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Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets end upstart season with 6-1 rout of New York Islanders

By Brian Hedger – April 18, 2025

They won't get a chance to keep it going in the postseason, but the Blue Jackets stormed into the offseason April 17 at Nationwide Arena like a playoff team.

Despite dealing with the disappointment of the Montreal Canadiens eliminating them the night before, the Blue Jackets finished with a 6-1 blowout of the New York Islanders. Afterward, they remained on the ice to salute an announced sellout crowd of 18,874 that loudly returned the gesture.

Backed again with a stellar performance in net from rookie goalie Jet Greaves (36 saves), the Blue Jackets (40-33-9) finished the season with 89 points, two behind Montreal for the final playoff spot in the Eastern Conference.

Zach Werenski, Cole Sillinger, Dante Fabbro, Dmitri Voronkov, and Sean Kuraly scored goals for the Jackets, who busted the game open with five goals in the second period. Greaves nearly pitched a third straight shutout, extending his streak of not allowing a goal to 173:38 before Hudson Fasching ended it with 5:12 left to play.

The streak began with a goal by Washington Capitals captain Alex Ovechkin, who scored 1:10 into the Blue Jackets' 4-1 victory April 13 in Washington. Columbus still had playoff life at that point and stayed alive with a 3-0 victory April 15 in Philadelphia.

The dream ended with the Canadiens' victory April 16 over the Carolina Hurricanes, who rested seven lineup regulars, but the Blue Jackets made sure they didn't end a remarkable upstart season as underdogs with a loss.

After a first period without a goal either way, the Blue Jackets blew the door down against the Isles with five unanswered in the second.

Sillinger got it started with his 11th goal of the season just 2:21 into the period, and his tally was followed by goals from Fabbro at 7:43, Voronkov at 10:09, Kuraly at 15:14 and Werenski with 2:33 left to essentially put the game out of reach.

Werenski's goal, which pushed his franchise record for goals by a defenseman in a season to 22, capped a beautiful pass from Sean Monahan off an off-man rush.

Between all those goals, Greaves continued his outstanding play in net to keep New York from scoring. The Jackets were outshot 25-17 in the first two periods and Greaves stopped all 25 to continue a shutout streak that began after Alex Ovechkin scored his 896th career goal.

The streak ended late in the third, courtesy of Fasching's goal, but Fantilli got it back by scoring the Jackets' final goal of the season for his 31st goal of the campaign. The win over the Islanders also the Blue Jackets' franchise record 16th game scoring at least six goals.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets close a season filled with grief, inspiration and hope: 'This has been an incredible run'

By Aaron Portzline – April 18, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets have had seasons that were more successful. They've had other seasons that ended on inspiring, positive notes, even when they didn't qualify for the playoffs.

But the 2024-25 Blue Jackets — this collection of players and coaches, in this fall-to-spring, 82-game marathon — will forever hold a special place in the hearts of their most ardent fans, not to mention the fans from across the hockey and sporting world who adopted them along this journey.

It started in October, when everyone wondered how the Blue Jackets would handle the grief that followed the tragic death of star winger Johnny Gaudreau, who was killed, along with his brother, Matthew, just three weeks before training camp.

It will end on Thursday, before anybody wants to say goodbye.

The Blue Jackets were officially eliminated from Stanley Cup playoff contention on Wednesday when the Montreal Canadiens beat the Carolina Hurricanes 4-2 in Bell Centre, clinching the final spot — the second wild-card spot — in the Eastern Conference.

A furious sprint to the finish — the Blue Jackets have won five in a row in regulation for the first time since 2020 — could only close so much of the gap they created with a 4-11-1 slide from early March into April.

Thus, the tone of Thursday's home (and season) finale has now changed. If the Canadiens had lost in regulation, the Blue Jackets would have hosted the New York Islanders on Thursday in Nationwide Arena with a chance to earn their first playoff berth since the 2019-20 season.

Instead, they were the last NHL club to be eliminated, which is quite something. Most expected they'd be a lottery club.

There will be no playoff angst on Thursday, only celebration. No matter the result, it will be quite the emotional scene with an over-capacity crowd when the final buzzer sounds, almost certainly to chants of "CBJ! CBJ! CBJ!" or perhaps "Johnny Hockey!"

The love affair between these players and this fan base will end with a heartfelt sendoff, with the fans standing and applauding as the players come together at center ice, their sticks lifted in appreciation, as they spin and survey the crowd, some smiling, some crying, some both.

Truth be told, the players and the fans lifted each other all season, beginning with a series of vigils and tributes to Gaudreau.

Who will ever forget the hundreds of fans, holding candles on the steps of Nationwide Arena, or 21-year-old Cole Sillinger speaking through tears to the crowd, then falling into the arms of veteran Sean Kuraly beside the stage?

Or the thousands of Calgary Flames fans who surrounded the Saddledome, where Gaudreau first starred in the NHL?

Will there ever be a more poignant tribute than the faceoff of the home opener in Nationwide, when Sean Monahan — Gaudreau's best friend — tapped the puck to his left, allowing it to come to a rest at a spot on the ice where Gaudreau would have been?

Blue Jackets players, moved by the powerful words of Meredith Gaudreau, Johnny's wife, found a purpose that nobody thought possible this season. Her directive, delivered in her eulogy at the brothers' funeral, was for Blue Jackets players to find joy in being together at the rink, and that they bond like never before as teammates.

Boy, did they.

Veteran players and young players alike could only look at Sean Monahan and marvel. Monahan, who signed as a free agent to play with Gaudreau, his best friend, became the very picture of courage and grace, exuding a vulnerability rarely seen among pro athletes.

Gaudreau was a close friend to many in the room, and they bonded together to push forward ... not through the grief, but with it.

General manager Don Waddell and coach Dean Evason, newcomers to the organization last summer, helped guide the players and coaches through the anguish with empathy and honesty. Evason implored his players to lean on each other and be open with their feelings, even if that meant tears or anger.

And when the games started, Blue Jackets fans, and fans across the league, saw something they couldn't believe.

Behind the sudden smoothness of defenseman Zach Werenski, the Blue Jackets were one of the NHL's most offensively explosive clubs, setting a franchise record for goals scored in a season and scoring six or more goals a whopping 15 times (and counting).

Meanwhile, most of the Blue Jackets' young players — the fruits of their struggles in recent seasons — took major strides forward, not just as good NHL players, but as bona fide difference-makers. Kirill Marchenko, a 24-year-old winger, has 31 goals. Adam Fantilli, a 20-year-old center, has 30.

Adam Fantilli has his first career 30-goal season!!

Fantilli was picked No. 3 overall in the 2023 NHL draft behind Connor Bedard and Leo Carlsson.

The playmaking of Kent Johnson, the power of Dmitry Voronkov, the tenacity of Sillinger, and the quiet precision of defenseman Denton Mateychuk — it was all on display this season. It wasn't until the final weeks of the season that goaltender Jet Greaves was recalled from AHL Cleveland, but he was a major driver of their strong finish that kept the heat on Montreal.

Blue Jackets fans have long been asked to wait for brighter days, but there has never been such a reason for optimism as there is now.

On Wednesday, after the Blue Jackets held an optional practice and before the Montreal game settled the standings, Werenski talked about the enormous growth that occurred this season and the dividends these meaningful games will pay.

"Either way, this has been an incredible run here and an incredible season," Werenski said. "We're going to be a better team, no matter what the outcome is."

Waddell is expected to be busy this summer. There are tough decisions to make, but there will be some aggressive moves, especially on defense and in goal. But Waddell has said that this season has shown him there's a much better foundation in place than many would have expected.

As much as fans are anticipating a bright future, there's a reluctance to let this season go. It will not end with a playoff berth, but the memories — the tribute these players, coaches and fans paid to No. 13 — will endure forever.

[BlueJackets.com / Blue Jackets cruise past Islanders, get 6th straight victory to end season](#)

By Craig Merz – April 18, 2025

COLUMBUS -- Jet Greaves made 36 saves to help the Columbus Blue Jackets win their sixth straight game, 6-1 against the New York Islanders at Nationwide Arena on Thursday.

It was the season finale for each team.

Cole Sillinger and Zach Werenski each had a goal and an assist for the Blue Jackets (40-33-9), who scored five goals in the second period. Greaves won his fifth straight start since being an emergency recall from Cleveland of the American Hockey League on April 10 because of an upper-body injury to Elvis Merzlikins.

"It's been a lot of good experience for me, playing this many games in a short stretch," Greaves said. "I've learned a lot from that aspect of it. It's just been a fun experience to be playing meaningful games this time of year in the NHL. You have to play in these games to gain that experience."

Columbus was the final team eliminated from Stanley Cup Playoff contention when the Montreal Canadiens clinched the second wild card from the Eastern Conference with a 4-2 win against the Carolina Hurricanes on Wednesday.

"This is the closest we've been and not made it since I've been here," Werenski said. "Definitely disappointing waking up today. We knew it'd be special tonight. It was pretty emotional here in a lot of ways. No better way to end up than in front of our fans here tonight."

Hudson Fasching scored, and Marcus Hogberg made 20 saves for the Islanders (35-35-12), who already had been eliminated from playoff contention.

"Games like this, it's about love of the game and pride and that's what you want to see," New York coach Patrick Roy said. "We gave too many chances and obviously Marcus might not have had his best night."

"So, put it all together. You have to be there for your goalie when he's not on top of his night."

Sillinger put Columbus in front 1-0 with an unassisted goal at 2:21 of the second. He stole the puck in the offensive zone and scored with a wrist shot from the left face-off circle.

Dante Fabbro made it 2-0 at 7:43 with his second goal in as many games. Jordan Harris kept the puck in the zone and passed to Fabbro for a wrist shot from near the right wall.

"If you play for the Columbus Blue Jackets, you play team first," Columbus coach Dean Evason said. "You play for each other. You play hard every night. They play the right way every night, and they play hard, and that's how we're going to continue to play."

Dmitri Voronkov extended the lead to 3-0 at 10:09 after a Werenski pass deflected off the stick of Islanders defenseman Scott Perunovich and then Voronkov's skate. Werenski got his 59th assist to tie Artemi Panarin for the most in a season by a Blue Jackets player (2018-19).

"We made a huge step forward with the team, almost made the playoffs, and feel like this season was successful from that standpoint," Voronkov said. "We have young players. We have a group of people who are older, but it's never boring. It's a lot of fun in the locker room."

Sean Kuraly made it 4-0 at 15:14, scoring from the right circle on the rush.

Werenski then pushed the lead to 5-0 at 17:27 on a 3-on-1, scoring from low in the right circle off a Sean Monahan pass.

Fasching cut it to 5-1 from the top of the slot at 14:48 of the third period to end Greaves' shutout streak at 173:38. He was going for his second straight shutout and third in four games.

"He moved really well tonight," Islanders captain Anders Lee said. "He got across his crease really well and he was just really solid -- not a lot of rebounds. We tested him a few times, and he was just there, solid. Not too many secondary chances and for the most part they played they played pretty clean in front of him."

Adam Fantilli extended his goal streak to four games (six goals) at 18:37 for the 6-1 final.

New York went 1-3-2 in its final six games.

"Everyone has to go home and get themselves right for the fall and get ready to go after this thing again," Lee said.

NOTES: The Blue Jackets had scored 15 straight goals at home over three games before Fasching scored. ... Columbus forward Jack Williams played 11:09 and was 5-for-11 on face-offs in his NHL debut. He was signed as a free agent from Northeastern University on March 25. ... Islanders forward Kyle Palmieri had two shots on goal and played 17:30 in his 900th NHL game, and New York forward Simon Holmstrom played 14:56 with three blocked shots in his 200th.

[BlueJackets.com / Winning Thoughts: Blue Jackets finish season strong](#)

By Garrison McDaniel – April 18, 2025

BLUE JACKETS 6, ISLANDERS 1

1. Zach Werenski earned his 82nd point to cap off his potential Norris Trophy campaign.

With his goal and assist in the second period, the standout defenseman etched his name in Blue Jackets history again.

Only one player in the history of the Blue Jackets had reached 82 points in a season, with Artemi Panarin doing so during both the 2017-18 and 2018-19 seasons. Now, Werenski joins him on that exclusive list.

"He's up in the play, in front of the net, and you're looking that way, and then you look back into our zone and he's standing in front of our net," head coach Dean Evason said. "He scores points. No question, we need points, we need goals, we need offense to win hockey games. But you have to keep it out of your net too and he's committed to do that. He's been a big part of our team."

His play has been consistent throughout the season, through his historic 22-game home point streak to his six-game point streak to end this season (3-5-8). Just the ninth NHL defenseman since 1996-97 to earn 80-plus points in a season, Werenski has been much of the reason Columbus earned the right to have playoff implications through game 81. Placing second in the NHL in both goals and points among defensemen, he will now see where he lands in the Norris discussion.

Werenski said he is proud of how the group fought through adversity throughout the season and added it was good to get one final win at Nationwide for the team, and the fans.

"Our core is going to be intact for a while," Werenski said. "But there's always guys moving in, guys moving out. I think just to enjoy tonight in front of our fans, get a big win, play loose, play relaxed and just play with each other, I think it was super special. One of those games you always remember."

2. Jet Greaves ended the season with a fifth straight win.

After being the talk of the NHL coming down the stretch thanks to his impressive play, Greaves earned one last win for the Blue Jackets, stopping 36 of 37 shots against the Islanders.

Since his call-up on April 10, he ended the season with a 5-0-0 record, two shutouts, a .975 save percentage and a 0.80 goals-against average. His late-season "Linsanity" run brought the Blue Jackets to the brink of the playoffs and showed his future is bright at the NHL level.

"It's been fun to watch him the last week or whatever," Werenski said. "He's been a special player and special person. I think just the way he approaches the game, the way he works, it's one of the best I've seen."

His teammates and coaches have shown their support after each game the past week. In this game, the fans jumped on board as they started "Jet, Jet, Jet" chants as the goaltender made key saves throughout the game.

"It was so cool," Greaves said. "You never expect those types of situations, but I'm just so grateful to be in those situations. The fans have supported this team so much all year through everything that's gone on, which it's just been so special to see that. We're just so grateful to play in front of these fans and have that support."

3. A five-goal second period earned the Blue Jackets their 40th win of the season.

For the seventh time in franchise history, Columbus reached the 40-win mark. That milestone was reached on the back of a second period where five different Blue Jackets put the puck in the net (Cole Sillinger, Dante Fabbro, Dmitri Voronkov, Sean Kuraly and Werenski). It was just the fourth time in team history the Blue Jackets had a period in which they scored five times, the last coming in the third period against Ottawa on New Year's Eve in 2018.

Home ice was a boost for the Blue Jackets all season, and the fans had the team's back all year. It was fitting for the Blue Jackets to reward them with one last six-goal performance, the 13th of the season at home and 16th overall.

"This fan base and this group here, we've gone through a lot together over the years," Werenski said. "It feels like one big family. ... I think tonight was extra special. I think this year was extra special in a lot of ways. I think they're the best fans in the league. I know it's the only thing I know, but I love playing here, and our whole group does as well."

The Blue Jackets have grown accustomed to scoring and winning at home this season, as their 161 goals on home ice is the most in the league as well as a franchise record. They also tied their team record for most points (57) in home games in a season.

"The fans don't change," Evason said. "They do the exact same thing every night. They are vibrant. They're jacked. They get us going. They know when to pick us up. It's been a family relationship with the fans, and hopefully we're giving back to them, and in the future, we want to still be playing so that they can cheer in the playoffs."

The Hockey News / What's Next For The Blue Jackets After Missing The Playoffs?

By Spencer Lazary – April 18, 2025

With the Columbus Blue Jackets now officially eliminated from playoff contention, they have one last game to play to round out the season.

After tonight's matchup with the New York Islanders, their focus will shift to the offseason and how the management group, led by GM Don Waddell, will work to improve the roster.

There are a few key questions that need to be addressed.

The first is the future of Ivan Provorov. Do they re-sign him, or let him walk to free agency and look to add someone else at a lower cap hit?

Secondly, there are potential buyout candidates. With all the talk about a complete overhaul in goal, Elvis Merzlikins becomes a name to watch. Another one is Damon Severson, who's signed long-term at a \$6.25 million cap hit.

There are also a number of pending free agents the team needs to make decisions on:

- Luke Kunin
- Sean Kuraly
- Christian Fischer
- Justin Danforth
- James van Riemsdyk
- Kevin Labanc
- Dante Fabbro
- Jack Johnson

Fabbro is someone they'll likely look to re-sign. He's fit well alongside Zach Werenski and could come in at a reasonable AAV. Kunin is another interesting name given his connection to head coach Dean Evason. And Danforth is a player who could get attention on the open market, but Columbus may make a strong push to keep him.

As for the rest, time will tell. Some may explore other opportunities. Veterans like van Riemsdyk and Johnson could look for a chance to chase a Stanley Cup. Maybe JVR ends up in Washington to play with his brother Trevor?

On the restricted free agent side, the list includes:

- Dmitri Voronkov
- Jordan Harris
- Daniil Tarasov

If I had to guess, Tarasov might be left unqualified, making him a UFA. As for Voronkov and Harris, both are likely to be qualified and re-signed.

Then there's the draft and free agency. After tonight's game, we'll know more about where the Blue Jackets will pick in the 2025 NHL Draft. If they end up in the 10-15 range, I'd expect them to keep the pick and draft a top-end prospect.

In free agency, they have the cap space to make a splash. Who's available and interested will be the big question. A name like Brock Boeser stands out—he's reportedly heading to market and might be looking for a new opportunity.

As I mentioned in a previous article, Boeser might benefit from getting out of a high-pressure market like Vancouver. Columbus has a loyal following, but it's not the same intensity as a Canadian market, which might be what he needs.

Another name to watch is Nikolaj Ehlers, who could be on his way out of Winnipeg. There's a chance he re-signs, but if he hits the market, the Blue Jackets should inquire. Like Boeser, he's a skilled goal scorer—something Columbus could use to get over the hump and into the playoffs.

Both players could command deals in the five-to-seven-year range with AAVs around \$7.5–8.5 million, which Columbus can easily afford to sign one of them while still letting its younger core develop.

The next two months will be all about the 2025 Stanley Cup Playoffs. Unfortunately, the Blue Jackets won't be part of it. But before turning the page completely, fans should take a minute to appreciate the effort this team put in. They dealt with plenty of adversity and still battled right to the end.

They'll be back next season—stronger, deeper, and aiming for the 2026 Stanley Cup Playoffs.

The Hockey News / Fantilli & Marchenko Achieve Rare Feat Not Seen Since 2015-16

By Spencer Lazary – April 18, 2025

When Adam Fantilli scored his 30th goal of the season the other night, it was a feat of its own. It was his first time hitting the 30-goal mark and only the ninth time a player has done so in Columbus Blue Jackets history — the 17th occurrence overall.

But it was more than just an individual milestone. Fantilli's goal also marked only the second time in franchise history that two players have hit 30 goals in the same season. This year, Fantilli sits at 30, and Kirill Marchenko has 31.

The last time that happened? Back in 2015-16, when Boone Jenner and Brandon Saad finished with 30 and 31 goals, respectively.

If neither Fantilli nor Marchenko scores tonight, they'll match that exact total from 2015-16.

As for Fantilli, he also becomes just the second-youngest player in Blue Jackets history to score 30 goals — behind only the legend himself, Rick Nash, who did it in 2003-04 at just 19 years old. Nash finished that year with 41 goals, a number that's within reach for Fantilli in the coming seasons. He's already shown elite goal-scoring ability, and hitting 40 seems like a real possibility.

If Fantilli were to score more than 41 in a season, he'd set a new franchise record. That mark — 41 goals — is currently shared by Nash and Cam Atkinson, who hit it in 2018-19.

At just 20 years old, Fantilli has all the tools to become the best goal scorer in franchise history. And for Blue Jackets fans, that's something to be excited about for years to come.

The Hockey Writers / The Inspiring Journey of Jet Greaves to the NHL

By Mark Scheig – April 18, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets came within one out-of-town game from playing Game 82 at home with a playoff spot on the line. Although the Montreal Canadiens punched their ticket to the Stanley Cup Playoffs with a 4-2 win over the Carolina Hurricanes on Wednesday night, the Blue Jackets still have a lot to be proud of especially the way they played down the stretch.

At the center of that Blue Jackets' surge is goaltender Jet Greaves. Elvis Merzlikins suffered an upper-body injury sometime after the Blue Jackets' 5-2 win over the Ottawa Senators on April 8. Merzlikins made 33 saves and was named second star of the game. Greaves was then called up on an emergency basis. But instead of being the backup to Daniil Tarasov, he got thrust into the starting role. He hasn't looked back since.

Between AHL Cleveland and the Blue Jackets, Greaves went 5-0-0 in the span of seven days. This included playing four games in five nights.

In each case, Greaves was helping his team try to clinch a postseason berth. He has been everything and so much more for a Blue Jackets' team that needed a spark after being shutout in a two-game set in Ontario against the Maple Leafs and Senators.

Greaves' rise had many wondering who he is and where he came from. The Cambridge, Ontario native has taken an unconventional path to the NHL.

And yet, Greaves has overcome every obstacle thrown his way to become one of the best late-season stories in the NHL. In the beginning however, he had to beg his parents to play goalie.

Greaves' Goaltending Desire

That's right. Greaves literally had to beg his father to let him be a goalie. His desire for this started at the age of two or three. His father Gerry started playing goalie when he was in his thirties.

Jet, which is actually his middle name, took after his father's lead and started taking an interest in being a goalie from there. As he was getting older, he and his brother Kai would play mini sticks with each other. They'd also watch the World Junior Championships together.

One player in particular stood out to Greaves. This led to him begging for the chance to be a goalie himself.

"When we were watching, and I think it was the 2007 World Juniors when Carey Price was a goalie for Team Canada and right before the gold medal game, they had a little feature on him just like walking around and I think it was in Sweden. I just thought it was so cool just like the way he carried himself. And then watching that game. He was awesome. Canada won in a shootout (2-1 over Team USA) and after that I kind of was always playing goalie and mini sticks with my brother and I was just begging my parents let me play goalie."

At first, Greaves' father wanted Jet to play another position. But then an opportunity came for him to finally get his chance to play goalie. That's because there was no one around who wanted to do it.

"They were okay with me playing goalie," Greaves said. "But my dad had always said he wanted me to play 'player' until I was 10 so I could just skate better and like learn the game better. And then I was just begging them like, let me play goalie, let me play goalie. And then it was like right before the first year of rep hockey, which was when we were seven maybe. One of my best friends at the time, still one of my

best friends to this day, he was a goalie at the time. I was a defenseman and he decided he wanted to play defense for that first year. There weren't any goalies, so my dad finally let me play goalie. I went to the tryouts and I was the only goalie there, so that was the start of it."

Greaves eventually worked his way up the ranks close to home. He played for the Cambridge Hawks U15 and U16 teams. He spent time with the Guelph Hurricanes of the GOJHL. Then he got the honor of hearing his name at the 2017 OHL Priority Selection.

Greaves was taken in the third round of the OHL Draft by the Barrie Colts. He made his debut for the Colts in the 2018-19 season posting an impressive .911 save percentage in 27 games. Although his numbers dipped the following season, he was on the radar of NHL teams. He was ranked by NHL Central Scouting in advance of the 2019 NHL Draft.

Hawerchuk's Influence

Greaves was coached in Barrie by the late, great Dale Hawerchuk. When the news of Hawerchuk's passing came out, it devastated many in the hockey world.

Hawerchuk lost his battle with cancer in August 2020. Greaves couldn't help but smile when thinking about his old coach. The impact Hawerchuk had on Greaves was a massive one. How much impact was there?

"So much," Greaves said. "He was just an amazing person to be around. He taught me so much about being a pro and just how to approach the game, learning the game and just appreciating it, enjoying it, coming to work every day. He was just such a great person, so fun to be around and had so many jokes. I have so many fond memories of him. He was an amazing player. Even still when he was coaching us, obviously long after he retired, he would play three on three and stuff like that. He was always the best player of the ice, so he was still so good. I was just super grateful to get to know him. We miss him a lot. He was just an awesome person."

Overcoming Covid & the Erie Prospect's Tournament

Greaves went without hearing his name called at that draft or any draft for that matter. In 2019-20, he posted a goals-against of almost four and a save percentage of .888. It was fair to wonder if he'd get his chance to make it to the NHL.

Then the world stopped thanks to the Covid-19 Pandemic. Like many others in his age range, Greaves lost an entire year of playing time with leagues shut down.

In true Greaves fashion, Jet made the most of that downtime. Not only did he get to spend more time with his family, his father built the brothers a rink in their back yard.

"I remember I was just out there on our backyard ice. My dad built a backyard rink. We helped him out," Greaves said. "My brother and I were just skating out there. We were skating there every day. That was so much fun just enjoying the game. I feel like that's what it always comes back to. We were on the ponds with our buddies just enjoying the game so much. So it was fun to have that time."

Then in the midst of finding a solution to not being able to play competitive hockey, one of Greaves' friends stepped up with an idea. Thanks to the help of several OHL players, that idea became the Erie Prospect's Tournament.

While Canada had more restrictions during the onset of Covid, the United States had some looser restrictions. This allowed Andrew Perrott and others to come up with the idea of the prospect's tournament.

Over the course of a few days in the summer, OHL players came to Erie to play in a tournament. This was comprised of players looking for their next opportunity. Greaves played in that tournament. Others like Logan Mailloux also made the trip.

Perrott's idea turned out to be a game changer for some. Scouts from 30 teams came to Erie for this event and got to watch several players in a competitive setting. The goal was to give these players extra exposure they may not have gotten otherwise.

For Greaves, this tournament ultimately helped him land his first pro contract. The Cleveland Monsters signed Greaves in July 2021 after not hearing his name at the draft. The Blue Jackets already knew who he was at that point.

Greaves was at Blue Jackets development camp before. And then at the Erie Tournament, Brad Thiessen was scouting and got a glimpse of Greaves again. They spoke in Erie. Shortly after the draft, the pro contract was signed.

Proper Development

Then in February 2022, Greaves signed an entry-level deal with the Blue Jackets. Although he appeared in just 10 NHL games between 2022-23 and 2023-24, he made a name for himself with the Monsters appearing in 89 regular season games and another 13 playoff games. He was one overtime away from helping the Monsters completed a comeback from 3-0 down against the eventual champion Hershey Bears.

This season, Greaves has done more of the same. He's appeared in 40 games in the AHL and 10 more in the NHL going into Thursday's regular-season finale against the New York Islanders.

Greaves is grateful for all the support he's received in his time with the Monsters. He understands that he didn't need to be rushed to the NHL. That extra time and preparation has him in position to succeed in the highest of stakes.

"It's been so helpful. I feel like I've been fortunate to have so much valuable experience there in Cleveland," Greaves said. "I've been able to play so many games over the last few years and have just a lot of different situations. Obviously those playoff games and just experiencing the ups and downs. I feel like I've learned a lot that's helped me and prepared me for these situations now. And I've also been really fortunate to just have a lot of really good people around me there. Whether it was with Brad Thiessen who's been our goalie coach there. He is taught me so much from his own experiences and Vogs (Trent Vogelhuber) and the whole coaching staff there. And then whether it was Manny Legace talking or with Nick (Backstrom) now, I feel like I've just been with a lot of people that have helped me to learn a lot and prepare me through this whole process."

Greaves Brings the Calm

Ask anybody about the impact that Greaves has brought to the Blue Jackets. The first thing most anyone will say is just how calm he is in the net. No matter how big or small the moment is, he brings a level of calmness and comfort to his teammates.

Being down 3-0 to Hershey didn't faze him. His play improved as the series went on. Being in the NHL playing four games in five days didn't faze him either. He has a 0.75 goals-against average and two shutouts in elimination games for the Blue Jackets.

Where did he get this level of calm from? Greaves says it's not just one thing.

"I think it's a little bit of everything. It's kind of just my natural disposition. I feel like this is just how I am day-to-day. I feel like that's just kind of how I'm comfortable being. I think it's also something that I've

learned over time and just through different experiences. You learn how you want to handle yourself in them. I think another big thing that I always come back to with that type of stuff is my faith. I think just trusting in God's plan for me and for us and his timing instead of it's not about when I think things should happen or trying to do everything on my own, but just trusting in Him and leaning on Him I think helps me a lot as well."

Ultimate Motivation

Greaves could easily be motivated by being passed over at NHL Drafts. It was always his desire to get to the NHL no matter what path he took. But for him, it's all about joy.

"For me growing up, I wanted to play in the NHL and I wanted to win hockey games at the highest level. I don't feel like that ever really changed. So I think not being drafted I guess is a part in the middle of that journey. But for me, it's always just been about enjoying playing the game and just trying to be the best I can be wherever I am, in whatever situation that is and just give my best every day."

Greaves' journey to the NHL is inspiring on many levels. It proves anyone can take the road less travelled. It shows that just because a team doesn't draft someone doesn't mean they still can't find their way to the NHL.

Greaves handled every situation being grateful for every opportunity while making sure joy was a part of it. The smile he wears daily is a sign of that joy he speaks of.

So who is Jet Greaves? He is the fun-loving, upbeat goalie for the Columbus Blue Jackets who has brought them to the cusp of the playoffs thanks to his super-calm demeanor.

Thanks to Greaves' long journey to the NHL, nothing fazes him whatsoever.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Defeat Islanders to End Season on High Note

By Mark Scheig – April 18, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets swallowed a bitter pill on Wednesday night when the Montreal Canadiens clinched the final playoff spot in the Eastern Conference. It made ending the season with a win that much more important for themselves and their fans. They did just that.

Cole Sillinger and Zach Werenski each had a goal and an assist in Game 82 while Jet Greaves continued his mastery with 36 saves to help the Blue Jackets to a 6-1 win to end their 2024-25 season.

The story of this game wasn't the game itself. It was the celebration of a team and its fans throughout the night.

Game Recap

Despite the game not having any meaning, Nationwide Arena had yet another sellout. The announced attendance was 18,874. The building was loud from the start. It got even louder in the second.

The Blue Jackets scored five times against goaltender Marcus Hogberg. Sillinger opened the scoring. Dante Fabbro, Dmitri Voronkov and Sean Kuraly added goals to make it 4-0.

Then off a nice feed from Sean Monahan, Werenski made it 5-0 after the second period. The 1-1-2 night for Werenski meant finishing the season with 82 points in 81 games played. Only Artemi Panarin has recorded more points in a single season.

The two teams traded goals in the third. Hudson Fasching broke Greaves' shutout to make it 5-1. Adam Fantilli scored the Blue Jackets' last goal of the season with just 1:23 left in the game for the 6-1 final.

Dean Evason was holding back tears postgame. It was an emotional night for everyone involved, from the players to the fans. They had one last chance to gather together for a game. It seemed no one wanted it to end either. It's a mix of sadness along with the disappointment of just missing out on the playoffs. There is still a lot to be proud of.

In the third period, fans chanted both "CBJ" and "Johnny Hockey." Once the game was over, they played "Johnny Be Good" with the players going around acknowledging the fans. This is a special team that won't soon be forgotten.

As well, the Blue Jackets all made sure to greet Matt Martin playing his last game with the Islanders after the final horn. It was another example of class being shown.

Evason said that Gaudreau will always be with them as long as he's there. "He will not leave our dressing room as long as I'm here. He will be in there and he'll be a presence and he'll help us win hockey games and he'll hopefully get us to where we want to be."

Werenski said that the team and the fans are like one big family. "The fan base and this group in here, we've gone through a lot together over the years and yeah, it feels like we're one big family. It's special playing in front of them. Tonight was extra special...I think they're the best fans in the league."

Evason did say that both Greaves and Denton Mateychuk are heading to Cleveland to help the Monsters with their playoff push. They need just 2 points in their final two games or they can have Belleville lose two points to clinch their spot in the playoffs.

Exit interviews are next for the Blue Jackets. They will meet with the media Friday before they go off for the offseason. Stay tuned to the Hockey Writers as we will have full coverage from Nationwide Arena.

1st Ohio Battery / Game Day #82: Blue Jackets Unforgettable Season Comes To An End Thursday Night

By Ed Francis – April 18, 2025

One of the most memorable seasons in team history comes to an end Thursday night the Columbus Blue Jackets face off against the New York Islanders in game #82.

The Blue Jackets were eliminated from playoff contention Wednesday night with the Montreal Canadiens 4-2 victory of a Carolina Hurricanes team that rested their top players.

With a different result, the Blue Jackets would have been in need of a regulation win Thursday night to earn what, at the beginning of the season, seemed all but impossible: a spot in the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

Instead, the game is a chance for the Blue Jackets and what will surely be a full house at Nationwide Arena to show love and appreciation for each other in a season that started with tragedy, then morphed into one of inspiration.

Here's what else to know when the Blue Jackets end a stories 2024-25 campaign:

- **JACK WILLIAMS DEBUT**

Jack Williams makes his NHL debut, three weeks after the club signed the Northeastern University captain to a two-year entry level contract. Williams had 94 points (39 goals, 55 assists) in 106 collegiate games. When the club announced the signing, President of Hockey Operations and General Manager Don Waddell said Williams is a "skilled, hard-working player with a passion for the game, who was a very productive player and leader during his time at Northeastern." Waddell also added that the club thinks the 23-year-old has "great potential." He'll slot in on the fourth line, centering Sean Kuraly and Justin Danforth.

- **MILESTONE POTENTIAL**

Boone Jenner is one goal shy of 200 for his NHL career. Sean Monahan (19 goals) and Mathieu Olivier (18) both have a chance to become the 6th (perhaps 7th) Blue Jacket to register 20 goals on the season; that would be a franchise record.

Additionally, a win would give the Blue Jackets 57 points at home this season; that would tie the 2016-17 season for the most in team history. It would also mean they finish with just ten regulation losses at home. Only six teams have fewer, three of which have nine.

- **JET IN NET**

Jet Greaves earns the start in Columbus' final game of the season. What more can be said about the NHL's First Star of the week last week? His 29-save shutout Tuesday night was his second shutout in three games and made it 119 saves on 122 shots since being recalled from the AHL's Cleveland Monsters last week. In ten total games this season with the Blue Jackets, Greaves is 6-2-2 with an incredible .934 save percentage and 2.00 goals against average. Ten games doesn't qualify Greaves for league-leader eligibility, but if it did, he would rank 1st in save percentage (Anthony Stolarz, TOR, .926) and tied for 1st in goals against average (Connor Hellebuyck, WPG).

- **LINEUPS CHANGES & PROJECTIONS:**

Williams insertion into the lineup means a banged-up Zach Aston-Reese will come out, but no

1st Ohio Battery / CBJ 6, NYI 1: Blue Jackets End 2024-25 Season With Emotional Victory

By Ed Francis – April 18, 2025

That's how you end a season.

The Columbus Blue Jackets scored five times in a second period offensive frenzy Thursday night, easily defeating the New York Islanders 6-1 to end the 2024-25 season on a six-game winning streak.

After a scoreless first period, Cole Sillinger gave the Blue Jackets a 1-0 lead just over two minutes into the frame on a fantastic individual effort.

Dante Fabbro added to the lead at the 7:43 mark, the first of four more goals Columbus would score in a span of 9 minutes, 44 seconds.

Columbus added to their lead and made it 3-0 on a Dmitri Voronkov goal, again bringing the more-than-sellout crowd to its feet.

Zach Werenski had the primary assist on the goal, tying him with Artemi Panarin for the second-most points in a season in franchise history.

After a Sean Kuraly goal made it 4-0, Werenski would get into the scoring column again — this time with a goal that extended Columbus' lead to 5-0.

The five-goal period was Columbus' highest scoring period of the season.

The Islanders only goal of the game came with just over minutes left.

Adam Fantilli responded with his 31st goal of the season in the final two minutes of the season. He finishes tied with Kirill Marchenko for the team lead in goals.

All that scoring, and the First Star of the Game was — yet again — Jet Greaves. Continuing to take the league by storm, Greaves stopped 36 of 37 shots to earn his fifth straight win in net.

In his five starts, Greaves stopped 156 of the 160 shots he faced; a save percentage of .975. Chants of "Jet! Jet! Jet!" reigned down multiple times throughout the night, something the goaltender said after the game that he's never heard on that scale before.

On and off the ice, the night was a celebration of the team's remarkable run.

On the ice, it began with forecasts of finishing at the bottom of the NHL standings and one that saw them in the playoff hunt until a Montreal Canadiens win on the penultimate night of the season officially eliminated the Blue Jackets.

Off the ice, it was a season that brought a team and a community closer together than ever after the sudden death of Johnny Gaudreau just three weeks before camp opened.

Gaudreau's jersey hung in the dressing room all season long.

Head coach Dean Evason said the end of the season will not be the end of that.

"He will not leave our dressing room as long as I'm here," said Evason. "He will be in there and he'll be a presence and he'll help us win hockey games and he'll hopefully get us to where we want to be and that's to win a Stanley Cup."

Werenski understood the important of what the night meant.

"The fan base and this group in here, we've gone through a lot together over the years," said Werenski. "It feels like we're one big family. It's special playing in front of them."

"Tonight was extra special."

Here's how the Blue Jackets wrapped up the that extra special season:

1st Period:

For the second straight game, Columbus heads into the first intermission at 0-0. Greaves stopped all ten shots he faced in what an evenly-played opening twenty minutes: the Islanders had a slight 21-20 advantage in shot attempts and lead 10-6 in shots on goal, but it was the Blue Jackets who had the better opportunities: a 9-6 advantage in scoring chances and three of the four high-danger chances in the period. Expected goals came out in Columbus' favor, 0.81 to 0.66.

2nd Period:

(2:21 – CBJ Goal): Sillinger gives the Blue Jackets a 1-0 lead with a fantastic individual effort. It starts with him disrupting the Islanders working to move the puck around in their own zone in an effort to clear. He then steals the puck just before New York can work it out of their zone. Sillinger then skates in and fires a wrister past Hogberg to give Columbus a lead.

(7:43 – CBJ Goal): Fabbro makes it 2-0 on a sailing shot from just outside the circle for goals in back-to-back games from the soon-to-be UFA defenseman. The puck bounces around in the low slot for a bit and gets ping-ponged out on its way out of the zone until Jordan Harris makes a nice play to keep it in. He pushes it over to Fabbro, whose floater finds the back of the net.

(7:43 – CBJ Goal): Columbus wins a faceoff in the New York zone and quickly shuffle the puck around. Werenski has it near the left dot and throws it into the crease, where Voronkov is waiting to tip it home and make it 3-0 Columbus. The man known as "Big Boss" has developed a knack for this all season and does it a final time in the 2024-25 campaign.

(15:14 – CBJ Goal): In what well could be his last game with the Blue Jackets, Kuraly gets his 6th of the season (and 40th as a Jacket) on a sequence that starts with Columbus winning a faceoff in their own zone. They quickly move up the ice, with Kuraly collected the puck near center ice and nicely settling it down as he advances on the rush. He beats Hogberg from near the dot to make it 4-0 Columbus.

(17:27 – CBJ Goal): The fifth and final Columbus goal of a wild second period comes off the stick of Werenski, giving the Blue Jackets a 5-0 lead. They move up the ice on a 3-on-1 break. Sean Monahan waits, waits, waits, then moves the puck over to an awaiting Werenski at just the right time and it's an elementary from there. Z easily beats Hogberg for his 23rd goal of the season to add to his franchise record of goals from a defenseman.

3rd Period:

(14:48 – NYI Goal): Islanders score their only goal of the game and afterwards, chants of "Jet! Jet! Jet!" reign down from the over-capacity crowd, showing their appreciation for his efforts.

(18:37 – CBJ Goal): The final goal of the Blue Jackets season is Fantilli's 31st of the season. He helps himself by swiping the puck away as the Islanders are working towards a clear, with James van Riemsdyk briefly collecting the puck before an immediate touch-pass back to Fantilli. He shoots, scores, and gives Columbus a 6+ goal game for the 16th time this season.

Stat Chat:

- The season concludes on Columbus' second six-game winning streak of the season. The Blue Jackets outscored their opponents 28-6 in those games. Additionally, all six wins were in regulation, which ties a franchise record for longest regulation win streak. They did it during the 16-game winning streak in 2016-17, and then again just a few weeks before the Covid stoppage in Jan. of 2020.
- This was Columbus' 16th game this season scoring six goals or more, further adding to their franchise record. That's 20% of all games they played this season. They had five goals nine times this season, meaning the Blue Jackets scored 5+ goals in 30% of their games this season.
- Jack Williams had 14 shifts and played 11:09 in his NHL debut, nearly collecting an assist late in the third period.

Up Next: That's all, folks.

The Athletic / Artemi Panarin, MSG reached settlements with Rangers employee after sexual assault allegation

By Katie Strang – April 18, 2025

New York Rangers forward Artemi Panarin and Madison Square Garden Sports, the company that owns the team, paid financial settlements to a Rangers employee last year after she alleged that Panarin sexually assaulted her, according to an NHL source who reviewed the settlements and three others briefed about them.

That woman left the organization in August 2024 upon reaching the agreements, which included non-disclosure and no admission of wrongdoing clauses. One settlement agreement was reached with Panarin and another was with MSG Sports. Several people in the organization were aware of the agreements and the circumstances surrounding her departure, and some of those individuals spoke to The Athletic on the condition that their identity not be disclosed because they still work in hockey.

The alleged assault occurred in December 2023 during a Rangers road trip, according to two Rangers sources briefed about the allegation. Panarin and the woman, who was a regular part of the team's traveling party, were at a postgame gathering at a hotel with about a dozen other players and staff members. Panarin allegedly took her phone and said he would only give it back if she retrieved it from his hotel room, the sources said. When she went to his hotel room to retrieve her device, Panarin pinned her down on the bed. She pushed him off, retrieved her phone and left the room.

Neither Panarin nor his agent responded to a request seeking comment. An MSG Sports spokesperson said in an emailed statement: "The matter has been resolved." The woman — The Athletic does not typically identify alleged victims of sexual misconduct without their consent — said only: "The matter has been resolved."

The NHL wrote in an email: "The Club retained an outside law firm to conduct an independent investigation, which the League was fully apprised of. We consider the matter closed."

There is no record of the woman reporting the incident to law enforcement. She also did not immediately alert the team. But about three months after the alleged sexual assault, she informed the team as part of an investigation into a separate incident. The team learned that the woman, whose anxiety around airplane travel was well known among team members, had shared her anti-anxiety medicine with a player who had the same issue. She was placed on paid leave pending the outcome of that investigation.

The female employee felt she was treated unfairly, according to team sources, and she then informed the team about the alleged assault.

While the woman was still on leave, an executive for MSG Sports convened a virtual meeting that included multiple Rangers office staff members and a human resources representative. Attendees were told not to talk to people about the woman's situation, according to multiple people on the call. The attorney "completely reamed us out," according to one attendee, because people were openly talking about the woman's absence.

One person who worked for the Rangers at the time the woman was placed on leave said the suddenness of the woman's exit made it a topic of conversation within the organization: "It's not a secret at all anytime someone vanishes."

In August, MSG and Panarin reached settlement agreements with the woman, and her employment with the team ended.

At the time of the woman's disclosure, Panarin led the team with 43 goals and 102 points and was in contention for the Hart Trophy, awarded to the NHL's most valuable player to his team. The 33-year-old Korkino, Russia native has led the team in scoring each year since joining the club as a free agent in 2019.

The league and Rangers declined to say whether Panarin was subject to any discipline.

In February 2021, Panarin took a leave of absence from the team for personal reasons following claims printed in a Russian newspaper that he was involved in a physical altercation with a woman in Latvia in 2021. The Rangers denied the allegations, calling them an "intimidation tactic" used against him in response to his comments on Russian politics.

On Wednesday, the Rangers announced that Panarin was named the team's MVP for the 2024-25 season.

ESPN / NHL contender flaws: Biggest issues for top Cup challengers

By Rachel Doerrie – April 18, 2025

The 2025 Stanley Cup playoffs begin Saturday after a riveting playoff race in both conferences. How lucky we are to have the Battle of Ontario, the Battle of Florida, the Mikko Rantanen Bowl and Round 4 of Kings-Oilers in the first round.

Many years, the initial round of the playoffs seems to produce the highest quality of series, since it is before teams lose players to injury. This year, there are real rivalries and intrigue right off the hop.

Every team has a chance to win it all, but not every team is a true contender. Then, there are the teams who are contenders on paper but have a habit of folding in the playoffs -- looking at you, Toronto and Winnipeg.

The common denominator is that every team has a fatal flaw -- an issue that could be its undoing. The positive? The team that best mitigates its fatal flaw and gets some luck is likely to lift the Stanley Cup in June. Here's a look at those major flaws for the 12 top contenders.

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Washington Capitals

Seed: Metro No. 1

The Capitals surprised many by finishing atop the Eastern Conference, backed by quality goaltending; excellent seasons from Dylan Strome, Pierre-Luc Dubois and Jakob Chychrun; and breakouts from Aliaksei Protas and Connor McMichael. (And the record-breaking season from Alex Ovechkin.)

The Caps had the best 5-on-5 shooting percentage this season, converting on 10.69% of their shots. That would explain the significant increase in production by quite a few of their offensive players. Looking deeper, the Caps scored slightly more per game (2.71) than they gave up (2.50) at 5-on-5.

According to Sportlogiq, Washington gained many of its standing points impact through finishing and goaltending. History shows that those two things are the most volatile in the playoffs. Neither Logan Thompson nor Charlie Lindgren has significant playoff experience, and while it should be enough to see them through the first round, the Capitals' fatal flaw is that their shooting luck can dry up at the worst possible time, and their goaltenders have been inconsistent of late.

The Caps are a good team, but their underlying numbers suggest they may not be good enough to withstand a shooting regression in the later rounds.

Toronto Maple Leafs

Seed: Atlantic No. 1

The Maple Leafs are in the contender category because they finished atop the Atlantic Division, not because they've had any recent playoff success. (They haven't.) On paper, the Leafs have excellent goaltending and strong defense and play a system that is more conducive to playoff success. The Leafs won their division with (relatively) down seasons from Auston Matthews and Morgan Rielly, but more staunch defending as a group.

None of that matters when the playoffs get underway. The Leafs' fatal flaw has been the same for nearly a decade: the demons. For more than a few seasons, the Leafs have been the better team heading into

their first-round matchup, and then their offense dries up, their goaltenders get outplayed and the end-of-season news conference happens before May.

The Leafs play a more boring brand of hockey with Craig Berube behind the bench: better defending, tighter checking and an offense structured around net-front play. But now they must also battle the demons within. Their best players are some of the best in the world. When those players perform at their peak, they are Toronto's greatest strength. When they get outperformed, they are Toronto's biggest flaw.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Seed: Atlantic No. 2

Every year we think the Lightning are going to take a step back, and then Jon Cooper's team proves us wrong. Many wondered what the impact of saying goodbye to Steven Stamkos would be; Tampa Bay heads into the playoffs with another Hart Trophy nominee-worthy performance from Nikita Kucherov, an excellent season from Andrei Vasilevskiy in goal and other standout performances from Brayden Point, Brandon Hagel and Victor Hedman.

The Lightning remain a quality hockey club, and they have one thing that many other teams don't: They know how to get it done in the playoffs.

Tampa Bay's fatal flaw is their luck running out. They have the highest 5-on-5 goal differential above expected, according to MoneyPuck, finishing fifth in goals scored above expected and fourth in goals saved above expected, and they own the highest PDO -- meaning they've had quite a bit of puck luck already.

Furthermore, Vasilevskiy has faltered in the past two playoff runs, finishing with a save percentage under .900 in each series. The Lightning need Vasilevskiy to outplay Sergei Bobrovsky in the first round if they are going to get by the defending Cup champions. Ultimately, the Lightning's undoing might be their best players losing the war of attrition due to their age.

Carolina Hurricanes

Seed: Metro No. 2

The Hurricanes have been a fun team to root for over the past few years, and their fatal flaw has been the opposite of Tampa Bay's regular season: a lack of offensive output and faulty goaltending.

Their system is predicated on puck possession and control, not necessarily direct offense and high-danger scoring chances. Carolina is a soundly built team, with depth at forward and quality on defense, and the addition of Alexander Nikishin only adds to that. The Hurricanes are a well-rounded team that plays with speed and generates scoring chances.

Carolina's goaltending is its fatal flaw this season, with only Frederik Andersen posting a save percentage above .900. Andersen and Pyotr Kochetkov are going to have to stop enough pucks to allow Carolina to get by winning games 2-1 or 3-2, because the shooting percentage and goal differential above expected rank in the bottom half of the league. The Hurricanes do not make their own luck, and while they are one of the best secondary scoring teams, they need their goaltending to step up to avoid another premature playoff exit.

Florida Panthers

Seed: Atlantic No. 3

The defending Cup champions placing third in their division is a testament to how brutal the Atlantic is. Tampa Bay, Toronto and Florida all have a legitimate case to be a Cup finalist on paper.

The Panthers' biggest flaw is their revolving-door lineup. Florida was decimated with injuries to key players down the stretch, and while those players are going to be available for the playoffs, it is unlikely they will be completely healthy.

Florida needs Aleksander Barkov to compete with other teams in the division, and it needs Matthew Tkachuk for his scoring and general roughhousing. There is no shortage of that on the roster with Sam Bennett and Brad Marchand, but can the Panthers stay disciplined enough to remain effective? How will Aaron Ekblad play after returning from his extended performance-enhancing substance suspension?

The playoffs are about feel, and there is a real chance that important players missing significant time hurts the continuity of the roster. Of all the problems to have, this is the best one. When healthy and firing on all cylinders, Florida is the best team in the East. There isn't a weak spot in the lineup. If the Panthers can find their groove and endure, they might find themselves playing in June for the third straight year.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Winnipeg Jets

Seed: Central No. 1

The Jets won the Presidents' Trophy, which is in itself a potential flaw considering the much discussed "Presidents' Trophy Curse." However, that is not their biggest flaw.

Unfortunately, Winnipeg's major flaw is the same as it has been for a few years now: its Vezina Trophy-winning goaltender come playoff time. Connor Hellebuyck is going to win his second consecutive Vezina, but there is a reason the NHLPA poll did not have him ranked as the league's top goaltender. The players ranked Vasilevskiy and Igor Shesterkin ahead of Hellebuyck, which is likely a result of their past success in the playoffs.

Hellebuyck recorded just two playoff wins in the past two seasons, has a save percentage of .874 and allowed 9.8 more goals than expected in that span. He isn't the only reason the Jets lost in the first round in consecutive seasons, but he was a significant part of the problem. When Hellebuyck is at his best, he is nearly unbeatable. The problem is, his best comes in the regular season, not in the playoffs.

The Jets have multiple players who have had career seasons: Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor up front, and Josh Morrissey in the Norris Trophy conversation on defense. Combined with Hellebuyck, the Jets should be a Cup favorite. If the Jets are going to make the Western Conference finals, they need two things to be true: Hellebuyck must play at Vezina level, and their depth must be able to match up against teams with more offensive talent at the center position.

Vegas Golden Knights

Seed: Pacific No. 1

The Golden Knights are atop the Pacific, and for the first time in years, no one is hollering about long-term injured reserve shenanigans.

Jack Eichel has been superb for the Golden Knights this season; he was in the Hart Trophy conversation, and might also be nominated for the Lady Byng. Outside of Eichel, the Golden Knights get key offensive production from Tomas Hertl, Mark Stone, Pavel Dorofeyev and Ivan Barbashev. They are one of the deepest teams in the NHL at forward and on defense.

Outside of remaining healthy, which has been an issue for Vegas, the team's fatal flaw is the penalty kill. Minnesota will be a tough test for Vegas with a healthy Kirill Kaprizov and Joel Eriksson Ek, as well as Brock Faber and the newly signed Zeev Buium, in the mix. The Golden Knights rank 26th on the penalty kill this season, with only the Wild and St. Louis Blues below them among playoff teams.

It is vital that the Golden Knights lock down their penalty kill, because if they get by Minnesota, teams in the West have some elite power-play talent (Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl, Cale Makar, Nathan MacKinnon, Mark Scheifele, Kyle Connor, etc.) that could be a key difference-maker in a series.

Dallas Stars

Seed: Central No. 2

The Stars are a fun hockey team, but they have the most glaring flaw of all the contenders. The absence of Miro Heiskanen due to injury is going to leave an enormous hole, and makes Colorado the favorite in the series.

With Heiskanen, the Stars can ice two defenders in the Norris conversation, Thomas Harley being the other. Without him, they are going to have issues managing Colorado's depth.

Their forward depth is among the best in the league, but the trickle-down effect of not having Heiskanen may be enough to undo them in the first round. Should Heiskanen return at any point, Dallas immediately leaps to the top of the Western Conference contender pile. Heiskanen is a true needle mover, and Dallas needs him to take a run at the Cup. Unfortunately for the Stars, their fatal flaw is not a systematic fix and is entirely out of their control.

Los Angeles Kings

Seed: Pacific No. 2

The Kings are a well-rounded team benefiting from excellent goaltending and balanced offensive production. Anze Kopitar remains one of the best two-way centers in the NHL, and the Kings do not have a single point-per-game player. Through a balanced offensive lineup and depth on defense, the Kings are 17-4 with a +41-goal differential and 56.2% expected goal percentage since the trade deadline. They have been one of the best teams in the NHL over that span and are peaking at the right time.

Their major flaw is the power play. Power-play opportunities don't come around often in the playoffs, and the Kings will need to score on more than 15% of their opportunities to have playoff success. Their 5-on-5 play is among the best in the NHL and will allow them to dictate pace of play and control the game. Facing off against some of the top power plays in the West, the Kings must find a way to produce with the man advantage to avoid another first-round exit.

Colorado Avalanche

Seed: Central No. 3

The Avalanche may have finished third in the Central, but many believe they are the best team in the West. Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar are having seasons that will earn them Hart Trophy votes. The addition of Mackenzie Blackwood has stabilized the goaltending, and allows Colorado to confidently compete with the Stars (Jake Oettinger) and Jets (Connor Hellebuyck).

Brock Nelson and Charlie Coyle have contributed admirably after coming over in trade, and give Colorado some of the best center depth in the NHL. More importantly, the Avs are expected to get Gabriel Landeskog back after a three-year absence. Not only will that boost the middle of the lineup, but it will also significantly boost the vibes in the locker room.

On paper, the Avs don't have a fatal flaw, which is crazy to say given they traded their second-best forward Mikko Rantanen earlier this season (and will see him in the first round).

The sneaky undoing for the Avs may be Dallas Stars coach Peter DeBoer. The Avs struggled to score against Dallas in the playoffs last year, and DeBoer has beaten the Avs in the playoffs with three different teams. He knows how to scheme against this team, and sometimes, it comes down to coaching. Jared Bednar is an excellent coach, but if the Avs have a fatal flaw outside of Blackwood's lack of playoff experience, it may be that Bednar gets outcoached.

Edmonton Oilers

Seed: Pacific No. 3

Coming off a Game 7 loss in the Stanley Cup Final, the Oilers are in a more precarious position this year. Already thin on defense, they should be the underdog in their matchup with the Kings because of their fatal flaw: a lack of depth.

Losing Mattias Ekholm to injury is a major blow to the Oilers, like the Stars losing Heiskanen. Ekholm is not Heiskanen by any stretch, but given the Oilers' blue line he is irreplaceable.

Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl missed time toward the end of the season with injuries, and it does not require a Ph.D. to realize that without both players playing at a Hart Trophy level, the Oilers are cooked. The lack of depth was even more noticeable with the departures of Dylan Holloway and Philip Broberg in the offseason, but has been an issue in recent seasons. Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and Zach Hyman regressed to their career play after extraordinary 2023-24 seasons, and the Oilers' goaltending has been questionable at best.

There are so many ways things can come undone for the Oilers, and it all boils down to their lack of depth at every position. Their goaltenders need to perform well, and their superstars must activate Avengers mode, because the rest of the roster does not have the feel of a true contender.

St. Louis Blues

Seed: West wild card No. 2

The Blues find themselves here not because they are necessarily a top Stanley Cup contender like the rest of the teams listed, but because we've seen them do this before.

Play "Gloria," anyone?

Since Jim Montgomery was hired on Nov. 24, the Blues have been outstanding. They set a franchise-record 12-game winning streak that saw them go from a 3.5% chance to make the playoffs to qualifying.

There is historical precedent for this franchise making an in-season coaching change before a long playoff run. Craig Berube took over the Blues in January 2019, and the Blues went on a magical run backed by Jordan Binnington's outstanding play in goal to win the Stanley Cup. Is that likely to happen again? No. Could the Blues upset the Jets? Yes.

St. Louis is the Cinderella team of this year's playoffs. No one knows when the clock will strike midnight, because there are many flaws to the roster. But the Blues are riding a confidence tsunami, and that is worth something in the playoffs.

[Sportsnet.ca / Analyzing \(and predicting\) the four Eastern Conference playoff matchups](#)

By Justin Bourne – April 18, 2025

I'll save you much preamble, as you're familiar with what's going on. Here's which teams in the Eastern Conference I think have advantages and disadvantages as we head into Round 1 of the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

TORONTO vs. OTTAWA

Season series: The Sens won all three games, by scores of 3-0, 2-1 and 4-2. Quick math on that, the Leafs scored three times in three games, which for a team that's been offensively starved in playoffs, seems like a bit of a concern.

The breakdown: On paper, this thing leans pretty heavily in the Leafs' favour. On paper, of course, not on the ice.

But on paper, the Leafs score significantly more than Ottawa, even if a lot of that is based on elite finishing and not creating a ton more chances. On paper, the Leafs are ahead in goals against per game, power play, penalty kill and team save percentage. On paper, the Leafs have the three highest-scoring forwards in the series, with John Tavares not included in that group, despite scoring nine more goals than the Sens highest scorer.

What most people will come back to is that the Sens aren't pushovers. Brady Tkachuk, Ridley Greig, David Perron and Nick Cousins will be eager to make playing hockey un-fun out there. And their offence is tailored more toward playoff hockey, in that they do a lot of their damage from in tight around the crease.

A big X-factor is Jake Sanderson, though the Leafs have typically fallen at the hands of teams with bigger, rangier D-men. It's been Aaron Ekblad and Victor Hedman and Brandon Carlo who have shut them down. If Sanderson and Thomas Chabot can skate the puck out of trouble, it could frustrate the Leafs forwards in different ways. But, at the same time, they're going to get their touches, and for once they should be able to find space and out-muscle a team whose best D-men are on the more slight side (with the meatier bottom pair being gettable for different reasons).

If the Leafs defence is healthy, the Sens will have their hands full when it comes to scoring. Which, of course, leads us to the most important position of all, goaltending. The Leafs have two inexperienced goaltenders who they're hoping can have playoff success. The Sens have one guy who hasn't had playoff success, but is very good in the regular season. Tough to point to an advantage either way there.

If the Sens have any real advantage, it might be the Brady Tkachuk factor. He's an absolute menace who leaves the game in his wake, pulling the course of events around whatever antics he's up to at any given time. Can he drag the Leafs into the type of dogfight they don't typically like?

My pick: Toronto in 6

A healthy Leafs D-corps should be able to keep Ottawa's offence in check. From there, the Leafs' problem in the past has been a lack of production from their Core Four, but I don't think the Sens have the defensive horses of the teams who've beat the Leafs in the past. They should finally break through.

FLORIDA vs. TAMPA BAY

Season series: They split the season series 2-2, but Florida won two close games, and Tampa Bay won 4-0 and 5-1 in their wins.

The breakdown: What we've got here is a battle of the numbers versus the eye-test, the gut feel. Tampa Bay is ahead of Florida in just about every statistical category, which includes the category where the Bolts are the best offensive team in the NHL.

But it's tough to shake the fact that the Panthers are the defending Cup champs, and injuries have greatly impacted their ability to put up representative numbers of their abilities at max strength. By Game 3, it's possible that the Lightning still won't have Oliver Bjorkstrand (injury), while the Cats will get Aaron Ekblad back and Matthew Tkachuk will be up and running. Brad Marchand with him could be deadly. A fully healthy Florida, with room to find itself, would be a terrifying prospect for Eastern Conference hopefuls.

Yet I can't shake the fact that a team that's bringing guys back from injury may not get the chance to get them up to full speed, and that Tampa may be the most underrated team this season. The Lightning also back to getting all-world goaltending from Andrei Vasilevskiy (likely Vezina nominee), which is no small potatoes.

My pick: Tampa Bay in 7

Seven is maybe a cop-out, but I just can't see the defending champs going down easy. The Lightning look all-around more dangerous, and we haven't seen the Panthers at full strength in awhile.

WASHINGTON vs. MONTREAL

Season series: The Capitals took five of six points against Montreal, losing in overtime in their last meeting, in January. If you're a Habs fan, you're pointing to the first couple of losses coming in 2024, before they'd really figured themselves out.

The breakdown: Some things the Habs have going for them:

- Samuel Montembault is playing great
- They've been playing for their lives every game for months, and that's historically made for dangerous first-round teams
- Ivan Demidov and Lane Hutson are a nasty injection of offensive skill to go with their always-improving first line
- Vibes

What the Capitals have going for them is that they're a better team. If this were a best-of-100, you'd bet your house on Washington, which is deeper, bigger, tougher, older. There are matchups the Caps could exploit — for example, Sportlogiq shows the Canadiens to be 28th at denying slot shots off the cycle, while the Caps offence is fourth at generating those very shots.

Still, the Caps have been scuffling over the past, oh, quarter of the season, their goaltending quality has slid a little, and I don't think they're as good as their finish in the standings.

My pick: Washington in 5

For the Habs, getting in was a win. The Caps have been thinking about the playoffs since the calendar flipped to the new year. They should be able to handle their business.

CAROLINA vs. NEW JERSEY

Season series: The scores in their four games were 4-2, 4-2, 4-2 and 5-2 (with an empty-netter), with both teams winning twice. Weird schedule quirk, though: they didn't play in 2025. Just banged out all four matchups in a few months and haven't seen each other since.

The breakdown: Based on recent play, this one does not have the feel of a heavyweight tilt. The Devils have lost four of their last five, which isn't good, unless you compare them to the Canes, who've lost six of their last seven.

Now, part of that is that they've long known their playoff seeding, and they've been resting guys, but it's also a vibe pushed along by the Canes trading Mikko Rantanen then never really replacing him for this season, and the Devils losing Jack Hughes outright for the season.

Fundamentally, nobody shoots the puck more than the Canes; they are a shot-attempt machine. The Devils create far fewer attempts, but do defend well. One stat I remember seeing that's tough to shake: When the Devils had their top-six D all healthy, which was pre-Christmas, they had a run of seven straight games where they allowed fewer than 20 shots, which I believe is an NHL record. If their defence is healthy, they'll be tough to score on. And Dougie Hamilton is back, and they're healthy again.

Both teams have awesome penalty kills (Nos. 1 and 2 in league), but the Canes power play struggles far more than the Devils'. I'm also not sure why I should believe the Hurricanes goaltending is going to be better than the 31st-ranked team they shook out to be this year. The Devils don't have the best goaltending right now, but I do think I prefer what they've got.

And so ...

My pick: New Jersey in 7

The Devils will struggle to score (missing Jack Hughes hurts bad), but I see this being a low-scoring series overall, and with the few advantages they hold, I had to give them the nod in the end.

[Sportsnet.ca / Stanley Cup Playoffs Round 1 Preview: Maple Leafs vs. Senators](#)

By Sonny Sachdeva – April 18, 2025

Fresh off a shutout performance that clinched the Atlantic Division crown for Toronto and triggered the long-awaited return of the Battle of Ontario, the Maple Leafs netminder summed up the first-round bout to come aptly.

“It’s gonna be a bloodbath,” Stolarz said. “Gonna be a little bit of war. So, we’ll be ready.”

It’s been 21 years since the Maple Leafs and Ottawa Senators last crossed paths in the post-season. For a stretch two decades ago, it seemed a near-annual affair, the provincial rivals meeting four times between 2000–04, the likes of Tie Domi, Chris Neil, Mats Sundin and Daniel Alfredsson, ensuring it was always appointment viewing.

“I grew up watching this series,” said Maple Leafs forward — and Kitchener, Ont., native — Steven Lorentz once the matchup was set. “I just remember being a little kid, having a mini-stick net right in front of the TV. And when there was a TV timeout or something like that, I just started firing the ball into the net. Now, to be able to do this, I still feel like I’m that eight-year-old kid watching on TV — but I get to sit on the bench for the big boys and go put my effort in out there.”

Since that last seven-game thriller in 2004, the two clubs have found themselves on different tracks. The Maple Leafs missed the post-season in 10 of 11 seasons following that series, while the Sens kept working their way up the ladder in the East, stitching together a Cup Final run in ’07. A decade later, in 2016-17, the organizations’ fortunes flipped. The Erik Karlsson-led Sens came within one win of the Stanley Cup Final, before falling into a playoff drought that’s endured for seven years — the Leafs, meanwhile, made their return to the dance with a rookie Auston Matthews at the helm, and have been in the mix every year since.

Now, after a decades-long wait, the two teams’ paths are set to finally converge — Toronto, nearly a decade into the high-flying Matthews Era, still hunting for meaningful playoff success after a run of seven first-round exits in eight years; and Ottawa, young and hungry, licking their chops for a chance to finally make some playoff noise once again, and to knock off their well-paid, much-discussed provincial rival.

It’s a meeting fans in both towns have been craving for years — a fact that hasn’t escaped participants in both rooms ahead of Game 1.

“‘Exciting’ is probably downplaying it a little bit. I mean, it’s going to be great,” Ottawa head coach Travis Green said after the matchup was locked in Tuesday night. “It’s going to be an intense series. It’s going to be a lot of emotions, for both cities. Really, everything you want in a playoff series.”

“We’d be happy with anyone,” added Sens forward Drake Batherson. “But I feel like everyone wants the Battle of Ontario. So, they’re gonna get it.”

HEAD TO HEAD RECORD

Maple Leafs: 0-3-0

Senators: 3-0-0

For how much the Maple Leafs faithful were clamouring for a shot at the Senators in Round 1 — more specifically, a shot at avoiding the familiar pain of a first-round bout with Florida or Tampa Bay — the task sitting in front of Toronto is far from a simple one.

Of the Panthers, Bolts and Senators, there's only one club Toronto didn't manage to register a single win against in 2024-25 — it was all Ottawa all year during the regular-season iteration of the Battle of Ontario, the Sens going 3-0 against the Leafs and outscoring them 9-3 in those meetings. If those tilts are any indication, the Maple Leafs figure to have their hands full against a young Senators side that managed to overwhelm them — either with an early stunner or a slow-and-steady comeback — every time they faced each other this season.

But it's the context beyond those regular-season meetings that brings the real fireworks to this opening-round bout, the extra sauce that comes with the all-encompassing intensity of playoff hockey.

On one side, we have a Maple Leafs squad that's seemed on a cliff's edge for years now, the potential for significant organizational change hovering above Toronto's star-studded core like a black cloud. We're in Year 2 or 3 of wondering if another first-round exit means the end of this iteration of the Maple Leafs — that is, whether one of the club's well-paid All-Stars will see his time in blue and white cut short. But, at the risk of falling into the trap that seems to be set annually for this organization, what if these Leafs are different?

There's no question they're a different club than the one that lost to Boston a year ago. The arrival of Craig Berube has fundamentally altered Toronto's approach, instilling in the highlight-reel seekers a style that certainly seems better suited to the grind of the post-season. That it lifted Toronto to its first Atlantic Division title says something of the growth this group has found this season. Still, as has long been the case with this club, it'll take undeniable post-season success to truly turn the doubters.

On the other side, we have a Senators team that seems to finally be reaching the culmination of a near-decade-long hunt for progress. From the arrival of Brady Tkachuk in 2018, to Tim Stutzle touching down in 2020, to the emergence of the rest of the club's young core along the way, the Sens have been building. But it's the past few years' worth of experienced additions that have helped them finally get over the hill and back into the dance, Ottawa supplementing that young core with proven, elite veterans like Claude Giroux and Linus Ullmark.

The arrival of Green this season — and his revamping of the Sens' defensive approach — has been another pivotal turning point, the new coach's guidance leading Ottawa to the 90-point plateau for the first time since 2017, when they marched all the way to Conference Final.

Pressure-wise, it couldn't have lined up better for Ottawa. The return to the post-season is progress enough — any playoff magic from here on out is a bonus for a squad that's simply been craving forward motion. They enter Round 1 as an underdog simply looking to show their mettle, with an opponent standing across from them that'll undoubtedly bring out their best.

Meanwhile, Toronto enters this next test draped in pressure — to live up to their division-winner status and dispense with a team they're favoured to beat, to make good on the opportunity of facing a wild-card squad rather than a recent Cup champ, to find the post-season results they've been seeking for the past half-decade.

Which squad rises to meet the moment?

Maple Leafs X-Factor: Anthony Stolarz

You have to go back half a century to find a Maple Leafs netminder who entered the post-season with numbers as good as Anthony Stolarz. Barring backups who saw limited action, no Toronto goaltender in the past 50 years has headed into the playoffs with a mark better than Stolarz's league-leading .926 save percentage.

Dig deeper and Toronto's No. 41 still comes out looking a dream. At 5-on-5, Stolarz's .944 save percentage ranks best in the league among all netminders who've played at least 20 games on the year — just a hair above Vezina favourite Connor Hellebuyck. He ranks tops in the league in terms of high-danger save percentage at 5-on-5 too, and third in Goals Saved Above Average at 5-on-5, behind only Hellebuyck and Andrei Vasilevskiy.

Whether that means Stolarz heads towards Game 1 as the best in the league, or among the best in the league, or as the best in this series, matters little. What matters more is simply whether he'll be able to make the saves the Maple Leafs need at the moments they need them most. It's especially key for a Leafs squad that's seen their fate decided by one-goal games time and time again over the past few years — the final three games against Boston last year; four of five games against Florida the year before; the final three games against the Lightning the year before that.

The margins have been slim, and having a netminder who can reliably make one more key save in one more key moment could prove crucial. And beyond Stolarz's numbers as a whole this season, his play of late — eight straight wins down the stretch, including two shutouts and a .950 over that latest span — suggests he's up to the task.

If there's any fanbase that needs no reminding of the value of an elite blue-liner, it's the Sens, whose most recent playoff success came off the stick of a prime, unstoppable Erik Karlsson. It's been a rollercoaster of a journey for the Senators' defence corps since the Karlsson Era ended, and the true heir to No. 65's greatness has yet to emerge. But Ottawa clearly has something special in young Jake Sanderson.

Just 22 years old, in only his third big-league campaign, the Whitefish, Montana product has found his level this season. Calm, collected and lethal from the back end, Sanderson's collected a career-best 55 points for the Sens in 2024-25, putting him top-10 league-wide in terms of scoring from the blue line. Maybe more impressive is the fact that the young rearguard really didn't pick things up until the new year — over the past three months, since mid-January, Sanderson's amassed 31 points in 36 games, the fifth-most of any NHL defender (behind only offensive behemoths Cale Makar, Rasmus Dahlin, Evan Bouchard and Victor Hedman) and level with rookie Habs sensation Lane Hutson.

Ask the 2024 Oilers whether finally having an elite scorer on the blue line made a difference in their efforts to find some meaningful playoff progress — on the heels of a regular-season breakout, Bouchard racked up 32 points during Edmonton's 25-game Cup Final march, the second-most points of anyone in the playoffs, at any position.

Will Sanderson's own emergence be enough to tip the scales in Ottawa's favour? Time will tell. But after being thrown into the fire at the 4 Nations Face-Off just a few months ago — drawing into Team USA's lineup for the tournament's heated final tilt, and coming up with a big goal — there's little doubt he can handle the weight of the moment.

[Sportsnet.ca / Stanley Cup Playoffs Round 1 Preview: Oilers vs. Kings](#)

By Rory Boylen – April 18, 2025

In the final regular season meeting between these two teams on Monday, the Los Angeles Kings won the game 5-0 against a shorthanded Edmonton Oilers squad that didn't dress Leon Draisaitl or Connor McDavid. The game was less about the result and more about bad blood boiling over — Edmonton totalled 53 penalty minutes and Darnell Nurse was handed a one-game suspension for a cross-check on Quinton Byfield. He'll be back for Game 1, however.

Familiarity breeds contempt and by now these teams loathe each other. The divisional rivals played four times this season, twice already in April, and now face each other in the first round for the fourth year in a row.

While Edmonton has won each of the three previous series (in seven, then six, then five games), the Kings have every right to believe the situation is different this time and that they could slay their dragon. The first difference is that Los Angeles holds home ice advantage this time, finishing the season on a high note that separated them from the Oilers. There's a sense this is the best, deepest Kings roster of these past four years and that they're capable of taking down last year's Western Conference champs.

"I feel like we have a really good team," Kings coach Jim Hiller said. "We have more size, more experience and more depth. Let's go play."

The Kings' big injury scare happened before the season even began, with Drew Doughty going down to a fractured ankle that kept him out of the lineup until late January. When he returned, Los Angeles was ninth in the league by points percentage, whereas Edmonton was third. Since having Doughty back, however, the Kings are 21-9-3 and 13 points better than Edmonton.

Adding to Los Angeles' confidence is that the Oilers arrive in this post-season banged up, choosing to rest a large number of their players in the final regular season games. On Monday came the bad news that Mattias Ekholm would miss the first round, at least, and possibly the entire playoffs, leaving a huge dent in the Oilers' blue line.

But Connor McDavid insists his group is ready to roll, healthier than it seems, and ready to take on the challenge of returning to the Cup final for a second season in a row. But, still, the Kings outscored the Oilers 8-0 in two regulation wins this month.

So, who really has the momentum? The team that has won the past three post-season meetings in a row? Or the one arriving hotter and healthier in 2025?

Last season, there was a lot of discussion around the Kings' "boring" style with a 1-3-1 system that made them one of the best defensive outfits in the league, finishing fifth in shots against per game and fourth in high-danger chances against. The first-round matchup against Edmonton was seen as an offence vs. defence set-up, so when the Oilers were able to score 22 goals over five games, the result was definitive.

This series again could be seen as an offence vs. defence battle. Los Angeles finished the regular season in an even better standing defensively: second in shots against per game, five-on-five high-danger chances against and goals against per game. The Kings' penalty kill is also inside the top 10.

So excellent and consistent was Los Angeles' team defence that it didn't lose a game in regulation all season when scoring at least three goals. And it only lost two of those games in extra time — the last coming all the way back on Nov. 1.

Meantime, when Edmonton is healthy and at its best, there is no mistaking what the team's identity is. With McDavid and Draisaitl at the centre, the Oilers are defined by their offensive excellence, though there is a little less shine on the group this season even though the two big stars had incredible campaigns once again.

Edmonton's goals per game dropped by more than league average and it's now just outside of the top 10 in offence, finishing 11th. The power play, historical in its success two years ago and still a great danger last season, also fell outside the top 10 in 2024-25.

The fact is, none of the Oilers' off-season pickups ever got too hot. Jeff Skinner failed to hit 20 goals in an 82-game season for the first time since 2014-15. Viktor Arvidsson missed a number of games because of injury and was well off his career point pace. As Dylan Holloway, signed away in an offer sheet last summer, went on for a career season in St. Louis, Edmonton ultimately downgraded the depth scoring of its roster.

The Oilers come into this series with plenty of question marks. Evander Kane, who hasn't played all season, is eager to get back in and show he can still contribute with offence or at least a physical edge. On Sunday, Stuart Skinner started his first game in a couple weeks after a head injury and looked good in a 4-1 win over Winnipeg, though wasn't overly tested, with just 18 shots against. He has the worst goals saved above expected total (minus-2.8) of any starting netminder in these playoffs.

The Kings might be at the right place and at the right time to get back at the Oilers, though last year's finalists have the superstar power Los Angeles just does not.

Edmonton is going to have to move on without its top defensive defenceman, as Ekholm's injury puts more pressure on the other blue-liners. In the crosshairs of attention surely will be Evan Bouchard, an excellent offensive contributor who scored 32 points in 25 playoff games last spring, more than any other blue-liner since Brian Leetch notched 34 playoff points in 1993-94.

The debate around Bouchard, however, is always: can he defend well enough? Ekholm was his security blanket this season, the responsible defensive complement to Bouchard's all-out offence. Bouchard's regular season was bumpy at times, though the offensive totals put him inside the top 10 at his position. While Nurse stands to gain the most minutes and responsibility from Ekholm's absence, the pressure will be more on Bouchard to meet the high expectations set by last year's post-season performance. He has to both continue pushing the offence while also being aware that his partner won't be able to do all the things Ekholm thrives at.

Although Los Angeles was a defensively stout team last season and remains so in 2025, this series could ultimately come down to their goalie's ability to hold off Edmonton's waves of attacks. Cam Talbot had a great season for the Kings in 2023-24 — .913 save percentage, 2.48 GAA — but in three playoff starts he collapsed to an .861 save percentage and 5.30 GAA. Backup David Rittich had to replace him the final two games, and the Kings didn't stand a chance.

This year's starter, Darcy Kuemper, is a Stanley Cup winner and finished sixth in the league by goals saved above expected. He finished third in the league in save percentage, tied for third in shutouts and tied for first in GAA. After a couple of statistically down seasons in Washington, Kuemper is back to posting similar (often better) numbers than he did when he won the Stanley Cup with Colorado in 2022. For as good as the Kings' team defence is, inevitably their chance of knocking off the Oilers will come down to Kuemper's ability to hold off the superstars coming at him and fare better than Talbot did a year ago.

[Sportsnet.ca / Stanley Cup Playoffs Round 1 Preview: Hurricanes vs. Devils](#)

By Emily Sadler – April 18, 2025

Yeah, there's a little history here. And it favours the Hurricanes. Carolina has claimed victory in each of these clubs' last four playoff meetings, including their most recent head-to-head in 2023 when Carolina took the second-round series in just five games.

It's no surprise a sixth series now lies ahead, a 2-3 Metropolitan matchup that was the first to be locked in this spring — it's felt inevitable ever since the Washington Capitals went on a tear to run away with the division shortly after the calendar turned to 2025. Aside from the Devils and Hurricanes swapping their seeding, with Carolina taking over second place as New Jersey dropped following a poor start to the new year, very little changed in the Metropolitan race over the course of the second half of the season.

The same cannot be said about the expectations on both sides of this matchup, however. That's where things get interesting in this first-round series.

Here's what you need to know heading into the Round 1 bout between the Hurricanes and Devils.

HEAD-TO-HEAD RECORDS

Carolina Hurricanes: 2-2-0

New Jersey Devils: 2-2-0

THE BREAKDOWN

Before we really dig into what to expect in this April showdown, let's recall what happened in March. The month wasn't exactly easy on either of these clubs, and how they emerged from it might just dictate what we're about to see as they go head-to-head.

The Hurricanes have been on track for the post-season all year long, but could've taken a step back after their blockbuster acquisition of Mikko Rantanen went south, with rumours piling up ahead of the trade deadline threatening to back them into a tough corner. Instead, Carolina salvaged the botched deal and sprinted down the stretch to remind everyone they're still very much a contender to be taken seriously.

Their biggest strength overall has been their consistency on both sides of the puck — that's a far cry from what we've seen in New Jersey this year.

After a few false starts, this was supposed to be the year the Devils, too, declared themselves a real-deal challenger. They entered the year with a new head coach in Sheldon Keefe, a new No. 1 netminder in Jacob Markstrom, and a new outlook on what a playoff run could mean for this club. And for the first half of the season, that message rang loud and clear through the league. Through the team's first 41 games, the Devils sat second in the Eastern Conference with a 24-14-3 record, ranking first in regulation wins (tied with Winnipeg). Offence was firing on all cylinders in the top tier of the league while defence was efficient, too, limiting opponents to the third-fewest shots per game.

The wins slowed down with Markstrom's five-week injury-induced absence in January, and then a pair of big-name injuries in early March stopped all momentum in its tracks as the team has limped to the finish line. Both top forward Jack Hughes and top defender Dougie Hamilton sustained long-term injuries early last month, with defenceman Jonas Siegenthaler also out. Hughes won't be back until next season, but Hamilton returned to action this week and will be ready for Game 1.

The Devils we've seen over the course of the second half of the season have, understandably, struggled mightily, with goals drying up along with the wins. Combine that lack of firepower with Carolina's ability to shut down opponents better than any other squad, and it's clear the Devils aren't walking into a friendly situation for a team already lacking its best players.

Where they do thrive, though, is on special teams. No one is better than Carolina when it comes to their penalty kill, but New Jersey comes close with its second-best 82.7 per cent kill rate. And the Devils' third-ranked power play (far better than Carolina's cumbersome unit, which ranks near the bottom of the league) has remained one of the club's biggest strengths all season.

There's a lot to love about these Hurricanes, and a lot of it has been surprising this season — particularly when it comes to the club's influx of young stars that have shone with greater opportunity. Logan Stankoven, who came over in the Mikko Rantanen trade from Dallas, has made it easier for everyone to forget about the chaos surrounding that whole ordeal as he's fit in seamlessly in Raleigh. Fellow rookie Jackson Blake, too, has been a bit of a revelation as he heats up at the best time.

But tempting as it may be to highlight one of the shiny new stars on the squad, this team is built on the strength of its blue line and that means Jacob Slavin. The 10-year veteran averages a team-high 21:34 a night (a total that always rises in the post-season) as an elite shutdown man. He's a big reason why the Hurricanes rank atop the league in fewest shots allowed per game. He's also a major driving force behind Carolina's league-topping penalty kill, which has operated at an 84.3 per cent success rate. That's going to be on full display against the Devils' strong power play — of all the things that have gone wrong down the stretch, New Jersey's power play isn't one of them; they finished the season with the third-best PP unit.

Devils X-Factor: Jacob Markstrom

Goaltending is always going to be an x-factor no matter the series, but when you're entering the post-season without your top forward and your best blue liner... well, you're going to need the man in the blue paint to shine. After question marks plagued the Devils' crease for years, the club went out and landed its answer in the veteran Markstrom last summer.

But just how far can he take this team?

At the halfway mark of the season, Markstrom ranked second in both wins and goals-against average behind only Connor Hellebuyck, securing 19 wins through 28 starts while allowing an average of 2.15 goals per game to go with a solid .912 save percentage.

That momentum remained steady into January, but was sidelined when Markstrom suffered a knee injury that held him out five weeks. (Excitement around his return in early March was quickly snuffed when teammates Hughes and Hamilton went down.)

Since Markstrom's return, he's posted just five wins in 13 starts and stats that are a far cry from his first-half numbers: .869 save percentage and 3.33 goals-against average. That's not all on Markstrom, of course, but if New Jersey is to overcome those setbacks atop the lineup and make any kind of run in the playoffs, they'll need their netminder to steal more than just a game or two.

[Sportsnet.ca / Stanley Cup Playoffs Round 1 Preview: Stars vs. Avalanche](#)

By Ryan Dixon – April 18, 2025

Take a bow, hockey gods.

The A-level plot of an opening-round series between the Dallas Stars and Colorado Avalanche is enough to sustain any hockey viewer. These are two top-level clubs with legitimate Stanley Cup aspirations clashing in a re-match of a 2024 second-round series.

Throw in the best B-level plot of the first round, though, and you've got must-see action, regardless of whether you support either squad.

In late January, the Avs shocked the hockey world by sending pending-UFA Mikko Rantanen — one of the best wingers in the world and a vital member of the club's 2022 championship — to the Carolina Hurricanes. When it became clear that was not a long-term marriage, Rantanen was on the move again and wound up in Texas with a big eight-year contract extension to boot.

Now, he and the Stars are set to battle a Colorado club he spent a decade with.

Beyond the Rantanen saga, there's all kinds of big-picture intrigue attached to this matchup. Dallas — which defeated Colorado in six games last season — has been a final-four club each of the past two springs, but has not been able to get over the top. Colorado, of course, summited the mountain in 2022 and has gone all in this year in pursuit of a second title.

Speaking of Colorado's 2022 Cup, Avs captain Gabriel Landeskog had not played a pro hockey game since that title-clinching victory three years ago in Tampa Bay until suiting up for the AHL's Colorado Eagles last weekend. Now, incredibly, all signs point to the 32-year-old Swede returning to the Avs lineup for the post-season.

The fact that is the second-biggest storyline we're dealing with here hammers home the notion this series is dripping with drama.

HEAD-TO-HEAD RECORDS

Dallas Stars: 1-1-1

Colorado Avalanche: 2-1-0

THE BREAKDOWN

The Stars have been playing without Miro Heiskanen since late January and GM Jim Nill has confirmed the stud defenceman will not be ready to return from knee surgery in time for Game 1. That's a huge blow to a Dallas club trying to stop a team with Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar at the top of the lineup. Heiskanen has not been ruled out for the entire series, but obviously it's concerning that he won't be ready to go from the jump and would be dropping back in to incredibly high-level, physically demanding hockey. Heiskanen was a beast last year versus Colorado, scoring four goals and eight points in the six-game victory for Dallas.

In Heiskanen's absence, Thomas Harley has really stepped up. The defenceman who won the 4 Nations Face-Off playing alongside MacKinnon and Makar on Canada just continues to evolve into one of the best two-way blue-liners in hockey. Since Heiskanen left the lineup, Harley has nine goals and 27 points in 29 outings; the only D-men in the entire league with more points during that span are Makar (36),

Rasmus Dahlin (33) and Evan Bouchard (29). Still, seeing the Avs' top gunners all game long, every other night for two weeks is going to be a big ask.

While Colorado will always be driven by what MacKinnon and Makar do, it's positively striking to see how different — and well-balanced — this forward group looks from opening night.

Before we get to the trades — and there are a lot of them — consider Valeri Nichushkin missed nearly half the season for multiple reasons. First, there was a six-month suspension — originally applied right in the middle of last year's series with Dallas — while he was in Stage 3 of the NHL/NHLPA player assistance program. Then there was the lower-body injury that basically sidelined him for January and February. When Nichushkin is in the lineup, he's scored at a 40-goal pace.

Throw in the potential return of Landeskog after a three-year absence — even if it's on a third line — and those are two pieces the team either played half or basically the entire year without.

Then there are the swaps.

Before Christmas, Colorado GM Chris MacFarland completely rebuilt his goaltending battery by acquiring Scott Wedgewood and Mackenzie Blackwood. In the New Year, MacFarland went about remaking the forward crew. Skilled winger Martin Necas came over in the original Rantanen deal with Carolina, but the more notable development might be the centre depth acquired before the trade deadline. Colorado is now running out a middleman crew that has Brock Nelson and Charlie Coyle coming on the ice after MacKinnon. That is certainly the best the Avalanche have looked down the middle since Nazem Kadri departed following the 2022 title. Nelson and Coyle are both playoff-tested veterans who, in different capacities, could really raise Colorado's post-season floor.

Stars X-Factor: Roope Hintz

Hintz had a tough go in the 2024 Stanley Cup Playoffs. He was forced out of Game 4 versus the Avalanche and didn't return until Game 3 of the conference final against Edmonton. Dallas lost its final three games of the post-season and Hintz failed to register a point in any of them. The Stars top-line centre wound up with eight points in 15 playoff games and half of them came in one outing versus Colorado.

One year prior, Hintz was a monster for Dallas in the second season, recording 24 points in 19 contests.

Will Dallas see that 2023 version of Hintz this year? The Finn came out of the 4 Nations on fire, putting up 28 points in 16 games despite missing about a week after taking a puck to the face in Edmonton.

Unfortunately for Dallas, the top line Hintz centres took a hit in the team's final regular season game when left winger Jason Robertson sustained a lower-body injury and reportedly left Nashville's Bridgestone Arena with a brace on his right knee.

On a more positive note, Tyler Seguin — who had not suited up since Dec. 1 thanks to hip surgery — returned to the Stars lineup in the finale.

Avalanche X-Factor: Mackenzie Blackwood

When the Avs won the 2022 title, Kadri was their second-line centre and Darcy Kuemper was their goalie. Both departed as free agents that summer and Colorado spent two-plus years insufficiently addressing both needs.

The arrival of Nelson and Coyle this year really solidified the middle of the ice. And, as noted, those moves came on the heels of MacFarland completely remaking the crease by acquiring Wedgewood in November and Blackwood in December. Since Blackwood played his first game for the club on Dec. 14,

Colorado has the 10th-best 5-on-5 save percentage in the league at .917. That might not be setting the world on fire, but it's still encouraging for a team that had the worst goals-against average (3.36) of any club to make it past Round 1 last year.

Blackwood has never played an NHL playoff game, so he's obviously got some proving to do. Wedgewood, meanwhile, has but three career post-season appearances, all with the Stars — as it happens — in 2023.