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## [BlueJackets.com / Voronkov all smiles as the points pile up](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – January 7, 2025

It didn't take Dean Evason long to take a liking to Dmitri Voronkov.

The Blue Jackets head coach purposefully came into his first season not wanting to know specifics about the players he was inheriting. He wanted a clean slate in order to make his own first impressions of his new charges.

As you might imagine, a 6-foot-5, 227-pound menace of a forward didn't take long to catch Evason's eye.

"I didn't realize how freakin' big he is," Evason said with wonder. "He's massive. I'm very excited."

But what Evason couldn't have known – or any of us, really – was just how good Voronkov would be at filling up the stat sheet in his second NHL season.

Voronkov has multiple points in five of the last seven games, including two goals in three of those contests. With seven goals and 11 points in the last seven games, the massive Russian wing is tied for the league lead in goals and fourth in points since Dec. 23.

In all, he's posted 15 goals and 26 points this year in 31 games, producing at a near 40-goal pace for an 82-game season. Among NHL players 6-5 or taller, he's one of just three with at least 15 goals, joining Buffalo's Tage Thompson and Washington's Aliaksei Protas.

Simply put, for a man his size, there aren't many comparable players in the league, and teammates often just smile and laugh when asked about what Voronkov brings to the table.

"You guys see him," Adam Fantilli said. "He's extremely skilled for a guy his size. He plays that netfront position perfectly, and he's complimenting that first line really, really well. We just want him to keep doing what he's doing. It's great."

"It's been awesome," Zach Werenski added. "He's so big, and he makes so many smart plays out there. He's not the fastest guy, but just the way his brain works, making plays, it allows him to have a lot of success."

That success has made him a find, as the Blue Jackets went to the 2019 draft with just three picks but struck gold with the 114th overall pick in the fourth round. Voronkov just passed the 100-game mark in the NHL but has scored 33 goals among his 60 points, marks that are 15th and 21st among his draft class, respectively. He's the leader in both categories among those chosen 100th or later in that draft, and it's all the more impressive considering he's only in the midst of his second season in the NHL.

And as the goals and points pile up, Voronkov said he's not shocked to find himself in this spot.

"It's not surprising," he said through interpreter Ivan Provorov after his latest two-goal performance Saturday vs St. Louis. "I work hard and play hard, and I'm going to continue to do the same thing. Everything is good with me all the time. I'm always confident."

Why wouldn't he be? So far, the biggest challenges he's had to face are adjusting to life in America – his home city of Angarsk, Russia, is located just north of Mongolia, half a world away from Columbus – and the English language. His personality is often evident through his smiles, practical jokes and occasional banter in the locker room – he understands more English than he speaks – and he's found a perfect running mate in Kirill Marchenko.

The two have been nothing short of a dominant duo whether it's at 5-on-5 with linemate Sean Monahan – the three have outscored the opposition 22-4 this year – or on the power play, where Voronkov leads the CBJ with six tallies and is fourth in the NHL with 4.50 goals per 60 minutes.

Marchenko jokes their secret is the ability to speak to one in another in Russian on the ice without opponents being able to understand what they're saying, but it's clear there's chemistry between the two and Monahan. All bring something different to the table, and for Voronkov, it's sneaky skill inside a frame that allows him to protect the puck and also score in a variety of ways.

Sure, there have been some tips and putback goals from the front of the net, where his size allows him to fend off opponents in a way others simply can't, but he's tallied in a variety of ways. There have been two breakaway goals this season, and his biggest show of skill might have come Dec. 27 vs. Boston when he took a pass right in front of the crease on the power play and put a backhand into the roof of the net from in tight.

Because of those skills, Voronkov has set a new career high for ice time in each of the last three games, and he's succeeded in all situations for the Blue Jackets this year.

"The coach trusts me and my line to go out there and play 20 or more minutes," he said through Provorov. "It's our job to contribute, and that's what we've done so far. (Our line) has a good chemistry. Everyone does what they're supposed to do. We have a really good chemistry, and it's working."

And while Evason is more than happy with Voronkov's production, he knows there's another gear to be found in his game. Some of that comes with getting in even better shape, as Voronkov has registered just 21 hits this year; as he puts in extra work, the Blue Jackets can see him becoming even more of a physical presence.

"I'll be honest with you, he has to get into even better shape than he is now in order to arrive (to plays)," Evason said. "He's committed to doing that. He's doing extra work in the gym, he's doing extra work after practice. It's not a desire thing. He's just not in the position yet to do it, so we've asked him to do that, get going so that you can be that physical presence."

"To put that whole package together, it should be very dominating. It's not just him – when you get a big body like that, you have to have it tuned up more than that little guy that can scoot. You have to get yourself in a position to get there physically. It's not a will thing, it's a physical thing that he has to continually work."

## The Hockey News / Reviewing The Columbus Blue Jackets Quarter-Century Team

By Spencer Lazary – January 7, 2025

With the Columbus Blue Jackets' Quarter-Century team being released by the NHL just a few days ago, it's a good time to review it and compare it to my colleague Jason Newland's Blue Jackets' Quarter-Century team prediction.

### **Blue Jackets' First Team:**

Cam Atkinson - Rick Nash - Artemi Panarin

Seth Jones - Zach Werenski

Sergei Bobrovsky

### **Newland's First Team:**

Rick Nash - Cam Atkinson - Boone Jenner

Seth Jones - Zach Werenski

Sergei Bobrovsky

The first team is very similar, with the only difference being Jason placing Jenner instead of Panarin. This does make sense; Jenner has been with the Blue Jackets for his entire career, whereas Panarin played just two seasons in Columbus. However, Panarin produced two of the highest single-season point totals in Blue Jackets history.

### **Blue Jackets' Second Team:**

Nick Foligno - Johnny Gaudreau - Boone Jenner

David Savard - Fedor Tyutin

Steve Mason

### **Newland's Second Team:**

Nick Foligno - David Vyborny - RJ Umberger

Jack Johnson - Fedor Tyutin

Steve Mason

The second team has some major differences. The biggest is Jason including both Vyborny and Umberger, who were among the original Blue Jackets players. There's a strong case for both to be on the team. However, with Panarin on the first team, Jenner is shuffled to the second team. Gaudreau was given the honor of taking the final spot on the second team.

The Blue Jackets have only been in the NHL since 2000. However, their first and second century teams have very good players on them with lots left off.

Do you agree with who was named to the Columbus Blue Jackets quarter-century team?

**What's Next** - The Jackets are on the road to take on the Pittsburgh Penguins on Tuesday.

## The Hockey News / Blue Jackets Weekly Injury Report: Week 13

By Spencer Lazary – January 7, 2025

The first Columbus Blue Jackets' injury report of 2025 and not a lot has changed.

The same four players are still sidelined with injuries and have not returned.

### **Injuries**

- **Boone Jenner** (shoulder) is on Injured Reserve on Oct. 7; (39 Games)
- **Erik Gudbranson** (upper body) is on Injured Reserve on Oct. 16; (36 Games)
- **Yegor Chinakhov** (upper body) is on Injured Reserve (18 Games)
- **Justin Danforth** (lower body) is on Injured Reserve on Dec.10; (11 Games)

### **TOTAL MAN GAMES LOST: 153**

The hope for the Blue Jackets is to get both Danforth and Chinakov back within the next few weeks. The team would then be the healthiest it's been since the beginning of the year.

As for Jenner and Gudbranson, there is no real timetable for their return. Blue Jackets fans are hopeful they will see both return to the lineup, however, it doesn't look like it will be anytime soon.

**What's Next** - The Jackets are on the road to take on the Pittsburgh Penguins on Tuesday.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / A Key Stretch Starting Tuesday, Blue Jackets' Next Seven Games Are Pivotal to Their Playoff Hopes

By Ed Francis – January 7, 2025

The Blue Jackets are a playoff contender.

With the calendar in 2025 and the season at the halfway point, the preceding sentence was not expected by even the most optimistic of pundits. As the club prepares for its game Tuesday night in Pittsburgh — Columbus' 41st of the season and the official midway point — the Blue Jackets sit just one point back of the second wild card spot in a crowded Eastern Conference race.

That final spot, coincidentally, is currently owned by the Penguins.

### Eastern Conference Wild Card Race

RANK	TEAM	GP	W	L	OT	PTS	POINT%
1st	Tampa Bay	37	20	15	2	42	.568
2nd	Pittsburgh	41	17	17	7	41	.500
t-3rd	Ottawa	38	19	17	2	40	.526
t-3rd	Columbus	40	17	17	6	40	.500
t-5th	Montreal	39	18	18	3	39	.500
t-5th	Philadelphia	40	17	18	5	39	.488
7th	Detroit	39	17	18	4	38	.487
t-8th	NY Rangers	39	18	20	1	37	.474
t-8th	NY Islanders	40	15	18	7	37	.463

Tampa Bay, with games in hand, has a healthy lead on the top wild card spot and sits three points behind Boston for third place in the Atlantic Division. If the Lightning catch the Bruins, it would flip the

Bruins into the wild card. It feels like both of those teams, barring significant injuries or setbacks, are still a good bet for the postseason.

But the other spot is up for grabs. The Penguins have it on points, but the Ottawa Senators (with three fewer games than the Penguins) have it by point percentage. Columbus, Pittsburgh, and Montreal are all even at .500, with a mess of teams on their heels.

It's truly a wide-open race, which makes Tuesday's game in Pittsburgh one that matters in the standings for the first time in several seasons. It also makes the game about more than the Blue Jackets simply trying to exercise their demons in the Steel City.

**As a painful refresher:** the Blue Jackets have not won in Pittsburgh since Nov. 13, 2015. That's 3,342 days. The only players still on the roster from that night are Boone Jenner and Jack Johnson, and in between that game and this game, Johnson:

- Played 149 games with Pittsburgh.
- Also played for the Chicago Blackhawks and NY Rangers.
- Won a Stanley Cup with the Colorado Avalanche.

It's been a while.

But Tuesday's game is the first in a stretch of seven straight that will may determine if the Blue Jackets were a nice first-half story, or if they're a legitimate contender for playoff spot.

**Here's what Columbus has on its schedule the next two weeks:**

#### Blue Jackets Next Seven Games

Date	Opponent	Points Rank	Home/Road Record
Jan. 7	@ Pittsburgh	18th	Home: 11-7-2
Jan. 9	vs Seattle	27th	Road: 8-11-0
Jan. 11	@ St. Louis	17th	Home: 8-9-1
Jan. 14	vs. Philadelphia	23rd	Road: 9-9-4
Jan. 16	vs. San Jose	31st	Road: 5-11-5
Jan. 18	@ NY Rangers	26th	Home: 8-9-1

Jan. 20

@ NY Islanders

28th

Home: 7-9-2

That's seven straight games against teams in the bottom half of the league standings, and as an added bonus (because Columbus has been horrid on the second leg of back-to-backs), the Blue Jackets have at least one day off between all of them.

It's worth mentioning that six of the seven opponents (the exception is Philadelphia) will also be coming off a one-day break between games.

It's one of, if not *the* most, favorable segments of the entire Blue Jackets schedule. The road trips are close, there are no back-to-backs, and it's their only stretch of the season longer than four games against teams currently outside the playoff picture.

Not everything is trending in the Blue Jackets' direction, though.

Some of them look like tough road games. The city of Pittsburgh, for the reasons mentioned above, is Columbus' kryptonite. Can the Blue Jackets solve their road woes in a city where they haven't tasted victory in since the Obama administration? The St. Louis Blues will certainly be looking for revenge after Columbus' win Saturday night, and it's in their home barn.

### **Can two straight games in the Big Apple generate at least one win for the Blue Jackets?**

Those are the four road games for Columbus in the seven-game stretch. Of those teams in the wild card, none have fewer road wins than the Blue Jackets. In fact, at 4-12-3 away from Nationwide Arena, the Blue Jackets have at least two fewer wins than any other team in the Eastern Conference and are the only team in the NHL to not have five road victories in the 2024-25 season.

If the Blue Jackets are truly going to establish themselves as a playoff contender, they're going to need to keep their sizzle at home, where they lead the league in goals and have points in 16 of 21 games.

But they're also going to need to win at least two of the road games. If they can do that and go (approximately) 5-2-0 over the next seven games, that would be 10 of 14 possible points and put them at 50 points through 47 games.

Contender? Pretender?

We're about to find out.



## The Athletic / NHL awards WATCH: Leon Draisaitl leads a fascinating MVP field

By Dom Luszczyszyn – January 7, 2025

Throughout the season I'll be breaking down the numbers behind the race for each major player award: the Hart, the Norris, the Calder, the Selke, the Vezina, the Art Ross and the Rocket Richard. Numbers of course aren't everything, but they add much-needed context to the awards race and can help shine a light on players deserving of more recognition while adding caveats to other players that may have some warts. This post will present the top 10 for each category based on a set criteria of guidelines. There is plenty of room for discussion and debate within (and outside) those guidelines.

We're right around the league's halfway point which is a perfect time to check in on the major awards races. A lot has changed over the last five weeks.

Not everything has changed — Connor Hellebuyck will probably win back-to-back Vezinas and someone from Florida deserves the Selke — but the other races have certainly seen some interesting movement. Aside from Hellebuyck running away with the Vezina, the races look really tight — between two guys, four guys or six guys.

It's going to be an extremely exciting race to the finish. Here's who currently leads the way based on my interpretation of their numbers.

### **Data as of January 5**

#### **Hart Trophy**

Given to the player judged to be the most valuable to his team.

**Criteria:** Skaters ranked by Net Rating, adjusted by position.

The MVP race is going to be a very difficult vote this season. Two of the strongest favorites to start are out with injury, the usual front-runners have taken a backseat to their other superstar teammates, and there's a goalie doing enough to make things extra spicy. Who should win this year? I have no idea — and that's what makes this year's race extremely exciting at the halfway point.

The favorite at the moment is probably Leon Draisaitl. By Net Rating, he's been the league's best player, currently sporting a one-goal lead over the next best skater. Draisaitl leads the league in goals and is second in points, which for some might be reason enough. But what makes his case so strong this year — in direct contrast with his win in 2020 — is his underlying numbers. Draisaitl has been a beast at both ends of the ice.

That's a big deal because it gives more credence to his production, that he's not just a Connor McDavid power-play merchant. He's doing a lot in his own right, and that starts with his play without the puck. Draisaitl has long had a reputation for his defensive shortcomings, at which he's been chipping away slowly with improved play over the last couple years. His work against the Stars last summer felt eye-opening to what he was capable of in a shutdown capacity and he's brought that over to this season, leading to some truly elite impacts. With Draisaitl on the ice, the Oilers have given up just 2.17 xGA/60 and 1.79 GA/60 — both career-best marks by a large margin. It's led to the Oilers earning 61 percent of expected goals and 64 percent of actual goals, also career highs.

Some will argue about the McDavid factor, and while it doesn't carry as much weight this year — Draisaitl has been excellent without McDavid — it is a worthy consideration. While I'm of the mind that value created is all that really matters, Draisaitl's proximity to McDavid on this list may be a difficult

hurdle to overcome. The gap between the two isn't that large and if McDavid catches up, they can't share the award. It could mean Draisaitl losing votes to McDavid, or losing votes to the party that likes to argue the semantics of "value to his team."

Draisaitl has been the league's best player this season. Is that enough?

Cale Makar faces a similar battle. He's second in Net Rating thanks to a 100-point pace and a return to form defensively, but Nathan MacKinnon — the league leader in points — isn't far behind. That both share so much ice together and struggle heavily without the other is a detriment to their cases, though. With how close the two are in value, it may be even harder for either to get the necessary support.

That's where Kirill Kaprizov and Quinn Hughes come in. Both are putting up the same value in a significantly weaker environment (though that is something the model adjusts for), which gives both players a stronger MVP narrative — satisfying the criteria for having the most value while also being "most valuable to their team" in the sense that the next best guy on the team isn't very valuable. While both Draisaitl and Makar have a friend on this list, that's far from the case for Kaprizov and Hughes. The next best Wild and Canucks skaters rank 28th and 68th respectively. The gap between these two and their teammates is so massive that it has to be a big consideration. So too, unfortunately, does the time they're going to miss to injury. How long they're out could be a major factor.

After that big four (or big six, really), other challengers could make things interesting. Zach Werenski is pushing the Blue Jackets into the playoff race with an incredible season in the Makar-Hughes stratosphere. Nikita Kucherov continues to put up big offensive numbers. And Connor Hellebuyck is the best goalie in the world again, lapping the field enough to warrant consideration; among goalies he's in the 99.8th percentile, while does fall below where the eight skaters land.

This is not going to be an easy choice.

### **Norris Trophy**

Given to the defenseman who demonstrates throughout the season the greatest all-round ability in the position.

**Criteria:** Defensemen that play top-pairing minutes, ranked by Net Rating.

The margins for the Norris Trophy race are razor-thin based on Makar and Hughes' current Net Rating. But that margin will likely grow in Makar's favor given Hughes is expected to be out for the next few weeks.

Before the injury, it was fair to say Hughes was the Norris Trophy favorite. His scoring rate was on par with Makar's and he was doing a lot more with a lot less at five-on-five. Hughes' relative lack of support compared to Makar being one of the Denver Avengers is a big deal and made Hughes' season look more special. While Makar feels like the driving force for Colorado this season, it's easy to do that when he plays over half his minutes with MacKinnon and Mikko Rantanen. That's a luxury Hughes doesn't have — especially considering Vancouver's two best forwards are a shell of themselves amid a very public spat — and yet Hughes still manages to have stronger relative on-ice metrics than Makar. The tougher-opponents argument for Makar (a real one as Hughes does get secondary matchups) doesn't quite fly either, considering the overwhelming teammate advantage.

The question now is whether the gap Makar likely creates in Hughes' absence will be too large for him to overcome. Hughes' lead over Makar wasn't that large to begin with (it would be 1.1 goals with the same game total), but if he misses 15 or so games, that could result in a four-goal lead for Makar in terms of total value.

I think players should be judged more on what they do per game than on total output, but that does have to be within reason. It's hard to give an award to a player who plays 41 games, but if Hughes plays 65 games and his per-game output is significantly stronger than Makar's, that should be enough to win. And for the Makar fans, it should be noted I held that same belief in 2022-23 when Makar only played 60 games.

The Norris will very likely come down to those two and games played may very well be the deciding factor.

After Makar and Hughes, there's a major challenger emerging: Werenski. He's the slam dunk No. 3 choice on the ballot at the moment, mostly a result of his scintillating scoring pace. That he's pacing for 92 points on Columbus (!) is an absolute marvel. His five-on-five numbers are strong, and while they do lack compared to some others down the list, his ability to create offense makes up for it. Only David Pastrnak has taken more shots than Werenski this season and over his last 25 games, he has 35 points. Only Leon Draisaitl has more over that stretch. Werenski is on fire.

After those three, it gets interesting. Josh Morrissey has been a critical part of Winnipeg's success this season and has proven again that he's one of the league's biggest difference-makers. Adam Fox is not the problem in New York — far from it — and has his usual spot on this list. He's been on the ice for 56 percent of expected goals and 58 percent of actual goals this season. When he's off the ice, the Rangers sink to 44 percent for both.

And there are some other strong choices who could make noise. Victor Hedman has been pivotal at both ends of the ice for Tampa Bay, while Edmonton's top pair has been excellent again, though not as good as last year. John Carlson has turned back the clock in Washington and is leading one of the league's best teams. Rasmus Dahlin is one of the few bright spots in Buffalo.

There are a lot of strong down-ballot options, but there should be no doubt who the top two are — though Werenski could make things interesting, especially if Columbus stays in the playoff race.

### **Selke Trophy**

Given to the forward who best excels in the defensive aspects of the game.

**Criteria:** Forwards who play over 16 minutes per game, receive 15 percent of their team's shorthanded minutes and face top-line forward competition, ranked by their Defensive Rating.

The Selke Trophy should go to a Florida Panther this season — but picking which Panther is not an obvious decision. Sam Reinhart and Aleksander Barkov have both been pivotal to Florida's ability to shut down opposing teams, and each feel equally worthy.

Reinhart currently leads all forwards (under the criteria listed above) in Defensive Rating at plus-4.8 and does narrowly edge Barkov on a per-game basis as well. Barkov would be at plus-4.1 without any time missed. Reinhart has been on the ice for fewer goals against (2.05 to Barkov's 2.1) and expected goals against (1.75 to Barkov's 1.89), holding the statistical edge. In terms of usage, Reinhart has had it tougher because of the time Barkov has missed, but both suit up nightly against the best of the best.

There is no wrong answer here. There's no shame going with the incumbent, knowing he's the guy for Florida. The eye test does not lie with Barkov, who has been just as good as when he won last season. But there's also no shame going with the sidekick, who proved his mettle after 10 games out by not missing a single defensive beat. Keep building Barkov's legacy, or give Reinhart his well-deserved flowers — what's it going to be?

After those two, things get really interesting. Just 0.7 goals separate the other eight players by Defensive Rating and all have a worthy narrative.

By Defensive Rating, both Jordan Staal and Anthony Cirelli have been level with Barkov. They've been defensive rocks for their teams, allowing superstar lines the freedom to do their thing. Staal doesn't quite make the 16-minute cutoff, but I'll allow it given how good he's been and the difficulty of minutes faced. Cirelli has been a monster this season and if you had any doubts about his inclusion on Team Canada for the 4 Nations Face-Off, those should be erased now. He's been one of the league's very best shutdown forwards and for the xG purists, his impact there is second to only Reinhart's.

Anze Kopitar is no stranger to the Selke Trophy and he's in the mix again. It's awesome to see him doing his thing again at 37 — the Kings have allowed only 1.61 goals against per 60 with him on the ice this season. Claude Giroux is in the same demographic and he's a pleasant surprise just outside the top five. Giroux has never finished top 10 in Selke voting, but he's taken on shutdown duties in Ottawa this season, including a big penalty-killing role. His 52 percent team-penalty-kill time is seventh among forwards.

It's also important to mention that while I established a criteria to hone in on shutdown forwards, two MVP candidates would've made the cut here ... if they killed penalties. If that's not something you care about, both Draisaitl and Kaprizov grade out just as strong.

### **Calder Trophy**

Given to the player selected as the most proficient in his first year of competition in the NHL.

**Criteria:** Rookie skaters ranked by Net Rating, adjusted by position.

Macklin Celebrini didn't crack the top 10 in the last Awards Watch. That's partly because he had only played 12 games at that point, but also due to weak on-ice numbers that took away some of the luster from his production. His 42 percent xG rate was among the worst marks on a bad Sharks team. Despite scoring 10 points in 12 games, his average Game Score was just 0.43.

Since then, though, everyone has caught Celebrini Fever as he's looked like a superstar in the making — if he's not already there. During that stretch, Celebrini has been a point-per-game player with 18 in 18 games, seven more than the next-best Shark, and he's been a legitimate difference-maker at five-on-five. When Celebrini has been on the ice, the Sharks have looked respectable with an even goal and xG differential. Without him, they've been outscored 31-24 and have a 39 percent xG rate. His average Game Score since the last Awards Watch has been 1.00. The sky feels like the limit for him. Celebrini has been appointment viewing, which says a lot given the team he's on.

After Celebrini, Dustin Wolf is an extremely worthy competitor and should be treated as a co-favorite — if not the outright top dog. He's saved 7.2 goals above expected and looks like a strong future starter for the Flames. Wolf is not far off the top 10 in GSAx and has been the biggest reason the Flames have hung around the wild-card race this season. His percentile grade is on par with Celebrini's.

Matvei Michkov is right there with those two to round out the top three, though has taken a noticeable step back. While his five-on-five game has come around, his production has dried up. He's been held scoreless in 10 of his last 11 games. Lane Hutson has arguably been the best offensive rookie this season, but his struggles defensively have him outside the top three.

While those guys have been great (and you can add Logan Stankoven and Maxim Tsyplov to that list, despite his second-quarter fall-off), this year's rookie class lacks depth outside the main guys. A serious dearth of first-year difference-makers could make picking the five guys on the ballot easy, but the actual order difficult. That there are only eight first-year players with an above-average Net Rating is rough.

## **Vezina Trophy**

Given to the goalkeeper adjudged to be the best at this position.

**Criteria:** Goaltenders who have played half of their team's games or more, ranked by goals saved above expected courtesy of Evolving Hockey and MoneyPuck.

Unsurprisingly, Hellebuyck is the front-runner, though it's a little closer than current sentiment suggests — by goals saved above expected, anyway. A tough week for Hellebuyck has cut his lead in GSAX over Lukas Dostal in half.

Hellebuyck has still been the league's best goalie this season and feels like a runaway train at this point. The Vezina is his to lose. He's on track to be the 13th goalie in league history with three or more Vezina Trophies and the first to win back-to-back since Martin Brodeur in 2006-07 and 2007-08. His .926 save percentage is among the highest in the league and he's saved 0.75 goals per game above expected. He's somehow looked even better than he did last season, and that's saying a lot.

A lack of brand names below him should help Hellebuyck's case further. As great as Dostal has also been, he's not getting picked over Hellebuyck, and the same can probably be said about Filip Gustavsson in Minnesota. Aside from Igor Shesterkin (who is injured and has struggled of late) and Jacob Markstrom, the rest of the group doesn't quite have the reputation to challenge Hellebuyck. That's both in the eyes of the voters and in the sense that it's harder to count on them to keep up their current pace.

That said, the rest of the top five — Dostal, Gustavsson, Karel Vejmelka and Logan Thompson — deserve major kudos for their work this season. So does whoever predicted any of those four would be top-five goalies at the halfway point.

## **Art Ross Trophy**

Given to the player who leads the National Hockey League in scoring points at the end of the regular season.

**Criteria:** Skaters ranked by their projected end-of-season point total.

As has been the case for the last two seasons, the Art Ross will likely come down to one of three players: McDavid, MacKinnon and Kucherov.

For now, though, MacKinnon has the edge thanks to a six-point lead over the field and a double-digit lead over his two biggest threats. You can probably add Draisaitl to that list as he's not far behind Kucherov in projected points. Though it does feel likelier that McDavid takes the reins in the second half.

Beyond the main competitors, it'll be interesting to see who can crack 100 points for the first time. Mitch Marner and Jack Eichel look likely while Kyle Connor and Makar are close.

## **Rocket Richard Trophy**

Given to the NHL's top goal scorer.

**Criteria:** Skaters ranked by their projected end-of-season goal total.

Auston Matthews may not be lapping the field this year, but that doesn't mean someone else is running away with it right now. Draisaitl currently holds a six-goal lead over the next-best player that should be relatively safe for the remainder of the year. Draisaitl is the only player projected to hit 50 goals this season, with 54, and his main challenger, Kaprizov, is currently on the shelf.

There are some great goal scorers behind Draisaitl, but without Matthews or David Pastrnak around, no one has the necessary pedigree to catch Draisaitl. The Rocket is his to lose.

## [The Athletic / Why the NHL needs a new award to better recognize defensemen](#)

By James Mirtle – January 7, 2025

There were so many great questions submitted to our last mailbag call-out that I wanted to dedicate a few columns to the best ones as we head into midseason.

Before the Christmas break, we examined what went into designing NHL arenas, and I tracked down a couple of architects to get into the issue.

Subscriber Michael H. asked about a cause near and dear to my heart, so we'll dive in on it a little in this space. **His question:**

"It seems a defensive defenseman can never win a major trophy, which feels like a gap as it excludes a significant number of players. Why does the league not add such an award? They already have one for defensive forwards."

I totally agree. Actually, way back in 2007-08, I started to name a "Rod Langway Award" winner for a few seasons, using a basic statistical formula to try to come up with the top players in the category.

There's been a general push in this direction for a long time from some media members and fans, and a lot of players and coaches around the league have recently expressed support toward better recognizing defenders with a year-end honor.

The Norris Trophy has evolved over the years into an award that leans heavily on rewarding offensive contributions, with the top handful of scorers among defensemen usually getting the bulk of the consideration.

The last Norris winner whose defensive play was the decisive factor was probably Zdeno Chara in 2008-09 (and he still had 50 points, 12th among D).

Before that, you might have to go back to, well, Rod Langway, who won back-to-back awards in 1982-83 and 1983-84 despite not topping 33 points.

He's the only winner under the 50-point mark in the last 56 years, minus shortened seasons.

The best thing about a Rod Langway Award is it would suddenly put a lot of unsung hero types up for discussion throughout the year. Just look at the potential candidates this season.

Using The Athletic's patented model (with a hat tip to Dom Luszczyszyn), here are the top 10 defensemen in Defensive Rating at midseason:

Other than Josh Morrissey, it's safe to say this is a list of players who aren't being talked about for any major recognition at the end of this season.

But the other key argument for adding another league award for defensemen is how poorly represented they are by the annual awards in general. While defensemen make up roughly one-third of the league's regular players (compared to 60 percent for forwards and 8 percent for goaltenders), they rarely get consideration for any major awards other than the Norris.

In the last three Hart Trophy votes, for example, defensemen have received just 2.5 percent of the overall vote totals, compared to 90.5 percent for forwards and 7 percent for goalies.

The last defenseman honored as league MVP was Chris Pronger back in 1999-00. Before that, you have to go back to Bobby Orr more than 50 years ago.

The Hart is far from alone in that regard. The NHL has more than a dozen major individual awards and, other than the Norris and Vezina (which forwards can't win), they are overwhelmingly dominated by centers and wingers.

In addition to 100 percent of the Selkes and Richards, forwards have won 97 percent of the Art Rosses, 91 percent of the Ted Lindsays and 93 percent of the Lady Byngs in NHL history.

Interestingly, the Conn Smythe for playoff MVP has representation that probably comes closest to matching players' value on the ice, with forwards, defensemen and goaltenders winning those 51, 20 and 29 percent of the time, respectively. (Which you could argue is likely closer to what the Hart should look like, given how valuable goaltenders are overall.)

The Calder Trophy for the NHL's rookie of the year has the next best split in voting, with forwards winning "only" 71 percent of the time. But even there, defensemen are given short shrift with only 13 percent of the awards.

**Over the last decade, of the 80 major individual trophies available to be won, defensemen have won just nine (11 percent):** three Calders, three Conn Smythes, two Byngs (both to Jaccob Slavin) and one Masterton.

This shortfall probably comes back to the nature of the position. There's no question it's easier to objectively measure what a goal scorer, playmaker or netminder brings, with the sport's marquee stats (goals, assists, points, wins, etc.) all highlighting their main contributions on leaguewide leaderboards.

What makes a defenseman elite can be offense, but not necessarily. What made Hall of Famers like Nick Lidstrom or Scott Niedermayer brilliant, for example, went well beyond putting pucks in the net, and the fact Niedermayer, in particular, only averaged a 48-point pace throughout his career doesn't stop him from being recognized as one of the 50 best players to play the game.

He won only two major individual awards over an 18-year career.

I don't know if the solution is to add a defensive defenseman award or instead to create an offensive defenseman award and then make the Norris more about "the greatest all-round ability in the position," something that has been hit and miss in the past despite being the definition of the award.

Awards voting has improved in recent years partly thanks to, I believe, the growing adoption of analytics and more easily accessible ways to analyze the game beyond goals, assists and points as well as the expansion of the voter pool. But Hart voting, in particular, shows just how overlooked the 230-plus players in the league who play on the blue line can be compared to their peers up front.

I don't think it makes sense for the Hart to be "the forwards' award" when there are so many trophies already earmarked for only scorers to win. Defensemen and goalies do occasionally win the league MVP when their seasons are so otherworldly that they manage to break through (i.e. Carey Price, Pronger, Dominik Hasek, Bobby Orr).

But changing the way the Hart is interpreted and voted on shouldn't be the only fix here. Recognizing more defensemen overall, especially those excelling at goal prevention and all of the non-offensive areas of the game, is worthy of its own change.

I know the NHL's brass feels that they already have enough awards. But surely, in a world where they're giving out a weird trophy for intangible leadership qualities and another for the outmoded goals-against-average stat, there's room for something for the Rod Langways, too.



## The Athletic / NHL weekend rankings: Offseason regrets, Lightning surge and are the Canadiens good?

By Sean McIndoe – January 7, 2025

**The holidays are done, you're sitting in a home surrounded by all your new stuff, and you're probably thinking:** I don't need some of this junk after all. I hope I kept the receipts.

A few NHL teams know how you feel.

We did this last year, and it's interesting to go back and look at that list. I think it holds up fine – there aren't any obvious cases where a player turned it around and made the doubters look bad. But what stands out is that even with a couple of honorable mentions slipped in, only one name from the list is still on the same team. That would be Anaheim's Alex Killorn and his long-term UFA deal everyone thought was too expensive. But the six other names had all found new homes by opening night, including three – Pierre-Luc Dubois, Joonas Korpi and Ryan Johansen – who were traded despite having contracts that felt unmovable. I guess there's some optimism to be found there if you see a guy on your favorite team on the list below.

### **Bonus five: Offseason acquisitions that haven't worked out (yet)**

**5. Tyler Bertuzzi, Blackhawks** – Bertuzzi held this spot a year ago too, when he was struggling with Toronto. The numbers haven't been great in Chicago, although now that he's finally being given a chance to click with Connor Bedard, there's still time for the results to appear.

**4. Vladimir Tarasenko, Red Wings** – One of Steve Yzerman's big offseason adds was the former 40-goal scorer who had 23 last year. So far, he's on pace to fall short of double digits despite missing just one game. Probably not the production you're looking for on a two-year deal that costs nearly \$10 million.

**3. Elias Lindholm, Bruins** – The idea here was for the Bruins to finally add their first elite top-six center of the post-Bergeron era. It hasn't really worked out that way, and while Lindholm has been better than some guys on this list, he's also locked into a seven-year deal that already looks regrettable.

**2. Viktor Arvidsson/Jeff Skinner, Oilers** – I still have no idea how these two additions haven't worked. At least they were reasonably cheap.

**1. Steven Stamkos, Predators** – I hate to do this because he's a personal favorite, but it's fair to assume that the Predators were hoping for a lot more than a 25-goal pace when they splashed out for the offseason's biggest free agent. It's impossible to untangle this from the team's miserable record, and you could absolutely mention Jonathan Marchessault here too, if only because this was supposed to be Nashville planting a flag as Stanley Cup contenders and they have been... not that.

### **Road to the Cup**

The five teams with the best chances of winning the Stanley Cup.

Man, it sure feels like something big could be coming soon in Vancouver, with Elliotte Friedman's latest report only adding to the intrigue. I thought I'd fantasy-booked every possibility already, but moving Elias Pettersson and J.T. Miller would be something.

**5. Florida Panthers (24-14-2, +8 true goals differential\*)** – I'm keeping the champs on the list even though there's a solid case to be made for the Kings. Hey, speaking of which: the state of Florida vs. California in the cap era, who you got?

**4. Edmonton Oilers (24-12-3, +19)** – They’ve won 14 of their last 18 to basically wrap up a postseason start before the midway mark. **Next up:** Figuring out how to go full Glen Sather on the trade deadline.

**3. Winnipeg Jets (27-12-2, +43)** – They’ve lost three straight, and more importantly, 12 of 25 since that 15-1-0 start. With the Wild heating up again and right behind them, they need to start putting some wins back on the board. **The good news:** They’ve got the next six at home.

**2. Washington Capitals (26-10-3, +42)** – They scored seven against the Rangers on Saturday, and now they’ve got the Sabres tonight. If they put another touchdown on the board, I say the league steps in to fine them for bullying.

**1. Vegas Golden Knights (27-9-3, +34)** – If you missed it, we have our midseason grades for all 32 teams here. The Knights, not surprisingly, do well – one of only six teams to land in the “A” range, and one of only two to get the coveted A+.

Meanwhile, congrats to Mark Stone on 600 points.

\*Goals differential without counting shootout decisions like the NHL does for some reason.

**Not ranked: Tampa Bay Lightning** – This week, Pierre dropped a piece that asked a question I’d been thinking about lately: Is the league sleeping on the Lightning?

**My answer:** I’m not sure whether the league has been sleeping, but I’m pretty sure I have.

Part of that is my sportswriter brain, which likes to look for the storyline. The Atlantic had plenty, with the Panthers as defending champs, the Bruins collapsing early, the Leafs facing a do-or-die season and the Senators pushing for the playoffs while the Wings, Sabres and Canadiens struggle to find their footing.

The Lightning? They’re good, just like they always are. Ho hum.

They’re certainly not boring, especially with the subplot of the beloved captain being pushed out in favor of the younger UFA prize. It’s just that at some point, you get used to teams being good all the time, and it doesn’t feel notable anymore.

But for this year’s Lightning, there’s more to it. For most of us, this year’s version was expected to make the playoffs yet again – ho-hum – but that was about it. They haven’t won a playoff round in the last two seasons, which isn’t much of a slump for most of the league but feels like it when you won 11 in three years before that. So while the Lightning were supposed to be good, as always, “good” was about the ceiling. Their days as elite contenders felt like it was done.

Apparently, they didn’t get the memo, humming along over .600 for most of the year, hanging just back of the Leafs and Panthers in the race for top spot in the Atlantic. They’re going to the playoffs, and of course, once they get there all that experience and rings-in-the-room know-how kicks in and they’re not the team you want to play.

At least, that’s how they look a lot of nights this year. Not all of them, as losses to the Canadiens, Sharks and Ducks last week showed. With the Lightning, you always wonder how much those mini-slumps are a case of a team showing its flaws and how much is just a group that’s learned that it’s an eight-month grind and you can’t be full throttle for all of it. They haven’t been in my top five yet this year, and they’re not exactly close right now, so clearly I’m not fully sold. But I’m not sleeping, and you shouldn’t be either.

**The bottom five**

The five teams that are headed towards dead last and the best lottery odds for James Hagens, or maybe someone else.

As a Canadian, I'm not really sure what to say about this year's World Junior Championships other than it was a real shame that the tournament was cancelled at the last minute. Ah well, best of luck to everyone next year.

**5. Anaheim Ducks (17-18-4, -18)** – I'll need at least one more week to get up the nerve to put the Rangers here, especially since they at least managed to beat the Hawks. And I don't think the Islanders deserve the spot quite yet, although reading quotes like this makes me wonder. Let's just stick with the Ducks, if only so we can use this space to mention the creative Frank Vatrano extension that may (or may not) be an example of using deferrals to create a win-win.

Frank Vatrano's 3-year, \$18M extension is an interesting one. He will get paid \$3M a year in base salary but then \$9M in deferred salary. Starting 10 years from now in 2035, will make \$900,000 a year for 10 years, and his plan is to live outside of California (and its tax system)...

**4. Nashville Predators (13-20-7, -25)** – At least they've found themselves a new enforcer.

**3. Buffalo Sabres (14-21-5, -15)** – I really enjoyed Matthew's piece on Sabres trade tiers, which I think strikes the right balance on who to move and what to expect in return. His list has only one untouchable, which seems right for a team having this kind of season. But there are enough names with trade value that you're reminded the Sabres front office has plenty to work with if they decide to roll up their sleeves and get to work. It's almost enough to get you feeling optimistic. Then you head to comments and see how optimistic Buffalo fans are about Kevyn Adams actually doing that, and... yeah.

**2. San Jose Sharks (13-23-6, -35)** – I could get behind the Mike Grier for GM of the Year push. A full strip-it-to-the-studs rebuild can be a bigger job than putting the finishing touches on a contender.

When Mike Grier took the Sharks GM job, he inherited the 32nd-worst cap situation and a prospect pool that wasn't close to great.

If GM of the year was actually about who has done the most to help the franchise in the past 12 months, Grier should be a finalist, at minimum.

**1. Chicago Blackhawks (13-25-2, -36)** – How about that Winter Classic. What did you think was the most memorable part? For me, it was when that guy did that thing. Anyway, we're at the point in the season where Laz is breaking out the italics for the word "excruciating," so that's fun.

**Not ranked: Montreal Canadiens** – Wait, are they good?

I don't mean "not in our bottom five anymore" good because that's not really good, and besides we haven't had them here for a few weeks now. And I don't even mean good as in better than expected.

Could they actually be "playoff team" good?

The standings say they're close. Saturday's shootout win over the Avalanche moved them to within one point of the Senators for the last spot before the Penguins jumped up to grab it on Sunday. Ottawa has a game in hand, and Columbus is a point ahead too, and that's before we mention a Red Wings team that's won four straight under Todd McLellan to get back into the race. It's crowded. But with half the season left to play, the Canadiens are in this race.

Whether they can stay there is another question. It's fair to say that this has been a tough team to forecast lately, especially over a stretch that saw them beat the Panthers, Lightning and Golden Knights only to lose to the lowly Blackhawks, which is the kind of week that turns NHL fans into human shrug

emojis. Beating those good teams has led to some well-deserved optimism in Montreal, who at least get to play some games that feel meaningful for a change.

Now comes the reality check. The models certainly don't love their chances, with Dom having their playoff odds at just 3 percent, while Money puck is more optimistic but still in single digits. Recency bias makes that feel low, but we're still talking about a long-shot story here. I guess our robot overlords don't believe in Jakub Dobes being the next in line for the Jacques Plante/Ken Dryden/Patrick Roy/Carey Price torch-passing. Yet.

So fine, they're a long shot. That's OK. This team was just about everyone's consensus pick to finish dead last in the division, if not the conference. If they can even stay within range of a wild card for another month or two, that's a lot of important experience for a young team that could use it, and a lot of optimism for a fan base that can be hard to please. With the future already looking bright, maybe that's enough.

They've got the drama-infused Canucks tonight, followed by two more heavyweights in the Capitals and Stars. Even three weeks ago, when this team was sitting at 11-16-3, you wouldn't have circled those games on the calendar as especially meaningful. Things can change quickly in the NHL. They've changed for the better in Montreal, and now we see how quickly it flips back to the expected script. If it does.

## The Athletic / Goalie Tracking: Eye exercises, Saros making saves with geometry and breakaway wizardry

By Jesse Granger – January 7, 2025

By now, you've probably seen at least one video of a goalie sitting on the bench, in the middle of an empty arena hours before puck drop, darting his eyes back and forth across the freshly cut ice.

If you haven't, here's a clip of Connor Hellebuyck doing it prior to Game 7 of the 2018 second round, courtesy of the NHL's YouTube page.

Welcome back to Goalie Tracking, where we examine the details of goaltending and attempt to explain why goalies do what they do. This week, we'll look at how the shortest goalie in the NHL — Nashville's Juuse Saros — makes himself bigger to shooters, and an interesting technique that Washington's Logan Thompson has been using to stonewall breakaways with impressive regularity. But first, back to the art of puck tracking at the highest level (tracking is the column's namesake, after all).

Goalies perform all sorts of eye exercises before games. Some sit on the bench with their eyes darting back and forth. Some hold both hands out in front of their face and switch their focus between the thumbs. Some bounce a lacrosse ball against the concrete wall in the bowels of the arena. They're all designed to warm up the eyes and help goalies track the puck through traffic and follow it off of their pads on rebounds.

If you watch the goaltender close during pregame warmups, you'll notice many exaggerate their tracking, watching the puck all the way into their glove and off of their blocker into the corner. Here's a clip of Edmonton's Stuart Skinner warming up, courtesy of Stars emergency backup goalie Chris Dudo, in which you can really see the exaggerated tracking.

It's all an attempt to build muscle memory so their eyes will track the puck amidst the chaos around the crease in an NHL game. It's honestly mystifying how well the world's best goalies maintain sight of the puck.

Here's a simple example, in which Vancouver's Thatcher Demko made the initial save on Utah forward Alexander Kerfoot with the blade of his stick. You can see Demko lock his eyes on the puck as it ramps up the blade and into the air, and he easily blockers it to the corner and out of harm's way.

Then there's this save by Toronto's Joseph Woll, which is a bit more impressive. Woll made the initial stop on a one-timer by Pittsburgh winger Michael Bunting, but he missed the puck with his blocker and it just clipped the top of his right leg pad, popping it straight into the air behind him.

Woll lost sight of the puck for a fraction of a second, but quickly located it floating perilously behind his head and knocked it aside. Those eye exercises paid off.

Sam Montembeault is having another excellent season in Montreal, ranking 12th in the league with 8.59 GSAx. One of the biggest reasons is he's an excellent puck-tracker. He fights hard to see through screens, and does an excellent job of following the puck on rebounds. This sequence on Dec. 3 against the New York Islanders is a good example of just how high-level some of these NHL goalies are when it comes to tracking the puck.

First, Montembeault had to deal with a screen on Grant Hutton's initial wrist shot, following the puck across the body of Islanders forward Jean-Gabriel Pageau to make a pad save back against the flow of the play. That's probably why the save looks a little awkward, with Montembeault falling backward. The

really impressive part, though, is how his vision stayed locked onto the puck as it bounced back to his right.

At first glance, it may look like Montembeault is just flailing his arms in panic, but the overhead camera angle shows his head tracking the puck as it bounces to Pageau, and he sticks his blocker-side arm out just in time for a spectacular save.

### **Thompson's breakaway brilliance**

Thompson, who was traded from Vegas to Washington this summer, may be the best value in the NHL. The 27-year-old carries a cap hit of only \$766,667, which is actually below the league minimum salary, but he's been one of the best goalies in the league this season.

Thompson ranks fifth in save percentage (.916) and sixth in GSAx (14.05), and has won 16 of his 20 starts to help Washington to the best record in the Eastern Conference. He's done it with an unorthodox, athletic style of goaltending that allows his compete level to shine. Thompson is a bit of a maverick. He finds different ways to make saves. It's probably a big reason his path to the NHL was different from most, but it has served him well at every level.

Thompson's unique style is visible in the way he defends breakaways, which was on full display during Washington's win over Montreal on Dec. 7. He stopped 22 of 24 shots that night, including three breakaways in the third period alone. This stop on Canadiens captain Nick Suzuki kept the game tied 2-2.

Thompson reads this play incredibly and is one step ahead of Suzuki the entire way. When Suzuki kicks his left leg up and fakes a shot at the hashmarks, Thompson drops his right leg pad into a half-butterfly position, which is something you rarely see in the NHL these days.

Notice a couple things from this still frame. First, Thompson is slightly to his left of the center of the net. That's because he's squaring himself up to the puck, not Suzuki's body. An easy mistake for goalies to make on a breakaway is to square themselves to the shooter, which leaves holes. Because Thompson is on angle, it forces Suzuki to deke. Next, notice that Thompson's right leg is already down in the half-butterfly, well before Suzuki makes his move.

Dropping that pad early sets up Thompson for an easy slide to his right, and he stuffs Suzuki's backhand attempt with relative ease. Most of the time, patience is key for goalies, but Thompson is actually making the first move himself.

Just a few minutes prior to this play, Thompson faced a breakaway from Montreal defenseman Jayden Struble and used the same technique. This time, Thompson dropped his left pad to the ice early, because that was the direction the shooter would have to deke to get around him.

Struble opted to shoot rather than deke, and Thompson's half-butterfly left no holes for the puck to find. He sealed the ice to prepare for a shot, while still maintaining lateral mobility in case of a deke.

Why don't we see more goalies doing this? Making the first move in a one-on-one situation can be risky. Guessing incorrectly can leave the goalie out of position and allow an easy goal. That can certainly happen, but Thompson's athleticism allows him to make saves even when he guesses incorrectly.

Here's an example from last year's playoff run with the Vegas Golden Knights. Stars forward Tyler Seguin walked in all alone and Thompson dropped his left pad early, anticipating Seguin would deke to the far side of the net.

Seguin instead deked back to the short side, which should've beat Thompson, but he quickly dug his left skate into the ice and exploded back to his right, stuffing Seguin's backhand attempt.

This may not be the most traditional way of playing a breakaway, but Thompson is using it incredibly effectively. He's the best deal in the NHL, but not for long. He'll be an unrestricted free agent after this season, and if he maintains his current level of play, he'll be due for a massive raise.

### **How Saros makes himself bigger to the shooter**

There's a reason only one goalie under 6-feet has played in the NHL this season. The combination of the skill of today's shooters and advancements in stick technology mean that modern goaltending is all about geometry. Goalies rarely have time to react to shots, so cutting off angles and giving shooters nowhere to fire the puck is imperative. The smaller the goalie, the more difficult that becomes, but it hasn't prevented Saros from becoming one of the best in the world.

Saros has elite edgework and athleticism, but he also has fantastic structure to his stance that maximizes his net coverage, especially in one-on-one situations. Goalie coaches use a term called "box control," which essentially means that the closer a goalie gets to the puck, the smaller area he has to protect because the puck can only travel in a straight line. Here's a visual from a coaching video by David Schultz at Stop-It Goaltending and Pure Hockey to help explain the concept.

In order to hit the net, the puck must travel through each of those boxes. The closer the goalie is, the smaller the box he has to cover. It's why goalies are coached to play with their gloves out in front of their body, and few do it better than Saros. Watch this glove save on a breakaway by Rangers forward Vincent Trocheck on Dec. 17.

Saros uses a really wide stance as the puck gets close to him, making it nearly impossible to beat him along the ice. That should leave room up top, especially considering his size, but he takes that away by projecting his gloves well out in front of his body. It may look like Trocheck did Saros a favor and shot the puck straight into his glove, but that's only because Saros gave him no angle to get the puck over his glove.

Saros' glove hand is so far in front of him that any shot over the top of his glove has no chance of sneaking under the crossbar. If he held his glove just a few inches further back, to his side, it's likely a goal. Instead, it looks like a simple glove save. From Trocheck's point of view, he sees space on the glove side, but it's an illusion. If we could see a camera angle from the puck's point of view, we would see little to no space available in that part of the net.

It highlights the importance of the small details in a goalie's stance, and how minor adjustments can make saves look much easier.

## The Athletic / 2025 World Juniors notebook: Scott Wheeler's thoughts on more than 100 NHL prospects

By Scott Wheeler – January 7, 2025

OTTAWA — After 29 games in 11 days, the 2025 World Juniors are in the books. I was in Ottawa for the full tournament, bouncing between the Canadian Tire Centre and TD Place.

To put a bow on our coverage at The Athletic, I'm opening up my entire notebook. Here's everything I had written down on the more than 100 drafted and draft-eligible NHL prospects who participated in the tournament.

### Team USA

**Oliver Moore (F, Chicago Blackhawks):** He made some skill plays and looked really confident with the puck. Finishing and execution aren't always there, though, which has become a bit of a theme for him. He drew some penalties turning defenders' heels. His skating is such a differentiator for him. Good on PK, created some offense. Tons of looks just lacked the finishing.

**Trey Augustine (G, Detroit Red Wings):** His low glove and high glove were both targeted at times. He looked out of sorts against the Germans, which is very rare for Augustine. He dropped some routine glove saves too and gave out big rebounds when he usually swallows them. Rebound control early in the tournament was a bit of an issue as well. He settled in and played really well against Canada and in the semifinal against Czechia as well, though. His athleticism popped a couple of times. The control and stoicism came back for the games that mattered most (though the glove did show up a couple more times as a bit of an issue). I hadn't identified it as an issue in previous viewings but I'll keep an eye on it now.

**Gabe Perreault (F, New York Rangers):** He just sees it. I liked his competitiveness. Hands and puck skill in tight/one-on-one, even off his first touch. Undressed some players and nearly goalies a couple of times. Multiple breakaways he didn't convert on. Hit a post in the semifinal as well. Turned some pucks over at times but also made some big plays and was one of the top forwards in the tournament when it was done. Didn't exceed expectations and blow the doors off the event but his skill and playmaking were still top-of-the-age-group.

**Austin Burnevik (F, Anaheim Ducks):** He showed some feel off his backhand. Skating is a limiter. Not much of a factor overall.

**Paul Fischer (D, Edmonton Oilers):** A couple of early-tournament tough turnovers cost him his spot in the lineup.

**Aram Minnetian (D, Dallas Stars):** He looked a little all over the place at times. Prone to losing his man in coverage. Scratched against Finland and then came back in as the seventh against Canada and played a limited role the rest of the way. A couple of bad turnovers trying to be cute. I thought he'd bring more and prove some people wrong after a so-so summer camp (he was really good late last year with BC and was a gamer at U18 worlds) but he just didn't rise to it.

**Brandon Svoboda (F, San Jose Sharks):** In front of the net. Physical. Good on the wall/forecheck. Choppy hands but I was never expecting him to offer more than that and bring offense. Thought A.J. Spellacy (Blackhawks) would have been the better selection for that role but Svoboda did what he was asked to do.



**Colin Ralph (D, St. Louis Blues):** Some tough moments in his own zone early in the tournament but he did get better as it went along. Even later in the tournament, there were a couple of haphazard shifts/tough one-on-one moments in his own zone in the semifinal and final. It showed that this was the highest level he'd played at internationally at times.

**Teddy Stiga (F, Nashville Predators):** Started as a scratch and then climbed his way from 13th forward to fourth line and eventually third line, only to score the golden goal on his first shift of overtime. Good on entries. Played with his usual energy and pace and made a couple of important plays beyond just the golden goal. He'll be a big part of next year's team.

**Brodie Ziemer (F, Buffalo Sabres):** Plays hard. Plays honest. Plays the right way. All of the cliches. Great instincts on the penalty kill. Found ways to contribute at five-on-five. Ziemer is one of the most consistently effective forwards in this American cycle and that was true again. I'm not sure what he is in the NHL but wouldn't bet against him having a nice career. He gets the most out of his game.

**Ryan Leonard (F, Washington Capitals):** Leonard was named the tournament MVP. He had a team-leading nine shots in the opener against Germany and a high-volume shot generator the rest of the way. His battle level and engine are always revved. Plays at the net. Such a strong, sturdy skater driving down ice and past D. Took a beating in some of the games sticking his nose in every scrum and attacking into contact. Play selection isn't always great. He was probably owed more (I counted three posts) and was a top forward for the Americans, as expected. His discipline issues kept him off my all-star ballot, though. Way too many unnecessary minor penalties. He needs to find that balance in big moments. It'll be a learning curve. He nearly cost them several times with his antics.

**James Hagens (F, 2025 NHL Draft):** Two-goal, four-point opener. Unreal dexterity and reflexes caught my eye and the puck just glues to his stick on first touch. An underrated quality in his game, for sure. Didn't stand out in the quarter or the semi but then scored USA's first goal of the gold medal game. Finished the tournament as one of the team's leading scorers, which by any measure is a strong showing for a draft eligible. Nice to see him put more pucks into the net as well as I know scouts have wanted to see him score more in college.

**Zeev Buium (D, Minnesota Wild):** Played a ton. I actually thought he was just OK in the opener against Germany and early on in the tournament. Looked frustrated and lost some battles in the first couple of games. Got caught a couple of times and mishandled some pucks, which is very rare for him. He wasn't at his best and didn't seem like himself early in the tournament. Really started to dance and look like himself as things progressed though and while he didn't take over the tournament like I thought he would, he still played 25-30 when it mattered most and impacted play at both ends. He created a ton in the gold medal game that didn't get converted on as well.

**Drew Fortescue (D, New York Rangers):** Buium's partner yet again. He showed some maturity in some important moments in the defensive zone. Some big blocks on PK. Eased pressure in the defensive zone a few times. He's an effective complementary D at this level.

**Logan Hensler (D, 2025 NHL Draft):** Found a role on the third pair with Colin Ralph. Didn't honestly notice him much, which indicates to me that he was told to simplify and not make mistakes (which he can be prone to do). He was OK.

**Cole Hutson (D, Washington Capitals):** One of the top players in the tournament and a real candidate for MVP. Outstanding with the puck all tournament making things happen with his feet and creating the inches of space he needs to execute. Great release. Wicked wrister multiple times. Head coach David Carle played him with Buium for the second half of the gold medal game to try to create more offense

and he delivered one last time in a big moment. He looked like a star-level prospect to me. Very impressive and defended really well all tournament long too.

**Trevor Connelly (F, Vegas Golden Knights):** The highlight of Connelly's tournament was a big play he made at a crucial time in the semifinal to find Cole Eiserman cross-ice. Otherwise, he played 12 or so minutes per game but wasn't used in any high-leverage situations. They didn't fully trust him after the way he cost them at U18 worlds and they used him more as an offensive utility piece at times, but he got a regular shift right through the third period of the gold medal game. He'll be a top talent at next year's tournament.

**Cole Eiserman (F, New York Islanders):** The hunch in his stride has such a unique look. His playmaking has improved. He was moved to 13th forward against Canada and stayed in that role. Clutch scoring, though. Made the most of his looks, which he has a one-of-one talent for doing. I thought he worked and forechecked quite effectively too, which was actually what I liked most about his play at times. Kept his feet moving off the puck. Scored a couple of big, big goals on the power play and filled his role with a maturity that he couldn't have a year or two ago. Nice to see.

**Danny Nelson (F, New York Islanders):** Really good in the second game against Latvia and good the rest of the tournament. Borderline excellent in some of the games. Wrister had some pop. Good spots. Gets open really well. Thought he ran out of steam a little in the gold medal game, though.

**Adam Kleber (D, Buffalo Sabres):** Scratched to start but finished on the second pair as Cole Hutson's partner. He was fine but they tried to protect him and the rest of the non-Buium/Hutson/Fortescue D.

**Max Plante (F, Detroit Red Wings):** Puts pucks into areas so well for his linemates. Small area skill. One scratch against Finland and then back in against Canada but on the fourth line (after I thought he played well on the third line early in the tournament). Played well in his minutes, for me.

**Carey Terrance (F, Anaheim Ducks):** Speed and transition game noticeable. Tracking pucks and applying pressure/winning body positioning on the forecheck. That's his game.

**Joey Willis (F, Nashville Predators):** Started as the 13th forward, was then scratched, got back in and took a slashing penalty that cost USA a goal and we never saw him again.

#### **Team Finland**

**Konsta Helenius (F, Buffalo Sabres):** Passing on the power play was really the only time he was consistently noticeable. Entries on the power play helped that unit have success as well. Some crafty moments with the puck in traffic. But outside of a four-point game in the semifinal, I thought he was pretty quiet throughout, particularly at five-on-five. I had higher expectations.

**Benjamin Rautiainen (F, 2025 NHL Draft):** A talented one-on-one player. He was really noticeable in the offensive zone against USA in the round-robin win. Poise and comfort on the puck. Looks like a mid-round pick to me.

**Tuomas Uronen (F, Vegas Golden Knights):** Passing and vision are both assets at this level. Intentional. Works. Wrister has some pop because of his stocky strength. Good player at this level. A huge 2-1 goal in the gold medal game punctuated a solid tournament.

**Petteri Rimpinen (G, 2025 NHL Draft OA):** Rimpinen has had a big year between Liiga and the World Juniors as a re-entry into the draft. He was one of the tournament standouts. He's really good laterally and athletic. Can move a lot but will battle. Good hands/tracking. He saved his best act for the finale in overtime, making several huge saves at three-on-three. He's going to get picked this year.

**Julius Miettinen (F, Seattle Kraken):** Quick hands. Played confidently with the puck. Tried things. More noticeable early in the tournament than late.

**Emil Pieniniemi (D, Pittsburgh Penguins):** Led all players in TOI in Canada-Finland on Boxing Day with 23:59, including 10:31 in the third. Didn't play in Latvia-Finland on New Year's Eve as he was nursing something. Some uncharacteristic lack of crispness on his passes at times but also made some big plays (including a huge goal in the gold medal game) and was counted upon to contribute at both ends. He was an important part of their success.

**Aron Kiviharju (D, Minnesota Wild):** His size and lack of length are noticeable when trying to defend the rush and be disruptive with his stick at times. A few sequences where he just couldn't get his stick on the puck. But Kiviharju was a big piece of this team and the right choice as captain. Needs to make decisions a little earlier at times but played well and really looks like a leader off-ice for this group. He also had a goal called back for offside in the semifinal. He has always been a top player when he has played against his peers.

**Jesse Kiiskinen (F, Detroit Red Wings):** Always seems to be lurking around the net but can make a play up high in the zone too and has a good shot/one-timer. Six goals and there was a little bit of everything in them. Calm in big moments. A very likeable player at this level.

**Daniel Nieminen (D, 2025 NHL Draft OA):** Struggled at times. Closed gaps and played physical at others. Played on the PK.

**Kasper Halttunen (F, San Jose Sharks):** I wanted to see a little more out of him. He does a really nice job for a big man handling pucks in his feet and pulling them around opposing players and into space. Struggled to get free for that big shot of his and crack open a game like he's capable of. Pace an issue at times.

**Heikki Ruohonen (F, Philadelphia Flyers):** He played with good jump and drive.

**Veeti Vaisanen (D, Utah Hockey Club):** Looked a step slow, or like he wasn't quite ready for this pace. This hasn't been a good year for him in my viewings.

**Rasmus Kumpulainen (F, Minnesota Wild):** He did a good job protecting off his hip and getting off the wall. His lack of pace was noticeable at times, though. He's got heavy feet still. He was fine but not impactful.

**Emil Hemming (F, Dallas Stars):** Best looks on the power play where his shot is threatening. He was otherwise pretty quiet for a first-round pick.

**Jesse Nurmi (F, New York Islanders):** Came and went. Made a few plays with his speed.

### **Team Czechia**

**Eduard Sale (F, Seattle Kraken):** He looked dynamic offensively for much of the tournament and made some big plays throughout and into the bronze medal game. Sale was one of the Czechs' top players and didn't disappear like he has in the past at times internationally. There were still some moments of careless/turning pucks over, though. But his skill level, his finesse on the puck and that game-breaking quality all flashed.

**Adam Novotny (F, 2026 NHL Draft):** A stocky kid who can hang at this level already. He has a good feel and smarts on the puck. Knows where to be and go. But also plays a competitive game for a young player. Legit prospect.

**Jakub Dvorak (D, Los Angeles Kings):** Physical. Strong in contact. Limited offense at this level and won't have much in the NHL either but he defended well. Not a perfect player but has enough pro traits to have a shot at becoming a bottom-pairing/depth type.

**Tomas Galvas (D, 2025 NHL Draft):** He's such an effortless skater and impacts play in so many ways with it. I thought he should have been a late-round pick in last year's draft and still do. I think he can be a good AHL D and call-up option at minimum.

**Adam Jecho (F, St. Louis Blues):** Despite playing a third-line role and minutes, Jecho found ways to impact play and had a couple of big moments in the tournament. I still wonder about his pace of play for the next level but he's a big body who knows what he is and gives a consistent effort and that was the same here. He'll have a good pro career even if I'm not sure he has the offense to be a full-time NHLer (he might become a fourth-liner).

**Jakub Stancl (F, St. Louis Blues):** Stancl had a really positive tournament and was one of the better forwards in the event. He scored some big goals and generated a lot. He's a big, strong player at this level who can hold pucks and push through contact or get open off them. This was the best hockey I've seen him play. Hit the post in the bronze medal game, too (in which he also scored his tournament-best seventh goal).

**Petr Sikora (F, Washington Capitals):** Played with pace and jump. Middle drive. Big goals against Canada and USA when the chips were on the table. He became public enemy No. 1 after drawing penalties in both of those games. More talented than I thought. Good hands. Strong tournament. I haven't been sure what to make of Sikora but he was on the puck a lot this week, found ways to contribute offensively and made some important plays. I don't think he was impactful as Stancl or Sale but he was good for them when they needed guys to step up up front.

**Jakub Fibigr (D, Seattle Kraken):** Fibigr had a quietly very effective tournament, playing to excellent results and chipping in offensively with his heady puck-moving. He's a smart, efficient, two-way defender at this level. Not sure if he has that same value as a pro. Lacks a defining quality. But he helped

**Miroslav Holinka (F, Toronto Maple Leafs):** It didn't maybe show up on the scoresheet in the way that it did for Stancl, Sale and Sikora but Holinka was an important part of this Czech team. Makes his linemates better. He was detailed and smart throughout. I like his reads and his support. Average skill but made some plays, too.

**Adam Jiricek (D, St. Louis Blues):** It's been a long year and a half for Jiricek but he has always played well for the national team. This week was a continuation of that, at least as an 18-year-old who has missed the time that he has (stemming from an injury in last year's tournament at that). He's capable of involving himself against his peers and hopefully he uses some good puck touches and plays this week to build some momentum in Brantford with the Bulldogs. He's a good NHL prospect who has length and has had some really strong stretches over the years.

**Jiri Felcman (F, Chicago Blackhawks):** Felcman was just OK. He took a bad penalty in the bronze medal game. His role was reduced from pre-tournament through the actual tournament. He was more of a secondary piece for them in the end. I haven't typically viewed him as an NHL prospect.

**Ondrej Kos (F, St. Louis Blues):** Limited role. Meh. Don't see it.

**Vojtech Hradec (F, Utah Hockey Club):** Sneaky-good tournament without popping. Hradec's a really good, strong, dependable player at this level. He's a big, strong kid who puts himself in good spots and consistently gets around chances.

**Vojtech Port (D, Anaheim Ducks):** I didn't notice him a lot but he seemed to be driving possession/play nicely when he was on the ice. Stats and underlying numbers look good and he and Fibigr gave the Czechs one of the better third pairings in the tournament.

**Michael Hrabal (G, Utah):** Hrabal had a strong tournament for a second straight year, helping the Czechs to a third straight medal and back-to-back bronzes. He still occasionally looks a little slow when he's on his knees, but fewer shots are sneaking through his body and his competitiveness and size are a good combination. He's on a path to becoming an NHL goalie with the right patience.

### **Team Sweden**

**Rasmus Bergqvist (D, Montreal Canadiens):** For this being his first international event, and for being asked to play with the team's No. 1 defenseman, I thought he handled himself well enough. He only played 15 minutes per game so it was a bit of an unconventional role because he didn't feature on special teams and Theo Lindstein and Tom Willander made up the shutdown pair, but he looked like he belonged more or less. A couple of moments where he looked rushed but nothing to worry about.

**Axel Sandin Pellikka (D, Detroit Red Wings):** ASP was one of the top players in the tournament and had more of an impact than he did when he won the top D award a year ago for my money, though he wasn't as impactful in the semi or bronze medal game. He did a really nice job getting shots through, walking the line, finding open teammates cross-ice or in the slot. Defended hard. Looked to make plays and activate but chose his spots well. His shot and skill are evident when he gets open. He's seeing the ice better and better without sacrificing his shot creation (led all D in shots). Can lose some races in straight lines, skating isn't explosive from a standstill. One of the top D prospects in hockey.

**David Edstrom (F, Nashville Predators):** Edstrom has been a top player for this Swedish age group for years and while the numbers didn't pop, he made some big plays late in the tournament, had a goal disallowed and played a lot (he led all Swedish forwards in average ice time at around 21 minutes). He has size and moves fine (it's not an asset in my view, though). He's not a natural playmaker but makes smart play and functions off two longtime linemates who get way more puck touches. His wall game is good and the net-front on PP suits him. Not mean but protects it really well and takes pucks to the net at this level. He was really good in the bronze medal game, scoring twice and creating several other looks.

**Felix Unger Sorum (F, Carolina Hurricanes):** Clearly one of the more skilled forwards in this Swedish age group for years. Holds. Shifty. Perimeter but in a way that works at this level with his handling and creativity. Stride can be a little hurried/sway a fair amount in straight lines but great on cuts/edges. Problem solver. Superb on zone entries/finding ways into the zone. He over passes and gets too cute at times, though, as well. Not entirely sure how it'll work in the NHL but he's a fun, talented player.

**Otto Stenberg (F, St. Louis Blues):** I like his cycle game/wall play at this level. Has always been a skill player at this level as well, which combines well with his work ethic. Good release. Comfortable one-timer. Will be more of a third-liner/secondary play driver up levels but has been a go-to guy at this one.

**Theo Lindstein (D, St. Louis Blues):** Lindstein was asked to play against the opposition's best a year after a breakout tournament in Gothenburg and he played a lot of minutes and handled it all well but certainly didn't have the standout tournament he had a year ago. Good stick defensively. PP2. Uncharacteristic turnovers at times. I want to see him be a little harder to play against, which would help his defensive game (which is generally strong for his age). An important player for Sweden in back-to-back years. We saw his usual poise in the bronze medal game.

**Tom Willander (D, Vancouver Canucks):** I thought Willander was better than Lindstein on what was effectively the Swedes' top pairing defensively. He was also on the power play as part of a two-D unit

with ASP and scored twice on it. He led the Swedes in ice time and it was deserved. Got pucks through and seemed to want to be more active and industrious with the puck this year as well which was positive. I thought he had a good tournament.

**Felix Nilsson (F, Nashville Predators):** Nilsson's puck game has always been his calling card but I was really impressed with his play off the puck in the tournament. Up and under sticks. Tracking. Good stick on lifts/takebacks. He kept his feet moving without the puck and skated off the puck to get pucks back. A real skill of his that I knew was there but didn't give enough love in prior evals. On the puck, he's more passer than shooter but sees the game really well and he's fast.

**Victor Eklund (F, 2025 NHL Draft):** Eklund helped his draft stock with his tournament. Works. Feet moving. Wins races. Inside body positioning. Good job on the bumper/goal line on the PP, but can also play the flank. Finishes his checks. Skilled but honest player. Fearlessness serves his attributes well. Rang one off the post on a breakaway in the bronze medal game that would have tied it 2-2. Thought he had a positive tournament and continues to look like a top 10-15 prospect for 2025.

**Anton Wahlberg (F, Buffalo Sabres):** Good tournament overall without being a standout. Big boy with some presence on the puck. Shoots it hard. Comfortable one-timer. Moves well when he gets going but can look clunky from a standstill.

**Viggo Gustafsson (D, Nashville Predators):** Wide base to his stance. Strong but not quick. Head up. First pass. Comfortable under pressure side-stepping first layer.

**Zeb Forsfjall (F, Seattle Kraken):** Plays with pace. Light skater. Good player at this level. Good first touch. Curl and drag wrister into his body to get shots past sticks/through feet. Good through neutral ice. Middle lane drive. They've always trusted him and for good reason. Do wonder if he's more of a middle-six AHLer/SHLer than an NHL prospect though.

**Axel Hurtig (D, Calgary Flames):** Slopier than his peers on that blue line.

**Linus Eriksson (F, Florida Panthers):** Non-factor. Some mistakes. He'll play higher on next year's team.

**Oskar Vuollet (F, Carolina Hurricanes):** I thought he'd give them some depth scoring/skill punch but he barely played.

**Herman Traff (F, New Jersey Devils):** Limited role but made a couple of plays in the offensive zone. Big kid with some transition game as well.

**Noel Nordh (F, Utah Hockey Club):** Late call-up. He was fine in a fourth-line role. Plays that role well at this level

**Melker Thelin (G, Utah Hockey Club):** It felt too often like whenever the opposing team got a good chance it went in. Beat along the ice a lot. Beat from some really bad angles. Clearly has work to do to seal his posts better.

**Marcus Gidloff (G, New York Islanders):** Only played twice but started the bronze medal game and after giving up a goal on the first shot of his game on a one-timer was very good the rest of the way. Movement down low still looks a little clunky at times but he's got some real tools and size. He was better than Thelin.

## **Team Canada**

**Tanner Howe (F, Pittsburgh Penguins):** He made a couple of plays early on Boxing Day and then while I thought he was mostly quiet from there on out, I did think he was good on the penalty kill and one of the only Canadian forwards who regularly cleared the zone. Made good reads in the D-zone. Positive on

penalty kill. Very little offense to his game at this level. You're hoping he becomes a competitive third-liner.

**Cole Beaudoin (F, Utah Hockey Club):** Drive. Heavy on pucks against D. Battled. One of the only guys finishing checks and planting himself at the front of the net in some of Canada's games. Good in the faceoff circle even though he primarily played the wing. Limited offensive player at this level but works and gives you something. Future bottom-sixer. Still needs to refine his touch/work on his hands and the first couple of steps.

**Ethan Gauthier (F, Tampa Bay Lightning):** Worked on PK and at five-on-five. Good spots. Good energy. Work ethic was noticeable game to game more than most for Canada. He just didn't finish his chances. Potential future third-liner.

**Mathieu Cataford (F, Vegas Golden Knights):** Limited role. Good on PK. Liked him as the 13th forward in the opener. On pucks. Hustled. I think he has a little more offense to his game than Howe, Beaudoin and Gauthier but he didn't show it.

**Matthew Schaefer (D, 2025 NHL Draft):** Three and a half periods as Canada's best defenseman before getting injured. PP and PK. So good in transition. Used more and more as the first game went on.

**Gavin McKenna (F, 2026 NHL Draft):** The talent divide is clear, even with top players, but they never used him like he was their top forward. Play creation was evident even when finishing of him/his linemates wasn't. Best transition/zone entry guy on the team by a wide margin after Schaefer went down. Third on the team in shots with 20 in five games but it was his passing and puck transporting that stood out. I have no doubt he'll be a star at next year's tournament. They didn't fully unlock him. I would have liked to see him on the first line earlier and/or with a shooter like Carson Rehkopf.

**Beau Akey (D, Edmonton Oilers):** The least-used Canadian player. A couple of nice cross-ice passes in the O-zone. Caught a couple of times early in the tournament and it put him behind in trust but I thought he settled in fine in his limited minutes as the tournament progressed. Skating and mobility noticeable at times in the offensive zone on pinches/with the puck.

**Caden Price (D, Seattle Kraken):** One of the positives for Team Canada for me. Showed some poise. Made some plays under pressure. Blocked some shots. Pleasant surprise who I think took the final top-six D job from Sawyer Mynio a little unexpectedly based on what I was hearing pre-tournament. One of the only D who looked confident/attacked with the puck. Did set some bad gaps but played his off-side well. Stepped up and closed some gaps, too. Got beat occasionally playing too tight but played his game and thought his poise on the puck in particular was there all tournament long when each of Canada's other D struggled with that at times.

**Andrew Gibson (D, Nashville Predators):** Played prominent minutes in a defensive role. Bobbled some pucks/execution. Good stick in zone and size was noticeable in battles but evident skill gap between him and his teammates at times as well. Big, strong right-shot who could someday be a third-pairing PKer type.

**Tanner Molendyk (D, Nashville Predators):** Some rare sloppiness from him in a couple of the round-robin games. Thought he looked more like himself and really started skating and trying to influence play more as the tournament went on. Noticeable in loss for his activity level. Wonder if coaches encouraged him to free-wheel more once they recognized team needed more offense from the back end. Drew some penalties with his mobility. Needs to be a little stronger on pucks at times and I thought he'd be one of the very best players at the tournament but he remains a top prospect and is expected to play in the NHL next year.

**Bradly Nadeau (F, Carolina Hurricanes):** Invisible at times but also misused on the power play (was given every opportunity to be high in the lineup at five-on-five). Was at net/bumper on power play instead of downhill on the flanks. Saw his creativity/skill on the puck really for the first time on a chance he set up to Howe in the second period of their third game of the tournament. Scored going to the net in the quarterfinal. Things just never seemed to click for him. A little vanilla for a player with his skill/skating/scoring traditionally. First major Hockey Canada event though, too.

**Calum Ritchie (F, Colorado Avalanche):** Laid the body. Has clearly worked hard to get stronger and faster. Caught some D on their heels in transition. Not an ox by any means but strong at this level after putting in some work and even after lost training time to the shoulder surgery. Drew some penalties with his ability to hang onto pucks. Thought he was owed a little more. Very good player. Fine tournament.

**Carson Rehkopf (F, Seattle Kraken):** Started as a scratch and then was essentially the 13th forward in the two games he played. The best stretch was a brief stint filling in, in the top nine before two penalties pushed him back down. Thought he was noticeable when used, though. He had the first big hit of the Canada-USA game on his first shift. Good look on his next shift with the second line with Berkly Catton. Skating, shot and even forechecking were noticeable in very limited usage. I think he could have really helped them create more offense if they'd used him more.

**Easton Cowan (F, Toronto Maple Leafs):** Despite leading the team in scoring with three points in five games (tied with Yager), it was a tough week for Cowan. Some good moments and even stretches in games where he was getting to the inside and willing plays when others weren't, but also a mountain of bone-headed decisions/poor play selection on and off the puck. Bad penalties (drew a couple of well). Perimeter shooting. Forcing plays. Missing teammates. Seemed to miss the net a lot when he was in good spots. Overshooting, too. I think he felt the pressure of needing to be a top guy and some selfishness/bad habits crept in. He's still a good player who is going to have a good NHL career.

**Oliver Bonk (D, Philadelphia Flyers):** Really fought the puck at times. Asked to do a lot, though. Average foot speed was noticeable at times as well (the weakest skater on this Canadian blue line). Some big blocks/PKs. Put in a bad spot running power play and immediately helped the power play look better in his normal bumper role. Finished the tournament as Canada's ice-time leader (almost 22 minutes per game) and with the best goal differential on the team at five-on-five (plus-4) so I wonder if the mistakes/feet were just noticeable at times because he was out there more. He was an important player for this team and projects as a smart NHL D.

**Luca Pinelli (F, Columbus Blue Jackets):** Made some plays. Played with determination and spark. Chippy (to a fault in the USA game). Gave something when others didn't at times, though. Used too high in the lineup for my liking but I didn't have an issue with his play outside of the penalty discipline at times. I know there was criticism of his selection but I thought there were other forwards who looked out of place and I didn't feel that with him when the tournament was over, frankly.

**Berkly Catton (F, Seattle Kraken):** Skill and skating noticeable relative to his peers. Play creation was there. Final execution wasn't. Two bad penalties against Latvia. A couple of bad passes/sloppiness in big moments. Good in pre-tournament play but didn't have the impact I expected him to have in the tournament. There were semi-regular dashes, though, and I can't say that about many good forwards.

**Sam Dickinson (D, San Jose Sharks):** They didn't seem to trust him early and he didn't seem to quite look like himself early (it appeared like he'd been told not to play the free-wheeling style he plays in the OHL). They finally moved him into the prominent role a player of his caliber likely warranted on this blue line after the Schaefer injury and he played mostly well the rest of the way and had a couple of good games and a couple of so-so ones. Some bad reads/panicked moments under pressure in the D-zone,



which is the area of his game that needs the most attention if he's going to reach his significant NHL potential. Power play immediately looked better after moving him onto it and sliding Bonk to the bumps, and so did he. Needs to pivot and set his gaps earlier at times. But he's a big kid who can really skate and involve himself when he's feeling like himself and I expect him to be a big part of next year's team if he's not in the NHL. Still one of the top D prospects in hockey.

**Jett Luchanko (F, Philadelphia Flyers):** I wanted to see more offense and for him to be more noticeable at five-on-five, where I thought his game was vanilla, but he was Canada's best penalty killer for me. Excellent routes/skating/pressure points made him a really valuable PKer. Used more late in games with the lead. Overpassing at times when I wanted to see him try to take charge. Skating is a real asset, for sure. Good poise on the puck later in the tournament. His best game was against USA. I wonder how much offense he's going to bring at the NHL level but there's a lot of value elsewhere in his game.

**Porter Martone (F, 2025 NHL Draft):** Non-factor in the opener against Finland. Pace questions in terms of high-end NHL offense limiter? I'm starting to wonder. Scratched against Germany and USA. Returned for quarters. Limited role but drew a couple of penalties, got into the mix, and scored a big goal on a tip when he was reinserted on the power play. Better than he showed early but also thought he could have offered more than some of the depth guys they kept going back to.

**Brayden Yager (F, Winnipeg Jets):** Mostly positive tournament. Not a star at this level but consistently played well I thought. Smart player who finds ways to get open and supports his linemates well. Skill and skating haven't taken off over the last couple of years but he's going to play in the league.

**Sawyer Mynio (D, Vancouver Canucks):** Started as scratch and then leapfrogged Akey to play on the third pair with Price for the second half of the tournament. Didn't have much written down. Got beat a couple of times trying to kill a play that he couldn't close out (more due to timing/read than skating, he's an excellent skater). Defended well in limited role, though, on the whole.

**Carter George (G, Kings):** George was Canada's best player at this year's tournament and is eligible to return next year. His composure has always been striking. He's a smart goalie in the crease who reads the game at a high level and rarely gives up softies, but he also just has this calm about him that really stands out in the net. He's got the demeanor to be an NHL goalie.

**Jack Ivankovic (G, 2025 NHL Draft):** Started the Latvia game and lost 3-2 but both goals were on the power play and he was lights out in the shootout. I thought he played well. Lost his net a couple of times but battled and relied on his feet.

### **Team Slovakia**

**Maxim Strbak (D, Buffalo Sabres):** Horse at this level. He was last year, even. Played big minutes (23:31 per game) and contributed in all areas of the game/zones of the ice. Has developed his confidence with the puck and activating into the rush over the last couple of years. Not just a sturdy, plays-hard type against his peers. Very involved. Step-up physicality. Kills plays. Not perfectly polished and can misread coverage or timing the odd time but offers a lot and can be relied upon in tough matchups. Still contributed six points in five games despite difficult assignments. Potential third-pairing/No. 7 D someday.

**Dalibor Dvorsky (F, St. Louis Blues):** Not much more to write/say about Dvorsky at this level. He's been a top player in the 2005 age group for a long time. He was a top player even when he played with the 2004s. Led the Slovaks in goals (five) and points (nine) in five games. Led the tournament's forwards in average ice time (over 23 minutes). Strong puck protector and one-touch shooter. Detailed-oriented two-way center at this level. Stick detail off the puck and in the circle. Great saucer passer. Thought he

looked like you'd expect him to look. This Slovak age group is weaker than some of the most recent ones before it as well.

**Juraj Pekarcik (F, St. Louis Blues):** Huge role and minutes, like Dvorsky. Seven points in five games. Good on-ice results. Size-skating-puck protection combo is noticeable at this level. Above-average skill. Would like to see him play a little harder and use his frame a little more off the puck to win positioning and battles, or get to the inside and score/finish a little more than he does. Some pro attributes, though. Going to be a good top-nine AHLer at minimum. Might play.

**Luka Radivojevic (D, 2025 NHL Draft):** Head is always up and on a swivel. Good, natural edges crossing over on his heels. Runs the umbrella and manages the puck atop the point really smartly. Gaps well going from his heels to his toes. Not a powerful skater, though, and that combines with his size (5-foot-10) to make him vulnerable to getting beat wide with speed and to project ability questions up level. Intellect is there. Want to see him play with a little more ambition at that size. Makes the right play more often than not, though he did make a couple of uncharacteristic mistakes in the event. Mid-rounder at this stage I think, despite a decent track record over the years.

**Tomas Pobezal (F, 2025 NHL Draft):** I wanted a little bit more out of him. I've enjoyed watching him at previous international events and he played almost 17 minutes per game in his first World Juniors and has had a notable season in Slovakia's pro league this year, but they needed him to be a secondary scorer/play-driver for them and he struggled to get good looks (though he's 5-foot-10, that has actually been a strength of his prior to this). Still think he's a mid-rounder.

**Tobias Tomik (F, 2026 NHL Draft):** Scoreless in a very limited role. He's a good player/prospect, though, and will be an important part of next year's team.

**Jan Chovan (F, 2025 NHL Draft):** Limited role. Smart player. Strong on pucks. Drew a couple of penalties. Positive results. I thought they could have benefitted from moving him up the lineup/using him more. Late rounder.

**Miroslav Satan (F, Washington Capitals):** Not a fan. Gets pushed around way too much for a big man. I don't view him as an NHL prospect.

**Tomas Kralovic (F, overager):** Big, heavy right-shot D who keeps his head up, seems to move well laterally and also moves pucks well. Doesn't profile as an NHL prospect but I plan to at least make some more time for him.

## Team Latvia

**Bruno Osmanis (F, 2025 NHL Draft):** Osmanis was Latvia's first-line winger opposite star Eriks Mateiko and had played really, really well, with four points in three games before a high-stick to his left eye in the third period on Dec. 30 took him out of the tournament. He makes his linemates better through his use of them. Average-sized but plays with noticeable feel for the game and what he is. He looked like an NHL prospect, building on what I saw at the U18 worlds in Finland and what he has shown in HockeyAllsvenskan and J20 in Sweden this year. Mid-to-late rounder.

**Olivers Murnieks (F, 2026 NHL Draft):** One of the youngest players in the tournament but he centered Latvia's first line and didn't look the least bit out of place. Led Latvia with a plus-4 goal differential, an incredible feat for a 16-year-old player on a team like Latvia (he's a July 31 birthday, too). He's also had a strong season with Sioux City in the USHL. Pro-built, pro-style center who plays a well-rounded, complete game. Looks like a real player/prospect for next year.

**Eriks Mateiko (F, Washington Capitals):** Mateiko was one of the standouts of the tournament, scoring half of Latvia's 10 goals (five in five games). Big kid whose skating and coordination have continued to

smooth out. He's made so much progress in the last three years, that it looks average now and above-average for 6-foot-5/6. Competitive. Some skill. Pucks are coming off harder. Protects it well. Plays in the guts of the ice and excels on the wall. Calm in big moments. Looked like a future NHLer.

**Darels Uljanskis (F, Anaheim Ducks):** One of the last picks of last year's draft. I thought he struggled to defend the speed of the top players in the tournament, getting caught on his heels and turned at times. He was fine but I don't view him as an NHL prospect.

**Rudolfs Berzkalins (F, 2026 NHL Draft):** Boston College commit. Limited role. Big kid who goes to the hard areas and front of the net.

**Roberts Naudins (F, 2027 NHL Draft):** Shattuck's 6-foot-6 forward. Harvard commit. Limited minutes. Good spots. Can make little plays on slip passes, etc. for a player his size. Smart. Definitely worth keeping an eye on.

### **Team Switzerland**

**Leon Muggli (D, Washington Capitals):** Muggli led the Swiss in average ice time (20:17) but struggled with the role at times, turning pucks over and not executing like they needed him to in some of the games. Skating looked sharper. Comfortable skating pucks and navigating the ice at this level. Decision-making was suspect when things picked up or caved in, though. He fought it at times. Considering his pro experience, I wanted to see him look a little more polished than he did. This was a weak Swiss group, though.

**Basile Sansonnens (D, Vancouver Canucks):** Hands aren't natural with the puck, can bobble and panic under pressure. I thought he had a tough tournament and didn't quite look at this level at times. Don't view him as an NHL prospect.

**Rico Gredig (F, New York Rangers):** Second-line center. Good athlete. Skates well. Don't see a lot of skill.

**Christian Kirsch (G, San Jose Sharks):** Starter. Got lit up by USA in the quarters and yanked but played better in the tournament than his .878 save percentage indicated. Made some big saves using his feet. Good size and mobility, just needs to harness it and maintain control and habits a little better.

**Jonah Neuenschwander (F, 2027 NHL Draft):** The youngest player in the tournament as a rare 15-year-old. Watched the first couple of games as a scratch. Point on PP in debut. Good size for his age (already 6-foot-3 and 181 pounds). Decision-making looked rushed at times, like he was still figuring out this level and not fully confident in himself, but he also showed some know-how and pro attributes in moments. I liked him against the Slovaks (the best of his three games). A name to know.

**Lars Steiner (F, 2026 NHL Draft):** He's having a really good rookie season in the QMJHL with Rouyn-Noranda. Physical. Competitive. Moves his feet. Sturdy for his age. Bumper on PP2. Good wrister. He wants the puck. Strong skater through compact crossovers. I'm a fan. Looks like a player already.

### **Team Germany**

**Carlos Handel (D, 2025 NHL Draft):** Handel led all Germany players in time on ice in the tournament, averaging 22:41 per game. He quarterbacked one of the power-play units and was a prominent piece of the penalty kill. I thought he was just fine defensively in big minutes, but they were asking a lot of a draft-eligible defenseman and this wasn't a strong German team; they nearly got relegated. Handel's a right-shot D who impressed at the Hlinka and got off to a good start in Halifax before hitting a bit of a wall. He's a draft pick but looks like a mid-to-late rounder to me. He does everything well enough without having standout attributes.

**David Lewandowski (F, 2025 NHL Draft):** Lewandowski had two goals and 13 shots (second on the team) through five games. Physical. Kept his feet moving. Curl and drag helps him shape his shots through. Good size and sense for spots/spacing. Knows where to be. He looks like a mid-round pick.