

CONFIDENTIAL REPORT: PITTSBURGH PENGUINS U23 PROSPECT ASSESSMENT

**TO: HOCKEY OPERATIONS

FROM: PRO SCOUTING DEPARTMENT

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SUBJECT: COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF U23 PROSPECT PIPELINE**

Introduction: The Dubas Doctrine and the Rebirth of a Pipeline

This report provides a comprehensive assessment of the Pittsburgh Penguins' prospect pipeline, focusing on players under 23 years of age who have not yet established themselves as full-time National Hockey League regulars. The state of the system has undergone a radical transformation over the past 24 months, shifting from a consensus bottom-tier pool to one that now possesses legitimate depth, high-end talent at key positions, and a clear strategic direction. This evolution is the direct result of a deliberate, multi-pronged strategy implemented by the current front office. After years of "win-now" moves that left the cupboards bare, the organizational philosophy has pivoted. The approach, which can be termed the "Dubas Doctrine," is built on two parallel tracks. The first track involved the aggressive *acquisition* of near-NHL-ready talent by leveraging established roster players in trades. The deals involving Jake Guentzel, Marcus Pettersson, and Brayden Yager were not merely asset-shedding moves; they were strategic injections of talent that immediately raised the system's ceiling, bringing in foundational pieces like Ville Koivunen, Rutger McGroarty, and Melvin Fernstrom.¹

The second track has been the relentless *accumulation* of draft capital to build a sustainable, long-term talent base. The organization now holds 29 draft picks over the next three years (2026-2028), including a remarkable 17 selections in the first three rounds.⁴ This stockpile was deployed to great effect in the 2025 NHL Draft, where the team made 13 selections—the most visible sign of the

commitment to rebuilding from within.⁵

Underpinning this strategy is a clear drafting philosophy that prioritizes specific traits: competitiveness, intelligence, and hockey sense.⁷ This represents a philosophical shift, learned from past experiences, that now values a player's impact on winning and their on-ice processing ability as paramount attributes. The 2025 draft class, with its blend of high-IQ playmakers and high-motor, character-driven players, is the first full embodiment of this doctrine. The system is no longer being built by chance; it is being constructed with a clear architectural vision aimed at supporting the current veteran core while simultaneously forging the next one, attempting to thread the needle between immediate contention and future sustainability.

Section 1: The New Guard - Ranking the Penguins' Future Core

The following rankings evaluate the top 12 prospects in the Penguins' system under 23 years of age, ordered by their projected long-term NHL ceiling and overall potential impact. This ranking prioritizes high-end upside over immediate NHL readiness.

Table 1: 2025-26 Penguins U23 Prospect Power Rankings

Rank	Name	Position	Age	Current Team/ League	Projected Ceiling	Likely Role
1	Ville Koivunen	LW	22	W-B/Scranton (AHL)	Top-Line Playmaking Winger	Top-6 Playm Winge
2	Owen Pickering	LHD	21	W-B/Scranton (AHL)	Top-Pair Two- Way Defenseman	Top-4 Way Defen
3	Harrison Brunicke	RHD	19	Kamloops (WHL)	Top-Pair Two- Way Defenseman	Top-4 Way Defen
4	Rutger McGroarty	LW	21	W-B/Scranton (AHL)	Top-6 Power Forward	Middl Power
5	Benjamin Kindel	C/RW	18	Calgary (WHL)	1st-Line Playmaking Center	Top-6 Playm Forwa

6	Joel Blomqvist	G	23	W-B/Scranton (AHL)	Starting Goaltender	1A/1E Goalte
7	Bill Zonnon	C/LW	18	Blainville-Boisbriand (QMJHL)	Middle-6 Two-Way Forward	High-l Botto Forwa
8	Melvin Fernstrom	RW	19	Örebro HK (SHL)	Top-6 Scoring Winger	Middle Scoring
9	Tristan Broz	C/W	22	W-B/Scranton (AHL)	Middle-6 Two-Way Center	3rd Li Forwa
10	Charlie Trethewey	RHD	18	Boston Univ. (NCAA)	Top-4 Offensive Defenseman	#5/6 Movin Defen
11	Sergei Murashov	G	21	W-B/Scranton (AHL)	Starting Goaltender	High-l Backu
12	Will Horcoff	C	18	Univ. of Michigan (NCAA)	Top-6 Power Forward	Middle Power

1.1 Ville Koivunen

●* **Player Vitals:** Left Wing, 22, W-B/Scranton (AHL), Acquired in trade from Carolina (2024)

●* **Scouting Breakdown:**

○* **Skating:** The most significant question mark in his profile. Koivunen is not an explosive or powerful skater, lacking a dynamic first step. His game is built on anticipation rather than pure speed. While his agility is sufficient, his top-end gear will need to improve to consistently create separation against NHL defenders.⁹

○* **Hockey IQ:** Elite. This is his carrying tool. Koivunen processes the game at an exceptionally high level, allowing him to anticipate plays, find soft ice, and exploit passing seams before they appear to close.⁹ His confidence and on-ice "swagger" are evident in his decision-making; he rarely panics under pressure.

○* **Compete Level:** Deceptively high. He doesn't play an overtly physical game, but he is smart and tenacious on the puck, using his stick and positioning to win battles rather than brute force.

- * **Shot:** More of a facilitator than a shooter, but he possesses a quick, accurate release. He understands how to use a shot to create rebounds or to finish plays in tight spaces.
- * **Puck Skills:** High-end. He is a creative and precise playmaker. His hands are soft, allowing him to handle difficult passes and distribute the puck effectively through traffic. His brief NHL stint showcased his ability to set up elite players, demonstrating instant chemistry with Sidney Crosby.
- * **Defensive Acumen:** Solid and intelligent. His high IQ translates to the defensive zone, where he reads plays well, gets his stick in lanes, and understands his positional responsibilities.
- * **Physicality:** Below average. At 6-foot-0 and 172 pounds, he needs to add significant strength to handle the physical demands of the NHL, particularly along the boards and in net-front battles.¹⁰
- * **Strengths & Standout Traits:** His primary strengths are his elite hockey sense and playmaking vision. He was a top rookie scorer in the AHL (6th in goals, 3rd in points) and immediately looked comfortable as a distributor on an NHL top line.
- * **Red Flags & Developmental Hurdles:** The primary red flag is his skating. If it doesn't improve, it could limit his ability to translate his elite brain to the faster-paced NHL game, potentially capping him as a power-play specialist rather than an even-strength driver.⁹ Adding strength is also critical.
- * **Projected Ceiling & Likely Role:** Ceiling is a first-line playmaking winger. His likely role is a productive top-six winger who can run a top power-play unit. He has the potential to be a consistent 60-70 point player.
- * **NHL Readiness:** NHL-ready. He should be in the Penguins' top-six to start the 2025-26 season and is unlikely to see the AHL again.

1.2 Owen Pickering

- * **Player Vitals:** Left Defense, 21, W-B/Scranton (AHL), 2022 Draft (1st Round, 21st overall)
- * **Scouting Breakdown:**
 - * **Skating:** Excellent for his size. At 6-foot-5, his mobility is a standout tool. He possesses a fluid stride and good agility, allowing him to close gaps effectively on the rush and transition the puck up ice with confidence.¹⁰ He has worked on becoming more explosive.⁹
 - * **Hockey IQ:** High. He makes mature decisions with the puck and shows good defensive awareness. He had a strong showing in NHL training camp, looking comfortable playing top-pairing minutes alongside Kris Letang, which speaks to his ability to process the game at a high level.
 - * **Compete Level:** Strong. He is not an overly aggressive player but competes hard in his own end and uses his size and reach to his advantage in puck battles.
 - * **Shot:** A developing tool. He has a hard shot but is not yet a primary offensive weapon from

the point. His focus is more on making a good first pass.

- * **Puck Skills:** Solid and efficient. He is a capable puck-mover who makes a strong, crisp first pass to exit the zone. He is not a high-risk, high-reward puck carrier but can skate the puck out of trouble when necessary.¹⁰

- * **Defensive Acumen:** His calling card. He uses his massive frame and long reach to disrupt plays, maintain tight gaps, and angle attackers to the outside. His positioning is sound, and he projects as a reliable defender against top competition.

- * **Physicality:** Good and improving. He has added weight to his 6-foot-5 frame (now listed at 200 lbs) and is learning to use his size more effectively at the pro level.

- * **Strengths & Standout Traits:** His combination of size and mobility is rare and highly coveted. He is a two-way defenseman who projects to be effective in all situations. His performance in the AHL, where he was an All-Star, and his strong NHL camp showing indicate he is on the cusp of being a full-time contributor.

- * **Red Flags & Developmental Hurdles:** The main hurdle has been staying healthy, as injuries kept him out of his first two NHL training camps.⁹ He also needs to continue to add strength to his large frame to handle the rigors of an 82-game NHL season and consistently win battles against elite forwards.

- * **Projected Ceiling & Likely Role:** Ceiling is a legitimate top-pair, all-situations defenseman. His likely role is a very effective top-four, two-way defenseman who can log heavy minutes.

- * **NHL Readiness:** NHL-ready. Given the Penguins' needs on the left side of their defense, he is expected to secure a full-time NHL role in the 2025-26 season.

1.3 Harrison Brunicke

- * **Player Vitals:** Right Defense, 19, Kamloops Blazers (WHL), 2024 Draft (2nd Round, 44th overall)

- * **Scouting Breakdown:**

- * **Skating:** Exceptionally smooth and fluid for a 6-foot-3 defenseman. His mobility is a major asset, allowing him to be effective in transition and defensively.¹¹ He uses his edgework and lateral agility to evade pressure and maintain tight gaps.¹²

- * **Hockey IQ:** High. He is an intelligent, heady player who makes smart decisions on both sides of the puck.¹² He showed tremendous poise for an 18-year-old in NHL preseason and quickly adapted to the AHL level, which points to advanced processing ability.

- * **Compete Level:** High. He is willing to engage physically, plays a hard game, and steps up for his teammates.¹³ His compete level was a standout feature at development camp.¹¹

- * **Shot:** A strong tool. He possesses a hard shot and isn't afraid to use it, firing a "seeing-eye shot" during development camp drills.¹¹ He has the potential to be a threat from the point.

- * **Puck Skills:** Polished and confident. He handles the puck well in tight areas, makes good zone exits, and can join the attack to generate offense.¹³ His puckhandling skills were on full display at development camp.¹¹

- * **Defensive Acumen:** Advanced for his age. He uses his size, reach, and active stick to defend effectively. His gap control is strong, and he reads plays well to break them up.¹²

- * **Physicality:** Good and growing. At 6-foot-3 and now listed around 195-203 pounds, he has the frame to be a physical force. He already plays the body well and engages in battles.¹³

- * **Strengths & Standout Traits:** Brunicke is the complete package for a modern defenseman: size, skating, skill, and smarts. He is the organization's top right-shot defense prospect and was close to making the NHL as an 18-year-old. His rapid adjustment to the AHL at the end of last season was a very promising sign.

- * **Red Flags & Developmental Hurdles:** The biggest challenge is opportunity. The Penguins' right side is currently crowded at the NHL level. His offensive stats in the WHL were somewhat suppressed by playing on a very poor Kamloops team, so his true offensive upside is still being determined.¹²

- * **Projected Ceiling & Likely Role:** Ceiling is a top-pair, two-way defenseman who can contribute in all situations. His likely role is a staple top-four, right-shot defenseman who can move the puck and defend reliably.

- * **NHL Readiness:** 1-2 years. He is eligible for the NHL or to return to junior. A return to the WHL for a dominant season and a starring role on Canada's World Junior team seems like the most prudent path, but he will push for an NHL spot in camp.

1.4 Rutger McGroarty

- * **Player Vitals:** Left Wing, 21, W-B/Scranton (AHL), Acquired in trade from Winnipeg (2025)

- * **Scouting Breakdown:**

- * **Skating:** Average. This is the main area for improvement in his game. He is a powerful skater but lacks explosive acceleration and top-end speed.¹⁴ His stride can be a bit heavy, which could limit his effectiveness in transition at the NHL level.¹⁵

- * **Hockey IQ:** High. He possesses excellent offensive awareness and a great feel for the game. He reads plays well, gets to the right spots, and understands how to play effectively with skilled linemates.¹⁰

- * **Compete Level:** Elite. McGroarty is the quintessential power forward who plays a relentless,

high-motor game. He drives the net hard, engages in board battles, and is a physical force on the forecheck.¹⁰

- * **Shot:** Heavy and effective. He has a quick release and is a scoring threat from the perimeter and in tight. He scored his first NHL goal in a high-pressure 6-on-5 situation, showcasing his finishing ability.

- * **Puck Skills:** Very good. He has soft hands for a power forward, allowing him to make plays in tight spaces and protect the puck effectively down low. He is more of a finisher than a primary playmaker but has decent vision.¹⁴

- * **Defensive Acumen:** Strong and improving. He developed his two-way game and penalty-killing abilities in the AHL, showing a commitment to playing a complete 200-foot game.

- * **Physicality:** A defining trait. At 6-foot-1 and 205 pounds, he uses his size and strength to his advantage, finishing checks, winning battles, and establishing a net-front presence.¹⁰

- * **Strengths & Standout Traits:** McGroarty is a true power forward with skill, a high compete level, and a knack for scoring. His willingness to go to the dirty areas and his physical style are elements the Penguins' system has lacked. His offensive breakthrough in the second half of the AHL season showed he was ready for the next step.

- * **Red Flags & Developmental Hurdles:** The only significant red flag is his skating. While his hockey sense and work ethic can compensate, improving his first-step quickness will be crucial for him to become a consistent top-six threat in the NHL.¹⁵

- * **Projected Ceiling & Likely Role:** Ceiling is a top-six, net-front power forward who is a fixture on the power play. His likely role is a highly effective middle-six winger who provides secondary scoring, physicality, and energy.

- * **NHL Readiness:** NHL-ready. He is expected to be in the NHL lineup to start the 2025-26 season, likely in a top-six role where he finished his last NHL stint.

1.5 Benjamin Kindel

- * **Player Vitals:** Center/Right Wing, 18, Calgary Hitmen (WHL), 2025 Draft (1st Round, 11th overall)

- * **Scouting Breakdown:**

- * **Skating:** Below average. This is the most significant weakness in his profile and the primary reason he was available at pick 11. His stride lacks explosiveness and power, and he is not a high-pace player.¹⁷ He will need to make substantial improvements to keep up with the NHL game.

- * **Hockey IQ:** Elite. His hockey sense is arguably among the best in the 2025 draft class.⁷ He processes the game at an advanced level, anticipates plays, and shows zero panic with the puck. His

vision is exceptional.¹⁷

- * **Compete Level:** High. Despite his small stature, he battles hard, gets to the dirty areas, and uses his intelligence and stickwork to win pucks rather than force.¹⁷

- * **Shot:** Good, not great. He has a quick, accurate wrist shot but it is not overpowering. He is more of a tool than a weapon, and he scores more through cleverness and placement than pure velocity.¹⁷

- * **Puck Skills:** High-end. He is a masterful playmaker with slick hands and elite passing ability. He can execute difficult passes, including filthy no-look dishes and long stretch passes, and creates offense out of nothing.¹⁷

- * **Defensive Acumen:** Strong due to his IQ. He reads plays well defensively, has a sneaky and effective stick, and positions himself intelligently to create turnovers.¹⁹

- * **Physicality:** A major concern. At 5-foot-10 and around 180 pounds, he lacks strength and is easily pushed off pucks. He will need to dedicate himself to a significant strength and conditioning program to survive at the NHL level.¹⁷

- * **Strengths & Standout Traits:** His game is built on elite hockey IQ and playmaking. His 99 points in the WHL were a testament to his ability to dominate with his brain and skill.¹⁹ He has the potential to be a dynamic offensive driver.

- * **Red Flags & Developmental Hurdles:** The red flags are significant: below-average skating and a lack of physical strength. This combination makes him a classic boom-or-bust prospect. If he cannot improve his skating and add at least 10-15 pounds of muscle, he will struggle to find space and time to use his elite skills in the NHL.¹⁷

- * **Projected Ceiling & Likely Role:** Ceiling is a first-line, playmaking center or winger capable of 80+ points. His likely role, if he develops physically, is a top-six forward who drives possession and quarterbacks a power play. If his physical development stalls, he projects as a middle-six forward who may struggle with consistency and playoff physicality.¹⁷

- * **NHL Readiness:** 3+ years. He is a long-term project who will need at least two more years in junior hockey followed by AHL seasoning.

1.6 Joel Blomqvist

- * **Player Vitals:** Goaltender, 23, W-B/Scranton (AHL), 2020 Draft (2nd Round, 52nd overall)

- * **Scouting Breakdown:**

- * **Athleticism/Quickness:** Good athleticism and lateral movement. He is not as explosive as some modern goalies but is quick enough to make challenging cross-crease saves.¹⁰

- * **Technique/Positioning:** Technically sound and calm. His game is built on strong positioning, puck tracking, and composure.¹⁰ He stays square to shooters and doesn't get rattled in high-pressure situations.

- * **Hockey IQ/Anticipation:** A major strength. He reads the play well and anticipates where shots are coming from, which allows his technical game to shine.

- * **Compete Level:** High. He is a focused and resilient competitor.

- * **Glove/Blocker:** Solid. No glaring weaknesses in his save selections.

- * **Rebound Control:** Generally good, a product of his sound positioning and ability to absorb pucks.

- * **Strengths & Standout Traits:** Blomqvist is a polished, technically proficient goaltender who has already proven he can be an elite AHL starter. In 2023-24, he posted a 2.16 GAA and .921 SV%, ranking among the league's best.⁹ His calmness and consistency are his biggest assets.

- * **Red Flags & Developmental Hurdles:** His two NHL stints in 2024-25 were a mixed bag. After a promising first call-up, his numbers fell off significantly in his second, raising questions about his ability to handle the speed and precision of NHL shooters consistently. An injury at the end of the AHL playoffs is also a minor concern.

- * **Projected Ceiling & Likely Role:** Ceiling is a solid NHL starting goaltender. His likely role is a dependable 1A/1B tandem goalie who can handle a significant workload. He may not have the elite, game-stealing upside of a Vezina candidate, but his floor is very high.

- * **NHL Readiness:** NHL-ready. He will challenge for an NHL job out of camp and could split time between the NHL and AHL in 2025-26, depending on the performance of the NHL tandem.^{[^9}

]1.7 Bill Zonnon

- * **Player Vitals:** Center/Left Wing, 18, Blainville-Boisbriand Armada (QMJHL), 2025 Draft (1st Round, 22nd overall)

- * **Scouting Breakdown:**

- * **Skating:** The primary area for improvement. He has good straight-line speed due to a long, powerful stride, but his agility, edgework, and lateral mobility need significant work.²³ His skating mechanics are described as "clunky" and limit his explosiveness.²⁵

- * **Hockey IQ:** Very good. He displays strong hockey sense in all three zones. He is a responsible two-way player who reads the play well, backchecks hard, and understands how to use his body and stick to be effective.²⁶

- * **Compete Level:** Elite. This is his defining characteristic. He has a "dawg mindset," a relentless

motor, and is a horse in puck battles.⁷ He is a constant nuisance for opponents and wins battles along the boards with ease.²⁷

- * **Shot:** Good. It's a heavy shot that "pops off his stick".¹¹ He is effective from the dots on the power play and is willing to go to the net for greasy goals.²⁶

- * **Puck Skills:** Surprisingly good. He is a better playmaker than he is given credit for, with good vision and the ability to make creative plays and find teammates in the slot.²⁵

- * **Defensive Acumen:** Excellent. He is a reliable and responsible defender who clogs passing lanes, sticks to his assignments, and is positionally sound.²⁶

- * **Physicality:** A major strength. At 6-foot-2 and 185-190 pounds, he is already strong on the puck and an immovable object in battles.²⁷ He finishes his checks and plays a heavy game.²⁸

- * **Strengths & Standout Traits:** Zonnon is the embodiment of the new drafting philosophy: a high-character, high-compete, two-way power forward. His work ethic, physicality, and defensive reliability give him an extremely high floor as a future NHLer.²⁴

- * **Red Flags & Developmental Hurdles:** His skating mechanics are the only major red flag. If they can be improved, his ceiling rises significantly. If not, it may limit him to a bottom-six energy role, as he won't be able to keep pace with more skilled NHL players.²⁵ His offensive production may not fully translate.²⁸

- * **Projected Ceiling & Likely Role:** Ceiling is a valuable middle-six, two-way forward who can play center or wing and contribute on both special teams. His likely role is a high-energy, physical, and defensively responsible bottom-six forward who is a nightmare to play against.

- * **NHL Readiness:** 2-3 years. He will need at least one more year in the QMJHL to work on his skating, followed by time in the AHL.

1.8 Melvin Fernstrom

- * **Player Vitals:** Right Wing, 19, Örebro HK (SHL), Acquired in trade from Vancouver (2025)

- * **Scouting Breakdown:**

- * **Skating:** Below average. This is the main knock on his game. He is a subpar skater who lacks explosiveness and a high-end motor, which could limit his ability to create space in North America.¹

- * **Hockey IQ:** Good offensive instincts. He knows how to find soft spots in coverage to get his shot off and is dangerous on the power-play flank.³¹ His defensive instincts need improvement.³⁰

- * **Compete Level:** Considered average. He is not known for his high motor or involvement in building play, which is a concern.³⁰

- * **Shot:** Elite. This is his carrying tool. He is a skilled shooter with a heavy wrist shot and an

excellent one-timer. He is a pure goal-scorer who can beat goalies clean from a distance.³⁰

- * **Puck Skills:** Good. He has skill with the puck and flashes of creativity, but his game is built around finishing plays, not creating them.³⁰

- * **Defensive Acumen:** A work in progress. His defensive involvement is an area that needs significant improvement for him to become a trusted NHL player.³⁰

- * **Physicality:** Good size at 6-foot-2 and 190 pounds, but he doesn't consistently use it to his advantage.

- * **Strengths & Standout Traits:** His shot is his ticket to the NHL. Winning the SHL Rookie of the Year as an 18-year-old is a significant accomplishment and proves his goal-scoring can translate against men.³²

- * **Red Flags & Developmental Hurdles:** His skating and compete level are major red flags. Pure shooters with these deficiencies often struggle to adapt to the smaller ice and faster pace of the NHL. He must improve his skating and overall engagement to avoid becoming a one-dimensional player who can be easily neutralized.³⁰

- * **Projected Ceiling & Likely Role:** Ceiling is a top-six scoring winger who is a primary weapon on the power play. His likely role is a middle-six, shoot-first winger who provides secondary scoring.

- * **NHL Readiness:** 2-3 years. He will play another season in the SHL before likely coming to North America to start in the AHL.[^30]

]1.9 Tristan Broz

- * **Player Vitals:** Center/Wing, 22, W-B/Scranton (AHL), 2021 Draft (2nd Round, 58th overall)

- * **Scouting Breakdown:**

- * **Skating:** Decent but not a standout attribute. He gets around the rink well but is not a dynamic, pace-pushing skater.³³

- * **Hockey IQ:** High. He is an intelligent and responsible two-way player who processes the game quickly and makes smart, straightforward plays.³³ He understands how to play in all three zones and elevates his game in important moments.

- * **Compete Level:** High. He is willing to go to the net front, plays with a dash of sandpaper, and doesn't shy away from physical play.¹⁶

- * **Shot:** An accurate and effective weapon. He can score with a one-timer or a quick wrist shot and has a knack for finishing plays in tight spaces.³³

- * **Puck Skills:** Good. He is a patient and creative playmaker who can complete difficult passes through defensive layers. He is not overly flashy but consistently generates offense.³³

○* **Defensive Acumen:** Excellent. This is a key part of his NHL-ready game. He is a responsible defender, trusted to kill penalties, and covers well for his teammates.³³

○* **Physicality:** Solid. At 6-foot-0 and 205 pounds, he has a sturdy frame and is not afraid to engage physically.¹⁶

●* **Strengths & Standout Traits:** Broz is a versatile, intelligent, and highly reliable two-way forward. His fantastic rookie season in the AHL (19 goals, 37 points in 59 games) demonstrated that his game is ready for the pro level. His ability to play both center and wing adds valuable lineup flexibility.

●* **Red Flags & Developmental Hurdles:** His offensive ceiling may be limited. He doesn't possess one elite, game-breaking offensive tool, which may cap him as a middle-six contributor rather than a top-line driver.³³ He has a tendency at times to play on the perimeter.³³

●* **Projected Ceiling & Likely Role:** Ceiling is a solid second-line, two-way center. His likely role is a valuable, versatile third-line forward who can play center or wing, kill penalties, and provide dependable secondary scoring.

●* **NHL Readiness:** NHL-ready. He will push for an NHL roster spot out of training camp and should see his first NHL games in 2025-26.

1.10 Charlie Trethewey

●* **Player Vitals:** Right Defense, 18, Boston University (NCAA), 2025 Draft (3rd Round, 73rd overall)

●* **Scouting Breakdown:**

○* **Skating:** Dynamic and a clear strength. He possesses strong four-way mobility, which allows him to close gaps, join the rush, and control play.³⁵ His skating is balanced and powerful.²³

○* **Hockey IQ:** Good, but with room for growth. He shows excellent defensive awareness and makes smart reads, but his decision-making can be inconsistent, especially under pressure.³⁵

○* **Compete Level:** High. He plays with a physical edge and is tough to play against in his own zone.³⁵

○* **Shot:** A weapon. He has a heavy shot and can beat goalies clean from a distance, making him a threat on the power play.³⁵

○* **Puck Skills:** Very good. He is a confident puck-mover who excels at transitioning the puck out of the defensive zone with precise passes. He has the vision and creativity to quarterback a power play.³⁵

○* **Defensive Acumen:** A mix of strengths and weaknesses. He uses his size and reach effectively to defend, but can be prone to taking poor routes to contain his check and can struggle with his

defensive details at times.³⁷

- * **Physicality:** A major asset. At 6-foot-2 and 201 pounds, he plays a physical game, delivers "bone-crushing hits," and effectively clears the crease.²³

- * **Strengths & Standout Traits:** Trethewey is a toolsy, physical, puck-moving defenseman with legitimate top-four upside. Getting a player with his combination of skating, size, and skill in the third round represents a potential draft steal.²³

- * **Red Flags & Developmental Hurdles:** The main red flags are his consistency and discipline. He can struggle with decision-making under pressure and takes too many penalties due to undisciplined physicality.²³ He is a raw prospect who will need significant development time in the NCAA.

- * **Projected Ceiling & Likely Role:** Ceiling is a top-four, two-way defenseman who can run a second power-play unit. His likely role is a solid #5/6 defenseman who can move the puck and provide a physical presence.

- * **NHL Readiness:** 3-4 years. He is a long-term project who will spend multiple seasons at Boston University to refine his game.

1.11 Sergei Murashov

- * **Player Vitals:** Goaltender, 21, W-B/Scranton (AHL), 2022 Draft (4th Round, 118th overall)

- * **Scouting Breakdown:**

- * **Athleticism/Quickness:** Elite. This is his best asset. He is incredibly athletic and can explode across the crease to make dynamic, unconventional saves that other goalies cannot.³⁸

- * **Technique/Positioning:** Improving. While his game is built on athleticism, his positioning is solid, and he doesn't have to rely on desperation saves as often as one might think.³⁸ He can shrink in his butterfly at times, leaving the top of the net exposed.³⁹

- * **Hockey IQ/Anticipation:** Very good. He tracks the puck well and anticipates plays, which allows him to get into position to use his athleticism effectively. His mindset and maturity are considered key attributes.

- * **Compete Level:** Extremely high. His attitude is described as "by any means necessary," and he will do whatever it takes to stop the puck.³⁹

- * **Glove/Blocker:** Quick, but can be beaten high due to his tendency to drop into his butterfly.³⁹

- * **Rebound Control:** An area that needs work, as his dynamic movements can sometimes lead to unpredictable rebounds.

- * **Strengths & Standout Traits:** Murashov is an athletic, high-ceiling goaltender who put up

staggering numbers in Russian junior hockey (1.58 GAA,.946 SV% in his D+1 season).³⁸ His smooth and successful transition to North America in 2024-25, where he excelled in both the AHL and ECHL, was extremely promising.³⁸

- * **Red Flags & Developmental Hurdles:** He is still a long-term project. He needs to continue refining his technique to be less reliant on pure athleticism. At 6-foot-2, he doesn't have the massive frame of some modern goalies and needs to continue adding strength.³⁸

- * **Projected Ceiling & Likely Role:** Ceiling is a top-tier NHL starting goaltender. His athleticism gives him a higher ceiling than Blomqvist. His likely role is a high-end NHL backup or a 1B goalie in a tandem.

- * **NHL Readiness:** 2-3 years. He will likely take over as the full-time AHL starter in 2025-26 and could push for an NHL job in the years following.

1.12 Will Horcoff

- * **Player Vitals:** Center, 18, University of Michigan (NCAA), 2025 Draft (1st Round, 24th overall)

- * **Scouting Breakdown:**

- * **Skating:** Okay for his size, but needs work. His stride can be upright and needs refinement to build more pace and consistency into his game.⁴⁰

- * **Hockey IQ:** Good. He sees the ice at a high level and has a creative offensive mind. His NHL bloodlines (son of former Oiler Shawn Horcoff) provide a strong foundation of hockey knowledge.⁷

- * **Compete Level:** High. He plays a hard game, is good in tough areas, and is willing to use his size and play the body.⁴¹

- * **Shot:** Has pop, but needs to improve deception and accuracy. He is effective at the net-front on the power play.⁴⁰

- * **Puck Skills:** Good. He can make "small-man-type plays" in tight areas for a player of his size and has soft hands. He needs to improve his handling posture and quick-thinking with the puck.⁴⁰

- * **Defensive Acumen:** Solid. He is good in his own zone and understands defensive responsibilities.⁴¹

- * **Physicality:** A major potential asset. At 6-foot-5 and 203 pounds, he has a massive frame. He is willing to play a physical game but is still growing into his body and learning to use his size consistently.⁷

- * **Strengths & Standout Traits:** Horcoff's primary assets are his immense size and athletic potential. The Penguins traded up to select him, indicating a strong belief in his upside and their own development program.²² His progression throughout his freshman year at Michigan was immense.⁷

- * **Red Flags & Developmental Hurdles:** He is an extremely raw project. Every aspect of his game—skating, shooting, puck skills—needs significant refinement and development.⁴⁰ He is a long-term bet on tools and projection, not on current accomplishment. There is a significant risk he never puts it all together.
- * **Projected Ceiling & Likely Role:** Ceiling is a top-six power forward who can play center or wing and be a dominant net-front presence. His likely role, if he develops, is a valuable middle-six power forward who creates space for his linemates.
- * **NHL Readiness:** 4+ years. He is the definition of a long-term project and will require multiple years of NCAA hockey followed by extensive AHL seasoning.

Section 2: Deep Dive - The Foundational 2025 Draft Class

The 2025 NHL Draft was a watershed moment for the Penguins organization, representing the largest single infusion of prospect talent in over a decade. The class of 13 players is defined by a clear philosophical direction, targeting skill, intelligence, and, above all, competitiveness.

Table 2: Pittsburgh Penguins 2025 NHL Draft Selections

Rd.	Pick	Name	Pos	Ht/Wt	Amateur Team	Scouting Snapshot
1	11	Benjamin Kindel	C/RW	5'10"/181	Calgary (WHL)	Elite IQ/ playmaker, but skating/ strength are major projects. High-risk, high-reward.
1	22	Bill Zonnon	C/LW	6'2"/185	Rouyn-Noranda (QMJHL)	High-motor, physical, two-way force. High-floor, character pick. Skating needs work.

1	24	Will Horcoff	C	6'5"/203	U. of Michigan (NCAA)	Massive frame, athletic upside Extremely raw project pick based on long-term potential.
2	39	Peyton Kettles	RHD	6'6"/195	Swift Current (WHL)	Huge shutdown defenseman, still growing into his frame. Moves well for his size.
3	73	Charlie Trethewey	RHD	6'2"/201	Boston Univ. (NCAA)	Potential draft steal. Physical, mobile, puck-moving D with top-4 tools.
3	84	Gabriel D'Aigle	G	6'4"/220	Victoriaville (QMJHL)	Huge, athletic goalie with elite raw tools but technically unrefined. Long-term project.
3	91	Brady Peddle	LHD	6'3"/203	Waterloo (USHL)	"Crushing" physical, shutdown defenseman. Projects as a bottom-pair defensive specialist.

4	105	Travis Hayes	RW	5'11"/175	Shattuck-St. Mary's	Scrappy, abrasive, high-compete winger who excels at the net-front.
5	130	Ryan Miller	C	6'0"/178	Portland (WHL)	Polished, mature two-way center with good skating and high hockey IQ
5	148	Quinn Beauchesne	RHD	6'0"/187	Guelph (OHL)	Aggressive, high-tempo, puck-moving defenseman with an elite skating base.
5	154	Jordan Charron	RW	6'1"/190	Soo (OHL)	Forceful, high-energy checking forward who excels in puck battles and on the forecheck.
6	169	Carter Sanderson	F	6'1"/196	Muskegon (USHL)	High-character team-first player who makes an impact with hockey sense and intangibles.

7	201	Kale Dach	C	5'11"/172	Calgary (WHL)	Undersized but highly skilled and intelligent playmaker who dominated the BCHL.
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2.1 The First-Round Infusion: A Portfolio of Bets

The Penguins' three first-round selections can be viewed as a diversified portfolio of bets on different prospect archetypes:

●* **Benjamin Kindel (11th Overall) - The Skill Bet:** This pick was a swing for the highest possible ceiling. Kindel's game is built on elite, top-of-the-class hockey sense and playmaking ability.⁷ He sees the ice like a chess master and can create offense from nothing with his vision and slick passing.¹⁷ However, this selection comes with significant risk. His skating is a well-documented weakness, lacking the necessary explosiveness for the NHL, and his undersized, slight frame raises major questions about his durability and ability to win battles.¹⁷ The Penguins are betting that their development staff can mitigate these physical deficiencies and unlock his elite brain. He is the ultimate test of the organization's player development capabilities.

●* **Bill Zonnon (22nd Overall) - The Character Bet:** Zonnon is the embodiment of the new management's philosophy. He is a powerful, high-motor, two-way forward with what team personnel described as a "dawg mindset".⁷ He plays a pro-style game, excelling in board battles, backchecking with purpose, and driving to the net.²⁴ This pick represents a bet on a high-floor player. Zonnon is almost certain to play in the NHL due to his work ethic, physicality, and defensive reliability.²⁴ The primary question is not

if he will play, but in what capacity. His ceiling is limited by his unrefined skating mechanics, which will need considerable work for him to become more than a bottom-six energy player.²³

●* **Will Horcoff (24th Overall) - The Tools Bet:** This pick, which required trading up, was a pure bet on upside and tools.²² Horcoff possesses a rare and coveted combination of size (6-foot-5), athleticism, and NHL bloodlines.⁷ He is, however, an extremely raw prospect. Every facet of his game, from skating mechanics to puck handling, requires significant development.⁴⁰ This was not a selection based on current production or polish; it was a long-term investment in a player with a sky-high ceiling if all the pieces come together. He is the biggest "swing for the fences" of the trio and will

require the most patience.

2.2 High-Value Day Two Selections: Finding Gems in the Mid-Rounds

The Penguins' work on Day 2 was crucial for adding depth and specific player types to the system. Several picks stand out as having particularly high value relative to their draft position.

●* **The High-Upside Faller (Charlie Trethewey, RHD, 73rd):** Many public scouting services had Trethewey graded as a potential late-first or second-round talent, making his availability in the third round a significant value proposition.²³ He brings a coveted package of size, dynamic skating, and physicality to the right side of the defense.²³ While he needs to refine his defensive details and play with more discipline, the raw tools for a top-four defenseman are present. This pick could be looked back on as the steal of the draft for Pittsburgh if he develops to his potential.

●* **The Goalie Project (Gabriel D'Aigle, G, 84th):** D'Aigle is a classic high-upside goaltending prospect. He possesses elite physical tools, with a massive 6-foot-4 frame and impressive athleticism.⁴⁴ However, he is technically raw, particularly with his rebound control and puck-handling, which were noted weaknesses.⁴⁴ Drafting him in the third round is a bet on the organization's goaltending development program to mold his raw talent into a future NHL starter. He is a long-term project, but one with a potentially huge payoff.

●* **The Identity Pieces (Peyton Kettles, RHD, 39th & Brady Peddle, LHD, 91st):** These two selections clearly address an organizational need for size, toughness, and defensive acumen on the blue line. Kettles is a giant at 6-foot-6 and moves surprisingly well for his size, but is still very raw and growing into his frame.⁶ Peddle is a punishing, physical defender described as a "crushing" presence who excels in a shutdown role.⁴⁵ Together, these picks signal a clear intent to build a defensive corps that is not only skilled but also difficult to play against.

●* **The Late-Round Flyers (Carter Sanderson, F, 169th & Kale Dach, C, 201st):** These picks represent bets on different, but valuable, attributes. Sanderson is a wager on intangibles. He put up modest numbers in the USHL but is lauded for his hockey sense, character, and ability to contribute to winning in ways that don't always show up on the scoresheet.⁴⁷ He's a "glue guy" prospect. Dach, conversely, is a bet on pure skill. He is an undersized but highly intelligent and creative playmaker who posted elite numbers in the BCHL.⁴⁹ His production profile was too strong to ignore in the final round.

Section 3: Pipeline Positional Analysis

A positional breakdown of the prospect pool reveals a system with distinct areas of strength and identifiable weaknesses that will need to be addressed in the coming years.

Table 3: U23 Positional Depth Chart

Position	Prospect 1	Prospect 2	Prospect 3	Prospect 4
C	Benjamin Kindel	Tristan Broz	Bill Zonnon	Will Horcoff
LW	Ville Koivunen	Rutger McGroarty	Tanner Howe	Mikhail Ilyin
RW	Melvin Fernstrom	Cruz Lucius	Samuel Poulin	Jordan Charron
LHD	Owen Pickering	Emil Pieniniemi	Brady Peddle	Kalle Kangas
RHD	Harrison Brunicke	Charlie Trethewey	Peyton Kettles	Chase Pietila
G	Joel Blomqvist	Sergei Murashov	Gabriel D'Aigle	Arturs Silovs

3.1 The Heirs in Net: A Position of Strength

The goaltending pipeline has been transformed into arguably the organization's greatest strength. There is a clear and deliberate succession plan in place, providing both immediate depth and long-term security. The structure is tiered perfectly by age and development stage. At the top is **Joel Blomqvist** (23), the polished, technically sound netminder who is NHL-ready after a dominant AHL season.⁹ He provides a safe, high-floor option who can challenge for an NHL job immediately. Right behind him is **Sergei Murashov** (21), the high-ceiling, athletic challenger. His staggering numbers in Russian junior hockey and his seamless transition to the North American pro game in 2024-25 suggest he has the raw talent to potentially surpass Blomqvist.³⁸ He can take over as the AHL starter and push for an NHL role within the next one to two seasons.

The third wave is **Gabriel D'Aigle** (18), the 2025 third-round pick. He is the long-term project with elite physical tools but a raw technical game.⁴⁴ He can develop for the next three to four years in junior and college hockey, ensuring a continuous pipeline of talent. This staggered approach mitigates the risk of a single prospect failing to develop and ensures the organization is well-stocked at the most critical position for the foreseeable future. The recent acquisition of Arturs Silovs (24) adds another layer of proven AHL depth to this already strong group.[^51

]3.2 Rebuilding the Blue Line: Size, Mobility, and a Question of Balance

The defensive corps is headlined by two legitimate cornerstone prospects in **Owen Pickering** (LHD) and **Harrison Brunicke** (RHD). Both possess the modern blend of size, skating, and two-way intelligence to project as future top-four pillars for the franchise. They represent the high-end talent around which the future blue line will be built.

The 2025 draft class was instrumental in adding a much-needed wave of size, physicality, and specific role-players behind them. **Charlie Trethewey** (RHD) brings high-end puck-moving potential and is the next most skilled defender in the system.³⁵ Prospects like

Peyton Kettles (RHD), **Brady Peddle** (LHD), and **Chase Pietila** (RHD) project more as defensive or shutdown specialists who will make the team harder to play against.⁶

Emil Pieniniemi (LHD) is another intriguing piece, a big defender who showed surprising offensive touch after moving to the OHL and is now transitioning to the pro game.⁵³

The key question for this group is the balance of skill and brawn. Beyond Pickering, Brunicke, and the projectable upside of Trethewey, there is a lack of proven, high-end puck-moving defensemen. The organization has successfully added depth and a variety of player types, but continued focus on acquiring skilled, transitional defenders in future drafts will be necessary to create a truly dynamic and balanced NHL blue line.

3.3 Forging New Weapons: A Surplus of Wingers, A Search for a Center

The forward group, particularly on the wings, has become a clear position of strength. The acquisitions of **Ville Koivunen**, **Rutger McGroarty**, and **Melvin Fernstrom** have injected three distinct, high-potential players who all project to be, at minimum, effective top-nine NHL wingers.¹⁰ Koivunen is the elite playmaker, McGroarty is the skilled power forward, and Fernstrom is the pure shooter.

They are complemented by a deep group of secondary prospects. **Tristan Broz** is a versatile and reliable two-way option who is close to NHL-ready. **Mikhail Ilyin**, now signed to an ELC, is a highly creative playmaker from the KHL whose main hurdle is his skating.⁵⁵

Tanner Howe is a tenacious, high-motor winger who projects as an effective bottom-six agitator.⁵⁶ The 2025 draftees,

Benjamin Kindel and **Bill Zonnon**, add two more high-upside players who may ultimately find their homes on the wing.

The central issue, and the most significant weakness in the entire pipeline, is the lack of a blue-chip center prospect. While the organization took three swings at the position in the first round of the 2025 draft with Kindel, Zonnon, and Horcoff, all three come with major questions. Kindel has the elite brain for the position but lacks the physical tools. Zonnon has the two-way reliability but may lack the offensive dynamism and skating for a top-six role. Horcoff is a massive, long-term project. Broz is the most proven center in the system but projects more as a solid third-liner. As of today, there is no clear heir apparent to Sidney Crosby or Evgeni Malkin in the pipeline. This remains the organization's most pressing long-term need.

Section 4: Strategic Outlook and System Evaluation

The final analysis synthesizes the individual and positional assessments into a holistic evaluation of the farm system's health, the management's strategy, and the remaining organizational needs.

4.1 Identifying Organizational Gaps

Despite the remarkable progress in restocking the system, two critical long-term gaps remain prominent.

- * **The Center Ice Conundrum:** This is the single most significant long-term challenge facing the organization. The current NHL roster is built around two generational centers who are in the twilight of their careers. While the 2025 draft was a clear attempt to address this void, it was done through a series of high-risk or project-based selections. There is currently no prospect in the system who projects with high certainty to become a first-line, play-driving center. The development of Benjamin Kindel, Will Horcoff, and Bill Zonnon will be the most crucial storyline for the franchise's post-Crosby future. Failure to produce at least one legitimate top-six center from this group will force the organization to address the position through expensive trades or free-agent signings down the line.
- * **Top-End Right-Shot Defense Depth:** Harrison Brunicke is an excellent foundational piece on the right side of the defense. However, the depth of high-end, dynamic, puck-moving talent behind him is a concern. Charlie Trethewey has that potential but is a long-term NCAA project with developmental hurdles to clear.³⁶ Other right-shot prospects like Peyton Kettles and Chase Pietila project more as

defensive or complementary players.²³ To build a truly elite and modern blue line, the team will need to continue targeting skilled, right-shot defensemen in future drafts to complement Brunicke.

4.2 Final Verdict: The Health of the Farm System

The Pittsburgh Penguins' prospect pipeline has been resurrected. In a short period, it has been transformed from one of the league's most depleted systems into a respectable, deep, and rapidly improving collection of talent. It can now be fairly assessed as **average-to-above-average**, with high-end, potentially elite pieces at wing (Koivunen, McGroarty) and in goal (Blomqvist, Murashov), and two legitimate foundational pillars on defense (Pickering, Brunicke).

The strategy driving this turnaround is a sophisticated hybrid model that can be described as "Win-Soon-and-Sustain." This is not a traditional, multi-year, tear-down rebuild. The front office is attempting to execute two objectives simultaneously. The first is to support the current veteran core by injecting near-ready, high-impact young talent acquired via trade, such as Koivunen and McGroarty, to extend the team's competitive window.⁹ The second is to build the foundation for the post-Crosby era by aggressively accumulating and utilizing a high volume of draft picks, as seen in the 2025 draft.⁴

This dual-track approach is a high-difficulty maneuver. It aims to avoid the painful "lost years" of a full rebuild by creating a continuous talent pipeline that can first supplement, and then eventually succeed, the aging core. The direction is logical, the strategy is sound, and the early results are undeniably positive. The system is healthier and more promising than it has been in over a decade.

Overall System Grade: B+

The final grade reflects the massive injection of talent and the establishment of a clear, intelligent strategic direction. The system now has depth and high-end potential at multiple positions. However, it is withheld from the 'A' tier due to the persistent and critical uncertainty at the center position. The ultimate success of this entire rebuilding effort will hinge on whether the organization can develop one of its recent draft picks into the next top-six center for the Pittsburgh Penguins.

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