

# the reflector

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## New year, new municipal budget

*While the new city council has long-term plans to address financial strain, can Calgarians afford to wait?*

**Acacia Carol**

Layout Editor

With a new year, a new council and a new mayor, the City of Calgary has released its 2026 budget. With a primary focus on affordability, the 150-page budget has ambitious plans to deliver on the election promises made in October 2025.

Following city council approval, the 2026 budget outlined four specific areas of investment: transit, public safety, infrastructure and housing.

Infrastructure and housing are the largest areas targeted by this budget, with infrastructure receiving \$201 million to support projects such as the maintenance of the Beltline YMCA. There will be \$106 million invested in housing projects, including the downtown office-to-residential conversions. Carrying over, \$1.1 billion has been previously allocated for water infrastructure.

Additionally, the budget cancels the planned 1 per cent property tax shift and reduces the tax increase as an affordability measure. By reducing the tax increase, the city reports that 2026 tax revenue fell from 3.6 per cent to 1.6 per cent.

### Old problems

Lori Williams, associate professor of policy studies at Mount Royal University



**Calgary city council faces pressure heading into a new year and a new budget. Photo courtesy of The City of Calgary**

(MRU), says that the budget reflects a city council and mayor that is attempting to balance voter's election concerns with Calgarian's priorities.

"Clearly, this is a response to some of the pressure that the council came under in the election campaign," Williams says. "There was a lot of discussion about managing taxpayer dollars, keeping costs under control."

The new budget, which includes \$17 billion towards long-term infrastructure

planning from 2023-26, is under the rate of inflation.

However, facing the recent Bearspaw water main break, Williams says council is facing "tough discussions" on how to maintain aging infrastructure at a "very significant" expense.

This is the second time since the initial rupture in June 2024 that the City of Calgary has dealt with a crack from the Bearspaw water line. Council plans to use recommendations from a report conducted after the

2024 rupture to deal with the current break.

Williams says that it is crucial for council to have a plan to address aging infrastructure, even if it means looking for provincial or federal support.

"We see that they're going to be using this rainy day fund to invest in the replacement of this water main," Williams says. "Sooner or later, those savings run out. Municipalities have very limited revenue sources."

### Affordability answers

While the budget prioritises keeping life affordable for Calgarians, transit fares and fees for services such as recycling, garbage, and compost are increasing under the new budget. Taxes were not increased.

Students and young adults might be further impacted by the increases, with daily fares increasing from \$3.80 to \$4 and monthly passes rising from \$118 to \$126. Although it's not a significant increase, Williams stresses that even a few dollars can make an impact for those already struggling.

"The reality is that most students are in situations where their housing costs, their transportation costs,

their recreational costs, those all might go up as a result of some of the things that have been decided by this council," she says.

Housing, in particular, is one area where the City of Calgary has been pushing to increase access and affordability. Within the new budget, the Home is Here housing strategy plans to address concerns through increasing the availability of affordable housing.

In addition to the planned downtown commercial office-to-residential conversions, the proposed housing measures include building 6,500 homes over the next 15 years, 260 of which are to be completed in Southview by 2028.

However, it's unclear whether this will benefit students and young adults. Williams explains that even if downtown housing grows in availability, the cost of living, especially including transportation, might not create an effective solution.

"I think there are a few questions that we need answers to before we can fully say whether this is going to make a difference, and who it's going to make a difference for," she says.

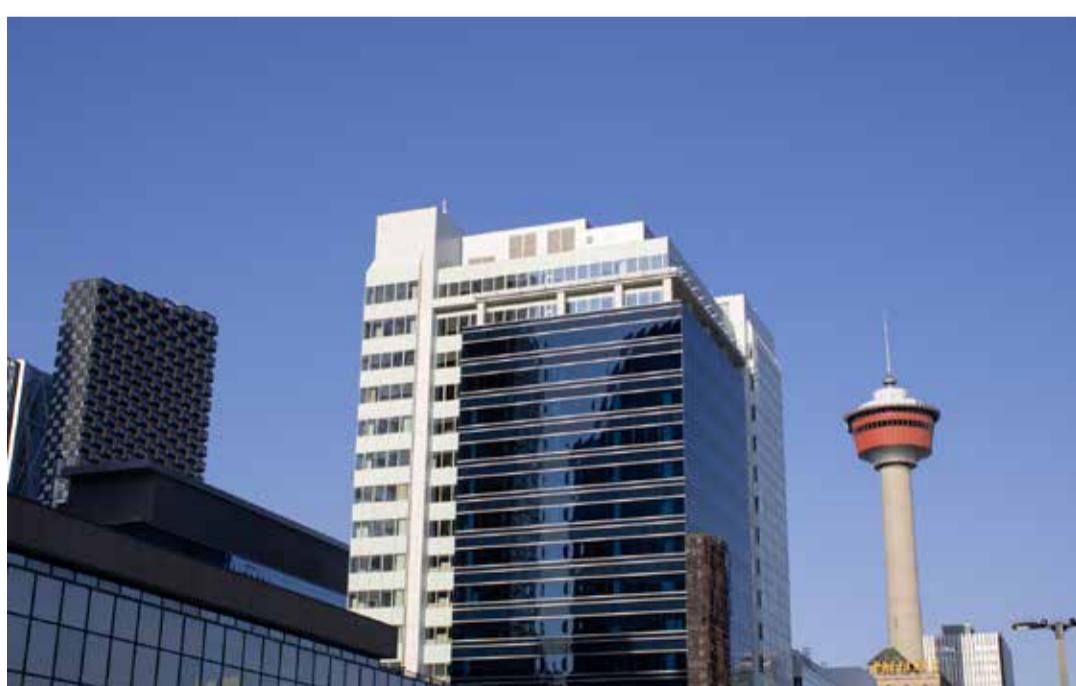
### New direction

Regardless, Williams says the current budget reflects a city council that has listened to voters' concerns. Within the new budget, council will be looking into more favourable solutions to replace the 2024 blanket rezoning policy.

"It's clear that people were unhappy with the current system and they're going to have to try to explore and experiment with new systems," she says.

In the proposed budget, the City of Calgary reports that Calgarians' satisfaction has been on a downward trend since 2015, driven by the operational budget failing to "keep pace" with population growth and inflation.

The 2026 budget was finalised on Dec. 3, 2025, with city council voting 12:3 in favour.



**Downtown will be receiving support through public safety and housing programs in the new budget. Photo courtesy of Aiden Johner**

# Chinook Blast Winter Festival: Art, entertainment, vendors and more

As *Calgarians gear up for another snowy season, one local festival prepares to open its doors for its fifth year of free family fun*

**Karra Smith**

Staff Writer



**As a warm light in the depths of dark winter, Chinook Blast aims to connect Calgarians in the cold. Photo courtesy of Chinook Blast**

The Chinook Blast Winter Festival is back this year, over three weekends starting Jan. 30, and is packed with many exciting attractions, performances and vendors.

Jeff Hessel, senior vice president of marketing and destination development for Tourism Calgary and a member of the executive committee for the Chinook Blast, says the festival's location change has expanded the event, making the festivities more centralised and accessible.

"We are doing more programming than ever this year compared to previous years, just because we're on this new location," Hessel says. "[We] really want to just make sure that there are tons of things for people to do, and it's all free."

With Eau Claire Plaza hosting the event this year, attendees can expect a range of art installations from creators based in the city and around the world.

"Bringing this international talent to Calgary, to meet

with our local artists, will only help our local artists get to this platform and this level," says Paul Magnuson, one of the guest curators.

"You'll see a lot of light art, as the Chinook Blast is known for. And in the international works, you'll see what I would consider three of the most popular touring artworks in that vein," he says.

Magnuson also explains that the experience is about more than just having interactive pieces for the duration of the festival — but

rather creating artwork that "encourages play and invites light into an otherwise dark and gloomy week, or several weeks."

Some of the installations that will be present at the plaza include:

"Tic-Tac-Tote(s)" by B!g Art, which combines the childhood game of tic-tac-toe with an interactive three-by-three tote sculpture.

"Electric Grove" by Biolumia, which stands out as several 10-foot-tall LED trees with hand-sculpted features.

"Crystal Wishes" by Mapperz, which encourages individuals to wish at the wishing well and watch as projections react to their voices.

However, the physical sculptures are not the only art that will be present at the Chinook Blast, as a variety of performers will also be providing entertainment for all ages.

One of the most notable events taking place is "Drag On Ice 4," which will be headlined by drag queen Joey Jay from the reality show RuPaul's Drag Race and Karla Marx from The Cabaret Company.

For Jay, this performance provides an extra bit of nostalgia and an opportunity to show off their skills.

"I grew up a competitive figure skater, and so now we're gonna take figure skating and the drag

performance and artistry and mesh them together," says Jay.

Stepping on the ice in full drag is an easy task. However, Jay says it's the ice that adds a certain element that you can't get at a typical venue.

"You can take something more emotional or closer to the heart, or you could even do something without any lyrics and still give a breathtaking performance," Jay says.

Along with "Drag On Ice 4", there will be live shows from people such as Cedric Lightning, a Cree/Stoney Nakoda drummer and his collaborator, songwriter and musician Kris Demeanor, as well as the group L'omelette, Blue Jay Session: Amped Up and more.

The festival will also include a market inside the Chinese Cultural Centre, roving performers on stilts and in costumes, a beer garden, food trucks and local establishments, and "The Dome", an art installation by B!g Art that gives attendees a place to warm up.

Hessel encourages anyone looking for more information to check out the Chinook Blast Winter Festival website and social media.

The Blast starts Jan. 30 at Eau Claire Plaza and is free for all ages.



**From light shows, live entertainment, food vendors and more, Chinook Blast offers festival fun for all ages. Photo courtesy of Chinook Blast**

# Access codes: The new barrier in education

*Student frustration with textbook prices is higher than ever*

**Amal Mouaouia**

Contributor

At the MRU Cougars campus store, the checkout counter has become an unexpected window into the current financial pressures facing university students.

At the start of each semester, students can often be seen asking to purchase online assignment codes separately, hoping to avoid the cost of a full textbook.

These required digital access codes play a major role in this growing financial challenge.

Major publishers such as Wiley, Pearson and McGraw Hill now offer online platforms (WileyPLUS, Pearson MyLab, McGraw Hill Connect, among others) that host quizzes, homework and even exams.

As these platforms require a one-time registration code tied to a student's account, learners are often forced to purchase the publisher's code to participate in graded coursework, regardless of whether they have the textbook content itself.

McGraw Hill, a leading educational publisher, reported \$85 million in post-secondary billings in its first quarter of fiscal 2025 and a record market share of 27.6 per cent, according to company filings.

In the past, students could mitigate textbook prices by buying used copies, sharing books with classmates, borrowing from libraries, or relying on older editions. Today, access codes are typically single-use and tied to an individual student's



**From access codes to steep textbook prices, student stress now goes beyond grades.**

**Photo courtesy of Pixnio**

account, rendering used textbooks incomplete and resale impossible.

"The book itself isn't the issue anymore," says Mahmood Sawarbi, a third-year accounting student. "It's the code. You can find the information anywhere, online, YouTube, PDFs, but the grade itself is locked behind a paywall."

From a faculty perspective, these systems offer clear benefits. Automated grading reduces workload, adaptive homework can target student weaknesses, and analytics can help instructors identify struggling students earlier in the term.

However, to students currently battling rising textbook costs, the frustration lies not in learning being restricted, but in having to pay for the proof that you have learned.

Access code requirements are not communicated

until instructors begin posting course materials on Brightspace D2L, the online learning platform used at MRU, sometimes only days before classes begin, leaving many students unexpectedly burdened by additional costs when alternatives are no longer viable.

This struggle reflects a growing tension in higher education: current technology has made finding free PDF versions of textbooks easier than ever, while completing a course is now increasingly requiring publisher-controlled access codes.

This conflict raises questions about whether academic assessment is becoming a form of gatekeeping rather than a measure of learning.

Campus-level responses have varied, with some universities and colleges expanding open educational

resource (OER) programs and adopting low or zero-cost course materials.

British Columbia has reported that adopting the initiative has saved its learners over \$4 million.

At the Students Association of Mount Royal University (SAMRU), VP Academic Meekena Erkin has identified increasing awareness of OER and zero-cost textbooks (ZCT) as a priority.

"In a time where students are facing increased costs of living and tuition, the importance of open educational resources and zero-cost textbooks continues to grow. These initiatives and resources aim to reduce student financial insecurity through ensuring textbooks and educational materials are more accessible," she says.

Erkin says that SAMRU's Representation Executive Council (REC) will continue to advocate for more student awareness concerning accessible resources.

There is a clear and growing awareness and momentum around reducing textbook and access code costs, with initiatives like those led by SAMRU's REC marking important progress.

For now, these expenses remain a significant and growing burden for many students. The frustration is clear, but so is the hope that increased awareness and action will ensure students' proof of learning is no longer locked behind a paywall.

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**Resources such as SAMRU aim to help students find accessible and affordable education tools.** Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

# features

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## Turning the tide, one thread at a time

*Art and climate forward initiative channels sustainability through fashion*

**Bella Coco**

News Editor



**From photoshoots to the runway, TAP rocks the fashion world with sustainable pieces. Photo courtesy of The Aquativity Project**

To the casual passerby, a table scattered with scraps of fabric and donated garment pieces looks unremarkable at first glance. But in the hands of The Aquativity Project (TAP), these once discarded pieces become the starting point for something extraordinary.

TAP is a non-profit, Calgary-based collective that transforms recycled and donated materials into upcycled fashion pieces while creating space for education, mentorship and community engagement.

Supported early on by Ocean Wise and shaped by partnerships with local artists and sustainability-focused groups, TAP has grown from a single idea into a platform for creative climate dialogue.

For Nidhi Kotikalapudi, TAP's founder and artistic director, turning waste into a catalyst for conversation is the core of the organisation's work.

### Putting down roots

However, before TAP was an organisation, it was merely an idea that began not in a design studio, but with environmental concern. Kotikalapudi describes herself first and foremost as

an environmentalist—not a fashion designer.

With an education background in biomedical sciences and neuroscience, Kotikalapudi says it was easy for her to see the important connection between human well-being and environmental health. By combining her learning with a passion for fashion, everything started to fall into place.

"I think what inspired me personally is that I really love clothes. I like fashion. I don't think I was ever considered to be someone who was a designer, but I liked fashion. Coming from a South Asian background, I've seen a lot of community interest, which is part of my upbringing. And then, mixing that with being an environmentalist, I think it was really cool to be able to merge those two ideas," she says.

Building TAP was never a solo effort. In its earliest stages, Kotikalapudi relied on extensive outreach, including numerous emails and phone calls, to recruit collaborators with skills in fashion, sewing, photography and production.

"I think the first month was really trying to find the right people with the right knowledge, because I had no design experience," she says.

"I didn't know how clothes were made, and I needed some expertise from people in the fashion industry."

### Past the soil

As TAP grew into a broader collective of designers, volunteers, interns, and artists, Kotikalapudi also made sure to support the people involved.

"Another really important thing for me was that we were supporting people who were aspiring professionals and not just jumping to who's the best photographer in town, or

who's the best videographer, but really finding people who were also trying to build their portfolios," she says. "So it was a win-win situation for everyone."

When it comes to fashion, Kotikalapudi argues it is uniquely suited to environmental storytelling.

"I think art is a really good storyteller. It can help bring the past, present, and future together and combine them. It's a great way to capture people's attention. When someone sees something, and they're like, 'wow, that's

really pretty.' But then, when they realise it's made entirely from thrifited, recycled, unwanted materials, that is when the conversation really starts," Kotikalapudi says. "That's the factor we want people to take away from this, rather than just having a trifold or an essay. That's a lot of words, but I think art can say a lot more than what we can do just with words."

### In bloom

Regarding future work, TAP is ready to gear up and achieve additional goals. By starting the year with their biggest fashion show to date on Jan. 10, TAP is ready to "refine their process" and continue working toward becoming zero-waste in their work and pieces.

With more local events, such as Bow River shoreline cleanups, on the horizon, Kotikalapudi says all the credit for TAP's growth goes to the community's support.

"Because of their support, that's why we're able to continue, expand our projects, do more collaborations, because people are really interested in the work that we do. We do something very unique. It's very difficult, but unique."



**Behind the scenes at a TAP photoshoot. Photo courtesy of The Aquativity Project**

# A look at performative male contests

## How MRU's exhibition is bringing people together

**Nadoo Abaagu**

Contributor

Excitement and anticipation fill the room as people take their seats, while others mill off to the side. No matter where they are, they all lean forward to catch a glimpse of the boys to come.

It's like a concert. From the outside, you would never guess that these hundreds of people were waiting for Mount Royal University's (MRU) performative male lookalike contest, not until you witness tampons and birth control thrown into a crowd, pads on men's heads and the word feminism thrown into every sentence.

Last year, the image of a man wielding matchas, labubus, feminist literature and indie artists has been ridiculed on the internet for being a caricature, a ploy by men to appeal to women's values without any sincerity.

It began with a Timothée Chalamet lookalike contest in New York City in late 2024. Since then, it has only grown in scale and scope, donning the faces of everything from celebrities to fictional characters to internet archetypes—the performative male.

### What's the draw?

Besides the trends and outrageous personas, why are young adults across the world flocking to organise and participate in these contests? Particularly, why are Calgarians going to these events?

Between the University of Calgary and MRU, fall 2025 saw several performative male contests, as did many other Canadian universities.

But what was in it for students? Prince Manzano, one of 18 contestants at MRU's event in October 2025, says his reason for competing was to put himself out there.

"I thought that it's my last year, let's make a memorable impact," says Manzano.

Taimur Ashraf, the winner of MRU's contest, says his motivations were similar. Ashraf says the contest was a great way to make friends.

The tie-breaker on Ashraf's win was his cover of "Creep" by Radiohead. He sang in front of a crowd of his peers, guitar in hand and stricken with fear, and watched as they responded in earnest.

"The people in the front row, while I was singing,



**The first round of 18 male contestants flaunt interests like literature and matcha at Mount Royal University's Wyckham House food court. Photo by Nadoo Abaagu**

immediately started singing along with me," he says. "There were people over there with flashlights on their phones, and they were waving the phones around. It was very magical."

Everyone from the contestants, to the audience members, to the judges believed Ashraf would win—he was the only one who brought a guitar. For Ashraf, winning the contest was surprising and gratifying. He says the experience taught him that his voice has value.

As for Manzano, his story is not so symbolic, but he did manage to make the memorable impact he was looking for. With an earnest performance, a good singing voice, and a charming disposition, he won second place.

He says the people he met—including contestants and the audience members—are what he treasures most from the experience.

"I felt that I got to meet new people," says Manzano. "Seeing people that are in the same mindset of let's have a fun thing, let's be chalant. Seeing other people like that made me feel like this is the group that I want to be with as I move forward."

Many of the contestants share these viewpoints. The contest was a silly idea, a TikTok or Instagram trend brought to life, but it inspired spontaneous responses. For the contestants of MRU's performative male contest,

the experience connected them with their peers.

Audience members voiced a similar feeling. While sitting through the two-hour pageant, cheering for their favourite contestants and anxiously awaiting the winners, they turned their mockery of the trend into sincere engagement with one another.

Maybe that's what Calgary's youth have flocked to in these contests—sincerity amid the irony, and genuineness amid the silly.

### Is it all a performance?

While these contests are inherently performative, Manzano and Ashraf say there is some sincerity to the shows they put on.

"The outfits that I wear myself and the things that I do, kind of align with what people consider performative," says Ashraf. "So it's kind of funny to me because my friends were just saying, 'this is literally what you wear every day.'"

Manzano says playing the performative male is ironic.

"This trend allowed us to ironically like our stuff," says Manzano. "We do it for the joke, but I feel like most people use the joke and are like, 'Okay, I actually like this.'"

Performative male contests present a heightened version of the performative male, complete with every

foolish stereotype, ready for audiences' mocking. But they are ultimately contests full of contradictions—archetype versus reality, irony versus sincerity.

The performative male is ridiculed, but he represents a broader cultural acceptance of men who step outside the neat boxes of masculinity or femininity. Men who pick and choose a little from both.

"I feel that trend actually benefited male masculinity,"

says Manzano. "I feel like having trends like this, making fun of what is masculine, allows more men to be okay with liking feminine interests."



**Winner of MRU's performative male contest, Taimur Ashraf, sings Radiohead's "Creep" at the Wyckham House food court. Photo by Nadoo Abaagu**

# Opinion: Should auld infrastructure be forgotten?

## Examining Calgary's water system amid feeder main repairs

**Ryan Montgomery**

Staff Writer

'Twas the night before New Year's Eve, and all through the city, lights were strung up, and boy, was it pretty. The people wished for beaches, they wished it were hotter, they didn't wish for their cars to be 4 feet underwater. So why was a section of Sarcee Trail and 16 Avenue all cold, wet, and soaked? Because a water main in Bowness had for some reason broke.

The new mayor, Jeromy Farkas, was quick to the scene. The city has since issued boil-water advisories for communities such as Parkdale, Hillhurst, Montgomery, and Point McKay, and issued water conservation warnings within municipal boundaries. Echoing sentiments like, 'don't drink the water.' It's a bummer, especially since this happened last summer.

In not being permitted to drink, swim, or shower as usual, Calgarians are maddened. So let's take a look back and see why this happened.

Ok, enough with *The Night Before Christmas* references, and let's get to the meat and potatoes of the issue. Why have burst pipes become a recurring issue for Calgary? Ever since the rupture of the Bearspaw South feeder main in June 2024, leading to weeks of city-wide water cutbacks, residents have been thinking about their municipal water infrastructure much more than anyone ought to.

The political and policy aftermath of the breaks has not been publicised nearly as much as the breaks themselves. It's hardly surprising because, frankly, it doesn't make for a page-turner, as you're no doubt about to realise as you read through this. But it's important, so we're going to look into it regardless.

After last year's break, the city commissioned a review of its pipe infrastructure to determine the cause of the breaks. The review concluded that "microcracking," high chloride levels in the soil, and damage to the pipe's structural wires led to the rupture.

Pointing to chloride levels

as the key culprit in the premature deterioration of the pipes, the report identified pouring salt on the roads to de-ice them in the winter months as the cause. The city says it will investigate the use of road de-icers in the future to prevent the issue—a rather unsatisfying conclusion, but hey, knowing is half the battle, as they say.

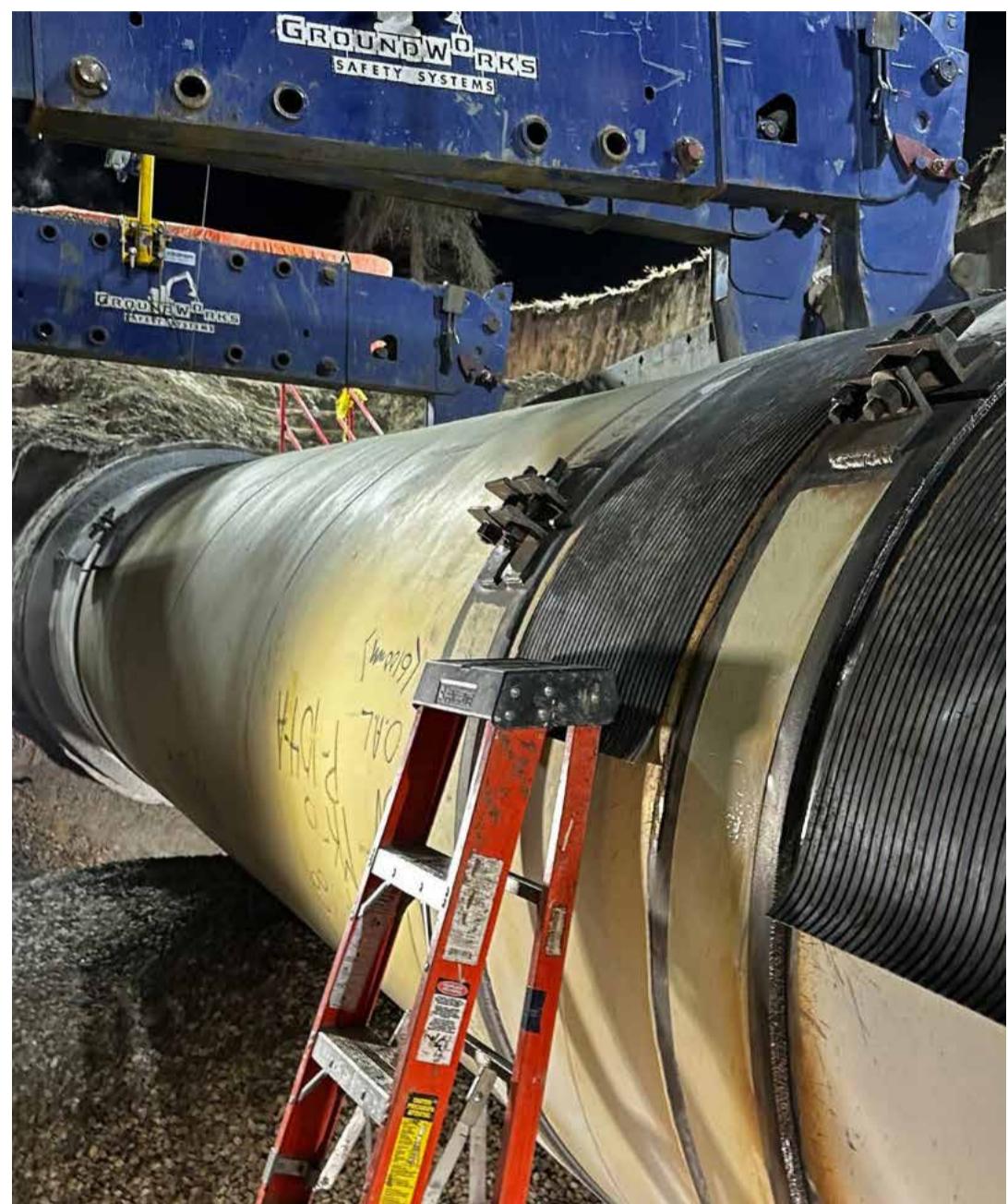
However, chemistry was not the only culprit. It had a despicable co-conspirator named political mismanagement. The report revealed that the city deferred or redirected recommended inspections in 2017, 2020, and 2022. I am of the opinion that critical water infrastructure shouldn't be governed by the same philosophy as my check engine light: 'it still runs, I'm sure it's fine.'

These inspections were suspended due to their perceived "low likelihood of failure," diverting resources to more pressing matters.

Another problem facing the city was the fairly archaic inspection and maintenance tools at the time. One favourite of the inspector was a highly precise, vastly technical instrument known as a hammer. They would take this marvel of human engineering and, like a particularly dexterous caveman, they'd bang on it. Sardonic journalistic jokes aside, this method was efficient at detecting cracks in the pipes themselves, but couldn't detect breaks in the wires that held the pipes together.

Another hurdle to maintenance was that ever-fickle devil of public opinion. Conducting a comprehensive survey would require draining the pipe for an extended period. All the while, entire neighbourhoods would have to go without running water, which would undoubtedly make whichever schmuck is in charge at the time quite unpopular.

But why are we in this sad state of affairs? What about the way the pipes were built makes them susceptible to rupture? To answer that, we need to go back to the era of disco, bell-bottoms,



**Construction underway at the Sarcee Trail and 16 Avenue section of the Bearspaw South feeder main to repair a break that occurred on Dec. 30, 2025. Photo courtesy of Instagram/@CityofCalgary**

and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan: the 1970s.

During that decade, the city began building a new main water pipe to accommodate the massive population increase from the oil boom. The city had the choice between two pipes: the classical yet more expensive steel option and the cheaper, groovy new concrete option. I think it goes without saying that they chose concrete. What they did not know at the time was that the type of pipe they used was flawed, with a similar pipe bursting in Florida only a few years after the Calgary pipe was finished. But alas, the pipe was built, and when it burst, it would be some other chump's problem. The flaw in the pipes, combined with the aforementioned villain,

chloride, made Calgary particularly susceptible to pipe degradation.

And so, my fellow dehydrated Calgarians, what are the risks of this happening again? Are we forever doomed to live under the tyrannical shadow of a burst pipe and a tragically cut-short shower? The answer is, probably? At least for a bit. While the city is working to update the pipes, this issue plagues much of Calgary's water infrastructure. Mayor Farkas pledged 'possibly the largest infrastructure project in the city's history.'

According to the report, of the 9.6 kilometres of pipe they inspected, 12.5 per cent was in some form of distress. The inspection also revealed a total of 239 deteriorated pipes, including the one

which burst. However, the report emphasised that this was out of a total of 2,000 pipe segments within the main that broke. So hey, 12 per cent ain't the worst.

The report issued three recommendations to the city to prevent further breaks, including creating an independent water oversight board—God bless bureaucracy—a dedicated water utility with segmented financial statements, a business would have, and a general strengthening of the city's risk management process. Whether these reforms will be instituted remains to be seen. But if there's any time to do it, it would be now. As Chaucer's old maxim goes, "strike while the iron is hot."



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# Bob-Sled music festival returns

*Canadian acts set to smoke out The Palomino stage*

**Emma Voelpel**

Staff Writer

The Sled Island music festival is typically in hibernation until summer, but The Palomino Smokehouse will be warming up in January with a special edition, Bob-Sled 2026.

Presented alongside '88 Brewing Co., the event hosts everything from indie folk to death metal, allowing all genres and artists to fly onto Calgary's radar.

The show's lineup features well-known acts from all over Canada, as well as highlights upcoming local bands from the city.

From Jan. 21 to 24, The Palomino will be filled with a variety of different musical styles, making it a special party for music lovers.

Those who wish to access

all the shows can purchase wristbands starting at \$88, whereas individual shows will start at \$26 on sledisland.com.

## Featured Canadian bands

Showcasing Canadian talent has always been a major highlight of Sled Island's summer festival, and Bob-Sled is out to prove that the winter edition is no exception.

Each night has an array of different acts, representing different corners of Canada, with artists coming all the way from Vancouver Island and Southern Ontario.

Bands joining the lineup include Canadian acts such

as Packs, Ribbon Skirt, Hedonist, and Milkmaid.

Packs—an indie-rock band from Toronto—will open the festival on Jan. 21, being the first to introduce Calgary to the Bob-Sled sound. With three studio albums already out, Packs can be described as a mix of dreamy pop with a little edge from their powerful bass lines, all the while exploring topics of love, friendship and change. "I don't think I will ever not have anything to learn, ever," said lead singer Madeline Link to Groovy Tunes in 2021.

**"That means there's always going to be songs to write."**

Performing the second night is Ribbon Skirt, a Montreal-based indie-rock duo made up of Tashiina Buswa and Billy Riley, who have made a name for themselves with their fast-paced driving rhythms. Their label, Mint Records, described their music as "threads that explore memory, love, grief and Buswa's relationship to her Indigenous heritage" on their website.

Welcoming the weekend, Friday will feature the death metal band Hedonist. Originating in Victoria, the band has seen international success with their sound that remains authentic to death metal, while also paying homage to the '80s rock sound. Their music toes the line between haunting and abrasive.

Finally, the closing Saturday night will feature the upcoming Calgary-based band, Milkmaid. The all-female act will be making a return to The Palomino after



**Hedonist at A Varning From Montreal Festival.**

**Photo by Rachael Eve, courtesy of Instagram/hedonistdeathmetal**

debuting there last August.

A post-sludge band with tribal influences, Milkmaid continues to find their sound amongst the Calgary scene, returning again and again to play local festivals, such as Bob-Sled.

Each of these bands represents a different music scene from all over Canada, marking the tip of the iceberg for performers at Bob-Sled.

## Sled Island & '88 Brewing Co.

The Sled Island Music and Arts Festival has been running since 2007, showcasing local artists from Calgary, as well as independent acts from around the world.

The yearly festival has

created a communal atmosphere and safe haven for those who enjoy independent punk, amongst the other music, art, and comedy embraced by the event.

"It's dedicated team working tirelessly each year to put together one week of relentless aesthetic moments, bridging the gap between the mainstream and the underground," says Range Magazine in their coverage of the festival.

As for '88 Brewing Co., they have been a longtime partner of the festival, creating brews that are exclusive to Sled Island, with many to be featured at the upcoming event.



**Ribbon Skirt on KEXP. Photo by Renata Steiner, courtesy of Instagram/@ribbonskirtband**

## The Barn Artisan Market

Back for another year, The Barn Artisan Market returns on Jan. 25 from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Hosted in the historic Shawnessy barn, the market includes two floors of local artisans and vendors, focusing on handcrafted, Alberta-made products. The market offers free admission all day.

## Shoresey Winter Classic

For fans of the hit Canadian show, *Shoresey*, the *Shoresey Winter Classic* challenges cast members to lace up their skates and face Calgary Flames alumni in a hockey game. Hosted at the Scotiabank Saddledome, the event takes place on Jan. 22 at 7 p.m., with tickets starting at \$40.

## High Performance Rodeo

Celebrating its 40th year in Calgary, High Performance Rodeo is set to return for three weeks, from Jan. 13 to Jan. 31. The annual festival features a range of avant-garde performances, including theatre, comedy, dance, music, and more. Prices vary; tickets available at [oyr.org](http://oyr.org).

## Calgary Mac and Cheese Festival

Returning for a second year, the annual Calgary Mac and Cheese Festival is set to run from Jan. 15 to Jan. 31. Join Calgary restaurants as they serve up mac and cheese for a full two weeks, with voting completed by Calgarians. Voting is available at [calgarymacandcheesefest.com](http://calgarymacandcheesefest.com).

# The art of starting fresh

Calgary's new art exhibitions and programs for 2026

**Katrina Ebuenga**

Staff Writer

Starting fresh this new year means unveiling new art within the city.

With a fresh art rotation comes new instalments and exhibitions, which are ready to keep the ball rolling on creativity in Calgary.

Located in familiar spaces, such as Contemporary Calgary and the Esker Foundation, brand-new exhibitions are ready to be unlocked and explored.

Through government-allocated funding and various non-profit societies, 2026 is forecasting new artists in Calgary.

## Centre city banners

Through Calgary Arts Development, the Centre City Banner Program displays artwork on bridge poles entering the city. This gateway draws viewers' eyes toward talented artists, opening the door to the growing art culture in Calgary.

For the 2025-26 year, local artist Michelle Ku crafted banners that evoke nostalgia for fellow Calgarians. By encapsulating playful scenes inspired by her childhood memories, Ku is able to create a dreamy entrance for the city's core.

Inspired by the mind-body-spirit connection, Ku sets up the art space for viewers to engage with other art curations in the city.

These can be found at city entry points, such as Centre Street Bridge, Reconciliation Bridge, MacDonald Avenue Bridge, and Mewata Bridge.

## Contemporary Calgary

Connections to nature and our role in the environment arise in the new art installations at Contemporary Calgary.

Open from Dec. 5, 2025 to March 15, 2026, "Entwined and Nelly-Eve Rajotte: Trees communicate with each other at 220 hertz," curated by Mona Filip, engages viewers with a different perspective towards the land. The exhibition includes 19 different artists and collectives, all working independently to create a collaborative gallery.

Embodying relationships with nature is the focal point of these new instalments, with no limitations to keeping



**City banner, "Cow City," by Michelle Ku. Photo courtesy of Calgary Arts Development / Calgaryartsdevelopment.com**

them in the internal spaces of the gallery.

Viewable from the building's facade, Calgarian artist Tyler Los-Jones displays his work, "Water's brief surfaces—Roundleaf Orchid," as a counterpart to his interior artwork in the ring gallery.

Like Los-Jones' work, the rest of the collection, handpicked by Filip, spotlights how nature is not limited to enclosed spaces and is gravely affected by society's actions.

The inspirations for these works draw from environmental concerns, with the exhibition bringing awareness to the impact of human actions, which emphasises the importance of prioritising environmental longevity.

Alongside Los-Jones, there are dozens of exhibition artists being featured this year, covering a range of creative outlooks.

Some explore the links between environmental concerns through the use of technology and found materials, displaying the interconnectedness of our

world and the wonder of life. Others use the lens of transformation and rebirth, reusing materials and giving new purpose to objects and highlighting the cyclical nature of life.

With so many artists lined up in the upcoming exhibition, there are endless creative narratives to explore this new year.

## The Esker Foundation

Shifting from naturalistic forms of art, the Esker Foundation features four different artists focusing on life's complexities, externally and internally.

Although the Esker Foundation is currently closed for installation, the new exhibitions are set to open on Jan. 23. They feature artists such as Anthony Cudahy, an American figurative painter, Alexandre Pépin, a French-Canadian visual artist, Justin de Verteuil, a Düsseldorf-based artist, and Magalie Guérin an artist that explores the mixture of textures, shapes, and colours within form.



**City banner, "Walk With a Friend," by Michelle Ku. Photo courtesy of Calgary Arts Development / Calgaryartsdevelopment.com**

opportunities to grow and explore your own creativity can be experienced within their studio, bringing the community together through art.

Throughout February, the studio will run a free, drop-in studio residency, experimenting with different artistic processes. The studio is available to the public, inviting anybody interested in starting a creative journey.

Along with the open studio, residence artists Colleen Rauscher, Anna Young, and Brenda Mansfield will present their approaches to experimenting with traditional and non-traditional art forms, in both collaborative and individual pieces.

Starting new is always the best way to discover and rediscover creative paths, and Calgary's upcoming art exhibits and events have your back this winter and spring.

## Sparrow Artspace

Sparrow Art Society is a non-profit organisation that encourages community creativity through their Sparrow Artspace, which expands the creative process to the public.

Located in Bridgeland,

# Breaking the ice

*Heated Rivalry*: Canadian creators can compete on the world stage

**Anais Loepky**

Staff Writer

When the steamy new romance, *Heated Rivalry*, premiered on Crave in late 2025, nobody anticipated just how quickly it would gain traction. The Canadian TV show took the world by storm, delivering a trepid love story.

*Heated Rivalry* is based on Canadian author Rachel Reid's book series, *Game Changers*, and the story is brought to life by Canadian filmmaker Jacob Tierney, who created, wrote, and directed the hit series.

The show was released into a market where domestic series almost never achieve international reach. However, against all odds, *Heated Rivalry* became one of the most successful original launches in Crave's history—an incredibly rare achievement for Canadian television, especially for a queer-focused story.

The series follows Major League Hockey (MLH) players Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov as they navigate a secret relationship over the course of their careers.

Hockey is a staple of Canadian identity, and *Heated Rivalry* adds a compelling queer story to the sport we know and love.

The combination of traditional hockey culture and romance has resonated deeply with audiences on a global scale, creating a show that people can't stop talking about.

## A record-setting launch



Hudson Williams (left) and Connor Storrie (right) in *Heated Rivalry*. Photo by Sabrina Lantos/Bell Media

## for Canadian streaming

According to Bell Media, *Heated Rivalry* became the platform's most-watched original series debut of all time, breaking viewership records during its first week. They report that streaming numbers continue to grow steadily following the premiere, prompting the swift renewal for a second season.

Shortly after its Canadian debut, *Heated Rivalry* was also licensed for distribution in multiple global markets, including in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Asia.

Canadian series have long had trouble breaking through into these international markets.

Bell Media, however, reports that *Heated Rivalry* set a record with streams increasing nearly 400 percent since premiere. The series thus defied long-standing expectations for the global reach of Canadian television.

## Canadian talent

Behind the show's success is a Canadian production model through and through.

*Heated Rivalry* was produced by Accent Aigu Entertainment, founded by Tierney and Brendan Brady, in partnership with Bell Media. They filmed across multiple locations in Ontario, including Muskoka and Guelph.

The series also features many talented Canadian

actors. Shane Hollander is played by Hudson Williams, an actor from Kamloops, B.C. Williams has had smaller television appearances in the past, but this was his breakout role.

Canadian actor François Arnaud also appears as Scott Hunter, another hockey player in the series. He is from Montreal, QC, and has been acting on screen since 2007.

The production and team highlight Canada's ability to create high-quality, scripted television without relocating to U.S. studios.

*Heated Rivalry* offers a shift in Canadian storytelling that prioritises inclusion, while still focusing on traditional Canadian stories, places, and creative teams.

## The importance of Canada's public arts funding

The success of *Heated Rivalry* illustrates the importance of Canada's public arts funding in fostering creativity.

This funding is key in making shows like this possible, giving Canadian series the resources to compete in an increasing global streaming market.

One of the most significant contributors to Canadian television production is the Canada Media Fund (CMF).

The CMF receives contributions from the

**Continues on Pg. 12**



## Girl In A Bottle

Anna of the North

[PIAS]

**Score: A-**

Anna of the North's *Girl In A Bottle* is a smooth electropop album that calms the saddened mood of heartbreak. This artist—from Gjøvik, Norway—continues to dabble in relaxing synths and steady beats similar to her earlier releases.

*Girl In A Bottle* explores the honesty of having loved and lost. The songs are lyrically vulnerable, highlighting a deep emotional intensity. Instrumentally, however, the songs are happy and even energetic. Together, the lyrics and instrumentals show the album's dynamics, which require a thorough listen-through to fully understand.

"Since You" is upbeat and fun, yet explores what is and what could have been if things were different. Similarly, "Call Me" plays heavily on '80s pop synths, with Anna of the North's soft lyrical voice echoing—she sings about being open to a past lover coming back into her life.

"Waiting For Love" is about the brief lovers that come into your life and get your hopes up, only to then leave. The song is emotionally strong, captivating the feeling she describes perfectly.

In "Sunday My Heart Hurts," there are slight folk influences which carry on throughout the song. The lyrics depict the days of the week and how emotions can change very quickly from Monday to Sunday.

With eight songs, two of which are short interludes that span under a minute, this album is quite short, with a playing time of only 23 minutes. Anna of the North is expected to release a second part of this album later this year, however, which will most likely bring more insight into her world of heartbreak.

—Maddie Gilder

## Great Pretenders

BETABOYS

**Self-released**

**Score: A-**



On Dec. 6, Calgary's own BETABOYS released their new album, *Great Pretenders*. Self-released, the album is available exclusively on Spotify and Bandcamp.

Defined by the influence of The Cars, Duran Duran, and the soundtrack of every John Hughes movie, BETABOYS leans into '80s nostalgia with their new wave sound.

An album that refuses to put down the midi keyboard, *Great Pretenders* is everything you could want from an '80s-leaning sound—fun and authentic, it stays on the synth-pop radar without getting lost in an era that it merely appreciates, rather than tries to replicate.

"Lorraine" showcases the new-wave edge to their sound, with heartfelt lyrics that reflect on what once was. Although they normally favour one guitar over two, BETABOYS doesn't let that stop them, making this one of the few songs where the midi keyboard stays home and the guitar takes the lead.

"Alone in Paradise," however, has no such reservations, highlighting the nostalgic sound BETABOYS are known for. The song opens the eight-track album, reminding listeners that the band's roots are with synthesizers and pop melodies.

The album's final track, "After a Life," is the best taste of *Great Pretenders*, showcasing their ability to widen their lane when it suits them. With a catchy hook and a saxophone solo, what more could you ask for?

A solid album that reflects their expanding brand, *Great Pretenders* is worth a listen, even if just to support fellow Calgarians.

—Rylie Perry

## Continued from Pg.

11

Government of Canada and Canada's cable, satellite and IPTV distributors. Ultimately, the CMF invests hundreds of millions of dollars annually in Canadian television, ensuring Canadian stories are created and promoted at home and abroad.

Canadian productions further benefit from federal tax incentives, such as the Canadian Film or Video Production Tax Credit (CPTC), which provides a refundable credit of up to 25 per cent of eligible Canadian labour costs. Incentives like this are in place to encourage companies to continue producing television in Canada, making series like *Heated Rivalry* financially possible without relocating production or creative leadership elsewhere.

Projects like *Heated Rivalry* also frequently receive support from organisations such as the Bell Fund, which focus on Canadian television and digital media projects.

The Bell Fund and CPTC create opportunities for Canadian ownership and creative control in the entertainment industry, with incentives and funding

helping to reduce the financial risk for Canadian producers.

*Heated Rivalry* is a prime example of how essential these funding systems are to future growth and global visibility of Canadian programming.

### Representation in television

*Heated Rivalry*'s portrayal of a queer relationship in traditionally hypermasculine sports, such as hockey, cannot be understated.

Coverage in outlets such as Teen Vogue framed the series as a meaningful step forward for 2SLGBTQIA+ representation in sports narratives.

Hockey culture has long been associated with "locker-room culture" and a history of silence around queer identity, making *Heated Rivalry*'s portrayal particularly impactful.

*Heated Rivalry* does not depict the queer relationship in a way that frames it as a tragedy or scandal. Instead, the series creates a relationship of warmth and passion, bringing queer intimacy into a mainstream narrative that is rarely afforded to 2SLGBTQIA+



Ilya Rozanov (left) and Shane Hollander (right) from *Heated Rivalry*. Photo by Sabrina Lantos/Bell Media

stories.

The scale of the audience further increases the impact this show has already had. By bringing queer storytelling into a sports narrative, the series attracts an audience who might not regularly seek out queer-centred programming.

Shows like *Heated Rivalry* help normalise queer relationships within one of the most traditionally exclusionary spaces in popular culture.

### The future of Canadian television

*Heated Rivalry* is a unique, Canadian series that has achieved immediate domestic and international success on a huge scale. They have also done so without sacrificing their strong Canadian identity.

The show is a perfect example of how public funding and creativity

can position Canadian programming as both culturally specific and globally relevant.

*Heated Rivalry* proves that continued funding and support of Canadian art is a viable strategy for international success, as well as supporting marginalised groups and stories.



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**22**

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## Cougars catchup

### MRU hockey, volleyball and basketball standings for 2026

**Zafir Nagji**, Sports Editor

**Naomi Campbell & Julia Finot**, Staff Writers



**With the 2025-26 Canada West hockey, volleyball and basketball seasons well into their second halves, the MRU Cougars are fighting for playoff positions in every division of every sport. Photo courtesy of Zafir Nagji**

Welcome back to Lincoln Park Campus, Cougars fans. Last year delivered plenty of excitement and even some silverware for Mount Royal University's soccer teams, but as the hockey, volleyball and basketball teams head into the final stages of their seasons, plenty more is on the horizon—and at stake—as all six teams are in heated battles for playoff positions.

#### Men's hockey

The Cougars men's hockey team had high expectations coming into the 2025-26 season after their historic playoff run in 2024-25. The men were ranked second in the coach's poll after their exhibition games in September, yet their season started off with a tough loss on the road to division rivals, the University of Saskatchewan (USASK) Huskies.

Their first few weekends kicked off on the wrong foot when the men only won games on Saturday nights. Their luck changed during their weekend sweep against the Trinity Western Spartans, starting their run to move past the middle ground of their division standings.

Moving into the second half of the year, the men's defensive core has added a new player, Ty Gibson. Gibson joins the Cougars after playing a full season

in the Eastern Canadian Hockey League (ECHL) with the Adirondack Thunder and Iowa Heartlanders. With Gibson being only 5-foot-9-inches tall, his stats from his time in the Western Hockey League on the Everett Silvertips prove he can play just as well as the bigger defenders.

After the men's Hail Mary run to the Canada West finals last season, they are eager to put themselves back on top, with sights set on championship banners.

#### Women's hockey

The women's season started off on a different path, with game one at home against the USASK Huskies, defeating them 3-1 in regulation. After being ranked third in the coach's poll at the start of the year, heading into the break, they see themselves at the top of the East division, and second in Canada West.

Midway through the first half of the year, they saw themselves in a shootout against the very skilled University of Alberta (UofA) Pandas. Head coach Scott Rivett put his trust in veteran Jordyn Hutt, before switching to rookie Keyana Bert, who in turn scored the lone goal to grab them a 4-3 win.

On the defensive side of things, rookie Isa MacPhee joins the roster all the way

from Kingsboro, P.E.I. MacPhee has become a force to be reckoned with on the blue line, as well as earning her first Canada West goal in the final game of 2025 in a 4-2 win against the University of Manitoba Bisons.

The women hope to head back to the Canada West playoffs this year, with a goal to push all the way to the finals after being knocked out in game three of the semi finals against the UofA Pandas.

At the midway point of the 2025-26 season, the MRU women's volleyball team has faced some challenges. They have started the season with a surprising record of 2-8.

After finishing sixth last year, the coaches poll projected them to finish eighth. Now, they find themselves second to last in the Canada West standings. The biggest issue has been finishing strong in games. They often come close but struggle to seal the deal.

Despite the struggles, a strong point for the team has been their blocking. They are ranked third in the division with 22 solo blocks, thanks to the talents of Faith Obasi and Mya Morgan.

Many players have stepped up but the standout has been

fourth-year outside hitter Sydney Scatcherd. She ranks in the top 20 for kills per set in the division. With 92 kills already, she is on pace to surpass her personal record of 166 kills.

One focus for the team is not only to win, but do so on home soil. They are 0-4 at Kenyon Court and they look to turn that around to close out the season.

#### Men's volleyball

Halfway through the 2025-26 season, the MRU men's volleyball team has seen some highs and lows. They started the season with four undefeated home matches. Unfortunately, that streak ended, and since then it has been up and down, losing some big series.

Last season the men finished 12th in the standings and this year the coaches poll projected them 10th overall. They are currently sitting sixth and are looking to improve for playoffs.

Their strength has been their roster depth. Between the star-studded group of veterans and a new bunch of recruits, this team has a large group with a diverse skill set adaptable to any situation.

Rookie Kale Orr has been the front man for this team. He is one of the best offensive players in Canada West. He ranks in the top 10 for both kills and kills per set. He also ranks in the top 25 for hitting percentage and digs. Orr is on pace for 244 kills, an achievement no player reached last year.

Consistency is the biggest focus for the team moving into the second half of the season. If they can polish their gameplay, they have the potential to finish strong.

#### Women's basketball

The Cougars women's basketball team were thrown a fierce gauntlet to open their 2025-26 campaign, as they started the season with four consecutive losses to the top two nationally ranked teams—the UofA Pandas and the USASK Huskies, who won last year's conference and national tournaments.

Since then, the Cougars have won seven of their last

nine games, including an explosive win against the University of Lethbridge Pronghorns that saw Jenika Martens break the Cougars' all-time rebounding record and tie her scoring career-high with 27 points.

Fourth-year guard Asha Donnelly also elevated her game, averaging a career-high 7.8 points per game and torching the twine with 22 made threes in 10 games this season—the second-most in Canada West.

With a 7-7 record, the Cougars hold the fifth seed in the Prairie Division, trailing Saskatchewan, Regina, Alberta and Calgary. The first two teams in that list have to lose with their 12-0 records. They'll face playoff teams in all of their remaining games, meaning the women will need to put in some serious work to stay in playoff contention.

#### Men's basketball

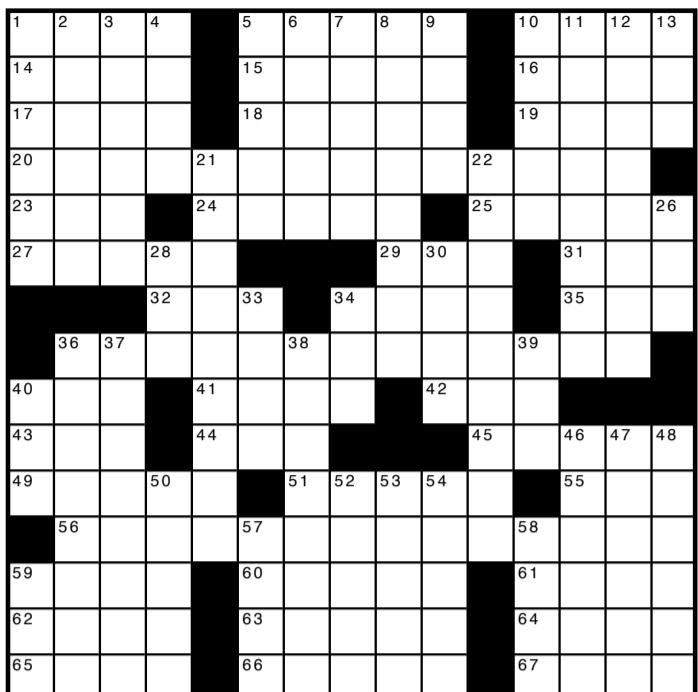
The men also started their season with a pair of losses against Alberta, but followed that up with three wins in their next four games—two against Saskatchewan and one against Winnipeg.

After their win in Winnipeg, the Cougars rattled off five more victories in their next six games, beating MacEwan and Lethbridge twice each and Regina once. Team captain Sam Barnie gave fans a night to remember against the Griffins, dropping a career-high 28 points on just 16 shot attempts in the 84-60 win.

However, as great as some of the individual performances have been this year, MRU found their success in playing unselfish, team-first basketball. Ranking fifth in field goals, three-pointers and free throws attempted, the Cougars play with pace and aggression on offence. Allowing the second-fewest opponent points and forcing the second-most turnovers per game, they're also a hellacious defensive unit.

At 8-6, the Cougars are sitting in the fifth seed of the Prairie Division. With less than four wins separating them from falling out of playoff contention, every game will be crucial in their path to the postseason.

# REFLECTOR DIVERSIONS



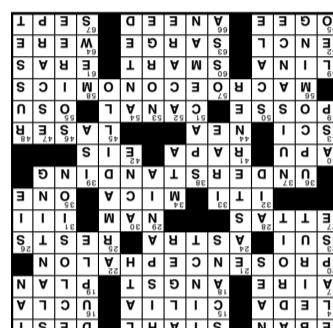
Crossword puzzles provided by BestCrosswords.com (<https://www.bestcrosswords.com>). Used with permission.

## BEST CROSSWORD

ACROSS		16	Abdul-Jabbar's alma mater
1	Israeli statesman Abba	17	Leeds's river
5	Lesley of "60 Minutes"	18	Inner turmoil
10	Lucy's husband	19	Scheme
14	Helen's mother	20	Forebrain
15	Eyelashes		

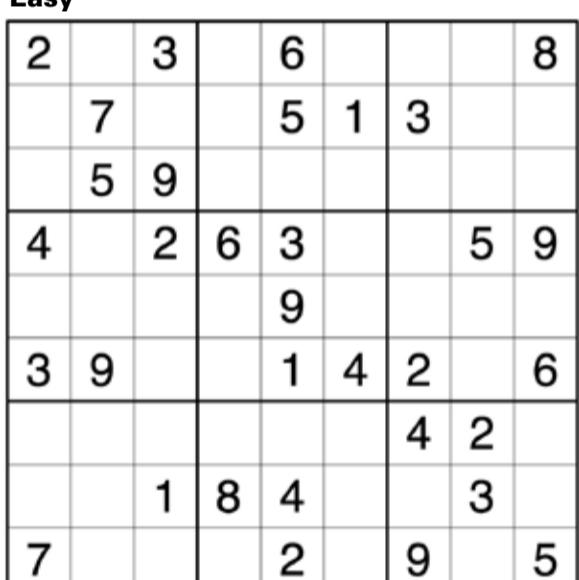
23 \_\_\_\_ juris  
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31 "Rocky \_\_\_\_" (1982)  
32 Lord, is \_\_\_\_?  
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35 Single  
36 Comprehension  
40 Clerk on "The  
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41 \_\_\_\_ Nui (Easter Island)  
42 Sue Grafton's "\_\_\_\_ for  
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43 \_\_\_\_-fi  
44 PBS benefactor  
45 Modern surgical tool  
49 Sheriff's group  
51 Artificial waterway  
55 Buckeyes' sch.  
56 Management of large  
amounts of resources  
59 Director Wertmuller  
60 Stylish  
61 Periods  
62 Business letter abbr.  
63 Beetle Bailey's boss  
64 Existed  
65 Type of arch

66	On __-to-know basis	40	Viper
67	Calendar abbr.	46	Evening affair
<b>DOWN</b>			
1	Go by	47	Steep bank under a rampart
2	Capital of Lebanon	48	Light brown
3	Deft	50	Fish covering
4	Scottish refusals	52	Without __ in the world
5	Examines closely	53	Norwegian name of Norway
6	Tinged	54	Chipped in
7	Author Horatio	57	Greek peak
8	Latin name of Iberian Peninsula	58	Sounds like a kitten
9	Slat	59	The Lion
10	Twofold		
11	Hatching of a larva		
12	Oblique		
13	Author Fleming		
21	Earliest person to see a sunrise, typically		
22	Sticky-tongued critter		
26	Sprechen __ Deutsch?		
28	Assist		
30	Teen spots?		
33	Dies __		
34	1959 Kingston Trio hit		
36	About to take place		
37	Annoying person		
38	Astronaut		
39	This stickup!		

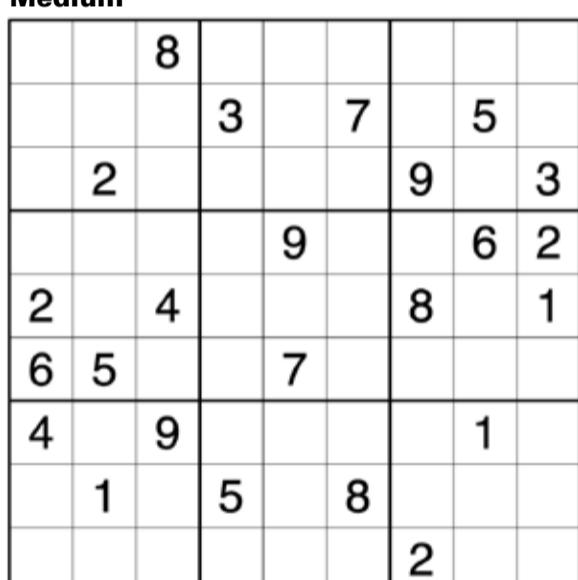


# SUDOKU

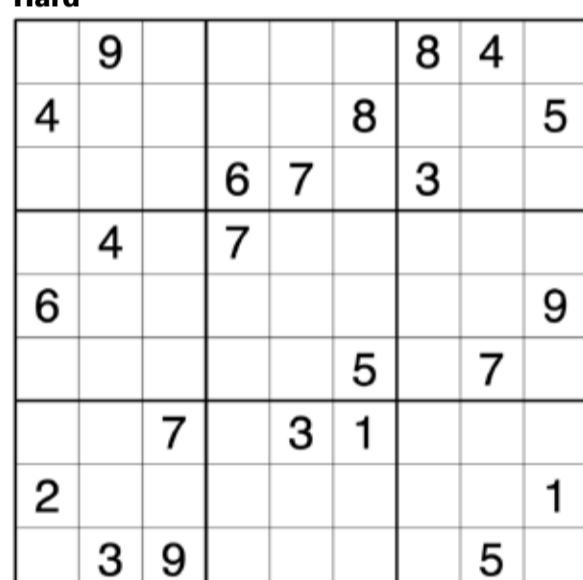
Essay



## Medium



Word



# WORD SEARCH

## Motivation

MOTIVATION  
S U C C E S S  
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CHASE  
COMPLETION  
DEDICATION  
ENTHUSIASM  
EXTERNAL  
FINISHING  
GOALS  
GRASP  
INTERNAL  
MATURITY  
MOTIVATOR  
PLANNING  
PROVOKE

PURPOSEFUL  
PURSUE  
PUSH  
REACH  
REACHING  
SCHEDULE  
STIMULUS  
STRIVING  
WINNING

# From serving a mission to serving on the court

*How religion put a new spin on Cougars volleyballer Kale Orr's life*

**Julia Finot**

Staff Writer

For Kale Orr, leadership didn't begin on the volleyball court, it started at home.

He grew up south of Calgary in Magrath, Alta., as the oldest of five children. Orr learned early what it meant to be responsible for others. With his four siblings close behind him, family was never just part of his life, it was the foundation of it. His family has proudly shaped the way Orr carries himself: hardworking, grounded and quietly confident, both on and off the court.

Orr is a family man, and he proudly refers to himself as a 'mommy's boy.'

When he's not playing volleyball, Orr enjoys staying active in simple ways. His summers are filled with crossnet, frisbee golf and rollerblading. These hobbies fuel his competitive nature without the pressures of structured competition. No matter the activity, family remains at the centre of his life.

Growing up in a small town in Alberta, Orr's parents emphasised values that went beyond sports.

"They put a big emphasis on teaching us how to learn and how to be better people," says Orr. "It's not necessarily giving you the right answer when you want them but teaching you to go and find the right answers."

These lessons remain important to him, as do sports.

Sports have always been a big part of Orr's life. Basketball was his first love; he started playing it back in elementary school. He also grew up playing baseball. Volleyball, basketball and baseball were the perfect rotation to keep him busy over the years.

Volleyball was ultimately the sport that stood out to Orr. What drew him in was the high level of competition and the team dynamics.

Volleyball requires trust,



**Kale Orr burst onto the scene for the MRU Cougars men's volleyball team, becoming a household name early into his first U SPORTS season. Photo courtesy of MRU Cougars**

communication and shared responsibility, all things Orr is fond of. Watching university and Olympic-level volleyball growing up showed him what was possible if he fully committed to the sport. His skills developed through playing club ball in Lethbridge and on his high school team.

Orr was very successful on his high school team, and he won a provincial championship with Magrath High School.

Even with those accomplishments, Orr believes what truly makes a team special has little to do with trophies.

"It's not about big wins or championships that make a team special, but just the bonds that you have with the guys around you," says Orr.

Just as his volleyball career was gaining momentum, Orr made a decision that would test his patience and faith.

Back in Magrath, he attended church every weekend with his family, and he developed a strong spiritual foundation from a young age. As he grew older, that connection deepened, and he began to feel called to serve a mission.

Volleyball requires trust,

Deciding to serve a mission was not easy. Orr was worried that once he was called, he would have to give up volleyball.

Ultimately, his purpose outweighed his fear, and he was called by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to serve a mission. Orr spent two years in Australia, focusing on helping people grow closer to God. While he didn't play competitive volleyball during that time, the experience challenged him in new ways. It was his first time living away from home, thousands of kilometres away from his family.

He was nervous but excited. Weekly calls home helped ease the transitions, and the relationships he formed overseas have had a lasting impact.

"Prayer and talking to God is something I've always turned to and something I'll continue to rely upon for the rest of my life," says Orr.

When he returned home, volleyball was waiting, and so was a new opportunity.

Orr committed to MRU before he was called on his mission. He was at a tournament held at the

University of Calgary when he was approached by fellow Cougars commit Marek Janutka, who asked Orr if he ever considered coming to MRU.

That year, three fellow 17U Alberta teammates committed to the Cougars—Ryan John, Cody Hudson and Grant Hill. Having so many familiar faces committed to the team and being close to home sealed the deal for Orr.

Joining the Cougars hasn't been something Orr has taken lightly. He spent the two years of his mission imagining what it would be like to wear the white and navy. When the moment finally came, it carried weight.

To Orr, wearing the Cougars uniform represents far more than just volleyball; it represents himself, MRU, and the Cougars volleyball program.

**"It's a huge honour to wear the uniform and represent Mount Royal."**

On the court, the transition to U SPORTS volleyball has been smoother than expected, though stepping back into competition after time away required adjustment. Orr has seen a noticeable improvement in his blocking, and he credits the team environment for helping him grow quickly.

Off the court, life as a student-athlete in Calgary has brought some new challenges.

It is a new fast-paced environment which entails balancing academics, training, and personal responsibilities. Orr admits it's difficult to relax from everything, but he is learning how to manage his time and balance everything.

Gratitude is his biggest motivator and helps him stay focused.

"Remembering is a key principle to staying strong," says Orr.

His faith continues to guide him through the stress of student-athlete life. He was worried that people in volleyball wouldn't be understanding of his faith but the Cougars have embraced Orr and his beliefs.

Many of his teammates share similar beliefs, and they openly discuss faith, which Orr says has been a blessing.

Looking ahead, Orr wants to take volleyball as far as he can. Representing Canada at the Olympics or competing professionally are aspirations he approaches with humility and determination. More than accolades, he hopes his time as a Cougar will reflect the values he was raised with: commitment, respect and service.

For Kale Orr, the journey has never been just about volleyball. It's about becoming the best version of himself—for his family, his faith, and the jersey he now wears with pride.

# 2025 F1 recap: Max vs. McLaren

*How Verstappen went from F1's supervillain to everybody's hero*

**Mustafa Imran**

Contributor

For the first time in several years, Max Verstappen entered a Formula One season not as the overwhelming favorite for the World Drivers' Championship, but he was still the man every rival wanted to beat. The leading contenders for his throne were the McLaren drivers Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri. Even though the Papayas comfortably won the Constructors' Championship, Verstappen made the WDC a legendary fight that ended on the final lap of the final race of the final season of the ground-effect era.

## Early season frustrations

The season began in Australia. On a rainy day in Melbourne on March 16, 2025, Verstappen finished second, narrowly missing out on victory in a race where front-runners made mistakes. The early signs were clear, while the Red Bull RB21 remained fast, its dominance had been blunted.

Just a week later, in Shanghai, China, Verstappen struggled with tire degradation and balance issues, finishing fourth, which exposed the team's setup vulnerabilities.

Relief came in Japan on April 6 at Suzuka. On a circuit that historically suits his driving style, Verstappen delivered a masterful lap in qualifying, leading to a pole-to-flag victory and kick-

starting his title defense. Also, highlighting when in the setup window, the RB21 is still race-winning.

After a frustrating sixth-place finish in Bahrain on April 13 due to pit stop errors, Verstappen lashed out on track, receiving a 10-second penalty for a pitlane collision during the Miami Sprint Race the following week.

Then, at the next race in Saudi Arabia, Verstappen lightly collided with Piastri's McLaren on the first lap of the first turn. Still, he recovered and secured second place, relinquishing the race victory to Piastri and reminding fans that he was human, succumbing to emotion in that high-pressure moment.

## Finding form and fighting back

Verstappen and Red Bull rediscovered their rhythm at Imola during the team's 400th Grand Prix. The Dutchman dominated, taking his second win of the season in front of jubilant fans. But just as quickly as momentum built, it faltered again.

At the Spanish Grand Prix, his beef with Mercedes driver George Russell reached its boiling point. After a myriad of strategic and communicative errors from his race management crew, Verstappen forced his way into the side of Russell's car in visible frustration late in the race, leading to a 10-second time penalty that caused him

to finish 10th.

Verstappen swept that under the rug with a second-place finish at the next race in Canada, reflecting the campaign's inconsistency.

Then came Austria. After colliding on lap one with rookie Kimi Antonelli, Verstappen suffered his first DNF of the season and showed a rare moment of vulnerability at his team's home track and—historically, one of his strongest.

From there, Verstappen focused on damage limitation. Despite starting on pole in Britain, more tire strategy issues plagued his race, and once again, Verstappen reacted outwardly, spinning his car during a mid-race safety car restart and crossing the line in fifth place. Rain delayed the next race in Belgium, where Verstappen finished fourth, and a bad qualifying lap in Hungary put him on the back foot, leading to a disappointing ninth-place finish.

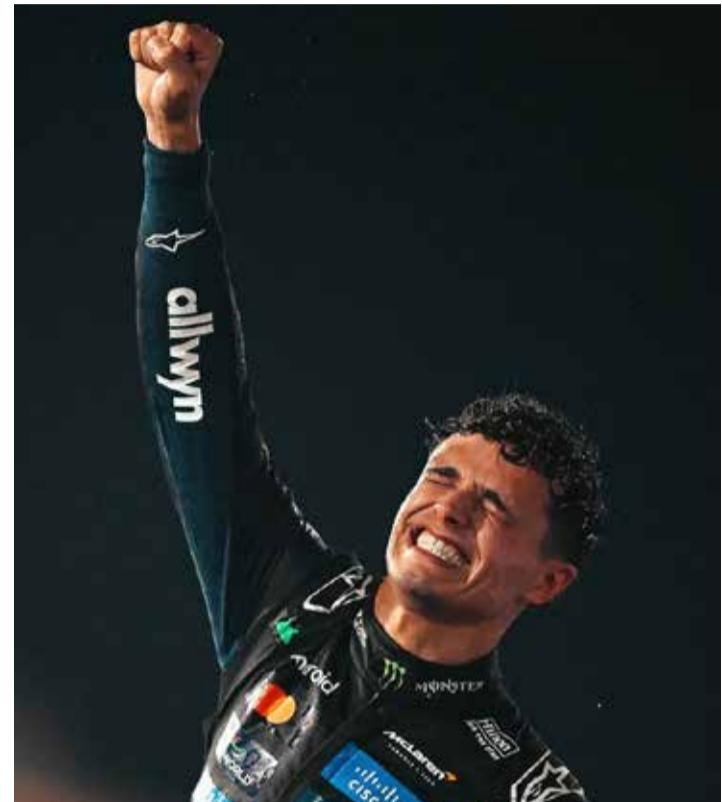
## Late-season surge

After the summer break, Red Bull brought a massive upgrade to Verstappen's RB21, helping him claim a second-place finish at his home race in Zandvoort, Netherlands, amid an electric atmosphere, reigniting both his confidence and title hopes.

Verstappen then marched into Monza, Italy, set the fastest qualifying lap by measure of average speed, and claimed his third win of the season. The performance was a reminder that his raw speed remained unmatched at the fastest track on the calendar.

Two weeks later, he triumphed again in Azerbaijan, converting pole into victory on the unforgiving streets of Baku, putting him squarely back into the championship conversation just as the McLarens began crumbling under pressure.

In the heat of Singapore on Oct. 5, Verstappen narrowly missed out on three race wins in a row, finishing second after a late-race safety car reshuffled the order. He rebounded at the next race in Austin, Texas, delivering a commanding drive to secure his fifth win of the season



**Lando Norris finally earned his first WDC win by just three points, but some still question if it was his driving skill or his McLaren's dominant pace that led to the trophy. Photo courtesy of Instagram/@mclarenf1**

while winning the sprint race as well.

At the next race in Mexico, Verstappen failed to overtake Leclerc in a heated late-race battle, crossing the line in third place as the season entered its closing stages.

## The final stretch

Then came Brazil. For the São Paulo Grand Prix on Nov. 9, Verstappen faced his most remarkable weekend of the year. Starting from the pit lane after a poor qualifying, he suffered from an early puncture, putting him even further behind the back of the pack. Nevertheless, the 'Flying Dutchman' dropped his sails and sped past the rest of the field, methodically making his way to a third-place finish.

Sin City came next, and many were asking if McLaren could break their Vegas curse. Early in the weekend, it looked like the Papayas finally found their groove, with Norris qualifying to take pole position, but the Briton lost his lead at turn one on the first lap. From there, Verstappen controlled the race and went on to win, and combined with an eventual double-disqualification for McLaren, the Dutchman sat just 24 points behind the lead for World Drivers' Champion (WDC).

At the next race in Qatar, Verstappen qualified third but didn't waste much time

moving into second place. He took advantage of an early safety-car pit stop and used a clever counter-strategy, allowing him to hold favourable track position and win the race, closing the gap to just 12 points in the WDC. All Verstappen needed was to win and for Norris to finish outside of the podium, and he would accomplish arguably the greatest late-season comeback in the sport's history.

The Dutchman led almost the entire race and won it convincingly, but his parade didn't last very long as Norris scraped his way to a WDC victory, finishing in P3 and claiming the title. In the end, Verstappen only lost by three points, and even though it wasn't the comeback of all comebacks, fans and media members agreed it was one hell of a fight. Verstappen's final second-place finish in the WDC was about more than winning and losing—it underscored his resilience and refusal to surrender, and reminded the world that even when the odds were against him, his raw talent at the wheel and mental fortitude would give him a chance in any race during any season. The 2025-26 Formula One season was a reminder that the World Drivers' Championship runs through the 'Flying Dutchman,' and will continue to until he hangs up the wheel.



**Max Verstappen has always had a reputation for being fast, but the 2025 F1 season put him into legendary company—even without a WDC victory. Photo courtesy of Instagram/@redbullracing**