

Pittsburgh Penguins Prospect Pipeline Analysis

The Penguins have engineered a remarkable turnaround in their farm system under GM Kyle Dubas, climbing from bottom-5 to 19th overall in organizational rankings. After trading away first-round picks 8 times in 12 years, the organization now holds 15 picks in the top three rounds over the next three drafts, creating their deepest prospect pool in nearly two decades.

Top 10+ Prospects by NHL Potential

1. Rutger McGroarty, LW (Age 20)

2022 1st Round (14th overall, WPG) | WBS Penguins (AHL)

Skating: McGroarty's primary developmental hurdle. His stride can be choppy and short, limiting power and acceleration. While his first-step acceleration is strong, his top-end speed remains average. Stride mechanics need refinement for better efficiency.

Hockey IQ: Elite vision and game awareness. Makes intelligent decisions with the puck, reads plays exceptionally well, and positions himself smartly in all zones. **Strong anticipation skills** and ability to find teammates in dangerous areas.

Compete Level: Outstanding. Described as having "abundance of lower-body strength" and being "nearly impossible to box out" in net-front battles. **Relentless motor** with elite work ethic that maintains intensity throughout games.

Shot: Heavy, accurate release from multiple positions. Dangerous from both perimeter and inside locations. **Excellent finishing ability** around the net with soft hands for deflections and rebounds.

Puck Skills: Strong puck protection with dexterous hands. Skilled at making plays off boards into middle ice. Uses delays and cutbacks deceptively.

Defensive Acumen: Solid two-way player who competes hard defensively. Uses size and positioning effectively in own zone. Responsible without the puck.

Physicality: 6'0", 205 lbs. Uses frame effectively, particularly in cycle game and net-front battles. Strong along boards and willing to engage physically.

Strengths: Net-front presence, power forward skills, leadership qualities, goal-scoring ability, work ethic

Concerns: Skating mechanics need improvement, game-to-game consistency

Ceiling: Top-6 NHL winger with power-play role (Anders Lee comparable)

Timeline: NHL-ready within 1-2 years

2024-25 Performance: 39 points (14G, 25A) in 60 AHL games; 3 points in 8 NHL games

2. Ville Koivunen, LW (Age 21)

2021 3rd Round (51st overall, CAR) | WBS Penguins (AHL)

Skating: Good mobility and speed with effective transition play. Can create separation from defenders.

Hockey IQ: Excellent playmaking ability and offensive instincts. **Strong vision and anticipation** allow him to find open teammates and create scoring chances.

Compete Level: High compete level with relentless work ethic. Battles hard for pucks and goes to dirty areas consistently.

Shot: Legitimate shooting threat from anywhere. Reached 20-goal plateau in AHL with quick, accurate release.

Puck Skills: Creative with the puck and skilled handler who makes plays in tight spaces. **Good passing ability** and offensive creativity.

Defensive Acumen: Defensive awareness and physicality need refinement for NHL level. Working on two-way consistency.

Physicality: Willing to battle in corners and along boards. Shows determination in puck battles.

Strengths: Offensive creativity, goal-scoring ability, playmaking skills, work ethic

Concerns: Adaptation to NHL pace, defensive consistency

Ceiling: Top-6 forward with offensive upside

Timeline: NHL-ready now, expected to crack lineup in 2025-26

2024-25 Performance: 56 points (21G, 35A) in 63 AHL games; named to AHL All-Rookie Team; 7 points in 8 NHL games

3. Joel Blomqvist, G (Age 22)

2020 2nd Round (52nd overall) | Pittsburgh Penguins (NHL)

Technical Skills: Aggressive netminder who plays far out of crease to cut angles. **Good technical foundation** with fluid crease movement. Can get lost in high-pressure scrambles.

Hockey IQ: Calm demeanor under pressure with good positional awareness and angle play.

Compete Level: Strong mental toughness and composure. Consistent performance level.

Athleticism: Good athleticism and reflexes with **sharp reflexes and solid positioning**.

Strengths: Angle play, consistency, mental toughness, regular season AHL success

Concerns: High-pressure NHL situations, adjustment to NHL pace

Ceiling: NHL backup with potential starter upside

Timeline: Ready for NHL backup role now

2024-25 Performance: 15 NHL games (4-9-1, 3.81 GAA, .885 SV%); 18 AHL games (8-7-4, 2.84 GAA, .914 SV%)

4. Owen Pickering, D (Age 20)

2022 1st Round (21st overall) | WBS Penguins (AHL)

Skating: Excellent straight-line speed and acceleration for 6'5" frame. **Strong edgework and lateral agility**. Some work needed on backwards skating and crossovers.

Hockey IQ: Above-average hockey sense with good play-reading ability. Makes smart decisions in all zones most of the time.

Compete Level: Strong work ethic and determination. Willing to engage physically despite needing to add strength.

Shot: Outstanding shot with tremendous power on slapshot and one-timer. **Keeps shots low and accurate.** Adjusts well to off-target passes.

Puck Skills: Core strength in puck-handling. Deceptive with cutbacks and changes of pace. Good breakout passes but **inconsistent passing accuracy.**

Defensive Acumen: High hockey IQ defensively with active stick work. Good positioning but needs to use size more effectively.

Physicality: 6'5", 200 lbs but still growing into frame. **Needs to add 15-20 lbs of muscle.**

Strengths: Size-mobility combination, shot power, puck-handling, hockey IQ

Concerns: Inconsistent passing, needs strength, defensive positioning

Ceiling: Top-4 defenseman with power-play upside

Timeline: 2-3 years from NHL readiness

2024-25 Performance: 13 points (2G, 11A) in 47 AHL games; 3 points in 25 NHL games; AHL All-Star

5. Harrison Brunicke, D (Age 18)

2024 2nd Round (44th overall) | Kamloops Blazers (WHL)

Skating: Smooth, fluid skating with **good mobility for 6'3" frame.** Strong edgework and lateral agility.

Hockey IQ: Advanced awareness and play-reading ability. **Good anticipation and positioning.** Scans well and makes quick decisions.

Compete Level: Strong competitor with good work ethic. Willing to engage physically and step up for teammates.

Shot: Strong shot from the point with power-play utility.

Puck Skills: Heady puck-moving ability with creativity. Can be deceptive with stickhandling but **occasional turnover issues.**

Defensive Acumen: **Excellent gap control and positioning.** Active stick work and good body positioning.

Physicality: 6'3", 187 lbs. Uses size well but needs to add strength.

Strengths: Size-mobility combo, defensive awareness, puck-moving ability

Concerns: Inconsistent puck management, needs strength

Ceiling: Top-4 defenseman with two-way upside

Timeline: 2-3 years from NHL readiness

2024-25 Performance: 30 points (5G, 25A) in 41 WHL games; impressed in NHL training camp

6. Vasily Ponomarev, F (Age 22)

2020 2nd Round (53rd overall, CAR) | WBS Penguins (AHL)

Skating: Good speed and mobility. Effective in transition and creates plays off the rush.

Hockey IQ: Smart two-way player with good decision-making. Reads situations well and makes appropriate plays.

Compete Level: Strong motor and work ethic. Doesn't give up on plays and creates second/third opportunities.

Shot: Solid shooting ability with good accuracy from various positions.

Puck Skills: Good puck protection and handling skills. Skilled at making plays in traffic.

Defensive Acumen: Responsible two-way player with strong defensive awareness and positioning.

Physicality: 5'10", 180 lbs. Uses body well despite average size.

Strengths: Two-way play, consistency, work ethic, versatility

Concerns: Offensive ceiling questions, size limitations

Ceiling: Bottom-6 forward with penalty-killing ability

Timeline: NHL-ready now

2024-25 Performance: 41 points (15G, 26A) in 55 AHL games; 0 points in 7 NHL games

7. Tanner Howe, F (Age 18)

2024 2nd Round (46th overall) | Calgary Hitmen (WHL)

Skating: Excellent speed and agility with quick first step and ability to change direction. Elusive in tight spaces.

Hockey IQ: Advanced hockey IQ with excellent vision. **Makes smart plays under pressure** and reads situations well.

Compete Level: High compete level despite smaller stature. Willing to go to dirty areas and battle for pucks.

Shot: Quick, accurate release with good power. Can shoot effectively from distance.

Puck Skills: **Creative playmaker** with precise passing ability. Can thread needle passes and make plays in traffic.

Defensive Acumen: Responsible two-way player who works hard defensively.

Physicality: 5'10", 180 lbs. Compensates for size with speed, tenacity, and willingness to battle.

Strengths: Speed, playmaking, hockey IQ, compete level, shot accuracy

Concerns: Size limitations, strength development needed

Ceiling: Top-6 forward with offensive upside

Timeline: 2-3 years from NHL readiness

2024-25 Performance: 46 points (18G, 28A) in 47 WHL games; underwent ACL surgery (9-month recovery)

8. Tristan Broz, C (Age 22)

2021 2nd Round (58th overall) | WBS Penguins (AHL)

Skating: Improved footspeed since moving to center. Uses motion to increase game speed.

Hockey IQ: **Smart, cerebral player** with exceptional vision and anticipation. Reads plays well.

Compete Level: High motor player who attacks hard and doesn't give up on plays.

Shot: Accurate shot that makes him dangerous from the slot. Can finish plays effectively.

Puck Skills: **Skilled playmaker** with quick hands who can make plays in traffic.

Defensive Acumen: Responsible defender using active stick and positioning to disrupt cycles.

Physicality: 6'0", 183 lbs. Willing to pay the price in front of the net.

Strengths: Playmaking vision, compete level, two-way play, "shark-like" in offensive zone

Concerns: Consistency, size for center position

Ceiling: Middle-6 forward

Timeline: Could be NHL-ready soon

2024-25 Performance: 39 points (14G, 25A) in 60 AHL games; 3 points in 8 NHL games

9. Emil Pieniniemi, D (Age 19)

2023 3rd Round (91st overall) | Kingston Frontenacs (OHL)

Skating: Agile with good mobility. Can log significant minutes.

Hockey IQ: **Sharp playmaking ability** and good game-reading skills.

Compete Level: Aggressive pincher who gaps up early. Not afraid of physical engagement.

Shot: Flashes of strong shot from the point.

Puck Skills: **Quick hands and sharp playmaking** with creative offensive instincts.

Defensive Acumen: Solid box-out game. Guides opponents toward boards before engaging physically.

Physicality: 6'2", 176 lbs. Pins up opponents along boards effectively.

Strengths: Playmaking ability, offensive instincts, mobility

Concerns: Needs to add strength, consistency

Ceiling: Top-4 defenseman with two-way ability

Timeline: 2-3 years from NHL readiness

2024-25 Performance: 60 points (10G, 50A) in 60 OHL games; led team defensemen in assists;

World Junior participant

10. Mikhail Ilyin, LW (Age 20)

2023 5th Round (142nd overall) | Severstal Cherepovets (KHL)

Skating: Improved significantly with better stride mechanics and lower posture than draft year.

Hockey IQ: Outstanding hockey IQ described as his best asset. Sees plays exceptionally well.

Compete Level: Doesn't give up on plays. Stays engaged and driven.

Shot: Improved release that can score from distance.

Puck Skills: Deceptive stickhandling and passing with "Kucherov-level deception" in plays.

Defensive Acumen: Applies details well. Rotates properly and drives inside to support teammates.

Physicality: 6'3", 191 lbs. Uses size effectively for puck protection.

Strengths: Elite hockey IQ, size-skill combination, professional experience

Concerns: Adaptation to North American hockey, consistency

Ceiling: Top-nine forward with potential for top-6 role

Timeline: 2-3 years from NHL readiness

2024-25 Performance: 30 points (7G, 23A) in 64 KHL games (one of only 8 teenagers in KHL history with 30+ points)

Notable Additional Prospects

11. Cruz Lucius, F (Age 21)

2022 4th Round (124th overall, CAR) | Arizona State (NCAA)

Projection: Middle-6 forward with speed and skill; 68 points in 70 NCAA games

12. Zam Plante, C (Age 20)

2022 5th Round (150th overall) | Minnesota-Duluth (NCAA)

Projection: Bottom-6 forward with cerebral game; 30 points in 64 NCAA games

13. Sergei Murashov, G (Age 21)

2021 4th Round (118th overall) | WBS Penguins (AHL)

Projection: Solid backup potential; strong positioning and reflexes

Teenage Standouts

Harrison Brunicke (18) nearly made the NHL roster out of training camp and is tracking ahead of schedule. His combination of size, mobility, and defensive awareness makes him a potential impact player.

Tanner Howe (18) possesses elite speed and playmaking ability despite size concerns. His competitive level and hockey IQ suggest he could exceed expectations.

Emil Pieniniemi (19) had a breakout season with 60 points in 60 OHL games and represented Finland at World Juniors, showing excellent development trajectory.

High-Upside Swings and Late-Round Steals

Mikhail Ilyin (5th round, 2023) represents the highest-upside swing in the system. His **30 points in 64 KHL games** as a teenager places him among elite historical company. At 6'3" with exceptional hockey IQ, he has legitimate top-6 potential.

Finn Harding (7th round, 2024) set a franchise record with 48 assists and earned a 3-year ELC, showing exceptional value for his draft position.

Mac Swanson (7th round, 2024) was the USHL Player of the Year with elite vision and playmaking ability, though size concerns (5'7") present challenges.

Organizational Pipeline Analysis

Critical Gaps

Center Depth: The organization faces a critical shortage of future top-6 centers. With Malkin expected to retire after 2025-26, the pipeline lacks a clear successor. Current depth is described as "so thin that a Fruit Roll-Up seems comparatively hearty."

Left-Side Defense: GM Kyle Dubas has specifically identified this as "a major area of focus." Current options (Ryan Graves, Ryan Shea, Vladislav Kolyachonok) are insufficient for top-4 roles.

Top-End Talent: While the system has improved dramatically, it lacks elite, franchise-changing prospects compared to top-tier organizations.

System Strengths

Defensive Depth: Strong pipeline with Pickering, Brunicke, Pieniniemi, and Kangas providing quality options.

Goaltending: Blomqvist leads a solid group with Murashov and prospect Gabriel D'Aigle providing depth.

International Talent: Strong Finnish contingent with several World Junior participants demonstrates quality scouting.

Farm System Health and Direction

Under GM Kyle Dubas, the Penguins have engineered a remarkable turnaround from bottom-5 to 19th overall in organizational rankings. The system now features its most promising collection of young talent in nearly two decades.

Management Philosophy: Dubas has accumulated draft picks "urgently," holding 15 picks in the top three rounds over the next three drafts. His strategy emphasizes skill over size, following the "next Jake Guentzel" model.

Development Timeline: Most prospects are 2-4 years from NHL impact, creating a challenging balance between the aging core's competitive window and prospect readiness. The organization is using accumulated assets to acquire NHL-ready young players to bridge this gap.

Competitive Outlook: The prospect pipeline provides a strong foundation for the post-Crosby era, though the organization faces a critical 2-4 year window where veteran decline may outpace prospect development.

This rebuilt farm system represents the Penguins' best hope for sustained success beyond their current core, with multiple prospects possessing legitimate NHL potential and several tracking ahead of expectations.