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## **FOX 28 / Young hockey player's battle with rare brain tumor inspires community support**

**By Nick Viland – September 11, 2025**

Since she was 3 years old, Quinn Halstead has had a passion for hockey.

"Once she stepped on the ice, she hasn't really wanted to get off," Quinn's father, Dusty Halstead, said.

Growing up in Cleveland, Quinn played on boys' teams, never shying away from competition. Dusty Halstead recalled, "She always got picked out, singled out a bit, but it never put her down. She always wanted to try harder."

In 2022, the Halstead family moved to Columbus when Dusty became an equipment manager for the Blue Jackets, giving Quinn a chance to bond with professional players like goalie Elvis Merzlikins.

"We had a chance to skate together, so she's stubborn, which is really, really good and gives you that happiness and laugh on your face," Merzlikins said.

Quinn's determination earned her a spot on the AAA Blue Jackets 12U girls team. However, just as the season was starting, everything changed. Dusty Halstead said, "We took her into the emergency room for a headache." An MRI revealed a brain tumor. "We broke down. She's our only child; she's everything to us," he said. "Quinn was scared."

Six days later, Quinn underwent surgery at Nationwide Children's Hospital. Her tumor was extremely rare, with doctors telling the family that only 5% of tumors are this severe. Dusty Halstead said, "You really know what being vulnerable means. The second you would walk away, you would always just think, 'I want to trade places with her.'"

After a 10-hour surgery, doctors removed 95% of the tumor. Now, radiation will target what's left. Back at the rink, her team continues to cheer her on. A sign outside her team's locker room reads "Quinn's Crew," and her teammates pass it every day. Dusty Halstead said, "The whole organization has been unbelievable."

The Columbus Blue Jackets were left stunned by the diagnosis. Merzlikins described the day as "shock sadness" and "a really, really sad day." He added, "When stuff like this happens, I'm amazed at how we become one huge family."

The hockey community has rallied around Quinn with donations, messages, and hope. NHL superstars like Sidney Crosby and Brady Tkachuk have sent encouragement.

Crosby said, "Hopefully you can get back on the ice in no time, stronger than ever." Tkachuk added, "I'm just glad everything is feeling better, that you're doing a lot better. Just know that we're always praying for you here in Ottawa."

Quinn's goal is to lace up her skates again and join her teammates. While she heals, Merzlikins has one message for her: "Never give up as you did on the ice against me, and maybe next time when we skate together, I'm gonna let you score that goal."

Doctors have advised Quinn to refrain from physical activity for the next three months. In the meantime, she looks to motivate her team in any way she can.

## The Athletic / Dean Evason Q&A: On Chinakhov relationship, Voronkov conditioning concerns and more

By Aaron Portzline – September 15, 2025

One year ago, Columbus Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason was in a whirlwind. Hired in late July, he was still learning his way around Nationwide Arena and matching names and faces with Blue Jackets players and staffers when training camp opened.

And, of course, there was the Johnny Gaudreau tragedy three weeks earlier, which cast a pall over everything and everybody.

*The Athletic* met up with Evason last week in Nationwide Arena, continuing a tradition of preseason Q&As with Blue Jackets coaches that began during the Ken Hitchcock era (2007-10). Evason was looking tanned and refreshed after a summer in which he played more golf than some PGA pros.

The 61-year-old knows his players now. He has a firm grip on who he's working with and where he thinks the Blue Jackets are heading. He is firmly in control after an impressive first season, and he was full of energy and bite, like a coach who can't wait to get going.

The Blue Jackets' 25th season on the ice is the franchise's most anticipated season in at least five years.

During a 45-minute sit-down, Evason was asked about Yegor Chinakhov's off-season trade request, how the goaltending duties will be split between Jet Greaves and Elvis Merzlikins, and what he feels is the best way to for the Blue Jackets — one of the NHL's best stories last season — to get to the next level.

**Let's get right into it. Yegor Chinakhov asked for a trade this summer. Do you need to meet with him before camp — have you met with him? — to make sure you're on the same page?**

I sat down with him two weeks ago. The three of us (assistant Jared Boll was there, too) sat down and I said, "You asked for a trade?" He said, "Yep. If I'm not going to play, then I want to get traded." And you know what I said? I said, "That's fine. As an ex-player speaking here, you need to do what you need to do. But I wanted to clear the air with you."

I told him there's no grudge. I don't care that he asked to be traded. I don't care that he said something (publicly). It's OK. I'm going to do what I do. Nothing has changed as far as how I'm going to treat you. If you don't compete, and if you don't do the things the organization asks you to do, you won't play. If you do those things, you will play. I will not hold a grudge. I'm not here to (badmouth) you about saying something. That has no bearing. I asked him at the end of our conversation if he had any other questions and he said, "If I'm not going to play, I don't want to play here. But I'll do everything to play here." I thought it was a really good talk.

**So, onward.**

I was talking with somebody the other day and a group of guys were coming off the ice, and I heard this, "Hey, Deano!" I'm looking to see who it was, and it's Chinny. He says, "Did you see who won the golf tournament?" I said, "Yeah, you did, you f—ing (sandbagger)." Last year, he wouldn't have said that. None of this is a negative for me. I don't feel any negativity toward him. He just needs to play well.

**Do you read into the fact that he was the first guy back from Europe ahead of camp?**

I do, 100 percent. We were talking earlier this summer, like, "Is he even going to come to camp?" You don't know. But he's here. Here's here and he looks great physically, so we'll see.

**Players and coaches talk about communication all the time. As a former player, is that a strength of yours, is that something you need to get better at? What are the challenges?**

I think every coach can get better at it. The issue is, you've got a lot of people in there, a lot of personalities. I think players forget, certainly with our staff, how involved all of the coaches are in this, that it's the coaches (et al) communicating too. Just because Boll is talking to a player, it doesn't mean that we're not all communicating.

I understand the head coach weighs more. I try to go around the room and talk with all the players, but the players know by now that I'm not a guy who is bringing every guy into the coaches' room to talk with them. We, hopefully, are making the right decisions about who we have to talk to more, who we don't have to talk to as much, but we make mistakes. That's a big part of coaching now, coaching the personalities and figuring out what's right and wrong. But here we do it as a coaching staff.

**How will you start the season in goal? Is the incumbent, Merzlikins, the No. 1 until proven otherwise, or do he and Greaves start in a timeshare?**

Camp determines.

**Do you want a clear No. 1 and a clear backup?**

I don't think in today's game you can really ride one guy until the end of the season. It's too hard. Somebody said we have 15 back-to-backs on the schedule. That's a lot. You can't have one guy play like that. Do we have a number on how we want to divide the starts? No. That position, to me, is the same as forward and defense. We don't change our philosophy for that position. If one guy is playing well and rested, he'll play.

**So whoever is better in camp will be the opening-night starter?**

Yeah. We haven't picked a starter for (Oct. 9) yet. We'll see.

**You've been here for more than a calendar year now. What has surprised you about living here?**

It's bigger than I thought. I don't just mean geographically, either. It's a bigger city in all ways. When we'd come in here (with Minnesota), it didn't seem like a big city, but it is. I'd already heard that the traffic is fantastic, the golf courses, obviously... It's a big city in all aspects, it just has a wonderful small-town feel.

**You were an assistant in Minnesota before you took over as head coach. You jumped right in last season, so there was a feeling-out process. How much can you and the players benefit from your relationship now, having some roots?**

Don (Waddell) and I would be standing next to each other at this time last year and a (player) would walk past and it'd be like "Who's that?" "I don't know." Now, we walk into the dressing room over the last week or more, or the training room, and I can go up to people and give them a "What's up?"

Being honest, with everything that went down with Johnny (Gaudreau) ... it just wasn't the normal process of meeting guys. That's no way to meet people, right? The first time I met Sean Monahan was that vigil. The first time I shook (Erik) Gudbranson's hand, he just started bawling, and then I started crying. Now, you go into that room and shake hands or fist-bump and you throw a few shots at guys ... there's a rapport. It's the entire coaching staff, too, not just me.

**That detailed knowledge of these guys and how they play, does that allow you to change or tweak your systems or style of play from the general approach of last season?**

Not the overall system package. But when we're putting together line combinations, power-play groups, penalty-kill pairs, etc. ... yeah. We have a better idea of what works. We're going to play the same way. We're not blowing our system or structure up. We're tweaking some things for sure. We have to be better in those areas. Knowing the personnel will allow us to put them in better situations.

**So many Blue Jackets young players had breakout seasons last season. How convinced are you that they'll continue to launch?**

Very. Very confident. They're all at that age, right? It's not like they've played 15 years and that was their best season ever. I believe every guy you mentioned (Adam Fantilli, Kent Johnson, Kirill Marchenko, Dmitry Voronkov) is going like this (upward). They all had success, and we need them to continue to go up and have the same or better seasons. We've added to the veteran grit level, some guys who can help even more the younger players. People talk about our young players, and it's true. But we have some fantastic veteran players in that room, too, and you don't have one without the other.

**You want a nastier forecheck.**

Yes. We want to be as aggressive or more aggressive to turn pucks over than we were last season. We want to make teams realize that when they play the Blue Jackets, they're in one.

**You added Charlie Coyle and Miles Wood via trade, and signed Isac Lundestrom, but the top half of your forwards and defense is untouched. Do you like that?**

It's fantastic. Are we going to play with some stuff in camp, some combinations? Yes. We know Monahan with Voronkov and Marchenko works. We know Fantilli with (Boone) Jenner and Johnson works. That's just the top. We could do the (defensive) pairs, too. I've got lines up on my board (in the office) already, but this year I really want to play with combinations that are a little bit different, so maybe we're not as predictable as we were last season. You'll see that in the preseason, for sure.

**By the end of last season, Damon Severson wasn't playing. Healthy scratch. Obviously that's not ideal with six years remaining on his contract. How do you get him back on track?**

He is a really good player. Don and I actually met with him a couple of weeks ago. He doesn't have to prove anything. He just has to play well within our system. He has to simplify. He has natural offensive ability ... it's right there, he doesn't have to push for that. It's going to come, but he has to be a defender first and simplify in areas. We still want him involved and jumping the play, just like anybody else. But it's going to come without forcing it.

As we talked, it was clear that we're both seeing the situation the same way. He gets it. We have to get all of our players in the right mindset, and he's there.

**You've challenged Voronkov as far as his summer conditioning. What do you need to see from him in training camp?**

I'm not going to go into a ton of detail on that, except to say that when we ended last season, we didn't meet with every player. But we met with him, and we did tell him that if he doesn't come into camp in phenomenal shape, he won't play. He's not unique in that regard. We're not singling him out. He has a bit of history, but if any player comes to our camp and isn't in shape, they aren't going to play until they're in shape.

**What does that mean? No camp, no preseason games, no regular-season games...?**

We've had this discussion, and there are two schools of thought. One is, if the player isn't in shape, you play them every game — every single game — to get them in shape. To me, that's not punishment.

That's a reward. There are a million kids who would give their left nut to play in a game. My philosophy is that you don't get the right to go battle with your teammates and play in that arena if you don't deserve it. So, that kind of answers your question.

**You made several changes to support staff this offseason, and the one that probably relates most to player performance is the hiring of Barry Brennan as your strength and conditioning coach. How much of a hand did you have in that?**

I talked to a bunch of people about Barry. Don and I communicated a lot, too. Don is the boss, but I was involved, and I got a lot of feedback from people who were here before (during Brennan's first tenure, from 2000-10). What I've seen so far is that there's no bulls—. I don't want to say it's old-school, because there's a lot of new stuff in there, science, that's being used. I think Barry and Ryan (Gadbois), that's a good team there. Barry is black-and-white. I've seen it and heard it from the players. No bulls—. You don't (mess) around, you work.

**Three ugly numbers from last season: road record (14-23-4), special teams (22nd in both power play and penalty kill) and back-to-backs (2-10-0 in second games). What's the fix?**

Being honest, we were all over the place with our personnel last season, mostly because of injuries. Everybody has them, so no excuse. But when you take Boone and Monahan and Gudbranson out of our penalty kill, you're going to notice, as they all missed long stretches. My God, the back-to-backs, all 11 of the second games were on the road, and that's not the case this year. (Four of the 15 are in Nationwide.) We're also going to tweak our systems so that we can play on those nights where we don't have 100 percent energy and still be aggressive without expending so much. It's just about being smarter and more strategic to get your legs under you.

**You've got a strange preseason schedule, with four days of camp before you play four preseason games in four days. How will you handle this?**

Those first four games will require some juggling. The top guys will play three games (out of the seven scheduled) and we'll have pretty much our full lineup for the final two games. We kind of have our "ghost" lineups already with a couple of spots and decisions to make.

**This is a difficult question, and I don't quite know how to ask it with the appropriate sensitivity. The Gaudreau tragedy was so galvanizing last season. There was an emotional connection to every game, almost everything you did as a team last season. Is that this team's North Star as well?**

Like we've always said, Johnny is always with us. He will always be with us, right? That bond that this group has because of that? We are stronger. It's still there, yes. We're stronger and now we carry forward.

## **The Athletic / Flyers trade goalie Ivan Fedotov to Blue Jackets: Sources**

**By Kevin Kurz and Aaron Portzline – September 14, 2025**

The Philadelphia Flyers have traded goaltender Ivan Fedotov to the Columbus Blue Jackets for a sixth-round pick in the 2026 draft, sources from both teams confirmed on Sunday morning.

The Blue Jackets take on Fedotov's full \$3.275 million salary-cap hit, although the goaltender is owed just \$775,000 in base salary. Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman was first to report the trade.

Fedotov, 28, is 6-14-5 with an .874 save percentage and 3.29 goals-against average in 29 career games with the Flyers over the past two seasons. The 6-foot-7, 214-pound Fedotov joined the club late in the 2023-24 season after he was forced into the Russian military for one year, and signed a two-year, \$6.55 million extension shortly after the season ended. He was drafted by the Flyers in the seventh round in 2015.

### **What it means for the Blue Jackets**

It means that general manager Don Waddell and his staff can get a good night's sleep for the first time in a while. The pursuit of a third goaltender had created a major stress point as the start of training camp neared.

The Blue Jackets expect Elvis Merzlikins and Jet Greaves to share the net in Columbus, but they had nobody on the depth chart with NHL experience who could be a viable choice for recall if either of them were injured, ill or otherwise unavailable.

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When you consider how often Greaves was recalled the past two seasons when Merzlikins or former Jacket Daniil Tarasov were unavailable, that's a very important role on the club.

The hope is that Fedotov's salary cap hit (\$3.275 million) will be a deterrent to any club that considers claiming him on waivers should the Blue Jackets send him down to Cleveland toward the end of camp.

But that figure is more palatable for the Blue Jackets, who have plenty of cap space. Also, Fedotov was paid a \$2.5 million signing bonus by the Flyers on July 1, meaning the Jackets are responsible for only \$775,000 in salary.

Fedotov, set to be an unrestricted free agent when his contract expires next summer, will likely make his AHL debut with Cleveland. A Columbus team source told *The Athletic* that Fedotov is committed to playing in North America, that he's no risk to seek a return to Russia.

### **What it means for the Flyers**

The Flyers signing of free agent Dan Vladar to a two-year, \$6.7 million contract in July all but ensured that Fedotov would be reassigned to Lehigh Valley to start the 2025-26 season, with Vladar and Sam Ersson as the NHL tandem.

Had that happened, there would have been a logjam at the goaltender position in the AHL, with Fedotov, Aleksei Kolosov and 2023 second-round pick Carson Bjarnason all competing for playing time.

Fedotov's departure also probably means that the Flyers have assurances from Kolosov that he is willing to play for the Phantoms this season, which he was essentially unwilling to do in 2024-25. The 23-year-

old Kolosov still has potential as a prospect, but he was clearly not ready for the NHL last season, posting an .867 save percentage and 3.59 goals-against average in 17 games.

While some may speculate that this opens the door for the Flyers to re-sign goalie Carter Hart, that seems unlikely. *The Athletic's* Chris Johnston reported on Friday that Hart, who was found not guilty of sexual assault in July, is "looking for a fresh start, which effectively rules out a return to Philadelphia."



## The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets add goalie Ivan Fedotov in trade with Philadelphia Flyers

**Brian Hedger – September 14, 2025**

Heading into the start of training camp, the Blue Jackets have added depth to their goaltending in a trade with the Philadelphia Flyers.

Towering goalie Ivan Fedotov, 28, was acquired Sept. 14 for the Blue Jackets' 2026 sixth-round draft pick.

Fedotov, listed at 6 feet 7, has played 29 NHL games over two years with the Flyers, including 26 last season (2024-25) while posting a 6-13-4 record with a 3.15 goals-against average and .880 save percentage. Those are unsavory numbers, but Blue Jackets president/general Manager Don Waddell said the intent in acquiring Fedotov was merely adding goaltending depth.

"Ivan has great size, is athletic for a big goaltender and will provide our club with additional depth at the position," Blue Jackets president/general manager Don Waddell said in a statement. "That has been a priority for us during the offseason and this trade accomplishes that."

Fedotov will likely get a closer look for the NHL backup role behind Elvis Merzlikins in training camp, but Jet Greaves appears to have an inside track for that role. Should it play out that way, Fedotov would start the season with the AHL's Cleveland Monsters on a contract with one year left at a guaranteed \$3.275 million.

He'll become an unrestricted free agent July 1, 2026 if not re-signed.

The structuring of the two-year contract Fedotov signed with the Flyers on April 23, 2024 is interesting to note. It includes a base salary of \$775,000 per season plus two \$2.5 million signing bonus payments for a total salary-cap charge of \$3.275 million per season. If the Flyers already paid this season's bonus July 1, the Blue Jackets are only on the hook to pay his remaining base salary.

That's important to remember should Fedotov spend the majority of this season in Cleveland. It was previously reported in Philadelphia that Fedotov is intent on making his career work in North America and doesn't prefer a return to the Kontinental Hockey League in Russia.

The Flyers selected Fedotov in 2015 as a seventh-round pick (188th overall). He spent eight of the next nine seasons playing in Russia's top two leagues, including two standout years with CSKA Moscow in 2021-22 and 2023-24. He missed the 2022-23 season fulfilling an obligation to serve in the Russian military, and returned to the KHL the following year to help CSKA Moscow win the league's Gagarin Cup championship with a 16-6-0 record, 1.85 GAA and .937 save percentage in the playoffs.

The addition replaces the departure of 6-5 goalie Daniil Tarasov, who was traded to the Florida Panthers prior to the 2025 NHL Draft for a 2025 fifth-round pick. Despite trading their own sixth-round pick in 2026 for Fedotov, the Blue Jackets still have a pick in that round acquired Feb. 22, 2024 in a trade that sent forward Emil Bemstrom to the Pittsburgh Penguins.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Acquire Ivan Fedotov From Flyers for 2026 Draft Pick

**By Christopher Babos – September 14, 2025**

The Columbus Blue Jackets acquired goaltender Ivan Fedotov from the Philadelphia Flyers for a 2026 sixth-round draft pick. The 6-foot-7 Russian goaltender struggled in his first NHL season. He recorded a 6-13-4 record, a 3.15 goals-against average (GAA), and a .880 save percentage (SV%) for a Flyers club that finished tied for the fourth-worst record in the 2024-25 season. In 29 career NHL games, Fedotov is 6-14-5 with a 3.29 GAA and an .874 SV% as he transitioned to the North American-style game.

“Ivan has great size, is athletic for a big goaltender, and will provide our club with additional depth at the position,” general manager Don Waddell told the Blue Jackets website. “That has been a priority for us during the offseason, and this trade accomplishes that.”

Fedotov, 28, arrived in the NHL following several seasons in Russia’s Kontinental Hockey League (KHL). He garnered worldwide attention by backstopping the Russian Olympic Committee to a silver medal at the 2022 Olympic Games with a 4-2-0 record, a 1.61 GAA, and a .943 SV% over six games.

Fedotov joins netminders Elvis Merzlikins and Jet Greaves during Blue Jackets training camp next week. Merzlikins, 31, recorded a 26-21-5 record with a 3.14 GAA and a .892 SV% last season. His campaign ended five games earlier than anticipated after he suffered a concussion in an April 2025 loss to the Ottawa Senators. Greaves, 24, finished the 2024-25 campaign with a 7-2-2 record, a 1.99 GAA, and a .938 SV% as the Blue Jackets fell two points shy of a playoff spot.

Even with Columbus having some bright prospects in net, there was no available help coming to the Blue Jackets before today’s trade. Pyotr Andreyanov and Sergei Ivanov are signed to KHL contracts for the 2024-25 season, while Melvin Strahl made his North American debut for the Youngstown Phantoms in the United States Hockey League (USHL) last season.

## The Columbus Blue Jackets / 5 takeaways from the Columbus Blue Jackets at the Buffalo NHL Prospects Challenge

By Brian Hedger – September 15, 2025

The days of the Blue Jackets taking a team stacked with high draft picks to a prospects showcase are shrinking in the rearview mirror.

They still have highly regarded prospects, but the top two weren't available for the Jackets' three-game slate Sept. 11-14 at the 2025 NHL Prospects Challenge in Buffalo, New York. Top prospect Cayden Lindstrom, picked fourth overall in 2024, is getting ready for his first collegiate season at Michigan State and 2025 first-round pick Jackson Smith (15<sup>th</sup> overall) is at Penn State.

Despite their lack of star power, though, the Blue Jackets put together a competitive team of drafted prospects and free agents that went 2-1-0 after downing the Pittsburgh Penguins 5-4 in overtime to conclude the showcase Sept. 14.

Nicholas Sima, a free agent, took a pass from Owen Griffin (2025 fifth-round pick) in 3-on-3 OT and slid the puck between the goalie's pads to end it with his second goal of the game. The Blue Jackets won their final two games against the Buffalo Sabres and Penguins by a combined margin of 12-9 after opening the weekend Sept. 11 with an 8-2 loss to the New Jersey Devils.

Here are five takeaways from the Blue Jackets' time in Buffalo:

### **Columbus Blue Jackets forward prospects Luca Pinelli, Owen Griffin and Oiva Keskinen shine**

Finding quality NHL contributors in the mid-to-late rounds can feel a bit like drawing lottery tickets, only they're not randomly chosen. Many hours and travel miles teams put into scouting amateur players can pay off with picks made beyond the first two rounds, and this Blue Jackets prospect team showed promise.

Luca Pinelli, selected 114<sup>th</sup> overall in 2023 (fourth round), led the Jackets in scoring with five points on a goal and four assists. He led the way in the second game with a goal and three assists in the victory over the Sabres and now looks to carry that success into the preseason leading into his first full professional season. Pinelli may be one of AHL Cleveland's top scoring forwards, and a strong effort there could lead to his NHL debut at some point this season.

Keskinen, a seventh-round pick in 2023, finished the showcase with four points on a goal and three assists. He centered the top line and first power-play group, showing impressive skills, skating and poise with the puck. Keskinen has steadily improved with Tappara in Finland's top circuit, Liiga, and will continue that climb if he doesn't make the NHL roster in his first Blue Jackets training camp.

Griffin, an undersized center from the OHL's Oshawa Generals selected in the fifth round of the 2025 draft, joined Pinelli and Keskinen by standing out offensively. Centering the Blue Jackets' third line, he added four points on two goals and two assists in the showcase, which was his first action in a Blue Jackets' uniform.

### **Jordan Dumais scratched for Columbus Blue Jackets' finale at 2025 Buffalo NHL Prospects Challenge**

After skating in warmups for the Blue Jackets' final game, forward Jordan Dumais was scratched for precautionary reasons related to lower body tightness.

The issue isn't considered a concern heading into the start of training camp, which starts Sept. 17 with medical testing and evaluations before on-ice work starts Sept. 18 at Nationwide Arena. Anything

related to the lower body with Dumais, however, raises slight concern after two sports hernia surgeries delayed the undersized scoring winger's development since he was taken 96<sup>th</sup> overall (third round) in 2022.

### **Nicholas Sima leads large group of Columbus Blue Jackets free agents at 2025 Buffalo NHL Prospects Challenge**

Sima's two-goal game to lift the Blue Jackets to victory over the Penguins in the finale wasn't the only time he drew notice for producing offensively. He scored three goals to lead the team in goals at the showcase, displaying a scoring knack to go with a rugged style and big body at 6 feet 3, 194 pounds.

Sima, 20, is out of eligibility at the junior level after playing in the OHL with the North Bay Battalion and Saginaw Spirit. He'll look to start his professional next and took an impressive stride forward in this showcase event with the Blue Jackets.

### **NCAA commitments prompt Columbus Blue Jackets to ice large contingent of free-agent prospects**

Twelve of the Blue Jackets' players in Buffalo (52%) were there on amateur tryout offers. That included forward Tyler Peddle, whom they selected in 2023 (seventh round) and opted not to sign prior to losing their exclusive negotiating rights with him.

That's a large percentage of a prospects roster dedicated to prospects who aren't affiliated to their showcase team, but that's a trend that likely will continue with more drafted prospects opting to play collegiately. Lindstrom and Smith weren't the only missing prospects for the Blue Jackets, who have a contingent of mid-to-late round picks from the past two drafts playing for NCAA teams.

### **Tyler Peddle gets new memory with Columbus Blue Jackets**

The Blue Jackets were a part of another special memory for Peddle, who faced his younger brother, Brady, in the finale against Pittsburgh.

Under the direction of former general manager Jarmo Kekalainen, the Blue Jackets made a trade in 2023 to select Tyler Peddle with the final pick in the draft. His brother, a defenseman, was selected 91<sup>st</sup> overall by the Penguins 91<sup>st</sup> in 2025 (third round).

Tyler is a power forward who stands 6 feet 1, 209 while Brady is a physical defenseman who's 6-3, 203. They didn't square off in a brotherly scrap, but Tyler did drop the gloves in the second period against Penguins defenseman Quinn Beauchesne. Adding to the family's Blue Jackets ties is their father, Brad Peddle, an amateur scouting consultant while also holding his full-time position as head coach for St. Francis Xavier University's hockey team in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Prospects to Watch at NHL Prospects Challenge

**By Matthew Buhrmann – September 11, 2025**

The Columbus Blue Jackets will have 23 players at the NHL Prospects Challenge, running from Sept. 11-15 in Buffalo, New York. This year's tournament will feature the Blue Jackets, Boston Bruins, Buffalo Sabres, New Jersey Devils, and Pittsburgh Penguins.

The Blue Jackets' roster includes 13 forwards, seven defensemen, and three goaltenders. Cleveland Monsters head coach Trent Vogelhuber will be behind the bench, coaching many players he will see in Cleveland this season. With two extra skaters beyond a typical game lineup, expect a forward and a defenseman to rotate in and out of the lineup over the weekend.

The Blue Jackets' first game is on Thursday, Sept. 11, against the Devils at 7:00 PM ET, following a morning skate. They return on Saturday, Sept. 13, for another 7:00 PM ET matchup, this time against the host Sabres. The tournament wraps up on Sunday, Sept. 14, when they take on the Penguins at 3:30 PM ET.

With a good mix of drafted prospects, free-agent signings, and invitees, this tournament should provide an early look at who is ready to take the next step in the organization's pipeline and who might be signed in the future. Here are some players to watch by position.

### **Forwards**

The Blue Jackets' 13 forwards include Josh Avery, Ryder Boulton, Jordan Dumais, Owen Griffin, Brendan Hoffmann, Oiva Keskinen, Max McCue, Ryland Mosley, Tyler Peddle, Luca Pinelli, Nicholas Sima, Evan Van Gorp, and Jack Williams.

### **Jack Williams**

Williams already has one NHL game under his belt after making his debut in the 2024-25 season finale. Signed as an undrafted free agent (UFA) out of Northeastern University earlier this year, he scored 41 points in 37 games in 2024-25 and quickly made an impression with his fast pace and high compete level.

Williams can play both wing and center, and his versatility should give him a legitimate chance to crack the NHL lineup at some point this season as a depth piece who can take draws.

Right now, Williams is part of a deep forward group that includes Luca Del Bel Belluz, Zach Aston-Reese, James Malatesta, and Mikael Pyhtia, who can step up from Cleveland if needed. In Buffalo, expect Williams to slot into a top-six role where he can show off more of his two-way game.

### **Luca Pinelli**

Pinelli is coming off a strong season in the Ontario Hockey League (OHL), where he scored 71 points in 52 games. He also gained valuable pro experience during Cleveland's Calder Cup Playoff run, contributing four points in six games. On top of that, he represented Canada at the 2025 World Junior Championship.

Drafted in the fourth round in 2023, Pinelli has consistently outperformed expectations based on his draft status and has the look of a long-term NHL option. This tournament will be a chance to measure how much his game has grown over the offseason. Expect him to see time in the top six, likely centering one of the first two lines, and maybe spending some time on the wing.

## **Oiva Keskinen**

The Blue Jackets signed Finnish center Keskinen in May 2025 to a three-year entry-level contract (ELC). A seventh-round pick in 2023 (194th overall), he was one of the final selections made by former GM Jarmo Kekäläinen. At 6-feet, 181 pounds, the late-round steal profiles as a possible bottom-six forward in the NHL, depending on how quickly he adapts to the North American pro game.

He could spend this season with the Monsters, though there is still the possibility he remains with Tappara in Finland. Regardless, his development will be important for Columbus's future center depth. At the Prospects Challenge, he should see middle-six minutes at center/wing with plenty of opportunities to showcase his skill.

## **Defensemen**

The Blue Jackets' seven defensemen consist of: Will Bishop, Jakub Chomiak, Charlie Elick, P.J. Fagan, Marcus Kearsey, Guillaume Richard, and Caleb MacDonald.

### **Guillaume Richard**

Richard, a 6-foot-2, 187-pound defenseman, signed his ELC on Mar. 30 after finishing a four-year career at Providence College. He then joined Cleveland at the end of the season, where he recorded four points in eight regular-season games and added two more in six playoff appearances.

A steady, low-risk defender, Richard projects as a possible third-pairing option down the road. With American Hockey League (AHL) experience already under his belt, he will likely play on one of the top two pairings in Buffalo, giving him an early chance to stand out.

### **Caleb MacDonald**

MacDonald signed out of the University of North Dakota this offseason and immediately adds size to the blue line at 6-foot-4 and 229 pounds. His offensive production in college was limited, but his physical game and defensive reliability are strong.

The question will be whether he can handle quicker, more skilled competition in Buffalo and show signs of developing a two-way game. He profiles as a depth option who could work his way into NHL consideration with time in the AHL.

### **Jakub Chomiak**

Chomiak comes to camp as an invite and could be a candidate for a contract down the line. He put up 32 points in 54 games with the OHL's Kitchener Rangers last season, adding eight more points in 16 playoff games. An elite passer, he racked up 35 assists and was one of the Rangers' top playmakers on the back end.

Leading up to his draft year in 2024, Chomiak was highly regarded in the NHL Draft rankings, but he ultimately went undrafted. His strong OHL season has earned him another chance to impress, and this tournament will be a key opportunity to prove he belongs with better competition moving forward.

## **Goalies**

The Blue Jackets are bringing three goalies to Buffalo: two signed prospects, Evan Gardner and Nolan Lalonde, along with invite Mason Vaccari of the OHL's Kingston Frontenacs. They will likely get one game each, for management and coaches to fairly evaluate them.

### **Evan Gardner**

Gardner signed with Columbus in March after a strong season in the Western Hockey League (WHL). He played one game with Cleveland at the end of the regular season and credited goalie coach Brad Thiessen and Jet Greaves for helping build his confidence.

“Getting into that game was great for my confidence and kind of reassuring me that I am able to compete at that level right now,” Gardner said. “I got to learn from a guy like Jet, who was lights out to end the season here. To watch him and be around him all the time down there was awesome for me. He was great to me.”

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

The tournament should give him another important chance to show his development and push for playing time at the AHL level.

### **Nolan Lalonde**

Lalonde is set to begin his pro career after finishing last season in the OHL with the Soo Greyhounds, where he played some of his best hockey late in the campaign.

“Everyone’s development path is different,” Thiessen noted at this off-season’s development camp. “We felt like last year it was best for him to go back to junior. He had a good year in junior. Late in the year, I think he played his best hockey with them. I am excited about him coming into pro now.”

Signed to an ELC in 2022, Lalonde still has plenty to prove. He will likely serve as the Monsters’ second or third goaltender this season, depending on whether GM Don Waddell adds a veteran goalie for organizational depth.

### **Mason Vaccari**

Vaccari, a 5-foot-10 netminder from the Frontenacs, earned his invite with his athletic play and decent numbers in the OHL. Though undersized compared to most modern NHL goaltenders, his quickness and compete level stand out. He will be looking to make the most of this opportunity to earn further consideration with the organization once his junior career ends. He will play for the OHL’s Flint Firebirds this season.

With the number of goaltenders expected to be in Cleveland this season, it would not be surprising to see one spend time in the ECHL, similar to how Cleveland’s Pavel Cajan was assigned to the Cincinnati Cyclones last season. The Prospects Challenge should give the staff a clearer picture of where each goalie stands heading into preseason and how the depth chart might shake out.

At this moment, none of the goaltenders currently on Cleveland’s roster, including Lalonde, Gardner, and Zach Sawchenko, are considered ready for NHL minutes. Because of that, Waddell has already noted that a third NHL-ready goalie will likely be added after training camp begins, someone capable of stepping in as a reliable backup if Greaves or Elvis Merzlikins are unavailable. This tournament will still be an important opportunity for the Blue Jackets’ young goalies to show where they are in their development, but it is clear the organization wants more NHL-level proven depth ahead of this season.

The NHL Prospects Challenge is always a good early test for young players, and this year’s Blue Jackets group offers plenty of storylines and a bunch of players who’ve never played together. Some, like Williams, Pinelli, and Jordan Dumais, are pushing for NHL minutes, while others are focused on finding a

role at the pro level or building their game before heading back to junior. And then there are players like Chromiak and Vaccari, who are fighting simply to earn a longer look as invitees.

This weekend marks the return of hockey as the first real chance to see what some of the next wave of Blue Jackets prospects can do.