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## **Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets playoff tracker: Still underdogs after 2-1-0 week**

**By Brian Hedger – April 1, 2025**

The Blue Jackets have 10 games left to earn a playoff spot.

Locked in a battle with a gaggle of Eastern Conference teams chasing the second-and-final wild card, aka the last ticket into the Stanley Cup Playoffs, the Jackets are about to test their mettle against a slate of tough matchups down the stretch.

"It's a sprint," second-year center Adam Fantilli said. "We've got to be playing our best hockey now. There's no time to waste. We can't go into a lull for a period or two, because that can cost us. So, it's just ... try to be as sharp as we can for as long as we can."

Despite them giving the Blue Jackets improved odds to make the playoffs following a 2-1-0 record last week against the New York Islanders, Vancouver Canucks and Ottawa Senators, the Jackets remain heavy underdogs with three weeks left. Helping the cause is a roster that's nearly at full strength after getting forward Cole Sillinger and defenseman Jake Christiansen back from injuries.

Dante Fabbro is questionable for a game Tuesday against the Nashville Predators (27-38-8), but that's the lone question mark for the Blue Jackets (33-30-9, 75 points) injury-wise. Otherwise, it's all hands on deck in a five-team race for a playoff spot that belongs to the Montreal Canadiens (34-30-9) starting the week. Along with the Jackets, those chasing the Canadiens include the New York Rangers (35-32-7, 77 points), Detroit Red Wings (34-33-6, 74 points), and Islanders (32-31-10, 74 points).

"Nothing can change (on our end)," defenseman Zach Werenski said. "We still have to approach it the same way and do what we've done to get us here. It's exciting. If we win (Tuesday) and Montreal loses, we're wild card two and we control our own fate. As crazy as it's been the last eight or nine games, we're still right there. It's exciting for our group."

### **Columbus Blue Jackets' odds of qualifying for the playoffs drop again**

The Blue Jackets have already exceeded all preseason forecasts for their season, but they've got an uphill climb to clinch a playoff spot. They've got a possible 20 points left in their final 10 games, which could be a long enough runway to get it done.

Those who forecast NHL games and produce betting odds are pessimistic about the chances they can pull it off.

DraftKings gives the Blue Jackets +330 odds to make the playoffs and -425 to miss, while BetMGM puts it at +320 and -425. Those DraftKings odds have improved from last week's +350 to make it and -450 to miss, while their odds on FanDuel have remained the same: +350 to make it and -520 to miss.

According to MoneyPuck, which uses percentages, the Blue Jackets' shootout wins over the Islanders and Canucks last week moved the needle up from 13.8% last Thursday to qualify for the postseason to 15.4% going into Tuesday's game against Nashville. Their chances to earn the East's second wild card also improved from 10.5% last to 14.2%, while their shot to land the first wild card dropped by 1.1%, falling from 1.6% last week to just 0.5% now.

MoneyPuck projects the Blue Jackets to finish with 85 points, which is in line with their .521 points percentage applied to the final 10 games.

### **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. The Blue Jackets and four other teams start the week separated by just three points for the East's second wild card and last ticket to the playoffs.

**Playoff cutoff:** The cutoff mark going into games Tuesday is 77 points for the Montreal Canadiens, who are tied in points with the New York Rangers and control the second wild card via a tiebreaker decided by games played. The Blue Jackets are 10th in the conference at 75 points, one point ahead of the New York Islanders and Detroit Red Wings.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets playoff outlook**

**Remaining points possible:** The Blue Jackets can earn up to 20 more points in their remaining 10 games. Using their .521 points percentage, they're projected to finish with 85 or 86 points after 82 games.

That's probably not enough to earn a playoff spot, but it might not take many more points to get the second wild card considering the logjam of teams so closely grouped in the chase for it. Getting to 90-plus points would provide a much higher probability, which the Jackets can do with a hot streak.

### **Here is how the Columbus Blue Jackets have fared recently**

**Last 10 Games:** The Blue Jackets are 3-6-1 in their last 10 games.

Notable wins/losses: While winning four straight games coming out of the NHL's pause for the 4 Nations Face-Off tournament in February, the Blue Jackets pulled off a memorable 5-3 win over the Red Wings in the 2025 NHL Stadium Series outdoor game at Ohio Stadium.

They also looked great while routing the New York Rangers 7-3 on March 9 at Madison Square Garden in New York, got a needed boost last Monday in a road shootout win over the Islanders and outlasted the Vancouver Canucks, 7-6, in a wild shootout win this past Friday night at Nationwide Arena. On the down side, they dropped eight of nine games following their outdoor triumph over Detroit and settled for a back-to-back split this past weekend with a 3-2 loss on the road Saturday against the Ottawa Senators.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets upcoming schedule**

#### **Here are the Blue Jackets' next five games with start time and TV/radio broadcast information:**

Tuesday, April 1 — Nashville Predators (27-38-8), 7 p.m. FanDuel Sports Network/97.1 FM The Fan

Thursday, April 4 — Colorado Avalanche (45-26-3), 7:30 p.m. FanDuel Sports Network/97.1 FM The Fan

Saturday, April 5 — at Toronto Maple Leafs (45-25-4), 7 p.m. FanDuel Sports Network/97.1 FM The Fan

Sunday, April 6 — at Ottawa Senators (39-28-6), 5 p.m. FanDuel Sports Network/97.1 FM The Fan

Tuesday, April 8 — Ottawa Senators (39-28-6), 7 p.m. FanDuel Sports Network/97.1 FM The Fan

### **Columbus Blue Jackets home/road splits**

The Blue Jackets have struggled all season on the road. Their splits between home and road games are striking, but six of their final four games are at Nationwide Arena:

**21-9-5 (45 points) Home Record: 21-9-5 (45 points)**

**Away Record: 12-21-4 (28 points)**

Summary: Teams that make the playoffs usually break even on the road and make hay at home. The Blue Jackets have the home success part down but can't shake their road woes.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets key players**

**The top scoring leaders for the Blue Jackets are:**

D Zach Werenski — 20 goals, 52 assists, 72 points

RW Kirill Marchenko — 28 goals, 38 assists, 66 points

F Kent Johnson — 22 goals, 24 assists, 46 points

C Adam Fantilli — 22 goals, 22 assists, 44 point

C Sean Monahan — 14 goals, 30 assists, 44 points

LW Dmitri Voronkov — 20 goals, 22 assists, 42 points

Breakdown: These six are critical to the Blue Jackets' playoff hopes, and Monahan's three assists in three games since returning from a wrist injury were a welcome boost atop the lineup. The Jackets also got Cole Sillinger back from a shoulder injury last week, and he's entrenched on the third line at left wing with center Justin Danforth and right wing Mathieu Olivier.

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

No. 1 starter — Elvis Merzlikins is 24-19-5 with a 3.09 goals against average (GAA), .895 save percentage (SV%) and one shutout.

Backup — Danill Tarasov is 7-9-2 with a 3.49 GAA, .882 SV% and one shutout.

**Breakdown:** After struggling with consistency, Merzlikins has been solid as the Jackets' top option between the pipes. Tarasov has also rebounded from a slump in the season's first half to provide a dependable backup option.

## [BlueJackets.com / Mateychuk playing beyond his years on the CBJ blue line](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – April 1, 2025

Denton Mateychuk grew up as one of five siblings, all of whom excel at highly competitive sports.

If that conjures images of a hectic household with a torn-up rec room and plenty of arguments among brothers and sisters, well, you're right.

"We had a little ministick area in my basement – we tore that to shreds," Mateychuk said of the family's home in Dominion City, Manitoba. "There was always something (being played)."

That competitiveness came naturally, as Mateychuk's father, Jason, played college baseball and his mother, Keela, is a marathon runner and skating coach. They grew up in athletics and raised their kids in sports as well, and the results are impressive.

The eldest Mateychuk son, Maddux, pitched at Campbellsville University in Kentucky. Denton is the second oldest and is now a rookie defenseman for the Blue Jackets, while the middle son, Kasen, made his debut for Denton's junior team, Moose Jaw of the WHL, this season.

Crosby comes next, and he's is a standout defenseman at age 15 who is expected to be selected in this year's WHL draft. Rounding out the quintet is the lone sister of the group, Brylee, who excels at both softball and hockey and appears to have quite a future ahead of her as well.

Think it's pressure to jump into the lineup as a 20-year-old defenseman for an NHL team battling for a playoff spot? Try surviving ministicks or a wiffle ball game with the Mateychuks.

"We definitely had that competitive spirit in all of us," Denton said. "We had ministick games, we played two vs. two baseball in the backyard. We built our own diamond. It was always wiffle ball, to keep safe from the windows and stuff. You'd tag the ghost runner and it would be an argument for half an hour."

Perhaps that's why the transition into the lineup hasn't seemed to bother Mateychuk, who has struck teammates with his unflappable nature.

"His disposition, just the way he is, the way you read that on the ice is how he attacks his day on a daily basis," veteran Erik Gudbranson said. "Away from the rink, he just seems calm, cool and collected. He's got his process every day and comes in and executes it. He's never too high, never too low. It's not too much of a shock just the way he is around the rink and away from the rink."

And as the games have become more and more important for Mateychuk, his performance hasn't suffered. The smooth-skating right-shot defenseman has posted a 4-6-10 line in 35 games, including a goal and three assists in the last four contests, and moved up to the top pair to skate with Zach Werenski in Saturday's game vs. Ottawa. Mateychuk also shined on the biggest stage, scoring the opening goal of the Blue Jackets NHL Stadium Series win vs. Detroit in front of more than 94,000 fans in Ohio Stadium.

There have been some of the usual growing pains a 20-year-old defenseman will have at the NHL level, but by and large, head coach Dean Evason has been impressed by what Mateychuk has brought to the table.

"More ups than downs, that's for sure," Evason said. "He plays the game above his age, and his maturity is real good. He conducts himself like a pro. He's going to be an NHL player for a very, very long time. He's handled a lot of situations extremely well."

There's only a handful of defensemen his age in the mix among teams with playoff aspirations – Montreal's Lane Hutson, the Calder Trophy favorite, leads the way among the 20-year-old crowd, while Vancouver's Elias Pettersson, New Jersey's Simon Nemec and the Islanders' Isaiah George are also on teams battling for spots – but Mateychuk has proved he has what it takes.

That's no surprise, though, given Mateychuk's pedigree. The No. 12 overall selection in the 2022 draft, Mateychuk was one of the best players in junior hockey a season ago, earning WHL defenseman of the year honors as well as the playoff MVP award after helping Moose Jaw win its first-ever league title. Mateychuk finished the season with 17 goals and 75 points in 52 regular-season games, then added 11 goals and 30 points in 20 playoff contests for the Warriors.

At the end of the season, he reported to Cleveland, where he had three assists in four games during the Monsters' AHL playoff run. This year, he proved he was ready for pro hockey when, after being one of the last cuts of CBJ training camp, he led all AHL defensemen with 25 points in 27 games with the Monsters before being recalled in late December.

Like any competitor, Mateychuk wanted to begin the year with the Blue Jackets, but he just went back to work and focused his energies in Cleveland to showing he deserved the call-up to the big leagues.

"Your goal is to play at the NHL level, and that's what I want to do for the rest of my career," Mateychuk said. "It's not a race, though, to get there. I just wanted to be a part of the process and keep working to this goal. I think it started in Cleveland, and I worked my way up."

As Evason noted, Mateychuk's ceiling is high, and it seems fair to say he's going to be an NHL defenseman for a long time. That's no surprise to his teammates, who have consistently been impressed with Mateychuk's skill, demeanor and approach.

"He's a great kid," Gudbranson said. "He's a really, really high-end player. He seems to be getting a comfort level every game. He can move his feet, he can advance the puck through the neutral zone and make really good plays."

## The Hockey News / Elvis Merzlikins Has A Couple Milestones In Sight

By Jason Newland – April 1, 2025

When it comes to goalie history for the Columbus Blue Jackets, Sergei Bobrovsky is the gold standard for that position. He owns the record for wins, games played, shutouts, and goals against average. It's going to take a lot for someone else to break those records.

In the shootout win against the Vancouver Canucks, Elvis Merzlikins moved into second place for career shootout wins for the CBJ passing Steve Mason. Elvis now sits with 13 shootout wins, while leader Bobrovsky has 23 such wins.

As far as other records, Merzlikins is close to moving into second place in a few categories.

Merzlikins currently has 92 career wins, which right now is good enough for 3rd all-time. Steve Mason had 96 wins in his CBJ career. If Elvis can manage five more wins, he'd move into second all-time behind Sergei Bobrovsky and his 213 career wins. That record seems out of reach for Merzlikins.

He also has 11 shutouts in his career, which is fourth for now. One more shutout will get him to 12 and will tie him with Marc Denis. Third on that list is Mason, who has 19 shutouts, and Bobrovsky has 33, which seems out of reach as well.

Before the season, most people would've been excited if Merzlikins won 15 games. Right now, he's sitting at 24-19-5, and with 10 games left, he has a shot at hitting 30 wins for the season. More importantly, he has a chance to equal or pass his career high of 27 wins, set back in the 21-22 season.

Unfortunately, Merzlikins also has 98 career losses, which is one behind Steve Mason. So, there's a good chance he'll be third all-time in losses after this season. But that'll happen when you play so many years with a single team, so nothing to see here. Marc Denis and Sergei Bobrovsky lead that category by a large margin.

Elvis Merzlikins has had a bounce-back year for the Columbus Blue Jackets, but he'll need to take it up a notch these last 10 games to get his team into the playoffs.

Has Elvis gotten his swagger back?

**Up Next:** The Nashville Predators come to Nationwide Arena on Tuesday.

## The Hockey News / Columbus Signs 2021 Fourth Round Pick To An Entry Level Contract

**By Jason Newland – April 1, 2025**

Columbus has announced that they have signed 2021 4th round pick Guillaume Richard to a two-year, entry level contract beginning with the 2025-26 season.

In 139 career games for Providence College, he scored 9 goals and had 54 points. He was also picked to be the alternate captain for this past season. He was also nominated for the Hobey Baker Award this past January.

The Cleveland Monsters also announced that they have signed Richard to an ATO for the rest of this season.

**Up Next:** The Nashville Predators come to Nationwide Arena on Tuesday.



## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Believe They Are Turning Corner on Back-to-Back Games

**By Mark Scheig – April 1, 2025**

The Columbus Blue Jackets enter the new week coming off a split of their back-to-back games against the Vancouver Canucks and Ottawa Senators. They find themselves still right there in the playoff race.

The Blue Jackets won a thriller 7-6 in a shootout against the Canucks on Friday night. Then in Ottawa Saturday night, they played well in stretches but ultimately fell 3-2 to the Senators.

The loss Saturday dropped the Blue Jackets to 1-9-0 on the second half of back-to-back games this season. But unlike the previous eight losses in this scenario, the Blue Jackets had a chance to win. It's marked improvement from earlier in the season.

### **Turning a Corner?**

Are the Blue Jackets starting to turn that all important corner when it comes to back-to-back games? The 1-9-0 would seem to indicate that they haven't.

But a closer look suggests perhaps there are some positive signs. Both Adam Fantilli and head coach Dean Evason believe the team is turning a corner.

"We came in and we gave ourselves a chance to win on a back-to-back," Fantilli said. "I think that's the best we've played on a back-to-back in a while here. I'm proud of our effort. Didn't go our way. We had some chances that didn't go in. What can you do? Try to get back at it (Tuesday)."

The Blue Jackets won't make excuses for their play in any situation. They know no matter how they feel or how quick a turnaround the next game is, they have to be at their best. Fantilli agreed that the team is turning a corner.

"There's no excuse for us to not be at the top of our game every night. We have all the resources to be there. We just gotta be at our best every night and there's no excuse for that. Just because we're playing a back-to-back doesn't mean we're going to be a little bit tired or sluggish. We still got to be the same team and play the same way and get the same result (wins)."

Evason believes the effort in more recent back-to-backs have been better. Like Fantilli, he believes the Blue Jackets are starting to turn a corner.

"I think that's fair," Evason said. "If you just look at the short term the last game in particular, we have talked about from our standpoint but that's as close of a playoff game. It was so fast at the start and so hard. Everyone's playing right and gritty and determined and the scored dictated. A one-goal hockey game, low scoring. Everyone was dialed in and committed to playing that type of a hockey game. And unfortunately, we couldn't find that one."

"We had a couple of chances at the end to tie it up. That would have been ideal and have a chance to win in overtime or the shootout. But yeah, I agree. I think if we just look at that back-to-back, we've got two more coming, if we play like that, we should put ourselves in a good spot."

The last two back-to-backs come up when the Blue Jackets play again in Ottawa on Sunday. But this time, both teams are playing back-to-back where as the Senators were waiting at home for the Blue Jackets the first time. The other back-to-back is against the Washington Capitals.

Saturday's game was the Blue Jackets' best effort on the second half of back-to-backs this season given the opponent and what was on the line. They didn't get the result. But they did establish the framework of what it's going to take to be successful in that situation.

### **Side Dishes**

- Evason said that Zach Werenski and Sean Monahan each had maintenance days. As for Dante Fabbro, Evason said "We're evaluating and I hope he plays tomorrow." Fabbro missed Saturday night in Ottawa and is considered day-to-day.
- Practice lines suggested no changes up front. That would mean Yegor Chinakhov and James van Riemsdyk among others would continue to sit. Evason didn't want to divulge his lineup on Monday. But he did admit that every decision about the lineup is hard and it's a topic of conversation in the meetings.
- The Blue Jackets play the Nashville Predators on Tuesday. Despite being eliminated, the Predators are still a dangerous team. The Blue Jackets know it too. Here's Evason: "You just look at their lineup. We've got it up on our board this morning and you just look at who is in their lineup. This league is too good to even think about teams being separate. The standings, the points maybe are separated, but the skill sets and how teams play in the National Hockey league is very consistent. We won't take anybody lightly."
- The Blue Jackets announced that they signed 2021 fourth-round pick Guillaume Richard to a two-year entry-level contract. The deal kicks in starting in 2025-26. He is now on an ATO with the Cleveland Monsters.
- The Monsters also signed Tyler Peddle to an ATO for the rest of this season.

## **The Athletic / NHL, Canadian media company Rogers agree to 12-year, \$7.7 billion TV deal: Reports**

**By Julian McKenzie – April 1, 2025**

The National Hockey League and Canadian telecommunications giant Rogers have agreed to a new 12-year national broadcasting deal worth \$7.7 billion that will begin in 2026, according to multiple reports Monday.

Rogers declined comment when contacted by The Athletic.

Sportico first reported the story Monday, and the Associated Press confirmed it, citing “a person familiar with the deal.”

The new agreement will come at the conclusion of the previous 12-year deal agreed to by both parties, which was signed in 2013 for \$5.2 billion Canadian. The deal is expected to allow Rogers to sell some games to other networks like Amazon Prime, which is broadcasting games on Monday nights in Canada through 2026.

Last June, Amazon declined comment when asked if Amazon Prime Monday games would be a gateway to getting more games once Rogers’ current deal expires next year.

The NHL also has broadcasting deals with ESPN and TNT in the United States. Both channels and the NHL agreed to a seven-year contract worth \$4.5 billion in 2021.

Canadian NHL teams will continue to have regional deals with either Sportsnet or TSN to broadcast their games. The Edmonton Oilers and Calgary Flames both agreed to 11-year broadcasting deals with Sportsnet in 2024. The Vancouver Canucks’ current deal with Rogers expires in 2033. Bell recently acquired content rights for the Toronto Maple Leafs last September in a 20-year deal. The Winnipeg Jets, Montreal Canadiens and Ottawa Senators each have broadcasting deals with Bell’s TSN or RDS that run through 2026.

Rogers also owns a 37.5 percent stake in Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment (MLSE), the conglomerate that owns the Toronto Maple Leafs, as well as the NBA’s Raptors, among other teams and real estate.

In September, Rogers announced plans to buy an additional 37.5 percent share in MLSE from telecommunications rival Bell. That deal is expected to close later this year.

## The Athletic / What we learned in the NHL in March: Blues' green flags, Stars' red flags, power-play slides

By Shayna Goldman – April 1, 2025

### **Is there a hotter team in the NHL than the St. Louis Blues?**

St. Louis was already showing signs of progress heading into the 4 Nations Face-Off break under Jim Montgomery. The team has made a statement since returning to play. The Blues boast a 15-2-2 record in 19 games over the last month-plus of action, with a league-high 0.842 point percentage over that span.

The Blues have sometimes benefited from schedule strength over this 19-game stretch, with meetings against the Blackhawks, Predators and Ducks. But the team also went head-to-head with playoff-caliber opponents. St. Louis earned two regulation wins over the Avalanche, beat the Capitals 5-2 and took five of six points against the Kings.

One of the most pivotal moments came in a comeback win over the Canucks on March 20. The Blues' playoff odds were at 23.6 percent heading into that game and have surged in the 10 days since to 76 percent (before accounting for the Canucks' loss to the Jets on Sunday).

The Blues aren't in a playoff picture because teams around them have wilted. This team powered its way up the standings against the odds, thanks to its play at five-on-five. With a 56 percent expected goal rate, the Blues are only a shade behind the league-leading Jets since the 4 Nations break.

St. Louis is getting contributions up and down the lineup. Robert Thomas, Pavel Buchnevich, Dylan Holloway and Jordan Kyrou are producing at the top of the lineup, while Zack Bolduc has stepped up in a supporting role. But the most impressive part of this run is how well the team has played defensively. The Blues have coughed up a league-low 1.93 expected goals against per 60 despite missing their top defenseman. Colton Parayko was one of the most improved players since the coaching change and excelled in tough usage. Philip Broberg and Justin Faulk have stepped up since he was sidelined, but there has been a team-wide effort to limit rush chances against.

There are just a couple of five-on-five numbers to keep an eye on. The Blues shouldn't be expected to shoot 12.5 percent forever or rock a 0.926 save percentage. Outscoring opponents 53-26 will be tough to sustain, but this team is showing that there is still oomph below the surface to support its play-driving.

It's good to be lucky, but the Blues aren't just lucky to be good.

### **Power-play opportunities are on the decline**

Power plays are scorching hot this year. Teams are clicking at an average efficiency of 21.7 across the league, the highest conversion rate since 1985-86's 22.1 percent. Prashanth Iyer wrote about the surge in power-play efficiency in mid-March and found that expected goal rates were also rising this season. Some trends that have built momentum in recent years play into that — more teams are deploying units consisting of four forwards and one defenseman, and there has been more emphasis on shots from the circle and net front instead of the point.

Despite generating more offense on the power play and converting at the highest clip in almost 40 years, the average rate of power-play goals per game is down to 0.59 this year from last year's 0.63 and 2022-23's 0.65. The difference is because of a drop in overall power-play opportunities this season. As The Athletic's Dom Luszczyszyn pointed out in 16 Stats earlier this month, this season's 2.71 power-play opportunities per game is a 10 percent decline from last year's 3.02.

Something really noticeable about that is when the whistles are going away. Officials are calling far fewer non-offsetting penalties after the 50-minute mark (including overtime). It's a steep drop from years past, especially the 2022-23 season, as pictured below thanks to Micah Blake McCurdy of HockeyViz.

The real question is why there is such a drastic swing in penalty-calling after the 50-minute mark and if power-play efficiency has anything to do with it. Every non-offsetting penalty called carries more weight because teams are converting on their opportunities at a higher clip, and that can be a difference-maker late in regulation and in overtime (remember, in 2022-23, there was an uptick in power plays called in overtime and it led to more games ending before the shootout). Is this a conscious decision to avoid officials having too much influence in games, or does putting the whistle away intentionally have the same effect?

### **Disastrous special teams in Columbus**

Not every team's power play is popping off; just ask the Blue Jackets. In 16 games since the 4 Nations break, Columbus has only scored three goals with the man advantage ... and allowed four short-handed back in that same span.

The Blue Jackets have generated more chances than the scoresheet shows, with an expected goal rate of 8.13 per 60 in that span. That is below league average but not as dire as their putrid scoring rate reflects. The problem is that those missed scoring opportunities could cost them in the wild-card race.

**3/29:** 0-for-1 against the Senators, lost 3-2

**3/20:** 0-for-2 against the Panthers, lost 1-0

**3/17:** 0-for-1 against the Devils, lost 2-1

**3/15:** 0-for-3 against the Rangers, allowed one short-handed goal, lost 4-0

**3/13:** 0-for-3 against the Golden Knights, lost 4-0

**3/11:** 0-for-3 against the Devils, lost 5-3

**3/6:** 0-for-4 against the Panthers, lost 3-0

The Blue Jackets could have won a few more games in March had they converted on some of those chances — and maybe would have the edge in the standings. Even if the team's shooting percentage rebounds from 4.65 percent, the other end of the ice still holds the team back.

Columbus' penalty kill has allowed a league-high 11.5 expected goals against per 60 since the break. The goaltending has been better than expected under that workload, but the penalty kill is still getting absolutely crushed. The Blue Jackets have given up 11 power-play goals in the last 16 games, which has been an outright back-breaker.

### **Red flags are emerging at five-on-five in Dallas**

After adding Mikko Rantanen to an already-stacked forward group without having to move out a core piece, the Stars emerged as one of the front-runners for the Stanley Cup. But there are some red flags below the surface raising concern at five-on-five.

The Stars have only mustered 43 percent of the expected goals share in 14 games in March, which ranks third-last ahead of only Pittsburgh and Boston. Defense had a lot to do with it; the Stars' five-on-five offense was nothing special, but their expected goals against ranked dead last in the league this month. Luckily for Dallas, its record doesn't reflect any of these struggles — the team went 10-2-2 this month and won 22 of a possible 28 points (79 percent). The Stars still had a 31-23 scoring edge at five-on-five.

That, plus a hot power play and solid goaltending from Jake Oettinger, made up for where the team fell short.

At the end of the day, they don't ask how, they ask how many. Teams can try to live by that philosophy, but it won't necessarily lead to a championship — especially not with a playoff path that will likely feature the Avalanche in Round 1, the winner of the Jets and Blues in Round 2, and then a Pacific Division contender to get through the West.

The right side of the blue line is a glaring weakness in Dallas, even if it didn't burn the team in the standings this last month. Cody Ceci has been over-leveraged against top competition. Ilya Lyubushkin also looks overtasked in the top four.

The return of Miro Heiskanen will help reset roles and responsibilities. It still isn't clear when he will be back — the Stars' No. 1 is skating again, but the team is also preparing to play a round without him. If something doesn't change over this next stretch of play, that could be really difficult against the Avalanche, whose speed could expose a Heiskanen-less blue line.

### **Washington's goalie rotation**

With a playoff berth clinched, the Capitals can focus on two things down the stretch: Alex Ovechkin making history and a long postseason run.

A key part of the Caps' playoff prep involves their goalies. Logan Thompson and Charlie Lindgren shared the net evenly all season, starting every other game. But now the coaches are starting to test their goalies with consecutive starts.

After returning from injury, Lindgren started two straight in late January. Thompson then played two consecutive games in early February. Since then, Thompson has started two in a row on four other occasions, signaling he will be the No. 1 in the playoffs.

A team may share the net evenly in the regular season, but the playoffs are a different animal. It helps to get one goaltender in a rhythm, no matter what the regular-season rotation looked like, and lean on them primarily unless injury or performance forces a change.

Just look at the last five postseasons — most goalies who played less than a 60 percent starting share in the regular season still became the de facto No. 1 once the playoffs began. That was the case for Jeremy Swayman in Boston, despite a pretty even regular-season rotation with Linus Ullmark.

Now Thompson is revving up for that expanded role. Even with the recent departure from the regulation, Lindgren is still getting his reps in, sometimes every three games instead of every other, so he should stay sharp if needed in the postseason.

### **Celebrini is a rising star**

The Calder Trophy race is incredibly tight this year. Dustin Wolf measures up not just to other rookies but to some of the top goalies in the league. Lane Huston's developing on both ends of the ice while playing meaningful hockey in the playoff picture. If either of those players could take home Rookie of the Year honors, it shouldn't take away from Macklin Celebrini's season in San Jose.

Celebrini's progress throughout the season has been impressive. Corey Sznajder's tracking at All Three Zones helps capture how well he is starting to stack up to some of the league's best offensive creators.

At five-on-five, Celebrini's already thriving as a dual threat. His puck-moving ability stands out, from his passing to his play in transition. He enters the zone efficiently, with a 75.6 percent carry-in rate, and turns those entries into scoring chances at a rate of 7.1 per 60. That puts him in the upper echelon of the

league, with the likes of Kevin Fiala, Jack Eichel, Jack Hughes, Leon Draisaitl, Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon and Mathew Barzal.

While Celebrini still has a ways to go before he can be in conversation with some of the league's best, this is a positive building block in his path to stardom. Celebrini has a high-end skill set that's already translating at this level despite not having much support around him.

### **March Stars**

Cale Makar remains one of the best all-around defensemen in the league. He tends to play in power vs. power matchups and continues to excel despite his workload. Even more impressive is how he and MacKinnon, Colorado's core players, have helped push the Avs through a post-deadline adjustment period after the team made several personnel changes.

Hutson is known for his offensive chops. In 14 games in March, he put up one goal and 14 assists and earned a 58 percent expected goal rate. But he also deserves credit for upping his defensive game over the last month of play while playing in high-pressure games in Montreal's chase for the second wild-card seed. Hutson has been a difference-maker in the Canadiens' push for the playoffs.

There is always a list for the third star. Draisaitl is a goal-scoring machine and Edmonton's most valuable player. McDavid elevated his game over the last month, too. Nick Suzuki, Kyrrou and Holloway have played big roles in their respective teams' playoff hunts. Nikita Kucherov is making his case for the Hart Trophy, while Sergei Bobrovsky and Darcy Kuemper have upped their games in net. But this month, the star belongs to William Nylander, who is "just trying to do what (he is) paid to do" in his third straight 40-goal season.

## The Athletic / If the NHL playoffs started today: The matchups and what to expect in each series

By Julian McKenzie – April 1, 2025

The NHL playoffs begin on April 19, in less than three weeks, and several division titles and wild-card spots remain up for grabs.

- Three teams are jostling for the Atlantic Division crown, with Toronto ahead of Florida and Tampa Bay by three points.
- Five teams are pushing for the Eastern Conference's second wild-card spot. The Montreal Canadiens are in that spot right now, holding the tiebreaker over the New York Rangers. Columbus, the New York Islanders and Detroit are within two or three points.
- Winnipeg and Dallas have clinched spots in the Central Division. But the Stars are within six points of the division lead, thanks to a five-game winning streak.
- The St. Louis Blues are on a nine-game winning streak and are level with the Minnesota Wild in points. Both teams are in wild-card positions in the Western Conference. Vancouver (six points back) and Calgary (seven points) remain in the race.

As we inch closer to the postseason, it isn't too early to start looking at which teams might meet in the first round. Here's how things looked Monday morning:

### **Eastern Conference**

M1 Washington (103 points) vs. WC2 Montreal (77 points)

M2 Carolina (94 points) vs. M3 New Jersey (85 points)

A1 Toronto (94 points) vs. WC1 Ottawa (84 points)

A2 Tampa Bay (91 points) vs. A3 Florida (91 points)

Other contenders: NY Rangers (77 points), Columbus (75), NY Islanders (74), Detroit (74)

### **(M1) Washington Capitals vs. (WC2) Montreal Canadiens**

It's a first-round rematch 15 years in the making. If we get this, Washington will hope to exact revenge on the Canadiens, who upset the Presidents' Trophy-winning Caps in 2010. The circumstances would be the same in this scenario, even though many didn't peg the Capitals as the league's best team at the beginning of this season. But Spencer Carbery's coaching job likely will earn him the Jack Adams Award.

The Caps are deep with prominent talents. Alex Ovechkin, of course, is still scoring goals and is marching toward Wayne Gretzky's career record. Dylan Strome, Aliaksei Protas, Jakob Chychrun and Logan Thompson also are leading the way, and that's with Tom Wilson and John Carlson playing well, too. The Canadiens are no slouches, however. They get goals from the top line of Nick Suzuki, Juraj Slafkovsky and Cole Caufield, and their second line of Christian Dvorak, Josh Anderson and Brendan Gallagher has been solid.

### **Remaining schedules:**

Washington (nine games): at Boston (Tuesday), at Carolina (Wednesday), vs. Chicago (Friday), at NY Islanders (Sunday), vs. Carolina (April 10), at Columbus (April 12), vs. Columbus (April 13), at NY Islanders (April 15), at Pittsburgh (April 17)



Montreal (nine games): vs. Florida (Tuesday), vs. Boston (Thursday), vs. Philadelphia (Saturday), at Nashville (Sunday), vs. Detroit (April 8), at Ottawa (April 11), at Toronto (April 12), vs. Chicago (April 14), vs. Carolina (April 16)

### **(M2) Carolina Hurricanes vs. (M3) New Jersey Devils**

The Hurricanes have been one of the league's best teams all season, with or without Mikko Rantanen. They came out of the brief Rantanen era pretty well, amassing draft capital and Logan Stankoven for future playoff pushes. Carolina plays a good brand of hockey, committing to defense — they're top five in goals allowed — while getting quality offense up and down their lineup and winning battles at five-on-five. Carolina has the best Corsi rating at five-on-five, according to Natural Stat Trick.

They'd be favored against the New Jersey Devils, who may have done just enough to stave off other Metropolitan teams. The Devils might get a healed Dougie Hamilton back for the playoffs, but they won't get Jack Hughes due to injury. There will be pressure on Devils goalie Jacob Markstrom to deliver and improve on his .900 save percentage for the season so far.

#### **Remaining schedules:**

Carolina (nine games): vs. Washington (Wednesday), at Detroit (Friday), at Boston (Saturday), at Buffalo (April 8), at Washington (April 10), vs. NY Rangers (April 12), vs. Toronto (April 13), at Montreal (April 16), at Ottawa (April 17)

New Jersey (seven games): vs. Minnesota (Monday), vs. NY Rangers (Saturday), vs. Boston (April 8), vs. Pittsburgh (April 11), vs. NY Islanders (April 13), at Boston (April 15), vs. Detroit (April 16)

### **(A1) Toronto Maple Leafs vs. (WC1) Ottawa Senators**

The Battle of Ontario will captivate the hockey world's attention if it happens. The provincial rivalry is reason enough to tune in. But these two sides haven't met in the playoffs in 21 years. On paper, the Maple Leafs have reason to fear the Senators: they lost the regular-season series against them, with Ottawa playing a tight defensive style.

But in a best-of-seven series, in which teams can focus on one opponent the whole time, there is no guarantee the Senators' winning ways would continue. That's the beauty of a long series: teams get opportunities to adjust. That said, the Maple Leafs have been favorites in first-round series before and lost. And fans have every reason to be nervous against any opponent, not just the Senators. There's something at stake with this core, too.

#### **Remaining schedules:**

Toronto (eight games): vs. Florida (Wednesday), vs. Columbus (Saturday), at Florida (April 8), at Tampa Bay (April 9), vs. Montreal (April 12), at Carolina (April 13), at Buffalo (April 15), vs. Detroit (April 17)

Ottawa (nine games): vs. Buffalo (Tuesday), vs. Tampa Bay (Thursday), vs. Florida (Saturday), vs. Columbus (Sunday), at Columbus (April 8), vs. Montreal (April 11), vs. Philadelphia (April 13), vs. Chicago (April 15), vs. Carolina (April 17)

### **(A2) Tampa Bay Lightning vs. (A3) Florida Panthers**

The Lightning are still good, if you didn't know. Since the beginning of February, they've won 16 of 22 games. The Bolts have a plus-69 goal differential, third-best in the league behind Winnipeg and Washington. Nikita Kucherov is tussling with Nathan MacKinnon for a second consecutive Art Ross Trophy win. The Lightning are heating up at the right time, and not many teams would want to face them in a playoff series.

But the Panthers might have something to say about that. They snapped Tampa Bay's eight-game win streak earlier this season and got the better of their in-state rivals in the playoffs last year. Yes, the closeness of the Atlantic Division means this matchup (just like the Battle of Ontario matchup) isn't a guarantee. But who would say no to another Battle of the Sunshine State?

#### **Remaining schedules:**

Tampa Bay (nine games): at NY Islanders (Tuesday), at Ottawa (Thursday), at Buffalo (Saturday), at NY Rangers (April 7), vs. Toronto (April 9), vs. Detroit (April 11), vs. Buffalo (April 13), vs. Florida (April 15), at NY Rangers (April 17)

Florida (nine games): at Montreal (Tuesday), at Toronto (Wednesday), at Ottawa (Saturday), at Detroit (Sunday), vs. Toronto (April 8), vs. Detroit (April 10), vs. Buffalo (April 12), vs. NY Rangers (April 14), at Tampa Bay (April 15)

#### **Western Conference**

C1 Winnipeg (106 points) vs. WC2 St. Louis (87 points)

C2 Dallas (100 points) vs. C3 Colorado (93 points)

P1 Vegas (98 points) vs. WC1 Minnesota (87 points)

P2 Los Angeles (91 points) vs. P3 Edmonton (89 points)

Other contenders: Vancouver (81 points), Calgary (80)

#### **(C1) Winnipeg Jets vs. (WC2) St. Louis Blues**

It is difficult to be the best team in the league from the beginning of the season until the end. But the Jets have been that good since the first puck drop. Connor Hellebuyck is an MVP candidate, while Kyle Connor and Mark Scheifele are both flirting with 40-goal seasons. The Jets have a lot to prove after a disappointing opening-round loss last year to Colorado.

The Blues are the league's hottest team, with a nine-game win streak. The Blues have some heavyweights left on their schedule, including the Jets, but they're still likely to enter the playoffs as one of the hottest teams to end the season. With St. Louis and Minnesota tied on points, this matchup isn't set in stone yet.

#### **Remaining schedules:**

Winnipeg (eight games): at Los Angeles (Tuesday), at Vegas (Thursday), at Utah (Saturday), vs. St. Louis (April 7), at Dallas (April 10), at Chicago (April 12), vs. Edmonton (April 13), vs. Anaheim (April 16)

St. Louis (seven games): vs. Detroit (Tuesday), vs. Pittsburgh (Thursday), vs. Colorado (Saturday), at Winnipeg (April 7), at Edmonton (April 9), at Seattle (April 12), vs. Utah (April 15)

#### **(C2) Dallas Stars vs. (C3) Colorado Avalanche**

These two Cup-contending teams are on a collision course. This was an intriguing possibility well before Rantanen joined Dallas ahead of the trade deadline. Of all the projected first-round matchups, this one might feature the most firepower on either side. The Avs are one of the top three teams at five-on-five, armed with an MVP candidate in MacKinnon, plus Cale Makar and more. And that's after they remade their goaltending and added to their forward core with Marty Necas and Jack Drury.

Dallas would counter with Rantanen, Wyatt Johnston, Jason Robertson, Jamie Benn and Jake Oettinger. There's also Miro Heiskanen, but he might not return for the first round. Still, Dallas could have enough

to punch back against the Avs. If things remain as they are, this could be the marquee matchup of the Western Conference.

**Remaining schedules:**

Dallas (nine games): at Seattle (Monday), vs. Nashville (Thursday), vs. Pittsburgh (Saturday), at Minnesota (Sunday), vs. Vancouver (April 8), vs. Winnipeg (April 10), vs. Utah (April 12), at Detroit (April 14), at Nashville (April 16)

Colorado (eight games): vs. Calgary (Monday), at Chicago (Wednesday), at Columbus (Thursday), at St. Louis (Saturday), vs. Vegas (April 8), vs. Vancouver (April 10), at Los Angeles (April 12), at Anaheim (April 13)

**(P1) Vegas Golden Knights vs. (WC1) Minnesota Wild**

The Golden Knights are contenders. Yes, again. It's been a constant since they entered the league in 2017. They're trending toward the Pacific Division crown while boasting top-five offense and defense. And Jack Eichel is close to his first-ever 100-point season. Vegas could find itself back in the Cup Final again.

The Wild, meanwhile, are hoping to get Kirill Kaprizov and Joel Eriksson Ek back sooner than later. They'll need them in any playoff series, let alone against Vegas. Filip Gustavsson's goalie workload was packed enough this year, but he's still holding it down with a 2.51 goals-against average and a .916 save percentage. He would be important in a postseason series against Vegas. Of course, it could be St. Louis or another wild-card team in this spot.

**Remaining schedules:**

Vegas (nine games): vs. Edmonton (Tuesday), vs. Winnipeg (Thursday), at Calgary (Saturday), at Vancouver (Sunday), at Colorado (April 8), vs. Seattle (April 10), vs. Nashville (April 12), at Calgary (April 15), at Vancouver (April 16)

Minnesota (eight games): at New Jersey (Monday), at NY Rangers (Wednesday), at NY Islanders (Friday), vs. Dallas (Sunday), vs. San Jose (April 9), at Calgary (April 11), at Vancouver (April 12), vs. Anaheim (April 15)

**(P2) Los Angeles Kings vs. (P3) Edmonton Oilers**

We could see Los Angeles-Edmonton for the fourth consecutive year, but this might be Los Angeles' best chance at upending last year's Western Conference champions. The Kings are one of the best teams at home and Darcy Kuemper has been a quality goaltender — maybe even Vezina Trophy level if not for Hellebuyck — with a 2.10 goals-against average and a .919 save percentage. In this scenario, they'd have a home-ice advantage for the first time in the four matchups against the Oilers.

Once the playoffs start, however, the Oilers should have Connor McDavid healthy. With McDavid and Draisaitl, the Oilers remain Western Conference favorites for many. Both teams are also brilliant at five-on-five, so this series has the potential to go the distance.

**Remaining schedules:**

Los Angeles (nine games): vs. Winnipeg (Tuesday), at Utah (Thursday), vs. Edmonton (Saturday), vs. Seattle (April 7), vs. Anaheim (April 10), vs. Colorado (April 12), at Edmonton (April 14), at Seattle (April 15), vs. Calgary (April 17)

Edmonton (nine games): at Vegas (Tuesday), at San Jose (Thursday), at Los Angeles (Saturday), at Anaheim (April 7), vs. St. Louis (April 9), vs. San Jose (April 11), at Winnipeg (April 13), vs. Los Angeles (April 14), at San Jose (April 16)

## The Athletic / Weekend NHL rankings: The Wild, the Canadiens and the 10 teams we haven't ranked yet

By Sean McIndoe – April 1, 2025

With the calendar about to flip over to April, we're down to three weeks left in the regular season. And that means we don't have many of these columns left. The finish line is in sight.

It's safe to assume the last few weeks will be dedicated to breaking down the various playoff races, unless every bubble team in the East just voluntarily folds their franchise to avoid landing a spot it's clear nobody wants. But in this semi-calm before the storm, a few of you have pointed out we've yet to visit an annual tradition around here: recognizing the teams that made it through the entire season without ever landing in either the top or bottom five.

This is the true middle of the pack, although as you'll see, they come in some very different flavors. And this year, the numbers reinforce that in a pleasingly symmetrical way: 11 different teams showed up in the top five, and 11 more had at least one appearance in the bottom five. That leaves us with an even 10 teams that didn't appear on either list all season long. Let's divide them into categories.

### **Bonus Five: The teams that haven't made the top or bottom five all year**

**5.** The good teams that could still theoretically find the top five: It's tough to crack either list for the first time this late in the season, but two teams have been good enough to be in top five consideration at a few points during the year and could theoretically still make it.

That would be the Lightning and the Maple Leafs, two teams battling with the Panthers for first in the Atlantic. The Panthers have been in the top five for much of the season despite having a similar record, which I think is fair given all their recent playoff success. But first place and a matchup with a wild-card is looming large, so if either the Leafs or Lightning got red-hot and ran away with the division down the stretch, they'd have a top-five case. For now, though, they've been just short.

**4. The teams that weren't close to the top five but are still happy with their season:** I'll put four teams in this category. The first is the Kings, a classic case of a team that's been consistently good with occasional gusts up to great, but never all that close to top-five status. I'll also include the Senators and Blues, two teams that have had their ups and downs but look like playoff teams down the stretch. And then there's the Flames, a nice story that seems to be fading down the stretch. I'm not sure that finishing 10th in the West would feel like a major success, but this is a team a lot of us wrote off before the season even started, and they spent most of the year proving us wrong.

**3.** The true mushy middle teams: This would be the Islanders and Utah, two teams that spent the year plugging away, hanging right around the playoff mix without ever looking especially threatening. I'm not sure there was a single week all year in which either team even occurred to me as a legitimate contender for either list. They're fine.

That leaves us with two teams, each of whom deserves its own category.

**2. The disaster:** That would be the Bruins. They started slow, fired the coach, never got more than a couple of games over fake .500, faded in the second half, sold at the deadline and are now cratering their way to a miserable finish. They're actually closer to the bottom of the standings than I'd realized, so there's a small but non-zero chance they could actually find the bottom five by the end of things. What a mess.

**1. The mystery:** That leaves us with the one team I still can't figure out. Yes, it's the Canucks, a team whose season has fallen well short of expectations but is still in the playoff hunt, if only barely, despite a firehose of drama, trading away one of their best players, key injuries and a coach who looks like he wants to strangle someone at all times. Every game these guys play is a roller coaster. I know they're not among the five best or worst teams in the league, but that's just about all I've been able to nail down.

**On that note ... Wow, this game:**

**The 2024-25 Vancouver Canucks:** A lot of things, but definitely not boring.

**A bonus note:** We managed to avoid the dreaded "team that showed up on both lists" this year. Well done, everyone, we cleared the lowest possible bar there is. On to this week's rankings ...

### **Road to the Cup**

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

Nope, still doesn't look right in that uniform.

No Panthers in the top five this time, as I stay clear of the Atlantic for the second straight week. We'll figure this out eventually, but when you've got time, use it.

**5. Carolina Hurricanes (45-24-4, +44 true goals differential\*)** — They look good, the Devils do not, and Thursday's meeting with the Capitals feels a lot like a second-round preview.

**4. Vegas Golden Knights (45-20-8, +57)** — Six straight wins, all in regulation and by a combined score of 28-11, suggests a team hitting its stride at exactly the right time. Home games against the Oilers tomorrow and Jets on Thursday will be great tests.

**3. Washington Capitals (47-17-9, +72)** — Three straight losses, including one to the first-in-conference Jets and another to the last-in-conference Sabres, isn't enough to have us panicking. These are the long-term rankings, and Caps fans had to wait for us to get on board, so we're not going to bail now after a bad week. But let's get it back on track tomorrow in Boston, OK?

**2. Dallas Stars (48-21-4, +63)** — I'm nervous about the first-round matchup, I'm nervous about the Miro Heiskanen injury and I'm nervous about having two teams in the same division in the top spots. But they just keep winning, so ...

**1. Winnipeg Jets (51-19-4, +83)** — This absolutely has to happen, and when it does it's Murat's fault:

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

**Not ranked: Minnesota Wild** — Wait, is this now the playoff spot that's up for grabs in the West?

It sure looks like it. The Wild begin the week in the seventh spot, tied with the Blues at 87 points but with an edge in points percentage thanks to a game in hand. But the switch almost feels like a formality, with the Blues remaining red-hot while the Wild spin their wheels. Saturday's loss to the Devils was their third in their last four, essentially undoing the gains from a three-game mini-streak the week before. Meanwhile, the Blues have won nine straight, wiping out Minnesota's eight-point lead in just two weeks.

Getting passed for seventh place isn't ideal, but it's far from an emergency. It probably means playing the Jets instead of the Golden Knights in Round 1, and that's not necessarily a huge jump in degree of difficulty. The bigger question is whether dropping to eighth could be the precursor to dropping even further. And that's where things get scary for the Wild.

Scary, mind you, but not terrifying. They were still sitting at 90 percent odds in yesterday's projections, and that will go up with the Canucks losing. They're six points up on Vancouver with the same number of

games played, and seven up on the Flames, who have two in hand. They'll likely hold the regulation wins tiebreaker over the Blues, and would definitely hold it over the Canucks or Flames. They're in good shape.

But good shape still feels scary when you were a lock not that long ago. It's really only been in the last few days that the alarm bells have started ringing, but the slump has been longer than that. After finishing the first half at an impressive 26-11-4, the Wild have gone just 15-17-1 since then, a 77-point pace. Maybe the bigger question than whether they can make the playoffs is whether they should bother, since they don't seem like much of a threat right now.

They've got a three-game road trip against the Devils, Rangers and Islanders this week before returning home to face the Stars and Sharks. Then comes the last road trip of the regular season, a two-game swing against the Flames and Canucks that could be crucial. Or it could be meaningless, if the Wild can bank enough points this week to put this thing away before scary turns into terrifying.

### **The bottom five**

The five teams headed toward dead last and the best lottery odds for a top pick that could be James Hagens, Matthew Schaefer, or someone else.

Pierre had an update on coaching hot seats, which will be of interest to a few of the teams that regularly grace this section.

**5. Buffalo Sabres (31-36-6, -24)** — Sabres fans, how are we feeling about this recent warm streak with nothing left to play for? Good sign for the future, or infuriating draft pick sabotage? (For the record, there is a right answer here.)

If you missed it, be sure to check out Matthew's deep dive into just how much misery a fan base can be expected to handle.

**4. Philadelphia Flyers (30-36-9, -49)** — They made the big headline this week, firing John Tortorella after a weird stretch that included two blowout losses, some strange postgame comments and an apparent altercation with Cam York. Kevin has been all over it, reporting on what exactly happened behind the scenes, just what the deal is with York and the contenders for the full-time job (including three big names currently employed elsewhere).

**3. Nashville Predators (27-38-8, -51)** — If you missed it, be sure to read Pierre's chat with Barry Trotz on how they start to dig out of this mess.

**2. Chicago Blackhawks (21-44-9, -69)** — There's nothing left to play for, but Hawks fans will get a look at 2023 first-rounder Oliver Moore as well as 2022 first Sam Rinzel down the stretch. Both have signed out of college and made their NHL debuts in yesterday's loss to Utah.

**1. San Jose Sharks (20-44-9, -90)** — There hasn't been much in the way of good news for the Sharks this year, but fans who could use some optimism and/or a reminder about the big picture will enjoy this podcast.

(Also, while interpreting The Code is always dicey, I'm pretty sure somebody needs to fight the Rangers' team bus.)

**Not ranked:** Montreal Canadiens — The losing streak is over. Everybody breathe.

Less than two weeks ago, the Habs were the hottest team in the league, winning eight of 11 immediately after the 4 Nations break. That stretch allowed them to push past the stagnant Eastern bubble field, looking a lot like the only team that actually wanted to be the conference's eight-seed. After beating the Senators on March 18, the Habs were alone in the final wild-card spot and even seemed to have a

potential path to catch Ottawa. But they followed that game by losing five straight while giving up 25 goals, including a high-profile matchup with the Blues earlier in the week that saw them get stomped. They were blowing it.

That's the bad news, and well, it's pretty bad. But step back, and the picture gets brighter. They might be blowing it, yes, but let's remember that the "it" here is a playoff spot nobody really thought they had a shot at this year. The realistic goal heading into the season was to play meaningful games (with apologies to Tortorella) and stay close enough to the race that they could shock the world. Now it feels like a failure that they haven't been able to lock up a spot with 10 games still left to play. It's easy to forget how much the expectations have shifted in a relatively short amount of time.

Still, beating a good Panthers team on the road was exactly the sort of win this team needed, especially with a rematch coming tomorrow in Montreal. And it was another reminder that writing this team off has been a bad move pretty much all year long.

Will any of that matter if this team ends up coughing up a playoff spot that was there for the taking? I think it should. That doesn't mean it won't sting, because of course it would. But if the season was about progress, it's already been an inarguable success, one that's seen the Habs drive past teams like the Sabres and Red Wings who were supposed to be years ahead of them. What more could a reasonable fan want?

A playoff spot, sure. You can't get this close without locking in on the prize. And that's where the other half of the good news kicks in: They're still in this thing. They get the Panthers again tomorrow, which is tough, but the rest of the season-ending schedule is reasonably friendly. The Bruins, Flyers and Predators are up next, three teams that are all but flatlining down the stretch. From there it's Detroit, Ottawa and a Saturday night showdown with the Leafs, followed by the lowly Hawks and then a playoff-bound Hurricanes team with nothing to play for.

The path is there. None of those games are guaranteed, but they're winnable. And at the very least, they're damn sure meaningful.



## [Sportsnet.ca / NHL Playoff Push: Looking at wild-card odds](#)

By Emily Sadler – April 1, 2025

It's the final day of March. Do you know where your team's playoff hopes stand?

For those in the top three of each division, the answer is, mostly, yes. Even though most clubs have yet to officially clinch their post-season berths, the separation in the standings between each division's top seeds and those battling for wild-card spots is pretty clear-cut. So while many teams can now coast to the post-season, the sprint is still full-speed ahead for those whose hopes are fixed on one of four wild-card spots.

And the margin for error is quickly shrinking.

With teams' remaining game counts now mostly down to single digits, we're looking at playoff odds in the league's most interesting races — the Atlantic's top three, as well as both wild-card battles. All playoff odds referenced are courtesy of MoneyPuck.

### **Maple Leafs lead tight race to top Atlantic**

While the Toronto Maple Leafs, Tampa Bay Lightning, and Florida Panthers still have yet to officially punch their tickets to the playoffs, we can safely write a little 'x' beside their names — MoneyPuck lists all three clubs' playoff odds at 100 per cent. The real question is about seeding — and while the Maple Leafs currently hold the top spot thanks to a three-point lead earned via a solid West Coast road trip, this is still anyone's division to take.

Toronto holds the highest odds right now of finishing atop the Atlantic — 44.7 per cent, per MoneyPuck — and will have plenty of opportunity to prove they're worthy of the No. 1 seed as they face off against the Panthers Wednesday night, followed by a road trip down to the sunshine state for another date with Florida before their final regular-season showdown against the Lightning on April. 9.

The Lightning currently hold the second-best odds of finishing first in the Atlantic (33.3 per cent), followed by the Panthers' 22 per cent odds.

### **Race tightens up in the East as Senators run away with WC1**

And then there was one — wild-card spot, that is. With seven points separating the Ottawa Senators and Montreal Canadiens, the Senators are sitting pretty in the first wild-card spot with a 99.6 per cent chance of making the post-season according to MoneyPuck. So, where does that leave the WC2 race? Here are the odds:

**Montreal Canadiens (38.6 per cent):** A five-game skid saw their playoff odds come back down to earth, but a big win Sunday against the Panthers has them back on track. A second win over Florida Tuesday night would go a long way in their search to secure the second wild-card spot.

**New York Rangers (32.8 per cent):** Hot on the Canadiens' tails thanks to the Habs' hiccup, the Rangers won't have an easy go of catching them. Just two of their remaining nine games are against non-playoff clubs.

**Columbus Blue Jackets (15.4 per cent):** Hold on tight, Columbus — with a home-and-home against both the Senators and the Capitals before season's end, this sprint could bring an early dose of playoff vibes.

**New York Islanders (8.7 per cent):** Three straight losses set New York's wild-card hopes back, and with the Lightning, Wild, and Capitals coming to visit all within the next week, things might not get any easier.

**Detroit Red Wings (5.7 per cent):** The Red Wings sit just three points back of the Canadiens for that second wild-card spot, so why such a big disparity in the playoff odds? It's all about their strength of schedule — Detroit's is the toughest league-wide (.612, per Tankathon), with all nine of their remaining games coming against clubs currently in playoff position.

#### **Golden Knights can officially punch their playoff ticket**

Despite having the night off, Vegas can clinch a post-season spot Monday night if the Colorado Avalanche defeat the Calgary Flames in regulation. Their odds of finishing atop the Pacific are looking incredibly strong, too, with the 2023 Stanley Cup Champs sitting with a comfortable 96.6 per cent shot of claiming the top seed in the Pacific.

#### **Blues' win streak has playoff odds skyrocketing**

Nine straight wins see the Blues no longer just sneaking into the post-season but rather announcing their arrival for the whole league to hear — and they're not done yet. Now tied with Minnesota in the standings, St. Louis is a 10th win away from taking over the first wild-card spot. They now hold stronger playoff odds (88.4 per cent) than the Wild (87 per cent). Both central clubs are still looking pretty comfortable above the post-season fold, which spells bad news for a pair of Canadian clubs whose own playoff odds are getting scarily small:

**Calgary Flames (15.5 per cent):** Back-to-back losses to the Stars and Oilers slowed the no-quit Flames' momentum, falling off pace of the Blues. But with three games in-hand and some winnable matchups down the stretch — including two each against the Ducks and Sharks — the Flames are still alive and should be watching Minnesota closely.

**Vancouver Canucks (9.7 per cent):** Of Vancouver's eight remaining games this season, five are against opponents currently in playoff position. That's a tough hill to climb. Like the Flames, the Canucks need a little help from their foes if they're to see those odds rise.

## TSN.CA / Eight factors that define the Western Conference playoff picture

By Travis Yost – April 1, 2025

The surging St. Louis Blues are poised to lock up the last playoff berth in the Western Conference. And barring a late-season miracle, it does appear we have our group of eight, which allows us to start making real sense of the playoff landscape out west.

To that end, I wanted to identify the eight statistics defining this year's Western Conference playoff picture. Though the conference has been a top-heavy and predictable group all season long, much has changed beneath the surface, giving us plenty to digest as we start analyzing the viability of each contender.

Let's start with the cream of the crop in the Winnipeg Jets, and work our way down through the wild-card bidders.

### **Winnipeg Jets: Connor Hellebuyck's persistent greatness**

Two months ago, I posited Hellebuyck had a real shot at winning the Hart Trophy, a major accomplishment for any goaltender in the modern era.

Hellebuyck's already a shoo-in for the Vezina Trophy, the third of his career, putting him on par with the likes of Patrick Roy and Tony Esposito. Suffice it to say Hellebuyck's already solidified his Hall of Fame case, and he's still just 31 years old. This year, he's again erased goals at an unrelenting clip, lifting Winnipeg to the top seed in the West:

A goalie erasing nearly a goal per game over an entire season seems improbable, but it has become par for the course with Hellebuyck.

What his legacy needs now is a Stanley Cup, and in lieu of that, a dominant postseason performance. For as unbeatable as Hellebuyck has been throughout his career, his playoff numbers haven't been as impressive. His past two appearances included disappointing stop rates (around 87 per cent) and quick exits for otherwise promising Jets teams over the prior two seasons (2022-24).

Jets fans know their path to a title starts and ends with goaltending outperformance, and considering his otherwise sterling resume, there has to be hope the past two playoff performances were outliers.

### **Dallas Stars: A defensive nightmare for all**

Dallas' top-end talent and depth were already the envy of the National Hockey League; add an elite forward the likes of Mikko Rantanen at a trade deadline, and it becomes an embarrassment of riches.

While Dallas is oozing offensive prowess, this is still a team that rests its laurels on being defensively impenetrable, especially as a five-man unit. Few teams, if any, insulate their goaltenders better than the Stars. Jake Oettinger is one of the best puck-stoppers you can find; put him behind a defence that never allows pressure from the net-mouth or low-slot area, and you have a team that can suppress scoring against any calibre foe (via HockeyViz):

### **Colorado Avalanche: It's all about the matchup**

The Avalanche have become a regular presence in the Stanley Cup Playoffs and the sheer thought of drawing into a series against the likes of Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar is terrifying.

This dynamic duo is again producing a career year – MacKinnon and Makar have combined for 193 points on the season, and when playing together at even strength, have outscored opponents 67 to 45 (+22).

But barring a major stumble from the Winnipeg Jets, we are going to see another matchup between the Avalanche and Stars. The two have met three times this season, and though the margins are razor-thin, Colorado's ahead on the scoresheet:

I'm not foolish enough to put heavy weight into three regular-season games, especially just one year removed from Dallas pushing Colorado aside in six games. And that was before Jason Robertson and Roope Hintz saw a considerable linemate upgrade in the form of Rantanen.

Dallas prides itself in making everyone uncomfortable, combining an oppressive forecheck with a defensive interior that's difficult to crack. Colorado is one of the few teams that's shown an ability to disrupt what Dallas wants to do and have the team structure to engineer an upset. That said, it's a near certainty they'll have to do it as the road team in the series.

### **Vegas Golden Knights and Los Angeles Kings: A tale of two power plays**

I'm cheating a bit by grouping these two Pacific Division foes together, but if power play performance is as important as the data indicates, Vegas is positioned for another deep title run.

Los Angeles? Let's call it an uphill battle.

Two teams that are of similar pedigree at even strength are anything but on the man advantage. Quietly, the Golden Knights have taken over as the league's deadliest power play group (11.8 goals per 60 minutes), whereas the Kings now sit 28th in the NHL (5.7 goals per 60 minutes). The cumulative differential between the two can explain nearly the entire point gap in the Pacific.

Doubling up another quality playoff team is a statement. The Kings have been searching for scoring all year, but absent Kevin Fiala (10 goals) and Adrian Kempe (six goals), it's been a punchless group. Vegas' top two scoring forwards – Tomas Hertl, and Pavel Dorofeyev – have combined to score more power-play goals than all Los Angeles units on the season.

### **Edmonton Oilers: Plenty of firepower, and plenty of goaltending concerns**

The goaltending debate in Edmonton has been exhausted. But the two-headed monster of Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl – an impossible ask to defend for even the best and deepest of competitors – doesn't look as indomitable with such poor goaltending behind them.

The Oilers' duo of Stuart Skinner and Calvin Pickard has stopped just 89 per cent of shots faced on the year, and when adjusting for the shot quality they are facing, it's clear the Oilers are going to be at a goaltending disadvantage versus the rest of the West:

Heading into the trade deadline, there was a genuine debate as to what goaltenders in the market could be upgrades over Skinner, with names like Anaheim's John Gibson and Utah's Karel Vejmelka at the top of that list. The Oilers opted to stand pat. We will know in a matter of weeks whether Stan Bowman's internal bet pays off.

### **Minnesota Wild: Kirill Kaprizov or bust?**

The Wild have dealt with an injury bug all season long, and though John Hynes has his team closing in on another postseason berth, their ability to engineer any upset is likely contingent on having a full lineup available. Joel Eriksson-Ek is back skating, but perhaps more importantly, so too is Kirill Kaprizov.

Minnesota is a fundamentally different team with Kaprizov on the ice. He's one of the league's most dynamic forwards and his presence at the top of the lineup allows Minnesota to play best-on-best with the elite Western Conference teams.

The problem for Minnesota is when Kaprizov isn't available (be it in the minutes he's simply resting, or in this year's case, missing from action with a lower-body injury), they look more like a draft-lottery team:

These are some of the most top-heavy results you will find at the player level, strikingly similar to the early years of McDavid and the Edmonton Oilers. Minnesota hasn't produced any sort of timeline for when Kaprizov could return to action, but getting back on the ice is a promising first step.

### **St. Louis Blues: Everyone's favorite late-season surprise**

Only recently have the Blues grabbed national attention, owing heavily to a blistering win streak that's given them an 85 per cent chance to qualify for the postseason.

But this team has been improving for some time. In fact, if you look at season-to-date goal differential, the Blues have outperformed both the Wild and the Oilers on the year, and that gap is increasing with time:

The Blues' woeful special teams masked an otherwise strong and deep team from getting competitive footing in the standings early in the year. But Jim Montgomery's team has been 31 goals better than the competition on the year at even strength, or +0.5 goals every 60 minutes played.

That rate performance is better than the Toronto Maple Leafs (+0.4), Vegas Golden Knights (+0.3), Florida Panthers (+0.3), and Carolina Hurricanes (+0.3). They're a team getting hot at the right time, and a daunting draw for the likes of Winnipeg or Vegas in two weeks' time.

**And with that:** enjoy the final weeks of the regular season, because the Stanley Cup playoffs are right around the corner.