

# NHL PREVIEW | 2025-26

## FOUR STORYLINES

■ **Rangers and Canucks looking to rebound**

The New York Rangers and Vancouver Canucks had almost the exact same season last year. Both teams had star players fail to produce, locker room infighting, a coach on the hot seat and noise outside creeping in. Both teams entered last year after winning their divisions the previous year and making deep playoff runs.

The Canucks and Rangers swapped players with each other. J.T. Miller is now the Rangers captain and Filip Chytil is in Vancouver. Both teams made huge trades or signings to get back to the playoffs and both teams made coaching changes, with the Rangers notably hiring former Pittsburgh Penguins boss Mike Sullivan.

Expectations to get back to the playoffs are high for both teams.

■ **Tank for McKenna?**

Gavin McKenna finished second in the WHL last season with 129 points as a 17-year-old and was the league's player of the year. This season the NHL's top prospect will play for Penn State after he received a reported \$700,000 in NIL money.

There will be a lot of interest in drafting McKenna next spring. And while team's can't simply "tank" to get the No. 1 pick in the draft because of the draft lottery, the worst team will get the most chances. There might just be as many eyes on the McKenna race as there will be the playoff chase.

■ **Three-peat effort already in danger?**

To start the season, the back-to-back Stanley Cup champions Florida Panthers are not only without superstar Matthew Tkachuk, but also captain Aleksander Barkov. Tkachuk wants to be back before the new year, but Barkov will not be back for seven to nine months.

With Florida looking vulnerable, playoff teams like Ottawa and Montreal will see this as an opening to make a deep playoff run. Teams like Buffalo, Columbus and Detroit will see this as a chance to break long playoff droughts. Carolina, New Jersey and Washington, meanwhile, will see this as an opportunity to get over the Florida-shaped postseason hump.

■ **Marnier-less Leafs**

The "core four" of the Toronto Maple Leafs has been broken up. Mitch Marnier was a part of a sign-and-trade

with Vegas, signing an eight-year, \$12 million contract upon his arrival. In return, the Leafs received forward Nicolas Roy.

The Leafs will rely on a second youth movement to replace Marnier. Matthew Knies (22) is the presumptive heir, but Matias Maccelli (24) and Easton Cowan (20) look to be options, too. These players are not expected to score 100-plus points, but with forward depth now being a strong suit for the Leafs, they all can chip in to replace Marnier.

For the already star-studded Golden Knights, Marnier is yet another superstar, joining Jack Eichel, Mark Stone, William Karlsson and Tomas Hertl up front, for one of the highest-powered offenses in the league. Will Marnier be enough to get Vegas its second cup in franchise history?



Florida Panthers center Sam Reinhart kisses the Stanley Cup after defeating the Edmonton Oilers in June. The Panthers enter the 2025-26 season as the two-time defending champions with plenty of teams looking to knock them off their throne.

## The race to raise the Cup is about to begin

By Ethan Lyons  
CNHI NEWS SERVICE

The NHL returns Tuesday with all 32 teams chasing Lord Stanley's glory.

The Florida Panthers will attempt to make the Stanley Cup Final for the fourth straight year and become the first team to three-peat since the New York Islanders won four in a row from 1980 to 1983.

The Panthers will mount their efforts without Captain Aleksander Barkov and star-forward Matthew Tkachuk for a large portion on the season because of injury. Barkov will miss seven to nine months with an ACL and MCL injury, and Tkachuk will be out for two to three months with a lower-body injury.

The rest of the east will be chomping at the bit to take Florida's Eastern Conference crown.

The Carolina Hurricanes look to finally get past the Panthers, as they have faced off in two of the past three Eastern Conference Finals.

After the Mikko Rantanen

saga last year, the Hurricanes signed the prize of free agency in Nikolaj Ehlers in hopes of getting back to the Stanley Cup Final for the first time in 20 years.

Young teams in the East also look to establish a claim to the Panthers' throne.

The Montreal Canadiens and the Ottawa Senators both completed their rebuilds last season after breaking three- and seven-year droughts, respectively.

The Buffalo Sabres, Columbus Blue Jackets and Detroit Red Wings, are among the other young teams looking to snap playoff droughts in the East, with questions surrounding not just Florida.

The Mitch Marner-less Toronto Maple Leafs, the aging Tampa Bay Lightning and Washington Capitals, along with the New York Rangers, fresh off a dysfunctional season, all have questions.

The Pittsburgh Penguins, meanwhile, will attempt to get back into the playoffs with an aging core led by Sidney Crosby and a new coach in Dan Muse.

In the West, the Dallas Stars,

like the Carolina Hurricanes, look to advance past the conference finals.

The Stars have fell to the Edmonton Oilers the previous two seasons and the Vegas Golden Knights in 2023.

The Stars were the winner of the Rantanen saga, landing the superstar and retaining most of their core players in the process. Standing in their way is the back-to-back Stanley Cup Final losers, the Edmonton Oilers.

The Oilers have a cloud of doubt surrounding the team as generational talent Connor McDavid is unsigned past this year. With the Oilers not addressing their goaltending issues and a strong reliance on youth, questions remain.

Other than Dallas, the Colorado Avalanche, Winnipeg Jets and Vegas Golden Knights all are looking to be true competitors for the Western Conference crown.

The Vancouver Canucks, Los Angeles Kings, Minnesota Wild and St. Louis Blues all look to break out of the second tier of teams to become a real competitor to Edmonton.

## THREE PLAYERS TO WATCH



career continues to wind down, you do not want to miss Toews in the league while he still is active.

■ **Luke Hughes, defenseman, New Jersey Devils:** Hughes just got paid. Hughes signed a seven-year \$9 million contract on Wednesday, making him the highest-paid Hughes brother.

Hughes is only 22 years old and has gotten better each season in his short career so far. With the contract out of the way, Hughes

can focus on his electric play, generating 40 plus points of offense, while still being more than capable defensively.

Luke Hughes and brother Jack Hughes, look to become a dynamic offense, defense duo in one of the most exciting teams in the league.

■ **Dustin Wolf, goalie, Calgary Flames:** Last season's Calder Trophy runner-up (rookie of the year), is back and ready for his sophomore season. Wolf went 29-16-8 in 53 games for a Calgary Flames team that was expected to be near the bottom last year.

Wolf stole the show for the Flames and almost single-handedly willed them into the playoffs. Wolf is one of the most fun and electric goalies to watch, and as a West Coast guy, he does not get enough praise out East.

Wolf will climb his way into everyone's top-10 goalie rankings by the end of the year, so stay up late and experience Wolf.

— Ethan Lyons

## WELCOME BACK

Teams we think will return to the postseason after previously missing out:

The NHL averages four to six new playoff teams per year. Here are four teams that we think will jump back into the playoffs:

■ **New York Rangers:** A year removed from winning the Metro Division and the Presidents' Trophy (Most points

in the league), the Rangers had a chaos-loaded season. Players were unhappy, the old core was dismantled and coach Peter Laviolette lost the locker room. With Chris Kreider and Jacob Trouba (both now in Anaheim), replaced by J.T. Miller and Vladislav Gavrikov, New York has a new-look core. Gone are the big physical guys, who lacked defensively and in are two-way guys who will contribute on both sides of the ice. Mike Sullivan is now behind the bench and with a fresh start away from Pittsburgh, Sullivan looks to bring the Rangers to Stanley Cup glory like he did the Penguins.

■ **Columbus Blue Jackets:** The Blue Jackets are an interesting team.

Last season was supposed to be another rebuilding year, instead the team looked like a playoff contender,

only missing by two points. They boast a top-10 center core in the league with young-stars Adam Fantilli and Cole Sillinger supported by veterans Sean Monahan and Charlie Coyle. This trend continues on the wing with Kirill Marchenko and Yegor Chinakhov breaking out last year. The biggest question is goaltending. The Jackets now have three goalies battling to be a mainstay in the league. Elvis Merzlikins has been the starter for three of his six seasons in the NHL, but his numbers fluctuate heavily. Jet Greaves went on a tear at the end of last season going 7-2-2 in an 11 game stretch. Recently acquired Ivan Fedotov, who might be one of the worst goalies in the NHL.

■ **Utah Mammoth:** In their second season of existence the Mammoth look to make the playoffs with another season under their young-guns' belts. Dylan Guenther, Logan Cooley and Clayton Keller are one of the best young trios in the league. Joining them is superstar in the making J.J. Peterka. The Mammoth defense is a top-10 unit in the league, even with the subtraction of Michael Kesselring.

■ **Vancouver Canucks:** Much like the Rangers, the Canucks' on-ice performance was overshadowed by the off ice issues after winning their division the

year before. J.T. Miller and Elias Pettersson (center) feuded all of last season until Miller was dealt to the Rangers. The superstar Pettersson only had 45 points and the Canucks still had a 90-point season. With Pettersson no longer distracted by Miller, Thatcher Demko now healthy, and a star studded defense, the Canucks just need to keep the off ice issues to a minimum to get back to the playoffs.

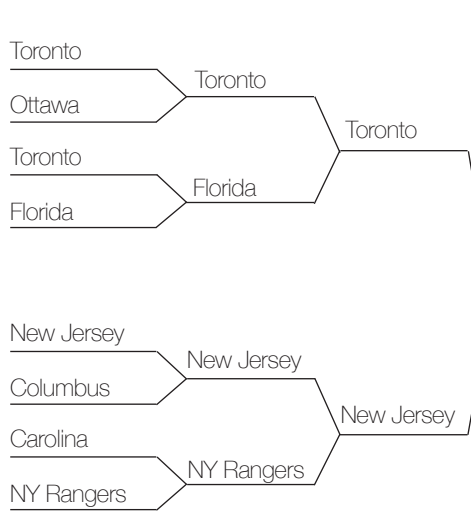
## HOW THEY WILL FINISH

Atlantic Division		
Record	Points	
Toronto .....	51-27-4	106
Tampa .....	50-28-4	104
Florida .....	48-28-6	102
Ottawa .....	46-31-5	97
Montreal .....	40-37-5	85
Detroit .....	39-39-4	82
Buffalo .....	35-40-7	77
Boston .....	33-40-9	75

Metropolitan Division		
Record	Points	
New Jersey .....	50-28-4	104
Carolina .....	48-29-5	101
N.Y. Rangers .....	47-30-5	99
Columbus .....	45-28-9	99
Washington .....	47-31-4	98
Pittsburgh .....	37-39-6	80
N.Y. Islanders .....	34-41-7	75
Philadelphia .....	32-44-6	70

Central Division		
Record	Points	
Dallas .....	53-23-6	112
Colorado .....	50-27-5	105
Utah .....	47-29-6	100
Winnipeg .....	47-31-4	98
St. Louis .....	44-32-6	94
Minnesota .....	41-36-5	87
Nashville .....	36-42-4	76
Chicago .....	32-43-7	71

Pacific Division		
Record	Points	
Vegas .....	51-28-3	105
Los Angeles .....	50-28-4	104
Vancouver .....	45-29-8	98
Edmonton .....	47-32-3	97
Calgary .....	39-37-6	84
Anaheim .....	34-44-4	72
San Jose .....	32-43-7	71
Seattle .....	30-47-5	65



## PROJECTED PLAYOFF BRACKET

