



Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips October 5-7, 2024

Columbus Blue Jackets

- PAGE 03: Columbus Dispatch: Replay: Columbus Blue Jackets routed by Pittsburgh Penguins in preseason finale
- PAGE 07: Columbus Dispatch: Columbus Blue Jackets face early injury setbacks: What it means for the upcoming season
- PAGE 09: Columbus Dispatch: Columbus Blue Jackets sign Kevin Labanc after Boone Jenner, Dmitry Voronkov injuries
- PAGE 10: Columbus Dispatch: 3 takeaways from Columbus Blue Jackets' preseason finale
- PAGE 13: The Athletic: Blue Jackets bold predictions: Adam Fantilli, Kirill Marchenko, Kent Johnson ready to take off
- PAGE 17: The Athletic: Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: Jenner, Voronkov injuries cause ripple effect
- PAGE 21: The Athletic: Blue Jackets sign veteran forward Kevin Labanc to 1-year contract
- PAGE 22: BlueJackets.com: The Bubble Boys: Mateychuk among those battling for a spot
- PAGE 26: BlueJackets.com: Young players will be key to success for Blue Jackets
- PAGE 28: The Hockey Writers: Blue Jackets' Injuries Leave Opening-Night Roster in Flux
- PAGE 30: The Hockey Writers: Emptying the 2024 Blue Jackets' Training Camp Notebook
- PAGE 35: 1st Ohio Battery: The Final Countdown: With The Preseason In The Rearview Mirror, It's Decision Time For The Columbus Blue Jackets As They Finalize The Opening Night Roster
- PAGE 38: 1st Ohio Battery: Columbus Blue Jackets Sign Forward Kevin Labanc To One-Year Contract
- PAGE 39: 1st Ohio Battery: Denton Mateychuk Is Doing All He Can To Make Decisions Tough On Blue Jackets

Cleveland Monsters/Prospects

NHL/ Websites

- PAGE 41: The Athletic: NHL season previews 2024-25: Projecting each team from worst to first
- PAGE 45: The Athletic: Enter the 2024 NHL prediction contest that's so easy it's almost impossible
- PAGE 47: The Athletic: Best and worst moments from Amazon's 'Faceoff: Inside the NHL' documentary series
- PAGE 53: The Athletic: NHL 2024-25 season predictions: Stanley Cup winner, playoff teams, dark horse and more
- PAGE 55: The Athletic: Should NHL teams be penalized for tanking? Plus Panthers' new blueprint and Capitals intrigue
- PAGE 59: The Athletic: Which NHL prospects have stood out early in the 2024-25 season?
- PAGE 63: The Athletic: NHL waiver tracker: Best players on the wire throughout 2024-25 preseason
- PAGE 68: The Athletic: NHL waiver targets: The 10 biggest names available after final roster cuts
- PAGE 70: ESPN: The NHL 2024-25 season guide: Key players, teams, stories

PAGE 75: ESPN: NHL players projected to leap forward in 2024-25
PAGE 78: Sportsnet.ca: NHL Power Rankings: One reason for optimism for all 32 teams
PAGE 81: Sportsnet.ca Two sentences on every NHL team's expectations for 2024-25 season

Columbus Dispatch / Replay: Columbus Blue Jackets routed by Pittsburgh Penguins in preseason finale

By Brian Hedger- October 5, 2024

Final: Penguins 7, Blue Jackets 3

Lori Schmidt

Columbus lost its final two games of the preseason to finish with an exhibition record of 4-4-0.

TEAMS	1ST	2ND	3RD	T
CBJ	2	1	0	3
PIT	2	4	1	7

9:10 pm ET October 4, 2024

Eller continues to roast Columbus Blue Jackets, second goal gives Pittsburgh Penguins 7-3 lead

Brian Hedger

The Blue Jackets are getting worn out by Eller, an NHL veteran center whose second goal in the game gives the Penguins a 7-3 lead 8:16 into the third. Eller also has two assists in a four-point game, and his rookie linemate, McGroarty, picked up his second assist for a 1-2-3 scoring line.

Eller's second goal was scored when he skated right down the slot unchecked, splitting Johnson and Hunter McKown before snapping a shot past Tarasov off a feed from Puljujarvi. It was another "learning moment" for the Blue Jackets, who've been completely dominated since the first period.

Getting blown out in Pittsburgh, however, is a common occurrence for the Jackets.

8:43 pm ET October 4, 2024

Columbus Blue Jackets reeling after two periods, trail Pittsburgh Penguins 6-3

Brian Hedger

The end of this preseason can't arrive soon enough for the Blue Jackets.

After a few impressive games and a 4-2-0 record in their first six games, these final two against the nemesis Penguins have stuck a pin in the Jackets' preseason balloon. Key injuries, a 3-1 loss on home ice with a better roster on paper and now they're getting housed by Pittsburgh in a game that was expected to be this way for the NHL-loaded Penguins.

Columbus brought a team with a lot of prospects who'll start this season in the AHL with the Cleveland Monsters, and it showed in the second period. Pittsburgh netted four goals, went up 6-3 and now the Blue Jackets have one period of exhibition play left. Mercifully.

8:28 pm ET October 4, 2024

Pittsburgh Penguins dealing Columbus Blue Jackets goalie Daniil Tarasov a tough night

Brian Hedger

Lars Eller puts the Penguins up 6-3 with Pittsburgh's fourth goal in the second period, slipping behind the Blue Jackets' defense and putting the puck through the pads. Eller got a free rush to the net, but his shot barely snuck through the wickets on Tarasov, who appeared to have it stopped.

Ugly period for the overmatched Blue Jackets, who are getting a lesson in how NHL rosters should take care of AHL-heavy preseason opponents.

8:21 pm ET October 4, 2024

Pittsburgh Penguins, Columbus Blue Jackets exchange two quick goals in second period

Brian Hedger

Acciari's second goal of the game pushed the Penguins' lead to 5-2 at 11:36 of the second, but Kent Johnson scored off a breakaway less than two minutes later to pull the Blue Jackets within 5-3 on his second goal and sixth point in five preseason games.

8:18 pm ET October 4, 2024

Pittsburgh Penguins surge ahead 4-2 against Columbus Blue Jackets with two goals in 11 seconds

Brian Hedger

Mateychuk and Clayton's good feelings from the first period disappeared in the span of 11 seconds early in the second. Both were on the ice for back-to-back goals from Jesse Puljujarvi and Rutger McGroarty at 5:54 and 6:05 to give the Penguins a 4-2 lead.

Puljujarvi snuck behind Mateychuk for a stretch pass from Lars Eller to create a breakaway for his goal and McGroarty put a shot under the crossbar on the ensuing shift.

8:01 pm ET October 4, 2024

Columbus Blue Jackets 'kids' impressive to start against Pittsburgh Penguins; tied 2-2 after one period

Brian Hedger

The Blue Jackets essentially did what the Penguins did Thursday at Nationwide Arena, sending a team with eight NHL "veterans" joining a roster full of scrappy AHL hopefuls into a building where a mostly full NHL lineup awaited them.

After one period, the younger Jackets are the better team despite a 2-2 score. Columbus has outshot Pittsburgh 13-6 and netted the night's first two goals in the game's first 5:05 on tallies by Pyyhtia and Clayton. Just as impressive were the setups for each one.

James Malatesta, a rookie forward, feathered an impressive diagonal pass through traffic to hit Pyyhtia in stride for the first goal, which was scored with a slick backhand between goalie Joel Blomqvist's pads.

Denton Mateychuk, a rookie defenseman, got the primary assist on the Jackets' next goal by receiving a short pass in the offensive zone, dragging it to the high slot and finding Clayton with a drop pass. Clayton's shot sailed through traffic plus Mathieu Olivier's screen in front for a 2-0 lead.

Malatesta committed a tripping penalty that led to Pittsburgh tying it 2-2 with a power play goal and Mateychuk was on the ice penalty-killing, but both rookies are still off to an impressive start in their final opportunity to impress this preseason.

7:55 pm ET October 4, 2024

Blue Jackets battling injuries

Lori Schmidt

The Blue Jackets didn't bring a lot of their NHL regulars to Pittsburgh tonight. Part of that, of course, is that this is a preseason road game. But another part of that is some of Columbus' regulars are beat up right now.

The latest, in case you missed it, is Dmitri Voronkov has landed on injured reserve.

7:30 pm ET October 4, 2024

Columbus Blue Jackets, Pittsburgh Penguins off to fast start at PPG Paints Arena

Brian Hedger

Neither team wasted time unleashing their offense.

The Blue Jackets raced out to a 2-0 lead in the game's first five minutes on goals by Mikael Pyyhtia at 4:25 and Cole Clayton at 5:05, but the Penguins didn't need long to counter. Noel Acciari cut the lead to 2-1 with a one-timer to beat Daniil Tarasov at 6:27 followed by Rickard Rakell scoring the equalizer less than a minute later to knot it 2-2 in the first period.

Clayton is expected to start the season with AHL Cleveland, but Pyyhtia could be locking up an NHL role with the Blue Jackets — who are short on forwards due to Justin Danforth (wrist), Dmitri Voronkov (upper body) and rookie Gavin Brindley (fractured finger) all on injured reserve.

6:47 pm ET October 4, 2024

Columbus' roster for the Blue Jackets-Penguins game

Lori Schmidt

2 Christiansen, Jake D

4 Sillinger, Cole C

5 Mateychuk, Denton D

7 Kuraly, Sean C

12 Sillinger, Owen C

18 Gambrell, Dylan C

19 Fantilli, Adam C

22 Harris, Jordan D

24 Olivier, Mathieu RW

34 Clayton, Cole D

41 McKown, Hunter C

55 Jiricek, David D

64 Fix-Wolansky, Trey RW

65 Del Bel Belluz, Luca C

67 Malatesta, James LW

81 Svozil, Stanislav D

82 Pyyhtia, Mikael LW

91 Johnson, Kent F

Goaltenders

40 Tarasov, Daniil

73 Greaves, Jet

5:49 pm ET October 4, 2024

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets face early injury setbacks: What it means for the upcoming season

By Brian Hedger- October 5, 2024

The Blue Jackets have almost a week left before opening the regular season in Minnesota, and they're already dealing with multiple injuries.

The latest involves Dmitri Voronkov, a power forward in his second NHL season. The Blue Jackets placed him on injured reserve Friday with an upper-body injury that will keep him out for an undisclosed amount of time. Two other forwards, Justin Danforth (wrist) and rookie Gavin Brindley (broken finger) are also on IR, while captain Boone Jenner and Yegor Chinakhov left practice Friday with apparent upper-body issues.

Jenner lost an edge during a "small area" drill, crashed hard into the boards and immediately left under his own power to get medical assistance. Chinakhov was inadvertently clipped in the face by Kirill Marchenko's stick and left for treatment. The team didn't issue updates for either player.

Oct 3, 2024; Columbus, Ohio, USA; Columbus Blue Jackets left wing Dmitri Voronkov (10) collides with Pittsburgh Penguins right wing Sam Poulin (22) early during the first period of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena. Voronkov did not return to action after the collision.

Meanwhile, defenseman Erik Gudbranson practiced Friday after leaving with a lower-body injury prior to the third period in a 3-1 loss Monday to the Washington Capitals.

The Blue Jackets, one of the NHL's most injury-prone teams of late, started training camp this season while also grieving the tragic loss of Johnny Gaudreau, who was killed along with his brother, Matthew, as they biked home Aug. 29 in Oldmans Township, New Jersey. After losing Gaudreau, trading Patrik Laine a week before the tragedy and not having Danforth or Voronkov available, the Blue Jackets are now significantly short on forwards.

They need to add at least three, whether through trades, waiver claims, free agency, AHL promotions or a combination of all four. Even Laine's dealing with another long-term injury now in Montreal, after missing most of last season with the Blue Jackets due to injuries and entry into the NHL/NHL Players' Association's player assistance program.

Sep 30, 2024; Columbus, Ohio, USA; Columbus Blue Jackets center Gavin Brindley (45) tries to fight between Washington Capitals defenseman Trevor van Riemsdyk (57) and defenseman Rasmus Sandin (38) to get to the puck during the third period of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena. The Blue Jackets lost 3-2.

It's not an encouraging way to begin a season, but the Blue Jackets should be used to it. Two years ago, they set a franchise record with a jaw-dropping 563 man-games lost to injuries, and last year they still finished with 327 while dropping the number significantly.

Assuming Jenner and Chinakhov avoided significant injuries Friday, missing Voronkov and Danforth creates two voids.

Nov 29, 2023; Columbus, Ohio, USA;

Columbus Blue Jackets right wing Justin Danforth (17) fights for the puck against Montreal Canadiens defender during the third period of their game on Wednesday, Nov. 29, 2023 at Nationwide Arena.

Danforth, a scrappy, versatile forward, would've started at left wing on the fourth line with center Sean Kuraly and Mathieu Olivier. Voronkov, meanwhile, toggled between the second and third lines this preseason as a powerful and talented left wing.

Replacing them won't be easy, which sounds all too familiar to this team.

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets sign Kevin Labanc after Boone Jenner, Dmitry Voronkov injuries

By Brian Hedger- October 6, 2024

After scoring six goals in four preseason while on a professional tryout offer with the Devils, the opportunity was there. What put the Blue Jackets in a better position to get the 28-year old forward's signature on a one-year contract worth \$775,000 was a better opportunity. Labanc is now heading to Columbus to help fill a big void after the Jackets lost two "top nine" forwards this past week to longer-term issues — including captain Boone Jenner with a fluke upper-body injury in practice Friday.

"Within 14 hours, you lose two of your top nine guys," Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell said Saturday. "We were tracking all these (PTO) guys. (Labanc) had a tough year last year, but if you go back, he's been a goal-scorer. He's scored a lot of goals."

Labanc's career NHL scoring line includes 82 goals, 143 assists and 225 points in 478 games, all with the San Jose Sharks, who drafted him in 2014 (sixth round). He finished last season with just 2-7-9 in 46 games after falling out of favor with former Sharks coach David Quinn.

Now, Labanc could step into the right wing spot on the second line with the Blue Jackets, who have Adam Fantilli centering that line with veteran James van Riemsdyk on the left. Meanwhile, there's a big vacancy at left wing on the third line after Dmitry Voronkov sustained an upper-body injury during an innocuous collision Thursday on his first shift against the Pittsburgh Penguins.

Voronkov, who scored 18 goals as a rookie last season, toggled between the second and third lines this preseason. He started at left wing on the third line against Pittsburgh, skating with center Cole Sillinger at center and Kent Johnson at right wing. Stepping into the Voronkov void now might be rookie Mikael Pyyhtia, an unheralded Finnish forward who made his NHL debut toward last season and helped the Cleveland Monsters make a deep run in the AHL's Calder Cup playoffs.

Through seven preseason games, he's drawn the attention of coaches and front office evaluators alike.

"He's not afraid," Waddell said. "He protects the puck, and he's got really good hockey sense, things you can't teach. We've just got to remember ... he's a second year pro."

Other internal candidates in the final mix to provide forward depth include rookie James Malatesta and Dylan Gambrell, another 28-year old former Sharks forward with 233 NHL games to his credit. Owen Sillinger, Cole's older brother, was assigned to Cleveland on Saturday but was told by Waddell, coach Dean Evason and Monsters GM Chris Clark to stay ready in case he's needed.

As for Labanc, who had 6-1-7 in the preseason for the Devils, the opportunity to revive his NHL career is now glowing in front of him. When he signed the contract with the Jackets on Friday night, Labanc was in New Jersey rather than with the Devils in Prague, Czechia — where they helped open the NHL's regular season by sweeping the Buffalo Sabres a two game global series.

"I'm not too worried about the fourth line, to be honest," Waddell said. "If we're going to do something, we need somebody who can play up in the lineup a little bit, and nobody's giving away real good players unless they have bad contracts. (Labanc) had the option of signing with Jersey, but there's much more opportunity with us right now."

Columbus Dispatch / 3 takeaways from Columbus Blue Jackets' preseason finale

By Brian Hedger- October 6, 2024

After starting the preseason 4-2-0, the Pittsburgh Penguins did what they always do to Columbus in the final two. They trounced the Jackets with a 10-4 combined score while sweeping the two games Thursday and Friday, winning the first 3-1 at Nationwide Arena and second 7-3 at PPG Paints Arena.

The Penguins also revealed some harsh realities about each team's status heading into the regular season. Pittsburgh, for instance, still has Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and a veteran team that can contend for a playoff spot in the Metropolitan Division. Columbus, on the other hand, is still far too young to be as competitive as the Jackets hoped starting training camp.

It's a long grind ahead, and the Blue Jackets still have miles to go before they can even think about joining the playoff chase in the Eastern Conference. That's a tough pill to swallow after two-plus years of miserable hockey, a litany of injuries contributing to it, more injuries already plus the grief the Jackets are still saddled with following the tragic deaths of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau.

It's time to regroup. Here are three takeaways from Friday's 7-3 Penguins rout:

How do we know the Penguins are so much better than the Blue Jackets based solely off two exhibition matchups?

It's because of what they did in both matchups. Despite bringing a team of prospects and depth players to Columbus on Friday, Pittsburgh won 3-1 while getting outshot 35-24.

They didn't have the puck nearly as much as the Blue Jackets, who hung onto it most of the game, but the Penguin excelled in one area that decided the game. They generated a lot more scoring chances in high-danger areas, scored two goals off those chances and limited Columbus to just a handful.

One night later, with the script flipped to give Pittsburgh the projected NHL lineup in a roster mismatch, the Penguins lit up the Blue Jackets' defense, and in turn goalie Daniil Tarasov, for seven goals. It was an ugly way to finish the preseason, and a harsh look at the stark differences that still exist between these teams.

Pittsburgh Penguins depth overruns Columbus Blue Jackets' youth

The rosters were uneven, especially in experience favoring Pittsburgh, but Crosby and Malkin weren't the main reason the Penguins blew the game open.

It was role players who did the most damage, paced by Lars Eller's two goals and four points, in a game that could've been a big stage for several Blue Jackets prospects. Rather than seizing the moment, a few wilted under the spotlight to give the Jackets' coaching staff and front office more to stew about while deciding the team's opening NHL roster due by 5 p.m. Monday.

Jake Christiansen and David Jiricek are both in the running for spots among the Jackets' top seven defensemen, played together a pairing Friday and were torched multiple times. Luca Del Bel Belluz and Hunter McKown each took -2 plus/minus ratings after defensive miscues led directly to Pittsburgh goals. A projected NHL fourth line that features Sean Kuraly and Mathieu Olivier also struggled, along with a group of others.

Other than an exciting first period, it was an ugly way for the Blue Jackets to end a preseason that otherwise had provided multiple reasons for optimism. Next up is a weekend of team bonding that

includes a players vs coaches golf outing plus a trip to Ohio Stadium for Ohio State's game against Iowa, then it's back to practice Monday with the NHL group.

Will three days of practice be enough to get the Jackets back on track? We'll find out soon enough.

Columbus Blue Jackets' forward issues could give Owen Sillinger, Mikael Pyhtia and Dylan Gambrell opening NHL roster spots

The Blue Jackets have already lost power forward Dmitri Voronkov to an upper-body injury that could be long-term recovery, lost rookie forward Gavin Brindley to a fractured finger Tuesday in St. Louis and haven't had Justin Danforth (wrist) all preseason.

All three will begin the season on injured reserve, and that's without knowing the extent yet of an upper-body injury captain Boone Jenner sustained Friday while crashing hard into a wall during a practice drill at the Ice Haus. Add those injury losses up, combine them with no longer having Johnny Gaudreau, Patrik Laine or Alexandre Texier and it quickly becomes apparent the Blue Jackets have a dire shortage of NHL caliber forwards on the roster.

Owen Sillinger, Dylan Gambrell and Mikael Pyhtia were all in the mix before Friday's game for what appeared to be two open forward spots on the Jackets' roster, but now all three could make the cut. Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell doesn't swing a trade or sign veteran free agents to bolster his NHL depth externally.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets lose 2 important players to injuries as season opener nears

By Aaron Portzline- October 5, 2024

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The Columbus Blue Jackets faced an uphill battle already this season, but the challenge has become dramatically steeper.

On Friday, Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner lost an edge during a practice drill and slammed into the boards, suffering an upper-body injury that the club was still working to diagnose a few hours later. Jenner left practice with Nates Goto, a member of the training staff, and did not return.

Also on Friday, the Blue Jackets placed winger Dmitry Voronkov on injured reserve with an upper-body injury suffered on the first shift of Thursday's preseason loss to Pittsburgh in Nationwide Arena.

The Blue Jackets, under new general manager Don Waddell and coach Dean Evason, will no longer make public an injured player's timeline for return, Evason told reporters on Friday.

But neither player is expected to be available for next Thursday's season opener against the Minnesota Wild and perhaps beyond, according to a team source. This is a massive blow for the Blue Jackets, who can ill-afford a wave of injuries like that ones that helped ruin the last two seasons.

Waddell was already spending considerable time each day attempting to add another NHL forward so that he could allow his collection of young, depth forwards to return to AHL Cleveland and continue their development.

As of yet, the NHL waiver wire has not produced any names that have prompted Waddell to act, but that could change in the next few days as clubs face a Monday deadline to pare their rosters to no more than 23 players.

Waddell has also been active in trade talks with several of his fellow general managers, he's said, but he has yet to find a deal that interests him.

Now the need for NHL bodies has become more desperate.

If Jenner should land on injured reserve along with Voronkov, that would leave the Blue Jackets with only 12 forwards in camp, including Owen Sillinger, Dylan Gambrell and Mikael Pyythiä, who just two days ago were in a battle for the final roster spot at forward.

Now, even if Waddell claims a player on waivers or swings a trade, they all three could make the club.

Also this week, forward Gavin Brindley, who was also in the battle for a final roster, spot, suffered a broken finger while blocking a shot in a preseason game. He's expected to miss four to six weeks.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets bold predictions: Adam Fantilli, Kirill Marchenko, Kent Johnson ready to take off

By Aaron Portzline- October 5, 2024

COLUMBUS, Ohio — If these turn out to be tremendously, hilariously wrong — and that is always the risk with bold predictions, right? — I'll deny I ever typed or believed such preposterousness. If any of these pan out, you'll never hear the end of it.

The Columbus Blue Jackets finish the preseason tonight in Pittsburgh, then will take two consecutive days off to rest their bones and brains before the marathon that is an NHL regular season gets started the following week. The opener is next Thursday in St. Paul, Minn.

In what has become an almost annual rite since I joined The Athletic, here are my bold predictions for what lies ahead this season.

Easy recipe: Take the perceived career arc of the players, mix in what you've seen during training camp and the preseason, and weigh it all against the opportunity the player is expected to see in the coming season.

Then, put all those players together, mix them in with a new general manager, a new coach, a highly anticipated outdoor game next spring ... and voilá, you have the potential for great unpredictability.

All right, let's get reckless.

1. Out of the cellar

It's not exactly a bold play to take the field in such a parity-driven league as the NHL, but here goes. The Blue Jackets are going to be a very popular pick to be the worst team in the 32-team league this season, but we're not having it.

Not only will they not finish last overall, but they also won't finish last in the Eastern Conference. And now we're going to take it a step further: They won't finish last in the Metropolitan Division.

I'm not saying who will finish last because I don't want hate mail from New York Islanders, Washington Capitals or Philadelphia Flyers fans.

We're not predicting the playoffs. We're not saying the Blue Jackets don't have a long way to go. But we suspect they'll play over their heads — and way over expectations — this season.

2. Make March matter

The last two Blue Jackets seasons were sapped of their purpose and drama by, what, November? It's hard in the era of 3-point games to be buried before the first measurable snowfall in Ohio, but the 2022-23 and 2023-24 Blue Jackets pulled it off.

I've been saying this for a while now, that a proper goal for this season is to still be within sniffing distance of a wild-card spot when the NHL Stadium Series game between the Blue Jackets and Detroit Red Wings is staged in Ohio Stadium on March 1.

That's probably a bigger "ask" than the first bold prediction. But my hunch is that the Blue Jackets-Red Wings game will have implications.

3. 'Adamo' Dynamo

“Adamo” Fantilli, better known as Adam, missed most of the second half of last season after suffering a lacerated calf when he was inadvertently kicked coming out of a check. That was quite a blow for Fantilli’s development during his rookie season.

So far this camp, Fantilli has looked bigger, faster and stronger than the 2023-24 model. This can’t be said about too many Blue Jackets players, but he makes scoring goals look so easy.

It says here that Fantilli, who will be the Blue Jackets’ second-line center — he’s skating with James van Riemsdyk and Kent Johnson — will lead the club in assists and points this season. He’s also playing a significant role on the power play.

4. Marchenko: 33 goals

Kirill Marchenko has spent the past two seasons adapting to life in the NHL, which is more physical and allows far less time with the puck than the KHL in Russia. Between that and playing with different linemates almost every other night, his output has been impressive.

Marchenko had 21 goals in 2022-23. He had 23 last season. Over the past two seasons, only Boone Jenner (48) has scored more goals than Marchenko (44).

So far in camp, Marchenko has skated on the right side of the No. 1 line, with Jenner now at left wing and Sean Monahan at center. That line should start with the puck and possess more than Blue Jackets fans are used to seeing, and Marchenko — a part of that, to be sure — can only benefit.

The Jackets asked Marchenko to be harder on pucks and more reliable in his defensive zone. Considerable progress has been shown on both fronts.

5. Won’t be denied

Since the start of camp, Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell has made the vow that every NHL GM makes at the start of camp: that the end-of-camp roster will be determined simply by who deserves a spot on merit, not contractual issues or anything else.

That type of statement always demands an asterisk, though.

It’s impossible to watch the Blue Jackets over the past two weeks and conclude that Denton Mateychuk isn’t already one of the organization’s top six defensemen. He’s incredibly poised for a 20-year-old facing NHL competition for the first time. He’s rarely out of position and makes smart, quick passes, often short and subtle.

The Blue Jackets do not want to rush their prospects, and Waddell is particularly averse to this. But there are exceptions to every rule, and Mateychuk might deserve to be the exception.

We’re not saying he’s going to open the season in Columbus, though that’s not out of the question. But Mateychuk will play for a long time in the NHL, and he’ll get 40-plus games in Columbus this season.

6. Coach’s impression

Perhaps owing to its century-old roots as a college football town, Columbus loves coaches, especially those who demand a highly competitive work ethic and show their passion for the city. Ken Hitchcock and John Tortorella aren’t everybody’s cup of tea, but they were beloved here.

Dean Evason is next, not just for the way his teams play, but for the person he is. Evason isn’t as loquacious as Hitchcock. He’s not as easily provoked as Tortorella.

But there’s a fire that burns below the surface, and there will be times when his passion bubbles to the surface. Fans can’t get enough of that.

Mostly, though, his players will do the talking with their play for Evason, and that's enough. There will likely be some explosive nights in Nationwide this season.

7. PIMs on the way

You can't watch the Blue Jackets play this season without noticing how they've significantly grown over the summer. Mix that with Evason's preferred style of play — confrontational, high energy, etc. — and we'll predict some different-looking numbers in 2024-25.

Over the past three seasons, the Jackets have finished 27th (2021-22), 25th (2022-23) and 24th (2023-24) in penalty minutes. Evason's Minnesota Wild teams, by contrast, were fourth, sixth and third, respectively. It hurt to play the Wild.

I know, I know. PIMs are not a measure of greatness. But they can be a reflection of the style of play. The Blue Jackets, under Evason, will play with a different energy than you've seen in three or four seasons.

8. Johnson poised to break out

Kent Johnson has teased with his talent during the first two seasons. You can see his considerable skill, but you can also see how merciless the NHL can be on young players, especially those with slight frames and below-average muscle mass.

After a massive summer, Johnson showed up at camp looking noticeably thicker and stronger. Once he stepped on the ice, you could see how he's gotten a step quicker, too. He has been, simply put, the Blue Jackets' best player through much of camp.

He's in a pretty good spot, too, with van Riemsdyk and Fantilli on his line. The guy who had 16 goals, 24 assists and 40 points as a rookie two seasons ago looks like he's ready to justify his No. 5 overall selection in 2021.

If anyone challenges Fantilli for the assists lead, it will likely be Johnson.

9. Active at the deadline

It'll be fascinating to see what shape the Blue Jackets are in by early March and whether that will dissuade Waddell from cashing in on some of his players with expiring contracts.

The Blue Jackets have several players who are heading into their final contract years with unrestricted free agency looming in the summer of 2025: forwards Sean Kuraly, Justin Danforth, Mathieu Olivier and van Riemsdyk, plus defensemen Ivan Provorov and Jack Johnson.

I'm not saying that Waddell will part ways with all of those players. He values veteran players in the dressing room, so some will probably stay. They might even sign extensions before the trade deadline.

But surely some veterans will be on the move, especially if the younger players push the veterans for playing time, as the organization hopes.

10. Sillinger siblings

Since the creation of the NHL in 1917, 47 sets of brothers have played on the same team in at least one game. At some point this season, we predict that Cole Sillinger and his older brother, Owen, will make it 48.

Owen Sillinger, 27, signed his first NHL contract this past summer, and he's had a strong training camp in the battle for the last forward spot. Twenty-one-year-old Cole, meanwhile, is entrenched as the club's third-line center. He's entering his fourth season in the NHL.

We're not saying it's going to happen by the Oct. 10 regular-season opener, although it could. But it's going to happen at some point this season, and it'll be a franchise first.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: Jenner, Voronkov injuries cause ripple effect

By Aaron Portzline- October 7, 2024

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

Item No. 1: Two big hits

Under new general manager Don Waddell and new coach Dean Evason, the Blue Jackets plan to limit the information they make public regarding injured players. Not just the specific malady — that’s nothing new in the NHL — but how long a player is expected to miss.

The news regarding captain Boone Jenner and power forward Dmitri Voronkov at the end of the week was not good. Both players will open the season on injured reserve, and one source said that each player’s absence might best be measured in months, not weeks.

“It’s gonna be a while, for sure,” Waddell told The Athletic. “Boone is going to see another specialist next week. But they’re both going to be gone for a while, for sure.”

Jenner, who was playing left wing on the top line with center Sean Monahan and right winger Kirill Marchenko, was hurt when he lost an edge during a skating drill in practice on Friday, wiping out and slamming awkwardly into the wall.

Voronkov, who was alternating between the second and third lines, was injured on the first shift of a preseason loss to Pittsburgh last Thursday in Nationwide Arena when he was checked hard and high by Penguins forward Sam Poulin.

The ramifications will be felt in many ways. Jenner, first and foremost, is the Blue Jackets’ captain, but he’s also a 20-plus-goal scorer, tremendous on faceoffs, a demon on pucks along the wall and a world-class battler for positioning and loose pucks in front of the net.

Voronkov, at a towering 6-foot-5, delighted the Blue Jackets by committing to an offseason workout regiment that dropped his weight from 240 pounds to 225. He looked quicker in training camp and wasn’t so visibly tired after long practices. He had been alternating between the second and third lines.

And, of course, their losses will impact Waddell’s decisions between now and the NHL’s 5 p.m. ET Monday deadline to set the 23-man roster.

On Saturday, the Blue Jackets signed veteran NHL forward Kevin Labanc, 28, to a one-year, \$775,000 contract to help fill out their lineup card. Labanc, who spent eight seasons with San Jose before hitting free agency this summer, had been in training camp with New Jersey on a player tryout agreement.

There could be more moves coming over the next two days, but by 2 p.m. on Sunday, Waddell will know if the waiver wire is going to bear fruit. That’s the last day for clubs around the league to put players on waivers and get them cleared (or claimed) before Monday’s deadline.

Waddell has been talking to his fellow GMs throughout training camp in his search for an NHL forward, but that’s gone into hyperdrive the last few days. He’s not in the best position to make a trade, obviously, but there’s some poker play involved here, too.

The trade talks have presented some intriguing names, Waddell said, but he's not sure he wants to part with any significant future commodities (think draft picks) to secure a player, especially if that player could become available on the waiver wire later Sunday.

"The amount of people I'm talking to right now who are trying to sell me on things," Waddell said. "I have a feeling there's going to be a few of these guys (who are being discussed), who don't get moved and may get waived (on Sunday).

"I have to be smart about the assets we're willing to give up, too. One player is probably not going to make a big difference. We're not trading for Connor McDavid. There are guys we like as a staff, but are you going to give up a second- or third-round pick? I don't think that makes a lot of sense."

The addition of Labanc gives the Blue Jackets 13 forwards. If they don't acquire a player via waivers or trade on Sunday or Monday, the forward spots could be set. Dylan Gambrell, James Malatesta and Mikael Pyyhtiä, in some order, would have earned the 11th, 12th and 13th roster spots.

The Jackets sent Owen Sillinger, another player in that conversation, back to AHL Cleveland on Saturday.

"Pyyhtiä has a skill level such that he could play higher up in the lineup," Waddell said. "The other two guys (Gambrell and Malatesta) will probably fill a role on the fourth line. We like what we've seen from them in camp."

Item No. 2: Mateychuk to AHL

Waddell indicated that the Blue Jackets would likely open the season with eight defensemen and that Denton Mateychuk, one of the standouts in training camp, would likely be the final player cut. Look for him to be sent to AHL Cleveland on Sunday.

"(Mateychuk) doesn't need to play eight to 12 minutes in the NHL, and he's not going to play in our top four right away," Waddell said. "He needs to play in the American League. He needs to play pro hockey, and we'll see how things go. He could be here in 15 games or 30 games.

"I've learned over the years that if you start a young player here and he goes into a little bit of a tailspin — which a lot of these guys do — it can be tough. It's better to send them down at the beginning of the year, let them thrive and then bring them back when they're ready to go."

Mateychuk's demotion means that the Blue Jackets will keep Jake Christiansen, Jordan Harris and David Jiricek for at least the start of the season. Christiansen and Harris, acquired in the Patrik Laine trade with Montreal in August, would require waivers to go to AHL Cleveland.

The Jiricek situation is delicate, of course.

There was much frustration from the player and his agent, Allan Walsh, over his handling last season — not just that he was sent to AHL Cleveland after spending most of the first half of the season in Columbus, but how the player was treated.

They bristled when he was told early in the season to "get a place in Columbus," a conversation that typically indicates to a player they are viewed as an NHL lineup fixture. Four days later, he was sent back to AHL Cleveland to play a game.

There were other matters, too, creating a toxic relationship that bubbled under the surface most of the season. The arrival of Waddell and Evason this summer provided the opportunity for a fresh start.

We've got ourselves ANOTHER first NHL goal. 😬

Congratulations, David Jiricek! #NHLFaceOff pic.twitter.com/mtCk27h8yh

— NHL (@NHL) October 15, 2023

When training camp opened, Jiricek was paired with veteran Ivan Provorov, appearing to form the Blue Jackets' second defensive pair.

But Jiricek, by all accounts, did not have a great camp. In six preseason games, he had zero points and a minus-5 rating. There were worrying signs last week when Evason moved Christiansen and Provorov to the right side of the ice, prompting many to wonder if they were looking at different options.

"It got better as camp went on, but (Jiricek) started really slow," Waddell said. "It's gotten better.

"The one thing I keep going back to, and Dean and I have talked about it all through our camp evaluations. ... He was such a good player last year for Cleveland. I know it was the AHL, but it's playoff hockey and he was probably the best player down there."

Jiricek and the coaching staff had a series of meetings last week to confront what they'd seen throughout training camp and the preseason.

"We know he has skill," Waddell said. "There's so much to like about his game, his potential. But he has to play within his limits and also within our system. If he does that, I think he's going to be fine.

"The coaches worked with him every day last week. They're doing more video work with him. He protects himself a little bit because he's not the best skater. He protects himself, and in our system, you can't do that. You have to trust that you're going to get help from a forward."

The Blue Jackets want their defensemen — and not just offensive-minded Zach Werenski — to engage in the play offensively, to carry the puck low and to stay there when there's a play to be made. But the challenge is to thread the space between aggressive and reckless.

Waddell said he kept Walsh aware that coaches were going to turn it up a notch on Jiricek. It's important, he knows, for all parties to be on board. Part of that is Jiricek's willingness to accept constructive criticism from a GM and coach with long NHL resumes.

"We made it clear to (Jiricek) that if we're not trying to help him, we're not doing our job," Waddell said. "But he's got to help himself, too."

Item No. 3: Snacks

- Labanc signed a contract on Saturday morning, then spent the day getting his car packed and saying goodbye. He has a wife and young son who will be joining him in Columbus soon, but he drove from New Jersey to Columbus with his mother, Anika, with an expected arrival time of 5 a.m. Sunday. "The last couple of days have been a whirlwind, just trying to figure out what the next steps are going to be," Labanc told *The Athletic*. "One thing leads to another, Columbus calls, and next thing you know you're on your way to Ohio. We're kind of scrambling, but I'm really excited. It's gonna be a lot of fun. I think it's a great group of guys."

- Labanc, 28, has been a double-digit goal scorer for much of his career, including a 17-39-56 outburst in 2018-19 with the Sharks that stands as a career high. He fell on hard times last season — two goals in 46 games, along with a bunch of healthy scratches — when he was in the final year of a four-year, \$18.9 million contract. You could say he arrives in Columbus hoping to get his career back on track, and he'll certainly get an opportunity. He had six goals in four preseason games with New Jersey, but it wasn't enough to land a contract with the Devils. He was part of the group that stayed behind when the rest of the club headed to Czechia for the Global Series against Buffalo.

- What does Labanc know about Columbus? "Sneaky good town. I've heard it's a beautiful place with a lot to offer, and a lot of guys who stick around after they're done playing. I'm always in a good mood

when we're going there. The best chicken parm that I've had in the entire NHL is at the restaurant near (Nationwide), I think it's called Martini. That's my favorite chicken parm place in any road city."

- At the end of a long camp, the Blue Jackets took Saturday and Sunday as off days. But they were busy on Saturday — a golf tournament (players vs. coaches and staff) in the early morning at owner John P. McConnell's course, Double Eagle, then a trip to Ohio Stadium to watch Ohio State vs. Iowa in the afternoon. The football game was part team bonding and part site visit, as the Blue Jackets will play the Detroit Red Wings at Ohio Stadium on March 1, 2025, in the NHL's latest Stadium Series event.

- With so many former University of Michigan players on the Blue Jackets' roster, we asked around about what they might be wearing to Saturday's Ohio State game. Might anyone be bold enough to wear maize and blue? Werenski does have that fantastic U of M-inspired suit, right? The consensus: Nobody planned to wear Michigan colors, but they damn sure weren't going to wear scarlet and gray.

- Here's your Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering trivia question: Ohio Stadium has a capacity of 102,780 for football, but it's unclear (yet) how many seats will be available for the Blue Jackets-Red Wings game on March 1. Which NHL outdoor game has drawn the largest attendance?

- The Blue Jackets gave Pyyhtiä every chance to earn a lineup spot. He played in seven of the eight preseason games, most of any player in camp. Adam Fantilli, Mathieu Olivier, Christiansen and Jiricek each played in six. Fantilli (4-2-6, plus-4) and Johnson (2-4-6, plus-2) were the offensive leaders in camp, while Olivier (4-0-4) tied with Fantilli for the lead in goals.

- Blue Jackets prospect Cayden Lindstrom began light skating this week, not with the group, but on his own. Waddell watched him skate on Saturday and said "it's going well." The Blue Jackets have been extremely patient with Lindstrom, and he's likely to remain in Columbus for several weeks until he's able to power skate, take contact and simulate play without discomfort or setback. He won't be sent to his junior club, Medicine Hat of the Western Hockey League, for a while yet. "We're not going to throw him into a situation where he's going to have a setback."

- Waddell said in August that Lindstrom would be signed to an entry-level contract at some point during training camp, but that's not going to happen. "The agent (Daren Hermiston) and I did talk (recently)," Waddell said. "He's not pushing it. He knows my feelings. I want to get this kid healthy. A signing isn't going to happen in the next day or so."

- Trivia answer: The Winter Classic between Detroit and Toronto at Michigan Stadium drew 104,173 fans on Jan 1, 2014. The NHL, per Ohio State, is still working on the specifics of how many tickets can be sold to this season's event. Some more seats could become available once they build the rink and survey the site. Stay tuned.

[The Athletic / Blue Jackets sign veteran forward Kevin Labanc to 1-year contract](#)

By Aaron Portzline- October 6, 2024

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The Columbus Blue Jackets have signed veteran forward Kevin Labanc to a one-year contract at the NHL minimum of \$775,000, hoping to patch one of the lineup holes created by a late-training camp rash of injuries.

Labanc has played 478 NHL games, all with San Jose, totaling 82-143-225. He was in training camp with the New Jersey Devils on a player tryout agreement before the Blue Jackets swooped in with a contract offer.

The 28-year-old winger has had an impressive preseason with the Devils, scoring six goals in four games. He did not travel with New Jersey to Prague, Czechia, for the team's season-opening Global Series games against the Buffalo Sabres.

Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell had already planned to be active on the trade market and/or the waiver wire in his search for a veteran NHL forward, and that was before the Blue Jackets lost top-six forwards Boone Jenner and Dmitri Voronkov to injuries in recent days.

The addition of Labanc will help. But Waddell likely isn't done. The Blue Jackets now have 24 healthy players — 13 forwards, nine defensemen and two goaltenders — on their roster.

[BlueJackets.com / The Bubble Boys: Mateychuk among those battling for a spot](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- October 5, 2024

It's a debate as old as time in the National Hockey League.

What's the best way to bring along a talented young player at the highest level?

It's a fine line Blue Jackets fans have watched players and coaches contend with over the past few seasons as Columbus – regularly one of the youngest teams in the NHL – has welcomed highly touted draft picks into the fold.

And it's a story playing out yet again in the person of defenseman Denton Mateychuk.

As we take our annual look at how the Blue Jackets roster might shake out ahead of Monday afternoon's roster deadline, Columbus will lean into its young players this season, but Mateychuk might be the most intriguing player battling for a spot.

The 2022 first-round draft pick has been excellent during four preseason appearances, doing all he can to state his case for the opening night roster. But the Blue Jackets aren't short on defensemen, and the team also must consider the long-term plan when it comes to turning the 20-year-old defenseman into the best player he can be.

"It's not just the coaches, it's the organization, right?" head coach Dean Evason said this week. "It's our whole management team. We're in constant communication with (general manager Don Waddell's) guys and with our guys downstairs of trying to figure out exactly how much someone can be given – or earned.

"There's a lot of guys that have earned to maybe be here or be in Cleveland or whatever, but now it's like, 'Well, OK, is he ready? Has he just had a phenomenal camp?' You gotta balance all that kind of stuff. 'Are we going to try to give him too much, or can he handle it?'"

When it comes to Mateychuk, the evidence on his side has been a preseason in which he's often looked to be ready. In four games, Mateychuk posted two goals and an assist, and when he was on the ice at 5-on-5, the Blue Jackets outshot teams 42-15 and outscored them 5-2. For a young defenseman, his poise and ability to read the play have been impressive to coaches and fans alike.

The case to keep him boils down to the fact he's done everything he can to earn a spot this fall, and that's why you have a training camp, right? On the other hand, would he be better served beginning his pro career earning more playing time and experience at the AHL level, especially given his youth?

"He's a good player, right?" Evason said. "We'll see what shakes out here, but what he has shown clearly, he's been that guy for a long time. He's going to be an NHL player for a long time. If he starts here, wonderful. If he doesn't, his development is going to be continually steady because of what we've seen and how he's played. He's gotten better and better.

"This is preseason, and the NHL is a great league – the best league in the world. When the regular season starts, there's a lot of heat, and there's a lot of heat on defensemen and there's of heat on young defensemen, so we have to be careful what we do and not get too far ahead of ourselves. We like his progress, as we do with a lot of players. If it works out that he's here, great. If it doesn't, great."

For his part, Mateychuk has kept his head down and only focused on what he can control during camp.

"I feel like I'm playing good hockey, and I feel good out there," he said. "I'm just going to go out there and play my game, and whatever happens, happens. ... What I've been told is offense can get you here, but your defense is what keeps you in the NHL and it prolongs your career. I've tried to focus on that, and that's what they want to see a bit, too."

Of course, the decision on Mateychuk is far from the only choice the Blue Jackets have to make before Monday afternoon's 23-man roster deadline. A number of players have been fighting for spots at the bottom of the forward lineup and on defense, giving Evason and his staff hard decisions to make.

We have two days until rosters are due, but here's what things look like in our eyes heading into decision day.

Forwards

With Justin Danforth missing the preseason as he rehabs a wrist injury, things looked pretty cut and dry for the Blue Jackets up front, with 11 players with extensive NHL experience returning. Things are a little more complicated now, though, as preseason injuries suffered by Dmitri Voronkov, Gavin Brindley and potentially Boone Jenner have muddied the waters. The Blue Jackets did make one move Saturday, signing veteran Kevin Labanc to add depth.

Locks (11): Yegor Chinakhov, Adam Fantilli, Boone Jenner, Kent Johnson, Sean Kuraly, Kevin Labanc, Kirill Marchenko, Sean Monahan, Mathieu Olivier, Cole Sillinger, James van Riemsdyk

Battling For Spots

Dylan Gambrell: The 28-year-old Washington native may have come in under the radar, but Gambrell has had a solid camp. A veteran of 233 NHL games with San Jose and Ottawa, Gambrell has posted 17 goals and 40 points over six seasons in the league before spending all of last season with Toronto of the AHL (14-22-36 in 66 games). A more than point-per-game player in college at Denver, he's reinvented himself as a play-the-right-way bottom-six player in his pro career. Gambrell has largely been a center previously but has played wing in camp.

James Malatesta: The 21-year-old forward taken in the fifth round of the 2021 draft was sent to Cleveland earlier this week but was not part of Saturday's roster cuts. The MVP of the Memorial Cup in 2023, Malatesta made his pro debut a season ago and was a key piece in Cleveland, scoring 12 goals with 22 points in 56 games. He then made his NHL debut at the end of the season, notching two goals and four points and delivering 41 hits in 11 games. He's not the biggest player (5-9, 191) but plays with energy and physicality and has some scoring touch.

Mikael Pyyhtia: A fourth-round draft pick of the Blue Jackets in 2020, Pyyhtia made his NHL debut two seasons ago and skated in 17 games last year with Columbus, notching two assists. There's likely more scoring in his game – he had 7-21-28 in 60 games last year in his first AHL season with Cleveland, and he posted 21 goals in 2021-22 with TPS in his native Finland – but coaches mostly love his solid game that includes excellent defensive positioning and a high battle level. Is there a reason the 22-year-old has played in seven of the team's eight preseason games?

Mystery Player X: The addition of Labanc, the NHL's preseason leader in goals, came after Waddell made no bones about the fact he spent camp scouring both the waiver wire and other teams' rosters as cutdown day nears, with the aim of potentially adding a forward to the group both to round out the roster as well as help the team get to the salary cap floor. There are bound to be some tough decisions around the league, and the Blue Jackets have kept their options open to potentially be a home for someone if teams are in a tough spot. He's also made clear, though, that it has to be the right player to add to the mix. Waddell found that in Labanc; could another addition be on the way?

Notes: The injuries have opened the door here to more potential opportunities for those in the organization. Such names as Trey Fix-Wolansky, Hunter McKown, Luca Del Bel Belluz and Owen Sillinger would be at the top of the list if the Blue Jackets have to go deeper into the farm system.

Defensemen

The Blue Jackets have five veterans in camp, and it seems likely all will make the opening night roster. From there, four players looking to cement themselves at NHLers are in the mix, which leaves open an interesting question – given the injuries up front, would the Blue Jackets begin the season with eight defensemen on the roster? Complicating things is the fact the Blue Jackets have six left-shot blueliners left in the mix but only three on the right after the departures of Adam Boqvist, Nick Blankenburg and Andrew Peeke.

Locks (5): Erik Gudbranson, Jack Johnson, Ivan Provorov, Damon Severson, Zach Werenski

Battling For Spots

Jake Christiansen: Is this the time for Christiansen to stick in the NHL? An AHL All-Star who has reached double digits in goals each of the past three years with Cleveland, Christiansen has played in 44 NHL games, including a career-best 24 two years ago. For a player who is able to create and finish in the minors, though, he's yet to see much production at the top level, posting one goal and seven points in those 44 contests. The 25-year-old has looked noticeably confident offensively this fall, and he can finish, but is the 6-0, 193-pounder able to hold his own in his own end at the NHL level?

Jordan Harris: Acquired this summer in the deal that sent Patrik Laine to Montreal, Harris comes to Columbus as a two-way defender who has carved out an NHL role the past two seasons. The 24-year-old Massachusetts native has skated in 121 games the past two years with the Habs, totaling seven goals and 31 points in that span. The 5-11, 189-pounder spoke about taking the next step in his career upon arrival in Columbus, but he's on the crowded left side; Harris has switched to the right for much of camp in a bid to earn a spot there.

David Jiricek: There's no doubt Jiricek has talent, as the 20-year-old right-shot D was taken sixth overall in the 2022 draft. He's big (6-4, 207), has excellent length to break up plays, boasts a booming shot from the point and can stop plays before they get started when he makes the right read. But coaches continue to work with Jiricek on when the right time is to go and when he needs to pull off the gas, and that part of his game remains a work in progress. Evason has talked about Jiricek's need to simplify things, and the coach also has acknowledged the Jackets are trying some lefties on the right side as they figure out how the lineup might look. Jiricek has played 47 NHL games the past two years since being drafted, posting a goal and 10 points.

Denton Mateychuk: We discussed the 5-11, 188-pounder in depth at the start of this article, and he might just be hard to keep off the roster given his strong preseason camp. Mateychuk also nearly made the team a year ago in camp as well before going back to Moose Jaw (WHL) and winning league defenseman of the year honors while leading the Warriors to the Memorial Cup. A smooth skater with poise, Mateychuk piled up the points a year ago with Moose Jaw, posting a combined 28 goals and 105 points in 72 regular-season and playoff games.

Notes: The Blue Jackets have a promising pipeline of young defensemen, with such names as 2021 draft picks Corson Ceulemans (first round) and Stanislav Svozil (third round) worth watching in addition to those named above.

Goaltenders

There isn't much debate as to what will happen here. Jet Greaves was sent to Cleveland on Saturday, leaving Elvis Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov as the two goalies on the roster to start the campaign. Greaves, 23, is expected to split the job in Cleveland with veteran Zach Sawchenko, while Pavel Cajan is a 21-year-old goalie who will be on call to earn time should any injuries come up.

[BlueJackets.com / Young players will be key to success for Blue Jackets](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- October 6, 2024

Gavin Brindley doesn't own a crystal ball, but as he looks around the Blue Jackets locker room, he can see the future.

In just about every corner of the room this fall, you could find a young player with seemingly limitless potential, something Brindley couldn't help but take notice of.

"Oh yeah, absolutely," Brindley said. "100 percent. There's so many good young guys. It's very exciting for the organization and for guys like myself that I've played with or played against for countless amount of years. It's cool.

"I'm definitely very excited to be here with the young guys that we have, so it's definitely going to be a fun couple years down the road."

As the Blue Jackets get ready to begin the 2024-25 season Thursday in Minnesota, a rebuild that got under way in earnest three seasons ago is beginning to show plenty of signs of paying big dividends.

Cole Sillinger (21 years old) and Yegor Chinakhov (23) enter their fourth years in the NHL, while David Jiricek (20), Kent Johnson (21) and Kirill Marchenko (24) enter year three. For Adam Fantilli (19) and Dmitri Voronkov (24), it's year two in the world's top league, while Brindley (20) and Denton Mateychuk (20) are rookies pushing for NHL minutes.

All except Voronkov were taken in the first two rounds of the last five NHL drafts, a bonanza of talent the Blue Jackets expect to help push the team back into contention as it matures.

But for some of those players, the belief is simple.

Their time is now.

"Everyone knows we have to take steps forward," Johnson said. "It's an exciting position to be in and be with those guys. I feel like all of us are feeling good about our games and the work we put in this summer and just getting more comfortable in the league. Hopefully we can all grow together."

That collection of young talent was one of the reasons the Blue Jackets' general manager job was an attractive opening as the organization looked to fill it this spring. Columbus has a strong veteran core – led by captains Boone Jenner, Zach Werenski, Erik Gudbranson and Sean Kuraly – but it's also no secret that the team has spent the past three seasons working those high draft picks into the lineup.

There have been the usual bumps in the road and growing pains for most of them – and injuries have not helped at times, including current upper-body dings to Brindley and Voronkov – but there is a belief the kids will be all right. For Waddell, the goal is to see them continue to make strides this season, and he was encouraged by the excellent preseasons of such players as Fantilli (four goals in six games), Johnson (six points in five games), Sillinger (three goals in five games) and Mateychuk (three points in four games).

"We're looking for these players to take the next step," Waddell said. "We're not going to force them into that. They're going to be provided an opportunity, and they have to take advantage of it. I'm pretty familiar with this team playing against them quite a few times the last few years. We have some great veterans, but the young players, we need them to continue grow and get better. As they do, we're going to grow as a hockey team."

And as the saying goes, sometimes it takes a village to make it happen. That's where the team's veterans come in, as Waddell did want to add some experience to the roster this offseason with the signings of such players as forwards Sean Monahan and James van Riemsdyk as well as veteran Jack Johnson.

That's a combined 44 seasons and 2,962 games of NHL hockey between the three, and all know they were brought in to not just make an impact on the ice but in the locker room.

"I think it's huge," Monahan said when he was signed in July. "Looking back when I was a young player, you really lean on veterans. Especially me as a center, I leaned on older guys on the team in Calgary. You take notes, you watch the way they do things and try to add that to your game. It's important to have good leadership in the dressing room. It creates a good culture, and I think I'm a guy that can serve that purpose."

That's also the attitude of such players as Werenski, who knows what it's like to handle the ups and downs of what it takes to play in the NHL. He burst onto the scene his rookie year and had a historic campaign, finishing third in the Calder Trophy voting in 2016-17.

In the years since then, though, he's had to navigate the ups and downs of what it means in the NHL, including weathering injuries, handling the daily grind of an 82-game season and dealing with the ebbs and flows of your game.

Those are lessons Werenski can help impart on the youngsters in the room.

"Most guys aren't going to be great their first few years in the league," Werenski said. "I had my ups and downs to be honest. My first year was good, but my second year wasn't. It's hard to understand the schedule and the grind of it and how many games you play.

"Obviously they've been very impactful players already, but just to see where their ceiling can be and how good they can be, I think they're going to take steps forward this year. I'm excited to see what the guys can do."

Head coach Dean Evason entered training camp with a clean slate for all his players, and he hasn't hesitated to let young players try new things in camp, including such examples as using Fantilli and Kent Johnson on the penalty kill.

It will be up to those players to continue to earn their time, but that's their goal as the season begins.

"My mentality is to try to be the best I can be," Fantilli said. "I want to be the best player on the ice as much as possible, and I know a lot of guys have that mentality on this team. That's why we're going to get there. We're going to get to that point that we want to.

"It's a matter of time. Everyone is getting a year older, everyone is getting a year more mature, stronger and faster. The more we play together, the longer we play together, we'll be able to build chemistry and move on from there."

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Injuries Leave Opening-Night Roster in Flux

By Mark Scheig -October 5, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets finished off a .500 preseason with a 7-3 loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins on Friday night. While it's time to look ahead to the start of the regular season, key questions remain as the roster deadline approaches.

Thanks to a couple of injuries to important players, who exactly makes the 23-man roster is not cut and dried. There's a good chance someone will start on the roster who's not even on the team yet.

GM Don Waddell is going to be busy this weekend and into next week trying to make some last-minute decisions on how the opening 23-man roster will look. Let's reset the injury situation first.

Key Injuries

We'll start with an ominous update. Dmitri Voronkov played one shift on Thursday night before having to leave the game. He suffered an upper-body injury. On replay, it did appear he was favoring his shoulder after he got caught up with Penguins' Sam Poulin. However, the team hasn't specified as of yet what the exact nature of the injury is.

On Friday, the Blue Jackets placed Voronkov on injured reserve. He will be out indefinitely. The team did not give an expected timeframe in which he might return. This does leave open the possibility his absence could be longer term.

Then at practice on Friday for the non-game group, Boone Jenner slammed into the boards. He left the ice and never returned. As of this writing, there is no official update from the team as to what his status is.

With Voronkov on injured reserve and the possibility Jenner has to miss time, that could give some players an opportunity to make the roster that would not have before. That coupled with the desire of the Blue Jackets to possibly add another forward and you have a situation in which the roster is anything but settled.

Where Roster Stands

The deadline for the Blue Jackets to set their initial 23-man roster is Monday Oct 7 at 5 P.M. eastern. Thanks to the recent decision by the NHL and NHLPA, the team doesn't have to be at the cap floor on that date. But it is expected that they get there in the future in a reasonable amount of time.

Depending on who makes the roster and what potential moves are made, there is a chance the Blue Jackets start the season above the floor. If they acquire a player with a big enough cap hit, then that's settled.

We'll start with the goaltending. This is easy to settle. Elvis Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov are the goalies. Jet Greaves was assigned to Cleveland on Saturday morning. This becomes interesting as soon as next season once Greaves needs waivers, the team would have three goalies under contract that all need waivers. Merzlikins is expected to be the opening-night starter although that's not official as of this writing.

On defense, the big story here is what to do with Denton Mateychuk. Given how well he played all preseason long, it would surprise nobody if he made it. Then conversely, going to Cleveland isn't a bad idea either.

Here are defensemen left in camp as of Saturday morning: Mateychuk, Jack Johnson, Zach Werenski, Ivan Provorov, Jake Christiansen, Erik Gudbranson, Jordan Harris, David Jiricek and Damon Severson. That's nine defensemen. The most they would keep is eight. Of this group, only Matyechuk and Jiricek don't need waivers. Unless there is a surprise, this appears like Mateychuk will be Cleveland bound eventually. We'll see though.

Now for the forwards. There are 13 forwards in play as of this moment that could make the roster. If you don't count Jenner, there's 12. They are Cole Sillinger, Sean Kuraly, Adam Fantilli, James van Riemsdyk, Sean Monahan, Mathieu Olivier, Dylan Gambrell, Yegor Chinakhov, James Malatesta, Mikael Pyyhtia, Kirill Marchenko and Kent Johnson.

Especially given the Blue Jackets open on the road in Minnesota and then Colorado, they would need an extra forward if Jenner's injury prevents him from being available.

As for the potential of moves, Waddell told Blue Jackets' radio on Friday that he's talked with several teams and is watching the waiver wire. The fit has to make sense to them. Watch 2 P.M. eastern for not only if anyone gets claimed, but who teams expose to the wire.

The Blue Jackets can always make moves after Monday at 5 P.M. But that is when they need to have a compliant roster with no more than 23 players on it.

The Blue Jackets were already looking to add prior to the Voronkov and Jenner injuries. Unless they elect to start the season with Malatesta, Gambrell and Pyyhtia as their 10-11-12 forwards, it's reasonable to expect one, maybe even two additional moves before Thursday's game in Minnesota.

The Hockey Writers / Emptying the 2024 Blue Jackets' Training Camp Notebook

By Mark Scheig- October 6, 2024

Training camp has come and gone for the Columbus Blue Jackets. They now turn their attention to the regular season which starts on Thursday night in Minnesota.

The time has come for us to empty out our Blue Jackets' Training Camp notebook. From storylines to questions answered, from quotes to other tidbits, you will see a little bit of everything in here.

Let's get started. We have a lot to discuss.

Emptying the Training Camp Notebook

- 1. Let's begin with what it was like being at camp overall. The biggest question I had coming in was what the dynamic would be like given the circumstances. Would the Blue Jackets be able to focus on hockey knowing that was an irreplaceable hole in the locker room? From my own set of eyes, the answer was yes. Knowing that Johnny Gaudreau would want them to play hockey is an important factor here. They want to honor him in every way possible. Being able to play hockey as he would want accomplishes that. When they were on the ice, the focus was on hockey. Practices were fast paced and focused. Players were challenged but also enjoyed what coach Dean Evason brought to the table.
- 2. While they were able to focus on hockey, it's very clear that the Gaudreau's will be close to them at all times. Seeing his jersey hanging in the locker room is a powerful reminder of the situation. Every time someone steps foot in that room, number 13 will be there. Above the stall where his jersey hangs is a picture of Johnny with a couple of his teammates. Appropriate given that he was the ultimate team player. There are going to be some heavy days with the Blue Jackets. No matter what they encounter, they will handle it as a team. It's clear being around the team how close they are becoming, even more so than before.
- 3. Understand these Blue Jackets are playing with heavy hearts. What they are doing is incredibly difficult. For my money, the biggest quote to come from this camp was when captain Boone Jenner said "there's no playbook for things like this." He's right. It's uncharted territory for them. The human element cannot be forgotten about as this season unfolds.

Camp Impressions & Goalies

- 4. Now we turn our attention to hockey. This camp felt and looked much more efficient than in the recent past. The big reason for that? A lower number of players in camp to start. That was done on purpose. Here's Evason: "We want to get to our group. We've got a lot of teaching to do. Clearly, we have a lot of practices and a lot of exhibition games. We'll be able to teach through video but you want to get on the ice with them and you want to teach them so that's why we've kept the numbers down."
- 5. After the first four days of camp, the Blue Jackets had two groups. Their NHL group and their mostly AHL group. This happened once junior players were sent back to their teams. This allowed the NHL group to get more time with Evason and staff and the AHL group more time with Trent Vogelhuber and staff. This more focused way of doing camp should payoff down the road. It was harder for the Blue Jackets when they had a camp start with over 70 in past seasons. Several players commented how much they liked how this camp was run.

- 6. Let's go by position groups. There wasn't much question about who the two goalies would be once the season started. Elvis Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov. What was a little bit of a question was who would start the opener. Of the two, Merzlikins had the better preseason. It's reasonable to expect him to start in Minnesota Thursday night. Evason is not one who will divulge his starting goalie all that often. We'll depend on who works in the starter's crease during practices and morning skates.
- 7. Did get to speak to goalie coach Niklas Backstrom during camp. Got into the topic of how they formulate a plan for each of the goalies. Here's Backstrom on that: "Usually after the season, we sat down and talked about the upcoming season and then how their game and what I feel. I can't dictate what I want them to do. We have to be on the same page and understand each other. Then going through the season, there's always some adjustments in your game. We tried to come in here in August. August is pretty much to get back feeling on the ice, get everything, time is set and then you start to work. When you get to games, we'll see where we are and what we have to work on."
- 8. Does Backstrom coach on the mental side of the game? Thought this was an interesting answer. "It's so many different aspects. It's your conditioning. It's your technical side, understanding the reads, reading the game but then the mental side. But to pick it up from practice to the game, it's mental. It's a lot. It's different. Every day, it's not that we have a session working on the mental part of the game. I think it's small parts everyday. What we do, the workouts, the skates we have but how we talk. It's always the relationship I feel with the goaltenders and their goaltending coach is different than players. I think it's a lot closer for sure. You only have 2-3 goalies on your team but you get to know each other more. It's a mental game to be a goalie. Some days we work for 30 minutes but some other days, it could be 10 minutes of work and more talking about things."
- 9. With different personalities come different approaches to coaching. Here's Backstrom on the different personalities the goalies have. "It's good to learn to know them as persons. Everyone is different. Something that works for someone doesn't work for the other one. So it's trying to find that right road for every goalie and that's a huge part of it. With eight goalies at camp, everyone is different and you have to get to know them and find out what works for them. Someone needs more cheering up but the other one needs maybe the other way. Then it's to find out what works for everyone."
- 10. What has Backstrom's biggest challenge been? "I think there's a lot of them. Every day, it's a privilege to work with them. Every day I have to get better and try to help them. I'm not here for myself. I'm here to help them. Every goalie is different. But then they change. They grow up. They mature. What worked last week for one goal maybe doesn't work next week. So to learn to know what works (for them is one of the biggest challenges.)"
- 11. Merzlikins likes where things are at with Backstrom. "With Backy, we have all the time a good relationship. Not going to lie. It's not that I spend all summer with him. When I came back to Columbus and before the training camp, we started skating here with the team, we started working together and it went well."

Defenseman

- 12. It does seem that the Blue Jackets will start the season with eight defensemen on the roster. By pairs, they are Zach Werenski & Damon Severson, Ivan Provorov and David Jiricek, Jack Johnson and Erik Gudbranson, Jake Christiansen & Jordan Harris. Evason said they would try different things out. One example of this was Provorov on the right of Werenski. What does that

mean for Denton Mateychuk? Unless there's an injury or a surprise, he seems primed to start in Cleveland. As we recently wrote about, that should be the move to start. He needs to play games in key situations.

- 13. Thought Jiricek's camp was up and down. He had some notable turnovers but then played very well in St. Louis alongside Mateychuk. We spoke to him early in camp. Here he is on Evason: "He's got so much experience, a lot of years in the league. It's going to be good to show him what I got and I hope he gets to like me. And then we'll see."
- 14. Jiricek's skating has improved, but still has work to be done in that area. Will be very curious to see how he's deployed early in the season.
- 15. Jordan Harris' first impression when he saw the Blue Jackets' facilities: "It's gorgeous. The gym here and everything's beautiful and that's the first thing I said when I walked in. I was like, wow. It kind of speaks for itself. Even having a practice rink in the building. It's super convenient and easy. We live probably six minutes away right now so it's really nice." Always interesting to get perspectives of new players from other teams like this.
- 16. We'll see eventually how Evason and his system get implemented, but one of the biggest questions remains how they'll keep their goals against down. There will have to be major individual improvements by everyone if they hope to get that down to a reasonable number.
- 17. Gudbranson believes the defense will be different. Here is what he said when talking about being a team that's hard to play against. "I'm a firm believer in teams that are built like that. We certainly had one in Calgary. We had one in Florida when we were good back in my early days. Skilled and smart, intelligent hockey IQ is very high. You have to be able to win those skill games and then when you have to have one of those hard nights where those nights bring you together. Let's play that way too. Having that in your back pocket is massive and I love (Evason's) attitude towards that."

Forwards

- 18. The big news from Saturday was when the Blue Jackets signed Kevin Labanc to a one-year contract. He was on a PTO with the New Jersey Devils. Despite scoring six goals, the Devils didn't sign him. According to Daily Faceoff's Frank Seravalli, part of the reason for this was the Devils would have put him in the AHL. With an immediate need on the NHL roster, Labanc can step right in and play. We'll see what practice brings. But don't be surprised if you see him play with either Adam Fantilli or Cole Sillinger right away.
- 19. Labanc has five NHL seasons with double-digit goals. Goal scoring and depth was an obvious need for the Blue Jackets. I don't think they're done if they can help it. That will depend on the injury situation. But if the right player becomes available, Waddell will strike.
- 20. Moving Boone Jenner to the wing was the outcome with the center depth being in a better place. Waddell said that the young players will get their chance. Much of the success of the Blue Jackets this season will come from how Fantilli and Sillinger do down the middle. Jenner won't have as much responsibility on the wing which should take some of the pressure off him. That top line will need to find ways to score while limiting the opposition. A tall task indeed.
- 21. Count Sean Monahan a fan of the center depth. "I think it's a lot of smart players. We've got enough offensive talent where I think we're going to be able to score goals. We got to push each other down the middle to be consistent every night and play both ends of the puck. I think when you're doing that, you have a good chance every night."

- 22. Kent Johnson is ready for liftoff. You have been forewarned.
- 23. James van Riemsdyk's presence is good for multiple reasons. He can impart his wisdom on and off the ice. He can also be a calming influence at times too. Multiple players commented how great it was seeing JVR walk through that door into camp. Reassurance is a big thing.
- 24. Gavin Brindley's broken finger landed him on IR. He had a decent camp but it did seem he was always destined for Cleveland. He showed the flashes of what he will become. He's out 4-6 weeks but then expect him to be assigned to the Monsters. If there's a need for more offense in a call up, keep Brindley's name in mind.
- 25. Overall, the offensive potential is there. The lack of experience at key spots will be the question. There will be some fun nights when the talent will rise to the top. But then there will be other nights where things don't go their way. They will win some games. They will lose some games. Their season will be dictated by the games that could go either way and the little details. Can they get to overtime on off nights? Can they create their own breaks? One thing is for certain. Their formula for success will come from being the hardest working team on the ice.

Miscellaneous

- 26. Merzlikins' mask has the memory of two players on it. Johnny Gaudreau and Matiss Kivlenieks. No one should have to endure one of those let alone two.
- 27. The Blue Jackets will be different on the ice. According to Trent Vogelhuber, there are changes all over the ice. There's also new coaches on the bench. You generally don't see everything in preseason. It'll be very interesting to see what differences the team shows in their approach.
- 28. Let's talk guys that stood out in different ways. First one was Luca Del Bel Belluz. At first, Vogelhuber admitted not being sure about his game. But now, he's put in the work and it's clearly showing on the ice. He took a step at this camp and will be a big part of the Monsters' season starting as their top-line center.
- 29. He's still in camp as of this writing, but James Malatesta took another step. He's quickly becoming one of those players you hate to play against. He has no problem answering for a teammate when needed. Will he be the one to start on the roster? He's done enough to warrant consideration.
- 30. Here's one low-key standout. Hunter McKown. He opened some eyes at this camp. Don't be surprised if you see him get a couple of games later in the season.
- 31. Mikael Pyyhtia played seven of the eight preseason games. That's a lot. That's a sign the team wanted to really get a good look at him. He's still in camp as the roster deadline approaches. He's not flashy but he's effective. That's caught the eye of the Blue Jackets.
- 32. Two other names to mention on standouts. Cole Clayton and Owen Sillinger. Sillinger started camp in a top-12 role. He's back in Cleveland now but don't be surprised if we see him later. He and his brother Cole have played AHL games together. It will be a big moment if they suit up in an NHL game together. As for Clayton, he was a big part of the Monsters' run last season and showed he can fill in as a depth option. You know what they say about injuries, right?
- 33. This season will be an evaluation season under the watchful eyes of Waddell and Evason. It's a fresh set of eyes looking down on the Blue Jackets' situation. They have to determine who is part of the solution and who isn't. The play on the ice will be the guide. With a lot of cap space

at their disposal in the future, they have the means to make major changes should it be warranted.

- 34. We'll end with 34 thoughts this year. Why? $13 + 21 = 34$. In the end, this season is about honoring the Gaudreau's and their lives. The home opener will be emotional for everyone. Both the Blue Jackets and Panthers will wear number 13 jerseys during warmups. They deserve to be remembered forever. The team is making sure that happens in every way possible.

1st Ohio Battery / The Final Countdown: With The Preseason In The Rearview Mirror, It's Decision Time For The Columbus Blue Jackets As They Finalize The Opening Night Roster

By Ed Francis- October 5, 2024

Win some, lose some.

In a nutshell, that was the preseason for the Columbus Blue Jackets.

They went 4-4-0.

For every young player that exceeded expectations (Denton Mateychuk), there was one who came up short (David Jiricek).

For every triumphant return from injury (Adam Fantilli, come on down), there was the inevitable-yet-still-demoralizing new injury (how long before we see Dmitri Voronkov again?).

For every top-line question answered (yes, Sean Monahan and Kirill Marchenko have great chemistry), a new one was asked (who will take Boone Jenner's spot on the top line while he's out with an injury?).

And so, with the regular season to begin Thursday in Minnesota, here we are: what moves will be made to finalize the opening night roster, where will those players slot into the lineup, and what are the ramifications of the late-preseason injury bug that bit the Blue Jackets hard?

Here's a look at where things stand as of early Saturday afternoon:

The Injury Bug:

Aside from the news that forward Justin Danforth would not be ready to start the season as a result of offseason surgery, the Blue Jackets were managing exceptionally well throughout camp and the preseason when it came to the injury bug.

But that changed quickly and suddenly over the final few days. First, it was announced that Gavin Brindley broke his finger and would miss between four and six weeks. Whether he was heading for Cleveland or staying in Columbus was unknown, but he was having a strong showing in the preseason and regardless of which club he was heading for, that's on hold.

Then Voronkov left Thursday's game against the Pittsburgh Penguins on his first shift. He's since been placed on injured reserve with an upper-body injury and all indications are that his injury is not a short-term one.

Friday's practice took a turn for the worse when captain Boone Jenner went awkwardly into the boards. He's still on the active roster as of Saturday morning, but according to Aaron Portzline of The Athletic, Jenner is likely heading for injured reserve and will miss the start of the season.

Saturday's Roster Moves:

The picture began to get a bit clearer Saturday morning, when the club announced that seven players were being assigned to the Cleveland Monsters of the AHL.

Most of those were expected, however with recent injuries to Dmitri Voronkov and Boone Jenner, it seemed that there was a chance one or two of those forwards (most likely Owen Sillinger) would start the season in Columbus on the fourth line. That no longer appears to be the case.

Things changed even more Saturday, when the club announced the signing of winger Kevin Labanc to a one-year deal. President of Hockey Operations and General Manager Don Waddell said he was looking close at the market, and Labanc is the fruit of that labor.

Defensemen & Goaltenders:

A quick mention of the goaltending situation: with Greaves heading to Cleveland as expected, the Blue Jackets will start the season with Elvis Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov. No surprise there. Merzlikins had the better preseason, and Tarasov giving up seven goals in Friday night's preseason finale. It feels like Merzlikins will get the opening night nod.

On the blueline, here's what we know:

- Zach Werenski is on the top pairing with either Damon Severson or Ivan Provorov. It looked like it was Severson's spot, but a wrinkle was added Thursday night when head coach Dean Evason put Provorov on the right side and top pairing as opposed to his assumed spot of left side, second pairing.
- Whoever doesn't pair up with Werenski will be on the second pairing, where the candidates to join that player will be (and likely ebb and flow between) Erik Gudbranson, Jordan Harris, Jake Christiansen, and Jack Johnson.

That's seven defenseman for six spots, and that doesn't include the two best prospects on defense in the system: Jiricek and Mateychuk. They are the only two players mentioned here (and still part of the active roster as of Saturday morning) who do not need to clear waivers to head to Cleveland. Jiricek has struggled throughout the preseason, but Mateychuk has consistently been one of the best players (on either side of the puck) in every game he's played in. It will be an incredibly hard decision to make and not one based on merit alone, but unless the Blue Jackets make a surprising move, it seems like Jiricek and Mateychuk will be the top defensive pairing in Cleveland to start the 2024-25 campaign.

Forwards (For Now...)

Before the injuries, this was a relatively clean picture, with just a couple of decisions to be made. But with a spot opening up long-term with Voronkov's injury and another spot for an undetermined amount of time with Jenner's injury, there's a little bit of chaos for the organization to handle. Here's what we know:

- In alphabetical order, there are nine absolute locks for opening night are: Yegor Chinakhov, Adam Fantilli, Kent Johnson, Sean Kuraly, Kirill Marchenko, Sean Monahan, Mathieu Olivier, Cole Sillinger, and James van Riemsdyk. Pending any last-second, unexpected hiccups, Labanc will be ten.
- That leaves two spots for three players: Dylan Gambrell, James Malatesta, and Mikael Pyyhtia. Gambrell is signed to a two-way contract but would still need to clear waivers to be sent to Cleveland (one-way and two-way contracts have no bearing on whether a player needs to clear waivers or not), while Malatesta and Pyyhtia would not need to clear waivers to go to Cleveland. Gambrell is probably in the opening night lineup for that reason.
- It feels like Malatesta may be the "odd man out" in this situation, because the Blue Jackets played Pyyhtia in all but one preseason game. That's rare, and a sign that the club was liking

what they were seeing out of him. He was the first goal-scorer in Friday's preseason finale, his second of the seven games. More than that, he's just looked solid throughout the entire camp. The signing of Labanc has ramifications here, too: it allows the club to give Malatesta (assuming it's him) a larger role in Cleveland to continue his development, rather than a limited role in Columbus.

So, what are the lineups opening night?

- Monahan and Marchenko are written in stone for the top line on opening night. Jenner was there too, but with it being unlikely he is ready to go to start the season, that's up for grabs. Johnson has been incredible throughout camp, so he may have the inside track to hold Jenner's spot to start.
- Fantilli will anchor the second line, likely flanked by van Riemsdyk to his left and Chinakhov on his right. Chinakhov seemed destined for the third line behind Voronkov, but, injuries.
- Sillinger centers the third line. Who plays around him? This seems like an ideal spot for Labanc, with either Gambrell or Pyythia playing the other side. If the Blue Jackets like Pyythia as much as they seem to, he may have the inside track to start.
- Process of elimination leaves us with Kuraly centering the fourth line, alongside Olivier and Gambrell/Pyythia.
- Combine that with the defensive pairings, and here's the best guess at Thursday's lineup:

Johnson	Monahan	Marchenko
van Riemsdyk	Fantilli	Chinakhov
Labanc	Sillinger	Pyythia
Gambrell	Kuraly	Olivier
Werenski - Severson		
Provorov - Gudbranson		
Harris - Johnson		
Merzlikins		

1st Ohio Battery / Columbus Blue Jackets Sign Forward Kevin Labanc To One-Year Contract

By Ed Francis- October 5, 2024

Don Waddell said he was looking hard at the market to add a forward.

The President of Hockey Operations and General Manager does not lie.

The Columbus Blue Jackets have signed forward Kevin Labanc to a one-year contract worth \$775,000, adding depth to the forward position just days before the season starts.

Labanc, 28, spent the first eight years of his NHL career with the San Jose Sharks. He was playing with the New Jersey Devils on a professional tryout contract (PTO) and scored six goals (adding an assist) in four preseason games. Labanc did receive an offer from the Devils, but opted for the Blue Jackets.

In 478 games with the Sharks, Labanc scored 82 goals and added 143 assists. He can slot in at any wing spot, but primarily was on the right side while with the Sharks and that continued this preseason under the PTO with the Devils.

Labanc is 5'11", 185lbs and a native of Staten Island, New York.

1st Ohio Battery / Denton Mateychuk Is Doing All He Can To Make Decisions Tough On Blue Jackets

By Will Chase- October 5, 2024

Will he or won't he make the team?

Denton Mateychuk is among those prospects looking to find out if he will be on the Columbus Blue Jackets roster when they kick things off for real at the Minnesota Wild next Thursday.

The 20-year-old prospect from Winnipeg has had a strong training camp for the Blue Jackets, playing in three preseason games and scoring in two of them. Mateychuk's first goal stood up as the game-winner against the St. Louis Blues on Sep. 25. He scored in the 3-2 loss to the Washington Capitals on Sep. 30, and did not score in the Jackets' 3-1 win over the Blues on Tuesday.

As Bally Sports broadcaster Jody Shelley said on The Inside Edge with Blue Jackets radio play-by-play voice Bob McElligott, it's more than just the offense that the Blue Jackets coaches and management are looking at with Mateychuk.

"They're watching how he takes the puck and gets out of pressure," Shelley said. "Makes plays easy. And that's what he does really well. He has a quietness to his game where he can take the first option and make a hard pass. It's a small detail but it's a big deal.

"The Blue Jackets ... of course defensively ... the focus is not only protecting the front of the net but getting out of your own end and controlling the puck and he seems to do that really well."

Part of Mateychuk's mission is making decisions tough for coaches and management. Even though he didn't score on Tuesday, he was one of the Blue Jackets' best players.

The same can be said for his game against the Capitals.

And in his first game of the exhibition season against the Blues, he was still among the top performers.

Columbus will wrap up its final preseason game against the Pittsburgh Penguins on Friday night and it could be Mateychuk's final shot to convince everyone he's ready now.

If he goes to Cleveland to start the season, it's just a matter of time before he's up in the NHL. Head coach Dean Evason knows the importance of development.

"What he has shown, clearly he's been that guy for a long time," Evason said after Monday's loss against the Capitals. "He's going to be an NHL player for a long time. If he starts here, wonderful. If he doesn't, his development is going to be continually steady because of what we've seen, how he's played, he's gotten better and better.

"His career is going to go like that as well."

What parts of his game has Evason been impressed with?

"His calmness," Evason said. "His poise as a young player. He doesn't panic in those situations. Even after he makes a mistake, turns the puck over, it's not a panic mode. Like he doesn't go chasing after it and compound that one mistake. That's why you don't see that glaring error.

"Obviously, he has offensive instincts. Like you see him getting into holes in the offensive zone. Rotating down where he can receive pucks.

"He's a really good player."

Will he be in Columbus or Cleveland?

"This is preseason and the NHL is a great league," Evason said. "Best league in the world. And when regular season starts, there's a lot of heat, and there's a lot of heat on defensemen, and there's a lot of heat on young defensemen."

"We have to be careful what we do and not get too far ahead of ourselves. We like his progress as we do with a lot of players. And as I said, if it works out he's here, great. If it doesn't, great."

Soon, we'll see how this shakes out.

[The Athletic / NHL season previews 2024-25: Projecting each team from worst to first](#)

By The Athletic NHL Staff Report- October 5, 2024

Welcome to The Athletic's 2024-25 edition of the team season previews, a deep dive into what to expect from each team for the upcoming season by Sean Gentile, Shayna Goldman, and Dom Luszczyszyn.

Between Sept. 30 and Oct. 2, we're previewing all 32 NHL teams in order of predicted regular-season finish, according to Dom's model.

Beyond the projected point total and playoff finish, you'll find a wildcard player that might have an unexpected impact on the forecast, a roster breakdown, one big question facing each team, and a best and worst-case scenario for each team.

- How these projections work
- Understanding projection uncertainty

32. San Jose Sharks

Points: 64.7

Playoffs: 0 percent

Stanley Cup: 0 percent

31. Columbus Blue Jackets

Points: 68.6

Playoffs: 0 percent

Stanley Cup: 0 percent

30. Anaheim Ducks

Points: 70.1

Playoffs: 0 percent

Stanley Cup: 0 percent

29. Chicago Blackhawks

Points: 77.1

Playoffs: 3 percent

Stanley Cup: 0 percent

28. Calgary Flames

Points: 78.9

Playoffs: 6 percent

Stanley Cup: 0 percent

27. Montreal Canadiens

Points: 80.6

Playoffs: 7 percent

Stanley Cup: 0 percent

26. Detroit Red Wings

Points: 80.0

Playoffs: 8 percent

Stanley Cup: 0 percent

25. St. Louis Blues

Points: 81.8

Playoffs: 10 percent

Stanley Cup: 0 percent

24. Philadelphia Flyers

Points: 81.9

Playoffs: 10 percent

Stanley Cup: 0 percent

23. Washington Capitals

Points: 85.3

Playoffs: 18 percent

Stanley Cup: 0 percent

22. Seattle Kraken

Points: 87.0

Playoffs: 27 percent

Stanley Cup: 0 percent

21. Pittsburgh Penguins

Points: 88.5

Playoffs: 30 percent

Stanley Cup: 0 percent

20. Buffalo Sabres

Points: 88.7

Playoffs: 30 percent

Stanley Cup: 0 percent

19. Ottawa Senators

Points: 89.8

Playoffs: 35 percent
Stanley Cup: 0 percent
18. Minnesota Wild
Points: 91.6
Playoffs: 47 percent
Stanley Cup: 1 percent
17. Utah Hockey Club
Points: 92.3
Playoffs: 51 percent
Stanley Cup: 1 percent
16. Los Angeles Kings
Points: 92.7
Playoffs: 55 percent
Stanley Cup: 1 percent
15. Vegas Golden Knights
Points: 95.9
Playoffs: 70 percent
Stanley Cup: 2 percent
14. New York Islanders
Points: 96.1
Playoffs: 67 percent
Stanley Cup: 2 percent
13. Tampa Bay Lightning
Points: 96.8
Playoffs: 69 percent
Stanley Cup: 2 percent
12. Boston Bruins
Points: 97.3
Playoffs: 71 percent
Stanley Cup: 3 percent
11. Nashville Predators
Points: 97.7
Playoffs: 75 percent

Stanley Cup: 3 percent
10. Winnipeg Jets
Points: 97.8
Playoffs: 75 percent
Stanley Cup: 4 percent
9. New Jersey Devils
Points: 99.2
Playoffs: 79 percent
Stanley Cup: 4 percent
8. New York Rangers
Points: 101.8
Playoffs: 87 percent
Stanley Cup: 6 percent
7. Carolina Hurricanes
Points: 103.1
Playoffs: 90 percent
Stanley Cup: 8 percent
6. Colorado Avalanche
Points: 103.8
Playoffs: 92 percent
Stanley Cup: 5 percent
5. Florida Panthers
Points: 104.78
Playoffs: 92 percent
Stanley Cup: 9 percent
4. Vancouver Canucks
Points: 105.4
Playoffs: 95 percent
Stanley Cup: 9 percent
3. Dallas Stars
Points: 105.6
Playoffs: 94 percent
Stanley Cup: 10 percent

[The Athletic / Enter the 2024 NHL prediction contest that's so easy it's almost impossible](#)

By Sean McIndoe- October 5, 2024

The NHL season has technically arrived, with a European appetizer being served up today between the New Jersey Devils and Buffalo Sabres. But the real debut comes next week, with the other 30 teams seeing their first action beginning on Tuesday. That's when we'll finally start to find out how teams will look in games that matter, after weeks of the so-called experts telling us what to expect.

But first: It's your turn.

After all, if me and all my colleagues are going to be forced to embarrass ourselves with bad predictions, then it's only fair that you get your chance too. And around these parts, that means an entry in the world's easiest prediction contest.

The concept is simple. I'll give you ten questions that should be super easy to answer. You decide how confident you feel and how many answers you want to give. Each right answer means more points, but each wrong one means you take a zero. But you won't have to worry about that because again, the questions are super easy.

Last year, you could have aced the contest by knowing that the Sharks and Ducks and Blackhawks would be bad, while the Panthers and Oilers and Avalanche would be good. You'd have known Jon Cooper and Jared Bednar were keeping their jobs, Connor Bedard would be a top rookie, Cale Makar would have a Norris-worthy season and Connor McDavid would be in the running for MVP. I mean, who didn't know all of that stuff?

Of course, you also had to know the Devils weren't making the playoffs, the Capitals were, Jack Hughes and Leon Draisaitl wouldn't get Hart votes, Adam Fantilli wouldn't be a Calder contender and Jay Woodcroft would get fired, or else you'd be risking zeroes in a bunch of questions. That made our simple contest a lot harder than it seemed, which is the whole point. And yeah, you guys did not do great.

We're keeping the same basic rules and format this year, but please give everything a quick read even if you're a contest veteran. If you're new, here's how this works:

The rules

The contest features ten questions, plus an all-or-nothing bonus that may or may not have a correct answer. For each of the ten regular questions, you can give at least one answer and as many as five.

For each of the regular questions, you can one point for your first right answer, two points for the second (for a total of three) and so on, all the way up to a maximum of 15 points if you run the table with five correct answers.

HOWEVER, even one wrong answer gives you a zero for the entire question. Going one-for-one and getting one point is better than four-for-five and zero, so just how confident do you want to be?

The bonus question is optional, and you can leave it blank. If you choose to answer, you'll give one and only one response, and earn 15 bonus points if you're right. But if you're wrong, you'll receive a zero for your entire entry. Not just that question – your whole entry is wiped out.

The winner is the entry that racks up the most total points. Note that this doesn't necessarily mean you have to get points on every answer. In fact, it would be reasonably easy to play it safe and end up with a

“perfect” entry that has no wrong answers but doesn’t rack up enough points. Every year of the contest so far has been won by entrants took zeroes in multiple categories.

Any entry that doesn’t follow the formatting rules listed will probably be ignored. It takes a lot of work to scrape all the information and store it, and if you make life difficult then we reserve the right to just skip over your entry.

As with last year, we’re counting invalid entries as wrong instead of just skipping them. This includes leaving an answer like “Tkachuk” or “Hughes” or “Armstrong” without specifying a first name. Pay attention to date cutoffs, and double-check names.

Optional bonus question:

For 15 bonus points, name one and only one player who will finish this season with at least 50 goals, but who is not Auston Matthews.

Remember, you don’t have to answer the bonus if you don’t want to, and a wrong answer wipes out your entire entry.

Watch out for those common last names and make sure your entry is clear about who you mean. Also, double-check that you have the right answers for the right question number. (You’d be amazed at how many people screw this up and end up listing Connor McDavid as a Norris candidate or swap the coaches and GMs.)

Finally, this isn’t a rule, but a suggestion: Record your answers somewhere, because this comment section will get big and it might be hard to find your entry if you come back in a few months wondering how you did.

There you have it. Ten easy questions, give or take an optional bonus. The answers will all seem obvious in a few months, but how confident do you feel right now?

The comments are open and the contest is on, so let’s see what you’ve got.

The Athletic / Best and worst moments from Amazon's 'Faceoff: Inside the NHL' documentary series

By Mark Lazerus- October 5, 2024

Editor's note: This story contains spoilers for Amazon's "Faceoff: Inside the NHL" documentary series, which releases to the public on Friday.

NHL commissioner Gary Bettman's voice echoed through the delirious Amerant Bank Arena as a sweaty, shaggy Connor McDavid trudged into the small visitors' locker room, the last one in, seemingly in a daze. Bettman was announcing McDavid as the Conn Smythe Trophy winner as playoff MVP, a legacy-making honor, but McDavid's face didn't register any of it. The Edmonton Oilers captain had just been told outside the locker room by the NHL's chief content officer, Steve Mayer, that he had won the trophy, and that he was expected to accept the trophy despite having just suffered the most agonizing, consequential defeat of his life to the Florida Panthers.

"I wouldn't have gone out there for a million dollars," he later said.

So the greatest player on the planet walked into the silent dressing room and sat at his stall, staring into the middle distance, trying to hold back the flood. On his left, Leon Draisaitl reached over and grabbed McDavid's left leg and patted it. On his right, Ryan Nugent-Hopkins put his arm around him. And that's when it all landed — the grind, the work, the blood, the sweat, the fears. All of it adding up to one goal short of glory. And he couldn't hold it back anymore.

McJesus wept.

At that point, a voice rang out, "Get the f—ing cameras out of here."

Those cameras belonged to Box to Box Films, the production company behind the wildly popular Netflix series documenting the drama and personalities of Formula 1, golf and tennis, among other sports. Last spring the company turned its attention to the NHL, creating a series of six 45-minute episodes for Amazon Prime Video called "Faceoff: Inside the NHL" that will be released on Friday. Unlike recent behind-the-scenes documentaries such as "Road to the Winter Classic," the teams and league did not have editorial control on what was included and what was not. So the new series got much more of the vibe of the popular HBO "24/7" shows of yesteryear, with all the drama, all the joy and anger and, of course, all the curses.

While the Panthers' Matthew Tkachuk gets perhaps the most air time, McDavid is the clear star of the show. In Episode 5, he calls himself an introvert and notes that people call him "boring" and a "robot." The big revelation of this show is that he's anything but. He's fiery, emotional and in the postseason, seemingly constantly teetering on the edge of a meltdown, his eyes glaring and his legs fidgeting constantly — on the bus, during team meetings, on the bench. McDavid is all intensity and emotion, and we see it time and time again through the production's cameras. Amazon spoiled the best moment of the whole series — the all-time fit McDavid threw in the locker room after Game 2 of the Stanley Cup Final — in the trailer, but, of course, it's way better with all the F-bombs.

Overview

Let's start with the "newsiest" bit out of this. Yes, Nylander said exactly what we all thought he said during that infamous playoff bench argument with Mitch Marner and Auston Matthews. "F—ing shoot it! Stop f—ing crying! This is the f—ing issue, you guys f—ing b— about s—. Let's f—ing go!"

This being an NHL-adjacent production, it's legally required to start with a Toronto Maple Leafs-centric segment. In fact, this episode might be more Leafs-centric than every podcast in the hockey world. Pastrňák and the Boston Bruins are very secondary. The producers fell in love with William Nylander — a big personality, by hockey's modest standards — and made him the centerpiece of a story leading up to the Bruins' seven-game first-round victory over Toronto. Nylander's friendship with Boston star David Pastrňák, and the migraine that kept Nylander out of the first three games of the series, get the spotlight.

Best exchange

Nylander and Pastrňák are getting dinner following a late-season matchup, discussing the standings.

Pastrňák: "Right now, we'd play each other in the playoffs."

Nylander: "That'd be fun."

Pastrňák: "Always fun, Toronto-Boston."

Nylander: "Just because you guys win all the time. For us, every time we have lost. It's been so s—."

Pastrňák: "It doesn't matter. If you don't win the Cup, it doesn't matter who moves on from the first round."

Highlights

- Nylander, looking like the most casual man alive wearing shades and a puffy jacket, driving with one finger on the wheel with his left leg up against the door.
- The clips of Nylander and Pastrňák as kids are adorable.
- Seeing Nylander during Games 1-3 watching the games from home, living and dying with each play.
- Pastrňák's moving discussion about his devotion to his daughter, Freya, after he and his partner, Rebecca, lost their first child at just 6 days old: "You mature real quick when something like that happens in your life."

Quibbles

- TNT analyst Paul Bissonnette, in a talking-head segment, says "The Boston Bruins are the standard." Really? The Bruins, while perennial contenders, have one Stanley Cup championship in the last 52 years.
- Auston Matthews is barely mentioned and interviewed just very briefly. Get used to it. Though Box to Box followed roughly 20 players around, including Matthews, Sidney Crosby and Connor Bedard, those three and many others were left on the cutting room floor in their entirety.

Overview

The episode focuses on the Nashville Predators' Filip Forsberg and Vegas Golden Knights' Jack Eichel as they build toward first-round playoff exits, but it's Forsberg's pregnant wife, Erin Alvey Forsberg, who emerges as the MVP of the series. Her eloquent and insightful perspective on the sport from a partner's point of view — on watching her husband fight, on concussions, on living with a routine-oriented pro athlete, on the sting of defeat — is far and away the best away-from-the-rink portion of the series. Also, she has an air freshener hanging from her car's rearview mirror that is simply Forsberg's face. She wins the show.

Beyond that, we get a recap of Eichel's fight to become the first NHL player to have artificial disk replacement surgery and the trade to Vegas from the Buffalo Sabres. The show really leans hard into the

idea that Eichel was very unhappy in Buffalo and is now very happy in Las Vegas. The cancellation of Nashville's trip to see U2 at Sphere and the subsequent 16-0-2 run gets a good chunk of time, too.

Best exchange

Eichel, on a double date with Noah Hanifin and his partner, summons a server and orders the following for the table: Shrimp cocktail, meatballs, calamari, penne alla vodka, rigatoni bolognese, sliced New York strip, creamed corn (?!), chicken parm and a (surely very expensive) bottle of Sassicaia. There are only four people at the table.

Highlights

- Learning that Forsberg wakes up at exactly 8:08 a.m. every day and puts his skates on before a game at exactly 7:07 p.m. "When you're speaking it out loud, it's pretty silly," Forsberg allowed.
- Eichel: "Everyone's biggest issue with (the surgery) was that it hadn't been done on a hockey player yet. I don't think, medically, that's a good enough reason to not let someone do something."
- Forsberg, mere days after being eliminated by the Vancouver Canucks, is holding his newborn, wearing a hat that says, "Hey, I'm Here For You." "The only silver lining of losing in the playoffs, I've been home for every single day." It's very sweet.

Quibbles

- Did you know that the Stanley Cup is the hardest trophy in sports to win? Well, you will after hearing it roughly 342 times.
- Extreme close-ups of Forsberg's foot and ankle as he gets acupuncture and electric stimulation therapy aren't necessarily for the squeamish.
- The Predators' postgame celebratory line dance thing is even harder to watch than the acupuncture.

Overview

If you were wondering if goaltender Jeremy Swayman was going to budge in his contract negotiations with the Bruins, you won't be after watching this episode. He ain't budging. Even though, as he says himself in this episode before losing in the second round, "I've still got so much more to offer, and I haven't proven s—." Meanwhile, Matthew Tkachuk is the happiest human alive, just driving his golf cart around Fort Lauderdale and literally hopping in the ocean and then his pool before every single home game.

Highlights

- Swayman has a framed photo in his home of himself and former teammate Linus Ullmark doing their postgame goalie hug. D'awwww.
- Tkachuk parking his golf cart at the beach for his pregame ocean ritual, looking at the meter, and saying, "I'm not paying." He makes \$9.5 million per year.
- Tkachuk to ailing Bruins forward Brad Marchand at the bench: "You all right? You all right? Never seen a captain quit on his team." Pastrňák responds: "Heh. Don't even listen to that."
- Swayman, after his star turn in the playoffs, on the arbitration process and the bad blood it engenders: "The arbitrator on their side, their job is to rip players. Hearing you're not worthy of what you think you're worthy of, that was hard to hear. You don't forget what was said. I wrote them down and I looked at them the other day, and I had a couple checkmarks. My biggest knock was how I wasn't trustworthy in

playoffs. Check.” Swayman also points to Tkachuk as someone he admires. “He wills his team to win games. I want to be like that.”

- Like the Old Man in “A Christmas Story,” Panthers coach Paul Maurice works in profanity the way other artists might work in oils or clay. It is his true medium.

Overview

In what is by far the weakest episode of the series, the show tries awfully hard to mythicize the idea of the NHL captain. Can Hughes be a leader at just 24 years old? Can Landeskog work his way back from a devastating injury? Can Trouba walk the line with his hits? Can we all stay awake while watching this?

Best exchange

The New York Rangers’ Braden Schneider breaks up a scoring chance with some quick stick work. Back at the bench, Trouba praises him.

Trouba: “Beautiful. Beautiful laydown of the stick.”

Schneider: “I almost pooped my pants.”

Trouba: “No pooping of the pants.”

Highlights

- Trouba, in roller blades and full Rangers uniform, getting his arms and legs slathered in black paint before jumping into a canvas repeatedly. Art is pain.
- Landeskog told his son that the huge scar on his leg was from a shark attack.
- Hughes talking about how he “went full health-freak mode this year” and read 20-25 books. “I just want to get off my phone.” When it’s time to cook: “I’m gonna chef up.”
- Hughes gets a brief pep talk (“like 40 seconds”) from his dad before every game. That’s cute.
- Trouba, trying and failing to give his baby a bottle: “Come on, we’re on camera, man. One time!” The baby immediately takes the bottle. “You legend! Dad of the year.”
- “What Chaos” host Pete Blackburn, in a talking head segment: “The Washington Capitals basically puked their way into the playoffs.”

Quibbles

- If you’re one of those cynical types who rolls your eyes when you hear people talk about leadership and intangibles, this episode could be hazardous to your health.
- Trouba, who has a long history of borderline, injurious hits: “If you watch hockey and you think I’m a bad guy, I have no control over that. I’m just doing my job.”
- There’s no way around it: That Trouba jumping-into-a-canvas painting was not very good.

Best use of profanity

None. This episode was pretty thin.

Connor McDavid under pressure.

Episode 5: Cup or Bust Part I

Featuring Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl and Zach Hyman

Overview

Now we're getting to the good stuff. The Stanley Cup Final material is the series' strongest, even if it skews heavily toward Edmonton. On the ice, in the locker room, in the heads of the biggest names in the league — this is where the show really shines.

Best moment

During an intermission in the Stanley Cup Final, Panthers bench boss Maurice takes one of his goalies' gloves and stick, gets on his knees in the middle of the locker room and demonstrates why he wants his players to shoot high on Oilers goaltender Stuart Skinner. "Under the f—ing bar!"

Highlights

- The show really tries to portray McDavid and the Oilers as under unfathomable pressure in Edmonton while Tkachuk is the chilliest dude alive in South Florida. You see a tense, aching McDavid getting physical therapy — smash cut to Tkachuk in his pool with shades on, talking about how the Panthers are "almost too relaxed." You see Tkachuk before Game 1 smiling broadly and saying it's "like Christmas morning" — smash cut to McDavid all jittery and fidgety on the bus on the way to the arena. It might be exaggerated, but it's effective.
- McDavid's obvious love for his dog, Lenard, is adorable. "He's my most prized possession." There are pictures of Lenny all around the house.
- McDavid has a basketball court and a custom-built weight room in his house.
- McDavid on whether he feels he's the best in the world: "When I'm at my best, it's a tough level to match."
- Draisaitl on the adulation the Oilers get in Edmonton: "It's hard to describe. We don't walk around thinking we are the Beatles. We're just like any other guy at home, eating chips or watching 'Friends.'"
- Media personality Blackburn on Oilers fans: "When the team is bad, their life is bad."
- Maurice during the first intermission of Game 2: "Breathe through your nose, not through your a—hole. Let's go, baby!"

Quibbles

- We could have used a little more Zach Hyman. He seems great.
- Apparently, Tkachuk is the only Panthers player. We couldn't hear a little from Aleksander Barkov? Or Aaron Ekblad? Anybody?

An absolutely epic moment that will live forever.

Matthew Tkachuk on playing in Stanley Cup Final Game 7: "You dream of this."

Episode 6: Cup or Bust, Part II

Overview

Oilers vs. Panthers, McDavid vs. Tkachuk. It all comes to a head in an unforgettable Stanley Cup Final.

Best moment

It's obviously McDavid's breakdown following the Game 7 loss. The raw immediacy of the moment is extraordinary, and something we rarely get to see. McDavid is so often performing superhuman feats that it's easy to forget he's actually human. But for variety's sake, the fact that Amazon gives us the actual moment Mayer, the NHL's chief content officer, approached McDavid about winning the Conn Smythe is fascinating.

Mayer: “You won the Conn Smythe.”

McDavid: “They want me to go out there?”

Mayer: “Yeah.”

The audio then cuts out of the rest of the conversation, but McDavid quickly turns and walks into the room. That’s when the producers cut to a follow-up interview in which McDavid said, “I wouldn’t have gone out there for a million dollars.”

Highlights

- McDavid, calmly, on his post-Game 2 meltdown: “It’s a high-emotion situation.”
- Tkachuk’s recounting of his broken sternum during the 2023 Final — brother Brady had to lift him out of bed so he could play — is harrowing.
- It’s moving to see how much Tkachuk winning the Cup meant to his father, who never won it. Brady Tkachuk said getting the Tkachuk name on the Cup would be “big for our family.” Seeing Keith in tears after Game 7, and seeing how much it meant to Matthew to hand him the Cup on the ice, was really something.
- Tkachuk before Game 7, after the Panthers had blown a 3-0 series lead: “You dream about this. I never dreamed about winning the Cup in Game 4, or 5, or 6. Or scoring the goal or making the big play in those games. It was always ... Game 7. Always. Each and every single time.”
- The on-ice action and audio is terrific, as you’d expect.

Quibbles

- Seriously, how did the Panthers win the Stanley Cup with Matthew Tkachuk as the only player on the roster?
- Do not take a drink every time a member of the Tkachuk family talks about “the dream.” You will die.
- The five talking heads the show used for exposition and analysis were Bissonnette, Blackburn, PK Subban, Jackie Redmond and Sarah Nurse. All of them did well (Redmond does most of the heavy lifting) but Nurse felt under-served. We could have used more of her perspective as both an elite professional athlete and Oilers defenseman Darnell Nurse’s cousin.

Best use of profanity

Hyman, after Game 7, while McDavid sobs: “There’s nothing I can say that’s gonna make this feel better. But I know we’ll be back. I f—ing KNOW we’ll be back. I know it in my f—ing heart.”

The Athletic / NHL 2024-25 season predictions: Stanley Cup winner, playoff teams, dark horse and more

By The Athletic NHL Staff- October 5, 2024

Can the Florida Panthers repeat as Stanley Cup champions or is it the Edmonton Oilers' turn to go from runners-up to No. 1? What will happen in the Eastern Conference wild-card race?

After kicking off The Athletic NHL staff's season predictions Thursday with individual awards, today we look at team expectations. Who makes the playoffs? Who are the potential dark horses? Which fan base is bound for disappointment?

To pick apart the results of our polling, provide context and give us a healthy critique, we've brought in NHL senior writers James Mirtle and Sean Gentile, analytics know-it-all Shayna Goldman and betting expert Jesse Granger.

Mirtle: I feel special with the lone Hurricanes pick. Maybe this is finally the year?! Right?

Goldman: Lose in the Stanley Cup Final then return to win the next year. I think I've seen that script before.

Gentile: I picked the Stars last season. The Devils don't quite seem ready. The Leafs are the Leafs. The Avs have loads of question marks. It's Edmonton by default.

Granger: I think the Devils are the perfect combination of talent, motivation and rest from a longer summer than they'd hoped for, with, finally, the addition of a top-flight goalie in Jacob Markstrom.

Gentile: In other words, most of us think the Rangers will find a new way to disappoint their fans in the playoffs.

Granger: Our consensus Cup Final pick is Oilers over Rangers. You can bet that exact result at 66-1 odds.

Granger: And Mackenzie Blackwood.

Gentile: The Sharks added several real, live NHL players this season. That doesn't mean things will change all that much.

Goldman: I didn't vote for Carolina, but it actually makes some sense here. Year after year, they're one of the Eastern Conference favorites. But the results just don't match the hype in the end, so it feels like the pressure is starting to amp up there.

Granger: Thatcher Demko's injury has me very concerned for Vancouver. He covered up a lot of holes on that team with heroics in net, shown by his sky-high .845 save percentage on high-danger shots. If he ends up playing the majority of the season, the Canucks should be fine, but if not, it's a lot to ask from Kevin Lankinen and Artūrs Šilovs.

Granger: The Devils are my pick to win the Cup, so I kind of had to pick them here.

Mirtle: I threw Vegas my vote here as (a) the Devils are the easy choice and (b) everyone is sleeping on how good the Golden Knights remain, which includes, perhaps, the NHL's best blue line. Plus they're going to add two \$10 million forwards at the deadline, anyway.

Goldman: I forget if I picked Tampa Bay or Nashville here, honestly. The Lightning have depth issues but aren't dead yet. And the Predators had a really interesting offseason. They're my two dark horse contenders to watch because Mirtle's right, the Devils are the easy choice here.

Gentile: Someday, I'll be done treating the Lightning as a true contender. Today is not that day.

Goldman: Detroit feels like the only legitimate pick here, especially if it can build off its level from that late-season push. Even if the Flyers go on a run like last year, their deadline moves likely take them right out of the conversation again.

Gentile: Yep, it's the Red Wings by default for me, too. Their path feels realistic, at least, especially if a couple of their prospects pop.

Mirtle: Nearly half the league being mentioned sounds like the NHL.

Goldman: The average tenure of an NHL coach is less than 2.5 years, so it's really anyone's game here.

Gentile: There's been so much turnover the past couple of years that we're short on actual candidates.

East playoff field

We asked each voter to pick the eight East playoff teams. Here is the percentage of the votes received by each team. (Note: * playoff team in 2023-24)

Goldman: Sorry Atlantic Division disruptors, it apparently still is not your time.

Gentile: Very funny to see the Capitals, a team that actually made the playoffs last season and then improved over the summer, that far down the list.

Granger: The funny thing is, the oddsmakers agree. Washington is a minus-190 favorite to miss the playoffs, and plus-155 to qualify for them.

West playoff field

We asked each voter to pick the eight West playoff teams. Here is the percentage of the votes received by each team. (Note: * playoff team in 2023-24)

Mirtle: Vancouver at 100 percent with Demko's injury issues is bold, but then again, the Pacific is no murderer's row.

Goldman: This is Utah erasure, wow. I'm a little surprised there isn't more confidence behind the Jets — Connor Hellebuyck can get his team there, the rest is just a little fuzzy.

Gentile: Glad to see we're all predicting another year of the best new tradition in the sport — the Kings losing to Edmonton in the first round.

Granger: With Drew Doughty going down in the preseason and the uncertainty with Darcy Kuemper and David Rittich in net, it makes sense that the Kings are the closest to slipping out of playoff position, even if they are still deep up front.

The Athletic / Should NHL teams be penalized for tanking? Plus Panthers' new blueprint and Capitals intrigue

By Eric Duhatschek- October 5, 2024

With the NHL season about to start, here's a whimsical question I've been pondering as I try to guess which teams will be better and which teams are going to be worse in 2024-25: Should there be a penalty for being a laughingstock?

And by laughingstock, I mean a team that is so bad you must conclude they are being deliberately bad in order to gain an advantage down the road.

This, of course, is realized in the theory of tanking.

Over the last few seasons, we've seen a handful of teams — notably the Chicago Blackhawks two years ago and the San Jose Sharks last season — rid themselves of as many contributing NHL players as possible to sink as far as they can and then hope the lottery balls fall their way. And they did for both teams.

Chicago was able to draft who they believe is a cornerstone player in Connor Bedard in 2023, and back in June, the Sharks were able to land Macklin Celebrini.

If you take the pulse of the respective fan bases in both markets, you'd have to conclude that many, if not most, are on board with the strategy. It's a 32-team league now and only one champion annually emerges, so to give yourself the best chance of being that team, you need a cornerstone player to build around, right? That's the theory, anyway.

Connor McDavid, a cornerstone player and the No. 1 pick in 2015, got Edmonton to the Stanley Cup Final in 2024, where he was ably abetted and supported by Leon Draisaitl, the No. 3 pick in 2014. Florida, the eventual champions, have one in Aleksander Barkov, No. 2 in 2013, who was taken just behind Nathan MacKinnon, the catalyst in the Colorado Avalanche's 2022 Stanley Cup title.

In practice, the problem with this approach is it flies against the NHL's main operating principle, which is supposed to be competitive integrity.

Conceptually, competitive integrity is something you have to have as a sports league, because without it, you're lost.

Considering how much gambling is now a fixture of the pro sports landscape, it should be more important than ever. The NHL will let players escape with any sort of egregious conduct on the ice and issue a slap on the wrist, or a minimal suspension, for bad behavior. But if you even flirt with gambling, expect to get banned for half a season the way Shane Pinto of the Ottawa Senators did for reasons the NHL chose never to fully explain.

Let's examine last year's final regular-season standings.

If you just compare the top to the bottom, you see an enormous gap between the first-place New York Rangers (114 points) and the last-place Sharks (47). That's an astonishing margin, and it's even more disturbing because the NHL's hard salary-cap system requires teams to spend between a lower and an upper limit to even the playing field. But if you dive a little deeper, you see that four teams at the bottom, the truly awful ones, obscure the bigger picture.

After San Jose, it was Chicago at 52 points, the Anaheim Ducks at 59 and the Columbus Blue Jackets at 66. The 28th-place finishers were the Montreal Canadiens, who had 76 points. The Ottawa Senators

were 26th; they won 37 games, only two fewer than the New York Islanders, who had 39 wins and finished 15th. The Islanders padded their point total with bonus points accumulated in overtime and shootout losses, another curious NHL practice designed to keep the standings as tight as possible for as long as possible. All those bonus points meant 22 of the 32 teams were above the NHL's calculation of .500 and three others (New Jersey, Calgary and Seattle) fell one game short (.492).

But at least those teams, from Montreal on up, were actively trying to win hockey games most nights. You could argue Columbus was as well but couldn't get it done for a lot of reasons — from injuries to the need to install a first-year head coach days before the start of training camp because their offseason hire (Mike Babcock) proved to be the wrong guy.

Not much makes my blood boil anymore, but tanking still irks me to no end because it rewards the teams trying hard to be bad and penalizes teams trying to put out a competitive team night after night.

There should be penalties attached to being truly bad, historically bad, but mostly deliberately bad.

Can it be done? If it's an 82-game schedule and you get a chance to earn all those bonus points anyway for shootout and overtime losses, can you put in a provision that if you fail to crack, say, 68 points, you are disqualified from moving into the No. 1 slot in the draft lottery?

I know. That's a pipe dream. The NHL would never go for it. But the larger question is, should they go for it? Or do something else to enforce the idea that it isn't OK to deliberately sabotage your season, or seasons, just so you can land a string of high-end prospects?

The fact is, there was a partial solution in place up until 2021. Back then, there were three draft lottery drawings instead of two, and often teams outside the top five moved up dramatically. I never minded that because it rewarded teams that played hard until the end.

Naturally, of course, the NHL felt the need to change the lottery rules, to reward the truly bad teams and penalize clubs that were trying to stay in the race as long as possible. Nowadays, there are only two draft lotteries.

Before the change, there were years like 2017 when New Jersey jumped from No. 5 to No. 1, Philadelphia moved from 13 to 2 and Dallas moved from 8 to 3. That there was potentially room to move meant teams played it out to the end instead of playing out the string. When I look at The Athletic's projections for this season from Dom, Shayna and Sean, the four bottom teams are familiar: San Jose, Columbus, Anaheim and Chicago.

If those projections turn out to be correct, those teams will likely add another blue-chip prospect to an already emerging young nucleus, while the teams actively trying to compete are penalized for doing the thing they're supposed to do as much as possible: win every time you take to the ice. Even the truly bad realize at some point that endless losing creates a bad culture, so this summer we've seen the bottom feeders add a few supplemental pieces to be less bad.

Maybe the gap between top and bottom won't be 67 points again, but I'm not holding my breath. And I'm tired of teams raising the white flag of surrender before the first puck is dropped to open a new regular season.

Around the camps

As of Tuesday morning, Samuel Honzek, Patrick Giles, Matvei Michkov and the Boqvist brothers, Jesper and Adam, were running 1-2-3-4-5 atop the NHL's preseason scoring race, which is all you need to know about how much results from exhibition games matter. Still, that three of those five names belong to the Stanley Cup champion Panthers is intriguing. There was a two-decade span between when the Detroit

Red Wings won back-to-back championships in 1997 and '98 and when a team did it again (Pittsburgh in 2016 and 2017). Then Tampa Bay went back to back in 2020 and 2021. So while it doesn't seem like an insurmountable challenge anymore, there always are challenges, like making the dollars work and then figuring out the chemistry. Let's start with the dollars because the Panthers have \$14.5 million tied up in two goalies — Sergei Bobrovsky at \$10 million and Spencer Knight at \$4.5 million.

Last year, the Panthers got a lot of mileage out of Anthony Stolarz, which resulted in Stolarz getting a payday from the Toronto Maple Leafs. Knight, meanwhile, played 45 games for the AHL Charlotte Checkers last season after spending time in the NHL/NHLPA player assistance program, but he is back and looks as if he'll reclaim the No. 2 job behind Bobrovsky.

In addition to Stolarz's departure, the Panthers' budgetary restraints also saw them lose Brandon Montour and Oliver Ekman-Larsson to free agency. In some ways, signing both Boqvists was a stroke of genius by GM Bill Zito because they can try to find their NHL strides together on the same team. Jesper is 25, Adam 24. The latter is a highly skilled offensive defenseman with genuine holes in his defensive game, which is why he didn't stick in either of his previous NHL homes, Chicago or Columbus. But what an opportunity here! He has demonstrated an ability to run a power play and will get a chance to do that in Montour's place on a unit that features real high-end talent up front: Aleksander Barkov, Matthew Tkachuk, Sam Reinhart and Carter Verhaeghe. His job will be to direct traffic — and the Panthers can afford to be patient and give the unit time to find its groove.

Remember, a year ago Florida muddled through the first half without Montour and Aaron Ekblad, won the Atlantic by a single point over Boston and peaked at the right time in the playoffs. The Boqvists signed identical one-year, \$775,000 contracts, as did the useful Tomas Nosek. Nate Schmidt got \$800,000 and A.J. Greer received \$850,000. So five players, projected to be regulars, coming in at or near the NHL minimum.

Every team every year is a chemistry experiment in the early going, and on paper, the Panthers defense looks as if it will be tested. Ekblad and Gustav Forsling are a solid No. 1 and the second unit is Niko Mikkola and Dmitry Kulikov, both of whom were reclamation projects back in July of 2023 and found a fit with the Panthers. Coach Paul Maurice knew Kulikov from the Winnipeg days, and that's the same familiarity that led to Schmidt's signing. Meanwhile, two key pieces up front — Verhaeghe (\$4.166 million AAV) and Sam Bennett (\$4.425 million AAV) — are both in the final years of their contracts and would be in line for hefty raises if they can duplicate their 2023-24 seasons.

The injury factor

Most teams don't run their real teams out until the final week, but some players, like McDavid, ask to play games so they can get sharp when the temptation of the coaching staff might be to sit him and not risk injury. All you need to do is look to Montreal and Los Angeles to see how catastrophic injuries can be; both Patrik Laine and Drew Doughty are out indefinitely. Injuries happen in a contact sport, and somehow, it seems an easier pill to swallow if it happens in a game where two points are on the line rather than in a meaningless exhibition.

The 2024-25 regular season opens Friday with a pair of games in Prague between the Buffalo Sabres and New Jersey Devils. For the remaining 30 teams, the regular season begins Oct. 8 with three games, including one featuring the Panthers' banner raising (versus the Boston Bruins) and the first-ever game for the Utah Hockey Club (versus Chicago).

Most teams play their home openers within the first week; the Kings don't play at home until the 24th. A long road trip right off the top is not ideal as they try to figure out life without Doughty for the foreseeable future. The Kings were my pick to miss the playoffs in the Western Conference, after making

it a year ago, before the injury occurred. Now? They'll be playing that us-against-the-world card and wondering what happened to the right side of their defense, which looked so good a couple of years back that they practically gave Sean Durzi away.

What can be valuable is to see how new faces in new places are adjusting. So, for example, Elias Lindholm — signed by the Bruins to a seven-year, \$54.25 million contract, in the hopes of anchoring the top line — was on the ice at the start of camp, immediately missed nine days because of an undisclosed injury and then returned this past Sunday. He's targeted for first-line minutes with David Pastrnak and Pavel Zacha, and will probably get into a game or two before that date with the Panthers.

But it's not ideal — starting from behind, trying to get up to speed, and of course trying to find some chemistry on the first power-play unit, which in Boston's case was 14th overall last season thanks mainly to 35 points from Pastrnak and 26 from Brad Marchand.

After Zacha and Charlie McAvoy, it was a hodgepodge of power-play production last season — James van Riemsdyk and Morgan Geekie had 12 points apiece, Charlie Coyle and Kevin Shattenkirk had 11, and Jake DeBrusk had 10. JVR, Shattenkirk and DeBrusk are all gone now. Lindholm can be effective there, with the right supporting cast.

In 2021-22, playing for Calgary, Lindholm produced 19 power-play points, while Tkachuk and Johnny Gaudreau led with 25. That trio was one of, if not the most effective in the league that season. As long as Jeremy Swayman remains unsigned — and as long as that soap opera plays out — the Bruins will remain the most scrutinized and volatile club in the league. That culture and commitment to winning, established by Patrice Bergeron and Marchand, is going to get tested early.

Roster churn

As noted above, good teams tend to stay good and bad teams tend to stay bad for long periods in the NHL. Every once in a while, an organization comes along to defy expectations and last year, that team was probably Washington, which unexpectedly made the playoffs despite the general feeling they were on a long, slow decline and that the only reason to watch the Capitals in the foreseeable future was to see if/when Alex Ovechkin breaks Wayne Gretzky's scoring record. They had a vast amount of roster churn in the offseason and took the single biggest individual gamble by acquiring Pierre-Luc Dubois and his weighty contract from L.A. for Darcy Kuemper and his weighty contract.

Dubois and Andrew Mangiapane are two new faces in the top six; Jakob Chychrun and Matt Roy are likely to play top-four minutes on the blue line; Logan Thompson will play in some sort of timeshare with Charlie Lindgren; and a couple of new support pieces, Brandon Duhaime and Taylor Raddysh, will flesh out the bottom half of the roster. That's not just one-third turnover, but four new faces in the top half of the roster, which is evolving slowly away from the old Nicklas Backstrom/T.J. Oshie/Evgeni Kuznetsov core.

Spencer Carbury had an under-the-radar successful first NHL season as a coach. If he can help Dubois resurrect his career, after the stumbles in Winnipeg and Los Angeles, you'd have to think he'd get some additional Jack Adams notices. However that plays out, the Capitals have gone from borderline irrelevance to fascinating experiment.

The Athletic / Which NHL prospects have stood out early in the 2024-25 season?

By Scott Wheeler- October 5, 2024

As NHL training camps wind down, leagues across Europe and North America ramp up.

A couple weeks into games in the USHL and CHL and a month into them in leagues across Europe, here are a dozen players who've impressed me early on in the 2024-25 hockey season, from 2025, 2026 and 2027 draft-eligibles to drafted NHL prospects.

Axel Sandin-Pellikka, RHD, Skellefteå AIK (Detroit Red Wings)

At just 19 years old, Sandin-Pellikka is already an SHL champion, fresh off one of the most productive age-adjusted seasons in the history of Sweden's top flight for a defenseman, and has been named top defenseman at both U18 worlds and the world juniors. He looks like he has taken yet another step early on in his return to Skellefteå, too. He's playing more than 19 minutes a night in their top-four, he's got two goals and five points through six games, and Skellefteå have outscored the opposition 9-4 with him on the ice at five-on-five. He's defending hard and firm. He looks like a strong 5-foot-11. And he has played with his usual confidence and attack mentality on offense:

There are some in Sweden who believe ASP is going to be a star in the NHL, and if he becomes one that could potentially change the calculus for the Red Wings as a team. Seven under-20 defensemen have broken the 20-point mark in SHL history. The list includes names like Victor Hedman, Rasmus Dahlin and Moritz Seider. It seems like a foregone conclusion that ASP makes that group eight this year. The all-time U20 scoring record for a D in the league is 11 goals and 31 points in 45 games, set by the Stars' Nils Lundkvist. I wouldn't be surprised if he breaks that too.

Nikita Artamonov, LW/RW, Torpedo (Carolina Hurricanes)

Artamonov hasn't yet turned 19 and he's already got 34 points in 67 career KHL games, including 11 more in 12 games to start this season. He played his way into the second round when he became a regular KHL contributor last season and he has done the same again to start his post-draft campaign. After playing just 9:38 in Torpedo's second game of the season, 0:29 in their third, and 8:39 in their fourth, Artamonov has now played his way back up the lineup, is tied for the team lead in scoring, and is riding a six-game point streak. Here's his latest goal from a three-point game (one goal, two primary assists) over the weekend. Though Artamonov doesn't have a game-breaking dynamic quality, this goal showcases exactly what has turned him into a legitimate NHL prospect. Watch No. 79 in white come off the bench, track a puck deep into the offensive zone, apply pressure, and then release and find open space. That last part is Artamonov's best skill. He's always finding soft ice, both inside the offensive zone and off the rush (where he has already scored several goals this year).

Artamonov's KHL contract runs through this year and next and I wouldn't be surprised if he's ready to come over and give it a go in the AHL or even NHL in the spring of 2026. He just gets it.

Kevin He, LW, Niagara IceDogs (Winnipeg Jets)

He, drafted in the fourth round by the Jets, was a player I identified as a potential breakout candidate coming into this season and while he's just two games into it, he has looked good in them. Three goals and four points in a small two-game span is one thing. But he's also registered 15 shots (seven in the first game, eight in the second game) and 19 shot attempts (eight and then 11) and the IceDogs have outscored the opposition 3-0 with him on the ice. Add in a primary assist in his lone preseason game

with the Jets and a one-goal, eight-shot, 12-attempt preseason game with the IceDogs, and the early sample size of strong play starts to expand.

And even more importantly, he has looked like he's really imposing his will on the game — like his blend of skating and skill is going to be a lot to handle in the OHL this year and next. He's a great athlete, he's got legit speed, and when you talk to his peers in the OHL about him his puck skills are commonly lauded.

Porter Martone, RW, Brampton Steelheads (2025 NHL Draft)

I went to last night's game between the Colts and Steelheads in Barrie to catch Martone, goalie Jack Ivankovic and D Kashawn Aitcheson, three of the top prospects in the 2025 class, and while it was well-attended by NHL scouts, it was a bit of a sleeper until Martone broke it open midway through the second period, scoring left alone in the slot and then toe-dragging into a backdoor dish to Angus MacDonell in the same shift. He added a second goal and third point a couple of shifts later, pounding a one-timer high in the zone. He's not shy either and got into it with scary Sens prospect Gabriel Eliasson. He now has nine points through the first three games of his draft season. Martone is a projected top-five pick whom I've seen play a lot in the last couple of years, both with the Steelheads and repeatedly with Hockey Canada (two U18 worlds, including as captain and one of the tournament's leading scorers last spring, the World Junior Summer Showcase, etc.). There were times when I was a little underwhelmed watching him play in Mississauga last year. But I've also seen him really stand out in stretches and he's a big, strong, athletic, good-skating winger with a dangerous hidden release, legit puck skill one-on-one and a willingness to finish checks and get after. He should be a force in the OHL this year and an impactful NHLer for a long, long time. He's got a real chance to make Canada's world junior team as a draft-eligible as well.

Jack Ivankovic, G, Brampton Steelheads (2025 NHL Draft)

Though the Steelheads controlled play for most of last night's game, whenever the Colts pushed — especially late in the second period and then again late in the third — Ivankovic always looked ready and set for whatever was in front of him. He stopped a point-blank backdoor with a sliding pad save, and a Grade A high chance in the slot, batting the rebound out of mid-air with his stick. He was hitting his spots and square to every shot. And he finished the game stopping 22/23, his lone goal against surrendered to first-rounder Emil Hemming in alone on a Barrie power play. And that's just standard for him. He's now 3-0 on the season and has stopped 76 of 79 shots (.962). Dating back to the Hlinka Gretzky Cup in August he has now given up just six goals in his last seven games, stopping 165 of 171 shots (.965).

Joshua Ravensbergen is the presumptive top goalie prospect in this year's class and a legitimate first-round candidate, but the more I've watched both him and Ivankovic, the closer I've gotten to saying this: I think Ivankovic is the better goalie today and maybe the better prospect, too. Ravensbergen's 6-foot-5 listing and growing track record with Prince George are very real. He's off to a great start to the season with the Cougars and was excellent for them in the playoffs last spring as well. But I've seen Ravensbergen have bad games and look like he's still got holes to patch. Ivankovic's 6-foot listing is the only thing that any scout could reasonably wonder about though.

He is lights out. Technically perfect. Extremely mobile. Super athletic. Ultra competitive. Composed mentally. Great hands. Superb tracking. Quick feet and reflexes. I think he's a potential star and a first-round candidate in his own right.

Michael Misa, C, Saginaw Spirit (2025 NHL Draft)

Misa was a top player and producer for the Spirit in both his exceptional status season and his 16-year-old year last year. But they were never his team and he played more wing in both of those seasons than

center. Now he's back at his natural position down the middle for his draft year and the Spirit have handed the keys over to him post-Mem Cup win. Heading into the year, scouts wanted to see him take over more and really assert himself in games. He's got easy skill, playmaking and skating. But he was also known for his quiet competitiveness in minor hockey and there were times last season where he would drift in games a little.

He has been all around the ice, too, making plays in motion, running the power play, getting pucks back and extending plays at five-on-five. He has looked like the full package early and I think he's better suited to the middle because of the way it involves him in games and increases the frequency of his touches low in the offensive zone (which allows him to use his skating to transport more pucks and flow with the play).

Maddox Dagenais, C, Quebec Remparts (2026 NHL Draft)

The No. 1 pick in the 2024 QMJHL draft and son to former NHLer Pierre Dagenais, Maddox has been impressive to start his 16-year-old rookie season with the Remparts and has already generated some real chatter amongst scouts for the way he looks as a player. He's got 23 shots, six goals and nine points on the board already through five games, with points in every game he has played in the league so far. Dagenais is a big (6-foot-2/3), already-strong center who outside of some early struggles in the faceoff circle has a game and a frame that are both mature. He has been around pucks and the net. He has shown confidence in holding it and shooting it. And he just looks like he's going to be a really solid pro player.

Roger McQueen, C, Brandon Wheat Kings (2025 NHL Draft)

McQueen has fascinated scouts with his combination of length (6-foot-5) and skill (he's got legit skill, period, not just legit skill for a big man) and position (center). But it has really come together in his last stretch of play. Though there were mixed reviews about his season a year ago, he was a standout early on at U18 worlds before getting hurt and then scored four goals in his draft season debut with Brandon. He's got six goals and nine points in four games now and has made plays all around the offensive zone (along the wall, in tight to the net or traffic, in open ice). His athleticism has slowly caught up to his frame and he's starting to really take shape as a player around his natural skill level. He profiles as a pretty unique player and scouts are excited about his potential.

Cameron Schmidt, RW, Vancouver Giants (2025 NHL Draft)

There are three small but high-end forward prospects in this draft that scouts are tracking closely as they try to wrap their heads around whether they're first-round types or more Day 2 targets, and while Adam Benak and L.J. Mooney are off to respectable starts, Schmidt has been the standout early. After scoring 31 goals as a rookie in the WHL last year and some big ones for Hockey Canada at both U17s and the Hlinka en route to two golds, he already has six goals in three games this season and has looked threatening whenever he's on the ice. He's a lethal shooter with a nose for the middle of the ice and tons of skill and pace. I think he could score 40-50 goals this year and really make a compelling case for the first round as a 5-foot-8 winger.

Landon Dupont, RHD, Everett Silvertips (2027 NHL Draft)

The WHL's second exceptional status player and first exceptional status D, Dupont already looks like a legitimate play driver from the backend at 15. He's got four assists in his first three games, has created some great looks for himself, and is probably owed his first goal. But even more impressively, he hasn't been on for a goal against at evens yet (score is 6-0 Everett with him on the ice), he has defended really well with his feet, smarts, and a great stick/sense for timing, and play has really steered his way in huge

minutes (more than 23 a night already). He looks exceptional and while it's still very, very early, the Cale Makar talk of some in western Canada doesn't look misplaced.

Ivar Stenberg, LW, Frölunda HC (2026 NHL Draft)

Last season, there was more talk in the public sphere about J18 record-setter Viggo Bjorck as the top Swede in the 2026 class than there was about Stenberg. And yet whenever I watched the two play Stenberg was pretty clearly more impressive to me and whenever I talked to folks in Sweden or the NHL privately, that was reinforced. And frankly, between the Hlinka Gretzky Cup (where Stenberg was a star for the Swedes and Bjorck played a limited role) and now their respective starts in J20 (where Stenberg has looked like a potential contender for No. 2 in 2026 behind Gavin McKenna and Bjorck has just looked like a potential first-rounder), I don't think it's particularly close. Stenberg is about seven months older, and that's a factor, but he's off to a historic start at the J20 level (eight goals and 21 points in eight games as the youngest forward on Frolunda's team, already 10 more points than his nearest teammate) that reflects that. He's a dynamic offensive talent whose skill level really pops whenever there's a play to be made or he gets out into open ice one-on-one with D off the rush. And while he's not a big kid, the belief is he'll get to 5-foot-11 and he's a strong athlete who has shown an ability to stay on pucks and is an above-average skater. He's going to play SHL games this season.

Ethan Belchetz, LW, Windsor Spitfires (2026 NHL Draft)

There was talk ahead of the OHL draft last season that Belchetz might not be the clear No. 1 pick and that if Adam Valentini hadn't decided to go the USHL-to-NCAA route with the Chicago Steel and University of Michigan he may have been the top prospect in the 2008 age group in Ontario. Well, Belchetz has certainly put that to bed in the early going with his play not just through his first three games as the No. 1 pick with the Spitfires (four goals and eight points, including a four-goal, six-point debut) but even before that in preseason (another six goals and nine points in five games). Those around the OHL have been extremely impressed by the already 6-foot-5, 226-pound winger. He has looked like a force, has played in all situations (including two shorties already), and has dominated play with his size, competitiveness and skill. He looks like he moves well for a big man, too. There will be questions about maxing out and whether he's too big and too young from a weight perspective, but teams are going to be excited about what he has to offer.

The Athletic / NHL waiver tracker: Best players on the wire throughout 2024-25 preseason

By Corey Pronman and Harman Dayal- October 7, 2024

As NHL teams trim their rosters before the regular season, The Athletic's Corey Pronman and Harman Dayal will provide analysis of the top players placed on waivers every day. Once a player is waived, the rest of the league has 24 hours to put in a claim for him. If a player goes unclaimed, they can be assigned by their team to the minor leagues.

Sunday, Oct. 6

All players on waivers: Patrick Brown (Bruins), Brandon Bussi (Bruins), Jiri Patera (Bruins), Billy Sweezey (Bruins), Jeffrey Viel (Bruins), Kale Clague (Sabres), James Reimer (Sabres), Lukas Rousek (Sabres), Devin Cooley (Flames), Jakob Pelletier (Flames), Cole Schwindt (Flames), Josiah Slavin (Hurricanes), Ty Smith (Hurricanes), Ryan Suzuki (Hurricanes), Isaak Phillips (Blackhawks), Sheldon Dries (Red Wings), Justin Holl (Red Wings), William Lagesson (Red Wings), Brogan Rafferty (Red Wings), Joe Snively (Red Wings), Josh Brown (Oilers), Drake Caggiula (Oilers), Raphael Lavoie (Oilers), Olivier Rodrigue (Oilers), Pheonix Copley (Kings), Samuel Fagemo (Kings), Jack Studnicka (Kings), Marc Del Gaizo (Predators), Shane Bowers (Devils), Nick DeSimone (Devils), Nolan Foote (Devils), Colton White (Devils), Samuel Bolduc (Islanders), Pierre Engvall (Islanders), Hudson Fasching (Islanders), Liam Foudy (Islanders), Marcus Hogberg (Islanders), Grant Hutton (Islanders), Frederik Karlstrom (Islanders), Jakub Skarek (Islanders), Matthew Robertson (Rangers), Adam Gaudette (Senators), Jan Jenik (Senators), Sebastian Aho (Penguins), Boko Imama (PIT), Corey Schuenemann (Blues), Tyler Tucker (Blues), Gage Goncalves (Lightning), Steven Santini (Lightning), Jesse Ylonen (Lightning), Matt Murray (Maple Leafs), Marshall Rifai (Maple Leafs), Matt Villalta (Utah), Erik Brannstrom (Canucks), Zach Aston-Reese (Golden Knights), Tanner Laczynski (Golden Knights), Jonas Rondbjerg (Golden Knights), Hunter Shepard (Capitals), Jaret Anderson-Dolan (Jets)

Saturday, Oct. 5

Kole Lind, RW, Dallas Stars

It took Lind a while to adjust to the leap from junior hockey to the AHL when he began his journey as a Canucks prospect (drafted No. 33 in 2017). Over the last handful of years, he's significantly improved his foot speed and developed into an elite AHL player while part of the Kraken organization. Lind scored at just shy of the point-per-game mark during the last two seasons, in addition to owning a projectable 6-foot-1 frame. However, he never really got an extended opportunity in the NHL because Seattle has had an excess of depth forwards. The 25-year-old signed a one-year, two-way contract with the Stars this summer. Dallas is also really deep up front, though, which leaves Lind on the outside looking in despite a solid training camp and preseason. Lind may just be a classic tweener player who excels in the AHL but can't stick in the NHL, but there's a possibility that he can provide some secondary offense at the bottom of an NHL lineup if given an extended opportunity.—Dayal

Josh Mahura, LHD, Seattle Kraken

Mahura is an excellent skater, which is why teams have continued to take chances on him. He can make a decent enough first pass, but I wouldn't call him a natural offensive type. He's average sized and not overly physical too, which has made him a tweener at the NHL level.—Pronman

Other players on waivers: Oscar Dansk (Ducks), T.J. Tynan (Avalanche), Chris Wagner (Avalanche), Kyle Capobianco (Stars), Magnus Hellberg (Stars), Cameron Hughes (Stars), Alexander Petrovic (Stars), Jacob Pettersson (Stars), Matt Kiersted (Panthers), Hunter Jones (Wild), Connor Mackey (Rangers), John Hayden (Kraken)

Update: All players cleared waivers.

Friday, Oct. 4

Ethan Bear, RHD, Washington Capitals

Bear is a smooth-skating puck-mover. The 27-year-old right-shot defender was a competent No. 4/5 defender for the Canucks in 2022-23, which included some time on the top pair with Quinn Hughes. Vancouver was interested in re-signing him but he was forced to have shoulder surgery after getting hurt playing for Team Canada in the 2023 IIHF World Championship. Bear wasn't going to be ready for the start of last season so the Canucks pivoted and Washington swooped in and signed Bear to a two-year contract. Bear appeared in 24 games with the Capitals last season — he struggled at times, with his underlying two-way numbers cratering. In late March, he entered the NHL/NHLPA player assistance program and was cleared to return approximately a month later.

The Caps are deep on the right side of the blue line with John Carlson, Matt Roy and Trevor van Riemsdyk, which left Bear as the odd man out. Bear can be suspect defensively at times, but he unquestionably has the mobility and puck skills to provide legitimate NHL value. The biggest risk for teams thinking about claiming Bear would be his \$2.062 million cap hit, with his contract expiring at the end of the season.—Dayal

Samuel Poulin, LW, Pittsburgh Penguins

Poulin, drafted No. 21 in 2019, has some heavy, hard skill to his game. He hasn't had the smoothest transition to pro hockey, largely because his footspeed is a concern. He also missed a large chunk of the 2022-23 season as he stepped away to take care of his mental health. Last season, he started to find his groove in the AHL, producing 31 points in 41 games. Poulin has projectable NHL tools if he can improve his skating.—Pronman

Other players on waivers: Jansen Harkins (Ducks), Michael DiPietro (Bruins), Vinni Lettieri (Bruins), Jordan Oesterle (Bruins), William Lockwood (Panthers), Taylor Ward (Kings), Justin Dowling (Devils), Mike Hardman (Devils), Samuel Laberge (Devils), Nathan Legare (Devils), Max Willman (Devils), Olle Lycksell (Flyers), Anthony Richard (Flyers), Emil Bemstrom (Penguins), Nathan Clurman (Penguins), Jonathan Gruden (Penguins), Joonas Koppanen (Penguins), Filip Kral (Penguins), John Ludvig (Penguins), Matt Tomkins (Lightning), Alex Steeves (Maple Leafs), Luke Philp (Capitals), Michael Sgarbossa (Capitals)

Update: Defenseman John Ludvig was claimed by Colorado; the rest of the players cleared waivers.

Ludvig is a highly competitive defenseman with decent enough hockey sense. He's likeable without the puck in his D-zone when he's killing penalties or breaking up plays. His skating and skill are both just OK, though. He's not a natural puck-mover by any means and lacks the pure talent to play at an NHL pace. He could be a useful depth defenseman in an organization.—Pronman

Thursday, Oct. 3

Simon Lundmark, RHD, Winnipeg Jets

Lundmark was a 2019 second-round pick by the Jets. He was picked that high because he's a big right-shot defenseman who skates well. At the time I'm sure Winnipeg was hoping for some more offense or meanness to develop in his game, but he's struggled to find a clear, definable NHL role for himself. He

has tools that someone may be willing to take a chance on if they feel he can make a first pass at the top level.—Pronman

Nick Blankenburg, RHD, Nashville Predators

Blankenburg could be a genuinely intriguing project. The 26-year-old right defender is a thunderous body checker despite being listed at just 5-foot-9. He pairs that physicality with good skating ability and decent puck skills. Blankenburg looked like a legitimate NHL player whenever he suited up for the Blue Jackets. Blankenburg's biggest problem is durability — he hasn't played more than 40 games in a season since turning pro in 2021-22. It's fair to wonder if he can sustain his aggressive, max-energy playing style at such a small size in the NHL.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Jarred Tinordi (Flames), Dryden Hunt (Flames), Walker Duehr (Flames), Rasmus Asplund (Panthers), Jaycob Megna (Panthers), Zac Dalpe (Panthers), Tobias Bjornfot (Panthers), Cale Fleury (Kraken), Nick Abruzzese (Maple Leafs), Patrik Koch (Utah), Ben McCartney (Utah), Andrew Agozzino (Utah), Axel Jonsson-Fjallby (Jets), Mason Shaw (Jets), Dominic Toninato (Jets)

Update: All players cleared waivers.

Wednesday, Oct. 2

Calle Rosen, LHD, Colorado Avalanche

Rosen, a 6-foot-1 left-shot defender, was solid in 49 games for the Blues in 2022-23. He drove decent underlying numbers in a sheltered third-pair role and chipped in with 18 points. He played well enough to deserve another NHL crack as a depth defender, but he became a victim of the numbers game. Last fall, as colleague Jeremy Rutherford explained, the Blues didn't want to risk losing Scott Perunovich or Tyler Tucker on waivers. Perunovich and Tucker were younger, higher potential defenders. Because of his older age and lack of upside, Rosen was waived and spent most of the year in the AHL. Now, on a loaded Colorado blue line, he couldn't crack an NHL roster again.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Spencer Martin (Hurricanes), Trey Fix-Wolansky (Blue Jackets), Calle Rosen (Avalanche), Matthew Phillips (Avalanche), Jack Ahcan (Avalanche), Cal Petersen (Flyers), Jimmy Huntington (Penguins), Marc Johnstone (Penguins), Mac Hollowell (Penguins), Bo Groulx (Rangers), Andrew Poturalski (Sharks), Scott Sabourin (Sharks)

Update: All players cleared waivers.

Tuesday, Oct. 1

Phil Di Giuseppe, LW, Vancouver Canucks

What a difference a year can make. Last fall, Di Giuseppe not only made the Canucks out of training camp but earned a top-six role alongside J.T. Miller and Brock Boeser. The 30-year-old left winger made a strong impression on Rick Tocchet because of his disruptive forecheck and reliable defensive play. Di Giuseppe was relegated to a fourth-line role as the season progressed but stuck in the NHL as a full-time contributor for the first time in his career. Now, he's been cut after an offseason where the Canucks significantly upgraded their winger depth. Di Giuseppe could be a decent 12th/13th forward — he's trustworthy without the puck and a solid forechecker.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Carson Meyer (Ducks), Josh Dunne (Sabres), Felix Sandstrom (Sabres), Jack Rathbone (Sabres), Brett Murray (Sabres), Mason Jobst (Sabres), Colton Poolman (Sabres), Ilya Solovoyov (Flames), Lane Pederson (Oilers), Ben Gleason (Oilers), Phil Kemp (Oilers), Collin Delia (Oilers), Jacob Moverare (Kings), Reese Johnson (Wild), Louis Domingue (Rangers), Anton Blidh (Rangers), Brandon Scanlin (Rangers), Casey Fitzgerald (Rangers), Gustav Olofsson (Kraken), Ales Stezka (Kraken), Ben Meyers

(Kraken), Max McCormick (Kraken), Brandon Biro (Kraken), Jiri Patera (Canucks), Nate Smith (Canucks), Christian Wolanin (Canucks)

Update: Goalie Jiri Patera was claimed by Boston; the rest of the players cleared waivers.

With Jeremy Swayman still unsigned, the Bruins have landed extra goaltending insurance by claiming Patera from the Canucks. Patera posted a .903 save percentage in 25 AHL games last season, which seems underwhelming, but the Henderson Silver Knights weren't a good team. He has a .902 save percentage in eight career NHL games with Vegas. Patera struggled during Canucks training camp. He was getting beat during rush drills very often and didn't look comfortable. That may have provided extra impetus for Vancouver to sign Kevin Lankinen. However, Patera was very good during the preseason start he got a week ago against Calgary. Patera doesn't look very big in the crease despite being listed at 6-foot-3 but has intriguing potential because of his powerful legs and movement.—Dayal

Monday, Sept. 30

Nikita Alexandrov, C, St. Louis Blues

Alexandrov has intrigued scouts at points due to his high skill level combined with a solid work ethic and ability to help at both ends of the ice. He makes and finishes plays well, and is quite effective inside the offensive zone. He's average-sized with below-average skating, though, and while he's played 51 games with the Blues, there are questions on how well his game translates to the NHL with his pace.—Pronman

Travis Boyd, C, Minnesota Wild

Boyd is a veteran right-shot center with nearly 300 games of NHL experience. During the Coyotes' lean rebuilding years, Boyd was a decent middle-six stopgap, scoring in the 35-point range in back-to-back years. He was relegated to a fourth-line role last year, contributing eight points in 16 games before an injury ended his season. Boyd struggles in the faceoff circle and his two-way metrics aren't great, but he's demonstrated a long track record of contributing reliable secondary offence in a bottom-six NHL role.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Jacob MacDonald (Avalanche), Cam Dineen (Oilers), Connor Carrick (Oilers), Jeff Malott (Kings), Devin Shore (Wild), Brendan Gaunce (Wild), Jimmy Schuldt (Sharks), Justin Bailey (Sharks), Kevin Connauton (Utah), Travis Barron (Utah)

Update: All players cleared waivers.

Sunday, Sept. 29

Vinnie Hinostroza, RW, Nashville Predators

Hinostroza is a plug-and-play option for depth offense. The speedy, undersized winger has scored five-on-five points at a bona fide middle-six clip over nearly 400 career NHL games. He's a bit of a tweener, though; he isn't dynamic enough to contribute on the power play and his lack of size and strength mean he's not an ideal stylistic fit for many teams' bottom six.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Marc McLaughlin (Bruins), Justin Kirkland (Flames), Martin Frk (Flames), Zach Sanford (Blackhawks), Brett Seney (Blackhawks), Reilly Walsh (Kings), Tyler Madden (Kings), Joe Hicketts (Kings), Glenn Gawdin (Kings), Joseph Cecconi (Wild), Cameron Crotty (Wild), Adam Raska (Wild), Lucas Condotta (Canadiens), Brandon Gignac (Canadiens), Matt Murray (Predators), Kieffer Bellows (Predators), Hunter Skinner (Blues), Hugh McGing (Blues), MacKenzie MacEachern (Blues), Mathias Laferriere (Blues), Derrick Pouliot (Lightning), Tobie Paquette-Bisson (Lightning)

Update: All players cleared waivers.

Saturday, Sept. 28

Grigori Denisenko, LW, Vegas Golden Knights

Drafted No. 15 by Florida in 2018, Denisenko's initial transition to North American pro hockey was bumpy. The skilled but slightly undersized winger produced at a solid but unspectacular clip in the AHL through three seasons between 2020-21 and 2022-23 and struggled during his brief opportunities with the Panthers in the NHL. Vegas claimed him off waivers last fall.

Denisenko, 24, took a significant step in the AHL last year, producing 56 points in 65 games, although he still couldn't stick in the NHL, as he went pointless in six games for the Golden Knights. Denisenko is a crafty, slick offensive creator and the step forward he took last season could be a sign that he still has some untapped upside.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Jonathan Aspirot (Flames), Clark Bishop (Flames), Keaton Middleton (Avalanche), Wyatt Aamodt (Avalanche), Kevin Mandolese (Avalanche), Maxime Lajoie (Kraken), Anthony Angello (Predators), Kevin Gravel (Predators), Jake Lucchini (Predators), Tyce Thompson (Islanders), Egor Sokolov (Utah), Callahan Burke (Golden Knights), Mason Geertsen (Golden Knights), Dysin Mayo (Golden Knights), Gage Quinney (Golden Knights), Robert Hagg (Golden Knights), Mason Morelli (Golden Knights), Ethen Frank (Capitals), Riley Sutter (Capitals), Alex Limoges (Capitals), Chase Priskie (Capitals), Hardy Häman Aktell (Capitals)

Update: All players cleared waivers.

Friday, Sept. 27

Ronnie Attard, RHD, Philadelphia Flyers

Attard has played games in each of the last three NHL seasons but hasn't broken through yet as a full-time player. He's a big right-shot with good offensive skills and can play both ways due to his frame and compete. He isn't an amazing skater, though, and his decision making has given him issues over the years.—Pronman

Other players on waivers: Louie Belpedio (Flyers), Rhett Gardner (Flyers), Hayden Hodgson (Senators), Cole Reinhardt (Senators), Jamieson Rees (Senators), Garrett Pilon (Senators), Nikolas Matinpalo (Senators), Maxence Guenette (Senators), Jeremy Davies (Senators), Luke Henman (Kraken), Nikolas Brouillard (Kraken), Zach Sawchenko (Blue Jackets), Jake Leschyshyn (Rangers), Ben Harpur (Rangers), Alex Belzile (Rangers)

The Athletic / NHL waiver targets: The 10 biggest names available after final roster cuts

By Corey Pronman and Harman Dayal- October 7, 2024

Monday is the deadline for NHL teams to submit their cap-compliant, opening-night rosters. Teams were forced to make their final cuts Sunday, which resulted in a massive dump of players, including some established NHLers, landing on waivers.

Let's take a quick look at some of the most intriguing players available on the wire.

Engvall is undoubtedly an NHL-caliber player. The 28-year-old left winger is an excellent skater (ranked in the 97th percentile of all players for speed bursts above 20 miles per hour, according to NHL Edge data) and has desirable height at 6-foot-5. Engvall has scored at a 33-points-per-82-games clip over the last three seasons, meaning he can contribute legitimate secondary offense. He's also driven strong two-way play-driving numbers during his last two years with the Islanders. Engvall can be a frustrating player, however, because he can look like a gentle giant rather than a physical force and he's prone to inconsistent stretches. He's had a rough preseason, which coupled with the Isles' forward depth additions, left him on the outside looking in. He has another six years left on a deal that carries a \$3 million cap hit so the odds of him getting claimed are slim despite being an intriguing player.

Justin Holl, RHD, Detroit Red Wings

Holl established himself as a competent No. 5 quality defender during his tenure with the Toronto Maple Leafs. He was a whipping boy at times for making loud, costly mistakes but his overall body of work wasn't bad. Holl offered size (6-foot-4) and genuinely excellent penalty-killing ability and wasn't even half-bad at moving the puck according to manually tracked data. Right-shot defensemen with that profile are desirable, but the Red Wings went too far and overpaid him last summer on a three-year contract with a \$3.4 million cap hit. Holl has been a disappointment in Detroit. The Red Wings had a logjam of bottom-of-the-lineup defensemen and Holl became a frequent healthy scratch. The 32-year-old is still a bona fide NHL quality player, but with two years left on a bloated contract, it'd be surprising if a team rolls the dice on him.

Adam Gaudette, C, Ottawa Senators

Gaudette has a wicked shot and decent speed and can help a second-unit power play at the NHL level (he was really good on Vancouver's PP2 in 2019-20 as a rookie). He's struggled to stick in the NHL as a full-time player, however, because he doesn't have the defensive ability and physical edge that teams are often looking for on their bottom-six lines. He doesn't have the best hockey IQ, either. With that said, he's got more than 200 games of NHL experience and broke out in the AHL last year, leading all players with 44 goals in 67 games. Perhaps there's a chance Gaudette can offer enough of a secondary scoring punch on the power play and at even strength for a team to stick him on a sheltered bottom-six scoring line.

Jakob Pelletier, LW, Calgary Flames

Pelletier is a likeable player due to his hockey sense and compete level. He can create offense with the puck and plays with courage despite his size. For a smaller winger, he does lack a truly dynamic quality in his game, though, especially given his lack of great speed. Despite being a first-round pick in 2019 he's likely just an organizational depth player.

Erik Brannstrom, LHD, Vancouver Canucks

Brannstrom is talented enough to provide NHL value but he's found himself as a tweener because he doesn't fit the archetype that most teams look for when building a third pair. The 25-year-old left-shot defender doesn't have the high-end skill or power-play chops to fill an offensive specialist role and he lacks ideal size (listed at 5-foot-10) and defensive ability. Brannstrom's puck-moving ability is a legitimate asset, though, and he quietly delivered promising underlying numbers with Ottawa. The Senators controlled 52 percent of shot attempts and 53.5 percent of expected goals during his five-on-five shifts over the last two seasons. After signing with Colorado in the offseason, he was traded to Vancouver on Sunday and immediately placed on waivers. He could be a useful pickup for a team that wants to break the puck out better on the third pair, not to mention he'd be a low-risk pickup because he's on a fully buriable \$900,000 cap hit.

Samuel Bolduc, LHD, New York Islanders

Bolduc has intrigued at times due to his pure tools. He's a big defenseman who skates well for his size and has at least some offensive skill, too. I don't think he's a natural with the puck, struggling at times with his decisions. He can defend fine, but he's not a super hard-to-play-against type, either. The result has been 50 NHL games to date, but a player who has struggled to find a defined role in the league.

Isaak Phillips, LHD, Chicago Blackhawks

Phillips has played games in each of the last three seasons with Chicago. I'm sure some would argue that if he can't make Chicago's blue line, why would a team want him? I think he does have a lot of NHL traits. He's big, moves well and plays hard. His puck play has been a question in his game, but as a pro, he has shown some offense. There could be a spot as a depth defenseman for him in an organization if he doesn't make Chicago.

Matthew Robertson, LHD, New York Rangers

Robertson has been in tough to crack an elite Rangers blue line. He's been on both special teams for AHL Hartford, playing legit minutes. He's big and mobile and can make a lot of stops, and while he's not a natural puck-mover, he has enough skill to be OK with the puck. He's a toolsy player who could be worth a gamble to see how he fares with opportunity.

Samuel Fagemo, LW, Los Angeles Kings

Fagemo has been through waivers several times. After being reclaimed by the Kings last season, he scored 43 goals in 50 AHL games. He's talented, but a bit of a tweener. He's a good skater with legit skill and scoring ability, but I wouldn't call him a dynamo with the puck, and while he works hard enough he's average off the puck. If a team were to claim him, they would have to have a power-play spot to give him, otherwise he'll be back in the AHL.

Ryan Suzuki, C, Carolina Hurricanes

Suzuki is a quick, skilled playmaking center who hasn't yet been able to put it all together. The 2019 first-round pick has been severely hampered by injuries and, even when healthy, hasn't produced at an elite level in the AHL. There's a chance he could become a late bloomer with improved health, though, because his offensive skill set has always stood out.

[ESPN / The NHL 2024-25 season guide: Key players, teams, stories](#)

By Greg Wyshynski- October 5, 2024

Reactions

The 2023-24 NHL season had goal-scoring fireworks, thrilling playoff races and a championship final in which the best player in the world led his team back from a 3-0 deficit only to fall short of the Stanley Cup in Game 7.

Yet after an offseason filled with stunning moves, dramatic decisions and significant tragedy, the 2024-25 NHL regular season sets up to be even more memorable.

If you haven't kept up with the NHL in the past few months, don't fret, we've got you covered. Here's a chance to catch up on everything that has happened -- the hirings, firings, signings and even a blockbuster trade. It's all in our guide to the 2024-25 season for lapsed fans. Read up before the puck drops!

The NHL mourns Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau

Before the joy of a new season, the hockey world was confronted with an unfathomable tragedy.

Columbus Blue Jackets star Johnny Gaudreau, 31, and his brother Matthew, 29, were killed on Aug. 29 near their boyhood home in New Jersey. Police said they were struck by a suspected drunken driver while they were riding bicycles. Both were to serve as groomsmen at their sister Kate's wedding the next day. The driver was charged with two counts of death by auto, along with reckless driving, possession of an open container and consuming alcohol in a motor vehicle.

The hockey world was devastated by the news. On the ice, Gaudreau was "Johnny Hockey," an electrifying offensive player with 743 points in 763 career games who possessed a joy for the game. He was named to the All-Star Game seven times and won the Lady Byng Trophy for gentlemanly play in 2016-17 while with the Calgary Flames.

Memorials were established at arenas in Columbus, Calgary and Boston, where the brothers played their college hockey. The Flames said that the hockey sticks left to remember the Gaudreaus will be repurposed into wooden benches sold to raise funds for charity.

The Blue Jackets will honor Johnny Gaudreau throughout their season. His jersey still hangs in his locker room stall. They wore helmet stickers in the preseason with "Gaudreau" printed between the images of two doves and the uniform numbers of the brothers: No. 13 for Johnny and No. 21 for Matthew, the number he wore for Boston College. They'll wear a commemorative patch on their jerseys during the season.

Goalie Elvis Merzlikins has Johnny Gaudreau's number on his mask as well as the image of a plate of pasta, which was Johnny Hockey's go-to pregame meal.

The Blue Jackets also postponed the usual fanfare of their first regular-season home game to honor the Gaudreau brothers on Oct. 15.

The players are also supporting Gaudreau's family after their loss. The Blue Jackets showed up to be with Johnny's daughter Noa for her second birthday earlier this month.

One assumes Johnny Gaudreau will also be remembered when Team USA takes the ice in the first 4 Nations Face-Off, having represented his country at several international tournaments.

Four nations, one tournament

The 2024-25 NHL season will take a breather from Feb. 10-21 for a first-of-its-kind tournament presented by the NHL and the NHLPA: the 4 Nations Face-Off, held in Montreal and Boston.

The tournament was born out of necessity. The NHL couldn't stage another World Cup of Hockey that involved Russia or Russian athletes because of the invasion of Ukraine. But the league wanted to stage an international event of some kind ahead of the 2026 Winter Olympics in Italy, where NHL players will compete for the first time since the 2014 Sochi Games.

The four nations involved in the tournament are the U.S., Canada, Finland and Sweden. It's a round-robin format -- three points for a win in regulation time; two points for a win in overtime/shootout; one point for a loss in overtime/shootout; and 0 points for a loss in regulation time. NHL rules will apply to the games. The two teams with the best tournament record advance to a one-game final on Feb. 20 in Boston.

The limited field of teams means major stars such as Leon Draisaitl (Germany) and David Pastrnak (Czechia) will have to wait until the Olympics for their best-on-best spotlight.

But the 4 Nations Face-Off gives hockey fans something they've been waiting nearly a decade to witness: the current generation of stars from the U.S. and Canada facing off on Saturday, Feb. 15 in Montreal ... and potentially a second time if they both reach the final. Auston Matthews, Jack Eichel, the Hughes and Tkachuk brothers vs. Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon, Cale Makar and an older gentleman named Sidney Crosby? Let's go.

Alas, fans have gained an international midseason tournament but have lost the NHL All-Star Game this season. We'll miss you most of all, Cheetos NHL Accuracy Shooting.

After Cup Game 7 loss, a big offseason for the Oilers

It didn't seem possible that Connor McDavid could get even more desperate to win his first Stanley Cup than he already was before last season. But seeing his emotional breakdown after the Oilers rallied from a 3-0 deficit to the Florida Panthers in the Final only to lose the Cup in Game 7 -- like when he was too distraught to accept his playoff MVP award on the ice -- revealed a superstar even more motivated to raise the chalice.

The Oilers are now battle-tested championship contenders who added even more high-end talent in the offseason: Jeff Skinner, a goal-scoring winger whose contract was bought out by Buffalo; and Viktor Arvidsson, a point-producing winger signed away from the Los Angeles Kings. They join a solid nucleus of McDavid, Leon Draisaitl, Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, Zach Hyman and Stuart Skinner, who has finally given this team a long-term solution in goal.

Edmonton had a noteworthy season beyond that.

Draisaitl signed the richest contract extension of the salary cap era: eight years and \$112 million, starting in 2025-26.

GM Ken Holland did not return to the team. He was replaced by Stan Bowman, making him the first former Chicago Blackhawks executive rehired by an NHL team since Chicago's sexual assault case came to light in 2021.

The NHL reinstated Bowman, coach Joel Quenneville and fellow executive Al MacIsaac in July. All three had been sidelined by commissioner Gary Bettman after an independent investigation found the Blackhawks mishandled the allegations made in 2010 by player Kyle Beach that he was sexually assaulted by video coach Brad Aldrich.

When hired by Edmonton, Bowman said: "These things will never happen on my watch again."

One of his first tasks as general manager was deciding what to do when the St. Louis Blues tendered offer sheets to Oilers restricted free agent forward Dylan Holloway and defenseman Philip Broberg.

The aggressive move paid off for the Blues, who landed both players through the rarely used free agent transaction. Some speculated that GM Doug Armstrong was going after Bowman, his former division rival in Chicago. To which Armstrong replied: "Quite honestly, I'd do it to my mother if she was managing the Oilers."

Cup champ Panthers retool

The team that defeated Edmonton in Game 7, the Florida Panthers, certainly made the most of their Stanley Cup celebration, from the infamous Elbo Room to the Atlantic Ocean. But when the partying stopped, the questions began: Could the Panthers repeat?

They saw some significant defections from last year's team: defensemen Brandon Montour (Seattle) and Oliver Ekman-Larsson (Toronto); forwards Vladimir Tarasenko (Detroit), Ryan Lomberg (Calgary), Kevin Stenlund (Utah) and Kyle Okposo (retired); and goalie Anthony Stolarz (Toronto). Among the reinforcements are defensemen Adam Boqvist and Nate Schmidt; and center Tomas Nosek.

There's some expectation for regression on this season's Panthers -- Sam Reinhart's 57 goals got him a new contract (eight years, \$69 million), but might not be repeatable. Yet the foundation is strong with Matthew Tkachuk, Aleksander Barkov, Carter Verhaeghe, Gustav Forsling and Sergei Bobrovsky. And based on the past two postseasons, they know how to win when they get in.

Nashville ballad of Stamkos, Marchessault

The Tampa Bay Lightning shocked the hockey world by moving on from captain Steven Stamkos. He was a franchise pillar for 16 seasons, scoring 555 goals in that span, including 40 last season.

But a contract impasse saw him leave as a free agent to the Nashville Predators (four years, \$32 million) while the Lightning quickly replaced him with a younger model: former Penguin and Hurricane Jake Guentzel (seven years, \$63 million), who turns 30 on Oct. 6. He'll slide into Stamkos' former spot on Tampa Bay's top line with Brayden Point and Nikita Kucherov.

Stamkos' departure wasn't the only significant split that benefitted the Predators. Jonathan Marchessault was an original "Golden Misfit" for the Vegas Golden Knights and won the Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP when they won the Stanley Cup in 2023. He had a 42-goal campaign last season, but that wasn't enough to convince Vegas to retain him, despite Marchessault wanting to remain with the team. He moseyed on over to Nashville, seeking to elevate a playoff team last season into a Cup contender this season.

Devils plug their holes

The New Jersey Devils face-planted last season after a playoff breakthrough in 2023. GM Tom Fitzgerald identified the cavities and did all he could to fill them before this season.

The goaltending, third worst in the NHL last season, now has a battery of former Calgary Flame Jacob Markstrom and Jake Allen, acquired from Montreal last season. Fitzgerald added veteran defenseman Brett Pesce (Carolina) and Brenden Dillon (Winnipeg). Forwards Paul Cotter (Vegas), Stefan Noesen (Carolina) and former Devil Tomas Tatar (Seattle) were added for depth.

The Devils also added a new coaching staff, led by former Maple Leafs bench boss Sheldon Keefe. His job is fairly clear: get the Devils to defend better, work with their talented young core led by Jack Hughes like

he did with Toronto's and get a team that seemed headed for Cup contention pointed back in that direction.

No team had more success in the standings over the past three seasons than the Boston Bruins, partially because they were No. 1 in team defense during that span. The main reason: their goaltending tandem of Linus Ullmark and Jeremy Swayman, acknowledged as the best in the NHL.

But both goalies wanted the majority of the playing time, and the Bruins needed to free up salary cap space for players such as free agent center Elias Lindholm, so they traded Ullmark to the Senators, who had the league's worst goaltending last season.

That anointed Swayman as the Bruins' starter ... except he needed a new contract as a restricted free agent, and the two sides are millions apart. Swayman didn't report to Bruins training camp without a new contract.

Then things got really contentious: Bruins president Cam Neely said he was surprised by Swayman's asking price and added "I know that I have 64 million reasons why I'd be playing right now" regarding his absence from camp. Swayman's agent Lewis Gross denied that amount was ever offered, and called out the Bruins for making their talks public. "We are extremely disappointed. This was not fair to Jeremy," Gross said.

Boston coach Jim Montgomery said that Joonas Korpisalo, acquired for Ullmark, is the likely starter for their season opener on Oct. 8. Swayman has until Dec. 1 to sign a contract in order to play this season.

Teams making big moves

The Los Angeles Kings and Washington Capitals took on each other's problems with a significant trade. The Kings sent center Pierre-Luc Dubois -- a bust in the first year of an eight-year contract (\$68 million) after being acquired from Winnipeg -- to Washington for goalie Darcy Kuemper, who lost his job to Charlie Lindgren and had three years left on his \$26.25 million contract. The Capitals also picked up Ottawa defenseman Jakob Chychrun for a package that included defenseman Nick Jensen.

Boston University center Macklin Celebrini was selected first overall by the Sharks in the 2024 draft, the first time in franchise history San Jose had the No. 1 pick. He'll join college rival-turned-NHL-roommate Will Smith from Boston College on the Sharks this season.

Welcome to the NHL, Utah

The saga of the Arizona Coyotes finally came to an end last season when Alex Meruelo sold the franchise to Utah Jazz owners Ryan and Ashley Smith in April. Originally, Meruelo was promised that he could reactivate the franchise within the next five years if he built an NHL-approved arena. But he walked away from Coyotes ownership in June, meaning if the NHL ever returned to Arizona it would be with a new owner.

Everything happened so quickly that the new team in Salt Lake City will not have a name or mascot in its first season. The former Coyotes are now Utah Hockey Club, wearing jerseys with the word "Utah" diagonal across the chest. A name for the team is expected to be in place for 2025-26, with "Yeti" or "Yetis" as the front-runner.

The buzz for the team locally has been strong, but some fans outside of Utah have mocked the challenging sightlines at Delta Center. Hey, it's nothing that a \$3 hot dog can't fix.

A legendary college football rivalry hits hockey

The NHL has two outdoor games on its schedule for this season. On Dec. 31, the Winter Classic returns to Wrigley Field for the first time since 2009 with a game between the Blackhawks and the St. Louis Blues.

On March 1, a college football rivalry moves over to the ice as the Columbus Blue Jackets host their first outdoor game at Ohio State's stadium against the Detroit Red Wings. Expect plenty of Buckeyes vs. Wolverines hype for the game at the Horseshoe.

Will Alex Ovechkin catch Wayne Gretzky?

Ovechkin is just 42 goals away from No. 895, which would break Wayne Gretzky's previously unsurmountable career total and make Ovechkin (officially) the greatest goal scorer in NHL history.

He has scored at a 42-goals-or-better pace in 15 of his 19 NHL seasons. But the 39-year-old's goal total dipped to 31 last season, the lowest total in an 82-game season of his career. Ovechkin then didn't tally a point in a four-game playoff loss to the Rangers.

In an NHL season that's shaping up to be a wild ride, seeing that record shattered would be the wildest part -- and something that transcends hockey.

ESPN / NHL players projected to leap forward in 2024-25

By Rachel Doerrie- October 5, 2024

Rachel Doerrie is a professional data consultant specializing in data communication and modelling. She's worked in the NHL and consulted for professional teams across North American and Europe. She hosts the Staff & Graph Podcast and discusses sports from a data-driven perspective.

Reactions

It feels to some that the NHL preseason has dragged on far too long, and teams have lost key players to injury. Drew Doughty, Patrik Laine and John Tavares have all been knocked out of games, with Doughty and Laine expected to miss regular-season action.

Injuries open opportunities for other players to have an increased role and positively impact their teams. But there are quite a few candidates for major leaps this season who are worth keeping an eye on, whether it's due to a teammate's injury or other reasons.

A major leap does not always mean just offensive production. It can mean an elevated role at even strength, more special teams time, and exposure to tougher matchups.

The following list includes players who had good seasons in 2023-24 but are expected to take another step forward in their development. In fact, most of the players featured on the list are not breaking out, but merely expected to take another major step to becoming a star in the NHL. As for those projected to take a step back, we covered them here.

Connor Bedard

C, Chicago Blackhawks

Yes, Connor Bedard had 61 points in his rookie season, winning the Calder Trophy. And yes, he is on this list. Why? He's expected to produce 30% more in his sophomore season. He has healthy wingers who have the talent to make plays, with Taylor Hall, Tyler Bertuzzi and Teuvo Teravainen all as possibilities.

He was tracking toward 70-plus points last season prior to injury, and the Blackhawks are expected to give him every opportunity to be their offensive conductor in 2024-25. Nobody should be surprised if Bedard puts up 35 goals and 80 points this season. Adding talented wingers to the lineup and a fully healthy season, Bedard could easily find himself in point-per-game territory.

He's currently on the bubble of Canada's 4 Nations Faceoff roster, but he will be an easy selection if he makes that leap in the early portion of this season.

Mavrik Bourque

C, Dallas Stars

Stop me if you'd heard this before: The Dallas Stars are expected to have a young players make key contributions this season.

Wyatt Johnston, Thomas Harley, Logan Stankoven ... the list goes on. Every season, it feels like a Star makes the preseason list of players ready for a leap -- a testament to the organization's brilliant drafting and development.

Bourque is expected to play in the middle of the lineup with Stankoven and one of Jamie Benn or Mason Marchment. Dallas has three lines capable of producing offense, and Bourque figures to play a key

secondary scoring role. After 77 points in the AHL last season, Bourque is primed to take advantage of easier matchups.

Expect him to have similar output as Johnston's rookie season (41 points) and see an increased role as the season progresses.

Leo Carlsson

C, Anaheim Ducks

The Ducks took an interesting approach with Carlsson in his rookie season, opting to manage his workload. The sophomore is expected to play a full season this time around, alongside rookie Cutter Gauthier on the second line. With a major size advantage on the line (Alex Killorn is expected to be the third member), the trio should have no problem punishing teams on the forecheck, creating off the cycle and drawing penalties.

Carlsson is also expected to play on the top power-play unit, where he can take advantage of his offensive tool kit.

In a full season, Carlsson is projected for around 70 points. The combination of speed, skill and physical strength makes Carlsson difficult to shut down. Pairing him with Gauthier -- who is a versatile offensive threat -- should give the Ducks two lines capable of producing. While the Ducks are not expected to be in playoff contention this season, Carlsson is expected to drive the second line and may ascend to a top-line role at different points.

Brandt Clarke

D, Los Angeles Kings

Clarke was a candidate for this list even prior to Drew Doughty's injury.

He is the best option to quarterback the power play in Los Angeles, one that features the talents of Anze Kopitar, Adrian Kempe, Kevin Fiala and Quinton Byfield. Clarke showed flashes of brilliance in 16 games with the Kings last season, and is clearly the best offensive option on the blue line while Doughty is out.

Defenders take longer to develop, and Clarke is no different. With 46 points in 50 AHL games last season, he took a major step forward in his development. He is ready for NHL playing time and the opportunity to step right into a power-play role will allow him to find his offensive footing in the NHL.

Expect Clarke to average close to 20 minutes of ice time per game with Doughty out, and if he plays well, to be a constant member of the top four in Los Angeles for the entire season.

Dylan Guenther

RW, Utah Hockey Club

New city, new contract -- it's all coming up Guenther heading into 2024-25.

Utah fans are going to have a lot of fun watching their young team, and Guenther is expected to be a major part of that. Utah is my sleeper pick to make the playoffs this season, and if that is to happen, Guenther needs a big season. Not only is he one of the best young shooters in the league, but his playmaking is also underrated. With an expected role as the shooter on the top power-play unit, Guenther is expected to far surpass last season's total of 35 points in 45 games.

There is a distinct possibility that Guenther scores 30 goals and close to 70 points. The combination of Logan Cooley and Guenther will be a fun one all season. Cooley's ability to create and find teammates in

open space fits perfectly with Guenther's scoring touch. Cooley has great hands to finish plays, and with Guenther's underrated playmaking, the two should form one of the NHL's most entertaining young duos.

Matthew Knies

LW, Toronto Maple Leafs

Knies is widely expected to feature alongside Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner on Toronto's top line this season. He was easily one of Toronto's best playoff players last spring, showcasing his talents and potential two-way ability. He's earned the chance to play on both special teams, as well as an extended look on the top line. Knies has all the tools to be an excellent puck retrieval player, net-front presence and scoring threat off the rush. Those skills complement Matthews and Marner very well.

Knies is expected to produce around 56 points this season, a nearly 60% increase over last season's 35-point output. It's conceivable that he produces more than that, and he is more likely to produce 50-plus points than below 40.

Defensively, Knies brings a reliable package to penalty kill and gives the Leafs reliable two-way players at all three positions on the top line. Expect Knies' ice time to increase by 3-4 minutes per game, giving him plenty of opportunity to make an impact on both sides of the puck.

Cole Perfetti

C, Winnipeg Jets

A new contract in tow, and hopefully a coach that uses him properly. If Perfetti is given regular power-play opportunities and top-six even-strength minutes, expect his production to take off. If Perfetti and Nikolaj Ehlers play together on the second line, there is a real chance Perfetti cracks the 60-point threshold, a 50% increase over last season's output.

The diminutive young player has been a lightning rod in Winnipeg, just like linemate Ehlers. Combining the two of them and letting them fly could result in a production explosion for both players. Perfetti is a well-rounded offensive player who will benefit from Ehlers' puck-carrying abilities. Finding open space to make the best of catch-and-shoot opportunities is a scheme in which Perfetti should thrive.

Confidence has been a major issue, given that Perfetti bounced in and out of the lineup and up and down the roster. Consistency is key, and if Perfetti gets consistent opportunities to produce offensively, he will not make as many scared mistakes, maximizing his talents.

Juraj Slafkovsky

LW, Montreal Canadiens

Slafkovsky was approaching bust territory until the calendar turned to 2024. Fast forward to this preseason, and my model projects him to be nearly a point-per-game player in 2024-25. After a tale of two seasons in 2023-24, Slafkovsky will surely garner more defensive attention this season. His chemistry with Nick Suzuki and Cole Caufield was brilliant to watch after the All-Star break, and should continue into this campaign.

Undoubtedly, the increased difficulty of the matchups will require adjustments, but top players find ways to break through.

Losing Laine hurts Montreal's chances, but opens more offensive opportunities for Slafkovsky to use his strength and skill. With more even strength and power-play ice time over the duration of the season, Slafkovsky should have a very productive campaign on Montreal's top line.

[Sportsnet.ca / NHL Power Rankings: One reason for optimism for all 32 teams](#)

By Ryan Dixon- October 5, 2024

For the last time from now until April, we're doing a power ranking that contains no team records.

The puck drops for real today in Czechia and, by this time next week, every NHL team will have played their first game of the 2024-25 regular season following the Buffalo Sabres and New Jersey Devils breaking the ice in Europe.

It's on, my friends.

To help everybody get ready for the regular season, we're nixing all negativity and highlighting at least one reason for optimism in all 32 NHL burghs. It doesn't matter whether your ambitions are centred on championship runs, squeezing in the playoffs or having the lottery balls fall your way; everybody is entitled to some hockey hope this time of year.

So, without further delay, here's a warm thought for every squad in the NHL.

1. Edmonton Oilers Technically, this is the first full year under coach Kris Knoblauch and he had .703 points percentage after taking over the Edmonton bench in November of 2023. Things are never as easy as they seem, but the Oilers could cruise to top spot in the Pacific.
2. Dallas Stars This team has made the final four each of the past two springs and — from really young guys like Wyatt Johnston, Logan Stankoven and Thomas Harley, to early-prime players like Miro Heiskanen, Jake Oettinger and Jason Robertson — it still feels like there so much room to grow.
3. New York Rangers Year 5 Alexis Lafreniere.
4. Florida Panthers If anyone can keep a team that's been to two straight finals motivated, it's Paul Maurice.
5. New Jersey Devils Even if the battery of Jacob Markstrom and Jake Allen is a top-12 duo in the league, this team's potential is off the charts.
6. Toronto Maple Leafs Auston Matthews has scored 169 goals since the start of 2021-22, 21 more than anybody else in the league.
7. Colorado Avalanche If — at some point — both Valeri Nichushkin and Gabriel Landeskog can rejoin the Avs this season, Colorado could look the best it's been since winning the title two years ago.
8. Vegas Golden Knights Tomas Hertl and Noah Hanifin are getting full seasons in the desert and Shea Theodore — after playing 47 games last season and 55 the year before — is primed for a healthy bounce-back.
9. Carolina Hurricanes Pyotr Kochetkov will become a true No. 1 this season and help offset the loss of Bret Pesce and Brady Skjei.
10. Tampa Bay Lightning The more you think about it, the more it feels like the Bolts needed a jolt and — difficult as it is to see Steven Stamkos and Mikhail Sergachev go — you wonder if some new blood (Jake Guentzel, J.J. Moser) isn't exactly what's needed to squeeze the final few drops out of this modern-day dynasty.
11. Boston Bruins You've got to have faith in the Bruins winning infrastructure, which is strong enough to absorb Jeremy Swayman's absence. For a while, anyway.

12. Vancouver Canucks For everything they've been through already, Elias Pettersson will be just 25 years old on opening night, while captain Quinn Hughes — coming off a Norris Trophy season — is only 24.
13. Nashville Predators Just knowing how all-in the Barry Trotz-led hockey ops department is has to make Preds fans delighted.
14. Washington Capitals The defence corps looks so much healthier with Jakob Chychrun occupying a spot on the left side of the top four and Matt Roy doing the same on the starboard side.
15. Winnipeg Jets Two goal-scorers — Kyle Connor and Gabe Vilardi — missed significant time last season. Let's give them both healthy years and hope they combine for 75 tallies.
16. Detroit Red Wings Ultimately, the Red Wings took care of business and got both Lucas Raymond and Moritz Seider signed and back in the fold well before the start of the season. Now Motor City fans can focus on watching the rise of defenceman Simon Edvinsson.
17. Ottawa Senators The two things that, perhaps, have the most power to make a hockey fan feel completely hopeless are bad ownership and bad goaltending. The Sens now have strong ownership and quality goaltending.
18. New York Islanders Noah Dobson busted out last season and the talented — and big — 24-year-old may still have another gear to find.
19. Los Angeles Kings The Kings have had a lynchpin right-shot D-man on their roster since Drew Doughty entered the league 15 years ago. By February, it's going to be easy to believe young righty Brandt Clarke can take care of the next 15.
20. Buffalo Sabres Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen could sniff the Vezina chase this season.
21. St. Louis Blues Newcomers Philip Broberg and Dylan Holloway are going to excel in larger roles.
22. Philadelphia Flyers Matvei Michkov has more skill than any rookie entering the league and, apparently, coach John Tortorella is here for it, "Michigans" and all.
23. Utah Hockey Club Clayton Keller's first year as captain is going to coincide with his first 40-goal, 90-point campaign.
24. Minnesota Wild When Matt Boldy gets in the lineup, he's going to find a new level.
25. Seattle Kraken A new coach with a Cup (Dan Bylsma), a new top-four D-man who just won the Cup (Brandon Montour) and a new top-six forward who won the 2023 title (Chandler Stephenson). That's a lot of winning pedigree landing in Seattle.
26. Montreal Canadiens Was there a single pre-season list of breakout candidates that didn't include 20-year-old Juraj Slafkovsky?
27. Anaheim Ducks Pick a young guy's name out of a hat, from sophomores Leo Carlsson and Pavel Mintyukov to rookie Cutter Gauthier to goalie Lukas Dostal (24 years old) to forwards Mason McTavish (21) and, yeah, Trevor Zegras (23).
28. Chicago Blackhawks Watching Connor Bedard's sophomore season would be enough, but with all the veteran adds over the summer, Chicago can absolutely be a competitive outfit every night.
29. Pittsburgh Penguins When 87 skates onto the ice, hope automatically overtakes the body.
30. Columbus Blue Jackets Adam Fantilli looks ready to do this thing.

31. Calgary Flames Who knows, by December it might be utterly clear Dustin Wolf is the goalie of the future.

32. San Jose Sharks Whatever the results this year, watching Macklin Celebrini and Will Smith take their first NHL strides should be more than enough to get Sharks supporters amped.

[Sportsnet.ca / Two sentences on every NHL team's expectations for 2024-25 season](#)

By Justin Bourne- October 7, 2024

It's once again that time of year when fans get excited for the upcoming NHL season, so they click around and see dozens of articles with pre-season predictions. Not everyone loves reading them, as they're just one person's opinion, and most analysts hate making them, because they're tied to evaluations done with incomplete information (injuries, acquisitions; a lot changes fast in hockey).

The thing is, they do serve a real purpose in that they set our expectations for the season, which is critical. Teams and players and coaches and managers aren't judged against one another as a pure meritocracy, but are weighed on their performance relative to expectations (otherwise Luke Richardson would not still be the head coach in Chicago, for a random example).

So, I'll throw my thoughts out there, and let's see if we can get on the same page about what we expect to see from each of the 32 teams in the season ahead.

Anaheim Ducks

The Ducks just finished third-last in the league with a minus-91 goal differential and proceeded to add nothing of substance to their roster, unless you count rookie Cutter Gauthier. Selling a slow and patient rebuild guarantees a GM years of job security, sure, but after six straight seasons of no playoffs for the Ducks, anyone else feel like they're willingly walking into 2024-25 as a punching bag yet again?

Boston Bruins

With Jeremy Swayman finally re-signed, their off-season looks like quantity out (Heinen, Lauko, DeBrusk, Forbort, Shattenkirk, etc.), and quality in (Elias Lindholm, Nikita Zadorov), so the Bruins' foundation of solid talent means they're probably still a playoff team. But that prediction hinges on Swayman, who missed camp and has never been a pure starter, producing the same quality goaltending as he's been in a tandem, which is no guarantee.

Buffalo Sabres

Like most other teams in the league the Sabres have some capable forwards, but they have a higher upside than other non-playoff teams because there's at least a chance a D-corps with Rasmus Dahlin, Owen Power, and Bowen Byram hits levels most teams can't match. If Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen lives up to his new contract and provides top-15 goaltending, don't be surprised if the Sabres are in the playoff hunt down the stretch.

Calgary Flames

The Flames don't seem comfortable with the word, but it's obvious they're, um, "reallocating assets towards future-facing growth opportunities," at this point (guys, it's a rebuild). They sent away Jacob Markstrom and Andrew Mangiapane for long-term gain, and in turn, they should be clearly out of the playoffs before the deadline.

Carolina Hurricanes

They lost Jake Guentzel and Teuvo Teravainen and Brett Pesce and Brady Skjei, which, y'know, probably matters. But their D are still extremely good (added Sean Walker to the third pair), their goaltending should be good (it's Pyotr Kochetkov's time!), and they're fast enough to create problems, so in a weaker Metro Division, they should be among the teams vying for top spot.

Chicago Blackhawks

I love when a team decides they'd like to stop getting embarrassed on a regular basis and acquires a bunch on legitimate NHL players to surround their recent promising draft picks -- it has to be one of the most fun phases for fans. I won't list all of Chicago's off-season acquisitions, but with Tyler Bertuzzi, Ilya Mikheyev, Teuvo Teravainen, TJ Brodie, Alec Martinez and Laurent Brossoit (and drafting Artyom Levshunov), I've got the Blackhawks taking a massive step forward this season.

Colorado Avalanche

The Avs are a little hamstrung heading into the season, given they don't know if and when captain Gabriel Landeskog will be available, and Valeri Nichushkin is suspended for having the audacity to (checks notes) deal with his addiction (if you missed the sarcasm, I still can't believe the league suspends players for relapsing during recovery). They're good at the top-end, and I like their blue line, but because they're pretty meh around the middle/bottom, a division crown and more rides on the two players above helping out upon returning, plus getting good goaltending from Alexandar Georgiev and Justus Annunen.

Columbus Blue Jackets

I'm not sure the Blue Jackets season will ever leave the spectre of this summer's Johnny Gaudreau tragedy, nor is it important that happens. Hopefully Adam Fantilli gives fans something to cheer for and the other young talents take a step so there's some forward progress towards better days, because looking at the roster, it doesn't seem like a season where they're ripe for a lot of winning (don't rule out earning a number one overall pick).

Dallas Stars

The Stars didn't do a ton this off-season, but they didn't really have to given the amount of talent on the roster. They've got a great goalie, they've paired offensively gifted defencemen with guys who can hit (new additions Ilya Lyubushkin and Matt Dumba), and they've got a mix of old and young offensive talents, which all together makes them the prohibitive Central Division favourite.

Detroit Red Wings

It's actually strange to look back at last season and remember the Red Wings only missed the playoffs by a tiebreaker with Washington, as most of the time they seemed unthreatening and mostly just "OK" (which checks out when it comes to the final playoff spot in the East last year). Their off-season was defined by absolutely treading water with their in/out list, and retaining their good players, so they seem primed for...91 points again, maybe?

Edmonton Oilers

The unequivocal "best team in the NHL" heading into Day 1 of the season (their over/under point line is set five points higher than the next-best team on most books). There's maybe some weight to that, but they improved their very good roster from last season (I like Viktor Arvidsson a lot if healthy), I like Stuart Skinner's odds of having a great year after a great playoffs, so yeah, these are your Presidents' Trophy favourites.

Florida Panthers

Everything went right last season for the Panthers (Sam Reinhart scored 57 times!), and they stayed true to their unquestioned identity of being extremely un-fun to play against. But they lost a couple good defencemen in Brandon Montour and Oliver Ekman-Larsson, they lost several physical players, and they got the second-best goaltending in the league last year in team save percentage, and so I think it's

possible they take a step back into the low-100s for points and will have their hands full trying to stay healthy and go deep for a third straight season.

Los Angeles Kings

The Kings are coming off a 99-point season with a plus-41 goal differential yet it feels like they're going to be in tough to get to 95 this year (and 98 was the playoff cut-off in the West last season). Matt Roy is gone and Drew Doughty is out long-term, they got the fourth-best goaltending in the league last year but are giving the keys to Darcy Kuemper (who had an .890 SV% last year), and it just feels like they treaded water at best this summer, which could mean they sink this winter.

Minnesota Wild

The past few seasons have seen the Wild drop from 113 points to 103 points to 87, which feels a bit dramatic for the still-decent talent on the roster (despite the salary cap constraints!). Their combined shooting and save percentage (PDO) last year was bottom-10 in the league, so I expect some bounce-back, but they kind of feel like the generic team you have to (and will) beat in a video game to level up and get to the boss-level opponents when it really matters.

Montreal Canadiens

This team is full of promising but young defencemen, a money pit at right wing, inexperienced (or just below average) at centre, and probably closer to a 75-point squad than the nearly 95 it might take to make the playoffs in the East. That said, they've got young prospects who could surprise, and they've got draft picks if they decide to make trades and get aggressive sooner than later (you can only carry 50 contracts after all), so the best-case scenario is they do what Chicago did this past summer and say "OK, time to win now" with some in-season transactions.

Nashville Predators

OK, lean in close and keep this between us as it's apparently a big faux pas to say too loud: I am not as high on the Preds (and their off-season) as everyone else. They've got talent and smart veteran players, they will do things the right way and be tough beat and all that (yada yada), but their blue line is just OK, and their most important forwards are old, so they just seem built to get 97 points and be eliminated by Dallas in the first round.

New Jersey Devils

The only possible reason to doubt the Devils is that, from the consensus of about 300 NHL preview articles, everyone thinks they're going to be great. But in fairness, they are coming off a year with terrible injury luck (Dougie Hamilton and Jack Hughes), they got bad goaltending (and traded for a good goaltender in Markstrom), and they got a new coach (Sheldon Keefe) which usually helps generate some extra pop, so I guess sign me up, they look like the Metro Division favourites?

New York Islanders

The Islanders finished the 2023-24 NHL season second-last in expected goals against, they don't quite have enough scoring, and so I don't quite understand them looking at their roster and going "maybe if we run it back it will work?" There's still a lot to like about their veteran team, and so I see still see a playoff chase in the cards, but they probably needed more than a Patrick Roy pop (and Anthony Duclair scoring a few) to push them into legit Stanley Cup contention.

New York Rangers

It doesn't even seem right remembering that the New York Rangers won the Presidents' Trophy last season, given it feels like they were not as good as Florida, or Edmonton, or Dallas, or Colorado, or, or,

or...others. But they did win it, and they didn't change much of anything (maybe taking a small step back minus guys such as Alex Wennberg and Jack Roslovic), so I guess they'll be a 100-plus point team again this season, though it won't be another Presidents' Trophy.

Ottawa Senators

There's a great clip of pro golfer Will Zalatoris talking about how hard it is for a 10 handicap to get down to a five, but he notes that it is exponentially harder for a five to get down to a zero, and I think that's a relevant metaphor for the Ottawa Senators. OK, you've improved a lot recently -- there's some real talent there -- now can you grind down the finer points and beat your good opponents enough to finish in the top half of the league (methinks it'll be close, but only if they stay healthy)?

Philadelphia Flyers

The Flyers seem in the midst of a proper rebuild, as their roster is littered with young players who are about to get a real chance to show their worth, while the overall team is likely to be Quite Bad. Hopefully for them Matvei Michkov is runaway-Calder-level good, but it's awfully tough for me to look at that roster coming off an 87-point season and forecast a better season ahead (but they should draft high again!).

Pittsburgh Penguins

I'm bullish on this Penguins roster, as they've got quality at the top-end, good veterans throughout the lineup (I like Kevin Hayes and Rickard Rakell in tertiary roles), and I think some nice value guys filling in around them this season. I also think Kyle Dubas knows this is a "win now" team given its age, and so they'll be aggressive, which in turn means I expect them to improve in-season and make the playoffs.

San Jose Sharks

Rebuilds are painful and the Sharks are going to be awfully rebuildy to watch this season (I'd like to see them add a couple decent NHL players, not to be competitive but just for the good of all involved). That said, you just hope Macklin Celebrini and Will Smith provide enough flashes of greatness that Sharks fans start to see what could be in a few years.

Seattle Kraken

Sometimes a team signs a UFA deal and people go "woof, I'm not sure about that contract," even though there's no denying that the team got better with the added player. Well, Chandler Stephenson and Brandon Montour make Seattle better, Shane Wright looks ready, and so I won't be shocked if the Kraken find their way back to the playoffs this season.

St. Louis Blues

Maybe it's because I'm in media, but I tend to hate when teams who are OK look at their roster and go "um, internal growth should fix this," because -- breaking news -- everyone gets a little better every year, growing from within doesn't make you special. I love that the Blues offered sheeted (and got) two good young players in Philip Broberg and Dylan Holloway, who won't be enough to make them a playoff team but should help for years to come.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Letting Stamkos go and then paying Guentzel is pretty ruthless (same with trading away Mikhail Sergachev), but make no mistake, the Bolts are an analytics organization that's trying to win Stanley Cups, and they knew that they needed to try something different. With a bounce-back season from Andrei Vasilevskiy, I expect the Bolts to be a playoff team yet again.

Toronto Maple Leafs

Fans are frustrated they're going to run back the same core, but those are awfully good hockey players most teams would kill to have, and so you can expect them to win a lot of (regular season!) games yet again. Their defencemen are better, they've got legit competition for their depth forward spots, and so if they get even league average goaltending (which is likely but not a given), they should surpass last season's 102 points.

Utah Hockey Club

Utah (formerly Arizona) got serious about their defence, getting Sergachev, Ian Cole, John Marino, and Robert Bortuzzo, which suddenly makes them playoff contenders, given their solid forward group. The bigger thing here is I expect they'll want to compete immediately, so will spend some draft capital to get better now, and they'll be a competitive team this year, right around that playoff hunt.

Vancouver Canucks

The defending Pacific Division champs (regular season) may not equal their great heights of last season, but this is still a really good team, even with the massive turnover. Jake DeBrusk, Danton Heinen, Vinny Desharnais ... these are guys who should help support the elite talent on the Canucks' roster, and so I expect them to finish second in the Pacific (behind Edmonton), with their fate from there riding entirely on the health of Thatcher Demko.

Vegas Golden Knights

As much as it's tempting to say "Vegas is finally going to pay for their sin of being too aggressive," their defence corps is still Alex Pietrangelo, Shea Theodore, Noah Hanifin, Nic Hague, Zach Whitecloud, and Brayden McNabb, so yeah, they're still going to win a lot of games. But we'll see if they can score and get the goaltending needed to take them from just another playoff team to a more serious contender.

Washington Capitals

The Caps were not a good team last season (minus-37 goal differential), but they took aggressive steps to rectify that this off-season, getting Jakob Chychrun, Matt Roy, Andrew Mangiapane, Brandon Duhaime, and the ever-mystifying Pierre-Luc Dubois. They're almost definitely better than they were last season, so I'll say they've taken a step from bad to average, and should finish... about where they did last season, either just in, or just out of the playoffs (all while being on Ovi Watch, as Alex Ovechkin needs 42 goals to break Wayne Gretzky's all-time record).

Winnipeg Jets

The Jets had a massive 110 points last season, and the bones of that team are still in place, including arguably the league's best goalie in Connor Hellebuyck. But while this is a very good team, they fell short last post-season, and let several good players go (Tyler Toffoli, Sean Monahan, Brenden Dillon, Laurent Brossoit to name a few) without really replacing them, so it'll be a year-long battle for the playoffs, barring the addition of some help along the way.