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## **The 2026 NHL Draft:**

### ***The Leafs Pipeline Guide to Toronto's #1 Overall Pick***

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## **BUT FIRST A LITTLE BACKSTORY IS NECESSARY**

My micro-obsession with Maple Leafs' prospects; the year I made two first round picks on behalf of the Maple Leafs; and launching leafspipeline.com

### **THE ORIGIN OF THE OBSESSION**

The micro-obsession over Maple Leafs' prospects goes back a long way. It started in the early '70s when my dad took me to Maple Leaf Gardens to watch the Toronto Marlboros play in the OHL. My interest hit another level when in the mid 1970's, the Leafs called up three players from their "farm team" – Bruce Boudreau, Paul Evans and Bob Warner. I wondered where those guys came from? In 1979, the Leafs drafted a 91-goal scoring center out of the QMJHL in the third round named Norm Aubin. I thought to myself, with 91 goals, how was this guy not selected first overall? He didn't make the Leafs roster the following season so where he go? At the time, I knew little about the draft, the minor leagues or the broader development system behind an NHL roster. That curiosity turned into a lifelong passion for tracking the players the Leafs drafted and developed before they reached the NHL.

### **A MOCK DRAFT THAT FELT REAL**

Fast forward to 2014. I applied for and was hired to become a paid writer covering Toronto Maple Leafs' prospects for the website HockeysFuture.com – the go-to site for updates on NHL team's prospects. At the time, the Leafs prospect pool was thin. They had just drafted William Nylander, but he was the exception. Most of the team's prospects were the likes of Josh Leivo, Stuart Percy, Brendan Leipsic, goalie Antoine Bibeau and Sam Carrick among others.

The good news was the Leafs had two first round picks in the 2015 NHL draft. Each year HockeysFuture.com hosted a "live" mock draft in which each writer made picks in the first round for the team they covered. When my turn came to select on behalf of the Leafs with the 4<sup>th</sup> overall pick, I chose the 6<sup>th</sup> NHL Central Scouting rated prospect, Mitch Marner. The Leafs had taken Nylander the year before as part of Brendan Shanahan's push to rebuild through skill. As the acting Leafs' Scouting Director for HockeysFuture, I felt strongly that Marner fit that bill to a tee. As we all know, that's who the Leafs chose.

When my turn came to select again for the Leafs with the 24<sup>th</sup> overall pick, I was hoping to take defenseman John Cabot, the highly mobile puck moving offensive defenseman – until the team picking 19<sup>th</sup> overall selected him (Ottawa ended up taking Chabot with the 18<sup>th</sup> pick). I have always believed teams should draft the best player available in the first round, then focus on positional needs later. The next best available player on my list was another RW in Brock Boeser but I selected him anyway (Vancouver drafted Boeser with the 23<sup>rd</sup> overall pick).

What did the Leafs do with the 24<sup>th</sup> overall pick that year? They traded down by sending the pick to Philadelphia for the 29<sup>th</sup> and 61<sup>st</sup> picks, and the Flyers used the selection on Travis Konecny. Toronto then traded down again, moving the 29<sup>th</sup> pick they received from the Flyers to Columbus for the 34<sup>th</sup> and 68<sup>th</sup> overall selections. Columbus used that pick on D Gabriel Carlsson. The Leafs used their

acquired picks to draft D Travis Dermott (34<sup>th</sup>), RW Jeremy Bracco (61<sup>st</sup>), and LW Martin Dzierkals (69<sup>th</sup>), of which only Dermott had some marginal success playing for the Leafs.

### **WHY LEAFSPipeline.COM EXISTS**

For NHL fans who care deeply about their team, the internet has opened up access to more information than we ever could have imagined when newspapers were the primary source of news. But even now, gaps remain. For me, the biggest gap was the lack of a single place to track every Leafs' prospect whose rights belonged to the organization – whether they were playing in junior, US college, the minor leagues, or in Europe. It simply didn't exist, so I decided to create one.

That is the gap **LeafsPipeline.com** was created to fill. It is a passion project built to consolidate and track every drafted or signed junior and professional Maple Leafs prospect into one reference point – Future Leafs. Tracked Today.

With that as background to this exercise, let's dive into the 2026 draft and consider what the Leafs should do with the first overall pick.

Ed Dermitt,  
Founder, LeafsPipeline.com

## Introduction

The Toronto Maple Leafs winning the 2026 NHL Draft lottery didn't just hand the organization a rare opportunity, it created a franchise-defining moment. For a team at a crossroads, the first overall pick is more than a selection; it is a chance to reshape the future, accelerate a reset, or make a bold bet on elite talent. That possibility is what makes this draft so fascinating – and why this report asks the questions every Leafs fan, analyst, and decision-maker should be asking right now.

In the 63-year history of the NHL Draft, 2026 marks only the third time Toronto will select first overall. History says these moments matter. The Leafs' previous top picks – Wendel Clark in 1985 and Auston Matthews in 2016 – became defining players for their era. Now the stakes are just as high, because getting this decision right could alter the trajectory of the franchise for years to come.

That sets up the essential question at the heart of this report: should the Maple Leafs stand pat and draft the best player available, or should they leverage the No. 1 pick as a trade asset to acquire a broader package of elite young talent? It requires understanding the strength of the 2026 class, identifying true separation at the top of the board and measuring whether any trade scenario could reasonably match or exceed, the value of keeping the selection.

This report was built to answer those questions with more than instinct or hype. Drawing on prospect evaluations, comparable players, historical context, and trade-value analysis, it works step by step through the evidence to determine what Toronto should do with the most important draft asset the franchise has held in a generation. If the Leafs are going to make the right call, it starts here:

- 1. Who are the best prospects available in the 2026 draft?***
- 2. Of the highest rated prospects, who is ranked number one?***
- 3. What current NHL player is the closest comparable for each prospect to better understand the type of player the Leafs would be selecting?***
- 4. How do the top 2026 draft prospects compare with previous first overall picks?***
- 5. If the Maple Leafs want to address their lack of elite young talent, should they trade the first overall pick for additional selections, and if they did, what return would provide equal or greater value?***

Only after answering these questions can we get a clearer picture of what the Maple Leafs should do with the first overall pick.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – The Answers at a Glance

### Q1. Who are the best prospects available in the 2026 NHL draft?

- A. Using consensus traditional scouting reports from publicly available narratives on the best prospects, we compiled a list of eight skaters and two goalies that are considered the best draft eligible prospects at their position:

#### SKATERS

Prospect Name (Alphabetical Order)	Pos	2025-26 Team (League)	Descriptor
Viggo Björck	C	Djurgårdens IF - SWE	Consensus #1 ranked international center
Caleb Malhotra	C	Brantford (OHL)	NHL Central Scouting #1 ranked North American center
Gavin McKenna	LW	Penn State (NCAA)	NHL Central Scouting #1 ranked North American forward
Chase Reid	RD	Soo Greyhounds (OHL)	NHL Central Scouting #1 ranked North American defenseman
Alberts Šmits	LD	Jukurit (Liiga) - FIN	NHL Central Scouting #1 ranked international defenseman
Ivar Stenberg	LW	Frölunda HC (SHL) - SWE	NHL Central Scouting #1 ranked international forward
Oliver Suvanto	C	Tappara (Liiga) - FIN	NHL Central Scouting #1 ranked international center
Keaton Verhoeff	RD	North Dakota (NCAA)	Consensus #1 ranked defenseman

#### GOALIES

Prospect Name (Alphabetical Order)	2025-26 Team (League)	Descriptor
Dmitri Borichev	Loko-76 Yaroslavl (MHL) - RUS	NHL Central Scouting #1 ranked international goalie
Brady Knowling	USNTDP Juniors (USHL)	NHL Central Scouting #1 ranked North American goalie

Source: "Consensus" ranking from eliteprospects.com

### Q2. Of the highest rated prospects, who is ranked number one?

- A. We went beyond the traditional scouting narratives to quantifiably identify the best player among the top ranked prospects regardless of position or geography, by using the **LeafsPipeline Draft Index Rating**. The LP Draft Index score uses a strict 60/40 weighted scoring model: **60% of a prospect's rating comes directly from technical data**, focusing on metrics that correlate highly with previous prospects having success in the NHL, while the other **40% incorporates consensus traditional scouting narratives**.

Viewed through this lens, the LP Draft Index rated **Gavin McKenna as the clear #1 prospect in the draft**. There is no close second.

**Q3. What current NHL player is the closest comparable for each prospect to better understand the type of player the Leafs would be selecting?**

- A.** The “Kucherov-Jack Hughes” parallel that McKenna projects to become would make him an ideal forward to build a team around. When you factor in McKenna’s **86% comparability score to that of Kucherov-J. Hughes**, he represents the lowest risk-highest reward prospect in the draft.

**Q4. How does the #1 ranked prospect compare with first overall picks of the last 20 years?**

- A.** Gavin McKenna’s **97.4 LP Draft Index score** ties him with Buffalo’s Rasmus Dahlin for **the fifth highest among the last 20 first overall picks**. This makes McKenna one of the top number one overall picks of the last two decades.

**Q5. If the Maple Leafs want to address their lack of elite young talent, should they trade the first overall pick for additional selections, and if they did, what return would provide equal or greater value?**

- A.** From a draft trade value perspective, none of the four teams picking right after the Leafs (Sharks, Canucks, Black Hawks and Rangers), can match the draft value and impact of McKenna. Even a “quantity over quality” package of six combined 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> round picks from the Calgary Flames can’t provide enough draft trade value for McKenna. **On paper, the Leafs should not trade down to acquire additional draft picks for the opportunity to McKenna.**

# **UNPACKING ANSWERS TO THE FIVE CORE QUESTIONS**

## Q1. Who are the best prospects available in the 2026 NHL draft?

### Consensus Scouting Narratives

There are eight skaters and two goalies that are ranked as a “#1 prospect” depending on their position and geography, according to reputable scouting services such as NHL Central Scouting and others. These narrative-based scouting services will describe players strengths, weaknesses, tendencies and other characteristics that help the reader paint a picture of the type of player the prospect is currently and projects to become if they reach their maximum potential. Such reports are helpful to see beyond what's on a prospect's scorecard – height, weight and statistics – to distinguish one prospect from another.

To set the stage for ultimately naming the #1 prospect in the draft, we have created Prospect Cards for the eight prospects based on consensus scouting narratives sourced from publicly available, reputable scouting services. This will allow us to gain perspective on what makes each of the top prospects stand out.

### The #1 Ranked Prospects by Position and Geography

Prospect Name (Alphabetical Order)	Pos	2025-26 Team (League)	Descriptor
Viggo Björck	C	Djurgårdens IF - SWE	Consensus #1 ranked international center
Caleb Malhotra	C	Brantford (OHL)	NHL Central Scouting #1 ranked North American center
Gavin McKenna	LW	Penn State (NCAA)	NHL Central Scouting #1 ranked North American forward
Chase Reid	RD	Soo Greyhounds (OHL)	NHL Central Scouting #1 ranked North American defenseman
Alberts Šmits	LD	Jukurit (Liiga) - FIN	NHL Central Scouting #1 ranked international defenseman
Ivar Stenberg	LW	Frölunda HC (SHL) - SWE	NHL Central Scouting #1 ranked international forward
Oliver Suvanto	C	Tappara (Liiga) - FIN	NHL Central Scouting #1 ranked international center
Keaton Verhoeff	LD	North Dakota (NCAA)	Consensus #1 ranked defenseman

**GOALIES** – there is no goalie that surpasses the top skater prospects, and there is only an outside chance that any are selected in the first round. Here are, however, the two most highly rated:

Prospect Name (Alphabetical Order)	2025-26 Team (League)	Descriptor
Dmitri Borichev	Loko-76 Yaroslavl (MHL) - RUS	NHL Central Scouting #1 ranked international goalie
Brady Knowling	USNTDP Juniors (USHL)	NHL Central Scouting #1 ranked North American goalie

Source for Player Profiles and Statistics: eliteprospects.com

Sources Consensus Traditional Scouting Reports: CHL.ca; ChrisWhalenHockey.com; DraftProspectsHockey.com; EliteProspects.com; McKeensHockey.com; NHL.com; NHL Central Scouting; TheHockeyWriters.com

## Viggo Björck – Consensus #1 Ranked International Center

Date of Birth	Mar 12, 2008	Position	C/RW
Age	18	Height	177 cm / 5'10"
Place of Birth	Stockholm, SWE	Weight	78 kg / 172 lbs
Nation	Sweden	Shoots	R

Season	Team	League- Country	GP	G	A	PTS	NHLe	PIM	+/-
2025-26	Djurgårdens IF	SHL – SWE	42	6	9	15	19	12	+5
	Sweden U20	World Juniors	7	3	6	9	n/a	2	+5
	Djurgårdens IF U20 (Playoffs)	U20 Nationell (SWE)	9	8	12	20	22	2	+10
	Sweden	World Championships	6	1	4	5	n/a	2	+2

### Consensus Scouting Summary – *Cerebral Playmaking Center; Elite Processor; Relentless Two-Way Facilitator*

Viggo Björck has risen into the consensus top 10 for the 2026 NHL Draft. The 5-foot-10 Swedish forward is widely described as a cerebral tactician and elite offensive facilitator. Despite size concerns, Björck has consistently proven his maturity, adapting seamlessly to the physical demands of SHL competition. He thrives as a playmaking center, using high-end hockey IQ and vision to manipulate passing lanes and create chances.

Beyond offense, scouts emphasize his relentless motor and competitiveness. Björck's nonstop energy makes him an effective 200-foot player, regularly battling in traffic and earning trust as a penalty killer. While he lacks true breakaway speed, his agility, edgework, and deceptive handling allow him to control the pace of play. Overall, he projects as an intelligent, complete top-six NHL forward whose processing and work rate can outweigh size limitations.

#### Strengths:

- **Elite Hockey IQ & Vision:** Processes the game at a remarkable level, constantly scanning the ice to anticipate plays and identify passing lanes that others miss.
- **Dynamic Playmaking:** A natural facilitator with tremendous creativity; uses precise, deceptive passing to orchestrate offense and manipulate defensive structures.
- **Relentless Motor:** Plays with non-stop energy and a high compete level, showing a willingness to battle in heavy traffic and win pucks despite his size.
- **Two-Way Maturity:** Exceptional defensively for an offensive prospect; tracks back hard, disrupts plays, and is highly effective on the penalty kill.

#### Weaknesses:

- **Undersized Frame:** At 5-foot-10, his lack of sheer size and strength will always be heavily scrutinized when projecting his ability to physically endure the rigors of an NHL schedule as a center.
- **Top-End Speed:** While he is an agile skater with great edgework and pacing, scouts note he lacks the elite straight-line breakaway speed often desired in undersized forwards.

### Caleb Malhotra – NHL Central Scouting #1 North American Center

Date of Birth	Jun 02, 2008	Position	C
Age	17	Height	188 cm / 6'2"
Place of Birth	Toronto, ON, CAN	Weight	83 kg / 183 lbs
Nation	Canada	Shoots	L

Season	Team	League- Country	GP	G	A	PTS	NHLe	PIM	+/-
2025-26	Brantford	OHL – CAN	67	29	55	84	20	51	+3
	Brantford (Playoffs)	OHL - CAN	15	13	13	26	26	4	+10

#### Consensus Scouting Summary – *Intelligent Two-Way Center; High-Motor Playmaker; Cerebral Competitor*

Caleb Malhotra is widely regarded as one of the top center prospects for the 2026 NHL Draft. Playing for Brantford in the OHL, the 6-foot-2 forward has the prototypical frame of a modern NHL center. The son of former NHLer Manny Malhotra, he shows a polished 200-foot game and maturity beyond his years.

Scouts consistently praise Malhotra's elite hockey IQ and spatial awareness. He processes the game at a high level, allowing him to dictate play and stay ahead of the competition. Rather than relying on highlight-reel moments, his production is driven by a relentless motor, strong puck battles, and an ability to find teammates in high-danger areas. He is a competitive, two-way center who impacts both ends of the ice. While some debate whether his ceiling is a true top-line driver or elite second-line center, his intelligence, work ethic, and versatility make him one of the most dependable and sought-after prospects in the draft.

#### Strengths:

- **Elite Hockey IQ & Vision:** Processes the game rapidly, demonstrating superior spatial awareness and the ability to anticipate plays before they develop.
- **Two-Way Reliability:** A highly committed 200-foot player who applies relentless pressure on the forecheck and plays a responsible defensive game without the puck.
- **Playmaking & Creativity:** Possesses soft hands and pinpoint passing ability, allowing him to navigate tight spaces and create offensive opportunities under pressure.
- **Competitive Motor:** Plays with a consistent, high-energy work ethic, actively engaging in puck battles and fighting for positioning in heavy-traffic areas.

#### Weaknesses:

- **Explosive Skating:** While his skating is technically sound and agile, scouts note that he currently lacks the elite separation gear or burst found in some of his draft peers.
- **Physical Strength:** He possesses a great frame but will need to continue adding muscle and bulk to maximize his physical effectiveness at the professional level.
- **Defensive Focus:** Though generally highly reliable in his own zone, scouts have noted occasional tendencies to "puck-watch" defensively.

## Gavin McKenna – NHL Central Scouting #1 North American Forward

Date of Birth	Dec 20, 2007	Position	LW
Age	18	Height	183 cm / 6'0"
Place of Birth	Whitehorse, YT, CAN	Weight	77 kg / 170 lbs
Nation	Canada	Shoots	L

Season	Team	League- Country	GP	G	A	PTS	NHLe	PIM	+/-
2025-26	Penn State Univ.	NCAA - USA	35	15	36	51	35	36	-7
	Canada U20	World Juniors	7	4	10	14	n/a	14	+7

### Consensus Scouting Summary: *Cerebral Tactician, Heavy Shooter, Offensive Forward*

Gavin McKenna has cemented his status as the consensus top-rated North American prospect for the 2026 NHL Draft. He combines elite vision, hockey IQ, and playmaking ability to drive offense in all situations. Following a record-setting Canadian junior career and seamless transition to Penn State, scouts highlight his ability to read the game several steps ahead of his peers. He excels as an offensive orchestrator, using precise passing and elite edge work to break down defenses, both off the rush and in-zone.

While playmaking defines his game, McKenna's scoring has evolved into a true dual threat, driven by deceptive shooting and a willingness to attack the middle. Despite a lighter frame, he avoids vulnerability through strong anticipation, skating, and tactical awareness. Widely compared to stars like Patrick Kane, he projects as a franchise cornerstone capable of leading a top line and number one power play.

#### Strengths:

- **Elite Hockey Sense:** Thinks the game at a true difference-making level; identifies and exploits passing lanes that few others see.
- **Dynamic Playmaking:** Operates as a master orchestrator; executes highly technical passes through traffic and excels at transition carrying.
- **Rush Offense:** A premier puck-carrier who uses speed differentials, crossovers, and cutbacks to effortlessly gain the middle of the ice.
- **Offensive Adaptability:** Balances high-end playmaking with deceptive, well-placed shots, making him a true dual-threat scorer.

#### Weaknesses:

- **Physicality & Strength:** A lighter frame limits his impact in tight puck battles and physical checking situations along the boards.
- **Defensive Engagement:** While improving, he can occasionally lack intensity away from the puck and in his own defensive zone.
- **Reliance on Perimeter:** Against heavier checking competition, he can sometimes default to the perimeter instead of driving to high-traffic scoring areas.

### Chase Reid – NHL Central Scouting #1 North American Defenseman

Date of Birth	Dec 30, 2007	Position	D
Age	18	Height	188 cm / 6'2"
Place of Birth	Chesterfield, MI, USA	Weight	85 kg / 187 lbs
Nation	USA	Shoots	R

Season	Team	League- Country	GP	G	A	PTS	NHLe	PIM	+/-
2025-26	Sault Ste. Marie	OHL - CAN	45	18	30	48	17	30	+27
	USA U20	World Juniors	5	2	2	4	n/a	4	0

#### Consensus Scouting Summary – *Transition Master; Offensive Quarterback; Mobile Puck-Mover*

Chase Reid has established himself as one of the premier defensemen available in the 2026 NHL Entry Draft, widely projected as a top-five selection and a potential franchise cornerstone. Ranked as the #2 North American Skater by NHL Central Scouting, the 6-foot-2, right-shot blueliner for the Soo Greyhounds possesses a highly coveted, modern toolkit. Reid is consistently lauded by scouting services for his elite edgework, fluid skating, and exceptional poise with the puck. He is a master of deception and transition, demonstrating a rare ability to slow the game down and manipulate forecheckers to open up high-danger passing seams. Offensively, he functions as a true dual-threat, pairing his high-end playmaking vision with a heavy, deceptive point shot, making him a natural power-play quarterback. While some scouts have noted occasional lapses in defensive zone coverage or a hesitation to engage physically, his overall trajectory points to a complete, 200-foot defenseman capable of logging heavy minutes. He is widely viewed as a future top-pairing NHL defender who can dictate the pace of play.

#### Strengths:

- **Elite Skating and Edgework:** Smooth and highly mobile, allowing him to easily escape pressure, efficiently transition the puck, and walk the offensive blue line.
- **High-End Playmaking and Vision:** Processes the game at an elite level, utilizing deception and patience to manipulate defenders and execute highly technical passes.
- **Transition Offense:** Outstanding at puck retrieval; he effortlessly turns defensive zone possessions into offensive rushes, making him a premier puck-moving defenseman.
- **Power-Play Quarterback:** Operates with calm instincts at the point, possessing a heavy, accurate shot that perfectly complements his elite distribution skills.

#### Weaknesses:

- **Defensive Consistency:** Can occasionally lose his assignments or struggle with coverage when the play starts moving rapidly around his own zone.
- **Physical Engagement:** Despite having a solid 6-foot-2 frame, he can sometimes play tentatively in high-traffic areas and needs to consistently apply more physical pushback along the boards.
- **Perimeter Reliance:** Some scouts note that he can occasionally rely too heavily on perimeter shooting and passing rather than pressing his offensive advantage into the tougher areas of the ice.

## Alberts Šmits – NHL Central Scouting #1 International Defenseman

Date of Birth	Dec 02, 2007	Position	D
Age	18	Height	191 cm / 6'3"
Place of Birth	Valmiera, LAT	Weight	93 kg / 205 lbs
Nation	Latvia	Shoots	L

Season	Team	League- Country	GP	G	A	PTS	NHLe	PIM	+/-
2025-26	Jukurit	Liiga - FIN	38	6	7	13	11	20	-3
	EHC München (Playoffs)	DEL -GER	11	2	4	6	9	6	+2
	Latvia	Olympics + Worlds	12	0	6	6	n/a	2	-1
	Latvia U20	World Juniors	5	1	4	5	n/a	2	-6

### Consensus Scouting Summary – *Physical Transition Defender; Aggressive Puck-Mover; High-Motor Blueliner*

Alberts Šmits is projected to become the highest-drafted Latvian in NHL history and is one of the top defensemen in the 2026 draft. The 6'3", 205-pound left-shot blueliner has risen quickly through Jukurit in Finland and during a loan with EHC München (DEL). Scouts highlight his modern, offensively driven toolkit, built around a big frame and aggressive tendencies. Šmits is a transition force who uses mobility, vision, and poise to lead breakouts and join the rush.

He uses his 6'3", 205 lbs. frame effectively to separate opponents from the puck and activates frequently to drive offense. While his physical two-way upside draws comparisons to Moritz Seider, his defensive game remains a work in progress. His aggressive style can pull him out of position as he refines his decision-making. Overall, Šmits is viewed as a high-upside prospect with top-four NHL potential.

#### Strengths:

- **Mobility & Transition:** An extremely fluid skater who excels at moving the puck through the neutral zone, utilizing both his speed and high-end passing vision to drive transition offense.
- **Physicality & Size:** Possesses a mature frame and plays with an aggressive edge, effectively using his reach and strength to win battles and knock opponents off the puck.
- **Offensive Poise:** Displays tremendous confidence with the puck on his stick, showing a willingness to activate into the play and orchestrate offense from the blue line.
- **High Motor:** Plays with a relentless, aggressive energy in all three zones, fully engaging in the play rather than waiting for it to come to him.

#### Weaknesses:

- **Over-Aggressiveness:** His desire to impact every play can lead to poor decision-making; he occasionally pinches at the wrong time or pulls himself out of defensive structure.
- **Defensive Consistency:** While he possesses the physical tools to defend well, his overall hockey sense and read-and-react skills in his own zone can be inconsistent against higher-level competition.
- **Shot Selection:** Scouts note that he can become too "shot happy" in the offensive zone, occasionally forcing lower-percentage pucks toward the net instead of utilizing his playmaking options.

### Ivar Stenberg – NHL Central Scouting #1 International Forward

Date of Birth	Sep 30, 2007	Position	LW/RW
Age	18	Height	182 cm / 6'0"
Place of Birth	Stenungsund, SWE	Weight	82 kg / 181 lbs
Nation	Sweden	Shoots	L

Season	Team	League- Country	GP	G	A	PTS	NHLe	PIM	+/-
2025-26	Frölunda HC	SHL - SWE	43	11	22	33	40	6	+10
	Sweden	Worlds	6	3	4	7	n/a	6	0
	Sweden U20	World Juniors	7	4	6	10	n/a	6	+5

#### Consensus Scouting Summary – Cerebral Tactician, Dangler, Playmaker

Ivar Stenberg is widely viewed as the premier international prospect and arguably the most complete winger in the 2026 NHL Draft. Ranked as the #1 International Skater by NHL Central Scouting, the Swedish forward delivered a historic draft-eligible season with Frölunda HC. With 33 points in 43 SHL games, he recorded the top scoring performance by an 18-year-old in Sweden's top league since the Sedin twins in 1998-99.

Scouts are drawn to Stenberg's blend of high-end offensive skill and detailed 200-foot play. Unlike many young scorers, he combines elite playmaking vision and a dangerous wrist shot with a relentless motor. He is an aggressive forechecker who embraces traffic, protects the puck along the boards, and consistently wins battles against veteran opponents. Described as a "cerebral tactician," he drives transition play and creates space in tight areas. Overall, he projects as a true top-line NHL winger who balances high-end skill with the hard-nosed habits required for playoff success.

#### Strengths:

- **Historic Production & Playmaking:** Elite offensive vision and passing ability, proven by near-historic point production against men in the SHL.
- **Relentless Motor & Puck Protection:** An incredibly active, high-energy player who thrives on the forecheck. Plays with a physical edge and a wide stance, allowing him to absorb contact, protect the puck down low, and win board battles.
- **Two-Way Completeness:** A true 200-foot player who tracks back effectively, disrupts passing lanes with an active stick, and can be trusted in late-game defensive scenarios.

#### Weaknesses:

- **Puck Dominance:** As a highly skilled, puck-dominant player, he can overhandle the puck or try to do it all himself. He will need to adjust to the tighter checking and reduced time-and-space of the NHL.
- **Lateral Quickness:** While a sturdy and effective skater with great balance, he can sometimes get beaten laterally in one-on-one defensive situations against shiftier forwards.
- **Offensive Pacing:** Scouts note that he occasionally needs to ensure he keeps his feet moving in the offensive zone, rather than waiting for the play to develop around him.

### Oliver Suvanto – NHL Central Scouting #1 Ranked Center

Date of Birth	Sep 03, 2008	Position	C
Age	17	Height	190 cm / 6'3"
Place of Birth	Turku, FIN	Weight	95 kg / 209 lbs
Nation	Finland	Shoots	L

Season	Team	League- Country	GP	G	A	PTS	NHLe	PIM	+/-
2025-26	Tappara	Liiga - FIN	48	2	9	11	8	16	+2
	Tappara U20 (Playoffs)	U20 SM-sarja - FIN	14	0	5	5	4	6	-4
	Finland U20	World Juniors	7	2	0	2	n/a	0	+2

#### Consensus Scouting Summary – *Mature Shutdown Center; Pro-Ready Puck Protector; Middle-Six Stabilizer*

Oliver Suvanto possesses an incredibly mature profile and is widely considered the top Finnish prospect eligible for the 2026 NHL Draft. The 6-foot-3, 209-pound left-shot center made the rare jump past the U20 level to play full-time against men in Finland's Liiga at just 17 years old.

Suvanto has showcased a high floor, a pro-ready frame, and defensive composure well beyond his years. His movement in tight spaces, defensive intelligence, and ability to absorb physical pressure. Defensively, he utilizes his large frame and smart positioning to force opponents to the outside, applying structured pressure and staying low in the defensive zone to support his defensemen. Offensively, he relies on his excellent puck protection, composure under pressure, and slick passing off the half-wall rather than raw explosiveness. While some question his ultimate offensive ceiling and overall scoring-chance generation, his size, center position, and two-way responsibility make him a highly coveted prospect. Suvanto projects as a stabilizing, middle-six NHL center who can anchor a penalty kill and provide elite shutdown coverage.

#### Strengths:

- **Prototypical Size & Puck Protection:** Uses his physical maturity to absorb pressure from defenders, operate comfortably in heavy traffic, and dictate play along the boards.
- **Defensive Maturity:** Shows exceptional awareness in his own zone, playing flawlessly within structure and utilizing his reach and positioning to be an effective, shutdown defensive center.
- **Composure Under Pressure:** Operates with a calm demeanor; he easily shrugs off physical pressure and navigates tight areas with the puck-handling ease of a much smaller player.
- **Playmaking Vision:** Capable of threading passes past defensive sticks, excelling at distributing the puck off the half-wall and finding open teammates when primary shooting lanes are closed.

#### Weaknesses:

- **Skating Explosiveness:** While he is highly mobile, his long stride mechanics occasionally limit his burst and acceleration, meaning he lacks elite separation speed to pull away on the rush.
- **Offensive Generation:** He is currently a low-scoring chance generator who doesn't shoot the puck frequently, relying on simplistic playmaking that lags behind some of the more dynamic offensive forwards in his draft class.
- **Consistent Physicality:** Despite his massive frame, he will need to play with more consistent energy and physical engagement to fully maximize his potential in a professional shutdown role.

## Keaton Verhoeff – Consensus #1 Ranked Defenseman

Date of Birth	Jun 19, 2008	Position	D
Age	17	Height	193 cm / 6'4"
Place of Birth	Fort Saskatchewan, AB, CAN	Weight	96 kg / 212 lbs
Nation	Canada	Shoots	R

Season	Team	League- Country	GP	G	A	PTS	NHLe	PIM	+/-
2025-26	Univ of North Dakota	NCAA – USA	36	6	14	20	13	2	+7
	Canada U20	World Juniors	5	0	4	4	n/a	0	+4

### Consensus Scouting Summary – *Poised Two-Way Blueliner; Minute-Eating Anchor; Physical Right-Shot Defender*

Keaton Verhoeff possesses one of the most coveted prospect profiles in hockey and is ranked as a top-three prospect for the 2026 NHL Draft. The 6-foot-4, 212-pound right-shot defenseman jumped from the WHL's Victoria Royals to the NCAA's University of North Dakota at 17—a move widely praised by scouts. Playing 16–20 minutes against older competition, Verhoeff showed a high floor and composure beyond his years.

Scouts praise his two-way maturity, high panic threshold, and command of the ice. Defensively, he uses strong gap control, precise stick work, and physicality to shut down the rush. Offensively, he pairs a heavy shot with excellent vision and playmaking, confidently managing the blue line and executing clean outlet passes. While some question whether his skating will reach elite levels, his size, handedness, and hockey sense make him a rare prospect. Verhoeff projects as a minute-eating, all-situations, top-pairing NHL defenseman.

#### Strengths:

- **Prototypical Size & Physicality:** Standing 6-foot-4, he uses his massive frame and strength to dominate the corners, cut down angles, and comfortably separate opponents from the puck.
- **Poise Under Pressure:** Operates with an incredibly high panic threshold; he rarely throws the puck away and uses his composure to navigate forechecking pressure efficiently.
- **Two-Way Playmaking:** Balances a highly responsible defensive game with the vision and puck skills to consistently connect on high-end transitional passes.
- **Offensive Tools:** Equipped with a booming, heavy shot from the point and the confidence to maneuver the offensive blue line to open up passing lanes.

#### Weaknesses:

- **Skating Pace:** While he skates quite well for his size, scouts note that he lacks elite separation speed or burst and will need to add another gear to maximize his potential at the NHL level.
- **Puck Management:** Because he handles the puck frequently and is relied upon to generate offense, he can occasionally over-skate the puck, hold onto it too long, or force plays that lead to turnovers.
- **Refining Low-Pace Skill:** Some evaluators have noted that his puck-settling abilities and technical skill in slowed-down scenarios still require a bit of refinement compared to his high-pace processing.

## Takeaways from the Prospect Card Narratives

### *McKenna is the Clear #1*

Traditional scouting narratives debate whether McKenna or Stenberg is the best prospect, with Reid mentioned by some because he is the perceived best defenseman, and a much sought-after right-shot. Such narratives can make it difficult to assess who is #1 because the opinions are inherently subjective and can be shaped by scout's experiences, stylistic preferences, recency bias, size bias, or raw scoring bias. That does not make those opinions wrong, but they remain opinions that are highly subjective.

Taken together, the top prospects in the 2026 NHL Draft reveal a clear separation between elite, franchise-altering talent and high-end but more conventional upside players. McKenna and Stenberg are considered the top-rated forwards with the consensus ranking McKenna at number one, although not exclusively. On defense, Reid, Šmits and Verhoeven are the top three but not in any unanimous order. Reid is the most dynamic offensively and is considered to have the greatest upside. Šmits appears to be the safest of the three given he has a proven track record competing in the top leagues in Finland and Germany and then acquitted himself well playing for Latvia at the Olympics and the World Championships. Verhoeven, like McKenna, made a smooth transition from the WHL to the NCAA this year and was an impact player and projects to have more offensive upside than Šmits.

#### **ANSWER:**

In a draft class filled with strong prospects, the presence of an elite-calibre talent like Gavin McKenna reinforces a core principle: select the best player available. While Stenberg, Reid, Šmits, and Verhoeff all project as highly impactful NHL contributors from the 2026 class, McKenna stands apart as the clear outlier. Scouts widely view him as having the highest offensive upside and the potential to become a dominant force on the ice. Although not every reputable scouting service ranks him unanimously at number one, and he is not without flaws, the overwhelming consensus is that his elite ceiling clearly separates him from the rest of the field.

## Q2. How do we identify the best player available in the draft and who is it?

### ***Moving Beyond Traditional Scouting Narratives to Quantifiably Identify the Best Player in the 2026 NHL Draft – Leafspipeline.com Draft Index***

For decades, NHL scouting has leaned heavily on traditional, narrative-driven approaches — methods shaped by groupthink, subjective opinions, and the old-fashioned “eye test.” That’s not meant to be criticism. It’s fact. In looking at this question, the last thing I wanted to do was offer yet another narrative-based opinion, when dozens of them already exist from those much more qualified than I am to offer them. Instead, I wanted to approach this answer from a different perspective – one that could, if possible, incorporate more of a data analytics lens to evaluating the best player in the draft.

LeafsPipeline saw a need to move beyond the traditional scouting narratives about a draft prospect, with a more objective, data-oriented system for evaluating future NHL talent. What began as a simple inquiry into which on-ice data best translate a prospect’s ability to achieve NHL success, turned into weeks of testing ideas and outcomes. That work led to the creation of the **LeafsPipeline Draft Index (LP Draft Index) – an analytics-weighted model that complements traditional scouting narratives to assign draft-eligible prospects with a clear, quantitative rating score.**

The LP Draft Index reshapes how draft-eligible players are ranked by putting statistical evidence at the forefront. Our system uses a strict 60/40 weighted scoring model: **60% of a prospect’s rating comes directly from technical data**, focusing on metrics that correlate highly with previous prospects reaching the NHL, while the other **40% incorporates consensus traditional scouting reports**. This clear division ensures that objective analytics remain the core driver of our rating score, rather than being overshadowed by subjective narratives. At the same time, by integrating established scouting perspectives, we safeguard against blind spots in the data, grounding our model in real-world, on-ice visual evaluation and practical hockey perspectives.

To achieve this, the LP Draft Index engine tracks an array of advanced micro-metrics that highly correlate to skills that translate best from junior and college hockey to the NHL, including:

- **Player-Action-Cycle (“PAC”) Latency:** PAC efficiency, measuring the micro-seconds between a player acquiring the puck and executing a positive-value action.
- **Transition Efficiency:** Controlled zone entry and exit percentages under pressure.
- **High-Danger Generation:** Isolated contribution to high-danger passing lanes and slot shots.
- **Possession Maintenance:** Puck protection success rates along the wall and in traffic.
- **Traditional & Era-Adjusted Production:** Raw offensive production, adjusted for league strength, age, and historical era.

Since a standard skater metric cannot accurately evaluate every player on the ice due to the distinct roles of forwards, defenseman and goalies, the LP Draft Index also utilizes position-specific algorithmic adjustments. For **defensemen**, the model integrates specialized criteria such as **gap-control tracking, defensive zone denial rates**, and **puck-retrieval-to-exit latency**. For **goalies**, the formula completely shifts to isolate **high-danger save efficiency, pre-shot lateral movement**

**tracking**, and **post-integration recovery speed**. This tailored approach ensures every position is quantified by the exact traits that drive modern NHL success.

The model does not account for player size, which is often overrated and weakly correlated with NHL success, or raw point totals, since only 5-on-5 goals and primary assists more accurately reflect true scoring ability. It also cannot project injuries, work ethic, motivation, or other human factors that can impact whether a prospect reaches their full potential.

### Important Disclaimer: How the LP Draft Index Scores Were Calculated

In practice, the LP Draft Index score prospect ratings listed below are based on data that is incomplete or inconsistent across players. That's because the rating scores were calculated using the best publicly available data that could be compiled by a subscription-based artificial intelligence app. While we stress-tested the AI outputs with hundreds of prompts to verify the logic, sources, validity and accuracy of the rating scores generated by our LP Draft Index model, they are not as accurate as a proprietary database would be. As a result, I have greater confidence that the ratings for the top 10 prospects more closely reflect the model's intended output than those for players in the lower half of the rankings.

### LP Draft Index Tier Guide: Contextualizing the Prospect Rating Scores

To provide clarity on what the LP Draft Index score for each prospect means, we have established the following tier classifications within the Index. This framework helps visualize the true scaling of the model, assuming a prospect maximizes their upside potential:

LP Draft Index Score Range	Tier Classification	NHL Projection & Analytical Significance
98.0+	Generational Talent	A franchise-altering engine. Prospects in this tier break historical micro-metric models and possess unparalleled PAC Latency. Instant elite impact.
95.0 – 97.9	Elite Star	Premium top-line forward or top-pairing defenseman. Guaranteed core player capable of independently driving line possession metrics.
92.0 – 94.9	High-End Core	High-impact top-6 forward or top-4 defender. Features elite traits in specific transition or generation metrics but may have slight variance in physical containment or cycle play.
88.0 – 91.9	Premium Regular	Strong top-six/top-four potential. Excellent complementary pieces who process the game cleanly and win their individual micro-battles at a highly favorable rate.
83.0 – 87.9	Depth/Project	Middle-to-bottom-six forward or bottom-pairing defenseman. High utility players with distinct stylistic strengths that will require more specific NHL deployment to maximize value.

Consider the prospect ratings in the table below as directional rather than analytically precise. For additional context, the Draft Ranking table below also includes the consensus draft ranking for each player, as well as their high-low draft ranking from reputable traditional scouting sources.

### First Round Prospects Ranked by LP Draft Index Rating

LP Draft Index Rank	Consensus Rank (Hi-Low Rank)*	Player	Pos	2025-26 Team (League)	LP Draft Index Rating Score
1	1 (1-2)	Gavin McKenna	LW	Penn State (NCAA)	97.4
2	2 (1-3)	Ivar Stenberg	LW	Frölunda HC (SHL) - SWE	95.1
3	4 (3-10)	Chase Reid	RD	Soo Greyhounds (OHL)	93.7
4	12 (4-15)	Alberts Šmits	LD	Jukurit (Liiga) - FIN	92.5
5	13 (4-20)	Caleb Malhotra	C	Brantford (OHL)	91.8
6	3 (1-11)	Keaton Verhoeff	LD	North Dakota (NCAA)	91.3
7	6 (3-23)	Carson Carels	LD	Prince George (WHL)	90.9
8	5 (3-12)	Viggo Björck	C	Djurgårdens IF – (SHL)	90.5
9	9 (7-20)	Daxon Rudoph	RD	Prince Albert (WHL)	89.8
10	7 (4-21)	Tynan Lawrence	C	Boston University (NCAA)	89.5
11	26 (9-37)	Alexander Command	C	Örebro HK (J20) - SWE	89.1
12	10 (7-19)	Ryan Lin	RD	Vancouver (WHL)	88.6
13	25 (13-33)	Nikita Klepov	LW	Saginaw (OHL)	88.4
14	8 (5-16)	Ethan Belchetz	LW	Windsor (OHL)	88.1
15	15 (10-32)	Oscar Hemming	LW	Boston College (NCAA)	87.8
16	11 (10-23)	Adam Novotny	LW	Peterborough (OHL)	87.4
17	20 (10-41)	J.P. Hurlbert	C	Kamloops (WHL)	87.2
18	33 (10-46)	Liam Ruck	RW	Medicine Hat (WHL)	86.9
19	18 (12-25)	Elton Hermansson	RW	MoDo (Allsvenskan) - SWE	86.7
20	32 (16-37)	Maddox Dagenais	C	Quebec (QMJHL)	86.5
21	29 (13-36)	Wyatt Cullen	LW	USNTDP (USHL)	86.3
22	30 (19-55)	William Håkansson	LD	Luleå HF (SHL) - SWE	86.1
23	22 (15-44)	Juho Piiparinen	RD	Tappara (Liiga) – FIN	85.8
24	23 (18-30)	Ilia Morozov	C	Miami-Ohio (NCAA)	85.5
25	14 (9-27)	Malte Gustafsson	LD	HV71 (SHL) - SWE	85.3
26	17 (9-28)	Oliver Suvanto	C	Tappara (Liiga) - FIN	85.0
27	34 (24-64)	Nikita Shcherbakov	LD	Ufa (KHL) – RUS	84.8
28	38 (31-63)	Simas Ignatavicius	C	Genève-Servette (NL) - SUI	84.8
29	37 (18-57)	Adam Valentini	F	Univ. of Michigan (NCAA)	84.4
30	45 (16-54)	Markus Ruck	C	Medicine Hat (WHL)	84.2
31	16 (6-39)	Xavier Villeneuve	LD	Blainville-Boisbriand (QMJHL)	83.9
32	40 (25-56)	Tommy Bleyl	RD	Moncton (QMJHL)	83.7

\*“Consensus Rank” as of May 24, 2026, compiled by eliteprospects.com. Consensus Ranks may change as we get closer to NHL draft day.

Note: No goalies were ranked in the top 32 by the LP Draft Index methodology.

**ANSWER:**

When the goal is to move past reputation and identify the prospect most likely to become a true NHL difference-maker, the answer comes into focus with unusual clarity: Gavin McKenna is the best player available in the 2026 NHL Draft.

The LP Draft Index does not merely place him first; it separates him from the field, awarding him a 97.4 rating and the draft's closest place to the model's Generational Talent tier. Just as significant is why he arrives there. McKenna's score is built from the 60% analytics weighting that tends to travel best to the NHL — rapid processing, strong transition play, consistent high-danger creation, and production that remains convincing even when adjusted for context. That conclusion is only strengthened by the fact that the 40% traditional scouting weighting reaches the same verdict, with McKenna also holding the consensus No. 1 spot. No model can account for every variable, but when the numbers, the projection, and the broader scouting picture all point in the same direction, the case becomes exceptionally strong. In this class, that player is McKenna.

**Q3. Can we identify which current NHL player each top prospect most closely resembles to better understand the type of player the Leafs would be drafting?**

To project the upside of the top-32 LP Draft Index prospects, we matched them to NHL players with similar profiles. Using the same PAC Latency and Transition Efficiency metrics behind each rating, we identified each prospect's closest "NHL twin" and calculated a percentage match.

**Top 32 LP Draft Index Prospect NHL Comparables**

LP Draft Index Rank	Player	Pos.	LP Draft Index Rating Score	Closest NHL Comparable (% Match)
1	Gavin Mckenna	LW	97.4	Nikita Kucherov (94%)
2	Ivar Stenberg	LW	95.1	Mitch Marner (91%)
3	Chase Reid	RD	93.7	Quinn Hughes (85%)
4	Alberts Šmits	LD	92.5	Moritz Seider (87%)
5	Caleb Malhotra	C	91.8	Aleksander Barkov (86%)
6	Keaton Verhoeff	LD	91.3	Dougie Hamilton (84%)
7	Carson Carels	LD	90.9	Shea Theodore (83%)
8	Viggo Björck	C	90.5	Elias Pettersson (82%)
9	Daxon Rudoph	RD	89.8	Noah Dobson (80%)
10	Tynan Lawrence	C	89.5	Matt Duchene (81%)
11	Alexander Command	C	89.1	Joel Eriksson Ek (85%)
12	Ryan Lin	RD	88.6	Devon Toews (82%)
13	Nikita Klepov	LW	88.4	Andrei Svechnikov (79%)
14	Ethan Belchetz	LW	88.1	Quinton Byfield (87%)
15	Oscar Hemming	LW	87.8	Chris Kreider (80%)
16	Adam Novotny	LW	87.4	Timo Meier (78%)
17	J.P. Hurlbert	C	87.2	Vincent Trocheck (84%)
18	Liam Ruck	RW	86.9	Jordan Kyrou (81%)
19	Elton Hermansson	RW	86.7	Jesper Bratt (85%)
20	Maddox Dagenais	C	86.5	Pierre-Luc Dubois (79%)
21	Wyatt Cullen	LW	86.3	Jake Guentzel (82%)
22	William Hakansson	LD	86.1	Mattias Ekholm (84%)
23	Juho Piiparinen	RD	85.8	Miro Heiskanen (77%)
24	Ilia Morozov	C	85.5	Robert Thomas (84%)
25	Malte Gustafsson	LD	85.3	Hampus Lindholm (86%)
26	Oliver Suvanto	C	85.0	Anton Lundell (83%)
27	Nikita Shcherbakov	LD	84.8	Mikhail Sergachev (81%)
28	Simas Ignatavicius	C	84.8	Nico Hischier (82%)
29	Adam Valantini	LW	84.4	Cole Caufield (80%)
30	Markus Ruck	C	84.2	Matty Beniers (79%)
31	Xavier Villeneuve	LD	83.9	Jared Spurgeon (83%)
32	Tommy Bleyl	RD	83.7	Vince Dunn (81%)

## **Top 5 Prospect Profile Player Comparables: Contextualizing the LP Draft Index Rating Score**

To better understand which NHL players each of the top five prospects most closely resemble, the LP Draft Index generated two NHL-twin comparables: one reflecting the prospect's transition and open-ice profile, and another capturing processing efficiency and impact in tighter areas of the rink. Together, these comparisons show how each prospect's game may translate to higher levels of competition, where time and space are more limited and transferable skills matter most. A percentage score was calculated for each prospect to measure how closely their analytics aligned with their dual NHL-twin comparables. The higher the percentage, the more likely the prospect is to mirror those profiles.

### **1. Gavin McKenna (LW) – Penn State University**

#### **Transition/Rush Style: Jack Hughes (92% Match)**

When McKenna utilizes straight-line speed, dynamic edge work, and controlled zone entries to attack defenders off the rush, his micro-metrics perfectly mirror the New Jersey Devils' superstar.

#### **Processing/Cycle Style: Nikita Kucherov (94% Match) – Best Comparable**

When the play settles, McKenna's elite PAC Latency takes over. His ability to delay, manipulate defensive structures, and slide deceptive passes through microscopic seams makes Kucherov his definitive match. He dictates the game's pace entirely with his mind.

<b>Combined NHL Comparables Score = 86% (highest probability)</b>
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### **2. Ivar Stenberg (LW) – Frölunda HC (SHL - SWE)**

#### **Transition/Rush Style: Lucas Raymond (89% Match)**

Stenberg's current data against professional men in the SHL showcases elite perimeter-to-slot passing and high-end transition metrics, heavily mirroring Raymond's clever wing play.

#### **Processing/Ceiling Style: Mitch Marner (91% Match) – Best Comparable**

Stenberg's best fit is Marner. Like Marner, Stenberg excels at creating scoring chances through sharp spatial awareness, quick transitions, and aggressive puck retrieval.

<b>Combined NHL Comparables Score = 81% (high probability)</b>
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### **3. Chase Reid (RD) – Sault Ste. Marie (OHL)**

#### **Transition/Rush Style: Cale Makar (81% Match)**

Reid's puck-retrieval-to-exit latency is elite. When he jumps into the play as a one-man breakout or activates on the rush, his offensive generation metrics closely replicate Makar's dynamic style.

**Processing/Distributor Style: Quinn Hughes (85% Match) – Best Comparable**

Reid's best fit is Q. Hughes. His blue-line lateral movement, spatial manipulation, and efficiency in finding open teammates out of a localized cycle make him the ultimate modern puck-moving quarterback.

**Combined NHL Comparables Score = 69% (lowest probability)**

**4. Alberts Šmits (LD) – Jukurit (Liiga – FIN)****Transition/Rush Style: Miro Heiskanen (84% Match)**

Šmits possesses incredible lateral mobility for his size (6'3", 205 lbs.). His smooth transition metrics and smothering gap-control data allow him to kill counter-attacks early, much like Heiskanen.

**Processing/Physical Style: Moritz Seider (87% Match) – Best Comparable**

Šmits tilts the model when tracking defensive zone denials and physical containment metrics. He uses his frame to isolate puck carriers and instantly stops cycles, making Seider his most accurate stylistic comparison.

**Combined NHL Comparables Score = 73% (low probability)**

**5. Caleb Malhotra (C) – Brantford (OHL)****Transition/Rush Style: Roope Hintz (83% Match)**

When pushing the pace through the neutral zone, Malhotra uses a high-speed, power-transition style that drives directly to the hard areas of the ice, closely mimicking Hintz's straight-line pressure.

**Processing/Defensive Style: Aleksander Barkov (86% Match) – Best Comparable**

Malhotra's true value lies in his elite two-way puck suppression. His defensive micro-metrics, faceoff efficiency, and cycle control look nearly identical to Barkov's masterclass profile, projecting him as a premium matchup center.

**Combined NHL Comparables Score = 71% (low probability)**

**ANSWER:**

The "Kucherov-J. Hughes" parallel is a better match for McKenna than Patrick Kane, which is often cited by most scouting narratives as his closest comparable. When you factor in McKenna's 86% probability score of reaching Kucherov-J. Hughes-like potential, he represents the lowest risk/highest reward prospect in the draft.

**Answer "cont."**

If looking to focus on the blueline as a priority, the "Q. Hughes-Makar" tandem profile projected for Chase Reid seems incredibly enticing, if Reid reaches his maximum upside potential. There would be a legitimate case to be made for prioritizing a "Q.Hughes-Makar" defenseman over a "Kucherov- J.Hughes" forward. However, Reid's probability of reaching his NHL-twins potential is only 69%. That makes Reid the highest risk/high reward option. A great draft pick... if he reaches his potential. But there comes a lot more "if" in Reid reaching that ceiling than any of the other top LP Draft Index top 5 rated prospects. Reid is too great a risk to take with the first overall pick given that McKenna provides greater certainty of reaching NHL star status.

## Q4. How does the #1 ranked prospect compare with first overall picks of the last 20 years?

### Historical Context: Where McKenna Stacks Up

Having the first overall pick in the draft can be franchise altering – if the team is lucky enough to be picking in a year where the best available player is a generational talent. The reality is not all first overall picks are equal. For every Connor McDavid, there are many more along the likes of an Owen Power or Juraj Slafkovský – good NHL players – but not in the mold of McDavid, Matthews or Celebrini. And then there are the years where you may be choosing from the likes of a Nail Yakupov – the “bust pick” of the last 20 years.

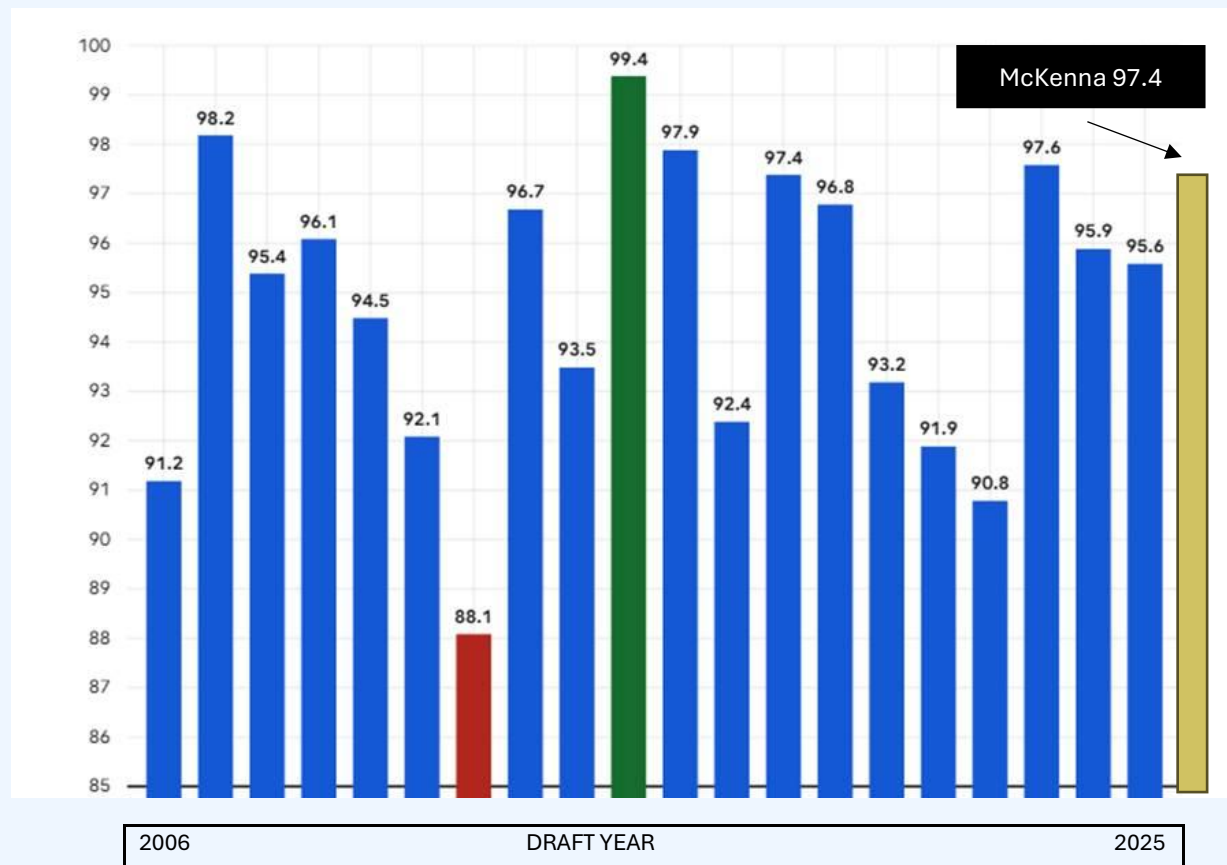
To truly understand the significance of McKenna's 97.4 LP Draft Index score, we applied the same Index score methodology to the last 20 first-overall selections from 2006-2025. By running previous first overall draft picks through the same methodology at the time of their draft years, we can place McKenna on a timeline of generational talent. Rather than using traditional narratives about how good McKenna stacks up against Celebrini, Bedard and other first overall picks, we can apply an apples-to-apples comparison by using the LP Draft Index methodology scoring system.

### Five Highest 1<sup>st</sup> Overall LP Draft Index Scores 2006-2025

1. **2015:** Connor McDavid – 99.4
2. **2007:** Patrick Kane – 98.2
3. **2016:** Auston Matthews – 97.9
4. **2023:** Connor Bedard – 97.6
5. **2018:** Rasmus Dahlin – 97.4
5. **2026:** Gavin Mckenna – 97.4

2006-2025 1 <sup>st</sup> Overall Picks		LP Draft Index Score
Avg. LP Draft Index Score of All First Overall Picks		94.7
Highest Score: Connor McDavid		99.4
Lowest Score: Nail Yakupov		88.1
Highest Defenseman Score: Rasmus Dahlin		97.4
2026 Top 3 Rated Prospects		Rank vs. Previous 1 <sup>st</sup> Overall Picks
#1. Gavin McKenna	97.4	Tie for 5 <sup>th</sup>
#2. Ivar Stenberg	95.1	10 <sup>th</sup>
#3. Chase Reid	93.7	13 <sup>th</sup> *
*As the highest rated defenseman in the 2026 draft, Reid ranks higher than three defensemen previously selected first overall: 1. Dahlin (97.4); 2. Matthew Schaefer (95.6); <b>3. Chase Reid (93.7)</b> ; 4. Aaron Ekblad (93.5); 4. Owen Power (91.5); 5. Eric Johnson (91.2).		

**LP Draft Index Scores of #1 Overall Draft Picks 2006-2025**



**Answer:**

The historical comparison makes clear just how rare McKenna's 97.4 score is. It places him in a tie for fifth among first overall-calibre prospects from the last 20 draft classes, alongside Rasmus Dahlin, and behind only Connor McDavid, Patrick Kane, Auston Matthews, and Connor Bedard. Just as importantly, his score sits well above the 20-year average of 94.7 for first overall picks, reinforcing that **McKenna is not simply the top player in his class, but a prospect who measures up with the most elite draft-eligible talents of the modern era.** In that context, a 97.4 does not just signal star potential—it marks McKenna as a historically significant prospect with the profile to alter the trajectory of a franchise.

**Q5. If the Maple Leafs want to address their lack of elite young talent, should they trade the first overall pick for additional selections, and if they did, what return would provide equal or greater value?**

### **The Science of Draft Pick Trade Values**

Trading the first overall pick requires a return that reflects the value of giving up a potential franchise player. Teams have long used draft trade value charts to assign point values to each selection based on the historical likelihood of NHL success and overall impact. Early versions of these charts were built on a simple benchmark: whether a player would appear in 200 or more NHL games. Over time, however, teams have refined their models using proprietary projections that incorporate micro-metrics, transition play, and expected on-ice value. As a result, draft pick valuation has evolved from a backward-looking measure of past outcomes to a forward-looking projection of future impact.

Modern quality-based draft value models view the top of the draft as a steep cliff rather than a gradual slope. The gap between the first overall pick and even the fifth overall pick is often measured less by games played and more by **expected star-level impact and salary-cap surplus**. That helps explain why draft value declines so sharply even among the very top selections. A true franchise cornerstone such as Sidney Crosby or Connor McDavid can provide far more value through elite impact than two players who become only solid NHL contributors.

The following Draft Pick Trade Value table is believed to have been used by the Montreal Canadiens for the 2025 NHL Draft, although that cannot be confirmed with certainty. Even so, it serves as a useful proxy for draft trade values, since every NHL team applies its own criteria and internal models when determining the value of draft selections.

Draft Pick Trade Values First and Second Round Picks				
First Round			Second Round	
Overall Pick	Draft Value		Overall Pick	Draft Value
1	1,000		33	127
2	727		34	121
3	603		35	116
4	532		36	111
5	484		37	106
6	442		38	102
7	419		39	97
8	396		40	93
9	372		41	89
10	354		42	85
11	339		43	82
12	324		44	78
13	311		45	75
14	297		46	72
15	284		47	69
16	272		48	66
17	260		49	63
18	249		50	61
19	238		51	59
20	228		52	56
21	218		53	54
22	208		54	52
23	199		55	50
24	190		56	48
25	182		57	47
26	174		58	45
27	166		59	43
28	159		60	42
29	152		61	40
30	145		62	39
31	139		63	37
32	133		64	36

**Trading Up or Down in the Draft**

An NHL General Manager looking to trade up or down in the draft could use the trade value table as a guide to determine what picks they would trade or receive in return.

**Example: The GM of the 1<sup>st</sup> overall pick is willing to trade down one slot to receive the 2<sup>nd</sup> overall and additional picks. What else would the GM need to receive in return?**

- Trade – 1<sup>st</sup> pick with 1,000 Value
- Receive - 2<sup>nd</sup> overall (727 value) + 15<sup>th</sup> overall (284 value) = 1,011 Value (or any combination of picks that equal greater than 1,000).

That is the theoretical, mathematical calculation to determine the value of trading up or down. However, a GM would not trade picks based on the table results alone. They would also know which prospects on their draft board slot into the pick(s) they are trading or receiving. If a GM has a prospect rated much higher than most other NHL teams, they may consider trading down in the hopes they can still select the player they want later in the draft, while also adding additional draft picks.

We will illustrate this below when we examine scenarios for the Leafs to trade down in the draft, by using the actual prospects ranked within each draft slot using the LP Draft Index.

## Draft Pick Return Scenarios for the Leafs' First Overall Pick

For the Leafs to justify trading the 2026 first overall pick, the return would have to cover the full “Generational Premium” attached to Gavin McKenna – not just in total asset value, but in projected elite upside. While there would be dozens of trade scenarios the Leafs could consider, for the purposes of this theoretical exercise, we will limit the trade evaluation scenarios based on the following assumptions:

- The Leafs trade down in the draft to acquire additional draft picks only;
- The Leafs trade down but not lower than the 5<sup>th</sup> overall pick.
- Draft pick trade proposals will be evaluated from teams picking in the top five: San Jose (2<sup>nd</sup> overall pick); Vancouver (3<sup>rd</sup>); Chicago (4<sup>th</sup>); and NY Rangers (5<sup>th</sup>).
- We'll examine a “quantity over quality” trade scenario that Calgary could propose given they have the most 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> round picks of any team in the 2026 draft.
- Trade proposals assume the Leafs would receive only 2026 draft picks in return. It is not possible to assign an accurate trade value to draft picks in future years without until the exact overall selection(s) being sent to Toronto are determined.
- The draft picks being offering to the Leafs in return must be “high-end” draft picks – defined as 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> rounders or in the top 64 only.
- This exercise is a straight draft trade value exchange. No players will be suggested in the trade evaluations as the results would negate or dilute the purpose of illustrating the draft trade value exercise and calculation.

Ultimately, external draft value charts only provide the theoretical framework. The true test of equivalent value occurs when knowing the specific players attached to those picks.

For that reason, we are going to conduct the Leafs trade evaluation scenario by combining the generic Draft Trade Value found on page 28 AND the LP Draft Index score for the prospect ranked in every draft slot. By doing so, we can obtain a more practical view on the expected prospects coming back in a weighted draft trade value return rather than simply looking at the generic draft value table.

In our scenarios, each draft pick's value is calculated by multiplying the generic draft slot value by the LP Draft Index score of the prospect projected for each draft slot.

For example, the weighted draft trade value for McKenna is 97,400. As such, a team looking to trade up to acquire the Leafs' first overall pick would have to offer draft picks that exceed 97,400 as being of equal value.

Overall Pick	Generic Draft Trade Value (“GDTV”)	Prospect	LP Draft Index Score	Weighted Prospect Trade Value (“WPTV”) (GDTV X WPTV)
1 <sup>st</sup>	1,000	Gavin McKenna	97.4	97,400

**Trading Down Value Scenarios**

We examine if the teams at the top of the 2026 draft have enough “high-end” (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> round picks) draft capital to entice the Leafs to consider trading down from McKenna’s draft trade value of 97,400:

**Selecting Second Overall:**

***San Jose Sharks offer the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 63<sup>rd</sup> overall picks***

- The Sharks have two 1<sup>st</sup> round picks (2<sup>nd</sup> overall and 20<sup>th</sup> overall) and one 2<sup>nd</sup> round pick (63<sup>rd</sup> overall). The value of the high-end draft picks the Leafs would receive in return are:

<b>Generic Draft Trade Value</b>	<b>2026 Weighted Prospect Trade Value</b>
727 + 228 + 37 = 992 <b>(1% less value)</b>	69,042 + 20,500 + 2,983 = 92,525 <b>(5.0% less value)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Leafs would need an additional 1% in value from the Sharks to match the 1,000-point value of the first overall pick.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• After factoring in the projected prospects for each pick, trading McKenna would result in the Leafs receiving 5% less overall value.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Verdict:</b> While the Sharks’ package is close in terms of generic draft value, it falls short when the expected quality of prospects, as ranked by the LP Draft Index, is taken into account.</p>	

*WPTV = LW Ivar Stenberg (69,042) + C Maddox Dagenais (20,500) + 63<sup>rd</sup> pick with a WPTV of 2,883 (37 x 78.2).*

**Selecting Third Overall:**

***Vancouver Canucks offer the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, 33<sup>rd</sup> and 41<sup>st</sup> overall picks***

- The Canucks have two 1<sup>st</sup> round picks (3<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> overall) and two 2<sup>nd</sup> round picks (33<sup>rd</sup> and 41<sup>st</sup> overall). The value of the high-end draft picks the Leafs would receive in return are:

<b>Generic Draft Trade Value</b>	<b>2026 Weighted Prospect Trade Value</b>
603 + 190 + 127 + 89 = 1,009 <b>(1% greater value)</b>	56,407 + 16,245 + 10,604 + 7,324 = 90,580 <b>(7.0% less value)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Canucks actually have a package of high-end picks that equal the value of trading for the first overall pick...</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ... until you attach McKenna’s name to that first overall selection which results in the Leafs receiving 7% less overall value.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Verdict:</b> While the Canucks’ general high-end draft package exceeds the value of the first overall pick, it is 7% lower when the expected quality of prospects, as ranked by the LP Draft Index, is considered.</p>	

*WPTV = D Chase Reid (56,407) + C Ilia Morozov (16,245) + 33<sup>rd</sup> pick with a WPTV of 10,604 (127 x 83.5) + 41<sup>st</sup> pick with a WPTV of 7,324 (89 x 82.3)*

**Selecting Fourth Overall**

**Chicago Black Hawks 2026 High-End Draft Capital – 4<sup>th</sup>, 34<sup>th</sup>, 37<sup>th</sup> and 45<sup>th</sup> overall picks**

- The Black Hawks have one 1<sup>st</sup> round pick (4<sup>th</sup> overall) and three 2<sup>nd</sup> round picks (34<sup>th</sup>, 37<sup>th</sup> and 45<sup>th</sup> overall). The value of high-end draft picks the Leafs would receive in return are:

Generic Draft Trade Value	2026 Weighted Prospect Trade Value
532 + 121 + 106 + 75 = 834 <b>(16.6% less value)</b>	49,117 + 10,091 + 8,787 + 6,120 = 74,115 <b>(23.9% less value)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Black Hawks package of high-end picks falls almost 17% below the value of the first overall pick.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• After factoring in the projected prospects for each pick, the Leafs would receive a much lower return for McKenna.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Verdict:</b> Both the GDTV and WPTV packages fall well short for obtaining the first overall pick or compensating the Leafs for not selecting McKenna with the first pick.</p>	

$WPTV = D Alberts Šmits (49,117) + 34^{rd} pick with a WPTV of 10,091 (121 \times 83.4) + 37^{th} pick with a WPTV of 8,787 (106 \times 82.9) + 45^{th} pick with a WPTV of 6,120 (75 \times 81.6)$

**Selecting Fifth Overall**

**New York Rangers 2026 High-End Draft Capital – 5<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup> and 62<sup>nd</sup> overall picks**

- The Rangers have two 1<sup>st</sup> round picks (5<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> overall) and one 2<sup>nd</sup> round pick (62<sup>nd</sup> overall). The value of high-end draft picks the Leafs would receive in return are:

Generic Draft Trade Value	2026 Weighted Prospect Trade Value
484 + 166 + 39 = 689 <b>(31.1% less value)</b>	44,431 + 14,077 + 3,057 = 61,565 <b>(36.8% less value)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One high first round pick, a low first round pick and a low second round pick do not come close to the value of the first overall pick.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The corresponding prospects the Leafs could expect to select with the Rangers' three draft choices do not compare to the value of McKenna.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Verdict:</b> The Rangers package of high-end draft picks are not a trade consideration the Leafs should entertain.</p>	

$WPTV = C Manny Malhotra (44,431) + D Nikita Shcherbakov (14,077) + 62^{nd} pick with a WPTV of 3,057 (39 \times 78.4)$

**Trading Down for Quantity over Quality**

To evaluate whether the Leafs would benefit from trading the first overall pick for multiple high-value draft picks to rebuild their depleted prospect pool, we analyzed the return they could expect from Calgary – the team with the most first- and second-round picks in 2026, with six.

**Calgary Flames 2026 High-End Draft Capital – 6<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, 35<sup>th</sup>, 36<sup>th</sup>, 51<sup>st</sup> and 55<sup>th</sup> overall picks**

- The Flames has two 1<sup>st</sup> round picks (6<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> overall) and four 2<sup>nd</sup> round picks (35<sup>th</sup>, 36<sup>th</sup>, 51<sup>st</sup>, and 55<sup>th</sup> overall). The value of high-end draft picks the Leafs would receive in return are:

Generic Draft Trade Value	2026 Weighted Prospect Trade Value
442 + 159 + 116 + 111 + 59 + 50 = 937 <b>(6.3% less value)</b>	40,983 + 13,483 + 9,662 + 9,224 + 4,655 + 3,985 = 81,992 <b>(15.8% less value)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Despite being able to offer a combination of six 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> round picks, the Flames package would still not match the value of the first overall selection.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The prospects the Leafs could expect to select with the Flames' six picks in the top two rounds of the draft would still not match the expected potential value of drafting McKenna.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Verdict:</b></p> <p>While trading down for Calgary's six high-end picks would deepen the Leafs' prospect pool, both GDTC and WPTV models show they would still be better off selecting McKenna, even under the unlikely scenario that all six picks reach their full potential.</p>	

*WPTV: D Keaton Verhoeff (40,993) + C Simas Ignatavicius (13,483) + 35<sup>th</sup> pick with a WPTV of 9,662 (116 x 83.3) + 36<sup>th</sup> pick with WPTV of 9,224 (111 x 83.1) + 51<sup>st</sup> pick with a WPTV of 4,655 (59 x 78.9) + 55<sup>th</sup> pick with a WPTV value of 3,985 (50 x 79.7).*

**ANSWER:**

From a pure draft value standpoint, none of the teams picking directly behind the Leafs can touch Gavin McKenna's combination of upside and impact. Not even Calgary's theoretical "quantity over quality" package of six combined first- and second-round picks is enough to bridge that gap. On paper, the Leafs should not move down.

That's because draft trade value models and the LP Draft Index don't scale neatly at the top. They spike. The difference between a 97.4 prospect like McKenna at number one, and a 95.1 prospect like Ivar Stenberg at number two is not marginal – it's enormous. It represents a major separation in projected on-ice influence, PAC Latency, and long-term salary-cap surplus. Put simply: assembling a trade package rich enough to justify passing on a McKenna-level talent is extraordinarily difficult.

And McKenna is not just another top prospect. His highly projectable and NHL-transferrable skills, places him in rare historical air. In a quality-over-quantity framework, one true superstar can deliver more value than several lesser pieces bundled together. That is the central truth here. Depth is useful. A franchise cornerstone is transformational.

That's why you don't trade a player like McKenna for a quantity of "good" and "maybe" NHL players. You keep the elite talent and build from there.

## Final Verdict: Keep the Pick and Draft Gavin McKenna

The Toronto Maple Leafs should keep the first overall pick and use it to select Gavin McKenna. The broader analysis points to the same conclusion from every angle: he is the best player available, he is the high reward/low risk pick to become a dominant player in the NHL, he carries the strongest generational profile in the class, and no realistic trade-down package fully replaces his projected impact. When a prospect separates himself clearly in both traditional evaluation and modern projection models, the correct move is not to get creative or take a contrarian approach – it is to make the obvious bet on elite talent.

### McKenna's Age-Related Point Production Shines a Light on His Unique Talent

For hockey traditionalists that focus on offensive production coming from a top prospect, McKenna's elite point totals in Canadian junior and US college were rare. In a May 2026 feature article by The Athletic's hockey writer Harman Dayal\*, he illustrated McKenna's age adjusted scoring against much older players as truly special:

*“McKenna scored an absurd 129 points in 56 games for the Medicine Hat Tigers of the WHL in his draft-minus-one season. That 2.3 points-per-game clip is the most of any CHL player in their draft-minus-one season in the last 20 years, putting him in elite company”*

CHL Players With 1.5+ P/GP In the Season BEFORE They Were Eligible (D-1) for the NHL Draft		
Rank	Player	Points Per Game
1	Gavin McKenna	2.30
2	John Tavares	2.00
3	Connor McDavid	1.74
4	Connor Bedard	1.61

Rather than returning to the WHL for his draft year – where, even as a 17-year-old, he likely would have surpassed his previous 129 points – McKenna chose to join Penn State and play in the far more demanding NCAA. There, he faced older competition, with the average NCAA player age at 21.5 compared with 18.3 in the WHL. Despite that major jump in difficulty, McKenna once again showed that his talent translates at every level. He finished with the fourth-highest points-per-game rate by a draft-eligible player in NCAA history

Most NCAA Points by a Forward in Their Draft Year		
Rank	Player	Points Per Game
1	Adam Fantilli	1.81
2	Jack Eichel	1.78
3	Macklin Celebrini	1.68
4	Gavin McKenna	1.46
5	Phil Kessel	1.31

To put a finer point on McKenna's ability to process the game faster and think the game at elite levels, one can also look how well he adjusted to the tougher NCAA from the first half to the second half of the season:

<b>McKenna at Penn State (2025-26)</b>	<b>GP</b>	<b>Points</b>	<b>Points Per Game</b>
<b>First Half</b>	17	18	1.06
<b>Second Half</b>	18	33	1.83

Dayan continues with one final compelling point about McKenna's point totals:

*“McKenna’s NCAA production is even more impressive when you consider...he didn’t have enough talented teammates who could keep up, especially relative to other recent, high-profile draft-eligible NCAA players. Penn State’s roster only featured four skaters who’ve been drafted by NHL teams, and only two of them were picked in the first three rounds.*

*For comparison, the Boston University team that Celebrini played on in 2023 featured 12 skaters already drafted by NHL teams, eight of whom were selected in the first three rounds, including Lane Hutson. Adam Fantilli’s 2023 University of Michigan team, meanwhile, had eight NHL draftees...and included four very high-pedigree first-round picks.”*

McKenna would give Toronto the rarest asset in hockey: a potential franchise offensive driver on an entry-level timeline, with an expectation to be a perennial 90+ point producer at the NHL level. His combination of processing speed, transition dominance, and playmaking ceiling gives the Leafs a player they can build around, not just add to the mix. Stenberg projects as an excellent player, and Reid makes a strong case if the organization prioritizes the blue line, but neither offers McKenna's total offensive ceiling or organizational value. For a team holding the No. 1 overall pick, this is the moment to secure the player with the highest chance to become a true difference-maker.

The Leafs should keep the pick, draft Gavin McKenna, and build the next era around him.

\*source: The Athletic, Harman Dayal, May 4, 2026

\*\*source: eliteprospects.com