Lombardi Lineup:
CAN ANYONE CATCH THE CANES?



Two Carolina Hurricanes players hug during a winning game against the Chicago Blackhawks. The Hurricanes won 9-2.
PHOTO COURTESY OF CAROLINA HURRICANES ON FACEBOOK

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Over a month into the NHL season, the league is filled with tight races for the top of the division. However, the defending Stanley Cup Champion Carolina Hurricanes have reigned supreme over the Metropolitan Division once again after a dominant 14-3-2 start, becoming the first team in the league to reach 30 standings points.

The Canes' strong start to the year can't be boiled down to one thing; they've built arguably the most well-rounded squad on both ends of the ice. Carolina leads the league in time spent in the offensive zone, delivering relentless puck pressure on opposing defenses. Meanwhile, goalkeeper Pyotr Kochetkov has held a top five save percentage in the league, stifling the few chances that come around.

Sebastian Aho has picked up from last season as one of the most reliable centers in the league, anchoring the top line with 10 goals and 16 assists. Paired with Andrei Svechnikov, who's continued his role as a steady scoring threat with nine goals and nine assists.

However, in recent games the Hurricanes have made more use of the second line with Nikolaj Ehlers, Logan Stankoven and Jackson Blake. Stankoven leads the team with 11 goals, while Ehlers and Blake have provided 11 and 14 assists, respectively. That kind of depth makes Carolina a daunting task and has been pivotal to their success.

Not to mention, the Canes are doing all this without longtime captain and reigning Stanley Cup MVP Jordan Staal. If the top team in the league is only getting better, that begs the question: Can anyone in the Metro division compete?

The other teams from the division that made the playoffs last year have had disappointing starts, by contrast. After both earning 98 points a season ago, the Pittsburgh Penguins and Philadelphia Flyers occupy the bottom spots of the Eastern conference.

Currently, the closest competition is the red-hot New Jersey Devils, who have been on a tear ever since trading for goalkeeper Connor Hellebuyck. New Jersey has gone 7-1 since that trade, looking to bounce back from a disappointing campaign derailed by injuries last season.

On offense, the Devils have been led by the likely suspects in Jack Hughes and Nico Hischier. Hughes leads the squad in goals and leads the entire NHL with three overtime goals. Hischier has been a steady force at center, scoring eight goals and five assists.

However, New Jersey hasn't had to rely on the top line as much as past years. After bringing in pieces like Evan Rodrigues and Luke Evangelista, the Devils have seen a spike in production from the lower lines.

Behind them, the New York Rangers are currently in possession of the third playoff spot, despite reeling from star goalkeeper Igor Shesterkin's season ending injury. 24-year-old Dylan Garand has since been thrusted into a much bigger role and has recently been settling in as the Rangers' top keeper.

It's been an up and down start for New York, bouncing back from a dismal 1-6 stretch by winning their last three.

Defenseman Adam Fox has led the Blueshirts in points with 22, currently top five in the league in assists with five. The scoring has been relatively spread out, with the top scorer being Alexis Lafrenière, who has looked like a No. 1 pick after inconsistent production in past years. The veteran presence of Mika Zibanejad and J.T. Miller have steadied the ship through the middle, taking off the pressure and delivering 12 and nine assists, respectively.

The Rangers' defense has seemingly taken a step forward, allowing just 2.9 goals per game. They boast one of the league's best penalty kills at a rate of over 89%.

Despite the inconsistencies, the Rangers have proven to be a balanced squad with scoring threats across lines, while denying opponents many opportunities. If they can channel their recent momentum going forward, New York could be a formidable force, even without Shesterkin.

Carolina remains the gold standard in the Metro Division, but it's too early to call it a runaway. After the Devils have closed the deficit to just four points, fans can hope to see a tight battle before the playoff field is finalized.



The Nascar Cup Series Championship Race on Sunday, Nov. 8, at the Homestead-Miami Speedway. This race gave Kyle Larson his third NASCAR Cup Series Championship.
PHOTO COURTESY OF NASCAR ON FACEBOOK



Kyle Larson wins the 2026 Nascar Cup Series Championship Race. Larson is the first back-to-back Cup Series Champion since 2010.
PHOTO COURTESY OF KYLE LARSON RACING ON FACEBOOK

HOW LARSON, ALLGAIER AND HONEYCUTT SECURED CHAMPIONSHIPS IN 2026

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Kyle Larson, Justin Allgaier and Kaden Honeycutt won championships at Homestead-Miami, and each of their paths to the title were much, much different.

Larson started the Cup Series Chase in seventh after his first winless regular season since 2019 when he was at Chip Ganassi Racing.

And, starting out, he wasn't even in conversations for the title. Instead, that went to Denny Hamlin, Ryan Blaney, Tyler Reddick, Chase Briscoe and Christopher Bell.

But after a top five finish at Darlington, and a win at Gateway, people started to notice the then two-time champion, who after two races, made his way to second in the standings.

Larson gained the championship lead at Bristol, before increasing it to 26 points after Kansas and 40 points after Las Vegas. Over those next three races, Larson finished in second, first and second, respectively, to complete his best five-race stretch of the season.

Larson then had his first non-top finish in the Chase after placing sixth at Charlotte before having his worst race of the chase in Phoenix where he finished 34th. But after that, he went back to winning ways, going from 10th to first in the final corner to win at Talladega, before finishing ninth at Martinsville.

Going into Homestead-Miami, Larson had a 67-point lead on Bell and 70-point lead on Hamlin, who were the other two drivers still in championship contention, meaning if he finished within a place of Bell and within four places of Hamlin in stage one, the title would be his.

And in stage one, he did just that, taking fourth place while Bell finished in third and Hamlin finished in sixth, giving Larson his third NASCAR Cup Series Championship. Larson was also the first back-to-back Cup Series Champion since Jimmie Johnson, when he won five back-to-back titles from 2006-2010.

Allgaier, on the other hand, came into the Chase in first after a dominant regular season. But at the start, Allgaier started to waver, finishing in 17th and 13th to open the O'Reilly Series Chase. Those two finishes put him in second place, below Sheldon Creed, who finished at least second in both races.

In Bristol, Allgaier got back on track, finishing in fourth, but Creed won again, putting him 11 points ahead of the 40-year-old. In Vegas, Allgaier had his worst finish of the year after a wreck in stage two which put him back to fourth and 31 points behind Creed.

But Allgaier found form again with four top five finishes in a row with the final one at Martinsville netting him enough points to regain the championship lead heading into Homestead-Miami.

In Miami, with a 22-point lead, Allgaier took four points in stage one, seven in stage two and 30 in the final stage to give him 41 points in the race. With Jesse Love failing to win, Allgaier finished the season with a 14-point lead over No. 2 to secure his second O'Reilly Series title.

Allgaier, who was contemplating retirement, re-signed with JR Motorsports for 2027 as he looks to make a title defense.

The final champion crowned this weekend was Kaden Honeycutt, who started the Chase in second but was still considered a long shot due to Layne Riggs being so dominant.

At Bristol, Riggs finished 32nd while Honeycutt finished in eighth to close the gap to just three points after the first race.

Honeycutt then went on a tear, recording a four-race stretch that included wins at Kansas and Phoenix and top five finishes at Charlotte at Talladega which gave him a 43-point lead over Riggs with just two races to go.

At Martinsville, Honeycutt had his lone dud in the Chase, finishing 14th while only netting nine stage points while Riggs finished in third with 20 stage points. That brought the gap down to just 20 points, meaning if Riggs and Honeycutt got equal stage points and Riggs won, he would win the title.

But things didn't go Riggs' way in Miami, making heavy contact with Nick Sanchez that ended his title hopes just two laps into the race. With Riggs dropping fast, Honeycutt was guaranteed the title anyways, but after a third-place stage one finish and a sixth-place stage two finish, Honeycutt was looking for the win.

And he got it, finishing the season strong after taking home the checkered flag in first place and winning his first NASCAR Truck Series Championship. This was also Honeycutt's second ever full-time season in the Truck Series and his first on the same team the entire year.

Honeycutt was re-signed to Tricon Garage for the 2027 season as he looks to defend his title.

With all three titles crowned, NASCAR won't be back until Feb. 13, 2027 for the NASCAR Cup Series Wheatley Vodka Clash. Meanwhile, the O'Reilly series will return on Feb. 20, 2027 for the United Rentals 300 and the Truck Series will return on Feb. 19 for the Fresh From Florida 250.