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The Hockey Writers / Emptying the 2025 Columbus Blue Jackets' Development Camp Notebook

By Mark Scheig – July 4, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets are almost ready to go into full offseason mode. But before they get there, 2025 Development Camp is taking place at the Ice Haus.

A total of 31 players, including Blue Jackets' prospects and some invites, came to Columbus to go through the camp. Players were broken into two groups for both on and off-ice sessions. The players also got to spend some time at Ohio State University touring their practice facility.

Camp always gives the team a measuring stick of where their prospects are at in their development. They can have one last in-person conversation before everyone goes their separate ways for the summer. Players will get a list of things to focus on in their training.

Camp started on Wednesday and will run through the prospect's scrimmage on Saturday morning. If it's like any camps of past years, a seat in the Ice Haus will be hard to find on Saturday morning.

At this point with just the scrimmage left, we are going to empty our 2025 Development Camp notebook. What you will see are random observations from camp as well as some quotes from different conversations I had during the week.

We will begin with a prospect that is coming off winning a WHL title and off to East Lansing after camp is over.

Lindstrom's Leadership

What a year it's been for Cayden Lindstrom. The fourth-overall pick from the 2024 NHL Draft spent most of the year in Columbus working his way back from an injury and surgery.

Lindstrom recovered enough to be able to rejoin his teammates in Medicine Hat for the WHL Finals. It didn't take him long to hit the scoreboard in that first game back.

On his first shift, Lindstrom recorded an assist. That moment was the culmination of a season's worth of hard work of recovery. The Tigers went onto win that series over Spokane which earned them a trip to the Memorial Cup.

Lindstrom had a chance to reflect on the last year since hearing his name called at the Sphere in Las Vegas.

"Honestly, it felt like the draft was just yesterday," Lindstrom said. "It flew by. It's been a whirlwind. It's been a huge learning experience for sure. There's lots of ups and downs and highs and lows but I've enjoyed every bit of it. Every little bit is a learning experience for me and I took so much from it."

Lindstrom is attending his second Development Camp with the Blue Jackets although it's his first on the ice. As with anyone returning, they have an idea of what to expect coming in. They also get to help impart their wisdom to those prospects there for the first time.

Lindstrom's leadership was on full display even in the littlest things. He was encouraging teammates when given the opportunity. He shared advice to those looking for that. He was usually smiling when on the ice while being an example to his teammates. He was having fun and enjoying the full experience.

"I think just being an older guy being a leader for these younger guys coming in the new draft picks, you have to go on that leadership role and just help your team and future teammates out," Lindstrom said. "Just show them the ropes and I've been here for a while now. I know a few things so it is good just to teach them and show them around."

Lindstrom said he was leaving for East Lansing after camp to dive right into training for next season. Perhaps the best news for him and Blue Jackets' fans is this. How is he feeling right now?

"I feel great. I'm pretty much 100%. There's a lot of things I need to work on from missing a year just little things, just getting back in shape, the endurance, the timing, just stuff like that. It will come over time."

Thiessen Talks Goalies

Goaltending coach Brad Thiessen has been very busy of late. When he hasn't been working with the Monsters' goaltenders, he's been involved in the scouting process for the next wave of goalies to come to the team.

The Blue Jackets made a surprising pick to many when they drafted Russian goaltender Pyotr Andreyanov in the first round. Thiessen along with other staffers including GM Don Waddell made the trip to the Gold Star camp in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

A popular question being asked is why was Andreyanov drafted so highly? Thiessen opened up on that process with him and spoke about other goalies in the organization including Evan Gardner, Melvin Strahl and Nolan Lalonde.

Andreyanov

"He's one of those guys that jumps off the screen right away on video. In Russia, especially in the numbers he was putting up in the league over there, dominating the way he did. You can only get so much by watching video. And so Jimmy (Viers) and I went down to that Gold Star camp. And the first day you see him on the ice, that guy's different. He's got a presence about him on the ice that he looks like an NHL goalie when you see him right away. Then the game started happening and then practicing the drills started happening. Everything is slow for him. It's the way he reads the game and the way he thinks the game. He's one step ahead of everybody all the time. That was something we were drawn to right away. It's just as an 18-year old kid, someone who can see the game the way he does. At that level, combined with his athletic ability. That was someone where we watched it for two days there."

"Jimmy and I went home. Trevor (Timmins) went in. He called us after the first day. He was like 'this guy's different. There's something better with this guy.' We got to have a serious conversation with what we want to do. So there was a lot of meetings and things about it. Credit to Don (Waddell). Drafting goalies in the first round isn't something that happens too often. He was the next guy that was on our list. Couldn't be more happy with it after seeing him for a week and being up close and being on the ice with him."

Gardner

"His high hockey IQ. His ability to skate and read the game. That year when we drafted him, he was the backup and he pushed from behind and was always pushing. He finally took over and went on a playoff run with them as the guy. This past year was his first year in the starting role. It was a great opportunity for him to learn how to handle all that comes with being a starting goalie."

"There are definitely some ups and downs for him in that sense. I know one of his big goals this year was being invited to the World Junior Camp before the tournament this year. When he didn't get that invite, I think it took a little bit for him to get over that and come back. But he came back strong at the end of the season. It was awesome to have him in Cleveland at the end of the year. He played with us and spent four weeks with us. He gets a front row seat to see a guy like Jet (Greaves) and how he prepares and goes about his business. I think that's something that we're working with him on. Some off ice stuff. Pro happens. What do the guys do off the ice, the routines that they have, things that allow them to have success on the ice because of the work they put in."

"He's coming a long way. He's awesome to work with and had a blast working with him. I was excited when we drafted him and after being around him for a year learning and getting to know him, I'm even more excited about him now."

Strahl

"We felt two years ago that coming to North Amercia was going to be a really good opportunity for him to take the next step in his development path. Credit to him for believing in what he had for him. That was something that was going to help him take that next step. Going to Youngstown which was an hour away from Cleveland so I could be there often. We kind of had a more hands on approach with him. He

did an awesome job right off the bat handling coming to a new country not knowing anybody. New style of game. New everything.”

“The schools were all over him. So he was going through that whole recruiting process and trying to figure out what was best for him. Going to Michigan State is going to be a perfect opportunity. He’s going to be in a situation where the team that they’re building, everyday in practice. He’s going up against the best of the best. I know Trey Augustine is still there. He’s someone where (Strahl) can watch and see how he goes about his business but also push. That’s the guy you’re trying to compete with for ice time.”

“After camp here, he’s going right to school and he’s going to restart the summer program there with them and get in the gym. It gives him the opportunity to work on some things off ice and on ice. I’m excited about his path there.”

Lalonde

“Everyone’s development path is different. Some guys were able to make the jump a little bit earlier. We felt like last year it was best for him to go back to junior. He had a good year in junior. He was traded to the Soo. Late in the year, I think he played his best hockey with them. I’m excited about him coming into pro now and be able to have more day-to-day interactions with him and then working with him and trying to develop his game. He’s come a long way in terms of his skating and his off-ice habits and just the way his body is athletically. Working with him a lot on just reading the game figuring out what the options are what could happen next on the ice. But he’s a really good kid and eager to learn. Excited to see, bring him now into the pro game and help him along with that transition.”

Other Observations

Remember the junior tournament in Erie during Covid? Former Erie Otter Brendan Hoffmann was invited to this development camp after spending last season in Idaho. That tournament helped the likes of Greaves as well as Logan Mailloux in their careers. Has Hoffmann been able to reflect on the impact of that tournament? “I had a couple conversations with Andrew (Perrott) a while ago. We kind of looked back at the old list we had. The guys that we keep an eye on as they’re advancing through their career. I don’t know the exact numbers but we got a good amount of NHL prospects come out of that. It’s cool to see guys like Jet and Logan. Andrew’s making progress in Hershey right now. You got so many other guys advancing because of it. Ty Voit (Toronto), Bryce Montgomery (Carolina) on NHL deals. So it’s cool to see down the road what it can do for you.”

Gardner is a more confident player. He credits his time working with Thiessen and building that connection. “A ton” was how he described how much his confidence has grown. He played in one game for the Monsters at the end of last season. “Getting into that game was great for my confidence and kind of reassuring me that I’m able to compete at that level right now. I got to learn from a guy like Jet who was lights out to end the season here. To watch him and be around him all the time down there was awesome for me. He was great to me.”

Jeremy Loranger is an interesting prospect. His skill was on full display during camp. He finished off a couple goals with great moves that left goaltenders frozen. Asked him where that skill comes from. "I will say practice behind the scenes. Just working on my skills. I had to go to a private school when I was younger. The practice was just everyday skills, smaller games and edges. I think that's where I got that from." Loranger said he had no idea the Blue Jackets were considering him in the draft. He was at home on the couch when he was picked. There were no in season conversations. "They just drafted me and I like what they sell."

Charlie Elick was traded midseason to Tri City. He became teammates with Jackson Smith. He reflected on his season and the trade. "Brandon was a great place for me to play. I loved it there. It was one of the best years of my life. It made me be able to get drafted by Columbus. So I'm proud of that. Things are going to line up and eventually the trade got confirmed. They really liked me. They wanted me earlier before that. I think it was a good move. Playing with Smith and Terrell Goldsmith on that team was a good step because I knew the guys before. I think just growing in the role there and being a leader on that team helps for sure."

Elick on being teammates with Smith: "It was awesome. I knew him from Calgary before. He's a well-spoken guy, a good kid. He's very fun to be around. For a young guy, he's mature for his age. He knows what to do and does things right."

Smith on being teammates with Elick: "Unbelievable guy. Right when he came in, he fit into our locker room super well in Tri City. Just a very personable guy, extroverted guy who can make friends very quickly. He fit in great with our team. I played with him on the ice a lot. We were D partners there so it was really good having him there."

Smith said classes at Penn State start on Aug 25. He expects to arrive in State College sometime in the middle of August.

The Donskov brothers along with Tommy Cross were at Development Camp working with the prospects. Trent Vogelhuber said one of the things he likes about camp is being able to bounce ideas off other coaches such as the Donskov's and Cross. "I like to bounce ideas off them and get drills and see what they're working on. They spend a lot of time in the development model of young players and that's something we're always looking to improve just ways to do that in season. I think that's a big takeaway and that doesn't include any of the players." Vogelhuber also said he enjoys being able to talk to players with their guards down and not from the perspective of a head coach. "I like to take this time to be a little more sit down next to them at the lunch table or get to know them a little bit and try to get them comfortable and get to know them as people which is important as a big chunk of these guys will come into the organization."

If you're going to the prospect's scrimmage Saturday, warmups start at 9 A.M. The game will begin at 9:30 A.M. Get there early to ensure you get a seat.

The Athletic / Five thoughts after an underwhelming start to the Blue Jackets' offseason

By Aaron Portzline – July 4, 2025

By now, the relative quiet of the Columbus Blue Jackets' offseason is likely sinking in with most of the fan base. There's still a lot of summer to go, but it looks as if the Jackets' changes will be more subtle than sweeping.

We've had some time to think about the moves that GM Don Waddell was able to swing, along with the ones he didn't pull off and the ramifications of those moves/non-moves that followed. There's always more than meets the eye, and that's what we're trying to scratch at here.

Here's a closer look at five topics we've been thinking about over the last week:

What the Noah Dobson talks revealed

We couldn't have known it at the time, but the way the trade of defenseman Noah Dobson played out last Friday — he was sent from the New York Islanders to the Montreal Canadiens — revealed the answers to two questions that lingered before the offseason carnival started.

First, that the Blue Jackets' two first-round draft picks were not enough, either alone or together, to swing a trade for an impact player. Both the Blue Jackets and Canadiens were required to throw in a roster player. For Montreal, that ended up being forward Emil Heineman. For the Blue Jackets, that, reportedly, would have been Dmitri Voronkov.

The second part of this requires a delicate touch.

Dobson, who is from Prince Edward Island, Canada, wanted to play for the Montreal Canadiens. It's likely not that he didn't want to play in Columbus, just that he preferred Montreal, one of the marquee cities in the country of his birth.

That scenario played out in a couple of other instances, too.

The Blue Jackets would have put a massive contract offer on the table for 100-point winger Mitch Marner, but Marner made it clear that he wanted to sign with the Vegas Golden Knights. His former club, the Toronto Maple Leafs, agreed to a sign-and-trade with the Golden Knights.

Meanwhile, the Blue Jackets were involved in trade talks for defenseman Rasmus Anderson, who would have been a perfect fit on the second pair opposite young Denton Mateychuk. Anderson, who has one year remaining on his contract with the Calgary Flames, apparently has made it clear that he'd only entertain a contract extension with ... you guessed it, Vegas. (He remains with the Flames.)

Columbus and the Blue Jackets are not seen by most NHL players as a city or franchise to be avoided. For proof, look at the two players acquired from the Colorado Avalanche, late last week. Both Charlie Coyle

and Miles Wood had modified no-trade clauses in their contract, meaning they could list a number of clubs to which they couldn't be traded.

Neither Coyle (10 teams) nor Wood (eight) had Columbus on their no-trade lists.

In summary, the Blue Jackets are not being avoided like the plague. But, they are not a marquee franchise yet, either.

Provorov's signing became imperative

It's clear that Waddell's honeymoon, for many Blue Jackets fans, has ended. He, along with other GMs, clearly misread what this year's market was going to be, how few players would change teams, and how the NHL's rising salary cap would flatten the market by allowing teams to keep more of their players.

But once it became clear that Waddell wasn't going to land a right-shot defenseman for his top four — Dobson being traded elsewhere, Andersson limiting the Flames' trade partners, and perhaps others — he circled back to get serious about negotiations with defenseman Ivan Provorov.

When talks resumed on the other side of the draft, with Provorov only hours away from hitting the open market, the player had all of the leverage. The ticket: seven years, \$59.5 million

At that point, the Blue Jackets had no choice but to sign him to a contract, because the worst possible scenario is not what happened with the free-agent and trade markets. No, the worst scenario Waddell faced on his blue line was failing to land any of those targets and allowing Provorov to leave via free agency.

Here's another perspective on Provorov's contract.

When Provorov signed a six-year, \$40.5 million contract with the Philadelphia Flyers in 2019, the salary cap for the upcoming season was \$81.5 million. That means Provorov's salary cap hit, \$6.75 million, occupied 8.2 percent of the salary cap.

The deal he signed on Tuesday, which carries an \$8.5 million cap hit, occupies 8.9 percent of the salary cap (\$95.5 million) this coming season. The NHL has already set the salary cap for the two seasons following the upcoming campaign. It'll be \$104 million in 2026-27 and \$113.5 million in 2027-28, which means Provorov will eat 8.2 percent and 7.5 percent, respectively.

The lesson: we should be prepared for skyrocketing NHL salaries.

Oversell, underdeliver

Blue Jackets fans came into this summer on a high note, not just because the Blue Jackets finished last season on a burner and nearly made the playoffs, but because Waddell was making clear his plans to add significant pieces to the roster with an aggressive approach.

Dreams of top-six wingers, a top-four defenseman and a new starting goaltender swirled through their daydreams. Instead, they got three bottom-six forwards: Coyle, Wood and Isac Lundestrom, to replace the outgoing Justin Danforth, Sean Kuraly and James van Riemsdyk.

It's an agitated fan base right now.

But once the disappointment fades in the searing heat of late July and August, most Blue Jackets fans will come back to the realization that this roster is still full of talent, and the reasons Waddell cited to believe that they can still be better next season are actually legitimate.

Young players — Adam Fantilli, Kirill Marchenko, Kent Johnson, Cole Sillinger, Dmitri Voronkov, Denton Mateychuk — already look like bona fide NHL players, and their profiles will continue to rise. Not every one of them in a perfectly straight, climbing trajectory, but logic dictates they're still learning and growing.

This might be the biggest "everything is going to be OK" argument, and it's something Waddell hinted at on the day free agency opened, when the Jackets re-signed Provorov: The Jackets' top four — Zach Werenski with Dante Fabbro, Mateychuk with Provorov — wasn't together all season. Fabbro was claimed on waivers in mid-November. Mateychuk didn't come up until just before Christmas.

We went digging into this, and the numbers are dramatic

In the 41 games in which Werenski, Fabbro, Mateychuk and Provorov all dressed, the Blue Jackets went 26-13-2 (.658 points percentage) and allowed 2.95 goals per game. In the 41 games in which one or more were missing from the lineup, the Jackets went 14-20-7 (.427 points percentage) and allowed 3.56 goals per game.

The Damon Severson problem

One can imagine that nobody was more relieved by Provorov's new contract than Damon Severson, who has not been able to find his groove in Columbus since he was traded to the Blue Jackets by New Jersey two seasons ago.

Severson, you'll recall, was a healthy scratch 10 times last season, including the final eight games. That's a hard pill to swallow for an organization that is paying Severson \$6.75 million per season through 2030-31.

But after Provorov's signing, Severson is now the third-highest-paid Blue Jackets defenseman, slotting behind Werenski and Provorov. That might sound like a minor issue, but Severson has been honest — especially in his first season in Columbus — about trying to live up to the contract Columbus bestowed upon him.

You can look at Severson from two different perspectives right now.

If he had played better his first two seasons in Columbus, they wouldn't have been so driven to find a right-shot defenseman for their second pair. Severson, after all, is a right shot, and he was pursued by the Blue Jackets because then-GM Jarmo Kekalainen saw him as a top-four defender.

Now, though, the Blue Jackets are looking to shelter the player and put him in a lineup spot where he can succeed. They can't trade his contract without eating a portion of the money he's due or sweetening the offer with a draft pick or a prospect. They have to find a way to make this work.

As of now, you would expect him to start the season on the third pair with veteran Erik Gudbranson.

Goaltending remains biggest issue

Coyle and Wood are going to give the Blue Jackets a different look on their bottom two lines. As noted above, you could make a statistical argument that the Jackets' top four is plenty good enough.

The biggest concern, if the Blue Jackets start the season as presently constructed, will be their goaltending, where Elvis Merzlikins appears poised to start his seventh season in Columbus. Jet Greaves, who jumped Daniil Tarasov on the depth chart and then supplanted Merzlikins as the starter late last season, will compete for the job.

Merzlikins, 31, has had a sub-.900 save percentage for three seasons now. In that span — from the start of 2022-23 — there are 66 goaltenders who have played 50 or more games, and only two have a lower save percentage than Merzlikins' .890: Philadelphia's Samuel Ersson (.888) and journeyman Spencer Martin (.875).

There's no question that Merzlikins is a sympathetic figure, having lost one of his best friends, Matiss Kivlenieks, to a tragedy four years ago.

He also has a wildly engaging personality, which isn't always the case among NHL players. There's a heck of a goaltender in there, too, but it hasn't been seen consistently since his first couple of seasons in the NHL. That seems like a long time ago.

It's possible that Greaves plays well enough to wrest the No. 1 job away from Merzlikins. But you have to wonder how Merzlikins would handle being a backup.

Of all that could have been upgraded this summer, it feels like this should have been the priority.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets sign restricted free agent Dmitri Voronkov to 2-year contract

By Aaron Portzline – July 5, 2025

Dmitri Voronkov, who has scored 18-plus goals in each of his first two NHL seasons and is regarded as one of the league's emerging power forwards, signed a two-year, \$8.35 million contract with the Columbus Blue Jackets on Saturday.

The deal pulls Voronkov off the restricted free-agent market, eliminating the risk of an offer sheet. Voronkov, who had arbitration rights, needed to decide before 5 p.m. ET Saturday if he wanted to request arbitration, but his new contract eliminates that decision.

His contract has a salary cap hit of \$4.175 million. He earned \$925,000 with his previous contract.

"We are very pleased to reach this agreement with Dmitri as he is an important part of our young core," Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell said. "He has size, strength and excellent hands, and he has a chance to be a very special player. We look forward to his continued growth and development as a Blue Jacket."

Voronkov, 24, set career highs last season with 23 goals, 24 assists and 47 points in 73 games. He also had 55 penalty minutes and a plus-17 rating.

In coach Dean Evason's first season behind the Blue Jackets' bench, Voronkov, a 6-feet-5, 227-pound left winger, found a home on the top line with center Sean Monahan and right winger Kirill Marchenko, becoming one of the top lines in the NHL.

Columbus' only remaining restricted free agent is Mikael Pyyhtiä.

In other Blue Jackets news Saturday, the Colorado Avalanche announced that they hired Columbus minor-league assistant coach Mark Letestu as head coach of the AHL's Colorado Eagles, the Avs' top minor-league affiliate. Letestu had been an assistant coach for the AHL's Cleveland Monsters for the past four seasons.

[NBC4i.com / Blue Jackets keep Dmitri Voronkov with two-year deal worth \\$8.35 million](#)

By David DeGuzman – July 5, 2025

In the Blue Jackets' latest offseason move, Columbus signed restricted free agent Dmitri Voronkov to a two-year deal worth \$8.35 million

"We are very pleased to reach this agreement with Dmitri as he is an important part of our young core," Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell said. "He has size, strength and excellent hands and has a chance to be a very special player. We look forward to his continued growth and development as a Blue Jacket."

The 24-year-old forward set single-season career highs last season with 23 goals and 24 assists, leading Columbus in power play goals. Since making his NHL debut in the 2023-24 season, Voronkov has registered 41 goals and 40 assists for 81 points.

The news comes as the Blue Jackets wrapped up their development camp Saturday morning and retained several big names with significant contract extensions, including defensemen Ivan Provorov and Dante Fabbro.

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets re-sign forward Dmitri Voronkov

By Brian Hedger – July 5, 2025

Don Waddell's offseason to-do list is just about complete.

The Blue Jackets' president/general manager reached an agreement with restricted free-agent forward Dmitri Voronkov on a two-year contract extension worth \$8.35 million for an average annual value of \$4.175 million per season against the salary cap.

The deal was announced less than three hours before the arrival of the NHL's 5 p.m. July 5 deadline for eligible RFAs to file for salary arbitration.

"People don't react until you have deadlines, and they had a deadline (July 5) to file or not," Waddell said. "So, we had several conversations today. We worked through where they thought their ask was, where we thought we'd be in arbitration and we found a common ground that worked for both of us."

Voronkov's extension capped a busy week for Waddell, who added forwards Charlie Coyle and Miles Wood in a June 27 trade with the Colorado Avalanche, re-signed defensemen Dante Fabbro on June 29 and Ivan Provorov on July 1 before and signed depth center Isac Lundestrom later on July 1.

According to Puck Pedia, Voronkov's new salary leaves the Blue Jackets with \$16.3 million remaining under the salary-cap ceiling of \$95.5 million with 22 spots of a possible 23 roster spots filled. The breakdown is 13 forwards, seven defensemen and two goalies, which leaves room for one more player added via trade, free agency or promotion of a prospect.

"If we can make our team better through trades, we're always going to do that, and maybe with the free-agent thing, if we can tweak around the edges (we will)," Waddell said. "If not, we might just wait for that famous wire pickup."

That's how he snagged Fabbro from the Nashville Predators last season. Meanwhile, the remaining RFAs are forward Mikael Pyhtia and defenseman Daemon Hunt, who haven't gained arbitration rights.

Columbus Blue Jackets nix arbitration filing with Dmitri Voronkov

Voronkov, 24, has quickly become an integral forward in the Blue Jackets' top nine, spending most of last season at left wing on the first line. After missing the first month with a shoulder injury, he finished with 47 points on 23 goals and 24 assists.

His extension negated the need for an arbitration filing, which could have mirrored what Kirill Marchenko did in July 2024. After filing for arbitration, Marchenko's case nearly went to the hearing stage in Toronto. He wound up signing a three-year extension worth \$11.55 million (\$3.85 AAV) on July 28, 2024, three days before the hearing was slated to begin.

No such drama awaits Waddell this time around. He locked up the 6-foot-5, 240-pound Voronkov with a two-year bridge deal that could turn into a long-term contract. Voronkov could become an unrestricted

free agent July 1, 2028, but he'll be an RFA again July 1, 2027, which gives Waddell a year to work on a longer-term deal.

Columbus Blue Jackets excited to keep Voronkov, Marchenko together

Voronkov and Marchenko excelled playing together for most of the 2024-25 season skating at the wing positions on the top line. They helped power the Blue Jackets to a franchise-record 267 goals, including a combined 54 from them.

According to Natural Stat Trick, Voronkov and Marchenko played 644:23 at 5-on-5 skating together on the Blue Jackets' top forward line in 2024-25. During that time, the Blue Jackets had 51.4% of the attempted shots, outshoot opponents 347-290 and had a +28 in goals for/against (47-19).

Those numbers were primarily split between Monahan and Fantilli at center due to the former missing roughly two months following mid-season wrist surgery. Fantilli filled the role admirably but was learning on the fly in his second NHL season. Monahan, who is skilled at taking face-offs and winning puck battles, brought out even more in the talented Russian wingers.

Skating together at 5-on-5 for 290:51, they helped the Blue Jackets control possession with a 54.4% share of attempted shots, 59% edge in shots (173-120) and 70.7% margin in goals (29-12).

The Blue Jackets also posted a 60% expected goals percentage, generated 54.8% of scoring chances (159-131) and had a dominant 61.4% edge in high-danger chances (78-49) with Voronkov, Monahan and Marchenko in the game.

Voronkov, 24, has only played two NHL seasons, while Marchenko, 24, has three under his belt. Both have plenty of time to keep maturing and room to improve, which is just the kind of X-factor the Blue Jackets may need to get back to the postseason.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: Dmitri Voronkov's new contract comes with demands

By Aaron Portzline – July 6, 2025

A collection of notes, insights, ruminations and did-you-knows gathered throughout the week that was for the Columbus Blue Jackets:

Item #1: Banking on it

When Kirill Marchenko signed a new contract last summer, Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell challenged him to become a more physically engaged player, especially in the defensive zone. A month earlier, when Kent Johnson signed his new deal, Waddell pressed him to keep getting stronger and better maintain possession of the puck.

And so it was this weekend with towering winger Dmitri Voronkov, who has been both a tantalizing talent and a simmering frustration for the Blue Jackets.

Voronkov signed a two-year contract worth \$8.35 million Saturday, a deal that will pay him \$4 million this coming season and \$4.35 million in 2026-27. The contract does not include any no-move clauses, but it does come with some demands.

Waddell, in this case, has been more pointed than he was with Marchenko or Johnson.

"It's the conditioning factor," Waddell said. "I was adamant with his agents about it. The problem is, if he doesn't take it seriously himself, he's punishing the team, and he's punishing himself because he'd be leaving a lot of money on the table.

"This guy has the chance to be a 30-plus scorer and a physical force. I mean, there's a lot of money to be made for a guy like that. So, yeah, we talked about it."

It's likely one of the reasons the Blue Jackets weren't willing to discuss a long-term contract with Voronkov. They discussed a one-year term before settling on two years, which leaves him as a restricted free agent when the deal expires after the 2026-27 season.

Voronkov is listed at 6-feet-5, 227 pounds. He was significantly heavier when he arrived in Columbus before the 2023-24 season, but in each of his two NHL seasons, he has lagged badly in the second half. Last season, he had 19-16-35 through 44 games, but put up only 4-8-12 in his final 29 games.

"The reports we've had this summer are that he's been working out five days a week," Waddell said. "He's skating every day with Marchenko. So far, the reports are very positive."

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason found a fit last season with Voronkov joining the top line opposite Marchenko, with Sean Monahan in the middle. It was one of the NHL's most effective lines for long stretches of the season.

On one hand, it's impressive that Voronkov has 41-40-81 combined in his first two seasons. But it also makes the Blue Jackets wonder how dominating a force he could be if his conditioning allowed him to move faster and respond quicker.

The assumption is that Voronkov's notorious physicality — he was known for throwing around his body in the KHL before coming to North America — would reappear if he could get on top of opposing skaters a half-step quicker.

That's the Voronkov they want to see before this new contract expires.

Item #2: Letestu joins Avs

For the second time in a decade, the Colorado Avalanche have turned to the Blue Jackets' organization, specifically the coaching staff at AHL Cleveland, to make a coaching hire.

The Avalanche hired Mark Letestu, who has been an assistant in Cleveland the past four seasons, to coach their AHL franchise, the Colorado Eagles, which play in Loveland, Colo., about 50 miles north of Denver. In 2016, Colorado hired Jared Bednar, who had been Cleveland's head coach, to succeed Patrick Roy.

"(Letestu) is very well respected in the industry, and he did a great job for us," Waddell said. "I'm not even really concerned about (a person's contract) in that situation, if it's an opportunity for them. I'll never hold a person back from an opportunity to learn and to grow."

It was that process — career advancement — that opened the position for Letestu to fill. Aaron Schneekloth, who had coached AHL Colorado, was hired last month as an assistant coach on Lane Lambert's staff with the Seattle Kraken.

Letestu, who had an 11-year NHL career with Pittsburgh, Columbus, Edmonton and Winnipeg, should be able to relate to all different types of players in the AHL. He played in both the AHL and ECHL for four seasons before reaching the NHL.

In Pittsburgh, he played alongside Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin. In Edmonton, he played with then-rookies Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl. In both cases, the crafty Letestu worked his way onto the power play with the future Hall of Fame players.

What type of coach will Letestu be?

"Everybody wants to be hard to play against. Everybody wants to play fast, right?" he said. "The challenge in coaching is how you get there, the teaching aspects, and explaining why I think that's what I want from a certain player.

"I want my teams and my players to know exactly why they're doing things, why they're in certain spots, why they need to compete the way they do, why are the systems structured the way they are, that kind

of thing. If it's done the right way, you're going to see a team that looks structured and competes really hard."

Letestu spent the last three seasons in Cleveland under head coach Trent Vogelhuber, who is 108-82-26 behind the Monsters' bench. Vogelhuber, who turns 37 later this month, has started to gain traction as a candidate for recent NHL jobs, but it's unclear if he's had official interviews. That seems inevitable, though.

Waddell said his staff met Sunday to discuss Letestu's replacement on the staff in Cleveland. Vogelhuber and associate coach Chris Bergeron are expected back, Waddell said.

Item #3: Happy Campers

The Blue Jackets finished their annual development camp with a scrimmage Saturday morning. Forward Jack Williams, who was signed out of Northeastern University last spring and made his NHL debut in the Jackets' last game of the season, led the way with a hat trick.

It was an unusual development camp compared to others in recent years. There were several NHL prospects on hand, but none expected to make the Blue Jackets out of camp in the fall.

We asked Blue Jackets director of player personnel Chris Clark for a brief thought on five players from this year's camp: the three first-round picks — center Cayden Lindstrom (No. 4) in 2024, and defensemen Jackson Smith (No. 14) and Pyotr Andreyanov (No. 20) last month; and two players of his choosing.

He chose forward Oiva Keskinen, a seventh-round pick (No. 194) in 2023, and forward Luca Pinelli, a fourth-round pick (No. 114) that same year.

Here's what he said:

Cayden Lindstrom: "Aside from what he's doing on the ice, just him being on the ice and having fun doing it, was great to see (following Lindstrom's back surgery last year). He was always in great spirits whenever we'd talk with him when he was going through (rehabilitation). He'd have a smile on his face, but I know it was eating at him to play and there were a lot of uncertainties.

"There's some rust to shake off because it's been a while, but he's young and he'll get back in form really quickly for this season coming up. To see him skating like he can skate and smiling was really good to see. He was having fun out there."

Jackson Smith: "The biggest thing, for me, (in this camp) is getting to know guys and talking to them off the ice, just seeing what kind of people they are. It's easy to know them as players from what you can see them do on the ice. There's video of every single second of every shift. I want to see how they interact with the other players.

"Some guys are shy. Some guys are outgoing. He's one of those outgoing guys that's easy for anybody to get along with. He's a good kid and he's got some personality, and the players really gravitate to those guys."

Pyotr Andreyanov: "I didn't get to him much at all (before he was drafted), just a little video here and there. (Goaltenders) are not my area of expertise. But seeing him on the ice and in the goalie drills quite a bit, understanding his technique ... yeah, impressive. He can move the puck. We heard he could do that, and he really did that in the (scrimmage).

"He was having fun out there, and it's got to be really, really hard for him because of the language barrier. He was the only Russian in camp, but he was hanging out with the guys, trying to speak and interact with them, which I thought was really cool. He wasn't off by himself, not at all."

Oiva Keskinen: "It's good that he's going to come over for training camp. If he doesn't make the team (the Blue Jackets) in the fall, he's going to head back to Finland. But he's on the radar now to come over, which is good. He'll go to Buffalo (for the annual prospects tournament).

"I was kind of keying on him. He's a good player. If he does go back to Europe and his season ends early, he'll be with us for the end of our season. So it was good to get a look at him and where he's at this summer."

Luca Pinelli: "We had Pins at the end of the year (in Cleveland). He's a fun player to watch. He's a spark plug. He's fearless, and he fits right in. I'm interested to see him in (training) camp, and with his confidence building, I want to see where it goes.

"He has a lot of skill, and it's in the middle of the ice, too, it's not on the outside. Some guys with his skill, they're doing everything on the outside. He'll do it between the dots, and he doesn't worry about being hit."

Item #4: Snacks

- For Blue Jackets fans, this development camp provided their first chance to see Lindstrom skate. He took the ice for the first day of camp last summer, but sat out the rest of camp, perhaps the first sign that his back wasn't healing. But, after returning to play late last season for Medicine Hat, Lindstrom is not back in the groove of a hockey player. He'll attend Michigan State in the fall. Asked how it felt to be "100 percent," Lindstrom said: "I'm not sure. I don't even know if I'm fully there yet. I'm close. It's step-by-step every day. Things take time to heal, right? You're not going to feel 100 percent right after surgery. I'm feeling good and working hard every day, training as hard as I can. That's all that matters. One hundred percent will come pretty soon."
- Jackson Smith admitted being a bit flustered in meeting two of the three fellow prospects who share the name Luca. That would be forward Luca Pinelli and defenseman Luca Marrelli. Here's Smith: "I kinda got 'em mixed up at first. I thought they were brothers, honestly."
- Waddell and several of his scouts traveled to South Florida in the week leading up to the draft to attend a camp for Russian players staged by agent Dan Milstein. The Blue Jackets came away from that camp impressed with Andreyanov, drafting him at No. 20. It changed their thinking. "We all left there very impressed," Waddell said. "One or two days later, when we all got together, we had him clearly as the No. 1 goalie. We always have a special category for goalies, a separate list. And that put him at the top of the list."

- It didn't help swing the deal, but the fact that Ivan Provorov's younger brother, Vladimir, will play at Ohio State beginning in 2027 was a nice little wrinkle. By then, Provorov will be two years into the seven-year, \$59.5 million contract he signed with the Blue Jackets just hours before free agency opened on July 1. "It's exciting," Ivan Provorov said. "Whether he comes the following year or two years from now, having him close will be really fun. I'll be able to go to his games, or he'll be stopping by for dinner once in a while. I'm excited for that."
- The Blue Jackets hired Paul DeFazio as their new equipment manager, replacing longtime manager Jamie Healy. DeFazio spent five years as the head equipment manager with AHL Scranton before working as an assistant with the Pittsburgh Penguins for the last six years.
- It wasn't a free-agent signing that sent shock waves through the NHL, but the good fans of Cleveland, Ohio, took notice. Trey Fix-Wolansky, drafted by the Blue Jackets in the seventh round (No. 204) of the 2018 NHL draft, has played 289 of his 315 pro games with AHL Cleveland, becoming a fan favorite and a franchise record holder for goals (112), assists (147) and points (259), along with several other offensive categories. Fix-Wolansky, who is 5-feet-7, 193 pounds, signed a one-year, two-way contract with the New York Rangers.
- Clark, who oversees the Cleveland roster, said of Fix-Wolansky: "He was awesome. The player he became, and the player he was ... he became a Cleveland legend. But it's time for him to see something else. It was his timing and our timing ... it's going to work out really well for him. I spoke with (Rangers assistant GM Ryan Martin) and they're really happy having him in there and seeing what he can do."
- We asked Fix-Wolansky what he wanted to say to AHL Cleveland fans and the city of Cleveland, his hockey home for the past six seasons. In a text exchange with The Athletic, he didn't hold back: "To the city of Cleveland, the Monsters organization, and especially the fans: THANK YOU. Thank you for supporting me every step of the way over my six years in 'the land.' From playing my first game as a Monster in the (AHL) playoffs as a 19-year-old, to my last game as a 25-year-old, you've been there, supporting me every step of the way. Moving to Cleveland full-time as a 20-year-old, I never would have expected the support and love I felt. You made my time in Cleveland so enjoyable and I will always cherish every memory I made with my teammates and with the fans. You supported me and our team through ups and downs and that's why I will always say Cleveland has the best fans in the AHL. Thank you for everything, Cleveland."
- As noted in this space last week, Blue Jackets prospect forward Jordan Dumais had two charges for driving under the influence dropped earlier this month when the arresting officer in Halifax, Nova Scotia, failed to show up to provincial court for trial. Mothers Against Drunk Driving Canada asked for an investigation, according to the Chronicle Herald. A public relations manager for the Halifax Regional Police later told the newspaper that an investigation is underway. "There is an expectation that officers take their duty to appear in court very seriously," the spokesperson said. "The officer had a duty to appear in court (on June 27) and did not. There are consequences under the Police Act that are being explored now."

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Fans Appear Split on How 2025 Offseason Was Handled

By Mark Scheig – July 7, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets have completed most of their important business for the 2024-25 season. With the signing of Dmitri Voronkov to a two-year deal worth \$8.35 million, just two RFA players remain unsigned. Those are Mikael Pyyhtia and Daemon Hunt.

Those contracts will be signed in due time. Meanwhile, the Blue Jackets go into the summer months of the offseason with very little drama surrounding them. Given how some recent years have played out, this is a much-welcomed change. Barring an unexpected trade, it is expected to be a quiet summer at the corner of Front and Nationwide Boulevard.

This will be our last column of the 2024-25 season. Now is a good time to ask an important question. How should we feel about the state of the Blue Jackets going into the summer? Based on what has happened this offseason, fans appear to be split on how to feel not only about the offseason, but also the team's immediate future in 2025-26.

There are fans that love where things are going. Then there are a segment of fans that like where things are going but have questions. There are also fans that feel pretty meh about where things stand. And then there is a small segment of fans that are worried sick that the team hasn't done nearly enough and will fall short.

In this column, we're going to try to outline these four groups and why they feel they way they do. In the end, we'll try to answer the all important question combining these four groups. How should you really feel about the Blue Jackets going into 2025-26?

For the purposes of this exercise, we will categorize the groups as feeling great, feeling good, feeling meh and feeling awful. Which one of these groups represents your thoughts on the Blue Jackets? Let me know in the comments or on social media.

Feeling Great

Let's start with the most optimistic view of the Blue Jackets. There is a small group of fans that absolutely love where the team is at. The top-six in some order will remain in tact. They added key pieces to fortify the bottom-six. They're keeping the defense consistent with the belief that playing together will provide the chemistry needed to improve on their numbers. They also ensured that Jet Greaves will have a path to being a significant contributor in 2025-26.

Although there wasn't a huge splash in the form of a big signing or trade, some moves were made. These moves kept their cap flexibility in order for potential future moves. Their center depth is in a great place especially adding someone like Charlie Coyle to be their 3C. Isac Lundstrom too adds to that center depth and is a good defensive 4C.

Fans in the feeling great category believe last season wasn't a fluke and have the ability as constructed to make the playoffs in 2025-26. The team is still young but it's very talented. They should have little issue scoring goals assuming everyone stays healthy.

These fans also believe that Adam Fantilli will eventually become the coveted 1C everyone is hoping for. While the fans in this group understand it will still take time, they can clearly see the vision and are feeling great about where things are going. This represents a small sample of fans somewhere around 10% if I had to guess.

Feeling Good, But...

These next two groups is where I think the majority of fans will be. They'll either feel good but have some important questions or they'll feel meh and the team will have to prove to them that things are heading in the right direction.

Fans that are feeling good with questions see the vision and see a path to being good down the road. But for the immediate future, there are significant questions that prevent them from feeling on top of the world.

First is the initial reaction of the Ivan Provorov contract. While there is an understanding that the Blue Jackets needed a second-pairing defenseman after missing out on other targets, they see the price tag. For the next seven years, it's an average-annual value of \$8.5 million. Woah.

The question in this group is was this really necessary at that price point? GM Don Waddell said after the season it was fair to wonder if the defense would be remade. They're essentially running it back.

Second, these fans feel good about the offensive potential but wonder if it will be a repeat in a higher goals-against total. The Blue Jackets are also bringing back two of the three main goalies from last season. While they feel good about how Greaves performed, they wonder if he can do that in a larger sample size. They also wonder if Elvis Merzlikins can consistently find his best game.

Despite the questions, the overall feeling is good given that there is a defined core and a plan in place. They understand there will be bumps in the road but the overall confidence is in a good place.

Feeling Meh

Fans in this group will feel underwhelmed by what happened this offseason. Where were all the big changes that could have happened? The Blue Jackets missed the playoffs. So they're running most of it back? Why?

Provorov might be playing on the right side again. Yes, he has done that plenty of times before. However, it's not the preferred way to play.

What about Denton Mateychuk? With Provorov staying for seven more years, does this relegate Mateychuk to the third pair? Or will he have a lefty playing to his right? Can Damon Severson regain his form?

This group also doesn't have confidence in the goaltending as currently constructed. Had it been even slightly better last season, the Blue Jackets are likely a playoff team. Why couldn't they bring someone else in?

As for the forwards, fans feeling meh are wondering why they couldn't land another top-six player with all the cap space the Blue Jackets had. It was over \$40 million at one point. Does no one want to come to Columbus?

The bottom line is fans in this group saw the moves that happened and the needle wasn't moved in either direction. It really didn't change their overall opinion of the state of the team. Perhaps there was some disappointment too but not to the level of our final group.

Feeling Awful

Like the feeling great group, there is a small percentage of fans that couldn't feel worse about the state of the Blue Jackets. "More of the same" is what they're thinking. Why should they expect something different if the most common recent result was missing out on the playoffs?

This group saw the Provorov contract and what was said about it being an egregious overpay and immediately began questioning management. They also saw the only other moves made were on the bottom-six. How can they compete with the likes of Florida or Carolina or any of the East's best teams by mostly standing pat?

These fans focus on seeing how far away the Blue Jackets are from consistently competing for a Stanley Cup. They'll continue to feel this way too until other, bigger moves take place. They will always focus on the negative and carry a pessimistic view no matter what good news you try to present to them. This represents a very small group of fans but they are out there.

How Should You Feel?

We see the four groups. You can clearly identify which group or groups represents your view. The bottom line is there is some truth to all four groups. Let's explain.

Given all factors, the answer lies somewhere in the middle. Here is a list of questions to consider and my answers to them. This should illustrate why there is a little bit of every group in play.

Are the Blue Jackets a true, Stanley Cup contender as currently constructed? The answer is no. They haven't yet shown they can get to the playoffs. They got close. You know where close only counts in. They are not to the level of the Panthers or Hurricanes, the two teams widely seen as the best in the East.

Did the Blue Jackets improve this offseason? The answer is yes. They added Coyle, Lundestrom and Miles Wood to solidify the bottom-six. Although the top-six remained the same, that was a strength of the team. The forward group is better as a whole. Meanwhile, the jury is out on the defense and goaltending. If, and that's a big if, everyone stays healthy, they have a path to being better and more consistent. But they could also struggle again. It will be a huge question going into 2025-26.

Are the Blue Jackets capable of making the playoffs in 2025-26? The answer is yes. They are capable. But it won't be easy. The talent is there. But no one is going to overlook them. Some important questions have to fall their way for them to make the dance.

Are there components on the team that make the future bright? The answer is definitely yes. The center depth is better than ever for the Blue Jackets. They have high-skilled wingers. They have a Norris-caliber defenseman in Zach Werenski. Low-key big storyline for 2025-26. Will the Blue Jackets look at the trade deadline for goaltending help if Merzlikins/Greaves doesn't work? Make no mistake. The Blue Jackets want the playoffs next season.

Is there stability behind the bench and in the management chair? The answer is yes. Dean Evason is more than capable of getting teams to the playoffs. Waddell has vast experience as a manager and has a plan in place.

Was Provorov overpaid? By what was expected in market, the answer is yes. However, it isn't as big a deal as some say. He certainly has to live up to the bigger number. But this is also a changing market. His cap percentage will actually be lower in two years than what it was for his previous contract. It's a new reality. Salaries are going to go up across the board. This will look better in the future but still carries risk.

Should the Blue Jackets have made a bigger move? The answer is yes. They knew they had to try. They just weren't able to get anything done. It wasn't for a lack of trying. They tried to improve and then circled back on other options. That's a sensible approach.

What's the bigger story in that? The bigger story is that the Blue Jackets still have a lot of work ahead of them. Players are choosing Columbus. But they are not known as a destination yet. They haven't won enough. There is progress though. The Blue Jackets aren't showing up on as many no-trade lists as before. Baby steps, right?

As you can see, there is a little bit of each group in play. Here is my breakdown of that.

Feeling great: Center depth, young dynamic talent ready to take next step, stable coach and management.

Feeling good: Progress towards playoffs, still have cap flexibility for future moves, players more welcoming to choosing Columbus, some improvement to roster.

Feeling meh: Defense/goaltending able to hold up their end of bargain?

Feeling awful: A lot of work ahead to get to level of true contenders. Could be more than a couple seasons away.

The Blue Jackets are confident in where they think they're going. This offseason showed that. Waddell called them a "special group" and wanted to give them the opportunity to stay together as much as possible. Was it the right choice? We won't know that for months.

In the end, the Blue Jackets came into the 2025 offseason hoping to pull off some bigger moves. While they weren't able to land the big fish, they made some smaller moves to improve and got some of their own re-signed. Some fans liked what they saw. Others not so much.

In this case, it's perfectly okay to feel both good and nervous going into next season. The combination of legitimate hope and unanswered questions truly will make the Blue Jackets a fascinating team to watch in 2025-26.

NHL.com / U.S. aims to build on 'huge' edge heading into 2026 Olympics, Werenski says

By Aaron Vickers – July 4, 2025

The United States is hoping to strike gold at the Olympic Winter Games Milano Cortina 2026, and already looks to have a head start toward mining a medal.

Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski said he believes having participated in the 4 Nations Face-Off in February -- the first best-on-best tournament since the World Cup of Hockey 2016 -- will give the U.S., Canada, Sweden and Finland an edge at Milano Cortina, where NHL players will participate for the first time since the 2014 Sochi Olympics.

"I think it's huge," Werenski said. "I think teams that played in that, the four teams that were in that, probably have a slight advantage going into that tournament because we just experienced it. There's no feeling like going out there with the colors on where it's best on best. I've never experienced anything like that before, and I definitely feel like, I don't want to say nervous, but like almost too excited the first couple of games. I feel like you kind of have a slight advantage, those four teams playing in it.

"I know the experience for me is definitely going to help me moving forward and ... hopefully at the Olympics if I'm on the team, I think that 4 Nations experience is only going to help me and my game."

Werenski and Team USA will gladly take any available advantage into the men's Olympic tournament, starting with preliminary games Feb. 11 and a gold-medal date scheduled for Feb. 22.

The last time the U.S. won gold at a best-on-best event was the 1996 World Cup of Hockey. Bill Guerin, Team USA's general manager, was a forward on the roster at the time.

The U.S. came within one goal of victory in the 4 Nations Face-Off, losing 3-2 in overtime to Canada in the championship game.

"Those games (at the 4 Nations) were the highest level hockey I've ever seen," Guerin, also GM of the Minnesota Wild, told NHL.com. "What I saw ... we always go back to this. ... It wasn't about the goals and assists and the points that guys got. It was the way they played. It was (Edmonton Oilers center Connor) McDavid vs. (Vegas Golden Knights center Jack) Eichel or (Pittsburgh Penguins center Sidney) Crosby vs. (Toronto Maple Leafs center Auston) Matthews out there, and they checked each other. The checking was incredible. There was no room, and the guys played discipline and they played tight. It wasn't just river hockey. It was tight-checking.

"That's the thing that sticks in my mind and what is probably going to be at the Olympics."

There will be some additional momentum on the Americans' side.

They enter Olympic play after having won the 2025 IIHF World Championship in Stockholm in May, the first gold at the event for the U.S. since 1933 -- a span of 92 years.

"I think we've definitely grown," Werenski said. "I thought the 4 Nations was a step in the right direction for us. I thought this, obviously, was a step in the right direction. There's a lot of good countries. This was our year."

Werenski and Boston Bruins goalie Jeremy Swayman were the lone members of Team USA's 4 Nations Face-Off team to win gold at the 2025 Worlds.

The goal is to replicate that result on the Olympic level; the United States has won gold there twice, including at the 1960 Squaw Valley Olympics and the "Miracle on Ice" 1980 Lake Placid Olympics, and won silver in 2002 and 2010 in competitions that also featured NHL participation.

The gold medal at the Worlds and the 4 Nations experience have the Americans feeling good about their chances next February.

"I think we all saw the level of play at that (4 Nations Face-Off) tournament," Swayman said. "We know what it takes now. That's the experience and the lessons that we need to utilize to move forward and know we need to be better. We were right there, obviously, but it's not enough. That's something that we're really excited about, to move forward with."

"The guys in that group that have that experience are going to make sure we do the job next time."

The Athletic / NHL free-agency report cards: Grading every team's early offseason moves

By The Athletic NHL Staff – July 5, 2025

Four days into NHL free agency, the list of impact players remaining on the market is ... not lengthy.

Has your favorite team gotten the help it needed?

The Athletic asked its NHL staff this week for their assessments of the early moves. The analysis is subjective to each beat, not based on a scale, and factors in a team's ability to make moves under the salary cap. Trades and re-signings since the season ended are also considered.

Here are the grades our writers assigned for the work done so far.

Anaheim Ducks: C+

All that salary cap space and the Ducks ... still have all that cap space. Not that they had a prime shot at Mitch Marner — and it's obvious that he had Vegas on his mind from when he was set to leave Toronto — but coming away with a 33-year-old Mikael Granlund has to be underwhelming given the possibilities. Granlund is a fine player and can help, but the next thing should be improving from within and re-signing RFAs Lukáš Dostál and Mason McTavish. — Eric Stephens

Boston Bruins: C-

There was a purpose behind their signings. Tanner Jeannot, Sean Kuraly, Mikey Eyssimont and Viktor Arvidsson are hard on pucks and opponents. The identity of the 2025-26 Bruins is clear. But there is a shortage of offensive skill. The Bruins did not improve their middle-six forwards. — Fluto Shinzawa

Buffalo Sabres: C+

The Sabres did well to fill two needs when they traded JJ Peterka to Utah for right-handed defenseman Michael Kesselring and winger Josh Doan. But replacing Peterka's scoring won't be easy. The depth additions of Justin Danforth, Alex Lyon and Conor Timmins were worthwhile additions, but there is still more work to do to bring this grade up. — Matthew Fairburn

Calgary Flames: C-

The Flames didn't overspend again, which is good as they continue their rebuild/retool. But they still have Connor Zary left on their docket to re-sign. And the biggest question mark is what they'll do with Rasmus Andersson. They are prepared to start the season with him on their roster, but they risk missing out on a window of opportunity if they don't, considering the UFA class on defensemen. A C- is as good as we can do, because we can't write "incomplete" just yet. — Julian McKenzie

Carolina Hurricanes: A-

The Hurricanes have swung big this offseason, orchestrating a sign-and-trade for defenseman K'Andre Miller and then landing one of the biggest free agents on the market by inking Nikolaj Ehlers to a six-year, \$51 million deal. The moves bolster Carolina both up front and on the back end, though the Hurricanes must still figure out who is going to center their second line. Still, both of the team's major moves have the potential to be home runs and solidify Carolina's spot as a Cup contender. — Cory Lavalette

Chicago Blackhawks: D

What the Blackhawks did this offseason seems to make sense within the context of their long-term rebuild, but it'd be hard to say job well done and hand out a favorable grade for a team that ultimately did very little and is sitting on \$20-plus million in cap space. Re-signing Ryan Donato was imperative and they accomplished that. André Burakovsky is intriguing if he can return to form. Overall, the lack of moves creates a path for the young players. — Scott Powers

Colorado Avalanche: B

Colorado didn't do a ton in free agency, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. The Avalanche signed Parker Kelly to a four-year extension while watching Jonathan Drouin and Ryan Lindgren walk on the open market. The biggest signing was adding veteran Brent Burns to the blue line. He's 40, but with a base salary of only \$1 million (according to Sportsnet's Elliott Friedman), he could be an incredible value. Burns' offense has regressed over the last couple of years, but playing on a fast-skating transition team such as Colorado could revive it a bit. — Jesse Granger

Columbus Blue Jackets: D

The Blue Jackets had grand plans to transform their lineup on both ends of the ice, but their attempts to add a top-six scoring winger and a top-four right-side defender never materialized. To cut their losses, they circled back and signed their own blueliner, Ivan Provorov, to a massive seven-year, \$59.5 million deal to keep him off the market. The Jackets added three bottom-six forwards in centers Charlie Coyle and Isac Lundestrom, and winger Miles Wood. But they take over for three veterans who were allowed to depart — Justin Danforth, Sean Kuraly and James van Riemsdyk. — Aaron Portzline

Dallas Stars: B

Dallas lost a couple of pieces, led by Mikael Granlund, but that was inevitable after adding Mikko Rantanen on a big ticket at the deadline. Jim Nill gets high marks for heavily discounted contracts for Matt Duchene and Jamie Benn, however, and basically balancing the cap books. There's another million or so to shed, with Matt Dumba the likely casualty, but they have young defensemen coming such as Lian Bichsel and a bit of flexibility to make it work. The big question: How do they take a step forward with a similar cast that has stalled out in Round 3 the past three years? Perhaps another deadline swing? — James Mirtle

Detroit Red Wings: B-

It's hard to quibble with anything the Red Wings did, and in adding John Gibson, James van Riemsdyk and Mason Appleton, they probably improved the overall roster. The middling grade, though, is because while those moves should help, they're also not major needle-movers. In a weak market, that's not totally unexpected, but for a team trying to snap a nine-year playoff drought, it's also not particularly exciting. — Max Bultman

Edmonton Oilers: B-

The Oilers didn't have much cap space after re-signing Trent Frederic and Evan Bouchard. They were sensible in their approach by bringing in speedy scoring option Andrew Mangiapane and the versatile Curtis Lazar, who could fill needs on the PK and as a right-handed faceoff guy. It's hard to foresee those two players offsetting all the losses the Oilers incurred so far this offseason, and neither is a sure-fire top-six forward. — Daniel Nugent-Bowman

Florida Panthers: A+

How can you possibly criticize bringing back one of the most dominant teams in NHL history? No one thought when GM Bill Zito said he would be able to bring his big three UFAs back that it was possible, but he pulled it off in dramatic fashion in signing Sam Bennett, Aaron Ekblad and Brad Marchand in the four days before July 1. — James Mirtle

Los Angeles Kings: C-

I get it. Many have already given the Kings' offseason an F and many more probably feel this meager grade is way too generous. Let a game or two be played first before concluding that Cody Ceci (or Ken Holland) and Brian Dumoulin (or Luc Robitaille) have permanently destroyed the franchise. The fourth line is instantly better, and Corey Perry is the net-front nuisance/occupant/finisher they need. But, no, they don't have Mitch Marner or Bowen Byram. — Eric Stephens

Minnesota Wild: C+

The Wild had hoped to sign Brock Nelson in free agency, but he re-signed in Colorado. They wanted to sign Brock Boeser, but when it became clear he had other options, they pivoted to Vladimir Tarasenko on a one-year bet that his career can be reinvigorated. Nico Sturm should help their penalty-kill and faceoff needs, but this was not the July 1 "Christmas" fans expected after four years of buyout shackles limiting their every move. — Michael Russo

Montreal Canadiens: B

The Canadiens weren't very active in free agency; they got their work done via trades (acquiring Noah Dobson and Zack Bolduc). Staying out of this free-agent market could be given a good grade on its own, but two sneaky signings addressed needed depth. Veteran goaltender Kaapo Kahkonen will serve as a mentor and tandem partner for top goalie prospect Jacob Fowler in the AHL, and Sammy Blais is the perfect extra forward/fourth-line energy guy/AHL veteran. The Canadiens didn't sign anyone who moves the needle a whole lot, but they filled needs. Still, the loss of Christian Dvorak and Joel Armia left holes that were not filled. — Arpon Basu

Nashville Predators: C-

Nick Perbix is an effective signing of a much-needed right-shot defenseman at a good price, to lift the grade a bit. But trading for Nicolas Hague and giving him a deal well beyond reasonable expectation? Doing nothing to address the worst center group in the league? More size and physicality on defense were needed, but it's far from enough. — Joe Rexrode

New Jersey Devils: B+

Tom Fitzgerald didn't make any huge splashes, but he shored up the forward group in a way that should really help if the team can stay healthy. Bringing back Cody Glass made sense, and Evgenii Dadonov and Connor Brown will both bolster a forward group that lacked depth in the playoffs. — Peter Baugh

New York Islanders: B+

As much as the Noah Dobson trade can be rationalized, that ticks off some points from the Islanders' grade. But otherwise, management gets credit for taking the team in a new direction. The team drafted well for a change, made some savvy short-term signings such as Jonathan Drouin and Maxim Shabanov, and extended players such as Adam Boqvist, Simon Holmstrom and Emil Heineman to cost-effective deals. — Shayna Goldman

New York Rangers: B+

The K'Andre Miller trade is risky, especially considering he's going to a division rival, but the Rangers signed a strong player in Vladislav Gavrikov, took care of Will Cuyll's second contract and added a depth winger in Taylor Raddysh. Plus, they did well on the Miller return, adding good draft capital and young defenseman Scott Morrow. — Peter Baugh

Ottawa Senators: C

The Senators weren't expected to be big players in free agency. So their small moves, adding Lars Eller and re-signing Claude Giroux and Nick Cousins, aren't too surprising. Trading for Jordan Spence could prove to be a solid move, too. Ottawa still could use another scorer on its top line, though. — Julian McKenzie

Philadelphia Flyers: B+

The Flyers acquired Trevor Zegras without having to give up much. They plugged a couple more holes in free agency, with depth center Christian Dvorak and goalie Dan Vladar. At the draft, they selected five players in the top 50, including potential top-line winger Porter Martone. While they still don't have a No. 1 center (Zegras will get a shot at it, but there are no guarantees he's the long-term solution), and Vladar's career stats are pretty meh, Daniel Briere has managed to improve the current team while maintaining flexibility for the 2026 offseason. — Kevin Kurz

Pittsburgh Penguins: B

Kyle Dubas didn't sign anyone to long-term money and he made a couple of sensible, cheap additions. Thus, he did fine. The Penguins aren't in a place to be aggressive during this time of year. The real test will come when Dubas makes some trades this summer. And they are coming. — Josh Yohe

San Jose Sharks: B

At this time in their evolution, it might be hard to distinguish if the Sharks are more in the filling-out-the-roster stage than a building-it-back-up stage, but they've wisely made useful additions with their vast amount of cap space without taking on or handing out max-term contracts on middling players. That way, San Jose isn't restricted for the future as it tries to build a team around future leader Macklin Celebrini. — Eric Stephens

Seattle Kraken: C

The Kraken weren't able to use their cap space to land an impact game-breaking piece, which remains this club's greatest need. But they did sign Ryan Lindgren to a four-year contract with a \$4.5 million cap hit. Lindgren is only 27, but his black-and-blue style of defensive hockey has resulted in a steady flow of injuries and his five-on-five form fell off last season. Meanwhile, the club's three RFAs — Kaapo Kakko, Tye Kartye and Ryker Evans — remain unsigned. Locking up Kakko and Evans long-term could improve this grade, but to this point, Seattle's offseason hasn't moved the needle. — Thomas Drance

St. Louis Blues: B+

The Blues tried to do everything imaginable. They went after Noah Dobson, but he wanted to play in the East. They entertained the idea of trading Jordan Kyrou but didn't find a good enough deal. They added young right-shot defenseman Logan Mailloux in a trade for Zack Bolduc. They added reliable vets Pius Suter and Nick Bjugstad in free agency. They put Nick Leddy on waivers and removed his \$4 million cap hit when he was picked up by San Jose. This grade would be an A if there wasn't concern about Bolduc's bright future, but you've got to give to get. — Jeremy Rutherford

Tampa Bay Lightning: B-

The Lightning made three low-key moves to round out the forward depth, including extending Yanni Gourde and signing Pontus Holmberg and Jakob Pelletier. Those kinds of contracts help balance the book around Tampa Bay's core players. The Pelletier contract is the exact buy-low deal this team needs to find, considering its budget. But management didn't sign a Nick Perbix replacement (or just a seventh defenseman). And the team hasn't been able to land any needle-movers, either. Had management been able to move out some salary, maybe the Lightning could have done more. — Shayna Goldman

Toronto Maple Leafs: C

It's difficult to fully grade even the early offseason because the Leafs have clearly gotten worse in the wake of Mitch Marner's departure, with no major additions as of yet and the same look on defense. At this point, it's Marner, Pontus Holmberg and Max Pacioretty (for now) out and Nicolas Roy, Matias Maccelli and Michael Pezzetta in. Roy and Maccelli both could be shrewd additions, but that's still a

significant downgrade in talent. The Leafs did well on the Matthew Knies and John Tavares contract extensions and a sharp trade for a top-six forward could push this grade higher. — Jonas Siegel

Utah Mammoth: A-

Acquiring JJ Peterka without giving up the No. 4 pick in the 2025 NHL Draft was a home run. He's another dynamic young star to add to Utah's impressive collection of rush-attacking forwards. The Mammoth did solid work filling out depth roles by signing Nate Schmidt, Brandon Tanev and Vitek Vanecsek at reasonable prices. — Harman Dayal

Vancouver Canucks: C+

To this point in the offseason, the Canucks have yet to address their significant needs at center. They even lost a center-capable forward in unrestricted free agency when Pius Suter signed in St. Louis. That's a gaping hole in the lineup, one the club will need to address over the rest of the summer or in-season. Vancouver paid a modest price for Evander Kane, which gives the team a different element in its top six. The Canucks also extended Conor Garland, Brock Boeser and Thatcher Demko, doubling down on their core. There is still work to be done in this lineup. — Thomas Drance

Vegas Golden Knights: A+

The Golden Knights' biggest need this offseason was scoring on the wing, and they signed the third-highest scoring winger in the NHL since 2016. Mitch Marner gives Vegas an elite, play-driving winger to go with its already deep group of centers. Alex Pietrangelo announcing he's out for the foreseeable future is troubling on the blue line, but there's not a lot the team could've done on that front, so they earned the highest grade in free agency. — Jesse Granger

Washington Capitals: C-

The Capitals needed a third-line center and, if possible, some top-six skill. That hasn't changed, though they made a run at Nikolaj Ehlers for the latter. Anthony Beauvillier is useful and Declan Chisholm adds quality depth on the blue line, but they're not needle-movers. — Sean Gentille

Winnipeg Jets: B

The Jets landed Jonathan Toews, creating the potential for a homecoming story that resonates with fans for a long time. They added Gustav Nyquist, Tanner Pearson and Cole Koepke, too, and there isn't an albatross contract among them: one-year term in all cases. Nikolaj Ehlers' departure will hurt, while the new additions come with enough question marks to cause concern, such as whether Winnipeg will be slow this year. A special season from Toews would change everything. — Murat Ates

The Athletic / Winners and losers of the offseason NHL goalie carousel

By Jesse Granger – July 3, 2025

This was far from the most exciting free-agent class in NHL history, especially when it came to the goaltenders.

Most of netminders that hit the open market on Tuesday projected as backups at best, and the top option, Jake Allen, re-signed with New Jersey before the clock struck noon Eastern, further deflating what was already an uninspiring class.

There was still quite a bit of movement in the crease on the first day of free agency. In total, 16 goalies signed contracts on July 1, worth a combined \$61.75 million, and three goalies were traded over the last week.

Some teams made sensible moves to improve their depth in net. Some paved the way for younger goalies within the organization to take a leap in 2025-26. Others idly watched goalies fly off the board without improving their own status.

We are here to declare the winners and losers of the offseason goaltending carousel, starting with the victors:

Winners

Thatcher Demko

The first goalie signing of the day on Tuesday was by far the biggest, as Vancouver locked up Demko with a three-year extension worth \$8.5 million per year.

There was speculation the Canucks could look to trade their 2023 Vezina Trophy runner-up after an injury-riddled season and after signing backup Kevin Lankinen to a five-year, \$22.5 million contract in February. They put that notion to bed by signing Demko to an extension that will make him the third-highest-paid goalie in the NHL when it begins in 2026-27.

Demko played only 23 games last season, dealing with a scary knee tear and multiple other injuries. In the limited action he did see, he never found his rhythm or looked like the elite goalie we've seen in the past. As a result of that lengthy injury history, the Canucks clearly preferred to sign Demko to more money with less term. The \$8.5 million cap hit is the same as two-time defending Vezina winner Connor Hellebuyck, which is a lot considering Demko has made 50 starts in a season only twice in his career.

This signing carries risk for Vancouver, which will have \$13 million allocated to goaltending when the extension kicks in, but it will be worth it if Demko returns to form. His rare combination of size, athleticism and edge work are nearly impossible to find.

Demko is the clear winner here, though. He got paid like an elite goalie in spite of a forgettable 2024-25 season.

New Jersey Devils

As mentioned, the Devils took the top unrestricted free agent goalie off the board before the market even opened by signing Allen to a five-year extension worth \$1.8 million per year.

The term on that contract is sure to raise some eyebrows, considering Allen will be 39 when it expires. As the top goalie of this class, he easily could've commanded more than \$1.8 million on the open market, but he likes it in New Jersey and got paid while helping general manager Tom Fitzgerald massage the cap hit by spreading it across five years.

It looks like a brilliant move by Fitzgerald to keep one of the better goalie tandems in the league intact. Allen is an elite backup, and while starting 35-year-old Jacob Markstrom, who hasn't reached 50 starts in either of the last two seasons, keeping Allen was a huge win for the Devils.

Not only is Allen a great insurance policy if Markstrom misses time, he played so well (ranking 14th with 19.07 goals saved above expected in only 29 starts) that New Jersey can play him with confidence and keep Markstrom's workload down.

Jet Greaves

One of the under-the-radar moves in the crease this week was Columbus' trade that sent Daniil Tarasov to Florida for a fifth-round pick. Tarasov was a third-round pick in 2017, but he has struggled in the NHL with a .898 save percentage and minus-5.24 GSx in three seasons with the Blue Jackets.

I like this move for Tarasov, who gets a fresh start behind a strong Panthers team and the chance to learn from Sergei Bobrovsky. Oddly enough, Bobrovsky grew up watching Tarasov's father, Vadim Tarasov, who goaltended for Bobrovsky's hometown KHL team in Novokuznetsk, Russia. Now he has the opportunity to mentor his son.

The real winner in this trade is Greaves, who has looked impressive in limited opportunities for Columbus but has been stuck behind Tarasov on the depth chart. Undrafted and undersized, Greaves has quickly risen up the ranks of talented young goalies ready to make their mark in the NHL. He has been dominant for the Cleveland Monsters in the AHL over the last two seasons, and put up a .939 save percentage and two shutouts in only 11 starts for the Blue Jackets last season.

Greaves reads the game well and has incredibly quick feet and great lateral movement. With a clear path to being a full-time NHL goalie in 2025-26, he is one of the early favorites to have a breakout season. It wouldn't be that surprising if he usurped Elvis Merzlikins as Columbus' starter by the end of it.

Losers

Edmonton Oilers

After back-to-back losses in the Stanley Cup Final, with goaltending being the clear and obvious need, the Oilers shocked many by standing pat in the crease – at least for now. Edmonton still has Stuart Skinner and Calvin Pickard under contract for one more season, and GM Stan Bowman chose not to add a goalie on Tuesday.

In Bowman's defense, it's not as if there was a bounty of options available to upgrade his goaltending. Still, he passed on John Gibson, who Anaheim traded to Detroit for Petr Mrazek and two draft picks. He also passed on signing one of the veteran backups on the open market.

There are still a few options out there. Ilya Samsonov, who started 29 games as the Golden Knights' backup this past season, and Alexandar Georgiev, who had a disastrous 2024-25 season with Colorado and San Jose, both remain unsigned. They've both been starters on playoff teams in the past, but neither is an obvious upgrade over what Edmonton already has.

Unless the Oilers can find an unexpected trade partner – such as prying Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen away from Buffalo – they'll enter the season with question marks in the crease yet again.

Sebastian Cossa

Detroit Red Wings general manager Steve Yzerman upgraded his starting goalie with the aforementioned trade to bring in Gibson. For a Detroit team fighting to break out of the rebuild stage and back into the playoffs, the potential of Gibson is enticing.

The acquisition also creates another hurdle for 2021 first-round pick Sebastian Cossa to break through with the NHL club. Taken with the No. 15 overall selection, Cossa is the third-highest drafted goalie in the last 15 years, but with Gibson and Cam Talbot in Detroit, it appears he's destined for a fourth season in the minor leagues.

It's not the end of the world for a 22-year-old goalie to get more seasoning, but Cossa has already played more games in the minors than every first-round pick since Jack Campbell in 2010.

In speaking with a few goalie coaches around the league, 100 games in the minors is considered a good amount for a young goalie prospect. Considering Cossa's pedigree one would expect fewer for him, especially when you add in the fact that Detroit hasn't exactly been settled in net.

Trey Augustine, whom Detroit drafted in the second round in 2023, has looked great at Michigan State and with Team USA at the World Junior Championship. He'll soon be nipping at Cossa's heels. The big, athletic Hamilton, Ont. native needs an impressive camp, and an even more impressive season with the Grand Rapids Griffins, to maintain his place as Detroit's goalie of the future.

Philadelphia Flyers

The Flyers didn't just have the worst goaltending in the NHL in 2024-25 — they were in their own universe entirely. Philadelphia had three of the bottom five goalies in the league in GSAX, and their combined minus-45.21 goals saved above expected were 30 below the the next-worst team.

Similarly to Edmonton, the permanent answer to the Flyers' goaltending troubles wasn't available in this free agency period, but it feels like Philadelphia could've done better than signing Dan Vladar to a two-year contract worth \$3.35 million per year. Vladar has spent the last four seasons as Calgary's backup. He's a big, rangy goalie but he has also produced a save percentage below the league average and negative GSAX in all five of his NHL seasons.

In the midst of a rebuild, the Flyers aren't desperate to find their franchise goalie at this moment, but better goaltending could accelerate the rebuild process. Philadelphia allowed the ninth-fewest shots and the fourth-fewest high-danger chances in the NHL last year but was completely undone by subpar goaltending.

Perhaps the last two "losers" on this list could help each other. If Detroit has any doubts that Cossa is its goalie of the future, the Flyers would be wise to inquire. There's no indication Yzerman has any interest in dealing Cossa, but with Augustine developing the way he has been, it could be worth a call.