



**Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips
November 7-8, 2024**

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Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets leave San Jose frustrated: 3 takeaways

By Brian Hedger- November 7, 2024

Which stings more for the Blue Jackets?

Having their doors blown off in back-to-back games this past weekend against two of the NHL's best teams or dominating the league's worst team late Tuesday/early Wednesday and losing to the San Jose Sharks, 2-1, in overtime at SAP Center?

More:Columbus Blue Jackets vs San Jose Sharks score today: Live NHL updates, highlights

If it helps you decide, it should also be mentioned the winning goal was scored by former Blue Jackets center Alexander Wennberg, whose propensity to shy from shooting led to his contract being bought out in 2021. Also, while mulling an answer, here are three takeaways from the Blue Jackets' third straight loss:

Columbus Blue Jackets already regret frustrating OT loss to San Jose Sharks

The Jackets dominated so thoroughly that you can pick almost any statistic and see how much it favored them. The only one that counted for two standings points, however, was the actual goal tally that gave San Jose a win.

"We did a lot of the things we talked about (Monday)," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said during his postgame television interview on FanDuel Sports Network. "We kept the puck out of the net (better). We had a ton of great looks. We just didn't score (enough). As far as how we played? We're very pleased with that."

That's because the Jackets owned everything else.

According to Natural Stat Trick, they finished with commanding advantages at even strength in attempts (75-45, 62.5%), unblocked attempts (58-34, 63%), shots on goal (43-25, 63.2%), scoring chances (40-17, 70.2%) and high-danger chances (21-8, 72.4%).

Looking at expected goals, the Blue Jackets finished with an edge of 4.68 expected goals to 1.41 for the Sharks at even strength, which is a 76.9% share. Including expected goals in all situations, it becomes a whopping 70.8% margin favoring Columbus (5.36 to 2.21).

"Very frustrating," former Sharks forward Kevin Labanc said of his return to San Jose. "I think we did a good job bouncing back from the previous two games, but it's a matter of finding a goal, and they got one in OT ... and there goes the game. That should've been a win for us."

That it wasn't, was astounding.

That's a credit to Sharks goalie Vitek Vanecek (50 saves), who improved to 7-0-0 all-time against the Blue Jackets. It's also a reminder of how inconsistent the Blue Jackets can be finishing scoring chances, something that has troubled them for two or three years now. They scored six goals in each of their first four victories, but only one in San Jose despite giant edges in offensive metrics.

This was a major missed opportunity to defeat one of the NHL's youngest teams, and it won't be forgotten.

Alexander Wennberg makes Columbus Blue Jackets pay for costly OT breakdown against San Jose Sharks

There aren't many players left in Columbus who were teammates with Wennberg, who is still being paid \$891,667 this season and next as part of the contract buyout that made him an unrestricted free agent in October 2020.

Two of his former teammates, however, were on the ice when he won it for San Jose. Zach Werenski was one of three skaters unable to stop Wennberg's solo rush with stick checks, while Merzlikins couldn't stop his wrist shot. That had to be a galling finish for those two plus the Jackets who weren't around for Wennberg's time in Columbus — which, ironically, was notable for his tendency not to shoot. Wennberg didn't pass up his shot Tuesday, after dangling through Sean Monahan, Cole Sillinger and Werenski.

"How it ended, we didn't play that rush very well in the 3-on-3," Evason said. "They make a good play on (Wennberg's goal), but we could've corrected that, as well. They should never be able to come through the middle of the ice like that off a rush."

Columbus Blue Jackets continue juggling lines against San Jose Sharks

Evason and his coaching staff keep mixing and matching forwards while looking for the best combinations up front. They're shuffling forwards less often than Pascal Vincent did last season, but not by much.

Yegor Chinakhov and Cole Sillinger keep moving between the first and second lines as left wings, rookie Mikael Pyyhtia has played with all four lines, and that's without mentioning Labanc, Zach Aston-Reese, James van Riemsdyk and Dmitri Voronkov all on the move in different roles. Voronkov's early return from an apparent shoulder injury gave the coaching staff an extra forward, which threw off the Jackets' early chemistry that was forming.

Aston-Reese was the odd man out in San Jose, a healthy scratch, while Pyyhtia flip-flopped with Labanc in the game — going from the second line to the fourth.

The Jackets also have Kent Johnson progressing in his rehab of an apparent shoulder injury. He could be ready by the end of November and will step back into the lineup when cleared. That will give the Jackets two extra forwards and even more options while searching for consistency up front.

It could take a while to settle on a regular lineup.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets fall in OT to San Jose's Alex Wennberg, who's still on Columbus' payroll

By Aaron Portzline- November 7, 2024

How tough was Tuesday's loss in San Jose for the Columbus Blue Jackets? They lost on an overtime goal from a player who is still on their payroll, and they were beaten — yet again — by a goaltender who has pretty much owned them for the past four seasons.

Alexander Wennberg weaved through three Blue Jackets and scored at 3:11 of overtime to send the San Jose Sharks to a 2-1 win over the Blue Jackets before an announced crowd of 10,376 in SAP Center. But it was the Jackets' inability to beat Sharks goaltender Vitek Vaněček that was most frustrating.

And that's nothing new.

Vaněček denied the Blue Jackets' first 43 shots on goal and finished with a career-high 49 saves, improving to 7-0-0 with a .950 save percentage and 1.55 goals-against average in his career vs. Columbus.

The Blue Jackets' only goal was scored at 9:17 of the third period when Kirill Marchenko buried a rebound off a Damon Severson shot.


"Their goalie made some unbelievable saves at the end," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason told reporters after the game. "I'm not sure how many chances (we had), but a lot of Grade-As that certainly could have changed the momentum or, obviously, the outcome of the game.

"Maybe (we could have had) more second or third opportunities, like we had in the third period. We got more rebounds, we got more whacks at the puck that maybe we didn't get over (Vaněček's) pad."

Wennberg is playing for his fourth club since the Blue Jackets bought out his contract following the 2019-20 season — Florida, Seattle, the New York Rangers and now San Jose, with whom he signed a two-year, \$10 million free-agent contract last summer.

But that's not all the money he's making. Wennberg is still on the Blue Jackets' books — to the tune of \$892,000 per season — through next season.

Wennberg wins it!

The Sharks forward goes end to end for the @SUBWAYCanada OT Winner 
pic.twitter.com/XoJC3BGp6I

— Sportsnet (@Sportsnet) November 6, 2024

They defended him in OT like he was still on the payroll, too. Wennberg skated with speed into the neutral zone, cut between Jackets forwards Sean Monahan and Cole Sillinger just as he entered the attack zone, then skated wide of defenseman Zach Werenski for a clean look on goaltender Elvis Merzlikins.

Wennberg's wrist shot from the left side of the crease beat Merzlikins on his glove side. It was his second OT winner of the season (14 games), matching the total he scored in the first 712 games of his career.

"(Every loss) is frustrating," Evason said. "How it ended ... we didn't play that rush very well on the three-on-three.

“They make a good play, but we could have corrected that. You should never be able to come through the middle of the ice like that off the rush.”

Tuesday’s game marked the fifth time the Blue Jackets had 49 shots or more on goal but still lost. Every Blue Jackets player in the lineup — save for Merzlikins — had at least one shot on goal. Severson and third-line center Justin Danforth each had six shots on goal.

Werenski played a career-high 31:26, while his defensive partner Ivan Provorov played 29:16, the fourth-most minutes of his career. With three days off before Columbus’ next game — Saturday vs. the Los Angeles Kings in Staples Center — Evason was willing to empty the tank.

Vaněček has now beaten the Blue Jackets with his third different franchise. He was 5-0 while with the New Jersey Devils, and 1-0 with the Washington Capitals.

“Vitek had a great game,” said Blue Jackets forward Kevin Labanc, who left the Sharks as a free agent this summer after eight seasons in San Jose. “We had 50 shots on net, and he only gave up one. He did his part. We didn’t do ours. That’s the way the game goes.”

The Blue Jackets have now dropped three straight after a modest four-game (3-0-1) point streak. They were challenged by Evason to get back to the hard-skating, aggressive system they played at the start of the season before suffering two lopsided losses last weekend, 6-2 to Winnipeg and 7-2 to Washington.

They did play better. Merzlikins, who finished with 26 saves, wasn’t under constant attack on Tuesday, and the Blue Jackets dominated the game by most metrics and measures.

But after a fast start to the season offensively, they’ve managed just seven goals in their last four games. They ran into a red-hot Vaněček on Tuesday.

“We did a lot of the things we talked about,” Evason said. “We kept the puck out of our net. We had a ton of great looks. We just didn’t score. But as far as how we played, we’re very pleased with that.”

Aaron Portzline is a senior writer for The Athletic NHL based in Columbus, Ohio. He has been a sportswriter for more than 30 years, winning national and state awards as a reporter at the Columbus Dispatch. In addition, Aaron has been a frequent contributor to the NHL Network and The Hockey News, among other outlets. Follow Aaron on Twitter @Aportzline

[BlueJackets.com / Blue Jackets military honoree fought in World War II](#)

By Garrison McDaniel- November 7, 2024

Coming from a long line of military veterans, 100-year-old Walter Stitt Jr. never thought twice about risking his life to fight against the Germans in World War II.

Recognized by the Blue Jackets on Oct. 17 as part of the the Elk+Elk Military Salute program, Stitt turned 18 just in time for America to enter the war and for him to go against his family's wishes and volunteer himself for his country.

Now he has spent the better part of 80 years with traumatic memories and an abundance of wartime stories to tell. These stories are all in his book, *Surviving Three Shermans: With the 3rd Armored Division into the Battle of the Bulge*.

Stitt's title for the book, which also appears on its cover?

What I Didn't Tell My Mother About My War.

Early Life

Stitt's father was a veteran of World War I and his great-grandfather fought in the Civil War. These role models made his decision to enlist an easier one than most.

In high school in Elm Grove, W.Va., Stitt played football and basketball briefly, but his parents always had an emphasis on education. Both graduated college, and they shared that expectation of their son.

Stitt graduated from high school in West Virginia in 1942. Once he suspected he and his friends were about to be drafted into the war, he took matters into his own hands and volunteered.

"I ran down and volunteered at the draft board," he said. "Oh, they were just tickled to death to have me show up and volunteer."

That decision came with some backlash from his father, who knew the atrocities of war. However, Walter would not be denied a chance to fight for his country with his high school friends.

Wartime Stories

Stitt trained at Fort Polk in Louisiana for 14 months before arriving in Scotland with the 33rd Armored Regiment, 3rd Armored Division, E Company on June 6, 1944, more famously known as D-Day. Luckily for Stitt, he just narrowly avoided the horrors that occurred on the beaches of Normandy that day.

He and his unit would go through the United Kingdom before ultimately ending up in Somerset County, Wales.

"Lovely little town, had a gorgeous cathedral," Stitt said. "Some things I left out of my book, one of them was that the first warm beer I had had stuff floating in it."

"They told us what our behavior was supposed to be, you know, which went right in one ear and out the other."

He did eventually land on Omaha Beach after the initial invasion, but not without some difficulty getting to shore.

"The waves were too high to land us, so we just pitched up and down for about two days and they saw how many people they could get seasick on the way over," he said.

His first night in France, he became aware of the dangers of war as he and his unit had to dig into foxholes as they were bombed by a German plane.

It's a moment he laughs about now.

"They turned on the spotlights and tried to find him, I have laughed over the years because if they didn't turn those lights on, he wouldn't have known where he was," Stitt said. "He'd have probably flown right out on the Atlantic Ocean and never been seen after."

He followed behind the front line of the war for a couple months until his sergeant decided he was ready to operate a Sherman tank, where he would spend the rest of the war.

"We all went with the same thing in mind," Stitt said. "If this tank is made in America by Americans, there isn't anything in the world any better than this tank."

He was initially trained to be the gunner in a tank; however, he was needed as a loader. He was more than happy to make the adjustment if it meant being inside of a well-armored vehicle.

"I felt better because I'd already been shot at by a sniper, and I had already been around with bombs dropped," Stitt said. "I thought, well, once I'm in this iron shell, it's going to be different, you know. I'm protected."

It was also easier on his conscience to be the loader rather than gunner.

"When you're putting all those shells in there, you don't think that they're shooting people. You just do what you're supposed to do," he said. "Then when you move over near the gunner, you got the crosshairs and all of a sudden you're going to step on that trigger. It's just not the way we're brought up."

Although he felt safe inside the tanks, there were many instances he came inches away from death.

During a battle where he lost his tank commander and had to be the senior officer from that point forward in the day, he lost his tank and he and his unit had to rush to a nearby house to take cover.

"I reached up and my head felt cold, and I just brought down blood," Stitt said.

He was wounded by shrapnel that fortunately did not cut deep enough, and he was able to survive. However, he was picking shrapnel out of his head for years following the war. When he was in the field hospital, the doctor started picking out pieces, one of which Walter has saved for 80 years since and still has hanging in his war memorabilia room at home.

He was able to keep calm during this by operating emotionlessly and without too much thought.

"I'm obeying orders. He tells me what the target is, and I'm heading to that target," Stitt said. "Of course, I've got my head down there most of the time watching to see if I see a target."

Since he was in a tank while he was in France, he could not recall the specific towns that he fought in. However, he remembers he fought through three towns in France.

When he and his unit arrived in Belgium, he remembers surrounding German forces in Mons, part of a decisive victory for the Americans over Germany.

"A few Germans tried the next day, when they realized they were surrounded, to make it out and didn't make it, and the rest of them surrendered. It was something like 14 or 15,000 Germans that we captured in Mons," Stitt said.

Stitt also fought in the Battle of the Bulge and was in one of the first tanks to cross the Siegfried Line into Germany.

After seeing three Sherman tanks get destroyed, being wounded twice and watching many of his fellow countrymen lose their lives, Stitt left Europe safely and returned home to his parents.

Post-War Life

For his efforts, Stitt received a Purple Heart with the Oak Leaf Cluster, and a few years ago he was awarded the Legion of Honor, France's highest honor for military members and civilians.

Immediately following the war he went to Marietta College in southeastern Ohio, fulfilling the expectations his parents had for him. This is where he would meet his wife, Betty.

Betty – who passed away in 2009 – was an English teacher, and while he was writing his book, he could hear her judging his grammar and punctuation.

“That whole thing is that my wife, whom I married on the day she graduated from Marietta College, was cum laude in English,” Stitt said. “All the time we were married, anytime I wrote something, she would look through it to see how bad it was.”

Upon graduating from college, Stitt would move around the Midwest a few times before ultimately finding his home in South Bend, Ind., where he found his calling as a Lutheran minister.

He would reconnect with the 3rd Armored Division as he took on the role as treasurer of the association. Here he found common ground with other soldiers and began to talk about his experiences.

“It's only after I started going to reunions, I began to talk more about with the family or anybody else,” Stitt said.

His daughter, Beverly Rutan, understands the importance this group had to him and allowed him to open up about his time in Europe.

“I think that was pretty common, though, with a World War II group, because they didn't talk about it,” Rutan said.

After Walter left his home in South Bend to move to Springfield, Ohio, to be closer to his family, he and Beverly found a box of letters that he wrote to his mother during his time in the war.

“I couldn't believe that my mother had saved all those letters,” Stitt said. “There were over 80, yeah, almost 90 letters.”

The contents of those letters, although written during his time in Europe, excluded many of the details of the combat he faced overseas. Which was the idea behind his book and why he chose the title *What I Didn't Tell My Mother About My War*.

[BlueJackets.com / Taking stock of the Blue Jackets' first 12 games](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- November 8, 2024

With a break in the schedule, 12 games played and 70 to go, now seems like the perfect time to evaluate where the Blue Jackets are in the 2024-25 season.

There have been some bright spots – including a historic start in the goal-scoring department, plus a 3-0-1 stretch that included victories over consistent playoff teams Toronto, Edmonton and the New York Islanders – and some frustration, such as the weekend’s pair of losses to red-hot Winnipeg and Washington teams.

Add it all up and the Blue Jackets are 5-5-2, a point-per-game pace that would leave the team short of a postseason berth but would also be a massive improvement on the past two seasons.

When Columbus was in the midst of its four-game point streak, head coach Dean Evason noted two things that continue to be true – there have been bright spots, but there’s still plenty of work to do on a night-in, night-out basis.

“It’s such a competitive league,” Evason said. “You have to compete every night and hopefully you can get your share of two points. To get off to a good start, sure, it’s great, and it’s also great to get that thought process that we can rebound after games, that the leadership is strong in there, that they’re saying and preparing the right way to play that next game regardless of what happens.

“We talk about where, when and who we play, it doesn’t matter. We just play the same way, and so far we’ve been able to do that.”

There have been some hiccups along the way, but the Blue Jackets have shown signs of being a fun team to watch through the first 12 games.

We’ll take a look at three good signs for the team so far, followed by a couple of areas the Blue Jackets can seek to improve.

What’s Working So Far

1. Improved structure: The eye test shows the Blue Jackets have been much better at getting out of their defensive zone and then getting on transition to try to create offense, which Evason has preached as the way you have to play in the modern NHL.

The numbers show that as well. A season ago, per MoneyPuck.com, the Blue Jackets allowed 2.95 expected goals per 60 minutes at 5-on-5. (Expected goals is a measure of shot quantity and shot quality.) This year, so far the team has allowed 2.63 xG per 60, showing an improvement in not allowing teams to set up and create offense.

There are always going to be situations where a team gets stuck in its own end, but it’s happening a lot less frequently this season to the Blue Jackets than in years past.

“I think we’ve done well defensively in our end, so it allows us to play offense,” Zach Werenski said. “We’ve closed down plays quickly. We’ve broken the puck out really clean. That just allows you to jump up and play offense.”

2. Youngsters stepping up: A lot of that offense has come from the continued steps made by the talented young offensive players the Blue Jackets have drafted and worked into the lineup in recent years.

Though the offensive spigot has dried up a bit the past few games, the Blue Jackets got off to a franchise-best start at putting the puck in the net, and the team's 40 goals through 12 games remains the second-most in team history.

Now in his third NHL season, Kirill Marchenko leads the way with five goals and 13 points, a pace that would allow him to challenge Artemi Panarin's team record for points in a season. In year four of his NHL career, Yegor Chinakhov has three goals and nine points to tie for third in team scoring, while fellow fourth-year player Cole Sillinger is fifth on the team with eight points. Adam Fantilli has added six points, while fellow Michigan product Kent Johnson had five points in four games before suffering an upper-body injury.

There will be ebbs and flows throughout the season for young players, but there have been encouraging signs they're working to become more consistent scorers.

"We've got a great mix of young guys who are willing to learn and getting better each and every night," Damon Severson said. "You can see the growth. It was very evident in training camp this year they're doing the right things. Sometimes it's not that fun to do the right things because some of these guys have been skilled players their whole lives, but they're buying in and doing the things that are necessary for us to win hockey games."

3. Unity and belief: Evason has spoken at length about the close nature of the squad since his arrival, and the Blue Jackets have shown that throughout the season thus far.

While things haven't been perfect, they've responded well to adversity and clearly bought in to what the coaching staff is preaching. And there's an added element of togetherness – brought on by a couple years of playing together and boosted by off-ice events – that has allowed the team to build some confidence and belief so far.

"I think it's a group that wants to win," said veteran Sean Monahan, who has helped stabilize the lineup and added 11 points. "I have a feeling this group wants to be in the hunt."

Added Cole Sillinger: "We've set the bar for ourselves. We know what we need to do to play well and win hockey games. It's just a matter of trying to be consistent and holding each other accountable to that."

What Needs Improvement

1. Consistency: As Sillinger noted, the biggest key to a long NHL season is consistency, and the Blue Jackets learned that lesson over the weekend.

In back-to-back losses to Winnipeg and Washington teams that got off to hot starts, Columbus was outscored 13-4 and took a pair of losses to end their point streak. While there was an element of tipping your hat to the opposition, the Blue Jackets also learned a lesson – when playing against the NHL's best, they have to be on their game or things can go south quickly.

"I think it exposes what happens when you're not playing your game and not playing hard enough," Werenski said. "We'll learn from it."

Columbus did just that, playing with pace and speed and putting 50 shots on goal in Tuesday's overtime loss at San Jose. While there was frustration at not being able to finish and get the two points, it was another sign the team is learning through adversity.

To Evason, that's part of the process for any team during an NHL season, especially one as young as the Jackets still are.

“There’s your consistency, right?” Evason said when asked if this was part of the natural growth for a team. “I’m not just saying consistency in how we play, it’s consistency in how we think, how we handle situations and how we move forward. It’s a process, and we’re going through it right now.”

2. Clean up around the net: We did say the Blue Jackets have gotten better defensively, and it is true. But a look at some numbers shows Columbus has some areas of improvement to work on.

Per MoneyPuck, the Blue Jackets are 21st in the NHL in expected goal differential at 5-on-5, and the team’s mark of 2.63 expected goals against per 60 minutes at 5-on-5 is 24th in the NHL. Again, that’s a major improvement from a year ago, but still not among the elite marks in the league.

Per Natural Stat Trick, the Blue Jackets have had 46.5 percent of the high-danger scoring chances at 5-on-5 this season, which places 24th in the NHL.

While the Blue Jackets are around league average in shot share and scoring chances, they need to improve a tad on not giving up chances around the net, but that also could be part of implementing and adjusting to a new system.

1st Ohio Battery / Blue Jackets Get 51 Shots on Goal, but Fall 2-1 in Overtime to Vanacek, Sharks

By Ed Francis- November 7, 2024

Some nights, there isn't much else you can do.

The Columbus Blue Jackets registered 50+ shots on goal for the first time in more than a calendar year and just the second time since 2020, but 51 would not be enough as goalie Vitek Vanecek and the San Jose Sharks get a 2-1 overtime win over the CBJ.

Kirill Marchenko scored the lone goal of the game for the Blue Jackets, who now stand at 5-5-2 on the season after the overtime loss.

Here's how it all went down in late-night hockey:

1ST PERIOD:

Five total penalties led to a pair of Blue Jacket power plays and one for the Sharks (the other two penalties were offsetting minors), but neither team scored in the opening period. Major categories favored the Blue Jackets: 13-6 in shots on goal, 28-12 in shot attempts, and 4-3 in high danger opportunities.

2ND PERIOD:

(7:51 — SJ Goal, Briefly): The Sharks appear to take a 1-0 lead with 12:06 left in the second period, but the Blue Jackets quickly challenge for offsides and win it. The clock is reset to 12:09 and the scoreboard goes back to 0-0.

(18:49 — SJ Goal): Second time's a charm for the Sharks as this time the goal stands to give San Jose a 1-0 lead with just over a minute left in the second period. This came just three seconds after Columbus completed a penalty kill and they weren't able to get set five-on-five before Jack Thompson takes a nice look from Will Smith and beats a diving Elvis. For the 22-year-old Thompson: his first career goal.

3RD PERIOD + OVERTIME:

(P3, 9:17 — CBJ Goal): After peppering Sharks goalie Vitek Vanecek in the first half of the final frame, the Blue Jackets finally break through with 10:43 left in the third period on a Kirill Marchenko rebound goal on a slapper by Damon Severson that registered 88 miles an hour on the radar.

(OT, 3:11 — SJ Goal): It's the former Blue Jacket, Alex Wennberg, getting his third goal of the season with less than two minutes left in overtime to give the Sharks a 2-1 extra-time victory. Justin Danforth had been robbed just a minute before by Vanecek on what was maybe the Sharks goalie best save of the night.

CBJ	GAME STATS	SJ
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51	SHOTS	27
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CBJ	GAME STATS	SJ
52%	FACEOFFS	48%
0/3	POWER PLAY	0/4
4/4	PENALTY KILL	3/3
17	HITS	23
12	GIVEAWAYS	8
8	TAKEAWAYS	3
11	BLOCKED SHOTS	16
ALL SITUATIONS ADVANCED STATS		
5.37	EXPECTED GOALS	2.20
88	SHOT ATTEMPTS	51
45	SCORING CHANCES	22
23	HIGH-DANGER CHANCES	11

DATA VIA:
 NHL.COM
 NATURALSTATTRICK.COM

STAT TALK:

- The stats tell just one story: this is a game the Blue Jackets should've won if not for the dominant performance by Vanecek. Columbus had a shots on goal advantage of nearly 2-to-1, and their scoring chances and high danger chances were more than twice that of the Sharks.

- Even when Columbus did score, it came in a third period where the Blue Jackets had outshot the Sharks 14-3 prior to the goal, and held a 12-0 advantage in high danger scoring and 16-1 in scoring chances.
- Zach Werenski could have claimed eminent domain on the SAP Center's ice. He was on for 29:57 during regulation and added more than a minute in overtime for a total ice time of 31:26. That's the most he's had in a game since April 2022.

UP NEXT:

The California portion of Columbus five-game road trip continues — but not for a few days. The Blue Jackets are off Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday before a Saturday night date with the Los Angeles Kings. Puck drops at 9:00 p.m.

1st Ohio Battery / Three Things: Can't Overcome Vanacek, Marchenko Breaks Shutout, Wennberg Wins It.

By Will Chase- November 7, 2024

Late-night hockey after dark is always interesting.

Alexander Wennberg's overtime game-winner lifted the San Jose Sharks over the Columbus Blue Jackets 2-1 on Tuesday night at SAP Center.

CAN'T OVERCOME VANECEK

A second-period Sharks goal was waived off due to a challenge by the Blue Jackets for goaltender interference. There were seven power-play opportunities between the clubs with the Blue Jackets 0-for-3 and the Sharks 0-for-4.

The Blue Jackets had 50 shots on goal.

Sharks goaltender Vitek Vanecek is playing his first season in the Bay Area after entering the league with the Washington Capitals and spending the last two seasons with the New Jersey Devils. He was traded to the Sharks in March and spent the remaining portion of the 2023-24 season on injured reserve.

In his career against the Blue Jackets, he's 7-0-0 in seven starts with a .950 save percentage and 1.55 goals against average. His 49-save performance on Tuesday is a new career high.

Justin Danforth and Damon Severson co-led the game with six shots on goal. Zach Werenski played 31:26.

MARCHENKO BREAKS SHUTOUT

Columbus was pouring it on Vanacek and the Sharks in the third period when Kirill Marchenko scored his fifth goal of the season to tie the game 1-1 on the Jackets' 45th shot of the game. The goal was his first in five games and he has a team-leading 13 points.

The Jackets secured their 11th all-time 50-plus shot-on-goal performance.

Kevin Labanc returned to San Jose after eight seasons with the Sharks.

Elvis Merzlikins made 25 saves.

WENNBERG WINS IT

Wennberg's goal at 3:11 of the overtime was the difference to help the Sharks over his former team.

Fabian Zetterlund had the primary assist and Vanecek had an assist. Wennberg's goal is his second overtime winner this season. He has three goals in his past five games.

This game also featured Jack Thompson's first career NHL goal at 18:49 of the second period to give San Jose the 1-0 lead.

Will Smith, the 2023 fourth overall pick earned his first career assist on the play and third career point. Zetterlund had the secondary assist.

Thompson, the 22-year-old defenseman, was drafted by the Tampa Bay Lightning in 2020 and was part of the trade that sent former Blue Jacket Anthony Duclair to the Lightning in March. Tuesday was his 10th career game.

Macklin Celebrini, the 2024 first-overall pick, played his second career game after sustaining a hip injury in his first career game of the season opener.

WEEKEND BACK-TO-BACK

The Blue Jackets begin the first of a back-to-back when they battle the Los Angeles Kings on Saturday, Nov. 9 at 9:00 p.m. ET. Columbus will take on the Anaheim Ducks on Sunday, Nov. 10 at 8:00 p.m. ET.

The Hockey News / How Is Columbus Blue Jackets Prized Prospect Denton Mateychuk Doing In Cleveland?

By Jason Newland- November 7, 2024

Denton Mateychuk is a constant topic of conversation in Columbus. When will he be called up? What will the CBJ do to make room for a call-up?

No matter the answers to those questions, Denton Mateychuk is playing in Cleveland and getting the minutes and experience he needs to be the best NHL defenseman he can be when the inevitable time comes that he gets to make his NHL debut. Sure sounds like a good plan.

So what does his stats look like so far?

8 Games Played - 1g-5a-6pts - .75ppg - 14 SOG - 1 PPG - 6 PIM

Mateychuk is tied with Owen Sillinger with 6 points, two points behind Roman Ahcan, Luca Del Bel Belluz, and Trey fix-Wolansky who all have 8 points. His 5 assists are also tied for the team lead. He also has two multi-point games so far this season.

His 6 points are third among all rookie AHL defensemen.

All indications are that Mateychuk is the real deal and will help the Columbus Blue Jackets long into the future. Even if Mateychuk doesn't make his debut this year for some reason, there are plenty of reasons to look forward to next season if that is when he comes to Columbus. With Ivan Provorov, Jack Johnson, and Jake Christiansen all UFAs after this season, there should be plenty of room for him.

Cayden Lindstrom and Denton Mateychuk are coming soon.

What's Next - The Blue Jackets have a few days off as they trek to Southern California to take on the LA Kings on Saturday.

The Hockey News / Columbus Blue Jackets Prospect Roundup

By Jason Newland- November 8, 2024

Since 2020, the Columbus Blue Jackets have had some outstanding drafts. From Yegor Chinakhov to Adam Fantilli, the cupboard has been restocked. Of the 8 first-round draft picks since 2020, five of them have played NHL games thus far. Denton Mateychuk('22) and Cayden Lindstrom('24) are soon to follow.

Leagues around the world are in full swing. From the CHL to the KHL, Blue Jackets prospects are worldwide.

Let's look at how they're doing in their respective 2024-25 seasons.

- Martin Ryšavý F - 2021 Draft 7th Round | Current Team - Bílí Tygři Liberec (Czechia) | 2g-1a-3pts | 17 Games Played | Left for Czechia this summer.
- Ben Boyd F - 2021 Draft 6th Round | Current Team - St. Marys University | 0g-5a-5pts | 7 Games Played
- Nikolai Makarov D - 2021 Draft 5th Round | Current Team - Zvezda Moskva (Rus-VHL) | 2g-4a-6pts | 14 Games Played
- Guillaume Richard D - 2021 Draft 4th Round | Current Team - Providence College | 0g-4a-4pts | 7 Games Played
- James Fisher F - 2022 Draft 7th Round | Current Team - Northeastern Univ. | 0g-0a-0pts | 5 Games Played
- Sergei Ivanov G - 2022 Draft 5th Round | Current Team - HK Sochi (KHL) | 2-8 .901% sv | 15 Games Played
- Kirill Dolzhenkov F - 2022 Draft 4th Round | Current Team - Zvezda Moskva (Rus-VHL) | 7g-5a-12pts | 14 Games Played
- Tyler Peddle F - 2023 Draft 7th Round | Current Team - Saint John Sea Dogs (QMJHL) | 7g-7a-14pts | 15 Games Played
- Oiva Keskinen F - 2023 Draft 7th Round | Current Team - Tappara (Liiga) | 4g-9a-13pts | 19 Games Played
- Melvin Strahl G - 2023 Draft 5th Round | Current Team - Youngstown Phantoms (USHL) | 5-4 .892% sv | 9 Games Played
- Luca Pinelli F - 2023 Draft 4th Round | Current Team - Ottawa 67's (OHL) | 13g-7a-20pts | 14 Games Played
- Andrew Strathmann D - 2023 Draft 4th Round | Current Team - Univ of North Dakota | 0g-1a-1pt | 6 Games Played
- William Whitelaw F - 2023 Draft 3rd Round | Current Team - Univ. of Michigan | 1g-2a-3pts | 7 Games Played
- Luke Ashton D - 2024 Draft 6th Round | Current Team - Minnesota State Univ. | 1g-3a-4pts | 10 Games Played

- Tanner Henricks D - 2024 Draft 4th Round | Current Team - Lincoln Stars (USHL) | 1g-3a-4pts | 13 Games Played
- Luca Marrelli D - 2024 Draft 3rd Round | Current Team - Oshawa Generals (OHL) | 9g-15a-24pts | 17 Games Played
- Evan Gardner G - 2024 Draft 2nd Round | Current Team - Saskatoon Blades (WHL) | 7-3-1 .906% sv
- Charlie Elick D - 2024 Draft 2nd Round | Current Team - Brandon Wheat Kings (WHL) | 0g-1a-1pt | 12 Games Played
- Cayden Lindstrom F - 2024 Draft 4th Overall | Current Team - Medicine Hat Tigers (WHL) | Lindstrom has yet to report to Medicine Hat due to the Blue Jackets monitoring his back. He could report back to Medicine Hat very soon.

Stay tuned to THN Columbus for any updates regarding any of the CBJ Prospects that are currently playing.

What's Next - The Blue Jackets have a few days off as they trek to Southern California to take on the LA Kings on Saturday.

[The Athletic / 'Road To The NHL Winter Classic' TV series to return ahead of Blackhawks vs. Blues at Wrigley Field](#)

By Mark Lazerus- November 7, 2024

The “Road To The NHL Winter Classic” TV documentary series will return next month, chronicling the run-up to the league’s signature event, which will feature the Chicago Blackhawks and St. Louis Blues meeting at Wrigley Field on New Year’s Eve. The first of four episodes will debut on Dec. 4 on TNT in the United States and Dec. 5 on Sportsnet in Canada, with the final episode airing before the game itself on Dec. 31. Episodes also will be available to stream on Max.

The docuseries, originally aired on HBO, premiered in 2010 ahead of the 2011 Winter Classic in Pittsburgh. Cameras follow the players of both teams on the ice, in the dressing rooms and away from the rink. It’ll also offer a glimpse at how the league transforms an iconic baseball stadium into a hockey venue, as it did in 2009. This year’s “Road to the NHL Winter Classic” comes on the heels of Amazon’s “Faceoff: Inside the NHL,” a six-episode series that focused on stars such as Connor McDavid and Matthew Tkachuk during the Stanley Cup playoffs.

The league didn’t have many details about the upcoming series, but it’s a safe bet that Chicago’s 19-year-old superstar Connor Bedard will be featured prominently. Bedard was originally expected to be one of the players featured in the Amazon series, but he told The Athletic that he never had a camera crew attached to him.

The Athletic / What was the worst team in NHL history to have the most Hall of Famers?

By Sean McIndoe- November 7, 2024

I've had the Hall of Fame on my mind this week, mostly because it's induction weekend. That's the fun part of the calendar that starts with you going "Oh yeah, that's who they picked back in the summer" and ends with a cool ceremony that honors the game's legacy.

It's also a good time to debate that legacy, and argue about bests and worsts and in-betweens. That's what we're going to do today.

About a year ago, I wrote a post on a simple question: What was the best team that had no Hall of Famers? I settled on the 2006-07 Sabres as the winner, in case you're wondering. You had plenty of your own suggestions, and we wasted the entire day arguing about it, which is what the hockey gods want us to do with HHOF debates.

Today, let's flip the question: What was the worst team to have the most Hall of Famers? That's a little trickier, just because we're not dealing with an absolute value like "none," but I think we can feel our way through some sort of weird ratio of team quality to HHOF totals. We should probably have a cutoff, though. Five? Five sounds good. Let's find some really bad teams that have at least five Hall of Famers.

I've come up with five teams that I think make for solid candidates. Have a look, then make your pick and/or tell me why I'm wrong.

The 1995-96 Blues

The bad team: Despite one of the most loaded rosters we've ever seen in terms of star power, the Blues managed to finish the season under .500, going 32-34-16 and finishing fourth in the Central Division.

The HHOFers: Brett Hull. Chris Pronger. Al MacInnis. Grant Fuhr. Glenn Anderson. A few months of Dale Hawerchuk. And oh yeah, some trade deadline addition named Wayne Gretzky.

The story: Longtime readers knew the Blues would be in here, because they're one of my all-time favorite teams. Just an absolute mess of big names they never really came close to meshing into anything worthwhile, all built by Mike Keenan at the height of his mad scientist powers. This was the team that decided to try to go an entire season without ever starting their backup goalie, where just about everyone was well into their 30s, and where putting the era's best goal scorer with history's greatest playmaker somehow didn't work at all.

Ultimately, the Blues made the playoffs and faced an equally old and messy Maple Leafs team that had five Hall of Famers of its own. They won that matchup before losing to the Red Wings in the second round, ending the Gretzky era just a few months after it began.

Why they weren't good: To this day I have no idea. The 1995-96 Blues should have won the Cup, leading to a leaguewide copycat trend of owners hiring wacky people to be GM and make three dozen trades a year.

Other names worth mentioning: In addition to the seven(!) HHOF players from the team, Keenan has a solid Hall of Fame case of his own. And since he was both coach and GM, he should count twice if he ever makes it.

Bottom line: I love this team, but I'm not sure they're quite bad enough to be the one we're looking for today. They not only made the playoffs, they won a round and came within an overtime classic of

winning another. I had to mention them, and if we ever do a “most mediocre team with the most HHOFers” piece then they’ll run away with it. But for now, let’s set our sights lower. A lot lower.

The 1989-90 Nordiques

The bad team: They won 12 games and had 31 points. I know, you’re assuming this must be some sort of shortened season, but it was not. They made these poor guys play the full 80 games, and that’s what they had to show for it at the end.

The HHOFers: Joe Sakic, Guy Lafleur, Peter Stastny, Michel Goulet, and they’d just taken Mats Sundin with the No. 1 pick in the 1989 NHL Draft but he stayed in Europe for a year. Gosh, can’t imagine why he wasn’t in a hurry to come over and join this crew.

The story: Stastny and Goulet were franchise icons who were aging and on the way out, with both eventually traded away ahead of the deadline. Sakic was already a star but too young to carry the team on his own. As for Lafleur, he’s the first actual Hall of Famer we’ve found, in the sense that he was already in the Hall when this season happened. Also, he’d play for the Nordiques until 1991, at which point they acquired him in a trade with the North Stars and he immediately retired. No, I didn’t mess up that sentence, you’re just going to have to trust me that the whole thing was very weird.

Why they weren’t good: Where to begin. They used seven different starting goalies, none of whom had a save percentage over .900. Aside from Sakic, the next leading scorer who lasted the entire season in Quebec was defensive defenseman Michel Petit, who had 36 points. Young wingers Everett Sanipass and Mark Vermette each had a paltry six points, yet there are literally 24 more players listed below them on the team scoring list.

Other names worth mentioning: Basically nobody, although they did have the No. 1 pick from the 1983 draft. That would be Brian Lawton, who was already on his fourth team and had 11 points for them.

Bottom line: You want a bad team? This is a bad team. Wait, that’s actually a little bit insulting to the concept of “bad.” Put your typical bad team in a seven-game series with the 89-90 Nords and they sweep them in three. That said, we had to cheat a little to get our fifth Hall of Famer, so maybe we should continue the search with a more recent team.

The 2003-04 Rangers

The bad team: The Rangers finished 27-40-7-8, back in that horrible era when having four columns in the standings felt like a good idea. I’ll save you the math: That all adds up to just 69 points, which was the sixth-worst record in the league.

The HHOFers: Mark Messier, Jaromír Jágř, Brian Leetch, Eric Lindros, Glen Sather as GM and first-half coach. They also had Pavel Bure, who was under contract but didn’t play due to injury.

The story: Pretty much the same as every Rangers story of that era — they spent a bunch of money on a bunch of big names, then missed the playoffs. This was the seventh straight year they went home early, despite being in on nearly every UFA every summer. Hey, somebody had to be the cautionary counterpoint to the “big markets will just win everything without a salary cap” arguments.

Why they weren’t good: As with all the other Rangers teams of the era, most of the big names were old. That includes Messier, who was 43. Meanwhile, Jágř came over in a midseason trade with the Caps and wouldn’t find his elite game in New York until almost winning the Hart the following season.

They also used five different starting goalies, the best of whom was Jussi Markkanen. Oh wait, I think I might have figured out what the big problem was.

Other names worth mentioning: Other star players from the roster who fell short of Hall worthiness include Alexei Kovalev, Petr Nedvěd and Bobby Holík.

Bottom line: This was the last season before the year-long lockout that this very team helped cause. Once it ended, another HHOFer showed up and changed the direction of the franchise. But for now, this team is a great option.

Speaking of Messier, let's get an obvious pick out of the way ...

The 1980-81 Oilers

The bad team: They finished well under .500, going 29-35-16 for 74 points. While that was good enough to make the playoffs via the preliminary, they lost in the first round.

The HHOFers: Wayne Gretzky, Mark Messier, Glenn Anderson, Paul Coffey, Jari Kurri, Kevin Lowe, plus Glen Sather as coach for most of the season.

The story: This is basically a combination of the 03-04 Rangers and 95-96 Blues, only from back when everyone was young and finding their way instead of creaky and over-the-hill.

Why they weren't good: Spoiler alert — they actually were. We just didn't know it yet, and as a young team, they were going through the sort of growing pains that you'd expect. It all turned out pretty OK in Edmonton in the 1980s.

Other names worth mentioning: If you're wondering, Grant Fuhr doesn't show up until the following season.

Bottom line: On one hand, seven HHOF players on a 74-point roster is exactly what we're looking for today. On the other, this feels like cheating, right? I think it might, so let's try one more team ...

The 1986-87 Sabres

The bad team: They went 28-44-8 for 64 points, leaving them dead last in the league.

The HHOFers: Gilbert Perreault, Dave Andreychuk, Phil Housley, Tom Barrasso, Clark Gillies, plus coach Scotty Bowman until he was fired by GM Scotty Bowman, who was also quickly fired.

The story: I kind of love this team. They're the perfect mix of legitimate legend you didn't realize played that long (Perreault), very good players who were borderline Hall guys (Andreychuk, Housley, Barrasso) and a player you have no recollection of ever playing for them (Gillies). Also, having the greatest coach of all time in charge of the whole thing but no idea how to fix it.

Why they weren't good: I'm not completely sure. In addition to the guys listed, they had a very good Mike Foligno, a young Daren Puppa, a young Christian Ruuttu, and even Tom Kurvers. But Perreault was old and hurt, Andreychuk only scored 25 goals, Barrasso ended up splitting time with Jacques Cloutier, and a 1-7-2 start basically doomed them.

Other names worth mentioning: After finishing last and earning the first overall pick, they drafted yet another Hall of Famer, Pierre Turgeon. Lindy Ruff was also on the team, and he could go in as a coach someday. And finally, they had future broadcaster Brian Engblom, who's apparently in the Manitoba Sports Hall of Fame. Nicely done, Brian.

Bottom line: You know what, this is my pick. And sure, some of that is because I love the symmetry of our best team with no Hall of Famers and our worst team with lots of Hall of Famers being the same franchise, exactly 20 years apart. Never stop providing fun for the rest of us, Buffalo Sabres. (Checks current standings.) Yep, awesome, keep it up.

The Athletic / Everything to know about the NCAA's decision to make CHL players eligible

By Scott Wheeler- November 8, 2024

It's official. The NCAA has voted to open up college hockey eligibility to Canadian Hockey League players effective Aug. 1, 2025, paving the way for major junior players to participate in the 2025-26 men's college hockey season.

Over the last several weeks, The Athletic has spoken with more than 30 coaches and executives from around the NCAA, CHL, BCHL, USHL and NHL to talk through the implications for their leagues, players, scouting, recruiting, development and more. These coaches and executives were granted anonymity in order to speak freely about the NCAA's decision.

"It's definitely the biggest shift that I've ever been a part of," said one QMJHL coach. "I don't see how you could get a bigger shift than what's coming up in our world. It's literally going to change everything."

Here's everything you need to know about that shift and what comes next.

Why did the NCAA make this decision?

The NCAA Division I Council first began considering a proposal "to eliminate legislation by which major junior ice hockey teams are considered professional; and in men's ice hockey and skiing to permit involvement with professional teams and leagues (e.g., contracts, payments, tryouts, practice and competition) before initial full-time collegiate enrollment, provided not more than actual and necessary expenses for participation are received or guaranteed" last month.

The new legislation is a direct response to the wave of NIL money entering college athletics.

It also comes in the wake of litigation filed against the NCAA that argued its rule prohibiting players who played in one of the CHL's three leagues (the OHL, QMJHL and WHL) from playing in the NCAA violated U.S. antitrust laws.

The move also followed 20-year-old Regina Pats forward Braxton Whitehead's decision to duck the restrictions and verbally commit to play for Arizona State University in 2025-26.

More questions than answers around the CHL — for now

"Mixed emotions," uncertainty about "unintended consequences," and plenty of questions.

Those were the most common refrains from the nearly 20 CHL general managers and coaches The Athletic spoke to about the change.

The NCAA's decision, several acknowledged, was out of their control. But it was also the first in a series of decisions both sides will have to make and that the NHL will want to be involved in ahead of the expiry of its collective bargaining agreement on Sept. 15, 2026 (and in turn the CHL-NHL Agreement tied to it).

Several junior hockey coaches and executives wondered whether the NHL will make changes to the signing window for CHL players before they become free agents. (As it stands, NHL clubs retain the rights to drafted CHL players for just two years but NCAA players must spend four years in college before they're eligible to become free agents.)

In the past, there have been debates about the rights of some NHL prospects who have moved from the NCAA to the CHL. Now there will need to be an answer on the rights of players who go the other direction.

One OHL general manager pointed to the very first such case, when former Devils draft pick Mike Van Ryn left the University of Michigan for the Sarnia Sting to exploit a loophole that allowed him to sign with the Blues.

Now, if the NHL doesn't make changes to the CHL signing window, what of this question posed by an OHL general manager: "As the trend increases with American players looking for guarantees to sign, does a CHL player turn down an opportunity to sign at the end of their 19-year-old year with the hopes that a year at 20 in NCAA as a free agent gives them a better route to the NHL?"

Other issues, such as whether scholarship money accrued by CHL players will be honored for those who now choose NCAA instead of USports (the Canadian university route), were top of mind for CHL executives. To that, QMJHL commissioner Mario Cecchini said as of now there are no restrictions on how that money is used.

One OHL general manager's first thought was about rookie tournaments. "Do CHL players now skip the prospect tournaments without being signed?" the executive asked. "Currently, NCAA players are only able to attend development camp."

The answer to that question may be that the new language regarding pre-enrollment activity actually allows NCAA commits to attend rookie tournaments now.

Across the OHL, QMJHL and WHL, there is excitement about potentially retaining top 16-year-old players who in the past could only choose other leagues if they wanted to play college hockey.

"On the positive side, we will get all the top young players coming to the CHL because we're the best development option at that age," said one WHL general manager.

In recent years, the CHL has lost top players such as Adam Fantilli, Owen Power, Michael Hage and just this season Adam Valentini to the USHL's Chicago Steel, as well as others like Sacha Boisvert even earlier to prep schools in the U.S.

We think it's a good thing," said one OHL general manager. "Players from USHL, BCHL likely track back into the CHL."

There is also worry, though, about the impacts on all three leagues of potentially losing some top 18-, 19- and 20-year-old players after they've graduated from high school.

"The USHL will probably be hit pretty hard, but I also don't really understand why the CHL wants this? Do they understand the colleges are coming for their best 18-year-olds, not their age-out guys?" warned one NHL executive.

"NHL needs to get involved," argued one OHL general manager. "If not, 18s and 19s could be jumping ship."

An important point of clarity for both the CHL and NCAA will be whether NCAA programs will only have access to players not signed to pro contracts, with those around the CHL arguing players signed to NHL deals should remain ineligible to play college hockey. Currently, NHL contracts can slide in the CHL but not the NCAA.

The NCAA clarified again on Thursday that "a prospect may sign a contract with a professional team, provided the contract is limited to actual and necessary expenses and does not promise or guarantee future payments. Further, if a prospect signs a multiyear contract, the contract must be terminated prior to initial full-time enrollment at any college or university."

Some also wonder about the potential for a formal transfer agreement between the CHL and NCAA.

“Is it just we can take their players and they can take our players just like the NCAA portal is now?” asked one OHL general manager.

“Will colleges have to pay a release like we have to if we want to go get a player?” asked a QMJHL coach. The former, multiple managers worried, could open a Pandora’s box.

“I think that if both the CHL and the NCAA sit together and make a structure, I think that would be the best thing ever. But I doubt it big-time, and in this case I think it could be a clusterf—,” said one QMJHL general manager. “If a guy starts and he’s not having a good year, he comes back to the CHL after, he gets drafted, he goes back — like that back-and-forth, it doesn’t make any sense.”

A QMJHL coach also worried about the growing power struggle in leagues he feels are already too agent- and parent-driven, cautioning he could already hear hypothetical calls of “If I’m not on the first power play next year, I’m heading to the NCAA.”

“I don’t know how bad it will be, but that will be an issue in particular with the younger, lesser-known agents that we see more and more of,” the coach said. “The established guys won’t play that card because they’ve got a reputation but the younger guys that have something to prove to their clients will use that card without a doubt.”

Some CHL coaches and executives aren’t expecting an exodus, though.

“There’s an assumption that I’ve encountered over the years that everyone wants to jump to the NCAA but there are some players who aren’t interested at all. Not everyone’s a university student,” said one OHL general manager. “The impact’s maybe not going to be as much as some think.”

There’s no questioning whether the CHL will get younger, though. Multiple coaches and executives pointed to NHL prospects they’ve had in recent years who could have played their 20-year-old season in the NCAA instead of jumping into the AHL before they were ready. Multiple CHL commissioners also told The Athletic they’ve had discussions about aligning all three leagues’ draft ages as well — the WHL’s bantam draft is currently held a year earlier than the OHL and QMJHL’s 16-year-old drafts. One QMJHL coach also wondered whether the league would give teams more roster spots for 16-year-olds to offset the loss of some of their older players.

CHL coaches and executives anticipate they’ll have to build their teams differently moving forward, too, unable to risk counting on older players sticking around to help them contend.

“You’ll have to win now with high-end 17-year-olds and some really good 18s instead of really good 18s and 19s,” said a QMJHL coach.

How different will the NCAA look?

“I think this is bad for the American player and USA Hockey.”

That was the first thought one Hockey East coach had.

There was a ‘but’ though: “The big caveat is ‘unless it leads to college hockey expansion,’” he said. “Is college hockey better? In general, probably. But the battle for the high-end talent in their 19-year-old season between the CHL and NCAA will probably determine which league is ‘better.’”

He raised similar questions to his CHL counterparts about a transfer agreement, scholarships, CBA changes to address the different NHL signing rights, and the big one for NCAA folks: “Will players who have signed and not played (in the NHL) remain eligible?”

“Those rules and how they are set up could certainly be a determining factor in which direction kids choose,” the Hockey East coach said. “My biggest concern is that the people voting on this and

implementing the structure may not understand the intricacies of our sport and how every decision could impact the strength of the college game. The coaches are not involved in determining how this is laid out — at least not yet.”

Naturally, there is also worry around the CHL about the growing sway of NIL money in college athletics.

“(Top 2024 prospect) Caleb Desnoyers who once he gets drafted, I don’t know, eighth overall, we don’t want to lose him to BU that makes him a \$100,000 offer because they’re allowed to give NIL money,” said one QMJHL general manager.

In that sense, both sides agree, the shift in the language was overdue.

“The guy who plays left defense for us gets \$470 a month and he was a ‘pro,’ but there are college athletes now getting millions in NIL. Like that’s just asinine to even say,” said one OHL general manager.

There are other factors that will affect just how many players make the move as well. Chief among them: grades.

“I had a lot of kids that wanted the Harvard or even a Clarkson but guess what? They couldn’t get in,” said one CHL coach who used to coach at Canada’s Jr. A level.

There’s also disagreement about how many CHL players will even fit the NCAA game.

“In some cases guys may not be good enough. The two games are quite a bit different in style of play, too,” said one OHL general manager. “From a development standpoint, does it make sense to leave an Oshawa for a Northern Michigan at 20? From a Northern Michigan standpoint, does it make sense to bring a guy in who may only want to be there for one year? The answer might be no.”

If the answer is yes, several posited the NCAA would get older, with teams potentially deciding to bring in fewer true freshmen if they can round out their fourth lines and third pairings with 19- or 20-year-olds who are more ready.

The NCAA’s decision could open up eligibility to some European players as well.

“There’s already some European and Russian players getting eligible, but what would be needed for them to be eligible?” asked the Big Ten coach.

For all of those reasons, the total number of CHL players college programs will be after could be smaller than you might think.

“We would want difference-makers. From what I’ve seen, the bottom six forwards and last D pairings don’t move the needle for us. I don’t think it will be an avalanche,” said a Big Ten coach. “The 20-year-olds are usually just OK — that’s why they haven’t signed NHL or AHL deals.”

What about the USHL, BCHL, NTDP, Canadian Jr. A and USports?

The most common refrain from CHL executives and NCAA coaches who spoke with The Athletic was that the USHL, Canadian Jr. A leagues, and the BCHL — which they say “were thriving off of guys that wanted to go NCAA” — will be most impacted by opening up the CHL-NCAA route.

One NCHC coach’s sense was that the CHL wouldn’t lose many players to start, but the USHL would be hit hardest because “there are many unhappy kids on fourth lines” who’ve had a lack of high-end places to play.

“The rich will always get richer but college hockey will only get better,” the coach said.

A Hockey East coach said he expects the NTDP’s ability to recruit dual citizens will be negatively impacted, and that some of the top Americans may also consider the CHL as well.

At the moment, Canadians make up 9 percent of Division I men's hockey players. A USA Hockey spokesperson says they don't expect material impacts from the change on any of the leagues, though the transfer agreement between USA Hockey and Hockey Canada may need tweaks over time.

"Might that (Canadian percentage) tick up a little bit? Perhaps. I don't think there's (a) mass exodus of players going back and forth between the U.S. and Canada in junior hockey either," said USA Hockey senior director of communications Dave Fischer.

As for potential impacts on the NTDP? They've heard that before.

"The National Team Development Program is just different than the programs in the CHL. It's a different way forward," Fischer said. "We had this when the National Team Development Program started and in the U.S. and in Minnesota there was, 'Why are kids going to leave high school hockey to go play at this?' And high school hockey is great but it doesn't have the elements of the National Team Development Program, nor does the CHL or USHL."

A Big Ten coach said the "USHL and BCHL will look different in the coming years" and wondered whether top teams in those two leagues would try to join the CHL, though he also argued that USHL rosters generally have more depth than CHL ones.

"The CHL is the number one development league for the NHL. The investment made in the student athletes in terms of development, schooling, scholarship money, player support, etc. — you can't compare the quality to the BCHL or USHL, it is a different league," countered a QMJHL executive. "Previously, and unfortunately, players had to compromise their quality of experience and development and go to those leagues in order to maintain their NCAA eligibility. That won't be the case anymore."

Others asked, "Why would you now go to play for Penticton if you could go play for the Vancouver Giants?"

"I'm sure the BCHL isn't going to die and they'll recoup some guys as well, but it's not going to be the original quality they thought," said one QMJHL coach.

But those within the USHL and BCHL are prepared to make their own case.

"I'm all in favor for kids having more access to education through athletics. The USHL has built itself up to a very high-quality league with not only a strong player base with close to 50 kids a year drafted to the NHL, but also a very high level of hockey being played. The last hurdle for the league is the perception of the league historically compared to the CHL," said one USHL general manager. "There (will) no doubt be changes but I would put our development model up against anyone."

One USHL coach pointed to top 2025 NHL Draft prospect Adam Benák's recent decision to play for Youngstown in the USHL, when he could have gone into the CHL import draft, as an example of it not being all about college.

A BCHL general manager believes the move will also open up his ability to recruit players from the CHL if they're unhappy. In the past, when BCHL clubs tried to pull from the CHL, the players were restricted to minor pro or USports.

"I think it will have a negative impact on the teams that don't invest enough into player development (full-time strength coach, skills and skating coaches, goalie coach, sports psychologist, etc.) and teams that don't have long-time relationships with NCAA teams. For the teams that do, it could actually be a positive," the BCHL general manager said. "The key is having the infrastructure to continue to develop players so they are contributing when they get to NCAA."

He did, however, hypothesize the BCHL may have to consider broader changes themselves in order to keep up.

“My guess is our league will try and split into two tiers. A ‘super league’ with all the big programs and a ‘development league’ with young players and maybe a pay-to-play model,” he said.

There is also now, in theory, more opportunities for CHL teams to recruit college-bound American players away from the USHL in their designated U.S. territory to come north at 16 and 17 before the draft. The QMJHL, whose territory includes the hockey hotbed of Massachusetts and parts of the east coast where many of the top college programs are, would stand to benefit the most. Again, in theory ...

“The issue there is that no American-born player will come here instead of the NTDP,” said one QMJHL coach. “In the Q, you’ve got the big markets and then after that it’s a huge drop in terms of all of the tools coaches and GMs have to offer their players, so you really have to get creative with that financially, I find.”

No level will be harder hit than USports, though.

One OHL coach argued scholarship money should remain only for players who pursue USports as a way to support Canadian universities and said that even if it’s made available in the NCAA, the cross-border differences in tuition costs, especially after converting currencies, mean “it’s nothing.”

“Some USports programs still think they’re pretty good programs and still think they’re going to attract athletes,” countered one OHL general manager with a USports background.

NHL Draft ripple effect?

There has long been talk within NHL front offices about the risks of selecting CHL players in the draft’s later rounds when you have a longer timeline to make a decision on Europeans and college-bound players.

One QMJHL coach wondered if a change to the CHL signing window could be a net positive for players who deserve to get picked on merit but have traditionally been passed over for that reason.

“There’s a lot of times where we question ourselves and say, ‘There’s some really good players that don’t get drafted in rounds 5-7 but then there’s guys that are getting drafted out of the Minnesota high school league.’ Well, the consensus seems to be: ‘We’ve got four years to work with these guys and now the CHL guys we only have two,’ and that kind of goes to the detriment of some of the quality players that are in the CHL,” said that coach.

Asked if they’d feel more inclined to select CHLers in the draft’s later rounds if they had more time to make a decision, two NHL scouting directors were split.

“100 percent I would,” said one.

“Not really,” said another. “Being 23-24 and still playing in the NCAA is a low-probability bet for NHL success.”

An AHL layer(s)

There are two new questions for the AHL in all of this.

One that’s top of mind for major junior execs is whether the NHL will uphold the rule that prohibits CHL players from playing in the AHL until they’re 20.

“So if you get drafted in the NHL at 17, at 18 you could go play in the NCAA for one year and then are you now allowed to play in the AHL at 19?” asked one QMJHL general manager. “To lose (a) first-round pick at 18, that could be tough for us.”

There is also some chatter as to whether the AHL’s demographics will shift if more CHLers elect to wait a little longer before turning pro.

Asked one QMJHL coach: “Are they going to lose those 20-22-year-olds that would have played in the American League and now that kid says ‘F— this, I’m actually going to go play for North Dakota.’ Does the kid say, ‘You know what? I played for Moose Jaw for the last whatever and now I’m going to go to North Dakota and see what I can do? Does the AHL now become more of what it was back in the day as an older pro league?’”

A win for the players

There is unanimity about only one thing across levels and leagues. As one OHL coach put it, “This is amazing for the players.”

One OHL general manager called it “awful” that for years players who’ve played one game in the CHL at age 16 would lose their eligibility.

“It seems so draconian in some ways,” the OHL general manager said. “I’m glad that that’s going to be gone and that that’s going to take that weight off of families’ shoulders.”

One QMJHL coach who used to be a player said he remembers starting his own junior career and asking himself “Why does this rule exist?”

Now that it no longer exists, another QMJHL coach said the increased competition for players will force all programs to provide better conditions. Ultimately, a win for the players is a win for the NHL and hockey at large, too.

One OHL general manager went as far as saying the move could create more NHL-caliber players and even help with expansion.

“If everybody is aligned properly, it’ll be the best path for every player and I think that it’s going to be great for the NHL,” he said.

The Athletic / NCAA votes to open up college eligibility to Canadian Hockey League players

By Scott Wheeler and Corey Pronman- November 8, 2024

The NCAA has voted to make Canadian Hockey League players eligible to play college hockey, according to a statement.

The move marks the start of a potentially seismic shift in hockey's development landscape, opening up new paths for players in the OHL, QMJHL and WHL, long the NHL's three biggest development leagues. CHL players have until now been excluded from playing NCAA hockey.

"College hockey gets deeper and more Canadian," said one Hockey East coach ahead of the decision.

The NCAA Division I Council passed the proposal in their November meeting on Thursday. The proposal, initially tabled in October, follows a wave of litigation filed against the NCAA which claims that prohibiting players who played in one of the CHL's three leagues (the OHL, QMJHL and WHL) from playing in the NCAA violated U.S. antitrust laws. Regina Pats forward Braxton Whitehead recently shirked the restrictions and verbally committed to play for Arizona State University in 2025-26.

The new legislation eliminates language that labeled major junior hockey as professional and thus its players ineligible to play men's college ice hockey.

The move also standardizes the NCAA's bylaws across sports, bringing ice hockey's language about pre-enrollment activity in line with that of other sports such as golf and tennis. This new legislation moves to "permit involvement with professional teams and leagues (e.g., contracts, payments, tryouts, practice and competition) before initial full-time collegiate enrollment, provided not more than actual and necessary expenses for participation are received or guaranteed."

The new legislation will take effect as of Aug. 1, 2025, opening up eligibility for CHL players for the 2025-26 college season.

The change will not impact CHL players exclusively, though, as the vote may also open up eligibility for some additional European players who have participated in a professional environment as well.

It will still likely be years before the long-term implications for college and junior hockey in North America are sorted out, too, with existing documents like the CHL-NHL Agreement and even the NHL's collective bargaining agreement (which is set to expire on Sept. 15, 2026) now requiring reopening and renegotiating.

For both the NCAA and CHL, though, some items need more immediate answers. Several CHL and NCAA coaches and managers contacted by The Athletic, who were granted anonymity in order to speak freely about the looming decision, said as of now, they have been given no directive by their respective leagues as to what the next steps are.

"It's going to be worked out on the fly," one OHL general manager said in advance of the vote. "It's fun to talk about over an ice-cold beer but now it's here. It's time for some action."

Several CHL coaches and executives who spoke with The Athletic in recent weeks wondered about a potential transfer agreement between the CHL and NCAA.

Others said they would need clarity on whether education packages — a promise of one year of university or college tuition per year played in the CHL — will be honored for major junior players who now choose to go to NCAA schools instead of Canadian universities in USports — last season, the CHL's

three leagues contributed more than \$7 million to their scholarship programs. QMJHL commissioner Mario Cecchini told The Athletic scholarship money is promised regardless of the post-graduate destination, but that there is an appetite to keep student-athletes in Canada.

Some in the CHL also pointed to the need for clarity on the differences in how long NHL teams retain the rights of CHL and NCAA players before they become free agents.

“The NHL will need to address the two-year signing period for CHL players and four years for NCAA players,” said one WHL general manager.

Around college hockey, there is also still much uncertainty about exactly how this shift in eligibility will be implemented.

“Will CHL teams let them out of their ‘contracts’?” asked one Big Ten coach in advance of the vote. “We have multiple USHL players who want to bolt for (the) CHL now if they can keep eligibility. We have also received a multitude of calls (from) CHL players looking to bolt for college next fall. I think it’s going to be super messy to start but will get ironed out.”

However, despite this uncertainty, NCAA teams have been preparing for this eventuality. In the opening weeks of the CHL season, numerous NCAA coaches were spotted at CHL games.

Multiple NCAA coaches told The Athletic they’ll also need additional clarification on which players are eligible to make the move, and whether those with professional contracts who haven’t yet played pro hockey will also now be eligible under the NCAA’s new rules.

One QMJHL executive said he expects that rules around signed players being ineligible to play in the NCAA won’t change and that they will continue to be unable to leave the CHL to play college hockey. This would potentially add a new wrinkle to NHL teams’ decisions on signing their top prospects immediately.

According to the NCAA’s eligibility center, “a prospect may sign a contract with a professional team, provided the contract is limited to actual and necessary expenses and does not promise or guarantee future payments. Further, if a prospect signs a multiyear contract, the contract must be terminated prior to initial full-time enrollment at any college or university.”

“NHL teams being able to slide entry-level deals in the CHL and not NCAA is something that needs to be looked at,” argued one Hockey East coach.

There is optimism, though, from coaches and executives in both junior and NCAA hockey, that the change will ultimately be a positive for both sides — and certainly for the players, who now have more options and new development paths to consider.

“Personally, I think that this is excellent for the players. I think the players need to have as many options as possible and I think that when we talk development and we preach development that this is now an extension and it needs to be embraced,” said one OHL general manager. “We’re pro education, we’re pro development and I think if done properly that this could become the best development path for everybody.”

The Athletic / Goalie Tracking: The top storylines in net from the first month of the NHL season

By Jesse Granger- November 8, 2024

Welcome to Goalie Tracking, an idea that spawned one night while I was watching way too much hockey, as I tend to do.

Think of it as a goaltending journal. If you've listened to "The Athletic Hockey Show" podcast, it will come as no surprise that I'm usually focused on the goalies. Sometimes they make spectacular saves. Sometimes they end up nowhere near the net, facing in the wrong direction. In both cases, we often wonder why.

My goal in this column is to dig into the technical aspects of the position and help explain how and why goalies are doing what they're doing. Maybe we can dispel some of the "voodoo" narrative around the position, but if nothing else, it's fun to examine why certain goalies are stopping so many pucks, while others aren't stopping enough. My plan is to pick a few topics to cover each month, usually around the biggest storylines between the pipes.

The first month of this season has been a wild one in the crease.

There are hot starts. Igor Shesterkin is dominating on one coast, while Lukáš Dostál is running with the opportunity as the Anaheim Ducks' starter on the other. In between, we've seen Anthony Stolarz get off to a great start for the Toronto Maple Leafs, Connor Hellebuyck just keeps rolling in Winnipeg, and both Ilya Sorokin and Andrei Vasilevskiy have bounced back nicely after down a year in 2023-24.

At the same time, the league-wide save percentage of .896 is the lowest it's been in 31 years. Scoring is up, as teams lean more toward skill and speed, making goaltending as difficult as ever. Several teams expected to contend this year – Colorado, Edmonton, Nashville and Boston – find themselves near the bottom of the league in team save percentage, and are looking up at their division rivals in the standings as a result.

There are plenty of storylines to pick from, but here are a few details that have stood out to me.

Shesterkin has found yet another level

Last season, around mid-February, Shesterkin found a rhythm and it's been lights out for scorers around the NHL ever since. During that span, including his 16 playoff starts, he has gone 32-13-2 with a .928 save percentage and has stopped 46.35 goals above expected, according to Evolving-Hockey.

He's a physical specimen, able to find his skate edges in even the most precarious of positions and explode laterally at any moment. We saw a great example of it Friday night in the Rangers' 2-1 win over the Ottawa Senators, when Shesterkin stopped 40 of 41 shots. He almost singlehandedly earned those two points for the Rangers, and he had four or five sensational stops I could've chosen from. One came early in the game, when Ottawa had a dangerous chance on an odd-man rush, but Shesterkin flew across his crease to rob Josh Norris' backside attempt.

Initially, Shesterkin was pushing out for a shot from Norris around the hash marks, but Rangers forward Vincent Trocheck got his stick on the pass attempt, deflecting it toward the goal line and changing where Norris would receive the puck.

Changing the direction of a butterfly slide in this situation is incredibly difficult (for normal humans) because of the momentum and lack of traction with pads sliding across the ice. Shesterkin is able to read

the deflection and immediately re-route himself back toward his post, giving himself a chance to make a reaching, acrobatic save.

He's able to do that for several reasons. The first is because his initial butterfly slide is very controlled, not a full-strength push. That half push keeps his weight centered and allows him to change directions before making the final, explosive push at the end. The other reason: he grabs hold of the ice with his left skate blade and has the strength to rotate that foot slightly forward and change the direction of the slide to get more square to the shot and cover as much of the net as possible. The result is an incredible save that few goalies can make.

Those acrobatics are impressive, but they're nothing new for Shesterkin. Where I believe he's taken his game to the next level early this season is on the mental side. He's playing such smart hockey and making things easier on himself.

Here's one small example, midway through the third period against the Detroit Red Wings on Oct. 14. Shesterkin gets his glove on a shot by Detroit's Vladimir Tarasenko, but isn't able to hold the puck. He sees it bouncing behind him, and net-front presence Michael Rasmussen is looking to jam the rebound in for a power-play goal.

Rather than trying to rotate and find the puck, which takes time, Shesterkin just pushes across to put himself between Rasmussen and the puck, and cleverly ties up Rasmussen's stick with his glove hand.

Is this move technically legal? No, not really. Is it a great split-second decision that nullified what could've been a goal? Absolutely. Even on the off chance a referee does call the goalie for that penalty, it's still worth saving a goal.

That's just one example of how Shesterkin is processing the game at a high speed at the moment and maximizing his obvious physical attributes. He's in complete control of the crease, and anyone's stick that gets too close.

Ullmark is the calm presence Ottawa needs

It hasn't been a spectacular start for Linus Ullmark in Ottawa, after he was traded there over the summer and signed a four-year extension with the club. He's already missed time with injury, and has put up middling statistics with flashes of brilliance. What I've noticed over his first five starts, though, is that his calm playing style should benefit a young Senators squad trying to learn how to win consistently.

Ullmark is stoic in the crease, efficient and purposeful with every move, and that's exactly what Ottawa was hoping for when it committed to him.

This sequence during a penalty kill in Friday's game against the Rangers shows his economical style, especially as he transitions back and forth from his post to his feet. One of the areas I've noticed Ullmark is particularly patient is when the puck is in tight to the side of the net, like the shot by Trocheck in this clip.

Ullmark recognizes the biggest threat is a shot from Trocheck, and drops into his reverse vertical horizontal (RVH) position to seal the short side post. It's rare a player will have this much time to wait a goalie out and pick a shot from this close to the net, but Trocheck takes his time and eventually fires a low shot.

The brilliance from Ullmark is the small move from RVH to his traditional butterfly. This is a vulnerable position to be in if there's a pass across, but he reads the shot all the way and drops his left pad to seal the ice, making this save look a lot easier than it otherwise would've been.

In the RVH, there are several holes for the puck to find — mainly underneath the left leg pad — but the quick switch to a tight butterfly gives Trocheck nothing to shoot at. Ullmark has his elbows tight to his sides and his glove hand projected out in front of him, cutting off any angle to the far-side top corner. If he attempts the same save from RVH, or standing, there's just so much more that can go wrong, both on the initial shot and any rebound attempt. This type of calm, positional goaltending is exactly what the Senators have been after.

DeSmith is the ideal backup goalie

Casey DeSmith has bounced around quite a bit lately, and is now on his third team in three years after signing with Dallas this summer. What's interesting is everywhere he's gone, the starting goalie seems to have an excellent year. Is that entirely because of DeSmith? Unlikely. But I do believe that his steady, veteran presence and ability to shoulder a decent workload helps his starter out tremendously.

At 33, DeSmith is at the stage in his career at which he's unlikely to become anyone's full-time starter, but in the new landscape of more evenly-split goalie tandems, he's still incredibly valuable.

Look at Tristan Jarry's performance in Pittsburgh. From 2021 to 2023, when he was in a tandem with DeSmith, he posted save percentages above the league average in all three seasons. In the two seasons since, his save percentage has been well below the average and he hasn't looked the same. The Penguins aging as a team in front of Jarry obviously plays a big role in that, but don't dismiss DeSmith's impact.

There's also Thatcher Demko in Vancouver. He was outstanding long before DeSmith's arrival last season, but hadn't reached his full potential. In 2022-23, the Canucks couldn't count on backup Spencer Martin, who had a league-worst .871 save percentage, putting added pressure on Demko, and the team ultimately foundered. The following season, DeSmith stabilized the tandem, relieved some of the pressure and Demko went on to have a career year.

It's still early, but we may be seeing a similar effect on Jake Oettinger in Dallas. The Stars have allowed the second-fewest goals in the league through 10 games, and are the only team with two goalies in the top six in GSAX.

GSAX Leaders (as of 11/5)

1

Igor Shesterkin

16.36

2

Lukas Dostal

13.80

3

Anthony Stolarz

10.27

4

Frederik Andersen

6.81

5

Joey Daccord

5.83

6

Jake Oettinger

5.42

7

Connor Hellebuyck

4.75

8

Vitek Vanecek

4.21

9

Kevin Lankinen

3.84

10

Casey DeSmith

3.58

Oettinger played 209 games over the last three seasons including the playoffs, and that heavy workload could be one of the reasons for last year's statistical dip. After three straight seasons with a save percentage above .910, Oettinger fell to only .904 in 2023-24.

This year, Oettinger has started seven games while DeSmith has taken three. If DeSmith continues playing the way he has, that could get even closer to a 60-40 split, which would be ideal to keep Oettinger fresh and at his best for what Dallas hopes will be another playoff run.

What stands out about DeSmith's game? His skating and edgework are crisp, he makes flying around the crease look easy, and gets to his spots on time. This video, taken by Stars emergency backup goalie Chris Dudo, shows the speed and precision of DeSmith's skating in a way you can't really get from the traditional broadcast angles.

DeSmith is good enough to give coaches confidence to rest their starter an adequate amount, but at this point in his career, he doesn't pose a major threat for playing time — especially to a star like Oettinger — which makes him a perfect backup goalie.

ESPN / Real or not? Early-season trends for all 32 NHL teams

By Greg Wyshynski- November 8, 2024

No, the Winnipeg Jets haven't already won the Stanley Cup, although one can be excused for feeling that way.

The Jets started the season 12-1-0, becoming the sixth team in NHL history to win 12 of their first 13 games of a season. They've outscored everyone in front of the player whom many consider the best goaltender in the world in Connor Hellebuyck. Things are certainly trending in their direction.

Some early-season trends in the NHL stick. Others are a distant memory by the end of the season: Please recall the Edmonton Oilers' horrific first month that preceded a resurgent run to the final game of the season in the Stanley Cup Final.

Injuries and slumps happen. Fans get their hopes up, only to be let down.

Here are trends for all 32 teams from the 2024-25 season thus far that we're testing with our patented (OK, patent-pending) "Trend-o-meter" to see how valid they are -- from certain to stick (10) to probably just a blip (1).

Jump to a team:

ANA | BOS | BUF | CGY

CAR | CHI | COL | CBJ

DAL | DET | EDM | FLA

LA | MIN | MTL | NSH

NJ | NYI | NYR | OTT

PHI | PIT | SJ | SEA

STL | TB | TOR | UT

VAN | VGK | WSH | WPG

Atlantic Division

Boston Bruins

Jim Montgomery will keep his job (by any means necessary)

Despite preseason platitudes from his bosses, Bruins coach Jim Montgomery does not have a contract with Boston beyond this season. That led to some "hot seat" speculation when the Bruins stumbled out of the gate, although they were 6-6-1 by the end of October.

It's a pressure-packed situation in Boston, as the optics have underscored. Bruins fans have seen Montgomery tear into captain Brad Marchand on the bench after a turnover and bench leading scorer David Pastrnak in the third period of a recent game. Boston players, including Marchand himself, treated the situations like nothing out of the ordinary. But it certainly feels as if Montgomery is desperately trying to get the attention of his team early.

And why not? He's not the reason that Jeremy Swayman is playing as if he didn't have a training camp or that management felt Joonas Korpisalo could replace Linus Ullmark. He's not the reason that a good

complementary player like Elias Lindholm was imported to be a No. 1 center or that they didn't sufficiently replace Jake DeBrusk's offense. It's his job on the line, though. Do as you will, Monty.

Trend-o-meter rating: 10

Buffalo Sabres

Sabres miss the playoffs ... again

It was supposed to be different this season. So far, it isn't. In fact, it's worse: Buffalo was 6-6-0 through 12 games last season. After 12 games in 2024-25, the Sabres are 4-7-1 for a .375 points percentage, tied for last in the Atlantic with the Montreal Canadiens.

Their defense (26th in the NHL) and goaltending (24th in save percentage) are once again a problem. The theory before the season was that Lindy Ruff, back for his second coaching stint in Buffalo, could potentially get this talented team to score its way out of problems. But that hasn't happened either: The Sabres were 16th in goals per game (3.00) through 12 games, giving up more (3.50) than they were scoring.

While their offensive analytics tell us they're actually scoring better than expected, the more promising news is that their underlying defensive numbers at 5-on-5 are better than their actual goals against per game. So there's a little hope here, if the goaltending can play above replacement levels, and especially if their special teams improve, as Buffalo was 27th on the penalty kill and dead last on the power play (8.6%).

But if the Sabres are going to avoid extending their NHL record playoff drought to a 14th season, they need to get this thing turned around pronto. There's still a lane for Buffalo in the East if they do.

Trend-o-meter rating: 6

Detroit Red Wings

The team can't score at 5-on-5

Through 11 games, the Red Wings were 30th in 5-on-5 goals (15), just ahead of Anaheim and Nashville. Their nine power-play goals helped boost their overall goals per game to 2.64, which ranked 25th in the NHL. But their even-strength numbers are ghastly, which is surprising coming from a team that ranked eighth last season in 5-on-5 goals.

Detroit doesn't shoot the puck enough, averaging 23.1 shots per 60 minutes at 5-on-5. Last season, the Red Wings were 24th (27.4). When they do get shots, they're not of the highest quality: Detroit had an expected goals of 2.03 per 60 minutes at 5-on-5, worst in the NHL, through 11 games. Its actual offensive output was even worse: 1.68 goals per 60 minutes at 5-on-5.

The Red Wings are not getting nearly enough from their depth players such as Vladimir Tarasenko, who mustered three points in his first 10 games. They've gotten just two goals at even strength from their defensemen, one by Moritz Seider and one by Simon Edvinsson.

Last season's performance gives hope that they can flip the script on their scoring this season. But to put it in Motor City terms: In a season when many hoped the Red Wings could put the pedal down and accelerate to the playoffs, their offensive engine is flooded.

Trend-o-meter rating: 5

Florida Panthers

Sam Reinhart leads the NHL in goals

So maybe it wasn't just a contract year thing? Reinhart, 28, obliterated his previous career scoring highs with 57 goals and 94 points last season before signing an eight-year, \$69 million contract extension with the Panthers; not a bad way to cap off a Stanley Cup-winning season, eh?

The extra cheddar in his wallet hasn't slowed Reinhart down at all. As of Tuesday, he was tied for the league lead in goals with 10 in 13 games. That puts him ahead of his pace last season (nine goals in 13 games). His chemistry with Aleksander Barkov continues to be palpable, but he has scored with a variety of linemates as well.

Reinhart was 12 goals off the lead of Auston Matthews last season (69 goals in 81 games), finishing second overall in goals scored. He's in his "fill the back of the net" era. Given his start, a Rocket Richard Trophy isn't out of the question.

Trend-o-meter rating: 7

Montreal Canadiens

Keep getting blown out

Star center Nick Suzuki was recently asked whether he was concerned about the Canadiens' start, which is behind their points pace from last season. "I wouldn't say I'm concerned," he said, via the Montreal Gazette. "I'm a little pissed off with how we've got blown out a couple of times. I think we're a way better team than what we've shown."

Of their first eight defeats, five were by a margin of three or more goals. That includes an 8-2 waxing by the Seattle Kraken and a 7-2 shellacking from the New York Rangers. That has helped relegate them to the second-worst goals against per game in the NHL through 12 games (4.08), something for which their middling offense (23rd, 2.75 goals per game) can't compensate.

While we'd like to calm the fears of Suzuki, the bottom line is that the Canadiens' underlying numbers (32nd in expected goals against per 60 minutes) don't inspire much defensive confidence -- especially if Sam Montembeault and Cayden Primeau continue to hover around replacement level in goal.

Trend-o-meter rating: 8

Ottawa Senators

Will make the playoffs

Based on points percentage, the Senators were inhabiting an Eastern Conference wild-card spot in the first week of November. After years of speculation about which team in the lower half of the Atlantic Division would "make the leap" to contender status, could it end up being the Sens instead of the Sabres, Red Wings or Canadiens?

The answer is a resounding "maybe." They're a middle-of-the-pack team in terms of shot-attempt share (14th) and expected goals percentage (14th) at 5-on-5. Their power play is cooking with gas (third overall through 11 games), but their penalty kill is an Easy-Bake Oven by comparison (19th). Their revamped goaltending, with Ullmark joining Anton Forsberg, was around 14th overall in team save percentage but had room for improvement, as Ullmark started the season playing below replacement level.

Look, the Eastern Conference has about three elite teams, a couple more on the cusp and a lot of also-rans early in the season. The Senators can join the playoff party if the 5-on-5 play and goaltending trend up. But we've been fooled before by teams looking to emerge from the Atlantic pack.

Trend-o-meter rating: 6

Tampa Bay Lightning

They're better without Steven Stamkos

The tear-stained No. 91 jerseys have been hung back up in Lightning fans' closets after Stamkos' return to Tampa last week. It's time to ask the question: Are they better off without him?

For all that they lost in leadership and vibes, Tampa Bay is demonstrably a better team having reallocated the money spent on Stamkos to sign Jake Guentzel for its top line with Brayden Point and Nikita Kucherov.

According to Evolving Hockey, the revamped line has shown growth in several key 5-on-5 metrics since the Stamkos-for-Guentzel switch. Last season's line had a 46.3% expected goals percentage, as it averaged 3.1 expected goals and 3.8 expected goals against per 60 minutes. In term of actual goals, it averaged 3.2 goals per 60 and 4.1 goals against per 60, earning 53.2% of the shot attempts.

The line of Guentzel, Point and Kucherov has a 55.2% expected goals percentage, with 3.3 expected goals and 2.7 expected goals against -- a big improvement defensively. When it comes to actual goals, this trio was averaging a whopping 5.22 goals and 1.25 goals against per 60 minutes through 12 games.

Two caveats. First: Sample size, obviously. Second: Point and Kucherov actually spent slightly more time with Brandon Hagel than with Stamkos last season and posted a better expected goals percentage (59.7%) than any other combination. Their goals (3.97) and goals against (3.33) per 60 minutes is dwarfed by what the new line has put up. (Hagel is skating mostly with center Anthony Cirelli this season and is putting up solid numbers.)

But if the question is whether the Lightning are better on the ice with Guentzel and without Stamkos, the answer is clear.

Trend-o-meter rating: 9

Toronto Maple Leafs

Anthony Stolarz is the answer in goal

The latest incarnation of the Leafs' goaltending battery features Joseph Woll, a 26-year-old who performed well last season and stopped 54 of 56 shots in three playoff games before an injury stopped him, and Stolarz, 31, who is on this fifth NHL team and backed up Sergei Bobrovsky on the Stanley Cup champion Panthers last season.

Most of the preseason speculation had Woll emerging as "the guy" in Toronto. And yet it's Stolarz who has started out strongly, with a 4-2-2 record, a .919 save percentage and a 2.38 goals-against average in his first eight appearances. Stolarz has four goals saved above replacement in that span as well.

Woll has already been out of the lineup once this season with an injury. Stolarz hasn't exactly been a model of health in his career either. That's the wager GM Brad Treliving placed this season. So far, it's playing Stolarz that has paid off. He'll be a key in getting the Leafs into the postseason. If Woll is healthy, though, it still wouldn't be surprising to see him take the crease back when it matters most.

Trend-o-meter rating: 6

Metropolitan Division

Carolina Hurricanes

Martin Necas must remain blond

Necas has been on the cusp of stardom before, like when he tallied 71 points in 82 games two seasons ago for the Hurricanes. But he has never had an offensive explosion like this to start a season: 18 points in his first 10 games, including six goals. The difference, obviously, is his hair.

According to The Hockey News, Necas lost a wager with teammate Brendan Lemieux in a stroke-play match at Old Chatham Golf Club in Durham. Along with dropping some money, Necas had to drop some hair dye on his locks, turning them blond per the conditions of the bet.

It's said that blond(e)s have more fun. Scoring 18 points in the first 10 games is, in fact, pretty fun. Necas signed a two-year bridge contract with the Hurricanes over the summer at a \$6.5 million average annual value. He's making it look like a bargain this season -- provided he keeps his golden locks.

Trend-o-meter rating: 10

Columbus Blue Jackets

Kirill Marchenko on pace for 30-plus goals

To understand the joy that is Kirill Marchenko, look no further than this video the Blue Jackets released around Halloween, in which they had players pluck candy from two baskets. Marchenko walked over and proceeded to grab both entire baskets. Realizing his error, Marchenko simply took nearly a dozen individual pieces instead.

TRICK-OR-TREAT 🎃 🍬 To get in the Halloween spirit, we surprised our players with some candy 🍬

Get your very own Hat Trick-Or-Treat basket at our Hockey Halloween game tomorrow!
pic.twitter.com/Rm0maU2oNI

— Columbus Blue Jackets (@BlueJacketsNHL) October 29, 2024

It's OK to be a little greedy when one is shooting 17.4% to start the season. Marchenko has four goals in his first 11 games, having scored 23 goals in 78 games last season. His top line with Yegor Chinakhov and Sean Monahan is clicking to the tune of 4.3 goals per 60 minutes at 5-on-5. With an increase in ice time of nearly 2 minutes per game, Marchenko looks primed to have his best NHL season as he projects to finish with around 30 goals -- and likely more than that.

Trend-o-meter rating: 8

New Jersey Devils

Nico Hischier outscoring Jack Hughes

There have been a few significant goal-scoring surprises on the Devils early this season, unless you were expecting Stefan Noesen (6) and Paul Cotter (6) to have more goals than Sidney Crosby through Nov. 4. But the biggest surprise has been the offensive dominance of captain Nico Hischier, with 10 goals in his first 15 games. His career high for goals in a season is 31 in 81 games in 2022-23.

He leads the Devils in both goals and points (16) early on this season, which means that star center Jack Hughes does not. Since 2020-21, Hughes has finished ahead of Hischier in points in three of four seasons, although injuries played a role in a couple of those campaigns. Hughes has 12 points in 15 games, including four goals, to start the season for the Devils.

There's every reason to believe Hughes will break out offensively, given that his 8.7% shooting percentage isn't in line with what he has done in the past three seasons. But there is something to be said for the comfort of productive linemates. Hischier's unit with Dawson Mercer and Timo Meier has been the Devils' most productive 5-on-5 unit.

Since both Hughes and Hischier get top-unit power-play time on a group that clicks at 30.4%, it's not out of the question this could be Hischier's year statistically. But when Hughes is on, he can stack points on points.

Trend-o-meter rating: 7

New York Islanders

The NHL's worst offensive team

Ilya Sorokin probably knows better than anyone about the Islanders' offensive failings. After Sorokin and the Islanders lost 1-0 to Detroit on Oct. 22, Eric Hornick of MSG Network noted that Sorokin had lost 11 games in his career when allowing one goal or fewer (a record of 44-4-7). It was actually the second time this season Sorokin lost a 1-0 game, as the Blues defeated the Islanders 1-0 on Oct. 17.

Through 12 games, the Islanders were 31st in the NHL in 2.25 goals-per-game average. Injuries to Mathew Barzal and Anthony Duclair played a part in that, but players such as Jean-Gabriel Pageau and Noah Dobson were off to slow starts as well.

A look under the hood shows a sizable gulf between the Islanders' expected goals (2.62) and actual output (1.84) at 5-on-5, thanks in part to a paltry 6.1% shooting percentage. Their power play was at a 20.4% conversion rate last season; through 12 games, the Islanders conversion rate was 12.5%. They'll get healthier, and the cyclical metrics will cycle into something more positive. Are they a bottom-five scoring team? Probably. But they might not be the worst at the end of the day.

Trend-o-meter rating: 5

New York Rangers

Igor Shesterkin on track for the Vezina Trophy

There's a whole lot that's gone right for the Rangers at the start of the season, from Artemi Panarin's scorching start to Alexis Lafreniere looking like a point-per-game player to winning eight of their first 11 games. The foundation for all of it, as ever, has been their goaltending led by Igor Shesterkin.

"Shesty" has a 6-2-1 record with a .933 save percentage and a 2.22 goals-against average. His 11.6 goals saved above expected is second to Lukas Dostal of the Anaheim Ducks, per Money Puck. Stathletes has Shesterkin with the lead in goals saved above expected in all situations with 13.8, well ahead of Dostal (9.9).

Shesterkin hasn't been a Vezina finalist since he won the award for the first time in 2021-22, the same season he was a finalist for the Hart Trophy. His numbers dipped from his sterling .935 save percentage in the following two seasons. Having backup Jonathan Quick post stellar numbers probably didn't help his case. But Shesterkin looks awesome off the hop this season, looking very smart for not signing a contract extension before what could be another season of postseason hardware for him.

Trend-o-meter rating: 8

Philadelphia Flyers

The goaltending is terrible

There was a time when coach John Tortorella's system would insulate his team's goaltending. That hasn't necessarily been the case in Philadelphia; the Flyers' team save percentage ranked 21st in his first season

(.893) and fell to 31st last season (.884), which saw them part ways with starter Carter Hart, who was charged with sexual assault in London, Ontario, in January.

There was some hope that the Flyers' duo of Samuel Ersson and Ivan Fedotov could stabilize the position. The early returns are ... not good. Through 12 games, the Flyers were 31st in the NHL with an .867 team save percentage. Fedotov in particular has struggled, to the tune of minus-5.1 goals saved above expected in three games, per Money Puck. He had a ghastly .821 save percentage in that span, compared to .901 for Ersson.

There's always a chance Fedotov finds his game, although goalie pundits have wondered if that's possible given questions about his agility and puck tracking. There is, however, another possible solution for the Flyers: rookie Aleksei Kolosov of Belarus, who was called up from the AHL in October. Could the talented 22-year-old reverse the fortunes of the Flyers netminders?

Trend-o-meter rating: 7

Pittsburgh Penguins

Michael Bunting is a bust

The play of forward Michael Bunting probably isn't that high in the list of Penguins fans' concerns, what with the team's struggling defensive game, its lack of success in the standings and the existential crisis about the franchise's near future due to the age of its superstar core. But it is a concern.

Bunting came over from the Hurricanes in last season's Jake Guentzel deadline deal, as a way to give the Penguins a veteran forward in their top six after shipping out Sidney Crosby's linemate. He produced after arriving in Pittsburgh, to the tune of 19 points in 21 games. After 12 games this season, Bunting now has 20 points in 33 games -- the 29-year-old has just one assist in his first 12 games, skating to a minus-5.

"I've never had a start like this, so I'm trying my best to get out of it," he told reporters on Tuesday. "It's frustrating for any athlete when things aren't bouncing your way, even though I feel like I've had a lot of chances."

His ice time has dropped from 17:19 last season to 14:33 this season, as Bunting is now playing in the team's bottom six. There's still plenty of time for him to find his game -- and his time in Toronto showed he can hang with high-end talent -- but in a month of brutal starts for the Penguins, Bunting's was particularly disconcerting. Although his goal Tuesday night was a start.

Trend-o-meter rating: 7

Washington Capitals

Alex Ovechkin is on pace to score his 900th goal this season

Ovechkin has apparently decided he wants to catch Wayne Gretzky this season, based on the available evidence. With seven goals in his first 11 games -- and only one of them on a power play -- Ovechkin is 34 away from tying Gretzky for the most career goals in NHL history.

His pace for an 82-game season: 52 goals and 104 points, which would be the first time Ovechkin has cracked 100 points since 2009-10. It's a pace that would eclipse anything a 39-year-old player as accomplished offensively in the NHL. It's a pace that not only would break Gretzky's record by season's end but make Ovechkin the first NHL player to score 900 career goals.

While it might seem absurd to expect any of this to happen for a player of Ovechkin's mileage ... he's looked fantastic this season. Full steam ahead for the Russian Machine.

Trend-o-meter rating: 8

Central Division

Chicago Blackhawks

Tyler Bertuzzi hasn't found his game

Bertuzzi signed a four-year deal with the Blackhawks in the club's effort to surround Connor Bedard with higher grade offensive talent. While the two have rarely played together at 5-on-5, they've seen ample time together on the Blackhawks power play. Chicago has scored six goals with the duo on the man advantage, with Bertuzzi netting two of them.

At even strength, Bertuzzi hasn't been that much of a difference-maker, with two goals and no assists in his first 13 games. He hasn't been the sandpaper-covered forechecker on every shift. But his play has seen an uptick lately as Bertuzzi gets more comfortable on his fourth team in three seasons. He might not end up with 21 goals and 22 assists in 80 games like he did with the Maple Leafs, but his production will get going.

Trend-o-meter rating: 2

Colorado Avalanche

Cale Makar will lead all players in scoring

It was in the ether that Makar was going to do something exceptional offensively this season. His 2.8 points per 60 minutes last season in 77 games was the highest average of his career, leading to a career-best 90 points. At a minimum, Makar looked primed to become the seventh defenseman in NHL history to break 100 points, and the first since Erik Karlsson tallied 101 in 2022-23. But could he do something even more exceptional?

Through 12 games, Makar was tied for the NHL lead with 21 points (five goals, 16 assists). Only one defenseman in NHL history has ever lead the league in points for all skaters, and it's someone mentioned frequently in the same breath as Makar: Bobby Orr, who did it twice: 1969-70 (120) and 1974-75 (135). In fact, Orr was the only defenseman to lead the NHL in scoring through the first month of the season until Makar joined him this season.

Makar is an offensive force of nature who is underestimated at one's own peril. But he's pushing against history. He hasn't played more than 77 games in a season -- witness his injury earlier this week in a game against Seattle. And Connor McDavid has returned to the Oilers with another Art Ross Trophy on his mind (among other trophies).

Trend-o-meter rating: 3

Dallas Stars

Is Wyatt Johnston OK?

Few young players in the NHL had the opportunity to level up more than Johnston this season. He was projected to play in the middle on the Stars' top line with Roope Hintz and Jason Robertson, filling in for the retired Joe Pavelski. But they only spent a limited time together. Johnston has played most of his minutes with Jamie Benn down the lineup.

Through 11 games, Johnston has a respectable six points, although that's off his considerable 2.8 points per 60 minutes pace last season. More concerning is that he's scored only one goal in 11 games, after posting seasons of 24 and 32 goals in his first two NHL campaigns.

His individual expected goals at 5-on-5 is in line with Hintz and Tyler Seguin (0.97). But his overall shooting percentage was just 4 in those 11 games, after he was around 15% in each of his first two seasons. Johnston remains one of the better young offensive players in the league. The goal scoring will come. At least Dallas hopes so.

Trend-o-meter rating: 2

Minnesota Wild

Kirill Kaprizov will win MVP

Kaprizov has been an MVP for the Wild over the past few seasons, scoring over 40 goals in each of the past three. Last season, he had 46 goals and 96 points -- that was 16 more goals and 30 more points than the next leading scorer on the team.

That kind of margin usually gets a star player serious Hart Trophy consideration for league MVP, but Minnesota didn't qualify for the postseason and the performance was ignored. In fact, Kaprizov's best finish for MVP was in 2021-22, his second NHL season, when he tallied a career-best 47 goals and 108 points, finishing seventh in the Hart voting.

The Wild are off to a great start. Their eight wins in 11 games was the second most they've had in franchise history in that span. (They went 9-2-0 in 11 games to start the 2006-07 season.) Kaprizov has been a major reason why: 21 points in 12 games, with seven goals and 14 assists. That's eight points clear of Matt Boldy, the second-leading scorer on the team.

Kaprizov is certainly in that category of players that have been waiting for their next shot at postseason hardware -- his only win was the Calder Trophy for rookie of the year in 2020-21. If the Wild are a playoff team and Kaprizov is driving the bus, he could steer it right into a finalist spot for the Hart.

Trend-o-meter rating: 7

Nashville Predators

From disaster to rebuild?

The Predators are the NHL's biggest disappointment of the season. They're in last place in the Central Division with a 4-8-1 record with a minus-13 goal differential. That's after the blockbuster free-agent signings of Steven Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault, which have failed to juice the 29th best offense in the NHL. GM Barry Trotz's reaction? Telling 102.5 The Game on Tuesday that if things don't turn around, "I'm going to start our rebuild plan."

That caused a huge stir around the NHL, but Trotz later clarified to The Tennessean that the "rebuild" could simply consist of having young players get a shot over struggling veterans. He specifically said his veteran core players "aren't going anywhere." Trotz is trying to thread the needle by icing a competitive team while allowing a collection of prospects to blossom. But even as the Predators struggle, Trotz said he's not tearing the team down.

Trend-o-meter rating: 3

St. Louis Blues

Goaltending can carry them to the playoffs

The Blues were an offensively challenged team even before losing top center Robert Thomas to a fractured ankle. Their 2.69 goals per game in their first 13 games ranked 24th in the NHL. That meant the Blues' best chance at winning would be through solid team defense to compensate for that lack of scoring. Alas, they averaged 3.08 goals against per game.

It could have been worse were it not for the goaltending battery of Jordan Binnington and Joel Hofer. Binnington (.904 save percentage, 2.77 goals-against average) and Hofer (.903, 3.39) helped propel the Blues into the top 10 in team save percentage early in the season.

The Blues aren't an exemplary defensive team under coach Drew Bannister, as they're 23rd in expected goals against per 60 minutes (2.57) and actual goals surrendered (2.72). While their goaltenders have been solid, both Binnington and Hofer have played below expected, per StatHletes. So there's room for improvement there, especially from Binnington, who could end up as Team Canada's starter in the 4 Nations Face-Off.

Trend-o-meter rating: 4

Utah Hockey Club

Can Connor Ingram recapture the magic?

As the Arizona Coyotes' players joined the Utah Hockey Club this season, the newest NHL team appeared to have a strong foundation on which to build thanks to 27-year-old Ingram. He posted back-to-back seasons of .907 save percentage goaltending and tied for the NHL lead in shutouts with six last season.

But in the goaltender's first season in Salt Lake City, fans haven't seen too much of that Connor Ingram. He's 5-2-3 with an .881 save percentage and a 3.57 goals-against average. According to StatHletes, he has a minus-7 goals saved above expected after finishing with a plus-3.4 goals saved above expected last season.

Ingram was a fantastic story in the Coyotes' swan-song season, winning the Masterton Trophy for perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to hockey after nearly retiring due to undiagnosed obsessive compulsive disorder and lingering depression before seeking help from the NHL/NHLPA Player Assistance program. He's a quality goalie. It's been a rough start. He'll persevere.

Trend-o-meter rating: 3

Winnipeg Jets

Jets will win the Western Conference

It's one thing for a team to have a hot start. The Jets certainly had one, with eight straight wins to start the 2024-25 campaign, tied for the third-longest streak in NHL history. It's another thing to be an absolute steamroller to start the season. Through 12 games, Winnipeg scored 59 goals. That's the highest total in a team's first 12 games since the 1995-96 Penguins scored 63 times. That team had Mario Lemieux, Jaromir Jagr, Ron Francis and Sergei Zubov. The 2024-25 Jets ... do not.

That's part of what has made this start special for the Jets. Through 12 games, they had eight players with 10 or more points. Every player on the roster that appeared in at least eight games had a goal, save for defenseman Dylan DeMelo and forward Morgan Barron, a fourth-liner. The Jets scored six or more goals for three straight games for the first time in franchise history.

They're shooting the puck at 5-on-5 around the same rate as last season, but it's finding the back of the net more often: a 9.8% shooting percentage at 5-on-5, up from 8.7% last season, and the league's best power play (44.4%). The scary part is that they haven't needed Connor Hellebuyck to be an all-world goalie yet this season, although he and Eric Comrie have combined for the fourth-best save percentage in the NHL through 12 games (.913).

Does a hot start portend postseason success? Well, let's look at the two teams that started the season hotter than anyone in NHL history: The 1993-94 Maple Leafs and the 2006-07 Sabres, both of whom won

10 straight games to start the season. They share another commonality: Both advanced to the conference final in those seasons ... and lost.

Trend-o-meter rating: 5

Pacific Division

Anaheim Ducks

Trevor Zegras has lost the vibes

The third anniversary of Zegras' lob pass over the net to Sonny Milano is Dec. 7. Which is to say that the greatest highlight of the Ducks forward's career is now three years old. Since then, he finished second for the Calder Trophy in 2021-22 with 61 points, and he had 65 points in 81 games in his third season. But Zegras struggled through an injury-shortened 31-game 2023-24 season (15 points) under head coach Greg Cronin, and he's not producing again this season.

Zegras, 23, has one goal and two assists in 12 games this season, skating 16:36 per game. He has moved around the lineup, from playing on Mason McTavish's wing to playing at his natural spot at center. While he doesn't have the offensive numbers, Zegras has received good notices for trying to become a 200-foot player and hone his defensive game.

Every young NHL star needs to have their defensive reckoning. Jack Hughes, a friend of Zegras, leveled up to superstar status once he played well in all three zones. There's still hope that Zegras can get there, too, but the offensive production has struggled during these growing pains.

Trend-o-meter rating: 7

Calgary Flames

Rebuild, schmebuild -- the Flames are a playoff team

GM Craig Conroy has called it a "retool" in Calgary. "Bringing in young guys, with our veteran players that we have here, we believe we can turn this thing around," he said. That seemed a little outrageous based on the fact that, (a) the Flames shed so many veteran players from their roster over the last year and (b) the clearest path back to relevance in the NHL is to tank hard and collect franchise pillars.

But the Flames were in a playoff spot through the first month of the season, thanks to goaltending that ranked in the top 10 in team save percentage and some strong offensive performances from players such as defenseman Rasmus Andersson (11 points) and a resurgent Jonathan Huberdeau (three goals, eight assists).

Will it last? The Flames have been defiant in answering that question so far. But given that some of their underlying numbers rank in the bottom half of the league -- and that teams like the Oilers and Avalanche look ready to get rolling -- it might not last much longer.

Trend-o-meter rating: 2

Edmonton Oilers

Their Stanley Cup hangover is a migraine

It's tough to climb the mountain again when you've been a fingernail away from the summit. Imagine the Oilers, staring up at that mountain on opening night after losing in Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final. How many of them wish they could just simulate the season to get to the postseason, like in a video game?

The Oilers were a middling 6-6-1 through 13 games, which was still a major improvement over the 3-9-1 mark they had over the first 13 games last season. An injury to Connor McDavid cost the superstar three games, although the Oilers went 2-1-0 during that span. They need their captain back, because if there has been one key issue with the Oil thus far, it's been their offense.

Through 13 games, the Oilers ranked 30th in goals per game (2.38). Only Leon Draisaitl and McDavid were over 10 points in the first 13 games of the season. Players such as Ryan Nugent-Hopkins (one goal), Viktor Arvidsson (one goal) and Zach Hyman (two goals) have yet to get rolling offensively.

Hyman had 54 goals last season while shooting 18.6%. This season, he's at just 5.7%. Shooting percentage is elastic. So is power-play efficiency, which sits at just 14.8% for the Oilers this season after converting at a 26.3% rate last season. Edmonton will be fine offensively. Now, about that penalty kill (60%, 32nd in the NHL) and goaltending (.881 save percentage for Stuart Skinner) ...

Trend-o-meter rating: 3

Los Angeles Kings

Jim Hiller was the right coach at the right time

Hiller went 21-12-1 after replacing coach Todd McLellan last season, leading the Kings to a first-round loss to the Oilers, as they are wont to do. GM Rob Blake ran it back with Hiller as his new head coach and the early returns are that it was a solid choice.

The Kings sprinted out to an 8-3-3 start in their first 14 games, sitting atop the Pacific Division. Hiller has maintained the Kings' solid defensive play, as they led the NHL in expected goals against per 60 minutes (1.99) at 5-on-5. But their offense has ticked up from last season, as the Kings are eighth in 5-on-5 scoring per 60 minutes.

Hiller has managed the roster well, from deployment of goalie Darcy Kuemper to moving Kevin Fiala around in the lineup to trying to keep Quinton Byfield in the middle rather than the wing. Byfield's line with Alex Laferrriere and Warren Foegele has been one of the team's best when assembled.

There were some high-profile coaches hired in the offseason, from Craig Berube in Toronto to Lindy Ruff in Buffalo to Dan Bylsma getting another shot in Seattle. Hiller wasn't usually mentioned among them, but he has the Kings playing great hockey -- even without the injured Drew Doughty.

Trend-o-meter rating: 7

San Jose Sharks

Will not finish with the league's worst record

Through 14 games, the Sharks have a points percentage of .357. That's terrible, but not the worst: The Flyers (.346 in 13 games) were actually in the NHL's basement through Wednesday's games. San Jose was the odds-on favorite to finish with the league's worst record again, as a team in a full-fledged rebuild. Are the Sharks better than expected?

They are getting strong performances from some veteran players such as Mikael Granlund (14 points in 14 games) and Tyler Toffoli (six goals). That's offset the early-season struggles for rookies Will Smith (three points in 11 games) and Macklin Celebrini, who has been limited to two games due to an early-season injury. Goaltending can be the great equalizer, and Mackenzie Blackwood (.894 save percentage) and Vitek Vanecek (.902), who had a 49-save win over Columbus this week, have played well.

All of that established, the mission remains clear: Put the "tank" back in the Shark Tank. They're competitive and hopefully more "fun bad" than "bad bad" this season, but it's in the Sharks' best interests to be the worst.

Trend-o-meter rating: 2

Seattle Kraken

Brandon Montour was one of the offseason's best signings

Montour was going to get paid this summer, because puck-moving offensive defensemen are always at a premium in the NHL. After winning the Stanley Cup with the Florida Panthers, Montour signed a seven-year, \$49,999,999 contract with the Kraken to be their top point-producing D-man.

Through 13 games, Montour has been as good as advertised, with four goals and six assists in 13 games. The 30-year-old blueliner has produced at even strength (seven points) and the power play (three points) while skating 23:43 per game.

His pairing with Jamie Oleksiak has been solid at 5-on-5, with just 1.56 goals against per 60 minutes. This is what the Kraken wanted out of this free-agent investment, and Montour has delivered.

Trend-o-meter rating: 8

Vancouver Canucks

Elias Pettersson is overpaid and underwhelming

Criticism of the Canucks star has become its own cottage industry in Vancouver. The center is in the first season of an eight-year, \$92.8 million contract extension, and has produced two goals and three assists in 11 games, skating to a minus-1.

He had a run-in with teammate J.T. Miller at practice, with a report by Sportsnet claiming the team wanted him to get "tougher." Vancouver media has enlisted pundits such as former Vancouver coach Bruce Boudreau to break down Pettersson's game: "He doesn't look excited when he plays and gets frustrated very easily."

Pettersson was an 89-point player last season. He was a 102-point player the season before that. There's an enormous amount of pressure on the Canucks after advancing to the second round last season, and on Pettersson to live up to the heft of this contract. They'll both be fine by season's end.

Trend-o-meter rating: 1

Vegas Golden Knights

The Knights are an offensive juggernaut

There was some concern before the season that the Golden Knights' offense might be muted. They were thin on the wing. They lost leading scorer Jonathan Marchessault to free agency. Vegas was middle of the pack last season (3.21 goals per game), so how much more offensive pop could be expected?

Turns out, a bunch more of it. The Golden Knights averaged 4.5 goals through 12 games this season. That's included some real MLB-level scores, like their 8-4 win over the Avalanche and a 7-3 win over the Sharks. But in 11 of those 12 games, the Knights scored at least three goals. Only Winnipeg had a more proficient offense to open the season.

They're led by one of the best lines in the NHL: Jack Eichel (three goals, 13 assists) in the middle of Ivan Barbashev (seven goals, five assists) and Mark Stone (five goals, 15 assists) who leads them in scoring. Pavel Dorofeyev, who had 13 goals in his official rookie season in 2023-24, has jumped out to seven goals

in 12 games on the team's second unit with Tomas Hertl (12 points in 12 games). All of them contribute to Vegas' power play, which ranked third in the NHL through 12 games.

Expect more Golden goals from the Knights this season.

Trend-o-meter rating: 8

[Sportsnet.ca / How an NCAA-CHL rule change could impact elite hockey at many levels](#)

By Mike Koreen- November 7, 2024

There is no doubt that Thursday's NCAA Division I Council meeting could result in major ramifications for elite men's hockey, for players in their early teens right up to the NHL.

What is far less clear is exactly how the hockey landscape will shift if the council does the expected and green-lights a rule that would allow Canadian Hockey League players to compete at U.S. colleges. If approved, the rule would go into effect on August 1.

Currently, playing one CHL game disqualifies a player from competing in the NCAA. A class-action lawsuit filed Aug. 13 in U.S. District Court in Buffalo challenged the NCAA's ban of players from the CHL's Western Hockey League, Ontario Hockey League and Quebec Maritimes Junior Hockey League.

"We don't exactly know what's going to happen," CHL president Dan MacKenzie said. "We've heard rumours, various people coming forward with the feeling they believe they know how the rules are going to change. But we don't really know that yet. So I think we have to take everything a little bit slowly on that front in terms of let's see if the rule does change on (Thursday) and what the implications of it will be."

To help get an idea of how this potential massive rule change could affect the sport, Sportsnet interviewed four people with different backgrounds in hockey:

- MacKenzie.
- USHL president/commissioner Glenn Hefferan.
- Queen's University men's hockey coach Brett Gibson.
- Former University of Wisconsin and Colorado Avalanche coach Tony Granato.

Sportsnet asked Hefferan if he felt you would get 10 different answers if you talked to 10 different hockey people about how they thought the sport would change if this rule passes.

"I think you're bang on about that," he said. "I think some people are clouded by what they think the outcome will be or what their preference will be."

Added Gibson: "I feel like I'm in the unknown. I know it's going to affect my recruiting 100 per cent. I know it's going to affect the landscape of U Sports. But we just don't know to what extent it's going to affect it. I'm a firm believer that I think the NCAA is holding the cards right now and I'm just playing with them. That's the hard part."

With the lack of certainty in mind, we do our best here to provide some educated guesses to some key questions:

Is this a good thing for hockey?

Our four experts all agreed that there can be positives for players, though some were more bullish than others.

"I think for the fairness of everybody, it's the right decision," Granato said. "You can go play in the (CHL), just like you play in the USHL, and should be able to go to college. I think that's the way it should be ... At

the end of day if you're looking to have hockey grow and make it better, I think this is an opportunity to look at it that way and I think that's what's going to happen."

Even Gibson, whose level of hockey could face the most significant challenges if this goes through, sees reasons why the NCAA should open the door to CHLers.

"I'm a firm believer in kids having an opportunity where they feel they can best develop," he said. "That might be stupid on my part because that might go against my program. I think in hockey we kind of dictate the path (of players). But I think there's an opportunity for kids to have a say in their path and I'm OK with that."

When can a player leave the CHL for the NCAA?

Now, here's a million-dollar question.

Canadian-born Macklin Celebrini played one year in the USHL with the Chicago Steel before going to Boston University for one season and then was picked first overall by the San Jose Sharks in this year's NHL Draft.

So, could a future Celebrini-type prospect play one or two years in the CHL (depending on birthdate) and then head to the NCAA before embarking on a pro career?

As the current rules stand, a standard CHL contract for a drafted player wouldn't allow that. In North America, a player typically stays in the CHL until their junior eligibility runs out, unless they make the NHL as a teenager.

"I can only talk about the way it is right now," MacKenzie said, acknowledging things could change down the road. "We have contracts with our players, (where) we make commitments to the player in terms of their hockey development and education, and they make commitments to the teams in terms of their duration with the team.

"That's the structure the way it exists now. I don't want to speculate what it might look like two, three years from now. But that's the way it is now. And it's been a system that's worked fairly well. Contracts players have signed have been recognized by federations, whether it be USA Hockey, Hockey Canada or international federations."

CHL contracts have been the subject of debate for years in hockey circles -- so it hardly seems like a sure thing this system remains in its current form.

Another hypothetical: perhaps we see a scenario where a CHL team grants an early exit to a Celebrini-type prospect in their contract so it can have the player for at least a year or two rather than never having him.

The USHL, meanwhile, is more than happy to see players leave after a year or two to go to the NCAA. That will continue to be a recruiting tool for that league if the CHL tries to hold firm on standard contracts.

"Our players are free to advance, whether that's pro hockey or college hockey, at a pace that's appropriate for them," Hefferan said.

Will signed NHL players be able to play in the NCAA?

It doesn't appear this rule change will allow that, which could help keep elite players in the CHL.

If a player is drafted out of the CHL, sometimes they are signed to NHL entry-level contracts (six or seven figures) and returned to junior.

In the NCAA, a player becomes ineligible once he signs with an NHL team.

No one is saying that's about to change.

"I think as long as (a player) doesn't sign an NHL contract, he'll be able to maintain his (NCAA) eligibility," Granato said. "If he played three years of Canadian junior (after a potential rule change), he can say 'Well, I'm not ready to sign yet, I'll go play college hockey.'"

What about the NHL Draft rules?

This appears to be something that's going to have to be discussed while the NHL and NHLPA are discussing a new CBA.

Currently, a CHL player goes back in the draft (if he's still age eligible) if he does not sign with the team that drafted him within two years. In the NCAA, NHL teams retain the rights to NCAA players for four years.

There's a feeling something's going to have to change on this front with many players expected to play in both systems.

"There's no way (the NHL) is going to let a major junior player go to college and now he goes to college and has four more years (where he's with the same NHL team)," Granato said.

Could all this lead to some sort of on-ice competition between the CHL and USHL?

You get two very different answers when you talk to Hefferan and MacKenzie about the potential of any arrangement.

Hefferan attended the Memorial Cup last season in Sarnia, Mich., and has had discussions with MacKenzie, along with WHL commissioner Dan Near and QMJHL commissioner Mario Cecchini -- he hasn't yet connected with new OHL commissioner Bryan Crawford, but expects to do so.

When asked if he'd like to see USHL teams get a chance to compete for the Memorial Cup, Hefferan said: "I certainly would. ... Or some North American championship. Maybe they can play for the Clark Cup (the USHL championship), too. I think having a North American championship would be outstanding. I think it would be a great television property and I think it would help us grow the game. I think so many pluses would come out of it."

MacKenzie, however, isn't reading from the same script.

"I think it's way too premature to consider that right now," he said. "I like Glenn, we have built a good rapport. But I think any speculation at that kind of level at this point is far too much premature. I'll leave it at that at this point."

Will CHL players cash in on NIL deals in the NCAA?

Name, Image and Likeness deals are all the rage in the NCAA, with athletes now able to make significant money while playing college sports.

We now see stories estimating which athletes have the highest NIL values.

One problem for Canadians, though.

Student-visa rules prevent Canadians in the NCAA from entering into the same type of deals as American counterparts -- a story best illustrated by former Purdue basketball star and Toronto native Zach Edey, the two-time NCAA player of the year.

The student-visa rules are so significant that Kingston, Ont., native and former UConn basketball star Aaliyah Edwards could not talk about an NIL deal she signed with Adidas Canada while in the U.S. last year.

There is an opening for players to engage in more NIL deals when their team crosses the border into Canada, a big reason why Purdue's men's basketball team played a regular-season game against Alabama in Toronto last season.

There is no sense an NCAA-CHL shift would change NIL rules for non-U.S. student-athletes.

Could more NCAA hockey teams play games in Canada to help top recruits out? Stay tuned.

Could there be a negative impact for any type of players?

The ones who seem to be in a bit of a tricky spot are younger teenagers who already have verbally committed to NCAA programs.

If the door opens for CHLers to play in the NCAA, will their spots be threatened?

"Most (NCAA) teams are two to three years out in (verbal) commits," Granato said. "Now, there will be six to seven Canadian junior players available to the program as well. So (programs are going to have to ask themselves) 'what are we going to do with the commits we already have?'"

What players will this affect most right off the bat?

It seems like it will be those finishing off their CHL eligibility, like the Regina Pats' Braxton Whitehead, who announced a verbal commitment to Arizona State earlier this year despite the rule not being officially changed yet.

Suddenly, players like Whitehead will have a chance to play in the NCAA and perhaps be a late bloomer in rinks where NHL scouts are known to congregate.

From a CHL perspective, the league can sell CHL-draft-eligible kids on knowing they're free to play in the NCAA down the road instead of having to make a huge decision one way or another around age 15.

"You can play in the league that's considered the best (development) league in the world and then still have those options open for you," MacKenzie said. "I think the net result is you're going to have the best 16- to 19-year-olds playing in our league. ... I think for us and our clubs, we just have to make sure we continue to provide that great experience and don't take that for granted because at end of the day, players' development is the most important thing."

Added Granato: "Probably 90-plus per cent of players, are not going to be able to make an NHL team at 20 years old, maybe 99 per cent. Why wouldn't you want to play longer, to get ready for your opportunity at 22, 23 as opposed to 19, 20 where Canadian junior players have to. I think that will be attractive for players who aren't quite ready for pro hockey or don't want to play in the minors."

Perhaps this spells some trouble for the USHL, or a league like the BCHL in B.C. and Alberta.

Hefferan, however, thinks he has a good product to sell, even if NCAA rules do change.

"We're going to continue to do a solid job," he said. "We have great owners, good markets, great fans. I'm not overwhelmingly concerned about it. There's steps we have to take that we've been working on to improve our product irrespective of this change."

Will this take away potential top recruits for Canadian university programs?

Gibson acknowledges U Sports will lose some players to the NCAA.

But he doesn't see this as a death knell for the Canadian university ranks. A Queen's degree, for example, can be a key recruiting tool for a player who hopes to work in Canada after his competitive hockey career is over.

"Not everyone is going to be attracted to the NCAA, just like not everybody is going to be attracted to U Sports," he said. "I think we're going to lose guys, yes. But I think there's going to be guys who naturally want to play in Canadian university. What we need to figure out is what the ground rules are. Right now, it's the wild, wild west."

Another area to watch is U Sports players (formerly of the CHL) transferring to U.S. colleges -- which is starting to become more common in men's basketball.

Michael Kelvin of the reigning national runner-up Queen's men's basketball team, for one, announced this summer he is transferring to Oklahoma State.

Sportsnet.ca / NHL Power Rankings: Biggest surprise for all 32 teams a month into the season

By Ryan Dixon- November 8, 2024

Friday is November 8, which means — if we overlook the early European start Buffalo and New Jersey got in Czechia — it's been exactly one month since the NHL season began in earnest on October 8 with a banner-raising in South Florida.

Some of what's happened in four-plus weeks since then is stuff many anticipated. On the other hand, it feels like the number of things that qualify as a surprise is at least slightly more extensive than usual.

For example, two teams many circled for a step back — the Winnipeg Jets and Carolina Hurricanes — sport the top two points percentages in the league. Martin Necas, a player mentioned endlessly in summer trade rumours, has 20 points and is being outscored by just five forwards in the NHL. Nikolaj Ehlers, cited in as many off-season fake trade proposals as Necas, is right behind with 17 points. The Washington Capitals, a club you may have forgotten even scraped into the playoffs last year, is authoring the kind of hot start that gives them the inside track on getting back this season and centre Dylan Strome has the fifth-best points-per-game mark (1.58) of any Canadian NHLer. Matt Duchene (1.36) is sixth.

Meanwhile, defenceman Cale Makar is competing with teammate Nathan MacKinnon for the league scoring lead, yet the Avalanche teammates are a combined minus-11 and play for a 6-7-0 team. Connor McDavid also plays for a sub-.500 squad. Due to a combination of injuries and uneven play by their teams, McDavid and Auston Matthews — the most recent two Rocket Richard winners — have combined for eight goals this year. In other words, the same amount put up by the Kings' Alex Laferrriere or the Avs' (now injured) Ross Colton.

The Boston Bruins — who won a league-record 65 games in 2022-23, when Jim Montgomery won the Jack Adams in his first year with the team — have been identified as a squad that might drop the axe on its coach, while the Nashville Predators — after winning the off-season — have won just four of 13 games this year. In fact, GM Barry Trotz is already talking about a rebuild.

Suffice it to say, surprises abound and cut both ways.

With that in mind, we're using this week's power rankings, one month into the season, to identify an eyebrow-raising note — good or bad — about all 32 teams.

1. Winnipeg Jets (12-1-0) Nobody saw a league-best 4.77 goals per game coming, and hands up if you had Neal Pionk being a point-per-game blue-liner through 13 contests.
2. Carolina Hurricanes (9-2-0) Martin Necas has been the offensive story, but how about new Cane Jack Roslovic netting seven goals so far?
3. Florida Panthers (9-3-1) Sam Reinhart is a wonderful player, but it was easy to believe his 57-goal showing from last season was going to be a bit of an outlier. However, Reinhart is a Rocket Richard threat once again, earning himself a share of the NHL goal-scoring lead with 10 tallies.
4. New York Rangers (8-2-1) Second-year Ranger Will Cuyllle has taken a nice offensive step with eight points in 11 outings this year. If he can bring offence like that in his six-foot-three package, New York will be over the moon.

5. Washington Capitals (9-3-0) Dylan Strome producing like a 1C? Alex Ovechkin scoring at a 55-goal pace at age 39? Both of those things catch your attention, as does Connor McMichael being tied for the team lead in goals (eight) with Ovie.
6. Vegas Golden Knights (9-3-1) What a scorching start by captain Mark Stone, who's driving Vegas' powerful offence with 21 points in 13 outings.
7. Minnesota Wild (8-2-2) Filip Gustavsson was the subject of off-season trade rumours, so his solid .917 save percentage is quite a sight so far.
8. Dallas Stars (7-4-0) No alarm bells are ringing, but for the second consecutive fall, Jason Robertson is a little sluggish out of the gate with just four goals in 11 contests.
9. New Jersey Devils (8-5-2) Nico Hischier has always been a quality player, but to see him scoring at a 55-goal pace is something else.
10. Los Angeles Kings (8-3-3) After everyone predicted another surge for Quinton Byfield, the big man is stuck on a single goal in 14 games this year.
11. Vancouver Canucks (6-2-3) You figured, after a summer to reset, Elias Pettersson's elite offensive game would return. So far, though, that's not been the case.
12. Toronto Maple Leafs (7-5-2) Two PPGs in their last outing helped, but it remains downright jarring to see the Leafs converting just 14.9 percent of the time (26th in the NHL) with the man advantage.
13. Tampa Bay Lightning (7-6-0) Anthony Cirelli as a point-per-game player? What a nice development for the Bolts.
14. Detroit Red Wings (6-5-1) Cam Talbot and Alex Lyon combining to provide Detroit with the fifth-best save percentage (.911) in the league? Didn't see that coming.
15. Edmonton Oilers (6-7-1) Even with Connor McDavid sidelined for a bit, it's absolutely shocking to see the Oilers ranked 30th in the league with 2.31 goals-per-game.
16. Ottawa Senators (6-6-0) We figured a Swedish goalie might have a .910 save percentage for the Sens this year, we just didn't bank on it being Anton Forsberg instead of Linus Ullmark.
17. St. Louis Blues (7-6-0) Brayden Schenn has been a consistent 20-goal guy, so to see him still stuck on one goal with top centre Robert Thomas out of the lineup is a surprise.
18. Boston Bruins (6-7-1) We're just not used to seeing Boston in the bottom third of the league in goals-against. The Bruins currently rank 22nd in the NHL, surrendering 3.29 goals a night.
19. Colorado Avalanche (6-7-0) Maybe it's actually a surprise this team is doing as well as it is with forwards Jonathan Drouin, Miles Wood, Ross Colton, Valeri Nichukshin and, yes, captain Gabriel Landeskog all on the sidelines.
20. Calgary Flames (7-5-1) Andrei Kuzmenko scored at a 40-goal pace after landing in Calgary last season, so it's a disappointing surprise to see him with just one tuck in 13 tries this year.
21. Columbus Blue Jackets (5-5-2) Sean Monahan played some great hockey last year, but it's still quite something to see him fit so well with his new club. The veteran pivot leads Columbus with six goals.
22. Utah Hockey Club (5-5-3) Nick Schmaltz is a pass-first creator, but to see him stuck with a goose egg in the goals column this year is a shocker.
23. Buffalo Sabres (5-7-1) One goal — and just four points — for Dylan Cozens? We know he scuffled last year, but what's going on here?

24. New York Islanders (5-6-2) Kyle Palmieri leads the Islanders with 11 points in 13 games. I'm not sure if that's a surprise or the most on-brand thing you could imagine for the Isles.
25. Chicago Blackhawks (5-8-1) Listen, the kid is going to get there, but aren't you a little surprised Connor Bedard has only scored three times this year?
26. Anaheim Ducks (4-6-2) It has not been a smooth ride for Trevor Zegras the past couple of seasons, but three points in 12 games? Ugh.
27. Pittsburgh Penguins (5-7-2) Really, most of what's happening around this club is predictable, including the conversation shifting toward what a long road back to contention this will be.
28. Nashville Predators (4-8-1) Throw a dart and you'll hit a bad surprise in Nashville. Throw two and you can hit Steven Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault combining for just five goals so far.
29. Seattle Kraken (5-8-1) It's crazy how quickly this season is getting away from Seattle. The Kraken are 1-6-1 in their past eight and if you take out a nutty 8-2 win versus Montreal, they're being outscored 26-10 in that stretch. They've got a six-game homestand starting Friday and need to turn things around fast.
30. San Jose Sharks (4-8-2) The fact this team currently has just one loss in its past five outings would surely surprise anybody who watched it fail to win through its first nine games. Kudos to San Jose's players for grabbing hold of the wheel.
31. Montreal Canadiens (4-7-2) The horrendous underlying numbers for this squad — which, despite not being that good last season, was usually very competitive — are truly astonishing.
32. Philadelphia Flyers (4-8-1) No matter what your expectation, a .842 combined save percentage in six games from Ivan Fedotov and Aleksei Kolosov is shocking to see.

[Sportsnet.ca / NHL's Top 12 RFAs of 2025: Latest rumours, reports](#)

By Luke Fox- November 8, 2024

No. 1 defencemen and No. 1 goalies. Bridge candidates and future superstars who need to be locked up before the big breakout.

The 2025 class of impending restricted free agents offers a little bit of everything enticing.

And although several potential RFAs avoided drama and uncertainty by signing well before July 1 (the Rangers' Alexis Lafreniere, Dallas's Jake Oettinger, Minnesota's Brock Faber, St. Louis's Jake Neighbours, Utah's Dylan Guenther, Vancouver's Nils Högländer chief among them), plenty of intriguing young names remain unsigned for next season.

As these RFAs look to bank off their platform campaigns and managers wonder how to spend their dollars against a spiking salary cap, plenty of tense negotiations (or a couple of trades?) are still on deck.

The situations in New York, Edmonton and Anaheim are particularly compelling.

Here's where things stand with the top 12 RFAs of 2025, with the trade deadline set for March 7.

1. Evan Bouchard

Age on July 1: 25

Position: Defence

2024-25 salary cap hit: \$3.9 million

Arbitration rights: Yes

Bargaining chips: Top-10 draft pick. Right shot. Releaser of the Bouch Bomb. Key power-play contributor. Stanley Cup finalist. Followed an 82-point regular season with 32 points in a 25-game playoff run. Holds the record for most assists by a D-man in one playoff year (26).

The latest: The Edmonton Oilers haven't dressed such a productive offensive defenceman since Paul Coffey, and Bouchard's performance in 2023-24 — particularly come the post-season — has set him up to flip his bridge deal into a whopper.

"Nothing on that yet," Oilers GM Stan Bowman told reporters in the pre-season. "He's still a very big priority for our team, he had a fantastic season, he's a great player, and I think his best years are still ahead of him. We'll probably get to that at some point."

Bouchard's pricy extension took a back seat to that of Leon Draisaitl's over the off-season, and Connor McDavid's raise lies around the corner.

Bowman knows he must squeeze in another superstar salary on the back end (somewhere in the \$10.5-million range?) for Bouchard, which is partly why St. Louis's offer sheets for Philip Broberg and Dylan Holloway were successful.

Every season is now "Cap or Bust" in Northern Alberta.

2. Noah Dobson

Age on July 1: 25

Position: Defence

2024-25 salary cap hit: \$4 million

Arbitration rights: Yes

Bargaining chips: Right-shot blueliner with tremendous vision. Top-12 draft pick. One of two Islanders defencemen to record 60 assists in a single season. First Isles D-man to hit 70 points since Denis Potvin. Logged 24:30 per night in 2023-24, tops among all pending RFAs. Seldom takes penalties.

The latest: General manager Lou Lamoriello got ahead of his most important RFAs, forward Mathew Barzal and goaltender Ilya Sorokin, in off-seasons past. But Dobson has entered 2024-25, the final year of his bridge pact, with uncertainty in the air.

The aging Islanders can ill afford not to invest in young talent.

“He’s growing every year,” Lamoriello said of his power-play QB. “And I think that there’s no ceiling to his potential.

“Every year that you have success, certainly you get recognized a little bit more and you get a little more attention. But there’s no question that the sky is the limit.”

Should Lamoriello go long-term here, we could be looking at an eight-year deal nearing \$8 million per season. Dobson should soon become the highest-paid player on the team's back end.

3. Wyatt Johnston

Age on July 1: 22

Position: Centre

2024-25 salary cap hit: \$894,167

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: First-round pick. Right-shot centreman. Named to the 2023 All-Rookie Team. Most goals by a teenager in Dallas Stars history. 106 points in the first 164 NHL games. Elevates in the post-season. Perfect NHL attendance.

The latest: Johnston entered his age-21 platform campaign having already piled up 14 goals and 22 points in 38 playoff games. He has rapidly become a play-driver for a contending club.

GM Jim Nill has a track record of getting his RFAs locked up for fair rates (the lack of state tax doesn't hurt, surely) and started with Oettinger.

Johnston should be next on the list, but raises for Nill's other young studs — Jason Robertson, Thomas Harley and Logan Stankoven (all due after 2025-26) — lurk around the corner and must be considered when planning long-term.

Matty Benier’s recent extension in Seattle (\$7.14 million times seven years) could be a smart comparable for Johnston, should Nill opt for term. Otherwise, a mid-term bridge could be the play. That’s the route the Stars went with Robertson after his 40-goal breakout.

“We eventually want to sit down,” Nill told The Athletic. “Do they want to talk this year? We’d love to. Maybe they just want to go play. We’ll figure that out.”

4. Luke Hughes

Age on July 1: 21

Position: Defence

2024-25 salary cap hit: \$925,000

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: Fourth-overall draft pick. Legit hockey family. World junior medallist. Already repped Team USA twice at world championships. Calder finalist. Named to 2024 NHL All-Rookie Team. EA Sports coverboy. Impressive 47-point rookie campaign and instant top-four D-man in the pros.

The latest: After hiring a new coach and making a ton of UFA noise in the summer of '24, New Jersey Devils GM Tom Fitzgerald's top priority is now clear: Get Hughes locked up for a team-friendly rate.

The Devils did just that with Hughes' older brother, Jack, and a great long-term comparable for Luke emerged when fellow 2024 Calder Trophy finalist Brock Faber re-upped in Minnesota for eight years at \$8.5 million per season.

Such a deal would elevate Luke's salary over Jack's \$8 million, which is excellent value.

Luke underwent off-season shoulder surgery, missing the first few weeks of his platform campaign.

5. JJ Peterka

Age on July 1: 23

Position: Centre

2024-25 salary cap hit: \$855,833

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: 2022 AHL All-Rookie Team. Silver medallist and Best Forward at the 2023 world championships. Superb skater. Sniper. Career-high 28 goals and 50 points in 2023-24.

The latest: In the case of multiple RFAs who have shown early promise — Tage Thompson, Dylan Cozens, Rasmus Dahlin, Owen Power, Mattias Samuelson — Buffalo Sabres GM Kevyn Adams has tried to get ahead of a breakout by locking up his young players for significant term.

A scorer in the ballpark of Guenther's capabilities, Peterka — one of the great bargain deals of 2023-24 — could be looking for an AAV north of \$7 million, should Adams wish to buy up some UFA years.

Failing that, a bridge deal would be the easier route.

Adams maintains that he is philosophically open to buying term, betting that the AAV would benefit the team against a rising cap.

"We're always open. We've done it before, but we've also gone the other way," Adams said, cautiously. "It's always about what's right for us and what's right for the player."

6. Fabian Zetterlund

Age on July 1: 25

Position: Left wing

2024-25 salary cap hit: \$1.45 million

Arbitration rights: Yes

Bargaining chips: World junior silver medallist. 2024 world championship medallist. Ripped 24 goals and added 20 assists in 2023-24, his first full NHL season. Leading goal-getter for San Jose. Rebuilding Sharks need to keep all legit 20-something talent. Can deadlift 600 pounds.

The latest: General manager Mike Grier doesn't have any re-signing priorities higher than Zetterlund, who enters the final season of his bridge pact as his club's most prolific finisher.

Another productive showing in Silicon Valley should establish the Swede as a fixture of San Jose's core.

Because Grier has shed so much salary in (a successful) attempt to win the draft lottery and stock up on young talent, cap space is of little concern and there is no reason not to attempt a long-term deal here.

With Zetterlund off to a strong start and striking a tight friendship with teammate William Eklund, we would be surprised if the sides can't reach common ground before the bargain winger nears expiry on June 30.

7. Mason McTavish

Age on July 1: 22

Position: Centre

2024-25 salary cap hit: \$894,167

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: Third-overall draft pick. Olympian. 2022 world junior gold medallist, MVP and author of the "McTavish Miracle." Consecutive 40-point seasons in the NHL. Key piece of Anaheim Ducks' future.

The latest: The seven-year, \$49-million contract Pat Verbeek issued young RFA centre Troy Terry in 2023 might tell us something about the type of deal the Ducks GM may wish to strike with McTavish, the next young stud centre on his to-do list.

The Terry deal took time to come together, however, and Verbeek's other high-profile forward, Trevor Zegras, settled for less money and less term.

The executive has cap space to play with but is mindful of the number of players he'll have knocking at his door for raises. He has a track record of patience, playing out situations where he holds the hammer.

"It's on the radar," Verbeek stated, when asked about potential extensions for players whose contracts will expire next summer. "We go through our process with the timing of it all. It'll certainly be something that we look at."

A comparable for McTavish's next contract could be Quinton Byfield's recent five-year extension in Los Angeles, which carries a \$6.25-million AAV.

8. K'Andre Miller

Age on July 1: 25

Position: Defence

2024-25 salary cap hit: \$3.872 million

Arbitration rights: Yes

Bargaining chips: First-round pick. World junior silver medallist. NHL All-Rookie Team. Durable. Great size and reach at 6-foot-5, 210 pounds. Productive despite limited power-play time. 43 games of playoff experience already. Excellent skater. A plus player in all five seasons.

The latest: Big, strong, smart blueliners in their prime are essentially must-keeps.

So while the New York Rangers were quick to re-sign power forward Lafreniere and already took a hard run at extending pending UFA Igor Shesterkin, locking up Miller before he wraps his bridge contract should be imperative.

GM Chris Drury will be staring at a \$4.65-million qualifying offer to retain Miller's rights this summer; a long-term deal should push Miller's AAV into the \$6 million-to-\$6.5 million range.

New York still holds a couple of years of club control here, but the hard cap is not Drury's friend.

Inevitable raises for Lafreniere, Shesterkin and Miller are the reason the team explored moving on from captain Jacob Trouba in the off-season.

Eventually, something will have to give.

9. Matthew Knies

Age on July 1: 22

Position: Left wing

2024-25 salary cap hit: \$925,000

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: Top-line power forward. Meshes well with superstars Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner. Biggest player on the Maple Leafs. Strong playoff showing. Should have no issue crushing rookie season totals of 15 goals, 35 points. Net-front presence. Draws penalties. Olympian.

The latest: So much for the sophomore slump.

Knies packed on 10 pounds over the summer, then got shot out of cannon. The second-year pro has instantly gained trust (and ice time) from new Toronto coach Craig Berube and has been one of the Leafs' best stories of the early season.

"He's a beast," confirms fellow Arizonan Auston Matthews.

Berube has gone so far as to compare Knies to power forwards Keith Tkachuk, Bill Guerin and John Leclair — comments GM Brad Treliving hopes Knies' agent didn't catch wind of.

In speaking with Knies, he has made it clear that he loves being a Maple Leaf and has no thoughts of leaving Toronto.

He has politely declined to publicly discuss the state of extension talks, but there is no doubt Treliving wants to keep him in the fold.

Of course, the Leafs have big decisions to make on Marner and John Tavares, but that didn't stop them from re-signing Jake McCabe in-season and shouldn't force them to wait on Knies either.

10. Lukas Dostal

Age on July 1: 25

Position: Goaltender

2024-25 salary cap hit: \$812,500

Arbitration rights: Yes

Bargaining chips: Gold (2024) and bronze (2022) medallist at world championships. Crowded Best Goaltender at '24 worlds. AHL All-Star. Clear successor to John Gibson as Anaheim's No. 1 goalie.

Fantastic traditional and underlying stats despite playing behind a subpar team of skaters. Ducks sure can use saves.

The latest: With Gibson sidelined by an appendectomy to begin 2024-25, Dostal happily carried the workload in Orange County and began performing among the league's elite at his position.

Dostal's strong track record has met opportunity at the perfect time, and the goalie is putting himself in line for a massive payday.

GM Verbeek was in no panic to extend Dostal before the season began, but the way Dostal is performing, the executive may wish for a time machine.

"We'll take our time on that," Verbeek stated at the start of training camp, when asked about extensions for his pending RFAs. "We haven't really started thinking about that yet, but we'll lay a plan out for when we'll start talking about all that stuff. To me, that's far down the road."

Verbeek has yet to extend one of his RFAs in-season, but if there is a candidate to break that trend, it may well be Dostal.

11. Marco Rossi

Age on July 1: 23

Position: Centre

2024-25 salary cap hit: \$883,334

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: Top-10 draft pick. Ontario Hockey League MVP. Austrian national team captain. Put up 21 goals and 40 points in first full NHL season. 2024 NHL All-Rookie Team. You can never have enough skilled centres.

The latest: Sure, Minnesota Wild GM Bill Guerin will soon be squirming out from the weight of the Ryan Suter and Zach Parise buyout payments, but only to face requests for significant pay bumps from integral forwards.

While Rossi's raise is a priority, Guerin's cap planning must begin with locking in team MVP, Kirill Kaprizov, to an eight-figure deal. Kaprizov is eligible to re-sign as early as July 1, but knowing his number will help inform how Minnesota allots the rest of its dollars.

The longer Guerin waits to negotiate with Rossi's agent, Ian Pulver, however, the more Rossi — already on pace for a career high in points — should ask for.

In light of Minnesota's tight budget and other centre prospects coming (Danila Yurov, Riely Heidt), things could get tricky here.

The best route is likely a short-term, kick-the-issue-down-the-road solution. Think something along the lines of Winnipeg's two-year, \$6.5-million extension in Winnipeg.

12. Philipp Kurashev

Age on July 1: 25

Position: Centre

2024-25 salary cap hit: \$2.25 million

Arbitration rights: Yes

Bargaining chips: Registered career highs in goals (18), points (54), ice time (19:01) in a breakout 2023-24. Formed fast chemistry with Connor Bedard. Speedy.

The latest: Cap space isn't yet an issue for the rebuilding Chicago Blackhawks, but with Bedard eligible to negotiate this summer, GM Kyle Davidson must be smart about making the proper investments surrounding the face of the franchise.

Make no mistake, Kurashev finds himself in a prove-it situation, as Davidson recruited a bunch of veteran forwards to give his younger players competition for top-six and power-play roles.

As strong as the Swiss speedster's offensive numbers were last season, he was also a minus-44 and has never been a plus player in the league.

"We need him to be playing harder and better," Blackhawks coach Luke Richardson said of Kurashev in October. "He's been pretty solid and consistent over the years, but this is a year we need to take steps forward."

Kurashev and the Blackhawks went through with arbitration last time he was due a raise, in 2023, and the forward will no doubt be looking for another bump.

More notable pending RFAs: Gabriel Vilardi, Morgan Frost, Joel Hofer, Will Cuyllle, Connor Zary, Devon Levi, Daniil Tarasov, Mason Lohrei, Dmitri Voronkov, Tyson Foerster, Cameron York, Bowen Byram, Morgan Geekie, Luke Evangelista, Alexander Holtz, Ridly Greig, Simon Holmstrom, Alex Laferriere, Hendrix Lapierre, Kaapo Kakko, Mark Kastelic, Jack McBain, Jack Quinn, Adam Boqvist, Ryan McLeod, Nick Robertson

[Sportsnet.ca / Things we've learned through the NHL's first month of the season](#)

By Rory Boylen- November 8, 2024

With the NHL season having opened in North America on Oct. 8, we are now one month into the meat of it, which is enough time to make some broad observations.

Although the true measure of pressure can be taken at the one-quarter mark, every team is through at least 11 games, and some leaders have begun to take shape. By points percentage, the Pacific has a couple of expected contenders on top, while the Edmonton Oilers are chasing a bit again. In the Central, the Winnipeg Jets are scorching and creating separation between them and expected challengers from Dallas and Colorado. The Metro has the usual cast on top, with the predictable resurgent New Jersey Devils in the mix, and the Atlantic Division is led by the defending Stanley Cup champions and followed by a whole lot of noise.

That's where we'll start our early-season observations, with a look at how one team in the Metropolitan Division is shaking things up out east.

Washington is helping make the Atlantic an even more fascinating division

Qualifying for last season's playoffs by the slimmest of margins (a tiebreaker), the Washington Capitals seemed to be on the way out, fading with an aging roster along with the Pittsburgh Penguins. Three points separated those long-time divisional rivals in 2024, and some projected both Pittsburgh and Washington to keep tumbling.

So far that has been true for the Penguins, but the Capitals have been one of the better early-season stories this season. With a 9-3-0 record and tied for first in the Metropolitan Division, the Caps have Alex Ovechkin with eight goals in 12 games pacing toward toppling the all-time record this season, Dylan Strome among the league points leaders with 19 in 12 games, and the Connor McMichael-Tom Wilson duo combining for 14 goals on a line, with reclamation project Pierre-Luc Dubois between them. Logan Thompson might possibly be playing his way into the Canadian goalie conversation for the 4 Nations Face-Off tournament. Meantime, defencemen Jakob Chychrun and Matt Roy have missed time to injuries.

Washington's surge back up the Metro is making things much tighter and more urgent in the Eastern Conference's other division. If the Caps had continued to fall back, two wild-card spots might have been available to the Atlantic and opened up a clearer path for one of Detroit, Ottawa or Buffalo to take the step they sorely need. Without that, those rebuilders will have to topple one of the Big Four (Tampa Bay, Toronto, Boston, Florida) ahead of them.

And early on, at least, the possibility exists that some turnover could come to the Atlantic. As of Thursday, the Boston Bruins sit on the outside of a playoff spot, with Detroit holding the second wild-card slot by way of points percentage (.542). Even the Senators have a better points percentage than the Bruins. The Sabres are nipping at Boston's heels and have a goal differential of minus-2 that is 10 better than the Bruins' minus-12.

There is caution for all of the bubble teams, however. Boston's coach may be on the hot seat, as the team leads the league in penalties and struggles to score at five-on-five. Buffalo and Ottawa are still struggling to find consistency, Detroit is struggling to find offence, while Montreal is showing through its lack of defence that it's still probably a step or two behind.

Tampa Bay is slightly ahead of this group in points, though actually behind the Red Wings in points percentage. The Lightning have lost three in a row and have the second-lowest expected goals rate in the division, propped up partially by a high shooting percentage.

Kirill Kaprizov's price goes up by the day

Winnipeg may be the top story in the Central Division, but don't discount the Wild. Until their loss Tuesday against Los Angeles, they were the only team left along with Winnipeg that had lost only a single game in regulation.

Long stuck in the league's mushy middle, with seven playoff appearances in the past nine seasons but zero series wins, there's optimism that the Wild could be setting up to turn a corner. At the centre of that outlook is Kaprizov, who is third in league scoring and first in primary assists. If this continues, he could be in a conversation to win his first league award since the Calder in 2021.

Anticipation had been building toward Kaprizov's arrival, and when he finally did come to the NHL as a 23-year-old in the pandemic-shortened 2020-21 season, it was obvious that much of the Wild's future hopes hinged on him delivering as a breakout star. And even without the hardware he has done just that, scoring goals at the fourth-best rate per game since entering the league.

PLAYER

GOALS PER GAME

Auston Matthews

0.73

Leon Draisaitl

0.6

David Pastrnak

0.58

Connor McDavid

0.58

Kirill Kaprizov

0.58

Mikko Rantanen

0.56

Now, this stardom may not have converted to playoff success yet — and the Wild did miss out on the dance entirely last season — but an interesting young core has been developing around Kaprizov.

Brock Faber, a strong Calder candidate last season and one of the most leaned-upon blueliners in the league (fifth in ice time at 25:25), is signed through 2033 at \$8.5 million. Matt Boldy, a first-time 30-goal scorer at 21 years old, is signed through 2030 at \$7 million. The team had been searching for centres for years and now seems to have two of them — Joel Eriksson Ek, signed through 2029 at \$5.25 million, and Marco Rossi, an important player to watch in the 1C spot this season running along at nearly a point per game and up for contract renewal.

In all, eight skaters are signed through at least the 2027-28 season in Minnesota, and GM Bill Guerin has been able to build this up under a punitive, self-imposed cap penalty since 2021, with \$14.747 million of this season's cap dedicated to the buyouts of Ryan Suter and Zach Parise.

Next year, that penalty falls to just \$1.66 million and finally expires after 2027-28.

In the meantime, the NHL's upper limit is also anticipated to keep rising, making this potentially perfect timing for the Wild to keep their own players and strike where they can on the open market. Kaprizov still has one season after this remaining on his \$9-million contract, but given he's eligible to sign an extension as early as July 1, there's a big conversation to have on what he wants to do, and what it will take to keep him in Minnesota.

"I don't look at Kaprizov as, well, He doesn't have a trophy or he doesn't have 120 points in a season, I look at what that team looks like if he's not there and how important he is to that team and organization," Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman said on this week's 32 Thoughts: The Podcast. "When I say that I think he's going to be in the Matthews-Draisaitl range, I believe that, if he wants to be."

Before this season even began, Wild owner Craig Leipold acknowledged that the positivity around an opening window to spend and compete centred on Kaprizov and that the team would do everything in its power to keep him. It's the only one that could offer him eight years.

"I will tell you nobody will offer more money than us, or longer. So, all we have to do is prove to him that we want to win," he said.

Auston Matthews' number is \$13.25 million, Leon Draisaitl's \$14 million. Kaprizov will be up for an extension at the same time as Connor McDavid, who is expected to reset a market-high. In the meantime, his price is going up by the day and the Wild are showing that they might be able to compete this season. It's a big year for all involved and the early returns are overwhelmingly positive.

Colorado might be this year's Edmonton

Sixth in the Central Division, with three- and four-game losing streaks already behind them, a few factors have been at play in Colorado, led by the goaltending being an utter disaster. The team's expected goals against rate at five-on-five is seventh in the NHL, but it's 27th in actual goals against in that situation. At .835, the Avalanche have the league's worst all-around team save percentage. And while Justus Annunen has been the best of the bunch, he's allowed three goals or more in his past three starts.

Injuries are also a big story here, with Artturi Lehkonen, Devon Toews, Miles Wood and Jonathan Drouin all missing time. Cale Makar was pulled Tuesday, but may be fine. There's still no indication of when (or if) Gabriel Landeskog may be back, but Valeri Nichushkin is set to return to the lineup on Nov. 15. It's been a streaky start for the Avs — they have a five-game winning streak, too — but you can bet on their talent pulling through. Nathan MacKinnon and Makar are 1-2 in league scoring, though both are minus players to date.

Remember last year's Edmonton Oilers, who began 3-9-1.

Coaches on the hot seat?

We are far enough along that the heat is being turned up in a few places, and the coaches in charge of the bench are feeling it. How many of them are truly on the hot seat though? We have a few who legitimately could be, and a few others who might be in normal conditions.

Boston Bruins and Jim Montgomery: A 3-2-0 start was fine enough, but the three-game losing streak that followed was the first sign that Boston's head coach could be in trouble. An OT win against Toronto quelled that talk for a few days, but it came back after a shutout loss to Philadelphia and an 8-2 drubbing by Carolina. Last weekend's back-to-back shutout wins made the situation appear less urgent once more, and then Tuesday's 4-0 loss to Toronto saw it boil up again.

The fact is that Boston is the NHL's most penalized team, is 27th in five-on-five goals, 21st in expected goals percentage, and both special teams units are in the bottom-third of the league. A home game to Calgary on Thursday is up next and then a huge divisional game against Ottawa at home on Saturday will be another pressure point. By American Thanksgiving, we'll have a far clearer picture of what's happening in Boston.

Nashville Predators and Andrew Brunette: After acquiring two 40-goal scorers in last summer's free agent market, the Predators are 29th in goals per game. The upside, perhaps, is that the team's shooting percentage is a lowly 7.28, with Steven Stamkos at 8.6 (three goals) and Jonathan Marchessault at 4.9 (two goals). They're due, right? Juuse Saros isn't at a Vezina level, but is eight in goals saved above expected.

Frustration is clearly boiling, though, and when GM Barry Trotz went on local radio this week, he said "If we don't get it going, then I'm going to start our rebuild plan a little bit." Oof. Today, Nashville is last in the league by points and points percentage, with the second-worst goal differential in the Western Conference. The Preds were four points out of a playoff spot on Nov. 1 (Friedman's early-season playoff chance cut-off stat) and are on the road for most of the next three weeks. But also remember that, late last season, this team started an eight-game winning streak on the road and carried an 18-game point streak that delivered it back into the playoffs and off the sellers' market. It's not too late yet, but when the GM talks about rebuilding a team like this, the coach has to be feeling the heat.

Detroit Red Wings and Derek Lalonde: This is why getting hyped up one way or another so early in the season is dangerous. Go back one week, and the Red Wings were 4-5-1, tied for last in the division with three others, and had followed a three-game winning streak with a three-game losing streak. One of the worst offensive teams at the time, perhaps Lalonde was creeping toward danger early in his third season, with so much on the line. But two wins in a row since — including a huge one over Buffalo — has them third in the Atlantic by points percentage. The pressure is back off a bit, for now.

Montreal Canadiens and Martin St. Louis: The team defence has been pretty awful, the losses mounting, and they still occupy last place in the Atlantic Division, the same place they finished in Martin St. Louis' first two years behind the bench. Yes, this is still a young team rebuilding and, yes, the Canadiens are still regarded as being a little behind Ottawa, Buffalo and Detroit in that process. But, eventually, progress will need to be made here. St. Louis was freshly extended to a multi-year contract this past summer and so it would be hard to believe the team moving off him so soon. Still, questions about St. Louis' tenure were being asked of our Eric Engels, who agreed that while the coach's seat isn't hot, the players need to start being held more accountable.

Penguins have more than a goalie problem

It's easy to point the finger at Tristan Jarry and, sure, he hasn't been great. When you're a team's No. 1 goalie making \$5.375 million on a contract signed just one year ago, and you start out with an .836 save percentage and a GAA ballooning over 5.00, it's fair to face some criticism.

But Pittsburgh's issues run much deeper than that surface-level takeaway. Defence and depth have been obvious pain points. Erik Karlsson leads the league in giveaways and isn't making up for it with his offence — he has two primary assists. Marcus Pettersson has been on the ice for a league-leading 19 goals against at five-on-five. As a team, the Penguins are 30th in shots allowed per game and in high-danger chances allowed per 60 minutes at five-on-five.

Not even Sidney Crosby can save these Penguins, nor can a throwback start by Evgeni Malkin, which has now been wasted.

Interestingly, though, the Penguins do still have something of an interesting situation in net. Joel Blomqvist (.909) and Alex Nedeljkovic (.900) have both been statistically better than Jarry — Blomqvist is the only one of the bunch with a positive goals saved above expected (2.2). He's also the only one of the three who is exempt from waivers.

Why is that important? Jarry was sent to the AHL for a conditioning loan on Oct. 26, and that expires on Saturday. In three games on the farm, he's a perfect 3-0 with a 1.95 GAA and .937 save percentage so, it seems, he's done what's needed to get back up.

Meantime, Nedeljkovic has started each of the past three Penguins games and shown well in each, while Blomqvist hasn't played since Oct. 29 and allowed four goals in each of his past three starts.

In some situations, we might have included Mike Sullivan on the coaches' hot seat, but with how embedded he is in the organization — and how sought after he'd become if let go — that seems a long shot.

Martin Necas is proving to everyone he's worth the money and minutes

It wouldn't have been at all shocking if Martin Necas was wearing a different jersey this season. An RFA last summer, Necas was seeking a bigger role but it wasn't so easily forthcoming in Carolina. He was top-of-mind in trade boards and, with the Canes also having to figure out a new contract for Seth Jarvis, wasn't even the most pressing deal to resolve.

"I think Carolina thought Necas was going to get dealt," Friedman said Wednesday.

After Jake Guentzel left as a UFA, the Canes needed Necas a little more and his expired contract gave him leverage — who would give up prime assets for a player who could leave in two years, and which teams had the cap space to do it? Rather than drag it out, or sell him for less than they believed he was worth, Carolina extended Necas for two years with a \$6.5-million cap hit. Now, it was up to the player to prove he was worth the role he was demanding, and set himself up for a bigger payday down the line.

This season, it's been perfect. Necas has seven goals and 20 points in 11 games, placing him among the top scorers in the league. His average ice time is up marginally, but has risen by nearly two full minutes per game on the power play — Necas is tied with Andrei Svechnikov for the team lead. Eight of his 20 points have come on the man advantage, which puts him in a tie for third league-wide.

"He and Brind'Amour, they had a real come-to-Jesus meeting. Brind'Amour said, 'You want more time, I have to be able to trust you.' And he said, 'I'll prove that you can trust me.' And he did," Friedman said on The FAN Hockey Show. "Both guys have lived up to their end of the bargain. He's playing more the way Brind'Amour demands, and Brind'Amour's saying, 'OK, you get to play more.'"

Some had Carolina pegged as a potential fallback team this season, yet here it is once again leading the league in corsi for percentage at five-on-five, shots for percentage, and third in goals percentage.

[Sportsnet.ca](https://www.sportsnet.ca) / Optimistic or pessimistic? Analyzing the Atlantic Division logjam

By Jason Bukala- November 8, 2024

The NHL's Atlantic Division is off to a mostly pedestrian start. Outside of the Florida Panthers, who top the division with a 9-3-1 record and have won five straight games, the rest of the teams have endured some uneven play out of the gate:

- The Toronto Maple Leafs appear to be trending in a positive direction, especially with their power play finally starting to produce, as they adapt to the style new head coach Craig Berube wants the group to play. They might not win the division, but they should have no issues making the playoffs.
- The Tampa Bay Lightning have looked terrific some nights and borderline disinterested some nights. The Lightning frustrate me at times, but they have the horses (Nikita Kucherov, Brayden Point, Brandon Hagel, Victor Hedman) to outscore their warts on any given night. Jake Guentzel is still adjusting to his new team and has another level to provide and Andrei Vasilevskiy still ranks as one of the top netminders in the NHL when on top of his game. They're behind Detroit in points percentage 13 games into the season, but bank on them being fine in the long-run.
- The Montreal Canadiens are still trying to figure out how to play with a consistent team identity. They have been riding a roller-coaster of results that have led to a 4-7-2 record and the second-worst goals against average in the league (4.00).

The rest of the teams in the division are all packed pretty tightly, with various reasons to either be concerned or hopeful of what's ahead. Still noting it's early in the season, I'm trying to conclude if I should be optimistic or pessimistic about the future outlook facing the Buffalo Sabres, Detroit Red Wings, Ottawa Senators and Boston Bruins, who may end up wrestling over one playoff spot in the East (or two at most).

- The Sabres continue to be an inconsistent team that runs ice cold or lukewarm for long stretches but never seems to get hot enough to either track down teams in front of them or pull away from teams behind them in the standings.
- Their power play started the season 1-for-26 and their penalty kill has room for improvement. Their combined special team statistics (PP% plus PK%) adds to 86.6 per cent. They have to find a way to move those numbers over 100 combined.
- Buffalo is very young in goal. Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen (25) and Devon Levi (22) have been tasked with tending the crease for a team desperate to make headway. The two netminders have combined to play a total of 109 games and 34 games respectively, with Luukkonen taking over more of the starter's workload. A lot of Buffalo's outlook relies on stability in the crease. No pressure!
- Tage Thompson is back ripping pucks and scoring goals after a bit of a dip last season (29G-27A). He's already contributed 8G-7A, leads the team with 44 shots, and holds the keys to improving the results for the Sabres' power play. There aren't too many NHL goalies who can stop Thompson's one timers from the weak side flank on the man advantage. He doesn't have a power play goal yet on eight shots, though.
- Owen Power, Rasmus Dahlin and Bowen Byram are leading the way defensively for Buffalo. They log the most amount of ice time and contribute offence -- each of them are within the top 33 scorers at the position league-wide.

- When it comes to how the Sabres score goals, one of my concerns is the fact they aren't a team that shows a willingness to get to the front of the net. They don't set screens, clean up rebounds, or tip pucks enough. In short, they don't create enough "havoc" around their opponent's net.

Stats provided by NHL EDGE

Pessimistic or Optimistic?

Pessimistic: It feels to me like this is a team that will tease its fan base on occasion with some positive results -- like this week's 5-1 win over Ottawa -- but they have too many inconsistencies in their lineup, they're very young in net and haven't shown me enough "growl" in the hard areas of the ice.

- The Wings nearly made the playoffs last season, losing out on the final wild card spot to the Washington Capitals in the tie-breaker (fewer regulation wins).
- The Wings have one of the best power plays in the NHL. Those results on the man advantage can keep them in close games and potentially lead to more victories.
- As good as Detroit's power play is, their penalty-kill has to improve from 69.4 per cent (28th in the NHL). They have to find a way to block more shots or get a timely save when a man short.
- The Wings' top five scorers are creating on the power play, but struggling to keep pucks out at even strength. They have combined to score 18G-31A, but are also a combined minus-3. Detroit's overall team goal differential is also minus-3.
- Today's NHL is a track meet every night, and the Red Wings are one of the slowest outfits in the entire league. They rank in the bottom half of the NHL in every skating metric, including top speed and small area bursts, which might explain the following chart:

Stats provided by NHL EDGE

Their high danger scoring chances are horrendous. They rely on scoring from distance or the perimeter slot more than most teams. They have to find a way to hunt pucks around the crease area more effectively than they are, and need to play quicker so they arrive on the scene first in all three zones.

Pessimistic or Optimistic?

Pessimistic: This group of Red Wings might get hot and find a way to ride a strong power play with their skill players, but they need to play with more grit, grizzle, and speed. The games get harder after Christmas, and I'd assume the Wings will be looking to add the type of player who will help in the areas I'm describing.

- It won't matter how great the Senators' win/loss record is on home ice if they don't start to find ways to bank important points on the road. They had a chance to put some distance between themselves and the Sabres on Tuesday night and ended up on the wrong side of a 5-1 loss. Instead of waking up five points clear of Buffalo, the Senators opened up an early season window for a team below them in the standings to climb back in.
- Linus Ullmark has been average to start the season in Ottawa. Suffice to say they are banking on him stealing some games as the season rolls along.
- Conversely, Anton Forsberg has been mostly solid for the Senators and on balance has provided what the team should expect from its backup netminder.
- Tim Stutzle has been terrific for the Senators. Not only is he providing offence (6G-11A), he's playing a more physically engaged style. Stutzle has been credited with 25 hits and eight blocked shots in his first 12 games this season, compared to 100 hits and 41 blocked shots all of last season.

- He flies under the radar compared to other young defenders on the Senators' roster, but veteran Nick Jensen has been a stabilizing influence for Ottawa. He's averaging over 20 minutes of ice time and being deployed in all key defensive scenarios. Jensen has contributed five assists offensively but, more importantly he leads Ottawa's defencemen with a plus-8 rating.

Pessimistic or Optimistic?

Optimistic: Ottawa's power play is fantastic and their penalty-kill isn't horrific. I'm banking on Ullmark rounding into form and stealing some games on the road for them. I feel like Ottawa is playing with more structure as a team overall and could chase down a wild card spot. There will be some hiccups along the way, but they are close.

- What to make of the Bruins? They have been a powder keg to start the season. Head coach Jim Montgomery has had some animated interactions with team captain Brad Marchand and recently benched leading scorer David Pastrnak for the entire third period of their game versus Seattle.
- Boston has been up and down like a yo-yo. Their recent five-game stretch included a 2-0 loss to Philadelphia, followed by an 8-2 loss to the Carolina Hurricanes. The Bruins then rebounded with back-to-back shutout victories over Philadelphia and Seattle before being shutout by Toronto 4-0 on Tuesday night. Talk about a team that's difficult to figure out.
- Jeremy Swayman missed all of training camp negotiating a new contract. In his first 10 games of the season as the Bruins' undisputed No. 1 netminder he has posted a 4-5-1 record paired with a 3.14 GAA and .894 save percentage.
- Pastrnak leads the Bruins in scoring with 6G-5A, but he's minus-5. It's easy to see why the coach sent him a message.

The end of David Pastrnak's last shift before his third period benching.

- The Bruins are getting fantastic contribution from their fourth line. Linemates Mark Kastelic (3G-4A, +9) Cole Koepke (3G-4A, +10) and Johnny Beecher (2G-4A, +5) have been the Bruins' most reliable group to start the season. Incredibly, the line averages only 12 minutes of ice time per game and produce those results.
- Lastly, take a look at how much more involved the Bruins are between the hash marks and around the crease in the offensive zone. The puck hasn't gone in as much as they would like, but I believe they will eventually be rewarded for their commitment in the trenches.

Pessimistic or Optimistic?

Optimistic: The law of averages should take over in time. The Bruins will score more and the coach is in the ear of his top players to provide more commitment defensively. More timely saves from Swayman will help as well.

[TSN.CA / NCAA rule change may dramatically alter path for elite young hockey players](#)

By Rick Westhead- November 8, 2024

The NCAA said Thursday that it would begin allowing Canadian Hockey League players to retain their eligibility to play U.S. college hockey, a decision that may dramatically alter the path for many elite young players.

The NCAA, which announced the decision would take effect Aug. 1, 2025, said Division I teams can begin recruiting players from the Ontario Hockey League, Western Hockey League and the Quebec Maritimes Junior Hockey League immediately, according to College Hockey Inc., a recruiting arm of NCAA schools.

The rule change comes after the NCAA said it was considering a proposal to enable prospects who participate in major junior hockey to retain NCAA eligibility, as long as they are not paid more than “actual and necessary expenses” as part of that participation.

Even after the change, players risk losing their eligibility if they accept jerseys, hats, T-shirts, or any material benefits from teams without paying for them, College Hockey wrote in a posting on its website.

Prior to joining an NCAA Division I school program, a prospect can attend as many NHL development camps as they would like and receive their necessary expenses for the duration of camp, including return travel immediately at the conclusion of camp, College Hockey wrote.

The eligibility rule has not been changed at the NCAA Division-III level.

“While we will take time to fully review this rule change, we believe this is a positive development that will provide our players with more opportunities to continue their hockey and academic careers following their time in the CHL,” the CHL said in a statement Thursday afternoon. “It will also give young players and their families more options in choosing their development path, which includes opening up the CHL – the best development hockey league in the world for players aged 16-20 – to more players worldwide.”

J.P. Barry, a player agent with CAA Hockey in Toronto, said in an interview with TSN that the NCAA’s decision should help CHL teams to attract the best young players because they won’t have to choose between major junior and U.S. college hockey.

“For top CHL teams, it puts muscles on top of muscles because it’s going to enhance their ability to attract the top players,” Barry said. “It’s huge. It’s good for players and it may completely alter their development path choices.”

Until now, the NCAA has considered all major junior players professional because some CHL players have already signed contracts with National Hockey League teams.

Barry said that, with the rule change, he could envision a number of top junior players leaving their CHL teams after a few seasons to go to NCAA schools, so long as they have maintained good grades.

“It’s also going to be good that this will put pressure on the CHL teams to help players do better academically,” Barry said. “Parents are going to want that assurance because you don’t get into an NCAA school without doing well in school.”

It’s hard to predict who might suffer from the NCAA rule change, Barry said.

He said it probably hurts Junior A teams, which often act as a bridge for players who are biding their time between minor hockey and the NCAA.

“[Junior A teams] rely on elite players who primarily choose the NCAA path,” Barry said. “Now these players can freely go to the CHL instead and still go on to the NCAA.”

And even though the rule change may help CHL teams attract the best top young prospects, it won't help the CHL to lose marketable 18- and 19-year-old stars after two or three seasons to the NCAA , Barry said.

Barry said another question that needs answering is what happens to the CHL's scholarship program. Currently, CHL players receive one year of tuition for every year they play in major junior hockey. Most NCAA Division I hockey players receive full-ride scholarships.

The NCAA rule change also comes as it defends a lawsuit filed in New York that alleges NCAA rules banning CHL players from playing in U.S. college hockey violate U.S. antitrust laws. In that lawsuit, Riley Masterson, who is from Fort Erie, Ont., and is listed as a class representative, allegedly lost his college eligibility two years ago when the then-16-year-old played in two exhibition games for the OHL's Windsor Spitfires.