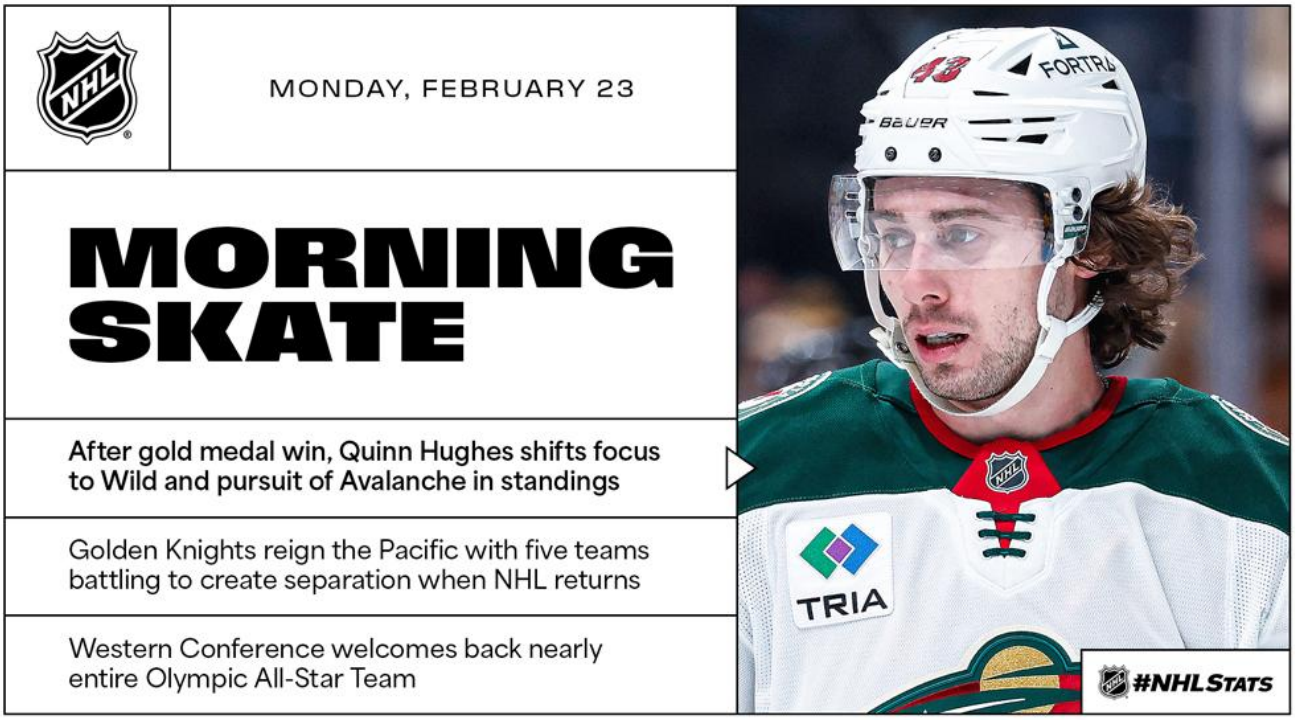
NHL MORNING SKATE – FEB. 23, 2026

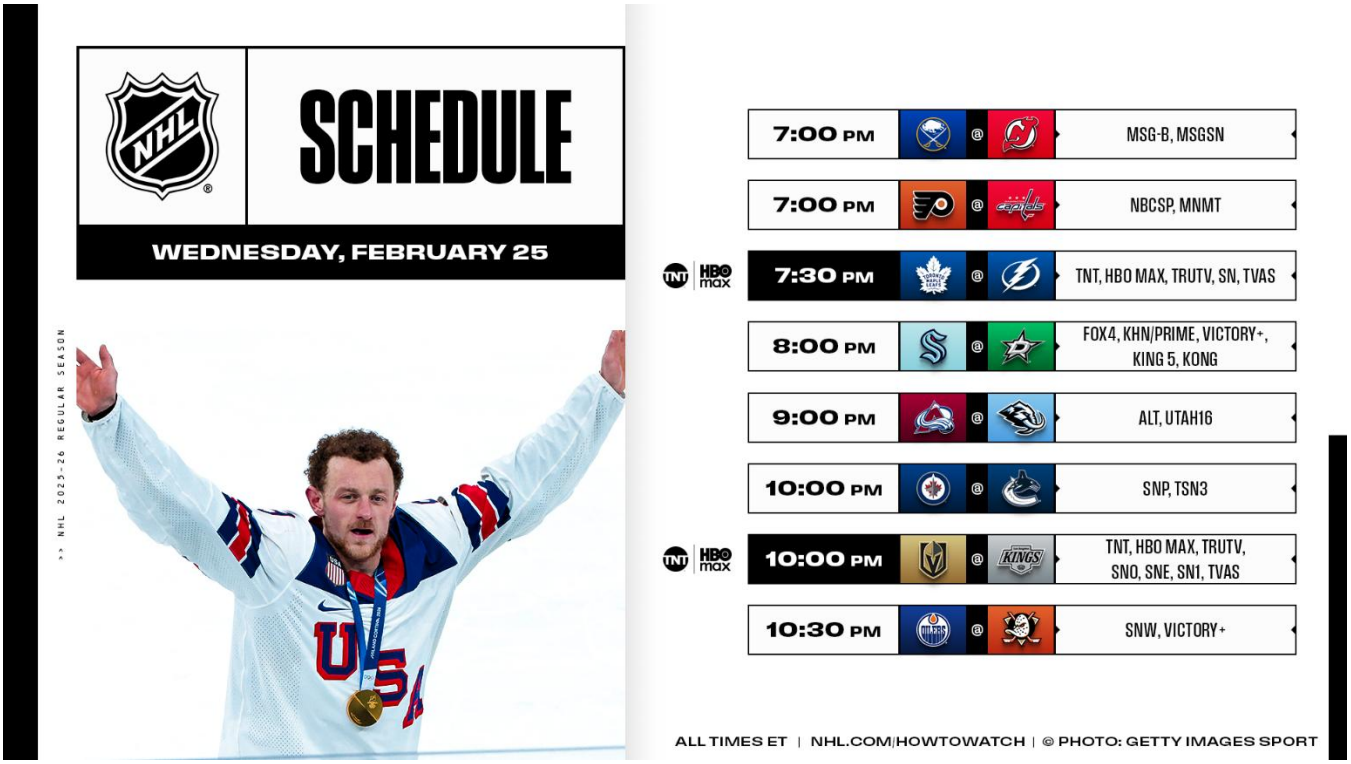


* With the return to the 2025-26 NHL regular season two days away – with national telecasts on TNT, Sportsnet and TVA Sports during an eight-game slate Wednesday – NHL Stats takes a deep dive into the Western Conference and a few of its star players heading into the home stretch of the campaign. The Eastern Conference will take center stage in the NHL Morning Skate on Tuesday.

* Five of six players from the Olympic All-Star Team play out of the Western Conference, including Best Defender **Quinn Hughes**, MVP and Best Forward **Connor McDavid**, Best Goalkeeper **Connor Hellebuyck** and teenage goals leader **Macklin Celebrini**.

* Olympic silver medalists **Nathan MacKinnon**, **Cale Makar**, **Devon Toews** and the Avalanche have occupied first place in the NHL standings for 93 consecutive game days dating to Nov. 1, but the surging Wild and Stars have closed in on Colorado, setting up a tight three-horse race for the Central Division crown heading into the final seven weeks of the regular season.

* Vegas will welcome home five players from the Olympic gold medal game – including Americans **Jack Eichel** and **Noah Hanifin** – as it looks to build on its lead in the Pacific Division, where only five points separate first and fourth place.



AVALANCHE LOOK TO FEND OFF WILD, STARS IN CENTRAL DIVISION RACE

The Avalanche (37-9-9, 83 points) have led by as many as 12 points atop the standings (Jan. 10-11) but two Central Division foes are hot on their heels with the Wild (34-14-10, 78 points) and Stars (34-14-9, 77 points) both within six points coming back from the break. Meanwhile, the Mammoth (30-23-4, 64 points) return to play occupying the first Wild Card spot in the West and will look to clinch their first berth into the Stanley Cup Playoffs. All four of those clubs are returning with at least one Olympic gold medal winner.

* Colorado, which had four players competing in the gold medal game on Sunday including **Brock Nelson** who added to his family's Olympic lore, has occupied first place in the League standings for 93 consecutive game days since Nov. 1. The Avalanche can become the first *Western Conference club t*o hold top spot in the NHL for at least 100 straight game days since the 2007-08 Red Wings (124 days).

TEAMS WITH 100+ CONSECUTIVE GAME DAYS ATOP NHL STANDINGS

SINCE 1974-75

TEAM	SEASON	GAME DAYS
MONTREAL CANADIENS	1976-77	**158**
EDMONTON OILERS	1984-85	**153**
EDMONTON OILERS	1983-84	**143**
DETROIT RED WINGS	2001-02	**140**
PHILADELPHIA FLYERS	1979-80	**129**
DETROIT RED WINGS	2007-08	**124**
TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING	2018-19	**122**
BOSTON BRUINS	2022-23	**121**
DALLAS STARS	1998-99	**119**
MONTREAL CANADIENS	1975-76	**115**

*THE AVALANCHE (93 DAYS) CAN JOIN THIS LIST



* The Wild own the third-best point total in the League (16-5-5, 37 points) and by far the best points percentage in the Western Conference (.712) since Dec. 14 when **Quinn Hughes** made his team debut. Hughes entered his first Olympics riding a franchise record 10-game assist streak – and during the break added a gold medal and "Best Defender" honors to his resume following his record-setting performance in Milan – with Minnesota posting an 8-1-1 record across that span to return from the break on pace for its second season with at least 110 points.

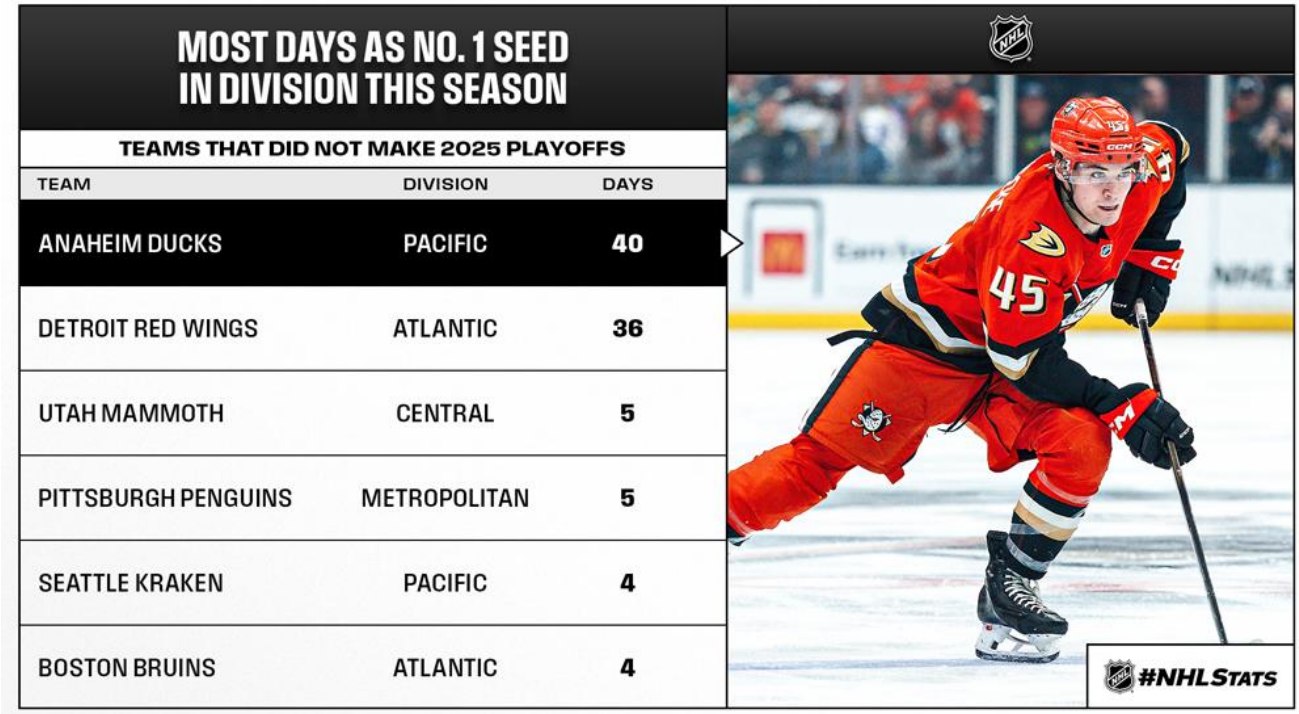
* The Stars return from the break with the longest active winning streak in the Western Conference (6-0-0 since Jan. 23), the second-most Olympic medalists (6) and as one of four clubs to have a player claim a medal of each color – **Jake Oettinger** secured gold, **Thomas Harley** a silver and bronze for **Miro Heiskanen**, **Roope Hintz**, **Esa Lindell** and **Mikko Rantanen** (also CAR, COL & FLA).

* The Mammoth can join the Golden Knights (2017-18; 1st season) and Kraken (2022-23; 2nd season) as the third straight new NHL franchise to qualify for the postseason within their first two seasons.

PACIFIC DIVISION STILL UP FOR GRABS

Six teams have ranked first in the Pacific Division in 2025-26, with its current leader the Golden Knights, occupying top spot the longest (64 days). Vegas (27-16-14, 68 points) has paced its division continuously since Jan. 4, but still has Edmonton (28-22-8, 64 points), Seattle (27-20-9, 63 points) and Anaheim (30-23-3, 63 points; WC2) all within five points of them. All four of those clubs have topped the Pacific this season

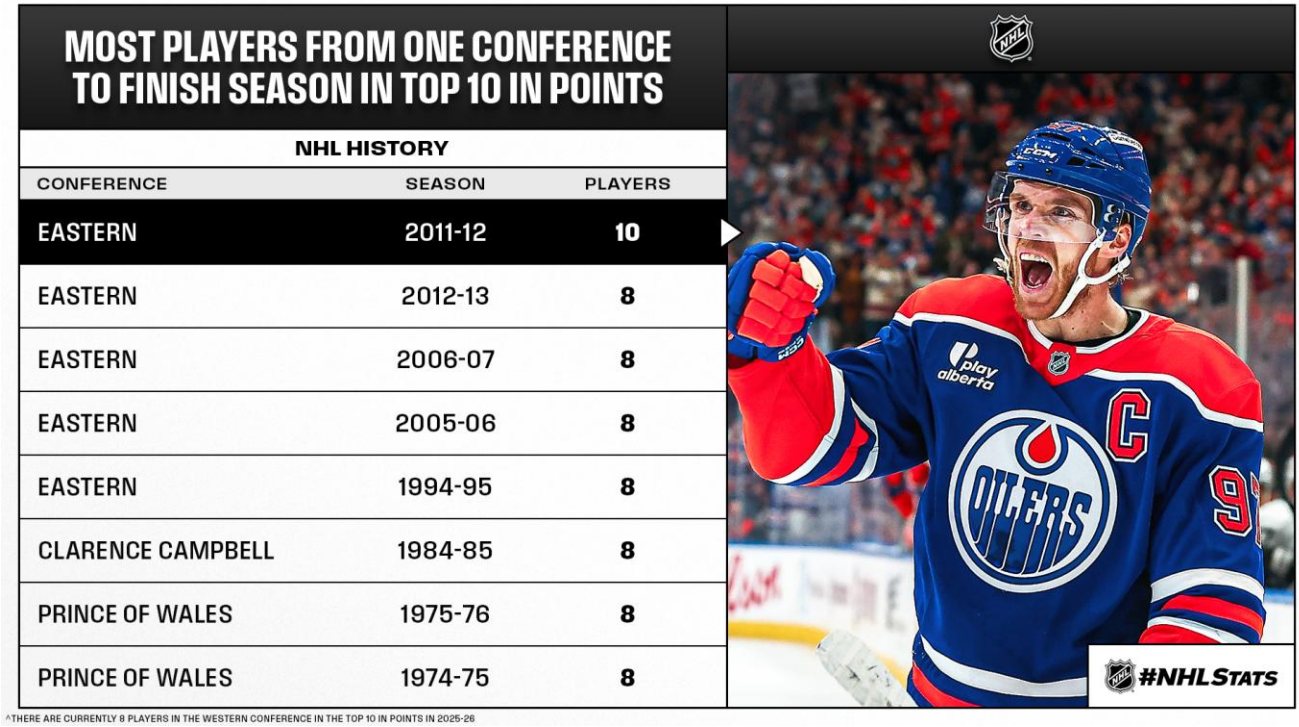
* Anaheim's 40 game days atop its division are the most this season by a team that did not qualify for the postseason in 2024-25. The Ducks last made the playoffs in 2017-18 and are looking to end the League's fourth-longest active postseason drought with the continued success of their youth, including rookie standout **Beckett Sennecke** (18-26—44). The forward can become the fifth Ducks rookie to score 20 goals in a season and needs 18 points in Anaheim's final 26 games to pass **Trevor Zegras** (61 in 2021-22) for the franchise's single-season rookie scoring record.



* Also lurking in the Pacific Division are the Sharks (27-24-4, 58 points) – led by 19-year-old Olympic All-Star forward **Macklin Celebrini** – and Kings (23-19-14, 60 points), the latter of whom welcome new star power in the form of newly acquired forward **Artemi Panarin**. Panarin (19-38—57 in 52 GP) will notch his 10th career 20-goal season with his first tally in a Kings uniform and is set to become the first undrafted player with as many such campaigns since **Martin St. Louis** (11).

WESTERN CONFERENCE STARS TO WATCH IN RETURN FROM OLYMPICS

Several of the Western Conference's star players return from the Olympic Winter Games Milano Cortina 2026 decorated in medals and ready to resume their pursuit of NHL hardware, including the most coveted prize of all: the Stanley Cup. Five of six members of the Olympic All-Star Team reside in the NHL's Western Conference, as do eight of the League's top 10 scorers as well as three of the five highest-producing defensemen.



* Olympic All-Star, Best Forward and MVP **Connor McDavid**, who set the record for most points in an Olympic tournament with NHL players, leads the NHL in scoring and is within four points of his ninth career 100-point season (34-62—96 in 58 GP) – he can tie **Wayne Gretzky** for the most in Oilers history. The Edmonton captain can be the first NHL player to 100 points in a season for the sixth time his career, which would match **Mario Lemieux** and **Phil Esposito** for the second most behind **Wayne Gretzky** (9x).

* Olympic All-Star and Best Defender **Quinn Hughes**, who registered the most assists by an NHL defenseman in an Olympic tournament, will look to extend his point streak to 11 games when he returns to the Wild and can match **Mark Howe** (11 GP in 1979-80 w/ HFD) for the second longest by a defenseman in their first campaign with a franchise. Hughes also has multiple points in each of his past three NHL games and needs one more multi-point outing to record 10 with the club. He and fellow Olympic All-Star **Cale Makar** – tied with 57 points apiece this season – are likely to clash again Thursday when the Avalanche host the Wild.

* Olympic All-Star **Macklin Celebrini** had a tournament to remember, topping all players in goals (5; tied for the most by a Canadian at Olympics with NHL players) and setting a new mark for most points by teenager in an Olympic tournament with NHL participation (10). He returns to the Sharks within two goals of his first 30-goal season (28-53—81 in 55 GP). The 19-year-old, who has four multi-goal NHL games in 2025-26, can become just the third teenager to record a 30-goal campaign in the past 14 years, following **Patrik Laine** (44 in 2017-18 & 36 in 2016-17) and **Auston Matthews** (36 in 2016-17).



* Olympic All-Star and Best Goalkeeper **Connor Hellebucyk** – the reigning Hart Trophy winner and repeat Vezina Trophy recipient – returns to the Jets looking to power the 2024-25 Presidents' Trophy winners back into a playoff spot (11 point back). Only one team has made the playoffs after being 11-plus points back 50-plus games into their season (2014-15 Senators).

QUICK CLICKS

* **Jack Hughes** becomes U.S. hockey hero by scoring 'Golden Goal' against Canada
* **Connor Hellebuyck** was 'beyond belief' for Team USA in gold medal game, **Mike Richter** says
* Honoring **Johnny Gaudreau** 'meant everything' to Team USA
* NHL EDGE stats behind **Jack Hughes**' prowess at 2026 Olympics
* NHL players tune in to cheer on teammates at 'incredible' Olympics