2022 PREVIEW 2023

Open late

Aging Capitals eye another Stanley Cup title run, say the window of opportunity hasn't closed yet

By Jacob Calvin Meyer
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

New season, same narrative: This year will finally be the one that the aging Washington Capitals miss the playoffs.

That's been the prevailing take on the Capitals the past few seasons, and this year is no different ahead of Washington's opener Wednesday against the Boston Bruins.

"Washington, to me, is a team that could drop," NHL.com's Dan Rosen said on NHL Network Sunday. "There's a lot of injuries, there's age, there's question marks there."

That exact sentiment was common last year too. Many websites and projection systems had the Capitals missing the postseason.

Instead, Washington started last year scorching hot (before severely cooling off in the winter) and made the playoffs for the eighth straight season (before losing in the first round for the fourth consecutive time).

Washington again sports one of the oldest rosters in the NHL. According to CapFriendly, only the Pittsburgh Penguins have an older opening night roster than the Capitals. The team's graying, combined with injuries to Nicklas Backstrom and Tom Wilson have some convinced that the Capitals' Stanley Cup window isn't just closing, it's

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Longest Stanley Cup droughts: Dating back to the original expansion year of the NHL (1917-18), there are 12 active teams that haven't won a Stanley Cup. The Capitals were on that list before the team won their first title in 2018. The Capitals went 43 years without winning the Stanley Cup.

Drought: 55 years
1. Toronto Maple Leafs
■ The Leafs joined the league in 1917 and have the second most Stanley Cup titles in league history behind the Canadiens (24) with 13 championships.

Drought: 51 years
2. Buffalo Sabres
■ After joining the league in 1970-71, the Sabres took four seasons to play for the Stanley Cup. They were turned away in 1975 by the Flyers during their Broad Street Bullies era.

Drought: 51 years
3. Vancouver Canucks
■ The Canucks had two Cinderella runs in 1982 and 1994. They lost the first against the Islanders before a heartbreaking Game 7 defeat against the Rangers in 1994.

Drought: 47 years
4. Philadelphia Flyers
■ The Flyers joined the league in 1967 and took just seven years to win back-to-back titles. The Flyers haven't been able to get past the first round since 2011-12.

Drought: 43 years
5. Arizona Coyotes
■ Originally coming into the league as the Winnipeg Jets in 1979, the Arizona Coyotes are one of the 12 NHL teams to have never won the Stanley Cup.

Team	Cup	Drought
Anaheim	2007	15 years
Arizona	—	43 years
Boston	2011	11 years
Buffalo	—	51 years
Calgary	1989	32 years
Carolina	2006	16 years
Chicago	2015	7 years
Colorado	2022	—
Columbus	—	22 years
Dallas	1999	23 years

Team	Cup	Drought
Detroit	2008	14 years
Edmonton	1990	32 years
Florida	—	29 years
Los Angeles	2014	8 years
Minnesota	—	22 years
Montreal	1993	29 years
Nashville	—	24 years
N.Y. Islanders	1983	39 years
N.Y. Rangers	1994	28 years
Ottawa	—	30 years

Team	Cup	Drought
Philadelphia	1975	47 years
Pittsburgh	2017	5 years
San Jose	—	30 years
St. Louis	2019	3 years
Tampa Bay	2021	1 year
Toronto	1967	55 years
Vancouver	—	52 years
Vegas	—	5 years
Washington	2018	4 years
Winnipeg	—	22 years

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION ROBERT COHN/THE WASHINGTON TIMES; ASSOCIATED PRESS

COMMANDERS

Rivera should look in mirror for answers to team's failures

THOM LOVERRO

What was funny about the latest predicament that Washington Commanders coach Ron Rivera found himself embroiled in — and, let's face it, this franchise is a Don Rickles stand-up routine 24/7 — was that it didn't happen as a result of one of his wordy, drawn-out answers to a press conference question.

It happened because he gave a one-word answer:

"Quarterback."

He might as well have stood up in a movie theater and shouted fire.

Following Sunday's 21-17 loss to the Tennessee Titans, leaving his team with a 1-4 record, Rivera met with the media Monday and, when asked by Washington Times sportswriter Matt Paras why the team's rivals — the Eagles, Cowboys and Giants — are further ahead with their

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Commanders quarterback Carson Wentz said he feels "pretty good," despite being a limited participant in practice with a shoulder injury.

Wentz says he and coach are 'fine,' focused on Bears game

By Matthew Paras
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

ASHBURN | Before Tuesday's practice, Ron Rivera apologized.

The Washington Commanders coach began his morning meeting with players to address the topic that had ignited a firestorm the day before: Singling out the quarterback play of Carson Wentz as a reason for the team's struggles.

Rivera told players he did a poor job of expressing himself and said he was sorry.

"I said some things that were misconstrued," Rivera said later, recalling the meeting. "I didn't present them properly and that's on me. So I took accountability and I told the guys that I should know better.

"(Shoot,) I had a bad day."

Rivera said he and Wentz had a "nice conversation" and are "ready to roll" ahead of Thursday's game against the Chicago Bears.

A day earlier, the coach, asked about the difference between the other three NFC East teams — all with winning records — and his Commanders, had a one-word answer: Quarterback.

The remark sparked a wave of

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SPORTS

Mismatched from the start

The square-peg Lerners, who won by losing before, double-down on futility

THOM LOVERRO

When I arrived at the Washington Nationals' spring training earlier this year in West Palm Beach, I wrote about how the clubhouse had the feel of the 2008 season — extra lockers, unrecognizable players and last-gasp veterans looking to extend their careers.

There were differences, of course — this wasn't the motorcycle gang that Jim Bowden had assembled in 2008. And Juan Soto was in the room (for how long now, who knows?).

But even then, back in March, there was a sense that — unless everything went right (and nearly nothing has) — this year was shaping up like another lost season. Like 2008.

How much like 2008? How about the 2022 Nationals calling up reliever Tyler Clippard from the minors — just like they did in the middle of 2008.

As the great mlb.com writer Rocket Bill Ladson would say, "Whoa!"

The 2022 Nationals begin the post-All-Star Game portion of the season with a record of 31-63. At this same time in 2008, their record was 38-61.

They would go on to lose 102 games in 2008. As the season plays out and the trade deadline comes and goes with the expected movement of players who help them win the few games they do, like Josh Bell (and maybe Soto), this Nationals squad may surpass the 102 losses of 2008.

It's never a good idea to lose 100 games in a season, despite the foolish idea that was the plan by the Lerner family to secure a high draft pick, which they did the following year by drafting Stephen Strasburg No. 1 and Bryce Harper after their 103-loss 2009 season.

They nearly lost the Strasburg pick, finishing with just two more losses than the Seattle Mariners, who wound up with the No. 2 pick, selecting infielder Dustin Ackley, a bust who was out of baseball by 2017.

The 2008 season was the opening year of Nationals Park,

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Second half of season may be uglier than the first if big names get traded at deadline

NL East	W	L	GB
New York	58	35	-
Atlanta	56	38	2
Philadelphia	49	43	8
Miami	43	48	14
Washington	31	63	27

By Jacob Calvin Meyer
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The first half of the Nationals' season was ugly.

Their 31-63 record at the break has them dead last in the major leagues. Somehow they've been even worse against division opponents with a putrid 8-36 record. And they've already had four losing streaks of six or more games.

It's hard to imagine the second half of the season, which begins Friday in Arizona, being much worse. But, with the Nationals expected to be aggressive sellers at the deadline, it likely will be.

Juan Soto

All-Star outfielder Juan Soto, who has been the subject of reports and speculation the last week after turning down a $440 million contract, could be on his way out via a massive trade package. USA Today's Bob Nightengale reported Thursday that seven teams — the Mariners, Padres, Giants, Dodgers, Yankees, Cardinals and Mets — have reached

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PHOTO ILLUSTRATION ROBERT COHN/THE WASHINGTON TIMES; ASSOCIATED PRESS

WNBA

Russia: U.S. law has no bearing on Griner case

By Jim Heintz
ASSOCIATED PRESS

MOSCOW | The spokesperson for Russia's Foreign Ministry lashed out Thursday at the United States characterizing basketball star Brittney Griner's jailing on drug charges as "wrongful detention," saying it shows disrespect for Russian law.

Griner

Griner has been jailed since she was arrested in mid-February at a Moscow airport after vape canisters containing cannabis oil were found in her luggage. The Phoenix Mercury standout and two-time Olympic gold medalist acknowledged in court this month that she had the canisters, but said she had no intent to break the law.

She faces up to 10 years in prison if convicted. Her trial is scheduled to resume Tuesday.

The State Department in May designated Griner as wrongfully detained, moving her case under the supervision of its special presidential envoy for hostage affairs — effectively, the government's chief hostage negotiator.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said Thursday that the legalization of cannabis for medical and recreational use in parts of the U.S. has no bearing on what happens in Russia.

"If a U.S. citizen was taken in connection with the fact that

» see GRINER | B7

COMMANDERS

Offensive line looks to maintain success

Andrew Norwell Trai Turner Chase Roullier

Washington's 2021 offensive statistics

First downs	345
Passing	181
Rushing	129
Penalty	35
Third downs	87/224
Fourth downs	16/32
Total yards	5,807
Total plays	1,070
Yards per play	5.4
Rushing yards	2,061
Rushing plays	477

Rushing yards per play	4.3
Passing yards	3,441
Completions	356
Attempts	550
Interceptions	15
Passing yards per play	6.8
Sacks	43
Touchdowns	37
Rushing touchdowns	13
Passing touchdowns	21
Turnover ratio	-5

Rivera relying on Panthers roots to fill void left by Scherff and Flowers

Editor's note: Welcome to our series on the big questions the Commanders face when camp opens Tuesday in Ashburn. Today: Will the offensive line be as dominant?

By Matthew Paras
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

There was a stat that Commanders coach Ron Rivera loved to tout this offseason, one that he almost always used as a selling point for his team. According to Pro Football Focus, the Burgundy and Gold had the NFL's sixth-best offensive line in 2021.

As proud as Rivera seemed to be of the group, the Commanders still went on to replace two starters.

The interior of Washington's offensive line projects to look significantly different this season after All-Pro guard Brandon Scherff signed with the Jacksonville Jaguars in free agency and Ereck Flowers was released for salary cap purposes. Starting center Chase Roullier, meanwhile, is also working his way back from a season-ending leg injury and is out for the time being.

To replace Scherff and Flowers, Rivera went back to a familiar place — relying on his Carolina roots. The team signed veterans Andrew Norwell and Trai Turner, two former Pro Bowlers who thrived with the Panthers when Rivera was there last decade. Backup Wes Schweitzer, traditionally a guard, has filled the middle as Roullier recovers.

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SPORTS

Dear Santa ...

A few last-minute gift suggestions for Washington's favorite franchises

All Mariah Carey wants for Christmas is you (baby), but Washington's sports teams need a lot more than that. The Commanders are currently the NFC's last wild card team, but it could be a challenge for them to hold onto that spot with three games remaining. The Capitals have spent most of the NHL season out of the playoffs, while the Wizards are near the bottom of the NBA standings and the Nationals are coming off a year as the MLB's worst team. With Christmas just hours away, all four teams have some big items on their lists for Santa this year. Here's one thing each Washington sports team should ask Ol' Saint Nick for Christmas:

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION ROBERT COHN/THE WASHINGTON TIMES

- **Commanders:** A lion's cage. The Fighting Taylor Heinickes control their own playoff fate. But with a tough remaining schedule, it will be an uphill battle to make the postseason. So, Ron Rivera & Co. may need some help. This gift will come in handy to tame those suddenly pesky Detroit Lions, who are nipping at the Commanders' heels for the final NFC wild card spot. The Commanders (7-6-1) are barely ahead of the Lions (7-7), but Detroit's remaining schedule is much easier than Washington's. The Lions play the Panthers, Bears and Packers (oh my), while the Commanders have games against the 49ers, Browns and Cowboys — two playoff teams in San Francisco and Dallas as well as a Cleveland squad with Deshaun Watson now under center. The Lions losing a game or two would go a long way in helping Washington make the playoffs for the second time in three years. Of course, Detroit isn't the only team chasing the Commanders. The Seahawks and Packers both have chances to usurp Washington of its wild card spot as well, although Seattle and Green Bay have more difficult remaining schedules than Detroit. So, throw the bird and the meatpacker in the lion's cage, too.

- **Wizards:** A trade partner. While the Commanders are staving off enemies, the Wizards could use a friend for Christmas. After starting the season 10-7, the Wizards went 2-13 in their next 15 games — including a 10-game losing streak they snapped on Tuesday. Now significantly below .500 on the season and closer to last place in the Eastern Conference than a top six playoff spot, rumors are swirling that the Wizards could be sellers at the trade deadline. Whether that's Bradley Beal, Kyle Kuzma, Kristaps Porzingis, multiple of those stars or all of them — who knows. Either way, if Washington can't turn its season around quickly, contending teams will come calling. A desperate trade partner willing to give up future first-round picks and young talent would be an excellent present for the struggling Wizards to find under their Christmas tree.

- **Capitals:** Chakra crystals. While the Capitals entered Thursday barely out of the playoffs, it's important for Santa to recognize that the first three months of the NHL season haven't been easy. For the first time in recent years, the Capitals started the season slowly and have had to battle their way out of the cellar of the Eastern Conference to now be a team fighting for a wild card spot. A large reason why the Capitals aren't at the top of the Metropolitan Division is due to a rash of injuries — and the healing properties of these chakra crystals could come in handy. Forwards Nicklas Backstrom (hip), Tom Wilson (ACL) and Carl Hagelin (hip) have yet to play this season. Forward Connor Brown (ACL) was injured in October and is likely out for the season. And several other key players have missed time, including winger T.J. Oshie (12 missed games) and defensemen Dmitry Orlov (16) and John Carlson (six). On a per-game basis, Washington leads the NHL in just over $11 million in lost time on injured reserve, according to NHL Injury Viz. Only one other team is over $8 million.

- **Nationals:** Holy water. The Nationals could ask for holy water for Stephen Strasburg. The 34-year-old has thrown only 31⅓ innings since winning the 2019 World Series MVP award. Last year, he started one big-league game before going back on the shelf with a ribs injury connected to his thoracic outlet syndrome. After losing an MLB-worst 107 games in 2022, the rebuilding Nationals are poised for another campaign near the bottom of the standings. If the Nationals have any chance of playing meaningful games in September 2023, having a healthy Strasburg would be a big boost. *— Jacob Calvin Meyer*

COMMANDERS

Pro Bowl berth a rush of emotion for Reaves

By Matthew Paras
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

ASHBURN | For about two hours after he found out he made the Pro Bowl, Jeremy Reaves set his phone on Do Not Disturb and just sat on his couch to think about everything he had been through the last few years.

The Washington Commanders safety thought about his mom's death last year, about how much she meant to him. He traced back over his football career — from breaking his back in high school to going undrafted to being cut a handful of times to finally becoming a special teams fixture for the Commanders this season.

On that couch, soaking in those memories, Reaves felt a rush of emotion. He cried. He smiled. He was sad and then excited. "I thought of all the trials that I had been through, and all the stuff I had to take to keep overcoming," Reaves said, "despite what I was going through."

Four Commanders were named to the Pro Bowl this week, but no selection was more surprising — or perhaps more meaningful — than the selection of Reaves. The 26-year-old earned his first Pro Bowl bid as the NFC's special teamer, becoming the first Washington player to do so since Lorenzo Alexander in 2012.

In a video that has since gone viral, team cameras captured

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Commanders safety Jeremy Reaves was named to his first Pro Bowl.
ASSOCIATED PRESS

NFL

Former Commanders finding success in other uniforms

By Jacob Calvin Meyer
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The Commanders are in the midst of their best season in at least seven years, but that hasn't changed a yearly tradition for local football fans: Seeing former Washington players excel for other teams.

Week 15 of the NFL season had multiple data points for the fan base's belief — true or not — that players who formerly donned the burgundy and gold often go on to find success in other uniforms. Several former Washington players, including two Giants who helped New York defeat the Commanders on Sunday, shined this past weekend, while others are having standout seasons.

Here are several former Washington players having good seasons.

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