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Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets playoff tracker: odds go from bad to worse in fourth straight loss

By Brian Hedger- March 19, 2025

The Blue Jackets' odds of qualifying for a playoff spot this season are quickly diminishing.

After losing for the fourth straight time Monday in a 2-1 loss to the New Jersey Devils, the Jackets have dropped six of seven games coming out of their thrilling win March 1 over the Detroit Red Wings in the 2025 NHL Stadium Series matchup at Ohio Stadium.

There are 15 games remaining for the Blue Jackets (31-28-8) to climb back into a playoff spot as a wild-card team in the NHL's Eastern Conference, but it's a tightly-packed race and there's realistically just one wild-card spot still up for grabs. Back in October, The Athletic used a predictive stat-based model to project the Blue Jackets as having a 0.3% chance of qualifying for the playoffs and finishing with only 69 points — 68.6 to be exact, but who's counting?

Going into Thursday's game against the Florida Panthers, the Jackets have surpassed that project with 70 points but they've been stuck there in four straight games. They're still in the hunt despite losing star left wing Johnny Gaudreau on Aug. 29 last offseason to a tragedy in South Jersey, not to mention trading Patrik Laine, and they've started fresh in both the front office with Don Waddell and coach's office with Dean Evason.

Evason tried to put as positive a spin as he could on Monday's loss to the Devils, but the truth is that one stung the Blue Jackets to the bone. It ended a troubling goal drought that lasted almost three full games at 182:55 before Mathieu Olivier finally scored late in the third period, but a tying goal didn't materialize.

The Blue Jackets lost and their odds of qualifying for the playoffs took another hit. As they continue to chase the postseason, though, the Dispatch is tracking the final leg of the race.

Here's how things stand Tuesday:

Columbus Blue Jackets face difficult odds in Stanley Cup Playoffs chase

Despite technically remaining in the race, NHL forecasters and oddsmakers who already didn't put much faith in the Blue Jackets have lost even more of it.

DraftKings and BetMGM list the Jackets' odds of qualifying for the postseason at +500 and -700 to miss the playoffs, while FanDuel puts the odds at +520 to make it and -900 to miss.

MoneyPuck uses percentages, and gives Columbus just a 5.7% chance of qualifying for the playoffs that dropped from 24.2% a week ago. That included a 4.6% chance of earning the Eastern Conference's second-wild spot, down from 13.8% last week. Their chance of landing the first wild-card spot has plummeted from 4.9% last week to 0.5% Tuesday, while their chances of finishing third in the Metropolitan Division have dropped from 5.4% to 0.5% now.

So, they're telling us there's still a chance. Barely.

How does the NHL determine its opening playoff field?

Conference standings: The top eight teams in the NHL's Eastern and Western conferences earn playoff spots. Going into a home/road back-to-back Thursday and Friday against the Panthers and Pittsburgh Penguins, the Blue Jackets are likely vying for just the second wild-card spots in the East.

Playoff cutoff: The cutoff mark Tuesday at with the New York Rangers, who hold the East's second wild card with 72 points and a whopping 30 regulation wins with 14 games remaining. The Blue Jackets are at 70 points with 15 games remaining, but the Rangers hold the a key tiebreaker over them with those regulation victories.

Columbus only has 23 of them. The Jackets are now 11th in the East, tied at 70 points with the Red Wings and trailing the Montreal Canadiens by one point among teams sitting just outside the cutoff mark.

Columbus Blue Jackets vitals

Record: After falling 2-1 to the New Jersey Devils on Monday, the Blue Jackets are 31-28-8 going into a game Thursday against the Florida Panthers (41-24-3).

Standing in the Eastern Conference: The Blue Jackets are 11th in the Eastern Conference with three teams behind them all within four points of pulling even.

Points: The Jackets need to start stringing together wins and overtime/shootout points to keep pace.

Columbus Blue Jackets playoff outlook

Remaining Points Possible: The Blue Jackets can earn up to 30 more points in their remaining 15 games. Using their current .522 points percentage through 67 games, their season total would climb to 86 at the end of the NHL's 82-game season. That's almost certainly not enough to earn a playoff spot despite the East's logjam of teams chasing the second wild card.

Here is how the Columbus Blue Jackets have fared recently

Last 10 Games: The Blue Jackets are 4-6-0 in their last 10 games, including regulation losses in four straight games and six of their past seven.

Notable wins/losses: Winning four straight games after the NHL's pause for the 4 Nations Face-Off tournament in February was a recent high point that included the Jackets' memorable 5-3 victory over the Red Wings in front of 94,751 people at Ohio Stadium.

The excitement, however, was quickly doused with consecutive losses to the Tampa Bay Lightning and Florida Panthers to open a four-game road trip. They've since dropped four in a row after routing the Rangers, 7-3, on March 9 at Madison Square Garden.

Columbus Blue Jackets upcoming schedule

Here are the Blue Jackets' remaining games for the month of March with start time and TV/radio broadcast information:

Thursday, March 20 — Florida Panthers (40-22-3), 7 p.m. FanDuel sports Network/97.1 FM The Fan

Friday, March 21 — At Pittsburgh Penguins (26-31-10), 7 p.m. FanDuel Sports Network/97.1 FM The Fan

Monday, March 24 — At New York Islanders (29-28-7), 7:30 p.m./97.1 FM The Fan

Friday, March 28 — Vancouver Canucks (29-24-11), 7 p.m. FanDuel Sports Network/97.1 FM The Fan

Saturday, March 29 — At Ottawa Senators (34-25-5), 7 p.m. FanDuel Sports Network/97.1 FM The Fan

Columbus Blue Jackets home/road splits

The Blue Jackets have made slight progress over the course of the season by winning more on the road, but they're still struggling away from Nationwide Arena. Their season splits between home and road games are striking, and they've now dropped three in a row in regulation at home:

Home Record: 20-9-4 (44 points)

Away Record: 11-19-4 (26 points)

Summary: Teams that usually make the playoffs tend to break even on the road while making hay at home. The Blue Jackets had the home success part down before their current slide, but haven't shaken their road struggles all season.

Breakdown: These five players are critical to the Blue Jackets' playoff hopes, especially with centers Sean Monahan and Cole Sillinger each sidelined. Monahan injured a wrist Jan. 7 in Pittsburgh, while Sillinger was injured Feb. 28 in Detroit.

Here's a look at the Blue Jackets' top two goalies:

No. 1 starter — Elvis Merzlikins is 22-18-4 with a 3.04 goals against average (GAA) and .896 save percentage (SV%) with one shutout.

Backups — Danill Tarasov is 7-8-2 with a 3.51 GAA and .882 SV% and one shutout; Jet Greaves is 2-2-2 with a 2.83 GAA and .905 SV%.

Breakdown: After struggling with consistency, Merzlikins has provided solid-to-great goaltending for two or three months. He's currently away from the team, though, for a family matter related to his wife's pregnancy with their second child. Tarasov has also rebounded from a slump in the season's first half. Greaves, a rookie, has impressed in all six appearances he's been called upon, even while allowing the winner Monday against New Jersey following a bad bounce off the end boards to Jesper Bratt.

Columbus Dispatch / Near miss: 4 takeaways from Columbus Blue Jackets' fourth straight loss

By Brian Hedger- March 19, 2025

If you're an optimistic Blue Jackets fan, the reasons for hanging onto playoff hope are dwindling.

That's the bad news after the Jackets' fourth straight loss, a 2-1 defeat to the New Jersey Devils on Monday at Nationwide Arena.

There are still reasons for optimism remaining, though, such as 15 games remaining and just three points separating the Jackets from the second wild-card spot in the NHL's Eastern Conference. Otherwise, things are beginning to feel bleak in Columbus.

Here are three takeaways from another frustrating loss for the Blue Jackets:

How the Columbus Blue Jackets' latest loss affects their wild-card chase

After losing four straight games without adding a point and dropping six of their past seven in that manner since outlasting the Detroit Red Wings on March 1, the Blue Jackets no longer control their own destiny.

If a playoff spot is clinched for the Blue Jackets, they're going to need help now. The loss kept them from reducing a two-point deficit between themselves (70 points) and the New York Rangers (72 points) for the East's second wild-card spot, while also keeping them from passing the Red Wings (70 points) and Montreal Canadiens (71 points).

Looking behind them in a crowded playoff chase is far worse.

Should the Blue Jackets lose in regulation again Thursday to the defending Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers, there's a chance they could slide from 11th in the East to 13th behind the Canadiens, Red Wings, Boston Bruins and New York Islanders. There's also a trip Friday to conclude a back-to-back at Pittsburgh, where the Jackets have won one time since the end of the Obama administration.

Pittsburgh is only four points behind Columbus.

Bad luck bounce sinks Columbus Blue Jackets, goalie Jet Greaves

Weird bounces often favor home teams in the NHL, where players strive to learn every nook and cranny of their home rink during practices, morning skates and playing 41 of 82 games.

Jet Greaves is a rookie goalie for the Blue Jackets who has played most of this season for AHL Cleveland, so the edge of knowing Nationwide Arena's eccentricities wasn't in his favor against the Devils. And even if it had been, Greaves might still have gotten burned by a terrible bounce off the end boards behind his net that led directly to New Jersey's winning goal late in the second period.

A long dump-in from the red line by the Devils on the shift after Timo Meier gave them a 1-0 lead led to a goal by Jesper Bratt that quickly made it a two-goal margin. Greaves went to play the puck behind the boards, but it took a sharp bounce off the plastic "kick plate" at the bottom rather than smoothly sliding to his stick.

The puck angled sharply, caromed off Greaves' stick and went straight out for Bratt to put back into an open net with Greaves unable to scramble back in time to stop it.

"It was coming out of the yellow and kind of kicked off the yellow (plastic), but at the end of the day, it's my job to stop it and keep the puck out of the net," Greaves said. "It's too bad, but it's part of the game. Bounces happen either way. You just have to handle them and respond and just keep going."

Mathieu Olivier energizes Columbus Blue Jackets by ending goal drought

Before Mathieu Olivier scored with 6:36 left to play, the Jackets' goal drought started to feel like it might last the rest of the season. Olivier put a stop to it at 182:55, stretching back to his previous goal in the third period of the Jackets' 5-3 loss to the Devils last Tuesday.

The Blue Jackets appeared to get an extra jump in their skating from it, which they hope carries over to Thursday's matchup against the Panthers – who shut them out 3-0 on March 6.

"You felt it in the building for sure, right?" Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "There was a lot of tension. There was a lot of waiting and, like, anticipation (among fans), and our group was doing the same thing. When that went in, it was so loud. It was incredible. (The fans) are trying their butts off to push us forward, and I believe they did. I believe we did, as a team. We are (going) in the right direction."

Columbus Blue Jackets use 'line blender' to combat slump

Evason and his coaching staff jumbled three of the Blue Jackets' four forward lines to start this game by using combinations from the end of a 4-0 loss Saturday to the Rangers.

Yegor Chinakhov moved onto one of the top two lines with fellow Russians Dmitri Voronkov and Kirill Marchenko, while captain Boone Jenner slid to left wing on a line centered by Adam Fantilli with Kent Johnson at right wing.

Olivier's line with Aston-Reese and center Justin Danforth stayed together, while James van Riemsdyk and recently acquired Luke Kunin flanked center Sean Kuraly on the fourth line. More futility prompted another in-game shakeup in the second that included Fantilli centering Johnson and Marchenko, and Jenner returning to the middle to center a line with Chinakhov and Voronkov at the wings.

"We made just a couple of tweaks, obviously," Evason said. "We did see some good stuff, but we'll have a look at it, and we'll revisit it, and chat about it and see if we stick with it."

1st Ohio Battery / Three Things: A Different Goalie, Similar Result, Shutout Streak Over, The Resulting Outlook

By Will Chase- March 19, 2025

Everything but the kitchen sink.

Timo Meier and Jesper Bratt scored 39 seconds apart and Jake Allen made 45 saves as the New Jersey Devils beat the Columbus Blue Jackets 2-1 on Monday at Nationwide Arena. The Blue Jackets have lost four straight.

A Different Goalie, A Similar Result

Jet Greaves made his sixth start of the season for Columbus and stopped the first shot of the game which is not something either Elvis Merzlikins or Daniil Tarasov could say after the last two games. This isn't meant as a serious shot at either Merzlikins or Tarasov but with the way things have been going lately, it sort of bears mentioning.

Greaves was brought up Friday on emergency recall. Merzlikins is unavailable because his wife will give birth to the couple's second child any day.

Both goaltenders, Greaves and Allen, played more than halfway through the game before the first goal by Meier at 13:35 for his 20th to extend a four-game point streak. Stefan Noesen (16) and Nico Hischier (25) assisted. Hischier is on a four-game point streak (two goals, two assists).

Only 39 seconds later, Greaves misplayed the puck behind the net to lead to the Devils' second goal and Bratt's 20th at 14:14. Brian Dumoulin (16) and Cody Glass (14) picked up the assists.

Greaves made 18 saves.

Shutout Streak Over

Mathieu Olivier keeps extending his career high in goals.

The Blue Jackets, desperate for a goal to end the scoring drought, got a big one from Olivier, his 16th, at 13:24 of the third period to cut the deficit to 2-1 and end the shutout streak at 182:55. The assists went to Justin Danforth (9) and Zach Aston-Reese (11).

Columbus had just finished a power play in which they couldn't convert but saw several good chances, the theme of the third period and the game for that matter. Columbus tweaked their lines at the start of the third period trying to find something that would work offensively.

Columbus outshot New Jersey 46-20 and had 80 shot attempts (5v5) to the Devils' 38 and a 44-6 third-period edge.

The Devils are 30-0-2 when leading after two periods this season.

Olivier set a franchise record with his 249th and 250th hit of the season, surpassing Brandon Dubinsky (248) in 2016-17.

The Resulting Outlook

In a 1-6-0 tailspin, Columbus remains two points out of a playoff spot but with a few teams in front of them in the wild-card race.

With 71 points, the Montreal Canadiens trail the Rangers (72 points) by one point for the East's final wild-card spot. The Detroit Red Wings are deadlocked at 70 points with Columbus but hold the tiebreaker with one more regulation win.

The Boston Bruins picked up a point in Monday's 3-2 overtime loss to the Buffalo Sabres. Boston is one point behind Columbus. The New York Islanders have 68 points and are the Jackets' opponent next Monday. And if you thought Friday's opponent, the Pittsburgh Penguins, were left for dead, they've won four straight and are four points back of the Jackets.

On Tuesday, the Canadiens battle the red-hot Ottawa Senators, the New York Rangers host the Calgary Flames, the Penguins host the Islanders, and the Red Wings are at the Washington Capitals.

The Next Biggest Game

Columbus wraps up its four-game homestand with the Florida Panthers on Thursday, Mar. 20 at 7 p.m. ET.

The Athletic / Tom Fitzgerald makes impassioned case to NHL GMs for cut-resistant equipment after son's close call

By Michael Russo and Chris Johnston- March 19, 2025

MANALAPAN, Fla. — Tom Fitzgerald and his wife, Kerry, were sitting in the bar of a Legal Sea Foods in New Jersey eating dinner on Dec. 28. As he has done countless times over the years, the New Jersey Devils president of hockey operations and general manager pulled out his phone so the couple could watch their son Casey, the captain of the AHL Hartford Wolf Pack, play the Providence Bruins.

In the second period, the former Boston College, Buffalo Sabres and Florida Panthers defenseman went into the corner for an innocuous-looking puck battle. But when Casey delivered the check, the skate of the Providence player shot back and clipped Casey up high.

Since it was the second period, it was the long change, so Casey continued to play. But he kept grabbing at the upper part of his neck. Fitzgerald thought his son may have gotten hit in the teeth.

"He stayed on the ice for another probably 12, 15 seconds and the puck got out and he actually asked the ref, 'Am I cut?'" Fitzgerald recounted.

The ref was on the other side of Casey, so he didn't see the cut and told him no.

But as Casey skated to the bench, a Providence player frantically yelled to him, "Dude, your f—ing neck is cut."

The Hartford trainers hustled Casey into the medical room, got the bleeding under control and rushed him to the hospital, where a team of a dozen doctors and nurses waited.

"My wife was a mess," Fitzgerald said, choking up. "I was cautiously optimistic because he stayed on the ice."

Fitzgerald and his wife were getting updates from Casey's girlfriend, but they had also taught their four boys to let them know right away if anything ever happened on the ice, so they got an early call from Casey too.

"He called us from the ambulance on the way to the hospital, saying, 'I'm OK. I'm gonna be OK,'" Fitzgerald said, his voice cracking. "We kind of broke down there."

On Tuesday morning, 20 minutes north of where Casey Fitzgerald was born in Boca Raton in 1997 while his dad was playing for the Florida Panthers, NHL vice president of hockey operations Rod Pasma updated the league's 32 general managers on dozens of cut-resistant options that are available to players. He then showed the execs a dozen video clips of near-misses or cuts sustained by players this season.

The last one was Casey, followed by two gruesome photos — one "before" picture of the open wound just below his jaw and one "after" picture of the 25 stitches needed to close the wound.

Pasma then turned the floor over to Fitzgerald, who asked his colleagues to use Casey's incident as an example when imploring their players to wear cut-resistant material over their necks, wrists and ankles.

"I don't wish that on any parent," Fitzgerald said. "My message was just, 'Tell the players you don't want your parents potentially going through something like this' — how scary it is. Put as much protection on as you possibly can because you're going to stop playing at some point, and you're going to have to live the rest of your life ... so live it."

Fitzgerald is the one general manager on the joint NHL/NHLPA Protective Equipment Subcommittee, along with NHL executives, trainers, equipment managers and NHLPA members. So this was already a subject near and dear to his heart.

When Kevlar socks first came out and Fitzgerald was reading about Achilles tendon and lace-bite cuts while working for the Pittsburgh Penguins, he'd take the socks home for his boys, "and if they didn't wear them, they didn't play."

What You Should Read Next

Remembering Adam Johnson, ex-NHL player who died after skate-blade accident: 'An unbelievable human being'

Remembering Adam Johnson, ex-NHL player who died after skate-blade accident: 'An unbelievable human being'

Johnson, a former Penguins forward, died after suffering a skate cut to the neck while playing in Britain's top hockey league.

After Hibbing, Minn., native Adam Johnson's death on Oct. 28, 2023, while playing professionally in England, several leagues around the world mandated neck guards. Neck guards are now mandated by USA Hockey, all major junior leagues in North America, the ECHL and the AHL. So Casey Fitzgerald, now 28, was wearing one during that December game in Hartford.

The skate caught him just above it.

"The first thing I thought about was a chin guard," Fitzgerald said. "If you can mandate to at least have the two-finger rule, would a Kevlar chin guard have stopped some of it? I don't know if it would've prevented all of it, but just ideas like that, and there's a prototype being made as we speak. Actually it was supposed to be ready by the 4 Nations."

The NHL's position is that all NHL players should wear neck protection. But it cannot be mandated unless agreed upon by the NHLPA.

For the NHLPA, the issue boils down to protecting the rights of players to make individual equipment choices while also gaining a better understanding of what options are available.

"The joint NHL/NHLPA Protective Equipment Subcommittee provides education to players and teams regarding cut-resistant equipment that is available to all players," the union said in a statement. "The NHLPA's emphasis is on making sure players have the necessary information to make informed choices about their equipment. Our membership continues to feel strongly that wearing cut-resistant equipment is a matter of individual preference."

The number of NHL players wearing cut-resistant gear is on the rise — between 55 and 60 players this season, according to Pasma.

As for mandates such as the ECHL and AHL's being grandfathered in at the NHL, the prevailing industry view is that it's more a question of "when" than "if."

The NHL has previously introduced mandates for helmets (1979), visors (2013) and helmets during warmups (2022) with grandfathering provisions. It could do the same for cut-resistant protection as part of ongoing CBA talks, which would mean introducing a mandate as soon as the 2025-26 season.

"I remember when we put netting behind the net," Dallas Stars GM Jim Nill said. "Remember the fight to do that?"

"I can't believe we went that long without netting," St. Louis Blues GM Doug Armstrong said. "I can't believe when I started out my wife and kids would sit in the corner 25 rows up and they didn't get (hit). It's just crazy. Safety should be paramount."

GMs believe mandated protection to exposed and vulnerable areas is coming.

"Players are creatures of habit, and they want to feel good," Nill said. "They're so competitive, they want to feel right. But I think eventually we're going to get to the point where they start to realize what's going on. And I think we have to help guide them there. I think the PA has to do their part and help push them, too."

One of the nearly five dozen NHLers to wear a neck guard is the Boston Bruins' Jakub Lauko. On Oct. 24, 2023, in a game at Chicago, Lauko was sliced open by a skate near his left eye. Leaving the ice, Lauko thought he actually lost his eye. When he returned to the lineup Nov. 11, he put on neck protection.

"Adam (Johnson's) incident happened four days after my accident, so it was one of the big reasons why I put one on," Lauko said. "I don't even notice it anymore. It's just part of my equipment now."

In the 2023-24 season, 78 percent of NHLers in The Athletic player poll, though, said they were opposed to neck guards being mandated. Lauko doesn't understand how Johnson's tragedy didn't cause NHLers to put on neck guards.

"Players think they're uncomfortable," he told The Athletic earlier this season, "but it took me like two or three practices to get used to it. I think the risk is much, much bigger than it's uncomfortable. If you can get through two or three practices, then you have another layer of protection on the most vulnerable spot on your body, which has already proven it can be fatal."

What really bothers some general managers is the number of AHL players who wear neck guards in the minors but take it off when they're recalled to the NHL.

"I told the PA to their face, actually, because we were all together in Montreal (during the 4 Nations), 'I don't care what you say. They come up, they're gonna keep it on,'" said Fitzgerald, who was one of Team USA's assistant GMs. "I haven't really enforced it yet, but I think it's important that we just have continuity."

Added Nashville Predators GM Barry Trotz, "I know in Nashville through our development camp, through our Milwaukee affiliation, we really push and demand that from players in the minors. Change comes from the younger group of players, and they get used to it and they understand it and they see it, and it's just an education process. We'll continue that. I just think safety's a priority. Our game's fast, it's dangerous and you want to keep the players and the athletes playing hockey."

"I know when I played, I wanted to wear what I wanted to wear," said San Jose Sharks GM Mike Grier. "That's the hard part. We have to encourage our players to protect themselves. I think our organization has been making sure our guys in the American League have the socks and wrist protection. And hopefully those guys will eventually graduate to the NHL and they'll just keep wearing it."

"But as far as our NHL guys, we make suggestions to them in training camp for what to wear, but that's as far as it goes. It's still going to be up to them to make the decision about what they want to wear."

Johnson's death highlighted the need to better protect hockey players, but most NHLers remain 'stubborn' about adopting protective gear.

Fitzgerald hopes NHL players think about their parents so "God forbid" they're not in the same position one day as Johnson's parents.

"We're very lucky," Fitzgerald said referring to the incident with his son. "(I don't understand) why the players don't think big picture. ... If they ever thought of their parents watching what we watched, maybe they'd think differently."

Added Armstrong, "There's so many near-misses, and you don't want to be part of a tragedy — you don't want to be part of the 1 percent or .01 percent, because potentially you don't come back from .01 percent."

Fitzgerald said after his son's wound was repaired and everything calmed down, Casey lay in that hospital bed and the reality of what had just occurred hit him.

He broke down as he thought about the "wow and the what-ifs," Fitzgerald said.

A few days later, Casey was back on the ice practicing with the Wolf Pack. He missed just two games and was back in Hartford's lineup in just eight days.

Fitzgerald is passionate about educating players about cut-resistant protection, but he hasn't been able to convince a single Devils player to wear a neck guard. The game before the 4 Nations Face-Off, the Devils' Luke Hughes had a close call with a skate.

He was rattled.

Hughes had known about what happened to Casey — had seen the pictures. But Casey's incident didn't trigger him to wear a neck guard, and even though he tried a neck guard after his scare, Hughes no longer wears one, Fitzgerald said.

"It's hard," said Fitzgerald, who played more than 1,100 NHL regular-season and playoff games. "I sound like a hypocrite. I didn't wear a half-shield. They were an option. And I tried. I didn't like it. And it felt like wearing glasses. But if it was mandated, and the more I wore it, the more you get used to it.

"I just don't understand how they can expose their ... they wear these 13-inch gloves and with exposure (on their wrists), I don't get it personally. Players are stubborn. I understand it. I was one myself, and I was as stubborn as they can be. It's about my career today. But if something like this could help think big picture versus the today, think about tomorrow."

The Athletic / Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin discuss possibility of future U.S.-Russia hockey games

By Scott Powers and Chris Johnston- March 19, 2025

U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed the possibility of U.S. and Russian hockey players being featured in games against each other during a phone call Tuesday, according to a readout of the conversation

Published by the Russian government.

According to the release, “Donald Trump supported Vladimir Putin’s idea to organize hockey matches in the USA and Russia between Russian and American players playing in the NHL and KHL.”

Russia and Belarus have been banned from international hockey competitions by the IIHF since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022.

The NHL said it had not been consulted on the possibility of Russia-U.S. games.

“We have just become aware of the conversation between President Trump and President Putin,” the league said in a statement to The Athletic. “Obviously, we were not a party to those discussions, and it would be inappropriate for us to comment at this time.”

Last month, the IIHF Council announced that Russia and Belarus would remain banned from IIHF competitions through the 2025-26 season.

“It is not yet safe to reintegrate the Russian and Belarusian National and Club Teams to its championships for the 2025-2026 season,” the IIHF said. “As the current security conditions do not allow the necessary requirements for the organization of tournaments guaranteeing the safety of all, the IIHF must maintain the current status quo until further notice.”

The Athletic / The NHL's 10 biggest disappointments of 2024-25, from contract mismatches to offensive declines

By Harman Dayal- March 19, 2025

The NHL is a harsh, results-focused business.

What a player did in the past doesn't matter; it's all about how they're performing right now. Contracts also play a massive role in setting expectations for players in a cap world.

Earlier this year, we highlighted some positive surprises by analyzing the league's most improved players. Now, here are the NHL's 10 biggest disappointments this season — only players, no coaches or GMs — in no particular order.

Elias Pettersson, Vancouver Canucks

Pettersson appears to perhaps finally be turning a corner — he's scored four goals and three assists in his last six games — but his drop-off over the last 12 months is one of the most mystifying stories in the NHL.

The 26-year-old Swede has scored just 42 points in 61 games, which translates to a 56-point pace over 82 games. He's produced just 1.5 points per 60 at five-on-five, which is third-line territory. It's all the more disappointing because his \$11.6 million cap hit is the fifth-highest mark of all players in 2024-25, not to mention his lackluster offensive performance was also a problem down the stretch last season and in the playoffs.

Why has Pettersson, who scored 102 points in 2022-23 and entered last year's All-Star break on a 107-point pace, seen his production fall off a cliff? Many theories are floating around but it's probably a combination of factors rather than a singular issue.

It's noteworthy, for example, that Pettersson revealed he was playing through knee tendonitis down the stretch last season, which coincides with when his point totals first cratered. It's fair to wonder if he's still felt the lingering effects of that at some points this season. Pettersson's top skating speed and speed bursts above 20 miles per hour are down significantly compared to two years ago. The first step of his skating has looked slow at times, which has hindered his ability to dynamically carry pucks through the neutral zone and create rush chances.

Pettersson's drop-off in skating speed

2024-25

55th percentile

72nd percentile

2022-23

88th percentile

94th percentile

Pettersson's waning confidence has also seeped into his game.

At his peak, he's a silky smooth puckhandler and can deke around defenders to manufacture dangerous passing and shooting lanes, but this season, he's been far more reluctant to attempt high-risk, high-

reward dangles. He's been playing it safe, which has made it difficult for him to take the puck to the inside.

Pettersson has also second-guessed his shot at times. There have been several plays, especially on the power play, where he's had the puck in a dangerous scoring location but has double-clutched or attempted an extra pass instead of just firing it on the net. He's generating shots at the lowest rate of his NHL career.

Elias Pettersson's shot rate

2024-25

5.6

2023-24

7.7

2022-23

9.4

2021-22

7.7

Lately, Pettersson's displayed a more aggressive shot-first mentality and is gaining some of his swagger back offensively, but it's going to take more than a handful of strong performances before we can confidently declare that he's back to his typical superstar level.

Brady Skjei, Nashville Predators

After the Preds traded Ryan McDonagh back to the Tampa Bay Lightning, general manager Barry Trotz vowed to his players that he'd find a high-end top-four defenseman to make up for the loss of McDonagh. Trotz delivered on that promise, signing Brady Skjei to a seven-year, \$49 million contract in free agency.

Skjei spent a large chunk of the first 20 games or so alongside Roman Josi. It looked like a tantalizing combination on paper, especially given the elite top-pair results teams like Colorado (Devon Toews, Cale Makar), Vancouver (Quinn Hughes, Filip Hronek) and Dallas (Thomas Harley, Miro Heiskanen) have gotten when pairing their two best offensive defensemen. In reality, Skjei and Josi got torched defensively and the experiment was scrapped.

Still, given his success anchoring Carolina's second pair in previous years, you expected Skjei to have success driving his own pair. That hasn't materialized. Skjei's been steadier since his nightmare start to the season, but he continues to decisively lose his matchups.

Nashville has been outshot, outchanced and outscored by 17 goals during Skjei's five-on-five shifts. He's been far leakier defensively than he was with the Canes and he's on pace for just 30 points offensively, which represents a significant dip compared to his last three seasons.

Dom Luszczyszyn's Net Rating player card

Environment, teammate quality and systems can drastically influence a defenseman's performance. In Skjei's case, the Hurricanes' favorable environment likely propped up his perceived value to a certain extent.

Elias Lindholm, Boston Bruins

The “check engine” light on Lindholm’s offensive game had already appeared last season, long before he signed a mega seven-year, \$7.75 million AAV contract with the Bruins on July 1.

Lindholm scored just 15 goals and 44 points in 75 games with the Flames and Canucks in 2023-24. He was still excellent defensively last season, but his offensive play-driving metrics had fallen off a cliff and the eye test backed it up as well. Lindholm didn’t have the dynamic speed to transport the puck up ice or excel as a playmaker; his offensive value was limited to his knack for getting open in the slot and finishing chances. Lindholm was terrific for the Canucks in the playoffs (10 points in 13 games on top of quality defensive play) but his point production was inflated by an absurd 16.4 percent on-ice shooting clip at five-on-five.

All signs pointed to Lindholm being a shutdown middle-six center at this stage in his career. Boston, however, rolled the dice on him being a true No. 1 center, the way he once was with the Flames when he played with Matthew Tkachuk and Johnny Gaudreau. The hope was that riding shotgun with David Pastrnak — which represented a huge upgrade in linemate quality for Lindholm compared to last season — could unlock his previous high-end top-six production.

That gamble has been a disaster.

Lindholm and Pastrnak mustered just 1.87 goals for per 60 in 224 five-on-five minutes together before the Bruins abandoned the experiment. Lindholm is on pace for just 43 points. He’s been an offensive black hole at five-on-five, scoring just 1.13 points per 60, which ranks 10th among Bruins forwards and 281st league-wide.

The 30-year-old’s defensive play is still superb, but he isn’t paid a \$7.75 million AAV to be a middle-six checking center. With six years of term remaining after this season, Lindholm’s contract carries serious long-term risk, even with the salary cap increasing.

Jack Quinn, Buffalo Sabres

Quinn, the Sabres’ No. 8 pick from 2020, appeared poised for a breakout campaign in 2024-25.

The 23-year-old winger was limited to just 27 games last season because of injuries, but he produced five-on-five points at the fifth-best rate of all NHL forwards who logged 300 minutes in 2023-24. With his pedigree, the hope for better health and a potential bump in ice time, Quinn was expected to make noise this season as a high-end top-six player.

Instead, he slumped to just one goal and four assists in his first 24 games and has scored at a mediocre pace of 34 points per 82 games. He and Dylan Cozens flopped together on the Sabres’ second line, which is one of the catalysts behind Buffalo’s underwhelming season.

Quinn is generating five-on-five shots and scoring chances for himself at the lowest rate of his career, which is concerning for a shot-first scorer. He’s been invisible for long stretches of the year and has struggled as a play-driver. The Sabres have been outscored by 12 goals during Quinn’s five-on-five shifts this season.

Chart via Evolving-Hockey’s RAPM model

Injuries have obviously hindered Quinn’s overall development, but he’s gone from being a core piece to entering “prove it” territory.

Matias Maccelli, Utah Hockey Club

Maccelli appeared to be a key part of Utah’s exciting young core heading into this season. He amassed 49 points in 64 games (a 63-point pace over 82 games) as a 22-year-old rookie in 2022-23 and followed that up with 57 points as a sophomore last season.

This year, he's scored just 18 points in 52 games and has been a healthy scratch for 12 consecutive games, dating back to Feb. 9 before the 4 Nations Face-Off break.

The 24-year-old Finnish winger is an exceptionally crafty, dynamic playmaker. He's a slick puckhandler and has impressive vision. However, Maccelli is undersized at 5-foot-11, can be a mixed bag defensively and isn't much of a forechecker, which is a disadvantage considering the coaching staff's preference for big, heavy forwards in the bottom six.

Last year, he had great success playing on the third line with Nick Bjugstad and Lawson Crouse, but that trio hasn't clicked this season, leaving Maccelli bouncing around the lineup, unable to find an ideal fit. Top-six duties haven't been easy to come by either because of the growth of Dylan Guenther and Logan Cooley.

Maccelli has also been a bit unlucky, as Utah has only scored on 6.4 percent of its shots during his five-on-five shifts, compared to the two seasons prior when it was nearly 10 percent. That kind of deflated on-ice shooting percentage will always have a negative impact on a playmaker's point totals.

Long-term, Maccelli is way too skilled to continue rotting away in the press box. But this year, at the very least, appears to be a write-off.

Jeremy Swayman, Boston Bruins

Jeremy Swayman's contract dispute with the Bruins wasn't resolved until Oct. 6, when he inked an eight-year, \$66 million contract with an \$8.25 million AAV. That deal made him the league's fifth highest-paid goaltender this season. Many feared he would start slow after missing Boston's entire training camp and preseason, but nobody predicted he'd be battling season-long woes.

Swayman's save percentage has consistently been in the .914 to .920 range in his NHL career, but he's slipped to .897 in 2024-25.

The Bruins haven't been as stout defensively in front of Swayman compared to years past. According to Evolving-Hockey, Boston ranks 18th at suppressing shots and expected goals against this season, which is a modest decline compared to last season and a far cry from the elite defensive environment of 2022-23. The increased volatility of Boston's defense is notable but isn't enough to justify Swayman's struggles. The 26-year-old is expected to be the type of star netminder who can bail mediocre defensive play out, but he's instead been part of the problem.

Swayman has also faced a learning curve as he adjusts to being the undisputed No. 1 goaltender rather than his previous 50/50 share of the net with Linus Ullmark. He's already played 49 games this season, which is a career high.

Goalies are notoriously volatile, and there are enough contextual factors, including the missed training camp/preseason, worsening defensive environment and increased workload, to hope Swayman will bounce back with a clean slate next season. However, it won't be easy with the roster in front of him weakening as the organization transitions to a retool.

Chris Kreider, New York Rangers

Nearly every core player on the Rangers has taken a step back this year.

Artemi Panarin is no longer playing like an MVP candidate, Adam Fox hasn't looked Norris-caliber and other top forwards such as Vincent Trocheck, Mika Zibanejad and Alexis Lafrenière have seen their offensive numbers tumble.

Chris Kreider's production has plummeted to 18 goals and just four assists in 54 games, which translates to a 33-point pace over 82 games after scoring 39 goals and 75 points last season. He has scored just 11

even-strength points all season, which is a colossal drop-off compared to the 41 even-strength points he notched in 2023-24.

Zibanejad and Kreider's inability to control play and drive offense at five-on-five on a line together is a huge reason why the Rangers have underperformed. Zibanejad has caught fire offensively with 20 points in 18 games since being shifted to the wing on J.T. Miller's line, but Kreider has still struggled.

Kreider has been a major drag on the Rangers' two-way results. During his five-on-five shifts, New York has controlled just 45.7 percent of shot attempts and 42 percent of goals. The 13-year NHL veteran has battled through back spasms, so his deteriorating physical health has been detrimental. Between that and natural aging, his elite speed has started to taper off for the second consecutive season.

Kreider's elite speed is tapering off

2024-25

84th percentile

71st percentile

2023-24

92nd percentile

89th percentile

2022-23

98th percentile

92nd percentile

Hopefully, Kreider can heal his body in the offseason and be fully healthy next fall, avoiding the start of a precipitous decline.

Philipp Kurashev, Chicago Blackhawks

Kurashev broke out with 54 points in 75 games last season, largely playing on Connor Bedard's line. Most understood his production was inflated from riding shotgun with Chicago's young franchise star, but there was still reason to believe Kurashev could be part of the Blackhawks' future as a supporting middle-six forward.

The 25-year-old was shifted back to the middle and began the season with a huge opportunity as the club's second-line center. He couldn't capitalize on it. Not only did he get off to a slow start offensively, but his two-way play didn't look comfortable at center. There were subtle situations in which he missed opportunities to drive play; a forecheck where he was half a second too late to disrupt the opposition, a puck down low he wasn't able to fully control for his line or a fast transition play he wasn't able to connect.

Kurashev has slumped to just 10 points in 43 games, and the Hawks have been outscored by an egregious 31-10 score during his five-on-five shifts. He's been healthy scratched several times and hasn't been able to consistently crack the lineup in the second half.

It's becoming abundantly clear that Kurashev was just a Bedard merchant. He's unlikely to be qualified in the summer as a restricted free agent, with this disappointing campaign likely costing him millions on his next contract.

Tristan Jarry, Pittsburgh Penguins

When Kyle Dubas took over as Penguins general manager two summers ago, he immediately faced a tough dilemma in goal.

Jarry, a two-time NHL All-Star with the talent to perform like a top 10-15 starter, was a pending UFA looking to cash in on a lucrative long-term contract. Jarry's lengthy injury history and unproven playoff track record made a long-term contract seem like a dicey bet, but the Penguins were handcuffed because the goalie market that summer was very lackluster and the organization was still in win-now mode, hoping to make one final push to contend around Sidney Crosby.

Dubas doubled down on Jarry, inking the talented, mercurial puck-stopper to a five-year extension worth \$5.375 million annually. Jarry was inconsistent in Year 1 of the contract, and it only got worse this season. The 29-year-old lost the starter's job and slumped to the tune of an .884 save percentage in 22 games before being placed on waivers and demoted to the AHL in mid-January.

It obviously isn't easy to play behind a leaky Penguins defense that concedes a ton of rush chances, but Jarry hasn't done his part to at least stem the bleeding. His contract, which has three years remaining after this season, has become a problem.

However, this is some hope. Jarry has a 4-0-0 record and has pitched a .930 save percentage in four games since his AHL stint. It's a tiny sample size, of course, but given how large of a role the mental side of the game can play in goaltending success, you're hoping his time in Wilkes-Barre was a chance to reset his confidence.

Ryan Nugent-Hopkins (and the rest of the Oilers' top wingers)

It feels unfair to single Nugent-Hopkins out because nearly every Oilers top-nine winger has underachieved this season.

Neither one of Viktor Arvidsson or Jeff Skinner, who were signed in the summer to beef up the club's middle-six wings, is likely to hit 15 goals this season. Zach Hyman went from scoring 54 goals last year to just 22 this season. Leon Draisaitl has been forced to drag around mediocre wingers all season on the second line. Edmonton's top nine looks noticeably slower after losing Dylan Holloway and Warren Foegele in the summer.

On the surface, Nugent-Hopkins' 42 points this season don't seem too shabby, but it's underwhelming considering the plum opportunity he's gotten to ride shotgun with Connor McDavid on the first line (although recently, he's centering the third line) and the top power-play unit.

Nugent-Hopkins has scored just 1.25 points per 60 at five-on-five, which ranks in the bottom 25 percent of all NHL forwards who've played at least 500 minutes this season. That's problematic when you consider he's spent about 50 percent of his even-strength minutes on McDavid's line. It's also part of the reason why the Oilers don't have a positive goal differential with McDavid on the ice at five-on-five this season, a stat that sounds nearly impossible to believe.

Don't forget Nugent-Hopkins scored 104 points only two years ago. Nobody expected him to be a consistent 100-point player, but that he's barely on pace to crack 50 points despite such favorable deployment is disappointing. Those offensive expectations will obviously change, however, if he continues centering the third line down the stretch rather than playing first-line wing.

Honorable mentions: Gustav Nyquist, Steven Stamkos, Yegor Sharangovich, Max Domi, Nils Högländer, Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, Matt Dumba, Chandler Stephenson, Ryan Lindgren

ESPN / NHL insiders debate playoff bubble, Cup finalists, MVP

By Ryan S. Clark, Arda Ocal, Victoria Matiash, Kristen Shilton, Greg Wyshynski- March 19, 2025

There is less than one month left in the 2024-25 NHL season but much remains to be determined:

Which teams will secure spots in the 2025 Stanley Cup playoffs?

Which team is under the most pressure in the final stretch?

Who will earn the Hart Trophy as league MVP?

And which two clubs will be squaring off in the Stanley Cup Final?

Read on as our ESPN hockey family debates those key questions.

Which team currently outside of the playoffs makes it?

Ryan S. Clark, NHL reporter: Let's go with the St. Louis Blues. Figuring out a defensive identity has been an issue the past few years. That's why they hired Jim Montgomery, and that led to improvement. Since they hired Montgomery in late November, the Blues are just outside the top 10 in fewest goals allowed, goals allowed per game and shots allowed per game. They have been one of the NHL's more consistent defensive teams in that time, and have won seven of their most recent 10 games.

Victoria Matiash, NHL analyst: Look out for the Utah Hockey Club. Riding a 9-4-2 record since Feb. 4, Utah hasn't lost two straight in regulation since Jan. 26. Outside of the crease -- Connor Ingram is out indefinitely after entering the NHL's player assistance program -- this is one of the healthiest teams in the NHL.

Clayton Keller is scoring, as usual. The second line duo of Dylan Guenther and Barrett Hayton is contributing. Utah's third line -- Jack McBain, Lawson Crouse, Josh Doan -- is proving tough to play against. Sean Durzi's long-awaited return bolsters the blue line in tangible fashion. If goaltender Karel Vejmelka can perform to near-optimal ability, this club has the wherewithal to sneak into that second wild-card spot in the West.

Arda Öcal, NHL broadcaster: Give me the Columbus Blue Jackets. They were in the second wild-card spot in the East, but after losing to the New York Rangers on Saturday, those two teams swapped places.

The East is a gauntlet and won't be decided until the last game. According to Statisticians, Columbus has the 10th-easiest schedule the rest of the way and fourth easiest in the East. The Jackets have a terrific 20-8-4 record at home, and play nine of their remaining games at Nationwide Arena. Plus a playoff berth would cap off an incredibly emotional season.

Kristen Shilton, NHL reporter: Let's go with the Montreal Canadiens. There's such spirit to that team, and the players radiate belief in themselves. It has been apparent in how the Canadiens are hitting a stride at this critical juncture. Cole Caufield and Patrik Laine have been especially strong leading the way on offense, and it has been encouraging to see the depth Montreal has exhibited.

GM Kent Hughes didn't make adjustments at the trade deadline. Clearly he too had faith in Montreal to be a playoff team without making additions. The Canadiens have a strong power play -- Laine is the point man there, too -- and their goaltending has improved. If Montreal can navigate a heavier schedule down the stretch -- including two more meetings with the Florida Panthers -- they can punch a postseason ticket.

Greg Wyshynski, NHL reporter: I predicted the Utah Hockey Club would make the playoffs before the season and I'll stick to that, because we're finally seeing what this team was supposed to look like. The Hockey Club is 6-3-2 since defenseman Sean Durzi returned to the lineup from injury. They missed him and John Marino for a majority of the season. Their returns have reset the Utah blue line, and the team's even-strength defense has been better for it: 1.50 goals against per game in its past 10 games, second only to the Winnipeg Jets and Carolina Hurricanes.

Utah is top 10 offensively at 5-on-5 in that stretch -- but if it's going to make the cut, it needs more from young star Logan Cooley, whose goal on March 16 ended a six-game scoreless streak. Utah will also have to ride Karel Vejmelka down the stretch, with the hopes that he continues his brilliant bounce-back season ... and that 25-year-old rookie Jaxson Stauber can produce the spot starts needed with Ingram in the player assistance program.

Which team is under the most pressure in the final month?

Clark: It's the Vancouver Canucks. The Canucks' journey to the second round last season raised questions. Namely, was this just one strong season, or could it be the start of something more substantial?

Reaching the playoffs for a consecutive season would at least establish that the Canucks can be a consistent postseason participant, which hasn't been the case in more than a decade. But missing the playoffs would only amplify the concerns about what happens going forward.

Matias: The Edmonton Oilers need to get their collective act together before the postseason, or it's going to be a short ride against whomever they face (the Los Angeles Kings, probably) in the first round. And that's not going to cut it with the Edmonton faithful, never mind stars Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl.

While Draisaitl and McDavid have a combined 46 points since Jan. 30, the rest of the Oilers' forward corps has a total of 48. Everyone else needs to figure out how to effectively pitch in, and soon. Meanwhile, the Oilers have allowed a fifth-worst 3.41 goals-against per game over that same stretch, partly due to Stuart Skinner's sub-mediocre play. Riding a 7-9-1 record since the end of January, Kris Knoblauch's squad needs to fix all that ails it in a hurry.

Öcal: If the Rangers fail to make the postseason, after making the conference finals two out of the past three years, you have to wonder what kind of changes we will see in Manhattan over the summer. It has been a tumultuous season for the Blueshirts already, with so many things -- memos to 31 other teams, captain trades, Ilya Sorokin scoring a goalie goal before Igor Shesterkin -- for fans to point to as reasons why the club took a step backward.

Shilton: The Toronto Maple Leafs have spiraled lately, and need to prove it's just a temporary glitch. The Leafs were riding high going into the 4 Nations Face-Off break but have stumbled badly against good teams since, with losses against the Vegas Golden Knights, Colorado Avalanche, Florida Panthers and Ottawa Senators.

Toronto's offense has stalled, the power play is sputtering and their goaltending -- a strength all season -- appears headed toward average (at best). Every team goes through rough patches, but this is a particularly poorly timed span of poor play by the Leafs. If it's nothing to worry about, they'd better start stringing some victories together before the postseason hits.

Wyshynski: The Detroit Red Wings. Teams fire coaches for a variety of reasons. For example, the Blues fired Drew Bannister because they're the NHL embodiment of the "guy looking at the other girl" meme when it came to Jim Montgomery's sudden availability. The Red Wings, meanwhile, fired Derek Lalonde

and hired Todd McLellan for one explicit reason: to make the playoffs for the first time since 2016, ending the longest playoff drought in this Original Six franchise's history and offering a scintilla of credibility to GM Steve Yzerman's vision for their revival, a.k.a. "The Yzerplan."

But they've remained a wildly inconsistent team under McLellan, who briefly managed to turn their season around before a disastrous stretch in which the Wings won twice in 10 games around the 4 Nations tournament. There's still a chance that Cam Talbot and Petr Mrazek could drag their anemic offense to the playoffs. But there's a greater chance they miss again, leading to yet another offseason with more questions than answers

Name your Stanley Cup Finalists with one month left.

Clark: Dallas Stars vs. Carolina Hurricanes. Deep down in all of us lies pettiness and a Hurricanes-Stars Cup Final with Mikko Rantanen at the right wing of it all, providing a level of drama that just can't be manufactured.

Matiash: Winnipeg Jets vs. Florida Panthers. I'll take the league's stingiest defense and third-best offense, buttressed by the game's greatest netminder, against a Florida squad that appears even more dangerous than last year's Cup winners following the key acquisitions of Brad Marchand and Seth Jones. Why overthink it?

Öcal: Colorado Avalanche vs. Tampa Bay Lightning. A 2022 rematch isn't out of the realm of possibility. Both teams leveled up in key areas at the trade deadline. The Bolts picked up Yanni Gourde and Oliver Bjorkstrand and now the top nine is stacked. They still have one of the best goalies in the league in Andrei Vasilevskiy. Meanwhile, Colorado added Brock Nelson, Charlie Coyle, Erik Johnson, Ryan Lindgren and Jimmy Vesey. I like the needs the Avs addressed before the deadline, and they look legit.

Shilton: Dallas Stars vs. Washington Capitals. Before the season began, there was a zero percent chance I would have suggested Washington was in position to reach the 2025 Stanley Cup Final. The Capitals are just having a special season, and those are rare. All things being equal, Washington should be able to translate its regular-season success into a long playoff run.

As for Dallas -- it's just time. The Stars have been circling a Final date for too long not to get there. Mikko Rantanen is on board. Miro Heiskanen will be back. Dallas should be formidable in every respect. It's their moment to shine.

Wyshynski: Dallas Stars vs. Florida Panthers. The Stars were my Stanley Cup pick before the season. Assuming it's all-systems-go for their wounded players -- Heiskanen, especially -- I'm still on them to break through after consecutive trips to the conference finals. Give me Jake Oettinger, Roope Hintz and Wyatt Johnston in any series; most importantly, give me Rantanen with something to prove on a stage he has owned for the past several postseasons.

Originally, I had them playing the New Jersey Devils, but that's not happening without Jack Hughes. So give me the Panthers' third straight trip to the Stanley Cup Final. Their core is built for playoff glory. They have Playoff Bob. GM Bill Zito has done a nice job addressing depth concerns. And adding Brad Marchand to a team that already has Matthew Tkachuk and Sam Bennett is, ahem, a tactical advantage no other team can boast. Bring your earplugs.

Who's your pick for Hart Trophy right now?

Clark: Connor Hellebuyck. It has been exactly a decade since Carey Price was the last goaltender to win the Hart. Price was beyond crucial to his team's success, while also leading the NHL in wins, goal-against average, save percentage and goals-saved above expected average. He was also in the top five in minutes played and saves.

Hellebuyck is atop the league in wins, GAA, save percentage, GSAA and shutouts, and has been going back and forth with Andrei Vasilevskiy for the lead in minutes played. There's no denying what forwards such as Leon Draisaitl, Nikita Kucherov and Nathan MacKinnon have done. It's just that what Hellebuyck stands to achieve is on par with what we expect out of a goalie being Hart-worthy.

Matias: Leon Draisaitl. Stubbornly siding with Nikita Kucherov -- still underrated as a game-changing asset to his team -- for a good part of this season, I can't help but now shift to the only projected 50-plus-goal scorer of 2024-25.

According to Evolving Hockey, Draisaitl boasts a league-leading 24.6 goals above replacement (GAR), 4.0 wins above replacement (WAR), and a whopping 7.6 standings points above replacement (SPAR). If that doesn't define "most valuable to their team," I'm not sure what does.

Öcal: Definitely Leon Draisaitl. He and MacKinnon will be neck and neck on points all the way to the last games of the regular season, but Draisaitl is running away with the Rocket Richard (49), currently 13 goals above William Nylander in second (36). Draisaitl also leads the league in even-strength goals (34). Plus, he's earning his Hart Trophy votes on a team that has Connor McDavid.

I'm picking Leon to win his second Hart in five years. Leon has been so good this season he could have helped Kino Loy swim away from Narkina 5.

Shilton: Nathan MacKinnon. Yes, we're talking back-to-back Hart Trophy wins. The last player to do it? Alex Ovechkin, in 2009. It doesn't happen often.

But MacKinnon has undeniably dragged Colorado back into the fight this season. Remember when we were counting out the Avalanche? MacKinnon never relented. Colorado lost Rantanen, and as devastating as that was, it almost seemed to light a larger fire under MacKinnon to keep Colorado in contending position. Now, if Hellebuyck takes it from MacKinnon that's incredibly well-deserved, too. But for me, it's MacKinnon, for how he has been the Avs' most valuable player practically every single game.

Wyshynski: Connor Hellebuyck. Let's not overcomplicate things. As of Monday, Hellebuyck had 39 of the Jets' 47 wins. He led the league in save percentage, and his goals-against average had dipped below two goals per game -- while that's considered a team stat rather than an individual one, it's fairly obvious who's responsible for it when backup Eric Comrie's GAA is half a goal higher.

There are certainly other worthy candidates: Draisaitl has an incredible case this season, and Zach Werenski deserves a shoutout for what he has done for Columbus. (And a louder shoutout to Quinn Hughes, who might have been the choice were it not for his injury.) But the Jets have been one of the NHL's best teams this season, and everything tracks to Hellebuyck as the foundation for that.

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

By Luke Fox- March 19, 2025

No. 1 defencemen, No. 1 centres, No. 1 wingers and No. 1 goalies. Bridge candidates and future superstars that need to be locked up before the big breakout.

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

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

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

The situations in Edmonton, Winnipeg, and Anaheim are particularly compelling.

Here's where things stand with the top 12 RFAs of 2025, as the flurry of trades and signings at the deadline settles.

1. Evan Bouchard

Age on July 1: 25

Position: Defence

2024-25 salary cap hit: \$3.9 million

Arbitration rights: Yes

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

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

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

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

Bowman knows he must squeeze in another superstar salary on the back end (somewhere in the \$10-million range?) for Bouchard, which is partly why St. Louis's offer sheets for Philip Broberg and Dylan Holloway were successful.

Because Bouchard has his defensive lapses, however, the idea of committing eight figures and locking him up long-term has divided the fan base.

"Bouch does get a lot of criticism — I think a lot unfairly so," Bowman told Daily Faceoff's Frank Seravalli on Feb. 26. "He's a great player. He really is a big part of our team. He's very effective, and I think

sometimes when... your mistakes get spotlighted, for whatever reason, then maybe there's more attention given to it.

"But he's played well. He's very good at complementing our best players. That's an important role. When you got really creative offensive players who are forwards, you need to have someone who can help them score."

Bouchard won't hit 80 points this season, 60 is more reasonable at this point.

Does that keep his asking price down a tad?

2. Luke Hughes

Age on July 1: 21

Position: Defence

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

Arbitration rights: No

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

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

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

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

Luke underwent off-season shoulder surgery, missing the first few weeks of his platform campaign, but rebounded strong and has stepped up down the stretch with injuries to Dougie Hamilton and Jonas Siegenthaler.

Fitzgerald said he would begin negotiating with Hughes's agent in January, but concrete updates have been scarce.

Bridging the young defenceman at, say, \$5.1 million per season, could save money now but set the Devils up for a monster bill when Hughes approaches UFA status and the salary cap has gone through the roof.

The smart money says buy big now.

3. Noah Dobson

Age on July 1: 25

Position: Defence

2024-25 salary cap hit: \$4 million

Arbitration rights: Yes

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

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

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

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

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

Hampered by injury and struggling at both ends of the ice compared to last season, Dobson’s production has been chopped in half. This is a disappointing season for all involved.

Dobson switched agents, from Andrew Maloney to Wasserman’s Judd Moldaver and Olivier Fortier, ahead of this critical negotiation.

Another cautious bridge deal, and the Isles could walk a top-four right shot straight to UFA.

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

4. Gabriel Vilardi

Age on July 1: 25

Position: Centre / Right wing

2024-25 salary cap hit: \$3.44 million

Arbitration rights: Yes

Bargaining chips: First-round pick. 2021 IIHF world champion with Team Canada. Traded a significant asset to obtain him. Three straight 20-goal seasons. Integral player in Presidents’ Trophy bid. Enjoying career season.

The latest: A major reason why trading Pierre-Luc Dubois to L.A. a couple of years back looks so good on GM Kevin Cheveldayoff, the versatile Vilardi has flourished as a Winnipeg Jet.

Not only has the forward grown from a third-liner to a top-six staple but he has become one of the more dangerous power-play threats in the league.

Another two-year bridge deal would walk Vilardi straight to free agency, so we suspect Cheveldayoff will aim for term here. The fit with core forwards Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor has been fantastic.

Cheveldayoff keeps his cards close to the vest, but when he was asked about doling out big raises for impending UFAs Nikolaj Ehlers and Neal Pionk, the executive said that he needs to sort out extensions for his younger RFAs.

Reading the tea leaves, we’d say the odds of Vilardi getting his money in Winnipeg are greater than Ehlers’.

5. Matthew Knies

Age on July 1: 22

Position: Left wing

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

Arbitration rights: No

Bargaining chips: Top-line power forward who skates on both special teams. Meshes well with superstars Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner. Biggest player on the Maple Leafs. Strong playoff showing. Easily crushing career highs in goals, points and minutes. Net-front presence. Fights own battles. Olympian.

The latest: So much for the sophomore slump.

Knies packed on 10 pounds over the summer, then got shot out of cannon. The second-year pro instantly gained trust (and ice time) from new Toronto coach Craig Berube and has been one of the Leafs' best stories of 2024-25.

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

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

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

He has politely declined to publicly discuss the state of extension talks, but there is no doubt Treliving wants to keep him in the fold, rebuffing rival GMs' trade interest at the deadline.

"Matthew is just realizing how big and strong he is, and he's getting more comfortable," Treliving said of his top-line left wing on March 7. "He's sort of grown right in front of our eyes. So, he's a big part of our team now (and will) continue to be moving forward. And he's a unique player. You know, that's a big, strong man at 22 years old."

Of course, the Leafs have monster decisions to make on UFAs Marner and John Tavares, but with the cap and Knies's stock both on the rise, we can't see a good reason not to lock him up for as long as possible.

6. JJ Peterka

Age on July 1: 23

Position: Centre

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

Arbitration rights: No

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

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

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

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

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

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

Despite a flurry of trade deadline rumours, Adams' stated goal is to sign Peterka to an extension at season's end. He plans to talk to Peterka's agent, Allan Walsh, soon.

"Zero, zero truth to that, anything around JJ in terms of looking to move him or any of that stuff," Adams said. "We'll get to his agent immediately, say, 'OK, where do we go from here?'"

"He's one of our core young guys. We need him to continue to get better, and we need to make sure that we're also explaining to him how we're going to make the team better."

Peterka has already eclipsed his previous season high in points (50) and is doing himself a favour by tracking back-to-back 20-goal showings on a talent-starved team with cap space to spare.

7. K'Andre Miller

Age on July 1: 25

Position: Defence

2024-25 salary cap hit: \$3.872 million

Arbitration rights: Yes

Bargaining chips: First-round pick. World junior silver medallist. NHL All-Rookie Team. Durable. Great size and reach at six-foot-five, 210 pounds. Productive despite limited power-play time. More than 40 games of playoff experience already. Excellent skater.

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

So, while the New York Rangers were quick to re-sign power forward Lafreniere, elite goaltender Igor Shesterkin, and newly acquired defenceman Will Borgen, locking up Miller before he wraps his bridge contract should be imperative.

All these raises add up, and Miller has (so far) survived the Rangers' in-season salary purge that has seen Jacob Trouba, Kaapo Kakko, Ryan Lindgren, Reilly Smith, and Jimmy Vesey sent packing.

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

New York still holds a couple years of club control here, so Miller's file has taken a back seat. That he survived the deadline bodes well for an extension, though.

"We're just looking for the best players we could," Drury said on March 7, regarding his defence corps.

"We knew we wanted to make some changes as this season got underway. Just the best pieces we could possibly find. There's certainly some size back there now, which is always nice. But you've got to be able to move, you've got to be able to move a puck, you've got to be able to play in a lot of different scenarios over the course of an NHL season. We think we have a lot of D back there that can do that."

8. Lukas Dostal

Age on July 1: 25

Position: Goaltender

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

Arbitration rights: Yes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That Gibson's salary could still get moved this summer — the Ville Husso trade feels like foreshadowing — only clears more space for a significant commitment to Dostal.

9. Marco Rossi

Age on July 1: 23

Position: Centre

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

Arbitration rights: No

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rossi says he "100 per cent" wishes to stay in Minnesota.

Guerin denied any thoughts of trading Rossi to The Athletic in late December. He also said there is "no rush at all" to re-sign the improving asset.

"I'm very happy with Marco. Oh, my God, yeah," Guerin said. "Just his pace of play, his engagement every night, he has been one of our best players. I think the biggest thing, too — and I know this is the hardest thing for young players — is his consistency.

"He's one of our better net-front presence guys. And he's not the biggest guy, but he stands in there and that's why he's getting rewarded. All his goals are from 10 feet and less. He's doing all the right stuff."

10. Dmitri Voronkov

Age on July 1: 24

Position: Centre

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

Arbitration rights: Yes

Bargaining chips: Silver medallist at world juniors and Olympic Games. Star player for Ak Bars Kazan in run to 2023 Gagarin Cup final. Seamless transition to North American game. Already set career highs in goals, assists, points, and plus/minus. Time as No. 1 centre on team in playoff race.

The latest: Voronkov has been a wonderful success story on a Columbus Blue Jackets team brimming with them.

The fourth-round pick has made an immediate impact since flying across the Atlantic after developing his game for four seasons in the KHL and has already hit the 20-goal and 40-point plateaus.

Asked to spotlight an under-the-radar player who has impressed him, GM Don Waddell pointed to his centreman.

"Well, I think Dmitri Voronkov has really taken a step forward. He's a big guy. For a big guy, he's got great hands. He goes to the net. He knows where to be," Waddell told The Hockey Writers.

Columbus is flush with cap space, and Voronkov is the perfect age to grow with Waddell's emerging core. He's getting a top-six opportunity.

We see no reason why both sides won't wish to extend the relationship here.

11. Mason McTavish

Age on July 1: 22

Position: Centre

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

Arbitration rights: No

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

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

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

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

That McTavish hasn't earned arb rights hurts. That he has improved defensively while remaining an offensive threat helps.

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

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

12. Fabian Zetterlund

Age on July 1: 25

Position: Left wing

2024-25 salary cap hit: \$1.45 million

Arbitration rights: Yes

Bargaining chips: World junior silver medallist. 2024 world championship medallist. Ripped 24 goals and added 20 assists in 2023-24, his first full NHL campaign. Can deadlift 600 pounds.

The latest: San Jose Sharks general manager Mike Grier didn't appear to have a re-signing priority higher than Zetterlund, who entered the final season of his bridge pact as his club's most prolific finisher.

Because Grier has shed so much salary in (a successful) attempt to win the draft lottery and stock up on young talent, cap space is of little concern in Silicon Valley. And there was no obvious reason to avoid a long-term deal with the sniper, who struck a tight friendship with teammate William Eklund.

Which is why Zetterlund's deadline-day trade to the surging Ottawa Senators caught many of us by surprise.

The Sens have decisions to make on UFAs like Claude Giroux and Anton Forsberg, but one must assume they acquired Zetterlund to keep him. A strong playoff showing will go a long way for the player's leverage.

More notable pending RFAs: Ryan McLeod, Philipp Kurashev, Morgan Frost, Joel Hofer, Will Cuyll, Connor Zary, Devon Levi, Daniil Tarasov, Mason Lohrei, Tyson Foerster, Cameron York, Bowen Byram, Morgan Geekie, Luke Evangelista, Alexander Holtz, Simon Holmstrom, Alex Laferriere, Hendrix Lapierre, Kaapo Kakko, Jack McBain, Jack Quinn, Adam Boqvist, Nick Robertson, Alexander Romanov, Pontus Holmberg