



Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips
February 6, 2025

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Columbus Dispatch / Two straight losses for Columbus Blue Jackets despite impressive effort: 4 takeaways

By Brian Hedger – February 6, 2025

Short-staffed from another injury spate, the Blue Jackets did what they've done all season Tuesday night at Harbor Center in Buffalo.

Despite falling 3-2 to the Buffalo Sabres to split a four-game road trip with their second consecutive loss, the battered Jackets fought to the final horn. Trailing 3-1 starting the third period, they nearly forced overtime after Ivan Provorov's goal with 7:22 remaining cut it to a one-goal deficit.

There just wasn't enough firepower to pull off a full comeback after adding Kirill Marchenko (fractured jaw), Zach Werenski (upper body) and Dante Fabbro (upper body) to a list of injured regulars that already included Boone Jenner (shoulder), Sean Monahan (wrist), Yegor Chinakhov (back) and Erik Gudbranson (shoulder).

Next up are home games Thursday against the Utah Hockey Club and Saturday against the New York Rangers before a break for the league's 4 Nations Face-Off, which can't arrive soon enough for the injury-plagued Blue Jackets.

Here are four takeaways:

Columbus Blue Jackets drop out of playoff spot after loss to Buffalo Sabres

The loss in Buffalo dropped the Blue Jackets out of the second wild card in the Eastern Conference. They're now 26-21-7 and tied at 59 points with the Detroit Red Wings, whom the Jackets will host March 1 at Ohio Stadium.

The Red Wings and Blue Jackets each trail the Boston Bruins (27-22-6, 59 points) and Tampa Bay Lightning (28-20-4, 59 points) by a point as the NHL's mid-February pause nears. Behind those four are the New York Islanders (57 points), Rangers (54 points), Montreal Canadiens (53 points), Pittsburgh Penguins (53 points) and Philadelphia Flyers (52 points) in a clogged playoff chase.

Even the Sabres, who are last in the East with 49 points, are within 10 points of Detroit and Columbus.

Columbus Blue Jackets come up short against Buffalo Sabres despite dominant third period

Structural coverage breakdowns in the second period cost the Blue Jackets again, but the game overall was one of their better statistical performances in a while. According to Natural Stat Trick, the Blue Jackets finished with edges in 5-on-5 scoring chances (21-20) and high-danger chances (10-9). They held the Sabres to just one shot in the third.

Going into Tuesday night's contest, they'd been outplayed in their previous 10 games in those categories despite going 6-3-1 and 4-1 in those games that went beyond regulation. Despite their massive personnel shortage in Buffalo, the Blue Jackets flipped the script on the Sabres.

That's the type of effort it'll take in their final two games this week.

Kent Johnson's backhand 'Spin-O-Rama' goal was lone bright spot for Columbus Blue Jackets

Playing without their top three offensive weapons, the Blue Jackets were thrown into offensive disarray. Adam Fantilli and Kent Johnson became the team's top two threats, and it was the latter who scored a highlight goal to tie it 1-1 early in the second period.

Getting the puck off on the left wing from James van Riemsdyk, Johnson used a quick reverse spin for a backhand 'Spin-O-Rama' shot that zipped past goalie James Reimer for his 16th goal of the season. It was also his 35th point in 40 games since missing 14 games in the season's first month.

Rather than moving to Fantilli's top line to replace Kirill Marchenko (broken jaw), Johnson stayed on the second line to continue playing with Van Riemsdyk. Rookie Luca Del Bel Belluz moved up from the third line to center the first group.

Columbus Blue Jackets' Mathieu Olivier hammered Buffalo Sabres defenseman David Gilbert in pointless opening bout

Mathieu Olivier has developed a reputation as one of the NHL's heavyweight enforcers, so getting him to accept a fight has become a bit of a status symbol. The Sabres, however, had ulterior motives after stewing over their muted response to an illegal hit in their previous game against the New Jersey Devils that knocked top center Tage Thompson out of the lineup.

That's how Olivier wound up fighting Buffalo's David Gilbert off the opening faceoff in a scrap that looked like something out of the NHL of the 1980s or 1990s. Gilbert tried to reclaim some lost dignity for his teammates but wound up taking a straight right to the mouth followed by three massive rights to his helmeted head before he dropped to a knee to end it.

That fight wasn't a good look for the NHL, the Sabres or Gilbert, who took a needless beating from a player who had nothing to do with Buffalo's misguided angst.

The Athletic / Bands, fireworks, cannons: What we know about the Blue Jackets' outdoor game

By Aaron Portzline – February 6, 2025

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The scene on March 1 will be at once iconic and unique.

Ohio State's marching band will play a pregame pep rally in St. John Arena, then lead a procession to Ohio Stadium, where they'll walk through the towering rotunda and down a long ramp to the field, with the roar of thousands of fans greeting them.

For fans of Ohio State's football team, that's a typical Columbus Saturday in the fall — the traditional "skull session" in the 70-year-old St. John followed by the iconic band entrance at 102-year-old stadium.

But here's what will be unique: just behind the blaring band as it crosses Woody Hayes Dr. to reach the stadium will be the Columbus Blue Jackets, making their way — in grand fashion — to play in the NHL's Stadium Series outdoor game against the Detroit Red Wings.

The NHL doesn't want to give away all of its secrets. They'll hold a news conference on Tuesday at Ohio Stadium to make some of their plans known in advance of the game, and there will be a steady drip of news — the ice trucks arrive on Feb. 17, the ice will begin taking shape on Feb. 21, etc. — leading up to puck drop.

On Thursday, FanDuel Sports Network Ohio, which airs Blue Jackets' games locally, will air Stadium Series preview show at 10 p.m., following the Blue Jackets game vs. Utah in Nationwide Arena.

There will be some surprises, too, of course. But here's what The Athletic has learned so far about the long-awaited outdoor game.

"This is one we can finally check off our bucket list," NHL president of content and events Steve Mayer told The Athletic. "This is going to be magnificent. It's just the coolest thing that ... all of the traditions that go along with Ohio State and that stadium, really give a lot of options to make for a special event.

"This is going to be a celebration of the Columbus Blue Jackets. They've never played in an outdoor game and we're going to take as much time and energy and bandwidth to celebrate the city and their team and really give them their moment. It's going to be a great, great day."

The NHL announced in recent weeks that two prominent bands with Columbus and Ohio State roots — O.A.R. and Twenty One Pilots — will play a big part in the day. but the Ohio State Athletic Band — some 300 strong — will be "a huge part of the environment," Mayer said.

O.A.R. will do the heavy-lifting during the pre-game show, but the Ohio State band will join them. (The band will also play the national anthem before the game, not Blue Jackets anthem singer Leo Welsh.)

"The final song (pregame) is going to be a collaboration," Mayer said. "And then the (Blue Jackets) are going to enter St. John Arena and the energy level in that building is going to go through the roof. And from there they'll go across the way into the stadium, and that — right off the bat, before the game even starts — is going to be a moment of moments.

"The more we're planning this out, it's pretty clear that every aspect of that moment is going to be the coolest thing we've ever done with the player arrivals."

Mayer said he doesn't know how the Blue Jackets players will be dressed, but making the entrance special has become a trend for NHL teams at outdoor games.

The Boston Bruins, for instance, dressed in “Peaky Blinders” attire before they entered Notre Dame Stadium to play Chicago in the 2019 Winter Classic. When the Seattle Kraken took the ice in T-Mobile Park to play Vegas in the 2024 Winter Classic, Pike Place Market fishmongers launched salmon back and forth over the heads of players.

“Teams always lean into their arrivals, but we (the league) don’t ever know what they’re doing,” Mayer said. “It’s the one thing we want to be surprised about, but I feel like that’s going to be a sick moment.”

Tickets are still on sale, but Mayer said the NHL is anticipating an attendance of “well over 80,000.” It will likely be the second-highest attendance for an NHL outdoor game, but it won’t approach the 105,491 who watched Toronto and Detroit play in the 2014 Winter Classic in Ann Arbor, Mich., or the 104,216 Ohio State football averaged this season.

The league had to take a “significant amount of seats out of play,” Mayer said, in order to configure the rink in a way that makes sense. Part of the reason is that Twenty One Pilots’ stage “is ginormous, with all of the lighting and the pyro.”

“I’ve read in a couple of places, ‘Are they going to get to 100,000?’” Mayer said. “With the field, the field design, the camera (stations), a broadcast (perch) ... we don’t have 100,00 seats to sell.”

As previously known, the Blue Jackets’ famous — or infamous — cannon that blasts in Nationwide Arena, will make the three-mile trip to Ohio Stadium. But even that will have a wrinkle.

“Not only is it coming with us from Nationwide Arena, but nobody’s gonna be able to miss it,” Mayer said. “I’m not going to give you too many secrets, but it’s going to be crazy when it (blasts). The building is absolutely going to shake.

“We have a level of pyro you will not believe. It’s going to be freaking crazy.”

The NHL and the Blue Jackets will set aside time, either before or during the game, to honor the lives of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau, who were killed in late August when they were struck by a car while riding bikes near their homes in New Jersey. Johnny Gaudreau spent two years with the Blue Jackets.

Mayer said it would be a “celebration of the Gaudreau brothers’ lives.”

There’s one other element that delights the league about this matchup: both the Blue Jackets and Red Wings are in the thick of the playoff picture in the Eastern Conference.

“It’s going to be a hell of a game. Just look at the standings,” Mayer said. “This is going to be an important game between two teams who are trying to make the playoffs.”

NHL commissioner Gary Bettman, who has told NHL owners to begin making preparations for his retirement, will be in attendance, a league spokesperson confirmed.

[BlueJackets.com / NHL Stadium Series plans starting to come together](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – February 6, 2025

The NHL has become experts at putting on outdoor hockey games, with the Navy Federal Credit Union NHL Stadium Series game March 1 between the Blue Jackets and Red Wings the 43rd such contest the league will stage.

Given the excitement in Steve Mayer's voice, the upcoming event in Ohio Stadium could be the best one yet.

The president of NHL events and content was in Columbus on Wednesday to stage preparatory meetings related to the game, which is now just 24 days away. He also met with the media to discuss what fans and players can expect for the first outdoor game in Blue Jackets history, leaving no doubt the spectacle could very well be unmatched.

"We do think we have an amazing plan and do think this is going to be one of if not the greatest outdoor game that we've ever done," Mayer said.

So, what do we know so far? Based on NHL announcements and what Mayer said on Wednesday, here's a rundown – with the caveat that Mayer noted the league wants to keep the element of surprise for some things.

- The NHL announced today that the Stadium Series version of the Skull Session – the Ohio State marching band pep rally that takes place before each football game in St. John Arena – will feature the band O.A.R. and the Ohio State athletic band, as well as an appearance from CBJ players before they walk to the stadium.
- The league expects to release its plans for a field design next week before crews arrive to begin work on building the rink starting Feb. 17. "It's very unique and it's very Ohio State and Columbus Blue Jackets," Mayer said. "You'll get it the second you see it."
- The Grammy Award-winning band Twenty One Pilots will stage what Mayer tabbed a "full-blown concert" during the first intermission on what he described as a "ginormous" stage. "It's probably the biggest of any show that we've ever done related to any of our outdoor games," Mayer promised.
- Yes, the CBJ goal cannon will be incorporated into the action.
- A fan fair will be staged outside the stadium.
- From the Ohio State side, the student cheering section Block O and the athletic band will be involved, while the NHL plans to celebrate the 2024-25 College Football Playoff national champion football team as well as the 2024 women's hockey NCAA championship team.

In all ways, the event will be a celebration of the Blue Jackets, the city of Columbus and The Ohio State University.

"Typically, what we want to do is let the people who are watching the game in Utah or Alaska or around the world know that we're in Columbus, Ohio," Mayer said. "They have to know that right off the bat. One of the ways to do it is through this great school, and the other way to do it is through the traditions of the Columbus Blue Jackets.

“We want to celebrate the history of the Blue Jackets. They’ve been around for 25 years. This is our chance to really play to that, and we’re going to do that.”

It should also help that the venue naturally lends itself to a show, as Ohio Stadium is one of the most recognizable venues in American sport. Howard Dwight Smith’s iconic horseshoe design draws inspiration from Ancient Rome, from the Colosseum arches and to the Pantheon’s rotunda, and has stood the test of time from when it opened in 1922.

The stadium can hold more than 100,000 people for football games, but Mayer noted the capacity will be lessened simply because of the configuration and sightlines for a hockey game as well as the need to construct hockey-conducive broadcast positions. While he noted tickets remain available, he has no doubt the stadium will be filled come March 1, which would put it in the running to be one of the most attended outdoor games in NHL history.

“When you really think of how many people we’ll have the day of the game in this stadium to watch hockey, it just blows my mind every single time,” Mayer said.

Then there’s the fact the game will be for an important two points in the standings. The Blue Jackets are one of the most notable stories in sports right now, with the team overcoming adversity to spend most of January in a playoff spot despite universal predictions it would be another long season in Columbus. Detroit, meanwhile, has won seven games in a row to move into a wild card position in the Eastern Conference.

“The fact that these two teams are fighting for a playoff spot is just incredible,” Mayer said. “This is a really important game. I think it’s something that everybody should note is that these games are meaningful. Even though they go from inside an arena to outside and they’re playing on a different surface in a different environment, they are still important, and they’re worth points that could result in teams making the playoffs or being out of a playoff spot.

“This game between Columbus and Detroit happens to be a very important game in the NHL season.”

Add everything up and Mayer expects the atmosphere four Saturdays from now to be one that the league and Blue Jackets fans will never forget. From the Columbus, CBJ and Ohio State touches to the fact the game will have a big impact in the standings, all the elements are there to provide a one-of-a-kind experience for the tens of thousands in attendance as well as those watching at home.

“We constantly are trying to think of, ‘How is this unique and different?’” Mayer said. “Obviously there’s a rink that’s in the middle of a football field. That doesn’t change, but what surrounds it always changes. It’s actually a great challenge, and it’s something that we love doing.

“We really think that each of these games takes on a life of their own. This (game) has a lot of different elements that we think will be really memorable, and that’s what it’s all about. You want people to leave the next day and be talking about, ‘Did you see this? Did you see that?’ If we’ve done that, we’ve done our job.”

The Hockey News / Shorthanded Blue Jackets Try To Wing It In Buffalo, Falls Flat In Loss To Sabres

By Jason Newland – February 6, 2025

Kent Johnson(16) and Ivan Provorov(5) provided the offense for Columbus, and Elvis Merzljikins stopped 18 of 21 Sabre shots in a 3-2 loss.

The game started with a bang as we saw Mathieu Olivier and Dennis Gilbert fight just three seconds into the game. Unfortunately for Columbus that would be all the fireworks they could muster until Kent Johnson decided he was going to do Kent Johnson things. His 16th goal of the season could be classified as a 1a/1b goal of the year for the CBJ. It's a must-watch highlight.

The undermanned Blue Jackets just couldn't get anything going in this game. They did pull to within one with about seven minutes left when Ivan Provorov scored his 5th goal of the season, but that would be it for the Jackets. Buffalo's Alex Tuch was the man for the Sabres, scoring twice and sinking Columbus.

Dean Evason said about the loss, "We still have to play like we play, and we gotta stay with how we play the game. We got out of it a little bit structurally, and it ends up in our net. But we certainly aren't gonna fault the effort."

Player Stats

- Kent Johnson scored his 16th goal of the season.
- Ivan Provorov scored his 5th goal. He also got his 19th assist and played 28:27 of ice time.
- James van Riemsdyk recorded his 14th assist.
- Damon Severson got his 15th assist.
- Luca Del Bel Belluz tallied his 6th assist.
- Elvis Merzljikins made 18 saves in the loss.

Team Stats

- The Jackets power play failed on its only man advantage.
- The Blue Jackets PK stopped Buffalo's only power play.
- Columbus won 48.1% of the faceoffs.

What's Next: The Blue Jackets are home on Thursday and will welcome the Utah Hockey Club in NWA.

[The Hockey News / Olivier Joins Morning Juice To Talk Fighting, Marchenko & More](#)

By Spencer Lazary – February 6, 2025

Columbus Blue Jackets forward Mathieu Olivier joined *Morning Juice* to discuss last night's game against the Buffalo Sabres.

One of the biggest talking points was Olivier's fight with Buffalo's Dennis Gilbert right at the start of the game. When asked about the reason behind it, he gave an interesting response.

"There was some buzz around the Buffalo team," Olivier said. "One of their star players took a dirty hit in the game before, and they obviously wanted to send a message and stand up for themselves. For me, it was more about making sure they didn't send that message against our group. We're not the team to do that against."

Olivier added that he expected a fight and that Gilbert asked him to go right off the opening faceoff. He figured it was best to take care of it early.

Another topic that came up was the freak accident that saw a puck fly into the Blue Jackets' bench and hit Kirill Marchenko in the face, breaking his jaw. He is expected to miss six to eight weeks.

"I've taken a few pucks to the face, but fortunately, none have been too hard," Olivier said. "That was a crazy play. I was on the ice when it happened. I had just hopped on, and he had just hopped off after blocking a shot off the ankle. That's why he was hunched over and didn't see the puck coming—it was kind of a double whammy for him."

Losing Marchenko is a big blow for the Blue Jackets, and Olivier didn't shy away from that reality.

"It's gut-wrenching. You lose your best forward. We're going to have to find a way to fill the gap."

Finally, Olivier was asked about the team's frustration following their Sunday night loss to the Dallas Stars.

"We weren't happy," he admitted. "There are things I can and can't say, but we felt there were a lot of missed opportunities. I'll leave it at that. A lot of things were missed in that game, and we felt like we got robbed."

What's Next: The Blue Jackets are home on Thursday and will welcome the Utah Hockey Club in NWA.

The Hockey News / Kent Johnson Scores Potential Goal Of The Year Candidate Against Sabres

By Spencer Lazary – February 6, 2025

Last night, the Columbus Blue Jackets faced off against the Buffalo Sabres, ultimately falling 3-2. However, one of those two goals might just be a Goal of the Year candidate.

Kent Johnson pulled off an absolutely ridiculous spin-o-rama goal that will be on highlight reels for years to come.

As Johnson worked his way down the left side of the ice with Bowen Byram in pursuit, he crossed the blue line and executed an incredible spin-o-rama, seamlessly lifting a backhand shot over the Sabres' goaltender.

Johnson said about his goal, "Whoever the D-man was matched my speed pretty good. I was thinking I would drive to the net, but I thought he was probably gonna get me closed off. I just know that I can spin there and it's really tough for the D-man. Luckily I kind of had the perfect shot there."

It was easily one of the nicest goals in recent years and should be a strong contender for Goal of the Year.

What's Next: The Blue Jackets are home on Thursday and will welcome the Utah Hockey Club in NWA.

The Hockey Writers / 2025 Stadium Series: 5 Takeaways From Steve Mayer's Press Conference

By Mark Scheig – February 6, 2025

We are now just 24 days away from the 2025 Stadium Series game between the Detroit Red Wings and Columbus Blue Jackets at Ohio Stadium. Representatives from the NHL are in Columbus now to start their final preparations to ensure everything for the game is ready to go.

NHL President of Events & Content Steve Mayer held a press conference inside Ohio Stadium on Wednesday. While he certainly didn't give away everything that is coming for the game, some pieces of information came out.

For now, we are going to discuss five takeaways from Mayer's availability. We'll discuss things from how long this has actually been in the making to how the NHL has improved their presentation of the game over the years. We'll also touch on ticket sales and the weather because we know you'll track it everyday from now until the game.

Game Was Years in Making

There has always been talk about a potential game for Ohio Stadium dating back years. On Wednesday, Mayer admitted how long the game has been in the making.

"We started talking to Ohio State and to the Columbus Blue Jackets almost five years ago," Mayer said. And the fact that we're a month away, it's pretty incredible. Ross (Bjork) mentioned the fact that here at Ohio State, they want to put on these incredible events. It has been amazing to work with the staff here from Ohio State. We do these a lot and we do these in these iconic stadiums. This is first class all the way and it's made our job so much easier."

NHL President of Events & Content Steve Mayer believes this will be one of the greatest outdoor games the NHL has ever done. (Photo: Mark Scheig/The Hockey Writers)

Recall that certain challenges were previously reported such as plumbing and the Stadium not being fully winterized. But given the timing of the game, everyone has had plenty of time to plan and to address any concerns. There is a level of excitement that the NHL has for this game given what has all gone into it.

"But we do think we have an amazing plan," Mayer said. "We do think this is going to be one of, if not the greatest outdoor games that we've ever done."

Game Will Celebrate Columbus Traditions

While certain details will be released in the coming days and weeks, Mayer said that they want to honor the traditions of Columbus, Ohio State and the Blue Jackets. One of the things fans will be able to look forward to is the player arrivals.

Both the Blue Jackets and Red Wings will have their own unique arrivals. Here's Mayer on that and more when it comes to celebrating the traditions of Columbus.

"We've got a lot that we're planning. This is not just a one day activity. It's an event and our team is here to put on a fanfare which will be outside of the venue. There is an event that goes on that's associated with the football team that goes on at Saint John Arena. Before the game work, we're here. We're gonna replicate that in many ways. We're calling it the NHL Stadium Series Pep Rally and it will feature a

concert from OAR. It'll be before the game. And not only will it feature the concert, it will feature the Ohio State Athletic Band and an appearance from the Columbus Blue Jackets."

"The Blue Jackets will stop in St. John Arena and then make their way from St. John Arena to the stadium. The arrival of teams have become really special. Each team is given the creative opportunity to do something very unique and different. And we're sure, even though we don't know, we're sure that the Columbus Blue Jackets will come up with an amazing idea. That's a very popular fan event. The Detroit Red Wings will also do a unique arrival as well."

"Once they're inside the stadium and some of the field design you're gonna see, we're gonna release within the next week or so what the field is gonna look like. It's very unique. It's very Ohio State and Columbus Blue Jackets. You'll get it second you see it. Then as we go through the game, we like to be very interactive in our games. Of course, from the first, second, and third period there's a hockey game. But everything else is unique. It's festive. We've got a concert with Twenty One Pilots. They'll be during the first intermission and it is a full blown concert. Putting that one together is probably the biggest of any show that we've ever done related to any of our outdoor games."

"A puck drop which will be ceremoniously and by the way, some things we're not gonna reveal. Some things are gonna be a surprise, and other things are very traditional if you look at any of our outdoor games. And we also are gonna be very traditional when it comes to Ohio State football. We obviously watched the teams run. It was awesome. We've spent a lot of time coming to games learning what the traditions are. Block O will be part of our environment. The Ohio State Athletic Band will be part of this environment and other Ohio State football traditions. We will celebrate the championship teams not only the football team but the cheer and dance team will be a part of what we're going to do inside the stadium. And there'll be a moment where we celebrate last year's championship in \ women's hockey. So there's just so much to talk about."

Tickets Still Remain

Mayer admitted that tickets still remain available for the Stadium Series game. To him and the NHL, that's not a surprise. Fans want to see what is unveiled leading up to the event. They also want to see how other factors work such as the weather and also what other plans fans might have.

This led to Mayer admitting that due to certain factors, there is not expected to be 100,000 fans at the game. Even still, it is expected to be one of the most attended outdoor games ever.

"Ticket sales are going well. I'm not gonna sit here, and this is very typical of any of the outdoor games we've ever done. Now we still have tickets remaining. But for us as I said, we were finding more and more that there is a level of fan base that waits to look at what's the weather gonna look like. What am I doing on March 1? We are exactly where we want to be. We know this building is gonna be filled the day of the game. So that's where we are. And the other thing to recognize and we should point this out, because of the configuration that is hockey, not football, we end up taking some seats out of the mix. We build stages in very unique places. You've got your hockey rink. The Twenty One Pilot stage is ginormous and so that's a factor. And we change television positions. We could never televise a hockey game with the football television positions. We have to build new positions and that actually takes out host of seats as well.

The expected crowd for this game should be around 80,000 when it's said and done.

The Weather

Anyone that knows Ohio knows that the temperature on March 1 can range anywhere from 20 to 80. The NHL has seen a lot in 42 previous outdoor games.

The one thing the league says they are is prepared. They have had to overcome delays in the past. But no matter what weather comes to Columbus, they are confident they'll be able to overcome it.

"We've seen. We had it all. Now if it's extreme, we certainly communicate well in advance and let our fans first know if there's any delays or anything as such. But, we have seen it all. We had a mini hurricane a day before a game in Annapolis. We had 70 degrees in Los Angeles. We had close to 70 degrees or even more than 70 degrees in Colorado. We've had snow. We've had rain. We've seen it all. Knock on wood, we've played 43 games. We've had a couple of delays but that's it. We'll monitor the weather. I'm sure the weekend, ten days before every single one of you is going to be monitoring the weather with us and we'll give you constant updates as to where we stand. Typically, this is a market and a city that we don't worry about. My team who's in the back is probably so upset that I just said that because we've monitored the weather and we do so many studies before we ever decide we're going to do a game in a particular market. This is pretty good as far as weather goes in terms of building ice and playing a game."

NHL Always Looking to Constantly Improve

The one thing the NHL strives for is making sure every Stadium Series game is a unique experience one from another. It's no different this time.

We asked Mayer where they've seen the biggest improvement in their preparation for games from their first iteration until now. For him, it's his team's ability to think outside the box for each individual game.

"I think you learn from experience," Mayer said. "I think we've tried a lot. I think we have the the greatest events team in all of sports and I really mean that. I'm not just sitting here saying that. They constantly are challenged to think out of the box to never make the last one look like the next one or the next one to look like Game 26. We constantly are trying to think of how is this unique and different. Obviously, there's a rink that's in the middle of a football field that doesn't change. But what surrounds it always changes. And then everything around it, how we activate ideas and events and how we bring traditions into the mix, that always changes. It's actually a great challenge and it's something that we love doing. It's part of when we tell our team we're going to Ohio State, it's like wow. You can see the light bulbs going off and all of a sudden they're just thinking of, alright, what are we going to do? And they're each individual area, they got to do something a bit different. It is as simple as the way the bus comes in. It's going to come in a different way. So it's a challenge and everybody has a unique position, a unique job to do, and we love doing it. We really think that each of these games takes on a life of their own. We're not afraid to do things that some work, some don't. But that's what we do love about this one."

Mayer also said that there will be a moment to recognize Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau and their family. "There will be moments within the context of our game where we will honor Johnny, Matthew, and the family. So we're not ignoring it at all. But we also want to be very respectful."

Stay tuned in the coming days and weeks. Mayer said that certain things will be revealed. In all, expect about 5-10 surprises that won't be immediately revealed.

One thing to watch out for? The Cannon. Wait until you see and hear how this is being implemented.

1st Ohio Battery / Three Things: Olivier Always One To Oblige, 8-Game Point Streak For KJ, Missing Key Players

By Will Chase – February 6, 2025

A .500 road trip.

Alex Tuch had two goals and an assist to continue a three-game point streak (one goal, two assists) as the Buffalo Sabres beat the Columbus Blue Jackets 3-2 for their fourth straight win on Tuesday night from KeyBank Center.

Olivier Always One To Oblige

The Blue Jackets came into the game in a wild card spot and ended the day out of a playoff spot. Meanwhile, the Buffalo Sabres, winners of a season-high four straight games, are last in the Eastern Conference but both teams came into the day with something to prove.

For Columbus, they wanted to shake the sting of Sunday's tough loss in Dallas and the Sabres wanted to come together as one unit in the wake of their biggest star Tage Thompson being on the wrong end of a cheap shot against the New Jersey Devils on Sunday. Thompson did not play Tuesday due to an upper-body injury.

The Sabres wanted to make a point of addressing their toughness and three seconds off the opening face-off, Mathieu Olivier and Dennis Gilbert dropped the gloves.

8-Game Point Streak For KJ

Kent Johnson is on an eight-game point streak (four goals, five assists), matching a career-high, following his second-period goal that tied the score 1-1 at 1:47. The goal is his 16th which ties a career-high. Ivan Provorov (19) and James van Riemsdyk (14) assisted on the goal.

Missing Key Players

Columbus was minus key regulars for their tilt with Buffalo including their top two leading scorers Zach Werenski and Kirill Marchenko.

Werenski missed his first game of the season with an upper-body injury after leaving Sunday's game against Dallas but returned for the third period of that game. He didn't participate in Tuesday's morning skate and is considered day-to-day.

Marchenko is out indefinitely with a broken jaw after being hit by a puck while on the bench Sunday. Dante Fabbro left Sunday's game after the first period and is out with an upper-body injury.

Facing adversity, Columbus played a decent game but the second period was the difference as the Sabres scored twice. Tuch (17) scored at 12:17 to give Buffalo the 2-1 lead. Gilbert (3) and Bowen Byram (21) picked up the assists. Then Tuch's (18) second goal at 18:56 made it 3-1. Rasmus Dahlin (34) and Jason Zucker (22) assisted. Dahlin is on a four-game point streak (zero goals, six assists). Zucker is on a three-game point streak (two goals, two assists).

Provorov's goal (5) — Damon Severson (15), Luca Del Bel Belluz (6) — in the third period at 12:38 cut the deficit to 3-2. Provorov wore the 'A' and played a game-high 28:27 as he finished with the two-point night. It's his second multi-point night of the season and he has goals in two straight.

The Hockey Club

The Blue Jackets battle the Utah Hockey Club in a rematch from Nationwide Arena on Thursday, Feb. 6 at 7 p.m. ET.

The Athletic / Team USA's new identity: Why this 4 Nations squad values speed and skill over grit

By Shayna Goldman – February 6, 2025

It has been over eight years since NHL players participated in a best-on-best tournament on the international stage and a lot has changed since then. The 4 Nations Face-Off may only be a taste of international competition, but it is the first opportunity for teams to show how they have adapted and evolved stylistically.

That's especially true for Team USA.

Not only have playing styles progressed since 2016, but so has team development in the NHL. Today's game emphasizes speed, skill and possession.

After years of constructing a team that prioritized grinding two-way talent, Team USA's identity finally reflects the shift in how teams are built. That should help them compete with some of the best in the world after falling behind the star-studded curve set by Canada in both the 2016 World Cup of Hockey and the 2014 Olympics.

When Team USA last opened a best-on-best tournament, they fell flat and were shut out 3-0 by the makeshift Team Europe. The Americans lost all three round-robin games for an early elimination after scoring just five goals and giving up a combined 11 to Europe, Canada and the Czech Republic.

Team USA was far from perfect in 2016. And the flawed roster wasn't fully optimized in those three games, either. But the team wasn't without talent. Patrick Kane, coming off a league-leading 106-point season in 2015-16, headlined the team. Blake Wheeler, Joe Pavelski, Max Pacioretty, Kyle Palmieri and James Van Riemsdyk helped form a deep forward group.

But USA didn't have the same up-tempo, high-scoring energy as the eventual winner, Team Canada. With Ryan Kesler, Zach Parise, Brandon Dubinsky, Justin Abdelkader, Derek Stepan and David Backes in the fold, the team had an identity that emphasized physical and grinding play, driving to the net, two-way ability and character.

Team North America's presence in the tournament may have had something to do with USA's identity because rising stars Jack Eichel, Johnny Gaudreau, Dylan Larkin and Auston Matthews were on the 21-and-under squad. But even if they had been eligible for Team USA, there was no guarantee those up-and-comers would have been selected.

The 2016 World Cup of Hockey was not the first iteration of this team built around hard-nosed, two-way players. Just look back at the 2014 Olympic roster, which featured Backes, Kesler, Stepan, Parise, Ryan Callahan and Dustin Brown.

While the USA's construction had flaws, it somewhat fit the era when grinding depth helped fuel championship runs for teams like the Boston Bruins and Los Angeles Kings. However, after two disappointing tournaments, it was clear Team USA needed to reconstruct its roster and identity.

As Bill Guerin, general manager of the Minnesota Wild and Team USA, explained, the game has evolved and different skills are now prioritized.

"We did not model this team after any previous U.S. hockey team. ... We'll have different players with different rules," Guerin said. "The game has changed a lot. So we just have to create our own identity."

This isn't the first time USA hockey has been revamped. This shift seems to mirror the transformation in the NHL, with scoring and pace on the rise.

"I know there's big moments for USA that kind of changed the tide," Ottawa Senators forward Brady Tkachuk said. "It started with the '96 World Cup. It sparked something special for USA hockey."

After an eight-plus-year absence from the international stage at this level, this represents the next wave for the USA.

"Our '96 World Cup team was a skilled team. Brett Hull was on that team, Brian Leetch, Chris Chelios, Keith (Tkachuk). We had skill," Guerin said. "It's just the game now, it's a different skill. The things they do with the puck, these little tricks and moves. It's a high, high level of skill, higher than it's ever been. So you've got to be able to play that game."

The star-powered USA forward group looks up to the task.

Team USA is stacked with talent up and down a lineup that brings a lot of versatility. Between the 13 forwards selected, seven can play center. That starts with Jack Hughes and Jack Eichel, two of the best puck-movers in the league; both can quarterback their team's offensive attack with their transition game and playmaking. Then there's Matthews, one of the best goal scorers in the world who can beat goalies in all different ways.

Matthews and Eichel, in particular, are two players who represent the change in team-building from years past. In a tournament setting, it helps to have a jack-of-all-trades who can be leaned on in any situation. In 2014, Brown and Callahan were prime examples of that. But in today's game, even the best scorers can take on different roles. Matthews and Eichel have built up their all-around games and are tasked with taking matchup minutes against the opponent's best to turn defensive situations into scoring opportunities. The two are both deployed in short-handed situations now that teams are leaning on more offensive threats to add dimension to penalty kills.

Behind that duo, USA has another play-driver at the 3C position in Larkin. Vincent Trocheck and Brock Nelson bring more dimension, likely at 4C.

On the wing, Matthew Tkachuk is a unicorn who brings elite skill and peskiness to the team. His brother, Brady, adds size and a physical edge without sacrificing skill. Chris Kreider, who uses his size in a net-front role, bulks up the forward group. But like most players on this team, he brings more than one element. In Kreider's case, it's speed to the bottom six. J.T. Miller adds another motor to the middle-six; he's an energy player who can also pour the points on. All of these players represent how much Team USA has changed, as roles are dedicated to energy or role players. So many high-end talents can contribute to all the different elements of the game, which raises Team USA's ceiling.

USA gains even more scoring and shooting threats with Jake Guentzel, Kyle Connor and Matt Boldy, which should help both at even strength and on the power play. Unlike in 2014 and 2016, more power plays are now comprised of four forwards and one defenseman. With so many offensive options, this team has the depth to fill out two highly capable units up front.

The stylistic differences extend to the back end, where a shift has been front and center in the NHL over the last few years. A new wave of blueliners has completely transformed how the position is thought of and analyzed.

Defense can no longer be judged alone by ice time, plus-minus, blocks or reputation. The best defensemen control play from the back end, regardless of their size or physicality.

Quinn Hughes and Adam Fox are two examples of that; so is Zach Werenski, who has embraced a rover role in Columbus. Hughes is an elite skater who dominates play in his minutes. Werenski is a catalyst for the Blue Jackets from the back end. And while Fox can't match the footspeed of those two, his anticipation makes him a threat. As much as the three are known for being gifted offensively, they use their two-way skill to out-possess and shut down their opponents.

While Charlie McAvoy is a throwback defensive defenseman, Brock Faber, Noah Hanifin and Jaccob Slavin all shut down play in a modern way with their skating, positioning and, especially in Slavin's case, discipline.

It makes for a blue line that brings more dimension than in years past and adds another level of support to the team's forward group. And elite talent in net makes for one of the most dangerous iterations of Team USA in years.

The 4 Nations Face-Off may not be the perfect best-on-best tournament, but it is the first opportunity for these four teams to show just how much they have changed since 2016 — and that is especially important for USA Hockey after falling so far behind the modern curve. The Team USA that will take the ice next week represents a new identity and has the skill to be a true contender.

"There's a tremendous amount of pride to wear the crest, more importantly, to represent our country in something bigger than yourself," Brady Tkachuk said. "There are opportunities ahead to make real statements and really make our mark, and just see if we're a global powerhouse."

The Athletic / 16 stats: Can Connor McDavid become the NHL's first \$20 million player?

By Dom Luszczyszyn – February 6, 2025

Last week the NHL announced massive jumps to the salary cap coming over the next three seasons: \$95.5 million in 2025-26, \$104 million in 2026-27, and \$113.5 million in 2027-28. This is a huge deal, one that carries immense implications for the league's contract landscape.

Players are about to get paid, none more so than the league's very best: Connor McDavid. His current deal ends in 2026, just in time for the cap to jump over \$100 million. McDavid's next deal will be seismic, there's no doubt about that. The question is just how high his salary will go. Can he be the NHL's first \$20 million player?

That's obviously a mind-boggling number at the moment, but this is the best player in the world we're talking about. In an exploding cap environment, he's worth a whole lot.

A league-max deal is 20 percent of the cap and during the 2026-27 season that amounts to \$20.8 million. According to my model, McDavid is currently the only player in the league projected to be worth 20 percent of the cap or more. He's the league's only blank check player and in 2026-27 would have a projected value of \$21.3 million.

Normally, a player's age (McDavid will be 29 at the time of signing) would be a big factor in any contract projection. At some point on any long-term deal, McDavid's value will drop below league-max value and that could happen as soon as Year 3 or 4. McDavid being an extreme outlier at the top of the league could mean there's more room to drop than modeled, too. But with a rapidly rising cap, McDavid's decline will likely be much slower than the rapid growth of the salary cap's upper limit.

Everything depends on how much the salary cap continues to grow after 2027-28, but even the most conservative outlook puts McDavid north of \$20 million on a long-term deal. On average, McDavid is expected to be worth 18.5 percent of the cap on an eight-year deal. A \$20 million deal comes out to 15.8 percent on average on the aggressive side (5 percent growth) but could be as high as 16.9 percent on average on the conservative side (2 percent growth).

In either case, McDavid would be well worth it. On the conservative side, he's worth \$21.8 million over eight seasons. On the aggressive side, his average value comes out to \$23.5 million. That's a huge number, but it's worth noting that at 5 percent growth, a \$20 million contract would be worth 15 percent of the cap by Year 5 of a new McDavid deal. In fact, it already drops to 17.6 percent in Year 2 at the already-planned increase to \$113.5 million.

In every other major men's sports league, the top players are making major dough. The highest-paid NFL, NBA and MLB players all clear \$50 million per season. The NHL is still playing catch-up on that front and McDavid has a chance to pave the way for that by raising the bar in a serious way.

And in a rapidly rising cap environment, even a deal as high as \$20 million leaves room to add around McDavid, especially as it ages. Win-win — even if a deal of that caliber comes with major sticker shock.

16 stats

1. Long-term deals adding even more value

With the increased cap over the next three years, any long-term deal already signed immediately looks better than it did a week ago (and that was already accounting for max growth of 5 percent per year).

There are almost 150 skater deals with three years of term or more remaining after this season and the average surplus value of those deals nearly doubled from \$626,000 to \$1.16 million per year. Of those deals, 67.1 percent now qualify as positive value deals, up from 57.8 percent. That's a big shift, one that puts more focus back on the ice where it belongs.

2. Cap Court with Pierre-Luc Dubois, Mark Scheifele, Mika Zibanejad, Nazem Kadri and J.T. Miller

Colleague Sean McIndoe has a recurring feature here called NHL Cap Court where he debates whether specific contracts around the league are good or bad. His latest edition goes hand-in-hand with the previous point, offering an appeal process to previously questionable deals.

It's a really interesting topic with the cap rising significantly, and I wanted to check what I had for these specific players in terms of market value — both before and after the cap announcement. Here's what I got.

Pierre-Luc Dubois

Contract: \$8.5M x 6 years

Previous Value: \$8.2M x 6 years

Current Value: \$9.0M x 6 years

Mark Scheifele

Contract: \$8.5M x 6 years

Previous Value: \$8.0M x 6 years

Current Value: \$8.7M x 6 years

Mika Zibanejad

Contract: \$8.5M x 5 years

Previous Value: \$5.5M x 5 years

Current Value: \$5.9M x 5 years

Nazem Kadri

Contract: \$7M x 4 years

Previous Value: \$6.1M x 4 years

Current Value: \$6.6M x 4 years

J.T. Miller

Contract: \$8M x 5 years

Previous Value: \$7.5M x 5 years

Current Value: \$8.2M x 5 years

A rising cap can't save Zibanejad's deal until he turns things around himself, but it did flip Dubois, Scheifele and Miller from slightly negative to slightly positive.

3. Elias Pettersson is still worth the money

Last note on future market values.

For those wondering, forward Elias Pettersson's average market value over the next seven years is still \$12 million — even with the model downgrading him during his current slump. The upside there is still tremendous and the Canucks front office would be out of its mind to give up on him one season into his eight-year deal. There's a good reason why a kettle of vultures is circling above Vancouver.

4. Quanton Byfield taking on bigger defensive challenge

On a team with Anze Kopitar and Phillip Danault, it speaks volumes that Byfield is the one getting the majority of the team's matchup minutes.

That's something that really started in early January against the Lightning, a home game where Byfield played 13 minutes head-to-head against Nikita Kucherov, while Kopitar and Danault played just under five minutes combined.

Since that day, Byfield has played 93 minutes against the opposing team's top forward while Kopitar has played 56 minutes and Danault has played 51 minutes. In terms of average Offensive Rating faced, Byfield is at plus-4.2 compared to Kopitar's plus-2.3 and Danault's plus-2.1. Big difference. Byfield has been the go-to shutdown guy and he's getting the results to match with a 56 percent expected goals rate fueled by allowing just 2.0 xGA/60, both among the best marks on the team.

That'll be an interesting development to watch down the stretch. Can Byfield's emergence down the middle help solve the Kings' McDavid-Leon Draisaitl problem in the playoffs?

5. Can Kevin Fiala have a second-half resurgence?

Another thing that can help: getting the real Fiala back. He's the closest thing the Kings have to a true offensive game-breaker, but he's been way too quiet this season to earn that notion. Fiala has just 31 points in 49 games this season, a 52-point pace that would be his worst since 2018-19.

Under the hood, it's business as usual for Fiala. At five-on-five he's still pushing play, he's still getting chances and he's still scoring. Ditto for the power play. The problem has mostly been his teammates — at five-on-five they've scored on just 4.8 percent of their shots with Fiala on the ice. That's the 25th-worst mark in the league with only two top-six players (Josh Norris and Nazem Kadri) above him.

That's probably not Fiala's fault either. According to data tracked by Corey Sznajder, Fiala is the team's leader in scoring chance assists per 60 at 5.8. That's one of the best marks in the league, comparable to elite playmakers such as Nikita Kucherov and Mitch Marner — his teammates just aren't finishing.

Fiala is playing good hockey and it feels like the results will come soon.

6. Nashville's shooters shoot line

When Nashville signed Steven Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault, one of the big questions facing the Predators was who was going to get them the puck. They were adding two shooters to a team that already had Filip Forsberg and was pretty short on passers. In that vein, it felt like a risky fit.

The solution, apparently: Put all three together. Shooters shoot, baby.

Andrew Brunette put the trio together just over 20 games ago and the move has helped the team jump-start their offense (to an extent). The line is generating roughly the same amount of scoring chances as Forsberg's previous top line with Ryan O'Reilly and Gustav Nyquist, but has more than doubled them up on goals. In 250 minutes, the new-look top line has scored 4.0 goals per 60, up from 1.83.

Maybe it's just a hot streak or simple regression to the mean, but it also might be a testament to having so many scoring threats on one line. That creates a bit more spacing for each player, allowing them to execute to a higher degree.

It also helps that Stamkos has taken on a playmaker role in his move back to center. According to data tracked by Sznajder, Stamkos has earned 9.6 shot assists per 60 this season, up from 6.1 last season, with an equal reversal in his shot rate. His shot-pass ratio has also completely flipped. That change has likely been the key to unlocking this line.

7. Home-ice disadvantage in Utah

Only one team, the Sharks, have a worse points percentage at home than hockey's newest franchise. The Utah Hockey Club sits at 9-12-6 at home, a 73-point pace that falls well below the team's 91.5-point pace on the road.

The difference is even more stark when compared to how this very team did at Mullett Arena over the previous two seasons. The former Coyotes were legitimately one of the league's best home teams, going 43-34-5 compared to 21-47-14 on the road. That's a 91-point pace compared to a 56-point pace, a 35-point difference.

In their first season, Utahns haven't received much bang for their buck watching their new team play.

8. Miro Heiskanen out long-term

The Stars lost Heiskanen to injury on Jan. 28 and after surgery, he's now being listed as month-to-month.

That's obviously a big blow to Dallas' already slim chances of catching the Jets for the Central Division crown, leaving the Stars in the dreaded Central Division 2v3 gauntlet.

With Heiskanen, Dallas' chances of winning the Central were an already slim 11.8 percent. If he misses the remainder of the regular season, those odds drop to 7.6 percent.

Surgery for Heiskanen went as expected, no surprises. The initial hope is to have Heiskanen back before the playoffs but Stars will have a better idea of the timeline after initial healing and once he begins rehab.

9. Harley Time

As bad as the Heiskanen injury news is, it's nice that the team has a budding elite defenseman behind Heiskanen who looks ready to step up. Thomas Harley already looks like a star and he's about to get a terrific opportunity to show just how bright he can shine.

The 23-year-old defenseman turned a lot of heads in his first full season and this year he's showing it was no fluke. With Heiskanen experiencing a down year by his standards before the injury, Harley has arguably been Dallas' best defenseman. Harley has a plus-10.2 Net Rating on the year which not only leads the Stars, it's a top-10 mark among all defensemen. He's been phenomenal.

The question for Harley now is whether he can handle big boy minutes without Heiskanen next to him. Harley is fourth on the Stars in offensive quality of competition faced this season, but has been the team's top choice for that role on a pair with Ilya Lyubushkin in the team's three games without Heiskanen.

Small sample size, but so far so good with Harley earning 53 percent of the expected goals during that time and outscoring opponents 3-1 — both well above average marks relative to the team. Harley looks like the real deal.

10. Dylan Samberg: defensive stud

I don't know if a lot of people outside of Winnipeg grasp how crucial Samberg is to the team's defensive might. Over the last month, only Josh Morrissey has been given more ice time for the Jets than Samberg.

He has effectively become the No. 2 in command on Winnipeg's back end, earning that distinction in ability, not just ice time.

That all starts with Samberg's defensive capability with his plus-four projected Defensive Rating being the best mark on the team. That's something that shined through last season even after accounting for his easier usage and has only grown since. Samberg looked like a legitimate difference-maker then, a guy who could really step up in a top-four role. That's exactly what we've seen this season ... and then some.

Samberg has been so good defensively that he's also started earning the coaching staff's trust in an even bigger role.

Prior to his injury, Samberg faced the fourth-toughest minutes on Winnipeg's blue line. Since returning he's been the team's top shutdown option. During that stretch, Samberg has taken his game to new heights despite the added degree of difficulty, earning 65 percent of expected goals and 72 percent of actual goals.

Winnipeg has a good one in Samberg and his ascent is a key reason for the team's success this season.

11. Adam Fantilli stepping up in Sean Monahan's absence

The sophomore slump hit Fantilli hard to start the season. A lack of top power-play time will have a big effect on his tepid scoring totals, but Fantilli's work at five-on-five was also concerning. A lot of that has changed in the absence of Monahan, Columbus' top center.

When the Blue Jackets needed Fantilli most, he stepped up. Offensively, Fantilli has been great. He leads the Blue Jackets with seven goals and 12 points in 13 games and has been playing 20 minutes per night. There's still work to be done at five-on-five, but at the very least there's been encouraging progress. Fantilli's 42 percent xG was right around the team average, a big improvement from the 35 percent he was at previously which was among the worst marks on the team.

A lot of the work Fantilli still needs to do comes on the defensive end and that's a tall task being thrust into a role at the top of the lineup. Still, he's done some admirable work in Monahan's absence which provides some optimism for the future. Next year could be the year he really takes flight.

12. Luke Hughes: defensive defenseman?

One of the knocks on Hughes in his rookie season was his play without the puck. In Year 2 he's made some big strides though, leading to a plus-2.3 Defensive Rating, a top 50 mark among defensemen.

That's a curious jump for a defender whose reputation skews toward offense, especially after his rookie season, and it's not just a result of playing the softest minutes on the team either. According to data tracked by Sznajder, Hughes leads all defensemen in his ability to deny entries at 21.7 percent and his ability to force dump-ins at 63 percent. That's easier to do against soft competition who aren't prone to entering the zone with control in the first place, but it's still a nice sign for the second-year defender. The league's best defenders — Jacob Slavin, Gustav Forsling, Jonas Brodin, MacKenzie Weegar and Mattias Ekholm — all excel at this particular skill.

13. Lane Hutson rushing up the ice

One of the things that separates the best offensive defensemen from the rest is their ability to join and lead the rush. Quinn Hughes, Cale Makar, Roman Josi, Zach Werenski — all elite.

This is obvious from watching him but put Hutson's name on that list, because it's something he's already elite at. Hutson has some of the highest entry volume in the league among defensemen and

carries the puck in 56 percent of the time according to tracking data from Sznajder. That's top 10 in the league.

14. McLellan easing Moritz Seider's burden

The Red Wings have been unbelievably hot under new coach Todd McLellan with a 15-4-1 record that has the team in a playoff spot. A run like that feels almost miraculous given where the team was when he was hired and McLellan obviously deserves a lot of credit. It also makes you really question some of Derek Lalonde's decisions when he was coach.

One of those decisions was the bafflingly difficult burden placed on Seider. Lalonde gave him the absolute toughest matchups in the league and it did a number on his numbers. McLellan has eased things considerably and it's made a difference.

Lalonde had Seider facing opponents with an average Offensive Rating of plus-3.0, 2.5 higher than the remaining team average (excluding his primary partner). Under McLellan, that burden has eased to a plus-2.5 opponent Offensive Rating faced, just 1.1 goals higher than team average.

That's made a big difference for Seider, who leads the team's defensemen in xG under McLellan at 49.7 percent. Under Lalonde, he was middle of the pack at 45.4 percent.

15. Red hot Pasta

David Pastrnak's New Year's resolution: catch fire. After a slow start to the season, Pastrnak is extremely back. Since January 1 Pastrnak leads the entire league in goals with 14 and points with 29. He's three goals and six points up on second place and it doesn't feel like he's slowing down anytime soon.

16. Spencer Knight: goalie of the present?

One of the big questions facing Florida this season was its goaltending, especially in front of a weakened defense corps. Sergei Bobrovsky is 36 and had been a bit uneven during much of his Florida tenure while Knight was still mostly unproven.

The worries about Bobrovsky seem legitimate now as he has a .901 save percentage and has allowed two goals above expected this season. But Knight has been a pleasant surprise behind him with a .906 save percentage and 7.5 goals saved above expected. Among the 44 goalies that have played 20 games or more, Knight ranks 15th in goals saved per game while Bobrovsky ranks 35th.

Knight is the team's goalie of the future, but it feels like the future might be coming sooner than expected. It's time to give him some more starts and see what he can do with it. A fresher Bobrovsky come playoff time wouldn't hurt either.

ESPN / Who excels in NHL's defining metrics at 4 Nations Face-Off?

By Neil Paine – February 6, 2025

The 4 Nations Face-Off, which is a round-robin hockey tournament scheduled for Feb. 12-20 in Montreal and Boston, will boast an international field stacked with elite scorers, playmakers, shutdown defenders and elite goaltenders: Connor McDavid is on for Canada, as are Nathan MacKinnon and Connor Hellebuyck in net. The USA team boasts Auston Matthews and Quinn Hughes; Sweden has William Nylander and Linus Ullmark (if healthy); Finland is led by the likes of Sebastian Aho and Juuse Saros.

The tournament, which replaces the NHL's typical All-Star Weekend, will feature rosters of NHL players from the United States, Canada, Sweden and Finland, all locked in a battle for bragging rights about which country has produced the best talent in the world.

But which player truly stands out as the most gifted among them?

Thanks to NHL EDGE tracking data, we can quantify factors such as the skating speed and shot power of every skater, among other attributes. Not only will those skills make a difference to the outcome of the tournament, but they're also darned exciting to watch in action.

Here are the 4 Nations players, selected among the four rosters of 23 players each, who excel in the metrics that define hockey dominance this season.

Fastest Skater: Jack Hughes, USA and Connor McDavid, Canada (tie)

Metrics of choice: Top speed and average skating speed at even strength

This is no cop-out: Hughes and McDavid are effectively tied in terms of rising toward the top-right hand side of our chart above. At even strength, Hughes cruises around the ice at an average speed of 10.83 mph, fifth highest in the league overall and the fastest of any player in the 4 Nations pool. It makes sense: When you watch Hughes play, he is always on the move, flitting about the ice in search of ways to set up scoring chances for himself and others.

But of course, not even Hughes (whose top speed is 23.33 mph) has a faster recorded speed than McDavid, who maxed out at 23.97 mph earlier this season. McDavid is the four-time winner of the fastest skater competition at the NHL All-Star Game, including at last year's festivities in Toronto. The sight of either Hughes or McDavid bearing down on you is enough to put fear into any defenseman or goalie in the league, so it's a toss-up who earns this title at the 4 Nations.

Sneaky fast: Finland's Roope Hintz is a known speed-burner, but he doesn't always get mentioned in the McDavid tier of skaters -- he has never competed in the fastest skater competition, either, so we really only get to see him jet around when scoring highlight goals for the Dallas Stars. But he's right next to McDavid and Hughes in our chart, as is 20-year-old Swedish phenom Leo Carlsson. Carlsson is still figuring out how to best use his combination of size and speed to produce in the box score, but he's closer to McDavid, Hughes and Hintz than the next tier of skaters.

And then there are the outliers of the chart: Players such as USA defenseman Jaccob Slavin, who tops out at 24.19 mph -- the fastest of any player at the 4 Nations -- but has an average even-strength speed of only 8.3 mph -- second slowest in the tournament. Defensemen in general tend to have lower average skating speeds, which hurts them in a comparison like this, but it also means we will likely get to see their engines at full burn only in rare moments.

Hardest Shooter: Victor Hedman, Sweden

Metrics of choice: Hardest shot speed and average shot speed

It's no surprise to see the 6-foot-7 Swedish captain, Victor Hedman, leading the way. Hedman won hardest shot honors at the 2022 All-Star skills competition, blasting a puck at 103.2 mph. He recorded a blistering 101.36 mph shot in the past season, his fastest in-game shot of the puck-tracking era. But where Hedman really shines is his consistent ability to put that booming shot to good use during the flow of play; he ranks seventh among all NHL players this season and No. 1 by far among 4 Nations players, with an average speed of 75.18 mph across all of his shots combined.

Some of that is because he is doing so much shooting from the perimeter, where power is king -- he's tied for 13th this season with 33 slap shot attempts, and nearly 70% of his shots have come from long range (shots in the offensive zone that are more than 43 feet from the goal). But when it comes to fearsome point shooters, few in the game are better than Hedman, who seems to have recovered from the down year he had a couple of seasons ago to once again rank among the league's most productive D-men.

Boom-boom Swedes: Scan the upper right part of the plot above, and you'll notice yellow dots (for Sweden) belonging not just to Hedman, but also to Gustav Forsling, Rasmus Dahlin and Mattias Ekholm. It's fair to say that, in terms of pure shooting firepower, the Swedish blue line has no equal at this tournament -- opponents will have to pick their poison between blocking these heavy shots or giving the defensemen too much space to operate.

The only real rival to the Swedes is Canada, who has a handful of booming blueliners (Colton Parayko, Cale Makar, Shea Theodore, Josh Morrissey and Devon Toews) who fill out the tier of shooters right below Hedman, Forsling and Dahlin.

Best Offensive Creator: Connor McDavid, Canada

Metrics of choice: Individual high-danger chances and assisted goals created per 60 minutes at 5-on-5.

In addition to being our co-fastest skater above, McDavid is also a predictable pick for the most dangerous offensive player in the 4 Nations Face-Off, between his scoring and passing abilities. His speed and agility on the open ice puts opponents on constant alert, creating untold havoc in the offensive zone and especially around the net. Among players with at least 400 minutes of ice time this season, McDavid ranks eighth overall in rebound chances created per 60 minutes at 5-on-5, a type of play that leads to a disproportionate amount of goals.

Between those flurries around the net and other situations where McDavid's combination of skating and skill overwhelms the defense, 50% of McDavid's shots have come in high-danger areas of the rink. And then there's his passing. Heading into Tuesday, McDavid was tied with Sidney Crosby for 12th in the NHL in first assists per 60 minutes at 5-on-5.

The setup men and the sharpshooters: Overall, McDavid has a balanced profile as an offensive creator, scoring plenty -- if not quite as much as a few years ago -- even while his value is tilted more toward playmaking. The mirror image of that among the top players in the tournament is Auston Matthews of Team USA, who is roughly as effective but does it more by creating high-danger chances for himself than others.

A perhaps surprising name that strikes a balance between the two superstars is Canada's Brandon Hagel, who is second to Matthews in individual high-danger chances while creating nearly 20% more assisted goals than his American counterpart. Then there are some interesting clusters of teammates at the extremes of the chart: Finns Hintz, Artturi Lehkonen and Erik Haula are among the players most

tilted toward creating individual scoring chances rather setting up others, while Canada's Sidney Crosby, Mitch Marner and Travis Konecny do much more of their damage as passers than shooters.

Best Goalie: Connor Hellebuyck, USA

Metrics of choice: Goals Saved Above Average (GSAA) per 60 minutes at 5-on-5 for high-danger and all other chances.

The chart illustrates how comically dominant Hellebuyck has been this season, which has been the case pretty much every season since about 2017-18.

Over that span, Hellebuyck leads all NHL goalies with 171.9 total Goals Above Replacement, 36.4 GAR clear of No. 2 Andrei Vasilevskiy (Tampa Bay Lightning); that gap between the Winnipeg Jets star and the rest of the field would itself rank 25th on the list of most valuable netminders of the past eight years, if it belonged to another goalie. All of which is to say that Hellebuyck is by far the top goaltender in the 4 Nations Face-Off, and he will give the United States a chance to win it all if he plays at a level remotely approaching his potential.

What makes Hellebuyck so great? Certainly, it's his ability to make spectacular saves on high-danger chances, robbing opposing scorers of what would otherwise be gimme goals. But an underrated aspect of his game is how he basically never allows goals on easier saves. While Hellebuyck "only" ranks second in GSAA (behind New York Islanders' Ilya Sorokin) on high-danger chances over the past three seasons, he easily leads the league in GSAA on medium- and low-danger chances, a testament to his consistency and focus.

Best of the rest: So, if Hellebuyck is head and shoulders above the rest of his peers between the pipes, who else might be a difference-maker in this tournament? Another goalie to watch is Sweden's Filip Gustavsson, who is solid on tough saves and (like Hellebuyck) is a paragon of focus on the more routine stops. Team USA backups Jake Oettinger and Jeremy Swayman also fit this category, as does fellow Swede Linus Ullmark.

Finland's Juuse Saros is sort of the opposite -- he has been shakier on less threatening chances -- but maybe that gives him upside if he tightens up in the mental part of the game. Finally, it's worth noting that Canada, for all of its speed and skill at forward and defense, has a fairly mediocre group in goal between Jordan Binnington, Adin Hill and Sam Montembeault. If the Canadians fall short here, it will probably be because the talent for stopping the puck wasn't there.

[Sportsnet.ca / 32 Thoughts: The NHL is heading into uncharted territory](#)

By Elliotte Friedman – February 6, 2025

The NHL is entering a new age. The hockey version of Captain Jean-Luc Picard: going where it has never gone before.

Everything we understood is changing. Contract comparables, economics, you name it. And if it is confusing for you and me, imagine what it's like for the people who really need to make these decisions on the fly — one month from a trade deadline.

Brief history lesson: when the NHL/NHLPA did their COVID CBA, there were two options. One was “low escrow” — less withheld from player paycheques, but it meant the cap would stay lower for a longer time. The other was paying back their debt faster, allowing the ceiling a quicker rise. But that meant higher holdbacks.

There is no phrase players hate more than escrow, so they avoided it like the plague.

Back then, no one knew where we were going. How long before fans returned to arenas? Would revenues recover? Everyone was on edge.

Thankfully, the worst-case scenarios evaporated. Depending on who you talk to, if the 50/50 split that existed in 2019 was still in place, the cap would be anywhere from \$102-\$105 million now. With record-high revenue projections, we're headed into uncharted territory: \$95.5 million in 2025-26, \$104 million in 2026-27 and \$113.5 million in 2027-28. The memo outlining these numbers indicated next season is set, but the following two can be adjusted. The world is more volcanic than stable, so you never know where things are going. But several sources believe that if the current path continues, those limits will go slightly higher.

The league, overall, is healthy. There are always worries (regional television, Canadian dollar) but the good outweighs the bad. Tampa Bay's sale price was just under \$2 billion and minority-stake franchise valuations are strong. It's very interesting that the NHL and the union agreed to “de-link” the cap from exact revenues for another three seasons — keeping escrow low was a motivating factor for the players — but if numbers dictate that's how much they are to be paid, that's what they've earned.

At the same time, not only is the overall player share larger than ever, so are the individual rewards. It is not exactly apples to apples, but, in the final season of the pre-cap system, Peter Forsberg and Jaromir Jagr each earned \$11 million. There were times contract structure allowed some to earn more in individual seasons — Brad Richards, Shea Weber, John Tavares among them — but no one did it on an overall AAV basis until Connor McDavid's \$12.5-million extension in 2018. Now we've gone from McDavid to Nathan MacKinnon (\$12.6 million) to Auston Matthews (\$13.25 million) to Leon Draisaitl (\$14 million).

Objects arriving faster than they appear: Mikko Rantanen, Kirill Kaprizov, Mitch Marner, Cale Makar and McDavid, once again. The bar will raise, multiple times. I never have a problem with anyone in life — player, manager, business-owner, blue-collar, white-collar — negotiating their best deal. Sometimes you have the hammer, sometimes you get hammered. You can't fault anyone for trying.

Does a player like Dylan Cozens become even more valuable because he's locked in for five more seasons at \$7.1 million? You have certainty on his salary. Does trading for an RFA like Bowen Byram or extending a UFA-to-be like Sam Bennett become even more complicated? What was true two weeks ago may not be true now.

The upcoming 4 Nations break will give GMs a chance to breathe, to address their own situations. They'll have a good idea of their negotiation situations by the end of the event.

When Marc Bergevin became Montreal's GM, he explained one of his core philosophies: know when you are ready to hit home runs.

He worked for the Chicago Blackhawks in 2006, when they had the opportunity to trade for Chris Pronger. They declined, the right decision because the draft pick that turned into Patrick Kane would have gone to Edmonton.

"Hit singles," he said, "until you are good enough to hit home runs."

Several years into his tenure, Bergevin modified his outlook.

"Those kinds of players aren't available often. If they are, you have to look at it."

Next year will still be tight for many, but it won't be long until almost everyone has room to swing their biggest bat. There is potential for bidding wars.

Maybe.

Days before Rantanen's earth-shattering move, one executive said: "No way Colorado can trade him, can they? You can't replace those guys."

The Avalanche did it anyway.

Clearly, they are going to pay Makar, which affected what they were willing to do with Rantanen, even though he's a stud. Roster construction/cap flexibility concerns are real. But the trade revealed something else.

While players are excited about the rising financial wave, teams are extremely wary. Maybe you're a Canadian club collecting revenues with a weakened dollar, paying players in American cash. In today's dollars, US\$95.5 million is CDN\$140 million. Maybe you believed you've squeezed as much as you can from your building or fanbase. Some will be very happy to flex financial muscle. Others aren't so sure.

It's tough to tell what's real and what's noise. This is competition, and many teams are consistently close to the cap. They want to win and there's fan/media/internal pressure to do what it takes. Rebuilding teams will drop to the floor, with others saying, "We'll spend later in the season if we're in it." Even the most reluctant, however, will find it extremely hard to avoid the pull to the top when their window opens.

What is true is that teams are uncomfortable.

There still are major variables to be introduced. Commissioner Gary Bettman is negotiating a new Canadian television deal, and he never aims low. There will be expansion. Those will bring financial spikes, potentially easing ownership concerns.

Last weekend's astonishing Luka Doncic deal made me think more about Rantanen. Two tremendous players. Both teams had the ability to pay them (Doncic on a much larger scale), and both opted not to.

Hockey fans already know the name, but this is not the blog. From Sportsnet, 32 Thoughts: The Podcast with NHL Insider Elliotte Friedman and Kyle Bukauskas is a weekly deep dive into the biggest news and interviews from the hockey world.

The Avalanche are an extremely well-run organization with extremely wealthy ownership. Look at the choice they made. They aren't finished with this renovation, so it's hard to give a final grade, but they moved on from one of the 10 best players in the sport.

MacKinnon-Makar-Rantanen. Those three make you a Stanley Cup contender every season. The GM who traded him even called Rantanen a superstar. Yet he basically said, “The numbers don’t work for us. We’re not going there.” They made this choice before knowing exact cap numbers, but I’m not sure things would be different if they did.

Who else is thinking like this? Who else is saying, “Sooner or later, we’ll be doing it, too?”

Everything is different. New economics, on the ice and off. A better idea of the landscape, but more changes coming. Two quieter weeks to map strategy right before the trade deadline. Where are we going, together?

32 THOUGHTS

1. Another area to WATCH: contract negotiations around “percentage of cap.” Players/agents have made it their strategy, and it’s a smart one. When he signed, McDavid’s percentage was 15.72, which remains highest overall. (Draisaitl, MacKinnon and Matthews are the others above 15.) This tactic has spread from superstars to everyone up and down the roster.

One exec said last week that negotiations with a solid, appreciated player on his team — but not one of their top guys — halted because this tactic took things where the organization wouldn’t go. Like most contract conversations, it comes down to leverage, but teams will try to limit percentage arguments to top players. We’ll see.

2. Ryan Hartman appealed his 10-game suspension. Commissioner Bettman is next on the agenda on the appeal, and he rarely decreases a sentence. A recent exception is Jason Spezza, reduced from six to four games in 2021. But he had a clean record. If Bettman keeps it above six, Hartman can go to an independent arbitrator — where Dennis Wideman and Tom Wilson received reductions.

Unique to this is the 4 Nations break, as this process doesn’t usually happen fast enough to get a player back in the lineup before the original suspension is over. Generally, the NHLPA isn’t crazy about appealing these if they don’t think they can win. One thing I heard about this situation: on-ice officials warned Hartman several times during the Ottawa game that he was in danger of losing control.

3. The Penguins practice Thursday. We’ll see if Sidney Crosby skates. If he doesn’t, I’m slightly worried.

4. I exist because of Canadian/American soldiers (and others) in the Second World War, so anthem booing is not for me. Canadian Flag Day is Feb. 15, and 2025 is the 60th anniversary of the red-and-white Maple Leaf. That night is Canada vs. USA in Montreal. Apparently, there are plans to hand out 20,000 flags at the game. Gonna be nuts.

5. As expected, the Canucks quickly extended Marcus Pettersson at six years, \$33 million. That was not going to be a difficult negotiation. The left-side jam made Carson Soucy available. Not an easy year for him, but I like Soucy — who played his weak side during Tuesday’s 3-0 win over Colorado. Very good for Vancouver in last year’s playoffs, and effective when Seattle beat Colorado in 2023. He can help someone. Calgary makes sense (he’s from Alberta), but the Flames want to see some Ilya Solovyov.

6. Watching the Rangers and Canucks post-J.T. Miller makes you realize how much better off everyone is now that this saga is over. No more uncertainty, no more stress. Miller is a different, more energized player in New York, and you can see how happy his new teammates — particularly Vincent Trocheck — are to have him.

With their two trades, the Canucks look like a different team. Remodelled defence; the entire group quicker both on their skates and moving the puck. For different reasons than Miller, Filip Chytil needed

his own fresh start. The Canucks outwrestled Western rivals Edmonton and Vegas (among others) for Drew O'Connor, and will attempt to extend him, too.

The Athletic's Arthur Staple reported New York was unwilling to part with 2023 90th overall selection Drew Fortescue, a defenceman at NCAA Boston College. Vancouver will be happy with Victor Mancini, but Fortescue was an original target. Rangers GM Chris Drury knows him very well, as his son, Luke, was a minor-hockey teammate for several seasons.

7. Colorado made a run at Miller, but it never got close enough to threaten the Rangers deal. That's why Casey Mittelstadt's name is out there. Believe New Jersey, Ottawa and Toronto poked around, but not with much traction.

8. The Devils, Senators and Maple Leafs also were among those who went hard for Brandon Saad, as did Tampa Bay. Can't fault Saad for picking Vegas, despite the team's current struggles. The Golden Knights will be just fine.

9. Will be interesting to see if Pittsburgh keeps that top-13 protected Rangers 2025 pick (unprotected for 2026). A couple teams were disappointed to not snare it. There's value. Everyone knows what the Penguins want — controllable young talent, preferably in the NHL or close.

10. Toronto is seeing how high it can go at centre. Won't be easy, and might not be able to shoot as high as a 2C, but the Leafs are looking. First-round picks matter, and they don't have one in June.

11. My Rantanen theory: Carolina's brain trust will do the math. Let's assume that, on the open market, he's getting seven years at \$14 million per. That's \$98 million. The Hurricanes will beat that total with the eighth year available to them, so we're talking nine digits. Maybe they offer deferment to keep the cap hit a little lower, but that didn't work with the same agency (Octagon) and Draisaitl.

Owner Tom Dundon has talked before about having a true star — one of the league's best players — on his roster, in his market. What it would do for interest, ticket sales, etc. Now he's got one. GM Eric Tulsky pointed out they are in a much better cap situation than with Jake Guentzel a year ago, but the organization learned one other important lesson: don't wait. Carolina eventually agreed to what the winger wanted, but it wasn't until right before the draft. By then, Guentzel decided to hit the market.

That won't happen this time. The Hurricanes are eager to give this a real run. How high will they go? Will it be enough? And, most importantly, what happens if it isn't done by March 7? All questions we await to see answered.

12. The Rantanen deal could have been a four-way. The Hurricanes called around to see if anyone else would get involved. I assume that was to eat some of Taylor Hall's salary.

13. Rantanen's got two points in five games with the Hurricanes, though he's had some great chances. It gets forgotten in all the hype, but there are always adjustments. A lefty, he's used to playing with two incredible righties: MacKinnon and Makar. His new centre, Sebastian Aho, is a lefty. When Aho was out a game sick, Rantanen scored his first Carolina goal on a terrific play by temporarily inserted righty Jack Roslovic.

Aho's a great player and they'll figure it out, but it's one of those neat things to watch. (I did see righty Brent Burns replace Shayne Gostisbehere on the power play; the lefty was there when I first watched after the trade.)

Martin Necas likes to carry the puck; the Avalanche have some pretty high-level guys who like that, too. He's got the skill and IQ to learn where to go for MacKinnon, but he is a different partner for Colorado's No. 1 centre than the physically imposing Rantanen.

“You have that duo,” Minnesota’s Marcus Foligno said last week. “Now, you take one away. It’s weird ... I always respected Rantanen because he carries a lot of the load. I don’t think (everyone) realizes how good he is and how much he helps out MacKinnon. Necas is a really good player, but it’s going to be weird not seeing Rantanen and MacKinnon coming over the boards together.”

Necas is averaging 22:43 ice-time in his first six Colorado games. No player is going to complain about that, but it’s an adjustment from the 18 in Carolina.

14. No one thinks Dallas is done. Depending on how they handle Miro Heiskanen’s injury status — and nobody’s going to be rushing him back for the regular season — the Stars still have about \$5 million in LTIR space. Don’t be surprised if they aren’t finished remodelling the right side of their defence.

15. The Sabres have won four in a row, but we will see if there is any long-term fallout from Sunday, when Stefan Noesen’s hit on Tage Thompson went unaddressed. One player on another team said he heard from a friend on Buffalo that there was talk of the leadership group and/or alternate captaincies being switched over what didn’t happen. What a gamer, Dennis Gilbert. Fought Mathieu Olivier three seconds into Tuesday’s game to make everyone look better. Not easy.

16. If he’s available, can see Tampa Bay lusting after Alex Tuch. They wouldn’t be the only ones.

17. In addition to Olivier, the Blue Jackets will try to extend Dante Fabbro, who has found a nice role there.

18. A three-game Wednesday means massive scout concentration, with plenty of attention at Edmonton/Chicago and Montreal/Los Angeles. There was interest in Connor Murphy a year ago, but injuries ruined his season. He’s healthy now, so plenty of eyes on him — along with Ryan Donato and Seth Jones. A lot of focus on Jake Evans in Montreal, but do not discount Joel Armia. His play is not going unnoticed.

19. The NBA’s Utah Jazz were the middleman in the massive Doncic deal. ESPN’s Tim MacMahon reported that Jazz president Danny Ainge didn’t know Doncic nor Anthony Davis were involved “until about an hour before it was completed ... But by then it was too late to do much about it.”

Kind of funny it happened a week after the Blackhawks were criticized for not getting more out of eating part of Rantanen’s salary. I asked around about this: should the Blackhawks have changed their minds, or asked for more? “How do you feel about breaking your word?” was the general response.

One thing everyone understood: GM Kyle Davidson wasn’t told specifics because Colorado demanded secrecy from Carolina. A couple executives said that, in this situation, you know what you’re being asked to retain, so you’re guessing who it could be. And, they bet Davidson was given a higher number than actually needed, to make it harder to guess who it was. Apparently, that’s a regular tactic.

20. What Connor Hellebuyck does for Winnipeg, Dustin Wolf has a chance to do for Calgary. Not only has he taken the number one job and breathed new life into the franchise, but veterans are beginning to believe he can be a franchise cornerstone. They recognize Wolf’s talent. GM Craig Conroy told teams Rasmus Andersson, Nazem Kadri and MacKenzie Weegar are off-limits. We’ll see where it goes when it really matters, but the Flames are confidently talking about keeping Andersson.

21. It did not go unnoticed that Conroy took a private plane to Philadelphia to pick up Joel Farabee and Morgan Frost. At least one Flyer took time to text the Flames about what great people they were getting.

22. Winnipeg (among others) will get down to contract business during the 4 Nations break. During my brief trip to the Manitoba capital, the quote that struck me most was from Dylan DeMelo. “This is where

I wanted to be,” he said about re-signing last summer. “I love that (management) doubled down on what we have.”

Apparently, exit meetings last year were brutally honest about what went wrong against Colorado and what needed to happen to avoid a repeat. Players showed up in great condition, they started strong and haven’t looked back. The most mystery surrounds Nikolaj Ehlers, and his teammates didn’t want to speak for him. As written above, we are in a new era, and it’s hard to predict where all of this is going. What the Jets did say was that players want to win more than anything else, and thanks to Hellebuyck, they believe they have that chance.

23. Thought Rickard Rakell would be a perfect fit for Winnipeg, but don’t believe that’s likely.

24. If you need a defenceman, keep an eye on Utah. They will soon have extra.

25. Unlike Heiskanen, Wiliam Karlsson, Jacob Markstrom et al, whose 4 Nations absence is as a result of long-term injury, Alex Pietrangelo continues to play. Watch this reaction to a hit last Sunday from Matthew Tkachuk. It’s an awkward play, but nothing you’d think would be so agonizing. It’s clear he’s playing in pain.

26. Hated to see Kaiden Guhle’s skate cut put him out; he’s suffered enough injuries. The details were gruesome, just a disgusting injury. A gentle reminder: wear the cut-resistant gear underneath socks, too.

27. As Hockey Canada considers a full-time world junior coach, one name to keep an eye on: Kris Mallette. Mallette was fired as WHL Kelowna’s bench boss in January, due to a poor start after three consecutive playoff berths. More importantly, he knows this age group of Canadian players, and has had success with them: three Gold medals at the Hlinka Gretzky Cup — one as a head coach, two as an assistant.

28. Thought it was great for hockey that McDonald’s brought together Auston Matthews and Connor McDavid for an updated commercial showdown. I loved the original — Larry Bird/Michael Jordan from 1993 “Nothing But Net” — followed by Wayne Gretzky/Mats Sundin in 1997. McDavid said he re-watched both “quite a bit as soon as I knew we were going to try to do something similar.”

In the Jordan/Bird version, the latter says, “No dunking,” so I wondered if any limits were applied between these two. “No restrictions,” said Rebecca Smart, McDonald’s Canada’s Brand Strategy Director. “We encouraged as much ad-libbing, riffing and chirping as possible to highlight their real friendship and a side we don’t often get to see from them.”

The Oilers captain said the two players didn’t have a ton of input “as the directors seemed to know our styles and preferences.”

“We definitely had some fun with it,” Matthews added. “The one where I hit Connor’s tooth out of his billboard is one of my favourites.”

29. There was never any resolution. No winner. Bird and Jordan were so fiercely competitive, I can’t imagine either being convinced to lose. Matthews and McDavid are cut from the same cloth. “They are so competitive we can’t imagine there ever being a winner,” Smart said. “They will consistently want to one up each other.”

Closest I got was asking who is the more accurate shooter. McDavid: “Tough to tell, situational for sure but I will say that 34’s release is second to none.” Matthews laughed: “Connor is one of the most accurate shooters in the league. I think we both take a lot of pride working on our accuracy.”

30. One year after the original basketball version, McDonald’s came out with an updated one, adding Charles Barkley. Will this follow the same pattern, a sequel adding another superstar? “We will leave

that to McDonald's to decide," McDavid said. Smart: "No sequel in the works, but we left it open ended for a reason." This has Leon Draisaitl written all over it.

31. Finally, because I had to know, what is each one's favourite food order? McDavid: "Non-Showdown related? Chicken McNuggets." Matthews: "The Quarter Papi, obviously." Both good choices, but nothing will ever beat two original cheeseburgers.

32. If you're looking for something to listen to, I would recommend Tim Ferriss's late January podcast with Chris Sacca. A real eye-opener.