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The Athletic / Blue Jackets' Boone Jenner, Sean Monahan seek 'a little more' after loss to Vegas

By Aaron Portzline – January 9, 2026

LAS VEGAS — By now, we know what the Columbus Blue Jackets are. They aren't as dangerous offensively or as stout defensively, and they have a mental block that keeps them from closing out games they lead in the third period.

But what are they *trying* to be?

Now well past the NHL's holiday break and two games into the second half of the season, the Blue Jackets' identity — which was so clear and reliable last season — remains a mystery.

Are they high-flying? Not really. Are they heavy and combative? Not nearly often enough. Are they resilient and relentless? Can't say that, either. All of these come and go from time to time, but they aren't sustained.

On Thursday, the Blue Jackets took a 2-0 lead only 10:41 into the game. But that wasn't enough to sustain them when the Vegas Golden Knights — everybody knows how they play, right? — made their expected push.

The Golden Knights, who lost goaltender Carter Hart to an injury on the first goal of the game, came back to win 5-3 before 17,614 in T-Mobile Arena, at one point scoring four consecutive goals.

"It comes down to how hard you're going to compete and how bad you want it, and I think that's the biggest thing," Blue Jackets center Sean Monahan said. "We've got to find ways to win games. We know we've got a good team.

"We believe in each other, and we've got to up that belief, I think. When you do that, you know you can come back in games if you're down, or if you have a lead, that you believe you can keep that lead and you're a hard team to play against. That's something we've got to get back to, and we've got to do that right away."

Boone Jenner, Kent Johnson and Kirill Marchenko scored for the Blue Jackets, and Monahan had two assists. Goaltender Jet Greaves, who has endured a heavy workload since before the holidays, allowed five goals on 26 shots.

The Blue Jackets have now lost three in a row and four in the last five (1-3-1), and it doesn't get any easier from here. On Saturday, they play the Colorado Avalanche, who have the best record (32-4-7) in the NHL and have yet to lose in regulation at home (18-0-2).

An effort like Thursday's won't cut it.

"I feel like we have our identity," Jenner said. "We know how we need to play to win, and how we need to play to get points in this league. This little stretch here ... we haven't been up to our standard of how hard we're going to play.

"It starts with myself and the older guys on the team and dragging everybody else in. We all have to give a little more here to (get to) that standard that we hold each other to in here."

Jenner's goal, a redirection of a Zach Werenski shot, made it 1-0 at 8:24 of the first. Then, only 2:17 later, Johnson ended a 15-game streak without a goal by scoring off a Monahan set-up coming through the right circle.

Vegas made it 2-1 at 12:20 of the first period, the first of four straight goals. The Golden Knights seemed to completely overwhelm the Blue Jackets at times in the second period, scoring three times for a 4-2 lead.

They had an answer for everything the Blue Jackets did. When Marchenko got behind the Vegas defenseman and cut the lead to 4-3 at 14:28 of the third, you wondered if the Jackets were going to do to Vegas what has been done to the Blue Jackets so many times this season.

But there was no late-game miracle.

Not even two minutes later, Vegas caught the Blue Jackets overcommitted in the attack zone and scored on a two-on-one to cap the scoring.

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason pushed back on the idea that his club, 43 games into the season, hasn't forged an identity and didn't compete hard enough Thursday.

"Our guys are committed," Evason said. "They're working their asses off, trying to score, trying to defend. It's just, at this point, we're (giving up) one or two ... opportunities, glaring mistakes.

"And we're just going to have to keep grinding and keep talking about it and keep showing it (to the players in practice and film). I know our heart's there. I know our desire's there. Our grind is there."

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The Blue Jackets remain in last place in the Eastern Conference, having settled into a .500 record (18-18-7) with their recent swoon. The wild-card chase is no longer the traffic jam it was just a couple of weeks ago.

Through Thursday's game, the Blue Jackets are seven points behind the Buffalo Sabres, who hold the second wild-card. The biggest obstacle — or obstacles — is that the Blue Jackets would have to jump eight teams to grab a postseason spot.

Watching them play so far on this road trip — they were outpaced by a young, up-and-coming San Jose club Tuesday, then overwhelmed by the veteran Golden Knights on Thursday — makes it hard to have that type of optimism.

Thursday's game marked the Blue Jackets debut of defenseman Egor Zamula, who signed a one-year, one-way contract with the club Tuesday. He played 11:12 on the third pair with Dante Fabbro and had a minus-1 rating and two giveaways.

It also marked the season debut in Columbus of Mikael Pyyhtiä, who was called up from AHL Cleveland following a rash of injuries. Pyyhtiä joined the fourth line with Brendan Gaunce and Zach Aston-Reese and played 9:27.

The Athletic / As Blue Jackets' top negotiator, newly hired Laurence Gilman will be plenty busy

By Aaron Portzline – January 8, 2026

LAS VEGAS — Columbus Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell made two free-agent signings Tuesday, but one of them might have flown under the radar.

Laurence Gilman, 61, who has served as an assistant GM with three NHL franchises — the Phoenix/Arizona Coyotes, Vancouver Canucks and Toronto Maple Leafs — was hired by Waddell to join the Blue Jackets front office as vice president of hockey operations.

That's an impressive title, but it doesn't express how important Gilman's role is going to be with the Blue Jackets in the coming months. And on a day when the Blue Jackets also signed 25-year-old defenseman Egor Zamula, the Gilman hire may not have been fully appreciated.

Gilman replaces assistant GM Josh Flynn, who left the organization late last month to join former Blue Jackets GM Jarmo Kekäläinen with the Buffalo Sabres. One of Flynn's main duties with Columbus was to negotiate contracts, and Waddell needed somebody with that skill set.

Enter Gilman, who has known Waddell for more than 30 years and was nearly hired by the Carolina Hurricanes when Waddell ran that franchise.

"Laurence is one of the best," Waddell told The Athletic. "And he's exactly what we need. When we found out that we were going to be losing somebody (Flynn), he's the first guy I thought about because the fit, I think, will be perfect.

"And, yes, I wanted to make sure I got a lawyer, for sure."

Gilman joins an inner circle with Waddell that includes director of hockey operations Rick Nash and director of player personnel Chris Clark. But Gilman steps right into a crucial role with the organization.

The NHL trade deadline (March 6) is less than two months away. The Blue Jackets, who are last in the Eastern Conference heading into Thursday's game against the Vegas Golden Knights, are shaping up to be a seller instead of a buyer.

But there are significant veteran players — forwards Boone Jenner, Charlie Coyle and Mason Marchment and defenseman Erik Gudbranson — who are unrestricted free agents this summer and could be traded if they don't have extensions in place with Columbus.

Waddell has said since the beginning of this season that those talks will likely start to intensify in February, perhaps when the NHL takes a three-week break so players can travel to Italy for the Olympics.

But those are just the front-burner fires.

Three of the Blue Jackets' core group of young players — goaltender Jet Greaves and forwards Adam Fantilli and Cole Sillinger — are all restricted free agents as of July 1.

Also as of July 1, the three other core youngsters — forwards Kirill Marchenko, Dmitri Voronkov and Kent Johnson — will officially be in the final year of their contracts, allowing them to sign extensions.

Nothing irritates and agitates Blue Jackets fans quite like contract talks, given the messy, unnecessarily personal negotiations that have fractured relationships between players and the club through the years.

Sergei Bobrovsky. Ryan Johansen. Pierre-Luc Dubois. Josh Anderson. The names send a shiver down the spine of longtime Jackets fans.

Last summer, Waddell's first full offseason in Columbus, saw some protracted negotiations. But none of them spilled over into the public. Now Gilman will do much of the legwork, though Waddell, like all GMs, will be involved in talks.

"I've forged my career in this industry first as a contract negotiator and hockey administrator," Gilman said. "When 2005 rolled around and the NHL's new (collective bargaining agreement) brought in the salary cap, I began to focus on the nuances of the cap, too.

"But to answer your question, the basis of my skill set was built upon my role as a contract negotiator and salary-cap specialist."

Before the start of last season, Waddell acknowledged in an interview with The Athletic that he and Nash had discussed "in general" the possibility that Nash would become the Blue Jackets' next GM when Waddell, 67, was ready to step down.

Gilman's "VP" title would seem to suggest that Nash, the "director," would report to him, but Waddell made it clear to The Athletic that all three of them — Gilman, Nash and Clark — report directly to Waddell.

The front-office staff, as noted on the club's website, has Gilman listed just below Waddell and just above John Davidson, who is a senior advisor but isn't involved in the day-to-day operation of the club.

After Davidson comes Nash and then Clark.

"I'm not big on titles," Waddell said. "I'm big on everybody working together."

Waddell and Gilman first met in the late 1990s when Waddell was an assistant GM with the Detroit Red Wings and Gilman was new to the NHL with the Winnipeg Jets. They continued to cross paths for many years before a friendship took root.

Gilman said he spent 36 hours in Raleigh, N.C., during the summer of 2018, interviewing with the Carolina Hurricanes — with owner Tom Dundon and Waddell, then the club president — for a front-office position.

He ended up joining the Toronto Maple Leafs instead, with whom he spent six years as assistant GM and later senior VP of hockey operations.

"But I stayed in contact with Don, and when he got the job in Columbus, I congratulated him," Gilman said. "At that time, I asked him what he was planning on doing, and he said he wasn't planning on making changes initially with anyone but that he'd keep me in mind.

"We spoke a few times over the course of the last year. But things started moving rapidly when Jarmo Kekäläinen took the job in Buffalo and Josh Flynn went with him."

The deal came together over the past two weeks, Gilman said. He expects to arrive in Columbus this weekend after gathering his belongings in Toronto.

“This represents an absolutely perfect fit,” Gilman said. “When I look at the makeup of the inner circle, if you want to call it that, with Don at the head and with Nash and Clark and (senior manager of hockey operations) Zach Abdou ... my skill set really matches theirs.

“It’s a good fit, and I could not be happier.”

The Columbus Dispatch / Blue Jackets defenseman Brendan Smith undergoes knee surgery

Brian Hedger - January 8, 2026

Blue Jackets defenseman Brendan Smith is expected to miss three-to-four months following Jan. 6 surgery to repair a torn meniscus in a knee.

Smith, 36, sustained the injury during a 4-1 victory over the Ottawa Senators on Dec. 29 at Canadian Tire Centre and has missed four games. The Blue Jackets (18-17-7) are the defenseman's sixth NHL team in his 15-year career and third in the past three seasons.

He went through training camp in Columbus with a professional tryout offer and started the season playing for the AHL's Cleveland Monsters without an NHL contract. He was signed to a one-year deal Nov. 24 to join the Blue Jackets. Smith earned a role on the third defensive pairing as a dependable defender with grit, contributing two assists while averaging 11:05 in ice time over 15 games.

The speed of his recovery plus the Blue Jackets' injury situation in late March or early April could determine whether Smith's season, and potentially his playing career, is over. Smith moved his family to Columbus prior to the season and helped coach his son's youth team at The Battery Hockey Academy, which is part-owned by former Blue Jackets star Cam Atkinson.

Smith's role for the Jackets will be filled by Jake Christiansen or Egor Zamula, who signed a one-year contract worth \$1 million Jan. 6, after the Pittsburgh Penguins terminated his contract for not reporting to an AHL assignment. Zamula could make his Blue Jackets debut Jan. 8 against the Vegas Golden Knights in the second game of a four-game road trip that started with a 5-2 loss to the San Jose Sharks on Jan. 6 at SAP Center.

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets' Mathieu Olivier fires heavy blows in NHL fight

Dan Aulbach – January 7, 2026

No need for the judges' scorecards: Blue Jackets forward Mathieu Olivier swiftly took down San Jose Sharks forward Ryan Reaves in a heavyweight brawl during a 5-2 Blue Jackets' loss.

In the final minute of the second period, Reaves dropped his gloves on center ice and invited Olivier to spar. After seconds of dancing and weaving, Olivier fired the first punch with his right fist, which caused the two players to grab each other's collars and exchange quick, violent haymakers.

After Reaves' helmet swung off his head from the momentum of the tussle, Olivier threw back a trio of jabs that sent Reaves to the floor in a decisive takedown.

Both players received five-minute major penalties for fighting. On hockeyfights.com, fans voted Olivier the winner 102 votes to none, with two fans voting for a draw. Olivier has been voted 21-0 in fights over the last two years, according to the website.

Almost a year ago, the two had sparred in Toronto when Reaves was with the Maple Leafs, a less dramatic bout between two of the biggest bruisers in the sport.

"It was the first time I've been caught knocked down by that," Reaves told reporters after the game. "...I had to memorize some words. Cotton, honey, arrow I think was there. The months of the year backward. ... Passed with flying colors."

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets' injury woes continue as Marchment placed on IR

Brian Hedger – January 7, 2025

The Blue Jackets' annual injury spate is in full bloom, arriving at the season's midpoint to claim recently acquired forward Mason Marchment.

Marchment, 30, was placed on injured reserve Jan. 7 with an upper-body injury, with the team describing him as week-to-week. He was hurt in the Blue Jackets' 5-4 overtime loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins on Jan. 4 at Nationwide Arena, when they blew a 4-1 lead.

The issue forced Marchment to miss the Jackets' 5-2 loss to the San Jose Sharks on Jan. 6 to start a four-game road trip. The move is retroactive to Jan. 5, but Marchment is expected to miss more than the required minimum stay of seven days for a standard IR stint.

Mikael Pyyhtia, a depth forward who played his rookie season with the Blue Jackets last year, was recalled from the AHL's Cleveland Monsters for his first NHL opportunity of this season. Defenseman Dysin Mayo was placed on waivers for the purpose of being assigned to AHL Cleveland following newly signed defenseman Egor Zamula's arrival.

The Blue Jackets have five players on IR, including Marchment. Along with him are forward Miles Wood (lower body), forward Isac Lundestrom (lower body), defenseman Brendan Smith (lower body) and defenseman Erik Gudbranson (hip). Center Sean Monahan just returned from a four-game absence after his own battle with nagging injuries, but losing Marchment makes that a wash.

Since being acquired Dec. 19 in a trade with the Seattle Kraken, Marchment has racked up seven points in seven games on five goals and two assists to go with a +4 plus/minus. Marchment quickly ascended to the top forward line to play with Adam Fantilli and Kirill Marchenko before the Blue Jackets' coaching staff, led by Dean Evason, went back to scrambling for effective line combinations.

Mathieu Olivier, a power forward, captain Boone Jenner, star defenseman Zach Werenski and second-year defenseman Denton Mateychuk have also missed time this season.

The Columbus Dispatch / Blue Jackets stumble in San Jose: Takeaways

By Brian Hedger – January 7, 2026

The season is steadily slipping away from the Blue Jackets just one game past the midpoint of an 82-game grind.

After dropping their second consecutive game in a 5-2 loss to the San Jose Sharks to start a four-game road trip Jan. 6, they remain last in the Eastern Conference at 43 points and have eight teams to catch for the final playoff spot. Only six points separate them from that position, which is currently held by the Pittsburgh Penguins, but the daunting reality of their situation with 40 games left appears to be creeping into the Jackets' minds.

Disappointment and anger have ceded to dejection during interviews after each new loss, because it's no longer early. The Blue Jackets (18-17-7) are officially on the back nine and need a miraculous charge up the leaderboard to even get a sniff of the postseason.

Nothing they've shown to date provides confidence they can pull that off, and things could get even more dire with three daunting matchups left to conclude this trip against the Vegas Golden Knights, Colorado Avalanche and Utah Mammoth.

Here are the takeaways from the loss to the Sharks:

Breakaways doom Columbus Blue Jackets in loss to San Jose Sharks

Jet Greaves was sharp in net, again, but the Sharks scored two key goals on clean breakaways that his teammates defended poorly.

Pavol Regenda scored the first to give the Sharks a 1-0 lead with 48.4 seconds left in the first period, outracing Adam Fantilli and Zach Werenski for a pass from Alex Wennberg off a 2-on-1 rush that gave him a breakaway from the blue line.

Zack Ostapchuk did the same in the third, giving the Sharks a 3-1 lead off a breakaway with 4:44 left by outracing Denton Mateychuk and Cole Sillinger to a loose puck created by Werenski's errant pass from the San Jose zone. That stood up as the deciding goal after Blue Jackets center Sean Monahan made it 3-2 with a goal on the ensuing shift.

Both Sharks scorers used impressive speed bursts to create space to operate, but Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason felt his team's defensive plays were also an issue.

"Both plays on the breakaways, we're in position to get out and get on top of them," he said, "and we'll have to chat with some people about why we didn't ... our sense of urgency to get back there for that puck in order to at least make it a little more difficult for them to have a clear breakaway. We need to do a better job there."

Columbus Blue Jackets literally paid a price for Alex Wennberg's big night

Wennberg led all scorers with three points on a goal and two assists for the Sharks, his fourth team since the Blue Jackets bought out the remaining three years of his contract Oct. 8, 2020, to make him an unrestricted free agent.

Former Blue Jackets general manager Jarmo Kekalainen made that decision to free up salary-cap space by reducing Wennberg's cap number and salary from Columbus, but NHL buyouts are structured to double the term remaining. Wennberg had three years and \$16.1 million left on his deal, which carried a \$4.9 million cap charge, so the Blue Jackets added three additional seasons of payments to save \$10.7 million in salary and free up \$4.4 million in cap space.

At the time, he was 26 and underperforming his contract. It made sense to buy out the last three years and pay Wennberg to play elsewhere, but he's since become a productive veteran who will play for Sweden in the upcoming 2026 Winter Olympics while forcing the Blue Jackets to count \$891,667 against the cap for his final season on the purchased contract.

In other words, they paid a percentage of what the Sharks' top point producer made in salary to defeat his former team. No wonder NHL GMs are hesitant to buyout multiple years on contracts.

Columbus Blue Jackets fail to capitalize on Mathieu Olivier fight

A heavyweight rematch fight broke out late in the second between power forwards Mathieu Olivier and the Sharks' Ryan Reaves, ending with the former sending the latter to the ice with a couple of overhand rights to the head.

It was a rematch of a fight they had while Reaves was with the Toronto Maple Leafs last season, which also ended with Olivier on top. Olivier has come the NHL's undisputed top fighter over the past two seasons, while Reaves has patrolled the league's heavyweight division for 16 years.

Reaves offered the invitation in Toronto, which Olivier accepted, so he returned the favor in this game. Olivier, hoping to build a spark after Werenski pulled the Blue Jackets within 2-1 late in the second, asked Reaves to fight during the ensuing draw. They dropped the gloves, sized each other up and then proceed to throw rapid fire punches at each other until Olivier ended it.

"He's been doing this for so long, it's very impressive how he's had the career he's had and he's been doing it year after year," Olivier said. "It was an open fight and anyone can get caught. Once I felt like he was going down, I tried to hold him up. He was all right. He came back and looked like nothing ever happened, so I was happy to see that."

Key injuries mounting for Columbus Blue Jackets

Mason Marchment, whom the Blue Jackets recently acquired from the Seattle Kraken, didn't play due to an upper-body injury that happened in a 5-4 overtime loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins on Jan. 4 at Nationwide Arena.

That forced Evason to reconfigure his top line to reunite Dmitry Voronkov with Kirill Marchenko and Monahan, who returned to the lineup after missing four games with his own nagging injury. The Jackets are also missing depth forwards Miles Wood and Isac Lundestrom with lower-body injuries. Depth defensemen Erik Gudbranson and Brendan Smith are also out.

The Blue Jackets' injury report isn't nearly as lengthy as it's been in recent seasons, but it's still a challenge.

The Columbus Dispatch / Blue Jackets drop second in a row to open road trip against Sharks

Brian Hedger – January 7, 2026

The Blue Jackets' spiral to the bottom of the NHL's Eastern Conference continued Jan. 6 at SAP Center with a 4-1 loss to the San Jose Sharks to start a four-game road trip.

Despite getting a strong effort from goalie Jet Greaves (31 saves) in his seventh straight start and outshooting the Sharks 18-9 in the third period, the Jackets dropped their second straight game while struggling to beat Sharks goalie Alex Nedeljkovic (34 saves).

Zach Werenski and Sean Monahan scored the only goals for the Blue Jackets (18-17-7), who pulled within a goal at 3-2 on Monahan's goal late in the third before the Sharks sealed the win on empty-net goals by Mario Ferraro and Macklin Celebrini.

Former Blue Jackets center Alex Wennberg factored into three goals for the Sharks (21-18-3), setting up two with assists and scoring a power-play goal for a 2-0 lead in the second. Pavol Regenda and Zack Ostapchuk scored the other two San Jose goals.

Shots finished even at 36-36 after the Sharks finished the second period with a 17-6 edge and the Blue Jackets finished the third with a nine-shot edge.

Ostapchuk gave the Sharks breathing room on a breakaway goal with 4:44 left in the third, putting them up 3-1, but Monahan made it 3-2 on the next shift to give the Blue Jackets a late push that was quickly stomped out. Ferraro's empty-netter from his own zone made it 4-2, Celebrini's into an empty net made it 5-2 and the Sharks won for the fourth time in the past five games.

The Blue Jackets, who played without forward Mason Marchment (upper-body injury) play the next three games of the trip with three tough matchups Jan. 8 at the Vegas Golden Knights, Jan. 10 at the Colorado Avalanche and Jan. 11 at the Utah Mammoth.