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## Columbus Dispatch / Wrist injury to sideline Columbus Blue Jackets' Sean Monahan six-to-eight more weeks

**By Brian Hedger – January 26, 2025**

The weight that Adam Fantilli carries for the Blue Jackets on his 20-year old shoulders just got heavier.

The team announced Saturday that center Sean Monahan is expected to miss another six to eight weeks after having a “setback” with a wrist injury that occurred Jan. 7.

“It sucks,” Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. “Do we want Monnie in our lineup? Absolutely, but he’ll get fixed up and people will continue to step up in his absence, and we’ll look forward to him coming back.”

Monahan’s injury, a stretched tendon, was initially hoped to be something he could overcome by immobilizing the wrist for two or three weeks. Now Monahan isn't expected back until mid-March.

Prior to the injury, Monahan was the Blue Jackets’ third-leading scorer with 14 goals, 27 assists and 41 points in 41 games. He anchored a top forward line that became one of the most productive in the NHL with Dmitri Voronkov and Kirill Marchenko at the wing positions.

Fantilli, the third pick in the 2023 NHL draft, has taken over that role in Monahan’s absence and has shown encouraging signs of growth. Despite struggling to win faceoffs, a common plight of young NHL centers, he's added six goals, five assists and 11 points in 10 games as Monahan's fill-in.

That includes his first NHL hat trick last week in a 5-1 win against the Toronto Maple Leafs, a memorable night with a large contingent of family and friends from his hometown of Nobleton, Ontario, in attendance.

Monahan, meanwhile, continues to be missed on important draws. He won 51.5% of his faceoffs before the injury, and took the majority of draws on power-plays, penalty-kills and during late-game situations. Boone Jenner took the majority of those faceoffs the past few years, but the Jackets' captain is still recovering from surgery Oct. 9 to repair a shoulder injury.

Jenner isn’t expected to play until late February, so the top center role belongs to Fantilli for a critical upcoming stretch with the Blue Jackets in a tight race for a playoff spot.

Fantilli’s “lessons” as a No. 1 NHL center have included head-to-head matchups the past five games against Anze Kopitar (Kings), Sebastian Aho (Carolina Hurricanes), Auston Matthews (Toronto Maple Leafs), Mathew Barzal (New York Islanders) and Mika Zibanejad (New York Rangers). He set an NHL career high against the Kings by skating 25:58 on 27 shifts.

“I think playing in these types of scenarios and the amount of minutes I’ve played recently has helped me a lot,” Fantilli said. “Hopefully, down the line I continue to do that no matter where in the lineup I’m playing.”

## Columbus Dispatch / Kirill Marchenko, Zach Werenski, Elvis Merzlikins help Columbus Blue Jackets top Kings

By Brian Hedger – January 26, 2025

The Blue Jackets had no business defeating the Los Angeles Kings 3-2 in overtime on Saturday at Nationwide Arena, but they did.

They were outshot, didn't have the puck most of the night, allowed the Kings to score a 6-on-5 tying goal with 1:05 left in the third period and spent most of the evening pinned inside their own blue line. That's no way to traverse the NHL landscape successfully, but the Blue Jackets (24-19-7) are somehow making it work while a handful of lineup regulars are out long-term.

They won their fifth straight game at home because of skill, defensive plays in their own zone, an impressive ability to counterpunch, goalie Elvis Merzlikins (31 saves), a growing confidence level and another memorable goal by Kirill Marchenko 3:45 into overtime.

"I think you can see the makeup of our team and how much each individual cares," defenseman Dante Fabbro said. "When the going gets tough, I think a big part of our character now as a team is we push back. It's really cool to see. I've been in the league for a little bit now, and it doesn't happen often when you get a feeling like this in a locker room."

Here are five takeaways:

### **Columbus Blue Jackets keep clinging to a playoff spot**

Nine teams are separated by seven points in a tight race for the two wild-card spots in the Eastern Conference, and for now the Blue Jackets have the second one at 55 points through 50 games. The Tampa Bay Lightning are in the first wild card with 55 points in 48 games, while the Ottawa Senators (54 points), Montreal Canadiens (53 points), New York Rangers (52 points), Detroit Red Wings (51 points) and Philadelphia Flyers (50 points) are all within five points of the East's final two postseason slots.

"Every game means a lot to us," Fabbro said. "It's tight. Each and every night, we're focused on those two points and we're not looking ahead. We're looking right in front of us in the present, and that's all that matters for us."

### **Kirill Marchenko goes 'Russian Bobby Orr' to deliver Columbus Blue Jackets another victory**

Getting the puck from Ivan Provorov in the neutral zone, Marchenko carried it into the Kings' zone for his winning goal during 3-on-3 play in overtime. Spotting Kevin Fiala, a forward gliding into a backward retreat, Marchenko aggressively dragged the puck to the outside for a take to the net.

He slid the puck under Fiala's stick, past a poke check by Kings goalie Darcy Kuemper and then, while airborne, tucked it into the net on the far side to win the game with his 20th goal of the season. It was a remarkable effort, a beautiful goal and a little reminiscent of Bobby Orr's famous goal to clinch the Stanley Cup in overtime on March 10, 1970 for the Boston Bruins.

Orr cut right to left in front of the net for his goal, which carried just a tad more historical significance. Marchenko's goal made him the first player in Blue Jackets history to score at least 20 goals in his first three NHL seasons with the team and kept the Jackets in a playoff spot prior to a four-day stretch prior to leaving on a four-game road trip.

"That looked like Bobby Orr there," Merzlikins said, smiling. "The Russian Bobby Orr. That was awesome."

### **Zach Werenski extends record home point streak**

All Zach Werenski does at Nationwide Arena is rack up points.

Against the Kings, his 16th goal and 54th point of the season opened the scoring 9:24 into the game and extended his franchise record home point streak to 19 straight games. Werenski is now tied with former Buffalo Sabres defenseman John Van Boxmeer for the fifth-longest home point streak by a defenseman in NHL history.

He's also tied with Colorado's Cale Makar for most goals by a defenseman this season and Vancouver's Quinn Hughes for most points (54) among NHL blue-liners. Much like the Jackets' playoff race, those three may take those scoring competitions to the wire. All three are also chasing the Norris Trophy, which is awarded to the NHL's top defenseman as determined by the Professional Hockey Writers' Association.

"He doesn't cheat the game at all," Fabbro said. "He plays the game the right way, every single game, so for myself and my teammates, it doesn't shock us at all. He's easily one of the best defensemen in this league and he's definitely in that Norris conversation, for sure."

### **Columbus Blue Jackets' Kirill Marchenko, Adam Fantilli set ice-time highs**

Knowing the Blue Jackets wouldn't practice again until Tuesday, coach Dean Evason double-shifted Marchenko on the first and fourth forward lines against the Kings while utilizing a lineup with just 11 forwards and seven defensemen.

Marchenko set his NHL career-high in ice time with 25:36 against the Kings, which included "locking eyes" with Evason in OT to gain his final shift to score the winner. Marchenko's ice time wasn't even the highest number on his main forward line, though. Adam Fantilli, a second-year center who's centering the Jackets' top line without Sean Monahan (wrist), logged 25:58 for his new NHL high.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets are counter-punchers**

The Blue Jackets improved to 6-2-1 since losing Monahan to a wrist injury Jan. 7 that's expected to keep him out until March. How they've posted that record amid a sea of statistical indicators that say those numbers should be flipped is impressive.

According to Natural Stat Trick, the Blue Jackets have been outshot 263-234 without Monahan while allowing 183 more shot attempts (628-445). They've also generated 97 fewer scoring chances (294-197) and yielded 43 more high-danger chances to opposing teams (128-85). Based off those numbers, the Blue Jackets have generated roughly five fewer expected goals without Monahan than their opponents despite outscoring teams in actual goals by a 27-19 margin.

Merzlikins, Daniil Tarasov and rookie Jet Greaves are the biggest reasons why, combining for an .885 high-danger save percentage that ranks sixth in the NHL during that span. Their combined overall save percentage of .928 also ranks fourth. The Blue Jackets also have a high "PDO" of 1.043 without Monahan, which is a statistical "luck" quotient that combines team shooting percentage with team save percentage.

That's the fourth-highest in the NHL over the past nine games, so the Blue Jackets are probably fortunate to have won so much without Monahan and other regulars. They've also become good at using their high skill level to counterpunch with opportunistic goals.

## Columbus Dispatch / Kirill Marchenko lifts Columbus Blue Jackets to fifth straight home win with OT goal

**By Brian Hedger – January 25, 2025**

The Blue Jackets continue making hay at home.

Hosting the Los Angeles Kings on Saturday night at sold-out Nationwide Arena, they picked up their fifth straight win on home ice with an exciting 3-2 overtime victory.

Despite losing a 2-1 lead on a goal by Quinton Byfield with 1:05 left in regulation, the Blue Jackets won on Kirill Marchenko's OT goal 3:45 into the extra frame. Marchenko's 20th goal ended the game 1:35 after Zach Werenski was denied by Kings goalie Darcy Kuemper on a penalty shot.

Werenski and Dante Fabbro scored the goals in regulation for the Blue Jackets (24-19-7), who play their next four games on the road in Las Vegas, Utah, Dallas and Buffalo. Phillip Danault and Byfield scored in regulation for the Kings (26-14-6).

Each team scored a goal in the first period, starting with Werenski giving the Blue Jackets a 1-0 lead at 9:24 with his 16th goal of the season to extend his franchise-record home point streak to 19 straight games. Danault tied it 1-1, scoring his fourth goal of the season just over three minutes later to cap a long stretch with the puck pinned inside the Columbus blue line.

The game remained tied at 1-1 through an evenly played second period and stayed that way until Fabbro's goal from distance put the Blue Jackets up 2-1 early in the third. The Kings appeared to tie it again on a goal by Alex Laferriere, but a Blue Jackets coaching challenge for a missed offsides play overturned it.

Replays showed that Danault entered the Blue Jackets' zone ahead of the puck 21 seconds before Laferriere slid it past Merzlikins off a rebound.

## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner cleared for contact in shoulder recovery

**By Brian Hedger – January 25, 2025**

The Blue Jackets' captain isn't back just yet, but Boone Jenner continues to pass milestones along a long road to recovery from shoulder surgery.

After skating on his own for a few weeks before recently getting clearance to take contact, Jenner joined the Blue Jackets' morning skate Saturday at Nationwide Arena. He even sent a good-natured "chirp" at goaltending coach Niklas Backstrom, which made head coach Dean Evason chuckle.

"It's pretty cool, right?" Evason said. "He's chirping (Backstrom) about which end he wanted at the start of practice, and I said, 'Maybe you should wait until you get in the lineup before you start chirping the coaches again.'"

That wait appears to be shrinking quickly, which isn't surprising.

Jenner has dealt with an assortment of injuries in his 11-year NHL career, including a broken jaw last season, and he always tries to return ahead of schedule. This time, Jenner is ahead of the curve following shoulder surgery Oct. 9 to repair an injury that happened while crashing into the boards near the end of a preseason practice.

His absence against the Los Angeles Kings on Saturday was the 50th game the Blue Jackets played without their captain, but Jenner continues to clear hurdles in his effort to rejoin the lineup. Participating in a morning skate was a big step, and the next is expected to happen in a full practice next week.

"This is just one step you have to get through," Jenner said. "Obviously, it's a morning skate, so getting into a couple more practices next week will be a little more helpful, getting some 5-on-5 stuff (and) just taking some hits on it and going from there. I guess the question would be, 'When am I playing?' but there's no set date yet."

Returning before or at the Blue Jackets' outdoor game March at Ohio Stadium against the Detroit Red Wings seems like a realistic target date. That would be about five months out from surgery, which is around the typical recovery timeline for shoulder repairs.

Jenner is optimistic he'll be ready to play the outdoor game, if not return before it.

"We've been waiting a while for it," he said. "I'm hoping to play that one, no doubt, but it's day-by-day right now. This was a big step today just getting back to practice."

Thanks to the Blue Jackets' push to stay afloat in the playoff chase despite multiple key injuries, there's also a bigger motivator for Jenner, center Sean Monahan (wrist), defenseman Erik Gudbranson (shoulder surgery) and Yegor Chinakhov (back) to return as soon as they're ready.

"The outdoor game's something, but everything else that's gone on (this season) is motivation for me to get back," Jenner said. "There's a lot that's happened in this past little (stretch) that I'm looking forward to getting back and playing for. The outdoor game's definitely a special one, but this one, for me, is a lot more than that."

Should the Blue Jackets get Jenner, Monahan, Gudbranson and Chinakhov back for the stretch run, it would be like adding a haul of talent, grit, experience and leadership at the NHL trade deadline, which is March 7.

“There’s a lot motivating me to come back, and I’m just sticking with it,” Jenner said. “I’ve been around as much as I can, and I just can’t wait to join the guys again. Today was a big step, and it felt right being out there. So, hopefully, just keep going.”

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: NHL greats weigh in on Zach Werenski's season, streak

By Aaron Portzline – January 26, 2025

A collection of notes, insights, ruminations and did-you-knows gathered throughout the week that was for the Columbus Blue Jackets:

### **Item No. 1: In great company**

Zach Werenski accelerated through the left circle as he gathered a pass from Luca Del Bel Belluz. His wrist shot sailed into the far corner of the net, giving the Blue Jackets a 1-0 lead on Saturday against the Los Angeles Kings.

It marked the 19th straight game in Nationwide Arena in which Werenski has registered at least a point, the longest streak in franchise history. More impressively, only three defensemen in NHL history — Bobby Orr (25 games in 1974-75 and 21 in 1970-71), Paul Coffey (23 in 1985-86) and Phil Housley (22 in 1991-92) — have had longer home point streaks.

In recent home games, he's surpassed streaks by two other greats, Brian Leetch (18 in 1991-92) and Ray Bourque (17 in 1992-93). Put another way: Werenski's streak is the longest in the NHL in 33 seasons.

It's all part of what's become the best season of Werenski's career. Among defensemen, he's tied for first in goals (16) with Cale Makar and first in points (54) with Quinn Hughes. There's a growing conversation about Werenski and the Norris Trophy, awarded to the league's top defenseman. At this rate, he'll get votes for the Hart Trophy as NHL MVP.

These are not topics Werenski wishes to discuss, mostly because he wants to keep the focus on the entire Blue Jackets team, especially now that they're in the throes of a playoff chase.

So, The Athletic reached out to other names on the list — Bourque, Coffey and Leetch — to get their thoughts on Werenski.

Bourque, who won five Norris trophies, remains the highest-scoring blueliner in league history with 410 goals and 1,579 points.

"The guys you always respect the most at that position are the guys who play power play, penalty kill, they play in the last minutes of the game, and they play against the other teams' best players," Bourque said. "He does all that, and he does it at a high level. That says a lot.

"The true No. 1 guys ... there aren't many. They might be No. 1 on their team, but that's different. But (Werenski) is a true No. 1."

Leetch, the second-highest-scoring American-born defenseman, has always kept an eye on the up-and-coming crop of young U.S. players. He remembers seeing Werenski at World Junior camps when Leetch's friend Chris Chelios was involved in coaching.

These days, he sees him in other places.

"I watch (NHL Network's) 'On The Fly' all the time," Leetch said, laughing. "And he's on there all the time. Everyone is talking about him this season."

Leetch, who won two Norris trophies, a Calder Trophy (best rookie) and a Conn Smythe Trophy (playoff MVP), said he always noticed Werenski's skating, tricky wrist shot and offensive instincts. But he always had a question about his career arc.



“He kept getting stuck around 40 or 50 points,” Leetch said, “and you wondered if he’d ever get above that. Well, here it is, right? The answer is yes.

“He’s fun to watch because he’s so dominant even in his own end. And the way he skates and gets up on the play ... man, that’s just really impressive. I’ve been waiting for the jump he’s making this year. The goals are awesome, and scoring goals as a defenseman is not easy.”

Coffey, who won the Norris three times, sits second behind Bourque in goals (396) and points (1,531). He’s currently an assistant coach with the Edmonton Oilers, who have already played the Jackets twice this season.

“I’ve always been impressed with (Werenski), and I like watching him because I like his puck-moving,” Coffey said. “I’ve noticed him, even before this year. I love guys like that who can play, who can really move the puck.

“You want to see consistency from year to year. I just hope this isn’t a one-off for him. You hope he’s battling for the Norris every year because that helps the Blue Jackets.

“He’s going to get some votes this year for the Norris, and that’s great. I hope he wins it.”

## **Item No. 2: Mateychuk here to stay**

Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell is a big believer in young players spending time in the American Hockey League before they make it to the NHL. That’s the only reason defenseman Denton Mateychuk started the season with AHL Cleveland.

Anybody who watched Blue Jackets training camp would tell you that Mateychuk, the No. 12 pick in 2022, was clearly among the club’s top six defensemen.

Mateychuk played 27 games in Cleveland and made it look easy. He had 9-16-25 and a plus-5 rating, drawing only five minor penalties despite playing about 25 minutes per night in his first pro season.

He’s looked the part in the NHL, too.

The Blue Jackets haven’t had the “get a place” conversation with Mateychuk yet, but Waddell was pretty clear when he spoke with The Athletic before Saturday’s game.

“He’s going to be here (in Columbus),” Waddell said. “We’re really happy with how Denton’s played, and we’re looking forward to keeping him for the rest of the year.”

Mateychuk, 20, has played on the left side of the second pair, with veteran Ivan Provorov switching from left to right to make room. In 13 games, Mateychuk has 1-2-3 and a minus-2 rating, but his average ice time — 18:02 — speaks to the trust he’s built with the coaching staff.

Not bad for the youngest defenseman in the NHL.

“I feel like it’s been good,” Mateychuk said. “I’m just trying to learn every day and get better. I’ve been doing the right things.

“It’s the little details. From juniors to the (AHL) and from the (AHL) to the NHL, the little details become that much more important.”

Like every young player, Mateychuk said lining up next to players you grew up watching on TV can be daunting. His second and third NHL games were against the Boston Bruins and defenseman Charlie McAvoy, who has always been one of Mateychuk’s favorites.

His seventh NHL game was against the Pittsburgh Penguins and legendary forward Sidney Crosby, a Canadian icon.

“You just look over and go, ‘Wow, it’s pretty awesome to go against these guys,’” Mateychuk said. “I’ve always believed I could do it, but going out and proving it is a good feeling.”

### **Item No. 3: Take 5, Steve Mears**

Take 5 is a breezy, (mostly) off-the-ice sitdown with a Blue Jackets player, coach, broadcaster or front-office staffer. This week’s features television play-by-play voice Steve Mears, who joined the Blue Jackets this season after a long stint with the Penguins and, before that, NHL Network.

1. What part of Columbus is home and why?

We’re in Dublin. Absolutely love it, love Bridge Park, and love the peacefulness of the area. It’s so picturesque, and we happened to see a house that we just fell in love with. The neighbors are incredibly kind. Immediately came and introduced themselves in the driveway and brought gifts over ... a bottle of Ohio bourbon and fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies. It felt like home right away.

2. What’s your biggest surprise with Columbus?

There’s so much to say here. When you come in as a visitor, you see the downtown, the rink, hotel and airport. You don’t really get into the real fabric of the city until you get to know the area. There are hidden gems, and finding those has been a pleasant surprise. The zoo is amazing. I had no idea Columbus had such an amazing zoo. The fans have been incredible, but that isn’t a surprise. I’ve always known that. The way I’ve been treated and welcomed by the fans has been so great. The organization, too. The way they’ve involved us broadcasters in things, and I really appreciate that. It’s been first class all the way.

3. Favorite restaurant in Columbus?

Not as many as when I’d come in as a visitor (laughs), because now we need a babysitter, right? The best we’ve found was Cento in German Village. Phenomenal. Everything, the whole experience, was wonderful. And that was my first time in German Village. We went to the Book Loft right there near the restaurant, and as an avid reader ... I just got lost in there. I didn’t know if I was going to get out.

4. Favorite CBJ memory so far?

That 7-6 Tampa game (on Nov. 21) when Zach (Werenski) fittingly wins it in overtime. That jumps to mind, because how many 7-6 games do we see? The way the building responded ... everybody left that night just buzzing. There have been so many memorable nights already, a bunch of comebacks ... winning in Pittsburgh (on Jan. 7), that was quite enjoyable, I’ll say that. That night just this week (Wednesday) in Toronto, when you’ve got a big team win, a Fantilli hat trick, his mother throwing her hat on the ice, the Del Bel Belluz family there celebrating ... when the hockey gods and the TV gods smile down on you, right?

5. Which member of this organization should have a podcast?

I would listen to a Dean Evason podcast. It’s got to be uncensored. He has a lot of interests beyond hockey. He has this reputation as this old-school hockey guy, he was a tough player, an intense coach ... but he has a lot of interests. I love just his takes on hockey, obviously, but he could go all kinds of directions.

### **Item No. 4: Snacks**

- Saturday’s OT winner was Marchenko’s 20th goal of the season, making him the first player in franchise history to begin his NHL career with three 20-goal seasons. It was also the second OT winner of Marchenko’s career. The first came on April 2, 2023, vs. Ottawa, a 4-3 win near the end of Marchenko’s rookie season.

- Goaltender Elvis Merzlikins is playing his way back to the form he showed early in his career. On Saturday, he stopped 31 of 33 shots, including a huge stop on L.A.'s Adrian Kempe at 2:10 of overtime when Kempe got a clean look off a two-on-one. Merzlikins is 9-2-1 with a .906 save percentage and 2.70 goals-against average in his last 12 outings dating to Dec. 19. In that span, he's beaten New Jersey, Boston, Carolina, Toronto and now Los Angeles, among others. With that recent run, his save percentage is up to .894, just a tick below the NHL's leaguwide average of .895.
- It's not only Merzlikins' numbers that have improved. Here's Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason on his goaltender: "What we really liked is his ability to calm things down in the zone. Elvis makes some spectacular saves. Highlight-reel saves. But the ones that are fantastic are the ones he catches when we're stuck in our zone, when he smothers the pucks like Velcro when we need a stop. There's not a lot of chaos after that. He's done a good job of that, but he's also done a good job, personally, of staying calm when things get a little hectic. We talk about leadership all the time, and you don't talk about goalies a lot (in that way). But he's led us in a lot of hockey games."
- Captain Boone Jenner took part in Saturday's morning skate, and he's expected to join the Blue Jackets for practice on Tuesday and Wednesday, two very positive steps forward in his recovery from shoulder surgery in October. Jenner will not be back in the lineup until after the Blue Jackets return from the 4 Nations Face-Off break on Feb. 22, but he will gradually ramp up his participation in contract drills over the next few weeks, Waddell said.
- The Blue Jackets are hopeful center Cole Sillinger, out the past three games with a bruised hand, will be able to play at some point on the upcoming road trip. Sillinger blocked a shot during the Jan. 20 loss to the New York Islanders and his hand is badly swollen. X-rays revealed no fractures, however.
- As for the not-so-great injury news over the weekend, Waddell said Sean Monahan, now out for an extended period with a sprained wrist, spent "three or four days" last week trying to find a way to play through the injury, putting off allowing it to heal 100 percent until the offseason. After a 30-minute conversation with Waddell, the decision was made to shut him down until mid-to-late March. He is now probably on a similar timeline for return as defenseman Erik Gudbranson, who had shoulder surgery after getting injured three games into the season.
- Del Bel Belluz, who was recalled from AHL Cleveland when Monahan went down on Jan. 7, continues to impress. He had an assist and a plus-1 rating on Saturday, giving him 3-5-8 in the first 10 games of his NHL career. The only Blue Jackets player with a more productive start in their first 10 games with Columbus is Werenski, who had 2-8-10 at the start of his career in 2016-17.
- Sunday Gathering trivia: After a plus-1 rating in Saturday's win over Los Angeles, Marchenko leads the NHL with a plus-29 rating through 50 games. Which Blue Jackets player has the single-season franchise record for the best plus-minus rating?
- A rarity during an 82-game NHL schedule: consecutive days off. Because the Blue Jackets don't play again until Thursday in Vegas, Evason and the coaching staff have given the players both Sunday and Monday off, a good break for a club that played nine games in 15 days, culminating with the Kings game on Saturday. "It's fantastic, just mentally," Evason said. "Physically, obviously. The exciting thing is we get two practice days (Tuesday and Wednesday) before we go (to Vegas). Sometimes the schedule isn't in your favor, and it hasn't been on a few occasions. But this is one time where it is.
- Nobody had a better week than Blue Jackets prospect goaltender Nolan Lalonde. Last Monday, he was named the Ontario Hockey League's goaltender of the week after stopping all 60 shots in back-to-back shutouts for the Soo Greyhounds. Then, on Friday against Flint, the 20-year-old scored a rare goalie goal, sailing the puck the length of the ice into an empty net with 1:21 remaining in a 5-2 win. "It still doesn't

feel real,” Lalonde told reporters after the game. “I’ve tried but never scored.” It’s the 12th goalie goal in OHL history.

- Trivia answer: Blue Jackets defenseman David Savard, who now plays for the Montreal Canadiens, had a plus-33 rating in 74 games during the 2016-17, which was tied for third in the NHL. Among forwards, the franchise record is plus-25 by winger Josh Anderson (2018-19), who now also plays for Montreal.

## The Athletic / Kirill Marchenko's 'engine' powers Blue Jackets to OT win with acrobatic goal

**By Aaron Portzline – January 25, 2025**

Kirill Marchenko had already set a career-high for ice time as he sat on the bench in overtime, catching his breath while his Columbus Blue Jackets teammates and Los Angeles Kings tried to break a 2-2 deadlock.

And all it took was one look from Marchenko to convince coach Dean Evason that he was ready for more.

Marchenko's acrobatic, airborne goal off a powerful drive to the net at 3:45 of the extra period — his 20th goal of the season and the second OT winner of his career — led the Blue Jackets to a 3-2 win before an over-capacity crowd of 18,919 in Nationwide Arena.

Zach Werenski and Dante Fabbro also scored goals, while goaltender Elvis Merzlikins continued his stellar run of play, making 31 saves. It was the Blue Jackets' fifth straight win at home and the 11th time in 12 games that they've earned at least a point in Nationwide.

But it was Marchenko who ended the Blue Jackets' latest gritty, teeth-gnashing victory. He'd already taken three shifts during the three-on-three overtime before locking eyes with Evason and going out for a fourth and final.

"We double (shifted) him every chance we could," Evason said. "His engine, or his recovery rate, was phenomenal all night.

"We had two other guys going (out next) in overtime at that last shift and he literally eyeballed me to go back on the ice. He's competing his ass off, right?"

Marchenko made a fascinating read as he came into the attack zone through the left circle. He recognized that Kings forward Kevin Fiala — not a defenseman — had switched to cover him, and he thought he could expose Fiala by making him skate backward and defend.

"If a guy goes against me (like that), it's hard to defend," Marchenko said. "I just think about it ... if it's a forward, I can beat him. Just drive the net. That's it."

Marchenko skated wide of Fiala, sent the puck under Fiala's stick to get it back to his forehand, then skidded the puck across the crease of Kings goaltender Darcy Kuemper before leaving his skates and burying the puck around the goalie's left pad.

"That looked like Bobby Orr," Merzlikins said. "The Russian Bobby Orr."

The Blue Jackets, thanks to a break in the schedule, are taking both Sunday and Monday as off days. With that in mind, Evason rode his No. 1 line hard against the Kings, one of the largest, most physical, and defensively stout clubs in the NHL.

Marchenko played 25:36, while center Adam Fantilli drew a career-high 25:58, and left winger Dmitri Voronkov played 19:22. Werenski, the NHL ice time leader, drew 28:00.

It was another all-hands-on-deck game for the Blue Jackets.

Werenski scored his 16th goal of the season at 9:24 of the first period, giving the Blue Jackets a 1-0 lead and extending his club-record home points streak to 19 games, only six short of the aforementioned Bobby Orr's NHL record.

His playing partner, Dante Fabbro, sailed in a long shot through traffic early in the third period to give the Jackets a 2-1 lead.

The Kings appeared to tie the score at two with 13:56 remaining in the third period, but video coaches Dan Singleton and Aron Augustitus — perched high above the ice at press level — alerted the bench that Kings forward Phillip Danault was in the zone ahead of the puck, an offside infraction.

After a long review, the goal was taken off the board. That would loom large the rest of the way.

With the Jackets leading 2-1, the Kings pulled Kuemper for an extra skater with 3:14 remaining. The Blue Jackets spent much of the next two minutes in their own zone, failing twice to clear the puck and get a change. The Kings scored off a rebound with 1:05 remaining to tie it.

In recent years — heck, maybe even earlier this season — a goal like that would have been crushing. This time?

“Nothing,” Evason said, proudly. “Nothing. (The response on the bench) was ... nothing. No panic. Nobody yelling. Nobody shouting. It happened. They scored. We got stuck in our zone, we didn’t get a clear a couple of times and it went in our net.

“But we’ve talked about the group in there, the leadership and not losing our composure in those areas. They proved that again today.”

The Blue Jackets are now 50 games deep in an 82-game season and they remain in a playoff spot in the Eastern Conference. They’re currently in the second wild-card spot but have the same number of points (55) as the first wild-card club, Tampa Bay.

It wasn’t supposed to be this way this season.

“You can see the makeup of our team and how much each individual cares,” Fabbro said. “When the going gets tough, a big part of our character right now is we push back. It’s really cool to see.

“You know, I’ve been in the league for a little bit now, and it doesn’t happen often when you get a feeling in the locker room. We had a lot of work ahead of us and it’s a long road. But there’s a lot of belief in here, for sure.”

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets' Sean Monahan expected to be out until March after injury setback

**By Aaron Portzline – January 25, 2025**

Sean Monahan, who has centered one of the NHL's best lines and been an invaluable veteran presence for the Columbus Blue Jackets this season, is expected to be out of the lineup until mid-to-late March after suffering a setback in his recovery from a wrist injury, a team source told The Athletic.

The Blue Jackets were hopeful that Monahan's right wrist, injured on Jan. 7, would heal quickly and he'd miss only a few weeks. But a recent medical check revealed no significant improvements, and doctors have now projected a longer recovery timeline, of an additional six to eight weeks.

That suggests that the earliest Monahan could return is March 7, which happens to be the day of the NHL trade deadline. If it takes him eight weeks, he'd be back on March 21. Either way, Monahan, 30, almost certainly will miss the March 1 Stadium Series game vs. the Red Wings at Ohio Stadium.

Monahan was injured during a 4-3 shootout win in Pittsburgh when he was checked by Penguins defenseman Kris Letang.

It's yet another injury blow for the Blue Jackets, who have played all season without captain Boone Jenner (shoulder surgery) and for the last two months without speedy winger Yegor Chinakhov (upper body). Veteran defenseman Erik Gudbranson (shoulder surgery) has been out since the third game of the season.

Monahan, who signed a five-year, \$5.5 million free-agent contract with the Blue Jackets last summer, has been everything the club hoped he'd be, and more.

With Monahan at center, the Blue Jackets have had one of the league's top lines, with Dmitri Voronkov and Kirill Marchenko flanking him on the wings. In 41 games, Monahan has 14 goals, 27 assists and 41 points, along with a plus-17 rating. He's also won 51.5 percent of faceoffs.

Not only has Monahan elevated his Russian linemates — Marchenko has 19 goals, 33 assists and an NHL-best plus-28 rating, while Voronkov has 18 goals and 15 assists — but he's been a huge help to young forwards Adam Fantilli, Kent Johnson, and others who are just finding their way in the league.

In recent weeks, both Fantilli and Johnson have raved about Monahan's steady influence, how he's helped them learn to play with more patience and responsibility in the defensive zone and shown all of the Jackets' young players how to prepare for games and practices.

The tutelage has paid off.

Since Monahan was injured, Fantilli, only 20, has moved up to the No. 1 line and seen his game awaken, especially offensively. In the last nine games, including the Jan. 7 win over Pittsburgh, which Monahan left early, Fantilli has six goals and five assists in nine games.

On Wednesday, in a 5-1 win over Toronto, Fantilli had his first NHL hat trick, having a career night in his hometown with nearly 100 friends and family in attendance.

The Blue Jackets got a boost on Saturday when Jenner joined the group for a morning skate in Nationwide Arena. He's expected to practice with the club next week before they depart on a four-game road trip, but will be kept out of heavy contact drills for the near term, general manager Don Waddell said.

Jenner is not expected to return until after the two-week break for the 4 Nations Face-off. But his return is good news for a club that needs it, especially so with the extended absence of Monahan.

The Monhan injury may also lead to a longer NHL stay for Luca Del Bel Belluz, who has been a lineup fixture for almost three weeks now. In eight games, playing a second- and third-line role, Del Bel Belluz has two goals, four assists and a plus-2 rating.



## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Better Equipped to Overcome Big Injuries

By Mark Scheig – January 26, 2025

What if we told you at the beginning of the season that the Columbus Blue Jackets' top-two centers in late January would be Adam Fantilli and Luca Del Bel Belluz? How would you have reacted to that?

On one hand, that's a positive development in the case of Fantilli. That meant he played well enough to earn the role. It's also a positive development for Del Bel Belluz because that meant he did well enough in the AHL to earn a promotion.

On the other hand, where are Boone Jenner, Cole Sillinger and Sean Monahan? Once again in 2024-25, the Blue Jackets are dealing with significant injuries. Jenner has been out since the end of training camp and is now starting to work his way back.

Sillinger has missed the last three games due to an upper-body injury. After the Blue Jackets' morning skate Saturday, he skated on his own in the Ice Haus. That was the first time on the ice since the injury. While he is day-to-day, he could miss a couple more games.

Then there is Monahan. Just after Saturday night's game against the Los Angeles Kings started, the Blue Jackets released a new update on his injury. The news was not good.

The Blue Jackets had hoped that immobilizing Monahan's wrist for two weeks would help the healing process. Things didn't go as planned. The team now has to go another 6-8 weeks without their number-one center who was off to one of the best starts in his NHL career.

In past seasons, this laundry list of injuries would have spelled doom to any hope of making the postseason. Things are different now with the Blue Jackets. They're better equipped to handle difficult injuries.

### **Overall Depth in Better Place**

The Blue Jackets for years have struggled with depth especially at the center ice position. Whether it was inconsistent play from their centers or simply not enough organizational depth, they could not compete with the NHL's best teams up and down their lineup.

Fast forward to this season. One of GM Don Waddell's first moves with the Blue Jackets was to make sure depth was no longer an issue.

Previous GM Jarmo Kekalainen didn't leave the cupboard empty when the team moved on from him. Waddell had plenty to work with. Then he made moves to ensure depth not only at center but all over the ice was addressed.

Up front, the biggest signing was Monahan. He signed a five-year deal in the offseason to immediately address the center depth. His presence has been massive on these Blue Jackets.

Monahan's play allowed others to play lower in the lineup or on the wing. His signing took on more importance when Jenner's injury occurred. Early on, the injury showed the Blue Jackets were better equipped to overcome.

That theme kept going as the season went on. Soon after Jenner's injury, Erik Gudbranson suffered a major injury that would take months to heal. The defense was in a better place too.

Waddell traded for Jordan Harris in the Patrik Laine deal and signed Jack Johnson to a one-year contract. In the event of major injury, the Blue Jackets had reinforcements ready to go.

Waddell wasn't satisfied. Given the defensive struggles, he saw an opportunity to claim Dante Fabbro off waivers from the Nashville Predators. All he's done is find a home playing with Zach Werenski. This turned out to be one of the best moves of the season in the NHL.

Waddell also brought Kevin Labanc, Zach Aston-Reese and James van Riemsdyk into the fold to help with the forward depth. The Blue Jackets prepared themselves in case a rash of injuries came. As of late, they've been tested.

Denton Mateychuk had to miss time due to illness. So did Jack Johnson. The Blue Jackets didn't miss a step. The big part to this is how they've been able to be in a playoff spot missing their number-one center in Monahan.

The Blue Jackets top-four centers on Saturday night against the Kings were Fantilli, Del Bel Belluz, Justin Danforth and Sean Kuraly. They beat a really good Kings' team in the process. Had the center depth not been properly addressed in the offseason, who knows what this lineup would have looked like?

The Blue Jackets have another four-game road trip upcoming. Until Sillinger is ready, they will have the same four centers from Saturday night's win. There is a belief within the locker room that they expect to win on any given night no matter who plays. Their confidence is high according to Fabbro.

"When the going gets tough, a big part of our character is we push back," Fabbro said. "It's cool to see. I've been in the league for a little bit now, and it doesn't happen very often that you get a feeling like this in the locker room."

The Blue Jackets' depth is healthy in all areas of their team. Once the injured are ready to return, the team will have tough decisions to make regarding who leaves the lineup.

All of this is just the first part of how they're better equipped to handle big injuries. Enter Dean Evason.

### **Systems & Structure Matter Too**

Teams need depth in the NHL. Injuries are a part of the game. No one is immune to them. The teams that are best able to manage their injuries tend to have the most success.

Part of managing their injuries is making sure the team has a chance to win every night no matter who plays. This is where Evason deserves a lot of credit.

The Blue Jackets on Saturday night hung in against one of the stingiest teams in the NHL at five-on-five. Evason's system allows the Blue Jackets both the ability to create offense but also limits the opposition's scoring chances.

You'll notice in recent games, outside of the game in Carolina, that the Blue Jackets' defense and goaltending have been much better of late. They're making a more concerted effort to stay above the puck which in turn limits what the opposition can do creating high-danger chances.

Elvis Merzlikins is playing some of his best hockey of his career in this recent stretch. The team in front of him is blocking shots and limiting what comes his way. That's a big reason why he's 6-1-0 in his last seven starts.

Here's where Evason gets credit. It's a simple system anyone can play. It's black and white. It's also the same system the Cleveland Monsters play under Trent Vogelhuber. With everything seamless, a call up can come right into the NHL lineup and feel right at home. That is why the depth on these Blue Jackets have been successful. They are more prepared than ever to play and have success. They know exactly what to do.

So Monahan has to miss 6-8 more weeks? It stinks for the team but they have depth at center ice that can carry them until he's ready to return.

Fantilli is gaining valuable experience as the top center. Del Bel Belluz has eight points in 10 games since being called up. They weren't ever going to fully replace Monahan. But their depth has allowed them to have an expectation they can win on any given night.

### **It Takes a Team to Overcome**

While several individual performances are worth noting throughout the season, the reason the Blue Jackets are holding a playoff spot is because they have bought completely into the concept of team. Evason brought that with him upon his hiring. The team has responded by becoming closer than ever.

Not many people expected the Blue Jackets to do much this season given how it started with the tragedy and then losing two of their captains to major surgery.

Turns out the Blue Jackets still expected to make a run at the playoffs this season. Their young stars have shined. Their depth has responded. They play a system that allows their depth to find success.

The Blue Jackets are in the midst of developing a winning formula. It's the kind of formula that can overcome big injuries.

Many expected the Blue Jackets to fall off after Monahan's injury. Nope. Fantilli stepped up and is doing an admirable job for someone who is about to play his 100th NHL game.

The Blue Jackets of the recent past had major injuries and weren't prepared to overcome them. The results spoke for themselves. Things are different now. Not only are they prepared to handle them, they expect to win every night. This is why having the right leaders in place matters. They have set the team up for success no matter what challenges present themselves.

The Blue Jackets are 7-2-1 in their last 10 games while missing some of their key players. Only the New York Rangers have been better of the wildcard teams in that stretch. It's no fluke what the Blue Jackets are doing right now.

Whether or not the Blue Jackets can make the playoffs remains to be seen. But if nothing else, being able to have a winning formula while being able to overcome big injuries only reinforces how bright the team's future is. No matter who's in, they expect success.

That's perhaps the biggest development so far for the Blue Jackets in 2024-25.

## Sports Illustrated / Blue Jackets Rookie Earning Full-Time Roster Spot

**By Jacob Punturi – January 26, 2025**

The Columbus Blue Jackets continued their pursuit of a playoff spot with an overtime victory over the Los Angeles Kings. With another win, the Jackets maintain their spot in the wild card race and currently have a one point lead over the Ottawa Senators for the final playoff spot in the Eastern Conference.

One player who is turning heads for the Blue Jackets over the last 10 games is rookie center Luca Del Bel Belluz. In addition to having the best name in the NHL, the 21-year-old forward has stepped into the Columbus lineup and been an instant contributor.

Through his first 10 career games, he has three goals and five assists for eight points.

This run with the Blue Jackets continues an impressive career for Del Bel Belluz, who has gone from under-the-radar young player in the Columbus organization to a can't-miss prospect this season. Last year was the Canadian-born forward's first as a professional, and he fared well despite the adjustments needed. Playing in the American Hockey League with the Cleveland Monsters, he scored nine goals and added 22 assists for 31 points in 58 games.

He began the current campaign in the AHL once again, and his improvement was noticeable immediately. He was quicker with his decision-making, made crisper passes and was a much more confident player. He carved up the league, scoring 17 goals and posting 37 points over the first 34 games before his recall to the NHL.

He's bringing that game to Columbus in his audition with the NHL club. Averaging 13:51 minutes of ice-time, Del Bel Belluz is playing relentlessly, launching pucks on net and keeping things simple. It's everything a coach wants to see out of a young player, and it's slowly leading to more trust and a larger role.

If he continues playing and growing at this pace, the Blue Jackets will be forced to make a full-time spot available for Del Bel Belluz on the roster.

## The Athletic / NHL trade deadline tiers: Buyers, sellers and those in between — plus biggest needs

The Athletic NHL Staff – January 27, 2025

Almost four months of the NHL season are behind us and there are only 39 days until the trade deadline.

Friday's three-team blockbuster is proof that by now, front offices have had enough time to evaluate their teams. Whether it's for the short- or long-term, all 32 clubs will be looking to improve in trade discussions between now and the March 7 deadline.

This week, *The Athletic* asked its NHL staff to put teams into three tiers — the buyers, the sellers and those in between — and highlight each franchise's biggest need. Of course, several teams will change tiers and shift their trade priorities in the coming weeks, but it's insightful to see where they stand at this point.

As of now, our staff believes there will be 13 buyers and nine sellers, leaving 10 teams that could go either way (or do some buying and selling). Teams are listed alphabetically in their respective tiers.

### **Buyers**

#### ***Colorado Avalanche***

Biggest need: Secondary scoring

Prior to Friday's blockbuster trade that sent star winger Mikko Rantanen to Carolina, Colorado's biggest need was adding a depth defenseman with the little cap space it had to shore up the bottom pairs. Now, things look a lot different. Martin Necas should fit well into the top six and could shine even brighter than he did in Carolina in a more free-flowing offensive system. But with the roughly \$5 million in cap space created by that trade, expect the Avalanche to be more aggressive ahead of the deadline to add more scoring punch. — *Jesse Granger*

#### ***Dallas Stars***

Biggest need: A top-six forward

The Stars have managed well enough since Tyler Seguin's potentially season-ending knee surgery, but they still have a void to fill. Whether it's someone such as the Islanders' Brock Nelson or the Sharks' Mikael Granlund or something splashier like a J.T. Miller trade, you can expect Dallas to do something to beef up its top nine, if not its top six. The only question is how much they're willing to part with to get it. — *Mark Lazerus*

#### ***Edmonton Oilers***

Biggest need: A possible No. 4-5 defenseman

This depends on how well the newest Oiler, John Klingberg, fares when he resumes his NHL career after a double hip resurfacing procedure. The Oilers can probably settle for adding a depth defenseman if Klingberg's play is anywhere close to his top form from a few years ago. They'll likely want a more notable addition if Klingberg isn't up to the task. Aside from the blue line, a top-nine winger and No. 4 center are also potential needs. — *Daniel Nugent-Bowman*

### **Florida Panthers**

Biggest need: Cheap blue-line depth

The defending champs don't project to have much cap space on deadline day, so barring a surprise, they'll be shopping the bargain bin. The Panthers can certainly win the Cup for a second straight year, but they need another half-decent option for the third pair. The Adam Boqvist/Uvis Balinskis/Nate Schmidt trifecta might not kill them, but it also isn't quite contender-grade. Time to try something different. — *Sean Gentile*

### **Los Angeles Kings**

Biggest need: A scoring winger

The Kings are pointed toward making noise in the playoffs after three straight first-round exits. They've been a bit of a surprise with consistent play all season, but a recent spell has highlighted their need for another scorer. Anze Kopitar, Quinton Byfield and Phillip Danault are three good two-way centers to throw at potential playoff opponents, but star winger Adrian Kempe has covered for some disappointing years from Kevin Fiala and Trevor Moore. Warren Foegele and Alex Laferriere have given them some secondary scoring and Alex Turcotte has been a nice fit with Kempe and Kopitar on the top line, but they can use another true threat like Marian Gaborik was in 2014. — *Eric Stephens*

### **Minnesota Wild**

Biggest need: A top-six center/winger

The Wild were doing a superb job at the start of the season accruing cap space, but then a never-ending stack of injuries began in November that resulted in mass call-ups and eventually stints on long-term injured reserve for Jake Middleton, Jakub Lauko and Kirill Kaprizov in order to afford call-ups. That may severely alter the Wild's deadline plans if they don't have the cap space to make a significant trade. They'll have to get creative: a third-party conduit and/or a partner to eat cap space. But the Wild would love to add another top-six forward to aid the offense. — *Michael Russo*

### **New Jersey Devils**

Biggest need: Added forward depth

The Devils put together a strong first half, and Tom Fitzgerald is poised to add at the deadline. He's been consistent about his desire to add at forward, and potentially up the middle. "You can't have enough centers," Fitzgerald told Pierre LeBrun recently. Centers have positional flexibility, and adding a good one to the mix could have a trickle-down effect on the Devils' lineup. Other players could slide into easier-to-manage roles. — *Peter Baugh*

### **Ottawa Senators**

Biggest need: A right-shot defenseman or scoring winger

The Senators' needs haven't changed for most of the year. Fortunately, Ottawa has made it work with AHL reinforcements on defense and in attack, using players such as Nikolas Matinpalo and Zack Ostapchuk among others with some mainstays injured. But if the Senators look to keep pace with their fellow conference rivals, a move may need to be made to bolster either their defense or offense. — *Julian McKenzie*

### ***Tampa Bay Lightning***

Biggest need: Depth scoring

The Lightning's top six is loaded and the defense, once J.J. Moser returns from injury, is pretty balanced. But Tampa Bay's scoring depth was a clear hole going into the season — one that management likely knew was something they needed to address at the deadline. The No. 1 priority should be finding a solid third-line forward who can give Nick Paul some two-way support so the team isn't as reliant on its stars to carry them. The Lightning should be able to swing that at a lower cost, as long as management learned from the Tanner Jeannot deal. — *Shayna Goldman*

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

Biggest need: A third-line center

The Leafs are putting together an impressive season, but the center situation beyond Auston Matthews and John Tavares has been an issue from the jump. Max Domi has really struggled this season and was recently leapfrogged on the depth chart (amid an injury to Tavares) by Pontus Holmberg, who's had a rough year himself while bouncing in and out of the lineup. GM Brad Treliving would like to add a center who can make an impact at both ends. It won't be easy. Plenty of teams need centers and the Leafs don't have an especially deep pool of tradeable assets. — *Jonas Siegel*

### ***Vegas Golden Knights***

Biggest need: A scoring middle-six winger

With one of the best records in the league, the Golden Knights will certainly be buyers at the deadline yet again, but may not be as aggressive as we've seen at past deadlines due to a lack of trade assets. Vegas doesn't have a first-round pick for the next two years, but should still be looking to add depth scoring. Jack Eichel is having an excellent season, but some of the depth scoring from players such as Keegan Kolesar and Brett Howden has been less frequent lately. It feels like the Golden Knights are one more scoring option away from a complete lineup. — *Jesse Granger*

### ***Washington Capitals***

Biggest need: Help down the middle

A contender looking to add a center? Shocking stuff. For the Caps, though, the cliché is also the truth. They're set with Dylan Strome and Pierre-Luc Dubois as their top two options, but behind them, things get fuzzy. Lars Eller, acquired from Pittsburgh to center the third line, has been passable — but just barely. Cap space could be an issue (about \$3.6 million projected on deadline day), but there's enough to make the situation workable. — *Sean Gentile*

### ***Winnipeg Jets***

Biggest need: A second-line center

There was a great argument for Winnipeg to add a center when the Jets were at full health. Adam Lowry's injury intensifies that need. Vladislav Namestnikov and Rasmus Kupari are capable players but they are not ideal No. 2 and 3 centers for the stretch run. Gabriel Vilardi and Cole Perfetti have played center in the NHL but they give up footspeed and Jets coaches demand pace from their centers. They could sign Jonathan Toews, who they're legitimately interested in, but the three-time Cup champ is coming from a long way back, health-wise, and turns 37 in April. The Jets could try to ride it out with what they have but this is a uniquely good year and they have ample cap space. They're buyers.

— *Murat Ates*

## **The teams in between**

### ***Buffalo Sabres***

Biggest need: A right-handed top-four defenseman

The Sabres won't be doing a total fire sale at the trade deadline, but they'll be in the position of a seller. A playoff push is unrealistic. They'll get calls on pending unrestricted free agents Jason Zucker, Jordan Greenway and Henri Jokiharju. But teams will also likely check the temperature on some of Buffalo's young core pieces because of how the season has gone. I have them as in between because I would expect the Sabres to be open to a hockey trade like the one that sent Casey Mittelstadt to Colorado for Bowen Byram last season. — *Matthew Fairburn*

### ***Calgary Flames***

Biggest need: A young, right-shot center or draft capital

What do you do if you're the Flames? They still have a chance at making the playoffs this year, which would make them way far ahead of schedule for their rebuild/retool. Even if it means risking a first-round exit and, depending on where they finish, losing out on a first-round pick thanks to that Sean Monahan trade from long ago. The Flames could buy. But depending on if they slide, there's reason for them to sell too. But their most enticing trade piece, Rasmus Andersson, doesn't appear to be for sale. Of course, regardless of position, the Flames continue to search for that elusive right-shot forward between the ages of 18 and 23. The Flames continue to intrigue. — *Julian McKenzie*

### ***Carolina Hurricanes***

Biggest need: Forward depth

The Hurricanes added two big pieces in trading for Mikko Rantanen and Taylor Hall on Friday, but Carolina could probably use a little more depth in its bottom six. Injuries to William Carrier and Tyson Jost have thinned the Hurricanes, and including Jack Drury in the blockbuster trade takes away one of Carolina's best faceoff men and a valuable penalty killer. The team could also continue to look to improve at second-line center, though it remains hopeful that Jesperi Kotkaniemi can fill the role. — *Cory Lavalette*

### ***Columbus Blue Jackets***

Biggest need: Veteran toughness

The future certainly appears bright in Columbus, with so many young players taking hold of big roles this season. And the expected return of Boone Jenner and Erik Gudbranson will add some muscle for the stretch drive. But if GM Don Waddell decides to straddle the line between buyer and seller, look for him to add veteran players who can help steer a young club in the throes of a playoff race. If the Blue Jackets trade veteran defenseman Ivan Provorov — he wants a long-term deal and may fetch a first-round pick — they'd like a solid defenseman to help buttress the back end. — *Aaron Portzline*

### ***Detroit Red Wings***

Biggest need: A long-term, top-six forward

The Red Wings certainly have their share of short-term needs, both on the blue line and up front. But while they've surged under new coach Todd McLellan, any deadline deals Steve Yzerman makes still have to be more about the big picture. They may do some minor selling, depending on where they stand come March, but if they add, it'll need to be for next year and beyond — so think players on the younger side. And while another top-four defenseman would certainly be helpful, the most logical move might



be a long-term, top-six forward — either at center or on the wing — to help provide scoring behind Dylan Larkin, Lucas Raymond and Alex DeBrincat going forward. — *Max Bultman*

### **Montreal Canadiens**

Biggest need: Depth on defense

The Canadiens are not likely to be buyers at the trade deadline no matter where they find themselves in the standings. The one thing they might buy is keeping their own rentals: Jake Evans, Joel Armia, David Savard and Christian Dvorak. But in the unlikely event the Canadiens do go out shopping, it might be to shore up their defense, especially on the right side. Mike Matheson is a left-shot playing on the right, and Savard's ice time has been steadily dropping of late. There could even be a scenario where the Canadiens trade Savard as a rental and go out and acquire a right-side replacement for him right away.

— *Arpon Basu*

### **New York Rangers**

Biggest need: Long-term improvements over short-term stopgaps

This isn't the year for the Rangers to go for expensive rentals at the trade deadline. They aren't in position to make Cup-or-bust moves. Chris Drury needs to look out for the team's long-term future. That doesn't mean he can't add. New York has been involved in the J.T. Miller sweepstakes. He's a player with term who can help beyond this year. The Rangers could also look to get back some mid-round draft picks by trading away pending free agents Ryan Lindgren, Reilly Smith and perhaps Jimmy Vesey.

— *Peter Baugh*

### **St. Louis Blues**

Biggest need: A No. 3 center

At the start of the season, the prevailing thought was that the Blues needed a No. 2 center. They tried Pavel Buchnevich, but he wasn't the answer, so they put Brayden Schenn back in that spot and he's been terrific. But now there's a hole at third-line center, where Oskar Sundqvist is playing. He's a heart-and-soul guy but a step slow after multiple knee injuries, making him more suitable on the wing. If the Blues still think they're a playoff team, they could help themselves by adding a third-line center in the trade market. — *Jeremy Rutherford*

### **Utah Hockey Club**

Biggest need: Talented young roster players

Utah would love to make the playoffs in Year 1 in Salt Lake City. But the Hockey Clubbers had only a 22 percent chance of qualifying before Sunday's matchups, and they'll be in tough as a wild-card team in Round 1 in a top-heavy Western Conference. How they play the next six weeks will affect their strategy, however. If they win a lot they likely will hold onto many of their rental players. Lose a lot and it's time to think about the future by dealing some of their seven pending UFAs and reloading for next year. This is a franchise on the rise but chasing the playoffs this year at the expense of improving for the future doesn't make a lot of sense. And some of their veterans will be highly desirable in a thin trade market.

— *James Mirtle*

### **Vancouver Canucks**

Biggest need: Resolve the J.T. Miller trade saga

The Canucks have J.T. Miller, one of their best players, on the trade block at the moment. And based on their recent form, they're a team that's waiting for the other shoe to drop. By the deadline, and ideally

before it, the Canucks will resolve this situation and chart a new path forward. While the club's recent performance might make the following comment seem like a stretch, the truth remains that this is a playoff-caliber side and may even be a playoff-caliber side if it subtracts a core piece, provided that, thereafter, the club competes more consistently. It seems like an expedited move might be best for all involved. — *Thomas Drance*

## **Sellers**

### ***Anaheim Ducks***

Biggest need: Another high-round draft pick

This should be more of a soft sell for the Ducks rather than a full sell-off as they should be in the mode of stepping out of a lengthy rebuild. But they're also not in the position to truly buy at the deadline. Frank Vatrano was re-signed for three more seasons, but they'll figure to take calls on defenseman Brian Dumoulin. Useful winger Robby Fabbri could attract some interest. John Gibson could be an attraction for a team in a contending window needing to fortify its goaltending, depending on whether the upper-body injury he sustained on Saturday is a long-term concern. They don't have a second-round pick, so securing one or another first-rounder would be ideal. — *Eric Stephens*

### ***Boston Bruins***

Biggest need: A No. 1 center

The Bruins thought they had signed a No. 1 center in Elias Lindholm. It looks like they were wrong. Lindholm is now centering their third line. Pavel Zacha has chemistry with David Pastrnak on the top line, but he is not a traditional first-line center in terms of offensive presence. It may be unlikely that the Bruins can acquire an offensive pivot at the deadline. — *Fluto Shinzawa*

### ***Chicago Blackhawks***

Biggest need: Create more NHL roster spots

The Blackhawks cleared one roster spot by trading Taylor Hall on Friday. GM Kyle Davidson will likely still want to open up a spot or two more. The Blackhawks are expected to have at least three prospects — Ryan Greene, Oliver Moore and Sam Rinzel — sign after their college seasons and jump to the NHL immediately while burning the first year of their contracts. Davidson will want to ensure ice time for them with roster openings, and the easiest way to do that is to trade away expiring contracts. Ryan Donato is probably the most likely to be dealt next. — *Scott Powers*

### ***Nashville Predators***

Biggest need: More draft picks

Preds GM Barry Trotz isn't likely to trade any foundational pieces away, because the team is playing better and it's crucial that this core group gets better together and figures a way to produce competent hockey in the early stages of next season. But Gustav Nyquist and Colton Sissons are probably not untouchable if the Preds remain well outside the playoff picture. Even if they start making serious noise, don't expect him to do any player renting. — *Joe Rexrode*

### ***New York Islanders***

Biggest need: Recoup future assets

Until recently, the Islanders hadn't been above .500 since the second week of November, which should tell you all you need to know about their deadline plans. Since Lou Lamoriello is in charge, however, the Islanders don't appear ready to sell. When they are ready, pending UFAs Brock Nelson and Kyle

Palmieri plus J-G Pageau and whoever else a team is willing to take should be out the door to replenish a barren prospect pool. — *Arthur Staple*

### ***Philadelphia Flyers***

Biggest need: A center

That the Flyers need a center has been evident for some time. Whether they attempt to deal for one before the deadline or wait until the offseason (or later) is difficult to predict. As for the deadline overall, the Flyers don't have any pending unrestricted free agents, so it could be fairly quiet. The players they do have who have been mentioned in trade speculation — Rasmus Ristolainen and Scott Laughton — both have term left on their deals so they aren't locks to be moved, either, particularly if the team gets back into the playoff race. Still, the Flyers selling off a piece or two remains the likeliest outcome. — *Kevin Kurz*

### ***Pittsburgh Penguins***

Biggest need: Young talent/assets

The Penguins, while still somewhat competitive, are very much in sell mode. Kyle Dubas wants draft picks, prospects and young NHL players and the majority of the Penguins are available for the right price. This is proof that you can indeed initiate a rebuild with a handful of Hall of Famers on a roster. It's happening in Pittsburgh right now. — *Josh Yohe*

### ***San Jose Sharks***

Biggest need: More draft picks

San Jose's direction hasn't changed. The prospect pool is looking much more fruitful these days and it never hurts to continue stocking the shelves. While the Sharks have their own first-round selection and could have a good shot at winning a second straight draft lottery, the Sharks have only six picks in total and could add to this year's haul by dealing more veterans on expiring contracts. Mikael Granlund is their most attractive asset. Others who could be in play are defensemen Cody Ceci and Jan Rutta (who was placed on injured reserve Sunday), along with forwards Luke Kunin and Nico Sturm (who is also on injured reserve). — *Eric Stephens*

### ***Seattle Kraken***

Biggest need: More future value

The Kaapo Kakko success story provides a template for a Kraken team that has to focus on mining as much future value — in both young players and picks — as possible between now and the NHL trade deadline. Since acquiring Kakko for Will Borgen and some picks, Kakko has been on a tear. To the point of changing the complexion of what we might expect from this still relatively young Kraken forward group in the future. Seattle still has a couple of valuable rental pieces to sell — Brandon Tanev and Yannick Gourde — and should do so with an eye toward recreating the success it's had with Kakko, in terms of bringing young upside into the organization ahead of the deadline. — *Thomas Drance*

## ESPN / NHL Power Rankings: 1-32 poll, most intriguing upcoming games

ESPN staff – January 24, 2025

NHL teams will be taking a break in the middle of February for the 4 Nations Face-Off tournament, featuring star players from each team playing for the United States, Canada, Sweden and Finland.

But before that event begins, which games are the most intriguing? As part of this week's updated edition of the Power Rankings, we've identified the top captivating contest for all 32 teams -- whether it's a game against a rival, one that takes on added value in the playoff races, or something else entirely.

How we rank: A panel of ESPN hockey commentators, analysts, reporters and editors sends in a 1-32 poll based on the games through Wednesday, which generates our master list.

Note: Previous ranking for each team refers to the previous edition published Jan. 17. Points percentages and paces are through Thursday's games.

### **1. Washington Capitals**

Previous ranking: 1

Points percentage: 73.96%

Feb. 1 vs. Jets. Not only is this a potential Stanley Cup Final preview -- sponsored by the letter W? -- but thanks to their heritage as the Southeast Division's Atlanta Thrashers, the Jets franchise is the team against which Alex Ovechkin has scored the most goals in his career (55). How many will he get in this one?

### **2. Winnipeg Jets**

Previous ranking: 2

Points percentage: 68.37%

Jan. 28 at Canadiens. Maybe this isn't for the entire team, but just for a couple of Jets in particular: Connor Hellebuyck and Kyle Connor. Though this game against the Canadiens obviously counts in the NHL standings, Hellebuyck and Connor will hit this same ice at the Bell Centre on Feb. 15 as the U.S. takes on Canada in the 4 Nations Face-Off, the first best-on-best clash between these two countries since the semifinal round of the 2014 Olympics.

### **3. Vegas Golden Knights**

Previous ranking: 3

Points percentage: 66.67%

Jan. 26 vs. Panthers. For any team that has its sights set on a long playoff run, games against the defending Cup champs take on extra meaning. The Knights lost a 4-3 overtime contest against the Cats on Oct. 19. How will this game end up?

### **4. Edmonton Oilers**

Previous ranking: 4

Points percentage: 65.63%

Feb. 1 vs. Maple Leafs. No Canadian team has won the Stanley Cup since the Canadiens in 1993, though the Oilers were just one win away in 2024. Along with the Jets, these two clubs represent the country's

best chance of breaking that streak, and the cross-continent clash will give us a preview of what a Cup Final between the two could look like.

### **5. Carolina Hurricanes**

Previous ranking: 9

Points percentage: 64.29%

Feb. 4 at Jets. A potential Stanley Cup Final preview? This matchup might not set any viewership records, but it would be superb hockey.

### **6. Toronto Maple Leafs**

Previous ranking: 8

Points percentage: 63.27%

Feb. 6 at Kraken. For years, Yannick Gourde tormented the Maple Leafs as a member of the Lightning. With the veteran center's name being floated in trade rumors -- and the Leafs always looking for ways to improve the team -- could they be playing this game against a future teammate?

### **7. Minnesota Wild**

Previous ranking: 6

Points percentage: 62.50%

Jan. 30 at Canadiens. Future Hall of Famer Marc-Andre Fleury has announced he'll retire at the end of this season, so -- barring a Stanley Cup Final matchup between these teams -- this will be his last visit as a pro to his home province.

### **8. Dallas Stars**

Previous ranking: 5

Points percentage: 62.77%

Jan. 24 vs. Golden Knights; Jan. 28 at Golden Knights. The Stars have had some epic postseason showdowns with the Knights recently -- and both appear playoff-bound again this season -- so this pair of games will be a treat. Will the intensity match what we've seen in springs past?

### **9. Florida Panthers**

Previous ranking: 12

Points percentage: 60.20%

Feb. 8 vs. Senators. There's a possible future world in which the Panthers and Senators face off in the first round of the Stanley Cup playoffs -- ensuring us at least four games of Tkachuk-on-Tkachuk combat. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Any game in which Brady and Matthews face off has the potential for viral highlights.

### **10. Los Angeles Kings**

Previous ranking: 10

Points percentage: 63.33%

Feb. 7 vs. Stars. On some nights, the Kings look as if they could beat any team in the NHL; other nights, not so much. So this matchup against the perennial contender Stars will be a litmus test ahead of the 4 Nations break.

### **11. New Jersey Devils**

Previous ranking: 7

Points percentage: 60.00%

Feb. 6 vs. Golden Knights. Because of some wonkiness with the schedule, this is the first meeting between these two playoff-bound clubs (they'll face off again in Vegas on March 2).

### **12. Colorado Avalanche**

Previous ranking: 11

Points percentage: 59.18%

Feb. 7 at Oilers. Once the 4 Nations Face-Off begins, Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar will be teammates of Connor McDavid's for Canada. But on this night, they'll be battling hard for two points as the Western Conference bracket remains tight.

### **13. Tampa Bay Lightning**

Previous ranking: 13

Points percentage: 57.61%

Feb. 4, 6 vs. Senators. For the past few preseasons, there has been some thought that the Lightning would regress and one of the rising Atlantic teams would take their spot in the playoffs. So far, that hasn't proven to be the case -- but this back-to-back set against one of those rising teams will go a long way (one way or another).

### **14. Calgary Flames**

Previous ranking: 14

Points percentage: 57.61%

Jan. 26 at Jets. Every game is important for a team like the Flames on the cusp of a wild-card berth. But, we'll circle this one as an old-school Smythe Division rivalry renewed, featuring two elite American goaltenders: leading Vezina Trophy candidate Connor Hellebuyck and Calder Trophy candidate Dustin Wolf.

### **15. Ottawa Senators**

Previous ranking: 17

Points percentage: 54.17%

Jan. 25 vs. Maple Leafs. The Battle of Ontario continues! The Sens took Round 1 this season in Toronto, and the two clubs will face off again on March 15. These games are never boring, especially with both teams in the playoff hunt.

### **16. Montreal Canadiens**

Previous ranking: 19

Points percentage: 54.17%

Feb. 9 vs. Lightning. Despite modest expectations entering this season, the Canadiens remain within shouting distance of a wild-card berth. A win against their division rivals from central Florida would greatly aid in that quest.

### **17. Columbus Blue Jackets**

Previous ranking: 16

Points percentage: 54.08%

Feb. 8 vs. Rangers. For a team on the wild-card bubble, every point matters. But games against division rivals matter more -- especially if a team can hand that rival a regulation loss. This game will make a statement (one way or another) for the Blue Jackets.

### **18. Boston Bruins**

Previous ranking: 18

Points percentage: 54.00%

Feb. 1 vs. Rangers. Have the Rangers turned a corner back to being a true contender after a midseason swoon? Perhaps. Whether the trend sticks or not, this is a pivotal game for the Bruins to use as a measuring stick (and the two teams will face off again four days later at MSG.)

### **19. New York Rangers**

Previous ranking: 22

Points percentage: 54.17%

Jan. 28 vs. Hurricanes. Although the Rangers won their second-round playoff series against the Canes last spring, Carolina has beaten them in regulation in both matchups this season. A win here would really signal that the Blueshirts have turned around their fortunes.

### **20. Vancouver Canucks**

Previous ranking: 15

Points percentage: 53.19%

Jan. 31 at Stars. If the various reports are true, the Canucks are seeking out the best new home for disgruntled center J.T. Miller. Well, on this night, they'll be visiting one of those potential options, as the Stars are on the prowl for a veteran center to replace injured Tyler Seguin.

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

Previous ranking: 21

Points percentage: 51.02%

Feb. 4 vs. Oilers. There are some who considered Oilers goaltender Stuart Skinner a snub from Canada's 4 Nations Face-Off roster. One of the netminders who did make it? The Blues' Jordan Binnington. Perhaps Binnington will have extra motivation in this one to show that Hockey Canada made the right call.

### **22. Philadelphia Flyers**

Previous ranking: 23

Points percentage: 51.02%

Feb. 8 vs. Penguins. Although the Keystone State battles are a little more captivating when the Flyers and Penguins are both in line for playoff berths, the matchups are typically enthralling; to wit, their matchup on Dec. 23 ended 7-3.

### **23. Utah Hockey Club**

Previous ranking: 24

Points percentage: 52.13%

Jan. 29 vs. Penguins. It's a big deal any time a superstar comes to town, but Penguins games are particularly notable for UHC center Logan Cooley, who participated in Sidney Crosby's "Little Penguins" program as a youth player.

### **24. Detroit Red Wings**

Previous ranking: 20

Points percentage: 51.04%

Jan. 25, Feb. 8 vs. Lightning. Given the ties between the franchises -- including current Detroit GM/former Tampa Bay GM Steve Yzerman -- games between the two are always must-see affairs. And with the Red Wings currently chasing the Lightning in the standings, these will matter even more.

### **25. Pittsburgh Penguins**

Previous ranking: 25

Points percentage: 48.00%

Feb. 8 at Flyers. A stretch in late January (at the Kraken, Sharks and Utah) might wield more influence on the Penguins' playoff hopes, but a win here against the rival Flyers might mean more heading into the break.

### **26. New York Islanders**

Previous ranking: 26

Points percentage: 48.91%

Jan. 24 vs. Flyers, Jan. 30 at Flyers. The Islanders' playoff hopes remain alive, and the Flyers are one of the teams over which they'll have to climb if they want to extend their postseason streak.

### **27. Seattle Kraken**

Previous ranking: 27

Points percentage: 45.92%

Jan. 28 vs. Ducks. Things haven't gone as well as planned in Dan Bylsma's first season behind the Kraken bench, and the team is closer to the bottom of the standings than the top. As a result, this matchup against another struggling Pacific Division club could have outsized impact on Seattle's ultimate spot in the draft order.

### **28. Nashville Predators**

Previous ranking: 30

Points percentage: 45.74%



Feb. 1 at Penguins. A rematch of the 2017 Stanley Cup Final! But as both GMs have continually been asked by reporters about their plans for the trade deadline, perhaps this will be a preview of some players who will find themselves skating elsewhere by March 7.

### **29. Buffalo Sabres**

Previous ranking: 29

Points percentage: 42.71%

Jan. 31 vs. Predators. It's looking more likely that the Sabres will miss the playoffs again, meaning that their rise up the draft lottery board is of no small amount of interest. Games against fellow struggling teams like the Preds will have an outsized impact.

### **30. Anaheim Ducks**

Previous ranking: 28

Points percentage: 45.83%

Feb. 8 at Kings. The Ducks are mainly looking at their spot in the draft lottery standings at this point, but their final game before the break will be against the rival Kings, a matchup that always raises the proverbial temperature.

### **31. Chicago Blackhawks**

Previous ranking: 32

Points percentage: 36.17%

Feb. 5 vs. Oilers. At one point, Connor McDavid was a generational star playing for a team that wasn't winning a ton of games. Will this matchup be a look into the future for Connor Bedard?

Next eight days: vs. TB (Jan. 24), vs. MIN (Jan. 26), @ TB (Jan. 28), @ CAR (Jan. 30)

### **32. San Jose Sharks**

Previous ranking: 31

Points percentage: 33.33%

Jan. 30 at Kraken. At some point, these are going to be really great matchups given the wealth of young talent on both of these rosters (and in the pipelines). For now, it's all about the nautical theming.