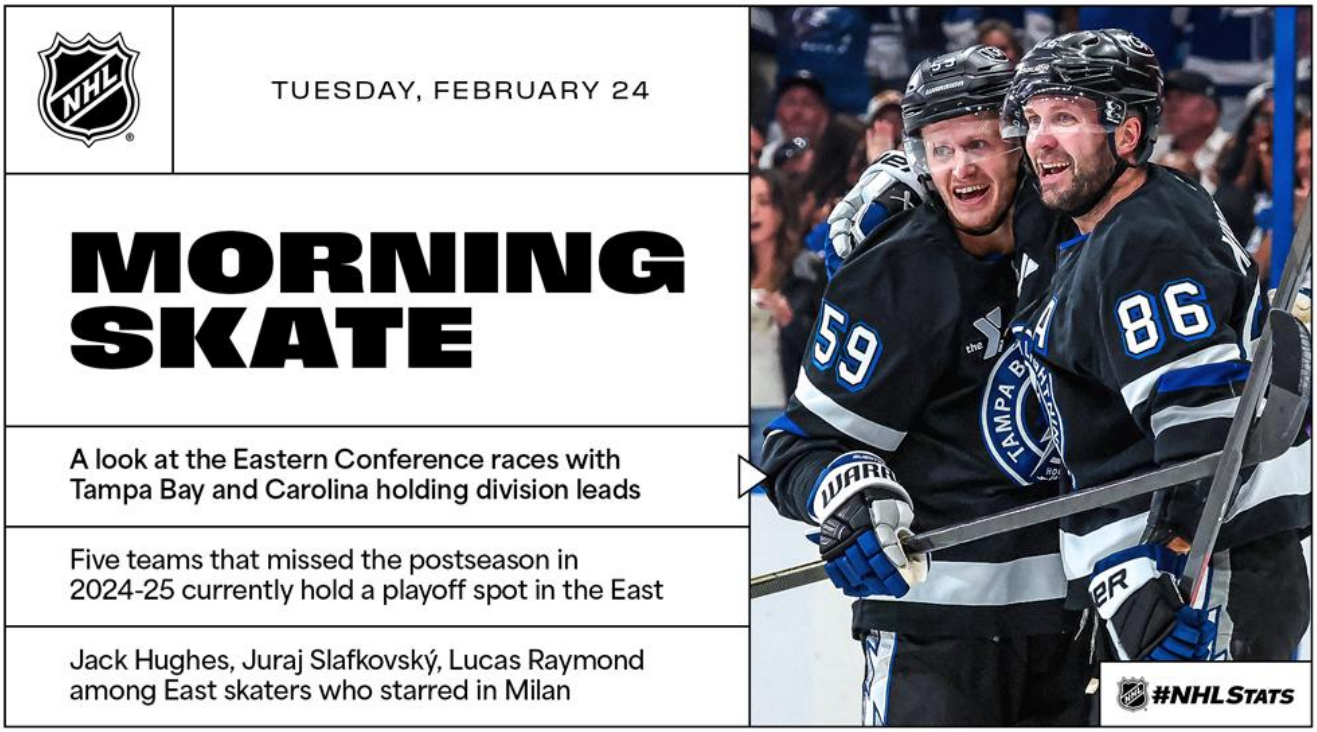
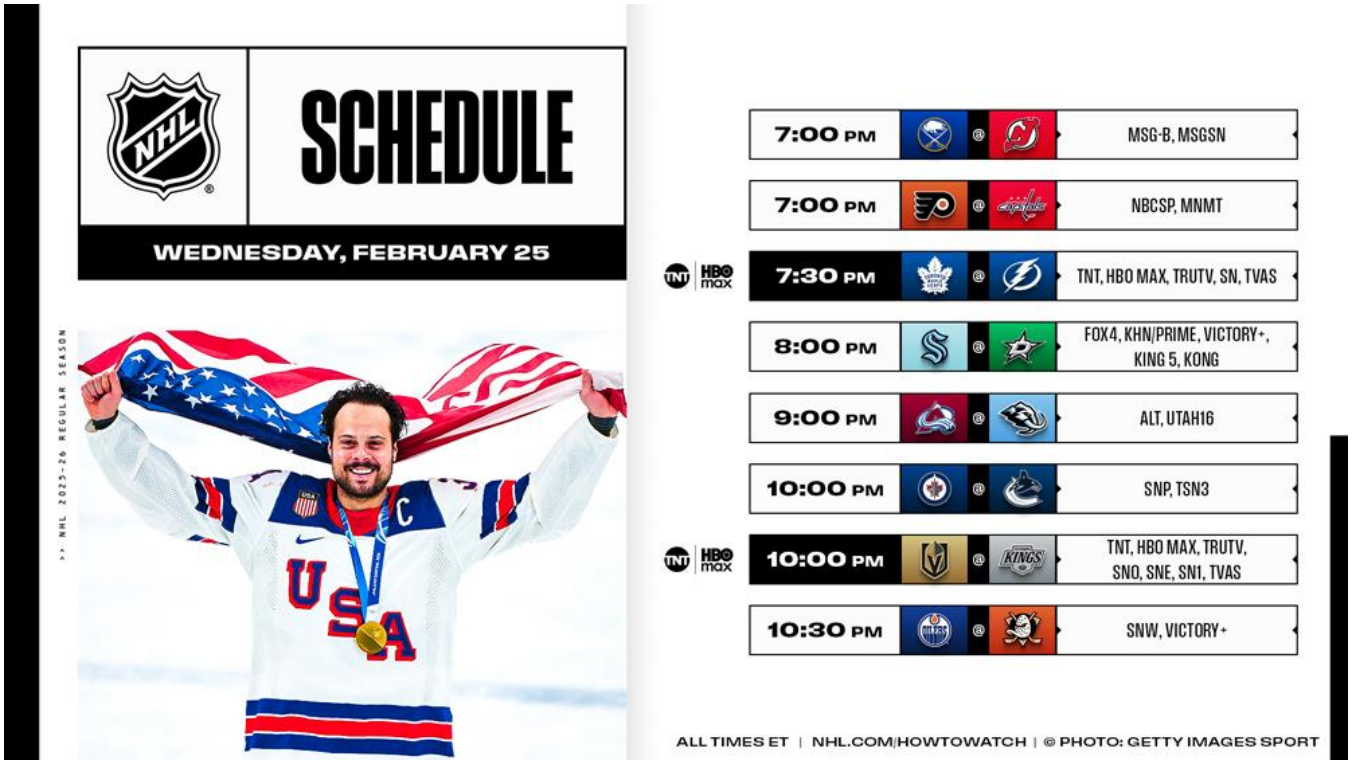
NHL MORNING SKATE – FEB. 24, 2026



* With the return to the 2025-26 NHL regular season just one sleep away – including national telecasts on TNT, Sportsnet and TVA Sports during an eight-game slate Wednesday – NHL Stats takes a deep dive into the Eastern Conference playoff race.

* The division-leading Lightning (Atlantic) and Hurricanes (Metropolitan) have been consistent contenders in the East, but multiple teams who missed the postseason in 2024-25 either hold down a playoff spot or are making a push to get inside the playoff line.

* Team USA gold medalists **Jack Hughes** (NJD) and **Auston Matthews** (TOR) are among a group of Eastern Conference players to watch after starring for their country in Milan.



21 MEDALISTS READY TO MAKE THEIR PLAYOFF PUSH AS RACE IN ATLANTIC HEATS UP

The Lightning (37-14-4, 78 points) were the NHL's hottest team entering the Olympic break after going 19-1-1 in their preceding 21 games and sit atop an Atlantic Division that featured 14 players who dressed for Sunday's gold medal game between Team USA and Team Canada. The grouping includes an 11-point margin between the No. 2- and No. 8-ranked clubs – the smallest among all four divisions as the quest for the 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs resumes. The Atlantic's 21 medalists at Milano Cortina 2026 were the second most among all divisions (CEN: 25; PAC: 15; MET: 13).

* **Nikita Kucherov**, who returns with an active 10-game point streak, and the Lightning, with sights on a ninth consecutive berth in the Stanley Cup Playoffs, own an NHL-leading 11 postseason appearances and 18 playoff series wins since 2013-14, and have bolstered their positioning in the Eastern Conference standings thanks in part to an active nine-game win streak at Benchmark International Arena dating to Dec. 20, 2025. Tampa Bay, which has become a near staple among the top three in their division since 2013-14, have spent 44 game days atop the Atlantic this season – the most among all teams in that cohort and eight more than the next closest team (DET: 36).

MOST GAME DAYS IN A TOP-THREE POSITION IN THEIR DIVISION

SINCE 2013-14

TEAM	DAYS
TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING	1,575
WASHINGTON CAPITALS	1,305
BOSTON BRUINS	1,295
TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS	1,284
ST. LOUIS BLUES	1,187
VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS	1,184
COLORADO AVALANCHE	1,156
PITTSBURGH PENGUINS	1,139



* Captain **Nick Suzuki** (silver w/ CAN) and rookie **Oliver Kapanen** (bronze w/ FIN) return to the second-place Canadiens (32-17-8, 72 points), who are tied with the Lightning (199 GF) as the NHL's second-highest scoring team in the League behind the Avalanche (212). The Canadiens have their sights set on their first top three finish in the Atlantic since 2016-17 (1st). Suzuki (18-47—65 in 57 GP) is on pace to become Montreal's first 90-point producer since **Pierre Turgeon** (96) and **Vincent Damphousse** (94) in 1995-96.

* Olympic gold medalist **Dylan Larkin** and the Red Wings (33-19-6, 72 points) sit third in the Atlantic Division and continue their pursuit of the franchise's first appearance in the Stanley Cup Playoffs since 2015-16 and first postseason series win since the 2013 Conference Quarterfinals. Larkin (26-25—51 in 58 GP), closing in on becoming the fourth player in franchise history with five consecutive 30-goal seasons, returns from the break within striking distance of also overtaking **Brendan Shanahan** for 10th place on the Original Six franchise's all-time points list.

* The Sabres (32-19-6, 70 points) and Bruins (32-20-5, 69 points) occupy the first and second Wild Card positions in the Eastern Conference, respectively. Buffalo last qualified for the playoffs in 2010-11 while Boston is aiming to return after missing out last season.

HURRICANES LOOK TO HOLD OFF PENGUINS, ISLANDERS IN METROPOLITAN DIVISION

The Hurricanes (36-15-6, 78 points), Penguins (29-15-12, 70 points) and Islanders (32-21-5, 69 points) lead a group of eight Metropolitan Division clubs returning from the Olympic break – a trio of clubs that have occupied some variation of the top-three positions in the group since Jan. 15. Carolina (3x), Pittsburgh (2x) and NY Islanders (2x) are three of four current Metropolitan Division clubs to make multiple appearances in the penultimate round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs since 2015-16 (also NYR: 2x).

* The Hurricanes return from the break with a 10-game point streak dating to Jan. 16 (8-0-2) and the most medalists among Metropolitan Division clubs (3). Head coach **Rod Brind'Amour** has helped Carolina occupy top spot in the division every day since Dec. 11 and eyes a postseason berth for the

eighth time in as many years to start his NHL coaching career – the longest by any individual since **Darryl Sutter** (8 from 1993 to 2002).



* The second-place Penguins have been one of the NHL's most successful teams since the calendar flipped to 2026, going 12-3-3 (27 points) during that stretch – second to only the Lightning (14-1-1, 29 points). Pittsburgh found themselves three points back of a Wild Card position and five points back of the Islanders to close out 2025 but have since risen to their current placing thanks to a 4-0-2 mark against divisional opponents during the current stretch.

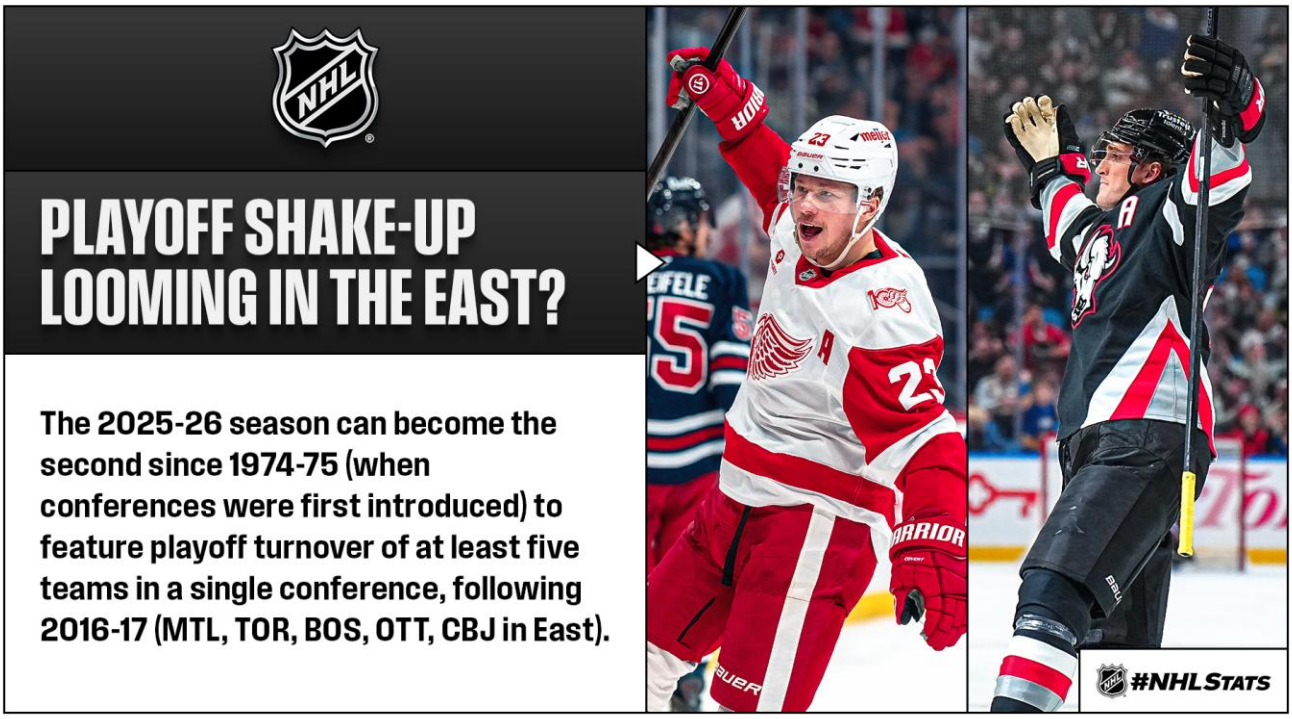
* **Matthew Schaefer** (16-23—39 in 58 GP) returns to the ice with the third-place Islanders as New York, five seasons removed from back-to-back appearances in the penultimate round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs, looks to rebound from a one-year postseason absence. Schaefer, two goals shy of the most by an 18-year-old defenseman in a single campaign in NHL history, can become the first No. 1 to qualify for the Stanley Cup Playoffs during his debut season since current Metropolitan Division rival and Devils captain **Nico Hischier** (2017-18).

* Olympic gold medalist **Zach Werenski** returns to the Blue Jackets (29-20-7, 65 points) following the Olympic break – the first team outside the playoff bracket in the Eastern Conference and resuming an active seven-game win streak dating to Jan. 22. Columbus' resurgence in the standings has coincided with the hiring of head coach **Rick Bowness**, who took over the helm on Jan. 13 and has since propelled the club from last-place position in the Eastern Conference with an NHL-best 10 wins during that stretch.

EAST CLUBS LOOKING TO REBOUND FROM POSTSEASON ABSENCES

The Red Wings (33-19-6, 72 points), Penguins (29-15-12, 70 points), Islanders (32-21-5, 69 points), Sabres (32-19-6, 70 points) and Bruins (32-20-5, 69 points) occupy five of eight playoff positions in the Eastern Conference after failing to compete in the 2025 Stanley Cup Playoffs; the Blue Jackets (29-20-7, 65 points) are four points back of both Wild Card 2 and third place in the Metropolitan Division after being eliminated on the penultimate day of the 2024-25 regular season.

* The NHL has featured at least five teams clinch a playoff spot after not being part of the previous postseason in all but two seasons since 2013-14. The most turnover ever in one campaign is seven teams (2020-21, 2017-18, 2016-17 and 2014-15).



BACK FROM MILAN – EASTERN CONFERENCE PLAYERS TO WATCH

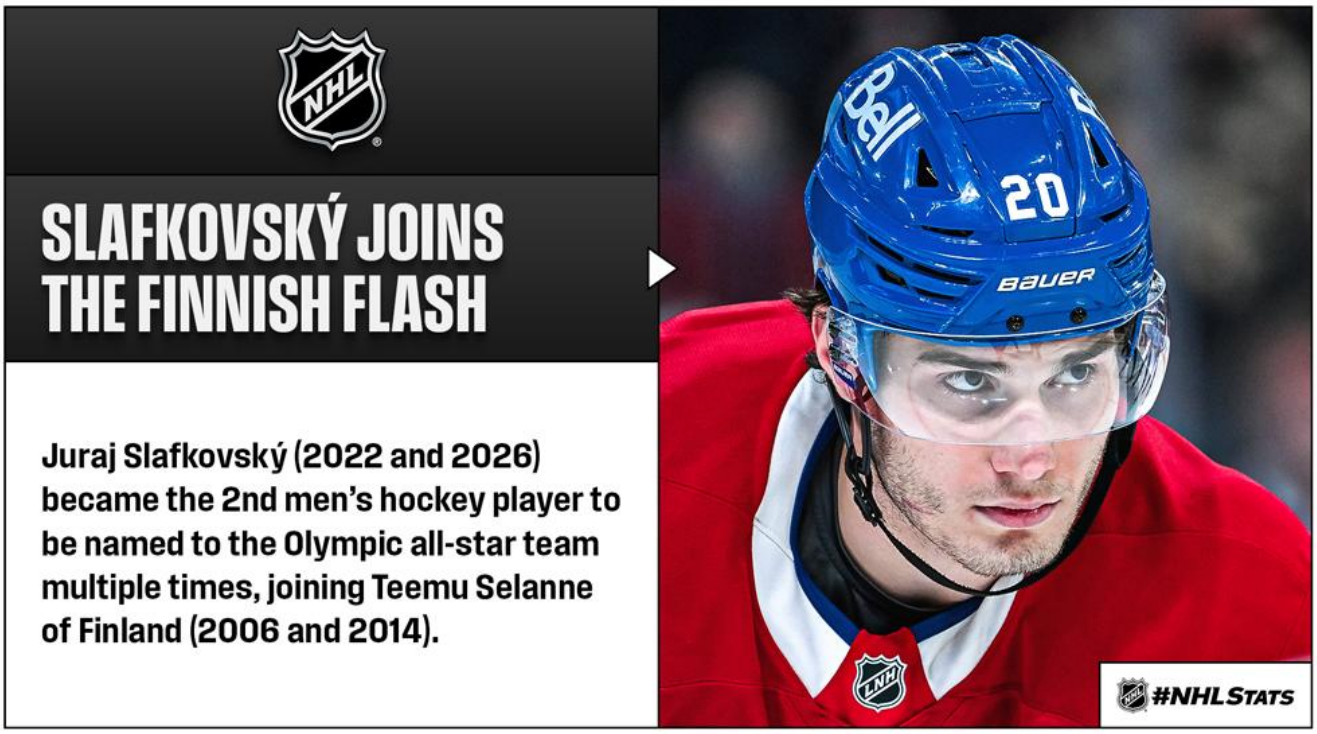
A look at some of the Eastern Conference players who had a starring role in Milan, looking to ride that momentum down the stretch when the 2025-26 regular season resumes Wednesday.

* Devils forward **Jack Hughes** had an iconic moment in the gold medal game for Team USA, accomplishing something only Penguins forward **Sidney Crosby** had done previously – scoring a "Golden Goal" in overtime in an Olympics with NHL participation. Hughes led Team USA with four goals in the tournament (t-2nd overall) and finished second (tied) on the team in points (4-3—7 in 6 GP) behind his brother **Quinn Hughes** (1-7—8 in 6 GP). Hughes enters the home stretch of 2025-26 (Feb. 25 vs. BUF) eight goals shy of his fifth consecutive 20-goal season and 13 points from becoming the 13th player to reach 400 points with the Devils franchise.



* **Sebastian Aho** (4-1—5 in 6 GP) led Team Finland in goals at the Olympics, including the opening tally in the country's bronze-medal winning finale to the tournament. Aho (20-37—57 in 57 GP) resumes the 2025-26 season (Feb. 26 vs. TBL) as the leading point producer on the Metropolitan Division-leading Hurricanes (36-15-6, 78 points). Should Aho hold on to the team lead at season's end, he would match **Eric Staal** (8x) for the most campaigns as the team leader in points in Hurricanes/Whalers franchise history.

* Canadiens forward **Juraj Slafkovský** was named to the Olympic All-Star Team for the second time in as many Olympic appearances (also 2022) after leading upstart Team Slovakia with 4-4—8 in six games as the country won Group B and advanced all the way to the bronze medal game before falling to Team Finland. Slafkovský (21-24—45 in 57 GP) has already set a new career high for goals this season and also is on pace for a new career high in points. He returns (Feb. 26 vs. NYI) as a key contributor to a Montreal team looking to make the postseason in back-to-back seasons for the first time since 2019-20 to 2020-21.



* **Lucas Raymond** led Team Sweden in points (1-8—9 in 5 GP) and came within one point of matching the highest single-tournament output by a Swedish player at Olympics with NHL players. Raymond (19-41—60 in 56 GP) resumes the NHL schedule (Feb. 26 at OTT) as Detroit's scoring leader and is on pace to set a new career high in points for a Red Wings team looking to return to the postseason for the first time since 2015-16.

* **Tim Stützle** led Team Germany in goals at the Olympics (4 in 5 GP), scoring in every preliminary round game to help his nation secure its best finish at an Olympics with NHL participation (6th). Stützle (No. 3 in 2020), tied with **Leon Draisaitl** (No. 3 in 2014) as the highest-selected German national in NHL Draft history, is Ottawa's leading scorer this season and already ranks fourth in League history for goals and points among German players. Stützle returns to NHL action (Feb. 26 vs. DET) riding an active five-game goal streak.

* **Rasmus Dahlin** led Team Sweden in average time on ice, skating more than 21 minutes per game, and also topped Swedish blueliners in scoring during his second Olympics – his other appearance was in 2018, at age 17 (months before being the first Swedish defenseman ever taken No. 1 in the NHL Draft). Captain of the Sabres, Dahlin ranks second in team scoring (tied) and returns (Feb. 25 at NJD) with Buffalo in its best positioning in the NHL standings in more than a decade as they seek their first playoff berth since 2011.

* Maple Leafs captain **Auston Matthews**' season so far has included surpassing **Mats Sundin** for first on the franchise's all-time goals list, the only active player to own such a record for an Original Six franchise, and captaining Team USA to the country's first Olympic gold medal in 46 years while finishing second (tied) on the team in points (3-4—7 in 6 GP). Matthews returns (Feb. 25 at TBL) looking to lead his NHL team back into a playoff position and extend the League's longest active streak of postseason appearances to 10 – Toronto sits six points back of the playoff line.

* Matthews (26) sits four goals from becoming just the sixth skater to record 10 consecutive 30-goal seasons from the start of their NHL career, in which he would join **Alex Ovechkin** (15 from 2005-06 to 2019-20), **Mike Gartner** (15 from 1979-80 to 1993-94), **Wayne Gretzky** (13 from 1979-80 to 1991-92), **Jari Kurri** (10 from 1980-81 to 1989-90) and **Mike Bossy** (10 from 1977-78 to 1986-87).



QUICK CLICKS

* Milestones Within Reach (Feb. 25 - March 7)
* **Connor McDavid** Vying for Ninth 100-Point Season
* **Anze Kopitar** Pursues Los Angeles Kings' All-Time Points Record
* #NHLStats Pack: 2025-26 NHL Trade Deadline
* Olympic #NHLStats Standouts


OLYMPIC #NHLSTATS
STANDOUTS
#NHLSTATS