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**December 9-10, 2025**

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## The Athletic / Dante Fabbro's third-period turnover sends Blue Jackets to loss to Hurricanes

**By Aaron Portzline – December 10, 2025**

It's been a troublesome trait of this season's Columbus Blue Jackets. No matter the opponent, nor where it ranks among the NHL's hierarchy, the Blue Jackets tend to let them establish the pace and style of play and then try to match it.

These Blue Jackets don't dictate. On some nights, their talent level is good enough for them to win or claim a loser's point, which is certainly progress from recent seasons.

But nobody is going to out-Carolina Hurricane the Carolina Hurricanes.

The Blue Jackets weren't smart enough, decisive enough or aggressive enough to hang with one of the Eastern Conference's elite clubs, giving up three third-period goals and losing 4-1 before a crowd of 18,299 in Lenovo Center.

"We talked to the group about staying patient and continuing to play the right way, because we were playing really well," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason told reporters in Raleigh, N.C. "Then we make a mistake, turn it over, and it ends up in our net.

"And then we're chasing it."

Tuesday's game was a sad capper to a winless (0-2-1) trip through Florida, Washington and Carolina — all Eastern clubs — just continuing to make the Blue Jackets' lives harder should they get it together and make a playoff push for a second straight season.

The Blue Jackets have lost consecutive games in regulation for the first time since Nov. 8, and haven't won consecutive games in regulation since Nov. 1.

And now an offensive chill has taken hold of the group. The Blue Jackets haven't scored an even-strength goal in 122 minutes, 29 seconds.

The only Columbus goal scored Tuesday was on the power play by Dmitri Voronkov, who redirected a centering pass by Sean Monahan at 12:39 of the first period for a 1-0 lead.

### **Top League Content**

But you could tell throughout the night it was going to be difficult for the Blue Jackets to get too many pucks past Carolina's red-hot rookie goaltender, Brandon Bussi.

The Blue Jackets didn't get their first shot on goal until 9:23 of the first period. There was a stretch of 13:15 from the middle stages of the second period to the early third period that Bussi didn't have to make a single save. The Jackets had shot attempts in those spans, but none on goal.

In one scene, Blue Jackets fourth-line forward Isac Lundeström waited so long on a three-on-two rush that the play fizzled and went back the other way as a three-on-one for the Hurricanes.

"We weren't shooting," Blue Jackets center Adam Fantilli said. "I thought we overpassed. Sometimes the first play is the right play. You have to shoot it.

"I'm guilty of it tonight. It cost us tonight, it really did. We have to recognize when we're in those golden areas, and we have to shoot the puck. Can't score if you don't shoot."

The Hurricanes tied it at 1 at 9:42 of the second period after a long shift in the Blue Jackets' end. Seth Jarvis, becoming a modern-day Jackets killer, scored on a one-timer from the slot off a pass from Andrei Svechnikov.

The Blue Jackets were mostly hanging on for the rest of the second, but they cracked only 7:53 into the third.

Defenseman Dante Fabbro, one of general manager Don Waddell's great finds off the waiver wire last season, has been dropped from the top pair to the third pair for most of the season. He's not going to move up with more nights like Tuesday.

Fabbro carried the puck into the neutral zone and was trying to chip it off the wall and get it ahead to Yegor Chinakhov. But the puck never made it to Chinakhov.

Carolina's Joel Nystrom intercepted and started a rush the other way, with Taylor Hall joining a two-on-one with former Blue Jackets winger Eric Robinson, who fired it over Blue Jackets goaltender Jet Greaves' right pad.

It was 2-1 Hurricanes, and the Blue Jackets were cooked. Carolina played tack-on the rest of the game, including an empty net goal with 1:15 to play by Jordan Martinook.

"We tried to be too cute on a few occasions," Evason said. "We tried to get right in front of the net as opposed to looking for second and third opportunities."

It marked another wasted outing by Greaves, who stopped 27 of 30 shots.

"We've got to capitalize," Fantilli said. "One goal's not good enough. Jet's playing phenomenal back there, and we're just not capitalizing."

The three third-period goals allowed gave the Blue Jackets the worst third-period goal differential in the NHL at minus-17 (45-28).

Since Nov. 2, when the Blue Jackets threw away a late lead in a regulation loss to the New York Islanders, they've been outscored 30-13 in the third period, 35-14 including overtime goals.

## The Columbus Dispatch / It's getting late early for the Blue Jackets: Takeaways

By Brian Hedger – December 10, 2025

After 40 minutes, the Blue Jackets and Carolina Hurricanes went to their locker rooms knotted 1-1 on Dec. 9 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, North Carolina.

It felt like the Hurricanes led 5-1 or 6-1 after they dominated the Jackets for the preceding 12:01, outshooting them 11-0 and tying the game on Seth Jarvis's goal in that stretch.

Jarvis scored after Blue Jackets defenseman Ivan Provorov was hauled down without a whistle in his own zone, which should be noted since one of the referees, Brandon Schaefer, had just worked the Blue Jackets' controversial 7-6 overtime loss Dec. 6 at the Florida Panthers, which prompted coach Dean Evason's postgame assessment that he'd just witnessed "a joke," of a game.

The Hurricanes would've won going away regardless, though.

The joke's on the Blue Jackets (13-11-6) seemingly every time they go to Raleigh, and this time it was their third straight road loss in four days. After watching them lose to the Panthers in a circus-like atmosphere a day before Washington Capitals goalie Logan Thompson shut them out Dec. 7 at Capital One Arena, those who watch this team regularly knew exactly how this movie would end.

After putting up a fight early and getting dominated to end the second, they'd crumble in the third after falling behind on a goal by somebody who used to play for the Blue Jackets. That's exactly what happened, of course, right down to Eric Robinson scoring the winner to give the Hurricanes their first lead, 2-1.

Robinson, who began his career with the Blue Jackets, did the honors to give his side a lead that Carolina had no problems converting into a victory. No overtime was necessary. No shootout.

Novel concept, yeah?

Unlike their Columbus counterparts, who've now lost nine games in which they've held a lead and blown 10 third period leads, the Hurricanes know how to win. They're bigger, stronger, more aggressive and willing to apply all of those edges under hard-nosed coach Rod Brind'Amour.

It hasn't paid off in a Stanley Cup, but it's a style that works glowingly in the regular season. The Blue Jackets, meanwhile, get a lot of goals from defensemen shooting from above the circles, have some skilled forwards who skate fast and still resort to counter attacks while getting pushed around by bigger, stronger and meaner teams like Florida, Washington and Carolina.

That was obvious on this road trip, and it's probably time for somebody within the Blue Jackets' inner circle to peel some paint off the walls, whether it's players, coaches, management or all three. More than one-third of the season is gone already, and they're stuck in the Metropolitan Division's basement with the division's worst goal differential (-12).

After the game, they talked about how good they played against the Hurricanes until, of course, the Jet Greaves Damn finally broke under an avalanche of Hurricanes pressure. Speaking of avalanches ... remember this one?

There's still time for the Jackets to get their issues straightened out, which is the bright side, but it's getting late early in Columbus.

Here are more takeaways:

### **Columbus Blue Jackets physically dominated by Carolina Hurricanes again**

The Hurricanes, as they usually do against the Blue Jackets in Raleigh, toyed with their meal before finally devouring it in the third period.

They hounded pucks all night, dominated possession time with grit and size, kept their own end clean except for the occasional counterattack, forced their own counterattacks off turnovers and made the Blue Jackets follow the puck around like kittens chasing a laser pointer.

According to Natural Stat Trick, the Hurricanes finished with 5-on-5 advantages in attempts (55% to 45%), unblocked attempts (58% to 42%), shots (56% to 44%), scoring chances (60% to 40%), high-danger chances (57% to 43%) and goals (2-0). Carolina also dominated faceoffs (57% to 43%), which contributed to their ownership of the puck, but the bigger issue was between the ears.

The Hurricanes are a physical team that looks to crush opposing players with body checks to win puck battles and take a toll on teams in third periods. It's a mentality. They grind teams to the final horn, win or lose.

The Blue Jackets lean heavily on skill players, which tends to fail against good defensive teams. They finished with 14 hits, but the Hurricanes dished out 19, including a bone-jarring smash by Jordan Martinook that sent Blue Jackets star Zach Werenski to the ice behind his own net.

The Jackets are sorely missing power forward Mathieu Olivier and gritty defenseman Erik Gudbranson, two of the toughest players in the NHL, but even their eventual returns won't hide the blemish of a roster that's either too dinged up, not physically capable or unwilling to physically win possession battles.

Until that changes, the Blue Jackets will get pounded, repeatedly, by the Hurricanes, Panthers, Capitals, New York Islanders, Philadelphia Flyers and any other team built to utilize size, strength and snarl as precursors to their skill.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets struggling against Metropolitan Division**

After finishing last season 13-10-3 against Metropolitan Division opponents to improve a glaring weakness, the Blue Jackets are back to struggling against their neighborly foes. Losing to the Hurricanes dropped them to 2-6-2 against division teams, whom they play most often.

It's not a new phenomenon. Since 2021-22, the Blue Jackets are 38-64-12 against the Metro while going 41-50-14 against the Atlantic Division and 63-59-17 against the Western Conference.

Western teams only play the Jackets twice, so they're typically less familiar with their players, structures and strategies. They're also inclined to start backup goalies since the points at

stake aren't as meaningful as those against teams from the West. The Blue Jackets get the same familiarity advantage against Eastern teams, but it often doesn't matter because they can't fully utilize that edge while facing disadvantages in size, strength and playing style within their division.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets' Zach Werenski gets lucky bounce**

Zach Werenski beat goalies with regularity, so seeing him score isn't a rarity.

Watching him accidentally beat his own goalie, however, was interesting. Midway through the first, the Blue Jackets' star had the puck to the left of Greaves while assessing exit pass options. The puck took a weird hop off his blade, slid between Greaves' skates and clanked off the right post before sliding back into the blue paint.

Greaves swatted it away, but the Hurricanes would've scored the game's first goal on a nightmarish own goal by Werenski had the puck slid into the net. It was another prime example of hockey's weird, fascinating bounces.

## The Columbus Dispatch / Hurricanes finish strong to deal Blue Jackets a third straight loss

**By Brian Hedger – December 9, 2025**

The Blue Jackets' woes in third periods remain issue, whether they're leading or tied.

Once again, a tight game in the third turned into a 4-1 rout for the Carolina Hurricanes that handed the Jackets a frustrating finale to an ugly road trip Dec. 9 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, North Carolina. After taking a 1-0 lead on Dmitri Voronkov's power-play goal in the first, the Blue Jackets (13-11-6) leaned too heavily on goalie Jet Greaves (27 saves) and cracked under the Hurricanes' domination in the third.

Eric Robinson, who started his NHL career with the Blue Jackets, buried a shot under the crossbar off a pass from Taylor Hall at 7:53 of the third to break a 1-1 tie and give the Hurricanes (18-9-2) a 2-1 lead. Unlike Columbus, which had blown 10 third period leads in its first 28 games, Carolina made it stand up for 27-year old rookie goalie Brandon Bussi's ninth win in 10 starts.

Jordan Staal's power-play goal made it 3-1 with 6:22 left in the third and the Hurricanes cruised to a victory that included Jordan Martinook scoring the game's final goal into an empty net with 1:15 left.

The Blue Jackets lost all three games on a road trip that began with a wild 7-6 overtime loss Dec. 6 at the Florida Panthers in which they lost three separate leads, including 4-1 in the second period and 6-4 in the third. They were also shut out 2-0 by the Washington Capitals' Logan Thompson on Dec. 7 at Capital One Arena before coming to Raleigh to take their usual pounding from the Hurricanes.

The Blue Jackets, who will start a four-game homestand Dec. 11 against the Ottawa Senators, are stuck in last place of the Metropolitan Division and have a -12 goal differential that's also worst in their division. They're now 7-8-3 in road games and 2-6-2 against their division.

## ESPN / Which NHL trends are for real? The trend-o-meter for all 32

By Greg Wyshynski – December 9, 2025

Every NHL season, there are hot starts and budding trends that feel like they're set in concrete early on but are shattered into dust by the time the Stanley Cup playoffs start.

Conversely, there are early-season developments that end up being harbingers for the rest of the campaign.

Here are trends for all 32 teams from the 2025-26 season thus far that we're testing with our patented (OK, patent-pending) "Trend-o-meter" to see how valid they are -- from certain to stick (10) to probably just a blip (1).

### Atlantic Division

#### **Boston Bruins**

The trend: Morgan Geekie's goals pace

After a 33-goal season, Geekie was a preeminent regression candidate in NHL preseason predictions, with some expecting him to top out at around 26 goals. As it stands, he should surpass that total by the end of December.

Through 30 games, Geekie has 22 goals. It took him until March 6 last season before scoring his 22nd goal. Geekie's shooting percentage (27.5%) is actually higher than his seemingly unfathomable average from last season -- 22%, after a previous career high of 13.1%. He's thriving despite not having the same percentage of offensive zone starts as last season and -- perhaps most surprisingly -- without David Pastrnak in the Bruins' lineup.

Pasta missed five games recently. Geekie scored five goals in his absence. The Boston offense this season has been "Geek and destroy."

Trend-o-meter rating: 9

#### **Buffalo Sabres**

The trend: The NHL's worst equilibrium

If there's progress to report with the Sabres, it's that there's finally good news to balance out the usual bad news ... but there's still bad news. Through 28 games, Buffalo was tied for ninth in goals per 60 minutes (2.78) at 5-on-5. Unfortunately, they were last in the NHL in goals against at even strength (3.06). Their penalty kill? Absolutely sick, leading the league in efficiency (87.2%) entering Monday night. Their power play? No so much, ranking 21st in the NHL (18.1%).

The Sabres are getting great performances from motivated forwards like Alex Tuch (wants free agent riches), Tage Thompson (wants Team USA roster spot) and Josh Doan (wants it to be called the "Josh Doan trade," with due respect to JJ Peterka). Alas, the same can't be said of defenseman like Owen



Power and Bowen Byram. At last their goaltending has been consistent, in that all three netminders they've used have played around replacement level.

All that established, if they can turn some of these lagging aspects of their game around, it's not impossible to see Buffalo sneak into the playoffs for the first time since 2011. But through 28 games, that still seems like a big "if."

Trend-o-meter rating: 7

### **Detroit Red Wings**

The trend: No secondary scoring

After a revelatory 4 Nations Face-Off performance, Dylan Larkin has been an MVP for the Red Wings, with 31 points in 29 games. His linemate Lucas Raymond has been just as proficient (31 points). Alex DeBrincat has produced well too (14 goals and 30 points overall) playing mostly away from Larkin while picking up 10 points on the power play.

After those three, there has been a lot of sputtering engines in Motown. Some of that is roster construction, but much of that involves players like Marco Kasper not hitting his expected marks. There are some bright spots: Patrick Kane (19 points in 20 games) has been solid when in the lineup and Moritz Seider (22 points in 29 games) is just outside the top 10 among scoring defensemen. But the blue line is demonstrative of the Red Wings' plight: Entering their 30th game of the season, no other defenseman beyond Seider was in double digits in points.

There's still a lot of runway left in the season for some of Detroit's slumping players to flip the switch or for GM Steve Yzerman to address these depth issues. But as of now, there's only a handful of players giving Detroit its offensive wings.

Trend-o-meter rating: 8

### **Florida Panthers**

The trend: Stanley Cup three-peat bid is over

After 28 games, the dynastic Panthers -- two straight Stanley Cup championships, three straight Eastern Conference titles -- were outside of a playoff spot. They were giving up more goals on average (3.18 per game) than they were scoring (3.11). There have been some games in which the Panthers look like the Panthers, and there are some stretches where they look like the shorthanded group that they are -- witness a recent four-game home winless streak that included defeats to the Flames and Predators.

But they're hanging tough and treading water until they're no longer as shorthanded. Brad Marchand (16 goals!) and Sam Reinhart (15 goals) are doing what they can, and Carter Verhaeghe has been on one of his heaters lately. Meanwhile, star forward Matthew Tkachuk is skating again. Eventually, role players like forward Tomas Nosek and defenseman Dmitry Kulikov can hopefully return. Then, if Florida makes the postseason, perhaps star captain Aleksander Barkov will have recovered from his preseason injury to join in the three-peat effort.

It's hard to really get a handle on what the Panthers are with this lineup. Their underlying numbers are respectable in front of goaltending from Sergei Bobrovsky that's been porous and well below

replacement levels. But Bobrovsky is the embodiment of the Panthers: Does it really matter what his regular-season numbers are as long as he enables them to make the postseason cut and becomes Playoff Bob again?

As long as Tkachuk is back soon, they should still make that cut. And who's betting against Florida if they do?

Trend-o-meter rating: 4

### **Montreal Canadiens**

The trend: Cole Caufield sets new career highs

Like so many other American-born NHL players, Caufield has a giant carrot dangling in front of him this season, as he tries to make a closing argument on an Olympic team roster spot. That argument: An 11-game point streak in which he has scored 12 points overall, continuing an offensive campaign that should result in the diminutive forward setting new career highs.

Caufield set new personal standards last season with 37 goals and 70 points. After Sunday's action, StatSheet has Caufield projected for 43 goals and 82 points this season. A good portion of credit should go to center Nick Suzuki, with whom Caufield continues to have indelible chemistry. But it's Caufield who continues to create his own chances and shoot the lights out (20.3% shooting percentage). Even if he doesn't earn a ticket to Milan, this pace has him on track for a career year.

Trend-o-meter rating: 8

### **Ottawa Senators**

The trend: The NHL's worst goaltending

Last season, it felt like the Senators had solved their longstanding goaltending issues. They finished seventh in the NHL in team save percentage after having acquired Linus Ullmark from the Bruins and handed him a four-year, \$33 million contract extension with a full no-movement clause. One year later, the Senators have the same team save percentage as the Oilers (.870) after 28 games. Which is not ideal.

Ullmark has shouldered much of the blame for that with an .877 save percentage in 21 starts. Money Puck has him at minus-10.3 goals saved above expected in all situations, which is worst in the league. Evolving Hockey has him at minus-8.7 goals saved above replacement, to quantify how much he's theoretically cost his team. Rookie backup Leevi Merilainen hasn't been much better, with a GAR of minus-4.5 and an .876 save percentage.

The good news is that Ullmark has had a save percentage north of .900 in seven of his past nine appearances. If that continues -- and he continues to make Superman stick saves from the bench -- Ottawa's goaltending will ascend from the NHL's basement.

Trend-o-meter rating: 3

### **Tampa Bay Lightning**

The trend: Brayden Point's baffling slump

That the Lightning are atop the Atlantic Division after 28 games is nothing short of miraculous given the amount of talent that has missed time in the lineup. Nikita Kucherov and Andrei Vasilevskiy recently joined a list that's included Victor Hedman, Ryan McDonagh, Erik Cernak and Point. Although when Point has played, he hasn't been himself.

It's one of the season's most inexplicable slumps: Point, a player who has scored well over a point per game in the past three seasons, has struggled to 11 points in 21 games so far for the Lightning. This is a potential 90-point center averaging 0.52 points per game. Hopefully his recent absence from the lineup gave him a chance to heal up and reset. It's hard to imagine a player this talented will remain this frosty for much longer.

Trend-o-meter rating: 5

### **Toronto Maple Leafs**

The trend: Miss the playoffs

It seemed like the minute the Blue Jays lost the World Series, the Leafs could no longer hide from scrutiny over their middling start. What was wrong with Auston Matthews? What happened to the goaltending? How badly did they miss Mitch Marner and insufficiently replace him in the offseason? Should head coach Craig Berube lose his job? Should GM Brad Treliving follow him out the door?

Things have quieted down just a bit with a recent 5-1-1 stretch that included quality wins over Florida, Carolina and Tampa Bay. Before Monday's win over the Lightning, the Leafs had just a 15% chance of making the Stanley Cup playoffs, per StatHletes. But they remain an offensively impactful team (3.34 goals per game, fifth in the NHL) whose defensive numbers should improve with better goaltending.

As usual, the Leafs are never as good or as bad as many will declare during any given season. But there are some danger signs for Toronto in this campaign -- not the least being the surprising depth of contenders in the Atlantic Division and the East overall this season.

Trend-o-meter rating: 6

### **Metropolitan Division**

#### **Carolina Hurricanes**

The trend: Seth Jarvis breaks Hurricanes' goals record

Jarvis is another one of those players with Olympic consideration who has absolutely sprinted statistically at the start of the season. Jarvis, who made the Team Canada 4 Nations Face-Off roster, tallied 16 goals in his first 28 games. It took him until Jan. 20 last season to amass that total.

Topping his career high of 33 goals seems likely. StatHletes projects he'll get near 40 goals. But given his start, could Jarvis threaten the Hurricanes' record for goals in a season? Eric Staal set that standard with 45 goals in 82 games in 2005-06. Based on his current goals per game output, Jarvis is on pace for 47 goals this season. He's got a shot, even if it's a long shot.

(Please note we're not talking about the franchise mark, which is held by Blaine Stoughton (56) for the Hartford Whalers in 1979-80.)

Trend-o-meter rating: 4

### **Columbus Blue Jackets**

The trend: Jet Greaves solves their goalie problem

At a minimum, the hope before the season was that 24-year-old Jet Greaves could solidify a shaky goaltending situation in Columbus. Ideally, Greaves would take the starter's job from Elvis Merzlikins and run with it.

Through 17 games, Greaves has Columbus squarely in the middle of the pack in team save percentage, while Greaves himself has a .907 save percentage and a 2.71 goals-against average in 17 games, compared to 12 games for Merzlikins. He's not the full-fledged starter yet, as coach Dean Evason has alternated them. But he's making his case, with 13 goals saved above expected.

Trend-o-meter rating: 7

### **New Jersey Devils**

The trend: Not a playoff team without Jack Hughes

Hughes played his final game last season on March 2 before undergoing season-ending shoulder surgery. The Devils were 33-23-6. They would go 9-10-1 down the stretch to make the playoff cut before losing to Carolina in five games in the first round.

This season, Hughes has been out since Nov. 12 after undergoing hand surgery following a freak accident at a dinner in Chicago. The Devils were 12-4-1 at the time of the accident. They've gone 4-8-0 since then, including a five-game losing streak in the past week and change. In the 12 games since his injury, the Devils have averaged 2.08 goals per game while falling out of a playoff spot. In the 17 games they had Hughes in the lineup, they averaged 3.35 goals per game.

It's pretty clear that without their star center, they're not winning jack.

Trend-o-meter rating: 9

### **New York Islanders**

The trend: Ilya Sorokin, sneaky MVP

Bo Horvat has the numbers, with 17 goals in 30 games this season -- a pace that could see him eclipse his contract-year high of 38 goals in 2022-23. Matthew Schaefer has the fame, as the 18-year-old first overall pick is playing like a veteran while amassing 21 points in 30 games.

But as the Islanders sit in a playoff spot after 30 games, would they be there without Sorokin?

The franchise goalie has put up better numbers in his career, but his .912 save percentage and 2.47 goals-against average put him in the top 10 for goalies with his workload. He has started 20 of their games and has posted three shutouts already. StatSheet has him at 12.6 goals saved above expected, which is tops in the NHL by their metrics. He has been everything they've needed, when they've needed it.

Trend-o-meter rating: 8

## **New York Rangers**

The trend: The lack of depth is concerning

After 31 games, there are eight Rangers players who have double digits in points. They are exactly who you'd figure they'd be: Top forwards Artemi Panarin (32), Mika Zibanejad (24), J.T. Miller (18), Alexis Lafreniere (17), Will Cuylle (16) and Vincent Trocheck (14 in 17 games); as well as top defensemen Adam Fox (26, currently injured) and Vladislav Gavrikov (13).

It's a top-heavy group whose top is heavy enough to have them in a playoff spot. The issue for the Rangers remains the rest of the lineup, which was the concern before the season, too.

Coach Mike Sullivan has attempted to move players around to spread the wealth, which could help offensively. But there's no getting around the quality drop-off beyond the top pairing on defense.

Trend-o-meter rating: 7

## **Philadelphia Flyers**

The trend: Trevor Zegras leads in scoring

The Flyers took a chance on Zegras in the offseason, trading for the restricted free agent after his star dimmed with the Ducks.

So far, it has paid off: Zegras leads the Flyers in points (26) and is tied for the team lead in goals (10) with Tyson Foerster, who's out for at least two months with an upper-body injury.

The Flyers' power play has been middling (18.4% conversion rate), but Zegras has been a star on special teams with 11 points, putting him among the top 20 scorers with the man advantage in the NHL this season. He's playing 18:17 per game and picking up points regularly for Philly. Again, we'll note this is happening in a contract year for the 24-year-old forward.

Trend-o-meter rating: 8

## **Pittsburgh Penguins**

The trend: Penguins will make the playoffs

If there's one word to describe the 2025-26 Pittsburgh Penguins, it's "defiant." Everyone outside of that dressing room was prepping for the rebuild to start with the end of Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin in Pittsburgh -- the former tired of finishing outside of the playoffs, the latter in the last year of his contract. But Crosby reiterated before the season that he wanted to compete for a playoff spot with Pittsburgh and was bullish on their roster to accomplish that.

At 27 games into the season, Crosby's right so far. The Penguins are in a wild-card spot under first-year coach Dan Muse. Of course, Crosby is also a primary reason for this happening with 30 points, including 18 goals (third in the NHL). Malkin's done his part, with 29 points. Both have helped Pittsburgh's brilliant power play, which is clicking at 33.3%, tied with the superstar-driven Oilers.

But it has been the Penguins' goaltending (sixth in the NHL in team save percentage) that has been the foundation for all of it. The question is how long Tristan Jarry and Arturs Silovs can continue that trend.

Trend-o-meter rating: 6

### **Washington Capitals**

The trend: This is 40 for Alex Ovechkin

It started a bit slowly for the greatest goal scorer in NHL history. Ovechkin had three goals in his first 15 games. He scored 11 in his next 15 games. He's still got it!

Ovechkin's current goal pace has him finishing with around 38 goals. As he has shown throughout his career, two hot weeks for the Capitals captain can quickly recalculate his scoring pace.

The milestone in his sights: Gordie Howe's record for most goals in a season for a player 40 years or older, set when he tallied 44 times in the 1968-69 season. Ovi has already matched Mr. Hockey for one achievement this season: He tied Howe for most goals through 30 games in a season by a 40-year-old.

Trend-o-meter rating: 6

### **Central Division**

#### **Chicago Blackhawks**

The trend: Connor Bedard breaks 100 points

Watching Bedard blossom into a game-controlling superstar has been one of the season's most delightful developments. There's a confidence in his game as a goal scorer and a playmaker that's now noticeable in the way that it is for someone like Jack Hughes, for example. Through 29 games, Bedard has scored 13 of his 18 goals and 27 of his 40 points at even strength. How high can he climb?

Bedard's career high is 67 points in 82 games, set last season. That was a pace of 2.4 points per 60 minutes. This season, Bedard is creating offense to the tune of 3.9 points per 60 minutes. Entering Monday's action, Bedard is projected for around 42 goals and just over 100 points per Stathead.

Will he clear the century mark? He remains a one-man gang for the Chicago offense, with 15 more points than teammate Tyler Bertuzzi, their next leading scorer. The Blackhawks' underlying numbers offensively -- 2.28 expected goals per game, getting 45.9% shot attempts at 5-on-5 -- don't inspire much confidence that they'll help him get over 100 points, despite Bedard's best efforts. But this is a special player having a special season.

Trend-o-meter rating: 3

#### **Colorado Avalanche**

The trend: Colorado is the NHL's best offensive and defensive team

The Avalanche have been a juggernaut this season, with just two regulation losses entering Monday night. With their .828 points percentage, they're going to threaten the Bruins' all-time regular-season record of 135 points set back in 2022-23 if they remain on pace. They haven't just been the best team in the NHL in the standings. They've been the most dominant teams in both ends of the ice.

Through 29 games, the Avalanche are averaging 3.97 goals per game, almost half a goal per game better than the Ducks in second (3.59). They're averaging 2.17 goals against per game, easily the best defensive team this season ahead of the Capitals (2.40).

Please note these teams eventually reached the Stanley Cup Final, with Montreal winning twice and the Canucks losing in a very infamous Game 7 to Boston.

Now, the 2025-26 Colorado Avalanche don't have Ken Dryden or Roberto Luongo on the roster, but between Mackenzie Blackwood (.920) and Scott Wedgewood (.920), they're getting goaltending that's way above expected in front of a defense that's fifth in expected goals against at 5-on-5.

Offensively at even strength, no one even approaches how dominant the Avalanche has been this season -- 3.6 goals per 60 minutes and 3.26 expected goals per 60 minutes. Nathan MacKinnon is cooking, with 49 points in 29 games. He has 24 goals in that span, which is a pace for 67 goals (!) on the season.

At some point -- due to slumps or injuries or the randomness of hockey -- the Avalanche freight train may finally slow down. Offensively, they may be unapproachable atop the league if MacKinnon and Cale Makar keep pushing the pace. Defensively, teams like the Capitals or Kings could ultimately push Colorado for the NHL's stingiest team.

Trend-o-meter rating: 7

### **Dallas Stars**

The trend: Stars win the Central?

If the NHL was a horse race, Dallas would be right in back of Colorado's gallop, keeping pace while having mud kicked into their faces. Despite the Avalanche's grandiose success this season, the Stars are right behind them with a .750 points percentage and just five regulation losses in 30 games.

The Stars have excelled despite significant time out of the lineup for defenseman Thomas Harley, center Matt Duchene and captain Jamie Benn. Forward Tyler Seguin was lost for the season after an ACL injury he suffered last week. Helping to fill those voids have been MVP-level performances from forwards Mikko Rantanen (39 points) and Jason Robertson (18 goals), with center Wyatt Johnston chipping in 16 goals as well. In goalies Jake Oettinger and Casey DeSmith, the Stars have a tandem that ranks behind only Colorado in team save percentage.

Stathead gives the Avalanche a 97.1% chance of winning the Central Division, which is understandable given their dominant play in all facets of the game. But that the Stars have even made this a conversation is one of the most underappreciated stories of the season. The race is far from over.

Trend-o-meter rating: 5

### **Minnesota Wild**

The trend: "The Wall of St. Paul" doesn't crumble

The 2025-26 NHL season has blessed fans with two new hockey nicknames. The first is Utah winger Daniil But, whom defenseman Ian Cole indicated is nicknamed "Cheeks," which is incredible. Meanwhile, thanks to his brilliant goaltending performances for the Wild, Jesper Wallstedt is known around the

league as "The Wall of St. Paul." Which is great for that city, so often overlooked for its twin, Minneapolis.

Wallstedt was 8-1-2 in 11 games, with a .936 save percentage and 1.95 goals-against average. Four of those wins came via shutout. Evolving Hockey has him at 12.5 goal saved above replacement in those 11 games. Teammate Filip Gustavsson has 7.5 GAR in 18 games.

Can that last? Goalies with 16 career games like Wallstedt can sometimes have an advantage on shooters who don't have a book on them yet. The Wild are 25th in expected goals against so far this season, projected to give up 2.8 goals per game at 5-on-5 but giving up just 2.12 goals against per game thanks in part to the Wall. But the Wild have smartly let Wallstedt percolate down in the AHL for three seasons before his breakout.

He might not always dominate -- as evidenced by his off night against Vancouver last Friday -- but this Wall doesn't look like it's going to collapse for the Wild.

Trend-o-meter rating: 8

### **Nashville Predators**

The trend: The trades will begin soon

The only team that has declared itself "open for business" is the Canucks, which offered up any pending free agent in a memo to other teams. But if they're open, how long can the Predators -- the only team with a worse points percentage (.429) than Vancouver (.431) through 28 games -- remain closed?

GM Barry Trotz hasn't been compelled by ownership to make a coaching change yet, but changes have to be made. The Predators are getting calls on center Ryan O'Reilly, who doesn't have trade protection but will have the courtesy of influence over his next destination; and Steven Stamkos, who has a full no-movement clause and an \$8 million average annual value contract that might also impact where he could be traded.

The only way Trotz wouldn't start dealing away veteran players was if they showed a spark of life in the standings in the past few weeks. They have won four of six games, but that might not be enough, considering they remain a country mile out of a playoff spot.

Trend-o-meter rating: 10

### **St. Louis Blues**

The trend: Jordan Binnington's nightmare season

Last season was a memorable one for Binnington, from backstopping Canada to 4 Nations gold in an overtime win to helping the Blues back to the Stanley Cup playoffs with a strong season measured either by traditional stats or analytically.

This season has been ... the opposite. The Blues have a less than 15% chance of making the playoffs, with StatHletes projecting them to have fewer than 83 points. A big part of that has been Binnington's terrible season, measured by traditional stats (.875 save percentage through 20 games) and analytically, as StatHletes has him with the worst goals saved above expected in the NHL (minus-14.25). It has gotten



so bad that Binnington's Olympic status, which seemed cemented after the 4 Nations win, has been debated.

Can he turn it around? The good news for Binnington and the Blues is that he has traditionally played better deeper into the season -- he has a .915 save percentage and a 2.48 goals-against average in 55 games played in February, for example. While the St. Louis blue line has its problems, coach Jim Montgomery's team is ninth in expected goals-against at 5-on-5. It has been a disastrous start for Binnington, but we anticipate a bounce-back.

Trend-o-meter rating: 4

### **Utah Mammoth**

The trend: Can Karel Vejmelka carry them?

The news was not good this week for the Mammoth, who lost leading goal scorer Logan Cooley (14 goals) for an indefinite period with a lower-body injury. That puts even more weight on the shoulders of Karel Vejmelka, who is now in his second straight season of trying to carry Utah to the Stanley Cup playoffs.

Last season saw the 29-year-old Czech play in 21 of the team's last 22 games of the season, thanks to injuries and ineffectiveness from other options. The team acquired Vitek Vanecek in the offseason to give Vejmelka some relief, but Vanecek has gone 2-6-1 in nine games with an .878 save percentage. Hence, Vejmelka has started 22 games for Utah so far, with an .896 save percentage and a 2.64 goals-against average.

The Mammoth are a fairly good defensive team at 5-on-5, so Vejmelka hasn't had to be superhuman: He has 5.85 goals saved above expected, per StatSheet. But it's clear he'll have to carry the ball over the goal line for them to make the playoffs, and there's at least a little proof of concept that he can after last season. But he could use some help.

Trend-o-meter rating: 6

### **Winnipeg Jets**

The trend: Jonathan Toews' rough comeback

There hasn't been much criticism of Toews around the NHL this season. There probably aren't a lot of people looking to play Scrooge about a guy who battled through myriad issues to get back to playing the game he loves in the NHL after stepping away in 2023. Seeing him suit up with his hometown Jets is the stuff Masterton Trophy campaigns are made of.

But it hasn't been a successful comeback yet. Toews has nine points in 28 games, skating to a minus-13 with just three goals while playing 16:08 per game. To his credit, he's still got it in the faceoff circle, winning close to 63% of his draws. But the rest of his game has been Jonathan Toews-in-name-only, which is a bummer.

One wonders how the Jets feel about all the bonus money coming his way based on his games played.

Trend-o-meter rating: 9

## **Pacific Division**

The trend: Beckett Sennecke leads all rookie scorers

Fun fact No. 1 about Sennecke: His mother, Candice Olson, had her own interior design show on HGTV and was a judge on the reality competition show "Design Star" while Beckett was growing up.

Fun fact No. 2 about Sennecke: Through 29 games, no rookie this season had more points than the Ducks forward. He had the lead in both points (24) and goals (nine) among rookies so far this season. He was two points clear of highly touted Canadiens rookie Ivan Demidov, and led a group of players that included Matthew Schaefer of the Islanders by one goal.

The main reason why Sennecke could end up as the NHL's leading rookie scorer -- besides obvious offensive talent from the 2024 No. 3 pick, who had 86 points in 56 games for the Oshawa Generals last season -- is that the Ducks are a scoring machine under new coach Joel Quenneville. They're second in the NHL in goals per game, behind the Avalanche. Sennecke's primary line, with Cutter Gauthier and Mason McTavish, is averaging 3.75 goals per 60 minutes at 5-on-5. But it's a crowded rookie field.

Trend-o-meter rating: 7

## **Calgary Flames**

The trend: The NHL's worst offensive team

Last season, the Flames were a tiebreaker away from making the Stanley Cup playoffs, getting carried to the finish line by rookie goalie Dustin Wolf despite an offense that sputtered to 29th in the NHL at 2.68 goals per game. This season, Wolf has not been there to save them this time -- although Devin Cooley is trying his best to do so himself -- while the team's offensive deficiencies have deepened (they're averaging just 2.33 goals).

Through 29 games, the Flames were one of only three NHL teams not to have at least one player hit double digits in goals. Among the disappointments: center Connor Zary (four goals in 28 games), winger Yegor Sharangovich (four in 26) and defenseman MacKenzie Weegar, who followed two strong offensive seasons with five points in 30 games.

The analytics point to this being an issue with execution at 5-on-5, as the Flames rank 12th in expected goals. Assuming their powerless power play (13.7%, last in the NHL) can tick up just a little bit, there's a chance the Flames could inch past some other offensively challenged teams in their conference, such as Seattle, Nashville and St. Louis.

Trend-o-meter rating: 6

## **Edmonton Oilers**

The trend: Finally trading for a goalie

After losing in the Stanley Cup Final for the second straight season, the Oilers ran it back with Stuart Skinner and Calvin Pickard, who have combined to rank last in the NHL in team save percentage (.870, tied with Ottawa) through 29 games.

Skinner has been slightly better than replacement level according to Evolving Hockey. Pickard has not.

There has been a slew of reporting around Penguins goalie Tristan Jarry's potential availability. The Penguins' contention in the East might complicate that. So might the fact that to make the money work, the Oilers would probably have to send Skinner to Pittsburgh, and they'd rather tandem him with Jarry on their own team.

It has been obvious for years now that the Oilers need an upgrade in goal. With the window to win with Connor McDavid set at three seasons, perhaps there's a little more urgency this time around.

Trend-o-meter rating: 7

### **Los Angeles Kings**

The trend: Cody Ceci, the most perplexing offseason move

When the Kings signed the veteran defenseman in the offseason to a four-year contract that carried a \$4.5 million annual cap hit and trade protection, there was palpable befuddlement, particularly from the analytics community. There was also pushback from those who feel Ceci's shortcomings are overstated by his critics, and saw the 31-year-old defenseman as a decent piece of whatever GM Ken Holland's building in L.A.

Alas, the naysayers have the advantage through 28 games this season. Ceci has one goal and five assists in that span, which is about what one would expect from a player who generates around 25 points at best in a season. But his defense hasn't made up for it: Ceci's pairing with Brian Dumoulin has produced an astonishing 23% goals-for percentage, second worst in the NHL for any pairing that has played more than 180 minutes together.

Trend-o-meter rating: 8

### **San Jose Sharks**

The trend: Make the playoffs

The last time the Sharks had any relevance in the standings, Joe Thornton was still on the team -- and that guy was just inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame after the required post-retirement waiting period. But thanks to young star Macklin Celebrini and goaltending that's thus far holding the fort, the Sharks are actually circling a playoff spot 30 games into the season.

Are they for real? Stathletes isn't buying it, projecting the Sharks to finish with 77 points and giving them just a 3.1% chance to make the playoffs. Their underlying numbers don't inspire much confidence, whether it's percentage of shot attempts (43.6%) or expected goals percentage (42.7%) at 5-on-5. So this bubble might burst eventually. Or Celebrini manages to carry them to a wild-card spot while building himself an MVP case to rival that of Nathan MacKinnon. One of the two.

Trend-o-meter rating: 5

### **Seattle Kraken**

The trend: The worst special teams in the NHL

The Kraken had been one of the NHL's biggest surprises through the first 21 games, going 11-5-5 and occupying a Western Conference playoff spot. They cooled off a bit since then, going winless in five games entering Monday night. One culprit, as it has been all season for Seattle: special teams.

Through 30 games, the Kraken had the league's worst penalty kill, ending just 64.8% of their opponents' power plays. Seattle's own power play ranked 22nd (16.9%), and it had generated just one goal in the past six games before Monday night.

As bad as this all looks, there are a couple of reasons why the Kraken won't be in the special teams basement. For their power play, forward Jared McCann is still searching for his groove since returning from injury. No Kraken player had more power-play points (39) than McCann did over the past two seasons.

For their penalty kill, they have only one more game against Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl, as the Oilers have scored seven goals against the Seattle kill. That's 28% of the goals the Kraken have given up short-handed.

Trend-o-meter rating: 3

### **Vancouver Canucks**

The trend: The end of the Quinn Hughes era in Vancouver

When word got out that the Canucks had alerted the rest of the NHL that they were seeking to make deals, speculation immediately went to the future of star defenseman Quinn Hughes. When it was clarified that the team was mostly seeking to trade some of its pending free agents ... speculation still went to the future of star defenseman Quinn Hughes, who is signed through 2026-27.

Hughes' future with the franchise has been uncertain for quite a while, especially after team president Jim Rutherford said Hughes wanted to play with his brothers Jack and Luke of the New Jersey Devils, and they made it no secret that they'd like to play with Quinn, too. But given that Vancouver is near the bottom of the NHL standings, the chatter around the Canucks' Hughes has only increased.

Could he end up with his brothers on the Devils? With his beloved former coach Rick Tocchet with the Flyers? With the Red Wings in Michigan, where the Hughes Bros. grew up and Quinn and Luke played college hockey? Could Vancouver still convince him to stick around on a contract extension with a solid plan for future contention? Heck, Rutherford seemed to indicate the Hughes reunion could happen in Vancouver.

Whatever the case, this situation seems like it's reaching its boiling point unless the Canucks can contend this season.

Trend-o-meter rating: 8

### **Vegas Golden Knights**

The trend: Jack Eichel, MVP

Eichel has reached a new level over the past two seasons. He hit 94 points in 2024-25, a career best, and in the process finished fifth for the Hart Trophy (MVP). This season he's on the same points-per-60 pace (3.6) in leading the Golden Knights to first in their division via points percentage.

He has been a dominant offensive force for the Knights, leading them with 36 points in 28 games, including 14 points with the man advantage. While his defensive metrics don't always underscore it, Eichel has earned a reputation for being a 200-foot player.

All of this should add up to more MVP attention for Eichel, but will he end up being a finalist? Colorado's Nathan MacKinnon seems like a lock for a spot. If either the Blackhawks' Connor Bedard or the Sharks' Macklin Celebrini get their teams within distance of a playoff spot, they could earn a spot. Then there's Dallas' Mikko Rantanen and Jason Robertson, Anaheim's Leo Carlsson and potentially Tampa Bay's Nikita Kucherov, if the voters want to give someone back East some love.

Trend-o-meter rating: 7