

BLEACHER BUZZ



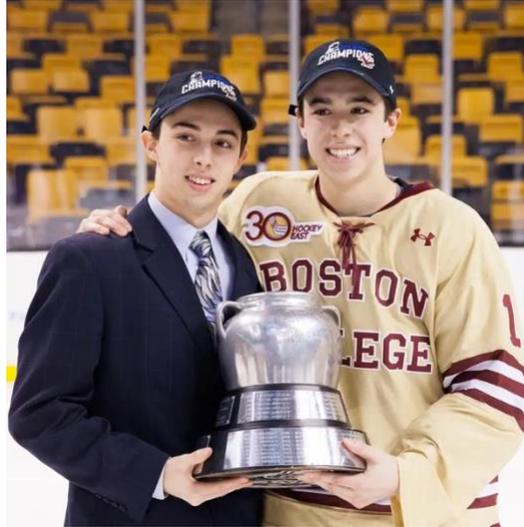
24 in '24: Ranking the Best NHL Players

September 24, 2024

As the 2024 NHL season kicks off on October 4, anticipation is running high for hockey fans. The league is brimming with talent, and apart from McDavid and MacKinnon being one and two has hockey fans giving rankings with all sorts of outcomes.

In this ranking, we take a deep-dive into the top 24 players and rank them based off consistency, potential, and ability to dominate the game. So with all that said, let's get started.

Honourable Mention: Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau



Both Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau made a positive impact on the game of hockey.

Johnny, known for his lightning-fast speed, playmaking, and creativity on the ice, inspired countless young players with his fearless style despite his smaller stature. Many Flames fans remember Gaudreau's [game-winning shot](#) to defeat the Dallas Stars in a seven game series, advancing the Flames to the second round of the playoffs.

Matthew, known for his gritty, physical edge and offensive flair, had 63 points in 119 games for [Boston College](#). Matthew was the head coach of his former high school's hockey team, [Gloucester Catholic](#) in New Jersey. Additionally, Matthew was an assistant coach for the Philadelphia Rebels, a junior program that develops NCAA and pro prospects.

Together, the Gaudreau brothers elevated the excitement of the game, showcasing skill, heart, and a love for hockey that continues to resonate with fans across the league.

24. Sidney Crosby, Pittsburgh Penguins



Let's get this out of the way: Sidney Crosby is a top-five player in the history of the league. He's the best player of the 21st century (so far) and the textbook definition of a leader. Ever since being selected [first overall](#) in the 2005 NHL Draft, expectations have been high for Crosby, and somehow, he has met them.

Nineteen years into his career, Crosby signed a two-year contract with an average annual value (AAV) of \$8.7 million. I thought I was being cheeky doing a 24-in-'24 player ranking, but this beats it.

For a 36-year-old to rank [12th in the league in points](#), including 42 goals, and play all 82 games in [back-to-back](#) seasons is impressive. The only reason Crosby ranks this low on my list is due to the lack of a strong supporting cast around him. He was the Penguins' leading goal-scorer and [point-producer](#) in consecutive seasons. For context, Evgeni Malkin ranked second in points, with nearly [a 30 point gap](#) between him and Crosby.

According to [Puckpedia](#), the Penguins' projected salary cap space ranges from \$874,000 to \$19 million. The team around Crosby is [aging](#) and in need of revitalization. Signing someone like Mikko Rantanen in the 2025 free agency would ease some of the pressure on Crosby, allowing him to focus more on playmaking. This could elevate Crosby's stats to the point where he is catapulted into my top 15 players for the 2025-26 season.

23. **Brayden Point, Tampa Bay Lightning**



Brayden Point took a step forward last year, further developing his game. He has recorded [back-to-back seasons](#) with 90 or more points and finished third on the team in power-play goals. This is quite the accomplishment, considering the Lightning [led the league](#) in power-play percentage. Once again, Point will centre the first line alongside [current Art Ross-winner](#) (the league leader in points at the end of the regular season) Nikita Kucherov.

What's working in Point's favour? He has arguably [the best](#)

[playmaker in the league](#) in Kucherov, and now two-time all-star Jake Guentzel joining the first line. Guentzel had six more assists than Stamkos, despite playing [12 less games](#). Guentzel possesses the ability to find the open man and has a reliable wrist shot in the slot (the area immediately in front of the goal crease). With an accurate slapshot and [improvements scoring low-danger goals](#) (a shot typically farther away from the net and low likelihood of going in), it's possible Kucherov and Guentzel will find Point open for a one-timer.

What separates Point from other noteworthy candidates is his potential to become [a 100+ point player](#). Point led the league in [game-winning goals](#) and [the fourth highest shooting percentage](#) last season. I wouldn't be surprised if he finishes next season as a top-five goal scorer.

22. Filip Forsberg, Nashville Predators



Speaking of Stamkos, let's talk about his new teammate Filip

Forsberg. Last year, Forsberg led the team in points accounting for [13 per cent](#) of the team's total points. Last season was not only [a career-high in goals and assists](#) for Forsberg, but [tied for 12th](#) in the league for points.

Since arriving from the Swedish Hockey League, he has made an immediate impact and was good enough to make the NHL All-Star Game [as a rookie](#). In 2023, Forsberg was named to the [NHL Second All-Star Team](#) (the equivalent to All-NBA 2nd Team).

His [patience](#) to find the most opportune moment makes him so fun to watch. He might [toe-drag](#) (using the toe of his or her stick to draw the puck back) and [fake the goalie out of his crease](#). When he calmly dekes around opponents, it reminds me ever so slightly of Pavel Datsyuk. Now Forsberg gets to play on [the top powerplay line](#) with exceptional goal-scorers Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault.

Forsberg is the kind of player who's always improving the offensive components of his game. If he can stay healthy, he's in for [a career-best season](#). Pre-established teammates, along with two additions who possess high scoring upside, should (at least on paper) improve Forsberg's playmaking ability.

21. William Nylander, Toronto Maple Leafs



William Nylander is possibly the biggest high-risk-high-reward player on this list.

[Compared to the 2022-23 season](#), takeaways dropped and giveaways increased. The lack of effort on the defensive end was noticeable at times. Watching him play last year, there were moments I was genuinely concerned that one of his [45 turnovers](#) would lead to a goal (such as [the neutral zone turnover](#) in the playoffs against the Panthers). He doesn't hit much, doesn't block shots that often — although, to be fair, he has been improving [year-after-year](#). Overall, my biggest issue with Nylander is that his effort level is inconsistent. In my opinion, it seems like Nylander stays back on defence to get a head start on the fast-break opportunities, rather than force defenders to turn the puck over in the defensive zone.

I'm hoping new head coach Brad Treliving will give Nylander some time on either the first or second penalty kill unit. Now that Nylander is making [\\$92 million over the next eight years](#), the Leafs might as well use him as much as possible. Working

alongside Marner to improve on the defensive end would prove he's more than an all-star goal-scorer. Also, I agree with Nylander when he came out to expressed enthusiasm [to play centre](#) instead of right wing.

His ability to remain calm in intense games, while being the forward who stays back as the "[trigger man](#)" is elite. [Last year](#), his shot volume increased, yet he was [25th](#) in goals above shooting talent. Nylander has back-to-back seasons with 40 goals and 45-plus assists. If he can accept his role on the second line and put in his full effort, I could see a future where Nylander moves to centre and Matthews shifts to the left wing.

20. Mitch Marner, Toronto Maple Leafs



Arguably the most controversial player on the list. In the playoffs, Marner has 11 goals and 39 assists but has only made it out of the first round once. As a member of the "Core Four," when Marner fails to perform in the postseason (he was just [seventh in team points](#)), Leafs fans become understandably frustrated.

Earning nearly \$11 million of the team's \$88-million salary cap, his desire to hold onto his no-movement clause makes it hard for the Leafs to shake up the roster and make necessary improvements. [Chris Johnston](#) of *The Athletic* put it best: "If you win, the points don't really matter. If you deliver big at the right time, many of the other details simply get lost to time."

But with all that said, Marner's contributions in the regular season are often overshadowed by his playoff performances. Since entering the league, Marner has posted 90 points in three different seasons. In 2022, he broke the Leafs' record for most consecutive games with a point, at 23. Former head coach Sheldon Keefe said in April last year, "[Mitch is our most reliable and consistent defensive player](#)" and even used him as a defenceman during a game against the Coyotes. Marner ranked 26th in primary assists, despite playing only 69 games, thanks to his high hockey IQ and reliable drop pass. If it weren't for Bergeron and Barkov, Marner might have already been a Selke Trophy nominee.

After this most recent playoff run, fans have really turned on him, to the point where I doubt he feels comfortable staying with the Leafs. As much as I'd like him to stay, realistically, he'll probably land a big contract with another team come free agency. He's good enough, and as [Nathan MacKinnon](#) said, "Marner is one of the best players in the league. I play with some of the best players in the league, and then I skate with Marns, and he's right up there with anyone."

19. Artemi Panarin, New York Rangers



If you're looking for the secret to an explosive season, just shave your head bald. Artemi Panarin did that and [finished fourth in total points and first in goals above expected](#). When the 32-year-old gets an open-ice opportunity, he's electric. [According to *Forever Blueshirts*](#), Panarin has averaged more than a point per game for the last five seasons and set the franchise record for the most 90-point seasons.

Outlets like [The Hockey News](#) and [The Hockey Writers](#) have pleaded Panarin's case for more Hart Trophy consideration. When he's in the opposition's defensive zone, it's like a shark smelling blood. You know he'll attack, but how, where, and when? New head coach Peter Laviolette favours a 2-3 offensive zone forecheck system, essentially having forwards double-team puck carriers to prevent lateral passes. The Rangers [ranked](#) sixth in takeaways per game with this system and fourth in puck possession time. The point of bringing this up is that Panarin is in an environment where he can thrive. As a hard-working

difference-maker for the Rangers, he has done a good job adjusting his style of play. Panarin has become more aggressive with the puck and puts pressure on defenders by always trying to get involved offensively.

Last year, he was on the fringe of the top five, and the only reason he's ranked this far back is the small sample size of superstar-calibre statistics. For the most part, he remains [in the top five](#) for playoff point production. If he can maintain this consistency in the regular season and be more aggressive come playoff time, the "Breadman" could easily leap into the top 10.

18. Roman Josi, Nashville Predators



You know the league is filled with talent when the best all-around defender is all the way back at 19. Josi is a brick wall, trusted to put his body on the line. [In a single season](#), he can produce 80 hits, 150+ blocked shots, and a goals-against that never exceeds 0.85. Aside from the [shortened COVID year](#), Josi

plays [at least 67 games](#), and like Crosby, the 34-year-old captain shows no signs of slowing down. His [defensive awareness](#) and ability to disrupt the offensive flow is arguably the best among defenders.

Last year, [Daily Faceoff](#) gave Josi a 95 per cent rating for power-play effectiveness. His hand-eye coordination, combined with his slapshot power, makes him unpredictable at the blue line. With several years of leading his team in points and ice time, Josi is [one of those rare defenders](#) who can put up 20+ goals and 70+ assists in a single season.

Throughout his career, Josi has built quite the résumé. He won the 2020 [Norris Trophy](#) (best defender in the league) and was nominated two other times, finishing [second this past year](#). In 2020, 2022, and 2024, Josi was [voted](#) to the NHL First All-Star Team by the Professional Hockey Writers' Association (the equivalent of the All-NBA First Team). Having players like O'Reilly, Forsberg, Marchessault, and Stamkos will prevent opponents from double-teaming him, improving Josi's offensive capabilities.

That's why he is my way-too-early pick to win the 2024 Norris Trophy.

17. Connor Hellebuyck, Winnipeg Jets



Connor Hellebuyck is the most consistent player and the heartbeat of this franchise. When he's off, the team will likely lose. Take, for instance, the playoff series against Colorado where Hellebuyck looked helpless against their formidable offensive firepower. He played every game, and the Jets were outscored 28-15, losing the series 4-1. The thing is — Hellebuyck is so good that hockey fans are [willing to overlook](#) this blunder.

The [most recent winner](#) of the Vezina Trophy (best goaltender) and the William M. Jennings Trophy (fewest goals allowed in the regular season), Hellebuyck has incredible reflexes, especially on the glove side. When [starting in 50 or more games](#), Hellebuyck has been in the top three in save percentage twice and top five in shutouts twice. With two Vezina Trophies in five years and being the clear leader in goals saved above expected last year (per [Sport Logiq](#)), it's no wonder Hellebuyck was the top-rated goalie in [NHL 25](#).

Admittedly, losing 4-1 in back-to-back playoffs doesn't look good. But since 2021, Hellebuyck has been one of the most reliable goalies. Throughout last season, he made sprawling stick

saves, rolled around on his head, and dove headfirst to prevent second-chance opportunities. His career save percentage in the playoffs is [four per cent higher](#) than it was in last year's playoffs.

The save percentage in his most recent Vezina-winning season was [less than a percentage point below](#) his career average. Would the Jets have had back-to-back [90-point seasons](#) without Hellebuyck between the pipes? Probably not.

16. Igor Shesterkin, New York Rangers



What do you get when you sign an athletic, flashy, multi-skilled goalie? Igor Shesterkin.

Ever since taking over for Henrik Lundqvist in [2020](#), Shesterkin hasn't posted a save percentage lower than [.951](#). His 2021-22 season was so dominant, not only did he win [the Vezina Trophy](#), but he also finished [third in Hart Trophy voting](#) (the NHL's Most Valuable Player). To put that into perspective, only [eight other goalies](#) have been Hart Trophy finalists since 2000.

Shesterkin's production continues to speak for itself. His “slump season” still placed him in the [top 15](#) for save percentage and goals against average (GAA). According to [Evolving Hockey](#), during the most recent playoff run, Shesterkin saved 15.7 goals above expected, placing him in the top four for this category. He also held the number one spot in 2021-22. His focus, reflexes, and poise under pressure remain constant, further solidifying his case as [one of the best goalies](#) of the 21st century.

He knows when to challenge the puck based on whether his defenders can protect his blind spots. Rather than continuing to list off stats to emphasize that Shesterkin is the best goalie right now, I'll share this moment the NHL deemed the “[save of the year](#)” or [this video](#) from NHL Network ranking him as the 18th-best player before the 2023 season. I am confident Shesterkin will bounce back

15. Aleksander Barkov, Florida Panthers



Upon reviewing the lists released by [ESPN](#), [NHL.com](#), and [CBS](#)

[Sports](#) for the best players in 2024, I was surprised by how far back Aleksander Barkov was ranked. It makes me think the casual hockey fan will undervalue Barkov as a result, but the Florida Panthers would not be as successful without him.

If Barkov's low ranking is justified based on his [injury history](#), I would respond by noting that, when injured, he was only sidelined for a few months at most. If the main criticism is that his stats aren't remarkable, I would point out that Barkov has posted a plus-minus rating in the double digits on [six different occasions](#).

If it wasn't impressive enough that he became [the first Finish-born captain to win the Stanley Cup](#), he also tied for first in goals against per game ([a franchise record](#)). Although he won the Selke Trophy last year, he's been nominated two other times proving it was no fluke the puck was in the offensive zone [almost 50 per cent](#) of the time Barkov was on the ice.

The offensive style of play tends to be the more "flashy" and garners mainstream attention. But Barkov is a part of a [defense-first coaching system](#), leading not only the first power-play unit but also the first penalty-kill unit, a testament to his selfless style of play that earns him respect from spectators. The National Hockey League Player's Association (NHLPA) asked over 600 NHL players who is the most complete player, and from 2019-2023 Barkov was [a top-five](#) candidate.

When *The Athletic* released the results from its Anonymous NHL player poll 2024, Barkov was voted most under-rated. For a more

in-depth look at how Barkov approaches the game of hockey, I highly recommend checking out [this video](#) from Hockey Psychology.

14. J.T. Miller, Vancouver Canucks



Last year saw J.T. Miller become the fastest player in Canucks history to reach 40 points, doing so in 28 games (via [Sportsnet](#)). He also became the second player in NHL history to record 100+ points and 200+ hits in a single season. One of nine members of the 100-point club this year, Miller is skilled in every aspect of the game and has experience [playing every forward position](#). I agree with Jacob Punturi of *Sports Illustrated* when [he mentioned](#) teammate Elias Pettersson receives more attention, even though Miller is currently the superior centre for the Canucks.

Per [Rob Williams](#) from the Daily Hive, once head coach Rick Tocchet came in back in January 2023, as Miller improved to 10 power-play points and 22 even-strength points across 35 games.

While Miller's career has seen periods of inconsistency, working with a [Jack Adams winner](#) (head coach of the year) in Tocchet should help him further unlock his potential.

I've seen [a lot of comparisons](#) between J.T. Miller and former Canucks player Ryan Kesler. Both are centres with similar builds, reliable shots (Miller favours the backhand, Kesler the wrist shot), and the strength to win battles along the boards. Both have had four seasons with over 20 minutes of ice time per game and six or more seasons with 100 or more hits (Miller recorded an incredible [200 hits](#) last year).

The only advantage Kesler holds over Miller is winning [back-to-back](#) Presidents' Trophies (awarded to the team with the most points at the end of the regular season). With several all-star teammates and point-per-game production in the playoffs, I can see Miller leading the Canucks to the Stanley Cup Final as their top scorer.

13. Sebastian Aho, Carolina Hurricanes



For several years, I said Mikko Rantanen was the most underrated player. As of late, more and more hockey fans have come to Rantanen's defence, leading me to believe he's no longer underrated. If I had to pick [a new player](#) to carry that prestigious mantle, I'm choosing Sebastian Aho.

According to Statmuse, the Carolina Hurricanes [tied](#) the Oilers for the best record since the start of 2024. The team was second in point differential, second in powerplay, and first in penalty kills.

Who's the leader of this charge? Aho. A plus-minus rating of +34, the next closest is 11 points fewer. For the last eight years, Aho has been durable. The only time he didn't play at least 65 games was during the COVID lockdown.

The 27-year old is a three-time all-star who received Selke Trophy consideration for all but one season spanning 2018-2023. What makes Aho special is his ability to be whatever is required. He can be trusted to be on the ice during the penalty kill, have a strong defensive presence in the neutral zone, or help the Hurricanes [rank first](#) in offensive zone time (a record the team has held since 2021).

What gives Aho the slight advantage over guys like Miller and Barkov is that he's still in his prime. According to [NHL Records](#), Aho ranks third in franchise history in multi-goal games and second in game-winning goals. In my opinion, if Aho played for a

team in a larger hockey market (like a Canadian team), he would receive more awards consideration.

12. Kirill Kaprizov, Minnesota Wild



In terms of players who have the most impact on their respective teams, none match the importance of Kirill Kaprizov (in my opinion). Players like McDavid or Matthews are impactful in their own right, but if the Minnesota Wild lost Kaprizov, they would no longer remain competitive.

If the Wild had a dynamic playmaker to pair with Kaprizov's elite scoring ability (such as Elias Pettersson) a 50-goal season would happen with ease. Throughout his career, Kaprizov has had [only one all-star teammate](#)—goalie Cam Talbot.

What Kaprizov lacks on defense (hit, blocks, awareness) he more than makes up for on his offence. He has some of the best stick handling in the league, reliable passing in the offensive zone, and the ability to protect the puck at high speeds. His style of play

mirrors that of fellow Russian Sergei Federov

According to [Hockey Reference](#), the 2021 Calder Trophy winner (rookie of the year) has been in the NHL All-Star Game every year, has reached over 90 points twice, and ranks seventh in franchise history in points (330) —despite playing just over 275 games.

11. Jack Hughes, New Jersey Devils



Jack Hughes might be the most intriguing player this year.

The only full season he played was during the 2020-21 COVID season playing 56 games and played more than 70 games just [once](#). Nevertheless, the 23-year-old centre (when healthy) is an elite playmaker creating scoring chances with his speed and agility. Hughes' steady development at such a young age have many believing he'll be one of the next superstars who will take over the league.

Based off the 74 points in 62 games last season, Hughes

was [projected](#) for 98 points in a full slate of 82 games. Despite the shot percentage dropping from last year, Hughes was fighting through the pain in the hopes of keeping the Devils in the playoff hunt. Clearly the Devils appreciated it, as his average ice time increased by [a full minute](#).

Now reports are stating Hughes shoulder is [healed from the off-season surgery](#) and will be ready to start the year with new head coach Sheldon Keefe. I'm assuming the the team will use what's called a "[downhill](#)" style of play. Essentially, the defence starts at the top of the offensive zone. Excellent movement from the forwards via cutbacks and slip passes allow forwards to get separation and chances in high-danger zones.

Hughes [broke the franchise's single-season points record](#) and is capable of reaching 55-plus assists, as he did in 2021–22. The potential is there for Hughes to become a perennial 100-point player. According to [Odds Shark](#), Hughes has the fourth-best odds to win the Hart Trophy.

10. Quinn Hughes, Vancouver Canucks



As NHL fans, we are fortunate to watch once-in-a-generation defencemen like Cale Makar and Quinn Hughes. In terms of most [three-assist games](#) in NHL history, Hughes is one of three defencemen in the top 50 overall players to achieve this notable feat. As the 15th captain in franchise history, Hughes is [the youngest](#) currently in the league, and [the franchise leader](#) for rookie assists.

So what's so special about his game? For starters, his footwork. Incredibly smooth on ice, but also calculated. He opts to go laterally across the blue line to assess his options, rather than force a scoring opportunity (such as in his rookie season at the [2:07 mark](#)).

[In one article](#), Hughes' leadership has been compared to hall-of-famers like Scott Niedermayer. Both are an under-sized, soft-spoken defenceman who could have scored more goals. But like Niedermayer, Hughes has been working on being a better two-way defender, getting more involved in [hits](#).

According to [NHL PR](#), Hughes has posted three straight seasons with 60-plus assists, became the third-fastest player in playoff history to reach 20 career assists, and is the franchise leader in regular-season points by a defenceman.

It's hard to believe the Red Wings [passed](#) on drafting Hughes, opting for defenceman Filip Zadina a year prior.

9. Matthew Tkachuk, Florida Panthers



Matthew Tkachuk is the guy your favourite player worries about. His gruff, old-school style of play is so uncommon for modern-day players that it's actually kind of refreshing. With an elite playmaker in Barkov and an all-star goal-scorer in Sam Reinhart, Tkachuk doesn't need to prioritize being the main point-getter.

He's not the most skilled player offensively... but that's not what's required from him. His role on the newest Stanley Cup Champions needs him to force players into takeaways, push the superstars around, and get into the adversary's heads with

derogatory remarks.

He riles players and fans alike with his questionable and sometimes dirty maneuvers, like when [he cross-checked Hathaway](#) in the the past playoff series. If the 26-year-old can take a page out of Brad Marchand's playbook and dial back the dirty plays, he'll win fans over with his persistent play style.

[That same game](#) against the Bruins, he scored between the legs off a re-direct shot. Trying to crash the net and poke at the puck, a scrum breaks out leading to a three-on-one against Tkachuk (one of those three being goalie Linus Ullmark).

In terms of fighting through adversity, Tkachuk suffered [a cracked sternum](#) against Vegas in the 2022-23 playoffs. He still managed to score the game-tying goal shortly after and helped the Panthers secure the team's only win in that playoff run. Speaking of playoffs, Tkachuk had a plus-minus rating of +12, and 61 points across 71 games since his time in Calgary. The goal and assist totals increase year-after-year.

Tkachuk has had back-to-back 100 point seasons and still put up 88 points after a painful recovery from [surgery](#). With a healthy start to the season and coming off a successful playoff run, where was [tied for fourth](#) in points. Tkachuk is the most talented goon that players [don't want to face](#) — but want on their team.

8. Mikko Rantanen, Colorado Avalanche



Since the [2020-21 season](#), the Colorado Avalanche are second in points for per games played (PF/GP), and fifth in powerplay percentage. A major contributor for both these accomplishments is Mikko Rantanen.

Over the [last four years](#), Rantanen has played 48 games with 62 points, averaging 1.3 points for playoff game. Rantanen also has the hardware to back up his game as a member of the 2022-23 Stanley Cup-winning team. As for the regular season, Rantanen has back-to-back seasons of 100+ points and [over a four year stretch](#), reached a shooting average of 16.15 per cent (higher than MacKinnon or Makar).

At 6'4 and 215 lbs., the Finish winger is able to hold onto the puck better than anyone his size. When he transitions from the neutral zone to the offensive zone, very few defenders can keep up. His ability to reel in the puck from a less than ideal pass makes him a constant threat on offence. With Rantanen's contract set to expire, the Avalanche need to pony up to keep this superstar.

With the salary cap [going up](#), I could see the next contract coming in at \$12 million AAV. If not, teams will be lining up and willing to overspend to acquire Rantanen's services.

7. Cale Makar, Colorado Avalanche



I'm not being hyperbolic when I say Cale Makar is the best defenceman since Nicklas Lidström.

Here's what Makar [has achieved](#) by the age of 25: Calder Trophy (rookie of the year), two NHL First All-Star teams, James Norris Memorial Trophy (best defenceman in the league), three James Norris Memorial Trophies nominations (2021, 2023, 2024), three NHL All-Star Game appearances, 2022 Conn Smythe (playoff MVP), and a member of the 2022-23 Stanley Cup championship roster.

If there was a voting poll for who's the imitated player in the league it might be Makar. The difficult angles he successfully

pulls off when getting around defenders leads to breakdown videos on [YouTube](#). Slipping through forechecks when retrieving the puck in the defensive zone comes easily to him. Rather than holding back on the transition, he attacks the open ice with two forwards behind him, creating a three-on-two advantage. Last year, Makar was tied with New Jersey Devils' [Luke Hughes](#) for the most 22-plus mph speed bursts among defencemen.

What makes Makar the prototype for the next generation of defencemen is his skill in using the inside and outside edges of his skate blades (known as "[edge work](#)") for close scoring opportunities. Additionally, if there are no openings to accelerate, Makar can use his hard slap shot to bruise anyone willing to take the block. challenge anyone willing to take the block. There are very few weaknesses in Makar's game, which explains why the NHLPA voted him as the "[defensive player you want on your team to win a game](#)".

6. David Pastrak, Boston Bruins



If David Pastrnak played for a team other than the Bruins, he would probably get more admiration from fans than he currently gets.

Although hockey fans love to come together to cheer against the Bruins, no one can deny the elite scoring talent of Pastrnak. If the Bruins are on a power play, chances are the team's best player will be doing everything possible to score. In the 2019-20 regular season, Pastrnak [had](#) 95 points in 70 games (the regular season was cut short due to COVID). Throughout his career, Pastrnak has recorded at least 70 points in any season where he's played 70 or more games. He's had back-to-back 100+ point seasons, ranked in the top 15 for goals over three consecutive seasons, and is [tied for fourth](#) in Bruins history for the most games with three or more goals. [Not to mention](#), the 2020 Rocket Richard Trophy winner (most goals in a single season), and runner-up for the 2022-23 Hart Trophy.

His one-timer is quite possibly [the best in the league](#), and the wrist shot is second to that of Auston Matthews. It will shock you how easily he slips past defenders to get wide-open lanes and fire an accurate shot uncontested. Even when contested, the puck gets off his stick so quickly that by the time the defender reacts — it's likely in the net. If Elias Lindholm can find opportunities for Pastrnak to shoot around [the left faceoff circle](#), I would be shocked to see Pastrnak score fewer than 50 goals.

5. Auston Matthews, Toronto Maple Leafs



This was a back-and-forth between Auston Matthews and David Pastrnak. But when you play hockey, scoring goals is the most important thing, and I think Matthews has the best wrist shot in the game. Leaving Matthews alone for the wide-open shot is like leaving Steph Curry uncontested for a three-pointer. When the best players in the world agree Matthews has [the best shot](#), his value remains at the top.

He can change the angle at will, deceiving the goalie one way while pulling the puck in for a goal [from a difficult angle](#). What always impresses me is how Matthews can skate backwards, collect a one-timer, and score without even looking up. It's as if he's always positioning himself to face the net, ready for a pass.

Many will mention that he struggles to lead a Leafs team past the first round. It's a fair assessment considering he's the newest captain and the pressure is mounting to change the narrative. However compared to [Pastrnak](#) Matthews has a better takeaway-giveaway ratio, blocks more shots, and has fewer penalty minutes annually. Not to mention, Matthews has won a Hart Trophy,

which Pastrnak has not.

His 200-foot game continues to improve, with him blocking scoring opportunities instead of staying back for fast-breaks, which is why he was [a Selke nominee](#) this past year). He has nothing left to prove in terms of goal-scoring, winning [three Rocket Richard Trophies](#) and runner-up for a fourth.

4. Leon Draisaitl, Edmonton Oilers



The best Batman-Robin duo in the league right now is Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl. For his career, has an excellent shooting percentage of [18.2 per cent](#). Not only is this shooting percentage higher than [Matthews](#) – but [McDavid](#) as well. All this to say Draisaitl does not get enough attention for being [the best finisher](#) in the league.

Draisaitl became the [third-fastest player](#) in NHL history to reach 100 career playoff points, doing so in only 60 games. In 2020, Draisaitl beat McDavid for both the Art Ross and Hart

Trophies. Since joining the league, every season in which Draisaitl put up 200 or more shots, his worst shooting percentage was still a staggering 18.9 per cent.

Five seasons with 100 or more points, three seasons being top five in assists, and four seasons in the top five for goals (per [ESPN](#)). A top five player in playoff points twice, who actually [improves](#) in average points per game from 1.18 to 1.61 in the playoffs. Despite getting hit nearly twice as much in the playoffs than in the regular season, somehow the [giveaways per 60 drop](#) from 3.63 to 0.79.

Some criticize Draisaitl for relying on the powerplay to help him score. But the way I see it, he has fantastic chemistry with McDavid and so what if he leads the league in powerplay goals? [The Hockey Guy](#) has a good video explaining the debate and why this shouldn't tarnish Draisaitl's legacy. If anything, going into next year, teams will hesitate drawing a penalty on the Oilers making it easier to create separation. Add new team mate Jeff Skinner into the mix, and Draisaitl can prove why he's the [highest-paid player](#) in the league.

3. Nikita Kucherov, Tampa Bay Lightning



Draisaitl might be the best finisher in the league, but Nikita Kucherov is the best finisher —period.

The pairing of Point with Kucherov is so problematic for defenders because both can pass across ice easily to the other and both are strong scorers. Kucherov can use the heel, face, and toe of the blade like very few to score anywhere from the top of the attacking zone or in the corners. The most impressive part is Kucherov doesn't really need to move to find an open spot on net.

What makes Kucherov special is that he knows where to place the puck, not just through scoring, but also one-timer passes. Kucherov will accurately and seamlessly [saucer-pass](#) (passing to another player in a way the puck moves in the air like a flying saucer) to a teammate skating down on a fast break. With two-time all-star Jake Guentzel on Kucherov's line alongside Point, I don't see how Kucherov couldn't put up [another 100-assist](#) season.

A lengthy resume [including](#): three-time NHL First All-Star, two-time Art Ross winner (most points at the end of the regular season), two-time Stanley Cup champion, 2019 Hart Trophy winner. Last season, he put up 144 points in 82 games. With that said, you'd think he would have won the Ted Lindsay and another Hart Trophy, but lost both to Nathan MacKinnon. Some reporters believed Kucherov was [snubbed](#), as he was the third player in NHL history to record a 40-goal, 100-assist season.

Simply put, Kucherov is a first-ballot hall-of-famer and [the best wing player](#) in the league.

2. Nathan MacKinnon, Colorado Avalanche



It shouldn't be a surprise that Nathan MacKinnon is the second-best hockey player in the world. Arguably [the fastest skater](#) in the league and [the youngest player in Avalanche history](#) to suit up for a regular season game.

Throughout [his career thus far](#), MacKinnon has five 90+ point

seasons (including the 140-point season last year) and two playoff seasons with 20 or more points. In a survey conducted by [The Athletic](#), readers were asked, “If you can start a franchise with a player not named Connor McDavid, who do you pick?” The winner, with 35 per cent of the total votes, was MacKinnon.

Once MacKinnon adjusted his mindset with the help of a [sports psychologist](#), he became the most vocal, superstar in the league. [Former teammates](#) have even drawn comparisons between MacKinnon and Michael Jordan for his demand for excellence, both from himself and those around him.

Clearly, this approach has paid off. MacKinnon has earned [seven consecutive all-star appearances](#) and played a major role in the Avalanche’s 2022 Stanley Cup victory. Earlier this year, MacKinnon had a [35-game streak](#) with at least one point in every home game this season, the second-longest in NHL history.

He’s a great role model for young players learning the game of hockey. MacKinnon attacks the net with speed and power, effortlessly transitioning from backhand to shot in one motion, and has overcome numerous setbacks. MacKinnon continues to improve with age, as shown by his recent [Hart Trophy win](#). If linemate Jonathan Drouin can break out this year alongside Rantanen and MacKinnon, another Stanley Cup run could further cement his legacy.

1. Connor McDavid, Edmonton Oilers



Is anyone surprised by this? A once-in-a-generation athlete gets the number one spot. A player so gifted at hockey he's been [selling out arenas](#) since 2015. McDavid is the youngest captain in not only Oilers history - but [league history](#). McDavid is so good that at 19, he was trusted to lead a multi-billion-dollar franchise.

If being the Oilers' captain for eight years isn't impressive enough, he's also been the captain of the NHL All-Star Game [six out of the last seven years](#). When he finally made it to the Stanley Cup Finals last year he broke [two records](#): he became the only player to record back-to-back games with four points in the Stanley Cup Finals, totalling eight points in two games. He's one of the few players to win a [Conn Smythe Trophy while on the losing team](#).

McDavid is easily the most agile player and [the best stick-handler in the league](#). It's not an exaggeration to say every aspect of his offensive game is [elite](#): wrist shot, slap shot, backhand, off-the-puck passing—you name it.

Since 2020, there has [been only one year](#) in which McDavid didn't win the Art Ross trophy. If the 2019-20 season hadn't been cut short due to COVID, that would have [would have been eight consecutive 100-point seasons](#).

McDavid is a leader, and with no signs of slowing down, he will remain at the top for years to come.



Copyright © 2024 Bleacher Buzz