

## **20. Pittsburgh Penguins**

### **Prospect System Ranking – 20th (Last Year - 19th)**

**GM: Kyle Dubas Hired: June 2023**

**COACH: TBD**

The Pittsburgh Penguins are turning the page on a storied era, parting ways with longtime coach and two-time Stanley Cup winner Mike Sullivan as they prepare for life beyond Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin, and Kris Letang.

In his second full season, GM Kyle Dubas orchestrated 11 transactions, most of which involved implementing a younger foundation for the future.

The work began last summer, when the Penguins made a big splash in the prospect realm, acquiring Rutger McGroarty for Brayden Yager. From there, they went on a season-long mission to accumulate youthful talent and future draft picks.

When all was said and done, they added Melvin Fernstrom (Vancouver) and a handful of picks, now giving them 11, including two in the first round in 2025.

Jumping up the ranks was Ville Koivunen (McKeen's 56th), who made his NHL debut late in the season with seven assists in eight games. His 56-point AHL campaign with Wilkes-Barre/Scranton, leading the team, shows promise and the potential as a top six playmaker. Alongside him, defenseman Owen Pickering (49th) split his rookie season between the NHL and AHL, cementing his status as the heir to Pittsburgh's aging blueline.

With an incoming new coach and Dubas's aggressive retooling, the Penguins are laying the groundwork for a post-Crosby era. The challenge is balancing youth development with competitiveness, a tightrope that defines Pittsburgh's next chapter.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
1	Owen Pickering	Pit	D	21	6-4/180
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 22(21st)	Pit	2022	21	27-Jan-04	Canada
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Wilkes-Barre (AHL)	47	2	11	13	10

Owen Pickering has had a nice first full professional season, where he has split time with the Pittsburgh Penguins in the NHL, and with the Wilkes-Barre-Scranton Penguins in the AHL. At both levels, Pickering has been counted on to log heavy minutes against many teams' best players, which is an extremely impressive accomplishment for such a young blueliner. The best part about Pickering's game is his consistency night in and night out; you know you are getting a strong defender in his own zone who can transition the puck to his forwards. But Pickering also has underrated offensive ability, particularly as a passer, so it will be interesting to see whether his offence from junior translates to the pro ranks over the next couple of years. Pickering has all the tools to become a bona fide top four NHL defender who plays hard at both ends of the ice.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
2	Ville Koivunen	Pit	LW	21	6-0/175
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
T(Car-3/24)	Car	2021	51	13-Jun-03	Finland
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Wilkes-Barre (AHL)	63	21	35	56	52

Ville Koivunen has been one of the most fun players to watch this season in the AHL. Originally taken in the second round by the Carolina Hurricanes, Koivunen was traded to the Pittsburgh Penguins as part of the Jake Guentzel trade. This trade has made Kyle Dubas look like a bit of a genius, where Koivunen has torched the AHL this season and really looks to have the potential of becoming a top six or maybe even a top-line NHL forward. The best part about Koivunen's game is his relentless skill. He's very shifty with the puck on his stick, which allows him to draw defenders in, and create time and space for his teammates. But he's also relentless on pucks; if he doesn't have the puck, he's working hard to get it. As a result, Koivunen tracks well to become a strong offensive contributor for the Pittsburgh Penguins, and we should see him play an integral role on the retooling Penguins as soon as next season. Penguins fans should be very excited; there's a real player here.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
3	Rutger McGroarty	Pit	LW	21	6-1/200
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
T(Wpg-8/24)	Wpg	2022	14	30-Mar-04	USA
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Wilkes-Barre (AHL)	60	14	25	39	37

Rutger McGroarty struggled with Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins to start the season, but he's really picked up his play as of late with Wilkes-Barre/Scranton and on the big club with the Pittsburgh Penguins. With Pittsburgh, McGroarty has shown that he can play with highly skilled players. He competes and goes to the hard areas, which creates time and space for his linemates' skill to take over. As a result, McGroarty can play any role on any line and still remain effective at both the AHL and NHL levels. There have been some growing pains, however, particularly as McGroarty adjusted to the pro game, but that is to be expected with extremely young players. Nevertheless, McGroarty should be a full-time player on the Pittsburgh Penguins in a prominent top six role. But even if he's not ready for that role, he can still play in the bottom six.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
4	Harrison Brunicke	Pit	D	18	6-3/195
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 24(44th)	Pit	2024	44	8-May-06	Canada
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Kamloops (WHL)	41	5	25	30	47

The Blazers did not make the playoffs this season, but it was through no fault of Brunicke, who was their number one defenseman and played a lot of great hockey during the campaign. He didn't stop playing there, though. Instead, he immediately headed over to the AHL to join the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins in their quest for the Calder Cup, getting into their lineup right away and registering his first professional point in his very first game. He's a tall, rangy, right-shot blueliner with superb skating ability, which he knows how to use defensively when keeping tight gaps and breaking out pucks, as well as offensively when it comes to attacking in transition or activating off of the offensive blueline. While still a bit raw and unrefined, Brunicke has improved a lot over the past few seasons and isn't showing any signs of slowing down any time soon.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
5	Vasily Ponomarev	Pit	C	23	5-10/180
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
T(Car-3/24)	Car	2020	53	13-Mar-02	Russia
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Wilkes-Barre (AHL)	55	15	26	41	44

Vasily Ponomarev has made great strides this season as a newly integrated prospect into the Pittsburgh Penguins' system. Like Koivunen, Ponomarev was acquired by the Pittsburgh Penguins from the Carolina Hurricanes in the Jake Guentzel trade. Ponomarev's game is all about consistent two-way play through relentless hard work and motor; he knows where to be in the offensive and defensive zones, he competes hard for loose pucks, and he uses an attack-like attitude across each aspect of his game. With Ponomarev, there's never a battle that he will avoid, nor one he'd be willing to ever run away from. As a result, Ponomarev projects as a two-way third line scoring threat for the Pittsburgh Penguins, but he can also be utilized on the penalty kill. He is very close to being full-time NHL ready and should feature in a prominent depth role for the Penguins next season.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
6	Tanner Howe	Pit	LW	19	5-10/185
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 24(46th)	Pit	2024	46	28-Nov-05	Canada
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Reg-Cgy (WHL)	47	18	28	46	28

This season Howe was traded from the Regina Pats to the Calgary Hitmen, which saw him switch from one of the worst teams in the entire CHL to one of the very best. Talk about a dramatic change in fortunes. That upheaval came with some adjustments, however, as he went from being his team's captain and primary offensive driver beforehand, to a smaller but more appropriately fitting cog in a well-oiled machine afterwards. This might turn out to be a benefit to his long-term development, because it aligns much better with his best possible pathway to the NHL: as a hard-working, high-character support player, in contrast to someone you'd want as the primary driver on a line. He's sure to become a favorite of both fans and coaches in Pittsburgh thanks to his tenacious, hyper-competitive approach, infectious personality, and willingness to battle hard even when he's sure to absorb a lot of punishment.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
7	Tristan Broz	Pit	C	22	6-0/180
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 21(58th)	Pit	2021	58	10-Oct-02	USA
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Wilkes-Barre (AHL)	59	19	18	37	38

Tristan Broz is as clutch of a player as they come. When you need a goal in a big game, there's almost nobody you'd rather have than Broz. He always scores in big games, and he never hides from the pressure. This is the perfect player for a seven game playoff series, and perhaps the next iteration of the old clutch performances from Justin Williams. As a first-year pro, Broz has done a good job adjusting to a more physical brand of hockey. He consistently finds open areas to use his quick release, but he's also very capable of deferring to open teammates when he's blocked in coverage. His defensive game is still in progress, however, but that will come with more time as a pro and as he builds more strength. As a player, he projects as a middle six scoring forward, with a third line role probably being the more probable outcome than a second line role. He still needs a season or two in Wilkes-Barre/Scranton, but he's on the right path.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
8	Mikhail Ilyin	Pit	LW	20	6-0/180
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 23(142nd)	Pit	2023	142	15-Feb-05	Russia
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Severstal Cherepovets (KHL)	64	7	23	30	14

Mikhail Ilyin has quickly emerged as one of the KHL's most intriguing young talents. He plays with an impressive calm and patience to his game, using smooth hands and strong skating to create offense with ease. He circles the offensive zone with his head up, scanning for options and delivering crisp, timely passes. Without the puck, his IQ shines as he finds soft areas in coverage to become a scoring threat. Defensively, he's shown solid growth, battling harder, chasing down loose pucks, and using his size to separate opponents. His contract is up at the end of this season so it will be interesting to see where he goes next. He will need another year or two to bulk up and improve his board play. It would not be a surprise to see him in Wilkes-Barre next season but another year in the KHL would not stunt him either. If all continues to go well, Ilyin could turn into a skilled two-way winger who can slow the game down and become a strong playmaking threat in the Penguin's middle six.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
9	Melvin Fernstrom	Pit	RW	19	6-1/190
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
T(Van-1/25)	Van	2024	93	28-Feb-06	Sweden
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Orebro (SHL)	48	8	9	17	4

Melvin Fernström took a solid step forward in his development in 2024-2025. The Vancouver third round draft pick from 2024, now property of the Pittsburgh Penguins, solidified himself as an everyday SHL player and saw his offensive ability start to translate to the pro game. As of right now, Fernström projects to be a pure sniper. His shot is deceptive and his release is quick, and he can find soft ice in the offensive zone with ease. His work rate on the ice looks much more consistent than it did last year, but his skating sticks out like a sore thumb. It's gatekeeping his involvement in play away from the puck and limiting his ability to carry the puck in transition. If he can really work on that, there could be a bottom six role for him on the penguins as a physical, goal-scoring winger.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
10	Sergei Murashov	Pit	G	21	6-0/170
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 22(118th)	Pit	2022	118	1-Apr-04	Russia
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Wheeling (ECHL)	26	17	7	2.40	0.922

In Murashov's 20-year-old season, he transitioned effortlessly from the MHL to dominating the ECHL. This played him into a stacked Wilkes Barre/Scranton goalie room where he proved that he was more than good enough to belong and even outplay some of the other goalies there. He's an exceptional skater- very explosive, precise, and fluid. He's also quite athletic, reacts very quickly to passes, and has shown elite positioning with a great understanding of potential dangers and using smart routes. His major weakness seems to be dealing with screens. Despite fighting hard to look around screens, it looks like he hasn't quite figured out a consistent way of doing so and can lose track of the puck through traffic. This is something that could be an issue in the NHL, but many goalies still find success despite that problem. Murashov's raw skillset is of a very high level; his chances to become a tandem or starting goalie in the NHL look to be very promising.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
11	Samuel Poulin	Pit	C	24	6-1/205
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 19(21st)	Pit	2019	21	25-Feb-01	Canada
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Wilkes-Barre (AHL)	57	19	24	43	34

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
12	Emil Pieniniemi	Pit	D	20	6-2/170
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 23(91st)	Pit	2023	91	2-Mar-05	Finland
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Kingston (OHL)	60	10	50	60	18

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
13	Cruz Lucius	Pit	RW	21	6-0/185
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
T(Car-3/24)	Car	2022	124	5-Apr-04	USA
T(Car-3/24)	Car	2022	124	5-Apr-04	USA
Arizona State (NCHC)	19	2	8	10	14

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
14	Joona Vaisanen	Pit	D	20	6-0/175
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 24(175th)	Pit	2024	175	29-Jul-04	Finland
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Western Michigan (NCHC)	42	4	22	26	12

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
15	Chase Pietila	Pit	D	21	6-2/185
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 24(111th)	Pit	2024	111	3-Mar-04	USA
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Michigan Tech (CCHA)	36	7	15	22	52