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The Columbus Dispatch / Ottawa Senators halt Columbus Blue Jackets' winning streak

By Brian Hedger – January 20, 2026

The honeymoon for the Blue Jackets and head coach Rick Bowness ended with a thud Jan. 20 at Nationwide Arena.

After winning the first three games of Bowness' tenure since taking over for Dean Evason on Jan. 12, the Blue Jackets were outskated, outplayed and defeated by the Ottawa Senators, 4-1, to bring their four-game winning streak to an ugly, screeching halt.

Tyler Kleven and Tim Stutzle gave Ottawa a 2-1 lead in the first period, Ridly Greig pushed it to 3-1 early in the third and Brady Tkachuk scored an insurance goal into an empty net with 3:06 left to seal it for the Senators (23-19-7) who got a strong goaltending performance from James Reimer (21 saves).

Elvis Merzlikins made his third straight start for the Blue Jackets (22-20-7) but left with an illness after stopping five of seven shots in the first period. Jet Greaves (12 saves) played the second and third periods in relief for the Jackets, whose goal was scored by Sean Monahan to tie it 1-1 at 7:46 of the first. Ottawa's defensive pressure gave Columbus fits all game, giving the Senators the edge in possession.

The loss was a tough way for the Blue Jackets to open a key five-game homestand that continues this week with games Jan. 22 against the Dallas Stars and Jan. 24 against the Tampa Bay Lightning, two Stanley Cup contenders.

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets skate report: Merzlikins to start vs Senators

Brian Hedger – January 20, 2026

Make it three starts in a row for Elvis Merzlikins, who'll try to backstop the Blue Jackets to their fifth straight win Jan. 20 at Nationwide Arena.

Merzlikins will face the Ottawa Senators after making 29 saves and stopping three of four shootout attempts in a 4-3 shootout victory over the Pittsburgh Penguins on Jan. 17 at PPG Paints Arena in Pittsburgh. James Reimer will start for the Senators (22-19-7), who've lost six of eight games and dropped their past two in overtime.

Reimer, 37, is 7-9-3 with a 3.28 goals-against average and .898 save percentage in 19 career starts against Columbus.

The Blue Jackets (22-19-7) will start the game with forward Dmitri Voronkov on the fourth line after his role was diminished in Pittsburgh. Rick Bowness, the Jackets' new head coach, spoke with Voronkov recently about adding more offense while trying to work his way up the lineup.

Danton Heinen, who scored his first goal since joining the Blue Jackets in a trade that sent Egor Chinakhov to the Penguins, will start at left wing on the third line. Dante Fabbro (lower body) will miss his first game after leaving in the first period against the Penguins. Bowness said the injury isn't as bad as first feared, but Fabbro will miss at least a week.

Mason Marchment, who's out with an upper-body injury, participated in the Jackets' optional morning skate. Bowness said he will also skate at practice Wednesday, which often signals that a player is nearing a return to action. Denton Mateychuk (upper body) also skated but isn't cleared for full practice yet.

The Hockey Writers / 3 Keys to a Blue Jackets Victory Over the Senators

By Wesley Minke - January 20, 2026

The Columbus Blue Jackets have a clear path back into the playoff race: keep winning. On the backs of a four-game winning streak, the Blue Jackets have rallied and shown major signs of life, jumping back into the playoff race over the past week in the process.

The locker room is still very much alive and believing. They just need to continue to string wins over this upcoming five-game home stand.

They will face some tough competition over this next week, including multiple playoff-bound teams, but they will have to go through it to keep their hopes alive.

So, as we look ahead to tonight's game with the Ottawa Senators coming to Columbus, we will look at three keys for the Blue Jackets to walk away with a win tonight.

Apply Pressure on the Forecheck Early

A massive piece to Rick Bowness' coaching style is getting players to buy in and physically outplay the opponent for 60 minutes. So far in the Bowness era, the Blue Jackets have physically outworked the teams they have played against, and because of it are 3-0-0.

The second and third lines have been playing excellently lately, but the fourth line has been outstanding in all phases. The line, comprised of Zach Aston-Reese, Brendan Gaunce, and Dmitri Voronkov — the latter was Danton Heinen before a bump to the third line — has been playing phenomenally, scoring two goals in the most recent game against the Pittsburgh Penguins.

However, it has been the Blue Jackets' buy in to play a full 200-foot game that has landed them these recent wins. Cole Sillinger has been another piece to that puzzle, as he and Kent Johnson have found themselves with a lot more playing time, a reward from Bowness, for playing the brand of hockey that will give the Blue Jackets the best chance to win.

If the Blue Jackets can continue to forecheck well, and apply pressure to a Senators team that has suffered back-to-back overtime losses, they will have the upper hand. The goal tonight, off of three days rest for Columbus, should be to swarm the Senators with pressure all night long.

Merzlikins Needs to Stay Hot in Net

Elvis Merzlikins has been up and down all season long in net, and because of that really lost a lot opportunity to get playing time under former coach Dean Evason. However, under Bowness, Merzlikins has started three of four games.

Bowness has clearly been impressed with Merzlikins' play, but some people are starting to wonder what happened to Jet Greaves.

Greaves was ranked ninth for goals saved above expected, and in just about every statistical category, was the main reason Columbus had a chance in most games. However, Bowness is continuing to roll with the hot hand to keep the Blue Jackets alive in the playoff race.

Merzlikins has benefitted greatly from the defensive structure the Blue Jackets have employed under Bowness. They have taken a concerted effort at denying slot opportunities, which was a major sticking point for Bowness in his introductory press conference.

Recent additions back in the lineup, such as Erik Gudbranson, have certainly helped to clog those open lanes for cleaner looks at the net. The Blue Jackets will have to play another great defensive effort in front of Merzlikins to win again tonight.

Give Reimer a Flurry Of Attention

James Reimer played for the first time all season in Ottawa's last game, a 4-3 overtime loss in Detroit to the Red Wings. He had 34 saves in that effort, and I can only assume the message tonight for Bowness is going to be to swarm the crease and just throw as many pucks at Reimer as possible.

Reimer is 7-9-3 in 19 games all time versus the Blue Jackets, with a 3.28 goals against average and .898 save percentage. His last game against Columbus came as a member of the Red Wings, in a game where he pitched a 4-0 shutout in Columbus.

Columbus' hot shooting of late and production from all their lines could play a big factor as well. Zach Werenski played one of his worst games of the season in his last showing in Pittsburgh, which could mean he is due to take over tonight with a stellar game.

Gudbranson, an Ottawa native, will also look to have a big game tonight and extend this win streak to five. Currently, the Blue Jackets have the second-longest active winning streak in the NHL, and sit just six points out of the final Eastern Conference wild-card spot.

If the Blue Jackets can score early and shake Reimer's confidence, they will have a great chance to keep applying the pressure and pull away with a win. They have to control all phases of the game and play a full 60 minutes. The playoff push is on.

The Hockey Writers / Meet Sean Monahan: The Blue Jackets' Beloved Team Prankster

By Mark Scheig - January 20, 2026

Sean Monahan's recent journey has been well documented since he signed a five-year contract to join the Columbus Blue Jackets. From overcoming the loss of his best friend Johnny Gaudreau to being a leader inside the locker room, Monahan's presence and demeanor makes him beloved by everyone that knows him.

Monahan is a team-first player that does everything he can to make himself available for games, even if he's battling through pain or injuries. This season especially, he's played most of the season banged up. While he did sit for a couple of games, he's grinded through his issues to help the Blue Jackets stay within striking distance of the playoff race.

To most on the outside, they know Monahan as a quiet leader, someone who lets his actions on the ice do most of the talking. But then when he does speak up, everyone listens. He has the respect of his peers.

Today, we're going to reveal a different side of Monahan you might not be as aware of. They say in life sometimes, you have to look out for the quiet ones.

In this case, that statement couldn't be any more true. Monahan might not always speak up. But if you're around him, you better watch your back.

Why? You may already be his next victim. Let's meet Monahan, the beloved Blue Jackets' team prankster.

Monahan Loves to Prank

It turns that this has been an ongoing thing ever since Monahan joined the Blue Jackets. He may have been like this before. But in terms of the quantity of pranks that are pulled in the room, multiple players confirmed that his antics can happen *on a daily basis*.

What kinds of pranks are we talking about? Based on what we have been able to confirm, it might not be to the level of Marc-Andre Fleury, at least not yet anyway.

No. The things that Monahan and some others (we'll get to that part later) do are actually very innocent and not over the top. But the acts done are quite hilarious.

In particular, there are a few things that Monahan does that teammates have said they've been a victim of. We will begin with raisins.

You might be wondering how does someone prank another with raisins? Because of how available these snacks are, they make for an easy weapon for Monahan to perform his next dastardly deed.

According to multiple Blue Jackets' players, Monahan takes a bunch of raisins and puts them in pockets. Jeans pockets. Coat pockets. Raisins have been found in various forms of pockets.

Imagine reaching into your pockets only to find a bunch of raisins waiting for your hands to grab. That's the kind of thing all Blue Jackets' players are on high alert for on a daily basis.

“Yeah. There’s a lot of raisins that go around here,” a smiling Monahan admitted. “They’re everywhere.”

But that’s only the beginning of the shenanigans. Apples are another snack found in abundance. One Blue Jackets’ player admitted he found apples in his socks. I mean, how can you not laugh at that? It truly is a fun-loving prank that isn’t over the top crazy. It is a reminder that Monahan is always on the lookout.

Even when talking with Monahan for this piece, he was eyeing down a player across the room. We asked him if there was a player who is more aggressive with their retaliatory pranks? With a big smile on his face and staring him down, Monahan said with conviction.

“Yeah, number 27.”

Yes, Zach Aston-Reese was identified as someone who constantly goes back at Monahan in a fun-loving way. Aston-Reese was willing to share one thing he did to Monahan.

Apparently, it was Monahan’s birthday. He was born on October 12. Aston-Reese ordered a delivery of 40 gallons of apple juice to arrive at Monahan’s house. That’s certainly taking apples to a new level.

The backstory on the apple juice comes from new Strength and Conditioning Coach Barry Brennan. The team drinks apple juice after a hard workout in order to replenish. So Aston-Reese decided to make sure Monahan knew he was replenished. Imagine 40 gallons arriving at your front door. Where are you putting all that juice?

That’s still not all. A couple of players admitted to having Monahan leave certain items on their car windshield.

One was a sunny-side up candy egg. The equipment guys had to do a little maintenance on the victimized player’s windshield wipers.

The other item that players have found on their windshield were hockey cards. Not just any hockey cards though. They are signed Monahan hockey cards.

“That’s happened (hockey cards),” Monahan said. “A couple eggs on the windshield too.”

“That’s great. That’s fun,” quipped one Blue Jackets’ player when there were several Monahan signed cards found on their car window.

There may be more antics going on within the room. This gives you an idea of how close the guys are, but also how much fun they’re having too. A couple players admitted that Monahan has a circle of players that get involved with his antics. However, no one was willing to fess up which players were part of this “inner circle.”

Monahan’s Motivation

Hockey players go through the long grind of a season full of ups and downs. For Monahan, his pranks are a way to have fun while lightening the mood.

“You come to the rink. You put in a lot of hard work together whether it’s in the gym, on the ice or in videos,” Monahan said. “So when you’re here, you enjoy it. I like to mess around with the guys a lot. It keeps a fun atmosphere. You give it, you’re going to get it. That’s what keeps it light around here.”

The players are have fun with it. Laughs are shared. And most importantly, the pranks don’t go too far that it offends anyone.

“It just lightens it up,” defenseman Damon Severson said. “That’s what I enjoy too. That’s why I like being part of that stuff. You got to be able to take a joke and give a joke. It’s all innocent things. It’s not going to hurt anyone’s feelings. It’s not going to ruffle anyone’s feathers. It’s just all for fun.”

The Blue Jackets are having more fun these days. They’re carrying a four-game winning streak heading into Tuesday night’s game against the Ottawa Senators. They need to keep winning just to be able to stay in the playoff race.

Monahan may look all innocent and quiet most of the time. But that’s likely because he’s already thinking about the next prank he’s going to pull on one of his teammates. It’s his overall demeanor and approach that truly makes him the beloved Blue Jackets’ prankster.

ESPN / What Russian NHL players are saying about the Olympic Games

By Ryan S. Clark - January 20, 2026

Reaching age 30 can inspire reflection. That holds true for athletes, too. It can prompt them to look back on their career -- while starting to think about how much longer they have to play.

That's where Boston Bruins defenseman Nikita Zadorov is at right now. He has played 13 NHL seasons, has become a top-four defenseman in that time and has had many experiences throughout his career.

One experience he has not had is to play for his nation, Russia, at the Olympics. He's starting to wonder if it will ever happen.

"[NHL players] have missed the last three Olympics. We were hoping for this year, but I guess not and it's tough," Zadorov said. "But from the other side, I understand where they're coming from, right? You know what I mean? The war's going on and everything, and there are the sanctions."

Being a hockey player in the best league in the world comes with certain expectations. Among them is having an opportunity to play at the Olympics and represent their nation. For some, it's on the same level or even greater than playing in the Stanley Cup Final.

That's what makes the discussion for Russian players about the upcoming Milan Cortina Olympics rather complicated. There are those who want the chance to play in what would have been the first true best-on-best Olympics in more than a decade.

Those same players also understand the dynamics behind why that won't be happening.

"I know it's tough right now. Everyone is excited about the Olympics but us," Columbus Blue Jackets winger Kirill Marchenko said. "And of course we would love to be at the Olympics. Russia would have a great team because our roster would have looked so nice."

RUSSIA'S OLYMPIC COMMITTEE remains suspended by the International Olympic Committee with the latter imposing sanctions stating that Russia violated the Olympic Charter when it invaded Ukraine in 2022. It has since led to a select group of individual Russian and Belarusian athletes that were allowed to participate at the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris under a neutral flag.

The International Ice Hockey Federation, the governing body for international men's and women's ice hockey, has continued to ban Russia and Belarus, having stated in February 2025 that it "believes it is not yet safe to reintegrate" both nations.

That, in turn, is why Russia will not be sending a men's hockey team to the Olympics in what has become a complex discussion during the past four years.

Sport is competitive in nature. It's what made going through 12 years and three Olympic cycles without NHL players competing in the men's hockey tournament feel incomplete. The Olympics still had flagship nations that have become staples on the world stage. But it came with the caveat that those same countries were also not fielding their strongest talent.

It's what led to a gradual outcry from fans and players, among others, about the need for true best-on-best international competition in men's hockey. The other senior-level international tournament -- the IIHF Men's World Championships -- is held at the same time as the Stanley Cup playoffs, which means

many players opt for starting their offseason rather than delay it to represent their nation, while others are still vying for the Cup.

The NHL and NHLPA agreed to have its players return to the Olympics, which was then followed by the creation of the 4 Nations Face-Off 2025 and the eventual revival of the World Cup of Hockey. It creates a calendar that now allows for more frequent best-on-best international tournaments (outside of the world championships).

Canada, Finland, Sweden and the United States faced each other in the 4 Nations Face-Off, in what was a precursor to the Olympics. It generated more excitement about Olympic hockey over the past year, which has led to questions about roster construction in addition to who could win.

It has also led to questions about Russia, its absence and what could have been for those who believe that the omission of one of the most successful nations in the sport is glaring.

"I feel like if the NHL would have run their own tournament like they did last February and if they invited Russia to it and told us, 'You guys can play. But you cannot use your flag or you cannot use your anthem,' I would say 99% of the guys in the league would agree. OK, sure," Zadorov said. "At the end of the day, we know who we are. We know we are Russians. We know where we come from. Our anthem is something we can sing in the [dressing] room.

"But we want to play best-on-best. You want to prove it to the world if you have that opportunity."

Zadorov said he understands that there may be Russian players whose situations would have prevented them from playing under his proposed scenario for the 4 Nations.

"But I think most of the guys I know would have done it for sure," Zadorov said.

Zadorov added that he heard there were concerns from other nations about having a Russian team at the 4 Nations. But he has also had conversations with players of different nationalities who told him they would have wanted to face a Russian team.

PLAYERS INTERVIEWED FOR THIS STORY acknowledged the complicated situation beyond their control preventing them from joining their NHL teammates in Italy.

"I mean, it's politics and sports," San Jose Sharks defenseman Dmitry Orlov said. "I cannot say anything, you know? It is just, it is what it is. It's not our decision. So we just take it how it is and keep living.

"We're lucky we're still playing in the NHL and it's important. We like our jobs and you just try not to overthink anything. You just hope that with the next Olympics that we'll have a chance to play."

Dmitry Orlov, left, will not be skating at the Milan Cortina Games, but San Jose Sharks teammate Macklin Celebrini will be competing for Canada. Lachlan Cunningham/Getty Images

Orlov, 34, is the sixth-oldest active Russian player in the NHL and part of a generation with a distinct view of the national team. He was 5 months old when the Soviet Union dissolved and the nation became Russia.

Hockey, along with sports as a whole, was part of the Soviet Union's identity. The Soviet Union's men's national team won 81% of its games, captured seven Olympic gold medals and won 22 gold medals at the IIHF Men's World Championships that included a run of nine straight tournament titles between 1963 and 1971.

While the nation was in search of a new, post-U.S.S.R. identity, more Russian players were heading to the NHL, now that they could live and play in North America with more freedom than before.

Orlov was 7 when Russia, which initially sent only its domestic players to the Olympics in 1994, used NHL players at the 1998 Games in Nagano, Japan. A group that featured stars like captain Pavel Bure, Sergei Fedorov, Sergei Gonchar and Alexei Yashin finished second.

As a teenager, Orlov was good enough to represent Russia. He would represent his nation 35 times in junior competitions and 31 times at the senior level. Orlov has won a world junior championship and a world championship. Even the Stanley Cup he won in 2018 as part of the Washington Capitals was captained by arguably the greatest Russian player of all time in Alex Ovechkin, the NHL's all-time leader in goals.

And yet? Orlov has never played in the Olympics.

"Growing up, we used to watch the Russian national team," Orlov said. "That was always fun. You used to play with each other back home when you were younger. You play against each other [in the NHL] and then you're on the same team speaking the same language. You just think about how everybody says it's great to be a part of that with the whole country cheering for you.

"That's how you felt about it when you were a kid. It's kind of tough that we're not able to play."

ADDING TO THE FRUSTRATION for the Russian players who are missing the Olympics is the belief that their team could have challenged for a medal -- and possibly even the nation's second gold medal since the Soviet Union dissolved. The team designated as "Olympic Athletes from Russia" won gold in 2018 while the Russian Olympic Committee was serving a ban for a doping scandal.

ESPN recently projected what a potential Russian men's Olympic hockey team roster would look like if it were heading to Milan Cortina. Marchenko was part of a group of forwards that featured Kirill Kaprizov, Nikita Kucherov, Evgeni Malkin, Artemi Panarin and Ovechkin.

Seeing that he made the roster made Marchenko smile, while adding he should have been on the second line in place of Colorado Avalanche winger Valeri Nichushkin (instead of the third line). Orlov and Zadorov were part of a defense group that also had Vladislav Gavrikov, Ivan Provorov and Mikhail Sergachev.

Then there's the goaltending dilemma that would have been facing Russia, knowing it would have had to choose between Sergei Bobrovsky, Igor Shesterkin, Ilya Sorokin and Andrei Vasilevskiy for its three available roster spots.

"Obviously, we would have a great team with the greatest goal scorer of all time," Sergachev said when asked about a potential Russian Olympic team roster. "We also would have had the best goalies in the league. Bobrovsky's phenomenal and probably a Hall of Famer. Shesterkin is the same thing. Sorokin. They're all great. I love them all. They're all my good friends. But, to me, Vasy's just something different.

"We'd have a great team. It'd be fun to get together again. But it's also tough to speak."

Reviewing all the reasons why Sergachev, a defenseman for the [Utah Mammoth](#), believes that Russia would have done well at the Olympics also provides him the opportunity to stress how this was likely the last chance for fans to see players like Bobrovsky, Malkin and Ovechkin play at the Olympics.

Bobrovsky was part of the Russian Olympic team in 2014, while Malkin and Ovechkin are both three-time Olympians who have won world championships but never an Olympic medal.

"It's sad ... but it is what it is," Sergachev said. "You can't really dwell on it or really think about it too much now. We have [NHL] games every day. There's still a lot of political stuff that needs to get done. I don't, at least, think about it much. But it would be great if [a return] happened."

Speaking about that older generation of Russian players is what made Zadorov think about the possibility his generation of Russian players could possibly miss out on the chance to ever represent their nation at the Olympics.

Nearly half of the Russians playing in the NHL season are at least 30. That group has players such as Dmitry Kulikov and Vladimir Tarasenko, along with Panarin, Gavrikov, Kucherov, Nichushkin, Shesterkin, Sorokin and Zadorov.

"Kuch has played in the World Cup [of Hockey], but he hasn't played in the Olympics," Zadorov said of the [Tampa Bay Lightning](#) winger and two-time Ted Lindsay Award winner. "He's going to be arguably, when he retires, one of the best Russian players to ever play this game. He's in that conversation. Panarin, he's getting older too."

Zadorov acknowledged he will be 34 when the next Olympics cycle arrives, with the understanding that his age, among other factors, could see him get passed over. The hulking defenseman has been open about criticizing Russian President Vladimir Putin and his policies.

In 2019, Zadorov did an interview with The Athletic in which he spoke in opposition to Russia's internet bill and how "actual patriotic people should speak up." In 2023, he did an interview with Russian YouTuber Yury Dud in which he spoke out in opposition against the war in Ukraine and stated, "I'm sorry. Instead of raising the new generation, we sent them to die."

Zadorov has also previously said he likely wouldn't return to Russia until Putin is no longer the president or "that regime is still there."

"With my political views and political situation, I don't know if I would have even made this team," Zadorov said. "Because I'm the guy who, when I speak, I break the internet with my quotes."

EVEN WITH THE DYNAMICS that are preventing them from participating, there will be Russian players who will follow what happens at the Olympics.

"I love hockey, and it's the best-on-best," Sergachev said. "Obviously, Russia isn't there but it's still best-on-best. I still want to watch Sidney Crosby go against Auston Matthews or [Connor] McDavid and [Jack] Hughes. You want to watch them. You want to learn what that situation is about with the Olympics."

Sergachev said he was like that with the 4 Nations Face-Off, in that he wanted to watch because the tournament still featured the best players in the world and he saw it as a chance to learn even more about them.

Marchenko echoed a similar sentiment, saying he also watched the 4 Nations and will watch some of the Olympics because of how much he loves hockey -- while using it as a chance to see what he can pick up from watching the game at the fastest possible level.

He admitted that he won't watch every game. The goal is to "go to a beach somewhere" that also has a nearby rink so he can find a way to get in his workouts and stay sharp, while also finding time to disconnect before the season resumes.

There is one team he might follow more closely than others, however.

"I want to support Zach Werenski and watch all his games," Marchenko said of his Blue Jackets teammate. "He's one of my friends and he's going to be playing."

The Athletic / Which NHL goalie can build the best roster of players who scored their first goal on him?

By Sean McIndoe - January 21, 2026

Today, we're going to play a roster-building game based on a relatively straightforward question: Which goalie can make the best six-man team out of players who scored their first career goal against them?

That's it. Nice and simple. But first, a few ground rules™:

- Each squad will be made up of three forwards, two defensemen and a goalie. Other than that, position won't matter.
- The forwards and defensemen must have all scored their first career goals against the same goaltender. That goalie will then complete the roster, joining the guys who scored on him.
- Once they're on the team, you're getting the peak version of that player.

Before we start, let's all tap sticks for reader Billy G., who not only sent me this idea but also included a massive spreadsheet of relevant research. Folks, I can't emphasize this strongly enough: My favorite readers are the ones who do a big chunk of the work for me. Way to go, Billy. You're like the [anti-Bryce](#).

We're going to crank up Stathead's goal finder and build out rosters for a dozen goalies, and then turn it over to you in the comments to see if you can beat them.

Team Marc-Andre Fleury

In theory, Fleury seems like a great option to start with, for two reasons. He's going to be a Hall of Famer, which gives our squad a strong foundation. And he played forever, meaning you'd expect to see plenty of guys who got their first goal against him.

And sure enough, we have an impressive 44 names to choose from. Can we find a mini All-Star team in there? Let's find out ...

Goalie: Marc-Andre Fleury

Defense: Bowen Byram, Morgan Rielly

Forwards: John Tavares, Seth Jarvis, Brandon Dubinsky

That's not bad. And it could have been even better, because Cale Makar got [his first regular-season goal](#) against Fleury back in 2019. But Makar is the rare case of a guy who scored his first NHL goal in the playoffs, so technically he doesn't count. (I don't think any of those playoff-first guys slipped into any of the teams below, but apologies in advance if they did.)

We still get some solid star power, ranging from Dubinsky in 2007 to Jarvis and Byram a few weeks apart in 2021. Team Fleury is a good one, but we can do better.

Team Henrik Lundqvist

Lundqvist didn't stick around quite as long as Fleury, but he still gives us 29 names to choose from. And right off the bat, we can find some legitimate star power in Nikita Kucherov, who got his first of many against Lundqvist so long ago that he was wearing the number 56 when he did it, and the announcer thought his name was Dmitri.

Kucherov is only the beginning, as our forwards are so loaded that we don't even need to use Mathew Barzal or Brayden Schenn. Other than the second blue-line spot, we're pretty loaded.

Goalie: Henrik Lundqvist

Defense: Kris Letang, Erik Gudbranson

Forwards: Nikita Kucherov, Artemi Panarin, Nikolaj Ehlers

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This strategy of using elite goalies who played for a long time is working. Let's try it one more time.

Team Carey Price

Price gives us 38 names to work with, one of whom is Paul Bissonnette. So ... 37 names to work with.

Goalie: Carey Price

Defense: Jakob Chychrun, Alec Martinez

Forwards: Mark Stone, Ryan O'Reilly, Timo Meier

You could also swap in Alex DeBrincat if you prefer. Either way, we've got three solid forwards, a defenseman having a career year right now, and a second blueliner who we know can score big goals. Still, I don't think this squad can compete with Team Lundqvist.

Let's mix things up by switching our strategy. We'll start with a great offensive player and see if we can build around him.

Team Pete Peeters

My first thought was to try Wayne Gretzky as our anchor, but his first goal came against Glen Hanlon, who doesn't give us much else to work with (with apologies to Ken Baumgartner). But the second name that came to mind works a little better.

Goalie: Pete Peeters

Defense: Viacheslav Fetisov, Sylvain Côté

Forwards: Mario Lemieux, Joe Nieuwendyk, Scott Mellanby

It's hard to beat Mario as your starting point, and we find two more Hall of Famers in Nieuwendyk and Fetisov, but this roster leaves me wanting a bit more. I won't criticize it too much, though, since they also have access to Chris Nilan and Tie Domi.

But hey, if building around one generational center from the 1980s is good, then two would be even better. And there happen to be two superstars who both got their first against a pretty good goaltender

...

Team Rogie Vachon

So yeah, Mark Messier and Bryan Trottier both scored their first goals against the same goalie. What I hadn't realized is that so did one of the greatest defensemen ever.

Goalie: Rogie Vachon

Defense: Larry Robinson, Barry Ashbee

Forwards: Bryan Trottier, Mark Messier, Rick Vaive

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As is often the case with these things, we fall just short of filling every spot with a superstar, although Vaive had three 50-goal seasons and Ashbee was a second-team All-Star once. Still, I think this is my favorite team we've built so far.

Now let's all enjoy Messier's highlight-reel first goal. Just like they drew it up.

Hey, you want to see a ridiculously good first line?

Team Sean Burke

The bad news: Burke was a good goaltender, but hardly a franchise guy, and the blue line is just OK. The good news: That stuff won't matter, because with these three forwards, we'll never let the other team have the puck.

Goalie: Sean Burke

Defense: Kimmo Timonen, Ed Jovanovski

Forwards: Joe Sakic, Sergei Fedorov, Marián Hossa

It's not a deep roster. Our next best option up front would probably be Marc Savard, who makes for decent depth but won't be allowed to coach our power play. But we only need six guys, and these six are pretty good.

OK, time to go back a bit further into the history books ...

Team Ed Giacomin

The Rangers Hall of Famer gives us a great start. And with his heyday syncing up perfectly with the start of the expansion era (and the high scoring that came with it), we should get some goal scorers to choose from. Let's see if it works.

Goalie: Ed Giacomin

Defense: Denis Potvin, Barry Gibbs

Forwards: Bobby Clarke, Jacques Lemaire, Ken Hodges

Not too shabby, with Giacomin giving us three more Hall of Famers plus two solid veterans. Not the very best top-to-bottom roster we've seen, but good enough that we should try one more old-timer.

Team Gump Worsley

Some of you oldies are already sitting up, because you know that in addition to being a legend in his own right, Worsley gave up the first goal of Bobby Orr's NHL career. We have 30 other skaters to sort through, and while none of them will be at Orr's level, I was hoping to find some star power. It's fair to say my hopes were met.

Goalie: Gump Worsley

Defense: Bobby Orr, Al Arbour

Forwards: Stan Mikita, Johnny Bucyk, Henri Richard

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I'd say that's a decent lineup. The forwards are fantastic, obviously, and Orr was unstoppable. The only weak spot is the second blueliner, where I went with Arbour over Bob Watson or Reggie Fleming. Three reasons there: Arbour was cool, he wore glasses, and his goal (one of just two he ever scored in three seasons with the Wings) was [assisted by Gordie Howe and Ted Lindsay](#).

OK, just a few more teams to build. Let's shift back to the modern era so you kids out there don't get bored and start looking at your phones.

Team Kari Lehtonen

Lehtonen was one of the highest-drafted goalies ever, going second overall in 2002. He went on to win 310 games, and more importantly for our purposes, he gave up the first goals for a pair of centers who've gotten to know each other pretty well in recent years.

Goalie: Kari Lehtonen

Defense: Jaccob Slavin, Johnny Oduya

Forwards: Connor McDavid, Aleksander Barkov, Blake Coleman

This one is admittedly a little top-heavy, to say the least. Still, we'll put McDavid in the offensive zone, Slavin on the defensive side, Barkov playing all 200 feet and let everyone else play a supporting role. I think it works.

Team Craig Anderson

Anderson was a better goalie than you probably remember, winning 319 games and leading the league in GAA (1.69) and save percentage (.941) in 2013. He also had an up-close seat to arguably the greatest debut of all time.

Goalie: Craig Anderson

Defense: Shea Theodore, Simon Benoit

Forwards: Auston Matthews, Jack Eichel, Nico Hischier

That's a heck of a first line, featuring three high picks. And we could run out a second line of Sam Bennett, Sean Couturier and Artturi Lehkonen. It's the second blue-line spot that trips us up yet again, though; other than Theodore, we have eight more defensemen to choose from, but Benoit is the only one who's played more than 100 NHL games, and only he and Kyle Capobianco are even still in the league.

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For our final two goalies, let's reach back to the '80s and '90s for a couple of well-traveled Hall of Famers.

Team Grant Fuhr

Fuhr only gets two Hall of Famers to join him here, but it's not a bad duo to build around. And the rest of the bunch is pretty good too. (Remember, before he was the coach with the funny mustache, Paul MacLean scored 40 goals three times.)

Goalie: Grant Fuhr

Defense: Brian Leetch, Jyrki Lumme

Forwards: Peter Forsberg, Theo Fleury, Paul MacLean

By the way, I did make sure to check the big three of Martin Brodeur, Patrick Roy and Dominik Hasek, but none had much to offer. Hasek peaks with Sergei Zubov, Roy's best option is probably Brian Rolston, and Brodeur (despite giving up first goals to 54 different players) can only get us Evgeni Malkin and Chris Kreider.

So instead, let's wrap this up with a guy who wasn't quite on that tier, but played a long time for a lot of teams on his way to an eventual call from the Hall.

Team Tom Barrasso

OK, I'm going to be honest with you. You could make a pretty decent team out of Barrasso's first goals, one that would include Eric Lindros and Pavel Datsyuk as well as Claude Lemieux.

But I'm not going to do that. Instead, let's build the one lineup that absolutely none of these other teams want any part of playing against.

Goalie: Tom Barrasso

Defense: Dave Manson, Bryan Marchment

Forwards: Craig Berube, Shane Churla, Rob Ray

Depth for the inevitable suspensions: Brad May, Brent Thompson, Jay Miller, Jim Sandlak

Yeah, I have no idea what's going on here. But when Claude Lemieux isn't even close to being your dirtiest player, you've got yourself a terrifying lineup. No wonder Barrasso was so cranky all the time.

And finally, I know we said we'd do a dozen goalies, but that still leaves us with one more roster to fill out ...

Team Empty Net

Goalie: n/a

Defense: Bret Hedican, Lindy Ruff

Forwards: Charlie Simmer, Vincent Trocheck, Anders Hedberg, Antoine Vermette

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Well, that's disappointing. And sure, we could technically use our goalie spot on Ron Hextall or Ilya Sorokin or any other goal-scoring goalie, but that would go against the spirit of the thing. So we're left with this not-so-imposing crew, which I guess proves that nobody wants to get their first career goal on a cheap empty-netter.

So who you got?

You probably have to go with Team Gump, or maybe Team Rogie. Among the more recent entries, it's hard to argue with Team Hank. But I'm open to your suggestions down in the comments. If you've got a Stathead account and want to try to make your own teams, you [can start here](#). Or you could just drop by

to say thanks to Billy G. for putting the wheels in motion. Just be nice about it, or else Team Barrasso will show up in a dark alley and have a little chat with you about manners.