



**Columbus Blue Jackets Media Clips**  
**March 2, 2026**

**Columbus Blue Jackets News**

- PAGE 2        The Athletic / Blue Jackets Monday gathering: Zach Werenski breaks down 'golden assist,' moment by moment
- PAGE 7        The Athletic / Blue Jackets blow early lead on 3 bad-luck goals, endure tough loss to Islanders
- PAGE 10       The Columbus Dispatch / Blue Jackets coach hopes to spark Kent Johnson
- PAGE 12       The Columbus Dispatch / Squandered scoring chances keep biting Columbus Blue Jackets
- PAGE 14       The Columbus Dispatch / New York Islanders deflate Columbus Blue Jackets in overtime
- PAGE 16       The Columbus Dispatch / Zach Werenski's Olympic gold: A hero's welcome home
- PAGE 18       Spectrum News One / Blue Jackets play first home game since Olympic win

**Cleveland Monsters / Prospect News**

**NHL News**

- PAGE 19       The Athletic / Which NHL top lines have been the best and worst of the 2025-26 season?

**Multimedia**

- [WATCH](#)       ABC 6 / Zach Werenski Celebrates 'Whirlwind' Olympic Gold in First Columbus Return

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets Monday gathering: Zach Werenski breaks down 'golden assist,' moment by moment

By Aaron Portzline – March 2, 2026

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

### **Item No. 1: Frame by frame**

Zach Werenski sat down, looked at the image in front of him and broke into a wide smile. It was one week ago Sunday that the Blue Jackets defenseman won a gold medal with Team USA at the Olympics in Milan.

Most of the glory has gone to Jack Hughes, and rightfully so. Hughes scored the golden goal that led to the United States' 2-1 overtime win over Canada, the first Olympic gold for the red, white and blue since 1980.

But Werenski's role in the play cannot be overstated. It was a primary assist, but also a prime-time assist for the ages that involved a series of little plays before the dramatic finish on the sporting world's grandest stage.

Werenski sat down with *The Athletic* after practice on Sunday to go frame by frame and describe the play from his perspective: what he saw, the split-second reads he made and the type of tidbits that most viewers may missed.

#### *1. The play starts...*

Canada's Connor McDavid came roaring through the right circle and flipped a puck on USA goaltender Connor Hellebuyck, who stopped it and swatted it behind his net. Hughes gathered it, skated behind the cage and passed it to Werenski in the corner.

Werenski: "As I was coming onto the ice, I was very aware of who was out there for them (McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon, and Cale Makar).

"If you notice, I kind of hesitate (when I get the puck), because it's McDavid, right? So if I pull it directly to my backhand, he's going to get it. He's so quick, that he'll probably lift my stick. That's a big reason why I just went to one hand. If I go to two hands ... by the time I get here (puts his two hands together) he's going to be within range to at least disrupt. So I tried to go with one hand.

"I make that play a decent amount of times during the season. It's kind of hidden within the game. Like if there's a guy ahead of me, I'll just push it up to him. This time, though, the puck rolled on me. If it doesn't roll on me, I probably lead Hughes (instead of him slowing and reaching slightly back). But from my angle, I can see that Jack's going to get it, it's just a matter of whether he's going to get it past (Makar)."

## *2. Makar's indecision*

If the puck weren't rolling on Werenski, and he made the clean, crisp pass he wanted, Makar wouldn't have been caught in the middle. But when Makar leaned forward in an attempt to pick off the pass, Hughes was able to swat the puck around him and follow it up the ice, leaving Makar in his wake. Makar never recovered.

Werenski: "You almost have to go if you're (Makar) there. I get it, it's a 50-50. It's tough. It's a tough play. I'd probably try to stand there, too. I mean, look who you're poking it to (McDavid) if you get it. Jack makes a great play not just poking the puck, but getting it around (Makar). And *he* gets around him, too, which was huge.

"I look to see where MacKinnon is pretty early. I know everyone is saying he should go (directly at the puck), and, looking back, with hindsight, maybe he should have. But look who's here and here (Werenski points at Hughes and Dylan Larkin trailing the play). If I dive and whack it, it could be a 2-on-0 or a breakaway. So I understand his thought of playing the angle and getting the puck to the corner. I mean, if he gets it, it's a 2-on-1 the other way.

"It's a tough play for him. He's catching a lot of heat for it, but if I see he's coming hard, I might make a desperation play and just dive for it."

## *3. Werenski vs. MacKinnon*

Werenski arrived at the puck just a split-second before MacKinnon, touched it forward with his backhand, then again to pull the puck under MacKinnon's stick. Then, with MacKinnon's momentum carrying him away from the puck, Werenski shoved him forward, away from the play, and was able to turn and survey the ice.

Werenski: "(MacKinnon) tried to finish me, which I was kind of ready for. I was trying to get the puck out of his reach and, honestly, at first, just get it to the middle. He gets unlucky — and we get lucky — when the puck hits off his skate.

"I was trying to get it back to Larkin, but it hit (MacKinnon's) skate and came back to me. I was ready for it. It just kind of sat there, right at my feet. And right here is where I see Jack. I see Jack just as I'm turning."

## *4. The golden assist*

Werenski realized that Larkin was close behind him and McDavid was fast approaching on the backcheck, but Werenski decided quickly to zip it across the zone to Hughes, who was wide open with Makar still way behind the play. Once again, McDavid's speed nearly disrupted the play, but the puck passed right in front of him on a line to Hughes. With a clear path to the goal, Hughes fired from low in the left circle.

Werenski: "I see (Hughes) as I'm turning, and I just throw it over there. I think it threw (McDavid) off by how quickly I got rid of the puck.

“It was meant to be, I guess. I feel like everyone (in the Olympics) could handle that pass, but in that moment ... it’s one of those plays where it’s just kind of ... yeah. It’s a great play by Jack. I knew where I was going with it the second I saw him, no hesitation.

“I’m not sure (if he got everything on the shot). It’s a good question. He doesn’t shoot very hard to begin with. (laughs) I mean, he’ll tell you that. He’s an unbelievable player, one of the best in the world. He picks his corners and all that stuff, but he doesn’t have a missile of a shot.

“Hearing him talk, he tried going against the grain. I don’t know if he tried to go five-hole or low glove or something. He’s probably going to die on the hill that he meant to do exactly what he did, right? I don’t know if we’ll ever truly know the answer.

“I’ve watched it a bunch of times. It’ll never get old. It’s awesome.”

## **Item No. 2: Powering down**

Blue Jackets coach Rick Bowness brought it up on his own after Thursday’s loss in Boston. With little prompting, he went in on the subject again after Saturday’s 4-3 overtime loss to the New York Islanders.

In doing so, he joined former Blue Jackets coaches Dean Evason, Pascal Vincent, Brad Larsen, John Tortorella, Todd Richards, Scott Arniel, Ken Hitchcock ... you get the point.

The Blue Jackets have long wondered why they seem to be on the short end of the whistle year after year, during good seasons and bad, under mild-tempered and ill-tempered coaches, etc. The numbers, frankly, are staggering.

Bowness went in on the topic, and so did Werenski after Saturday’s game, in which the Blue Jackets — in a fast-paced, physical game — had zero power plays. They have a grand total of two power plays in their last three games.

“I can’t explain it,” Bowness said after Saturday’s game. “Honestly, I can’t. I’m seeing things that, OK, I think are penalties and the referees obviously don’t. But that’s two games now, and we’ve had one power play. I can’t explain that.”

On the season, the Blue Jackets are averaging 2.38 power-play opportunities per season, 31st in the NHL.

Werenski fumed after Saturday’s loss, too. The Blue Jackets wanted goaltender interference on the Islanders’ second goal — their challenge was denied — and they thought captain Boone Jenner was tripped by New York’s Adam Pelech during the second period.

Instead, it marked the second time this season, and the 30th time in franchise history (1,954 games) they’ve played a game without a man advantage.

“If you go back to the Chicago game before the break, we had one as well,” Werenski said. “So our last three games, we have two power plays.

“It’s not like we’re being dominated. We have the puck. We’re making plays. If anything, it’s an even game or we’re taking it to teams. We have two power plays to show for in three hockey games. I think that’s unacceptable.”

Since Werenski put his name on it, we decided to look at the numbers during the entirety of his career, which began with the 2016-17 season. Again, staggering.

The Colorado Avalanche have had nearly 600 more power play (2,776) in that span than the Blue Jackets (2,192). The Avs and Florida Panthers (2,723) have had more than 500 more man-advantages than Columbus, while three other clubs — Tampa Bay (2,683), Ottawa (2,643) and Nashville (2,610) — have at least 400 more attempts than Columbus.

There are 14 clubs, almost half the NHL, that have 300 or more power plays than the Blue Jackets since the start of the 2016-17 season. The club just above the Blue Jackets, the Islanders, has had 104 more power plays.

It makes sense that the Avs, especially in recent seasons, would draw more power plays than the Blue Jackets. Colorado, with dominating stars such as MacKinnon and Makar, are an incredibly difficult team to defend within the NHL rulebook.

But ... 600?

### **Item No. 3: Snacks**

- It might be too early to call any game a “must-win.” Pace yourself, people. The Blue Jackets have 25 games to go. But Monday’s game against the New York Rangers falls under the “probably oughta win” header. The Rangers are in last place in the Eastern Conference, just 7-15-5 in Madison Square Garden, and 3-11-2 in their last 16 games. One other good note for Columbus: former Blue Jackets winger Artemi Panarin, who had 11-13-24 and a plus-7 rating in 19 games vs. Columbus since joining New York, was traded to Los Angeles just before the Olympic break.
- The NHL trade deadline is Friday, so Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell has three more games to make the call. After playing the Rangers on Monday, the Blue Jackets fly home to host the Nashville Predators on Tuesday. The Florida Panthers arrive on Thursday. It’s been said all along that Waddell wants to keep this group together, even being willing to carry unrestricted free agents Charlie Coyle, Boone Jenner and Mason Marchment beyond the deadline without contracts in place. But if the Blue Jackets continue to falter in these next three games, Friday could be a tough day for Blue Jackets fans. At last check, Waddell has not extended contract offers to any of his four UFAs, including defenseman Erik Gudbranson.
- It would be an emotional boost — to the dressing room, but also among the fan base — if former Blue Jackets captain Nick Foligno returned to Columbus via a trade with the Chicago Blackhawks. Foligno, 38, is in the final year of his contract with the Chicago, and he hasn’t decided yet if this season, his 19th in the NHL, will be his last. Foligno has always dreamed of playing with his brother, Marcus, but the Minnesota Wild’s salary-cap constraints (Foligno’s cap hit is \$4.5 million) might make it hard for the Wild to make it work. He’d also like to take a run at the Stanley Cup, which is missing from his resume. But

Foligno, who plans to retire with his family in Columbus, should be seen as a possible target for the Blue Jackets if these next three games go well. Waddell is a big believer that a team can't have enough respected veterans, especially during a stretch drive.

- Kent Johnson was a healthy scratch in Saturday's 4-3 overtime loss to the New York Islanders, and it appeared in Sunday's practice that nothing will change on Monday against the Rangers. "(Sean) Monahan's line needs a little bit more offense," Bowness said before Saturday's game. "I had a good meeting with K.J. He has to understand ... listen, I know he scored those goals (24). I was looking at them (via video on Friday) and I said (to Johnson), 'In fairness, in the 12 games I've been here, I haven't seen that. I need to see that.' I showed him a couple of other things he has to improve on. You know what, he's a big part of the future of this team." After putting up 24-33-57 in 68 games last season, Johnson has just 6-12-18 in 56 games.
- Kirill Marchenko's goal in Thursday's 4-2 loss in Boston was his 20th of the season. He's the first player in Blue Jackets history to start his career with four consecutive 20-goal seasons, and he's one of only four players overall to have at least four 20-goal seasons. Rick Nash had eight, Cam Atkinson had six and R.J. Umberger had four. Marchenko, with 268 games played, has scored 95 goals, making it likely that later this season he'll become the franchise's ninth player to score 100 goals. At his current pace, only Rick Nash, who scored his 100th goal in his 237th game, has hit the century mark in few games.
- This week's Blue Jackets trivia question: Werenski's two assists on Saturday extended his points streak to nine games, the longest by a defenseman in franchise history and the sixth-longest overall. Who has the longest point streak in franchise history?
- One name to keep in mind at the trade deadline is Blue Jackets' second-round pick Luca Del Bel Belluz (No. 44 in 2022), who leads AHL Cleveland in goals (15) and points (43) and who appears parked behind the Blue Jackets' strong center depth chart. NHL scouts think Del Bel Belluz has middle-six talent if he can improve his skating. He has never looked out of place in 29 games (3-7-10, plus-1) with Columbus over the past three seasons, including 13 games this season. The Blue Jackets wouldn't move Del Bel Belluz just to move him, though. They like the player. But he could be used as a sweetener in a larger deal, if Waddell ends up buying at the deadline.
- Four of the top 15 local TV market ratings for the United States vs. Canada gold-medal game were Ohio cities. Cleveland, which was tied for seventh, had a 10.6 rating, meaning 10.6 percent of households with TV in the Cleveland market were tuned to to the game, according to NBC. The other Ohio cities: ninth Dayton (10.4), 12th Columbus (9.8), and 15th Cincinnati (9.3).
- Trivia answer: Ryan Johansen had a 13-game point streak from Dec. 18, 2014, to Jan. 17, 2015, totaling 8-8-16 in that span.
- There's more than the NHL trade deadline happening on March 6. The Winter Paralympics hold their opening ceremony on that day in Milan-Cortina, Italy. Former Blue Jackets equipment boss Jamie Healy, who was let go by the club after last season, is working the hockey games for Team USA. Healy is no stranger to international competition. He's worked four IIHF World Championships for the USA as far back as 2014.

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets blow early lead on 3 bad-luck goals, endure tough loss to Islanders

**By Aaron Portzline – February 28, 2026**

Uh oh.

The Columbus Blue Jackets were the NHL's hottest club heading into the Olympic break, crawling their way out of the Eastern Conference cellar to within sniffing distance of a playoff spot.

However, that mojo has gone missing.

The Blue Jackets lost an early 2-0 lead, fell behind after three bad-bounce goals by the New York Islanders in the second period, and lost 4-3 in overtime on Saturday before a standing-room-only crowd of 18,925 in Nationwide Arena.

The Islanders, who are one of the clubs the Blue Jackets are chasing, ended it at 1:47 of OT when New York's Simon Holmstrom got behind Adam Fantilli at three-on-three play and scored past Jackets goaltender Jet Greaves.

The Jackets also lost in Boston on Thursday. It marked the first time the Blue Jackets have lost two straight games since Rick Bowness took over as coach on Jan. 12.

"You have to take advantage of every change you get, and when you don't, lucky bounces like that can lose the game," Fantilli said. "I thought we carried play for 85 percent of the game, and we played in their end as much as we wanted to.

"They had a couple lucky bounces. If it goes the other way, we're not having this conversation, so ..."

Fantilli, Isac Lundeström and Mason Marchment scored the Blue Jackets' goals, while Greaves stopped 22 of 26 shots, including 10 he faced in the third period. He had his shutout streak of 136:39 snapped with the Islanders' first goal in the second period.

The loss was damaging.

The Blue Jackets now sit five points behind the Bruins for the second wild-card spot and seven points behind the Islanders for third place in the Metropolitan Division, with the Washington Capitals just above them in the standings.

"We probably deserved four points and we came away with one point against two teams we're chasing," said Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski, who was honored during a brief pregame ceremony for winning Olympic gold with Team USA last week.

"We have 24 games left now, so it's extremely disappointing, but we have a lot of hockey left, and we're still in it."

In many ways, Saturday's game felt like an exaggerated repeat of Thursday's game, a 4-2 loss in Boston.

The Blue Jackets felt like they dominated the first and third periods against the Bruins, and pointed to the 40-23 shots advantage as proof. They also watched one of Boston's goals sail into the net off their own player (Lundeström) and complained about getting just one power-play opportunity.

The Blue Jackets held a 23-11 shot advantage midway through the second period on Saturday before their puck luck faltered. The Islanders' three goals in regulation were the greasy type that playoff hockey demands.

They pulled to 2-1 when the Islanders' Scott Mayfield backhand lobbed a puck toward the net. It struck either Anders Lee or Greaves, before dropping into the slot for Lee to sweep home at 11:37.

Only 22 seconds later, it was tied.

Islanders center Jean-Gabriel Pageau followed his shot toward Greaves and sandwiched Blue Jackets defenseman Dante Fabbro between him and Greaves in his hungry pursuit of the rebound.

The Blue Jackets challenged the goal — Bowness said they saw Pageau's skate interfere with Greaves — but the NHL didn't buy it.

The third goal was the most ridiculous.

Mayfield started it again, sending in a wrister from the right circle that caromed off Blue Jackets winger Kirill Marchenko, shot toward the net and glanced off Werenski's right leg of skate, dribbled past Greaves.

"I feel for Jet," Marchment said. "Those are some pretty good bounces for them."

The Blue Jackets tied it with only 1:02 remaining in the second period when Fantilli redirected a Werenski shot, but they could muster nothing more in the third.

In OT, Fantilli was caught up ice, allowing Holmstrom to skate past him for a clear shot.

"We're not having this conversation if I don't get beat back to the net in the overtime," Fantilli said. "That can't happen."

The Blue Jackets were once again miffed about their lack of power plays. They had one in Boston, none on Saturday vs. the Islanders. It's only the second time this season they haven't had at least one man advantage.

"I can't explain it," Bowness said. "Honestly, I can't. I'm seeing things that, OK, I think are penalties and the referees obviously don't. But that's two games now, and we've had one power play. I can't explain that."

The Blue Jackets had a memorable Olympic break, if only because Werenski won a gold medal with Team USA. He received a standing ovation from most fans in Nationwide Arena when he was recognized briefly before the national anthem.

Except the Blue Jackets may have been the NHL's only club that would have liked to keep playing. They were winning games, climbing up the standings and watching their confidence soar throughout the lineup.

They are still playing well. Yet the results aren't following like they did when Bowness first stepped behind the bench.

"They know we're playing good hockey," Bowness said. "We dominated for two periods again tonight. They know we're playing good hockey. You've just got to fight through it. We can't change anything.

"We wouldn't be creating chances if we weren't playing well. If we weren't playing well enough, then that's a whole other discussion right now. We played well enough to win both, and we didn't. We got a point. So get ready for the (New York) Rangers (on Monday)."

## The Columbus Dispatch / Blue Jackets coach hopes to spark Kent Johnson

**By Brian Hedger – March 2, 2026**

It's rare that you hear an NHL coach say a player is being scratched because they need to produce more offensively, especially a coach with Rick Bowness' tenure.

Usually, it's a lack of defensive awareness that does it. That's not the case with Kent Johnson, whom Bowness sat as a healthy scratch Feb. 28 when the Jackets lost 4-3 in overtime to the New York Islanders. Johnson's skill would've been handy in 3-on-3 OT, but his ongoing struggle to create time and space for himself during other situations is largely why he sat.

It's also why Johnson might sit March 2 against the New York Rangers at Madison Square Garden to open a back-to-back that concludes March 3 against the Nashville Predators at Nationwide Arena.

"Listen, he's a big part of the future of the team," Bowness said. "This isn't, 'We're going to sit you out for the next month.' This is 'take a look at the game.' Sometimes there's a little more room out there than you realize when you're on the ice, with the pace of the game. 'We're not down on you. We've just got to make some changes.'"

Johnson, who has six goals and 12 assists for 18 points, has seen a drop in production that's striking, given what he did last season. He's gone from resembling a developing version of Vegas Golden Knights star Mitch Marner to a forward who gets erased too often and can't drive play like he did a year ago.

It's baffling.

Despite battling through an early shoulder injury, Johnson put up career-highs last season with 24 goals, 33 assists and 57 points in 68 games. It resembled his rookie year (2022-23), when Johnson contributed a solid 16-24-40 in 79 games.

What he's going through now looks more like his second NHL season, when he produced career lows with 6-10-16 in 42 games and struggled through a slow start that led to an AHL assignment.

Bowness, hired Jan. 12 to replace Dean Evason, needs to see less of that Johnson and more of the guy whose elite skills as a freshman at the University of Michigan enticed the Blue Jackets to select him fifth overall in 2021.

That's the crux of what the veteran coach told Johnson about his decision to skate Danton Heinen at right wing on Sean Monahan's line. Dmitri Voronkov also moved off Monahan's line, heading to the fourth line in a flip-flop with captain Boone Jenner. Johnson's wiry frame and playing style left him without a matching role.

He's a highly skilled forward in the mold of Marner or Patrick Kane, and the Blue Jackets need him to play like it down the stretch. That's his goal.

“I want to be an offensive guy,” Johnson said. “That’s why I was drafted. I know [Bowness] talked about the goal scoring and shooting, and he watched my goals ... I was also drafted to be a playmaker, so I want to be a dual threat and set my linemates up a lot. So, I think it’s good. I should be focused on offense. That’s obviously what I want too.”

## The Columbus Dispatch / Squandered scoring chances keep biting Columbus Blue Jackets

**By Brian Hedger – March 1, 2026**

The most encouraging thing about the Blue Jackets' two-game restart after the NHL's Olympic pause is also the most frustrating.

Despite mostly outplaying teams they're chasing for playoff spots Feb. 26 at the Boston Bruins and Feb. 28 against the New York Islanders, the Jackets lost each game after failing to convert enough scoring chances into goals. They outshot the Bruins 40-23 and lost 4-2, then lost 4-3 in overtime to the Islanders despite leading 2-0 in the second period of their first game back at Nationwide Arena.

Against the Islanders (34-21-5), the Blue Jackets (29-21-8) couldn't make it 3-0 on a series of dominant shifts in the second before allowing three straight goals that were all aided by odd puck bounces.

"We're all over them," Blue Jackets star defenseman Zach Werenski said. "We have a lot of chances, don't score, and they come down and get two fluky ones and it's 2-2 at that point."

It could've been 3-0, if not more, had the Jackets scored while outshooting the Islanders 11-1 during a five-minute barrage preceding Anders Lee's goal that made it 2-1 with 8:23 left in the second. Lee scored after having a backhand shot from teammate Scott Mayfield bounce off his helmet and drop the puck to his feet in front of the Blue Jackets' crease.

Jean-Gabriel Pageau tied it 2-2 on the ensuing shift by following his own shot and tapping the puck to his right skate for a deflection that went into the net while the Islanders' forward contacted goalie Jet Greaves' left pad with the same skate. The Blue Jackets challenged for goaltender interference and lost, giving New York a power play on the resulting delay-of-game penalty.

The Islanders' third goal was even goofier. Mayfield fired a harmless shot that skipped off Blue Jackets forward Kirill Marchenko's stick, hit Werenski in front of the net and deflected past Greaves. It was a double-doink the Blue Jackets could've used earlier in the period.

Instead, the Jackets came up empty until Werenski shot a puck off Adam Fantilli's backside that tied it 3-3 with 1:02 left in the second.

"Guys are going to step up and we're going to score enough goals, but it's moments like that, that can either put you up 3-0, or the next thing you know it's 2-2," Werenski said. "It's kind of a defining moment in a hockey game and it would've been nice to get one more there."

The Blue Jackets have said that or something similar too often.

Last season, while setting a franchise record in goals, they led the NHL in scoring six-plus goals by doing it in a whopping 16 games. This season, not counting a 6-5 shootout win

Dec. 4 against Detroit, they've scored six-plus goals four times, watching shots that went into the net last year be denied by goalies, posts, crossbars, blocks, missed attempts or bad luck.

According to Natural Stat Trick, the Blue Jackets are seventh in the NHL in generating even-strength scoring chances (1,447). They're 15<sup>th</sup> in the league creating scoring chances from high-danger situations most likely to produce goals (590). As for goals at even strength, they're 14<sup>th</sup> in goals scored (149) and 18<sup>th</sup> in high-danger goals (66).

So, they're creating enough scoring chances but not scoring enough on those opportunities. It's been a season-long issue, along with coughing up late leads, but coach Rick Bowness has seemingly corrected the latter since replacing Dean Evason on Jan. 12.

Can he also help a frustrated team put more pucks in the net?

"We had them down 2-0, and we had so many chances there to make it 3-0, and Sorokin just came up big, which was the same thing as in Boston (against goalie Joonas Korpisalo)," Bowness said. "You've just got to fight through these things. It's disappointing, but when you get a chance to make it 3-0, and we had enough chances to do that, that eventually will bite you."

## The Columbus Dispatch / New York Islanders deflate Columbus Blue Jackets in overtime

**By Brian Hedger – February 28, 2026**

In the span of two games after the NHL's 2026 Winter Olympics break, the Blue Jackets have gone from scorching hot on a seven-game winning streak to ice cold after losing twice to teams they're chasing and whom they've largely outplayed.

After falling 4-2 in Boston coming out of the break, the Jackets blew a 2-0 lead in the second period against the New York Islanders and lost 4-3 in overtime Feb. 28 at Nationwide Arena. Simon Holmstrom scored at 1:47 of the 3-on-3 OT to give the Islanders (34-21-5) a win to move seven points ahead of the Blue Jackets (29-21-8) for third place in the Metropolitan Division.

Carrying the puck up the right wing, Holmstrom cut inside Adam Fantilli, slid across the goal mouth and tucked the puck between goalie Jet Greaves' right skate and left post to end it.

"If we score three goals at this time of year, that should be winning hockey games," Fantilli said. "If we're going to score three a game, that's got to be enough to win hockey games. We can't let in four, however they go in, and we're not having this conversation if I don't get beat back to the net in overtime. That can't happen."

Anders Lees, Jean-Gabriel Pageau and Scott Mayfield scored the first three Islanders goals, all in the second period to overcome a 2-0 deficit, and Ilya Sorokin earned the goaltending win with 27 saves. Isac Lundestrom, Mason Marchment and Fantilli scored for the Blue Jackets, who got 22 saves from Greaves and two assists from star defenseman Zach Werenski to push his points streak to nine straight games.

Prior to the game, Werenski received an ovation for helping the United States defeat Canada to win the gold medal in men's hockey at the Milano Ciortina 2026 Winter Olympics in Italy. Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins, who played for Latvia, was also recognized along with Islanders Olympians Bo Horvat (Canada) and Ondrej Palat (Czechia).

Lundestrom put the Jackets up 1-0 just 2:30 into the game when a puck shot by Dante Fabbro deflected off his leg and into the Islanders' net without him even realizing what happened until the goal horn sounded. That was the lone goal of the first period.

Marchment made it 2-0 at 3:58 of the second on his 14th goal of the season, which extended Werenski's point streak to nine straight games with an assist. The Blue Jackets nearly made it 3-0 on back-to-back shifts spent buzzing around New York's zone, but they couldn't beat Sorokin and allowed the Islanders to climb back into the game.

Lee cut it to 2-1 with a goal from the net-front with 8:23 left in the second, Pageau tied it 22 seconds later and the Islanders then took a 3-2 lead on Mayfield's goal with 2:50 left in the period. The go-ahead

goal was scored after Greaves stopped Mayfield's shot with a pad save and sent the puck off Werenski's leg and back into the Blue Jackets' net.

It was a giant shift in momentum that could've led to the Islanders breaking the game open, but Werenski and Fantilli combined for a tying goal that made it 3-3 with 1:02 left. Fantilli won a faceoff at the left circle inside the islanders' zone, Werenski scooped the puck and wheeled to fire a shot that skipped off Fantilli's back side and went into the net for his 15th goal.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets playoff picture**

The overtime loss drops the Blue Jackets seven points behind the Islanders for the third place in the Metropolitan Division, which is one of three guaranteed divisional playoff spots. The Jackets gained a point on the Boston Bruins in the race for the second wild-card spot, the last ticket into the playoffs in the Eastern Conference, thanks to the Philadelphia Flyers defeating Boston on Feb. 28 in regulation.

Columbus stayed one point ahead of Philadelphia with its overtime point but was caught at 66 points by the Ottawa Senators, who defeated the Toronto Maple Leafs. The Blue Jackets also stayed three points behind fourth in the Metro after the Washington Capitals lost to the Montreal Canadiens in regulation.

The East continues to be a log-jam of potential playoff teams, while the Western Conference has a little more separation. If the Blue Jackets had the same point total (66) in the West, they'd be three points up for the second wild card.

## [The Columbus Dispatch / Zach Werenski's Olympic gold: A hero's welcome home](#)

**By Brian Hedger – February 28, 2026**

Zach Werenski didn't get home from Boston until 3 a.m. following the Blue Jackets' 4-2 loss Feb. 26, so he didn't realize the extent of redecoration his yard had undergone.

He saw a few yard signs congratulating him on winning a gold medal at the Milan Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics, ending the country's 46-year Olympic drought in men's hockey, and it put a smile on the star defenseman's face. Waking up the next morning, Werenski saw more than a couple of signs.

His entire yard was decked out by handmade signs, red, white and blue banners, and more.

"It makes you emotional in the sense of how many people support you and care," Werenski said Feb. 28 at the Blue Jackets' morning skate. "It's a lot of people I don't really know personally, but for them to take the time to come out and decorate and write all that stuff, that means a lot for sure."

Werenski will play his first home game Feb. 28 at Nationwide Arena when the Blue Jackets host the New York Islanders, and fans will get a chance to welcome him back. It's sure to be a raucous moment that he won't soon forget, just like celebrating the win with his USA Hockey teammates before rejoining the Blue Jackets and returning home to a patriotic yard.

"This is home for me now," Werenski said. "I've been here for 10 years. This is the place I've grown up, the people I've made friends with, and obviously the national stuff's great, but to come back here and be around the people that helped me get there, the people who've supported me for the past 10 years, I think that means the most. So, coming home to that was pretty special."

### **Columbus Blue Jackets star Zach Werenski recalls golden goal**

Werenski played an integral role in setting up New Jersey Devils star Jack Hughes for the shot in 3-on-3 overtime that gave the U.S. its first men's gold medal since 1980. Werenski's part in it has gone largely overlooked by analysts and national media, but Hughes wouldn't have gotten the puck without Werenski's instincts.

After Hughes got a stick on his backhand pass inside the U.S. zone, tapping the puck to the neutral zone just before Canada's Cale Makar could steal it, Werenski headed up ice to chase it.

"It's a unique play, for sure," Werenski said. "I was pretty committed to joining the rush there when I tried getting it to Jack. It kind of rolled on me originally, and then he makes a great play getting it by (Makar)."

Spotting Canadian center Nathan MacKinnon racing over to it, Werenski had a split-second decision to make. Keep going or pull back?

“At first, I didn’t think I was going to get to it, but at that point it was kind of all-or-nothing, so I just tried to put some pressure on MacKinnon and make him uncomfortable, and I did just that,” Werenski said. “It kind of threw him off a little bit. He kind of hesitated, and the puck came right back to me.”

Dylan Larkin, Werenski’s longtime friend and former University of Michigan teammate, cruised into Canada’s zone right after Werenski bumped MacKinnon out of the way. He could have scooped the puck from Werenski but opted to let it play out.

“Larks makes a great read not grabbing it, because he easily could’ve grabbed that and turned the other way, which would’ve been fine, as well,” Werenski said. “We would’ve had possession, but I saw Jack over there, so I definitely wanted it. So, I made a play to him and the rest is history. It’s one of those things where it’s not a special play, by any means, but it’s a historic play and I’m just happy to be a part of it.”

### **Columbus Blue Jackets' Zach Werenski reflects on gold medal importance**

Werenski saw the puck go into the net before Hughes, whose vision was blocked by goalie Jordan Binnington. Initially unsure on how to react, he threw his stick down, threw off his gloves and joined a mass of U.S. players who had rushed onto the ice.

“If you watch the reaction, I realize very quickly Jack’s not coming for me when he turns, so I kind of beat him to where he’s going,” Werenski said. “But it was one of those things where you can’t really draw it up any better. It was an incredible moment.”

It was also historic, which wasn’t lost on Werenski or his teammates.

“It’s a type of emotion I’ve never felt before,” he said. “I’ve grown up watching the movie ‘Miracle,’ playing on U.S. teams, hearing about how long it’s been since the U.S. had won a gold medal. I’ve heard from former USA players that played for however many years and never accomplished it, so we understood the magnitude, in terms of winning for USA Hockey, but once I saw it go in, you really understand the magnitude for what it means to the country.”

## Spectrum News One / Blue Jackets play first home game since Olympic win

**By Saima Khan – March 1, 2026**

The Columbus Blue Jackets returned to Nationwide Arena to a sellout crowd Saturday night for their first home game in three weeks, following the Olympic break and a gold-medal run for Team USA that included an assist from defenseman Zach Werenski.

Fans said the Olympic performance has shifted the energy around the team.

“I think it’s going to be extremely electric. I think it’s going to be hype in there today for sure,” said Chris Bachus, a Blue Jackets fan attending the game.

Werenski, who helped set up the golden goal that secured the United States men’s national ice hockey team’s victory, said the reception from fans stood out.

“It makes you emotional in a sense of how many people support you and care. A lot of people I don’t really know personally. But for them to come out and take the time to decorate and write notes on stuff, it means a lot for sure,” Werenski said.

He said the Olympic experience was about more than a single play.

“For us, our goal was, inspire the next generation of us hockey players. And I think we did just that, not just with the win. I think with how close our team was, how much we loved representing our country,” Werenski said.

Columbus entered the break still in the playoff picture. Some fans said the Olympic moment has renewed their focus on the rest of the season.

“I’m more excited. I’m paying a lot more attention. We only missed the playoffs last year by two points. So we can get back in,” said Danael Spires, a Blue Jackets fan.

After weeks without home games, the arena was filled again as the team resumed play, with fans hoping the Olympic momentum carries into a postseason push.

## The Athletic / Which NHL top lines have been the best and worst of the 2025-26 season?

By Harman Dayal – March 2, 2026

Nearly every powerhouse NHL team boasts star forwards at the top of its lineup. This has been true for recent Stanley Cup winners like the Florida Panthers, Vegas Golden Knights, Colorado Avalanche and Tampa Bay Lightning.

Of course, there's way more to team-building than having a few elite forwards. This isn't the NBA, where one or two superstars are enough to form a contender; you need formidable depth throughout your lineup.

A dominant top line is one heck of a start, though.

With that in mind, let's analyze which first lines around the NHL are producing and which are underperforming this season.

We'll begin by identifying each team's No. 1 center as a proxy for the first line, then examine the results when that player is on the ice. There will be exceptions for teams whose top center has moved up and down the lineup rather than staying fixed on the first line, or has missed significant time due to injury. In those cases, we chose a winger to represent his team's top-line minutes (eg: Clayton Keller, David Pastrnak, Nikita Kucherov, Travis Konecny, etc).

Here are the proxies we used:

**\*SEE ARTICLE FOR FULL LIST\***

To measure performance, we'll look at the goals for and against differential when that first line is deployed at five-on-five. As an example, it means we're looking at how many goals Edmonton scores and how many it allows with Connor McDavid on the ice at even strength. We're using that as our measure instead of points because points can't account for defense.

Goal differential can be skewed positively or negatively based on shooting and goaltending luck. Sometimes, a team's first line controls play well and generates tons of chances, but is snakebitten finishing-wise and/or doesn't get saves from its goaltender. We'll be sure to point out where that seems to have made an impact.

Here are the numbers so far this season, sorted by the best goal differential rate:

**\*SEE ARTICLE FOR FULL LIST\***

### **Colorado Avalanche**

Colorado's top line is not only the best in the NHL this year, it's lapping the competition. Nathan MacKinnon's line has outscored opponents by a laughable 75-25 margin at five-on-five, making it on

pace for an eye-popping plus-72 goal differential by the end of this season. The gap between the goal differential of the Avs' top line and the next-best first line is equivalent to the gap between second and 14th place.

It only took MacKinnon 55 games to score more five-on-five points than he did during all of last season. His 57 five-on-five points are eight more than the next-highest player in the league, Nikita Kucherov.

Martin Necas, who's on pace for a career-high 99 points, deserves a ton of credit for being a seamless fit on the top line. Necas is an elite puck transporter with game-breaking speed, and when you combine it with MacKinnon's exceptional skating, it makes this the fastest, most dynamic top line in the league. The only question is whether Necas can translate his elite production to the playoffs, where he has historically lagged (35 points in 66 career postseason games). Arturri Lehkonen's two-way intelligence, puck retrieval skills and off-puck work are a nice complement to them.

MacKinnon's line is benefiting from strong goaltending (.943 on-ice save percentage), which explains why they're surrendering a league-best 1.61 goals against per 60, despite their expected goals against rate appearing more middle-of-the-pack.

### **Tampa Bay Lightning**

I don't think anyone is surprised that a team with first-line options like Kucherov, Brayden Point, Jake Guentzel and Brandon Hagel is getting elite results at the top of its lineup. However, it's impressive and surprising that the Lightning have boasted the best top line in the Eastern Conference despite Point's underwhelming, injury-plagued campaign.

Point got off to an uncharacteristically slow start (three goals and eight assists in his first 21 games) and suffered an injury in late November. He returned in the second week of December and was finally scoring at his usual clip, but got hurt again right before the Olympic break. Overall, he's missed 18 games.

Kucherov and co. have found a way to keep rolling, though. Kucherov is the best east-west playmaker in the sport. Since Dec. 1, he leads the NHL in five-on-five points.

Interestingly, Kucherov's results haven't seen any drop-off away from Point: He's driven 61 percent of expected goals and has a plus-14 goal differential in 429 five-on-five minutes without his usual center. This does shine a light on how well Hagel, who barely played on the first line last year, performed when he had to elevate to the top line on Kucherov's opposite wing (he's back on the second line now).

### **Montreal Canadiens**

Nick Suzuki and Cole Caufield have been one of the most entertaining first-line duos in the NHL. They've been dynamic and threatening offensively, but their strong defensive results — a 1.88 goals against per 60 rate and a top-10 expected goals against rate — have taken them to the next level this season. Suzuki is having a Selke-caliber campaign, and Caufield, on pace for 46 goals, is one of the best snipers in the sport.

The other big story with the Canadiens' top line is that they've bumped Juraj Slafkovský down to drive the second line alongside Ivan Demidov and Oliver Kapanen. This has been a game-changer — Slafkovský looks like a completely different player now that he has more opportunities to carry the puck and make plays, rather than in his previous role with Suzuki and Caufield, where he had fewer puck touches and functioned more as a puck retriever.

This new-look second line has been dynamite, and was particularly important in picking up the slack in December when the Suzuki line momentarily cooled off.

### **Utah Mammoth**

When the Mammoth are healthy, they have two relatively balanced top-six lines in a 1A/1B look — one led by Clayton Keller and Nick Schmaltz, and the other driven by Logan Cooley and Dylan Guenther. However, when Cooley hurt his leg in early December, it made Keller's unit the undisputed top line. There was extra pressure on them to deliver because the Mammoth were 10th in the West by points percentage at the time Cooley was injured, and they were struggling to get bottom-six offense.

Keller's line has answered the call. They outscored teams by a dominant 29-11 margin at five-on-five when Cooley was out, while also controlling an imposing 57 percent of scoring chances. That, coupled with Karel Vejmelka's heater in goal, helped Utah charge back into a playoff spot during Cooley's absence.

It will be really interesting to see what this success means for Nick Schmaltz's future with the club. Schmaltz, on pace for a career-high 76 points, has been immensely valuable to this line's gaudy results, but he's a pending unrestricted free agent and his price is surely going up by the day.

### **Vegas Golden Knights**

This is the third year in a row that Vegas' top line has ranked top-5 in the NHL. Jack Eichel has long been the engine for this line with his silky-smooth puck control, sublime passing and elite defensive game.

The only surprise is that Mitch Marner has mostly played on Vegas' second line when many expected he'd instead be a full-time lock next to Eichel, the way he used to be with Auston Matthews. Marner and Eichel were given an early look together, but while they performed decently, they didn't quite catch fire (perhaps because both of them are pass-first players). Instead, we've seen Mark Stone and even youngster Braeden Bowman, when Stone was injured, play on Eichel's right wing.

Ivan Barbashev is the unsung hero of this line as a staple on the left wing. Barbashev's heavy frame, ability to win puck battles and highly underrated playmaking down low make him the perfect complementary winger for Eichel. He's scored the fourth-most five-on-five points of any winger in the NHL, and is on pace for 57 points despite not receiving any first-unit power-play time.

### **San Jose Sharks**

What more can you even say about Macklin Celebrini?

The 19-year-old is a legitimate Hart Trophy contender, not just because he's on pace for 117 points but because of how little help he's had around him. Connor McDavid has Evan Bouchard and Leon Draisaitl (on the power play and at times at even strength), MacKinnon has Cale Makar and Necas, but Celebrini has to work around arguably the weakest blue line in the NHL, and while Will Smith is improving rapidly (41 points in 45 games), he isn't an elite running mate yet, as evidenced by the staggering 42-point gap between Celebrini and Smith, who's the second-highest-scoring Shark.

### **Washington Capitals**

Arguably no team's top line gets more favorable deployment than Washington's, as Dylan Strome and Alex Ovechkin lead all NHL players in offensive-zone starts. For this to work, the Caps lean on the Tom Wilson-led second line to absorb the toughest defensive matchups and also ask defensive specialist Nic Dowd to soak up tons of defensive-zone starts.

To their credit, Strome/Ovechkin's line is making the most of this catered opportunity, as they're one of only eight top lines scoring at least 3.5 goals per 60, and offensively their expected goal generation rate ranks sixth-best in the league.

There are defensive flaws with this line, as their 3.12 expected goals against per 60 rate ranks 31st in the NHL. But overall, they're creating more offensively than they're giving up, which makes it an acceptable trade-off. You might be surprised that Washington's first line ranks so high in goal differential when the team is outside a playoff spot. That's largely because both special teams units have sunk them — the Capitals' five-on-five goal share is third-best in the league, behind only Colorado and Tampa Bay.

### **Dallas Stars**

The Stars basically have two top lines: one predominantly driven by Mikko Rantanen and Wyatt Johnston, and the other led by Roope Hintz and Jason Robertson. The Hintz/Robertson combo has been electric (57.7 percent of expected goals and outscored opponents 30-14), but the Johnston/Rantanen pair is more commonly referred to as the team's "first line."

Rantanen and Johnston haven't carried territorial play as assertively, but it hasn't really cost them because of their elite finishing. Rantanen, in particular, has been ruthlessly efficient at converting chances into goals — he doesn't need many looks to break a game open.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets**

Last year, the Blue Jackets' top-line trio of Kirill Marchenko, Sean Monahan and Dmitri Voronkov was unstoppable. They not only controlled a dominant 71 percent share of goals during their shifts together, their underlying process was equally imposing as they drove nearly 62 percent of high-danger chances.

However, Monahan's slow start — he scored only six points in his first 13 games, despite being over a point per game last season — led to Adam Fantilli getting bumped up to center the first line with Marchenko.

The Blue Jackets' top line has driven above-average two-way numbers and is generating scoring chances at a prolific rate (eighth-best expected goals per 60). Tactically, I find it interesting that the first line has

spent significantly less time self-matched with the Zach Werenski pair than last year — Marchenko is on pace to play roughly 100 fewer five-on-five minutes alongside Werenski than last year. It shows that Columbus is trying to spread Werenski's Norris-caliber effect throughout the lineup rather than solely maximizing his time with the top line.

### **Carolina Hurricanes**

Sebastian Aho's line is performing just as you'd expect. They have a decisive advantage over opponents in puck possession and offensive zone time, as evidenced by their sparkling analytics, and their bottom-line results in goal differential are strong but not quite elite.

The big story for Carolina's first line this year is Andrei Svechnikov's resurgence. Svechnikov, who failed to crack the 50-point mark last year, looks the healthiest he's been since his ACL surgery in 2023 and is on pace for a career-high 71 points. Meanwhile Seth Jarvis, who plays on the right wing, continues to thrive as a star two-way forward.

### **Philadelphia Flyers**

The Flyers are fortunate to rank this high — their expected goal differential ranks bottom-five among top lines in the NHL, which means they struggle to control play and will likely see their results regress down the stretch.

With that said, Philly's first line still deserves some credit for producing at a respectable rate, considering the team's glaring weakness at first-line center. Travis Konecny has bounced back after a slow start (only five goals and 17 points in his first 23 games) and is now on pace for a career high in five-on-five points.

Trevor Zegras mostly played on the second line to begin the year, but lately, he's played more frequently on Konecny's opposite wing. The top line's underlying numbers are significantly better with Zegras on it (Konecny's xG rate is 52.8 percent with Zegras, compared to 40.9 percent away from Zegras) even though the actual goal swing hasn't been as dramatic.

### **Nashville Predators**

Luke Evangelista's monster breakout has been a game-changer for the Predators' top line.

The results speak for themselves: When he and Ryan O'Reilly have played together, Nashville's top line is clicking at an elite level, both in terms of dominating possession and scoring chances, and also massively outscoring opponents. On the other hand, O'Reilly's results driving the top line without Evangelista fall off a cliff, with that version of the top line decisively losing its matchups.

### **New York Islanders**

The Islanders' first line may not boast a true superstar, but Bo Horvat's risen to the occasion as a capable 1C — he's on pace to hit a career high in five-on-five goals. Impressively, he's done this without having high-end linemates for most of the season. Early in Horvat's Islanders tenure, the club would shift Mathew Barzal to the wing in an attempt to load up the first line. But with Brock Nelson gone as the 2C,

Barzal has mostly been asked to drive his own line this season (even though they've been reunited lately), and this balanced top-six approach has yielded strong results.

The top line's results do come with an asterisk, though — their goal differential is boosted by Ilya Sorokin's superb play, which has papered over some of the line's mediocre play-driving numbers. New York's top line is surrendering chances against at a very high rate (seventh-worst in the NHL), but its actual goals against rate ranks in the top 10.

### **Boston Bruins**

David Pastrnak's superstar impact has carried Boston's first line to the league's 14th-best goal differential despite the club's lack of a true top-flight center. It's been remarkable to watch Pastrnak, who initially made his name as an elite sniper, evolve his game into becoming the kind of game-breaking playmaker that can elevate his linemates and singlehandedly drive a line now that he has less help than the Perfection Line days when he was rolling with Patrice Bergeron and Brad Marchand.

Since the start of last season, Pastrnak has recorded the third-most five-on-five assists in the league, ahead of elite playmakers such as McDavid and Marnier. The way he can hold onto pucks, attract the opposition's attention and set others up is breathtaking. It's a huge reason why Morgan Geekie has become a top-flight scorer on this line.

Pavel Zacha was Pastrnak's most frequent center last season, but this year, we've seen much more of Elias Lindholm.

### **Winnipeg Jets**

Winnipeg's top forwards are still firing on all cylinders — it's unfortunately the club's nonexistent secondary scoring that's putting them at risk of missing the playoffs. Mark Scheifele has scored the third-most five-on-five points in the league. His line has produced 3.81 goals for per 60, which is the fourth-best rate among NHL first lines.

The top line's overall goal differential is weighed down a bit by some defensive struggles — they're bleeding chances and goals against at a very high rate — but you can't blame Scheifele and Kyle Connor for that because they're forced to take more risks than usual, knowing they're the only reliable source of offense on the team.

### **Minnesota Wild**

I was a bit surprised that Minnesota's top line has been average rather than truly high-end, but it makes sense when you dig deeper.

Kirill Kaprizov's running mate, Mats Zuccarello, missed 20 games because of injury. With Zuccarello out for a large chunk and Minnesota icing weak 1C options such as Ryan Hartman or promising rookie Danila Yurov — remember, Joel Eriksson Ek anchors the second line despite being the club's best center — it makes sense that the top line has been closer to the middle of the pack rather than the top tier.

Kaprizov has played well at even strength, but his power-play dominance (he's already scored 13 power-play goals compared to four during all of last year) is what's truly catapulted his overall point totals.

### **Ottawa Senators**

Tim Stützle's taken another mini-step offensively, as he's on pace for nearly 90 points. That's driven the Senators' top line to a 3.51 goals per 60 rate, which ranks seventh-best among all first lines. The top line's overall goal differential is being dragged down because they're surrendering goals against at the seventh-worst rate, but some of that is likely just a result of Ottawa's poor goaltending this season.

Line construction-wise, it's interesting to note that Stützle hasn't spent nearly as much time with Claude Giroux or Brady Tkachuk (Tkachuk also missed 20 games with injury) as he did last year, with Drake Batherson instead emerging as his most common winger in 2025-26.

### **Los Angeles Kings**

L.A.'s top line desperately needed Artemi Panarin's game-breaking skill. Yes, the goal differential for the Kings' first line looks fine on paper, but it's largely because they're surrendering goals against at the fourth-lowest rate of all top lines. And those defensive results have at least partially been inflated by strong goaltending, as they rank closer to the middle of the pack in expected goals against rate.

Offensively, L.A.'s first line has been one of the lowest-scoring in the league. Panarin should be a game-changer on this front, even though the early five-on-five returns haven't been anything to write home about.

### **Seattle Kraken**

It's no secret the Kraken lack game-breaking, star forward talent, which limits the offensive ceiling for their first line. All things considered, though, Seattle's top line has held its own considering those offensive limitations. Matty Beniers' responsible two-way style fits the Kraken's overall identity as a plucky, low-event squad that makes it very difficult for opponents to manufacture offense. Beniers' line has surrendered just 2.00 goals per 60, helping drive a positive goal differential despite struggling to score.

### **Toronto Maple Leafs**

In the last three years we've done this exercise, Toronto's top line was consistently elite, ranking 11th, 8th, and 1st. There's been a steep drop-off this season, though, which reflects a few factors.

The obvious change is Marner's departure. With Marner gone, Max Domi has spent a lot more time on Auston Matthews' wing. Going from Marner to Domi is about as extreme a fall-off as you can expect defensively, so it's no surprise the top line's ability to control play and prevent chances against has fallen off a cliff.

Matthews hasn't looked like himself for most of the season as well. He's looked better since the holiday break (12 goals and 28 points in his last 23 games), but he's producing less than a point per game for the season as a whole, which hasn't happened since his rookie year.

On the left wing, Matthew Knies has played through injury and hasn't been as impactful as a play-driver, which has meant more time playing further down the lineup rather than being a full-time fixture on the Matthews line like last year.

### **Pittsburgh Penguins**

It's remarkable that Sidney Crosby is still producing at over a point per game at 38. When you look below the hood, though, you do notice Crosby's five-on-five play is closer to being great than as elite like we've come to expect. Crosby's line is scoring 2.91 goals per 60, which is respectable but a noticeable drop-off from the 3.44 goals per 60 it recorded in 2024-25 and the 3.71 goals per 60 in 2023-24.

It hasn't helped, of course, that Rickard Rakell missed a decent chunk of the year with an injury.

Make no mistake, Pittsburgh's aging stars are obviously the main drivers of the team's unexpectedly competitive season. It's just that they've been dominating more on the power play rather than even strength.

### **Edmonton Oilers**

Connor McDavid's line hasn't been throttling teams on the scoreboard as decisively as we'd expect — he's only earned 51.8 percent of goals, his lowest mark since the pandemic. There are a few factors to explain this, starting with some bad luck with finishing. Edmonton's top line is generating 3.75 expected goals per 60, which leads the NHL, but its actual scoring rate is much lower at 3.39 per 60. We should expect their finishing efficiency to improve.

Zach Hyman's injury also played a significant role. Together, McDavid and Hyman have a plus-12 goal differential and outrageously strong underlying numbers. However, McDavid has also played 451 minutes without Hyman, and in that sample he has a minus-four goal differential and a more pedestrian 52 percent expected goal share.

Lastly, there's plenty of room for this line to improve defensively, as they're allowing scoring chances and goals at high rates.

### **Detroit Red Wings**

Detroit's top line hasn't been as productive as you might think based on the team's surge up the standings. They've been excellent together on the team's ninth-ranked power-play, but at five-on-five, Dylan Larkin's line has been sluggish over the last three months.

Since Dec. 4, Larkin's line has a minus-8 goal differential and has driven only 44.3 percent of expected goals. He only has four five-on-five points in that 33-game stretch. Thankfully, the team's second line with Alex DeBrincat, Andrew Copp and Patrick Kane is crushing its competition, which, in conjunction with the club's stingy defensive results, has helped Detroit keep winning games.

### **Buffalo Sabres**

I was surprised that Buffalo's first line didn't rank higher, considering Tage Thompson is tied for the most five-on-five goals this season. Unfortunately, they've given a decent chunk of that value back with

their leaky defensive play — they've surrendered 3.05 goals against per 60, the eighth-worst mark among first lines.

It's extremely important to note, though, that Thompson's line has been red-hot since early December, which coincides with the Sabres' season turning around. Since Dec. 9, Thompson's line has earned nearly 56 percent of actual goals, including a significant reduction in how frequently they're surrendering goals against defensively.

### **St. Louis Blues**

It's been a difficult year for the Blues all around, and the top of their forward lineup is no different. St. Louis' first line has struggled to generate offense, as its expected and actual goals-for per 60 rate rank 25th and 24th, respectively, among the league's first lines.

Thomas scored 61 even-strength points last year, but in 2025-26, he's down to just 24 in 43 games. A big part of this line's mediocrity can be attributed to Pavel Buchnevich's decline. Buchnevich was a near-point-per-game winger with an elite two-way play-driving profile a few years ago, but he's a fraction of that player now.

### **Chicago Blackhawks**

Connor Bedard has taken a massive step; he's only two points back of matching last year's five-on-five point production in only 47 games. His line is scoring 3.19 goals per 60, which is a huge bump compared to 2.28 goals per 60 last season. And impressively, he's doing it with linemates that wouldn't be first-line wingers on most teams, as cap dump André Burakovsky and youngster Ryan Greene have most frequently ridden shotgun with him.

Chicago's top line is struggling defensively, ranking 32nd in both expected and actual goals-against rate. However, the defensive results for Bedard's line will surely improve in future years once he's surrounded by a capable blue line and upgraded linemates, not to mention his individual age-related growth.

### **Anaheim Ducks**

Leo Carlsson is in the middle of a monster offensive breakout, but his five-on-five results have been quite streaky and volatile. During the first seven weeks of the season, his line was on fire. They were driving nearly 55 percent of scoring chances, outscoring opponents 21-14, and individually he was racking up 2.52 points per 60. Carlsson was a game-breaker off the rush and excelled under Joel Quenneville's new run-and-gun playing style.

Opposing teams have adjusted, however. Since Dec. 1, Carlsson's line has scored only 10 goals while allowing 19; his expected goals-against rate is the worst among Ducks forwards, and his five-on-five point production rate has been cut in half, down to 1.23 points per 60.

This is obviously still a wildly encouraging year for Carlsson overall. We shouldn't be surprised that a 21-year-old playing as a No. 1 center has been a bit inconsistent and streaky. What version of Carlsson's line

(which has often featured Chris Kreider this season) the Ducks get down the stretch could swing whether or not the team clinches a playoff spot.

### **Florida Panthers**

Florida's top line ranked fifth and first for goal differential when we did this exercise over the last two years. This year, they've suffered a catastrophic drop-off, which says all you need to know about how indispensable Aleksander Barkov is.

Barkov's line over the last two years was by far the best in the league at denying goals against. Anton Lundell is a good player, but with him stepping into the 1C role after Barkov's injury, the top line's defensive performance has slipped significantly. Offensively, they've only mustered 2.49 goals for per 60, which ranks 25th as well.

### **New York Rangers**

The Rangers haven't really had a consistent top line this season. J.T. Miller and Vincent Trocheck have had injury spells, and Artemi Panarin is now on the west coast. Mika Zibanejad and Panarin were probably the team's most consistent first-line duo this year, but in any case, there hasn't been a whole lot to write home about for New York's top forwards.

New York's top line has produced a measly 2.12 goals per 60, which is the third-worst mark among NHL first lines. This is a slow, aging top six that lacks dynamic, game-breaking talent.

### **Calgary Flames**

The Flames are a spirited, hard-working team, but their lack of star forwards has been evident all year. Calgary's first line is scoring goals at the fourth-lowest rate in the league.

Nazem Kadri is still a great player, but at 35 he simply can't be counted on to singlehandedly carry a first line. He's had a lackluster crop of wingers as well, with Joel Farabee, Yegor Sharangovich, Jonathan Huberdeau and Connor Zary all logging at least 150 five-on-five minutes on his line.

### **Vancouver Canucks**

Elias Pettersson's two-way play has been sturdier than his line's alarming goals-against rate (which is likely worsened by Vancouver's post-Quinn Hughes blue line and Adam Foote's system) suggests. Defensively, he's deserved better results.

Offensively, though, there's no denying he's no longer the game-breaker that once scored 102 points. Yes, Pettersson's been hindered by a disappointing group of wingers (Evander Kane, Jake DeBrusk, Brock Boeser) on his line, which has almost certainly deflated his point production. However, it's also clear his skating lacks the separation it used to have, and his individual shot rate remains a major red flag.

Overall, it isn't surprising the Canucks' first line is one of the worst in the NHL because it consists of mediocre middle-six wingers and a center that's still good, but a low-end 1C/elite 2C rather than a premium No. 1 center.

## **New Jersey Devils**

With the elite forward talent they boast, I don't think anybody would have guessed that the Devils' first line would be struggling this mightily.

Jack Hughes' injury had a devastating impact as he was out of commission for 21 games. Nico Hischier had to fill in as the 1C at times and has had a down year. He also hasn't been fully healthy — he played through an illness that caused him to lose 10 pounds — which is a contributing factor. Jesper Bratt, who was coming off an 88-point campaign, has had a disappointing year and hasn't been able to step up, either.

There's also an element of brutal finishing luck involved: New Jersey's top line has the third-best expected goal differential among all first lines, but they've scored on just 5.8 percent of their shots and have a PDO of just 93.5. So yes, the Devils' top players unquestionably need to play better (and hopefully stay healthier), but they're also the unluckiest top line in the league.