



## **Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips January 24, 2025**

### **Columbus Blue Jackets**

- PAGE 02: Columbus Dispatch: Carolina Hurricanes storm past Columbus Blue Jackets with five-goal second period
- PAGE 03: Columbus Dispatch: Fantilli's first NHL hat trick tops Columbus Blue Jackets' key win in Toronto: 4 takeaways
- PAGE 05: The Athletic: Blue Jackets' back-to-back struggles continue with lopsided loss to Hurricanes
- PAGE 07: BlueJackets.com: Winning Thoughts: Fantilli, Del Bel Belluz spark a hometown victory
- PAGE 10: BlueJackets.com: PREVIEW: Blue Jackets get right back at it in Carolina
- PAGE 13: BlueJackets.com: Hurricanes rally past Blue Jackets
- PAGE 15: The Hockey News: Adam Fantilli Records First Career Hat Trick; Elvis Merzjkins Plays Lights Out As Columbus "Leaves" Toronto With Two Points
- PAGE 17: The Hockey News: Olivier & Reaves Have "Rock 'Em Sock 'Em" Tilt
- PAGE 18: The Hockey News: Columbus Blue Jackets (53 pts) vs. Carolina Hurricanes (61 pts) Game Preview
- PAGE 20: The Hockey News: Merzjkins & Matthews Caught In Hilarious Moment Resulting To Penalties
- PAGE 21: The Hockey Writers: Jarvis' 4-Point Night for Hurricanes Leads to 7-4 Win Over Blue Jackets
- PAGE 23: 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery: Game Day #49: Blue Jackets Set To Complete Four-Game Road Trip, Face Hurricanes Thursday Night
- PAGE 25: 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery: CAR 7, CBJ 4: Five Second-Period Goals Too Much For Blue Jackets To Overcome In Loss To Hurricanes
- PAGE 27: 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery: Three Things: Fantilli, Del Bel Belluz Have Big Night In Front Of Friends & Family, Elvis Spectacular In 5-1 CBJ Win Over Toronto

### **Cleveland Monsters/Prospects**

#### **NHL/ Websites**

- PAGE 29: The Athletic: Breaking: NHL has begun preparation for Gary Bettman retirement in 'couple years'
- PAGE 31: ESPN: NHL Bubble WATCH: Projecting playoff hopes for all 32 teams
- PAGE 43: Sportsnet.ca: NHL Power Rankings: The minute-munchers each team relies on
- PAGE 46: Sportsnet.ca: 32 Thoughts: How record revenues in NHL could impact salary cap, next CBA

## Columbus Dispatch / Carolina Hurricanes storm past Columbus Blue Jackets with five-goal second period

**By Brian Hedger – January 24, 2025**

The Blue Jackets won the first period impressively, but the Carolina Hurricanes dominated the second and third for a 7-4 victory Thursday night in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Paced by Seth Jarvis's four points on two goals and two assists, the Hurricanes (30-16-3) overcame a 2-0 deficit by outscoring the Blue Jackets 7-2 over the final two periods at Lenovo Center.

Carolina netted five goals in the second in a span of 8:46 to seize control of a game the Blue Jackets (23-19-7) had commanded for 20 minutes. Jackson Blake, Jordan Martinook, Eric Robinson (a former Blue Jackets forward), Sebastian Aho and Jarvis scored, frazzling Blue Jackets goalie Daniil Tarasov, who had been fantastic to start the game.

Jesper Kotkaniemi scored an insurance goal in the third for the Hurricanes, pushing it to 6-4 before Jarvis sealed it late with an empty-net goal for the final margin.

Kent Johnson and James van Riemsdyk each had two-point games with a goal and assist to lead the Blue Jackets, whose other goals were scored by Dmitri Voronkov and Kirill Marchenko. The loss was their third in a four-game road trip that concluded with a tough back-to-back set.

Despite a short turnaround after winning 5-1 Wednesday in Toronto, the Blue Jackets surprised the fully rested Hurricanes to take a 2-0 lead in the first period. Johnson opened the scoring at 7:08 of the first with his 14th goal of the season, which Marchenko followed 2:40 later for a two-goal lead on his 19th goal.

The Jackets outshot the Hurricanes 13-9 in the first, while also getting more possession time inside the offensive zone than they'd had the previous three games. The second period was a different story.

Carolina outshot Columbus by a whopping 23-3 margin and stormed back with Jarvis netting the period's first goal to cap a power play at 2:48. Robinson tied it, 2-2, at 7:11. Blake scored 47 seconds later to make it 3-2. Aho made it 4-2 at 8:33, and Martinook tacked on the 'Canes' fifth goal of the period for a 5-2 cushion 3:01 later.

The Blue Jackets pushed back goals by Van Riemsdyk and Voronkov 1:21 apart, both scored with tipped shots while screening goalie Frederik Andersen, but that's where the comeback ended.

## Columbus Dispatch / Fantilli's first NHL hat trick tops Columbus Blue Jackets' key win in Toronto: 4 takeaways

By Brian Hedger – January 24, 2025

The Blue Jackets couldn't afford a third straight loss.

After dropping the first two games of a road trip to the New York teams on Saturday and Monday, they headed into a challenging set of back-to-back games to close the trip Wednesday at the Toronto Maple Leafs and Thursday against the Carolina Hurricanes.

Fighting to keep pace in a tight midseason chase for playoff positioning in the Eastern Conference, the upstart Blue Jackets couldn't afford a loss to the Atlantic Division's top team. So, they won 5-1 at Scotiabank Arena to move back into the first of two wild-card spots despite being outshot 30-19 in the game.

Elvis Merzlikins made 29 saves, Adam Fantilli netted his first NHL hat trick and rookie center Luca Del Bel Belluz added a goal and assist to key an impressive performance against a team that's loaded with offensive weapons.

Here are four takeaways:

Elvis Merzlikins capped an odd day with a brilliant goaltending performance for Columbus Blue Jackets

Wednesday will be a day that Merzlikins should remember a long time, and not just for getting his fourth straight win over the Maple Leafs and third straight in Toronto.

He'll also remember being injured on a shot during the morning skate that forced him to leave early, deciding to play through it rather than sitting out and then holding the high-powered Maple Leafs to just one goal on 30 shots.

Merzlikins will also remember picking up an odd penalty for holding a stick when he snatched a stick right out of Maple Leafs captain Auston Matthews' hands in the first period and started using it instead of his own stick. Matthews, befuddled by having the opposing goalie swipe his stick, briefly picked up Merzlikins' stick and appeared to look for a pass before dropping it and skating away.

Officials saw both things and called Merzlikins and Matthews for minor penalties – the former for holding Matthews' stick and the latter for using a goaltender's stick as a skater, which is against the rules. Merzlikins helped the Blue Jackets get through the ensuing 4-on-4 with some impressive stops that he followed with similar brilliance the rest of the game.

Since dropping four of five outings from Dec. 3-15, Merzlikins is 8-2-1 in his past 11 starts with a 2.78 goals-against average and .903 save percentage.

Adam Fantilli gets first NHL hat trick, shaving cream 'pie' and lasting memory in front of many family/friends

Fantilli's father, Giuliano, is a lifelong Boston Bruins fan, so he also grew up a Bruins fan while growing up in the Toronto-area town of Nobleton, Ontario. Fantilli's youth was spent cheering against the Maple Leafs, who are one of the Bruins' longest tenured "original six" rivals.

Now, he's all Blue Jackets and hasn't lost the zeal for playing his best against the Maple Leafs. That's particularly true in Toronto, where Fantilli still has a lot of family and friends. According to FanDuel Sports Network, Fantilli netted his first NHL hat trick in front of 75 friends and family who attended. He

also received his second career shaving cream 'pie' in the face from forward Mathieu Olivier during a postgame TV interview.

Fantilli's first goal was also his first short-handed tally in the NHL, putting the Blue Jackets up, 1-0, late in the first period. His second goal made it 3-0 in the second despite the Maple Leafs finishing that period with double the shots in the game (24-12). Fantilli clinched the hat trick by making it 5-1 with 7:58 left in the third, scoring into an empty net after Maple Leafs coach Craig Berube surprisingly pulled goalie Dennis Hildeby early for an extra skater during 4-on-4.

Fantilli's parents celebrated with loud cheers as soon as the puck hit the back of the net, and his mom, Julia, fittingly tossed a hat tossed to the ice.

Columbus Blue Jackets rookie Luca Del Bel Belluz has memorable first visit to Toronto as NHL player Not to be outdone in Toronto homecomings, Luca Del Bel Belluz had his own memorable night in his first career game against the Maple Leafs.

Unlike Fantilli, Del Bel Belluz was a Maple Leafs fan growing up in the nearby town of Woodbridge, Ontario. He cheered for James van Riemsdyk as a Maple Leafs power forward, so centering a line Wednesday with the veteran as his left winger created a special memory before the game even started.

Assisting on Van Riemsdyk's goal to make it 2-0 in the second and scoring one for himself to make it 4-0 in the third was the proverbial icing on the cake for Del Bel Belluz – who, according to FanDuel Sports Network, had 50 family and friends in the arena.

Columbus Blue Jackets' Mathieu Olivier squared off in heavyweight tilt against Toronto Maple Leafs' Ryan Reaves

Early in the game, two heavyweight enforcers did their thing off a faceoff. Blue Jackets forward Mathieu Olivier and Maple Leafs forward Ryan Reaves removed their gloves, sized each other up, went for their initial jersey grabs and started throwing haymakers at each other in a fight reminiscent of scraps from years ago.

Each combatant landed and absorbed at least a couple hard right hands to their face before they opted to end it with the building buzzing over their bout. The two spoke across the glass in the penalty box, and it appeared to be lighthearted banter.

The fight was Reaves' first of the season. As one of the NHL's most fearsome fighters, he's had a difficult time finding takers. Olivier hasn't had quite the same issue, yet, but his success against some of the league's toughest enforcers has gotten his name out this season. Olivier has also earned a bigger role in the Blue Jackets' lineup this season, skating at right wing on the third line. He played 13:48 that including 1:26 killing penalties and picked up a short-handed assist on Fantilli's first goal.

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets' back-to-back struggles continue with lopsided loss to Hurricanes

**By Aaron Portzline – January 24, 2025**

It's one of Dean Evason's favorite topics because it's one of his least favorite excuses.

Any question about the difficulty of playing back-to-back games — especially the dreaded second game after a long previous night of travel — causes the eyes of the Columbus Blue Jackets coach to sparkle and a smile to form while he waits to answer.

Evason thinks it's nothing more than a convenient excuse. He's made that clear several times this season, including on Thursday before the Blue Jackets played the always-difficult Carolina Hurricanes in Lenovo Center, less than 24 hours after an emotional win in Toronto.

If only the numbers agreed.

The Blue Jackets ran out of gas — physically, emotionally or both — in the second period Thursday, allowing the Hurricanes to score five consecutive goals on their way to a 7-4 win before 18,700. Carolina teed up 24 shots on goal in the second, the most the Blue Jackets have allowed in a period all season.

That drops the Blue Jackets to 0-7 this season in the second half of a back-to-back. Columbus has been outscored 36-12 in those games, losing by a margin of more than two goals in six of the seven games.

"We got away from our structure a little bit (in the second period), cheated it a little bit," Evason told reporters in Raleigh. "First shift, they get an odd-man rush. We didn't stay within ourselves. They obviously had a push, but we needed to be firmer with our structure throughout that second period."

Later Evason was more to the point: "We were reeling a little bit."

Kent Johnson, Kirill Marchenko, James van Riemsdyk and Dmitri Voronkov had goals for the Blue Jackets, while Adam Fantilli and Jack Johnson each had two assists. Goaltender Daniil Tarasov finished with 36 saves, but was hung out to dry from the start.

The Jackets led 2-0 after the first period on goals by Johnson and Marchenko, and they seemed poised to build on the win over the Maple Leafs just one night earlier.

But the lead evaporated quickly in the second, with Carolina scoring five goals in a span of 8:46. Until Ivan Provorov's shot on goal at 9:19 of the second period, the Hurricanes had taken 16 unanswered shots on goal on Tarasov. At one point, they scored goals on three consecutive shots.

The Jackets stopped the bleeding with two net-front deflections — first by van Riemsdyk, then by Voronkov — to give them a sliver of hope, but it was clear their tanks were empty.

"We weren't playing our game or executing or breaking out," Johnson said. "We were hemmed in a couple of times."

The third period was mostly without drama. The Hurricanes bounced on a Dante Fabbro turnover right in front of Tarasov to make it 6-4. Seth Jarvis, who had a 4-point night, scored his second goal of the game on an empty-netter with 1:52 remaining to cap the scoring.

Evason doesn't want to hear it, but the Blue Jackets' travel schedule, in this instance, was a major challenge. The Blue Jackets are not an exception here. Every NHL team endures difficult travel schedules, including at least a few rough patches that set up as a problem.

The Blue Jackets landed in Raleigh around 1:45 a.m. By the time they cleared customs and were bused to their hotel, it was 2:45 a.m. They skipped a morning skate, instead meeting at the team hotel, and then gathering at the rink in the afternoon a few hours before puck drop.

When asked about the challenge before his club — Toronto and Carolina are among the Eastern Conference's top teams, especially at home — he acknowledged the coaching staff addressed the Blue Jackets' struggles with the players before Thursday's game.

He also gave his typical response to the question.

"We talked this morning to the group, and we asked 'Z' (Zach Werenski) how many minutes he played (Wednesday versus Toronto)," Evason said. "He said he wasn't sure, and we told him it was under 30 minutes. Now, if he played the most on our team, and say he spends 30 minutes on the ice playing hockey, and he does it again tonight, that's not that terrible of a job, right? It's not that taxing.

"I don't care what time we got in. I don't care how long the flight was. You play the same way. If you can't play less than 30 minutes and then skate 30 minutes (again), then you shouldn't be a professional athlete."

His ultimate message: "Embrace it. Have some fun with it. Use it as a challenge. And let's get after it."

The Blue Jackets, who have five more back-to-backs on the schedule, will get another crack at it before this month is finished. Next week, they play in Las Vegas on Thursday and Utah on Friday, another tough assignment.

## [BlueJackets.com / Winning Thoughts: Fantilli, Del Bel Belluz spark a hometown victory](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – January 24, 2025

After CBJ wins, we'll give three takeaways about what stood out or what we'll remember from the Blue Jackets victory.

### **RECAP: Blue Jackets 5, Maple Leafs 1**

#### **1. Adam Fantilli had a night he'll never forget.**

Your first NHL goal is special, to the point that every player who has ever scored one can remember the minute details years later.

Your first NHL hat trick ranks right up there as well, and that's if you're lucky enough to even get one. In 24 seasons of Blue Jackets hockey, 319 skaters have worn the union blue sweater and only 50 hat tricks had been scored by 30 different players going into tonight.

They don't happen very often, but it sure seems like tonight's was a harbinger of many more to come for Fantilli. His first career hat trick came in a variety of ways, as he used a tremendous individual effort and elite shot for a shorthanded goal to start the scoring in the first, cleaned up around the net for a tally that made it 3-0 in the second, and displayed the poise to wait out a defender and score into an empty net to set the final score in the third.

That it came in his hometown of Toronto and with an immeasurable number of friends and family members in attendance only added to the accomplishment, and his mother, Julia, was the first to throw her hat on the ice after his third goal.

Fantilli was more than happy postgame as he posed with three pucks to celebrate, but he also kept an eye on his development when asked if this performance would give him more confidence going forward.

"I don't know," he said. "I'm just trying to keep chipping away at becoming a better player every day, and I'm really grateful to the players that I've been able to watch up until this point and how much they've been able to help me to become the centerman that I want to be. Obviously I'm not there yet, and I'm gonna keep working toward that, but I'm really grateful to the people that helped me this season and last."

Fantilli's impact on the ice has consistently grown as the season has gone on, and he's now up to a career-high 14 goals. In the seven-plus games since he's taken over as the team's No. 1 center following Sean Monahan's injury, Fantilli has six goals and three assists.

Perhaps more importantly, he's more than held his own against top opposition, including on this night when he helped limit Toronto star Auston Matthews.

"Clearly, as you've seen tonight, he has an offensive game that is fantastic, but you have to keep the puck out of the net as well," head coach Dean Evason said. "If he's not committed to do that, he doesn't get the looks he's getting. He was sound tonight, played against one of the best players in the world the majority of the night, and did a really good job not only offensively but defensively as well."

Fantilli (20 years old) and Luca Del Bel Belluz (21) were the top two CBJ centers against the Maple Leafs with Cole Sillinger out with an upper-body injury, and they've known each other since they were kids (more on that in a moment). With that in mind, Del Bel Belluz certainly wasn't surprised to see his longtime friend take over in their hometown.

“Since we were kids, he’s always one been of the best players on the ice, and tonight, he was the best player on the ice,” Del Bel Belluz said. “It’s definitely special to see.”

## **2. Meanwhile, Del Bel Belluz also had a night he’ll never forget.**

Fantilli and Del Bel Belluz essentially grew up together in Toronto’s northern suburbs, skating with one another as they grew up in the city’s intense hockey scene, going to school together for a couple of years and even playing AAA hockey on a notable Toronto Red Wings U-16 team in 2018-19.

So as excited as Del Bel Belluz was for Fantilli’s night, Fantilli felt the exact same way for his longtime friend. It was Del Bel Belluz’s first NHL game in the arena he grew up watching hockey in, and he had a goal and an assist to celebrate in front of 50-plus friends and family.

“We’ve been buddies for a long time,” Fantilli said. “I was really happy for him to be able to get those two points tonight and score his goal here. He had a ton of people here as well. He’s a great kid, a great friend, a great teammate, so it’s really great to see him perform like that tonight.”

Del Bel Belluz has already put together an impressive resume at the top level, becoming the first CBJ player ever to score in his first two NHL games and just the second to have a three-game point streak to open his career. But game No. 8 will forever be memorable because it came against the team he cheered for as a kid.

“It’s special,” he said. “Obviously with a lot of people in the crowd supporting me, it’s good to give them (a goal), at least something they remember from this game. It was just super fun.”

There was a particular irony in his first point of the night, the assist, as one of the players he grew up idolizing while watching the Leafs was James van Riemsdyk; his cross-crease feed to the longtime NHLer to slam home gave the Blue Jackets a 2-0 lead in the second period.

Del Bel Belluz then made it 4-1 himself early in the third period. He outraced the Maple Leafs down the ice to prevent an icing at the end of a long shift, then battled a handful of Toronto players behind the net with Mikael Pyyhtia. That forecheck paid off, as Del Bel Belluz ended up with the puck on his stick and stuffed it past goalie Dennis Hildeby at the post.

“Honestly, I don’t even really know (how I scored),” he said. “I think (van Riemsdyk) dumped the puck in. I think I was one-on-three with their players, not really thinking I was going to come out with that one. Somehow the puck ended up on my stick and I was just fortunate enough to sneak it by the goalie there.”

Each time Del Bel Belluz’s name was announced in Scotiabank Arena for his points, a noticeable cheer from his friends and family could be heard, and Del Bel Belluz certainly noticed.

“I did hear some cheers,” he said. “It’s good to hear even though there’s obviously a lot more Leafs fans. They made sure that they were heard.”

## **3. Mathieu Olivier helped set the tone with his fight in the first period.**

Olivier skated onto the ice 1:31 into the game for his first shift of the night and wasn’t expecting to see his gloves on the ice a few moments later, but he wasted no time accepting the early challenge from Toronto enforcer Ryan Reaves.

The two heavyweights dropped the gloves at the faceoff and went at it in what might have been the NHL’s fight of the year, a nearly minute-long scrap that included plenty of swings of both players’ massive right hands. Olivier got Reaves off balance early, but the Maple Leafs forward regained his feet before the two swung at each other in a fight that made it seem like 1995, not 2025.



Finally, the two agreed it was time to end it, giving each other their mutual respect before heading to their respective penalty boxes. The CBJ bench was particularly vociferous after the scrap, and to a man, the Blue Jackets said that battle was a harbinger of things to come.

“It was a great fight, wasn’t it?” Evason said. “Yeah, the guys responded, and Ollie has done that all year.”

“Ollie is a guy that never says no, and he definitely knows when to go and give your bench a lot of juice,” Fantilli said. “It fired us up a lot. I give him a lot of kudos. It’s not something I could ever do. He’s a special person for that, so it’s great to see.”

“I know I was fired up after the fight,” Del Bel Belluz added. “It was right in front of the bench. It was awesome – like nothing I’d ever seen. It definitely gave me extra juice. The bench was pretty loud. Just a great fight.”

## [BlueJackets.com / PREVIEW: Blue Jackets get right back at it in Carolina](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – January 24, 2025

### **BLUE JACKETS (23-18-7) at HURRICANES (26-19-3), 7 PM, LENOVO CENTER**

Are the Blue Jackets for real?

It's a topic people around hockey are starting to debate, and the spotlight on Columbus shined particularly bright when the team arrived in the center of the hockey universe for last night's game against Toronto.

One of the best ways to get noticed in the NHL is to take the show to the epicenter of the sport, and the hockey media descended on the Blue Jackets before and after Wednesday's game.

They certainly didn't disappoint. Facing a huge January battle against a Maple Leafs team that entered leading the NHL in home wins, the Blue Jackets raced their way to a 5-1 win that featured standout performances from Toronto kids Adam Fantilli (first career hat trick) and Luca Del Bel Belluz (a goal and an assist).

When writers say the story writes itself, they dream of nights like that, but for the Blue Jackets the focus was much more on getting back in the win column. In the midst of a tricky four-game road swing that continues tonight in Carolina, Columbus needed points after starting the trip with a scoreless shootout loss at the Rangers and a rough setback against the Islanders.

"We didn't like the result the last couple of games," said James van Riemsdyk, who also scored a goal. "Obviously, I thought our game at MSG was better than the last one, so we really wanted to make sure we responded the right way, getting back to being predictable with each other, being connected as a five-man unit and just stick together as a team. I thought we did all of that tonight."

It was a game that showed the Blue Jackets at their best, as they played as a team, defended staunchly and got contributions from everyone on the ice. Mathieu Olivier set the tone early with an inspirational fight against Toronto heavyweight Ryan Reaves, Elvis Merzlikins held down the fort with 28 saves, and 10 different players got on the scoresheet.

And perhaps the biggest sign of growth came in the way the Blue Jackets held a 3-0 lead after two periods. A year ago, Columbus saw a 5-0 third-period lead in Toronto evaporate before winning in overtime; this time around, they not just protected but extended their advantage.

"There's just a belief in our locker room," Fantilli said. "I think we've been playing as a solid unit, sticking to our systems and just trusting each other a lot, trusting each other's ability and trusting that we're all going to be playing within the system. I think if we do that, we can be a great team and we can beat anybody on any given night."

Head coach Dean Evason was also pleased with the performance postgame, noting that "everybody played their part" in the victory. The Blue Jackets have been happy with their increased focus on defensive structure in recent games, but in New York, they didn't get an offensive payoff with just a single goal scored in the two games against the Rangers and Islanders.

On this night, they defended staunchly against one of the league's top offensive teams and then got the reward on the other end, turning victorious battles in the offensive zone into goals.

"(It's) not cheating the game," Evason said. "We don't talk about opening things up and trying to score goals. We talk about keeping it out of our net and allowing that to translate into offense. It did tonight."

## **Know The Foe: Carolina Hurricanes**

**Head coach:** Rod Brind'Amour (Seventh season)

**Team stats:** Goals per game: 3.29 (6th) | Scoring defense: 2.73 (6th) | PP: 21.0 percent (17th) | PK: 85.2 percent (2nd)

**The narrative:** The Canes just keep on Canesing, as the team's high-pressure style continues to lead to turnovers, a bushel of shots on goal and a lot of wins. Fresh off six consecutive playoff appearances, Carolina went through major changes in the offseason – including the departure of GM Don Waddell to Columbus – but just keeps on rolling. The Canes are again firmly in a playoff spot and chasing Washington for a fourth Metro title in five seasons, but the Stanley Cup is the one thing that has eluded the group to this point.

**Team leaders:** Martin Necas is having his best season yet, as the 26-year-old native of Czechia leads the Hurricanes with 54 points on 16 goals and 38 assists, though he has just two goals in the past 22 games. One of the most consistent players in the NHL, Sebastian Aho continues to produce with 14 goals among his 46 points, while 22-year-old wing Seth Jarvis has a 16-18-34 line. Jack Roslovic adds a team-best 17 tallies and Andrei Svechnikov 15, and veteran Shayne Gostisbehere leads the defense with 28 points.

With goalie Frederik Andersen out for much of the season with a knee injury, Carolina has used five different goalies this season. Pyotr Kochetkov has stepped into the lead role, starting 30 games and going 18-9-2 with a 2.47 GAA and .904 save percentage, while Andersen (4-1-0, 1.78, .929) returned to the lineup and got the win Monday vs. the Blackhawks.

**What's new:** Carolina underwent not just a shakeup in the front office but also the lineup this offseason, as the team said goodbye to Jake Guentzel, Teuvo Teravainen, Stefan Noesen and Brady Skjei and welcomed in former Blue Jackets Roslovic and Eric Robinson as well as Gostisbehere, William Carrier and Sean Walker. After a hot 16-5-1 start, Carolina went through a 10-11-2 skid but has won three in a row over Vegas, Chicago and Dallas. The power play is struggling, though, scoring just once one time in 31 chances over the last 11 games.

**Trending:** This is the final contest of the four-game series this year, with Columbus winning both games in Nationwide Arena and Carolina taking the lone matchup in BBQ country, a 4-1 victory Dec. 16.

**Former CBJ:** Robinson is ninth on the team in scoring this season, posting a 10-12-22 line, while Roslovic's goal-scoring touch has been on full display. Goalie Spencer Martin is back in the minors but has played in nine games.

**Scratches:** Cole Sillinger (upper body injury), Kevin Labanc, Denton Mateychuk (illness)

**Injured reserve, Injured/Non-Roster list:** Sean Monahan (upper body), Yegor Chinakhov (upper body), Erik Gudbranson (upper body), Boone Jenner (upper body)

**Roster Report:** The Blue Jackets will again skate 11 forwards and seven defensemen as Sillinger will not play. The only change comes in net, where Tarasov will get the second half of the back-to-back.

## **The Numbers Game**

Columbus has allowed just 10 goals in the last seven games, and CBJ goalies have a .947 save percentage in that span. ... Zach Werenski has a 12-30-42 line in the last 33 games and has 20 points (4-16-20) in the past 14. His average ice time of 26:46 leads all NHL players, and he's tied for first among league defensemen in goals (15) and points (52) with Colorado's Cale Makar on the season. ... Marchenko has an 8-16-24 line in the last 19 games and 35 points in the last 29 (12-23-35). He leads the NHL with a plus-28 rating. ... Dmitri Voronkov has 20 points (10-10-20) in the last 18 games. ... Adam Fantilli has a 7-4-11

line in the last 10 games, while James van Riemsdyk has notched a 5-4-9 line in that span. ... Columbus is tied for first in the NHL with 110 goals at 5-on-5, and their 3.29 goals per game are tied for sixth in the league. In addition, Columbus has scored at least six goals 10 times in just 47 games this season, one shy of a franchise record (2018-19). ... Columbus has scored on 17 of 54 power plays (31.5 percent) in the last 22 games and is now 10th in the NHL for the season in power-play percentage at 23.1. ... Blue Jackets defensemen have 30 goals this season, most in the NHL. ... Cole Sillinger is three points from 100 in his NHL career.

### **This Day in CBJ History**

**Jan. 23, 2021:** In one of the most notable trades in Blue Jackets history, the team acquires All-Star wing Patrik Laine and Columbus native Jack Roslovic from the Winnipeg Jets in exchange for center Pierre-Luc Dubois and a 2022 third-round pick.

## [BlueJackets.com / Hurricanes rally past Blue Jackets](#)

By Kurt Dusterberg – January 24, 2025

RALEIGH, N.C. -- The Carolina Hurricanes scored five straight goals in the second period, and Frederik Andersen made 18 saves for his 300th NHL win, 7-4 against the Columbus Blue Jackets at Lenovo Center on Thursday.

Seth Jarvis had two goals and two assists, Sebastian Aho had a goal and two assists, and Andersen made 18 saves for the Hurricanes (30-16-3), who have won four in a row.

Andersen, who played his 500th game on Monday, is 300-128-52, including 74-28-4 with Carolina.

"It makes a long season a little bit more memorable," Andersen said. "A game like tonight was a little bit back and forth. You wish you could play some things a little different. (But) you don't win games in this League without goal support."

"We struggled for a while, and it always felt like it was coming but it never really did," Jarvis said. "We just take every day as a new day. We don't look forward or look back on anything. I think that's what's been working the last couple games."

James van Riemsdyk and Kent Johnson each had a goal and an assist for the Blue Jackets (23-19-7), who defeated the Toronto Maple Leafs 5-1 on Wednesday. Daniil Tarasov made 36 saves.

"We got away from our structure a little bit," Columbus coach Dean Evason said. "We didn't stay within ourselves, and they obviously had a push.

"Our thought process was to frustrate them, not give them those odd-man rushes and not allow them to get behind us. We gave them a little crack, and they got through it."

Columbus took a 1-0 lead at 7:08 of the first period. After the Blue Jackets forced a turnover, Luca Del Bel Belluz fed a pass to Johnson, who scored five-hole from the left faceoff circle.

Kirill Marchenko made it 2-0 at 9:48 when he took a cross-ice backhand pass from Adam Fantilli and roofed a shot over Andersen's glove.

Carolina cut the lead to 2-1 with a power-play goal at 2:48 of the second period. Aho passed from the left circle to Jarvis for a back-door tap in.

The Hurricanes tied it 2-2 at 7:11. Andersen rimmed the puck around the boards to the neutral zone, where Jarvis gathered the puck at the red line and hit Eric Robinson driving the net for a redirect under the blocker.

"(Columbus) likes to pressure the defense a lot, so you try to bypass them and break out a little easier," Andersen said. "I thought that went pretty well tonight."

Carolina took a 3-2 lead at 7:58 on a sharp-angle wrist shot by Jackson Blake that handcuffed Tarasov.

Moments later, Blake knocked down a clearing attempt and passed to Aho, who scored with a quick snap shot for a 4-2 lead at 8:33.

"They kind of played to their strengths, get on their transition, get on the forecheck," van Riemsdyk said. "Some of those plays, maybe (it was) a little bit of (our) execution."

Jordan Martinook scored off a saucer pass from Jarvis on a 2-on-1 for a 5-2 lead at 11:34.

“He’s growing still as a player,” Hurricanes coach Rod Brind’Amour said. “Those kind of players, as they grow, they’re thinking the game two or three steps ahead. That’s where you’re seeing growth in his game, both offensively and defensively.”

Columbus then scored two goals on net-front deflections. Johnson’s shot through traffic went into the net off van Riemsdyk to make it 5-3 at 13:21, then Zach Werenski’s shot deflected off Dmitri Voronkov to cut Carolina’s advantage to 5-4 at 14:43.

“It was kind of weird,” Jarvis said. “You score five, you let (in) two. All of a sudden, you’re only up one. So there’s a range of emotions, but I think we did a good job staying level-headed, knowing we played a good game and just a couple lapses led to the two goals.”

Jesper Kotkaniemi scored into an open net off a pass from Martin Necas for a 6-4 lead at 11:12 of the third. Kotkaniemi has four goals in the past three games after scoring one in the previous 16.

“It’s good to get a couple goals,” Kotkaniemi said. “It was a little tougher stretch there for a while. I’m just a big believer in working hard and thinking it’s going to pay off at some point.”

Jarvis added an empty-net goal at 18:08 for the 7-4 final.

**NOTES:** Andersen is the second-fastest in League history to 300 NHL wins behind Tampa Bay Lightning goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy (490). Vasilevskiy achieved the record in a 4-1 win against the Winnipeg Jets on Nov. 14, 2024. ... The Hurricanes have won seven straight at home against the Blue Jackets. ... Carolina finishes the season series 2-0-2 against Columbus.

## The Hockey News / Adam Fantilli Records First Career Hat Trick; Elvis Merzljikins Plays Lights Out As Columbus "Leaves" Toronto With Two Points

By Jason Newland – January 24, 2025

Adam Fantilli(12-SHG, 13, 14), James van Riemsdyk(9), and Luca Del Bel Belluz(2) scored the goals for Columbus as the CBJ dominated the Leafs on the score sheet. Elvis Merzljikins played extremely well in the win as well, stopping 29 Toronto shots. The only goal he surrendered was against Jacket Killer Auston Matthews with 10 minutes left in the game.

This game started with a bang as Mathieu Olivier and Ryan Reaves would have a heavy-weight fight 1:32 into the game. It got both teams going early and got the rowdy crowd involved too. Elvis Merzljikins was getting shelled the entire first period and had everyone thinking it was only a matter of time before the Leafs broke through and scored on Elvis. And then hometown boy Adam Fantilli happened.

In front of approximately 75 friends and family, Fantilli opened the scoring in the first when he beat Dennis Hildeby to make it 1-0. Fantilli would go on to score another goal in the second that made the score 3-0. In the third, with Hildeby pulled for the extra attacker with eight minutes left, Fantilli was fed by Kirill Marchenko who then beat a sprawling Mitch Marner to score his first career hat trick. Not only was it near his hometown, but it was in front of his parents. His mother got to throw a hat on the ice to celebrate her son's achievement.

Luca Del Bel Belluz also scored a goal on the night. LDBB is from nearby Woodbridge, Ontario, and had about 50 people in the building supporting him.

With the win on Wednesday night, the Jackets are back in the first wild card spot with 53 points. They also improved their road record to 7-13-4.

Dean Evason said after the game, "Everyone did their part tonight."

### **Player Stats**

- Adam Fantilli scored his 12th, 13th, and 14th goals of the season for his first career hat trick. He's the 4th youngest player in Columbus to score a hat trick.
- James van Riemsdyk scored his 9th goal of the season.
- Luca Del Bel Belluz scored his 2nd goal of the year.
- Ivan Provorov collected his 17th assist.
- Mathieu Olivier got his 8th assist.
- Luca Del Bel Belluz tallied his 3rd assist.
- Kent Johnson got his 15th assist.
- Dmitri Voronkov recorded his 15th assist.
- Zach Werenski tallied his 37th assist.
- Dante Fabbro collected his 8th assist.
- Kirill Marchenko got his 33rd assist.
- Elvis Merzljikins made 29 saves in the win.

**Team Stats**

- The shorthanded goal by Adam Fantilli was the team's 6th of the season.
- Columbus wasn't awarded a power play in this game.
- The Jackets stopped all three Leaf power plays on the night.

**What's Next** - The Blue Jackets travel to Carolina to play the Hurricanes tonight in Raleigh.



## The Hockey News / Olivier & Reaves Have "Rock 'Em Sock 'Em" Tilt

**By Spencer Lazary – January 24, 2025**

Less than two minutes into the Columbus Blue Jackets vs. Toronto Maple Leafs game last night.

Two of the league's toughest fighters, Mathieu Olivier and Ryan Reaves, dropped the gloves.

The fight was an old-school tilt that caught the internet by storm. There were a lot of toe-to-toe punches, and helmets went flying. At one point, Reaves slipped and ate four to five punches before getting back to his feet.

The fight lasted around 45 seconds before both players were tired and the linesmen stepped in.

The fight energized the crowd like it was an early 2000s battle. It was nothing short of amazing to watch!

**What's Next** - The Blue Jackets travel to Carolina to play the Hurricanes tonight in Raleigh.

## The Hockey News / Columbus Blue Jackets (53 pts) vs. Carolina Hurricanes (61 pts) Game Preview

By Jason Newland – January 24, 2025

The Jackets visit Lenovo Center for the second and final time this season as the two teams will finish off a four-game season series on Thursday.

Head Coach Dean Evason will try to get his team to win three of four games against the Canes on the season. This will be his 300th career game as a head coach in the NHL, and he has a career NHL coaching record of 170-95-34.

The Hurricanes come into this game winners of three straight and six of their last 10. The Blue Jackets beat the Maple Leafs badly last night, but are coming in on a back-to-back on the road, which is never easy in this league.

The Jackets have been outscored 11-10 on the season by the Canes, but Columbus is 2-1 against Carolina thanks to a pair of shootout wins. Now that we're talking about a playoff race, the Jackets can ill afford to give a point to Carolina. Although tonight will be an uphill battle for the road-weary Jackets, they must try to salvage a point themselves in this tight wild card race.

It's no secret that the Carolina Hurricanes are a wagon, but the CBJ are no slouch themselves and can win this game. Like last night's "Team win," they're going to have to do that again tonight.

ADVERTISING

### **Series History vs. The Hurricanes**

- Columbus is 13-15-3 on the road and 29-29-5 in all meetings against Carolina.
- The home team has won 9 of the last 11 in the series, including five straight.

### **Who To Watch For The Hurricanes**

- Martin Nečas leads the team with 38 assists and 54 points.
- Jack Roslovic leads the team with 17 goals.
- Frederik Andersen is 4-1 with a .929 SV%.
- Pyotr Kochetkov is 18-9 with a .904 SV%.

### **CBJ Player Notes vs. The Hurricanes**

- Kirill Marchenko has 10 points in 9 games vs. the Hurricanes.
- Zach Werenski has 15 points in 30 games.
- Ivan Provorov has 13 points in 32 games against Carolina.

### **Injuries**

- **Boone Jenner** (shoulder) is on Injured Reserve on Oct. 7; (48 Games)
- **Erik Gudbranson** (upper body) is on Injured Reserve on Oct. 16; (45 Games)
- **Yegor Chinakhov** (upper body) is on Injured Reserve (27 Games)
- **Sean Monahan** (upper body); is on Injured Reserve retroactive to Dec. 7 (7 Games)

- **Cole Sillinger** (upper body) missed Wednesday's game (1 Game)

**TOTAL MAN GAMES LOST: 199**

**How to Watch & Listen:** Tonight's game will be on FanDuel Sports Network. Steve Mears will be on the play-by-play. The radio broadcast will be on 97.1 The Fan with Bob McElligott behind the mic doing the play-by-play.

## The Hockey News / Merzlikins & Matthews Caught In Hilarious Moment Resulting To Penalties

**By Spencer Lazary – January 24, 2025**

Last night, one of the most confusing but hilarious moments happened between Columbus Blue Jackets' Elvis Merzlikins and Toronto Maple Leafs' Auston Matthews.

Seven minutes into the first period, Merzlikins and Matthews both lost their sticks at the same time, which resulted in both players picking up the wrong stick.

Matthews picked up the goalie stick and took a few strides before realizing that he had the wrong stick. After he threw it on the ice, the refs blew the whistle and called a penalty.

At first, only Matthews was penalized for using an illegal stick. However, after the refs discussed the play, they eventually called penalties on both players.

It may have been one of the most confusing, but also one of the most hilarious moments of the season.

**What's Next** - The Blue Jackets travel to Carolina to play the Hurricanes tonight in Raleigh.

## The Hockey Writers / Jarvis' 4-Point Night for Hurricanes Leads to 7-4 Win Over Blue Jackets

By Zach Martin – January 24, 2025

What a night to be a hockey fan of the Carolina Hurricanes and the Columbus Blue Jackets. Going into the game on Thursday night (Jan. 23), the Blue Jackets will finish the month of January playing six of their seven games on the road. On the flip side, the Hurricanes just played their third game in four days. Talk about a long stretch of hockey for both sides. This matchup was the final of four games between the two sides as Columbus led the season series 2-1. The Hurricanes were looking to even the series, and did they ever. When the final horn sounded, the Hurricanes dropped seven goals in a 7-4 win over the visitors from Ohio.

### **Game Recap**

Despite what the score indicated, the Hurricanes were down 2-0 before 10 minutes into the game as Kent Johnson and Kirill Marchenko scored two goals in a span of 2:40 in the first period. It felt like the game on Monday for the Hurricanes when they were down early to the Chicago Blackhawks. After the two goals, Frederik Andersen was dialed in and stopped Columbus from adding on. The first 20 minutes seemed mainly on the side of the visitors. However, that changed in the second period.

The second period could only be described as an onslaught of goals from both sides. They scored a combined *seven* goals in the game's middle frame. However, it mainly Carolina took most of the control over a span of 12 minutes. They went on a five-goal barrage that saw Seth Jarvis, Eric Robinson, Jackson Blake, Sebastian Aho, and Jordan Martinook turn the game from a 2-0 deficit to a 5-2 Hurricanes lead. Jarvis' power-play goal snapped a 0-for-30 run the team was on and sparked a storm of points from the home side. Daniil Tarasov from the Blue Jackets was under siege as the Hurricanes scored five unanswered goals before James van Riemsdyk and Dmitri Varankov stopped the bleeding.

Carolina Hurricanes Goalie Frederik Andersen makes a glove save of the puck during the third period of the National Hockey League Eastern Conference First Round Game 3 between the Carolina Hurricanes and the New York Islanders (Photo by Gregory Fisher/Icon Sportswire via Getty Images)

In the second period alone, Jarvis and Aho had three points each as the middle period ended with a 5-4 Hurricanes lead after 40 minutes. Talk about a whirlwind of emotions and trying to keep up with all the scoring. The third period was more Carolina as they added two more goals in the final 20 minutes of the game. Jesperi Kotkaniemi scored his fourth goal, which is now a three-game goal streak. His 10th of the season was a huge one to give them some breathing room.

As the game was winding down and the net empty for the Blue Jackets, Jarvis added his second goal of the game, and fourth point of the night, to make a 7-4 game putting it well out of reach. It ended with the Hurricanes winning their 30th game of the season.

The four points were the first-ever such game for Jarvis whose two goals put him at 18 on the season. Furthermore, that gives him the team lead after passing Jack Roslovic. Also, the win gave Andersen his 300th career NHL win. Aho ended the night with three points followed by Jordan Staal, Blake, and Martin Necas with two points each. It was a padding the stats night for the Hurricanes who are now 30-16-3 on the season with 63 points in 49 games.

### **We Move On**

The Hurricanes are back at it on Saturday, Jan. 25 as they head up to the island to take on the New York Islanders (19-20-7) as they look for their fifth straight win. The game is set to start at 7 p.m. Eastern. Regarding the Blue Jackets, they will be back home on Saturday, Jan. 25 to host the Los Angeles Kings (26-14-5) for their last home game of January. That game is also set for a 7 p.m. Eastern puck drop.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Game Day #49: Blue Jackets Set To Complete Four-Game Road Trip, Face Hurricanes Thursday Night

By Ed Francis – January 24, 2025

The first half of what was arguably their toughest back-to-back of the season resulted in two points for the Columbus Blue Jackets, as they dominated the Maple Leafs in Toronto, 5-1.

The second half comes Thursday night, when the Blue Jackets head to Carolina to conclude their season series with the Hurricanes and was also the second game of a back-to-back.

Columbus has won two of the first three this season between the teams, with both wins coming at home in a shootout. The other game in Carolina was a 4-1 victory for the Hurricanes.

The Blue Jackets sit at 53 points in the first wild card spot as of Thursday morning and while winning both games of the back-to-back is something few would have expected, they have the chance to do that tonight.

**There's also this:** with a win in regulation, they would sit just five points of Carolina for third in the Metro division — with two games in hand. A top three finish has a remote chance of happening, but the mere fact that the statement is true in late January is a testament to how competitive the Blue Jackets have been this season.

### **Here's what else to know as the Blue Jackets and Hurricanes go to battle in Raleigh:**

- **RE: CANES**

Like the Leafs did before Wednesday's game, the Hurricanes will play Columbus having won three straight. Two of those wins have come against the Golden Knights and Stars, two of the elite teams in the Western Conference. ... Carolina is 7-3-1 in January, but it's no thanks to their power play. They are just 1 of 31 this month when up a man. ... Frederik Andersen gets the start in this one. He has missed a majority of the season with an injury but returned Monday and allowed three goals (on 25 shots) to the Chicago Blackhawks, a game that Carolina needed overtime to win.

- **TARASOV BETWEEN THE PIPES**

One night after his stellar performance against the Maple Leafs, Elvis Merzlikins gets a well-deserved night off. That means Daniil Tarasov is in net for the Blue Jackets. Tarasov was great Saturday night against the New York Rangers, getting credited with his first career shutout despite Columbus' 1-0 shootout loss. In his two starts last week, Tarasov stopped 49 of 51 shots and went 1-0-1.

- **TOP LINE D**

The Blue Jackets top defensive pairing of Zach Werenski and Dante Fabbro have played exceptionally well since being joined together in November after Fabbro came over from the Nashville Predators on waivers. But what about the defensive ability of the Blue Jackets top forward line? In Wednesday's win, the trio of Dmitri Voronkov, Adam Fantilli, and Kirill Marchenko skated together for over 12 minutes in 5-on-5 play, much of it against the Maple Leafs' "Matthews Line". They allowed just six shot attempts, none of which registered as a shot on goal, in that time frame. Even with Sean Monahan out for several more weeks with a wrist injury, the Blue Jackets are continuing to prove that they have a legitimate first line — on both sides of the puck.

- **LINEUPS & PROJECTIONS**

Why change what's working? The forwards and defensive pairings remain the same as they did for last night's victory.



## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / CAR 7, CBJ 4: Five Second-Period Goals Too Much For Blue Jackets To Overcome In Loss To Hurricanes

By Ed Francis – January 24, 2025

It was good, until it wasn't — and then it got interesting again, until it didn't.

The Columbus Blue Jackets went from up two to down three in the second period of Thursday night's 7-4 loss to the Carolina Hurricanes.

Kent Johnson and Kirill Marchenko each scored in the first period, one that the Blue Jackets won handily. But for as well as they played in the opening twenty, it all went away in a span of just over ten minutes in the middle frame.

Carolina would score five times — four of which came in just 4:23 — before the Blue Jackets would answer with two of their own later to make it a game heading into the final period.

But the 5-2 deficit was just too much for Columbus to overcome.

With the game at 5-4 Carolina through two periods, the Hurricanes would get their sixth goal of the night just over halfway through the third period to essentially put the game out of reach before an empty-netter in the final two minutes would officially end it.

"We didn't stay within ourselves, and they obviously had a push and we needed to be a little firmer with our structure throughout the whole second period," said head coach Dean Evason.

**Here's how the loss came to be in Raleigh:**

### **1st Period:**

**(7:08 — CBJ Goal):** Carolina wins a faceoff in the neutral zone but the puck never makes it beyond center ice before the Blue Jackets make it 1-0. James van Riemsdyk disrupts the Hurricanes clearing attempt and chops the puck towards Luca Del Bel Belluz. Two Hurricane skaters close in on him, leaving Johnson free to skate up through the Carolina zone without anyone between him and Canes goalie Frederik Andersen. Luca sees it and dishes to KJ, who goes five-hole on Andersen to get the scoring going for Columbus.

**(9:48 — CBJ Goal):** Marchenko gets his 19th of the season after yet another good play for the Blue Jackets between and around the neutral zone. This time, Adam Fantilli gets the puck near the blue line and takes a quick peek to see Marchenko to his left. and hits him with a nice backhand pass. With both Carolina defenders focused on Fantilli, Marchenko skates right into the low slot and beats Andersen to make it 2-0 Columbus, a score that would hold through the end of the period.

### **2nd Period**

**(2:48, 7:11, 7:58, 8:33, 11:34 — CAR Goals):** A two-goal lead turns into a three-goal deficit in less than a half-period of action. Damon Severson goes off for a tripping call that didn't appear to be much of a trip, if one at all. In either event, Seth Jarvis gets his 17th goal of the season and that starts a sequence of five Carolina goals in a span of less than 10 minutes. Former Blue Jacket Eric Robinson ties it at the 7:11 mark of the period and the Hurricanes take the lead less than a minute later on a goal that took a review to confirm. Just 35 seconds after that, the Canes score again to make it 4-2 and they'd add another three minutes after that to complete a half-period nightmare for the Blue Jackets.

**(13:21 — CBJ Goal):** The Canes clearing attempt from their own zone is interrupted by good stick work from Jack Johnson. He gets it to Kent Johnson, who dangles the puck around the Carolina defense in the high slot for a moment before firing it through traffic. One of those creating traffic is van Riemsdyk, who tips it in for his 10th goal of the season and make it a 5-3 Hurricanes lead.

**(14:43 — CBJ Goal):** Just over a minute after trimming the deficit to two, the Blue Jackets make it a one-goal game with another tip-in goal. This time it's Dmitri Voronkov's tipping it into the net after getting a piece of Werenski's floating shot through traffic. The Blue Jackets would finish the second period with just three shots on goal, but this was one of the two that found the back of the net.

### **3rd Period**

**(11:13 — CAR Goal):** Jesperi Kotkaniemi beats a diving Tarasov to put Carolina in front 6-4 after Dante Fabbro has trouble playing the puck near the Columbus net.

**(18:08 — CAR EN Goal):** The Hurricanes wrap up their victory with an empty-net tally from Seth Jarvis, his second goal of the night.

### **Stat Chat:**

- van Riemsdyk's 10th goal of the season makes it a 16th straight season of 10+ goals for the veteran. He's scored at least 11 goals every year of his NHL career.
- The Blue Jackets blocked 21 shots for the night, or the score could've been worse. Carolina ended up with 76 shot attempts at 5-on-5, compared to the Blue Jackets 33. Carolina ended up with 83% of the game's 53 scoring chances, and 22 of the 28 high-danger opportunities.
- Defenseman Jordan Harris played 8:49 for the night, but some of that time was spent as a forward. The Blue Jackets were only playing with 11 forwards to start and after Justin Danforth missed most of the second period with a hand injury, Evason inserted Harris — the extra defenseman for the game — as a fourth-line forward. "Thought he did a real good job (as forward)," said Evason.

### **Up Next:**

The Blue Jackets return to Nationwide Arena after the road-trip, but the competition doesn't get any easier: they'll face the Los Angeles Kings at 7 p.m. Saturday night.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Three Things: Fantilli, Del Bel Belluz Have Big Night In Front Of Friends & Family, Elvis Spectacular In 5-1 CBJ Win Over Toronto

By Ed Francis – January 24, 2025

That's how it's done.

After a tough loss shootout loss Saturday night against the New York Rangers and a flat performance Monday night against the New York Islanders in a 3-1 loss, the Columbus Blue Jackets scored five goals and shut down the Toronto Maple Leafs offense in a 5-1 win Wednesday night.

The rebound win was propelled by a couple of hometown kids: Adam Fantilli and Luca Del Bel Belluz, both from the Toronto area, combined for four of Columbus' five goals and Fantilli picked up his first career hat trick en route to the rout of the Maple Leafs.

Elvis Merzlikins put together one of his best performances of the season, stopping 28 of the Maple Leafs 29 shots and making a number of big saves when the game was still up for grabs.

For all three players, it was an unforgettable night. For the Blue Jackets, it was a huge two points to end a brief, two-game skid.

Here are three things from Columbus' big night in Canada:

### **Fantilli's First Hatty And A Hat From Mom**

After scoring an aggressive short-handed goal late in the first period, Fantilli got his second of the night on a doorstep snapper that extended Columbus' lead to 3-0 in the second period.

He then completed the hat trick on an empty-netter with nearly eight minutes (!!!) left in the game, after Maple Leafs head coach Craig Berube got overly aggressive in trying to give Toronto a man-advantage.

Fantilli is from Toronto, and had dozens of friends and family in attendance. One of them: his mom, Julia. When the Blue Jackets blossoming star was on a 2-on-1 with Kirill Marchenko and the Leafs net empty, Julia was ready to lose her hat to help celebrate her son's first three-goal effort.

"It means the world to be able to do that in front of my friends and family," Fantilli told the Toronto Star. "I'm super grateful that they all came out and I was able to pull that one off."

Fantilli now has 14 goals in 48 games this season, half of which have come since the calendar flipped to 2025. Since being inserted as the top line center following the injury to Sean Monahan earlier this month, Fantilli has been amongst the best players on the team and is showcasing why he was the third overall pick in 2023.

### **LDBB Proving His NHL Worth**

Fantilli's hatty came in his second game in Toronto — but Luca Del Bel Belluz had a goal as part of a two-point effort in his first game in Toronto, where the rookie was born and raised.

The 21-year-old had the primary assist on a James van Riemsdyk goal that put the Blue Jackets up 2-0 in the second period. That was enough to excite his 50-ish friends and family in the Scotiabank Arena. But in the third period, with Columbus up 3-0, Del Bel Belluz was in the right place at the right time via good hustle and a strong forecheck and turned the night into something he (and those with him) would never forget:

"It's special," said Del Bel Belluz. "Obviously with a lot of people in the crowd supporting me, it's good to give them (a goal), at least something they remember from this game."

Del Bel Belluz has been magnificent since being called up January 9th following the injury to Monahan. He has two goals and three assists for five points in seven games — and add a goal and a point to that if you include his only other NHL game: the 2023-24 season finale, where LDBB scored in his big-league debut.

Monahan is likely to return sometime in February or early March, but it's not going to be as easy as sending Del Bel Belluz back to Cleveland, where he led the team (and the AHL) in scoring at the time of his call-up. The Blue Jackets are bursting at the seams with young talent, and Del Bel Belluz's hot start to his NHL career is only more reason for optimism.

### **Elvis Stops 28, Plays With Matthews' Stick**

Without Fantilli and Del Bel Belluz's career nights in the shadows of where they were born and raised, Merzlikins would have been the story of the game.

He allowed just one goal, putting Toronto's potent offense to bed. The Leafs had won three straight games, scoring 16 goals in those 180 minutes of hockey. According to Natural Stat Trick, the Maple Leafs had 39 scoring chances and 16 high-danger chances Wednesday night, but Merzlikins remained cool, calm, and collected throughout the night and stymied Auston Matthews and company.

One of the funnier moments of the season came in an exchange between Merzlikins and Matthews. When both players lost their stick, the easiest route for each was to play with each other's stick. That's illegal, but made for a fun moment:

Matthews and Merzlikins received minor penalties for stick-related infractions.

Merzlikins was named the second Star of the Game.

### **UP NEXT:**

The Blue Jackets are one leg through their toughest back-to-back of the season. Thursday night comes leg two, when Columbus is in Raleigh to battle the Carolina Hurricanes. Puck-drop is set for 7 p.m.

## The Athletic / Breaking: NHL has begun preparation for Gary Bettman retirement in 'couple years'

By Michael Russo and Chris Johnston – January 24, 2025

ST. PAUL, Minn. — The executive committee of the NHL's Board of Governors has begun planning for Gary Bettman's retirement in "a couple years" and has started the process of finding a successor for the longest-tenured commissioner in North American sports, Minnesota Wild owner Craig Leipold said on a podcast Wednesday and clarified with greater detail during a phone call with The Athletic on Thursday.

Leipold was asked Wednesday if he had any concerns about the business of the game during an appearance on The Sick Podcast/The Eye Test with Pierre McGuire and Jimmy Murphy. He raved about where things stand with the league before adding his lone concern: "The fact that Gary is going to be retiring."

Leipold said it would be a sad day when Bettman, commissioner for nearly 32 years, was not part of the league, "but that's a couple years down the road and we're doing the planning now, and we have to make sure we get it right when he leaves."

Leipold, one of the owners on the Board of Governors' executive committee, elaborated during his conversation with The Athletic.

"Listen, we're like a \$5, \$6 billion company — the entire league is," he said. "So we have a CEO who's going to be moving on and any transition would cause us to be concerned. And so, really, all I was saying is that we have had a commissioner now for 30 years, maybe a little more, and he has been outstanding. I mean, truly, truly, has been an incredible commissioner and has done great things.

"Now we're going to transition to somebody else, and that should make us all a little concerned that we have to be certain we get the right person. It's a concern that I have that, 'How are we going to get anybody as good as Gary?' The answer is we're not. So who's going to be the second best person, and is that going to be good enough?"

Asked if the executive committee had begun the formal process of finding Bettman's successor, Leipold said: "I would say that we have."

Leipold didn't realize, however, that Bettman had not formally announced his plans to retire.

Bettman coincidentally attended Thursday night's Wild game against Utah Hockey Club and met with The Athletic alone in Leipold's suite prior to the game.

Bettman, 72, said he has not decided when to retire but did bring his eventual retirement up to the executive committee for the first time in advance of last month's Board of Governors meeting in Manalapan, Fla.

"I raised the specter that at some point this is something the league is going to have to deal with because when you're dealing with a CEO who has been doing this as long as I have, it's a more complicated process," Bettman said. "But the only discussion that was had was with three-plus decades at this job, at some point the league is going to have to deal with the reality that I can't do this forever."

Bettman was named NHL commissioner on Feb. 1, 1993, and has already surpassed Clarence Campbell for the longest tenure among any leader in league history. The NHL has grown from 24 to 32 teams on his watch and pursued a strategy of expansion into the Southern United States. It's also become a nearly \$7 billion per year business.

Bettman was also at the helm for four work stoppages, including a lockout that wiped out the entire 2004-05 season before the introduction of a salary cap.

There's been increasing interest in Bettman's future as his tenure stretched into a fourth decade with the league, as well as much speculation on a succession plan that could even see the reins passed off to deputy commissioner Bill Daly. Bettman has repeatedly swatted away questions on the topic.

Eyebrows were further raised in November when the NHL gave promotions to multiple senior staff members — elevating Steve McArdle to Chief Operating Officer, Keith Wachtel to President of NHL Business, Steve Mayer to President of NHL Content and Events and Julie Grand to Daly's Chief of Staff — in a series of moves seemingly made with the long-term future of the league's head office in mind.

But while Bettman said it would be irresponsible of him to not have the Board of Governors begin preparations for life without him, he insisted he never told Leipold and the executive committee the timeline of his eventual departure.

"I just wanted to put it on their radar," Bettman told *The Athletic*. "When you don't have the energy and the passion you have to think about it. The good news is I have the energy and I have the passion. I love what I do, and actually I enjoy doing what I'm doing probably more than I ever would enjoy retirement.

"I'm not wired to be retired."

## ESPN / NHL Bubble WATCH: Projecting playoff hopes for all 32 teams

By Greg Wyshynski – January 24, 2025

NHL teams don't necessarily need a goaltender that can drag them to the Stanley Cup, mostly because those types of netminders are unicorns. What they need is a goalie that can make a save at a critical time; and, perhaps most of all, not lose a game for the team in front of them.

As the NHL playoff picture comes into focus, so does the quality of every team's most important position. Will their goaltending be the foundation for a playoff berth and postseason run? Or is it the fatal flaw in their designs on the Stanley Cup?

The NHL Bubble Watch is our monthly check-in on the Stanley Cup playoff races using playoff probabilities and points projections from StatSheet for all 32 teams. This month, we're also giving each contending team a playoff quality goaltending rating based on the classic Consumer Reports review standards: Excellent, Very Good, Good, Fair, Poor.

We also reveal which teams shouldn't worry about any of this because they're lottery-bound already.

### **ATLANTIC DIVISION**

#### **The locks**

##### **Florida Panthers**

**Record: 28-18-3, 59 points**

**Playoff chances: 99.3%**

The Panthers have the best chance of winning the Atlantic Division (42.5%) according to StatSheet, something that would potentially ease their path to a third straight Stanley Cup Final but deprive NHL fans of another all-Florida lovefest against the Tampa Bay Lightning.

The Panthers' offense continues to carry them, thanks to another incredible goal-scoring season from Sam Reinhart (27 goals in 47 games) and some unexpected contributions from players such as Jesper Boqvist, whose recent scoring burst gave him a new career high (11) in goals.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Very good. Sergei Bobrovsky being below average in save percentage (.896) and below expected analytically is neither a surprise nor a harbinger of doom for Florida. When the puck drops for the postseason, he becomes Playoff Bob -- .906 save percentage, 2.32 goals-against average in winning the Stanley Cup last season -- and all is forgiven. Meanwhile, Spencer Knight has been one of the league's best under-the-radar stories as Bob's backup, with a .905 save percentage in 18 games.

##### **Toronto Maple Leafs**

**Record: 30-17-2, 62 points**

**Playoff chances: 98.6%**

The Leafs just keep cruising along in the Atlantic Division, being pretty good in all facets of the game -- and by "pretty good," we mean lingering just outside the top 10 in scoring, defense, power play and the penalty kill. They've overcome having Auston Matthews and John Tavares miss time to injuries by getting all-world seasons from stars Mitch Marner and William Nylander.

Marner is playing like it's a contract year -- and it's not exactly subtle. The Leafs winger had 67 points in his first 48 games this season, and that 1.40 points per game average would be his career best. Nylander, meanwhile, filled in the goal-scoring blank left by Matthews with 28 goals in 48 games, which is currently his career high for goals per 60 minutes (1.33). Nylander leads the Leafs with 12.4 goals scored above replacement as well.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Good. Joseph Woll's numbers might not knock you over (.907 save percentage), but he has done everything they've needed him to do in winning 17 games in 25 appearances. Anthony Stolarz has been even better when he has played, with a .927 save percentage in 17 games and better underlying metrics than Woll. But the operative phrase for both Leafs goalies remains "when he has played," as the fragility of Woll and Stolarz in their careers is well documented. Woll at least has playoff experience, albeit seven games. Stolarz has played roughly 35 minutes in the postseason.

### **Tampa Bay Lightning**

**Record: 25-18-3, 53 points**

**Playoff chances: 98.5%**

Even though they have a high percentage chance of making the playoffs and finishing either second or third in the Atlantic, coach Jon Cooper's team would probably like a little more breathing room between themselves and the four division rivals (sorry Buffalo) that are within a half dozen points of them in the standings. But with Nikita Kucherov doing his MVP thing again -- his 1.59 points per game rate through 44 games leads the NHL -- the Bolts should stay above the fray.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Very good. Andrei Vasilevskiy is Andrei Vasilevskiy again after a down year statistically, with a .915 save percentage after 36 games. But he still has something to prove in the playoffs, as one of the best postseason goalies in NHL history has been eliminated in the first round in two straight trips, with a save percentage under .900. Jonas Johansson has been OK in his rare starts.

### **Work to do**

#### **Ottawa Senators**

**Record: 24-19-4, 52 points**

**Playoff chances: 68.5%**

The Senators are tied for the eighth-best points percentage over their past 25 games but are a team that basically scores as much as it surrenders. They've played through a collection of injuries -- most significantly star goalie Linus Ullmark, who hasn't played since Dec. 22 -- but have surged to the wild-card bubble anyway.

"We've found a way to win in different manners, I guess different fashion from game to game," coach Travis Green said recently. "And that's important during the season because every game isn't going to be scripted the same."

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Good. Ullmark was as advertised for Ottawa after being acquired from Boston, with 9.71 goals saved above expected before his injury. But Ullmark's regular-season dominance, which included a Vezina Trophy win in 2022-23, hasn't been matched in the postseason, where he had a 3.59 goals-against average and an .887 save percentage in Boston. One bit of crease intrigue for Ottawa: Has rookie Leevi Meriläinen market-corrected Anton Forsberg in the tandem, or will NHL opponents start figuring him out?

#### **Montreal Canadiens**



**Record: 24-19-4, 52 points**

**Playoff chances: 37.0%**

Montreal's 5-on-5 offense ignited during that span: 2.74 goals per 60 minutes, second in the league behind Connor McDavid and Edmonton. Both Cole Caufield and Nick Suzuki were in the top 25 in even-strength points, while rookie sensation Lane Hutson was second among all freshmen in EV points.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Fair. Sam Montembeault was named to Team Canada in the 4 Nations Face-Off and has turned his season around for the Habs, with a .904 save percentage in his past 19 starts. After backup Cayden Primeau proved to be one of the NHL's worst goalies this season, rookie Jakub Dobes started his NHL career with five wins in five games. By our calculations this means he'll need 687 more starts to break Martin Brodeur's all-time wins record, should he remain on his current pace.

### **Detroit Red Wings**

**Record: 21-21-5, 47 points**

**Playoff chances: 12.9%**

GM Steve Yzerman fired head coach Derek Lalonde after three seasons and a 13-17-4 record. Enter Todd McLellan, trying to end an eight-season playoff drought in the Motor City. While nothing has shifted dramatically in their underlying numbers, the Wings went 6-3-1 in a 10-game stretch under McLellan to keep pace in the East.

To his credit, the veteran coach is doing what he can to get their attention, with postgame comments such as: "Say you're at your desk but you're not working, then you're useless. It's one thing being there, it's the other thing getting the job done."

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Fair. The Red Wings' goaltending depth chart looked like an "American Idol" audition earlier this season, but Detroit has settled on Cam Talbot and Alex Lyon as their tandem. Stathletes has both netminders under water in goals saved above expected; Money Puck's numbers indicate they're both better than expected. One thing is clear: McLellan is very familiar with Talbot, having coached him in Edmonton and Los Angeles previously.

### **Boston Bruins**

**Record: 23-20-6, 52 points**

**Playoff chances: 11.6%**

Boston's eight-season playoff streak is in serious jeopardy. The Bruins' offense has dried up outside of David Pastrnak and Brad Marchand. Their defense is an uncharacteristic 23rd in the NHL, despite goalie Jeremy Swayman finally finding his form after a very shaky start.

Team president Cam Neely recently said that he believes these Bruins are a playoff team, but that there are "two paths" in front of the franchise right now: making deals at the trade deadline or "retooling a little bit." Even the consideration of the latter isn't a good sign for Boston.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Very good. There's no question that missing training camp during a contract impasse with the Bruins did not do Swayman nor the team any favors. But the Boston goalie has been getting better as the season has gone on, with a .932 save percentage at 5-on-5 over an 11-game span. In 20 postseason games, Swayman has a .922 save percentage and a 2.38 goals-against average. The issue for him and the Bruins: actually making the cut this season. Backup Joonas Korpisalo has been a demonstrable step down from Linus Ullmark in the tandem.

## **Lottery-bound**

### **Buffalo Sabres**

**Record: 18-24-5, 41 points**

**Playoff chances: 0.1%**

Maybe 14 straight seasons without a playoff appearance is how the word balances itself for owner Terry Pegula, whose Buffalo Bills have made the AFC playoffs in seven of eight seasons, and the AFC Championship Game twice. As for his hockey team, the only one in the Atlantic not directly in the playoff mix: As always, it's wait 'till next year and good luck in the draft lottery.

## **METROPOLITAN DIVISION**

### **The locks**

#### **Washington Capitals**

**Record: 32-10-5, 69 points**

**Playoff chances: 99.9%**

The Capitals took a surprise playoff team from last season, smashed the upgrade button in the offseason and ended up with a roster that has risen to the top of the NHL standings. New additions such as Pierre-Luc Dubois, Jakob Chychrun, Matt Roy and especially Logan Thompson joined an age-defying Alex Ovechkin to fuel a team that's in the top two offensively and defensively in the NHL -- and is a serious threat to win the Stanley Cup.

"There has to be an expectation that we're going to win," forward Tom Wilson said. "That's a culture that's been built. The new guys came in this year and complemented that."

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Excellent. If it weren't for a certain goalie in Winnipeg, Logan Thompson would be the odds-on favorite to win the Vezina Trophy. He's 22-2-3 with a .925 save percentage and a goals-against average that's flirting with being under 2.00. "He delivers when we need a big save. When we need to preserve the win, he delivers," coach Spencer Carbery said. Thompson's postseason numbers in Vegas were stellar in four appearances. If Charlie Lindgren gets back to last season's form, the Capitals could perhaps have the East's best tandem.

#### **Carolina Hurricanes**

**Record: 29-16-3, 61 points**

**Playoff chances: 99.5%**

Analytically, the Hurricanes are their typical elite selves, leading the NHL in percentage of shot attempts and expected goals percentage at 5-on-5. But their actual numbers are off from the expected ones, as they score less and give up more than they should. That said, a .635 points percentage after 48 games is stellar.

They're very good, but one wonders what GM Eric Tulsky and his crew have in mind to make them elite as the March 7 trade deadline nears.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Good. Pyotr Kochetkov has gotten the majority of the action and has delivered both in traditional stats (.904 save percentage) and in underlying numbers (6.0 goals saved above expected). He has a lot to prove in the playoffs, however: In six games, Kochetkov has an .863 save percentage and a 4.01 goals-against average. Keep in mind only two of those games were starts.

Frederik Andersen, 35, just recently returned to action for the Canes. He's the superior postseason goalie, but as always, his availability remains the biggest concern.

### **New Jersey Devils**

**Record: 27-17-6, 60 points**

**Playoff chances: 88.9%**

The Devils have had a struggle of it lately during a 2-6-3 run that saw their potent offense score two or fewer goals in eight games. In particular, their supporting cast's scoring has dried up. Another issue that has lingered for this group over multiple seasons and multiple coaches: getting a lead. The Devils have trailed first in 27 of 49 games this season. They're a respectable 12-12-3 in those games, but that's a lot of playing from behind.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Excellent. Jacob Markstrom was acquired to solve the Devils' goaltending issues, and he has delivered: 11.8 goals saved above expected per Money Puck and a .912 save percentage. While he will occasionally let in a questionable goal, he more than makes up for it with highlight-reel saves in almost every game. He exited Wednesday's game and will "miss some time" according to Devils coach Sheldon Keefe. Backup Jake Allen has been dependable. Both goalies have considerable playoff experience and very solid numbers.

### **Work to do**

### **Philadelphia Flyers**

**Record: 22-20-6, 50 points**

**Playoff chances: 41.9%**

The Flyers have gone full John Tortorella mode over the past few weeks, playing the kind of lane-clogging, shot-blocking defensive style that has become synonymous with the veteran coach. Philadelphia gave up two or fewer goals in nine of 11 games -- and it's not its substandard goaltending that's putting up that wall. The question is whether that approach is either sustainable or effective enough to snag a wild-card spot in the East. But Torts has grinded his teams into postseason berths before.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Poor. The Flyers have by far the worst team save percentage in the NHL after 47 games. Samuel Ersson has had the run of play lately, as the best of three less-than-ideal options. Highly touted Ivan Fedotov played below replacement level; rookie Aleksei Kolosov was even worse with minus-5 goals save above expected. Kolosov at least has youth and NHL inexperience as an excuse.

### **New York Rangers**

**Record: 23-20-4, 50 points**

**Playoff chances: 25.8%**

Rumors of the Rangers' demise were greatly exaggerated. OK, that's not entirely true, as the Blueshirts still have an aging core that struggles at even strength. But a 6-1-3 run in the past 10 games has given New York new life and a lot of its success can be attributed to being better than its analytics at 5-on-5: The Rangers are second in scoring during that 10-game span despite being 14th in expected goals. The team deserves some puck luck after a rough first half.

Now, does GM Chris Drury continue with his retooling or augment the roster with immediate help? And would a trade for Vancouver's J.T. Miller satisfy both desires?

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Excellent. Igor Shesterkin hasn't had the most consistent season, but his recent play is a reminder that the Rangers are quite difficult to beat when he's hard to beat -- including back-to-back shutouts over Columbus and Ottawa, two Eastern Conference playoff rivals. Shesterkin and Jonathan Quick -- solid, but not as spectacular as last season -- give the Rangers a huge advantage over other teams in the muddled Eastern wild-card race. If they make the cut, Shesterkin's playoff numbers (.928 career postseason season save percentage) are outstanding.

### **New York Islanders**

**Record: 19-20-7, 45 points**

**Playoff chances: 19.9%**

Coach Patrick Roy has remained positive through a frustrating season for the Islanders, even if that has meant conjuring platitudes such as, "I have nothing to support what I'm going to say, but we're playing good hockey" during dire times. With a combination of improved health, the Mathew Barzal-Bo Horvat duo clicking and better defense, the Islanders have inched up the standings in the Eastern Conference lately, and StatHletes projects them to finish with 86.5 points.

But to what end? It still might be time to move veterans such as Brock Nelson at the trade deadline in an effort to retool.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Very good. With Semyon Varlamov injured, Ilya Sorokin has carried the load to a .902 save percentage in 32 games, playing just a shade better than league average analytically. But his team is playing better in front of him and backup Marcus Högborg, who has put up strong numbers in limited action.

### **Long shots, at best**

### **Pittsburgh Penguins**

**Record: 20-21-8, 48 points**

**Playoff chances: 10.1%**

The Penguins continue to shamble along like a Robert Kirkman zombie toward another playoff miss and a trade deadline that will certainly see a number of players skate to another market. Would that include players such as Kris Letang or Erik Karlsson (and his contract)? That's unlikely, but outside of Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin, it's hard to imagine anyone is safe. After 49 games, the Penguins were the worst defensive team in the NHL -- a combination of lax 5-on-5 defense and atrocious goaltending.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Poor. Tristan Jarry was finally banished to the AHL after blowing a lead in about one minute of the third period against Seattle recently. Alex Nedeljkovic, while an accomplished goal scorer, hasn't been the solution either, playing below expected. There's an argument to be made that rookie Joel Blomqvist has been the team's best goaltending option this season. With Jarry in the minors, we're going to see a lot more of Blomqvist.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets**

**Record: 23-18-7, 53 points**

**Playoff chances: 1.7%**

The Blue Jackets are only a couple of points out of a playoff spot, but neither StatHletes nor Money Puck (16.2%) really like their chances to make the cut. In fact, StatHletes has the Jackets projected for 79.4 points, putting them last (again) in the Metropolitan Division.

If Columbus did earn a postseason berth, it would obviously be one of the most heartfelt sports stories in recent memory, as a franchise still processing the grief from Johnny Gaudreau's tragic death on the eve of the season advances to the playoffs in a season dedicated to his memory. With the way a forward such as Kirill Marchenko and especially defenseman Zach Werenski are playing, we're not counting them out.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Poor. The Jackets are eighth offensively and 28th defensively this season, which tells you all you need to know about the state of their goaltending this season. Elvis Merzlikins is 16-11-3 despite an .890 save percentage and playing well below replacement levels. Money Puck has Daniil Tarasov as nearly a minus-8 goals saved above expected. But their goaltending has seen an uptick recently, including Jet Greaves being thrown into the mix on occasion. Tarasov recently played Shesterkin to a 0-0 regulation stalemate, for example.

## **CENTRAL DIVISION**

### **The locks**

#### **Winnipeg Jets**

**Record: 32-14-3, 67 points**

**Playoff chances: 99.7%**

For Jets coach Scott Arniel, Winnipeg's 15 wins in its first 16 games was less about setting an NHL record (which it did) but banking a considerable amount of points ahead of inevitable wobbles during the season.

The Jets have had losing streaks of three and four games, and relinquished the NHL standings lead to Washington, but they remain cushioned ahead of the field in the Central Division with a team that's top three in team defense and offense, the latter thanks to a torrid power play led by winger Kyle Connor (21 power-play points).

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Excellent. There's an argument to be made that Connor Hellebuyck shouldn't just win the Vezina Trophy for a second straight season, with a .927 save percentage and 11.6 goals saved above expected, but that he should get serious consideration for the Hart Trophy as league MVP. But he does have something to prove in the playoffs, with a sub-.900 save percentage in back-to-back trips. Eric Comrie has been slightly above average as his backup, but given his recent NHL history he'll no doubt take that.

#### **Colorado Avalanche**

**Record: 28-19-2, 58 points**

**Playoff chances: 94.4%**

At the risk of spoiling the next section: Mackenzie Blackwood has been the story of the season for the Colorado Avalanche. Not only because the team nuking its goaltending depth defines its season, but because Blackwood arrived from the San Jose Sharks and went 9-4-1 in 13 games with a .928 save percentage, a 1.97 goals-against average and 12.1 goals saved above expected.

There are other reasons the Avalanche have become a playoff lock, from the MVP performance of Nathan MacKinnon to 25 goals in 48 games from Mikko Rantanen in a contract year. But Blackwood has been a revelation so far, to the point of already earning a multiyear extension from the Avs.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Very good. Have we mentioned Mackenzie Blackwood? The other in-season goalie acquisition for Colorado, Scott Wedgewood, has posted decent stats and decidedly average metrics as Blackwood's backup.

### **Dallas Stars**

**Record: 29-17-1, 59 points**

**Playoff chances: 89.1%**

After a middling start, the Stars rolled to 11 wins in 13 games to reestablish themselves in the Central Division race. They're just outside the top 10 offensively, but solidly top five in team defense, underscored by strong 5-on-5 analytics. They lost Tyler Seguin for the regular season to hip surgery, and have missed Mason Marchment since late December because of an injury, but the Stars keep chugging along with balanced scoring.

They're a legitimate Stanley Cup contender, and one that's going to have some long-term injury cap flexibility for GM Jim Nill to use at the trade deadline.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Excellent. He hasn't received the fanfare of Hellebuyck or buzz that goalies such as Logan Thompson and Jakob Markstrom have in the East, but Jake Oettinger has quietly put together a terrific bounce-back season after a "good, not great" 2023-24. He has a .914 save percentage in 35 games, with 8.74 goals saved above expected. In the playoffs, he's the type of netminder who can win games on his own. New backup Casey DeSmith has been fine for the occasional spot start.

### **Minnesota Wild**

**Record: 28-15-4, 60 points**

**Playoff chances: 80.7%**

Perhaps the most impressive thing about the Wild this season is they didn't collectively collapse into the fetal position when Kirill Kaprizov was lost to a lower-body injury on Dec. 23. He remains their leading scorer with 50 points in 34 games, including 23 goals. He's progressing toward a return soon, which could mean Minnesota goes from maintaining its spot in the Central, going 7-5-0 without him in the lineup, to rocketing back up the Western Conference standings.

The Wild are 19th in the NHL in goals per game with the 23rd-ranked power play. Kaprizov is one of a parade of injuries recently that has also included defensemen Jared Spurgeon and Jonas Brodin. The team announced that Kaprizov and Spurgeon are due back on Thursday night against Utah.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Very good. The Wild are around the top three in team save percentage (.906) this season thanks to Filip Gustavsson (.914 save percentage, three shutouts) who has seven goals saved above expected. There is some concern about his work rate: Last season's 45 appearances were a career high, and this is right around where his stats took a dip a year ago. Marc-Andre Fleury has solid traditional stats (.906) and less than average analytics in his swan-song season. Fleury has over 15 years of playoff experience. Gustavsson was great in his five playoff games back in 2022-23.

### **Work to do**

#### **St. Louis Blues**

**Record: 23-21-4, 50 points**

**Playoff chances: 26.2%**

While they keep taking one step back for every step forward in the standings, there are a lot of positive signs for St. Louis under new coach Jim Montgomery. Jake Neighbours, 22, continues to trend in the right direction. Star winger Jordan Kyrou, 26, leads the team in goals. Then there's Dylan Holloway, 23, whom the Blues acquired via restricted free agent offer sheet from Edmonton. He has a career high in goals (15), assists (21) and points (36) in 48 games thanks to increased ice time (16:19).

Now if they could only string together a few winning streaks.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Good. After both goalies were analytics darlings last season, Jordan Binnington and Joel Hofer regressed to the mean this season. Hofer has better traditional stats (.906 save percentage) than analytics compared to Binnington. But Binnington remains one of the NHL's greatest feast-or-famine netminders in the league. Some nights he looks like a goalie whose metrics point to him being a replacement-level performer this season. On other nights, Binnington looks as if he could carry the Blues to the postseason -- or, perhaps, win the 4 Nations Face-Off for Canada.

### **Utah Hockey Club**

**Record: 20-19-7, 47 points**

**Playoff chances: 26.0%**

Utah did itself no favors with losing 10 of 12 games, many of them against teams the team is chasing in the Western Conference standings. Utah is still in the race for the final wild-card spot -- anything above that is probably out of reach -- but it needs to find more offensive pop to mount a serious run. That means getting more scoring outside of Clayton Keller (50 points), Logan Cooley (42), Nick Schmaltz (37) and Dylan Guenther (0.85 points per game) when he's back from injury.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Good. Karel Vejmelka had arguably been the team's MVP with a .910 save percentage in 28 games, including 7.5 goals saved above expected. He might finally get some help from Connor Ingram, who has looked good after being away from the team for both an upper-body injury and to be with his mother, who died in December.

**Long shots, at best**

### **Nashville Predators**

**Record: 17-22-7, 41 points**

**Playoff chances: 38.0%**

One look at the standings tells you that the Nashville Predators don't have much of playoff chance this season, lingering in the neighborhood of also-rans such as Anaheim and Seattle. And yet, Stathletes continues to give the Preds a significant percentage chance of making the playoffs, although Money Puck (5.3%) is more bearish.

As the past eight games have shown, there's still time for Nashville to get rolling -- they have the time and the talent to still make this interesting in the West. The question is whether GM Barry Trotz will use the trade deadline to fuel a flicker of playoff hope or get his Preds in a row for next season. Stathletes still projects Nashville to be a 90-point team, for what it's worth.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Very good. The dichotomy of Juuse Saros: He has been well below his standards this season but also remains one of the primary sources of hope for a Nashville turnaround. His .901 save percentage would be the worst mark of his career, and he has played below expected analytically. But Saros is a high-work rate goalie who could carry this team for a bit if he gets rolling. That's a big "if" this season, as Justus Annunen has better numbers than Saros at 5-on-5 lately.

## **Lottery-bound**

### **Chicago Blackhawks**

**Record: 15-28-4, 34 points**

**Playoff chances: 0.0%**

Connor Bedard is trying to give fans a reason to watch the Blackhawks before their next draft lottery drawing, finally coming alive with nine points in his past 10 games. That extends a scoring tear under interim head coach Anders Sorensen, in which last season's rookie of the year has 22 points in 21 games.

## **PACIFIC DIVISION**

### **The locks**

#### **Edmonton Oilers**

**Record: 29-15-3, 61 points**

**Playoff chances: 99.9%**

The Oilers know they can count on Leon Draisaitl (an NHL-best 34 goals in 47 games) and Connor McDavid (65 points), when the latter isn't engaging in vigilante justice. But Edmonton really leveled up in the standings when the supporting cast picked up its play, such as Zach Hyman going from eight points in his first 20 games to 18 points in his next 22 games and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins finding his stride as well.

The Stathletes model has them projected just ahead of the Golden Knights for the Pacific Division title.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Good. The Oilers are middle of the pack in team save percentage (.895) but both Stuart Skinner and Calvin Pickard are both under league average in save percentage and have played below expected levels based on the analytics. What keeps this rating from being in the "fair" category is the proof of concept Skinner showed in the Oilers' Stanley Cup Final run last season. It's not always pretty or consistent, but he's a gamer.

#### **Vegas Golden Knights**

**Record: 29-14-4, 62 points**

**Playoff chances: 99.9%**

Despite a recent stumble, the Golden Knights are one of the NHL's most complete teams, with an offense that ranks in the top five and a defense that ranks in the top 10. The scoring balance of the Knights has been impressive this season.

While it's true Jack Eichel has a comfortable lead as the team's top scorer (58 points in 46 games), 15 points over defenseman Shea Theodore, eight different players have at least 10 goals, led by winger Pavel Dorofeyev's 20 goals in an impressive breakout season.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Very good. The Knights have goaltending right around the top 10 in team save percentage. Adin Hill and Ilya Samsonov have similar numbers right around the league average, and better than expected analytically. They're a solid foundation for what the Knights do, and Hill obviously has some postseason success on his résumé.

### **Work to do**

#### **Los Angeles Kings**



**Record: 26-14-5, 57 points**

**Playoff chances: 72.2%**

The Kings have an underappreciated dynamic duo in Anze Kopitar and Adrian Kempe. They've been primary linemates since the 2021-22 season, skating with a variety of wingers.

This season, the Kings outscore opponents by 18 goals when Kopitar and Kempe are on the ice together at 5-on-5. Their line with Alex Turcotte averages nearly four goals every 60 minutes, and gives up only 1.6 goals against per 60 minutes. Kempe leads the Kings with 23 goals in 44 games, trying to top his career high of 41 tallies set in 2022-23.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Good. For all the hype about Pierre-Luc Dubois' career renaissance with the first-place Capitals, Darcy Kuemper has been pretty fantastic for the Kings after their "the trade was one-for-one" summer swap. Kuemper was 13-4-5 in 23 games with a .922 save percentage and a 2.10 goals-against average. Lest anyone think he's just a product of a solid Los Angeles defensive team, he has 9.23 goals saved above expected. David Rittich, who got a long run of games when Kuemper was injured, hasn't really held up his end of the bargain in traditional stats (.886) and fancy stats (minus-8.7 goals saved above expected per Stathletes).

### **Vancouver Canucks**

**Record: 20-16-10, 50 points**

**Playoff chances: 42.9%**

There was no better encapsulation of the Canucks' season than their heart-stopping, one-goal win over the Oilers followed by their heart-wrenching one-goal loss to the Sabres at home this week. It's as if they're tied to a giant rubber band, where every leap forward is met with an emphatic tug backward.

As the on-ice product struggles, the drama off the ice continues with speculation about the relationship between star forwards Elias Pettersson and J.T. Miller -- and which one could be traded sooner than later.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Fair. Thatcher Demko put it bluntly this week: "I don't think I've been good enough this year so far." The numbers bear that out, as Demko has a minus-6.2 goals saved above expected and a .873 save percentage in a truncated 11-game season because of injury. Where would the Canucks be without Kevin Lankinen, whose .903 save percentage and four shutouts have kept them in the playoff hunt?

### **Calgary Flames**

**Record: 22-16-7, 51 points**

**Playoff chances: 30.3%**

Stathletes projects the Flames will finish with 88.5 points, which would be 10th most in the Western Conference, which is not good news for them. But Calgary has been all about defying expectations this season. They don't score all that much (2.60 goals per game, 29th overall) and their goaltending is better than the defense played in front of it, but the Flames find ways to win. Since Dec. 3, they haven't lost more than two games in a row.

Playoff quality goaltending rating: Very good. Dustin Wolf is making a serious push for NHL rookie of the year, and in the process he's pushing the Flames to the playoff bubble. Wolf has a .917 save percentage through 25 games, winning 16 of them. Money Puck had him at 11.7 goals saved above expected this

season. His backup Dan Vladar has had better seasons (.889 save percentage), but at least 50% of his appearances are "quality starts" per Hockey Reference.

### **Lottery-bound**

#### **Seattle Kraken**

**Record: 21-24-3**

**Playoff chances: 0.7%**

Money Puck is a bit kinder to the Kraken, projecting a 2.7% chance of making the playoffs, but they're in the bottom half of the league in offense and defense. It might be time for the four-year-old franchise to go back to the drawing board, starting with this summer's draft.

#### **Anaheim Ducks**

**Record: 18-23-6, 42 points**

**Playoff chances: 0.1%**

The Ducks are the worst offensive team in the NHL, absolutely wasting fantastic goaltending seasons from Lukas Dostal (.907 save percentage) and John Gibson (.911), both of whom have played well above expected and deserve better than a .447 points percentage.

#### **San Jose Sharks**

**Record: 14-30-6**

**Playoff chances: 0.0%**

The NHL's most "fun bad" team this season, thanks to rookie sensation Macklin Celebrini (34 points in 38 games), the ever-improving William Eklund and a team that gives up 3.56 goals per game.

## [Sportsnet.ca / NHL Power Rankings: The minute-munchers each team relies on](#)

By Ryan Dixon – January 24, 2025

The biggest minute-muncher of the past 15-plus years looks as though he could be making his season debut sooner rather than later.

And as good as the Los Angeles Kings have been for much of this year, they should be that much better when their right-shooting rock of a defenceman, Drew Doughty, returns to action after breaking his left ankle in the pre-season.

Doughty, of course, has been Mr. Everything for the Kings for the duration of his career. And the things Doughty does, he's basically always doing.

Since No. 8 debuted with the Kings in the 2008-09 season, he's averaging 26:13 minutes of ice per game over 1,177 contests. That's nearly a minute more of ice per night than the guy averaging the second-most in that span, Erik Karlsson (25:16).

The only player with more total time on ice since 2008 is St. Louis Blues veteran Ryan Suter, who turned 40 on Tuesday.

In a five-year period starting with the 2014-15 campaign and ending with 2018-19, Doughty did not miss a game for the Kings. He logged the most total time on ice during that stretch, averaged 27:31 per night (second only to Suter's crazy 27:36), had the fourth-most short-handed time on ice and the second-most overtime minutes.

Last season, during his age-34 campaign, Doughty saw 25:48 per game, more than everybody in the league, save Washington's John Carlson (25:54).

So, with the Kings workhorse on the verge of getting back where he belongs, we're using this week's power rankings to highlight a minute-muncher or two for all 32 clubs.

**1. Washington Capitals (32-10-5):** John Carlson is still soaking up all kinds of time for the Caps. Carlson, who turned 35 a couple weeks ago, is playing 23:51 per night, basically three minutes a game more than the next-busiest Cap, Jakob Chychrun (20:48)

**2. Winnipeg Jets (32-14-3):** The real workhorse on the Jets is goalie and Hart Trophy candidate Connor Hellebuyck. No puckstopper has played more games (543) or total minutes than the big American since the start of the 2015-16 season. Once again, he leads all goalies in games played (38) and total minutes played this winter.

**3. Carolina Hurricanes (29-16-3):** Brent Burns, who turns 40 on March 9, is still playing 21:30 per game for the Canes. The only Carolina skater seeing more time is Jaccob Slavin (21:38).

**4. Edmonton Oilers (29-15-3):** Only 10 forwards in the league are averaging more than 21 minutes per night and two of them are Connor McDavid (21:58) and Leon Draisaitl (21:33).

**5. Minnesota Wild (28-15-4):** It looks like Kirill Kaprizov could draw back in for the Wild on Thursday night. The 27-year-old winger was seeing 22:37 per night before getting injured just before Christmas, more than every forward in the league save Nathan MacKinnon (23:11).

**6. Toronto Maple Leafs (30-17-2):** Mitch Marner's 21:27 per night isn't just the most of any Toronto forward, it's more than any Leafs skater.

- 7. Vegas Golden Knights (29-14-4):** Alex Pietrangelo (22:37) and Shea Theodore (22:00) get more ice time than any other Golden Knights and could see more of it skating on the same defence pair for Team Canada at the 4 Nations Face-Off.
- 8. Dallas Stars (29-17-1):** Miro Heiskanen is a horse for Dallas, playing three minutes more per game than anybody else at 25:15. Wyatt Johnston, who is well off his 32-goal pace from last year, is still seeing the most of ice of any forward at 19:18 a game.
- 9. Los Angeles Kings (26-14-5):** In Doughty's absence, Vladislav Gavrikov (23:56) and Mikey Anderson (23:09) have stepped up to help fill the void. Both guys are playing about three minutes per night more than they did last season.
- 10. Florida Panthers (28-18-3):** Pending UFA (and currently injured) Aaron Ekblad is seeing a team-high 23:32 per night. That's about three minutes per game more than he skated last season, when fellow right-shot D-man Brandon Montour was still with the club. Gus Forsling is also playing over 23 minutes per game, which means he and Ekblad typically see about three more minutes per contest more than any other Cat.
- 11. Colorado Avalanche (28-19-2):** MacKinnon is the only forward averaging over 23 minutes per game in the NHL (23:11). If he stays above 23 for the year, he'll be the first forward to average that amount of ice per contest since Ilya Kovalchuk was seeing nearly 24 minutes per outing for the Devils in 2012-13.
- 12. New Jersey Devils (27-17-6):** The Devils and Ducks are the only teams in the NHL without a guy who's averaging at least 21 minutes per night. Defenceman Brett Pesce is the leader at 20:57 and he's followed by closely by forwards Jack Hughes (20:54) and Nico Hischier (20:28).
- 13. Tampa Bay Lightning (25-18-3):** Victor Hedman plays nearly two minutes per night more than any other Bolts skater and, since the start of 2016-17, only seven NHLers average more time on ice than his 24:25.
- 14. Montreal Canadiens (24-19-4):** Lane Hutson is averaging 22:36 a night for the Habs. No other rookie in the league is seeing 20 minutes per game. In the past 15 seasons, only eight freshmen have averaged more ice time than Hutson.
- 15. Columbus Blue Jackets (23-18-7):** Bow down to Zach Werenski, who — at 26:46 a night — is playing a full minute more than anybody else in the league.
- 16. Calgary Flames (22-16-7):** Rasmus Andersson (24:19) and MacKenzie Weegar (23:25) pace the Flames from the back end.
- 17. Ottawa Senators (24-19-4):** Jake Sanderson has been averaging nearly 22 minutes a night since his first shifts in the NHL. He's leading the Sens this year at 24:26.
18. New York Rangers (23-20-4): At 21:33 a night, Vincent Trochek is playing nearly two minutes more per game than any other Rangers forward.
- 19. Philadelphia Flyers (22-20-6):** Travis Sanheim clocks in with a team-high 24:36, nearly three minutes more per game than Cam York's 21:29.
- 20. Boston Bruins (23-20-6):** Charlie McAvoy plays 23:41 a night for Boston, basically three more minutes than any other Bruin.
- 21. St. Louis Blues (23-21-4):** Cam Fowler has come over from Anaheim and put up 13 points in 18 games for the Blues while playing 22:55 a night. The only Blue who averages more ice time is Colton Parayko (24:27).

- 22. Vancouver Canucks (20-16-10):** Quinn Hughes is a pillar for Vancouver (25:22) and getting Filip Hronek (23:23) back is also a big boon.
- 23. Utah Hockey Club (20-19-7):** Mikhail Sergachev was brought in to play big minutes for Utah and that became even more the case when UHC lost D-men John Marino and Sean Durzi early in the season. Only Werenski is playing more per night than the 25:45 Sergachev is skating.
- 24. Detroit Red Wings (21-21-5):** Moritz Seider has always been a big-minute guy for Detroit, but he's jumped up to a whole other level this season, playing 25 minutes a night for the Wings. That's basically four more minutes per game than anybody else on Detroit.
- 25. New York Islanders (19-20-7):** There's no denying what a huge blow the lower-body injury sustained by Noah Dobson earlier this week is for the Isles. Dobson was playing a team-high 24:01 a night for New York.
- 26. Pittsburgh Penguins (20-21-8):** Since 2011-12, Erik Karlsson has averaged the second-most ice time per game in the NHL (25:45) and Kris Letang is No. 3 (25:19). (Doughty is No. 1 at over 26 minutes per game). This year, Letang leads the Pens with 23:35 a night, just ahead of Karlsson (22:47).
- 27. Seattle Kraken (21-24-3):** Seattle inked Montour to lean on his legendary cardio and, sure enough, the first-year Kraken D-man is leading the team with 23:32 of ice per night.
- 28. Nashville Predators (17-22-7):** The Preds have a pair of go-to workhorses. Roman Josi has played more total minutes since 2017-18 than everybody in the league save Brent Burns and Ivan Provorov, while Juuse Saros has seen more games (307) than every other goalie except Connor Hellebuyck (331) since the start of 2019-20.
- 29. Buffalo Sabres (18-24-5):** Rasmus Dahlin (24:31), Bowen Byram (23:13) and Owen Power (22:23) all play a chunk more than any other Sabres.
- 30. Anaheim Ducks (18-23-6):** With Cam Fowler gone, newcomer Jacob Trouba plays more than any other Duck at 20:57 per game.
- 31. Chicago Blackhawks (15-28-4):** Seth Jones sees a team-high 24:40 from the right side, which is why you still wonder if — with a significant amount of retained salary — he might appeal to some other teams in a potential swap.
- 32. San Jose Sharks (14-30-6):** Jake Walman is scoring at a 60-point clip and playing a team-high 22:42 for the Sharks. Not a bad summertime pickup.

## [Sportsnet.ca / 32 Thoughts: How record revenues in NHL could impact salary cap, next CBA](#)

By Elliotte Friedman – January 24, 2025

When it comes to future salary ceilings, the question is not only when we will get clarity — but will we get it beyond 2025-26?

As prophesied in the current collective bargaining agreement, the 2025-26 cap will be approximately \$92.5 million — although the NHL and NHLPA can agree to lift it higher. At the December Board of Governors meeting, NHL commissioner Gary Bettman indicated those discussions will occur, and for good reason. When the two sides negotiated the COVID-19 CBA in 2020, the cap was “de-linked” from a 50-50 revenue split, with guardrails in place in case economies did not recover from lockdowns. A strong post-COVID surge — with Bettman projecting a record \$6.6 billion (USD) in revenues this season — indicates there is plenty of room for a larger bump.

According to several sources, the league and union are not just negotiating a 2025-26 number, but beyond that. It depends on who you talk to but, if this works out, we could get up to two additional seasons solidified.

On his Agent Provocateur podcast this week, Allan Walsh said, “I am telling you right now, the upper limit of the salary cap next year will be \$97 million,” adding it could reach \$105 million by 2027-28. Walsh has better sources than I do, so he’s got better detail on numbers. But it fits with the salary cap being set for three seasons. Also, what stood out to me was his use of the word “smoothing.”

The NBA had a massive jump in the summer of 2016: \$24.1 million, and in retrospect, both owners and players hated it. Too much chaos and jealousy — the gigantic bump allowed the Golden State Warriors to sign Kevin Durant, prolonging their dynasty. In their new CBA, both sides agreed the cap can't increase by more than 10 per cent from one season to next.

That’s smoothing.

There are reasons for the NHL and its players to support this approach. Some organizations — even well-run ones — are nervous about an \$110 million cap, especially those whose revenues come in Canadian funds. Right now, two-thirds of the league is within \$2 million of the top. It’s going to be very interesting to see how much that changes as things rise.

As for the players, easing the pop allows more than one free-agent class to benefit. And, it protects them from their most-hated word: escrow. (When Scott Moore hired me at Sportsnet, he told me I’d get fired if he heard the word escrow. Thank God he’s not here now.) If the cap goes high and revenues drop, their escrow percentage rises. That’s the reverse of what they want. So, slight caution is smart for them, too.

There is hope this will happen in advance of the March 7 trade deadline — so teams and players can make more informed decisions. If it does, there’s also reason to be optimistic in CBA negotiations. If the financials are sorted out, what on earth could stop a deal?

### THOUGHTS

1. Bad news for Team Sweden as Jacob Markstrom will “miss some time,” according to Sheldon Keefe, after getting hurt Wednesday against Boston. Linus Ullmark is a question, too, and now there is concern

that whatever lingering injury is bothering William Karlsson could cause him to miss the 4 Nations Face-Off. We should get clarity soon. Hopefully, everything works out for him.

**2.** The wish is that Markstrom recovers as quick as possible. One thing to remember: if Jake Allen plays 40 games, the Canadiens get a second-round selection at the upcoming draft. If not, it's a third. (He's at 15.)

**3.** Mercifully, Connor McDavid threw cold water on the red-hot takery coming out of his suspension, saying Wednesday while he thought it "might've been a little harsh, I understand their decision and have to move on." I was slightly surprised that a few players indicated they felt McDavid's previous suspension — a two-gamer in 2019 — shouldn't have factored in. The reason: they felt it wasn't relevant to this play and also thought three games was too many. "I just don't think anyone benefits from him being out three games," was a common thought. You don't hear that rationale too often. McDavid also said, "A penalty in the first is a penalty in the third, and a penalty in October is a penalty in April." When McDavid was on the Competition Committee, that was his consistent comment. Call the rulebook.

**4.** I was talking with another executive who said the Oilers and their opponents will be on high alert for how games are called in the aftermath. Do the Oilers get more power plays? Is there any bias against them? Teams worry about overcompensation. The situations are not comparable, but Calgary's penalty count went from 30th to fourth after Dennis Wideman high-sticked a linesman in 2016. So the paranoia exists.

**5.** Vancouver coach Rick Tocchet had a great line when asked if Conor Garland would face any repercussions during the rematch Thursday in Edmonton. "Yeah, he held a guy. So is that 'Wanted' posters?" This is why McDavid and Tyler Myers were guaranteed two games. If there's an opportunity for the league to turn down the heat in a rematch, it will. Possible the teams get warned, too.

**6.** Mikko Rantanen and Colorado need a deadline. Deadlines spur action. No more bluffing, true cards on the table. The big question: do the Avalanche consider March 7 to be that deadline, or are they willing to take their chances if he's unsigned by then? Even though Gabriel Landeskog signed in late July 2021, no one thought he was going to leave. Does everyone feel the same here?

**7. Team to WATCH: Carolina.** They are active, ready to pounce.

**8.** The Hurricanes and Rangers are two of the teams with permission to talk to J.T. Miller. Believe the New York offer was Filip Chytil, a first-rounder and a prospect. I get very mixed messages on New Jersey. The Rangers have the cap room to do it, but the Devils would need to perform roster surgery to pull it off. Yes, they struggled until pounding Boston on Wednesday, but that's a good team. I'm not convinced about Dallas, either. I always assume I'm missing something, though.

**9.** Elias Pettersson communicated to the Canucks he wishes to stay. We will see how all of this unfolds.

**10.** A few days after frustrated comments to a Slovakian newspaper, things have cooled down around Simon Nemec. The Devils communicated to anyone who asked they have zero interest in the dealing the 2022 second-overall selection. If anything, the Olympic qualifier injury last August hurt his chances of making New Jersey. Things will reset next fall. Let's see what unfolds then.

**11.** With all of the noise around the Penguins, I believe they have interest in some of Buffalo's younger, NHL-ready prospects. It fits what they want.

**12.** Columbus has little interest in mid-round picks for its unrestricted free agents. Everyone's rooting for them, and I'd go for it too, instead of accepting a low price. A couple of the players referred to captain Boone Jenner, injured before the season, as "our deadline acquisition."

**13.** Jack Johnson, in Toronto on Wednesday with Columbus, said he wants to play one more season. That would be 20 years in the NHL, including the five games he played in 2006-07 after leaving the University of Michigan.

**14.** One executive reached out during the David Carle coaching discourse to say that the average salary for a first-time head coach is \$1.4M. I still think someone makes a legit run, but it would be a leap for his peer group.

**15.** The Blue Jackets had a great social media spot on Monday, hours before Ohio State won the NCAA football championship. Several players wore Buckeye jerseys upon arrival on Long Island for their game against the Islanders. None were the team's Michiganders. Johnson joked they were "separated" from those players, while Zach Werenski added, "There's no chance I'd be doing that."

**16.** Our Werenski interview will air on Friday's podcast. He's great, and one story stood out. There was a game this year where a Blue Jacket made an extra move at the blueline, causing teammates to go offside. A television timeout followed. One of the other players was frustrated, and, if you were really looking for it, you could see it. Werenski skated up to that player, said something, softening him into giving an encouraging tap to the offending puckhandler. "There are so many emotions within a hockey game, right? I just feel like in certain situations there's a time and place to hold teammates accountable, for sure. Don't give anyone any advantage if they see us bickering at each other or fans or whatever. Let's just handle that by ourselves in the room...It's something I wouldn't have done two years ago or maybe even last year. But I feel like with where we're at, we're so close to where we want to be. I feel like those are big moments. They're small things, but they're big moments within the team." Don't let anyone see you sweat? "Exactly. Don't give them any advantages."

**17.** I felt really old when Charlie Coyle informed me he is the second-oldest Bruin. I was 21 when he was born.

**18.** Tom McVie died this week at age 89. Very, very friendly, he had one of the most distinctive voices in the sport, gravelly and unmistakable. At one of the Roger Neilson coaches' clinics, Dave Barr, who played 614

NHL games, told a phenomenal story about playing for McVie on the 1991-92 New Jersey Devils. Barr got stripped carrying the puck in his own zone, leading to a breakaway. Their goalie made the save, but Barr, charging back as hard as he could to make up for his mistake, knocked the puck into his own net. An absolutely disastrous shift. Sitting on the bench, "I could feel (McVie's) eyes burning holes through me," Barr laughed years later. "Finally he yelled, 'Not only did you get the goal, you also got an assist!' All I could see what my teammates around me, shaking as they tried to hold their laughter."