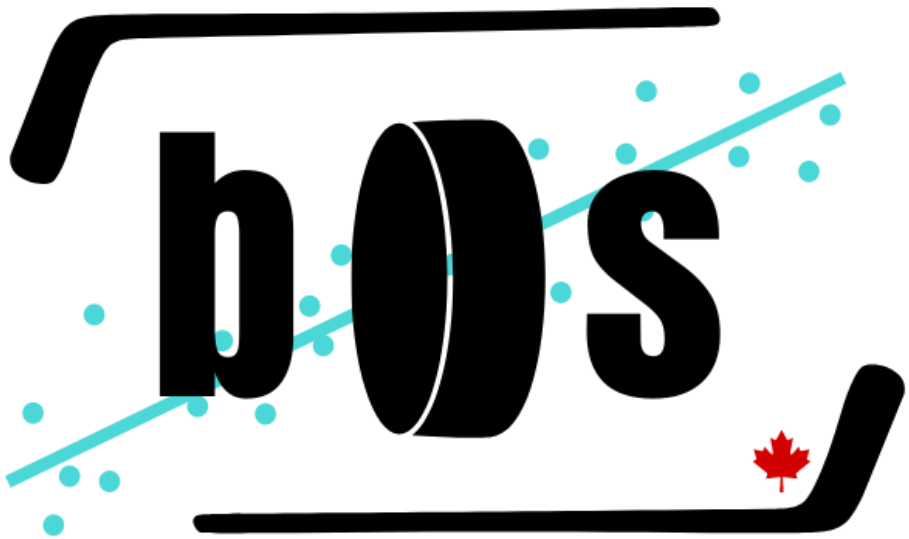
Special Teams by Design

What separates NHL power plays and penalty kills in 2025–26?

2025–26 NHL Regular Season



Article by Bos at Bosveld Stats Aug-2026

Introduction

Special teams are often reduced to two numbers: power-play percentage and penalty-kill percentage. Those numbers tell us what happened. They do not tell us how it happened.

A 25% power play can be built on controlled possession and sustained offensive-zone time. Another team can reach a similar number through a smaller volume of high-quality looks. The same logic applies to the penalty kill: one team can pressure the puck carrier and hunt shorthanded chances, while another concedes possession and leans on defensive structure.

This report applies the Bosveld rate-based model to the 2025-26 NHL special teams dataset (82 games, all 32 clubs), converting raw totals into per-60 rates so that every team is compared on a common time scale, before layering coach identity and NHL EDGE tracking concepts on top.

1. The Model

Instead of leaning only on conversion percentage, the model separates efficiency from opportunity volume using two rate formulas:

$$PP\ GF/60 = (PP\ Goals \div PP\ Minutes) \times 60$$

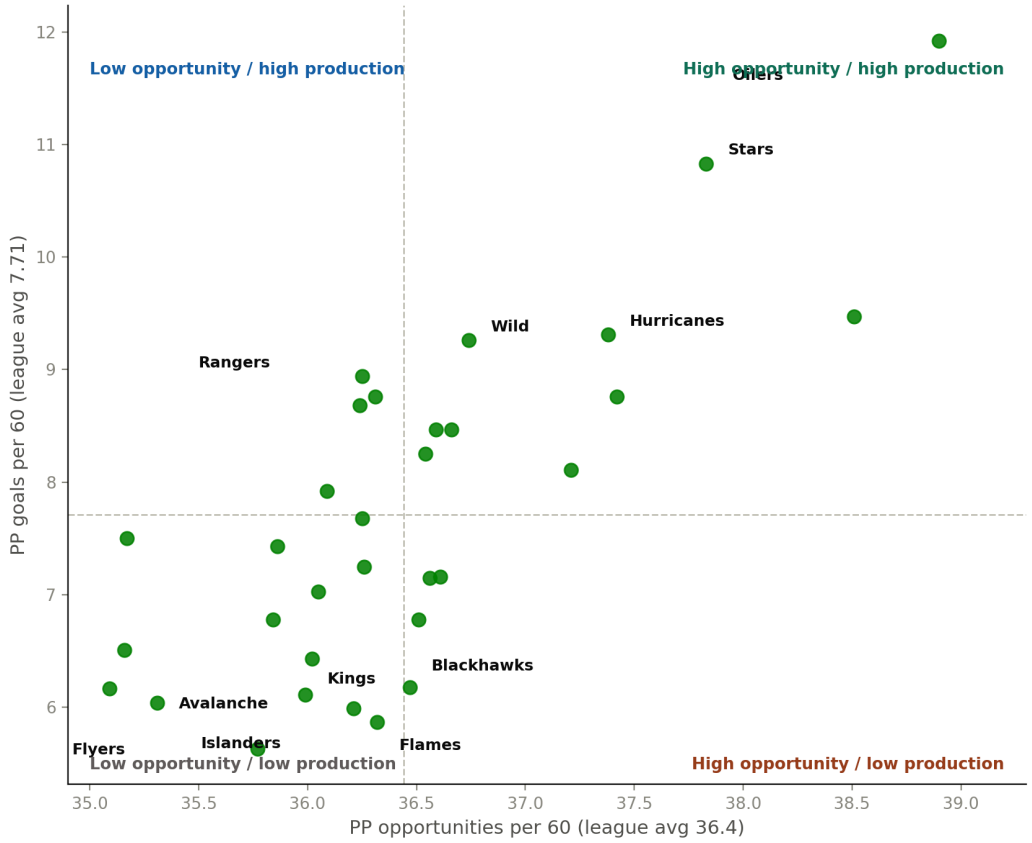
This measures how frequently a team scores while on the man advantage, not how many advantages it receives.

$$PK\ GA/60 = (PK\ Goals\ Against \div PK\ Minutes) \times 60 \quad (lower\ is\ better)$$

This measures how difficult it is for opponents to score against a given team while that team is shorthanded, not how often that team is shorthanded.

The two questions this separates: How productive is the power play while it's actually on the ice? and How difficult is it for opponents to score while this team is shorthanded? A team's raw PP% or PK% cannot answer either question on its own, because it blends efficiency and opportunity volume into a single number.

2. Power-Play Efficiency



PP opportunities per 60 (x-axis) vs. PP goals per 60 (y-axis). Dashed lines mark league averages (36.4 opportunities/60, 7.71 goals/60).

Plotting opportunity volume against scoring rate produces four team profiles:

- High opportunity / high production, the ideal profile. Edmonton (Knoblauch) and Dallas (Gulutzan) sit here alone at the extreme, both drawing the most power-play time in the league and converting it at the league's two highest rates.
- Low opportunity / high production, teams that don't draw an unusual number of advantages but maximize the ones they get, such as the Rangers (Sullivan), a sign of efficient personnel or puck movement rather than volume.
- High opportunity / low production, the most actionable group for a coach. Chicago (Blashill) and Calgary (Huska) draw roughly average power-play time but convert well below it, the issue is not opportunity generation, it's execution once the advantage is created.
- Low opportunity / low production, Philadelphia (Tocchet), the Islanders (Roy), and LA (Laviolette) are behind on both counts and need a more structural rebuild of the unit.

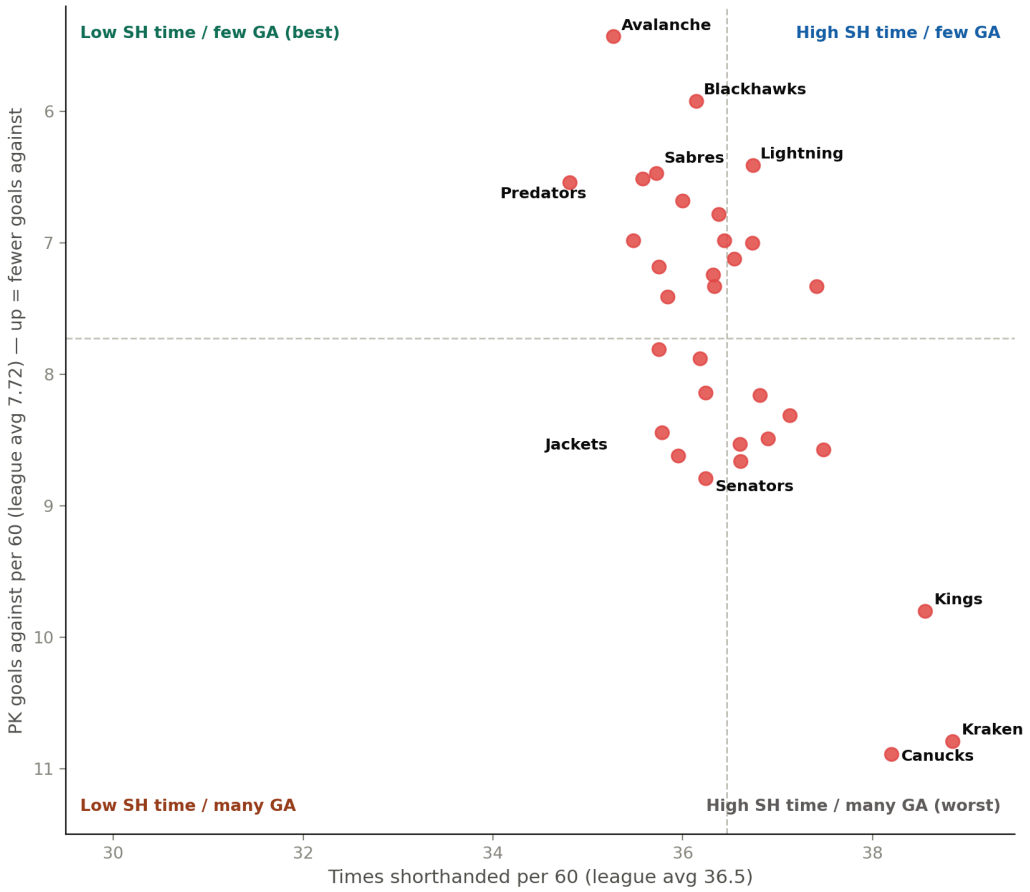
3. Why Rate Matters

The raw 2025–26 totals illustrate why a rate-based view is necessary. Montréal recorded 56 power-play goals this season, while Boston recorded 55, nearly identical totals.

But total goals alone don't say how much power-play time each team used to get there. Montréal scored its 56 goals at a rate of 8.47 GF/60 across 36.6 minutes of PP time per 60; Boston scored its 55 at 8.76 GF/60 across 37.4 minutes. Boston was very slightly more efficient per minute despite fewer total goals, a distinction invisible in the raw goal count, and one that matters directly for practice-time allocation: Montréal's issue is closer to volume, Boston's unit is already converting well and mostly needs more opportunities.

This matters most when comparing teams with different penalty-drawing profiles. A team that plays a heavier forecheck may simply draw more penalties as a byproduct of its 5-on-5 identity, meaning opportunity generation is itself part of a team's style, not just a special-teams input.

4. Penalty-Kill Efficiency



Times shorthanded per 60 (x-axis) vs. PK goals against per 60 (y-axis, plotted so up = fewer goals against). Dashed lines mark league averages (36.5 times shorthanded/60, 7.72 GA/60).

The penalty-kill version of the same question separates how often a team is shorthanded from how well it defends once it is:

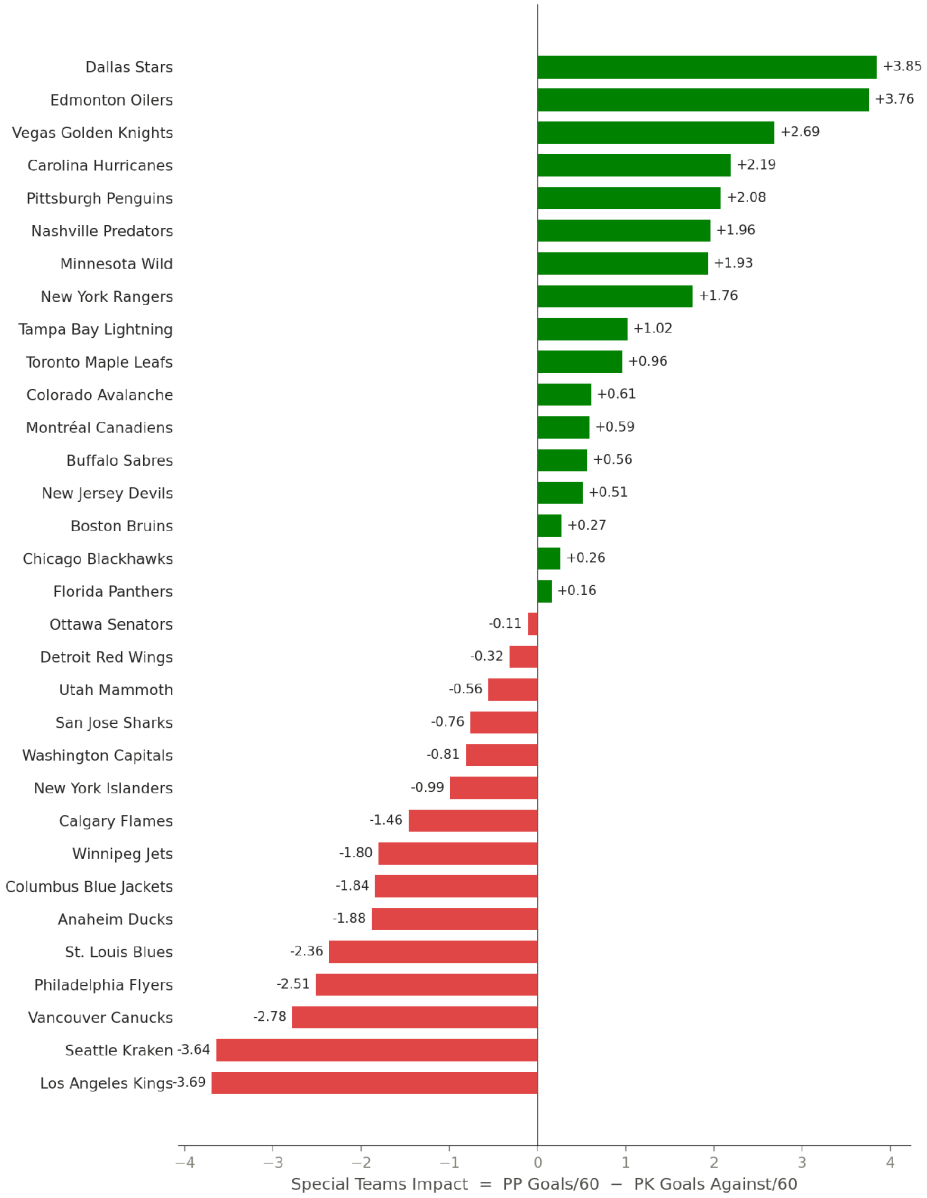
- Low shorthanded time / few goals against (best), Colorado (Bednar) and Chicago (Blashill) are drawing relatively little penalty-kill time and conceding at the league's lowest rates when they are shorthanded, clean, disciplined, well-structured units.
- High shorthanded time / few goals against, Tampa Bay (Cooper) kills at an elite rate (82.6%) despite taking on real shorthanded volume, a sign the structure itself, not just a light workload, is doing the work.
- High shorthanded time / many goals against (worst), Vancouver (Foote) and Seattle (Lambert) are the clearest problem cases in the league: both take the most penalties and concede at the highest rate once shorthanded, meaning the fix is two-part, 5-on-5 discipline to reduce exposure, plus kill structure once they're down a man.

5. Special Teams Impact

To summarize both units on one scale, the model calculates:

$$\textit{Special Teams Impact} = \textit{PP GF/60} - \textit{PK GA/60} \quad \textit{(higher is better)}$$

This isn't meant to replace PP% or PK%, it's a way of putting offensive special-teams production and defensive special-teams suppression onto the same rate basis, in actual goals per 60.

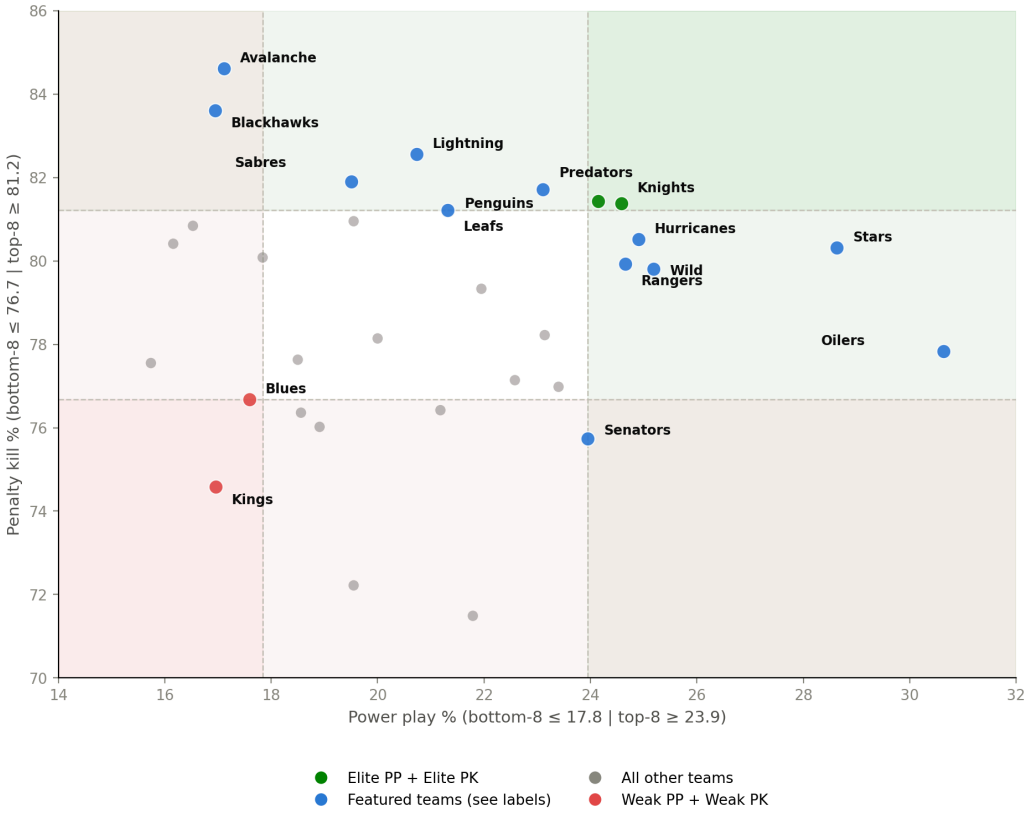


All 32 teams ranked by Special Teams Impact. Dallas (+3.85) and Edmonton (+3.76) lead the league; Los Angeles (−3.69) and Seattle (−3.64) trail it.

The spectrum shows the story is rarely one-sided: the top of the list is a mix of teams getting there through PP scoring (Dallas, Edmonton), balanced production (Vegas, Pittsburgh), and PK suppression (several teams from Section 4 cluster in the positive-but-modest range even with average power plays).

6. PP vs. PK: Different Teams, Different Profiles

A team does not need to be elite in both phases to have an effective overall special-teams profile. Splitting PP% and PK% into elite (top 8), average (middle 16), and weak (bottom 8) tiers produces several distinct team types:



All 32 teams by PP% and PK%, shaded by tier

Profile	Teams
Elite PP + Elite PK	Vegas Golden Knights, Pittsburgh Penguins
Elite PP + Average PK	Dallas Stars, Edmonton Oilers, Carolina Hurricanes, Minnesota Wild, NY Rangers
Average PP + Elite PK	Nashville Predators, Tampa Bay Lightning, Toronto Maple Leafs, Buffalo Sabres
Weak PP + Elite PK	Colorado Avalanche, Chicago Blackhawks
Elite PP + Weak PK	Ottawa Senators
Weak PP + Weak PK	St. Louis Blues, Los Angeles Kings

Two teams can finish with similar overall special-teams value through completely different paths: Colorado (Bednar) wins the special-teams battle almost entirely through PK suppression despite a bottom-10 power play, while Edmonton (Knoblauch) wins it almost entirely through PP scoring despite a bottom-15 kill.

6. The Coaching Question

The central question this model is built to answer is not “which coach has the best power play.” It's “what type of team produces an effective power play or penalty kill, and through which mechanism.”

Coaching style influences forecheck aggression, transition speed, defensive-zone structure, line matching, and in-game adjustments, but players execute the system. The strongest interpretation is that special-teams performance reflects an interaction between coaching system, personnel, deployment, and execution, rather than coaching in isolation.

That leaves three broad paths to power-play success, volume (generate more opportunities), possession (hold the offensive zone once there), and finishing (convert possession into goals, often personnel-driven), and three broad paths to penalty-kill success: pressure (attack the puck carrier), structure (protect the middle of the ice), and possession denial (clear the puck, prevent sustained zone time). Two teams can post similar percentages through very different combinations of these levers, which is exactly why a bare PP%/PK% ranking understates what's actually happening on the ice.

8. Where NHL EDGE Fits

Traditional statistics describe the outcome. NHL EDGE tracking data, skating speed and distance, shot speed and location, offensive- and defensive-zone time, and speed-burst frequency, describes the environment that produced it, and can be filtered specifically to special-teams situations.

Two tracking variables are the most direct extensions of this model: 20+ mph speed bursts (a proxy for tempo, where Colorado and Edmonton have both ranked among the league's most frequent burst-skating teams) and offensive-zone time percentage (a proxy for sustained possession, an area where Carolina has been a consistent league leader). Neither guarantees special-teams results on its own, speed without puck control doesn't produce power-play goals, but both give a coach a mechanism to test against the efficiency maps in Sections 2 and 4: is a low-production power play failing to enter the zone, or entering but failing to hold it?

Conclusion

The traditional special-teams leaderboard asks who has the best power play. This model asks why, separating opportunity from efficiency, putting PP and PK on a shared per-60 scale, and grouping teams by the mechanism behind their numbers rather than the number alone.

The clearest practical output is Section 6: teams do not need to fix both units at once. Colorado and Chicago should spend their practice time on the power play, since the kill is already elite. Edmonton and Ottawa should spend theirs on the kill, since the power play is already elite. Vancouver and Seattle need to fix penalty discipline before either unit's structure will show up in the numbers. That allocation, not a single composite score, is the actionable output of the model.