

# # Pittsburgh Penguins U23 Prospect Pipeline – 2025 Scouting Report

## Top 10 Prospects (Under Age 23)

Below are the Pittsburgh Penguins' top prospects under 23 years old, ranked by long-term NHL potential (highest to lowest). Each profile includes vital info, a scouting breakdown across key skill areas, strengths and concerns, and a projection of NHL role and timeline. All of these players are not yet full-time NHLers but are the brightest pieces of Pittsburgh's future.

### 1. Rutger McGroarty (LW/C) – Age 21 – Drafted 2022 Round 1 (14th overall by WPG; acquired via trade in 2024)

- **Current Team/League:** Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins (AHL) – expected to turn pro in 2024-25 after two NCAA seasons .
- **Scouting Report:** A powerful 6'1", 205-lb forward, McGroarty is a bullish, blue-collar scorer with a well-rounded game. He isn't a blazing skater, but his **skating** is decent for his size with a strong stride and enough speed to keep up on a scoring line . His **hockey IQ** shows in his off-puck positioning – he excels in the cycle and finds soft spots around the net. His **competitiveness level** is elite: McGroarty *"battles so hard"* every shift , outworking opponents along the boards and establishing inside positioning. He has a heavy **shot** and has shown he can finish chances (50+ points as a college sophomore) , though many of his goals come from net-front tips and rebounds rather than pure snipes. His **puck skills** are not particularly flashy, but he makes simple, effective plays – winning puck battles and cycling down low rather than dangling through defenders. Defensively, he projects well – he has played some center, backchecks reliably, and understands positioning in his own zone. **Physicality** is a cornerstone of his game: McGroarty is *"an absolute tank"* in net-front battles , using his powerful lower body to shield the puck and bulldoze into high-traffic areas.
- **Strengths:** Outstanding strength and net-front presence; thrives in cycle play and along the boards . High competitiveness level and leadership intangibles – he consistently brings energy and physicality. Plays a responsible two-way game and can complement skilled linemates with his work ethic.
- **Development Concerns:** Lacks game-breaking speed or agility – his skating, while improved, is not a standout trait and could limit him against faster NHL competition. Offensive game may be somewhat one-dimensional (net-front grease goals over finesse) ; he's not a natural play-driver in transition. Needs to prove he can create offense without an elite setup man feeding him.

- **Projected Ceiling & Role:** Versatile power-forward who could become a top-six NHL winger that provides scoring, forechecking, and net-front muscle. More likely projects as a strong third-line winger who can moonlight in the top six, score ~20 goals, and be a net-front power play contributor . His mature two-way game gives him a relatively high floor as an NHL regular.
- **NHL ETA:** Very soon. After dominating college and forcing a trade to Pittsburgh, McGroarty is turning pro and “*may be NHL ready sooner*” rather than later . A strong training camp could even earn him a look alongside Sidney Crosby early on . Most likely he’ll start in the AHL in 2024-25 and push for a full-time Penguins role by late 2025.

## 2. Ville Koivunen (LW) – Age 22 – Drafted 2021 Round 2 (51st by CAR; acquired via trade in 2024)

- **Current Team/League:** Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins (AHL) – expected North American rookie in 2024-25 after leaving Finland .
- **Scouting Report:** A skilled Finnish winger, Koivunen is a crafty offensive creator coming off a breakout Liiga season. **Skating:** He has average speed and acceleration – not a burner – and scouts question if he’s quick enough to thrive on smaller North American ice . He will need to add explosiveness to beat NHL defenders. **Hockey IQ:** Excellent in the offensive zone – Koivunen has great vision and instincts. He was sixth in Finland’s top league in scoring with 56 points (22 goals) last year, the only U22 player to hit 50+ points , showcasing his playmaking sense and timing. **Compete Level:** Offensively, he competes to make plays and isn’t shy about handling the puck, but his game has been characterized as more finesse than grit. He’ll need to prove he can handle a tougher, faster game; consistency and effort off the puck are areas to watch. **Shot:** He’s a capable finisher (22 goals in Liiga) with a quick release when he finds space. Koivunen is more a pass-first forward but can surprise goalies with accurate snipes. **Puck Skills:** One of his standout traits – he’s a *creative playmaker* who can thread passes through seams and stickhandle in tight spaces to create chances . He’s very poised with the puck. **Defensive Acumen:** This is a work in progress. In Liiga he was used in offensive roles; his defensive awareness and puck support need refinement for the NHL level . He can be too puck-focused and will have to learn to play a responsible two-way game. **Physicality:** A noted concern – Koivunen is 6’0” but still lean. The “*blockbuster trade*” that brought him to Pittsburgh will test how he adapts to North America’s physicality . He isn’t naturally physical and can be knocked off pucks; adding strength is imperative.
- **Strengths:** High-end offensive skill set – vision, puckhandling, and creativity – that could translate to a scoring role . He’s proven himself against pros in Finland, showing he can produce points consistently. Has a knack for finding soft spots in coverage and making quick, smart plays

when the puck is on his stick.

- **Development Concerns:** How he handles the **transition to the smaller ice** will be key. *“Questions remain about Koivunen’s transition to North America”* – specifically his ability to handle the faster pace and more physical board battles. His defensive play and off-puck engagement need improvement for coaches to trust him. Without added strength and a bit more pace, there’s a risk he could struggle to impact games as he did in Europe.
- **Projected Ceiling & Role:** If his skill translates, Koivunen projects as a second-line NHL winger and power play asset – a playmaking winger who could score 50-60 points at his peak. In a perfect scenario he’s a top-six forward who brings a dose of creativity the Penguins lack. If he cannot handle the physical demands, he might top out as a skilled but inconsistent third-line winger or tweener.
- **NHL ETA:** Likely 1–2 years away. Pittsburgh will let him acclimate in the AHL in 2024-25; *“the team will likely give him time to develop in the AHL”* while monitoring his adjustment. A late-season call-up in 2025 isn’t out of the question if he impresses early. He should compete for a full-time NHL spot by 2025-26 after a year of North American seasoning.

### 3. Joel Blomqvist (G) – Age 22 – Drafted 2020 Round 2 (52nd overall)

- **Current Team/League:** Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins (AHL) – entering second AHL season.
- **Scouting Report:** Blomqvist is a technically sound Finnish goaltender who had an outstanding North American debut. He’s 6’2” with a calm, poised style. **Skating & Movement:** He’s athletic and *“moves fluidly in the crease”*, playing aggressively at the top of the blue paint to cut down angles. His lateral pushes are strong and he tracks play well, rarely caught out of position. **Hockey IQ:** Shows mature reads for a young goalie – anticipates passes and shooters’ options effectively. He’s quick to square up to the puck and rarely over-commits. **Compete Level:** High – Blomqvist battles through traffic and doesn’t quit on plays. He demonstrated confidence under pressure by thriving as an AHL rookie starter. **Rebound Control:** One area to polish – while generally sound positionally, he can *“allow a few too many weak goals”* or lose pucks in scrambles. Tightening up rebound control and focus on second-chance shots will be key. **Puck-Handling:** Not a major strength or weakness; he makes the simple plays and avoids risky adventures out of the net. **Athleticism:** Good flexibility and reflexes – capable of acrobatic saves when needed, though he prefers economy of movement. **Physicality:** Not applicable like a skater, but he does hold his ground well when bumped and shows no hesitation in traffic.
- **Strengths:** Proven winner and fast adaptor – he posted a 25-12-6 record with a sparkling 2.16 GAA and .921 SV% as an AHL rookie, even earning an AHL All-Star nod. Tracks the puck exceptionally well through traffic. Technically refined for his age – maintains good positioning,

and his compact butterfly takes away the bottom of the net effectively. Mentally, he's calm and unflappable, a trait the organization loves.

- **Development Concerns:** Blomqvist's 6'2" frame is just *average* by modern NHL goalie standards, so he must rely on sharp technique – any lapses in positioning can expose openings high. There are occasional focus lapses where a soft goal slips in, suggesting he's still finding consistency night-to-night. He hasn't faced NHL shooters yet – the jump in shot quality and traffic is an adjustment ahead. Staying healthy and handling a heavier workload (45 games last year) will be ongoing tests for his durability and endurance.
- **Projected Ceiling & Role:** Blomqvist has the upside of an NHL **starting goaltender** or strong 1A/1B option. Within the organization he's tracking as Tristan Jarry's potential successor. If he continues on this trajectory, he could be a reliable No.1 who plays 50+ games a year. At worst, he should become at least a solid NHL backup – his floor appears relatively high given his polish and early success.
- **NHL ETA: Soon.** He could compete for the NHL backup job as early as 2025. The Penguins will likely give him another year as the AHL starter in 2024-25, but *"he could be pushing for an NHL backup role sooner rather than later"* if his development continues smoothly. Look for Blomqvist to possibly see some NHL games in the next 1–1.5 seasons and be a full-time Penguin by 2025-26.

#### 4. Owen Pickering (LHD) – Age 20 – Drafted 2022 Round 1 (21st overall)

- **Current Team/League:** Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins (AHL) – entering first full pro season after junior.
- **Scouting Report:** A rangy 6'4" defenseman with smooth skating ability, Pickering is Pittsburgh's top blue line prospect. **Skating:** Excellent for his size – Pickering is a *"mobile, 6-foot-4 defender"* who skates well in all directions. He has a fluid stride and can lead the rush or recover defensively with above-average speed and agility for a big man. **Hockey IQ:** This is where questions linger. He shows flashes of high-end reads – jumping into offense at the right times, or using his long reach to break up plays – but his decision-making can be inconsistent. He's prone to occasional *"bad giveaways"* under pressure and needs to improve his processing speed and choices with the puck. **Compete Level:** Variable. When engaged, Pickering can dominate shifts with his length and skating, but scouts noted *stretches of disappearing acts* in junior. He's still learning to bring intensity every night and to assert himself physically. **Shot:** A definite asset – he has a *booming point shot* that he isn't shy to unleash. He can hammer one-timers and get pucks through traffic, which accounted for a good chunk of his 46 points in 59 WHL games last year. **Puck Skills:** Solid but not elite. He can carry the puck in transition and shows glimpses of puck-

handling to beat forecheckers, but he's not a dynamic power play QB in terms of vision. His passes are generally on target, though he'll force plays under pressure at times. **Defensive**

**Acumen:** Promising due to his reach and mobility – he can close gaps quickly and use his long stick to disrupt entries. He's best when he keeps his game simple and uses his tools to defend; however, like many young D, his reads can be inconsistent. At times he'll make a smart pinch or step up, other times he may misjudge and get caught. As he matures, coaching will aim to iron out those mental mistakes. **Physicality:** Currently more finesse than snarl. At ~180 lbs on a 6'4" frame, he's still lanky and hasn't fully grown into his body. He isn't a heavy hitter, but he will use leverage and reach to angle opponents off and has improved at battling along the boards. Adding strength will allow him to better win net-front duels and impose himself defensively.

- **Strengths:** Combination of **size + skating** that is hard to find – he projects as a modern NHL defenseman who can cover a lot of ice. When confident, he can contribute at both ends – last year as Swift Current's captain he set a career high in points and showed leadership in logging big minutes. His shot from the point is NHL-caliber and could make him an asset on a second power-play unit in time. The raw tools (reach, mobility, offensive touch) give him clear top-four upside.
- **Development Concerns: Consistency.** As one scout summary put it, *"flashes of brilliance... overshadowed by stretches of inconsistency"*. He needs to eliminate the lapses in focus and decision-making that lead to turnovers or passive play. Strength and physical maturity are also ongoing needs – he must get stronger to handle NHL forwards in the corners and net-front. Essentially, he's not yet putting it all together every game, and the Penguins will be looking for a steadier, more assertive Pickering in the AHL.
- **Projected Ceiling & Role:** The organization hopes he can become a **top-4 defenseman**, potentially a No.3 who can play 20 minutes a night in all situations. If everything clicks, he could be a second-pair two-way defenseman – think a left-shot version of a Brandon Carlo or Brady Skjei – with the skating to transport the puck and size to defend. More conservatively, he might settle in as a third-pair defenseman who contributes on special teams. His ceiling is high, but reaching it will depend on polishing the mental side of his game.
- **NHL ETA:** Still a couple years out. After a brief 8-game AHL taste last year, *"this season will be crucial"* as his first full pro campaign. He likely needs at least 1.5–2 AHL seasons to develop consistency. A realistic target is a NHL roster spot by the **2026-27** season. He could get a cup of coffee in 2025-26 if his play stabilizes, but the Penguins will be patient given his importance to their future.

## 5. Tanner Howe (LW) – Age 18 – Drafted 2024 Round 2 (46th overall)

- **Current Team/League:** Regina Pats (WHL) – returning to junior for 2024-25; signed to an entry-level contract .
- **Scouting Report:** Howe is a highly skilled yet undersized winger who plays with *surprising bite*.  
**Skating:** There's a bit of a split opinion – he's very agile with a quick first step and excellent edgework , making him elusive in tight spaces. However, scouts have noted his top-end speed and acceleration are merely average for his size . He'll need to keep building leg strength to be explosively fast at the pro level. **Hockey IQ:** Advanced for his age. He reads plays well and can anticipate openings to set up teammates. In the WHL he's been a creative force, often a step ahead in vision. **Compete Level:** Off the charts – despite being 5'10", 180 lbs, Howe *"battles for pucks"* and plays with a fearless, pesky edge . He models his game after Brad Marchand and it shows – he's willing to throw hits, chirp opponents, and get under their skin. Connor Bedard (his former junior linemate) even described Howe as *"a bit of a prick"* on the ice (meant as a compliment) . **Shot:** Dangerous – Howe has a *quick, accurate release* that he can get off in stride or from awkward angles . He scored 36 goals and 85 points playing with Bedard in 2022-23, then proved it wasn't a fluke by posting 28 goals and 76 points in 68 games the year after Bedard left . He can finish chances at junior level and has natural goal-scorer's instincts around the net.  
**Puck Skills:** Excellent. He's a *creative playmaker with excellent vision* who can thread passes through traffic . His hands are quick and he can dangle past defenders or slide passes through seams on the power play. He's the kind of player who can orchestrate an attack from along the wall or half-boards. **Defensive Acumen:** Still developing. He backchecks with effort and has the hockey sense to eventually be responsible, but at this stage he's known more for offense and agitation than defensive prowess. He'll need coaching on positioning and using his stick given he won't out-muscle NHL forwards. **Physicality:** High willingness, low capacity – he *"isn't afraid to go to the dirty areas"* and throws his body around with a high compete level , but at 5'10" he relies on leverage and sneaky hits. He's tenacious on the forecheck (a *"missile on the forecheck"* as scouts call him) , finishing checks at every opportunity. The physical edge is a big part of his identity, even if he'll never intimidate with size alone.
- **Strengths: Dynamic offensive skill** combined with a gritty mentality – a rare combo. He's a top-line talent in junior who plays a 200-foot, aggressive game. His ability to both make plays and score goals, along with that feisty competitiveness, makes him an exciting high-upside prospect. Notably, his production remained strong even without Bedard, alleviating concerns that he was only riding coattails . He's shown leadership and big-game ability as well.
- **Development Concerns: Size/Strength.** Like many 18-year-olds, he simply needs to get stronger, but for Howe it's especially vital given his smaller frame. Can his game translate when facing men? His skating, while very agile, needs more explosiveness to compensate for his stature . He sometimes relies on talented linemates to drive play, so he'll have to prove he can push the pace himself and not just be a complementary piece . Discipline is another minor

concern – playing on the edge, he'll take the occasional bad penalty or get drawn into scrums, something to rein in as he matures.

- **Projected Ceiling & Role:** The optimistic projection is a **top-six offensive winger**, in the mold of a Marchand-lite or Brendan Gallagher type, who can agitate opponents and contribute 20+ goals in a season. If he hits, he could be a second-line winger who provides scoring and energy. There's also the possibility he ends up more of a middle-six pest who chips in offense but not enough for a scoring line. The range is wide – he's a bit of a boom/bust swing. At minimum, his tenacity could carve out a bottom-six role, but the Penguins hope his skill will make him more than that.
- **NHL ETA:** Several years away. He's only 18 and will spend 2024-25 back in junior. Given his age, figure at least **2 more seasons** before turning pro. A likely path: another year in WHL, then perhaps a year or two in the AHL to adjust to pro size/speed. Earliest NHL cameo might be 2026-27, with a more realistic target for regular duty around **2027**. Patience will be key, but the payoff could be significant.

## 6. Harrison Brunicke (RHD) – Age 18 – Drafted 2024 Round 2 (44th overall)

- **Current Team/League:** Kamloops Blazers (WHL) – expected to return to WHL for 2024-25; signed to ELC and briefly joined AHL camp after draft .
- **Scouting Report:** Brunicke is a young, **6'3", 210-lb** right-shot defenseman whose game is built on smart defensive play and poise. **Skating:** Solid for his size. He has decent straight-line speed and mobility, though adding a bit more agility and quickness in tight spaces would help . For a big 18-year-old, his footwork is already good – he's not lumbering at all, but there's room to get more explosive. **Hockey IQ:** One of his standout qualities. Brunicke "*rarely gets caught out of place*" and makes very mature decisions with the puck . He reads the play well in the defensive zone, anticipating where threats are and positioning himself to negate them. Offensively, he keeps it simple – perhaps to a fault – but shows good awareness of when to hold the line or make a safe outlet pass. **Compete Level:** High. He takes pride in shutdown defense – willing to block shots, win net-front battles, and do the dirty work. Coaches describe him as a player with a steady effort and a team-first mentality. **Shot:** Not a primary weapon in his arsenal. He has an average slap shot from the point; he usually opts for wristers to get pucks on net through traffic rather than blasting bombs. His offensive numbers in junior (modest point totals) reflect a player not focused on scoring. However, he may have untapped offensive upside – some scouts feel his numbers didn't show his puck-moving potential . In international U18 play, he flashed an ability to join the rush and make a crisp first pass. **Puck Skills:** Simple but effective. Brunicke isn't flashy with the puck – he won't dangle through forecheckers – but he has a crisp outlet pass and



maintains possession with safe plays. He *“often opts for the safe pass to exit the zone rather than forcing risky plays”*, which results in low turnover rates . On the offensive blue line, he keeps pucks in and distributes quickly to forwards rather than trying to do too much. **Defensive**

**Acumen:** This is his calling card. Brunicke is *“known for his poise and reliability in the defensive zone”* . He uses his reach effectively to break up plays and has excellent positioning – you’ll rarely find him out of position or losing track of his man. He clears the crease with his big body and is a dependable penalty-killer who uses an active stick and good timing to disrupt passes.

**Physicality:** Strong and not shy about using it. At 210 lbs, he already has a pro frame and *“often uses his body to effectively clear the crease and win battles along the boards”* . He can deliver solid hits when the opportunity arises, though he’s not known for open-ice hits – it’s more about grinding out battles and leveraging his strength to seal off opponents.

- **Strengths: Defensive maturity** beyond his years – he projects as a safe, coachable player who can be trusted in his own zone . His size/reach combined with mobility give him the tools to match up against tough competition. Even as a draft-year player, he impressed scouts with his calm under forecheck pressure and his knack for breaking up plays without panic. Additionally, there’s a sense that he has more offense to give than he showed; his performance at the U18s and comments that *“his offensive abilities are better than his numbers suggest”* hint at untapped potential if he grows in confidence . As a right-handed defenseman, his presence fills a key organizational need as well.
- **Development Concerns:** He’s not a flashy puck-mover, so some wonder if he’ll have enough puck skill to be more than a stay-at-home type. Will his offense develop? If not, his margin for error defensively in the NHL will be slim (since he won’t offset mistakes with points). He also needs to continue improving lateral quickness – the pace of the pro game will challenge him to stay agile. In junior he can physically dominate; in the AHL/NHL he’ll face stronger, faster forwards, so continued work on foot speed and not getting over-aggressive with hits (to avoid being burned) will be important. Overall, he’s a “safer” prospect, but one with a somewhat lower ceiling if the offensive side never comes.
- **Projected Ceiling & Role:** Projects as a **dependable second-pair shutdown defenseman**. Think of a stable, minute-eating blueliner who might not put up big points but can be trusted against good players and kill penalties. If his puck-moving blossoms, he could be a very well-rounded top-four D. If not, he could still carve out a career as a third-pair/PK specialist who is low-event in his own zone. The Penguins see him as a potential heir to the kind of role Brian Dumoulin played (albeit right-handed) – steady and unspectacular, but important.
- **NHL ETA:** A few years off. Brunicke just turned 18 and will almost certainly play two more seasons in the WHL. After that, expect at least a year in the AHL. So we’re looking at **2027** or so for a serious NHL roster push. He’s a long-term project in the sense of seasoning, but his mature game could allow him to adapt faster than most teenagers. Some within the organization feel



he's not terribly far from pro-ready defensively – he even joined the AHL squad for a stint after his draft – but there's no rush. The earliest we might see him get a trial NHL game is late 2025-26, with a full-time role around 2027.

## 7. Vasily Ponomarev (C/W) – Age 22 – Drafted 2020 Round 2 (53rd by CAR; acquired via trade in 2024)

- **Current Team/League:** Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins (AHL) – will play his third AHL season in 2024-25; could push for NHL call-ups.
- **Scouting Report:** A versatile Russian forward, Ponomarev is a polished two-way player with a balanced skill set. **Skating:** One of his better tools – he has a quick, powerful stride and good edgework, allowing him to keep a high pace. He's strong on his skates and uses his **speed** to be effective on forechecks and backchecks. **Hockey IQ:** Quite high in the sense of understanding both offensive and defensive responsibilities. He doesn't wow with creativity, but he *“seems to do all the little things right”* – supporting the puck, reading the play in the defensive zone, and making smart simple passes. At times he can hesitate to shoot or defer, which can be an issue (as seen in a drop in goals last year), but generally he makes good decisions. **Compete Level:** Excellent. Ponomarev plays a very consistent, high-effort game. Coaches have trusted him in many situations because he competes every shift and is detail-oriented. He won a Calder Cup in 2022 with Chicago, showing he can thrive in playoff-style hockey. **Shot:** Decent but underutilized of late. As a rookie pro he scored 24 goals in the AHL, showing he can finish when confident. Last season, however, he tallied only 9 goals, often passing up shooting opportunities (*“he seemed to hesitate more as a shooter”*). When he does shoot, he has a quick release and can pick corners from the slot – it's more a matter of mentality to use it consistently. **Puck Skills:** Solid if unspectacular. He's not an overly creative stickhandler, but he protects the puck well and can beat opponents one-on-one with speed or a power move. In tight, he has the puck protection skills (strong lower body) to fend off checks and extend plays. He can play in traffic areas thanks to this strength. **Defensive Acumen:** Arguably his best attribute. Ponomarev has developed into a reliable two-way forward who backchecks hard and understands defensive positioning. Carolina even gave him a two-game NHL call-up, where he notched a goal and assist, largely because of his responsible play. He can kill penalties and is diligent about puck support down low. **Physicality:** Not a big player (about 5'10", 180) but he *“uses his body to effectively protect the puck”* and isn't afraid of contact. He won't deliver huge hits, but he plays with a bit of grit – he's scrappy in battles and doesn't shy away from the corners.
- **Strengths: Well-rounded game** – there are no glaring holes. Ponomarev's strong skating and high work rate make him effective in all three zones. He's the kind of player coaches love

because he can be trusted with defensive assignments, take key faceoffs, and chip in offense. His consistency and hockey sense led to 85 points in 116 AHL games so far , which is solid production for a young prospect who also focuses on defense. In short, he's a "safe" prospect to become an NHL contributor, even if not a star.

- **Development Concerns: Ceiling.** While he's well-rounded, he may not have one standout elite skill to guarantee a top-six role. His offensive production, while good, hasn't screamed "high scorer" – he *"isn't going to wow or dazzle with skill"* and needs to prove he can be a consistent creator at the next level . The dip in goal-scoring last year raises a question: was it just injury/role related (he did miss some time) or indicative of a more limited offensive upside? Also, at 5'10", he's on the smaller side for a forward who might be tasked with defensive roles – he'll have to continue to compensate with skating and smarts.
- **Projected Ceiling & Role:** Likely outcome is a **middle-six, two-way forward**. He could be a third-line center or winger who provides energy, sound defense, and secondary scoring (think 30-40 points in a season in a complementary role). There's an outside chance he could stick as a second-line winger if his offense picks up – he *"has the tools to be a top-six winger"* if everything comes together , but more likely he tops out as a quality role player. In essence, a reliable third-line center/wing who can slide up in a pinch is a realistic projection.
- **NHL ETA: Near-term.** Ponomarev is entering his third pro season and will be 22 – he's knocking on the door. He already had a brief NHL taste with Carolina and now with Pittsburgh's thinner forward depth, he could get more looks soon. A strong start in the AHL could earn him a call-up in 2024-25. By **2025**, it's reasonable to expect him competing for a full-time NHL spot, especially if he continues to round out his offensive consistency. Pittsburgh will likely give him an opportunity in the bottom six within the next year.

## 8. Tristan Broz (C/LW) – Age 21 – Drafted 2021 Round 2 (58th overall)

- **Current Team/League:** Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins (AHL) – entering first pro season in 2024-25 after NCAA career.
- **Scouting Report:** Broz is a skilled, playmaking forward whose development took a positive turn in college. **Skating:** Above-average. He's got good speed and agility, which he uses to navigate through traffic. His first few strides are decent and he can accelerate into open ice effectively. He's not an elite burner, but his mobility is definitely an asset in creating offense off the rush. **Hockey IQ:** A tale of two ends – offensively, he's very intelligent, showing *"exceptional vision and anticipation"* as a playmaker. He reads defenses well and can thread passes to teammates in scoring positions. Defensively, he has shown he understands positioning and can be responsible (especially as an older college player), though consistency in effort has been a knock (see

below). **Compete Level:** This has been the question mark. Broz has all the tools, but he's been critiqued for "*inconsistent effort level*" and the tendency to **disappear** for stretches. When engaged – for example, during Denver's championship run – he looked determined and made clutch plays. But on some nights he can be perimeter and less involved. Maintaining a high motor every game will be his big challenge transitioning to pro. **Shot:** Pretty good. He has an **accurate shot** from the slot and can finish chances set up by his own playmaking. He scored 16 goals in 43 games in his final NCAA season, many coming from finding soft spots in coverage and one-timing feeds. He's more of a setup man by nature, but he can certainly bury a quality chance.

**Puck Skills:** One of his strengths – quick, soft hands that allow him to stickhandle through tight spaces and execute tricky passes. He's confident carrying the puck and can be creative one-on-one, though he's not overly flashy just for show; he uses his skill with a purpose (usually to set up teammates). **Defensive Acumen:** Fairly reliable when he applies himself. In college he improved his two-way game under a strong program at Denver. He backchecks and uses his stick reasonably well, and being a center at times, he learned to play down low in his zone. However, any lapses in effort also affect his defensive consistency – the tools are there for him to be a solid two-way forward, but he has to bring consistent engagement. **Physicality:** Not a major element of Broz's game. He's around 6'0" and 180, and while he doesn't shy from contact, he's not a big hitter or an agitator. He's more finesse-driven, though he will compete along the boards to extend plays. Adding more strength will help him win puck battles as a pro.

- **Strengths: Playmaking ability** stands out – Broz can orchestrate an offense and make those around him better when he's on his game. He has a knack for finding teammates through seams and is especially effective on the power play as a half-wall distributor. His junior year at Denver (40 points in 43 games) showed he can be a point producer and even step up in big moments (two OT goals in the NCAA tournament). He's also fairly versatile, having played both center and wing – that flexibility could help him find a niche. When motivated, he shows a nice blend of skill, skating, and hockey sense that suggests NHL upside.
- **Development Concerns:** As noted, **consistency and compete** are the red flags. One scout summarized that Broz "*can attack hard and create space, but the problem is he's too inconsistent in his effort – he can disappear in games*". That kind of inconsistency won't fly at the pro level; WBS coaches will demand he brings it every night if he wants ice time. Another concern is that despite his offensive talent, he never utterly dominated in college – he was very good, but not a superstar, which suggests his ceiling might be moderate. He'll need to prove that his game can translate against faster, stronger competition and that he can play with pro pace while maintaining his creativity.
- **Projected Ceiling & Role:** Broz projects as a **middle-six forward** if he reaches his potential – likely a third-line playmaking winger who can also slot in at center if needed, and contribute on a second power-play unit. In a best-case scenario, he could be a top-six complementary playmaker

(a bit like a poor man's Jake Guentzel stylistically, though not as high-end). If his motor doesn't improve, he could stall out as an offensive AHLer or up-and-down depth player. The Penguins are hoping he becomes a reliable 40-point two-way winger who can play up and down the lineup.

- **NHL ETA:** He's turning pro now, so it really depends on his AHL performance. Given his age (21) and need to adjust, he'll likely spend at least **one full season in the AHL**. If he finds consistency and success, a cup of coffee in late 2025 or 2025-26 is possible. More realistically, look at **2026** for him to push for a bottom-six NHL job. Pittsburgh won't rush him; they'll want to see a sustained high effort and production in Wilkes-Barre before promotion.

## 9. Cruz Lucius (RW) – Age 20 – Drafted 2022 Round 4 (124th by CAR; acquired via trade in 2024)

- **Current Team/League:** Arizona State University (NCAA) – transferred from University of Wisconsin; projected to play 2024-25 in NCAA.
- **Scouting Report:** Lucius (the younger brother of Winnipeg prospect Chaz Lucius) is an exciting offensive winger with speed and skill. **Skating:** One of his best assets – he's "*electrifying*" in open ice. He has very quick feet and can change directions on a dime, making him dangerous off the rush. If anything, scouts say he could still work on his first-step **explosiveness** and overall strength, as adding power will make him even more effective. **Hockey IQ:** He shows a good offensive mind – anticipates well and finds soft spots to get his shot off. At Wisconsin, he was a go-to scorer because he understood how to create chances each game. He might not be a pure playmaker, but he reads developing plays and gets himself in position to make something happen. **Compete Level:** High. Lucius is described as a "*relentless forechecker*" who uses his speed to pressure opponents and force turnovers. Despite not being big, he plays with a lot of energy and tenacity, always looking to attack. He's got a bit of a chip on his shoulder in puck battles and doesn't give up on plays. **Shot:** Impressive – heavy and accurate for a player of his size. He can score from the circles with a quick snap shot, and he's very good at picking corners on the rush. He also has a nose for the net, often following up on rebounds or deflections he creates. **Puck Skills:** High-end. Lucius is very *skilled with the puck*, possessing quick hands that allow him to beat defensemen one-on-one or make sharp cuts in tight spaces. He can stickhandle at top speed, which combined with his skating makes him a real handful for defenders. He's creative and confident in his puck play, and that helps him generate "high-quality scoring chances" frequently. **Defensive Acumen:** Still developing. He's willing to come back deep and help out, but like many young offensive forwards, he can be focused on pushing the pace offensively. At Wisconsin he was not a defensive specialist by any means. That said, his

effort is there and with coaching he has the speed to be disruptive defensively. It will be about harnessing his competitiveness into a structured defensive game. **Physicality:** This is an area for growth. Listed around 5'11" and under 180 lbs, Lucius is not big, and while he plays hard, he's not going to win many brute strength battles. He *"isn't the biggest player, but makes up for it with pure drive"*. He'll need to add some muscle to handle pro defenders and to be more effective along the walls. Right now his physical impact comes more from his speed and willingness than from knocking guys over.

- **Strengths: Speed/Skill combo** – Lucius can skate past you or stickhandle through you, making him a dangerous offensive weapon. He averaged nearly a point-per-game in college and consistently generates chances every game. His shot is pro-caliber, and he's got that scorer's mentality to attack the net. The Penguins lack wingers with this kind of dynamic offensive flair in their pipeline, so Lucius immediately stands out. Moreover, his competitive nature means he doesn't float around – he's always in pursuit of the puck, which bodes well for his pro adjustment.
- **Development Concerns: Size/Strength and Rounding Out Game.** Lucius will have to get stronger – he's a prime candidate for another year or two in college to build up physically. Without more strength, he could struggle to win battles or stay durable in the pro grind. Also, like many offense-first prospects, he must continue developing his play without the puck – decision-making (when to push for offense vs. when to play safe) and defensive details will be key areas. If he doesn't refine those aspects, coaches may be reluctant to trust him with significant NHL minutes despite his scoring ability. In short, he has to prove he can be more than just an offensive spark – that he can be reliable enough to stay in the lineup even when he's not scoring.
- **Projected Ceiling & Role:** Lucius projects as a **middle-six scoring winger** with upside to play on a second line. If he maxes out, he could become a 20-goal, 50-point winger who provides a spark and plays on a power play unit. Given his skill set, a realistic role in a few years is a third-line winger who brings speed and offense in spurts, while working his way into a top-six role as openings arise. He has the talent to be a legitimate contributor in an NHL middle-six if he continues on this trajectory .
- **NHL ETA:** Still a bit down the road. Lucius will play the 2024-25 season at Arizona State in the NCAA, which will be his junior year. He'll likely turn pro after that or play one more college season at most. The Penguins will let him develop at his own pace; expect him in the AHL by **2025-26**. From there, he could push for NHL time by **2026**. His timeline got a bit longer with the college transfer (new team/system to adjust to), but that's fine for Pittsburgh. Look for him to potentially debut in 2–3 years.

## 10. Mikhail Ilyin (RW) – Age 19 – Drafted 2023 Round 5 (142nd overall)

- **Current Team/League:** Admiral Vladivostok (KHL) – expected to continue development in Russia in 2024-25.
- **Scouting Report:** Ilyin is a Russian winger who has already logged significant KHL time as a teenager. He's a bit of a dark horse prospect – not flashy, but effective. **Skating:** A known area for improvement. Ilyin's skating is considered below NHL average currently – he lacks top-end speed and his first step is a bit sluggish. The encouraging sign is that he made “*strides forward*” in his skating during the last year. He's working on his explosiveness; at present he can keep up with the pace of play his teammates set, but he's rarely the one pushing the pace himself.  
**Hockey IQ:** High in terms of understanding his role and supporting the play. He plays a “*smart, simple game*” – which implies he makes the right reads, doesn't force risky plays, and is usually in the right spot for outlets or defensive coverage. He's not a creative offensive driver, but he processes the game at a pro level, which helped him stick in the KHL. **Compete Level:** Excellent. One of Ilyin's calling cards is that he “*competes hard, never giving up on a play*”. He has a high motor and is willing to do the little things like backcheck diligently, battle along the boards, and take a hit to make a play. For a young player in a men's league, his coachability and work ethic stand out. **Shot:** Modest. He scored 12 goals in 65 KHL games last season, so he can finish when he gets opportunities, but he's not known for a blazing shot or elite scoring touch. He tends to score “greasy” goals – rebounds, tap-ins – consistent with his straightforward playing style. **Puck Skills:** Adequate but not remarkable. He's not one to dangle through a defense; he generally matches the pace and flow set by others rather than creating it. That said, he has decent puck control in tight and can make quick passes in the cycle. He's effective at maintaining possession along the boards and cycling the puck down low. **Defensive Acumen:** This is a strong part of his game. Ilyin plays a mature two-way style – he backchecks hard, stays above the puck, and does the “support” role well. In the KHL, he earned trust to play regular shifts as a teenager because he didn't shirk defensive responsibilities. He's not overly aggressive offensively which actually helps him defensively – he's usually in good position. **Physicality:** He won't wow you with big hits, but he “*isn't afraid to play a physical game*” and can handle the rigors of board battles. At 6'0” and ~185 lbs, he's got a decent frame for a 19-year-old and doesn't mind taking contact. He showed he can hold his own against grown men in the KHL physically.
- **Strengths: Reliability and work ethic.** Ilyin already plays a North American-style simple game – he's the kind of prospect who does a lot of things right but under the radar. His experience playing an entire KHL season at 18/19 (29 points in 65 games) is impressive for a mid-round pick, suggesting a high level of maturity. He's been called a potential “*steal*” from that 2023 draft because he fell to the 5th round despite already competing at a pro level. His willingness to go to the dirty areas and support his linemates makes him a complementary player who could fit various line assignments.

- **Development Concerns: Skating and limited upside.** As mentioned, he must continue to improve his skating to have an NHL shot – the pace of the NHL would challenge him right now. He doesn't have the dynamic offensive skill that jumps out; there's a risk he tops out as a player who is good at everything in lower levels but doesn't have one standout trait for the NHL. Essentially, he could become a "tweener" if the offense doesn't translate. Also, the Russia-to-NHL factor: there's always uncertainty about if/when a Russian prospect will come over. The Penguins will have to sign him and bring him to North America at some point to truly test him against peers. Until then, he's somewhat of a wildcard.
- **Projected Ceiling & Role:** Profiles as a **bottom-six NHL winger** who can contribute in a checking role while chipping in some offense. If his skating takes a leap and his offense continues to progress, he could be a reliable third-liner who gives you 10-15 goals and solid defensive play – a complimentary piece on a energy line. More conservatively, he could be a fourth-line grinder. Given his age and improvement curve, there's still room for growth, but projecting him as anything more than a supporting cast player would be optimistic.
- **NHL ETA:** Not imminent. Ilyin will likely play another year or two in Russia. The Penguins won't rush to bring him over until he's ready to compete for an NHL spot. A reasonable timeline might be **2026-27** for him to come to North America (around age 21-22) and spend a season adjusting in the AHL. So an NHL debut is perhaps **2-3 years away**, depending on his development and contract situation.

## High-Upside Youth and Steals in the System

Beyond the top ten, Pittsburgh has a few notable *teenage standouts*, *high-upside swings*, and *late-round steals* to highlight:

- **Mac Swanson (C, Age 19) – 2024 7th Round (207th overall):** Swanson is a pint-sized playmaker (5'8", 167) who lit up the USHL and could be the "*steal of the Penguins' 2024 draft class*". He put up 77 points in 55 games last year for Fargo, leading the USHL in assists and winning Forward of the Year and playoff MVP. His size pushed him to Round 7, but he is "*highly skilled and highly intelligent*" by all accounts. Swanson's vision and hockey IQ are elite – every pass is crisp and on target. The catch is his skating needs to be a top strength to overcome his stature, and he's working on that. If he can add a step and strength over the next few NCAA seasons (he's headed to the University of North Dakota), he has legitimate long-shot upside as a dynamic playmaker. At worst, his selection at 207th already provides great value given his junior résumé.
- **Tanner Howe (LW, Age 18) – 2024 2nd Round:** Mentioned above in the top 10, Howe qualifies as both a teenage standout and a high-upside swing. He was a point-per-game player in the



WHL and showed he could produce even after Connor Bedard left Regina . Howe's combination of skill and feistiness (he's been likened to a "*young Brad Marchand*" type agitator) makes him a boom-or-bust prospect . If his skating and size don't hold him back, he could far outplay his draft slot. The Penguins took a calculated swing on his upside and competitive edge.

- **Harrison Brunicke (RHD, Age 18) – 2024 2nd Round:** Also in the top 10 above, Brunicke was Pittsburgh's first pick of the 2024 draft at 44th overall and is a teenage standout on defense. He was tracking as a potential late first-rounder during his draft year , so getting him in the mid-second could prove a coup. He's already showing advanced defensive play and has the frame and smarts to develop into a top-four blueliner, which addresses a major organizational need. The fact that he was immediately signed and even briefly joined the AHL team suggests management is very high on him and sees a clear path to the NHL with proper development .
- **Sergei Murashov (G, Age 21) – 2022 4th Round:** Murashov is a goalie prospect sometimes overlooked due to Blomqvist's presence, but he has intriguing upside. Drafted 118th overall, he has sharp reflexes and strong fundamentals, and McKeen's scouts even noted he "*could emerge as a reliable NHL starter*" with further development . He's signed and expected to begin his North American journey in the AHL/ECHL. Given the variability of goalie development, Murashov is a longer-term project, but having a second potential starter in the system is a luxury for Pittsburgh. He's a **high-upside swing** at a position where the Penguins have not traditionally had much depth.
- **Mikhail Ilyin (RW, Age 19) – 2023 5th Round:** Ilyin, profiled at #10, is worth reiterating as a potential **late-round steal**. Getting nearly 30 points in the KHL at 18 years old is no small feat . His game might not have top-line upside, but his early success against men hints that he could have an NHL future as a reliable role player. For a 5th-round pick, that's excellent value. The key will be monitoring his desire to come to North America and continue improving his skating. If he does, Pittsburgh might have found a solid NHL forward in the late rounds.

Other names to monitor include **Emil Pieniniemi (LHD, 19)**, a 2023 third-rounder known for his mobility and offensive lean from the back end (he'll play in the CHL this year to adapt to the North American game), and **Kalle Kangas (LHD, 19)**, a 6'4" 2023 7th-round pick with raw tools (size and skating) who is a long-term project on defense. Additionally, 2022 picks **Zam Plante (C/W, 19)** and **Luke Devlin (C, 20)** are in the NCAA and have flashed skill in junior; they represent longer-term developmental swings that could pay off with patience. While these prospects are not blue-chips, they each address a need for speed, skill, or size in the pipeline and were picked with an eye on upside.

## Organizational Pipeline Gaps & Needs

Despite the recent improvements, the Penguins' prospect pool still has some **notable gaps** and areas of concern:

- **No Elite Forward Talent:** The system lacks a *surefire top-line forward*. Outside of McGroarty – who himself projects more as a very good complementary piece than a franchise cornerstone – there isn't a can't-miss offensive star in the pipeline. As one analysis noted, "*outside of McGroarty and, perhaps, Koivunen, [the Pens] don't have many scoring options*" in the system. The absence of a high-end game-breaker means the Penguins might struggle to replace the scoring of the Crosby/Malkin/Guentzel era internally. They have several potential top-six **candidates** (McGroarty, Koivunen, maybe Howe or Lucius down the road), but none that project as a true first-line driver or a future All-Star.
- **Lack of Center Depth at the Top:** While the prospect pool has a decent number of centers or center-capable forwards (Ponomarev, Broz, Swanson, Devlin, etc.), none profile as a future *top-6 center*. The Penguins traded away their one recent blue-chip center prospect (Brayden Yager) in the McGroarty deal. McGroarty can play center, but many see him sticking at wing in the pros. This leaves a potential succession gap down the middle. There's no obvious heir to eventually take a top-two center role when Crosby and Malkin age out. This is an organizational blind spot – the pipeline could use a high-potential center to groom as a future top-6 pivot.
- **Unproven Top-Pair Defense Potential:** On defense, the addition of Pickering and Brunicke has bolstered what was a very thin group, but it's still fair to say the Pens lack a *clear future #1 or #2 defenseman* in the system. Pickering has tools but also significant question marks to reach top-pair level. Brunicke looks very promising as a shutdown guy, but likely as a supporting piece, not a do-it-all elite defenseman. Beyond those two, depth drops off – other D prospects (Pieniniemi, Kangas, Laatsch, etc.) are long shots or project as specialists. In short, there's no surefire future **top-4** defenseman pipeline beyond Pickering (and he's not guaranteed). The system could use more high-ceiling defense prospects, particularly ones who can run a power play or generate offense, as that role is not clearly filled by anyone currently.
- **Immediate NHL Help:** Another gap is the lack of NHL-ready prospects who can help the aging core *right now*. Many of the top prospects are 18-20 years old and a few years away. The more "seasoned" prospects (Ponomarev, Puustinen, Hallander types) project as role players. This means if the Penguins want to boost their lineup in the short term, the farm may not provide much beyond perhaps McGroarty or Ponomarev as a bottom-six addition in the next year. This gap is a natural consequence of having had a weak system – it takes time for the younger talent to mature. But it's worth noting given the team's intent to contend while Crosby and Malkin are still around.
- **Strengths in Goal (and Relative Depth):** On a positive note – which highlights other gaps by

contrast – goaltending is comparatively well-stocked. **Goaltending** might be the strongest position group in the pipeline now (two legitimate prospects in Blomqvist and Murashov), whereas many teams have zero. By contrast, wing has some skill but not elite talent, center is shallow at the high end, and defense, while improved, is middle-of-the-pack at best. In summary, the pipeline is **balanced** position-wise (there’s at least someone at each position to pin hopes on), but lacks the high-end quality at forward and defense that truly strong farm systems boast.

- **Physical/Fast Wingers:** Another minor gap – while the Pens have added some grit and speed in guys like McGroarty, Howe, and Lucius, they don’t have a lot of *big, power forwards* aside from McGroarty. Many forward prospects are under 6’0” or not particularly heavy. This isn’t a critical flaw, but it’s something the team has started to address (McGroarty fills it somewhat). In the modern game it’s not a huge issue, but the pipeline could use more blend of size and skill on the wings, as a lot of their forward prospects skew towards “skilled but not large.”

In summary, the Penguins still **need more top-of-the-line talent**, especially at center and on defense. The prospect pool is deeper than it was a couple years ago, but it’s built largely on potential middle-six forwards and middle-pair defensemen. To truly secure the next core, Pittsburgh will likely have to either draft and develop an elite talent (which is hard without high picks) or trade for one. The current management seems aware of this and has been acquiring as much talent as possible to increase the odds of someone breaking out beyond expectations.

## Overall Health and Direction of the Farm System

Overall, Pittsburgh’s farm system has transformed from one of the league’s weakest into a **respectable, if still mid-tier, pipeline**. As of late 2024, independent rankings placed the Penguins around 19th–20th in the NHL for prospect talent – a significant improvement after years near the bottom. This upward trend is a direct result of strategic decisions under President/GM Kyle Dubas and his staff in the past year:

- **Infusion of Talent via Trades:** Dubas recognized the barren state of the prospect pool and has leveraged trades to restock it. The bold trade of Jake Guentzel in March 2024 brought in three quality forward prospects (Koivunen, Ponomarev, Lucius) plus a 1st-round pick . Swapping 2023 first-rounder Braden Yager for Rutger McGroarty was another unconventional move that turned one good prospect into a slightly more NHL-ready one . These moves injected immediate top-end talent into the system and accelerated the rebuild of the pipeline. It’s unusual for the Penguins to *acquire* prospects in trades (rather than trading them away), and it signals a philosophical shift – management is preparing for the future more proactively, even at the cost

of a current asset like Guentzel.

- **Drafting Philosophy – Swinging on Upside:** With Dubas (and amateur scouting director Nick Pryor, plus influence from Dubas’ Toronto experience with scout Wes Clark ), the Penguins have started to take bigger swings in the draft. For 2024, despite missing a first-rounder, they grabbed high-upside players like Brunicke and Howe in the second round – players who “*many believed could have gone in the first*” or who bring an element of surprise . In late rounds, they targeted skill (Swanson) and unique traits (Kangas’ size, Foster’s speed). This is a departure from some safe, low-ceiling picks of previous regimes. It shows an understanding that to make up for a lack of high picks, you sometimes have to gamble on talent in later rounds. Not all these swings will hit, but it’s the right approach for a team that needs to uncover gems. Early returns, like Swanson being touted as a steal, are encouraging .
- **Development Focus:** The organization has also beefed up development, with folks like Tom Kostopoulos (Player Development) and bringing in personnel like Matt Cullen (who had a role with Fargo in USHL) to mentor kids . We see prospects like Sam Poulin being handled patiently through personal challenges, and no rush on players like Pickering or Blomqvist – they are given time at the proper level. The AHL team in Wilkes-Barre got younger and more prospect-heavy last year, which is a deliberate shift to prioritize development over AHL veteran fillers. The results have been positive (e.g., Blomqvist thriving as a rookie, young players making playoffs in WBS). There’s a sense that the **development pipeline is being repaired**, though it will take time to really bear fruit at the NHL level.
- **Balanced Approach – Contend vs Rebuild:** Under Dubas, the Penguins are attempting a tricky balance: **contending now** (as evidenced by trading for Erik Karlsson in 2023 and keeping the NHL roster competitive) while **rebuilding the prospect base**. The farm’s overall health is better, but it’s fair to say it likely won’t produce stars in time to significantly impact the tail of the Crosby/Malkin era. As Daily Faceoff put it, “*most of the team’s farm system won’t be ready to make a significant impact while the current core is still in charge*” . This is an important context – the improvement in the system is geared more toward the post-Crosby future. In the short term, the farm can maybe supplement the roster (cheaper depth, a young goalie option, etc.), but it’s not going to drive a Cup run next year.
- **Positive Trajectory:** For the first time in a while, there is legitimate optimism about prospects in Pittsburgh. The system is “*climbing the ranks... on a positive trajectory*” . It’s no longer a punchline or “last in the league” situation. Prospects like McGroarty, Pickering, and Blomqvist give the team some pieces to build around. The influx from the Guentzel trade signals a partial youth movement. And with all their top prospects, the emphasis is on **upside and character** – these guys (McGroarty, Brunicke, Howe, etc.) are noted for high compete and leadership qualities in addition to talent. That bodes well for the culture of the pipeline.

In **summary**, the Penguins' farm system under current management is on the mend and pointing in the right direction. It still lacks star power and remains a work-in-progress (likely mid-tier among NHL teams), but the strategy to rejuvenate it is evident and already yielding some results. The team is trying to navigate the end of an era while planting seeds for the next one – a challenging task. The overall health is improved – there's finally some depth and a few potential impact players – but there's more work to do. As an executive or coach would appreciate: the cupboards aren't fully stocked yet, but at least now there are ingredients to work with, and a plan in place to keep adding more. The Penguins are no longer completely **“bankrupt” in prospect capital**, and if they stay the course, they should avoid the franchise collapse that many feared would follow the Crosby era. The system's direction is positive; it just needs time and perhaps another year or two of focused drafting (and maybe a bit of luck) to produce the next generation of Penguins contributors .

Ultimately, the Penguins' prospect pool is **honest** – there are a handful of NHL players here, some potentially good ones, but it's not overflowing with blue-chippers. The current management deserves credit for recognizing this and acting decisively to address it. In the coming years, we'll see if those moves were enough to bridge the gap between the present and future of the franchise. For now, the arrow is pointing up, but the real test will be how many of these young players can take the next step and become impact NHLers. The groundwork has been laid; it's on the development staff and the prospects themselves to realize that potential.

**Sources:** McKeen's Hockey , Pittsburgh Post-Gazette , American Hockey League News , Daily Faceoff , DK Pittsburgh Sports , Pittsburgh Hockey Now .