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March 4, 2026

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[Cleveland.com/ 5 players the Columbus Blue Jackets must target at the 2026 NHL trade deadline](#)

By Tim Bielik – March 5, 2026

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The 2026 NHL trade deadline is on Friday at 3 p.m., and the Columbus Blue Jackets find themselves in a position to be buyers.

They are three points behind the Boston Bruins for the final wild card spot in the Eastern Conference and five behind the Pittsburgh Penguins and New York Islanders for a Metropolitan Division playoff spot.

A win on Thursday night vs. the Florida Panthers could essentially guarantee the Jackets are a buyer for Friday's deadline.

But regardless of the outcome, they should be looking to upgrade their roster to give themselves a better shot to get back to the playoffs for the first time since the 2019-20 season.

Where should they be looking for help?

Here are five players they should target.

5. Panthers W Evan Rodrigues

With the Panthers being in seller mode according to Pierre LeBrun of The Athletic, Rodrigues has the potential to be a player Florida needs to move to create salary cap flexibility.

He's not a prolific scorer with career highs of 19 goals and 43 points, both of which came with the Penguins in 2021-22. But he's a reliable two-way player who can also play center.

Rodrigues is tied for 22nd in the NHL in takeaways (28) and according to Natural Stat Trick, he has a high-danger scoring chance percentage of 55.58%, meaning his team generates more high-danger scoring chances than it allows while he's on the ice. That would be seventh best on the Blue Jackets.

There is also something to be said for targeting a player who has scored against Columbus more than any other team — eight goals in 22 games.

4. Flames D Zach Whitecloud

Defense is still a concern for the Blue Jackets, but Whitecloud is the only defenseman I have in this top five.

Whitecloud, who went to Calgary from Vegas in the Rasmus Andersson trade, brings a lot to the table. He's only 29, has decent size at 6-2, 210 pounds and is a right-shot, which is always coveted when it comes to defensemen.

Whitecloud won't provide much offense with just two goals and 11 points in 59 games between Vegas and Calgary. But he is a sound defensive defenseman and is willing to be physical. His 73 hits in 47 games with Vegas are still eighth most on that team even though he was dealt to Calgary on Jan. 19.

Whitecloud has taken steps forward in a larger role with Calgary since the trade, playing more than 23 minutes per game and posting a better Corsi for percentage (53.5%) than he did with less ice time in Vegas (50.3%).

Rick Bowness values defense and has spoken about how it gets teams to the playoffs. If the Blue Jackets want to shore up the back end further, Whitecloud might be a good option.

3. Canucks W Brock Boeser

With where the Canucks are, selling off multiple pieces and going full-scale rebuild might be the best course of action. They've already traded Quinn Hughes, and even though they re-signed Boeser last summer, that doesn't guarantee he'll stay past Friday.

The Blue Jackets could use some more goal scoring, and that's Boeser's specialty. He has just 12 this season, but his shooting percentage of 10.3% is the third worst of any season in his NHL career. He has six 20-goal seasons, and scored 40 just two seasons ago.

Boeser also has a decent playoff track record with 11 goals and 23 points in 29 playoff games.

A concern is that he just started a seven-year contract with an average annual value of \$7.25 million. He also has a no-move clause.

But he could be a good fit and could give the Blue Jackets more offensive firepower in their top six if they are able to get him.

2. Blues W Jordan Kyrou

The Blues could be a team in fire-sale mode when they hit the deadline, and Kyrou might be one of the most intriguing pieces available. He has had an uncharacteristically quiet season with just 14 goals after scoring at least 31 in each of his previous three.

But his 10.8% shooting percentage and the underwhelming offensive numbers of the Blues suggest he could catch fire elsewhere.

The Blue Jackets could use more dynamic play on the wing, especially considering how Kent Johnson has struggled to regain his form from last season.

It's important to note he has a no-trade clause, so he might not even move this week. But if he's willing to listen to a move, even though he carries five more seasons at an \$8.125 million AAV on his contract, he could be the missing piece Columbus needs for its top six.

1. Blues C Robert Thomas

This feels like the most ambitious option for the Blue Jackets because Thomas is as sought after as any player ahead of Friday's NHL trade deadline. He would easily cost the most, but any team that can land

Thomas ahead of Friday's trade deadline could be signaling its intent to contend not just this postseason, but for years to come.

The 26-year-old Thomas has 12 goals and 35 points in 43 games. But he is coming off back-to-back seasons of 80-plus points and has won at least 52% of his faceoffs in each of his last four seasons.

He also has plenty of playoff experience, appearing in 52 postseason games and scoring six goals and 26 points.

There's a decent chance he stays put because the price tag on him is very high, and rightfully so. But if Waddell wants to put his stamp on the Blue Jackets, this is about as good a statement move as he could make.

Like Kyrrou, Thomas also has a no-trade clause.

Sports Illustrated / Blue Jackets Repeating Old Mistakes with Kent Johnson

By Tyler Miller – March 4, 2026

The Columbus Blue Jackets are on the outside looking into the Eastern Conference's second wildcard playoff spot as they trail the Boston Bruins by 5 points which could be 3 if they beat the New York Rangers. And being that close to a playoff spot, Columbus needs as much scoring help as they can get.

But they are not helping their case as of late as they have been scratching 23-year-old former 2021 5th overall pick Kent Johnson from their lineup. Johnson is a top six player and thrives when he is deployed correctly and actually gets to see the ice.

But Johnson has been sitting in the press box the last couple games because he is currently having a tough year. Johnson has played in 56 games so far this season and has only tallied 6 goals and 12 assists.

But last season Johnson played in 68 games and tallied 24 goals and 33 assists for 57 points which is great production for a player like him. But Johnson is not getting a chance to redeem himself or be played correctly in the top six if he is going to be scratched for veteran Danton Heinen who doesn't do much.

The Blue Jackets did the same exact thing that they are doing with Johnson with former forward Egor Chinakhov. Chinakhov was having a rough year and was being deployed on the fourth line and then got healthy scratched. But Chinakhov was then traded to the Pittsburgh Penguins where Chinakhov is flourishing.

Columbus and head coach Rick Bowness needs to realize he is making a mistake and swap Heinen back out for Johnson. When Johnson is on his game, he can provide offense, Heinen has slowed down a lot over the last few seasons and does not provide much offensively.

Bowness needs to realize his mistake before it is too late

The Columbus bench boss needs to realize that Johnson is a way better player that can provide more offense than Heinen can. Heinen is somebody that can chip in offense once in a blue moon but that is about it.

There is no possible way that Bowness is deciding to give up on Johnson already like former head coach Dean Evason gave up on Chinakhov. There are going to be teams lining up for Johnson's services if the healthy scratches continue.

Bowness needs to realize that Johnson is the type of player that can help his team get closer if not into postseason contention. He needs to realize this mistake soon and correct it as soon as he can.

The Columbus Dispatch / Blue Jackets' trade deadline: What Waddell will do with free agents

By Brian Hedger – March 5, 2026

The NHL's countdown clock to this season's trade deadline of 3 p.m. March 6 is ticking down to its final stages.

Front offices across the league are making plans and sorting through potential moves, including Blue Jackets president/general manager Don Waddell and his staff. Depending on the outcome of a game against the Florida Panthers on March 5 at Nationwide Arena, the Jackets could be as close as one point from a playoff spot or face a five-point gap when the deadline arrives.

Whichever end of the spectrum they're nearest to could factor into which path is taken with one or more of their pending unrestricted free agents who are occupying full-time roles.

Waddell said on Feb. 24 that he's expecting to keep UFAs Boone Jenner, Charlie Coyle, Mason Marchment, Erik Gudbranson and Danton Heinen, but nothing is set in stone until the deadline expires.

Columbus Blue Jackets assets at NHL trade deadline

If the Blue Jackets were in a rebuilding mode, Waddell would be sitting pretty.

Coyle and Jenner are coveted as two-way forwards who can play at center or a wing position, Marchment has ignited his offensive production while providing a power forward's frame and the Blue Jackets could supply experienced grit with Gudbranson and Heinen. All would fit nicely on a playoff roster, which means buyers would likely have interest.

Coyle turned 34 on March 2, so he's aging, but he has put together an outstanding season for the Jackets, who acquired him along with Miles Wood in a June 27 trade with the Colorado Avalanche. Coyle centers a physical checking line with Mathieu Olivier at right wing and Cole Sillinger on the left, and Blue Jackets coach Rick Bowness recently called that group his second line.

That's how vital Coyle has become while contributing 16 goals, 30 assists and 46 points in 60 games.

The Boston Bruins traded him to the Avalanche in a deadline deal last year to get center Casey Mittelstadt, a 19-year-old forward and 2025 second-round pick, and Coyle wasn't having nearly as much success as he is now.

Jenner, meanwhile, has long been coveted by opposing GMs for his ability to win board battles and faceoffs while playing with grit.

His production has dropped playing on the wing, which sometimes keeps him from getting to prime scoring areas, but the Blue Jackets' captain has chipped in 8-19-27 in 45 games. Jenner is dealing with a lower-body injury, but he'd probably return an impressive haul if made available.

Marchment would, too, since he is built for the grind of the playoffs. It took a 2026 fourth-round pick and 2027 second-round pick for Waddell to get him in a trade with the Seattle Kraken on Dec. 19, so the price tag for inquiring GMs is likely inflated.

Marchment has also found a home on the Jackets' top line with Adam Fantilli and Kirill Marchenko and has added 10-7-17 in 18 games since the trade. That leaves Gudbranson and Heinen, two UFA vets who offer quality depth and bite. Gudbranson has entrenched himself as a leader in the Blue Jackets' locker room, so that's another desirable trait.

Waddell also has valuable trade chips with 16 picks over the next two drafts plus lots of salary-cap space. According to PuckPedia, the Blue Jackets could have enough space at the deadline to absorb up to \$45.5 million in cap hits, which could generate incentivized offers from GMs looking to offload contracts.

What do the Columbus Blue Jackets need at the NHL trade deadline?

The short answer is nothing, as Waddell already has a bunch of productive UFAs who are equivalent to rental players. A more in-depth answer would include depth for the playoffs, which every playoff-hunting GM seeks.

The Blue Jackets have eight NHL defensemen instead of the more standard seven, and they have AHL forwards with solid NHL experience, including Zach Aston-Reese and Brendan Gaunce. That doesn't mean Waddell won't look to add around the edges as he did a year ago by acquiring depth forwards Christian Fischer off waivers and Luke Kunin via a trade with the San Jose Sharks.

That deal required a 2024 fourth-round pick for Kunin, so it wouldn't be a surprise if Waddell acquires additional depth by similar means this year. Would a mid-round pick offered to the Chicago Blackhawks be enough to bring back former Blue Jackets captain Nick Foligno, a gritty power forward who's still beloved in Columbus?

It's worth considering. Foligno has an expiring contract and would add instant leadership value along with skill and depth.

Will the Columbus Blue Jackets pull off a blockbuster swap?

Waddell likes to leave all options open, but don't count on it. Sending away draft capital and/or prospects to add a big-name UFA rental for the stretch run doesn't make sense for the Blue Jackets.

They already have a handful of rental types occupying spots in the active lineup, leaving little need for outside UFAs to fill gaps. Waddell said he'd be willing to consider trades for NHL players with term remaining on their contracts, but deals like those are rare and usually happen around the draft in late June or the July 1 start of free agency.

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets injury updates on Zach Werenski, Boone Jenner

By Brian Hedger – March 4, 2026

Following the Blue Jackets' 3-2 victory over the Nashville Predators on March 3 at Nationwide Arena, coach Rick Bowness provided brief medical updates on star defenseman Zach Werenski (illness) and captain Boone Jenner (lower-body injury).

Neither played against the Predators and Werenski missed his second straight game. The Blue Jackets hoped Werenski could skate in pregame warmups before a decision was made on his availability, but neither he nor Jenner participated.

Werenski, who won a gold medal with the United States at the 2026 Winter Olympics, is still recovering from an illness that has spread throughout the Blue Jackets' roster over the past month.

"He's not doing great," Bowness said. "So, we'll see how he is through the night (of March 3)."

Jenner sustained an undisclosed lower-body injury in the Blue Jackets' 4-3 overtime win March 2 at the New York Rangers and is listed as day-to-day now.

The Blue Jackets initially said Jenner would miss the game against Nashville for "maintenance," but Bowness confirmed after the game that Jenner sat out for a medical issue rather than a precautionary measure as a potential trade chip with the NHL's trade deadline looming at 3 p.m. ET on March 6.

"Lower body, maintenance, take your pick," Bowness said of the captain's injury. "He couldn't play."

The Blue Jackets didn't practice March 4 and return to action against the Florida Panthers on March 5 at Nationwide Arena.

The Athletic / The case for and against each NHL wild-card playoff hopeful

By Shayna Goldman – March 5, 2026

The big-picture plan for all 32 NHL teams revolves around one ultimate goal: Winning the Stanley Cup. But as each season rolls on, the pool of teams actually in contention thins out.

There is still a solid mix of teams vying for one of 16 coveted spots. So who will ultimately make it?

Each hopeful, both in the bubble and just outside, is building a case for and against a postseason berth. While there can always be surprises and wild swings down the stretch, for our purposes, those hopeful include teams on the fringes of the playoff picture, and outsiders within five points of the eighth seed.

Eastern Conference

Boston Bruins

The case for: David Pastrnak continues to prove that he is one of the best wingers in the world, no matter his surroundings. Whether he is skating alongside Morgan Geekie, who has already matched last year's goal-scoring total with 33 in 59 games, Elias Lindholm, or Marat Khusnutdinov, Pastrnak is an elite offensive force. Pair that with a bounce-back season from Jeremy Swayman, who has given the Bruins a chance to win with 31 quality starts in 40 appearances this season. After saving 3.35 goals above expected against the Penguins on Tuesday, he is up to a GSx of 34, which ranks third in the league.

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Between those core performances, a red-hot power play, some two-way improvements at even strength and some solid supporting performances from players such as Hampus Lindholm, Viktor Arvidsson and Fraser Minten, among others, it's made for a really strong 2026 so far in Boston.

Since New Year's, the Bruins boast a 13-3-3 record and a .763 point percentage, which has helped them stay in the playoff picture. And there is a lot of substance behind that, as the team's value has jumped by a plus-18.4 Net Rating over the last month.

The case against: As well as the Bruins have played this year, the team has been very streaky across the 59-game schedule. And really lucky: At five-on-five, this team is shooting 10.6 percent, and has a .914 save percentage. So the team has to find ways to add substance while taking on one of the most difficult schedules to close out the regular season.

To do that, the Bruins likely need some reinforcements to address roster holes. But this is where things can get tricky, because Boston technically never completed the retool started last spring. So, unless management can add some of the younger players available on the trade market, this team could go right back to mortgaging the future for a return to the playoffs.

Washington Capitals

The case for: The Capitals' roster may not compete with the top teams in the league, but its combination of home-grown talent and savvy acquisitions has made for a deep team over the last couple of seasons. Management has done a really good job of identifying reclamation projects and potential fits, while Spencer Carbery and the coaching staff have maximized those players. The coaching has earned a lot of credit for helping this team operate above the sum of its parts. So if the Caps take a swing in the coming days, it's a safe bet that the coaches can push the right buttons with any additions.

The return of Pierre-Luc Dubois was basically an internal addition for the Caps, since he only played six games before returning in early February. Since rejoining the team, he has earned six points and an average Game Score of 1.94, giving the second line a real boost.

The case against: As much as the Caps have embraced a deeper approach and have six players above the 40-point mark, having a 50-point scorer lead the way is less than ideal.

As much offense as Washington has created — at a rate of 3.03 xG per 60 at five-on-five, which ranks fifth in the league — it just hasn't translated to the scoresheet enough. That extends to the power play as well; the Caps' scoring chance generation hasn't been perfect on the advantage, but even more glaring is a lack of finish.

The Caps' team defense has been far from perfect, too, but the goaltending has done a lot to mask weaknesses.

Goal differential isn't everything, but it's generally a good temperature check of a team in the playoff mix. The Capitals rank eighth in the East with a plus-10 differential. Part of why that isn't enough to move up the standings is that Washington has struggled in tight games, and Tuesday's 3-2 loss to Utah was another example of that.

The fact that the Islanders keep cooking, with an 8-2-0 record in their last 10, and that the Penguins are also holding firm in the top-three in the Metro (with three games in hand), has only complicated things further for Washington.

Columbus Blue Jackets

The case for: The Blue Jackets have made a ton of progress over the last two years. Zach Werenski's elite all-around game is at the heart of that, along with growth from players such as Kirill Marchenko and Adam Fantilli. Some solid veterans, such as midseason addition Mason Marchment and defensive ace Charlie Coyle, have added some support.

But the big story now, of course, is the new coach bump. The Blue Jackets have gone 12-2-1 since making a change behind the bench. Rick Bowness was brought in to help stabilize Columbus's defensive zone play. So far, the team has improved its shot and scoring chance suppression over the last 15 games, compared to the first half of the season under Dean Evason, which is giving Jet Greaves more help.

All of that has contributed to a [30 percent jump](#) in the Blue Jackets' playoff odds over the last month. And management has the means to build on that, with cap space and trade assets at its disposal.

The case against: As much as Columbus has improved under Bowness, the team still has to work on defending leads. Last Saturday, the Blue Jackets blew a 2-0 lead to the Islanders and lost in overtime. While they took home two points on Monday, it was only *after* blowing a 4-0 lead to the Rangers.

The Blue Jackets may be one of the hottest teams in the league, but it still isn't clear if they will be a buyer or a seller. Columbus could stand pat and hope that the new-coach bump is enough to jump into eighth place. But that may not be enough, despite improvements under Bowness. The Blue Jackets could use more two-way support, whether it's reinforcements on defense or some finishing talent to kick the team's scoring rate closer to last year's levels.

But management could also take a more realistic approach with the long game in mind, and flip players such as Coyle, Marchment and Boone Jenner to load up for next season.

Western Conference

Edmonton Oilers

The case for: A team led by Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl and Evan Bouchard should be too strong to fall out of the top eight in the West. Besides, the Oilers are notorious for having rocky starts and turning it on when it matters most.

Edmonton's offense is red hot, both at even strength and on the power play. The core is the driving force behind that, and Zach Hyman's rebound has been clutch. Matt Savoie is finding his footing lately, and Kasperii Kapanen's return has helped boost the supporting cast.

Paul Coffey's return behind the bench should help stabilize the Oilers' defense. So should the addition of Connor Murphy, who defends the rush well and brings an element of stability to the blue line.

The case against: The Oilers may be two points away from first in the Pacific, but this team is also two points out of the playoff picture entirely.

It shouldn't be this difficult to build a contender around McDavid, Bouchard and Draisaitl. Instead, management tied up over \$9 million in Tristan Jarry and Trent Frederic's contracts, and already traded away its next two first-rounders.

The Jarry addition is the most damning because it comes with another two full seasons, which lines up with McDavid's next contract. The Oilers' chaotic defense has only put a brighter spotlight on an already volatile situation in net. Darnell Nurse continues to be unpredictable on the back end, while Mattias Ekholm's game has declined.

So while Murphy was a solid addition, this team likely doesn't have enough cap flexibility (or creativity from this front office) to fix all of its problems.

Instead, the Oilers have to keep betting on their big guns to outscore their problem. Sure, that worked on Tuesday night after Edmonton allowed two quick second-period goals to go down 4-2, and were ultimately saved by Draisaitl's five-point night. But that isn't a sound, sustainable strategy for success.

Utah Mammoth

The case for: The Mammoth are dynamic offensively, led by a really exciting group of rising stars. This could legitimately be the fourth-best team in the Western Conference.

From Clayton Keller and Mikhail Sergachev to Dylan Guenther, JJ Peterka and Logan Cooley, there is a lot to be excited about in Utah. This group plays with a lot of pace and thrives in transition; since New Year's, it's added up to a 3.02 xG per 60 and 3.13 goals per 60, which both rank sixth in the league. The supporting cast is only improving on the fly, too. John Marino has been great on both ends of the ice this season. Daniil But was emerging into a two-way threat before getting sent back to Tucson.

Since moving to Utah, ownership has given management the room to take bold swings and go big game hunting. And that could be the key to solidifying its playoff standing, because this team has the assets to bring in a real difference-maker.

The team already used its deep asset pool to bring in MacKenzie Weegar, and still has the pieces to add a forward.

The case against: Of course, to take a big swing, the Mammoth have to win bidding wars. And that is obviously the unpredictable part of the trade deadline, because there are only so many top-end talents available. Utah could still afford to bolster its center depth, but that tends to be in high demand this time of year.

One other potential area of concern is Utah overworking Karel Vejmelka. While he has proven that he can do a lot of heavy lifting — he did start down the stretch last year, after all — it is a risky strategy that could lead to fatigue or injury. Vitek Vanecsek has been fine as a backup, but could derail a lot of this team's progress in a bigger role.

But maybe the biggest case against Utah is the fact that it's wild card or bust — and that's why the Mammoth are featured here, while the seventh-place Canadiens aren't in the East. At this point, it's next to impossible to break into the top three in the Metro Division, with a 14-point gap separating the Wild and Mammoth. While Utah has a four-point lead on ninth place, there are still a few teams in the mix here.

Seattle Kraken

The case for: Joey Daccord and Philipp Grubauer's consistency has given Seattle a balanced crease to lean on; the two have each saved 20-plus goals above expected this season and rank in the top-15 in the league. The two have combined for a .903 save percentage that ranks third in the league, behind only the Wild and Avalanche.

The Kraken are getting timely saves and converting on their five-on-five chances. And, like the Mammoth, have the means to improve to add more layers below that. While the Kraken haven't been buyers in years past, it's no longer Ron Francis managing the team, either. Francis moved up the chain last spring, and Jason Botterill has taken over as GM. So this team *could* break the mold this year, and actually make some noise at the deadline to better its chances of disrupting the playoff picture.

The case against: While the Kraken have shown that a depth approach can work, with their 2023 playoff run, this team still lacks serious star power. Matty Beniers has the chops to become a top-end two-way center, but few others on this roster have that upside. Having Jordan Eberle's 41-points lead the way is a red flag.

Seattle may have the assets and cap space to do some damage at the deadline, but there are only a handful of needle-movers available — and the Kraken don't have a track record for making these splashy moves, either. Without outside help, this team may not be able to pull above break-even in xG down the stretch, or give the power play a boost. And that is concerning, considering the road ahead. The Kraken have one of the most difficult remaining schedules moving forward, while two teams in the mix for the same playoff spots have a much easier path.

San Jose Sharks

The case for: Just when it seems like the Sharks have come back down to Earth, with losses to the Flames and Sharks, they respond with three straight wins.

And two of those wins were bangers — a 5-4 win over the Oilers and 7-5 against the Canadiens.

Those wins highlighted some of the best that the Sharks have to offer. Macklin Celebrini, at just 19, is having an MVP-caliber season, which is *the* reason this team is even in the conversation. Add in some growth from up-and-comers such as Will Smith, Collin Graf and Michael Misa, and the present and future are only getting brighter for the Sharks.

Now, the Sharks are only a few points back of the Oilers and Kraken with games in hand — and this team has one of the easiest schedule strengths moving forward.

The reality is, the Sharks aren't ready to contend. But after a few seasons of savvy asset management, the team has some leeway to add a little more deadline support to 1) reward this team for exceeding expectations, and 2) push this young team to gain experience playing meaningful hockey in the spring.

The case against: Since the Sharks' chances of doing any damage in the playoffs are slim, management's focus has to stay on the big picture — even if it hurts this team's postseason chances this year.

As fun as the Sharks are, the reality is that this team has way too many holes. The defense is far too leaky and is a key reason why San Jose is below the break-even mark in expected goals at five-on-five.

The Sharks are over-reliant on goaltending to make up for their lapses, too, and that is especially true in short-handed situations. As excellent as Yaroslav Askarov was earlier this season, his level seriously dropped off after a star-powered November. His December was disastrous, and his play over the last two months has been streaky and inconsistent.

Maybe this team just isn't ready yet.

Los Angeles Kings

The case for: The Kings have the most favorable remaining schedule. The road ahead includes a lot of games against teams contending for these same wild-card seeds: the Mammoth, Predators, Kraken and Oilers. So there is a real opportunity for L.A. to do some damage and solidify its playoff chances.

With Artemi Panarin in the fold, the Kings have the potential to make some noise. As much as his scoring ticked down in New York this season, he has the dynamic skill set this team craves between his transition game and elite passing.

L.A. has the assets to keep adding around core players such as Adrian Kempe and Anze Kopitar, too.

On the back end, Brandt Clarke is progressing in more meaningful minutes. And while Darcy Kuemper's return to play was rough, he has generally been above-average this season.

The case against: The Kings continue to look outmatched by the best in the West — and recent losses to the Golden Knights, Oilers, and Avalanche only highlighted that. Some of Ken Holland's offseason signings are a driving force behind that. Take Monday's matchup against the Avs, where the Kings were outshot 34-11 in Cody Ceci's 22 five-on-five minutes, only earned a 17 percent xG rate, and were outscored 2-0.

The team's aging defense hasn't been sharp enough, especially in short-handed situations. The Kings have been giving up a lot of scoring chances on the penalty kill, and the goaltending hasn't been able to contain that.

And the offense isn't high-powered enough to negate that, either. It would be one thing if the Kings had both Panarin and a healthy Kevin Fiala in the lineup. That would seriously help an underwhelming power play, and a struggling five-on-five offense that has only mustered 1.86 goals per 60 in 22 games since New Year's.

The Kings have lost ground in the playoff race over the last few months. A new coach bump may not be enough to turn that around. How much meaningful change can D.J. Smith make midseason? He doesn't exactly have the best reputation for building an uptempo offense or a stout defense.

Nashville Predators

The case for: The Predators still have elite talent to build around at each position. Filip Forsberg's goal scoring is back on the rise this year, with 27 goals in 61 games; he is on pace for a 36-goal campaign. Roman Josi has made an impact since returning to the lineup and boosted the Preds' scoring by 0.46 goals per 60. While Juuse Saros' play has been far from perfect this season, his play for Team Finland was a reminder of his ceiling.

Luke Evangelista has emerged as a real bright spot with his ability to set up scoring chances. Ryan O'Reilly is still a very good two-way center. And Steven Stamkos, after a tough start to the season (and his overall Preds' tenure), has found his scoring touch again. And since those veterans aren't racing out of Nashville, they can keep contributing to a turnaround back into the playoff picture.

The case against: A team can't be eliminated from the playoffs a quarter into the season, but can dig a hole that is impossible to get out of. Nashville's start was absolutely brutal again this year. On Dec. 1,

they sat dead-last in the league with an 8-13-4 record and 20 points. As much as the Predators have turned things around, with a 19-13-4 record since, it may not be enough. Of all of the teams mentioned today, Nashville's playoff odds are the lowest at just [16 percent](#), despite having one of the most favorable schedules ahead.

So even if veterans such as Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault opt against waiving their no-movement clauses, management is still likely to sell any other movable players. As much as this team needs whatever support it can get to stay in the playoff race, management has to keep the big picture in mind because the long-term trajectory is not very bright.