

YOUNG TALENT ABOUNDS IN THE NHL

If somehow the draft and eligibility rules were rewritten, a National Hockey League team of players 21 and under could be formed that might run away with the Stanley Cup.

The young talent around the NHL is staggering. And they're from all over the world — Finland, Russia, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States and, of course Canada, where the best player in the world, and the leader of this mythical 21-and-under squad, Connor McDavid, learned the game.

The Wayne Gretzky trade-to-L.A. influence is really starting to show up, with some of the world's best players having U.S. addresses. Arizona native Auston Matthews of the Maple Leafs leads the way — already a superstar just a notch or two below McDavid. He is one of two Leafs in this 21-and-under group, with Canadian Mitchell Marner joining Matthews for a potent 1-2 punch in Toronto.

The team with the most stars in this 21-and-under group is the Arizona Coyotes, which may bode well for future success for this long-suffering franchise. Forwards Clayton Keller, 20, and Christian Fischer, 21, join 20-year-old defenceman Jacob Chychrun on this young squad. All three were born in the U.S. but Chychrun — whose father played in the NHL, as did his uncle, Luke Richardson — has Canadian connections.

Montreal Canadiens drafted an 18-year-old from Finland named Jesperi Kotkaniemi, who picked up an assist in his first game Oct. 3 and thus became the first NHL player born in 2000 or later to record a point. Ah, kids.

This year's No. 1 draft pick, Rasmus Dahlin, is an 18-year-old from Sweden. Said to possess skills similar to those of McDavid, Dahlin leads a group of young stars on the blue line that includes Zach Werenski, 21 (U.S.), Ivan Provorov, 21 (Russia), Charley McAvoy, 20 (U.S.), Mikhail Sergachev, 20 (Russia) and Noah Hanifin, 21 (U.S.). Where are all the young Canadian defencemen?

Up front, the young talent behind McDavid, Matthews and Marner is immense — Patrik Laine, 20 (Finland), Sebastian Aho, 21 (Finland), Nico Hischier, 19 (Switzerland), Travis Konecny, 21 (Canada), Casey Mittlestadt, 20 (U.S.), Brock Boeser, 21 (U.S.) and Elias Pettersson, 19 (Sweden).

Give any coach those players and he wouldn't lose too many games. Problem is, there are no 21-and-under goalies currently in the NHL, and 'experience' is always valuable in the playoffs. But this is just a mythical group. The point is, the NHL's future is certainly bright.

- **Dwight Perry** of the Seattle Times: "The Cavaliers — despite the departure of **LeBron James** — are still the team to beat in the Eastern Conference, Cleveland centre **Tristan Thompson** told reporters. Oddsmakers immediately made Thompson the morning-line favourite for first NBA player to get drug-tested this season."
- **Brad Rock** of the Deseret News: "Cleveland forward **Tristan Thompson** says the LeBron-less Cavs are still four-time conference champs and 'until you take us down from that, teams ain't got much to say.' Except maybe this: The Browns aren't the worst team in Cleveland anymore."
- **Bob Molinaro** of pilotonline.com (Hampton, Va.): "Was Orioles manager **Buck Showalter** fired? Or was he granted clemency?"
- **Norman Chad** of the Washington Post, on his thoughts on last year's Vegas Golden Knights, as they approached their first NHL season: "I would've written that Sin City needs the NHL like Vatican City needs a tattoo parlor."
- Chad again: "Given a choice between a burlesque show and a Golden Knights-Blue Jackets game, I believe most red-blooded, steak-eating American male tourists would choose the strip tease before the slap shot." (He then added 'Maybe I was wrong.')
- Blogger **Brad Dickson**, on Nebraska's loss to Michigan: "Special teams reminded me of the 'Three Stooges' episode where Larry kept hitting himself in the head with a hammer."
- **RJ Currie** of sportsdeke.com: "This just in: the **Mayweather-Pacquiao** rematch set for December may be in jeopardy. One of them has tested positive for Poligrip."
- Comedy writer **Alex Kaseberg**: "In Minnesota's loss to the Rams, Viking long snapper **Kevin McDermott** lost the tip of his pinky finger, got it sewn-up and kept playing. Soccer players leave on a stretcher if their man-bun comes undone."
- **Dwight Perry** again: "Seahawks linebacker **Mychal Kendricks** has been suspended indefinitely after pleading guilty to illegal stock-market moves. Coincidence? ESPN's NFL Insiders got the scoop."
- **Kaseberg** again (deviating from sports), after a runaway horse galloped into a bar in France: "Nobody was hurt, but a priest, a rabbi and a minister all spilled their drinks."
- **Janice Hough** of leftcoastsportsbabe.com, after Cubs pitcher **Jon Lester** said the Cubs 'can only learn from losing': "Does this mean the Orioles are the smartest team in baseball?"

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