Right-Shot Defensemen

The fans of the Ottawa Senators would love the team to acquire two right-shot defensemen. For several seasons now, Ottawa has tried to address their lack of talented RSDs by using LSDs (left-shot defensemen) out of their natural position, and those experiments have failed.

I thought I'd look at (almost) all of the RSDs in the league and evaluate how risky it would be to acquire them, defining risk as "the chances the player will be playing at his current level three seasons from now." While the highest-level RSDs are either not available or not affordable, they will be included. Only low-skill RSDs will be excluded, as Ottawa must know by now that a fringe-level defenseman is not the answer to their problems .

Past, Present and Future

Past, present and future all have a part to play when one considers the acquisition of a player. NHL executives will consider those periods differently than I do and may not think of their considerations in the context of past/present/future.

A player's past is defined by his statistics since he entered the league: the goals he scored in 2021-22, the hits he delivered in 2019-20, his poor season in 2022-23 and his great season in 2023-24. NHL executives may also consider a player's junior statistics.

A player's present is his current value, which for me is based on his statistics from 2023-24.

A player's future is his probable value three seasons from now (at the end of the 2026-27 season). Three seasons is an appropriate time frame for the fans of the Ottawa Senators, who are not interested in yet another five-year rebuilding plan.

It is impossible to predict the future of a specific player with accuracy, yet it is a player's future that must be the biggest consideration given his acquisition: the acquiring team acquires a player's future, not his past and not even his present.

Let's dig a little deeper, starting with the present. What do we know about RSD based on their last season?

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The Present

Stapled to the Bench has two player rating systems that could be used to evaluate a player's acquisition potential: Productivity Rating and Value Rating. Productivity Rating tells us what a player did in a particular season, while Value Rating tells us what a player is worth. Consider the PR and VR of these three "A" defensemen (so labeled because their first name starts with "A") from 2023-24.

Player	Team	Prdctvty Rating		Value Rating	
		Category	Score	Category	Score
Aaron Ekblad	FLA	Regular	4.8	First5	7.5
Adam Pelech	NYI	Regular	5.2	First5	7.0
Artem Zub	OTT	First5	6.6	First5	6.1

Ekblad and Pelech missed a total of 55 games, explaining their low PR-Scores. Zub "only" missed 13 games and had the best PR-Score of his career. While PR accurately reflects what these players did in 2023-24, it does not accurately reflect what they were worth. The PR statistics for Ekblad and Pelech are low due to games missed, while Zub's PR statistics are high considering the games he missed.

Their VR statistics, which are based on three season's worth of data and are forgiving about the impact of missed games, more accurately reflect their worth as defensemen. Ekblad is towards the top of the VR-First5 category, Pelech is in the middle and Zub snuck in through an open door in the back.

As VR more accurately reflects the worth of a defenseman at a given point in time, that is the statistic that will be used to categorize the present value of defensemen. VR-Category will be used as VR-Score is too detailed.

The Future

The key question I would like the management of the Ottawa Senators to consider is, "Given that Aaron Ekblad is a VR-First5 RSD now, how likely is he to be at least a VR-First5 defenseman three years from now?" Is he young enough that his skills could grow, is he at his peak and likely to hold that level, or is he so old that he could retire before three years have passed?

An earlier article (*Career Peak*) showed that the age and the skill level of a player are incredibly important when answering that question. Generally, the better players hit their peak at younger ages and hold their peak longer. To determine the risk factor for current defensemen, I'm going to look at the past of all defensemen since 2007-08.

Right-Shot Defensemen

Determining Risk of Acquisition

STTB has player data from 2007-08 through 2023-24. As we are looking at defensemen, I will only use defensemen in this risk analysis, but I will not restrict this part of the study to right-shot defensemen.

Here is an example of the specific data that will be used.

Name	Season	Team(s)	Age	VR Score	VR Category
Brent Burns	2009	MIN	24	6.83	First5
	2012	S.J	27	7.72	First5
Brian Dumoulin	2019	PIT	28	6.72	First5
	2022	PIT	31	6.62	First5
Eric Brewer	2011	T.B	32	6.89	First5
	2014	ANA, T.B, TOR	35	5.39	Regular
Ron Hainsey	2017	TOR	36	6.93	First5
	2020	*DNP*	39		DNP

Brent Burns in 2009-10 was a 24-year-old defenseman who was a VR-First5. Three years later he was still a VR-First5, although he had moved from the middle of that category (VR-Score 6.83) to the top (VR-Score 7.72).

Brian Dumoulin in 2019-20 was a 28-year-old VR-First5, and three years later he was still a VR-First5 with close to the same VR-Score.

Eric Brewer in 2011-12 was a VR-First5 at 32 years old. He declined over the next three seasons, becoming a VR-Regular.

Finally, Ron Hainsey in 2017-18 was a VR-First5 at 36 years old. By the time he was 39 he was retired.
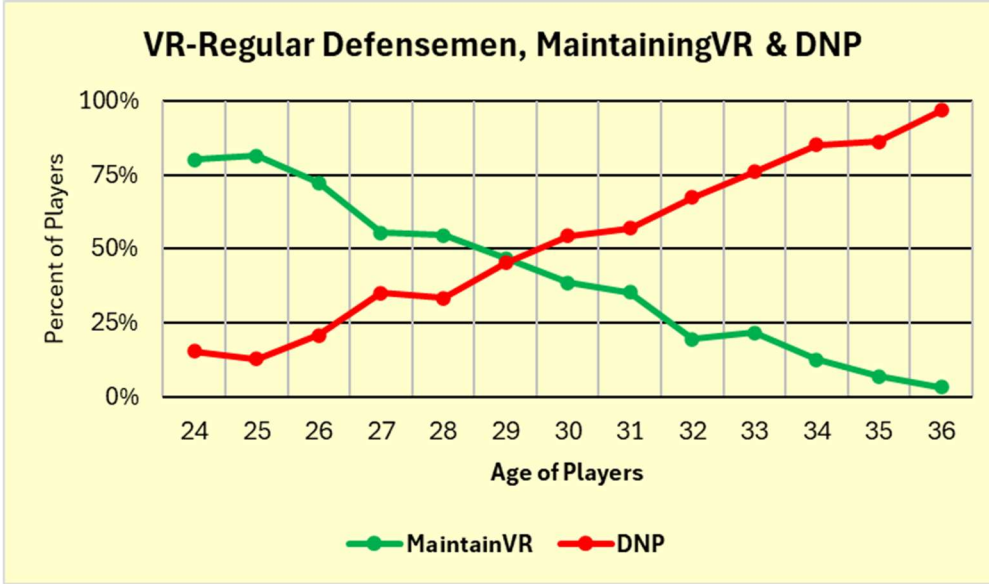
For each player age from 24 through 36, I will count the number of defensemen in the age group by VR-Category. I will also count the number of them that at least maintained their VR-Category three years later (as did Burns and Dumoulin), and the number of them that were no longer playing (as was Hainsey). A chart will show this data rather nicely.

VR-Elite and VR-Star defensemen were treated as a group (VR-Star+) as there were too few VR-Elite to use by themselves.
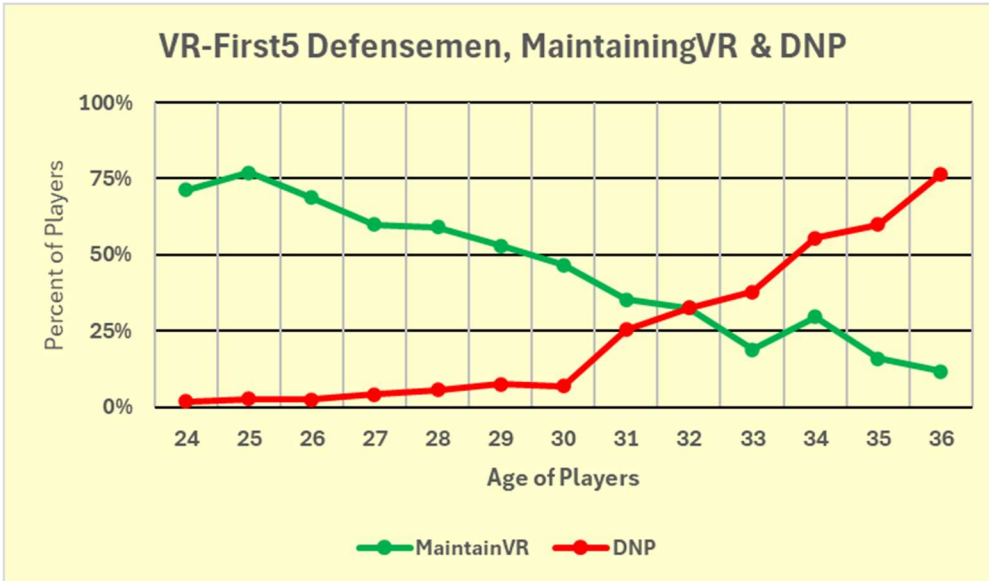
Right-Shot Defensemen

Risk of Acquisition for VR-Regulars

There will be three categories of risk: good risk, risky, and bad risk. A player's age is a good risk if the percentage of players who at least maintained their level over three years is well more than the percentage of players who were no longer playing three years later.

VR-Regular Defensemen, MaintainingVR & DNP

(Chart: Percent of Players vs. Age of Players, ages 24 to 36. Green line = MaintainVR, Red line = DNP)

A VR-Regular is a good risk at or under the age of 26, he is risky from ages 27 to 29 and he is a bad risk at or over the age of 30.

Risk of Acquisition for VR-Regulars

VR-First5 Defensemen, MaintainingVR & DNP

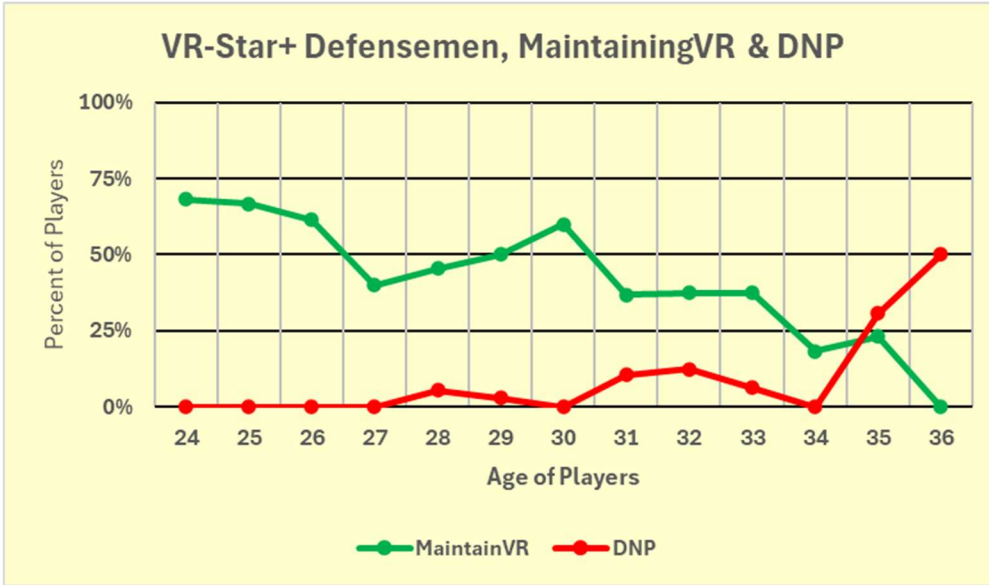*(Chart: Percent of Players vs. Age of Players, ages 24 to 36. Green line = MaintainVR, Red line = DNP)*

A VR-First5 is a good risk at or under the age of 30, he is risky from ages 31 to 32 and he is a bad risk at or over the age of 33.

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Risk of Acquisition for VR-Star+

VR-Star+ Defensemen, MaintainingVR & DNP

A VR-Star+ is a good risk at or under the age of 34, he is risky at the age of 34 and, he is a bad risk at or over the age of 35.

The way I have presented the data for these three sets of defensemen may be misleading. There is a huge difference in skill between a VR-Regular and a VR-Star defenseman, so a VR-Star dropping a category (to VR-First5) is still better than a VR-Regular who maintained his category.

These charts show how likely it is that a defenseman will be "the player we got" when he is acquired. The talent level of the players in each chart is different, getting progressively better. A VR-Star defenseman who declines to the VR-First5 level in three years would not show up on the VR-Star+ chart, but he would be a better defenseman than a VR-Regular who was still a VR-Regular three seasons later.

With all of that palaver out of the way, it is time to look at the RSDs and see which of them are good risks, which are risky, and which are bad risks.

Right-Shot Defensemen

To Dream the Impossible Dream

There are only two VR-Elite right-shot defensemen, both are 25 years old, and any team would love to have either one of them.

2023-24 VR-Elite RSD		
Name	**Team**	**Age**
Cale Makar	COL	25
Adam Fox	NYR	25

I'll go into the row shading in detail in the next section, where all of the row shading colours are present. And I will continue to play with the lyrics of The Impossible Dream.

To Reach the Unreachable Star

2023-24 VR-Star RSD		
Name	**Team**	**Age**
Erik Karlsson	PIT	33
Charlie McAvoy	BOS	26
MacKenzie Weegar	CGY	29
Evan Bouchard	EDM	24
Moritz Seider	DET	22
John Carlson	WSH	33
Alex Pietrangelo	VGK	33
Noah Dobson	NYI	23
Seth Jones	CHI	29
Adam Larsson	SEA	31
Rasmus Andersson	CGY	27
Drew Doughty	L.A	34
Kris Letang	PIT	36
Brent Burns	CAR	38

What is more controversial: that Erik Karlsson is shown as a good risk, or that Letang and Burns are shown as bad risks?

Karlsson declined in 2023-24, but he was coming off one of the best seasons a defenseman has ever had, and that's a hard level of play to maintain at any age.

Letang will be 39 in three seasons, Burns will be 41. They could still be playing, but it is very doubtful that they will be playing at the VR-Star level.

To me, these categorizations are not controversial because they are based on a player's age and skill level, regardless of the player's name. Erik Karlsson is as likely to be a VR-Star level defenseman in three years as is John Carlson and Adam Larsson.

Right-Shot Defensemen

To Run Where the Brave Dare Not Go

2023-24 VR-First5 RSD		
Name	**Team**	**Age**
Colton Parayko	STL	30
Filip Hronek	VAN	26
Aaron Ekblad	FLA	27
Damon Severson	CBJ	29
Jacob Trouba	NYR	29
Brandon Montour	FLA	29
Dougie Hamilton	N.J	30
Sean Durzi	ARI	25
Matt Roy	L.A	28
Dylan DeMelo	WPG	30
Neal Pionk	WPG	28
Brett Pesce	CAR	29
John Marino	N.J	26
Cody Ceci	EDM	30
Ryan Pulock	NYI	29
Andrew Peeke	BOS, CBJ	25
Artem Zub	OTT	28
Brandon Carlo	BOS	27
Justin Faulk	STL	31
Erik Gudbranson	CBJ	31
Jared Spurgeon	MIN	34
Christopher Tanev	CGY, DAL	34
Radko Gudas	ANA	33
Tyler Myers	VAN	33
Jeff Petry	DET	36
Nick Jensen	WSH	33
Kevin Shattenkirk	BOS	34

Buried in the bottom of the green-highlighted rows you will see that Ottawa has a good right-shot defenseman in Artem Zub. Ottawa wants two more good right-shot defensemen.

Another thing to note is this list includes Dylan DeMelo and Cody Ceci, both of whom used to play in Ottawa. It would seem the Senators know how to acquire RSD but are weak at keeping them.

Another former Senator, Erik Gudbranson, is listed as risky. I have no problem with the risky rating, but I was surprised to see him in the VR-First5 category. I had to check his statistics.

Two of his last three seasons were PR-First5 level and the third season was above the mid-point of the PR-Regular level in a season where he missed 12 games. He has set career bests in VR-Score in each of his last three seasons. Leaving Ottawa might be the best thing that ever happened to him.

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To Fight the Unbeatable Foe

2023-24 VR-Regular RSD		
Name	**Team**	**Age**
Erik Cernak	T.B	26
Henri Jokiharju	BUF	24
Timothy Liljegren	TOR	24
Dante Fabbro	NSH	25
Nick Perbix	T.B	25
Johnathan Kovacevic	MTL	26
Adam Boqvist	CBJ	23
Ethan Bear	WSH	26
Jamie Drysdale	ANA, PHI	21
Alexandre Carrier	NSH	27
Matt Dumba	ARI, T.B	29
Tony DeAngelo	CAR	28
Sean Walker	COL, PHI	29
Rasmus Ristolainen	PHI	29
Connor Clifton	BUF	28
Ilya Lyubushkin	ANA, TOR	29
Zach Whitecloud	VGK	27
Matthew Benning	S.J	29
Will Borgen	SEA	27
Kyle Burroughs	S.J	28
Troy Stecher	ARI, EDM	29
David Savard	MTL	33
Josh Manson	COL	32
Trevor van Riemsdyk	WSH	32
Scott Mayfield	NYI	31
Connor Murphy	CHI	30
John Klingberg	TOR	31
Jani Hakanpaa	DAL	31
Justin Holl	DET	31
Tyson Barrie	NSH	32
Jan Rutta	S.J	33
Justin Schultz	SEA	33
Erik Johnson	BUF, PHI	35
Luke Schenn	NSH	34
Colin Miller	N.J, WPG	31
Travis Hamonic	OTT	33

A VR-Regular defenseman is a #3 or #4 defenseman, maybe a good #5. If Ottawa could pick up two of the good-risk VR-Regular RSDs that would have the approval of their fanbase, provided they didn't have to trade away the core offensive players to get them.

What Ottawa does not need, in my humble opinion, is yet another grizzled veteran who is not at the peak of his career but will be a good presence in the locker room. Arguably they already have that with Travis Hamonic.

What the Senators need are players who will be a good presence on the ice.

If you have made it this far, congratulations. You are entering the final stretch of this marathon of an article.

Right-Shot Defensemen

Right-Shot Defensemen Summary

VR Category	Group Count	Good Risk	Risky	Bad Risk
VR-Elite	2	2	0	0
VR-Star	14	11	1	2
VR-First5	27	**18**	**2**	7
VR-Regular	36	**9**	12	15
Total	**79**	**40**	**15**	**24**

Who would I like to see playing for the Senators next season? Pretty much any of the players in one of the three sub-groups whose count in the above table is in bold red font.

It is unrealistic to target the VR-Elite defensemen: if they even have a price, it is one that Ottawa would not pay.

Ottawa might be able to pick up a VR-Star defenseman who was old and had a high salary, but I sincerely hope Ottawa isn't that foolish. In three years, Brandon Carlo (now VR-First5) will probably be a better defenseman than Brent Burns (now VR-Star).

Here are the names of the players I'd like Ottawa to consider. Only Artem Zub was removed from the players in the three sub-groups of interest because he already plays for the Senators. The players whose information is shaded in green are of particular interest.

Name	VR Category	Team(s)	Age	Name	VR Category	Team(s)	Age
Colton Parayko	VR-First5	STL	30	Ryan Pulock	VR-First5	NYI	29
Filip Hronek	VR-First5	VAN	26	Andrew Peeke	VR-First5	BOS, CBJ	25
Aaron Ekblad	VR-First5	FLA	27	Brandon Carlo	VR-First5	BOS	27
Damon Severson	VR-First5	CBJ	29	Justin Faulk	VR-First5	STL	31
Jacob Trouba	VR-First5	NYR	29	Erik Gudbranson	VR-First5	CBJ	31
Brandon Montour	VR-First5	FLA	29	Erik Cernak	VR-Regular	T.B	26
Dougie Hamilton	VR-First5	N.J	30	Henri Jokiharju	VR-Regular	BUF	24
Sean Durzi	VR-First5	ARI	25	Timothy Liljegren	VR-Regular	TOR	24
Matt Roy	VR-First5	L.A	28	Dante Fabbro	VR-Regular	NSH	25
Dylan DeMelo	VR-First5	WPG	30	Nick Perbix	VR-Regular	T.B	25
Neal Pionk	VR-First5	WPG	28	Johnathan Kovacevic	VR-Regular	MTL	26
Brett Pesce	VR-First5	CAR	29	Adam Boqvist	VR-Regular	CBJ	23
John Marino	VR-First5	N.J	26	Ethan Bear	VR-Regular	WSH	26
Cody Ceci	VR-First5	EDM	30	Jamie Drysdale	VR-Regular	ANA, PHI	21

Right-Shot Defensemen

What Would it Take?

What would it take for Ottawa to acquire a VR-First5 defenseman? Looking strictly at the skill level of the players involved in a one-for-one trade, and ignoring salary cap considerations, I would expect that Ottawa would have to give up a VR-First5 forward.

Some of the fan base may well think that a good general manager could land Cale Makar by offering up Matthieu Joseph and a ticket for a free breakfast at Denny's, but those people are thinking with their hearts instead of their heads.

Ottawa has one VR-First5 forward: Drake Batherson. Would you trade Drake Batherson for John Marino (D, N.J.)? If your answer was instantly "yes", do you think New Jersey would trade Marino for Batherson?

I am always impressed when teams make talent-for-talent trades, as it seems impossible to balance out all of the real-world factors that both teams have to consider.

Summary

If this off-season goes like the last few have, Ottawa will end up getting Erik Johnson and Luke Schenn, two bad-risk VR-Regular defensemen. It isn't what Ottawa fans want, but it is what we've come to expect.

Data Sources

NaturalStatTrick.com (NST) provided almost all of the player data that was needed.

NHL.com was used for players who are right-handed shooters. This particular datum is not provided at NST and was obviously a critical piece of information for this article.

StapledToTheBench (STTB) was used to get Value Ratings (VR) and Productivity Ratings (PR) of players.

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