

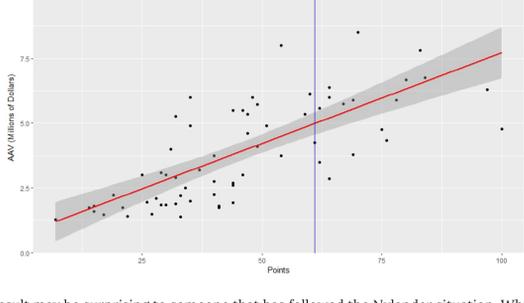
# Can the Toronto Maple Leafs Pay Up?

By [Joe Dunham](#) • 28 Nov 2018 • 9 min read

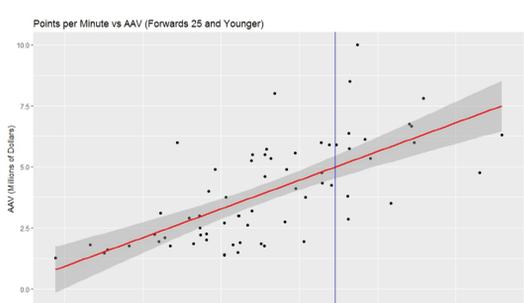
It's no secret that William Nylander has held out on signing a contract with the Toronto Maple Leafs. As a restricted free agent about to enter into his first non-entry level NHL contract, Nylander is very limited in his options: sign with the Leafs, or don't play at all. Players rarely choose not to play at all, with many top six players opting for bridge deals - three-to-four year contracts typically valued far less than they wish in exchange for an opportunity to prove themselves more capable of a future contract more extensive in both term and salary. It is also common for players to begin negotiations asking for high pay, only to settle for what they were actually hoping for. What makes Nylander's situation unique isn't that he reportedly asked for upward of \$8 million per year (money typically reserved for roughly top two talent on a team), but that he has not since backed down and signed for less. Against everyone's expectations, it is now late November, the Leafs have played over a quarter of the season, and they are still without the 22 year old Swede.

Nylander's holdout begs the question: how much money should he sign for? In order to come to any sort of conclusion, one must first consider what exactly goes into the value of a contract. Player ability, clearly, is the most important variable. To find a comparison, data was used from all 965 NHL players from the 2017-18 season. For issues of sample size, a minimum of 50 games played was set, bringing the total down to 513 players. To better fit Nylander's situation, only forwards 25 years or younger were considered. Finally, only players with contracts of over \$1 million per year AAV (Average Annual Value, per Cap Friendly) were included to prevent entry level contracts from significantly altering conclusions - it would be unwise to compare contract sizes otherwise when Art Ross winner Connor McDavid was only paid \$925 thousand for the season. In the end, 67 players are left that fit the criteria described above. How does Nylander stack up to these 67?

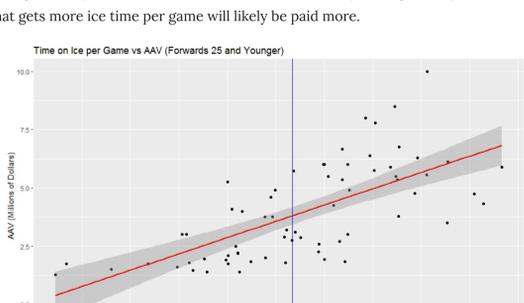
Perhaps the most obvious comparison to draw is how many points each player earned. In the chart below, total points are plotted against contract sizes. The vertical blue line is where Nylander's 61 points would place him among his peers.



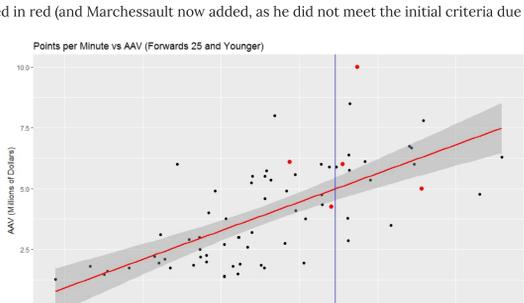
This result may be surprising to someone that has followed the Nylander situation. While his initial request for \$8 million has been deemed ridiculously high by most, it has been generally thought that he would end up receiving a contract in the \$6 million to \$7 million range. The linear model places Nylander very near the \$5 million mark based on contracts of those with similar point totals to his. Also noteworthy is how less-than-stellar the chart makes out of Nylander as a scorer. Though it should be stressed again that the chart is only showing young players that make over \$1 million per year - you won't find many fourth line grinders here - it is interesting to point out that, among those in similar circumstances, Nylander's point total isn't exactly elite. One may consider that Nylander wasn't playing top line minutes for the Maple Leafs (about 16 minutes per game), and that total playing time (including loss of time due to injury) greatly affects year end point totals. To compensate, an adjusted plot is shown below this time using points-per-sixty minutes played along the x-axis. The result is a more linear plot, but with near identical findings in regards to Nylander.



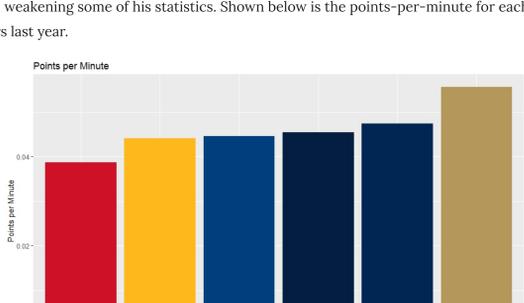
Of course, points do not tell the entire tale of player ability. However, while other statistics such as shooting percentage, Corsi, faceoff percentage (for centers), and point shares are clearly telling of how effective a player is, these statistics by themselves have little correlation when it comes to contract values, especially compared to simply the amount of points they put up. There is, as always, variation. Quality of line-mates certainly affects point totals, and it is likely that other statistics, including those listed above, have a lot to do with the variability about the regression line. But, the only other statistic that isn't directly derived from points that clearly relates to contract amounts is time on ice per game. At first glance, this appears trivial - better players get more playing time, who would've thought? - but the importance becomes more apparent when comparing two players on different teams with similar ability. Though nearly identical in skill, the one that gets more ice time per game will likely be paid more.



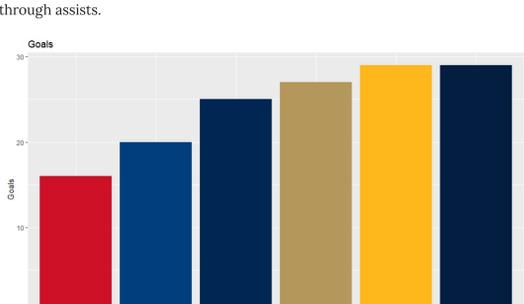
This leads to another observation: player ability is without a doubt connected to how much they get paid, but, perhaps more significantly, it is player importance to a team that determines how much the team is willing to pay. Teams are restricted by the salary cap, and do not have unlimited resources to provide their players. A center, regardless of skill, would likely be paid more by the Montreal Canadiens (who notably lack center depth) than the Pittsburgh Penguins (who have Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin already taking up positions). To relate this back to Nylander, it is enlightening to look at comparisons to a group of five other players around the NHL, who each have similar numbers and contracts set in stone and could be used as reference points. These players are Dylan Larkin, Jack Eichel, Jonathan Marchessault, Viktor Arvidsson, and Nikolaj Ehlers. The chart below is the same points-per-minute plot as above, but with these 5 players now marked in red (and Marchessault now added, as he did not meet the initial criteria due to age).



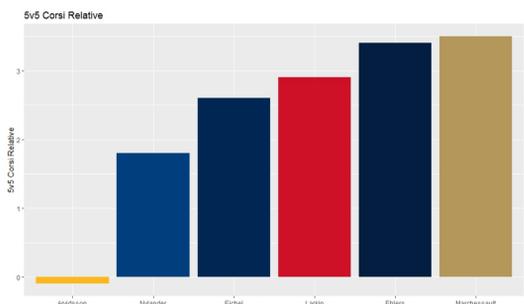
There are a few additional comments that should be made to give more insight into these players. Larkin, Eichel, and Ehlers each played last season at the same age as Nylander (21 years old). Arvidsson was 24 years old, but had his break-out year around the same time as the others listed. Marchessault was older at 27 years old last year, but also put up similar numbers to Nylander and signed a new contract for the 2018-19 season. In addition, Jack Eichel played only 67 games due to injury, weakening some of his statistics. Shown below is the points-per-minute for each of the players last year.



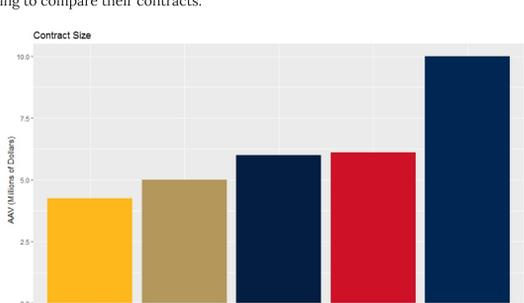
Nylander's points-per-minute is roughly the same as Arvidsson, Ehlers, and Eichel. Marchessault's higher value, being a more experienced player, can be seen as a reasonable expectation of growth for any of the other players listed. Larkin's value is lower, but that is partially accounted for with his abysmal 6.9% shooting percentage (significantly lower than his career average, which has returned to form currently in the 2018-19 season). The primary takeaway here should be how similar these players' offensive efficiencies are. The number of points put up by five of the six players (excluding Marchessault) was between 60 and 64; however, as seen below, the goal numbers vary considerably more. Compared to a player like Ehlers, the bulk of Nylander's points came through assists.



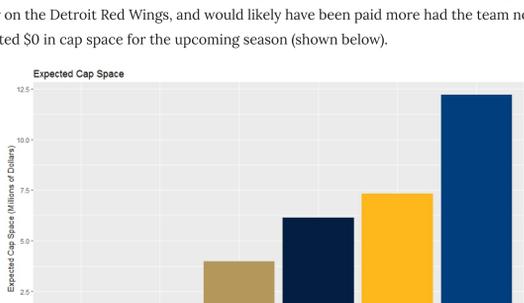
After accounting for Eichel's missing 15 games, it is clear that Nylander and Larkin are a step behind the others when it comes to putting the puck in the net. Finally, comparing each player's relative Corsi (percentage of shot attempts taken by the player's team when he is on the ice relative to other players on the same team) suggests Ehlers and Marchessault are a level above the others when it comes to driving possession, while Nylander again takes fifth out of the six players.



Now, with the knowledge of how these players compare to each other in performance, it is revealing to compare their contracts.



So what is the cause for these significant differences? As discussed before, the importance to the team is possibly the most important factor in determining contract values - more-so than actual ability. This is especially the case for young players, who are locked in to their teams as restricted free agents. Jack Eichel is undoubtedly the franchise player for the Buffalo Sabres, whose next largest contract belongs to Kyle Okposo for \$6 million per year. For the time being, nobody on the Sabres is as important to the organization as Eichel, and it certainly shows in his contract. The case is similar for Dylan Larkin. Despite only having a contract of \$6.1 million, he is the highest paid player on the Detroit Red Wings, and would likely have been paid more had the team not had an expected \$0 in cap space for the upcoming season (shown below).



Nikolaj Ehlers has an interesting contract of \$6 million despite being the fifth highest-paid person on the Winnipeg Jets. However, the Jets are in a situation with enough cap space to sign such contracts. Jonathan Marchessault and Viktor Arvidsson (playing for the Vegas Golden Knights and the Nashville Predators, respectively) have lower contracts than the rest. In Marchessault's case, it is likely due to uncertainty of reposition of last year's stats (something that could be said about much of the Golden Knights' season). For Arvidsson, it is a matter of being a very good player on a team of very great players - he is tied for seventh highest paid person on the team.

It is in these comparisons that the Nylander situation has evolved. William Nylander would likely be disappointed in Larkin's \$6.1 million dollar contract. But it is simply fact that Nylander is not as important to the Toronto Maple Leafs - a team with incredible talent such as John Tavares, Morgan Reilly, and Patrick Marleau already signed to large contracts and with Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner requiring upcoming extensions - as Larkin is to the Red Wings. There just isn't space for the Maple Leafs and Nylander to come to a satisfactory deal, and if rumors of a near \$7 million contract become true, it would likely end up hurting the Maple Leafs more than it helps. Unfortunately for Nylander, his standing with his team seems much more akin to Viktor Arvidsson than Jack Eichel. His raw stats suggest a \$5 million contract and his reference players suggest \$6 million, but his willingness to hold out and the financial state of his team suggest one of two options: either he gives in and signs for \$5.5 million from Toronto, or his refusal to sign lands him roughly \$6.5 million on a team that's able to pay. Either way, it is certain that Nylander will have a pivotal role on the team that signs him, and his play will certainly hold the interest of fans, if for no other reason than to see if record setting contract negotiations lead to equally impressive performance.

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