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BRUINS

## NHL Notebook: David Pastrnak and Auston Matthews' contracts represent dueling philosophies

BY PATRICK DONNELLY

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I know, no one wants to hear about professional athletes earning millions of dollars missing out on earning millions more dollars.

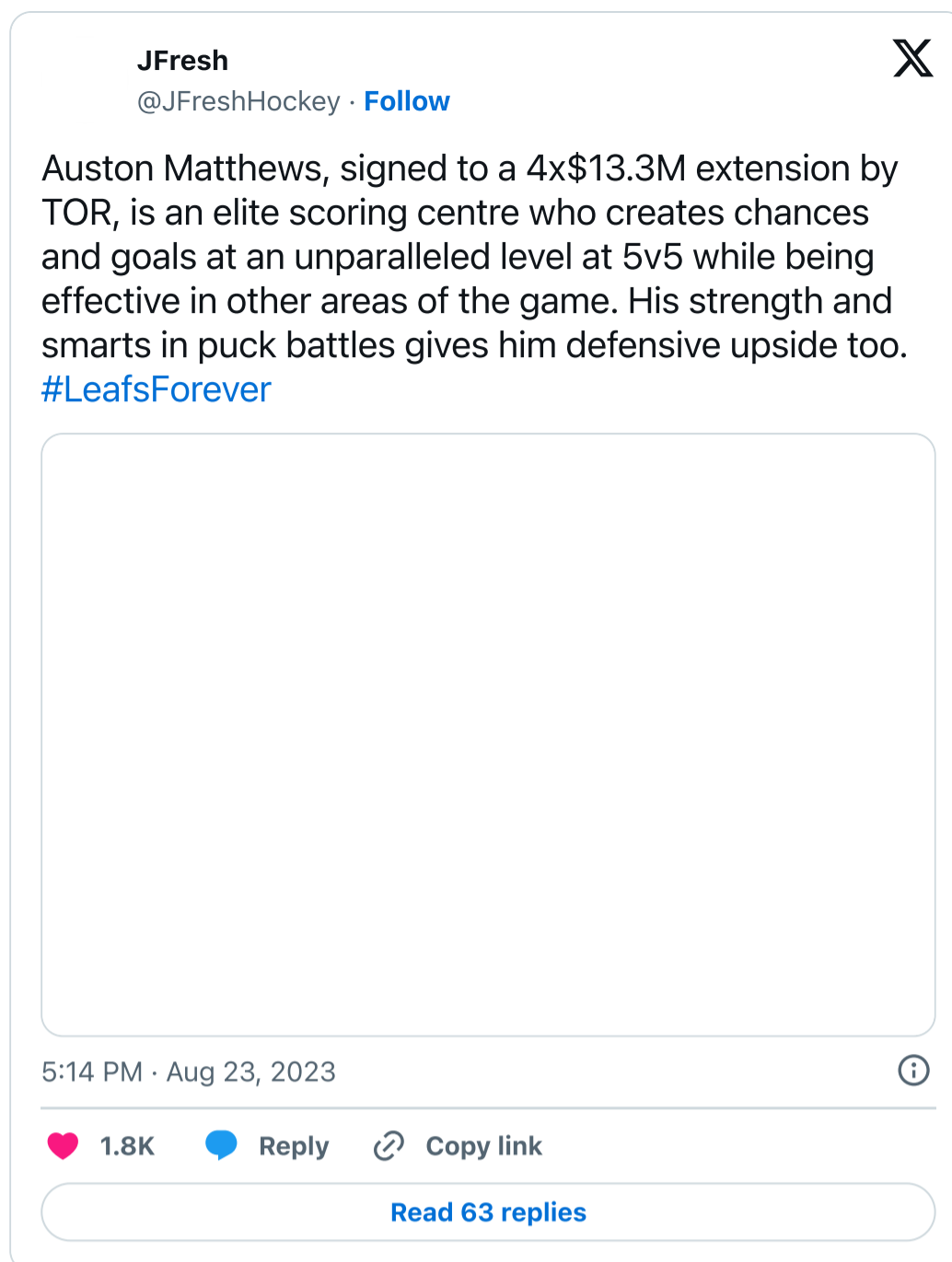
But the reality is, with the current contract structure of the NHL, **David Pastrnak**, the sixth-highest-paid player in the league in terms of cap hit, probably left money on the table, even after securing an eight-year, \$90-million bag.

**Connor McDavid**, the second-highest-paid player in the sixth year of his \$100 million deal, and **Nathan MacKinnon**, No. 1 with the onset of his \$100.8 million contract over the next eight seasons, did as well, among others.

That's the nature of the current economic landscape in the NHL, where the superstars are almost always inclined to secure the longest possible term for the maximum amount of dollars they can get.

They're well within their rights to do so, and it makes perfect sense. Hockey is a physical sport in a confined area, moving at an incredibly high pace. There's a risk of injury greater than nearly every sport outside of football. So, it's completely reasonable for a player to seek the deal that offers him and his family the most security and set themselves up for life.

Few players can afford to take the type of gamble **Auston Matthews** is taking after he put pen to paper on a four-year deal that will pay him \$13.25 million per season beginning in 2024-25. The contract, the second medium-term deal of his career after his ELC, will make him the league's highest-paid player.



It's a break from the norm of the eight-year mega deals we've grown accustomed to, and it's only natural that Matthews, very much a different cat in several ways, is the one blazing that path.

"I don't think I've ever done things just to be different," Matthews told reporters via Zoom. "I just felt strongly in my situation, in my position that this was the best deal for myself and the best deal for the team."

The best deal for himself it is.

With the salary cap expected to surge up to \$87.5 million in the 2024 offseason before potentially \$92.5 million in 2025, it's not unreasonable to forecast a larger bump to the \$100 million neighborhood (or higher) by the time No. 34's new deal expires.

When that time comes, there will be more money to go around in the system, a much larger piece of the pie for the taking. What Matthews and his agent **Judd Muldaver** have done for themselves is create the greatest earning potential they could for the player. Although, there's a greater conversation to be had for another time on cap hit versus percentage of the cap. As an example, Matthews' current deal ate up 14.64 of the salary cap at the time of signing in 2019. Should the cap rise as expected, this extension will take up 15.4 percent once it begins. Relative to the cap, it's not *that* much of a raise, but I digress.

Even if an eight-year term might have netted a greater total sum and perhaps a larger average annual value, Matthews would have seen the league's projected inflation pass him by.

"The bottom line is, you're talking about one of the world's best talents. And in the situation he was in, he could come in and demand a whole lot more than what he got. And that's just the reality," Maple Leafs general manager **Brad Treliving** told reporters. "To me, it was a partnership more than it was a negotiation. This got done because Auston decided he wanted to get it done."

It's a strategy more akin to what we've seen in other sports, like the NBA, where four to five years is frequently the going rate for the top players, although CBA restrictions play a big factor there.

"One of the things I think Matthews will go down for, in addition to whatever he does on the ice, is he is going to change the way contracts are done in the NHL," **Elliotte Friedman** said on the latest "32 Thoughts" podcast. "This is normal in the NBA, short-term, big number. **LeBron James** has done it many, many, many times. That he is going to change the way this is done in the NHL."

James, for example, has repeatedly signed two-year deals with a smattering of three or four-year deals in there as well, offering himself the greatest chances to continually cash in as the salary structure continues to evolve in the league.

Not only did players like Pastrnak miss out on larger paydays they surely would have gotten had they hit the open market (I know, the hardship of not getting a few more million), but they also may have limited their total earning potential for their careers as a whole. No. 88 will be worth every cent of his new contract, and while the price will always be steep, there's a strong likelihood the Bruins will be extracting more value for their dollars as the cap increases and the contract takes up a smaller chunk of the pie.



Now, Matthews has the chance to cash in at age 30 when there should be plenty of cash to go around, whether it be one long-term megadeal to carry him through most of the remainder of his career or another series of medium-to-short-term deals.

"I was talking to a player in July, a good NHL player, and he asked me what I thought Matthews was going to sign for. I said the same thing I said on this podcast all the time: three to five years, between \$13 and 14 million," Friedman said. "He thought about it for a while, and then later on, he said to me, in his position, he didn't think that he was in a spot to do that, but he thinks more players will. Now we're in a situation where everyone thinks the cap is going up next year. ... I think there's gonna be some players who look at it and say, 'All right, do I still go short [term]? Because I think it's going to be even more than that.'

"Like Matthews did this because I think he wants to sign one more deal when he's 30 years old and figures out again, where he feels at that point in time. I just think that more and more players are going to start looking at this and saying, 'Yeah, I like that.'"

### Swayman thought he was going to be a Leaf

In an alternate universe, the Maple Leafs don't have question marks between the pipes entering 2023-24. Instead of a combination of **Ilya Samsonov**, **Martin Jones** and **Joseph Woll** holding it down in the crease, it's **Jeremy Swayman** taking primary duties in net for Toronto.

As crazy as it may sound, it was a draft pick away from being a reality in 2017.

Speaking on the "Empty Netters" podcast this week, Swayman explained he was confident that if any team called his name before the end of Day 2, the Leafs would have been a strong bet. Although, as he watched from Alaska with his dad, he was never actually sure he would even be picked in the first place.

"I was sitting at my breakfast table with my dad, we were four hours behind in Alaska," Swayman said. "I knew I wasn't going in the first round with it being my first year eligible for the draft. There was a lot of hope, but I was a C-rated prospect, so it wasn't necessary [to attend the draft]."

He caught the eyes of several teams and scouts while playing in the Rocky Mountain Junior Hockey League in 2015-16, where he put up a .940 save percentage in 18 games with the Pikes Peak Miners 18U squad. In his draft year, he had a .914 in 32 games with the sub-.500 Sioux Falls Stampede in the USHL.

Toronto was among the teams that kept in touch the most.

"I got a text from my agent saying, 'I know Toronto was hot on you during the year. So just be by your phone.' So every time Toronto came up, we were like, 'Alright, maybe we'll get a call,'" Swayman said. "The fourth round came and Toronto was up [at] 110 and they picked a goalie and my dad and I were like, 'No way.' It was like 'Ah, man. Alright, maybe not this year,' that kind of thing. Kind of bummed but at the same time hopeful still cause I talked to other teams."

After the Leafs selected an eventual CHL and WHL Goalie of the Year in **Ian Scott** (now retired at 24 due to injuries), the Bruins were pleased to swoop in and snatch up Swayman with the very next pick (111th overall).


The only problem was that Swayman never actually saw it live.

"So we're sitting there, and all of a sudden, I get a text and it's from my buddy actually from Alaska. He was at the draft and he said, 'Congrats Sway!' and I'm like 'What?'" he explained. "I'm looking at the screen, and the next pick is the Bruins, and I'm like, 'Alright, nothing's happened yet.' So then I get a call from my agent, and he's like, 'Sway, you're a Bruin. Let's go! Unreal!'"

"I can't see anything, and my phone starts blowing up. Finally, I'm like reloading this thing on and on and on, and it shows up."


Safe to say, with the time difference in Alaska, the festivities were just beginning for the day in the Swayman household.




"We had a pretty good celebration," Swayman said. "It was totally unexpected, which is the coolest part. I think because you're so devastated for one second and the next second it's like a new world opens up. That was a pretty cool experience to share with them, and I'm glad it turned out the way it did."

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Jeremy Swayman on the [@EmptyNettersPod](#) says he thought he was going to be the drafted by the Toronto Maple Leafs [#NHLBruins](#)

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### Krejci wishes Cassidy tried Pastrnak on his right in 2019

**David Krejci** partially cleared the supposed air between him and Bruce Cassidy in [an interview with iSport in Czechia this week](#), calling Cassidy "one of the best coaches in the NHL" and saying the two "had a great relationship off the ice, and we had great conversations" (translated from Czech).

But the newly retired centerman does have one "regret." He wishes Cassidy broke up the so-called 'Perfection Line' of **Brad Marchand**, **Patrice Bergeron** and Pastrnak in favor of a more balanced lineup.

"I think he could have thrown the three away and given me a little help. That and the team. In 2019, we went to the Finals, I had over 70 points in the season without starting for a long time with Pasta. If Cassidy had seen it a little differently back then..." he said, fading off, at least per the translation.

No. 46's lack of consistently successful wingers in the post-Lucic-Horton-Iginla days might have been underscored in that playoff run when **Karson Kuhlman** and **David Backes** moonlighted on the second line.

The Bergeron line had its own problems matching up with **Ryan O'Reilly's** line, and perhaps shifting Pastrnak away from the top trio would have simply created another headache for the B's. Either way, like many, Krejci felt it might have been at least worth a go. Per the translation: "They say I'm a player who makes others better. A lot of people have told me that. But there are times in the playoffs when you sometimes don't do so well and you need to helve a little. But I don't want to sound negative. I just thought that we could have put it together a little differently then."

### Some RFA dominoes beginning to fall


The Bruins aren't the only team getting squeezed in the final summer of the flat-cap hellscape plaguing the NHL.

It's especially true on the restricted free agent market, where some of the game's brightest youngsters, those without arbitration rights in particular, have seen their summers drag on amid continuing negotiations with their teams.

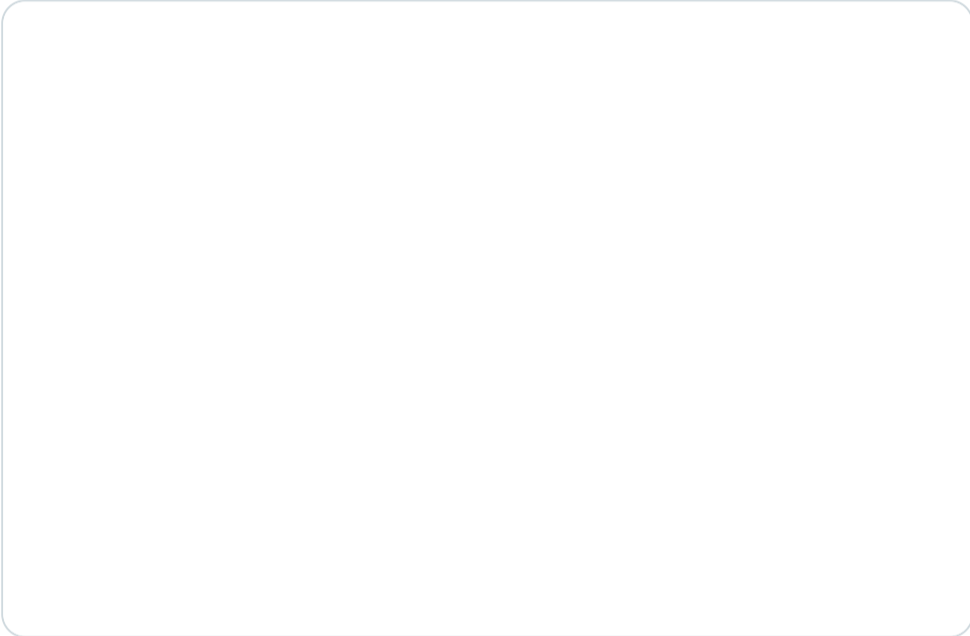
Part of the logjam began to break up this week with a pair of bridge deals for **Evan Bouchard** and the Oilers as well as **Alexis Lafreniere** and the Rangers, albeit with two players very much at different junctures in their careers.

Bouchard, who inked a two-year deal worth \$3.9 million per season, has risen to become one of the league's most prized young puck-movers on the backend. The 10th overall pick in 2018, he's coming off back-to-back campaigns with at least 40 points since breaking in full-time on the blue line, and he led all defensemen with 17 points in the 2023 playoffs, even after the Oilers bowed out in the second round. The 24-year-old will again be an RFA by the time the deal is done.




Like Matthews, Bouchard maximized his earning potential for his next deal. Say he signed a six-year deal this time around, AFP Analytics projected him to earn \$5.465 million per season (compared to a \$3.68 million projection for two years), but *The Athletic's* model currently values him at as high as a \$9 million AAV. It'll work out wonderfully for Bouchard if all goes accordingly over the two years, but it will be quite the headache for the Oilers when it comes time to pay up.

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Finally. The Edmonton Oilers have re-signed Evan Bouchard to a two-year deal with an AAV of \$~3.9M. You know, we like Bouchard's game a lot. He's a legit number one defenseman for us & one of the best offensive defensemen in the NHL. We expect he'll score +60 points next year.



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Lafreniere, meanwhile, hasn't quite lived up to the expectations bestowed upon him with the first overall pick in 2020. The 21-year-old is coming off a career year that saw him put up 16 goals and 23 assists keeping in line with a steady increase in production each season, even if it's hardly been the type of pop expected of a player that entered the league with as much fanfare as he did. While an established top-six grouping in New York has certainly posed its challenges to Lafreniere's ice time, the winger hasn't necessarily been able to overcome those roadblocks with his performance, either.

Unlike Bouchard where he should be set for a major payday when it comes time for his next contract, Lafreniere's two-year, \$2.325 million deal (AFP projected him at two years, \$2.6 million) serves as a much more vital proving ground as he enters some make-or-break developmental years with the Blueshirts.

Elsewhere, a few more important RFAs remain unsigned, between Minnesota's **Calen Addison**, Philadelphia's **Morgan Frost**, Anaheim's **Jamie Drysdale** and Ottawa's **Shane Pinto**.

But those three contracts will pale in comparison to the dollars the Ducks will have to hand out to **Trevor Zegras**, who may find himself in the same position between a bridge deal and a long-term rate as Bouchard. The difference between Edmonton and Anaheim, however, is the cap space at their disposals. The cash-strapped Oilers are now almost \$400,000 over the cap after signing the latter, while the Oilers still have over \$16 million to dish out for the former.

On a short-term deal, AFP projects Zegras to sign for \$6.487 million over three seasons, compared to its long-term outlook of \$8.298 million over eight seasons, which is roughly \$2 million more than *The Athletic's* model.

If Zegas can truly reach that next level from being more than a fun highlight reel to being a potentially dominant, point-per-game force, then it might make sense for Anaheim to lock him up now before there will be more money to go around at the end of the hypothetical bridge deal. Unlike Bouchard, Zegas isn't pigeonholed into the bridge because of his team's financial hurdles, but at the same time, if he feels he can take that step, it might make the most sense for his earning potential.



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