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# NHL DRAFT 2026

THE 2026 DRAFT SPOTLIGHT

Buffalo, NY · KeyBank Center · June 26–27, 2026



## AGENDA

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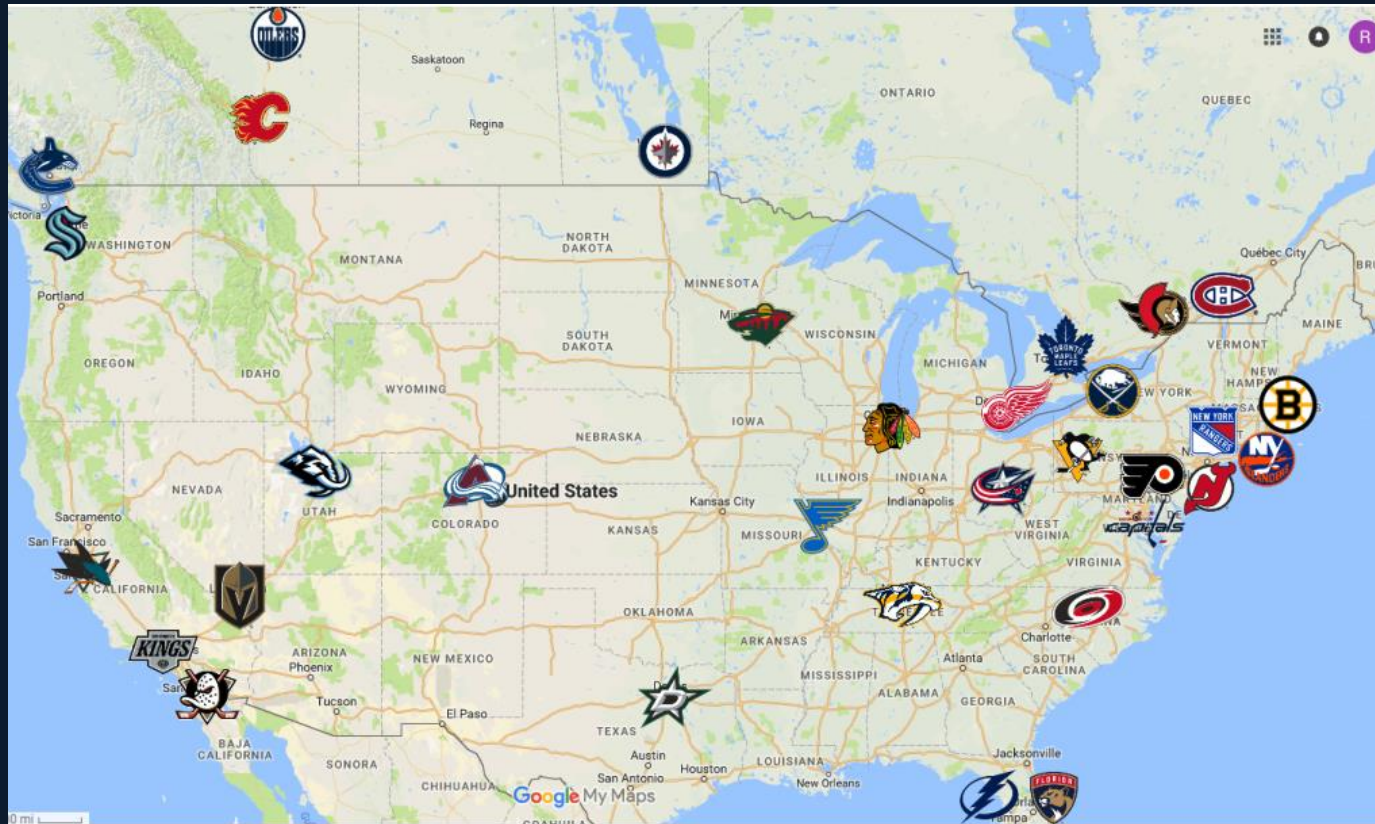
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## THE BASICS

# The draft at a glance

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**7**

**rounds**

224 selections, 32 in Round 1

**June 26–27**

R1 on the 26th · R2–7 on the  
27th

**Buffalo**

**KeyBank Center**

Host: Buffalo Sabres

**4th**

**time as host**

After 1991, 1998 & 2016

### DECENTRALIZED FORMAT

Prospects attend in person in Buffalo, while all 32 teams operate remotely from their home war rooms — the same model the league has run in recent years.

# Why Buffalo

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- **Hardcore hockey market**

A genuine fan base that treats the draft as a real event, not a spectacle.

- **On the US–Canada border**

Easy access for both fan bases — central to the sport's heartland.

- **Already hosts the Combine**

Buffalo runs the NHL Scouting Combine annually, so the infrastructure is in place.



**Less about spectacle,  
more about keeping the  
draft anchored in real  
hockey territory.**

*Repeat host: 1991 · 1998 · 2016 · 2026*

# What defines the 2026 class

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## Defense-heavy at the top

Five of the consensus top 10 are defensemen — and not filler. These are legitimate top-pair projections, unusually deep supply on the blue line.



## Real top-six forwards

Gavin McKenna headlines, with Ivar Stenberg, Caleb Malhotra and Viggo Björck giving teams credible first-round scoring options.



## A messy, traded-up order

Pick ownership is lopsided — St. Louis and San Jose hold extra firsts, while several teams don't own their original selection.

Most valuable asset in this draft: **a top-pair defenseman.**

# The #1-pick reality check

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~95%

play NHL games

~85%

reach 300+ games

~25%

hit 1,000+ points

A #1 pick is a **floor play, not a guaranteed ceiling** — very safe to become an NHL player, far from safe to become a franchise-defining superstar.

# The spectrum of #1 picks

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## Generational

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Mario Lemieux '84

Sidney Crosby '05

Connor McDavid '15

Alex Ovechkin '04

## Cornerstones

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Auston Matthews '16

Nathan MacKinnon '13

Patrick Kane '07

Rasmus Dahlin '18

## Underwhelming

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Nico Hischier '17

Owen Power '21

Erik Johnson '06

## Busts

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Alexandre Daigle '93

Patrik Stefan '99

Nail Yakupov '12

Rick DiPietro '00

# Steals & the goalie trap

## LATE-ROUND STEALS

Pavel Datsyuk **171st**

Henrik Zetterberg **210th**

Pekka Rinne **258th**

Joe Pavelski **205th**

Nikita Kucherov **58th**

*Elite hockey IQ over raw projection — the draft is an imperfect system, not a meritocracy.*

## GOALIES AT #1 = BAD BET

**3**

goalies ever taken  
#1 overall

**Marc-André Fleury '03**

hit — 1,000+ games, Cups

**Rick DiPietro '00**

cautionary failure (injuries)

**Michel Plasse '68**

average outcome

# Gavin McKenna — the headline

SPI SCORE

94

LW · Canada  
Penn State (NCAA)

Elite offensive manipulator — slows the game down better than anyone in this class.

**STRENGTHS**

Vision, deception, playmaking, puck control

**WEAKNESS**

Not physically dominant yet

**PROJECTION**

Franchise-level top-line winger

**REALITY**

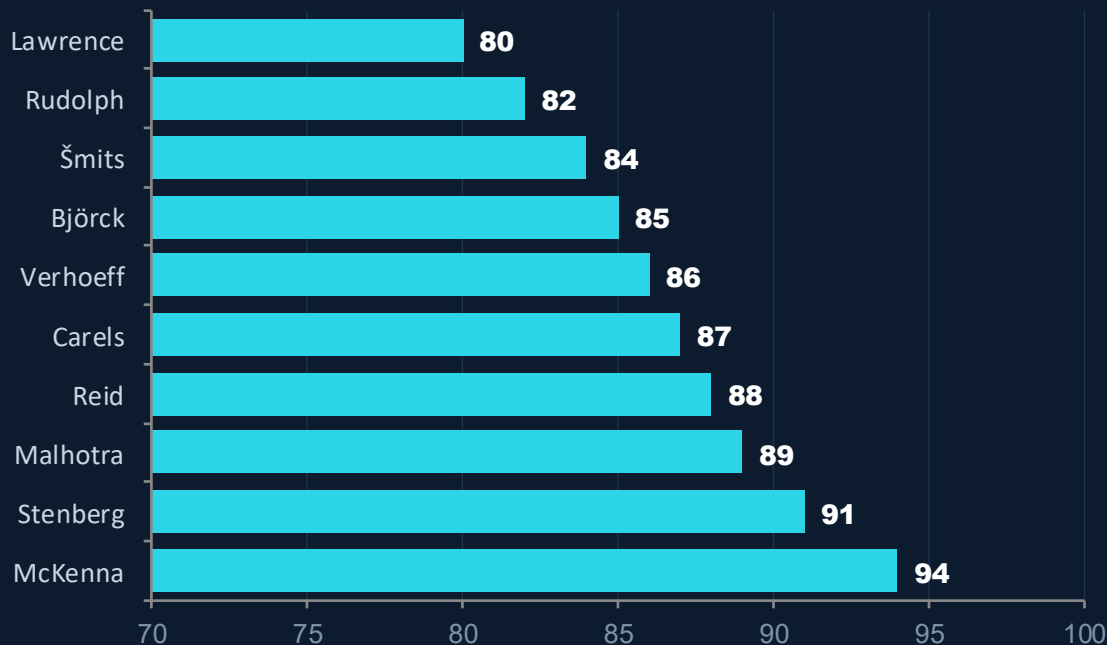
Safest bet in the class to become a star forward

# Top 10 prospects

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| #  | Player          | Pos   | Origin / League                | SPI |
|----|-----------------|-------|--------------------------------|-----|
| 1  | Gavin McKenna   | LW    | Canada · Penn State (NCAA)     | 94  |
| 2  | Ivar Stenberg   | LW/RW | Sweden · Frölunda (SHL)        | 91  |
| 3  | Chase Reid      | D     | Canada · Soo (OHL)             | 88  |
| 4  | Caleb Malhotra  | C     | Canada · Brantford (OHL)       | 89  |
| 5  | Viggo Björck    | C/RW  | Sweden · Djurgården (SHL)      | 85  |
| 6  | Carson Carels   | D     | Canada · Prince George (WHL)   | 87  |
| 7  | Keaton Verhoeff | D     | Canada · North Dakota (NCAA)   | 86  |
| 8  | Alberts Šmits   | D     | Latvia · Europe (Liiga)        | 84  |
| 9  | Tynan Lawrence  | C     | USA · Boston University (NCAA) | 80  |
| 10 | Daxon Rudolph   | D     | Canada · Prince Albert (WHL)   | 82  |

# SPI tiers — top 10



## READING THE TIERS

### ● Elite / franchise

86–94 · the top six on the board

### ● High-probability

80–85 · the next four

### ● SPI weighting

Production, league calibre, athletics, development, readiness, position & risk

# What jumps out

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## Defense is the signal

5 of the top 10 are defensemen — all legitimate top-pair projections. Unusually heavy blue-line supply shapes the whole top 10.



## Geography leans Euro-Canadian

Canada-heavy via CHL & NCAA, strong Scandinavian wave (Stenberg, Björck), plus Latvia's Šmits. The USA is thinner at the very top.



## Three development models

CHL = high variance / big offense ·  
NCAA = structure & readiness ·  
European pro = pro habits already baked in.

**Safest:** Carels, Šmits, Verhoeff

**Most volatile:** Reid, Lawrence, Rudolph

**Likeliest star:** McKenna

# Round 1 order — picks 1–16

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|   |                     |    |                       |                |
|---|---------------------|----|-----------------------|----------------|
| 1 | Toronto Maple Leafs | 9  | San Jose Sharks       | <i>via FLA</i> |
| 2 | San Jose Sharks     | 10 | Nashville Predators   |                |
| 3 | Vancouver Canucks   | 11 | St. Louis Blues       |                |
| 4 | Buffalo Sabres      | 12 | New Jersey Devils     |                |
| 5 | New York Rangers    | 13 | New York Islanders    |                |
| 6 | Calgary Flames      | 14 | Columbus Blue Jackets |                |
| 7 | Seattle Kraken      | 15 | St. Louis Blues       | <i>via DET</i> |
| 8 | Winnipeg Jets       | 16 | St. Louis Blues       | <i>via WSH</i> |

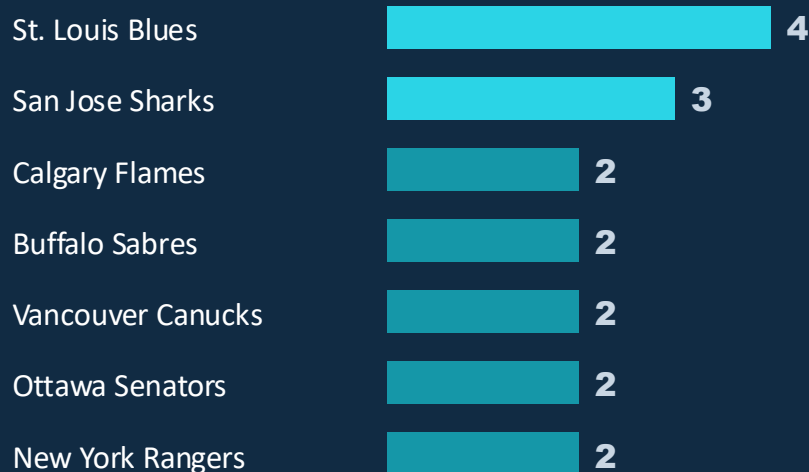
# Round 1 order — picks 17–32

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**17** Los Angeles Kings**18** Washington Capitals*via ANA***19** Utah Mammoth**20** Buffalo Sabres*via EDM***21** Philadelphia Flyers**22** Pittsburgh Penguins**23** Boston Bruins**24** Vancouver Canucks*via MIN***25** Ottawa Senators*via TBL***26** New York Rangers*via DAL***27** San Jose Sharks*via BUF***28** Montreal Canadiens**29** St. Louis Blues*via COL***30** Calgary Flames*via V GK***31** Carolina Hurricanes**32** Ottawa Senators*final*

# Where the draft capital sits

## MOST ROUND-1 PICKS



## NO ORIGINAL FIRST-ROUNDER

Chicago · Florida · Detroit ·  
Washington (partial)

**A few teams can reshape an entire  
rebuild in one night — the Blues  
and Sharks most of all.**

# Strongest team–player fits

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|                  |                                    |                                                                     |
|------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Toronto</b>   | <b>Gavin McKenna</b>               | Obvious best player available — the best ceiling on the board.      |
| <b>Vancouver</b> | <b>Caleb Malhotra</b>              | Cleanest need/player match: a two-way centre spine for the rebuild. |
| <b>Buffalo</b>   | <b>Chase Reid</b>                  | For a team ready to graduate from “fun” to hard to play against.    |
| <b>Seattle</b>   | <b>Keaton Verhoeff</b>             | Big right-shot D with NCAA readiness — sensible franchise building. |
| <b>San Jose</b>  | <b>Stenberg + blue-line volume</b> | Right macro-strategy: one elite forward, then defensive depth.      |

# Biggest risk picks

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## Tynan Lawrence

Talent is obvious, but injuries and an inconsistent season lower the projection.



## Gleb Pugachyov

Interesting tools, but MHL translation and signing uncertainty add real risk.



## Brooks Rogowski

Size is seductive; big junior prospects can become very large question marks.



## Daxon Rudolph

Valuable offensive-D profile, but the defensive game needs cleaning first.

# Build through the draft

## Carolina

A-

### BUILD THE SPINE

Own-drafted core: Aho, Svechnikov, Jarvis, Slavin, Nikishin, Kochetkov, Blake — real value found in rounds 2–4.

## Vegas

B-

### BUILD THE CURRENCY

Draft-and-convert: core is mostly others' draftees — Eichel, Marner, Stone, Theodore, Hanifin, Hill.



*Carolina hoists the Cup*

Pure drafting → **Carolina**. Asset aggression → **Vegas**.

THE BOTTOM LINE

# Four calls on the 2026 draft

**BEST SPI PLAYER**

**Gavin McKenna — 94**

**BEST TEAM FIT**

**Vancouver / Caleb Malhotra**

**BEST DEFENSIVE VALUE**

**Buffalo / Chase Reid**

**BEST DRAFT PORTFOLIO**

**San Jose Sharks**

*Good teams get stronger — bad teams can still blow it by chasing the wrong archetype.*

# Team needs by category

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## Prioritize defense

Toronto, Chicago, San Jose, Edmonton, Anaheim, New Jersey, Buffalo, Ottawa, Florida

## Prioritize centres

Vancouver, Calgary, Nashville, Winnipeg, Pittsburgh, Utah, Detroit, Columbus

## Prioritize scoring wings

Boston, Islanders, Los Angeles, Seattle, Minnesota, Washington, Philadelphia

## Can afford upside swings

Colorado, Dallas, Carolina, Tampa Bay, Vegas

# PROJECTED PICKS - #1

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**Toronto**

**Gavin McKenna**

Obvious best player available — the best ceiling on the board.



# PROJECTED PICKS - #2

## San Jose Sharks

Ivar Stenberg

San Jose can pair Stenberg with its young forward core, then address defense with later firsts.



# PROJECTED PICKS - #3

## Vancouver

Cleanest need/player match: a two-way centre spine for the rebuild.

### Caleb Malhotra

