish number of wins is notable, but as hockey historian James Benesh wondered: "Why do some people treat goalie wins as a measure of how dominant they were? We don't judge forwards or defensemen by the number of games they won."

When we reflect on Fleury's career, we see a Hall of Fame netminder who won a lot of games and three Stanley Cups and is properly slotted in the 25-to-30 range among all-time goalies.



## TOP 'TENDERS

**THIS IS HOW THE HOCKEY NEWS RANKED THE NHL'S TOP 50 GOALIES OF ALL-TIME IN 2018. PLAYERS IN RED WERE ACTIVE AT THE TIME**

- |                      |                        |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Terry Sawchuk     | 26. Tom Barrasso       |
| 2. Patrick Roy       | 27. Carey Price        |
| 3. Martin Brodeur    | 28. Harry Lumley       |
| 4. Jacques Plante    | 29. Roberto Luongo     |
| 5. Dominik Hasek     | 30. Ed Giacomin        |
| 6. Glenn Hall        | 31. Alec Connell       |
| 7. Ken Dryden        | 32. Jonathan Quick     |
| 8. Bill Durnan       | 33. Rogie Vachon       |
| 9. George Hainsworth | 34. Hap Holmes         |
| 10. Turk Broda       | 35. Tim Thomas         |
| 11. Bernie Parent    | 36. Curtis Joseph      |
| 12. Frank Brimsek    | 37. Chuck Rayner       |
| 13. Grant Fuhr       | 38. Mike Vernon        |
| 14. Georges Vezina   | 39. Gerry Cheevers     |
| 15. Charlie Gardiner | 40. Marc-Andre Fleury  |
| 16. Clint Benedict   | 41. Miikka Kiprusoff   |
| 17. Tony Esposito    | 42. John Vanbiesbrouck |
| 18. Ed Belfour       | 43. Mike Richter       |
| 19. Billy Smith      | 44. Dave Kerr          |
| 20. Lorne Chabot     | 45. Ron Hextall        |
| 21. Tiny Thompson    | 46. Sergei Bobrovsky   |
| 22. Johnny Bower     | 47. Mike Liut          |
| 23. Roy Worters      | 48. Pekka Rinne        |
| 24. Henrik Lundqvist | 49. Al Rollins         |
| 25. Gump Worsley     | 50. John Ross Roach    |



LINUS ULLMARK

# FINDING

## THE RIGHT

## WORK / LIFE

## BALANCE

**W**HAT DO WE PLAY FOR? Money? Fame? Glory? Admiration? There's no right or wrong answer, and the checklist for any athlete will vary. For Linus Ullmark, the latest – and Senators fans hope the last – in the carousel of high-profile goaltenders acquired to bolster Ottawa's crease, the balance between a love of the game and an even greater love for his family has resulted in the most prolific period of his career.

As he settles into life in Canada's capital after being acquired by the Sens in a June

swap with the Boston Bruins, the 31-year-old admits that his family is easing into the comforts of the Ottawa area.

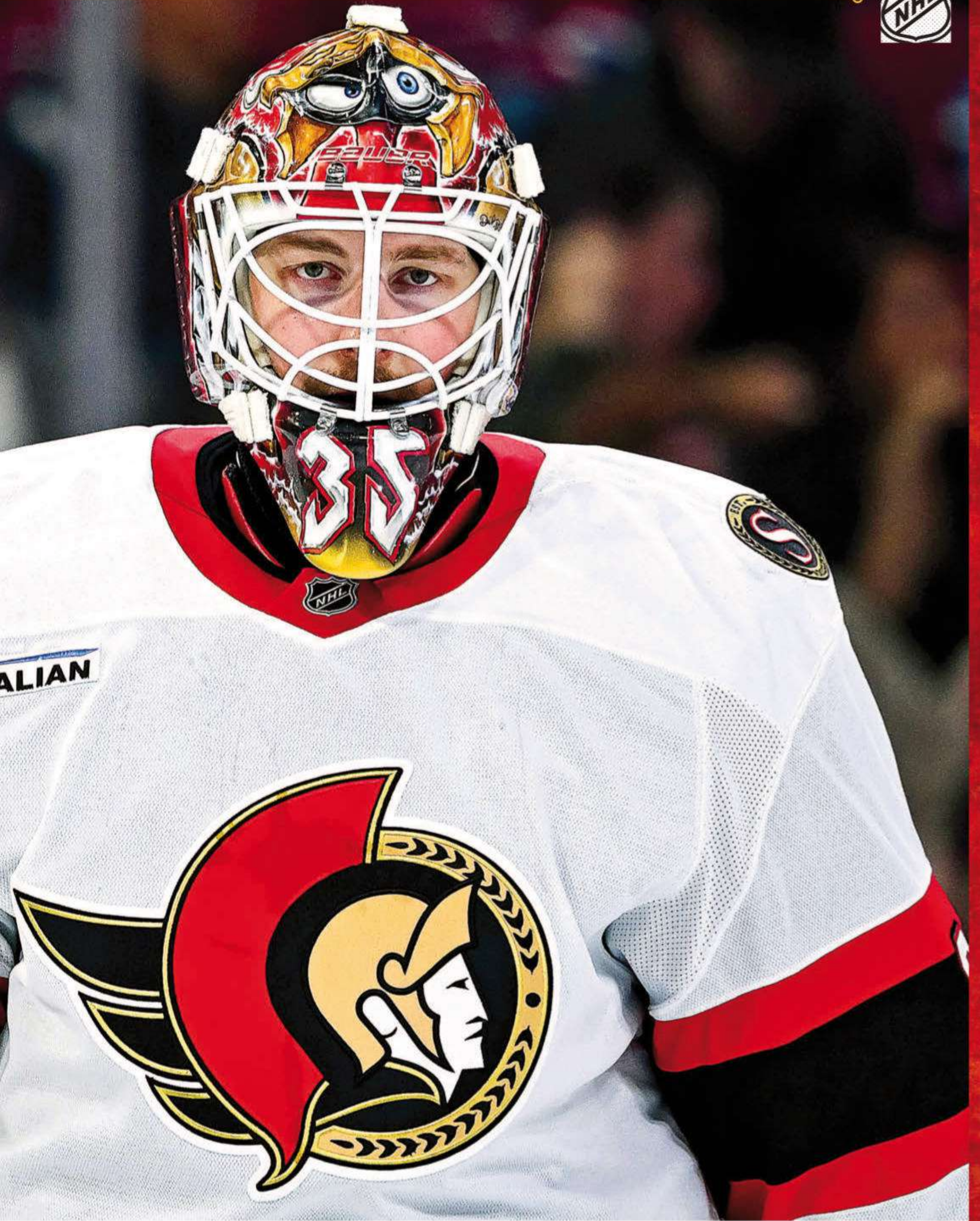
"It's a very peaceful and calm neighborhood that we're living in, and we are very much enjoying ourselves at the moment," Ullmark said. "The kids are having fun at school, which is always a blast as a parent when you see that your kids are thriving and enjoying themselves. And that's the most important part, that they're doing well and that they're enjoying it, and that my wife is feeling safe and calm and happy about where we are at the moment. That is always

**LINUS ULLMARK**  
**LIKES WHAT HE**  
**SEES ON AND OFF**  
**THE ICE IN OTTAWA**  
**AS HE GETS SET**  
**TO TAKE OVER**  
**THE SENATORS'**  
**NO. 1 GOALIE GIG**

BY DILLON COLLINS



DAVID KIROUAC-IMAGN IMAGES



# LINUS ULLMARK

going to be one of the main focuses and questions when you get traded or you sign for a new team or whatever it may be.”

Ullmark's road from a wide-eyed fan of legends such as Peter Forsberg and Dominik Hasek to a runaway Vezina Trophy winner began in earnest with the storied Modo program, where the young goaltending prospect from Lugnvik, Swe., served parts

of six seasons between the junior and pro levels. There, he rubbed shoulders with his current goaltending partner in Ottawa, Anton Forsberg. The oddity of reuniting with Forsberg after a decade isn't lost on Ullmark. “It is a special situation that not a lot

against average for a Sabres squad that missed the playoffs both years.

His dependable play earned him a four-year, \$20-million UFA deal with Boston in the summer of 2021, which paid immediate dividends as Ullmark delivered a sturdy 2.45 GAA and .917 save percentage in 41 games. He followed that up with a sensational campaign in 2022-23, winning the Vezina and Jennings Trophies on the strength of a 1.89 GAA, .938 SP and an unreal 40 wins in 49 regular-season games.

Ullmark exits a 1A/1B split-start situation with Jeremy Swayman for an anticipated higher workload in Ottawa. The Senators have rotated through a cadre of would-be starters in recent years, from Cam Talbot to Matt Murray to Filip Gustavsson to Joonas Korpisalo. They are now betting big on the Ullmark-Forsberg connection to end a seven-year playoff drought.

Patience from fans is low while on-ice expectations trend high, but Ullmark believes a steady and mature dressing room buoyed by new management and fresh coach Travis Green will carry the day.

“Rome wasn't built overnight,” Ullmark said. “So, for me and other guys that come in from the outside, obviously there's a lot of responsibilities for us, and the expectation is for us to show the team what needs to be done. But there are still pieces in the squad that are another year older with another year in The Show. I think for the management and the coaches, it's all about utilizing everybody's strengths to come together as a unit and play as a full team.

“When I look around the room, there are a lot of skillful players and smart and good players. They're good human beings that, in the right environment, will blossom and become star players. And I'm excited to see that unfold and hopefully be a part of making

that happen.”

Battle-tested through two tours of duty in the ultra-competitive Atlantic Division, Ullmark is primed and ready to take the reigns as a true No. 1 netminder. He's quick to point out, however, that a complete team effort, and nothing less, will lead the Senators to greener pastures.

“I've learned throughout my career from being around world-class players and leaders that it's not a one-man show,” Ullmark



said. “The whole season is not upon my shoulders. I learned that, and it's never going to be like that. My job is to stop pucks. I can't go out there and score goals. I can't go out there and make big plays at all times. We have to all rely on each other and utilize our strengths and play to our utmost capacity every single night.

“We all win as a team. We all lose as a team. It doesn't matter if you're one of the reasons, if you drop the puck or let in a bad goal, it all comes down to the fact it's a team effort, and we win and we lose as a team. And that's something that we all have to get behind. Because that'll help you understand the bigger part of it and not get you too down or too high when things go bad or things go right.”

After being embraced by the franchise



of guys can relate to,” he said. “Me and Anton started our professional career back in Sweden together, and now, look at us 10 years down the road. We're playing for the same franchise and same team again. I'm just hoping and praying that everything goes well and goes like it did the last time we played together. If it does, this will be a very, very fun season.”

A sixth-round selection (163rd overall) of the Buffalo Sabres in 2012, Ullmark split his formative pro years between the SHL and the AHL's Rochester Americans, becoming an anchor of the rebuilding Sabres as the club cruised toward the 2020s. Across 2019-20 and '20-21, he posted 26 wins in 54 games with a solid 2.67 goals-

## ULLMARK'S HALLMARK

After 40 wins in 49 games in 2022-23, Ullmark was awarded the Vezina and Jennings Trophies.



and fan base, Ullmark has his priorities in place, and he feels ready to thrive on and off the ice. “That’s one of the things that I felt coming in here and meeting all the fellas,” Ullmark said. “I felt very comfortable. It’s not just me being a very carefree and easygoing person. They’ve done a good job of treating me with respect and as an equal right away and making me and my family feel welcome. So, I have a lot of gratitude, and I think that’s not just the players but the coaches, the management, the whole organization, everybody that lives here in Ottawa.

“Having those pieces fall into place at an

**“EVEN THOUGH I HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY ON THE ICE AND WITH WHAT I DO FOR A LIVING, I DO IT FOR SOMEONE ELSE, AND THAT’S FOR MY FAMILY”** – LINUS ULLMARK

early stage, it calms you down and brings you some inner peace as a player. Even though I have a responsibility on the ice and with what I do for a living, I do it for someone else, and that’s for my family. If they’re not well and they’re not thriving, then there’s just going to be so many ques-

tions and anxieties towards that for me as a parent and a father and a husband. And those things are always bigger than hockey. So, taking care of those things off the ice will allow me to focus more on the task at hand. And that’s to stop pucks for the Ottawa Senators.” **H**



**JOSEPH WOLL HAS BEEN TO THE ALPS AND DREAMS OF ONE DAY EXPERIENCING THE HIMALAYAS. BUT IN THE MEANTIME, HE'S HOPING TO SUMMIT A PEAK OF ANOTHER SORT IN TORONTO** BY RYAN KENNEDY

# CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN

**D**URING THE HOCKEY season, Joseph Woll lives in Canada's biggest city, a teeming metropolis where every resident seems to have an opinion on how his team can finally win the Stanley Cup. So, when the Toronto Maple Leafs goaltender gets time off in the summer, he tries to go off the grid for a bit, taking in the great outdoors when he's not training.

This off-season, Woll headed out to Colorado with his brother and his best friend. The year prior, he went to Europe to engage his passion for mountains. "I took a cool trip out to the Alps to see Mont Blanc, and that's my favorite mountain so far," Woll said. "For my mask this year, I had Dave Gunnarsson of DaveArt put Mont Blanc on my helmet for a little personal touch."

Right now, for obvious reasons, Woll is limited in how much perilous adventuring he can do, but he sees himself getting into mountaineering in his post-hockey life, with the Himalayas being a bucket-list destina-



tion. Of course, that's not going to happen for a while, as the 26-year-old Woll is just getting started in the NHL.

For the past two seasons, we've seen glimpses of the big netminder's potential, as the Leafs have turned to him in the play-



DAN HAMILTON-USA TODAY SPORTS





# JOSEPH WOLL



offs twice when he was needed to replace erstwhile starter Ilya Samsonov. With Samsonov now a member of the Vegas Golden Knights and former Florida Panthers backup Anthony Stolarz joining Toronto, Woll will undoubtedly surpass the 25 regular-season appearances he made as a rookie last year.

It may be a gamble for the Leafs, but the team feels like it's a safe one based on what Woll has shown so far. "I've got all the confidence in the world in him," said GM Brad Treliving. "Joe is one of the top young goaltenders in the league. Now, there's a step, right? There's a process you go through because it's a hard position,

the St. Louis native is primed to have a big season in Toronto. He put in the work with Leafs goalie coach Curtis Sanford during the summer to make it so. "One of my big focuses was about body mechanics," Woll said. "Being able to focus on that off the ice was really good because it set the stage for when I got back on the ice. I felt a tangible difference in how I moved. It's about making sure the right muscles are on and doing their job. Over the course of my career, I've seen myself grow and evolve. Before I turned pro, I relied quite a bit on my athleticism and making saves when I was out of position. Since turning pro, I've learned to harness that better. It's really about learning to work within a system. That kind of mindset and the longevity you can get from operating in a healthier way and protecting your joints is very important."

Woll cut his teeth with USA Hockey's National Team Development Program, where he formed an impressive battery with Dallas Stars starter Jake Oettinger. From there, the two became rivals as Woll headed to Boston College while Oettinger patrolled the crease for Boston University. Woll spent three seasons with the Eagles before turning pro in 2019. He made his NHL debut two seasons later, getting into four games with the Leafs. But it was 2022-23 where he really came onto the radar, posting an exceptional .932 save percentage and 6-1-0 record in seven NHL appearances while also playing well in the



**IT'S VERY DIFFERENT BEING A GOALIE WHO PLAYS THREE TIMES A WEEK AND A GOALIE WHO PLAYS ONE GAME A WEEK** — JOSEPH WOLL



and we want to make sure we support him. We have great depth at the position."

We might have seen more from Woll already if it had not been for injuries, including a high-ankle sprain that kept him out for nearly three months last season. But as it is,

AHL with the Toronto Marlies.

Last season was another step up, and this season promises to feature even more NHL work — potentially double the 25 appearances he made in 2023-24 — but Woll has already learned to keep his head out of the

clouds. "It's funny," he said. "Every year, I go into the season with the mindset that, 'I've learned what I've needed to learn and I'm ready to go.' And every year, I'm constantly reminded that it's an ever-evolving process. Every year, I'm given things where I realize



guy who works extremely hard and has played outstanding for us. He's a mature young man. He's not a kid. He's confident, and as a D-man, it's nice to have those conversations over the summer where you see he's focused. And I think he's looking forward to more playing time. He's ready for it."

Playing in Toronto comes with a lot of pressure, especially for a goalie serving as the last line of defense. But the fact Woll has shown he can perform in the playoffs, even in a small sample size, puts him in a better position than many of Toronto's past starters, who have been part of the reason the Leafs have won only one playoff series in nearly 20 years.

Luckily for Woll, he has other pursuits that alleviate that pressure and work his mind in different ways: playing piano and writing music. In some ways, the structure of piano is similar to hockey, but when Woll is creating his own compositions, he's firing entirely new synapses. "It's pure creativity and letting my mind go every place it can," he said. "In goaltending, it's almost the opposite. You're very in the moment, and you keep returning to the moment. Creative thoughts aren't necessarily the most productive when you're in net and trying to focus on the puck. Playing piano, you can get in the flow of something, and that's very similar to hockey."

The Leafs believe Woll has the technical ability and demeanor to be a difference-maker in the crease. Staying healthy is the only question mark. Stolarz is coming off a Cup-winning season with the Panthers, where he posted a .925 save

### NET GAINS

Woll played 25 games as an NHL rookie last season. Barring injury, he may play twice as many games this year.

I still need to learn and experience things. Last year, there were different pockets of time where I was starting more or starting less, and the big thing I learned is that it's very different being a goalie who plays three times a week and a goalie who plays one game a week. It's very different in your mindset and how you take care of your body, and it was great seeing glimpses of that to look at where I fell short or wasn't doing what I needed to at the time. Those things are only granted through experience. Having the aspiration to be a starting goalie is a different animal than being in the AHL or only playing now and then."

Woll's dedication to improvement is evident to his teammates. "Joe's been great for us, and I know he had a great off-season," said defenseman Morgan Rielly. "He's a big

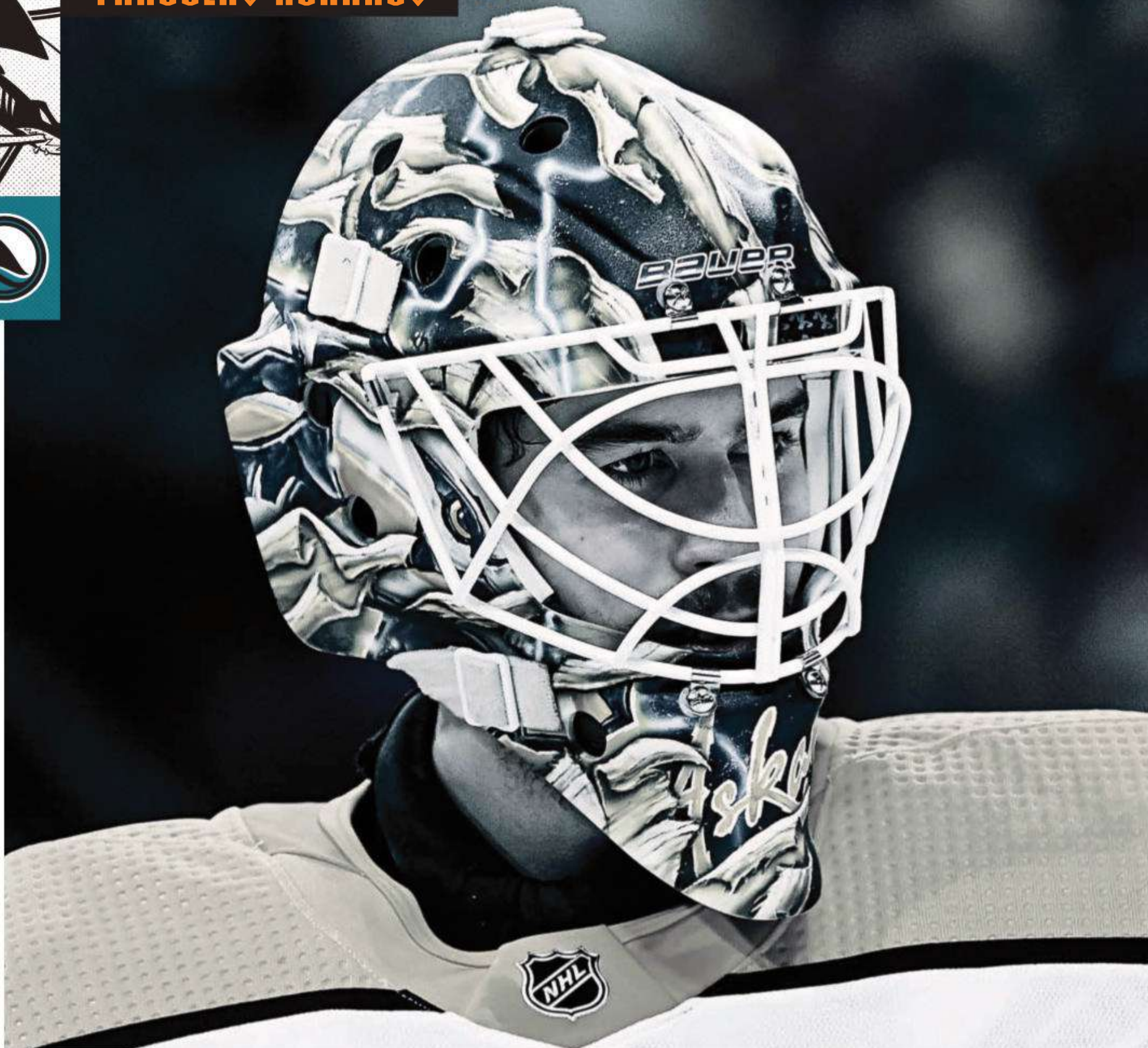
percentage in 27 games, and new Toronto coach Craig Berube noted that both Woll and Stolarz will likely play more games this season than they did last year. The mission is to make a deep playoff run and go for a championship this season, and while the Maple Leafs say achieving that goal will be a process that builds throughout the campaign, their sights are set high.

And if Woll can get Toronto to the top of the mountain in the NHL, his future trip to the Himalayas will seem like a walk in the park. **H**



TOP: JOHN E. SOKOLOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; MIDDLE: JOHN E. SOKOLOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS

YAROSLAV ASKAROV



# SINK OR SWIM

**THE TRADE TO THE SHARKS GIVES YAROSLAV ASKAROV EXACTLY WHAT THE PROMISING YOUNG NETMINDER HAS ALWAYS WANTED – THE CHANCE TO SHOW HE HAS WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A STARTING GOALIE IN THE NHL** BY JARED CLINTON

DAVID KIROUAC-USATODAY SPORTS



integral to the Sharks' decision to pull the trigger was the positive feedback from San Jose's resident crease experts, headed up by director of goaltending Evgeni Nabokov. And if anyone knows a thing or two about being a young Russian kid standing in the blue paint for the Sharks, it's Nabokov, who arrived in San Jose in 2000 as a 24-year-old and spent the next decade as the franchise's starting goalie.

When it comes to Askarov, though, Nabokov is quick to temper expectations. "Everybody has their own route to the NHL," Nabokov said. "Some kids adapt really quickly; some kids not. And to be honest with you, I don't know yet."

Don't take that to mean Nabokov isn't bullish on Askarov's

ability. The former Sharks stopper has had an eye on his compatriot since Askarov was a teenager, and Nabokov sees the same attributes as all who've watched Askarov: the size, the athleticism and the ability to read and stay ahead of the play. Nabokov also noted that Askarov's footwork and quickness is a step ahead of his peers.

However, despite Askarov's abundant talent, Nabokov doesn't want the Sharks to just hand the reins to the newcomer. "For us, what's important is that he has to earn it," Nabokov said. "That's huge for us. It's not all about how your structure is or your technique is. It's more than that. With a No. 1 goaltender, it's always the mental part of the game, the emotional part of the game, how you handle so many different things. Because if you want to be special, if you want to be that No. 1 goalie, it takes more than just being talented."

If there has been any criticism of Askarov, it's been the intangibles. But don't misconstrue that as a knock against his personality. His bench-pressing celebration after shootout wins in the AHL isn't an issue, nor is the edge he has to his game. "It's a competitive sport, and we want guys who compete hard every night, play with emotion and play with fire," Grier said. "Obviously, you have to reel it in and harness it in the right way, but it's hard to

play any sports at a high level without playing with emotion and fire."

But Askarov has lacked consistency. In his two AHL seasons, he's been among the league's top netminders, appearing in the All-Star Game in both campaigns. He's racked up 56 wins and nine shutouts in 92 regular-season outings on the farm. But Askarov also fumbled his starting gig in consecutive post-seasons, and he has posted a combined .897 save percentage and 2.85 goals-against average in the playoffs.

Few will begrudge a goalie of Askarov's age for not being a finished product, though, and the Sharks signing him to a two-year, \$4-million extension shortly after his ar-



### THE PUCK STOPS HERE

The Sharks have high hopes for Askarov, but he has to earn the No. 1 job; they're not simply going to hand it to him.

rival is an indication that while they believe in his ability, they aren't hitching their wagon to him quite yet.

All that means is that Askarov, with the Sharks in the nascent stages of a full-scale rebuild, will have room to

grow. He'll be given time to develop, to slip, to stumble. He'll even, according to Grier, accept more time in the AHL if need be, which was reportedly a sticking point for Askarov prior to moving to San Jose. And then, when the time comes, it will be up to Askarov to prove he can be the No. 1 he believes he can be. "For me, it's all about how bad do you want it," Nabokov said. "That's what it comes down to." **H**

**IT'S ONE THING TO** see the writing on the wall. It's another to see your future spelled out in flashing neon lights. And when Juuse Saros signed a mega-money extension with the Nashville Predators in July, followed not long after by the Preds' signing of veteran second-stringer Scott Wedgewood, upstart keeper Yaroslav Askarov couldn't ignore what was staring him in the face: a gargantuan sign letting him know that his hope of becoming an NHL No. 1 wasn't going to happen in Music City.

By all accounts, of course, this wasn't how it was supposed to happen. Drafted 11th overall in 2020, Askarov was – and still is – considered one of the top goaltending prospects in the world. He seemed destined to be shepherded into the top job in Nashville, much like Saros had been by Predators icon Pekka Rinne. But with Askarov's path to the NHL blocked by Saros' new long-term deal, he wanted a fresh start. He wanted a chance.

And in August, after a month of rumors and trade chatter, Askarov got it.

Days after reports surfaced Askarov had asked for a trade out of Nashville, the San Jose Sharks scooped up the 22-year-old netminder in a swap that GM Mike Grier said was a golden opportunity for his franchise. "We're very confident that he's going to be a No. 1," Grier said. "You don't have too many chances to add players of this caliber in this position. It's the hardest position to draft and develop and find, and to be able to get someone like this and add him to our group, we're really excited."

Not that Grier needed much cajoling to add a prospect as coveted as Askarov, but

# CHARLIE LINDGREN





# BETTER LATE THAN NEVER



**IT'S NOT OFTEN A 30-YEAR-OLD GOALIE BURSTS ONTO THE NHL SCENE. BUT CHARLIE LINDGREN FINALLY GOT THE CHANCE TO BE A NO. 1 NETMINDER LAST SEASON, AND HE REPAID THE CAPITALS WITH A BREAKTHROUGH PERFORMANCE**

BY BEN RABY

**I**F ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE COULD produce a model for an elite NHL goalie, Charlie Lindgren wouldn't be the prototype. Even Lindgren admits as much. He knows his resume: undrafted out of college, followed by six years spent mostly in the minors. Lindgren readily concedes he's neither the most naturally talented nor the biggest goalie in the world. Yet, try telling him he can't hang with the NHL's best at your peril.

"My ceiling? I believe I can be a top guy in this league," said Lindgren before the season.

If you chat with him at length about his career, there is plenty of deflection – his family, coaches, teammates, trainers and specialists are really the ones who made it all possible, according to Lindgren. Thanking others comes naturally for the native of Lakeville, Minn. One former teammate suggested Lindgren could be the mustached face of 'Minnesota Nice' and is, at times, humble to a fault.

But excuse the 30-year-old for breaking character to laud *himself* for his coming-out party in 2023-24. After spending the vast majority of his first six pro seasons in the AHL before serving as a backup in his first

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# CHARLIE LINDGREN



year in Washington, Lindgren finally broke through as an NHL starter last year.

"It was definitely the most fun I've had playing since college," he said. "It was my favorite year of pro hockey, probably the best I felt in my life in terms of what I was doing on the ice. I got in a really good rhythm and had a chance to take the ball and run with it."

Lindgren's ascent began organically enough. Injuries to Darcy Kuemper in the first half opened the door for Lindgren to earn regular playing time. Shutouts over the defending Stanley Cup-champion Vegas Golden Knights and his brother Ryan Lindgren's New York Rangers were early statements. As the sample size grew, so did the Capitals' trust in the goalie they affectionately call 'Chucky.'

"For many pockets of the year, he was among the best," said Capitals goalie coach Scott Murray. "He has a very strong mentality, and he put his head down and found that competitive spirit to push through."

By season's end, Lindgren had career highs across the board: 25 wins in 48 starts and tied for the league lead with six shutouts. A workhorse as the NHL's most frequently deployed goalie from Jan. 16 onward, Lindgren elevated his play as the

## NEW YEAR'S REVELATION

No NHL goaltender played more games than Lindgren from mid-January onward last season.

stakes grew higher. Along the way, he carried the load down the stretch, starting 19 of Washington's final 22 games and helping the Capitals secure an improbable playoff berth with a win in the season finale. "Playing a lot and play-

ing like a true starter was something I didn't take lightly," said Lindgren, who at 6-foot-2 and 180 pounds, is marginally slight for an NHL goalie. "Obviously, my journey has been long, and there have been times where maybe it was frustrating. I've faced a good amount of adversity in my career. But it all led me to this moment. It was something that was very special."

To Lindgren's point, his career hasn't exactly been linear since signing with the Montreal Canadiens after his junior year at St. Cloud State in 2016. His five seasons in the Habs' organization were primarily spent with their AHL affiliate, with only occasional NHL recalls. When he finally had a lengthy stay with the Canadiens, it came as a taxi-squad goalie during the pandemic-abbreviated 2020-21 season.

"I got frustrated towards the end there," Lindgren said. "It wasn't easy. Carey (Price) and (Jake) Allen were in the nets, taking all the reps, and I'd be on the sheet just trying to find ice to be able to move around and

better myself. I wasn't playing any games. At that point, the well was running dry."

A fresh start came with a one-year, two-way deal from St. Louis for 2021-22. Lindgren was recruited primarily to serve as a mentor for Blues prospect Joel Hofer in AHL Springfield, but he ultimately revived his own NHL aspirations.

Under the tutelage of Blues goalie coach Dave Alexander, Lindgren polished his game with technical improvements. Lindgren admits that early in his career, he relied on instincts and raw athletic ability to make saves, sometimes unconventionally. Starting with the Blues, he's worked on implementing a narrower stance, which allows him to be more positionally sound and leaves him better equipped to read plays off the rush.

In Washington, he's prioritized improved puck-tracking while trusting a quick glove hand that he frequently uses across his body to snatch pucks on his blocker side and kill plays or rebound opportunities.

"With St. Louis, they built some structure in his game and foundational pieces he could rely on along with the natural instincts he has to be a puckstopper," Murray said. "His game as he came up wasn't necessarily cookie-cutter, so adding some foundational pieces allowed him to grow and have a good season with Springfield, and when he got in with St. Louis, he made the most of it."





Lindgren went 5-0-0 during a cameo with the Blues in December 2021, posting a 1.22 goals-against average and .958 save percentage. The Capitals took notice and, on the same day they signed Kuemper to a five-year deal averaging \$5.25 million per season, Lindgren inked a three-year pact with a \$1.1-million AAV. For the Caps, it was a cost-efficient signing. For Lindgren, it was the multi-year, one-way contract he yearned for.

“Washington seemed like a really good fit,” he said. “Knowing (fellow St. Cloud State alums) Nic Dowd and Nick Jensen and seeing them over the years and how they talked

Carbery was hired as Capitals coach in the spring of 2023. Lindgren told Carbery that he had used his first year in Washington to get his foot in the door as a full-time NHL backup. In Year 2, Lindgren said, he planned to blow the door open.

“He’s such an easy guy to root for because he’s such a quality person,” Carbery said. “He works so hard, and all he cares about is the team doing well. Any time that comes off as genuine and your teammates recognize it and they’re around it, it’s easy to see why guys really pull for him and have so much respect for him.”

competitor or battler traits, I wouldn’t be here today,” Lindgren said. “There are a lot of guys who can rely on talent and skill and size. That’s not me. But my compete and my will to win, I pride myself on having that among the best.”

Bob Motzko, Lindgren’s coach at St. Cloud State for three years, saw those traits firsthand. “He was a tough-minded kid when we had him,” Motzko said. “Just a mean competitor. It’s not surprising that whatever was in front of him along his journey, he was going to battle through it and be ready for an opportunity when it came his way. Mental ups

## “HE GIVES ME BRADEN HOLTBY VIBES OF STAYING INVOLVED IN PLAYS AND MAKING SAVES ON PLAYS HE HAS NO BUSINESS MAKING – CAPITALS TV ANALYST KARL ALZNER

about D.C. and being a Capital, that gave me a ton of reasons to come here. My first two years, I can’t say enough good things.”

While Lindgren’s breakthrough season caught many by surprise, he never doubted his ability to carry the load. He shared the belief with Spencer Carbery soon after

There’s an underdog appeal to Lindgren, who coaches and teammates laud for his work ethic and competitiveness. “He gives me (Braden) Holtby vibes of staying involved in plays and making saves he has no business making,” said retired defenseman Karl Alzner, who played with Lindgren in Montreal and is now an analyst on Caps telecasts. “He’s constantly giving that extra effort where, a lot of times, you could pack it in.”

Lindgren also brings a unique personality. After wins last season, the victory song that played in the dressing room was a cover that Lindgren recorded himself of Eric Church’s *Talladega*, with Lindgren providing vocals and playing guitar.

“Chucky has come a long way,” said Dowd, a college teammate of Lindgren’s in 2013-14. “Without even knowing it, he’s become a leader.”

Added Carbery: “He carries a lot of weight in our room.”

Lindgren credits his parents for instilling his blue-collar work ethic at a young age. His father, Bob, a one-time collegiate goalie at Michigan, had Lindgren in pads by 10. The oldest of three boys, Lindgren had plenty of competition at home. But it was on the ice as he navigated high school and college where his mental make-up and compete level stuck out the most. “If I didn’t have my

and downs weren’t going to stop him. He was going to battle through.”

Lindgren’s compete level and work ethic have also been complemented by more resources. In the summer of 2023, before his breakthrough season, Lindgren put a greater emphasis on body fluidity. He cut back on heavy weightlifting and hired mobility coach Grace Witthuhn in Minnesota. He again worked with Witthuhn this summer while visiting a new chiropractor and physical therapist. Strengthening his core after missing a couple of weeks early last season with a lower-back issue was a priority. “I tell people all the time, when I look back on my career, one thing I know I’ll be able to say is I didn’t have any regrets, and I didn’t waste any days,” he said. “I want to be the best version of myself I can be, and I’m going to give myself every chance to do that.”

Now, as he enters a contract year, Lindgren may be leaned on even more. The summer trades that sent Kuemper to Los Angeles and saw Logan Thompson arrive in Washington leave Lindgren as the Caps’ most experienced goalie. While Lindgren and Thompson – who had 42 starts last year with Vegas – will compete for playing time, there’s an organizational belief Lindgren’s play last year has earned him a longer leash. Lindgren isn’t shying away from the challenge of replicating last year’s success.

“As far as recapturing it, I think experience helps a lot,” he said. “This is my ninth season as a pro. Playing a lot last year, that’s going to springboard me. That gives me a ton of confidence right off the bat that I can play at a high level. So, I’m excited. Definitely felt like I made a name for myself, and I want to continue to do that.” **H**



CHARLIE LINDGREN & ALEX OVECHKIN

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UKKO-PEKKA LUUKKONEN



# BUFFALO



# HUNT

## 'WHEN THE PUCK DROPS, ALL THAT MATTERS IS WINNING.' THE CHALLENGE IS SIMPLE FOR UKKO-PEKKA LUUKKONEN: LEAD THE LONG-STRUGGLING SABRES INTO THE PLAYOFFS FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE 2011

BY RYAN KENNEDY



**O** **N A SUNNY AUTUMN** afternoon in Buffalo, Sabres fans eschewed the outside warmth in favor of the cold grasp of LECOM Harborcenter, where the franchise's prospects were dominating their peers from the Columbus Blue Jackets system as part of an annual rookie tournament. As the Buffalo faithful high-fived in celebration of Jiri Kulich's latest snipe, members of the here-and-now Sabres were getting in a skate before training camp at KeyBank Center, the NHL arena conveniently connected to LECOM by a pedestrian bridge. Among the skaters was Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, the 25-year-old goaltender who has positioned himself as Buffalo's best hope between the pipes as the Sabres attempt to make the playoffs for the first time since 2011. Coming off career-best totals of 54 games, 27 wins and a 2.57 goals-against average, the towering goalie known as 'UPL' was far from the weak link on last year's Sabres team, which felt like it could've broken through for a post-season slot in the Atlantic. Instead, it was a combination of injuries to key players and a slow start – prefaced by what felt like a misstep in forcing prospect goalie Devon Levi into an early starter's role – that doomed Buffalo.

But there is reason to believe the Sabres can exorcise their demons. Lindy Ruff, who guided the franchise to its most recent Stanley Cup final way back in 1999, is back behind the bench, replacing Don Granato – a fantastic development teacher of a coach who unfortunately couldn't get the team enough wins in the end. "Everybody's really excited that we have Lindy here now," Luukkonen said. "Donny pushed us and helped a lot of players get to another level, but now getting a new coach and everybody knowing what the goal is, we want to be more ready for the season. We know how important this season is. I'm really excited, and everybody else is, too."

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For the most part, Buffalo will have to rely on internal growth (and health) to improve, though off-season additions Ryan McLeod, Sam Lafferty and Beck Malenstyn will fortify the bottom six up front. A full season of Bowen Byram – acquired before the 2024 trade deadline from Colorado – will elevate the blueline. But enough about the Sabres on paper; they know they have to prove their worth on the ice. “I feel like everybody has a chip on their shoulders,” Luukkonen said. “Even though I personally had a good year last season, it doesn’t matter how well you do yourself. In the end, all that matters is how well the team does. It’s a passionate sports city, and everybody feels that. We want to make the playoffs, but the more important thing is to start well. That was the problem last year. We were sliding from the start.”

The Sabres made sure to give Luukkonen a big vote of confidence as they head into this crucial campaign, and it came during the summer in the form of a new five-year contract with a \$4.75-million annual cap hit. With new backup James Reimer making \$1 million on a one-year pact, and Levi and Felix Sandstrom making even less, it is Luukkonen’s crease to lose. “Taking a deep dive with goaltending coach Mike Bales, to the analytics, to looking at everything, gave me comfort that he’s still getting better,” said Sabres GM Kevyn Adams. “When you make a long-term commitment to a player, you really want to feel confident that they still have room to grow and get better, and we felt that ‘UPL’ took a big step last year, but he has an opportunity to continue to grow and get better and better. I just think he showed a maturity about him last year, a calmness, and it takes time. Especially as a young goaltender, to get to that spot where you believe every time you step on the ice that you can win hockey games.”

For his part, Luukkonen spent the summer both recharging and continuing to push his game. The 6-foot-

**“ I FEEL LIKE EVERYBODY HAS A CHIP ON THEIR SHOULDERS. EVEN THOUGH I PERSONALLY HAD A GOOD YEAR LAST SEASON, IT DOESN'T MATTER – UKKO-PEKKA LUUKKONEN**

5, 215-pound Finn went back to Helsinki, where he spent time with family and friends at cabins, taking in the famous Finnish saunas while also golfing and swimming in lakes. When it was business time, he honed

his game on the ice. “It’s always good to go back home and work on the game,” he said. “There’s always details you can smooth out. Just focusing on how important patience is. And my stance, being more balanced on my



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feet, keeping my chest more upright, finding more power from there. And, of course, getting stronger in my legs and core so I can move better and be faster on the ice.”

Should the Sabres manage to finally end their playoff drought, goaltending will be key in a stacked Atlantic Division. Not only does the Atlantic boast top scorers such as Auston Matthews, David Pastrnak and Nikita Kucherov, but many of Buffalo’s rivals have excellent goalies of their own, including Andrei Vasilevskiy, Linus Ullmark (now in Ottawa), Sergei Bobrovsky and Jeremy Swayman. For Luukkonen, he doesn’t mind the competition. “It’s great to see all the great goalies,” he said. “Every night, you have to perform and beat

the guy at the other end. Being a goalie, you try to be somewhat of a friend because you know how it is to be a goalie, but when the puck drops, all that matters is winning. It’s great having that competition in the division.”

Just how many starts Luukkonen can earn against those friendly foes this season remains to be seen. Ruff and Adams agreed that it takes more than one netminder to be successful in today’s NHL, though it’s worth noting that if Levi needs starts, the AHL may be the best place for him to do so at the moment. Reimer is a capable backup at this point in his career, so there are options to make sure Luukkonen doesn’t burn out. “It’s really a two-goalie league

**DEEP ATLANTIC**

The Sabres’ quest to crack the playoffs means holding their own in a division with plenty of star power.

now,” Adams said. “And, to be quite honest, that’s why I feel good about the depth we added in the off-season with Reimer and Sandstrom. You could need three, and we’ve been in a position where we needed four. I

of the Sabres feels deeper than the franchise has seen in a long time.

In the meantime, Luukkonen has found a second home in Buffalo. “The more time I’ve spent here, the more I like it,” he said. “For a Finnish guy, it feels kind of like home, not only weather-wise, but also it’s not too



**“WE FELT THAT ‘UPL’ TOOK A BIG STEP LAST YEAR, BUT HE HAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO CONTINUE TO GROW AND GET BETTER AND BETTER**

– SABRES GM KEVYN ADAMS

think we’re set up with depth, which I think is really helpful, but we’ll monitor it.”

Needless to say, the Sabres know their fans have been far beyond patient when it comes to the team’s lack of success. That goalie depth is one way of ensuring that no scenario is left unprotected. And while injuries can’t be forecast, this iteration

big of a city. Everybody is really friendly, and I’ve gotten to know some people outside of hockey, too.”

He cheers for the NFL’s Bills and gets out to games when he can, so Luukkonen knows what it’s like when things are good for a sports team in Buffalo. The challenge now is to get those good vibes going on the ice and keep them going until the city is again warm enough for short sleeves – and hot for some Stanley Cup playoff action. **H**

BOB FRID-USA TODAY SPORTS



**IT WASN'T SO LONG AGO GOALTENDERS HAD TO RACE TO THE BENCH BETWEEN WHISTLES TO GET A DRINK. BUT THEN CAME A RADICAL ACT – PUTTING A WATER BOTTLE ON TOP OF THE NET** BY AL DANIEL



# GOALIES GET THIRSTY, TOO

**O**VER THE FIRST WEEKEND of 1985, Scott Gordon launched perhaps the most consequential goaltending revolution this side of Jacques Plante's first mask. And all because his Boston College athletic trainer prescribed an incidental New Year's resolution. These days, Gordon still takes magnesium to prevent cramping. Back then, he adhered to a then-uncontested myth that *any* liquid provided hydration. By indulging in diet soda between on-ice sessions, he parched

his system and invited discomfort by game-time. "Nothing was stopping it," he said.

Coming off college hockey's multi-week mid-season break for term finals and holiday respites, he only felt more out of synch when trying to restore his rhythm. And over a three-game homestand at the end of the 1984 calendar year, BC went 2-0-1 but surrendered 16 goals.

When the Eagles went to Wisconsin for a post-New Year's series, Gordon followed the trainer's directive to increase his water and Gatorade intake before games. But there

called "an abnormal amount of shots," he backstopped BC to 5-2 and 6-2 victories.

Results aside, nothing was stopping this custom. Today, uninformed millennials and Gen Zers may assume that the most physically taxing and isolating position in team sports always came with an arm's reach access to hydration.

That assumption may equal the way Gen Xers and boomers couldn't fathom taking to the crease without facial protection. Gordon took that for granted so much, he ranks his happenstance game-changer ahead of

was an additional urge to refuel amid the action itself, and up to that point, his only recourse was to hustle to the bench between plays and borrow a water bottle.

The solution of storing his water bottle on top of the net for limitless, short-order fixes was equal parts simple and radical. Upon spotting the novel tactic, the referee approached Gordon to question him.

"I need to have something to drink during the play," Gordon said, "and I can't go to the bench every whistle."

His explanation sufficed, and while the Badgers besieged Gordon with what he



## GOOD TO THE LAST DROP

Florida's Sergei Bobrovsky sends a geyser of water into the air during a break in play.

Plante's. "For me, it was No. 1, because as I got older, it got harder to get through games without cramping," he said.

As his contemporaries and successors have proved, fulfilling a shift without exposing some idiosyncrasies is similarly tough. Just as the permanent advent of masks opened the floodgates for self-expression, solo water bottles unveil other personality traits.

Throughout the 2010s, Braden Holtby was an attention magnet for preceding the opening faceoff by setting off a geyser and gazing at his work. It was a way of resetting himself between plays, and the habit spread to other netminders. "It's like they're tracking the puck," Gordon said, "(but) they're tracking the drops of water."

— who represent the NHL's coldest locale — scoffing at the need.

Those Oilers were, incidentally, the last dynasty defined by overwhelming firepower. Has the subsequent universal acceptance of on-demand hydration for goaltenders helped to douse that phenomenon for good?

"I think it's certainly a small part of it," said Chris Terreri, a 406-game NHL veteran who benefitted from New Jersey's trap system in the 1990s.

He added that goalies and their equipment have bulked up while shooters have grown stronger and sharper. "Every little bit, every little edge you get, you try to keep it," he said.

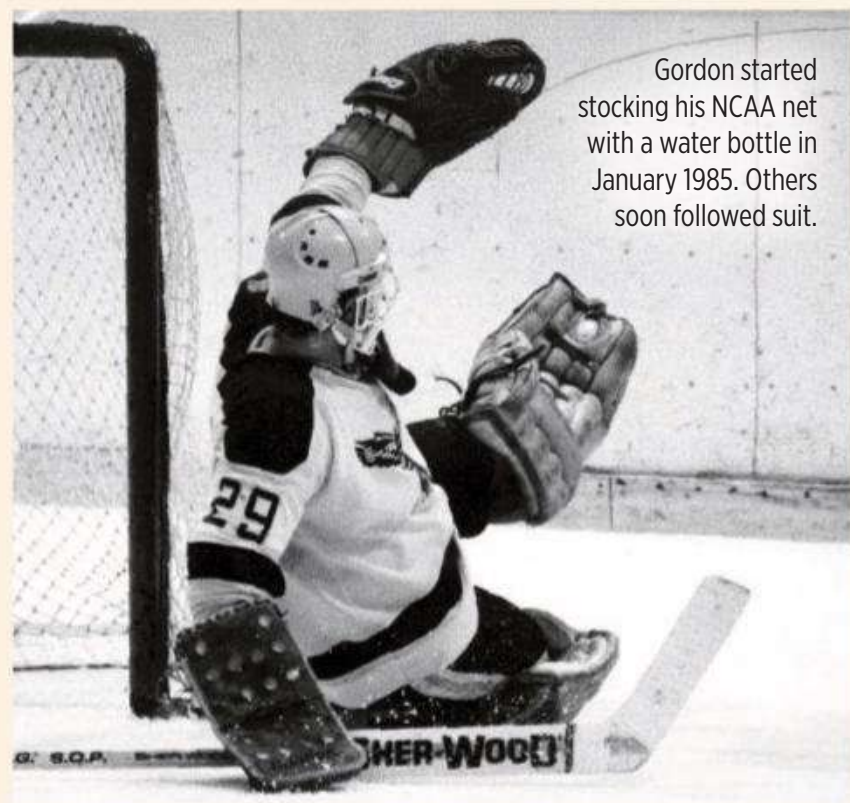
In mid-March 1985, the new edge for netminders was balanced at the Providence Civic Center. The Hockey East championship between Gordon's Eagles and Terreri's Providence Friars presented the first popularly documented case of both goalies stor-

Terreri said, "so I probably would have melted away without it."

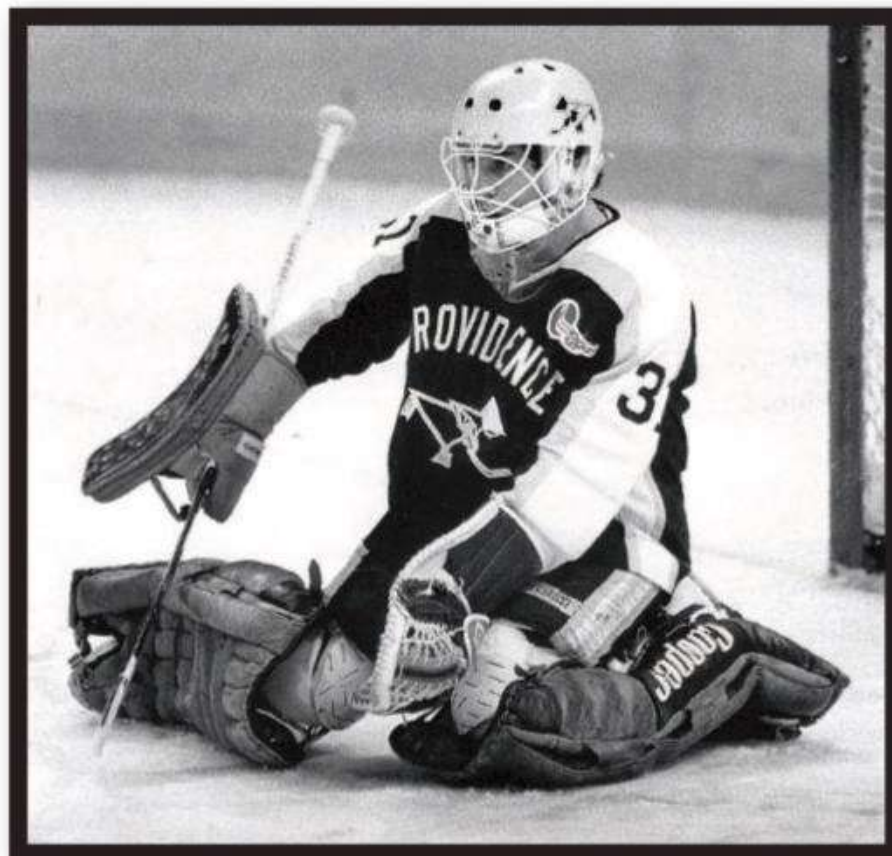
Instead, after Gordon blinked in each staring contest — by scores of 2-1 and 4-3 — Terreri claimed the most-outstanding-player titles in the conference and national tournaments.

The increased workloads and venue sizes from campus to AHL to NHL previewed what both men confronted when they turned pro. "The buildings are warmer, the pressure and stress are a little bit higher, and I was a person that can sweat anywhere from 12 to 15 pounds a game," Gordon said. "It eventually catches up to you."

It also came back around for him to see from behind the bench. On May 9, 2018, Gordon coached the victorious Lehigh Valley Phantoms in the AHL's longest-ever playoff game. Alex Lyon repelled all but one of the Charlotte Checkers' 95 shots in 146 minutes and 48 seconds of action. But



Gordon started stocking his NCAA net with a water bottle in January 1985. Others soon followed suit.



In another sense, goaltenders can rebaptize themselves to expel the demons after surrendering a soft goal. Even without physical thirst, they crave a literal palate cleanser to rinse away the setback's figurative vinegar.

"It has a few other purposes," Gordon said. "But by and large, it's mostly just for hydration."

After that purpose first prompted the practice in the winter of 1985, it grew more acute by spring. That year's NHL post-season stretched to May 30 for the first time, and the finalist Philadelphia Flyers wanted some mercy for their keepers. One dispatch from that series by the *Los Angeles Times* had the opposing Edmonton Oilers

ing water behind their backs.

"It's kind of funny, I guess," said Terreri of that aspect of his legacy. "It's better than being remembered for giving up a lot of bad goals."

As it happened, the Eagles-Friars contest that night and another two weeks later in the NCAA semifinal at Detroit's Joe Louis Arena were significantly lower-scoring than most other games in that post-season. More crucially, the water's benefits arrived amid intensifying elements. The conference title game required two overtimes, and the rematch took a third bonus period.

"I probably weighed about 140 pounds,"

## GOALIE DROUGHT

As a 140-pound goalie in his college days, Terreri says he would have "melted away" without a water bottle.

sympathy for the skaters was equally warranted. "Their legs were tightening," Gordon said. "Players had to miss shifts."

As for the two generations of goalies, there were no you-kids-don't-know-the-half-of-it lectures. "We were just happy

to have won the game," Gordon said.

He emits the same typical hockey humility when assessing his role in history, deflecting the credit to the metaphorical mother of invention.

"I was part of it," Gordon said, "but it wasn't like I was trying to create something or be an innovator. It just happened out of necessity." **H**



## FLORIDA PANTHERS

# LOOK FOR CARTER IN THE CLUTCH

Carter Verhaeghe's aptitude for producing in the big moments has been a pivotal reason for the Panthers' success, and it could land him a spot on Team Canada **BY CAROL SCHRAM**

**IT'S NO SECRET THAT** Doug Armstrong has a nearly impossible task ahead of him in setting Team Canada's star-laden roster for this February's 4 Nations Face-Off.

Over the past five seasons, Carter Verhaeghe has turned nearly every childhood street-hockey fantasy into reality. He would love to add a Team Canada experience to that box of

memories. "Playing for Canada would be a cool thing," Verhaeghe said. "I've done it once, at the U-18s. That's definitely another thing that you're thinking about as a kid growing up."

With Florida's Aleksander Barkov, Matthew Tkachuk and Gustav Forsling each on the 4 Nations' first-six lists for their respective countries, Canada is the only team that does not yet

have a representative from the reigning Stanley Cup champions on its roster.

Higher-profile players are in the mix, but how many can match Verhaeghe's highlight reel? Game 7 overtime goal against Boston to cap off Florida's first-round comeback from 3-1 down in 2023? Check. First goal in Game 7 of the 2024 Stanley Cup final?

Yep, he did that, too. And the primary assist on Sam Reinhart's Cup-winning goal? Yes, he can dish as well as snipe.

In just four years, Verhaeghe has become Florida's franchise leader with 26 playoff goals. He's second only to Barkov in post-season points. His 10 game-winning playoff goals over the past three seasons are four more than any other player league-wide. And his five playoff overtime winners tie him for third-most all-time, behind only Joe Sakic (eight) and Maurice

Richard (six). And don't forget one Cup ring for each hand.

The man they call 'Swaggy' is clutch.

But while it's all sunshine now in South Florida, there were many dark days along the way.

Drafted by Toronto in the third round in 2013, Verhaeghe bounced around the minors for four years before playing his first NHL game at 24 with the Tampa Bay Lightning in 2019.

Less than a year after his big-league debut, Verhaeghe hoisted the Stanley Cup inside the bubble at Rogers Place in Edmonton. The pandemic festivities were limited to a skeleton crew, but Verhaeghe's father, Thomas, travelled from Waterdown, Ont., and went through the quarantine process in order to share that unique moment with his son.







## WORKING OVERTIME

Verhaeghe has scored more playoff OT goals than all but two players in NHL history – Sakic and Richard.

When free agency opened 11 days later, new Florida GM Bill Zito made Verhaeghe one of his first signings. It was the left winger's first one-way deal, on a two-year term that offered some security. But he wasn't ready to immediately cut ties with his Lightning teammates. "I remember signing the contract," he said, "then going to celebrate with the Cup on a boat."

The Sunshine State rivalry has intensified as the Panthers have improved, but the two organizations operate like competitive siblings, each striving for the upper hand while working together to grow the game.

In 2021, the Bolts' big-brother status held firm as they captured another Cup. On the other side, Verhaeghe flourished. He approached a point per game in the regular season while playing top-six minutes. And when the two sides met in the first round of the playoffs, Verhaeghe logged his first two playoff goals – with many more to come.



The Panthers took another step in 2021-22, winning the Presidents' Trophy for the first time. Verhaeghe became one of the league's best-value players, hitting career highs of 24 goals and 55 points. Six more goals came in the playoffs, including three straight game-winners as the Panthers eliminated Washington for their first playoff series win since 1996.

The arrivals of Matthew

Tkachuk and coach Paul Maurice for 2022-23 elevated the Panthers to another level. Verhaeghe exploded for 42 goals, then added 17 playoff points on a gruelling journey to the Cup final. He followed that up with 11 goals and 21 points in the 2024 playoffs. Ultimately, he found himself right back in Edmonton – this time playing to capacity crowds as the Oilers pushed the final to a Game 7.

Back in Sunrise, after a two-point night and a 2-1 win, Verhaeghe celebrated his second Cup with family, friends and a South Florida fan base that has come to love its puck. "When I first got here, I wouldn't get recognized anywhere," he said. "But now, it seems like there's hockey fans all over the place. There are so many people that are new to the game, and I think it's huge, especially going to the final for two years in a row. It's really become a hockey town."

During the playoffs, wedding planning was also in progress. On July 27, at the Four Seasons Palm Beach, Verhaeghe married Casey Engleson, a Floridian he met after joining the Panthers. And while his second day with the Cup back in Waterdown was an encore opportunity to embrace the community where he grew up, the couple's Fort Lauderdale beach-area residence is now the place they call home.

Verhaeghe's path with the Panthers neatly fits the script that team president Matt Caldwell laid out when describing the club's goal of becoming a destination franchise. "That means it's a place where people want to live, they want to build their families, want to be in these communities like South Florida," Caldwell said. "At the same time, be part of a very first-class, top-tier hockey operation that has traditions, wins and that's committed to win the Stanley Cup."

Verhaeghe says that his impressive career arc has come from sticking with the process and maintaining his self-belief. As he plays out the final year of his contract, he hopes his next deal will keep him in the market where he's had so much success and begun to put down roots. He believes he still has even more to give. "I always knew I was a really good player and could be a really good player," he said. "I still feel the same way, that I haven't exactly reached my potential yet."

If he does raise his game even more, realizing that childhood dream of donning the maple leaf is a real possibility. **H**



## MONTREAL CANADIENS

# TWO-WAY THREAT, TWO WAYS

Whether it's language or on the ice, Montreal's Nick Suzuki is making every effort to be a versatile leader **BY MICHAEL TRAIKOS**

**GIVE NICK SUZUKI CREDIT.** At least he's making an effort. Still, confusing the French word for "change" with "trade" caused a kerfuffle when the Montreal Canadiens captain tried explaining to a Tim Hortons employee that he no longer wanted his usual drink.

"What? Suzuki was traded!" the employee said in French,

setting off an accidental chain reaction of panic throughout the restaurant that made its way to the drive-thru window, where Habs PR director, Chantal Machabee, happened to be placing her order.

"Quoi?!?" asked Machabee.

It was all part of a commercial, both poking fun – and praising – the young captain's ongoing journey to becoming

fluent in French. As most Quebecois will tell you, they appreciate the attempt. And Suzuki, who has shot multiple commercials in his not-so-native tongue, is doing everything he can to fit in and win over fans as he enters his sixth year in *La Belle Province*. "My French is actually pretty good," Suzuki said at September's NHL/NHLPA Player Media Tour in Las Vegas, while Machabee smiled from a seat over. "Obviously, it's tough to have a conversation. I'm not quite there yet. They speak pretty fast."

Entering his third year as captain, Suzuki is proving to be a quick learner. Known more as a two-way center who can match up against the other team's best players, Suzuki showed he's a handful for defenders as well, scoring a career-best 33 goals

## MR. EVERYTHING

The Habs rely on Suzuki to do it all: score, shut down opponents, anchor the power play and kill penalties.

and 77 points last season. He finished tied for 30th overall in the scoring race. But among centers, only six – Auston Matthews, Leon Draisaitl, J.T. Miller, Sidney Crosby, Steven Stamkos and Sebastian Aho – had more goals, more points and a better faceoff percentage than the 25-year-old. "I thought it was pretty good," he said. "Each year, I'm trying to get better. Last year, I was really able to take both sides of the game where I wanted to be and keep growing in those positions. I think I can keep getting better."

The Habs, who had the worst record in the Atlantic Division last year, hope to take a similar step forward. With 2022 No. 1 overall pick Juraj Slafkovsky coming off a breakout 20-goal season and the cupboard stocked with top-end prospects such as David Reinbacher, Ivan Demidov and Michael Hage, Suzuki is done talking rebuild. "Personally, I feel like you can't just keep stockpiling prospects," he said. "At some point, not every prospect that you draft is going to turn into probably what you thought of him. Not everyone makes the team. The guys that do, it's our job to keep getting better."

To that end, GM Kent Hughes sent a strong message to his team this summer when he acquired Patrik Laine from Columbus. In Laine, the Canadiens have a player with 50-goal potential. It's now up to coach Martin St-Louis, along with Suzuki, to bring out that potential after some difficult years for the 2016 draft's No. 2 overall pick.

"I was excited to get him on the team," Suzuki said. "Getting Patty kind of solidifies our top six and puts guys in positions to succeed, whether that be on the third or fourth line. I think we'll have four really good lines at forward and a lot of depth."

Unfortunately for Suzuki and the Habs, that new scor-

ing depth will be delayed after Laine sustained a knee injury in the pre-season that will keep him out until at least December.

In the meantime, Suzuki will continue to be one of the league's most versatile players. After all, how many skaters can kill penalties as well as anchor the power play? How many can play first-line minutes while also matching up against the opponent's top line? His ability to play on both sides of the puck has made him an outside candi-

killer and playing less minutes, that's fine with me. Obviously, the forwards who are already on the team are really high-end, so if I make the team, I just want to carve out a role that can help the team win."

Though most pundits are ruling out the playoffs for Montreal this year, Suzuki isn't. It's not like his previous playoff runs were expected. As a rookie, Suzuki helped the Habs grab an unlikely post-season spot in the pandemic-shortened 2019-20



date to grab one of the depth spots on Canada's 4 Nations Face-Off roster.

"I obviously want to be on that team," he said, adding that there's extra motivation because Montreal is a host city for the February event. "I've thought about it a lot. Putting on a Canadian jersey in Montreal would be pretty fun. So, hopefully, I can make that happen.

"I'm a player that can kind of be put in any situation. I can play fourth line, I can shut other guys down, play a shutdown role with my team every single night. So, yeah, I like to be put in that position. If I'm penalty

season, when they upset Pittsburgh in the best-of-five qualification round in the Toronto bubble. The next year, Montreal advanced past Toronto, Winnipeg and Vegas to earn a spot in the final – although home games were played in front of a mostly empty arena. "I want to be in the playoffs," Suzuki said. "I've been in the playoffs twice now, and they haven't been under normal circumstances. So, I haven't got to play at the Bell Centre in front of a sold-out crowd. That's definitely something I'm itching for this year."

As the French would say, "tout est possible." **H**



# ATLANTIC DIVISION

## GOALTENDING FUTURE

BY JARED CLINTON



With Jeremy Swayman as the Bruins' long-term No. 1 and new arrival Joonas Korpisalo locked up for another four years, the outlook for **BRANDON BUSSI** isn't rosy at the moment. But don't write off the 26-year-old's potential to push for NHL backup duty as early as next season. In 2023-24, he tied for the second-best save percentage among AHL keepers to play in 40-plus games, and he was an AHL all-rookie teamer the season prior. He's talented. Now, he just needs a path to the big leagues.



The baptism by fire didn't quite work for **DEVON LEVI** last season. So, the Sabres adjusted, bringing in James Reimer this summer to serve as the team's No. 2 netminder. That will allow for Levi, 22, to get more seasoning in the AHL, where he excelled last year. Of course, Levi will only be able to establish himself as Buffalo's future No. 1 goalie if he can outduel 25-year-old Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen. It's a young and promising duo, and eventually, Buffalo will be forced to decide between the two talented stoppers.



**SEBASTIAN COSSA'S** impressive trajectory over the past three seasons – WHL standout to ECHL all-star to AHL starter – puts the Red Wings in an excellent position, especially as the 21-year-old is going to be given time to build on last season's success. What puts Detroit in an enviable position, too, is that Trey Augustine, 19, is likewise on a great development path. After taking Team USA to gold at last year's WJC, he then won a Big Ten championship and took home conference-tourney MVP honors for Michigan State.



The Panthers future-proofed their crease by drafting **SPENCER KNIGHT** in 2019, and his potential was evident when he made four NHL appearances (plus two playoff starts) at age 20. Now 23, and having returned to the AHL last season after taking time away to focus on his health, Knight will be back in Florida this year to serve as Sergei Bobrovsky's backup. The Panthers still believe in Knight, and he'll be given the chance to push for the starting job as Bobrovsky's contract inches toward its 2026 expiration.



With 11 goalies in the system, the Habs have taken a volume approach to finding their next great goalie. For now, Montreal is happy with Sam Montembeault and Cayden Primeau. But down the line, the Canadiens' hopes are potentially pinned on **JACOB FOWLER**. The 19-year-old was an NCAA first-team all-American last season, and his .926 save percentage was second-best among 30-game starters – and that was as a freshman. He's returning to Boston College this fall, and Montreal will be watching him intently.



In 27 NHL appearances, **MADS SOGAARD** has posted an .884 SP and 3.44 GAA. But don't give up on the 23-year-old, especially as his stats have no doubt been hindered by some substandard defending in Ottawa the past three seasons. For a goaltender his size – and he's been gifted with a towering 6-foot-7 frame – Sogaard is deceptively explosive. It's a winning combination, and one he used to put up career-best AHL numbers last season. He's not ready yet, but he's not far off.



At first blush, **HUGO ALNEFELT** signing a three-year pact in Sweden would suggest there's no future for the 23-year-old in Tampa Bay, especially as his departure comes after three mediocre campaigns in the AHL. But a return to Sweden could do wonders for Alnefelt, who immediately slots into starting duty in one of Europe's top leagues. If Alnefelt fails to pan out, the next in line for Andrei Vasilevskiy's throne is 19-year-old Harrison Meneghin. But the 2024 seventh-rounder isn't really on the NHL radar yet.



**DENNIS HILDEBY** got his feet wet in the AHL at the end of 2022-23 before camping himself in the Toronto Marlies' crease last season. The 23-year-old made his case as the Leafs' goalie of the future by finishing tied for fifth in the AHL with four shutouts and posting a solid .913 SP. If he continues his current trajectory, he'll become a nightmare for opposing shooters. At 6-foot-7 and 222 pounds, he would've been tied for tallest goalie in the NHL last season – and he would've been one of the bulkiest, too.


**CAROLINA HURRICANES**

# SLAVIN SHOOTS AND SCORES, TOO

Known as one of the best defensive defensemen in the NHL, Jacob Slavin is on his way to becoming the Hurricanes' all-time leader in offense from the blueline **BY MICHAEL TRAIKOS**

**A**S A STAY-AT-HOME defenseman who has never scored more than eight goals in a season, Jacob Slavin knows where his strengths lie and what his role is with the Carolina Hurricanes.

He's not going to skate the puck from one end to the other like Cale Makar or Quinn Hughes. Nor is he going to blast

slappers from the point like Brent Burns. He's a shutdown specialist, one who is valued more for his shot-blocking ability and knack for keeping the puck out of his own net – rather than trying to put it into the opponent's cage.

As such, Slavin has never once led Hurricanes defensemen in scoring in a season. But

because he's played each of his nine NHL seasons with the same team, Slavin is already the franchise's all-time leader among defensemen in assists, points and pretty much every other meaningful statistical offensive category.

The only one he's missing is goals. But just give it some time. After this summer, when Slavin inked an eight-year extension with the Canes that kicks in for 2025-26, it's a matter of when – not if – the 30-year-old will go down as Carolina's most offensive defenseman.

For someone who has built an identity around doing the exact opposite, it's a testament to Slavin's longevity and loyalty more than anything else. "I'm just thankful that I get to have that opportunity to play there my whole career," he said.

**STORM WATCH**

Slavin will be tested this year after the Hurricanes lost three blueline regulars to off-season free agency.

TO WEAR THE SAME JERSEY FOR WHAT I HOPE TO BE MY WHOLE CAREER IS AN INCREDIBLE FEELING

– Jacob Slavin

When Slavin hangs up his skates, there's a good chance his No. 74 will be raised to the Lenovo Center rafters. But when asked how it feels to have his entire hockey identity wrapped up in the Canes, the Colorado native seemed a bit uneasy with that characterization.

"There's a lot that goes into that," he said. "From a hockey perspective, it's awesome. To be able to wear the same jersey for what seemed to be my whole career and what I hope to be my whole career is just an incredible feeling. And my family's happy because they don't have to get any other jerseys. They just get to stay with Carolina black-and-red. They don't have to worry about switching."

The symbolism of potentially putting on the same jersey for 17 straight years isn't lost on Slavin. On one hand, he realizes his identity is tied up in hockey. But he attributes his success in the league to being able to distinguish between Jacob Slavin, the hockey player, and Jacob Slavin, the devoted husband, father and church-going member of the community.

"Obviously, I love playing hockey, and it makes me happy to play hockey, but it doesn't give me, like, everlasting joy," he said. "And so, if I were telling my 21-year-old self just starting

out, it's, 'Don't put your identity in this game, and just have fun with it.' Hockey is going to end one day, right? Hockey is going to end. And if your identity is in the game of hockey, when it ends, you're going to be rocked."

That sort of perspective has served Slavin well. Hockey is an emotional game of ups and downs. It's also a business, where losing can cause ownership to make harsh decisions. That was underscored this summer, as the Canes lost in the second round and then bid good-

up, and I get called up two weeks later, and then, we both are in the NHL from that point on. And so, seeing him go was tough. And Brady Skjei's been there for the past five years. These are guys that you become really good friends with, so seeing them go is never fun."

Without Skjei, who led Carolina D-men with 13 goals and 47 points last season, more will be expected out of Slavin. But just because his offensive role might be growing, don't expect his ego to grow along with it.



JACCOB SLAVIN

## THESE ARE GUYS YOU BECOME REALLY GOOD FRIENDS WITH, SO SEEING THEM GO ISN'T FUN – Jacob Slavin

bye to GM Don Waddell and UFA D-men Brett Pesce, Brady Skjei and Tony DeAngelo.

"It's definitely the most changeover we've had probably in my career so far," Slavin said. "I've played my whole career with Brett Pesce. We started rookie camp together. We started training camp together. We were both the last cuts the first year and got sent down to (AHL) Charlotte. He gets called

He knows what his identity is. Both on and off the ice.

"For myself, it's finding my identity in who God says I am versus anything else," he said. "I know my God doesn't care about my performance. He cares about where my heart is in the matter, and I'm just glorifying Him. So, that actually gives me more freedom to go out and use the abilities He's given me to the fullest." **H**



# METRO DIVISION

## GOALTENDING FUTURE

BY RYAN KENNEDY



With Pyotr Kochetkov now in the NHL, the Hurricanes' best goalie prospect becomes another Russian in **RUSLAN KHAZHEEV**, the 2023 fifth-rounder who is coming off a splendid season with Chelyabinsk in Russia's top junior league. A big netminder who's adept at challenging shooters and moves quite well in the crease, the 6-foot-4 Khazheev signed his entry-level deal with Carolina in the spring and has come over to start his North American pro career this season, potentially with AHL Chicago.



After playing for Sweden's Modo organization the past three years, 6-foot-3 **MELVIN STRAHL** has left for Ohio – specifically, to the USHL's Youngstown Phantoms. While Strahl's stats weren't great last season, his Modo team wasn't that good, either. This year's Phantoms, meanwhile, look intriguing. The Blue Jackets' 2023 fifth-rounder will be joining fellow European import Adam Benak, a dynamic center eligible for the 2025 draft. And Strahl is just two-and-a-half hours from Columbus now, which is a bonus.



With Jacob Markstrom and Jake Allen on board, the Devils hope they won't need to dip into their prospect pool this season. In past years, injuries and inconsistency from their NHLers led to young netminders such as Nico Daws (still in the system) and Akira Schmid getting forced into action early. But with the current set-up, a highly touted prospect such as 2024 second-rounder **MIKHAIL YEGOROV** can take his time. Yegorov is playing for USHL Omaha this season and is slated for Boston University after that.



With Ilya Sorokin and Semyon Varlamov in the NHL, the Islanders haven't had to worry about their goaltending in a while – and that will likely continue to be the case in the coming years. New York can thus take its time in developing a netminder such as **JAKUB SKAREK**, who has already made more than 100 starts in the AHL with Bridgeport the past three seasons. The 24-year-old Czech has great size and calmness in the crease, though he'll have competition for starts with the Baby Isles this year.



Though he must fill out his 6-foot-3, 177-pound frame, **DYLAN GARAND** has put up excellent numbers in his past three playoff appearances (one year with WHL Kamloops and the past two with AHL Hartford). He also has a WJC gold medal from Canada's 2022 victory, so the kid has seen some pressure-packed games – which is perfect for a goaltender who may play in Madison Square Garden one day. For now, though, the poised 22-year-old can continue working on his game with the AHL's Wolf Pack.



The opportunity is there for **CARSON BJARNASON** to have a massive season. The WHL Brandon star has gotten statistically better every season with the Wheat Kings, and he looked great in Canada's net at the World Junior Summer Showcase in August. Should Bjarnason lock up a job with the WJC team in December, he'll have the chance to win a medal in front of a staunchly pro-Canada crowd in Ottawa. With Bjarnason's size and agility, the future is bright for the stopper the Flyers drafted 51st overall in 2023.



In his first full season of North American pro hockey, **JOEL BLOMQVIST** established he was a force to be reckoned with in the Pittsburgh system. The Finnish national earned the lion's share of starts for AHL Wilkes-Barre/Scranton and posted an impressive .921 save percentage with the Baby Pens (not to mention an invite to the AHL All-Star Game). Quick and smart in the crease, Blomqvist can continue to build his game in the minors – unless the Penguins need him for NHL spot duty at any point.



There's no better experience than a championship run, and even though **CLAY STEVENSON** was the backup to Hunter Shepard in AHL Hershey's latest triumph, Stevenson is coming off another fantastic campaign himself. The undrafted Dartmouth alum had a staggering seven shutouts in 36 appearances last season, tops in the AHL. Meanwhile, his .922 save percentage was among the best in the league, too. At 6-foot-4, Stevenson has an NHL frame, and he knows how to position himself well in the crease.



## CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS

# TAKING CARE OF THE KIDS

Taylor Hall missed all but 10 games last season, but it allowed him to spend some precious time with his new son, Stetson. Now that he's healthy again, the one-time NHL MVP is ready to tend to his young hockey charges in Chicago **BY JARED CLINTON**

**I**F THERE'S ONE WAY to get your mind off of an excruciating injury, season-ending surgery and months of rigorous rehab, it's diaper duty.

So, while Taylor Hall would have given anything to be out on the ice with his Chicago Blackhawks teammates last

season, the 32-year-old is able to find a silver lining in a campaign spent almost entirely on the shelf: he got to enjoy quality time with his newborn son, Stetson. "I'll remember that for my whole life," Hall said. "To see him grow up in a different way than I would have if I was play-

ing has been really cool. That's a positive for sure, and just having that time off mentally after doing this for such a long time was something that I just really had to take advantage of."



After 10 months away, however, the 2018 Hart Trophy winner has never been more ready to get back to work. As well as he handled his time off, Hall joked that he'd "go completely out of my mind" if he had to watch from the sidelines again, adding he was starting to get the itch by the end of last season – an itch that only worsened as summer progressed. "Being out of the games killed me," he said. "Once I started skating again and joined the team for practices by the end of the regular season last year, that's when I

## HALL MONITOR

At 32, the veteran Hall knows that a key part of his role is to serve as a guide for Chicago's next generation.

BEING OUT OF THE GAMES KILLED ME. I REALLY MISSED BEING PART OF THE TEAM

– Taylor Hall

really missed being part of the team. So, the summer was almost harder in some ways than the regular season."

The way the Blackhawks operated throughout the summer has also made Hall as eager as ever to get back. No stranger to rebuilds, having lived through a seemingly perpetual state of roster-revamping during his time as an Edmonton Oiler, Hall watched as GM Kyle Davidson reshaped the top end of Chicago's roster. "For whatever my opinion is worth, I thought we had a really good free agency, off-season, and along with the growth of some of our young guys, there's some exciting times ahead," he said. "As a veteran player, I've seen this play out a few times before, but this is one of the ones that makes me most excited, just with the way our team has been built."

Some of those new arrivals are familiar faces, including Pat Maroon and Craig Smith. The latter was a member of Hall's wedding party, and Hall counts Smith among his best friends. But also arriving are Tyler Bertuzzi and Teuvo Teravainen, a pair of legitimate top-six talents who can provide the scoring punch that was sorely missing in the Windy City last season. And after playing just 10 games last year, a healthy Hall also stands to feel like a new addition.

But it will be the job of the Hawks' refurbished attack, Hall said, to complement what he feels is the most exciting part of Chicago's potentially transformative summer: the bolstering of the back end and blue paint.

Adding goalie Laurent Brossoit, who will compete with Petr Mrazek for the starting job, has Hall bullish on the Blackhawks' crease tandem, and he's even more thrilled about Chicago bringing aboard defenders T.J. Brodie and Alec Martinez, both of whom Hall name-checked as

similar stability to a fresh-faced roster. Last season, he helped shepherd along Connor Bedard, sharing advice and trading stories with the fellow No. 1 overall pick, and Hall wants to continue passing wisdom on to the Blackhawks youngsters, such as Philipp Kurashev, Lukas Reichel and Kevin Korchinski.

So, while Hall hungers to get back to his scoring ways and prove he can still be a game-in, game-out offensive threat, he believes one of his best assets heading into his 15th big-



TAYLOR HALL & CONNOR BEDARD

## IT'S NOT JUST ON THE ICE IN THE GAMES. IT'S IN THE WEIGHT ROOM AND HOW YOU PREPARE — Taylor Hall

veterans whose influence can spread throughout the dressing room. "When you get into the regular season and you get into Games 40 and 50 and 60 and your team is still trying to find consistency," Hall said, "it's those players who have experience, know the right things to say and can bring consistency in their own game night in and night out that are so valuable."

Hall also wants to be the type of player who can offer

league season is as an on- and off-ice leader. That, he hopes, can also help drive Chicago forward. "It's not just on the ice in the games, but it's in the weight room, how you prepare for games and practices," he said. "A lot of that isn't seen by fans, but it's very important to the development of our culture of our team and the development of individual players within our organization. That's the biggest thing that I think I can bring." **H**



# CENTRAL DIVISION

## GOALTENDING FUTURE

BY JARED CLINTON



**ADAM GAJAN** is still at least a few years away, but the Blackhawks have high hopes for him. Winner of top-goaltender honors at the 2023 World Junior Championship – and twice selected as a top-three player on the Slovak WJC squad – Gajan, 20, is heading to Minnesota-Duluth after seasons in the NAHL and USHL. The Bulldogs are in a transitional period after winning back-to-back national titles pre-pandemic, so Gajan could find himself thrown into the deep end as a freshman.



Alexandar Georgiev has one season left on his deal, and Justus Annunen's .928 save percentage across 14 appearances in 2023-24 has given Colorado hope the Finn can push for starting duty. But the long-term answer appears to be **ILYA NABOKOV**. The 21-year-old, who was the KHL's rookie of the year last season, bordered on unbeatable in the playoffs, capturing post-season MVP honors while leading Magnitogorsk to the title. (For those wondering: Nabokov is not related to longtime NHL goalie Evgeni Nabokov.)



The Stars' crease belongs to Jake Oettinger now and for the foreseeable future. That benefits Dallas, who can allow for the patient development of its top goalie prospects, of whom **MAXIM MAYOROV**, 20, is the most intriguing. A 2022 fifth-round pick, the towering, 6-foot-6 Mayorov posted the Russian junior circuit's best goals-against average last season. He has a good pedigree, too. His father, Vasily Koshechkin, backstopped Russia to 2018 Olympic gold and won two KHL titles and top-goaltender awards.



It's not a matter of if **JESPER WALLSTEDT** is next in line, but when he'll arrive. While Minnesota's re-signing of veteran Marc-Andre Fleury blocked Wallstedt's path to regular backup duty, there's little doubt he'll slide into that role as early as next season and perhaps earn himself a few starts this season. The 21-year-old, who was selected 20th overall in the 2021 draft, has already twice represented the Wild's farm club at the AHL All-Star Game. Big, mobile and patient, he's the full package.



With the trade of Yaroslav Askarov to San Jose, the door is open for an up-and-comer to earn their place behind Juuse Saros. Perhaps farthest along in his development is Ethan Haider, who arrives in the AHL with four solid NCAA campaigns on his resume, but Nashville might have its hopes pinned to **JAKUB MILOTA**. Selected 99th overall in the 2024 draft, the 18-year-old earned a spot on the QMJHL all-rookie team and backstopped Czechia to within one goal of gold at the 2023 U-18 Hlinka Gretzky Cup.



With all due respect to Vadim Zherenko and Will Cranley, to suggest that either one is the future in the Blues' crease is to ignore **JOEL HOFER'S** potential to lock down the No. 1 job for the next decade. Per naturalstatrick.com, among goalies to play at least 30 games last season, Hofer finished fifth in goals saved above average per 60 minutes at 5-on-5, even outpacing creasemate Jordan Binnington. Hofer is only 38 games into his NHL career, but he's positioned to hold down the Blues' crease for years to come.



His outings weren't all gems, but **MICHAEL HRABAL** backstopped Czechia to bronze at the 2024 World Junior Championship, and his performance in the quarterfinal against Canada was impressive. At the club level, the 19-year-old was thrown into the deep end at UMass, starting 30 games as a freshman and returning an impressive .912 SP to go along with two shutouts. The size is what stands out – Hrabal is 6-foot-6 – and his frame will only become more advantageous as he rounds out his skill set.



Connor Hellebuyck's seven-year pact means the Jets are in no rush to graduate a goalie to the bigs. Thus, Winnipeg can take a wait-and-see approach as a two-horse race develops between **THOMAS MILIC** and Domenic DiVincentiis. Milic, 21, battled his way to starting duty in the AHL last season and got the nod for the Manitoba Moose in both games of their brief post-season stay. DiVincentiis, 20, struggled statistically last year, but he was a first-team all-star and goaltender of the year in the OHL in 2022-23.



## SEATTLE KRAKEN

# RISING FROM THE DEPTHS

Joey Daccord is used to challenges. He was passed over in the draft, then went 199th overall the next year, and his school didn't have a Div. I team when he signed on **BY KEN CAMPBELL**

**T**OWARD THE END OF his breakthrough season, Joey Daccord did the Seattle Kraken a solid. He appeared on a web series called *Uncharted*, where a player on the team joins broadcaster Alison Lukan on a local adventure, which they use as a backdrop for a chat designed to help fans to get to know the player

better. Fly-fishing with Will Borgen. Hiking with Alex Wenberg. You get the idea. When Daccord's number was called, it was an exercise in learning to navigate a 75-foot Fleming yacht around Puget Sound under the guidance of captain Chris Freshwater. Seriously, that was the guy's name.

Even though Daccord has his

boating license, he was a little shocked to learn he would actually be at the helm. "I'm, like, stunningly nervous right now,"



said Daccord at the time. "This boat is worth so much money. More than I could ever pay back."

Yeah, about that, eh? A quick Google search indicates these barges will set you back between \$3.5 million and \$4 million. That's not in Daccord's snack bracket. Yet. But with unrestricted free agency on the horizon, if he puts together another season like he did for the Kraken in 2023-24, he might want to get himself fitted for one of those pretentious sea captain hats.

Taking over the Kraken crease after Philipp Grubauer went down with an injury that kept him out for two months,

Daccord was a top-10 goalie last season by pretty well every key metric. It was a long time coming for a young man who is used to patiently waiting for opportunities to prove himself.

Here's a guy who went through his first draft year in 2014 without being selected, then was the 13th-last player chosen the next year, 198 picks after Connor McDavid. That might make a guy a little sour, but Daccord was thrilled, and he turned it into a positive by remembering that Tom Brady was also drafted 199th overall 15 years before he was. Here's a guy who also wasn't getting any legitimate interest from the Boston-area academic institutions, so in his final year of prep school, he committed to Arizona State University, which hadn't even taken a single faceoff as a Div. I program. He turned that around, too, telling himself it was a chance for him to be a part of history. Now, when ASU coach Greg Powers is trying to recruit kids, something that is a lot easier these days, he has them talk to the guy who went there before it was cool. Then, there were the minors, the lower minors – remember the ECHL's Brampton Beast? – and the expansion draft, all of which led Daccord to his emergence with the Kraken last season. "Everything I went through, all the ups and downs, contributed to the person and the hockey player I am today," Daccord said. "Maybe in the moment it wasn't easy, but now, I look back at it and I'm grateful for it."

So are the Kraken, who watched Daccord go on an absolute heater shortly after Grubauer got hurt. Daccord posted eight straight wins, including the first shutout in a Winter Classic, to go with a 1.49 goals-against average and .956 save percentage. It was a classic case of Daccord waiting for his time to shine, then proving himself. It came as no surprise to Powers, who watched Daccord set an early standard for ASU's program. "That's him in a nutshell," Powers said. "He bets on himself, he believes in himself



and that's a perfect example."

This hardly makes Daccord unique among goalies, who seem to take their time developing and rarely end up playing regularly for the organization that drafts them. For example, Sam Montembeault, Adin Hill and Karel Vejmelka were also taken in Daccord's draft year, and although they've had more NHL reps, they're still establishing themselves as No. 1 goalies nine years after being drafted. Daccord, Montembeault and Vejmelka are on their second NHL organizations, while Hill is on his third.

You always know the fundamentals are going to be there with Daccord. After all, his father, Brian, worked with goalies with both the Toronto Maple

SP, 'The Mayor' probably could have run for public office.

This season is a pivotal one for Daccord, who you'd have to think is the presumptive starter for the Kraken. He's entering the final year of a contract that pays him a modest \$1.2 million a season, which was commensurate with his value when he signed the deal.

With a big year this season, all that will change. Another interesting tidbit: Daccord holds citizenship in three countries – the U.S., where he was born; Canada, where his father was born and raised; and Switzerland, where his father played professionally for seven seasons. To this point, Daccord has never represented any of them in international competition.



Kraken staff call Daccord 'The Mayor' due to his outgoing personality and enthusiastic nature.

Leafs and Arizona Coyotes and is now the goalie coach at Boston University. Daccord is technically sound, has a good mental approach and is an elite puckhandler. All those skills have taken him from being a depth goalie to becoming a potential No. 1 guy. He also brings an enthusiasm to the rink that is genuine. After the Kraken's first media day, staff started calling him 'The Mayor' because he was so outgoing. It's a name that followed him to Coachella Valley, where he led the Firebirds to within an overtime goal of winning the Calder Cup in their first AHL campaign in 2022-23. After the season he had there, which included 26 wins in 38 games and a .918

And with the 2026 Olympics looming, he's also a free agent internationally. The natural inclination is Switzerland, until you consider the dog's breakfast that is Canadian goaltending at the moment.

For his part, Daccord says he's not focused on his contract status heading into the season. But they all say that. "Yeah, it's definitely in the back of your mind, but you have to go out there and perform your best every single night regardless," Daccord said. "Even if it wasn't a contract year, I'd have the same mindset. Honestly, I just love playing hockey and competing, and any way I can do that, regardless of the contract stuff, is important to me." **H**



## PACIFIC DIVISION

### GOALTENDING FUTURE

BY BRIAN COSTELLO



At 6-foot-6 and 214 pounds, **DAMIAN CLARA** comes across physically as a bit of a man-child, but he's still a teenager for another few months. A second-round pick in 2023 – and the first player from Italy to be drafted by an NHL team – Clara had a stellar 2023-24 season with Brynas as they were promoted back to the SHL. He got the majority of starts over former NHLer Anders Lindback and had a better save percentage (.913 to .889). Big and quick, he needs to refine his occasional overreactions and consistency.



Now is the time for Dustin Wolf to lock down the 'future franchise stopper' label in Calgary. But who's next in line to one day compete alongside Wolf? The Flames have drafted four Russian-born goalies in the past five drafts. Arsenii Sergeev is in his third NCAA season, transferring to Penn State from Connecticut. Daniil Chechelev and Yegor Yegorov are playing in Russia. The most compelling is 2024 third-rounder **KIRILL ZARUBIN**. His lateral mobility and anticipation are first-rate for a 19-year-old.



Entering the 2023-24 season, **EEMIL VINNI** ranked near the top of the class among 2024 draft-eligible goalies. But he had a mediocre season with Kiekko-Pojat and ended up being the fifth goalie selected in June, as the Oilers took him with the second-last pick in the second round. Vinni has outstanding athleticism and challenges shooters well. He'll get a good test with HIFK in Finland this year. Among his items to work on are tracking the puck better and being less busy with his movements in the crease.



**CARTER GEORGE** was the third goalie drafted in 2024, going 57th overall to the Kings. He was also one of the busiest goalies last season, playing 60 games with OHL Owen Sound (56 in the regular season and four in the playoffs) and was Canada's starter at the world under-18s and the Hlinka Gretzky Cup. At 6-foot-1, he's not massive in the crease, but he has good reflexes and squares up to shooters. He's also an excellent athlete and is on the radar to represent Canada at the world juniors in 2025 or 2026.



Would you believe that in the 34 NHL drafts the Sharks have participated in, they've never taken a goalie in the first or second round? It's true. And the last time the Sharks drafted a goalie who actually played for them was 2008 with Harri Sateri. That's probably why GM Mike Grier decided to go out and acquire a stopper of the future – and present. **YAROSLAV ASKAROV** is that man. He's been among the top-ranked goalie prospects since he was drafted 11th overall by Nashville in 2020. He's a Calder Trophy candidate.



Drafting and developing goalies is a five- to seven-year project for NHL teams. So when **NIKLAS KOKKO** was one of 11 selections by the second-year Kraken in 2022, it's a name that easily could've been lost in the shuffle. But Kokko has made good progress in the two years since, splitting 2022-23 between the Mestis and Liiga, then last year playing 41 regular-season and playoff games for two teams in Finland's top league. He's been a model of consistency and composure for the Lahti Pelicans, with a .925 SP in 30 games.



Canucks fans got a good taste of what **ARTURS SILOVS** can bring to the table during the NHL playoffs last spring. Subbing in for the injured Thatcher Demko and Casey DeSmith during the first-round playoff series against Nashville, Silovs won five games and guided Vancouver to within one victory of making the conference final before a Game 7 loss to Edmonton. The cool-headed Latvian will be tested again this season with Demko's playing status still a little uncertain. At 23, Silovs oozes confidence.



When the Golden Knights picked up Alexander Holtz and **AKIRA SCHMID** in a June trade with New Jersey and signed free agent Ilya Samsonov a couple days later, it was assumed that Schmid would be relegated to third-string duty behind Adin Hill and Samsonov. But the 24-year-old Swiss stopper may have different plans. Once a rising star in the Devils' system, Schmid has 43 NHL games under his belt and a strong desire to get back in a big-league crease sooner rather than later.

A full-body photograph of a young man, Connor Bedard, standing on an ice rink. He is wearing a red Chicago Blackhawks hockey jersey with the team's logo on the chest and the number 8 on the left sleeve. He is also wearing black hockey pants, red knee pads, and red and white striped socks. He is holding a black Sherwood hockey stick with yellow accents. The background is dark with a large white graphic of the number 8. The text 'CONNOR BEDARD SHERWOOD' is overlaid in the bottom left corner.

CONNOR  
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NHL

# PADDED PUZZLE

For fantasy hockey GMs, there may not be a more difficult decision this season than who to slot between the pipes

**W**HAT HAPPENED TO THE starting goalie?

In the first season of the NHL's salary-cap era in 2005-06, three goalies started 70-plus games – Martin Brodeur, Miikka Kiprusoff and Roberto Luongo – and there were eight others who started at least 60 games. Last season, only three goalies started at least 60 games – Juuse Saros, Alexander Georgiev and Connor Hellebuyck. Over the past 20 years, the workhorse starting goalie whom fantasy managers could rely upon has slowly gone the way of the dodo.



There's no denying the trend: No. 1 goalies are starting fewer games than ever before, and more teams now prefer to run a 1A-1B tandem. It's a tactic that has proven to be successful, with the latest example being the Boston Bruins' duo of Linus Ullmark and Jeremy Swayman, who combined to win the Jennings Trophy in 2022-23. It was the sixth time in the cap era that the award winners had won 20 games each.

There isn't one specific reason the NHL has trended this way but rather a combination of factors. Despite better travel amenities and more knowledge about physical fitness and rest, the position is arguably more taxing than ever. Shooters shoot harder – aided by continually improving stick technology – and skaters skate faster. The talent level is also higher than ever, and the crackdown on clutching and grabbing has allowed for a more free-flowing game. And there's more skill in the lineup, with increased demand for players who can create scoring chances and less demand for skaters who can throw hits and punches but can't contribute much else. Add up all these components, and, *voilà*, it's become a challenging time for goalies.

Teams have averaged more than three goals per game in five of the past six seasons, and average power-play efficiencies have eclipsed 20 percent in five of the past seven seasons. Conversely, penalty-killing efficiencies and save percentages have



dipped. Since 1994, the only other times teams averaged more than three goals per game were in 1995-96 and 2005-06, which – perhaps not coincidentally – were seasons that closely followed lockouts. (Maybe we can attribute that to rusty goalies?)

From a fantasy perspective, these trends have altered the strategies and attitudes toward all goalies. But rather than increasing the value of an elite netminder, they have devalued the position altogether, considering its randomness and how few keepers can stay consistently elite. The days of a goalie starting 70 games and winning 40 of them, as Brodeur once did regularly, will likely never be seen again.

## THE DAYS OF A GOALIE STARTING 70 GAMES AND WINNING 40 OF THEM WILL LIKELY NEVER BE SEEN AGAIN

Of course, the devaluation of goaltenders is measured in degrees depending on a fantasy league's settings and the GMs' biases. Some leagues will still reward fantasy teams with an elite netminder because the scoring system is heavily skewed toward goaltending, but in other leagues, goaltending can be an afterthought. Some managers think goaltending is far too random, and that targeting netminders early wastes draft capital when an individual skater's scoring production is far easier to predict.

### BUYCK-ING THE TREND

Winnipeg's star starter is one of the few goalies who fantasy GMs can count on to play 60-plus games.

There are a handful of goalies, such as Hellebuyck or Andrei Vasilevskiy, whom we can expect to be among the league's best, barring injury. But they're few and far between, and rarely are they good enough to carry a fantasy team. They simply don't play enough games to do so anymore.

Close to one-third of NHL teams will likely run a tandem this season, including Stanley Cup contenders such as Carolina (Frederik Andersen and Pyotr Kochetkov) and Toronto (Joseph Woll and Anthony Stolarz).

Then, there are the teams who don't have the option of having a No. 1 and instead are throwing darts at a wall, such as Detroit (Cam Talbot, Alex Lyon and Ville Husso), or they're keeping the seat warm for a prospect, such as San Jose (Yaroslav Askarov) and Minnesota (Jesper Wallstedt).

When it comes to goalies in fantasy hockey these days, tread cautiously and try not to tear out your hair. **H**

> For daily fantasy hockey coverage, check out [THN.com/fantasy](#)

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NEW YORK SIRENS

# BIG-LEAGUE AMBITION

The PWHL is packed with great goalies and national-team starters. But that didn't stop Kayle Osborne from entering the draft early – and New York was glad she did so **BY IAN KENNEDY**

**I**N A SIX-TEAM LEAGUE, the competition for goaltending positions is fierce. In the NHL's Original Six era, it was a time dominated by Hall of Fame netminders such as Terry Sawchuk, Bill Durnan and Jacques Plante. Someday, the PWHL's Original Six era might produce a similar number of legendary netminders. With the depth of talent already in PWHL creases, Kayle Osborne was bold to forego her final season of NCAA eligibility and enter the PWHL draft a year early. The decision could easily have backfired.



It could have, but it didn't. A product of Westport, Ont., a village outside of Ottawa, Osborne was selected in the fifth round (28th overall) by the New York Sirens in the 2024 PWHL draft following a spectacular four-year stint in the NCAA with Colgate. Knowing the fledgling PWHL included national-team starting netminders from Canada, the U.S., Sweden, Czechia and Germany – all of whom are looking for spots in the league this season – Osborne, 22, risked it all by declaring for the draft a year early. She had her university degree. She'd proven herself in the NCAA. So, according to Os-

borne, it was time for a new challenge. And she believes in her ability to secure a position in the world's top league. "I'm most looking forward to developing my game at a higher level," Osborne said. "Stepping into this league, I have a lot of learning to do, but I'm also looking to develop my game, learn from the best, and also (to) compete against the best in the world."

Last season, Osborne would come together with many of her Colgate teammates to watch PWHL games. She was one of five Colgate players – with Danielle Serdachny, Sydney Bard, Dara Greig and Ally-

## THE FUTURE IS NOW

With the rise of the PWHL, Osborne decided to leave college a year early and test her mettle in the pro game.

son Simpson – to be drafted this year. "It was super cool still being in college and watching this league develop," Osborne said. "When I was in my sophomore and junior years, I was kind of questioning what I was going to do with hockey after. I didn't know if I wanted to play overseas or how things would play out. Having a league develop last year, we watched a lot of games, especially as a team. It brought us all together."

While Colgate players gathered and dreamed of a professional future, Osborne tried to focus on the present last season, knowing her time in the NCAA was coming to a close. As a goaltender, the ability to focus on the moment at hand is a valuable trait, and one that Osborne believes will continue to serve her well.

"Focusing on where my feet were allowed me to play my best," she said. "I want to continue not looking too far into the future, but focusing on my development and showing up to the rink every day ready to work and knowing if you do that one day after another, you're going to get where you need to go."

New York had no doubts about Osborne, signing her to a three-year contract, the longest allowable under league rules. At the NCAA level, Os-



DANIELLE SERDACHNY & KAYLE OSBORNE

OLIVIA HOKANSON/COLGATE ATHLETICS



to get on the ice to prove New York's faith was not misplaced. "It showed a lot in New York's belief in me as a goaltender in how I can develop over the next few years, and having that security means a lot," Osborne said. "It gives me a sense they know what I can do in this league and within three years' time, I'll be able to make huge leaps in my development. It's a really great feeling, honestly, having them have that belief in me this early in my career."

Because of that faith, Osborne has no plans to change what got her here and made her successful the past four years. She's also "going in with an open mind" and is ready to

learn from the veteran netminders on New York's roster.

While she's signed for three years, all teams carry three goalies, which means Osborne still needs to earn her playing time. She's confident, however, that after spending a lifetime watching many of the netminders in the PWHL, she's ready to step into the game herself and claim a spot for years to come.

"I grew up looking up to these goalies, and watching them play last year and through my years at college, I learned a lot from watching them," she said. "They're some of the best in the game and best in the world, so being able to earn a spot in this league is an honor." **H**

borne posted a career stat line of a 1.64 goals-against average, .927 save percentage, 13 shutouts and a 61-20-4 record in 92 appearances. According to Sirens GM Pascal Daoust, he was thrilled to add Osborne to a goaltending group that already included PWHL goaltender-of-the-year finalist Corinne Schroeder, saying Osborne's signing brings "quality and stability to the team and our fans for the coming seasons."

This season, Osborne will be one of only a handful of rookie netminders to crack PWHL rosters. The others include first-team all-American and 2023 NCAA goaltender of the year Gwyneth Philips, who was also Team USA's third goalie at the 2024 world championship, and Raygan Kirk, who won two NCAA national championships with Ohio State.

"While playing a technical game, Kayle is especially explosive and powerful, making her a goaltender who consistently battles and competes for pucks, even the ones that seem impossible to stop," Daoust said. "Around her net, she excels at playing the puck, giving the team the advantage of an extra player on the ice."

Osborne spent her summer

training, including stays in Las Vegas and Calgary. In particular, she worked with Top Prospects Goaltending, an organization that's worked with a slew of elite Canadian women's netminders including Shannon Szabados, Ann-Renee Desbiens, Charline Labonte and Emerance Maschmeyer.

Osborne herself has been a regular at Canada's national-team selection camps and served as Canada's third goalie at the Rivalry Series last season. This year, she's ready to not just watch and learn but



Osborne posted 13 shutouts and a miniscule 1.64 GAA in 92 career games with NCAA Colgate.

TOP+MIDDLE: OLIVIA HOKANSON/COLGATE ATHLETICS; BOTTOM: MARK STEWART/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL



BOSTON FLEET

# TITLETOWN 'TENDY

Aerin Frankel is proud of the resilience that her Boston team showed in Year 1 of the PWHL. But she knows the fans in Beantown won't settle for second-best **BY CAROL SCHRAM**

**J**UST AS FENWAY PARK'S left-field wall famously steals home runs from deserving batters, Aerin Frankel has a propensity for thwarting what look to be sure goals from deserving shooters.

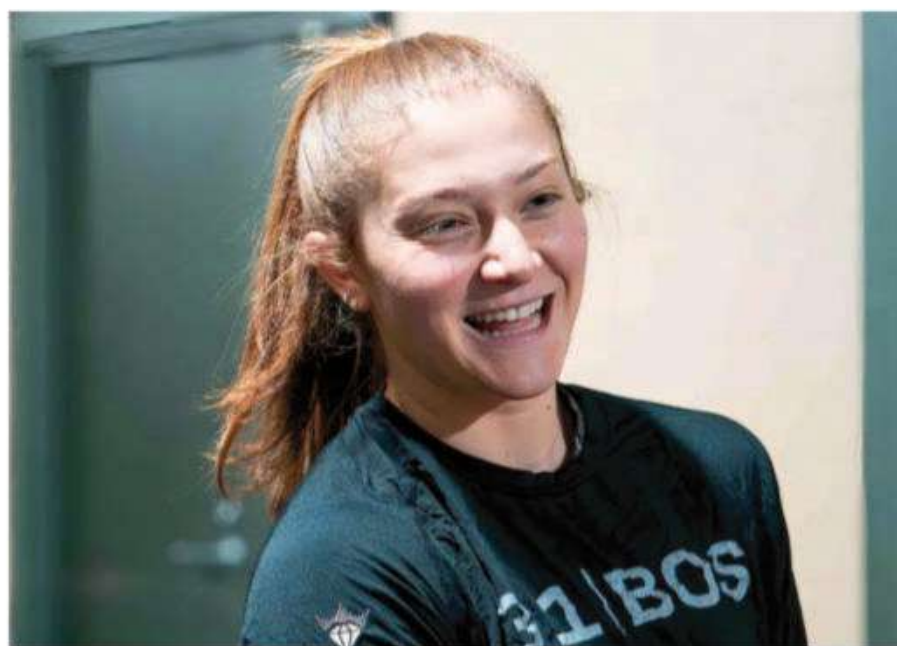
Meet the Boston Fleet's 'Green Monster.' "She's just the ultimate competitor," said Fleet GM Danielle Marmer. "I knew I wanted a goaltender who was going to compete, who can win. Aerin's won at every level she's played at."

Boston ultimately finished one win shy of capturing the inaugural Walter Cup. But Frankel established herself as one of the league's top goalies by elevating her game after a strong

regular season, and she was named a PWHL goalie-of-the-year finalist.

With plenty of elite talent between the pipes in the women's game, Boston was one of just three teams to use a (pre-draft) free-agent spot on a goalie. Marmer targeted Frankel – fresh off her gold-medal win as Team USA's starter at the 2023 worlds – and two other Team USA veterans in superstar right winger Hilary Knight and steady defender Megan Keller.

It was a perfect scenario for Frankel, a native New Yorker who had already put down roots in Boston after five seasons at Northeastern. In 2020, she helped the Huskies snap a six-year drought to win the Women's Beanpot. In 2021, she



became just the fourth goalie to win the Patty Kazmaier Award as the top player in women's college hockey. She also claimed the NCAA's first two women's goalie-of-the-year awards in 2021 and 2022.

"I didn't really know if any of the teams were going to reach out to me during free agency," Frankel said. "Boston was definitely the most exciting opportunity for me. I was hoping that they were going to contact me, so it was a no-brainer for me to want to stay here."

Once the roster was filled out, Frankel was in the company of two more familiar faces: former Northeastern teammate and close friend Alina Muller and U.S. national-team center Hannah Brandt.

Bostonians love their sports teams. And whether it's on the field, the hard court or the ice, winning is the expectation. Heading into Year 1, Frankel and her teammates understood the assignment in Titletown. But it was tough going in the brand-new league. Four

TOP: LUKE SCHMIDT/PWHL; MIDDLE: MICHAEL RILEY/BOSTON FLEET





straight losses in early February dropped Boston down the standings and triggered the first-ever PWHL trade. Seeking to change her team's chemistry, Marmer sent defender Sophie Jaques to Minnesota for blue-liner Abby Cook and center Susanna Tapani.

During that early adversity, Frankel learned an important lesson about keeping an even keel through the season's inevitable ups and downs. "You're not going to win every single game," she said, "no matter how good your team is, because the competition in our league is just so good."

Soon enough, the tide began to turn. On Feb. 25, Frankel earned her first PWHL shutout with a 41-save effort against Minnesota in front of more than 10,000 fans at Xcel Energy Center, and she was named one of the league's three stars of the week for the first time.

A month later, with Boston still outside the playoff picture and players headed to the 2024 World Championship, Knight delivered a clear message to her teammates. "I can remember, before we left for that international break, Hilary addressing the room and telling everyone, 'Listen, we have an opportunity here,' " Frankel said. " 'Each person is responsible for going back to where they're going and training. What you do during that time will be up to you. But it will show when we get back and have a chance at a collective goal.' "

Looking for another gold medal in Utica, N.Y., Team USA came up just short. Danielle Serdachny beat Frankel on the power play at 5:16 of overtime to give Canada the win, which fired up the goalie and her national-team mates to embrace their opportunity in Boston. "Being able to return to the pro season after that world championship and having another chance to win something was something pretty special," Frankel said.

It came down to the wire. But with four one-goal wins and a shootout loss in its final five games, Boston climbed to third



berth in the Walter Cup final.

In the final, Frankel delivered one more statement game when Boston faced elimination on the road in Game 4. Making save after spectacular save, she delivered a 33-save double-overtime shutout to help send the series back to Tsongas Center for the decider at home.

During her grueling post-season run, Frankel said the pro-level resources available to the PWHL players helped her to train and kept her sharp. But during those long games with

### GETTING BETTER OVER TIME

Frankel struggled early last season, but she thrived with her back against the wall – especially in playoff OT.



place in the six-team league and faced No. 2 Montreal in the first round. "We were playing in kind of a do-or-die type situation, needing almost every point we could get our last five games," Frankel said. "That gave our group confidence, knowing we had all the pieces to the puzzle."

No piece was more important than the goalie herself. Frankel played every post-season minute for Boston, posting a .953 save percentage while allowing just 14 goals in

eight games. And she was a perfect 4-0 in overtime.

The first-round sweep of Montreal was anything but easy, with every game going to extra time. Frankel made 53 saves in the series-opening 2-1 road win at Place Bell.

Two nights later, she was even better with 56 stops on 57 shots in a 111-minute triple-OT marathon. Then, back on home ice, Boston erased a 2-0 deficit, and Frankel made 32 stops on the way to a 3-2 win and a

sky-high stakes, her team's positive approach was also crucial.

"People were hydrating and getting snacks, but more so just keeping the locker room really loose," she said. "We were all just laughing and having fun and not tense at all."

"I think that's what led to our success. We weren't thinking that our backs were up against the wall. Obviously, they were, but we were just playing free and having fun." **H**



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AHL



### GOALIE MONSTER

Greaves set a Cleveland franchise record with 30 wins last season, then led the team to the conference final.

look to continue the hottest run of his pro career.

Last year, Greaves set a Cleveland Monsters single-season franchise record for wins while ranking second among AHL goalies in victories (30-12-4), earning his first appearance at the AHL All-Star Classic. In the post-season, he posted an 8-5 record with a 2.17 goals-against average, .926 save percentage and one shutout in 13 games to help Cleveland advance to the Eastern Conference final. The Blue Jackets subsequently rewarded Greaves with a two-year extension.

Greaves has thrived playing meaningful games for an organization that's still searching for its first true No. 1 goalie since newly minted Stanley Cup champion Sergei Bobrovsky bolted for the Sunshine State. "I've really enjoyed my time in this organization," Greaves said. "I've been fortunate to be around so many really good people, especially with the goaltending staff. We've had Manny Legace and now Niklas Backstrom and then Brad

## CLEVELAND MONSTERS

# PLEASE REMAIN SEATED

Jet Greaves is calm, cool and collected in the crease, and the Blue Jackets goalie prospect is coming into his own after a deep AHL post-season run **BY DILLON COLLINS**

**I T'S HARD TO IGNORE** the elephant in the room as Jet Greaves sits down for a pre-season interview. Days removed from the funeral for Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau, the entire Columbus Blue Jackets organization – of which Greaves is a highly regarded goaltending prospect – remains in a numb state of grief. But if there is any silver lining to be found in the senseless loss, perhaps it's that pain can serve as a great unifier.

"Johnny was such a great player, but for everybody who knew him, he was such a great

person," Greaves said. "We were all super lucky to get to know him and his family. We'll always remember him and try to carry him with us everywhere we go. But yeah, just a super tragic few weeks, but it's good to be with everybody and kind of go through it together and be able to support each other."

Returning to the game of hockey is a daunting task in the aftermath of the tragedy, but the inner flame for the Gaudreau brothers burns brightly in each member of the Blue Jackets family.

For Greaves, a 23-year-old native of Cambridge, Ont., the 2024-25 season will see him



TOP: CHRISTIAN BONIN/TORONTO MARLIES; BOTTOM: PHOTO BY CLEVELAND MONSTERS

Thiessen in Cleveland. It's just been a lot of really good people to learn from. I feel like they've helped me so much to learn about the game and to learn my game and how to be successful at different levels."

Greaves' infatuation with the sport goes back to his childhood in the hockey hotbed of southern Ontario. Jet and his brother Kai, who will suit up at Princeton this season after a successful BCHL career, battled it out in competitive games of mini-sticks, emulating the exploits of their NHL heroes.

But it was Carey Price's all-world performance at the 2007 World Junior Championship that steered Greaves head-on into a love affair with stopping pucks. "Every year during the world juniors, my brother and I would play mini-sticks while we were watching the world



nate in Barrie to have some really good people around us that we could learn from. And that's something that has helped me in the next steps of my career after that."

Named to the OHL's first all-rookie team in 2018-19, the undrafted Greaves earned a contract with the AHL's Monsters, making his pro debut in a 40-save effort against the Belleville Senators in October 2021.

Splitting time between the AHL and ECHL in his first pro season and inking an entry-level deal with Columbus in February 2022, Greaves made his NHL debut that April. He set a Blue Jackets franchise record for a goaltending debut with 46 saves on 49 shots in a loss to the Toronto Maple Leafs, just an hour or so from his hometown.

"No matter what, your first NHL game is going to be really special and one you'll never forget," Greaves said. "But to be able to play it in Toronto so close to home with so many friends and family was something I was really grateful for. You know, I feel like I'm the one who plays the games, but there are so many other people that are a part of it. To be able to kind of share that with everybody was super special."

Entering his fourth year in the Columbus system, Greaves has cemented himself as a steady hand and wild-card contender for NHL minutes alongside the tandem of Elvis Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov.

But for a player who was undrafted and has had to earn every inch of ice he's been given, Greaves owns every moment, counting every shot and savoring every second.

"For me, I love playing games," he said. "I love learning about the game and just focusing on improving. That's kind of where my attention always is, whether that's in Columbus or Cleveland or wherever it is. For me, it's just about continuing to improve and trying to help the team win hockey games. I've been enjoying that experience. I'm excited for the next phase of that process to keep my focus in those places." **H**



juniors, just trying to imitate whatever we were seeing on TV," Greaves said. "Price was amazing. I always wanted to be a goalie in mini-sticks after seeing him and how calm he was in the net and the way he carried himself. I was such a fan of watching him. After that, I was hooked on playing goalie."

Greaves steadily progressed through the ranks of Ontario hockey, first as a budding start-

er in the Greater Ontario Jr. B League with the Cambridge Winter Hawks and Guelph Hurricanes before landing with the OHL's Barrie Colts in 2018, where he sat under the learning tree of two of the game's greats.

"Dale Hawerchuk was our head coach when we were in Barrie, so he obviously had an amazing career and was a really special person," Greaves said. "He taught all of us so much

### EARNING THE OPPORTUNITY

The undrafted Greaves has steadily moved up the ranks and could see some NHL action this year.

about being pros and what it took. That was something I'm super fortunate to have. And then our goalie coach was Billy Smith, who also had an amazing career. We were really fortu-


**IDAHO STEELHEADS**

# SHOLLY YOU'RE NOT SERIOUS?

Steelheads fan-favorite Tomas Sholl returns to Idaho in unconventional hybrid coach/player role **BY JACOB STOLLER**

**T**OMAS SHOLL WAS A little weary when he saw the Idaho Steelheads were hyping his return to Boise. “When I saw the video on Instagram, I was kind of thinking, ‘Uh, maybe we should temper expectations,’” he said with a laugh.



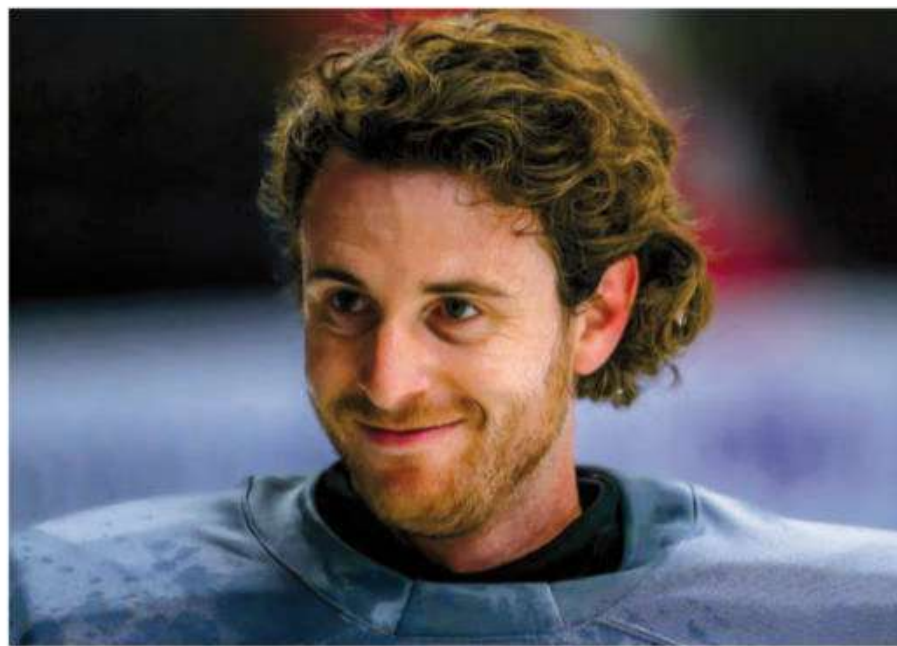
The 30-year-old is already a legend in Boise, where he earned ECHL goaltender-of-the-year honors in 2020. But he wasn't always destined for success – starting in the Southern Pro League after a lackluster NCAA career at Bowling Green State. Then, he got to the ECHL. Be-

tween his rookie season, 2017-18, and 2019-20, Sholl ranked first in save percentage (.930) and shutouts (12) among ECHL goalies who played at least 40 games. His 12 shutouts were also an Idaho franchise record.

He parlayed his ECHL success into a brief AHL stay before spending the past few years overseas in Italy, Slovakia and Sweden. So, what brought Sholl back to the U.S.? “I’m not coming in to be the starting goalie,” he said. “I’m coming in to be a third goalie/goalie coach.”

Wait, what?

“It’s sort of a transition from being a full-time player,” Sholl said. “If I wanted to be a full-



time goalie, I’d make a lot more money if I went back to Europe. This is more about opening up post-playing career options.”

Sholl and his wife, Delaney, are expecting their first child this fall, and they wanted to return to North America. It was only fitting that it would be in Boise, where they own a house – as do Delaney’s parents – and where Sholl runs a goaltending school.

While Sholl will officially be listed as a goalie on the roster, the plan is for him to act as a

**STEEL A LEGEND**

Sholl hasn’t played for Idaho since 2019-20, but the franchise’s shutout leader remains a local hero.

hands-on liaison between the coaching staff and the team’s netminders. Sholl isn’t exactly sure what his day-to-day life will look like. Will he lace up the pads every practice? Will he skate out in a tracksuit and put the goalies through workouts? That is yet to be determined.

But Steelheads coach Everett Sheen doesn't envision Sholl being completely in the shadows. "He's going to end up playing more than he thinks," Sheen said. "When you've got a goalie of that caliber, you're not going to not play him. Say he played the whole year for us; he's certainly good enough to carry us to a championship."

When Sholl proposed this arrangement, Sheen was fully sold on it. The Steelheads, the ECHL affiliate of the Dallas Stars and Texas Stars, are due to have at least a stopper or two assigned to them from the AHL.

Designated goalie coaches are a rarity in the ECHL, where the team staffs don't run deep. "I don't know anything about goaltending," said Sheen with a laugh. "It's going to help quite a bit to have someone out there helping our goalies with the technical aspects. I can't give them any direction. I don't know any goaltending drills."

Having dedicated guidance isn't something Sholl was afforded during his initial ECHL stint. "When I was playing here, the Steelheads didn't have a

goalie coach," Sholl said. "We had a guy in Texas, Jim Bedard, who would come down maybe once a year. But aside from that, we were on our own. It's going to be beneficial to get these guys some consistent coaching. For the team, too, they know that if someone gets hurt or called up, I'm there. And they'll have the best third goalie in the league."

Sholl has already had several conversations with AHL Texas' goaltending development coach, Ryan Daniels. After initially reaching out to assure him that he wasn't there to steal playing time from the organization's goalie prospects, Sholl has had frequent phone calls with Daniels in preparation for this season.

"When guys are sent down, a lot of the time, they'll be told to not look at it like a punishment and that it's an opportunity to develop," Sholl said. "But when you send a guy down and there's no goalie coach, how is he really supposed to develop? Having someone there on a full-time basis, almost like a surrogate, that's going to communicate with them and share



information, it's going to go a long way towards guys not feeling like they're just being shipped off to the ECHL and that nobody cares about them."

This won't be Sholl's first coaching experience. During the pandemic, he opened up a pair of goalie-coaching companies - Idaho Hockey and Sholly's Goalies - and he continues to run clinics for young stoppers across the state. "I'm pretty much the only goalie coach in the city of Boise, if not the entire state of Idaho," Sholl said.

His camps are another reason he's coming back to Boise. Sholly's Goalies is currently undertaking a massive expansion, with the company breaking ground on a training facility at Idaho IceWorld. Plans are already underway to build a designated room - with a 20-by-20 sheet of real ice for the goalies and synthetic ice for the shooters and instructors - exclusively for goalie training. "One of the beautiful things about being a pro hockey player or coach is that you have a lot of free time," Sholl said.

## POST TO POST-PLAYING

Sholl says his return to North America is about setting himself up for life after he hangs up his skates.

"You show up to the rink, practice, work out, and then you're pretty much out of there by around noon each day."

Sholl's plans for life after hockey in Boise stretch far beyond his goaltending school. He's applying for firefighter school in Boise, and if he's accepted, his training could begin in March. Sheen has braced for the possibility of Sholl having to leave mid-year, although the coach has an inkling that the fire department, which is filled with several ex-Steelheads, would allow Sholl to finish up the ECHL season first. But Sholl and Sheen have agreed to cross that bridge once they get there.

For now, 'Sholly' is all-in on helping Idaho in any way he can. "I'd like to stay involved with the Steelheads as much as possible for years to come," he said. "I really do love the team. I love the city. No matter where I've been since I've played there, it's always kind of been the team in my heart. I've always felt like a Steelhead." **H**





WHL



SEATTLE THUNDERBIRDS

# QUIET THUNDER

Sawyer Mynio was cast in a defensive role during Seattle's 2023 WHL title run, and then his growing game was obscured by the Thunderbirds' tumble down the standings last season. But he's a blueliner worth buzzing about **BY CAROL SCHRAM**

**W**HEN SAWYER MYNIO set out for his first WHL training camp in the fall of 2021, he was so sure that it would be a short stay that he packed just one suitcase. But after the 16-year-old earned a spot on the Seattle Thunderbirds' defense, his father was dispatched to bring the rest of his stuff from his hometown of Kamloops, B.C. On a blueline that gave up the third-fewest goals in the WHL and was anchored by 2022 No. 7 overall pick Kevin Korchin-

ski, Mynio got into 47 regular-season games as a rookie. He then collected 21 games' worth of valuable playoff experience as the Thunderbirds went on a surprise run to the WHL final. Building on that success, Seattle GM Bil La Forge set his sights on a championship. In November 2022, he acquired 19-year-old left-side rearguard Nolan Allan for a package that included six draft picks and three players. And before the trade deadline had passed, elite forward rentals Brad Lambert,

Dylan Guenther and Colton Dach were also brought in.

The plan worked. Seattle cruised to its second WHL title, then reached the 2023 Memorial Cup final. But with so many top talents on the cusp of taking the next step in their careers, it couldn't last. "I think we had, like, 10 to 12 guys go play professional hockey after that season," Mynio said.

Korchinski jumped straight onto the Chicago Blackhawks as a 19-year-old, while Allan laced up his skates with the AHL's Rockford IceHogs. Along with Lambert, Guenther and Dach, key incumbents Reid Schaefer, Lucas Ciona, Jared Davidson, Kyle Crnkovic, Luke Prokop and goalie Thomas Milic also turned pro.

Seattle's run to the 2023 Ed Chynoweth Cup featured 54 regular-season wins and a staggering goal differential of plus-



## UPPER WEST SIDE

Mynio's performance in Seattle was noticed by Vancouver, as the Canucks drafted him in the third round in 2023.

145. In his second WHL season, Mynio got into all 68 games. A strong skater with good hockey sense, he was tasked with playing a defensively responsible game. Along with 31 points, he finished with a plus-50 rating, which tied him with Korchinski for eighth-best in the league.

But because he played deep on a roster loaded with older stars, Mynio didn't generate nearly the same buzz as other 'Dub' prospects such as Connor Bedard, Zach Benson or Nate Danielson heading into the 2023 draft. At least NHL Central Scouting took notice of his contributions, though, and they bumped him from No. 111 in their mid-term rankings up to No. 62 on their final list of North American skaters.

On Day 2 of the draft in Nashville, the Vancouver Canucks took him in the third round at 89th overall. After going through development camp and his first Young Stars tournament, Mynio signed an entry-level deal in September 2023. Then, he went back to Seattle.

Suddenly, the faces in the dressing room were much younger. And the Thunderbirds' season became even more challenging when returning NHL-drafted forwards Nico Myatovic and Jordan Gustafson each missed half the year due to injuries. The win total dropped from 54 to 27, and the goal differential swung from plus-145 to minus-69 as Seattle finished nine points out of a playoff spot.

On the back end, Mynio joined 20-year-old Jeremy Hanzel as a top-pairing blueliner. And he thrived. "I got more chances out there on the ice," Mynio said. "I was (on the first) power play (and) PK. Playing 30 minutes every single night helped my game grow. I loved every minute of that."

After putting up five goals and 31 points in 2022-23,

BRIAN LIESSE/SEATTLE THUNDERBIRDS





Mynio climbed to 16 goals and 53 points last season. He was named to the WHL's U.S. Division's second all-star team, then received his first call from Hockey Canada with an invite to the World Junior Summer Showcase.

"I found out, probably, a month before I went," he said. "It was pretty honoring to be

able to go and wear that jersey."

The camp was split between Windsor, Ont., and Plymouth, Mich. Travelling with teammate and "best buddy" Scott Ratzlaff – a World Junior Championship vet and 2022 U-18 Hlinka Gretzky Cup gold medallist – Mynio seized his opportunity. Skating with and against the best in his age group, he

showed well enough to put himself in the mix for the 2025 main event in Ottawa.

"We played a red-and-white game, and I thought that was my best game," he said. "I played really good there. Then I played Sweden, and I played Team USA. I was happy with my performance. They played me in lots of the big minutes, overtime and stuff like that, so I felt good."

And while the 2024 playoff miss in Seattle was a disap-

pointment, Mynio put the resulting free time to good use. Two-and-a-half weeks after his junior season ended, he put on a pro jersey for the first time in a 3-1 road win for the AHL Abbotsford Canucks over the Calgary Wranglers – three weeks before his 19th birthday.

"It's pretty cool, just to play a game," he said. "Hopefully, next season, I can crack that roster."

Mynio won't be AHL-eligible for one more year, but he has already started building rela-



tionships in the Fraser Valley as he continues to work on adding a pro-level physique on his 6-foot-1 frame. During the summer, he trained alongside AHL veterans, including John Stevens and one-time Kamloops Blazer Jermaine Loewen, while working with Abbotsford's strength and conditioning coach, John Murray.

"He's great," Mynio said of Murray. "I loved training with him, so I stayed out there for a couple months."

In Seattle this season, Mynio believes the Thunderbirds will be on the rise again in coach Matt O'Dette's eighth year at the helm. "Guys are getting older and stronger, and they've gained lots of experience like I did," he said. "When I was 16, I was just a young guy, not playing much. When I was 17, I was killing penalties and stuff in my draft year, playing 20 to 25 minutes a night. I'm sure lots of guys will take a big step this year and help our team out." **H**


**CAPE BRETON EAGLES**

# READY TO BREAK OUT

Whether in the crease or an escape room, Jakub Milota has a calm approach that serves him well. And he'll have plenty of chances to use that skill as Cape Breton's No. 1 **BY WILL MACLAREN**

**O**NE OF THE FIRST times Jakub Milota made an impression on his Cape Breton teammates, he wasn't trying to keep his Eagles in a game. In fact, the netminder was looking for a way out.

During a team-building activity at an escape room in Quebec, the players were divided into small groups. The hunt for freedom was on. "The first and only team to get out was Jakub's," said coach Louis Robitaille. "He just took the (instructions) and

figured it all out. He made it his mission to get out. He's kind of like a silent competitor."

Indeed, the 18-year-old from Ostrava in Czechia is a young man of few words. And it's not necessarily due to language. He gets his point across calmly and succinctly, and he's perfectly fine letting his play speak volumes. Just like that day in the escape room, Milota is on a mission.



And that pursuit began in earnest with his move to North America in 2023. "It was a completely new experience for me," he said. "I wanted to move forward in my career, and, as everybody knows, the QMJHL is one of the best junior leagues in the world. I wanted to compete against the best players my age."

Despite facing a quicker pace and smaller ice – not to mention gaining familiarity with his new home and its cultural differences – Milota managed to adapt successfully, using athleticism and a strong ability to read the play in front of him to record 18 wins and three shutouts as the understudy to Nicolas Rucica. Though it took some time – when the calendar flipped to 2024, his record was below .500 – the season was, on the balance, a triumph. "Jakub had some rough starts early on," Robitaille said. "He felt pressure, and he wanted to do well. That said, as soon as he got here, he began growing on a daily basis.

It might be an easy thing to say, but to see it develop in front of you, getting more and more comfortable with his teammates, it made an impression. I had no doubt from the start that he'd be our No. 1 at some point."

Part of Robitaille's confidence was due to Milota's performance at the 2023 under-18 Hlinka Gretzky Cup. Milota led his club to the gold-medal game on his home soil, and only an overtime goal by Canada's Malcolm Spence prevented Czechia from winning the tournament. Milota's overall play at the event, including a 37-save clinic in the final, made the hockey world take notice.

Another international opportunity presented itself in the spring when Milota was named to the Czech roster for the 2024 under-18 worlds in Finland. It was, however, a decidedly different experience for the stopper. Not only was he sent back across the Atlantic to compete for his country while his Eagles embarked on their longest

playoff run in 17 years, but his country came up short at the event, losing a 3-2 squeaker to rival Slovakia in the quarterfinal.

Though he's always a person of few words, he was particularly pensive when trying to think of how to describe an experience he'd rather not relive. "It wasn't a perfect tournament for me or for the team," he said bluntly. "Our expectations were very high. It was a good opportunity to learn from those mistakes and move forward, though."

Move forward he has. The first step in the right direction occurred in June when the Nashville Predators drafted him in the fourth round (99th overall). "It was one of the best experiences of my life," Milota said. "Every young hockey player's dream is to be drafted. I'm so grateful. I know it's just another step closer to my



and made a semifinal run in 2024. It's a trend they hope to continue with Milota as the go-to guy in net. Just as his coach predicted, Milota is now the unquestioned No. 1 thanks to an off-season deal that sent the over-ager Ruccia to the Charlottetown Islanders.

Milota, who credits his returning teammates with helping him adapt to life in North America, sees the potential in front of him. "We have a really good defense," he said. "Through the season, it's hard to do it yourself. Our team is very close to one another. I'm really grateful for that."

Robitaille understood something had to give in the Cape Breton crease, but everyone on the team is optimistic about what lies ahead. "(The players) didn't want to see Ruccia go, but they knew where the situation stood, and it made sense to all of

us because we had Jakub," Robitaille said. "Having him take over the starting role wasn't a concern for us for a moment. We saw him develop as a rookie, then get drafted into the NHL. Now, he's our guy. We don't expect him to be the best starter in the world right away. We want him to grow into it. He's going to get better, just like the rest of the team."

#### CAPE CRUSADER

With Milota between the pipes, the Eagles are a team to watch in the QMJHL this season.

dream of reaching the NHL. For a goalie, it's one of the best organizations to be a part of."

He got a taste of NHL life at this year's development camp

**“FOR A GOALIE, IT'S ONE OF THE BEST ORGANIZATIONS TO BE A PART OF”** – Jakub Milota on being drafted by Nashville

with the Preds, but before reaching big-league heights, he'll spend another season with an organization that's proven impressive in its own right the past couple of years. After missing the playoffs twice in a row, the Eagles have improved in each of the past two seasons

Milota is also taking a long-term outlook and is focused on earning some team hardware. "I think this year's team has a lot in front of us," he said. "We want to go as far as possible. We want to win the league, but we need to focus from the first game. There's a long way to go." **H**



TOP: JAMELEE GOUTHRO/CAPE BRETON EAGLES; BOTTOM: MIKE SULLIVAN/CAPE BRETON EAGLES


**BRAMPTON STEELHEADS**

# WINNING HABIT

Jack Ivankovic is one of the top-rated goalies for the 2025 draft. But first, he's focused on an OHL title run **BY TONY FERRARI**

**A**S AN OHL ROOKIE last season, Jack Ivankovic stepped into a unique situation for his hometown Mississauga Steelheads, joining a club that already had a young starting goalie in Ryerson Leenders and a burgeoning roster with high expectations. Even as the No. 7 pick in the 2023 OHL draft, Ivankovic wouldn't be handed anything.

A year later, with the team moving down the road to Brampton, Ivankovic is the starter after Leenders was traded in the off-season. And the Steelheads now have title expectations. On top of all that, it is also Ivankovic's NHL draft-eligible season.

The 17-year-old netminder says he isn't worrying about his own statistical success or personal accolades. He's just letting his draft year come to him



and focusing only on what he can control. "I just want to help this team on a deep play-off run and to win the OHL championship," Ivankovic said. "The stats will take care of themselves. Showing NHL teams that I can be a big part of helping a team win is all I need to do in my draft year."

Ivankovic started the year by putting his winning pedigree on display at the U-18 Hlinka Gretzky Cup in Edmonton in August, where he was the unquestioned starter for Team Canada. He took on a leadership role after being Canada's third-stringer at the under-18 World Championship in April. He

saw what it took to win gold and brought that experience to the Hlinka Gretzky.

Ivankovic was dominant in Edmonton. Allowing just three goals in four games, Ivankovic posted MVP-worthy numbers en route to the gold medal.

## STRONG AS STEEL

Coming off a golden summer, Ivankovic wants to keep his winning ways going in Brampton.

While Canada was an undeniable force in the tournament, the team pushed the pace and constantly tried to create offense, which left them susceptible to giving up chances in their own end. But



Ivankovic was ready to stand tall and mute any chances coming his way. "Winning any medal in your country's jersey is really special, and we had a great group," Ivankovic said. "Winning gold set me up for the year in Brampton. It gave me confidence heading into training camp, and it's part of why my expectations for the year are an OHL championship."

Ivankovic is excited to enter the season as the undisputed No. 1, but the relationship he and Leenders developed throughout last year won't be forgotten. The duo became good friends and battled fiercely in practice, pushing each other to improve every day.

That competitive friendship was on full display in the Steelheads' opening game of the season, a home date against the Brantford Bulldogs in which Leenders was in the crease opposite Ivankovic. The game ended up going Ivankovic's way, as he posted a 21-save shutout in a 7-0 Brampton win. "We always pushed each other in practice," Ivankovic said.

"Whether it was individual drills or 3-on-3, neither of us wanted to lose."

Taking on his former crease partner is just the first step toward achieving his goals. Ivankovic plans to let his play on the ice and team accolades do the talking as he embarks on the most important year of his young career.

He enters the year viewed as a second-rounder for the 2025 NHL draft, but a good showing would see that stock rise. Ivankovic's knack for winning and making big saves will go a long way toward making that happen – and propelling the Steelheads to an OHL title. **H**

ONTARIO HOCKEY LEAGUE

# DAWN OF A NEW DAY

Bryan Crawford is aiming to usher in a new era of OHL engagement as he takes over the commissioner chair: 'Personality creates a connection' **BY TONY FERRARI**

**W**HEN NEW OHL commissioner Bryan Crawford stepped into the role, he understood he had big shoes to fill. After all, his predecessor had held the job since before the 42-year-old Crawford was born.

 Luckily for Crawford, David Branch – who served as the league's commissioner from 1979 to 2024 – has been heavily involved in the transition process. "To have the opportunity to have him around and consult with him and have his support and knowledge, in this initial transition and certainly in the initial couple of years," Crawford said, "was actually a very big selling feature to wanting to take the opportunity and fill the role."

Crawford is excited to lead a new era and build on what the OHL has done well in recent years. The league is coming off of one of its most successful seasons ever. According to Crawford, the 2023-24 campaign saw the third-highest total attendance in OHL history, with its most fans since 2014-15. There were record streaming numbers, and the OHL's overall business is as good as ever, fully recovered from the hit that every sports league took during the pandemic.

Crawford is a former CFL running back who was heavily involved with that league's players' association, helping to represent the players in collective bargaining and union issues. After he retired, he held leadership positions with On-

tario University Athletics, Basketball Canada and, most recently, Golf Canada. The Hamilton native has had his hand in the business side of sports for as long as he can remember. Crawford wants to lean on his experience as an athlete and as an executive to help the OHL reach its full potential.

His goal early on is to modernize and continue to grow the league. He wants to showcase the on-ice product the OHL has to offer while continuing to put the league's personalities on display. The latter part of that goal hasn't always been a focus in hockey. "I mean, hockey players are notorious for not having personalities that are all that divergent from each other, right?" he joked. "That's something that people really want to see. That personality creates a connection to that individual, to their story. And it gives people something to hold on to or something to cheer for."

Changing the culture won't be easy. Players have reservations about saying the wrong thing or not being accepted if they don't fit into the cookie-cutter personality the sport has long preferred. "Part of what our game needs is to continue to lean into making sure players feel comfortable, first and foremost, to kind of share and be their authentic selves," Crawford said. "That you can be authentic in a way that is unique and different and special."



## REGIME CHANGE

For the first time since 1979, the OHL has a new commish as Crawford takes over for longtime leader David Branch.

With the understanding that personalities add significant value to teams, the league and players' personal brands, Crawford is aiming to create avenues for players to showcase who they are. He wants the OHL to be the steward of storytelling for the players.

Crawford's main goal is to build a space for players to grow – both on and off the ice. The former pro football player is ready to help bring the world of modern sports and marketing to the major-junior ranks.

"My ultimate vision for the league is that we're a best-in-class league that's revered around the world for what can be done in sports at this level and what can be done with



student-athletes as we have," Crawford said. "That's ultimately what the league is about. We're about developing young people. That was honestly one of the biggest draws to coming to this role was the opportunity to work in that environment." **H**



Despite being a USHL rookie last season, Slukynsky was the league's top goalie and led Fargo to the Clark Cup.

WESTERN MICHIGAN BRONCOS

# HAMMER TIME

Hampton Slukynsky – or ‘Hammer’ to his friends – takes his puck-stopping talents to Western Michigan after a dominant season in the USHL **BY RYAN KENNEDY**

**E**VER SINCE HE WAS a kid, Hampton Slukynsky has been nicknamed ‘Hammer.’ When Slukynsky started playing goaltender around age seven or eight, his mother would stick a foam hammer to the glass behind his crease, and that practice has continued throughout the netminder’s developing career – depending on how the local rink crew felt about it.



“She still does it,” Slukynsky

said. “Some rinks in the USHL didn’t allow it, but she’d always put it up to take a picture until someone took it down.”

In Fargo, where Slukynsky helped the Force win a championship last year, the folks at the arena were more than happy to see the hammer posted up whenever the kid was in the crease. Indeed, despite being a rookie, Slukynsky led the USHL with a 1.86 goals-against average and .923 save percentage, garnering goaltender-of-the-year honors in the process.

During Fargo’s march to the Clark Cup title, Slukynsky was even better, rocking a 1.69 GAA and .931 SP while playing all of the Force’s 12 playoff games.

During the regular season, Slukynsky had shared the crease with USHL veteran Anton Castro, and their teamwork helped the younger netminder get accustomed to the circuit. “For me, being my first year out of high-school hockey in Minnesota, it was an eye-opener at the start of the season, just how big the jump was,” said Slukynsky, 19. “One thing I took away from it was how consistent you had to be because that league is so tight, even though we were the best team.”

Drafted in the fourth round (118th overall) by the Los Angeles Kings in 2023, Slukynsky made a name for himself playing for Warroad High School in northern Minnesota, a pro-

gram that has produced elite talents such as T.J. Oshie, Brock Nelson and Gigi Marvin (for old-schoolers, Henry Boucha and the Christian brothers also played for Warroad back in the 1960s and ’70s).

Playing in the state’s small-school bracket, Warroad made the final two years in a row with Slukynsky in the crease, losing to Hermantown in 2022 and Mahtomedi in 2023. Nevertheless, it was a time the goaltender will never forget. “Growing up in Warroad, from the time you’re four or five years old, you’re watching those high-school games,” he said. “So to be able to play there for three years and play in a couple championships is a dream come true. I wish we could’ve won one, but it was a really cool experience, and I’m glad I played my senior year there.”

Now, Slukynsky is in another Midwestern locale for his next challenge: the NCAA. He’s suiting up for Western Michigan this season, where the Broncos benefitted from a recruiting coup. Originally, Slukynsky was committed to Northern Michigan, but all three Wildcats coaches left in the summer, meaning the netminder was free to enter the transfer portal.

Older brother Grant had just completed his freshman season at NMU, but Grant started



MARISSA SHIOCK/FARGO FORCE



to look elsewhere, and the pair ended up choosing Western Michigan. “He’s an elite goaltender and has a history of stopping pucks,” said Broncos coach Pat Ferschweiler. “So when he got into the portal, a lot of teams were excited about trying to get him. We had a couple things that were attractive to, not only Hampton, but Grant as well. We still had some schol-

### LOOKING AHEAD

Slukynsky has high hopes for Western Michigan this year, and he’s a good bet to join Team USA at the WJC.

arship money, so that put us in the conversation, but we also needed a center. Hampton is a prized goalie, but Grant is also a really good player. We’re ex-

cited about both the brothers.”

Western Michigan has made the NCAA tournament three years running, which was attractive to Hampton, while the coaching staff and the chance to play with his brother were also positives. Much like in Fargo, Slukynsky will have the benefit of an older netminder to share the crease with, this time in fifth-year NCAA vet Cameron Rowe – a USA Hockey National Team Development Program alum who played two years at Wisconsin before decamping for Western Michigan.

Ferschweiler likes the idea of having competition in net and said Rowe was excited as well. Slukynsky may be an incoming freshman, but his coach knows the talent he brings to the campus in Kalamazoo. “His most important skill set is his calm,” Ferschweiler said. “He’s unfazed by the things that go on in front of him. It’s a very impressive quality, especially for a young man. He has a lot of trust in his style, in himself, and it shows. You can feel it. A puck goes by him and he doesn’t change, he doesn’t blame. He has that next-puck mentality. As a person, he carries himself very well, and his competitiveness is really impressive.”

Slukynsky may miss a few games in the winter, as he’s a strong candidate to make Team USA for the world juniors.

At 6-foot-1, Slukynsky has just enough size to be forecasted as a future NHLer, but it’s important that he prides himself on his skating, flexibility and athleticism. He improved his ability to read plays while in Fargo and continues to work on his con-

sistency both on and off the ice (plus his edgework, since he believes you can never be too good at skating).

In terms of NHL players Slukynsky watches, his favorites run the gamut from the obvious to the intriguing. “Right now, obviously Sergei Bobrovsky with the Stanley Cup run,” he said. “But I also like Casey DeSmith. He’s really quick. Juuse Saros is fun to



watch the way he moves and controls himself, holding his edges. I’ll throw Igor Shesterkin in there, too. He was really fun to watch in the playoffs.”

Playing in the NCHC, Western Michigan will face tough competition all season, and if the Broncos want to make a deep playoff run, they’re going to need all hands on deck, including the Slukynsky brothers. The big question, of course, is whether Hampton’s mom will bring the hammer to Lawson Arena. “I’m sure it will be up,” Slukynsky said. “I’m sure she’ll find a way.” **H**



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## JOKERIT

# BACK TO WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

At 40, Valteri Filppula returns to Jokerit to help his alma mater graduate from Finland's second-tier league **BY RISTO PAKARINEN**

**V**ALTERI FILPPULA, THE most decorated Finnish player in history, isn't quite done with hockey yet. The 40-year-old center and longtime NHLer recently signed a one-year deal with Jokerit, with whom he made his pro debut in 2003. Making it more remarkable is the fact Jokerit now plays in the Finnish second division, the Mestis.

Oh, and Filppula will reportedly play for free – though that's a matter of interpretation. Jokerit chairman Mikko Saarni explained Filppula would receive part-ownership in lieu of salary. "Filppula won't be a burden to our player budget," Saarni said. "Besides the Jokerit shares, Filppula won't get a salary from the club. He wants to be a part of taking Jokerit back to the top for the right reasons. There are some bonuses in the contract, but those are ones that the club insisted on."

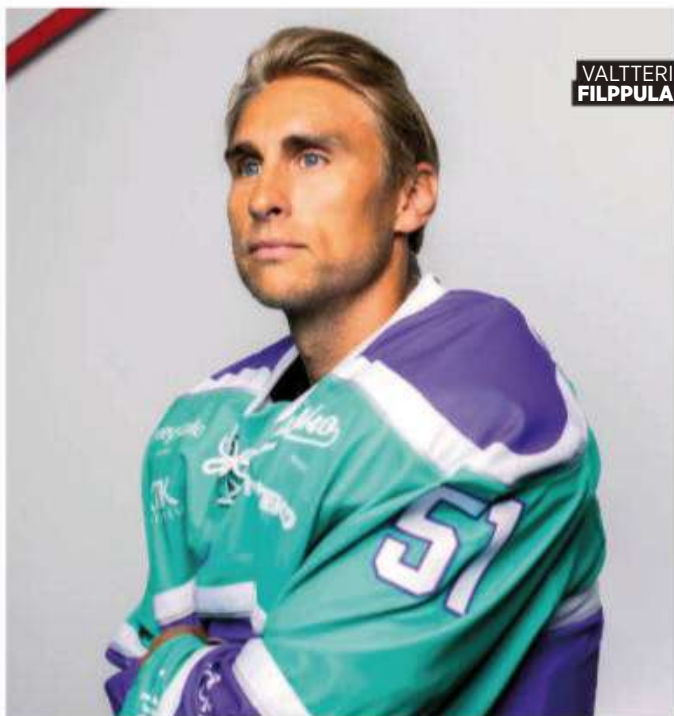
The Helsinki-based team has something of a checkered past. Founded in 1967, they won the Finnish title in 1973 before fading into obscurity – and several times to the brink of bankruptcy – and being relegated from the top league in 1987.

Even though the team earned promotion back to the top league, they again faced bankruptcy when Harry Harkimo bought the club in 1991. The

next year, led by the team's star – a baby-faced, speedy winger named Teemu Selanne – Jokerit won the Finnish title.

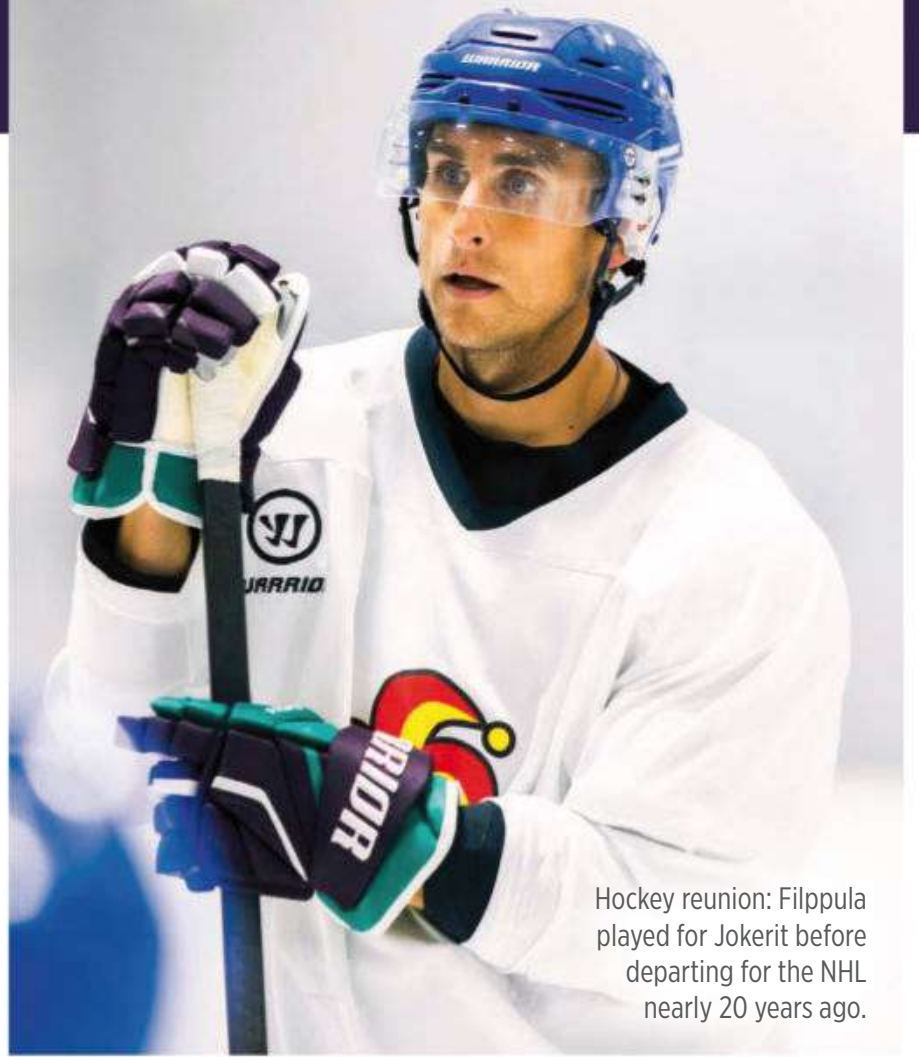
Jokerit quickly became a force in Finnish hockey, winning the league championship five times – and reaching the final on another two occasions – in an 11-year span. Filppula was on the team that made the final in 2005, but the 2002 title was the last time Jokerit hoisted the Liiga championship trophy, the Canada Bowl.

In 2013, Harkimo sold Jokerit's arena and 49 percent



VALTERI FILPPULA

of the club to Russian oligarchs and pulled the team out of the Liiga to join the KHL. In 2019, he then sold the club to Jari Kurri. Kurri had been Jokerit's GM since 2014 and continued in that role through 2022, when Jokerit pulled out of the KHL after several team sponsors raised objections due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.



Hockey reunion: Filppula played for Jokerit before departing for the NHL nearly 20 years ago.

The team made its long-awaited domestic re-debut last season, when the Finnish federation opened the door for Jokerit to join the Mestis.

Signing the only Finn in the 'Triple Gold Club' (wins of the Stanley Cup and both World Championship and Olympic gold medals) will surely give Jokerit the boost they need on their path to promotion. "This is a great moment for us and for Finnish hockey in general," Saarni said. "It's also a great opportunity for us. About a year ago, we created a few scenarios for our future, and this is the best one."

Playing for Geneve-Servette last season, Filppula helped make history by leading his team to become the first Swiss side to win the Champions Hockey League. That came following a National League title in 2023.

According to Filppula, he first had to ensure he was still motivated to continue his career. But once he knew he still had the drive, Jokerit was the only choice. "We made initial contact in June, and after I had skated a little and I knew I still wanted to play, things moved on smooth-

ly," Filppula said. "Jokerit has always been close to my heart, and it was from here that I left for the NHL once. When I wore the Jokerit sweater, I was one of the youngest players on the team, and now I'll be the oldest. I remember how much I learned from the more experienced players and hope that I can help some of the young players on this team."

Filppula will also wear the 'C' this year with Jokerit. "Fun- nily enough, I've never been a captain on a club team, only on Team Finland a couple of times," he said. "I'm not the most vocal guy in the room, but I hope to lead by example."

A lot has changed since Filppula last played in Finland. For example, he'll spend hours on the bus, travelling to small arenas to play in front of hundreds, not thousands, of spectators. However, there are some familiar faces around the team. Former NHLer (and his former Team Finland roommate) Ossi Vaananen is one of them. "I've been very impressed with (Filppula)," Vaananen said. "He could've signed with any team, but he wanted to return to Jokerit. He doesn't want any special treatment; he just wants to be one of the guys."

Concluded Saarni: "This is the best thing that could have happened to us." **H**

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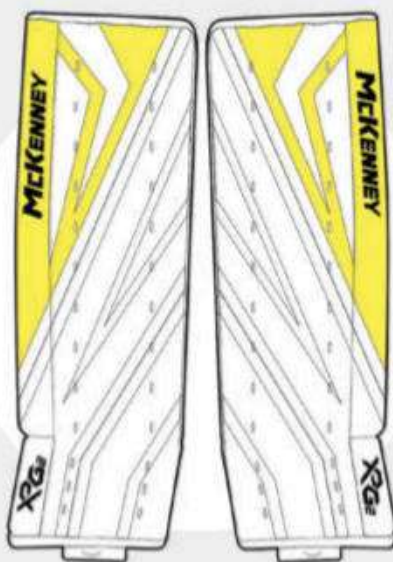
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# PADS



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## > FEATURES & SPECS



- All new design, featuring an ultra-thin pre-curved profile with angled solid outer side roll and two inner-core options: CORE FLEX LTE offers a flexible pre-curved shape with dual inner breaks above and below knee or CORE FLY LTE offers a stiffer pre-curved shape with no internal breaks.
- Canadian Custom Crafted Pro-Spec Construction for pro-level performance.
- Firm flat-face pad design offers more active and controlled rebounds.
- Flexible boot core for maximum mobility and range of motion.
- Dual-density HD Protection inner core offers better pad stability and superior seal to the ice while greatly reducing our pad weight to 4 lbs, 4 oz in a 34+1" size.
- New wider MRC - Motion Response Channel facilitates better pad rotation and leg support in the butterfly position, while featuring grey Nash material for superior durability.
- Redesigned PFS - Precision Fit Strapping System features new 2" Dual Elastic Calf straps for more secure lower-leg fit, as well as a 2" Elastic Knee Strap with dual attachment locations at knee or upper calf.
- Exclusive "Lock-Lace" Bungee toe-tie system with new Clarino toe-wear attachment tab.
- 11" Pro width featuring pre-curved shape for optimal performance.
- New XPG2 Pro Elite graphics.
- Available in sizes: 32" to 37" with either +1" or +2" options.

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# CATCHER



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## > FEATURES & SPECS

- Canadian Custom Crafted Pro-Spec Construction for pro-level performance.
- All-new glove design featuring a one-piece thumb/cuff for maximum coverage.
- 60-degree break angle with finger-to-thumb closure.
- Floating cuff design for increased wrist mobility.
- SureGrip palm material for increased grip.
- Air-knit mesh finger stalls for comfort and heat dispersal.
- Double tee for increased pocket width and puck retention.
- 3/8" felt / HD Protection inner palm with defined break for game-ready flex.
- Triple backhand/wrist PFS – Precision Fit Strapping System for quick and secure adjustment.
- HD Protection in finger-back pad.
- New XPG2 graphics.
- 2 lb, 4oz weight.
- Medium or Large sizes - both with 45" Pro Perimeter.



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# BLOCKER



## > FEATURES & SPECS

- Canadian Custom Crafted Pro-Spec Construction for pro-level performance.
- Bindingless face for maximum blocking area.
- Dual-density HD inner blocking board with PE for reduced weight and durability.
- HD Protection side hand plate with low-profile design for better stick control.
- Reinforced Nash Palm with ventilated mesh gussets for breathability.
- Wide flared cuff design for increased range of motion.
- HD Protection foam finger guards with Velcro adjustable design.
- Side index-finger pad to cover over stick paddle.
- Back hand cushion pad for added comfort and protection.
- New XPG2 graphics.
- 1 lb, 12 oz weight.
- 8" x 15" maximum Pro blocking surface.

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# PANTS



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## > FEATURES & SPECS

- Canadian Custom Crafted Pro-Spec Construction for pro-level performance.
- XPG2 Pro Elite model features the ultimate in protection, comfort and performance.
- Design features maximum-coverage thigh pads for increased net coverage.
- Waist design feature more segments for added flexibility and performance.
- Extra-large tail bone/spine protector with HD Protection.
- Large double inner five-hole blocks to eliminate five-hole area.
- Pro Front Flex panels feature HD Protection in the high-impact areas.
- Precision Fit System inner belt for more secure fit while the pant remains loose with a barrel-fit design for maximum coverage.
- 420 denier urethane coated “High Tenacity” nylon outer-shell construction.
- Durable polyester “Double Knit” inner lining.
- Available in Black, Navy, Red and Custom Colors.
- XPG2 Pro Elite sizes: SM, MED, LG, XL, XXL, and XXXL.





**XPG<sub>2</sub>**  
**PRO ELITE**

# CHEST & ARMS

## > FEATURES & SPECS

- Canadian Custom Crafted Pro-Spec Construction for pro-level performance.
- Lightweight Pro design with durable 420 Nylon and Air-Knit construction.
- Air cushion chest pad with “Shock Shield” sternum plate with extra-thick HD Protection.
- Contoured body chest block design with separate Velcro adjustable side Rib-Wings for maximum coverage and protection.
- Pro-design, adjustable-length arms feature tapered floating forearm and bicep caps constructed of HD-110 foam with Air-Tek Velcro inserts for added comfort and protection.
- Moulded plastic elbow caps with air cushion foam inserts.
- PFS – Precision Fit Strapping System for the back harness features Quick-Change side-release buckles for easy replacement and dual wrist strap attachment areas for custom fit.
- Large back pad with high-density foam spine protection.
- Available in sizes: SM, MED, LG, XL.



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# GEAR REVIEW

**McKENNEY'S XPG2 LINE GIVES  
ALL THE BENEFITS WITHOUT  
THE PREMIUM PRICE**

@GOALIEGARNERD

**I**N AN INDUSTRY dominated by a handful of large companies whose primary focuses lie in retail and NHL market share, McKenney goalie equipment – part of the Roustan Hockey umbrella – is taking a different tack. The McKenney brand strays from the beaten path by eschewing overseas mass production in favor of domestically produced, customized products. McKenney's goal is to create equipment for goalies as unique as the company. Everything McKenney builds is made in Canada and produced at pro spec. In other words, McKenney doesn't produce any recreation-level equipment.



The new McKenney XPG2 lineup blends 30 years of the company's craftsmanship with the needs of modern goalies.

Starting with the **LEG PADS**, the XPG2 adopts various design concepts specifically catered to meet what today's net guardians need to stop pucks. The pads remove knee rolls – required in the early days to maintain the pad's width – and feature an angled outer roll (as opposed to the traditional squared shape) to help angle pucks toward



the pad's face. Gone, too, are skate-lace toe ties. Instead, the XPG2 line features an exclusive "Lock-Lace" bungee toe-tie system, which makes the pad responsive to the goalie's movements without putting excessive pressure on their ankles and knees. The leg-strapping system is intuitive, highlighted by their updated "Precision Fit Strapping" system, which anchors the pad to the goalie's calf. This is an ideal connection point because it is high enough on the leg for the pad to be responsive to the goalie's movements but is still below the knee, which allows for easy rotation. To make the pads stand up better to the demands goalies put on them, McKenney installs grey Nash in the "Motion Response Channel" along with a high-quality dual high-density foam core. Those additions keep the pad's shape – and have the added benefit of making the equipment featherlight (four pounds, four ounces in a 34+1-inch pad). The overall structure of the pad is available in two configurations. The "Core Flex LTE" is for goalies who want more flex above and below the knee, while the "Core Fly LTE" is for goalies who favor a stiffer profile. Most other pad specs, from strapping to toe-tie configuration, can also be customized. The possibilities explode when one considers the 19 different color zones and four different logo-color options.

For the **XPG2 CATCH GLOVE**, McKenney went with an all-new construction, moving to a one-piece thumb (for max coverage), floating-cuff design (for max wrist mobility) and SureGrip palm design (for max control). The glove is built with a 60-degree closure, the most popular angle used by NHL goalies, and comes with a double-T pocket construction

for blackhole-level puck retention. Like the pads, the glove has its own “Precision Fit System,” this time with straps at the fingers, knuckles and back-hand to allow goalies to dial in the glove to their exact preference.

The **XPG2 BLOCKER** features a super-wide wrist cuff to allow goalies maximum range of motion – and for excellent finger protection when pucks do sneak in at weird angles. The blocker’s glove has superior ventilation thanks to its mesh gussets but retains its firm grip due to the reinforced Nash palm.

The **XPG2’S CHEST & ARM PROTECTOR** (C&A) attempts to satisfy the dual – but often contrasting – mandates for C&A gear to be both protective and mobile. The XPG2 is made exclusively for pro-level protection. So, you can rest assured it can handle any shooter that shows up to your pick-up game – even that ringer wearing the matching helmet and gloves.

The sternum is reinforced via a “Shock Shield” plate, while the arms (which feature fully wrapped forearm and bicep pads for off-angle shots) have extra Air-Tek inserts under floating forearm and bicep caps. The unit is made of 420-denier nylon and is air-knit, making it both durable and lightweight.

**“INCREDIBLY, MCKENNEY PRICES THEIR STOCK AND CUSTOM PRODUCTS THE SAME”**

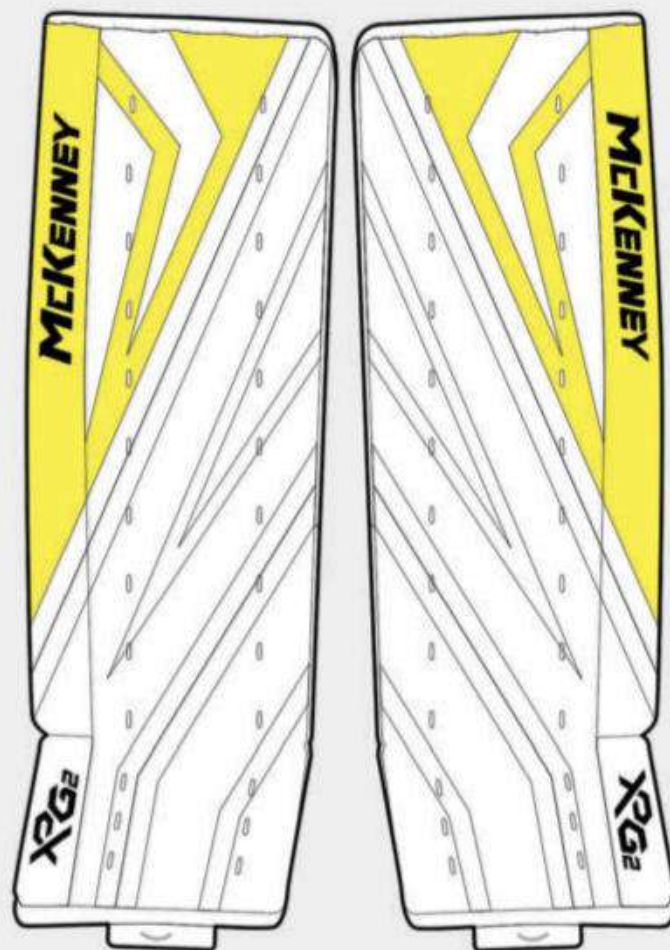
Because goalie-gear style doesn’t end with masks, pads and gloves, McKenney is one of the few companies offering custom-colored pants. Like its C&A big brother, the **XPG2 PANT** provides protection and mobility thanks to pro-front flex panels and extra protection in the tailbone/spine area. The pants have an inner belt to cinch to the goalie while maintaining a barrel shape to help with coverage. The pants are extremely durable thanks to a 420-denier urethane coating and polyester double-knit inner lining.

The XPG2 line is a big step forward for a company already well-regarded for the quality and customization of its products. Incredibly, McKenney prices their stock and custom products the same. Both can be purchased directly through their site or via select retailers. If you’re a goalie gear nerd who is looking for a set of Canadian-made gear, McKenney’s XPG2 line is definitely worth checking out. •

**XPG2**

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- Select your customized “SPECS” from the dropdown menus.
- Finally, “Add to Cart” and “Checkout” or “Print/Save” your design and order through an authorized dealer.

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# PANTS

## > FEATURES & SPECS

- Canadian Made, Custom Crafted Pro-Spec Construction for pro level performance.
- XPG2 models features pro level protection, comfort, and performance.
- 420 denier urethane coated "High Tenacity" nylon outer shell construction.
- Maximum width air cushioned thigh pads with rear leg splits.
- 3-way flex pad in upper thigh area with HD Protection inserts for added protection.
- Lace up front area for added adjustment.
- Large double inner five-hole blocks to eliminate five-hole area.
- Precision Fit System inner belt for more secure fit while the pant remains loose with a barrel fit design for maximum coverage.
- Stocked in Black, Navy, Red with Custom Colors available

## > SIZES AVAILABLE

**PRO** SM, MED, LRG, XL, 2XL, 3XL

**INT** MED, LRG

**JR** SM, MED, LRG

**YTH** MED, LRG



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**XP**G<sub>2</sub>

# CHEST & ARMS



## > FEATURES & SPECS

- Canadian Made, Custom Crafted Pro-Spec Construction for pro level performance.
- Lightweight Pro design featuring durable 420 Nylon and Air-Knit construction.
- Large shoulder and arm floaters for added protection and maximum blocking area.
- Adjustable arm system features “Quick-Adjust” webbing straps with Velcro attachment.
- Pro chest pad design with side Rib-Wings for maximum protection and mobility.
- Universal arms feature moulded elbow caps with air cushion foam.
- Air cushion chest pad with “Shock Shield” sternum plate with HD Protection.
- PFS – Precision Fit Strapping System back harness features Quick-Change side release buckles for easy replacement.

## > SIZES AVAILABLE

**PRO** SM, MED, LRG, XL

**INT** MED, LRG, XL, 2XL

**JR** SM, MED, LRG

**YTH** MED, LRG

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# XPG2

INTERMEDIATE | JUNIOR | YOUTH

# PADS



## > FEATURES & SPECS

- Canadian Made, Custom Crafted Pro-Spec Construction for pro level performance.
- Ultra thin pre-curved profile with angled solid outer side roll and two inner core options: CORE FLEX LTE offers a flexible pre-curved shape with dual inner breaks above and below knee or CORE FLY LTE offers a stiffer pre-curved shape with no internal breaks.
- Firm flat face pad design offers more active and controlled rebounds.
- Flexible boot core for maximum mobility and range of motion.
- Dual-density HD Protection inner core offers better pad stability and superior seal to the ice while greatly reducing our pad weight.
- New wider MRC – Motion Response Channel facilitates better pad rotation & leg support in the butterfly position.
- Redesigned PFS – Precision Fit Strapping System features new Dual Elastic Calf straps.

## > SIZES AVAILABLE

**INT** 30+1", 31+1", 32+1" at 10.25" width

**JR** 26+1", 28+1", 30+1" at 9.5" width

**YTH** 22+1", 24+1", 26+1" at 8.5" width



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# BLOCKER & CATCHER



## > FEATURES & SPECS

### BLOCKER

- Canadian Made, Custom Crafted Pro-Spec Construction for pro level performance.
- Dual density HD inner blocking board with PE for reduced weight and durability.
- HD Protection side hand plate.
- Reinforced Nash Palm with ventilated mesh gussets for breathability.
- HD Protection foam finger guards.

### CATCHER

- Canadian Made, Custom Crafted Pro-Spec Construction for pro level performance.
- Glove design featuring a one-piece thumb/cuff for maximum coverage.
- 60 degree break angle with finger to thumb closure & game ready flex.
- SureGrip palm material for increase grip.
- Double tee for increased pocket size.
- Precision Fit Strapping System.

## > SIZES AVAILABLE

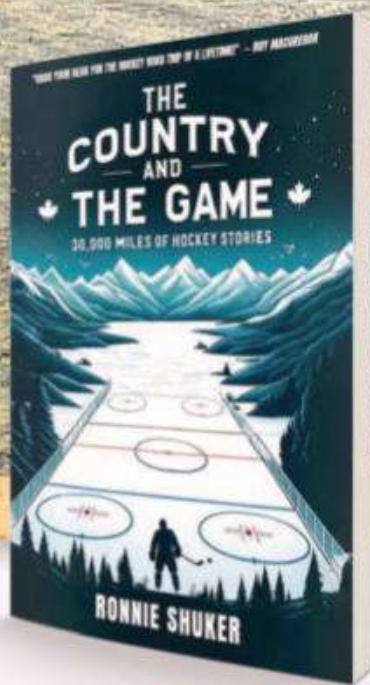
**INT** 8" x 14" BLOCKER / 43" CATCHER

**JR** 7" x 13.5" BLOCKER / 41" CATCHER

**YTH** 7" x 12.5" BLOCKER / 39" CATCHER



THE COUNTRY AND THE GAME:  
30,000 MILES OF HOCKEY STORIES



# BOMB

**WITH ITS LOVE FOR THE GAME AND LARGER-THAN-LIFE CHARACTERS – INCLUDING THEIR AFFINITY FOR PROFANITY – FLIN FLON IS A ONE-OF-A-KIND HOCKEY TOWN**

**BY RONNIE SHUKER**

**I****N THE WANING DAYS** of the pandemic, THN's editor at large Ronnie Shuker embarked on an eight-month cross-Canada road trip in search of all things hockey. In his trusty four-wheeled friend 'Gumpy,' named after Hall of Fame goalie Gump Worsley, Shuker ventured from coast to coast to coast, through all 13 provinces and territories, visiting more than 50 hockey towns in the country. He played, watched and talked about the game with all the puckheads he met along the way, from pros and semi-pros to beer-league veterans and fans. The following excerpt is taken from his book *The Country and the Game: 30,000 Miles of Hockey Stories*, published by Sutherland House Books in Toronto and set for release on Oct. 15. The excerpt picks up Shuker as he's making his way through the Prairies on his way to Flin Flon, Man., home of the legendary Bombers and their unique – and talkative – cult following.

PHOTO BY RONNIE SHUKER





# TRACK

I am now far enough north in Saskatchewan that it makes sense to turn northeast back across the Manitoba border to Flin Flon, named after Josiah Flintabbatey Flonatin, a fictional character in a novel by British author J. E. Preston Muddock. Flin Flon is a town of talkers. But it is a certain kind of talk that only happens here. It covers all topics but converges into one. History, tradition, people, the mine, the weather, music, sex – every conversa-

tion leads to hockey. They call it Bomber Talk.

I drive past the large statue of “Flinty” that greets people coming into town, and then another of him riding a submarine on the eastern edge of Ross Lake. I check into my motel and drive to the old Whitney Forum, built by Flin Flon’s main employer, Hudson Bay Mining & Smelting.

When I arrive, the Bombers have just wrapped up their morning skate ahead of their game that night against the

Weyburn Red Wings. Players collect their shoes from the cubbyholes outside the dressing room (no footwear is allowed inside). Coach and general manager Mike Reagan, clad in a Bombers jumpsuit, comes out and leads me to one of the lounges.

“It’s a lifestyle, it’s a culture here, the Bombers,” he says. “We’ll have probably 700 to 800 people here tonight, and there are Bomber fans that don’t come to the games but they

follow it intensely, whether listening on the radio or just talk at the mine.”

Flin Flon so self-identifies with its hockey club that to talk about the team is to talk about the town. The team actually predates Flin Flon, which wasn’t incorporated until 1933, by six years (although it wouldn’t be named the Bombers until 1936).

The Bombers have a mythology all their own, one borne of place. It is impossible to export

**THE COUNTRY AND THE GAME:  
30,000 MILES OF HOCKEY STORIES**



it beyond the borders of Flin Flon. You have to live or have lived here to be a Bombers fan, and you must love the team as much as the town, because the two are as inseparable as the Bombers' maroon and white.

"Bomber Talk is every day," Mike says. "The coffee shops, the theme is the Bombers. Even in the summertime, everybody's still talking about the previous season or the upcoming season."

Born in Flin Flon and bred on

**WELL, HELLO THERE**

'Flinty' welcomes visitors to the town along with a sign explaining the origin of Flin Flon's name.

the Bombers, Mike was raised by a single mother who billeted players to give her young son male role models. Mike played four years for the

Bombers in the late 1990s. After four years of college hockey in the United States and a short stint in minor pro leagues that took him through the Deep South and, briefly, Quebec, the Bombers brought him back in 2007 as coach and GM. He's been here ever since.

Flin Flon lies on the western edge of Manitoba and trickles

over into Saskatchewan. The Bombers play in the Saskatchewan Junior Hockey League. For most teams in the league, road games are an hour drive out and an hour back home. For the Bombers, short trips are three to four hours away. Life is lived on the road aboard the bus. Their longest drive is Estevan, 15 minutes from the American border, 11 hours away. Road trips often feature four games in five nights or three in three, getting back into Flin Flon anywhere from two to five o'clock in the morning. One of Mike's main recruiting requirements during the summer is to look for players who can handle the rigors of the road.

"Our road trips are long, and some people see that as a disadvantage," he says. "Don't get me wrong, it's tougher, but I also look at it as it prepares us for playoffs. When playoff time comes, we're used to the grind of the road, whereas some teams aren't. I also look at it from the perspective

that our guys get an opportunity to come close together on the road."

I follow Mike back to the dressing room. Everything about the Bombers, their logo, the inspirational quotes on the walls, their blue-collar, fan-friendly playing style, the arena they play in – it all mimics the mining mentality of the town. On the inside door, a sign reminds players, "Through this door walks the heart of a champion." In the team's gym, "Nobody outworks the Bombers." Where the players dress, a large maroon rug, with the words "Built on Passion," covers most of floor, mirroring the fluorescent sign above it on the ceiling. Above a large TV is a moose rack from a Bombers super fan, Clarence Pettersen, who donated it to the team a week before he chose to get the shot to end his life because of cancer. The signatures of every Bomber who's ever graduated from the team as a 20-year-old covers the plywood ceiling of

PHOTOS BY RONNIE SHUKER



the laundry room. Everything is in maroon and white, even the washer and dryer.

In the early days of the Bombers, the players did their laundry like miners. "In the mine, they used to dry their clothes using a pulley system with chains," Mike says. "They had a pulley at the top and they'd hang their underwear up there. Then they'd pull it up and the heat would dry out their stuff. They used to have that here. In the ceiling there were baskets, you put everything in there."

I leave Mike to prepare for the game and drive to CFAR, the local radio station, to talk with Flin Flon's professional talker, the Bombers' longtime play-by-play caller, Rob Hart. Although the walls outside his second-floor office are covered in posters of rock bands and musicians, Rob's tiny, windowless, half-wood-paneled, half-white-brick office is almost all hockey. It virtually enfolds Rob as he reclines on his swivel office chair, arms crossed, resting



on his belly. Although a longtime Canadiens fan, he's wearing a Florida Panthers T-shirt, prescient since the Panthers would make it to the Stanley Cup final this season.

"Flin Flon's got a mystique, it's a special place," Rob says. "We talk about the history of the team and the success of the team, but there's a lot of characters in the community itself. That makes it fun to go to the rink as well."

"Is it common for people who leave Flin Flon to keep tabs on the Bombers?" I ask.

"I get emails from people all over the world that listen to the Bomber broadcast. There's a pilot in Japan who used to send me emails regularly that he was listening and to make sure I put a shout-out to him during the broadcast. He lived in Flin Flon for a couple of years way back when, is a fan, and he just listens to the games."

In an age when cutbacks are keeping NHL radio broadcasters at home, Rob still travels with the Bombers to almost every road game. Even the Maple Leafs' radio crew no longer travels with the team, forcing fans to listen to them call "road games" off a TV in Toronto, even during the playoffs.

I go back downstairs and get talking with Austin Mattes and



Raphael Saray, two of the station's other voices. I'm about to leave when the station's manager, Dianne Russell, pops out of her office.

"They used to say you're either a hooker or a hockey player if you're from Flin Flon," she says.

It isn't the first time I've come across this joke. Birk Sproxtton wrote about it in his poem "The Hockey Fan Reflects On Beginnings:"

*Flin Flon? they say.*

*Why the only people I know from Flin Flon are hockey players and hookers.*

*My mother is from Flin Flon, you say.*

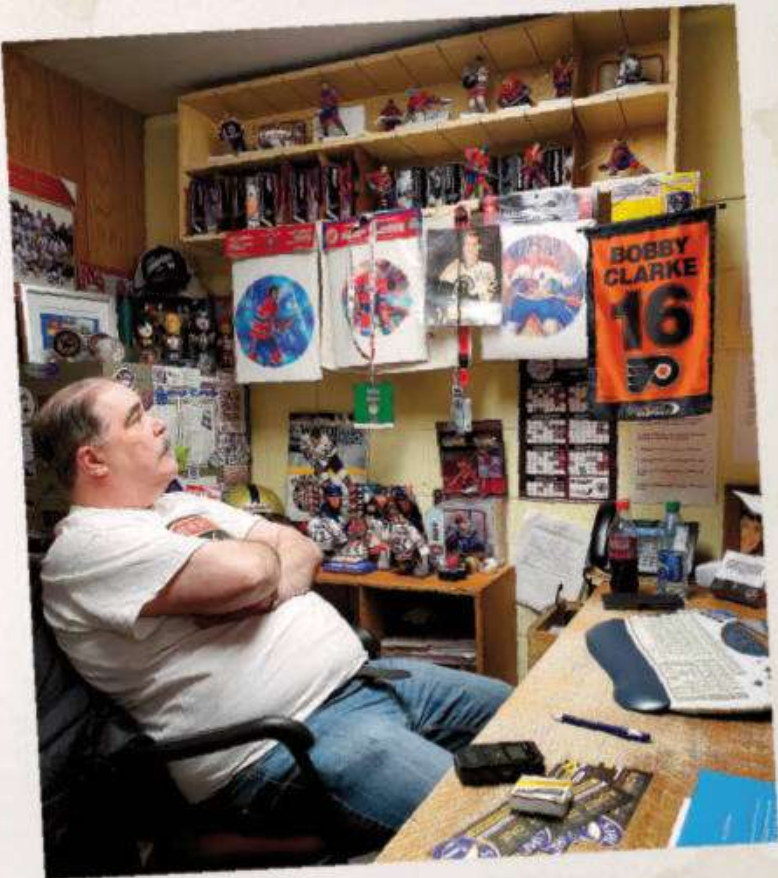
*Long pause.*

*And what position does she play?*

"When the mine started, that wasn't totally untrue," Dianne says. "It was either you played an instrument, or you played hockey, or there was a red-light district, because there was a lot of single guys up here back then. It was like a shanty town."

Flin Flon is a lot like Newfoundland. It is rocky and hilly and has a similar vibe as a once one-industry town. Even though that lone industry isn't doing so well, the people still have hope that things will turn around for the better, that the town will find its way again. If nothing else, Flin Flon has the Bombers. People here are





**HART'S  
HEART**

The Bombers' play-by-play man has a deep passion for hockey and the town. His packed office is proof.

happy, content, and love to talk. If there is a difference, Newfoundlanders are born storytellers, while Flin Flonners are born talkers.

"Who are you talking to next?" Raphael asks.

"Brent Lethbridge, you know him?"

"Uncle Lefty!" Raphael says. "He used to have a TV show, the fabulous Bomber Show. That was kind of the Bomber hype show."

"He'll give you lots about the Bombers," Austin says. "He loves the Bombers, too. He's a really talkative guy."

"Retired insurance salesman," Raphael says. "Part-time rock star."

After dinner, I drive back to the arena to meet with Brent before the game. The concrete walls are half maroon and half white with a black stripe in between. The creaky wooden floor in the lobby, where we sit, is all maroon, as are stacking chairs piled along the walls. Brent has brought along his sis-

ter-in-law Jennifer Hanson, a former anthem singer for the Winnipeg Jets in the 1990s. I tell them I've just come from the radio station.

"So you've talked to all the professional talkers," Jennifer says.

"I was wondering if everybody in Flin Flon is a professional talker."

"Well, there's lots."

"People are happy to talk," Brent says.

Both Brent and Jennifer were born in Flin Flon, both are musicians, and both understand the analogy between being in a band and playing on a hockey team. In Flin Flon, music and hockey are intertwined.

As a company town full of miners, Flin Flon's only land link to the rest of the country used to be the train. No roads were built to it until the 1950s. It was a booming mining community back then, but it was isolated. Hudson Bay Mining & Smelting knew it needed to offer more than just jobs to keep

people from leaving. They started to hire special miners.

"There's not much to do in the winter, so two things got a foothold," Brent says. "One was musical culture and musical theater, and the other was hockey. If you were a hockey player, a good hockey player, they would hire you to work at the mine. They'd work out a little deal where you'd get paid full-time, but you weren't there when you're on road trips, and when you were there, you weren't working when you were practising. So they got full pay. It was almost a little bit professional."

They would hire singers, too.

Jennifer's father was hired as a tenor, and she became a singer herself. She left Flin Flon at 18 when her career took her to Atlanta, Georgia. Bomber Talk followed her there.

"I had a house gig at this bar, and people would find out that I was from Flin Flon, and they would wanna talk about Bobby Clarke, about hockey and Flin Flon, especially if they were hockey fans," Jennifer says. "This guy walked up to me once, and he goes, 'I heard you're from Flin Flon.' And I was like, 'Yes, I am.' He said, 'Bobby Clarke ruined hockey.' I was like, 'Hey, man, he is a national f---ing treasure in Canada. I will





posed to say that in Flin Flon!" Jennifer says.

The name Flin Flon, the cast of characters and professional talkers, the combination of hockey and music, the unusual border-spanning layout of the town, the long tradition of the Bombers, and the lore of Bobby Clarke – it has all created a pop culture cult following of the team and the town. In the movie *Mystery Alaska*, Canadian actor Mike Myers plays a sports reporter from Flin Flon named Donnie Shulzhoffer, who describes the goalie in the championship game: "He looks like he's from the Flin Flon Bombers." The town and the team are also a favorite among low-budget, straight-to-video releases, like *The Road to Flin Flon*, a 1990s comedy in which a Californian travels to Flin Flon to find enlightenment, and *Santa's Slay*, a Christmas horror comedy in which the protagonist wears a Bombers jersey while trying to track down a murderous rampaging St. Nick.



not have you speak about him like this.'"

Bobby Clarke, the archetypal Bomber. His connection to his hometown runs deep. Clarke, whose father had been a driller in the copper and zinc mines, played three years for the Bombers before leaving for the Philadelphia Flyers. Although he lives in Pennsylvania, Clarke still has family in Flin Flon, owns property in town, and comes back to fish from his cabin some summers. He is all over the Whitney Forum, including the Bomber Hall of Fame, although a mural of him

depicts the left-shooting Clarke shooting right-handed. The gymnasium at Ecole McIsaac School in town is named after him, and tourists still ask to see his signature in the Bombers' laundry room.

At a team function in town, long after he retired, Clarke once referred to himself and other Bomber alumni as players who had "Made in Flin Flon stamped on our ass." In true Flin Flon fashion, Clarke made profanity an art form in hockey. If, as Gordie Howe once said, all hockey players speak two languages, English and profanity,

Clarke was fluently bilingual.

"When I was a kid, the CBC came up with this great brain wave," Brent says. "Toronto's playing Philadelphia, 'Let's put a mic on Bobby Clarke.'"

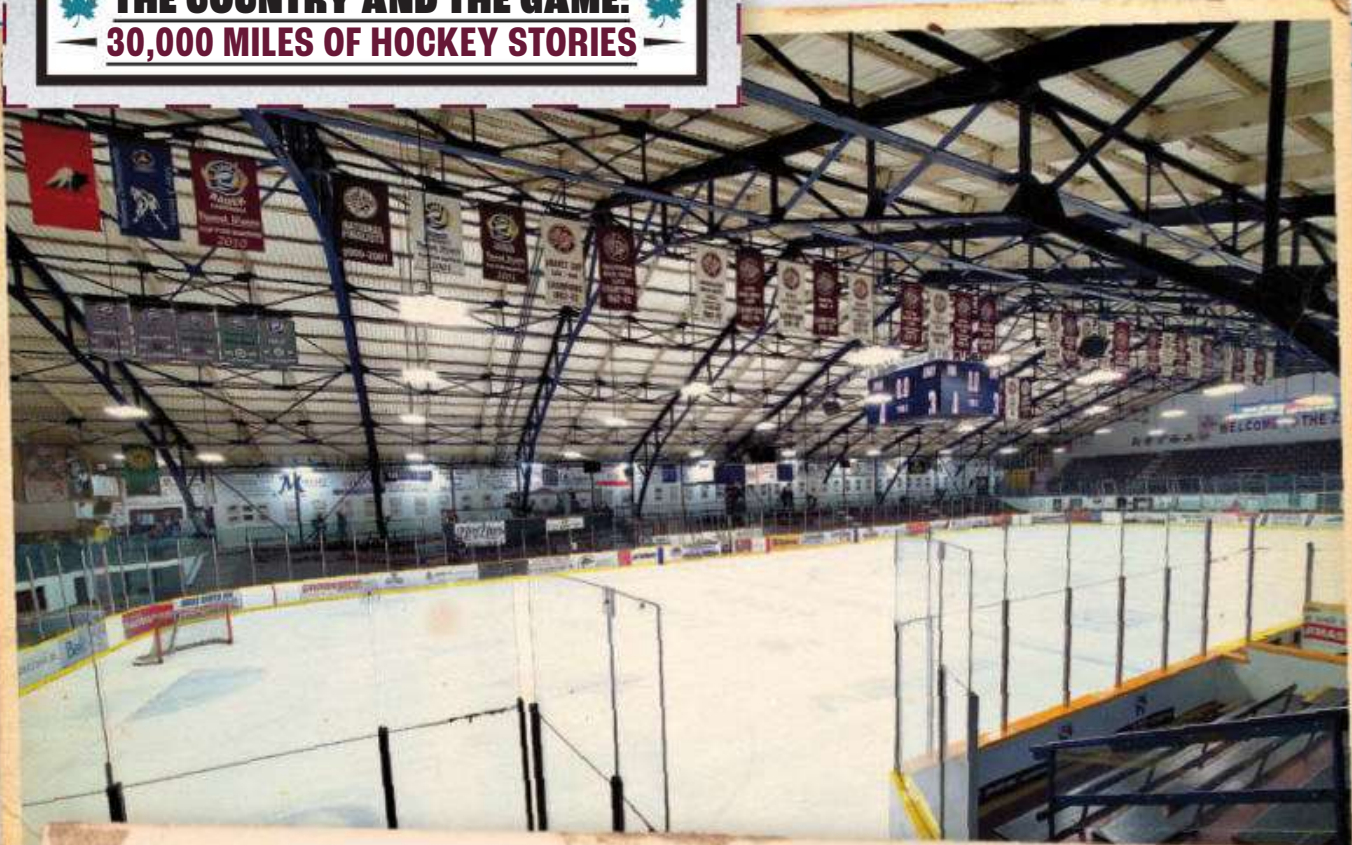
Jennifer laughs hard. She hasn't heard the story, but she knows how it will end.

"They put a live mic on him, and Andy Van Hellemond, who used to come here and referee, was reffing the game," Brent says. "Bob's on the bench and something goes sideways and he says, 'Andy, you f---ing c-----er!'"

"Bobby, you're only sup-

**THE COUNTRY AND THE GAME:  
30,000 MILES OF HOCKEY STORIES**

**BOOK EXCERPT**



aren't shy to remind the players of that.

"Hit him! Hit him!"  
"Come on! Nail these guys!"  
"Hit their goalie!"

As a mining community, the people in Flin Flon expect physical hockey, and the Bombers have rigged their rink accordingly. It is 15 feet shorter and 10 feet narrower than regulation size. It is blue-collar hockey played in front of blue-collar fans in a blue-collar town, and the Bombers send them home happy, with a 4-3 win over the Red Wings.

As is tradition after every home win, fans heft a couple of moose legs over the glass. I watch them slide to center ice, where a pair of Bombers pick them up to be placed with all the others in a freezer in the team's dressing room. Several years ago, the Red Wings kicked off a bench-clearing brawl with the Bombers when they tried to steal the moose legs after a loss.

I thank Brent and Jennifer and begin making my way to the exit. As I file out with the rest of the crowd, I understand something Raphael said to me back at the radio station.

"We don't have hockey fans here. We have Bomber fans." **H**

"If there wasn't a fight at the bar on Saturday nights, there was nothing happening," Jennifer says. "It's not really like that anymore, but in the '80s and the '90s, it was like that. I don't know if it was the hockey bug, I don't know if it was the small-town vibe, but if you didn't get stoned, drunk...and in a fight, it just wasn't a good weekend, you know."

The three of us go out to watch the game. I look around the arena. Glass-encased Bomber jerseys of alumni hang on the walls along with old team pho-

tos. Across from us, I can see the bright white sign for the Bombers' wall of fame. Above us, Bombers banners hang the length of the rink. At the far end is written "Welcome to the Zoo." This is where Flin Flon's most colorful fans watch the

**WHERE'S THE REST?**

Flin Flon fans toss moose legs on the ice after wins. Once, a visiting team took the legs, leading to a brawl.

dirty, clawing a living from the earth. Fans demand the Bombers play the same way, and they



*Ronnie Shuker is an author, editor, freelance writer and an editor at large for The Hockey News. He has travelled to places like North Korea, Chernobyl, Transnistria and the Himalayas, where he took part in the Guinness World Record for the highest-altitude hockey game ever played. He lives in the Greater Toronto Area and plays pickup hockey north of the city.*



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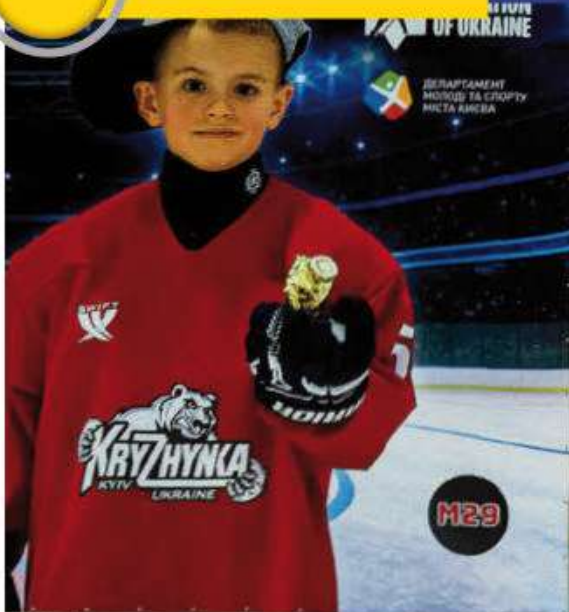


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# WELCOME RESPITE

As the war in Ukraine rages on, members of the hockey community are striving to give youth players some level of normalcy by getting them back on the ice **BY VADYM PLACHYNDA**

**A**S GEORGII ZUBKO, THE president of the Ice Hockey Federation of Ukraine, stood in front of the Shalett Hockey Arena in Kyiv, he looked exhausted but was all smiles, glowing with joy.

It was Friday, Aug. 16, the final day of the Hockey Dreams Development Camps, a five-day event that was remarkable in many ways. Led by Canadian coach Nicholas Phelan of Unite Hockey Development, the camp



featured around 170 kids. It was the first camp held during this time of war, and it was the first-ever select combine scouting and testing for 13- to 16-year-olds, where Ukrainian kids were evaluated under the

Hockey Canada system with detailed scouting reports. The event culminated with a Blue vs. Yellow scrimmage game.

Training sessions were stopped several times, with kids and coaching staff going to

ANASTASIIA SHUMILOVA / ICE HOCKEY FEDERATION OF UKRAINE





**KYIV KINDNESS**

The Shalett Arena was bursting with youngsters attending Ukraine's first camp since the start of the war.

shelters as the sirens signalled new air attacks. The camp resumed only after the danger cleared. The kids, who are accustomed to this, seemed to take it better than the visiting coaching staff.

Zubko organized the camps under the umbrella of the Ukrainian Hockey Dreams Charitable Foundation, and it was free for everyone attending. CCM donated jerseys for the kids. The demand was extremely high, with almost 500 kids signing up, but only the first 130 who applied made

the cut, along with 40 top prospects recommended by coaches attending the Select Combine. Phelan, the camp's head coach and an assistant coach on Ukraine's national team, volunteered his time and spent his vacation on Shalett ice, running sessions and evaluations from dawn until dusk.

"I am grateful to Nic for what he has done," Zubko said. "He has three little ones at home, and coming to Kyiv amidst daily attacks is nothing short of heroic. But you should have seen all the smiles on the kids' faces when he took the ice. It meant the world to them.

"When the war started, for a moment, we thought there would be no more hockey, that there was no place for a game anymore. But in the very first weeks, we evacuated 1,000 kids with their mothers to European clubs. It took us a while to come out of the initial shock, but we completely re-imagined what sports can mean during the war and what it can be. It brings us together, gives hope and helps us get through the tough times.

"We saw kids coming to practices, waiting in the shelter in full uniform with skates on, hoping to make it to the ice even for half an hour. Skating with lights from a diesel generator amidst blackouts... this is when we realized that hockey couldn't stop, and we needed it to help our youth get through the war. So, we

**“ WE NEEDED IT TO HELP OUR YOUTH GET THROUGH THE WAR. SO, WE REGROUPED AND DECIDED TO FIGHT FOR THE GAME – Georgii Zubko**

regrouped and decided to fight for the game.

"Ukrainian hockey is comparatively very small. There were only 29 arenas for the whole country before the war, with 4,000 kids attending hock-



GEORGII ZUBKO



NICHOLAS PHELAN

ern Ukraine, in relatively safer zones. But seeing how much they want to succeed, how much joy it brings them, I cannot let them down.

"We chose what I call a, 'Everyone matters strategy,' where we do everything we can to maximize every player's performance. With such low resources and small internal competition, we need every single player, and we make sure they can develop to their full potential."

Zubko explained that they are trying to eliminate entry and training barriers as much as possible by reusing equipment, fundraising to subsidize

ey schools. This is smaller than a single town in Minnesota. Now, we are down to 17 arenas, with 1,000 players on transfer practising abroad. We only have about 2,500 kids taking to the ice in Central and West-



ice-time costs and extending partnerships with international clubs, foundations and corporate sponsors.

“I am willing to fly and meet personally with anyone who can donate used arena equipment, no matter how old,” Zubko said. “We can make use of anything here.”

“In these two years of war, we’ve had to completely change our perspective and rebuild the program under the Western model, getting rid of the archaic remains of the Soviet system and outdated training process. Our strategic focus is on kids’ hockey because, through them, we can ensure we will be competitive three, five, seven years down the road. If we lose this generation, we may never be able to rebound.”

“We’re working on developing coaches, introducing the scouting system and opening up amateur and sledge hockey for the veterans of war. Our biggest dream, of course, remains the rebuilding of infrastructure, because every arena can become home to a new hockey school, an amateur and pro club and the center for rebuilding the community. My inspiration is the Belfast Giants club, who used hockey to heal their com-



munity after 30 years of ‘The Troubles.’ I want to do the same here, in our cities.

“Ukraine has never been very connected internationally in hockey circles, but in this short period, we’ve held two fund-

raising tours of our under-18 and under-25 national teams in Canada. We were able to meet with Gary Bettman, the NHL commissioner, who expressed support for our efforts, and that inspired us a great deal. I’m for-

## POUNDS ALL AROUND

Kids were thrilled to get back on the ice, and they showed their appreciation to Zubko and others.

ever grateful to Graeme Rouston, Gord Miller, Nicholas Phelan and Robert Fitzpatrick, with Steve Thornton from the Belfast Giants, who have helped us so much. I’ll never forget this.”

Zubko’s efforts are paying off. Besides the Hockey Dreams development camps and the Hockey for Ukraine Canadian tour of the under-18 team, the national teams performed well in international competition last year. The under-20s took a silver medal, and the men’s and women’s national teams won gold in their divisions of the World Championship. The men advanced to Div. I-A.

**“FOR TOO LONG, UKRAINE HAS BEEN COMPLACENT ON THE ICE. IT IS TIME TO WIN. ON THE ICE AND IN LIFE”** – Georgii Zubko

“I want to build a new, winning culture here,” Zubko said. “For too long, Ukraine has been complacent on the ice. It is time to win. On the ice and in life.”

“Nic Phelan has done an outstanding job. He doesn’t have all the numbers on the combine performance yet, but he told me some of the kids were amazing and, with proper guidance, can definitely make it all the way to the national team. I know we are doing the right things, and we will keep fighting through.” **H**



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**BROWN HOCKEY**

## Down Goes Brown

**AFTER MORE THAN HALF A CENTURY AS AN INDEPENDENT ENTITY IN THE GOALIE GEAR BUSINESS – DATING BACK TO THE EARLY DAYS WHEN PROTECTING NETMINDERS WAS CONSIDERED ALMOST RADICAL – JOHN BROWN CUSTOM SPORTING EQUIPMENT IS CLOSING UP SHOP** **BY JONATHON JACKSON**

**A SHATTERED DREAM** is an awful thing in the moment, but it can also turn out to be a blessing in disguise. That's how John Brown looks at it.

"Honestly, this is what I was meant to do," said Brown, the namesake of John Brown Custom Sporting Equipment, from an office in his now-silent factory in Collingwood, Ont.

Brown has ended his 54-year career in designing and manufacturing top-of-the-line goaltending equipment. "I don't know how it all happened, but it did," Brown said. "It was being in the right place

at the right time, having the right energy, and being crazy enough to do all the things I did over the years."

But it took being in the wrong place at the wrong time to put him on the right track. It was in Ottawa on Dec. 21, 1970, when Brown's dream of eventual NHL stardom as a goaltender was left in ruins.

Newly called up to the Hamilton Red Wings of the Ontario Association Major Jr. A Series – now the OHL – he watched from the bench midway through the second period as the Red Wings fell behind 7-1 to the Ottawa 67's. Brown had made his Jr. A debut a month earlier and had performed well, holding the

BROWN: PHOTO BY JONATHON JACKSON



in only two more games with the Wings after the Ottawa debacle. But even though he had been mostly a victim of circumstance, Brown soon recognized that his dream of playing in the NHL was over.

But hockey was still very much in Brown's future. Like all hockey goalies of his era, he wore rudimentary equipment that barely protected him. He was accustomed to the pain that accompanied the job, but he had some ideas of how things could improve. And, unlike other goalies, he brought those ideas to fruition.

Brown started by taking a mold of his own face and creating his own custom mask, which he wore in Jr. B and then in Hamilton. Soon, he was hearing from other goalies who

also wanted better facial protection. If they couldn't come to him, he would send them a face-molding kit with instructions. They'd send back the molds, and he would produce the masks. With time and freedom to pursue his interest after his competitive playing career had ended, Brown suddenly found that he was a hockey-equipment manufacturer.

He started in his father's garage in the town of Maple, Ont., north of Toronto, before moving to a shop in the Downsview area of the city and then to another facility near Pearson Airport.

### THE FRUIT OF HIS LABORS

By the early 1980s, Brown's business was based out of a former apple storage facility in Collingwood, Ont.

### MASK MARVELS

Two of Brown's early custom masks. The top one was his first, which he wore playing junior in 1970-71.



after he took over in net. And the 67's just kept coming after that, and they kept scoring. By the time it was over, Brown had surrendered 11 goals in a period-and-a-half of hockey. Ottawa won by the wildly lopsided score of 18-3 in what was believed at the time to be a league record for most goals in a game by one team.

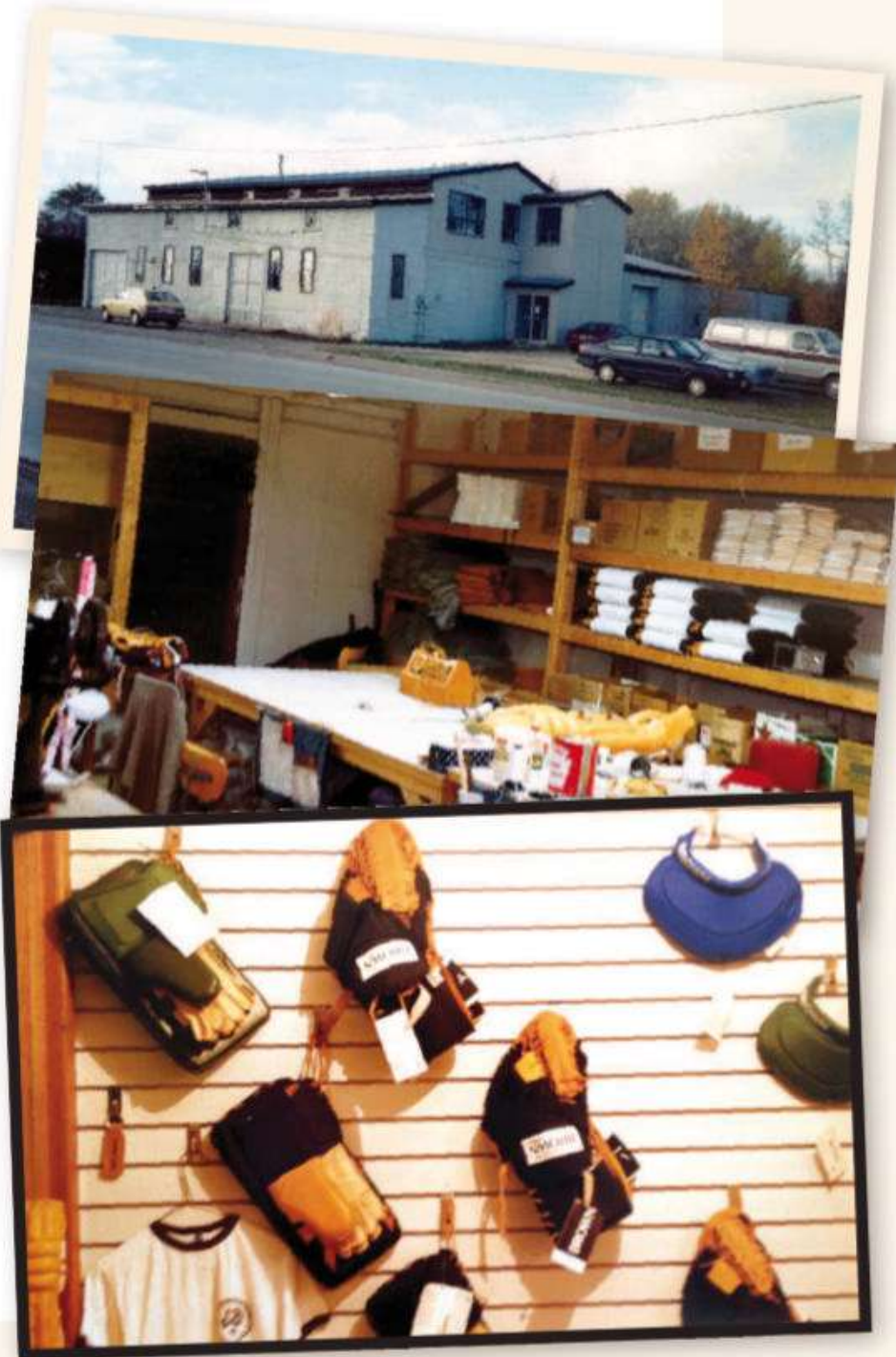
"I remember there were a lot of two-man breakaways, or no one was covering the guy in front," Brown said. "I'm thinking, 'What's going on here? Are these guys that good? Am I that bad? And where's my team?'"

The humiliation was compounded by the Ottawa fans who, in Brown's words, "were all going insane. They started singing, 'John Brown's body lies a-moldering in the grave.' Chanting that and yelling, 'Sieve! Sieve!' It was shocking. It was a dream shattered, for sure."

Years later, Brown learned that the Red Wings, a team in turmoil, had deliberately played poorly that night in the hope of ridding themselves of their coach. It was a small consolation for Brown, who played

Montreal Jr. Canadiens scoreless in relief of the Red Wings' No. 1 goalie, Mike Veisor. Now, in Ottawa, he was tapped to relieve Veisor again.

Ottawa scored its eighth goal of the game only 19 seconds



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DANICA BROWN/BROWN HOCKEY

Brown used his earnings to attend the University of Western Ontario, where he played hockey, earned a history degree and took some business courses, including one class where he was required to give a presentation about a business idea. He presented his own enterprise, to his professor's dismay. "At the end of my speech, the prof said, 'The chance of this working is almost nil, but since you're already doing it, what can I say?'" Brown said, laughing.

Brown's next move was to create chest-and-arm protectors, and then leg pads. He wore Kenesky pads when he played – as did every serious goaltender back then – and he studied how the pads had been put together. "It was fairly easy to make



**“IT WAS BEING IN THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME, AND BEING CRAZY ENOUGH TO DO ALL THE THINGS I DID”**

– John Brown

something a little wider, a little thinner, a little shorter, a little this, a little that," Brown said. "You listened to what the goalies wanted."

He was learning what goalies wanted because he was building a reputation through word of mouth. He spent time as a practice goalie with the WHA's Toronto Toros, where he met longtime pro Les Binkley and created a mask for him. The next pro goalie he met was Ken 'Spider' Lockett, who had met a kid at a hockey school who wore a Brown-manufactured mask. Lockett asked Brown to make



a mask for him, and Lockett became the first NHLer to wear Brown's pads while he was with the Vancouver Canucks.

Brown built on these early successes by visiting NHL training camps each fall and seeing various teams when they came to Toronto to play the Maple Leafs. It wasn't easy to convince goalies to take a chance on him.

One future Hall of Famer, who Brown doesn't want to identify, didn't want to wear the chest and arm protector because it would have worked too well.

"He said, 'If I wore that, I wouldn't get hurt. And if I didn't get hurt, I wouldn't be a pro goalie,'" Brown said, noting that many older goalies felt the same way – that they needed

## IN THE GAME

Through hard work and tireless travel – as well as word of mouth – Brown was doing good business in the '90s.

to feel the pain to be convinced they were doing their jobs.

But the legendary goalie's backup was listening, and he pulled Brown aside and ordered a chest-and-arm protector for himself. As the older generation of goalies retired from the game, younger netminders who were more sensible about safety were far more open to Brown and his growing line of products, which soon also included blockers and trappers.



JOHN VANBIESBROUCK

Brown estimates about 200 NHL goalies have worn his gear, plus hundreds of others in junior and minor pro.



Brown hired employees to help produce his designs, which allowed him to become his own best salesman. He travelled relentlessly to promote his gear to retailers. And he marketed directly to goalies, talking with the netminders on their level. "I understood them," he said. "I understood their fears and insecurities."

This helped him stand out from other manufacturers in an era when the market was growing and his competitors, big and small, had trouble keeping up with demand for various reasons. "I was able to fill that gap," he said. "We could deliver, the product was good, and if there was an issue, we fixed it."

Brown built up his inventory

during the summers, as pro hockey wasn't yet a year-round endeavor in those days. As styles evolved and goaltenders themselves changed, he adapted his equipment to meet their needs. Tan leather pads stuffed with deer hair and kapok gave way to colored synthetic leather and foam.

By Brown's estimate, approximately 200 NHL goalies, including Hall of Famers Grant Fuhr, Dominik Hasek and Mike Vernon, have worn his gear in games. Hundreds of others

### NOTHING TO SEE HERE

Brown's name and logo famously had to come off of Vanbiesbrouck's pads before an NHL game in 1989.



# BROWN HOCKEY



have worn it in minor pro, junior and youth leagues.

Brown, who moved to Collingwood, Ont., in 1977 and bought his current facility in 1980, eventually encountered difficulties. He made national news in 1989 when the New York Rangers' John Vanbiesbrouck was forced to black out Brown's name and logo from his pads. The NHL had lev-

scaling back to survive. He adapted by using the internet to sell directly to customers around the world. "That kept us going for a number of years, but it really wasn't all that profitable," he said.

With his remaining staff aging, as he is, Brown decided this summer to shut down. "It's just time," said Brown, who plans to keep busy in retirement.



ied a \$10,000 licensing fee on equipment manufacturers, and Brown had declined to participate at the time, although he did later.

"My budget was blown apart," he said of the expense. "(Vanbiesbrouck) wanted to still wear the pads, so we took the logo off or spray-painted over it, whatever we had to do."

Brown's larger competitors later started paying goalies to wear their equipment. Retailers that he'd done business with for years formed buying groups to make better deals for themselves. Brown, forced to lower his prices, had to start

And he'll look back fondly and gratefully on his legacy, which includes many loyal and longtime customers who have reached out to express their appreciation.

One could say that Brown has been responsible for so many saves over the decades that he long ago evened the score from that night in Ottawa when 11 pucks got past him and put him on track for a career he had never envisioned. "For a kid who was hockey-crazy, it was wonderful to be part of it," he said of his life in the sport. "It was probably a dream come true." **H**

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The Hockey News



# CROSSWORD

BY LARRY HUMBER



## ACROSS

- 1 He went first overall in 2014
- 4 The 2024 Norris Trophy winner, pictured
- 9 Huddy, who won five Cups with Edmonton
- 10 Jordin Tootoo was the first player of \_\_\_\_ descent to play in the NHL
- 11 Mark \_\_\_\_, the only NHLer ever from Delaware
- 12 Climate Pledge Arena site
- 13 Organization that governs U.S. college sports
- 15 He's been a Star since 2009
- 18 Nickname of Pittsburgh's first NHL team
- 21 One of the Broten brothers
- 23 Al Hamilton was an original \_\_\_\_
- 24 Where Ryan Nugent-Hopkins played junior
- 25 Ryan Kennedy is THN's current \_\_\_\_ in chief.
- 26 James, elected to the Hall of Fame in 2010

## DOWN

- 1 Former Sabre now lighting it up in Vegas
- 2 Hard shot
- 3 City that may be in line for a third NHL try
- 5 Home of the AHL's Comets
- 6 Where Gordie Howe and his sons first played together
- 7 'Slats' was coach and GM in both Edmonton and New York
- 8 They replaced 3 Down's latest NHL iteration
- 14 Undrafted junior who'd later captain Oshawa
- 15 Home of the WHL Wheat Kings
- 16 Play against
- 17 \_\_\_\_ Hunter won a pair of World Championships with Canada in the 1990s
- 19 Marty \_\_\_\_ was between the pipes in Dallas
- 20 In pain
- 22 A Toronto arena is named after the legendary athlete/writer Ted \_\_\_\_

# Hockey TRIVIA



### > BEGINNER:

The woman above was the first goalie taken in the PWHL's inaugural draft. And it paid off, as she led Minnesota to Walter Cup glory in 2024. Who is she?

### > INTERMEDIATE:

The NHL single-season record for goalie wins is shared by Martin Brodeur and this man, whose sublime 48-9-7 record led him to the 2015-16 Vezina Trophy.

### > EXPERT:

While goalies tend to be more focused on preventing goals, nobody was better at setting them up than this HHOfer. His 48 career assists are an NHL record.

# Word SEARCH

Hockey's masked men have some of sports' best sobriquets. These are a few of our favorites

## Goalie Nicknames

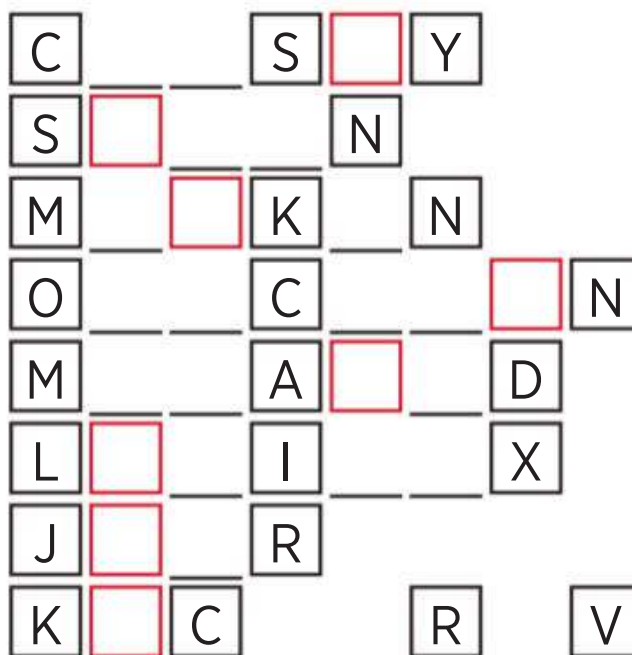


- 'BULIN WALL'  
(NIKOLAI KHABIBULIN)
- 'BUNNY'  
(MICHEL LAROCQUE)
- 'COBRA'  
(GARY SIMMONS)
- 'CUJO'  
(CURTIS JOSEPH)
- 'DOMINATOR'  
(DOMINIK HASEK)
- 'EAGLE'  
(ED BELFOUR)
- 'GUMP'  
(LORNE WORSLEY)
- 'KING'  
(HENRIK LUNDQVIST)
- 'MR. ZERO'  
(FRANK BRIMSEK)
- 'RED LIGHT'  
(ANDRE RACICOT)

# PUCK PUZZLE

Can your hockey brain bring its A-game? The challenge is on!

Listed here are many familiar names, all of them Art Ross Trophy winners. Once you have identified them, the name of the player who won the scoring title for the 1955-56 season will appear in the red boxes.





**PWHL**

# SIRENS VS. PIZZA RATS

The PWHL's new monikers raise a host of questions about the future of branding

**N**EW HOCKEY TEAMS ARE incredibly exciting. The speculation surrounding who will play for the squad is matched by all the possibilities that come with a new jersey, name and logo. But what goes *into* a name these days?

Back in 1926, the New York Rangers got their moniker because their owner was nicknamed "Tex" – so, Tex's Rangers. Get it? Creating an identity for a franchise is a little more rigorous these days. As someone fascinated with jerseys and team names, I couldn't help but go down a rabbit hole when the PWHL announced the new names for its six franchises. What an opportunity. But also, what an interesting case study of how names have evolved over the years. Lions, Tigers and Bears? Not so much anymore. In fact, there were no animal logos used by the PWHL, and it's worth noting that we haven't seen one in the NHL since the Atlanta Thrashers in 1999 (a thrasher is a type of bird) – though the Minnesota Wild introduced the

outline of an animal in their nascent logo one year later. The NHL's newest franchise, the Seattle Kraken, are repped by a fantastical beast, but it's not one you'll find in any zoology textbook.

Similarly, teams don't end in 'S' as frequently as they once did. The Kraken, Wild, Avalanche and Lightning are all less than 35 years old. With the PWHL, the *majority* of teams do not end in 'S' – Montreal Victoire, Boston Fleet, Ottawa Charge and Minnesota Frost. Only the Toronto Sceptres and New York Sirens hew to the old standard. So, how did we get here? I got some intriguing answers from the PWHL's vice-president of brand and marketing Kanan Bhatt-Shah.

Long story short, there's no conspiracy against animal names and no drive to downgrade the importance of the letter 'S,' but finding unique monikers was important to the league. "We wanted to be rigorous in our criteria," she said. "What do we think a successful name and identity feels like?"

Time was a factor because the league wanted the identities established for Season 2 of the PWHL, which meant intellectual-property and trademark concerns were a factor. However, if Toronto wanted to be nicknamed the Jets, it probably would have been fine. "You can definitely co-exist, and that was very much on the table, but we were balancing different things," Bhatt-Shah said. "Names unique to us felt very special."

But four criteria came before the IP question: 1. Does it inspire real pride of place? This means connection to the community. The Ottawa Charge, for example, references the city's motto "Advance Ottawa – En Avant." 2. Will it resonate with players and

fans? There had to be an emotional connection: fans wanted fierce, powerful names. 3. How will the name come to life? This was important for the visual design of the jersey, including color theories and maintaining the primary color from Season 1 because many fans already had merch. 4. How will it get activated in the arena and come to life? One example is the Boston Fleet, who, if they so choose, could incorporate the Boston Harbor-based USS Constitution, a.k.a. 'Old Ironsides,' into their game presentation.

At its apex, there was a spreadsheet of about 800 names being bandied about during what was a fluid process. Along with Bhatt-Shah, some of the other drivers behind the effort included senior VP of business operations Amy Scheer and the New York-based branding firm Flower Shop. But the process was also open, in the sense that teams were also paying attention to suggestions from players and fans. In fact, one of the most surreal name ideas kept popping up during the live streams of New York's games last season: fans in the comment section were boosting 'New York Pizza Rats' as a favored choice. "The fans were manifesting that," Bhatt-Shah said.

Ultimately, Bhatt-Shah feels the best names won out, and with jerseys scheduled to be released in early November, we'll get another wave of excitement surrounding the PWHL before Season 2 begins.

In the meantime, we can turn back to speculating about what Utah's NHL team will be called in the future. With Mammoth, Yeti, Blizzard, Venom, Outlaws and Utah HC still in the mix, we've got a card filled with choices that line up with current trends. But which one will be the victor? **H**

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