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Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets push late, drop fourth straight in 2-1 loss to New Jersey Devils

By Brian Hedger – March 18, 2025

Well, at least the goal drought's over.

Mathieu Olivier ended an unsightly dry spell in goals for the Blue Jackets at 182:55 on Monday night at Nationwide Arena, but the New Jersey Devils still managed to win, 2-1, to deal Columbus a maddening fourth straight loss.

Despite coming to life following Olivier's goal, which cut the Devils' lead to 2-1 and prompted a late push that led to a whopping 24-3 edge in shots over New Jersey in the third, the Blue Jackets (31-28-8) couldn't avoid another gut-wrenching defeat. They dropped their fourth straight game while trying to keep pace in a tight playoff race for the second wild-card spot in the NHL's Eastern Conference.

"We played the right way," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "We played hard, we played disciplined, we played within the system structurally. We just didn't get the result ... but we're right where we want to be. We've love to be 10 points up in a (playoff) spot, but these kind of things, streaks, you have to believe. It takes some time to get out of it, and you have some breaks, and that has to be our momentum-shifting period to go forward."

Timo Meier and Jesper Bratt scored goals on successive shifts late in the second period for the Devils (37-26-6), who got 23 of 45 saves from goalie Jake Allen to get out of a lopsided third period with a win. Rookie goalie Jet Greaves started for the Blue Jackets and made 18 saves in a tough-luck loss.

"I was just thinking more about the win," Olivier said of ending the Blue Jackets' prolonged scoring slump. "I think a win would've been better to lift that weight. Our 'compete' was there, definitely a better performance, we gave ourselves a chance to win and sometimes you just fall short."

It took almost two periods, but the Devils took a 2-0 lead late in the second on back-to-back goals by Meier and Bratt, who scored with 6:25 remaining and then 5:46 left respectively.

Meier scored off a strong rush to the net up the left wing, jamming the puck between Greaves' pads for a 1-0 lead before crashing into the Jackets' rookie goalie. Greaves then coughed up the puck off an unlucky bounce off the yellow plastic kick plate of the end boards behind his net. His clearing attempt went straight to Bratt rather than around the boards and the Devils forward pounced to put it into an open net.

"I thought we had a decent game overall," Olivier said. "We just had a second goal that was kind of a fluke and it just cost us a game. It's a 1-1 game if you take he fluke out of the game, but that's life. That's the game, as well. I thought we pushed really hard in the third, gave ourselves a chance ... fell short."

The goals finally put an end to a stretch of 33:35 with the score 0-0, but the Jackets' drought from their previous two-plus games lasted through the second and most of the third. They trailed 2-0 starting the third, had to be feeling snakebitten going into the second intermission and nearly went another full game without scoring.

It wasn't for lack of effort.

The Jackets outshot the Devils 22-17 and held a 37-36 edge in attempts after two periods before stepping on the gas pedal in the third. Powered by desperation, the Blue Jackets threw everything they

had at Allen and the Devils in the third. It still wasn't enough to get a puck in the net until Olivier finally got the job done with a wrist shot from the middle of the slot with 6:36 left to play.

That pumped life into a lifeless building and the Jackets, who peppered Allen with an 8-2 edge in shots on a 15-4 edge in attempts after Olivier's goal. It just wasn't enough. The challenge only gets more difficult Thursday with the defending Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers visiting Thursday, but the goal is to carry the end of Monday's game into the start of that one.

"Did we get the result? No," Evason said. "Did we play the right way? Do we believe this is the turning point? Do we believe this is the one that - not only the period but the game - that turns us around and we're ready to go forward? Yeah, 100%."

The Athletic / Blue Jackets end long goal drought, search for silver lining in loss to Devils

By Aaron Portzline – March 18, 2025

COLUMBUS, Ohio — It's rare for NHL coaches to address players en masse in the dressing room after games, win or lose. But Columbus Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason and his staff had a message to deliver after Monday's 2-1 loss to the New Jersey Devils in Nationwide Arena.

It wasn't the type of speech you might expect for a club that has suddenly forgotten how to score goals, lost four straight games at an unforgiving time of the season and fumbled its grip on a playoff spot.

"We went in and talked about how incredibly positive that game was, that (third) period was," Evason said. "The guys know it. We know it. We're good."

In the absence of much-needed standings points, the Blue Jackets have to hope that Monday's loss was the first sign of the traction they need to dig out from this late-season funk. There's evidence to support that theory, too.

Mathieu Olivier scored the Blue Jackets' only goal at 13:24 of the third period, ending a season-worst shutout streak (182 minutes, 55 seconds) and lifting a weight off not only the players on the bench but many in the crowd of 16,708, who seemed nervously quiet in the first two periods.

Olivier's goal made it 2-1, and the Blue Jackets played unburdened the rest of the way. They outshot the Devils 24-3 in the third period and 46-20 on the night. As for shot attempts — that's all shots fired toward the net, including blocked shots and missed shots — the Jackets had an 87-43 advantage.

They did everything but score on Devils goaltender Jake Allen, who had 45 saves.

"It was freakin' awesome," Evason said. "Did we get the result, no. Did we play the right way? Do we believe that this is the turning point? Do we believe that this is the ... not only the period, but the game that turns us around and we're ready to go forward? Yeah.

"We played our asses off, guys. We had so many unbelievable opportunities. We played the right way. We played hard. We played disciplined. We played within the system, structurally. We just didn't get the result."

Evason has done a masterful coaching job all season with the Blue Jackets, and the approach he's taking at a tenuous time of the season is pretty clear.

Like every season, the play across the NHL has ramped up considerably since the calendar flipped to March. The Blue Jackets are not just one of the league's youngest clubs, their young players are in prominent spots in the lineup.

Five of their top-six forwards, for instance, are 24 or younger, including 20-year-old No. 1 center Adam Fantilli. And they're seeing, for the first time, how every inch of the ice becomes contested territory and how the space in front of the opposing goaltender is full of elbows, cross-checks and stick whacks.

They've seen how NHL officials tend to lose their whistles for anything less than simple assault.

Evason is trying to prop them up and guide them through this, trying to keep their chests full of confidence, all the while knowing it can't take too long to adjust or a playoff spot — once a pipe dream, still a possibility — will be out of reach.

"You go through ebbs and flows throughout a year," Olivier said. "Sometimes (the puck) goes in like nothin', and sometimes you're having a hard time scoring. It's just part of a long season. Unfortunately, our timing of not being able to score as much is a little tough.

"We did the right things to score. It's going to come. This group still believes. We definitely put our best foot forward and had every chance to get this done."

When the Blue Jackets and Devils met six days earlier, the Blue Jackets were just 4 points behind New Jersey, hoping to challenge for third place in the Metropolitan Division. Now, they're 10 points back of the Devils and sitting in 11th place in the East. (Yes, Detroit moved into 10th even though it didn't play.)

New Jersey scored both of its goals only 39 seconds apart in the second period, taking a 2-0 lead.

At 13:35 of the second, Devils forward Timo Meier caught Jackets defenseman Dante Fabbro flat-footed in the neutral zone and raced around him for a clean look on Columbus goaltender Jet Greaves, who was called up Sunday from AHL Cleveland.

Then, at 14:14, Greaves left his net to play a puck that had been sent along the wall to his right. One problem: As the puck skidded around the corner boards, it took an unusual kick off the wall and shot past Greaves behind the net.

Worse yet, the puck landed right on the stick of Devils forward Jesper Bratt, who scored from the right circle before Greaves could get back.

"It was coming in flat on the yellow and kind of kicked off the yellow, but at the end of the day, it's my job to stop it and keep it out of the net," Greaves said. "It's too bad, but it's part of the game. You just have to handle them and move on and keep going."

The Blue Jackets switched up their top two lines before the game and before the third period. For the third, Fantilli played between Kent Johnson and Kirill Marchenko, while Boone Jenner moved back to center Dmitri Voronkov and Yegor Chinakhov.

The 46 shots on goal were the Blue Jackets' second-highest this season. Chinakhov, in a funk since his return from a lower-back injury, led the way with six, while Olivier and Zach Werenski had five each. Allen was peppered in the third, but only Olivier could solve him.

"We believed we could do it," Olivier said. "I thought we had a decent game overall. I thought we pushed really hard in the third, gave ourselves a chance and fell short.

"I'm not going to go home and dwell on the standings and the 2 points we didn't get. I'm going to start focusing on our game with Florida (on Thursday) and recreating a similar performance with a better result."

BlueJackets.com / PREVIEW: Blue Jackets host Devils on St. Patrick's Day

By Jeff Svoboda – March 18, 2025

The Blue Jackets need to find their offensive game. They need to be better on special teams, and they need to stop putting themselves into early holes, as well.

And they also might need a little luck of the Irish.

As the Blue Jackets head into tonight's crucial St. Patrick's Day contest vs. Metropolitan Division rival New Jersey, head coach Dean Evason can't help but feel like his team could use a good break or two. In two straight games at Nationwide Arena, the Blue Jackets have come out with plenty of energy, only to fall into early deficits on the way to shutout losses.

Thursday vs. Vegas, Columbus didn't allow a shot attempt for the first 12 minutes, only to see the Golden Knights' first one go in the net. In Saturday's game against the Rangers, a misplay between defenseman Damon Severson and goalie Daniil Tarasov led to an open-net tally for New York less than two minutes into the game.

And if anything encapsulates how things are going right now for the Blue Jackets, it came in the middle of the second period against the Rangers. Forward Dmitri Voronkov was all alone on Igor Shesterkin, stickhandled around the New York goalie and saw his shot go off the far post and out.

Evason understands you make your own luck at times in this game, but it would also help if the Blue Jackets caught a break or two right now as they try to break a streak of five losses in the last six games.

"We have to find a way more than anything to just build the confidence back up and continually build toward (that), and then catch a break or catch a couple of breaks," Evason said after Saturday's loss.

"Everybody's talked about it before. Whenever teams are in a bit of a funk, you need something positive to happen. Which we'll work (toward) – we've never not worked.

"It would be a different story if I came in here and said we got outworked tonight and that's why we lost this game. We didn't. We have to continue to work and believe there's enough games left for us to get there."

The loss to New York put the Blue Jackets on the wrong side of the playoff line for the first time since Feb. 24, and the reality is the season is far from over. Columbus has 16 games to play and is just two points behind the Rangers and one behind Montreal for the final Eastern Conference wild card spot, and they retain two games in hand on New York as well.

But Columbus has no time to waste and must find its game quickly, especially on the offensive end. The back-to-back shutouts vs. the Golden Knights and Rangers are the first for the Blue Jackets since December 2008, as well as the first time they've been blanked in Nationwide Arena in consecutive games since March 2011.

It's the time of year where squads have to fight for every inch of ice and take advantage of the chances they get, and the Blue Jackets haven't done so the past few games. Add in a power play that doesn't have a goal in the last six games and lighting the lamp has been elusive of late.

"I think we are playing our way and try to do our best that we can, but we didn't score," Kirill Marchenko said after the Rangers game. "We have good opportunities and everybody have a lot of shots. I don't think we need to think or talk about the last two games a lot. Just try to focus on the next game and be better."

Know The Foe: New Jersey Devils

Head coach: Sheldon Keefe (1st season)

Team stats: Goals per game: 2.99 (14th) | Scoring defense: 2.59 (4th) | PP: 27.5 percent (4th) | PK: 82.6 percent (3rd)

The narrative: The last two years have shown just how precarious the building process can be for a young team. Led by Jack Hughes, the Devils drafted an impressive number of talented players during a stretch that included just one playoff appearance from 2013-22, and it all paid off two seasons ago when New Jersey won 52 games and made it to the second round of the playoffs. Last year, though, injuries and inconsistency doomed the Devils to a seventh-place finish in the Metro. This year, injuries – including season-ending shoulder surgery for Hughes – have reared their head again, but the Devils' hot start still has the squad in a postseason spot.

Team leaders: The injury to Hughes is a huge blow for the Devils, as one of the top young stars in the league had a team-high 27 goals among his 70 points in 62 games before going down last Sunday in a game at Vegas. One of the most underrated players in the NHL is at it again, as Jesper Bratt is tied with Hughes for the team lead in scoring with 79 points, including 19 goals and 60 assists. Nico Hischier adds 28 goals among his 52 points, while Stefan Noesen (19 goals), Timo Meier (19) and Dawson Mercer (15) also could reach 20 goals.

The biggest improvement for the Devils has come in scoring defense, and a lot of the credit has to go to the new goalie tandem of Jacob Markstrom and Jake Allen. Markstrom has started 41 games and is 22-13-5 with a 2.45 GAA and .902 save percentage, while Allen has a 2.60 GAA and .910 save percentage despite an 11-13-1 record.

What's new: Hughes isn't the only one out long-term, as the defensive corps took a huge hit with recent injuries to Dougie Hamilton and Jonas Siegenthaler. New Jersey was 24-11-3 through Dec. 27 but hasn't been able to find its game consistently for months now, going 12-15-3 in its last 30 contests to add some spice to the Metro race. The offense has been a key culprit, as the Devils have scored four or more goals in just six of the last 30. Bratt is almost single-handedly trying to change that, notching three points in three straight games (2-7-9).

Trending: The teams have split the previous two games this season, earning home wins in their own buildings. Columbus won the first game of the season series by a 4-2 score Dec. 19 at Nationwide Arena before New Jersey's 5-3 win at The Rock on Tuesday.

Former CBJ: None

Scratches: Christian Fischer, Jake Christiansen (upper body), Jordan Harris, Elvis Merzlikins (personal)

Injured reserve: Cole Sillinger (upper body), Kevin Labanc (shoulder), Sean Monahan (upper body), Erik Gudbranson (upper body)

Roster Report: Greaves will get the start in net, his sixth of the season, against the Devils, while the Jackets are changing up the top two lines in an effort to try to kick-start the offense.

The Numbers Game

Columbus has tied a franchise record with five players with 20-plus goals on the season (Kirill Marchenko, 25; Kent Johnson, 21; Adam Fantilli, 21; Zach Werenski, 20; Dmitri Voronkov, 20). ... Second among all NHL players with 48 points (14 goals, 34 assists) at home, Werenski has a single-season team record with 49 assists on the year, and his 20 goals are tied with his mark of 20 in 2019-20 as the most in team history. He has a 17-42-59 line in his last 50 games. His average ice time of 26:58 leads all NHL

players, and he's second among league defensemen in goals (20) and second in points (69) on the season. ... Adam Fantilli has a 14-12-26 line in the last 27 games. ... Marchenko has set a new career high with his 25 goals on the season. He is tied for fourth in the NHL with a plus-31 rating. ... Johnson has 21 points (10-11-21) in the past 22 games. ... James van Riemsdyk has notched a 10-11-21 line in the last 27 games. ... Mathieu Olivier has a career-high 15 goals and is one of two NHL players with 10-plus goals and 100 penalty minutes in 2024-25. He has three goals in the last four games and five in the last nine. ... Boone Jenner has nine assists in 10 games this season since his return from injury. ... The Blue Jackets also have set a franchise record of 12 games with six-plus goals. ... Columbus is 19-6-4 in its last 29 home games and averaging an NHL-best 3.81 goals per game this year at home. ... The Blue Jackets are second in the NHL with 155 goals at 5-on-5, and their 3.23 goals per game are eighth in the league. ... Blue Jackets defensemen have 43 goals this season, the most in the NHL, and 161 points, good for fourth place in the league.

This Day in CBJ History

March 17, 2018: The Blue Jackets post the only win on St. Patrick's Day in franchise history, downing Ottawa by a 2-1 score in Nationwide Arena to earn their seventh victory in a row. Boone Jenner scores in the first period and Markus Nutivaara breaks a 1-1 tie in the second with a power-play goal that would stand as the winner as Sergei Bobrovsky makes 23 saves.

[BlueJackets.com / Blue Jackets dominate third but fall to Devils](#)

By Craig Merz – March 18, 2025

COLUMBUS -- Jake Allen made 45 saves, including 23 in the third period, for the New Jersey Devils in a 2-1 win against the Columbus Blue Jackets at Nationwide Arena on Monday.

Timo Meier and Jesper Bratt scored 39 seconds apart in the second period for the Devils (37-26-6), who have won four of five.

"We won. So that's all that matters," Allen said. "Obviously we don't want to be under that much duress. They were a desperate team and they threw everything they could at the net. We would have been doing the same thing if we were in that situation as well.

"Columbus, every time we've played them, it's a tough game, especially in their building. I thought for the most part for those two periods, it was a pretty solid effort. Obviously, the two late goals in the second was huge for us, and we grinded it."

Mathieu Oliver scored in the third period to end a 182:55 scoreless drought for the Blue Jackets (31-28-8), who have lost four straight and six of seven. Jet Greaves made 18 saves.

Despite the loss, Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason was impressed by the performance.

"It was freaking awesome," he said. "Did we get the result? No. Did we play the right way? Do we believe that this is the turning point? Do we believe that this, not only the (third) period, the game, turns us around and we're ready to go forward? Yeah, 100 percent.

"We had so many unbelievable opportunities. We played the right way. We played hard. We played disciplined. We played within the system structurally. We just didn't get the result."

The Devils are six points behind the Carolina Hurricanes for second place in the Metropolitan Division. The Blue Jackets remain two points behind the New York Rangers for the second wild card in the Eastern Conference.

"A desperate opponent coming at us," Devils coach Sheldon Keefe said. "They're real aggressive, lots of pressure, hard to make any real tape-to-tape passes in that environment so you're under siege. But goaltending was terrific from Jake Allen.

"I thought the guys, despite giving one up, that's sort of the bend don't break type mentality and we earned two points off of that mentality."

Meier made it 1-0 at 13:35 of the second period by bursting past Dante Fabbro through the left circle and putting a backhand five-hole on Greaves.

Bratt extended the lead to 2-0 at 14:14. Greaves misplayed the puck being rimmed around the boards behind the net and it slid out to Bratt, who fired it into the net before Greaves could get back into position.

"It's my job to stop it and keep the puck out of the net," Greaves said. "It's too bad, but it's part of the game. Bounces happen either way. Just have to handle them and respond and just keep going."

"Our line did a pretty good job creating scoring chances," Bratt said. "Definitely had some good looks before that, but sometimes you get those and you've just got to put those in too."

Olivier scored from the low slot off a pass from Justin Danforth at 13:24 of the third period to make it 2-1. He also scored the last goal for Columbus before its scoreless streak on March 11 against New Jersey.

"You go through ebbs and flows in the year. Sometimes it goes in like nothing, and sometimes you're having a hard time scoring," he said. "It's just part of a long season. Unfortunately, our timing of not being able to score as much is a little tough, but obviously, we did the right things to score.

"It's going to come. This group still believes and it's one game. Take the fluke goal out of the way, it's anybody's game. But we definitely put our best foot forward and had every chance to get this done."

Notes: Bratt (three goals, seven assists), Meier (three goals, one assist) and Nico Hischier (two goals, two assists) each extended their point streaks to four games. ... Meier tied Kevin Fiala and Nino Niederreiter (both with seven) for the most 20-goal seasons by a Swiss-born player in NHL history. ... Bratt (20 goals, 60 assists) became the third player in franchise history to record consecutive 80-point seasons. The others: Zach Parise (2008-09 and 2009-10) and Wilf Paiement (1976-77 and 1977-78).

The Hockey News / Blue Jackets Fall Out Of Wild Card Spot After Being Shutout In Back-to-Back Games

By Spencer Lazary – March 18, 2025

Just a few days ago, almost every Columbus Blue Jackets fan and journalist was talking about how the team could pull within two points of the New Jersey Devils for third in the Metro. Unfortunately, they lost to the Devils and fell six points back.

Since then, it hasn't been good for the Blue Jackets. They lost to both the Vegas Golden Knights and New York Rangers in games where they were shut out in both. Their shutout streak has now hit 129 minutes, and with those two losses, they have fallen out of both Wild Card spots.

Before the game against the Devils on March 11, they were in the first Wild Card spot, and now, just five days later, they are on the outside looking in.

Life comes at you fast, and that is what happened to the Blue Jackets and their fans. However, it is important for both the team and the fan base not to panic. With a few wins, they can be right back to where they were.

Here's an updated look at the Eastern Conference Wild Card race:

WC 1: Ottawa Senators - 77 points

WC 2: New York Rangers - 72 points

3. Montreal Canadiens - 71 points
4. Columbus Blue Jackets - 70 points
5. Detroit Red Wings - 68 points
6. Boston Bruins - 68 points

This is obviously not ideal for the Blue Jackets, as they have fallen from the first Wild Card spot down to fourth. They will need to clean up their play, stay together, and battle hard to get back into the second Wild Card spot.

Looking ahead at the Blue Jackets' next five games:

- March 17: New Jersey Devils
- March 20: Florida Panthers
- March 21: Pittsburgh Penguins
- March 24: New York Islanders
- March 28: Vancouver Canucks

There are a few big games ahead, and they need to come out of this next five-game stretch with at least three wins to push back into the Wild Card race.

The Hockey News / Columbus Blue Jackets (70 pts) vs. New Jersey Devils (78 pts) Game Preview

By Jason Newland – March 18, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets and New Jersey Devils play for the third and final time this season. Each team has won a game, so this will be the rubber match.

New Jersey Devils goaltender Jacob Markstrom (25) makes a save against the Columbus Blue Jackets during the third period at Prudential Center. Ed Mulholland-Imagn Images

Every game the Blue Jackets play from here until they either make the playoffs or are eliminated will be the "biggest game of the season."

It's no secret; they haven't played well of late, and if they want a chance to at least compete for a playoff spot, they need to get out of the funk that they're currently in. That means now, not later.

The Devils have built an eight-point lead on the Jackets for third place in the Metro, but they haven't exactly been lighting it up earlier. If the CBJ want any chance, they have to invoke the "six goals at home Jackets" instead of the back-to-back shutouts at home Jackets.

Devils Stats

- Power Play – 27.5% - 4th in NHL
- Penalty Kill – 82.6% - 3rd in NHL
- Goals For - 203 – 12th – 2.99 GPG – 13th
- Goals Against – 176 – 5th – 2.59 GPG – 4th

Series History vs. The Devils

- Columbus is 17-10-0 at home and 29-20-4 in 53 all-time games against the Devils.
- Columbus has scored a power play goal in five of the last six home games in the series (5-of-18; 27.8 pct.).
- CBJ have killed off 15-of-17 New Jersey power play attempts over the last six meetings (88.2 pct.).

Who To Watch For The Devils

- Jesper Bratt leads the Devils with 60 assists and 79 points.
- Nico Hischier leads the team with 28 goals.
- Jacob Markstrom is 22-13-5 with a SV% of .902.
- Jake Allen is 11-13-1 with a .910 SV%.

CBJ Player Notes vs. Devils

- Boone Jenner has 20 points in 35 games against the Devils.
- Zach Werenski has 9 points in 23 games.
- Ivan Provorov has 21 points in 37 career games against New Jersey.

Injuries

- Erik Gudbranson (upper body) is on Injured Reserve on Oct. 16 (63 Games)
- Sean Monahan (upper body) is on Injured Reserve retroactive to Jan. 7 (25 Games)
- Kevin Labanc (shoulder) is on Injured Reserve as of Feb. 21 and out for the season (10 Games)
- Cole Sillinger is day-to-day with an upper body injury (7 Games)
- Jake Christiansen (upper body) is out (1 Game)

TOTAL MAN GAMES LOST: 283

The Hockey News / Blue Jackets Weekly Injury Report: Week 22

By Spencer Lazary – March 18, 2025

The NHL season is winding down, but injuries are piling up across the league. For the Columbus Blue Jackets, they have 16 games left in the season, but unlike most teams, they're getting players back from injury.

Recently, head coach Dean Evason told the media that Erik Gudbranson is close to returning and could be back sometime this week. The Blue Jackets could use another experienced defenseman on their blue line as things tighten up down the stretch.

They're still waiting on Sean Monahan, who will be a huge boost to their power play once he returns.

Without further ado, let's look at the Blue Jackets' weekly injury report:

Injuries

- Erik Gudbranson (upper body) is on Injured Reserve on Oct. 16 (63 Games)
- Sean Monahan (upper body) is on Injured Reserve retroactive to Jan. 7 (25 Games)
- Kevin Labanc (shoulder) is on Injured Reserve as of Feb. 21 and out for the season (10 Games)
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- Jake Christiansen (upper body) is out (1 Game)

TOTAL MAN GAMES LOST: 283

The Blue Jackets are getting healthier, and the hope is it'll be in time for the playoffs.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Shuffle Their Top-Six Looking For a Spark

By Mark Scheig – March 18, 2025

Coming off consecutive home shutouts, the Columbus Blue Jackets are looking for a spark to get their offense going. On Monday night against the New Jersey Devils, they have decided to make a major change.

The Blue Jackets will show a different-looking top-six. In the process, we will see an old line reunited.

New Look Top-6

While the bottom-six will remain in tact from Saturday's game against the New York Rangers, the top-six will be revamped. The all-Russian line of Yegor Chinakhov, Dmitri Voronkov and Kirill Marchenko will play together on one line.

Then on the other line, it will be Adam Fantilli centering Boone Jenner and Kent Johnson. For head coach Dean Evason, they had to try something to get this offense going during their most important stretch of the season.

"When you don't have success, you gotta tweak some things," Evason said. "And so we're moving some pieces around."

Those new look lines were used at the end of the game Saturday. Evason admitted liking what he saw.

"We went to it. Those two lines in particular went to it at the end of the game. We liked what we saw. We obviously had a little sample of it. Did we have success right away with it? No. You always try to find a wake-up call. Not that we've played poorly but we haven't played like we can play. And we've gotta get back to that. There's different ways to try to do that as a coaching staff and that's what we're trying to do."

While the personnel itself won't change from Saturday in terms of the skaters, there is one change to the lineup. Goaltender Jet Greaves will get the start on Monday with Daniil Tarasov backing up.

The defense pairs will remain the same as Saturday. This means another game for Jack Johnson paired with Damon Severson on the third pair. The top-four will remain together for now.

As for the injured, Erik Gudbranson got another skate in. It's only a matter of days until we see him back. In addition, Jake Christiansen joined the morning skate as he's working his way back from an upper-body injury. So did Cole Sillinger. Sean Monahan did not join the main group on Monday.

Werenski & Jenner Remain Confident

Although the results haven't been there of late, the Blue Jackets remain confident that the goals will eventually come. A win on Monday would put the Blue Jackets back in WC2.

Here is what they each had to say Monday morning about where the team is at.

"We're two points out of a playoff spot. We're in a great spot," Werenski said. "Obviously we've lost a few but nothing we haven't faced before this year, a little adversity. So I think we're all in a good spot. We know we have to get a win tonight. If you would have told us we'd be two points out with 16-17 games left, I think we'd be excited about it. That mindset is still the same."

"Things get ramped up this time of year and mistakes get more magnified. But I feel like we're just having fun. We're enjoying it," Werenski continued. "It's one of those things where you have to learn

when you're going through this process. You have to learn a lot of things and learn how to play. It's probably been a little more defensive than it has been throughout the year. It's harder to score goals as we've seen but I think in saying that, we're enjoying that. We're in a great spot right now. We know if we play well the rest of the season, there's a good chance we can play in the playoffs."

"We just trust our game," Jenner said. "The style we've played all year. Just do that right now. That's gotten us to this point and kept us going. For us, we don't have to change anything. We just play Jackets' hockey and that's treated us well. We have to play that way to have success in the series. For us, it's just playing to our identity as a team."

"This time of year, these games are big and there's pressure," Jenner continued. "But that's what we want as athletes to be in this position to have these games down the stretch. They're only going to get more and more important here. 16 left, these games are huge for us. They're playoff games for us. As a group, we want to be in that spot. You don't want to be in the other spot. All the pressure is fine. I think this group can handle it. We've been through a lot throughout the whole season with adversity. So for us, we just keep going."

Blue Jackets Expected Lines/Pairs

- Yegor Chinakhov – Dmitri Voronkov – Kirill Marchenko
- Boone Jenner – Adam Fantilli – Kent Johnson
- Zach Aston-Reese – Justin Danforth – Mathieu Olivier
- James van Riemsdyk – Sean Kuraly – Luke Kunin
- Zach Werenski – Dante Fabbro
- Denton Mateychuk – Ivan Provorov
- Jack Johnson – Damon Severson
- Jet Greaves starts.
- Daniil Tarasov backs up.
- Scratches: Jordan Harris (healthy), Jake Christiansen (upper-body), Elvis Merzlikins (personal), Christian Fischer (healthy).
- Jake Allen starts in net for New Jersey, per Sheldon Keefe. Erik Haula will return to their lineup with Daniel Sprong coming out.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Fall to Devils Behind Jake Allen's 45 Saves

By Mark Scheig – March 18, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets and New Jersey Devils met for the second time in six days, this time at Nationwide Arena. Despite the Blue Jackets throwing everything they had at the Devils, it was Jake Allen who stole the show.

Allen made 45 saves Monday night to backstop the Devils to a huge 2-1 win over the Blue Jackets. He made a pair of second period goals hold up with an unbelievable third-period performance.

The Blue Jackets now have a couple days to think about what could have been.

Game Recap

The first period was two teams getting a feel for each other. There was not much room out there. Shots in the period were just 8-5 for the Blue Jackets.

The Devils got a power play when Denton Mateychuk held Nico Hischier. That turned out to be the only penalty of the night the Blue Jackets took. They successfully killed the penalty off. It was 0-0 after one.

The second period started much like the first. It was a staring contest and whoever blinked first would give up the first goal. The Blue Jackets got caught flat-footed and allowed the Devils to score first.

Timo Meier got the puck on left wing and drove the net hard. Jet Greaves opened the five-hole in the process which allowed room for the opening goal to go in. Meier's 20th of the season made it 1-0 Devils. The Blue Jackets dominated the game until that point and found themselves trailing.

It only took 39 seconds for it to snowball to a 2-0 lead for the Devils. A bad bounce behind the net got past Greaves and allowed Jesper Bratt to convert on his 20th goal of the season.

The Blue Jackets reached eight full periods at home without scoring a goal. They played the third period like their season was on the line. They finally broke through with just 6:36 left in the game.

Mathieu Olivier scored the Blue Jackets' first goal overall in 182:55 and first at home in 174:32 to pull them within 2-1. They turned the third period into their own personal firing barrage at Allen. He answered everything else thrown his way.

Shots on goal in the third ended 24-3 Blue Jackets. Despite winning the faceoff at the end and getting a chance to tie, they failed to score.

Postgame, Dean Evason expressed how pleased he was with the effort especially in that third period.

"It was freaking awesome. Did we get the result? No. Did we play the right way? Do we believe that is the turning point? Do we believe that this is one not only the period, the game that turns us around & we're ready to go forward? Yeah."

Greaves finished the night with 18 saves. Evason said "he played great." On the 2-0 goal, Evason said the puck hit the seam on the yellow which caused the bounce.

The Blue Jackets remain two points behind the Rangers for the final wildcard spot in the Eastern Conference. They will have Tuesday off before returning to practice on Wednesday. They play Thursday against the Florida Panthers.

The Devils now head home and will host the Calgary Flames on Thursday.

1st Ohio Battery / Game Day #67: Greaves Set For Biggest Start Of Young Career As Blue Jackets, Devils Clash Monday Night

By Ed Francis – March 18, 2025

Losers of three straight and shut out in back-to-back games for the first time in over 15 years, the Columbus Blue Jackets will desperately look to get back to their winning ways Monday night against the New Jersey Devils.

The losing streak started last Tuesday in Newark, New Jersey — a 5-3 loss to the Devils in which Columbus fell behind 3-0 after one period and couldn't come back.

The streak has put the Blue Jackets on the outside looking in of a jumbled wild card race, with Saturday's 4-0 loss to the New York Rangers booting them from a playoff spot for the first time since Feb. 25th. Between those two games: another 4-0 loss, this one at the hands of the Vegas Golden Knights.

Still, it's still a tight race. A win Monday night over New Jersey would put Columbus back in the second wild card spot (at least for a day).

For that win, the Blue Jackets are turning to Jet Greaves in net. The 23-year-old has made five starts with the club this season, but none since Jan. 11th when he stopped 31 of 32 shots in a 2-1 Columbus win over the St. Louis Blues.

Greaves has looked the part of an NHL goalie in his limited action this season, going 2-1-2 with a 2.98 goals against average and .906 save percentage. Two of those games came against the Washington Capitals and Tampa Bay Lightning, who are ranked first and second in goals per game.

No doubt about it: this will be the biggest of Greaves' 15 career NHL starts.

Daniil Tarasov, who started Saturday, will serve as Greaves' backup. Elvis Merzlikins remains unavailable to the team right now as he and his wife are expecting the birth of their second child at any time.

Here's what else to know when the Metro division rivals face-off:

- **RE: JERSEY**

Opposite of Greaves in net will be Jake Allen, who makes his second start of the season against the Blue Jackets. The Devils' #2 goalie gave up three goals on 19 shots in a 4-2 loss to Columbus on Dec. 19th. ... The Devils had a three-game win streak (including last Tuesday's victory over the Blue Jackets) snapped Saturday in Pittsburgh, giving up seven goals to the Penguins. ... With forward Jack Hughes out for the season, the Devils' offense relies heavily on the two-headed monster of Jesper Bratt and Nico Hischier. Bratt leads the team in assists (60) and points (79), while Hischier has usurped Hughes as the team leader in goals (28).

- **CHANGING IT UP**

The Blue Jackets shuffled the lines at practice Monday morning in a big way: Yegor Chinakhov and Kirill Marchenko were on a line centered by Dmitri Voronkov, with Adam Fantilli centering Boone Jenner and Kent Johnson to complete Columbus' top six. Voronkov will take the draws at center, where he's won 44.8% of his 85 faceoffs this season.

- **POWERLESS PLAY**

It was another 0-for-3 night for the Blue Jackets' power play Saturday, their third straight game of exactly that. Columbus is now 0-for-16 since the Stadium Series on the man-advantage and have dropped to 23rd in the league on the PP. Looking back further, the Blue Jackets have just

four power play goals in 46 attempts (8.6%) since losing Sean Monahan to an injury in early January.

- **LINEUPS CHANGES & PROJECTIONS:**

Aside from the top six being shuffled, no other lineup changes are expected beyond Greaves getting the start in net.

1st Ohio Battery / NJ 2, CBJ 1: Mathieu Olivier's Late Goal Isn't Enough As Blue Jackets Lose Fourth Straight

By Ed Francis – March 18, 2025

A late goal ended a season-long scoreless drought but the Columbus Blue Jackets suffered their fourth straight loss Monday night, falling 2-1 to the New Jersey Devils.

Neither team scored until the final minutes of the second period, when the Devils connected on goals 39 seconds apart to take a 2-0 lead into the third period.

Mathieu Olivier's goal with 6:36 left in the finale frame was the result of a dominant third period of hockey from the Blue Jackets.

Columbus outshot the Devils 46-20 for the game and 24-3 in the third period, making a feverish push to try and tie the game after Olivier's goal put an end to a goalless streak that lasted 182 minutes, 55 seconds over parts of four games.

Head coach Dean Evason believes the final 20 minutes could be a turning point in Columbus' cold streak.

"Did we play the right way? Do we believe that this is the turning point? Do we believe that this is the one that, not only the period, the game, that turns us around?"

"Yes. 100%," said Evason. "We played our asses off."

"We just didn't get the result."

Jet Greaves, recalled this week from Cleveland, made his first NHL start since Jan. 11th. He stopped 18 of New Jersey's 20 shots.

Here's how Columbus came up just short despite the solid game:

1st Period:

A scoreless first period with a relatively low number of chances, including just two high-danger chances (both from the Blue Jackets). New Jersey had the only power play in the frame but Columbus did an excellent job of shutting it down, allowing just one shot on goal (and grabbing one of their own, too).

2nd Period:

(13:35 — NJ Goal): It takes more than half the game, but the Devils take a 1-0 lead with 6:25 left in the second on Timo Meier's 20th of the season. He grabs the puck in the neutral zone and muscled past Dante Fabbro, getting a shot off that goes five-hole on Greaves for the first goal of the game.

(14:14 — NJ Goal): Greaves had avoided any blunders — until here. He goes to play the puck behind the net and it takes a weird bounce, kicking off him and going right to Bratt. Greaves can't recover in time and Bratt gets his 20th of the season to join Meier in the 20-goal club and put the Devils up 2-0.

Greaves took full responsibility for the play, despite the quirky bounce.

"At the end of the day, it's my job to stop it and keep the puck out of the net," said Greaves.

3rd Period:

(13:24 — CBJ Goal): *Finally, finally, finally.* Olivier ends the scoreless drought with his 16th goal of the season to put the Blue Jackets within one, 2-1. Zach Aston-Reese dumps the puck in front of the net and

it gets through its intended target of Justin Danforth, but he gets just enough of the pass to deflect it to the stick of Olivier, who secures the first Columbus goal in over three hours of play.

Stat Chat:

- Shot attempts in the third period: 50-7 in favor of the Blue Jackets, an incredible 87.7% of the attempts. Nearly half (24) were shots on goal, and half of those (12) were categorized as high-danger chances.
- Mathieu Olivier registered two hits in the game, breaking the single-season club record for hits. He passed Brandon Dubinsky, who had 248 in the 2016-17 season. Olivier is now at 250 for the season.
- They had just one attempt Monday night, but the Blue Jackets are now at seven straight games without a power play goal. They are 0-for-17 during that stretch.

Up Next:

The Blue Jackets will look to avoid a winless homestand when they face the Florida Panthers. Puck-drop Thursday night is scheduled for 7 p.m.

The Athletic / Will NHL ever fix its playoff format? Toughest division? Marchand insight? Caps contenders? Ask CJ

By Chris Johnston – March 18, 2025

On this side of the NHL's trade deadline, the focus for those working behind the scenes in front offices tends to start shifting toward the impending summer business and plans for next season.

Of course, for teams in the playoff hunt, nothing is more important than the games being played each night. And the two-month grind of a Stanley Cup tournament still lies ahead. But the time when general managers can make meaningful changes that will impact their rosters during the 2024-25 season has basically passed.

Some fans are looking ahead, too.

When we put the call out for mailbag questions last week, there was a lot of focus on what comes next for players and teams. There were queries about Mitch Marner, Brock Boeser, Brad Marchand, the never-ending rebuilds in Buffalo and Detroit and the scuffling Nashville Predators, among others.

As always: Thank you for taking the time to read, engage and respond.

Let's go.

What will it take to get a 1 vs. 8 playoff system? — James B.

The first thing that needs to happen is a change in leadership at the NHL. There is no bigger believer in the merits of the current divisional playoff format than commissioner Gary Bettman. So until that happens, it's basically a non-starter. The one thing that may ultimately work in favor of a 1 vs. 8 conference format somewhere down the road is that it's been used in the past and seems to poll well among both players and fans. Of course, it's reasonable to assume that the next time the NHL is seriously looking at adjusting its playoff format, it'll probably be adding some form of wild-card or play-in round to involve more than 16 teams ...

Mikko Rantanen seems another example of a player wanting to sign in a 0 percent state tax market. Wouldn't be surprised if Brad Marchand does the same in Florida. Is the league looking at addressing this issue? It seems like cap circumvention. — Stephen B.

There has definitely been some grumbling at the club level on this topic, particularly with the backdrop of a new collective bargaining agreement currently being negotiated and the possibility of changes to how the system works on the horizon.

However, whether this is even an "issue" that needs to be addressed really depends on who you ask. A team based in a zero-income-tax state may point out that Original 6 teams or those based in a metropolitan city may have an advantage when it comes to attracting certain free agents. Basically, not every player is going to prioritize tax savings or warm weather when making his choice where to play.

What will be interesting to gauge is how the series of salary-cap bumps set to take effect in the next few seasons may affect the perception on this topic. Perhaps with more money in the system as a whole and fewer capped-out teams, it will no longer be viewed as an "issue" worth discussing at all.

No one seems to take the Caps seriously as a contender despite being well ahead of the rest of the East in the standings. Is this just another way of saying the regular season is meaningless? Or is it possible that the national observers really haven't watched the Caps at all and don't know what is driving their success? Thoughts on where they fit? — Gary R.

In my view, the dissonance you're observing is essentially a lag in recognizing how meaningful a step the Capitals have taken. Last year's team barely squeezed into the playoffs and was outscored by eight goals in a four-game sweep by the New York Rangers, which may be coloring the national view of what's happening now in Washington.

To me, they look and feel like a real contender this season. They're scoring more goals per game than every other team in the league while allowing the fourth-fewest goals against. It wouldn't surprise me in the least to see a roster producing those kinds of results go on a long playoff run.

What players do you think are viable offer-sheet targets this summer? — Christian P.

Gauging to what degree various teams may be targeted with an offer sheet is difficult to do without knowing the other significant cap-related decisions they'll make this offseason. Still, let's do our best to project.

The biggest lesson to glean from the St. Louis Blues prying both Dylan Holloway and Philip Broberg out of Edmonton using offer sheets last August is that mid-tier or emerging players may actually produce the biggest vulnerabilities because contending teams are most worried about not overpaying for that area of the roster.

In other words: It's unlikely Connor Bedard would ever be considered a true offer-sheet threat because there's basically no way for a rival team to structure a deal that the Chicago Blackhawks wouldn't match. However, what about a player like Mavrik Bourque? The Dallas Stars have already made some big new cap commitments for next season, and Bourque's a pending restricted free agent with upside.

Or what about Florida Panthers forward Mackie Samoskevich? Not saying it will happen in either case, but those are the kind of players where a cap team might be put in a challenging position. My colleague Peter Baugh also recently mentioned two members of the New York Rangers as possibilities: Will Cuyllé and K'Andre Miller.

Ultimately, the Maple Leafs' 'Core Four' experiment has, at best, seemed to produce a competitive team that is not of the same ilk as those who end up as the last two to four standing. Are they not better off redistributing Mitch Marner's potential cap hit elsewhere this offseason? And if so ... did GM Brad Treliving miss his chance to accumulate assets for Marner? — Noah D.

The Leafs may ultimately be left with no choice but to reallocate Marner's cap space elsewhere since the pending unrestricted free agent holds basically all of the leverage when it comes to his immediate future. However, I can also understand why they'd prefer to simply keep him and pay him.

The odds of finding a better use for the \$11 million isn't particularly high in the short term if Marner walks away as a free agent. The Leafs would essentially then be in a position to overpay less talented or productive free agents.

Now, this would have been a much different debate to wage in spring 2023, when former GM Kyle Dubas indicated a willingness to shake up the "Core 4" days before he was fired. At that point, the Leafs had six weeks to potentially trade Marner (or William Nylander, or Auston Matthews) before those players had no-movement and no-trade protection kick in on July 1.

Had Toronto gone down that avenue in Treliving's first days on the job, it would have gained the additional cap space plus whatever assets it received back for one of those highly talented players. But alas, we'll never know.

Can we get some concrete clarity on the Marchand contract negotiations (with the Bruins before he was traded to Florida)? — Sue.silk1

What I can tell you with certainty is that the sides were discussing a possible extension right up until the day before Marchand was dealt. The Bruins had also relented and tabled a three-year offer after previously trying to limit the term on the 36-year-old's next deal to no more than two years. Ultimately, they couldn't bridge the financial divide and management decided to cut the cord by trading Marchand to an agreeable destination.

It was a difficult decision and one bound to be met with criticism from portions of the team's fanbase. As Marchand himself said: "That's business."

What is the succession plan for when NHL commissioner Gary Bettman retires? — Roland C.

This is a closely guarded secret at the league, although Minnesota Wild owner Craig Leipold recently let it slip publicly that the Board of Governors has started planning for life after Bettman.

While not confirmed, the NHL's most likely succession plan would see deputy commissioner Bill Daly elevated to the top job whenever Bettman decides to step away, guaranteeing continuity at a time when league business is booming. Given that Daly is already 60, his tenure as commissioner may only be granted for a prescribed period of time while a more long-term leadership candidate is identified.

What do you believe would be a fair contract for Brock Boeser this summer as a UFA? — Aj S.

What makes Boeser's case so interesting is that he's currently in the midst of a down season — seeing a significant decline in year-over-year production — and yet he's almost certainly in line for a raise. And perhaps a meaningful one. With the salary cap due to take a significant jump this summer, Boeser would jump from a \$6.65 million average annual value to a \$7.65 million AAV just by securing the same percentage of cap (8.06 percent) as he got on his last RFA deal with Vancouver in 2022. When you then account for the fact he's now a UFA heading into a marketplace with very few other above-average goal-scorers, it wouldn't be a surprise to see him secure an \$8.5 million AAV or higher on the open market.

What's the plan in Nashville this offseason to get this team back on the rails? — Justin M.

The Predators seem to be operating in a way that suggests they're not an offseason fix or two away from re-entering a contention window. They spent big in free agency last July and have been paying for it ever since with an aging roster that is full of holes. GM Barry Trotz recently warned there may be some "pain" ahead while the franchise pivots to acquiring and developing more young talent, which essentially carves out the path immediately ahead. While there doesn't appear to be a full-scale rebuild on the horizon, Trotz is going to be pursuing forward-thinking moves this summer that may result in a team that doesn't win as much next season.

What is your take on what is the toughest division? Maybe put divisions in quality order from best to worst? — Jaso S.

Let's start with CJ's extremely unscientific ranking: Central, Atlantic, Pacific, Metropolitan.

The biggest thing I wrestled with is how to measure top-heavy divisions against those with fewer bottom-feeding teams. Ultimately, the Central took home my No. 1 seed in large part because I think a strong case could be made for any of the Winnipeg Jets, Dallas Stars or Colorado Avalanche to be considered a bona fide Cup contender.

By definition, that should make it the most difficult division to emerge from during the playoffs.

But who is kidding who? There's not a ton of separation between most teams in the mushy middle of this league. The Metropolitan also lost some points here because of how the Devils' poor run of injury luck has changed the power dynamic there.

What are people around the league saying about the Sens under owner Michael Andlauer? What are their general impressions? — Dubby W.

Given how turbulent the operation was under previous owner Eugene Melnyk, the Senators now look like the model of stability by comparison. Andlauer was a well-known and well-liked figure in the industry after serving as a minority owner of the Montreal Canadiens for years and he seems to have brought a passion to Ottawa since taking the helm there in September 2023. He even showed up at a road game in Toronto over the weekend wearing a suit lined with Senators logos!

While challenges lie ahead, starting with getting a new downtown arena built, the prevailing industry view is that this is an organization finally heading in the right direction both on and off the ice.

Looking ahead to the Olympics, does the NHL benefit financially at all other than exposure? With the NHL no longer on NBC, none of their TV partners benefit either. How much are the players giving up to do the Olympics and is it really worth it for them? — James M.

From a strictly dollars-and-cents business perspective, shutting down the NHL season for an Olympic tournament probably doesn't make much sense. That's because team owners bear the risk of seeing their most valuable assets — the players — injured while competing for their countries in games played a continent away from where they operate. Oh, and they get next to no ancillary benefits due to the stringent restrictions placed around media and licensing at the Games, too.

Viewed through that lens, you can understand why the league is so anxious to create its own rotation of regularly-scheduled international events. As the recent 4 Nations Face-Off demonstrated, there's a tremendous thirst for that kind of competition — from players, from fans and from media partners. However, it was ultimately a one-off showcase and it didn't change the fact that nothing else currently matches or exceeds Olympic best-on-best hockey.

The Athletic / NHL owner rankings: Grading every team, from Tampa Bay to Buffalo

James Mirtle – March 18, 2025

Editor's note: This article is part of our Rankings & Tiers series, an evaluation across sport about the key players, front offices, teams, franchises and much more.

They're not always talked about as much as star players, head coaches and general managers. And, in many cases, they're not in the limelight.

But one thing I've seen repeatedly covering the NHL the past 20 years is the value of a good owner to an organization — and the disruption that can come from having a bad one.

Owners set the tone for their franchises. They, ultimately, pick who is in charge of their most important hockey decisions, as well as the organization's key business decisions. They help build arenas. They build fan bases. And they can also help build communities through charitable endeavors and redevelopment projects.

Several months ago, we put out a call to our NHL readers to evaluate their owners. Nearly 4,000 of you — including representatives from all 32 NHL fan bases — filled out our detailed owner survey, and the results are fascinating.

We've compiled your answers in four key ownership categories — willingness to spend, organizational stability, treatment of the fan base and franchise vision — into a "Fan Score" and combined that with our own ranking that factors in objective things such as team performance in the regular season and playoffs (over the past decade) as well as ownership's general reputation and influence, according to our reporting.

The end result is our first-ever NHL ownership rankings. Keep in mind that this ranking is an amalgam of 50 percent fan perception of their teams' owners and 50 percent of our own accounting for owner performance, and in some cases, those factors don't align with one another. (In some markets, fans don't love their owner even though the franchise is successful on the ice, for example.)

Note: Survey responses have been edited for clarity and length.

Vinik has become the gold standard for an owner, not just in the NHL but also in pro sports. He took the Lightning from a bottomed-out laughingstock to a powerhouse, a team that has won more games than anyone over the past decade and somehow remains a contender, year after year.

Vinik also transformed downtown Tampa through massive redevelopment of the area and has donated millions to charity through community initiatives every home game.

Lightning fans voted Vinik the NHL's top owner in treatment of the fan base and organizational stability, but he scored highly in every category to the point he ran away with the top spot. He is the only owner in the league to receive an A+ rating.

The only negative note? Vinik has sold most of his stake in the franchise and will step aside for a new majority owner in 2027.

Those are very big shoes to fill.

Fan perspective: "While I still think he is the top owner in the NHL, I'd be lying if I wasn't scared about the upcoming ownership change. Vinik has spoiled Lightning fans and created an unmatched culture."

“He not only revitalized a crumbling franchise but turned it into a world-class championship organization, and his generosity and philanthropic efforts throughout Tampa Bay have meant even more. He is the shining beacon against whom all other owners should be measured.”

“Jeff please don’t leave us (sobs uncontrollably).”

The defending champs were built with a lot of sweat equity — and a ton of Viola’s Virtu Financial money. The Panthers were a completely lost franchise when he purchased them 12 years ago for a song; an organization that was giving away tickets and missed the playoffs in 15 of 19 seasons.

Viola airlifted in an aggressive group from his New York headquarters, led by CEO Matt Caldwell, that took a unique approach to building an NHL team. The group hit some bumps in the road early on, but ultimately its work paid off with a Stanley Cup victory last season.

Hiring Bill Zito as GM in 2020 was the final piece of the puzzle.

Fan perspective: “The Violas and (co-owner Doug) Cifu have been a godsend to this franchise. I had season tickets before they took over (season tickets were \$7 a game) and I still felt I was being ripped off because of the amount of people getting free lower bowl tickets. When they took over, the first thing they did was tell us they are committed to us and putting value and pride to our fan base.

There were some lean years for sure, but they stayed committed and I cannot be more happy and proud to be a Florida Panthers fan. Down to earth and approachable folks (bought our table a round of beers at a NYC bar before a playoff game) and still offer an affordable ticket for season ticketholders with some of the best playoff pricing in the league.”

“Turning the Panthers from a joke to a juggernaut has been truly miraculous.”

It’s almost ridiculous what the Golden Knights have accomplished in fewer than eight seasons in the league.

A trip to the Final in Year 1 as an expansion franchise. Four trips to the final four in their first seven postseasons. A pile of blockbuster trades and players flocking to a market many were skeptical of when Vegas was awarded an expansion team less than a decade ago.

Foley set a lofty goal of winning a Stanley Cup within six seasons, and he certainly delivered. And, as a bonus, there may not be a more entertaining building to be at for a big game.

Vegas fans voted Foley No. 1 in willingness to spend to win and fifth in franchise vision.

Fan perspective: “VGK ownership is second to none. He supports his organizational team to the max and lets them do their jobs without any interference from him.”

“Love his willingness to go all-in from Day 1.”

It took time to lay the foundation, but since hiring Jim Nill away from the Detroit Red Wings to be GM in 2013, the Stars have quietly evolved into a perennial contender, thanks to savvy drafting and talent acquisition.

Gaglardi’s franchise earned top marks from fans for organizational stability and franchise vision (both ranked third in the NHL), largely thanks to one of the league’s best front-office groups. And many Stars fans compared Gaglardi’s relative anonymity in Dallas favorably with another more, uh, visible owner in the market: Jerry Jones of the Dallas Cowboys.

Fan perspective: “Gaglardi brought us out of the dark ages. The Stars went from irrelevant to contenders thanks to him. Not only that, we’ve hosted the draft, the Winter Classic and been a choice

destination considered by basically every free agent the last five years. All he needs is a Cup and Gaglardi may be the best owner we've ever had."

Flags fly forever. The Blues' surprise Stanley Cup win in 2019 may have been six years ago, but it still received many prominent mentions from Blues fans when it came to Stillman, who brought the franchise a great deal of stability when he purchased it 13 years ago.

That championship changed the perception of the franchise and the hockey culture in St. Louis to the point that many fans and their children began playing the game for the first time, even though the NHL had been in the city for more than 50 years when the Blues won.

St. Louis finished second in voting for treatment of the fan base, behind only the Lightning. Fans also lauded Stillman's willingness to spend to the cap despite being in a midlevel market.

Fan perspective: "Tom Stillman is one of the best owners in all of sports. He has built a consistent winner, he's never been scared to spend to the cap if the circumstances are right, and he views the organization not as an investment to profit from, but a civic duty. The man is a gem."

"Mr. Stillman saved our franchise and brought us the Cup."

It was a long, long wait for Leonsis to finally get his championship, with nearly 20 years of twists and turns before Alex Ovechkin raised the Stanley Cup at the ripe old age of 32 in 2018.

It's a fitting sign of Leonsis' longstanding success that the Capitals remain a contender even now. Fans voted Washington as sixth best in organizational stability, although there were plenty of grumbles about the team's near-move to a new arena in Virginia last year that dropped Washington's "treatment of the fan base" score.

Fan perspective: "Leonsis has led a stellar organization for years, but his Virginia stadium fiasco has definitely undermined confidence in and good feelings toward him."

"Ted seems to truly care about the fans, and his communication is extremely good. Surprising how tone deaf he was with the attempted move to Virginia but seems back on track in D.C."

The fan base is clearly happy with the team on the ice, led by superstars Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar, and ranked the Avs fourth in organizational stability.

But there was some strong pushback from fans in a few other areas, with the Avs finishing a surprising 21st in the "treatment of the fan base" category. At issue primarily seems to be the struggle to watch games on television consistently given the structure of the rights deals.

Fan perspective: "The years-long fight with cable companies — such that most fans couldn't watch either the Avs or the Nuggets win championships — was and remains a huge slap in the face to fans."

"The Kroenkes are the best owners in pro sports. They hire great people and get out of the way."

The NHL's newest majority owner, Smith is difficult to place on a list like this. But the early returns are incredibly positive, with the fan base loving his personal approach and enthusiasm.

If Utah can sneak into a wild-card spot in the Western Conference, what's quickly become one of the league's louder groups of fans will have even more to cheer about.

Fan perspective: "Ryan Smith is a great owner who cares about the team, players and community and puts his money where his heart is."

"The guy does everything for the community. It's hard not to see him as the ideal owner."

Another brand new owner, Andlauer has done a good job of quickly winning over the Senators fan base in the honeymoon phase.

Ottawa fans have been through a lot given their historically challenging ownership situations, so he has a chance to rewrite franchise history the way few owners can. Especially if he gets a new arena built closer to downtown.

Fan perspective: “He’s at least brought class and stability to our team after 10 years of futility of running an NHL team to the ground.”

“Ottawa has become an actual professional organization instead of an underfunded plaything.”

“Andlauer has totally transformed the public face of the Ottawa Senators. He is a down-to-earth, engaged individual who genuinely wants to bring respectability back to this franchise. From totally revamping the management group, spending to the cap, expanding the community to finally include Gatineau and taking a professional approach to the construction of a new arena, there is a breath of fresh air and optimism surrounding the team.”

Having brought in some ideas that are different from the NHL’s norm, Dundon can be controversial — just look at our agent survey from last month for some examples — but for hockey fans in small market North Carolina, he’s been a godsend.

Caniacs ranked Dundon the fourth-best owner under the category of franchise vision and seventh for organizational stability, scores that helped him creep into our top 10. The Hurricanes’ sparkling win-loss record since he bought the team helps, too.

Fan perspective: “Dundon has saved the ‘Canes, so it’s hard to ding him for much because they likely would be elsewhere without his ownership. I wish he was a little less bare-bones when it comes to the front office and scouting, but it has been working so it’s hard to complain too much.”

“Having lived through the tail end of the Karmanos era, Dundon is a massive improvement and the on-ice product reflects that. He may need to rely on his staff more than he does, but it seems like they all have it handled.”

“Love (that) he is willing to think outside the ‘hockey box’ and basically doesn’t care about what anyone thinks. Also embracing the Billy Bean philosophy on selecting the players.”

Ever-passionate Minnesotans flooded our survey with the most responses of any fan base, and the results were largely positive. Leipold was ranked sixth for his willingness to spend on the team and eighth for treatment of the fan base, although he ranked middle-of-the-pack in organizational stability and franchise vision.

More success in the postseason is needed to climb higher than this ranking, as many fans are frustrated with the Wild being in the mid-tier again and again.

Fan perspective: “Love his commitment to the fans, but we have never truly been a cup contender since he purchased the team.”

“Ownership’s commitment to ‘going for it’ every year has meant the team has been stuck in the middle for far too long, with only marginal variances up or down. Too good to get good draft picks, too bad to really make noise in the playoffs.”

The Canadiens have lost a ton of games under Molson’s watch lately, but that hasn’t dissuaded a fan base that loves his personal approach and enthusiasm for the team. They also make clear they believe the Habs are finally headed in the right direction, under a bright new management team and with many young stars in the fold.

Fans ranked the Canadiens sixth in franchise vision and eighth in willingness to spend and treatment of the fan base, very high marks for one of the sport's marquee franchises.

Fan perspective: "I couldn't be happier about Geoff Molson's decision to pursue a rebuild for the Canadiens and then to follow through with the necessary patience and commitment to make it work. The organization's adoption of a more progressive and modern approach to management and roster building is a breath of fresh air for the lifelong Habs fan."

"Geoff Molson is a great owner. He is equally as nice. He can be seen walking around town and speaking with fans very often."

"Molson has definitely improved during his time as owner. He's been historically hampered by being slow to address issues in a dynamic way. However, his handling of the Habs over the past three years has instilled a new confidence amongst the fan base, myself included. Hiring Gorton and Hughes and navigating the franchise out of the 'old boys club' mentality has been refreshing."

It's been a bumpy road for this well-heeled ownership group, with nine postseason misses in 11 years. The franchise was in a tough state when ownership bought it, after selling the future for so many years to try to keep the glory years alive.

But fans are largely happy with the state of the long-running rebuild, centered around Jack Hughes, and believe the Devils' time as a contender is just around the corner. Still, fans do worry about the franchise playing third fiddle to the owners' other teams, led by the NFL's Washington Commanders.

The Devils scored only 16th under the "treatment of the fan base" category.

Fan perspective: "I think they get a bit of a harsh rep by Devils fans who have PTSD from the failings of previous ownership and a rebuild that took longer than expected to come together, but overall I think they've generally done a good job as owners. They've hired smart people who've brought their hockey and business ops into the modern era, and have largely stayed out of their way and let them do their jobs. ... Just look around the league and you'll find so, so many worse owners. I can't call them the best owners in the league, but by and large, they do all the things you want your owners to do to support a winning team."

Playoff wins have been hard to come by, and there are new grumbles in the fan base over how the attendance situation was handled a year ago, with national headlines shining on Winnipeg for a rare negative reason.

Overall, fans are appreciative that their franchise is back and owned by one of the richest men in the world. But the Jets finished 24th in treatment of the fan base, which shows where ownership still has work to do.

Putting up more wins in the spring should help, too.

Fan perspective: "Great ownership. They did take for granted that the sellouts would continue and did not serve their customers like they should have. They have admitted that mistake and are working hard to improve things."

"Mr. Chipman took way too long to recognize that the fans must be respected at all times. He seemed to think that bringing the Jets back would be enough for us to open our wallets no matter how we're treated or how much we're charged. He has a long way to go but at least we can see progress on that front."

An octogenarian German billionaire, Plattner is considered as hands-off as they come in the NHL. The Sharks' longstanding success has hit a rut recently with a deep rebuild, something that has split the fan base.

The Sharks finished middle-of-the-pack in every category in our survey, although 58 percent of fans said they felt more confident in their ownership over the past year, one of the higher positive responses in that regard. That Macklin Celebrini appears to be the real deal already certainly helps.

Fan perspective: "There are probably better odds of seeing Elvis and Big Foot sitting together at a Sharks game than seeing Plattner at one, but I'd rather have him than an overly meddlesome owner."

"Hasso Plattner seems to be a decent owner. When the team was good, the team was up against the salary cap every year. The current rebuild doesn't lack conviction either."

The Predators are owned by a large group of more than a dozen mostly local owners. Stakes within that ownership group have evolved over the years, so they've at times lacked a visible face of the organization since Craig Leipold sold the franchise to take over the Wild. Former Tennessee governor Bill Haslam is set to take over majority ownership later this summer, which may change that.

Nashville had the fewest fans complete our ownership survey by a fairly large margin, a sign of some apathy on the subject. Those who did weigh in, however, put the Predators solidly middle-of-the-pack in most categories. They did rank 28th in franchise vision during what's become a very tough season on the ice.

Fan perspective: "Owner(s) are invisible. No idea who is in or out of the ownership group. No vision about the franchise shared. The only thing I can surmise is they like booze because you can't walk more than 10 feet in the concourses without stumbling into a beer or liquor stand. But, then again, that's the whole city."

One of the more unusual ownership groups in pro sports, MLSE is currently made up of Canada's largest telecom companies, Rogers and Bell, which split a 75 percent stake, and individual owner Larry Tanenbaum.

While the fan base recognizes the Leafs' liberal use of their financial might — ranking them fifth in willingness to spend — ownership scores poorly in every other category, including the fourth-worst score in treatment of the fan base.

And with Rogers set to buy out Bell's 37.5 percent stake in a purchase that will close later this year, 48 percent of fans said they had a lower level of confidence in ownership than a year ago. A 58-year-long Stanley Cup drought isn't helping, either.

Fan perspective: "Have been systemically unable to turn revenue advantage into a performance advantage. Steadily losing market share in Toronto and generational interest."

"With Rogers taking majority control of MLSE, I have less faith in the group, especially as it is likely Larry Tanenbaum will be out as well. To me, Rogers is only in it for profits and does not care about winning. You see that with the Blue Jays."

After many, many years as a top contender, the Bruins were in the unusual position of being trade deadline sellers last week. That lack of success of late has raised some serious frustration in what can be a cantankerous fan base, a group for whom the 2011 Stanley Cup win now feels like ages ago.

Jacobs has long been a polarizing figure in NHL circles, but under our ranking criteria, his team's track record on the ice helps balance out some of the negative opinions and optics that have arisen during things like contentious CBA negotiations.

Despite their on-ice success, the Bruins were voted 29th in willingness to spend, 27th in treatment of the fan base and 26th in franchise vision. And 58 percent of the fan base said they had a more negative level of confidence in ownership this year compared to last.

Fan perspective: “Jacobs will always spend to the cap ceiling but is fiercely loyal to a management team that is never accountable, or, let’s face it: successful. Jacobs’ teams are productive, but the cost to see a game in Boston is not worth the product on the ice anymore.”

“They need to hire an executive that is not a former player. We need a nerd in the front office somewhere.”

After putting up a 100-point season two years ago, the Kraken had 81 last season and are on pace for just 73 this year. They are, in other words, going in the wrong direction.

Only four years into their existence, it’s clear the honeymoon period is beginning to wane a little, too. While fans lauded the team under the “treatment of the fan base” category, the Kraken received a middling score for franchise vision.

The biggest impact against their ranking here, however, was their regression in the standings the past two seasons.

Fan perspective: “I think ownership has made a mistake with Ron Francis. The team seemed set up to build conservatively through the draft (a strength of Francis) but has changed course to try to be aggressive through free agency.”

“The way this team has become a part of the community in so many ways has been wonderful.”

The Ducks’ lone championship is now nearly two decades old, and the franchise is on the verge of missing the playoffs for a seventh consecutive season.

The Samuelis have long had an excellent reputation in the market and around the league, but the stalled rebuild is beginning to take its toll. Ducks fans ranked ownership 30th under willingness to spend and 18th for franchise stability, likely due to the fallout from former GM Bob Murray’s tenure.

Producing more tangible results from the draft and their young players in the system is a must in the near future before more goodwill gets eroded.

Fan perspective: “The Samuelis care about the community, have committed their time and money, brought in a Cup and treat people respectfully. What more can you ask for?”

“The owners are hands-off when it comes to running the team. I sometimes wish they were a little more hands-on, though; the last eight years have been rough.”

The Islanders had a couple trips to the conference finals (2020 and 2021) and now have their new, state-of-the-art home. But cracks have begun to show, on and off the ice, and that’s evident here from a fan base frustrated with an aging, underperforming roster.

Ownership was ranked 27th out of 32 teams for franchise vision in our survey, and 54 percent of respondents said they had lower confidence in Ledesky and Malkin than a year ago.

Fan perspective: “The owners spend to the max, which is great, but are slow to realize that this team is in dire need of a rebuild. Whether this is all on Lou, or whether the owners are telling Lou to just focus on making the playoffs, even if they’re a one-and-done team, is unknown. But the perennial mediocrity is becoming tiresome.”

“After years of rumors around moving to Kansas City, the Isles now have ownership that is willing to spend, have stabilized the team’s reputation and are generally competent. It’s hard not to see them as anything but a positive force given how things were before them.”

It’s a little surprising to see the Oilers this far down the list, given they have a beautiful new building and a contending team, but Edmonton is called the city of champions for a reason. The lean years and managerial mistakes under previous front offices continue to not sit well with an educated fan base, even with their current superstar-led cast getting to within a win of a championship last season.

Fans in our survey lauded Katz’s willingness to spend (fourth best), but the Oilers finished 28th under organizational stability and 24th under treatment of the fan base, with many complaining about costs at the arena. So there’s still work to do to win over folks in the Alberta capital.

Fan perspective: “Since he has owned the Oilers, Daryl Katz has had something like seven different GMs and 11 different coaches. Unbelievable lack of organizational stability and long-term vision.”

“Katz is willing to spend but has made terrible decisions to date with management hirings. That has held the team back from winning a Cup with McDavid and Draisaitl.”

Another polarizing figure in a major sports market. In fact, we couldn’t publish quite a bit of the commentary we received from surly Rangers fans.

The Rangers have made the playoffs 11 of the past 14 seasons and gone to either the conference finals or Cup Final five times in that span, so the on-ice success has often been there, even if they haven’t been able to win a championship.

During a tough season this year, however, the Rangers were ranked 25th in organizational stability and 28th in treatment of the fan base, according to the MSG faithful who weighed in.

Fan perspective: “He’s done an OK job with the Rangers, but his ownership of the Knicks, MSG, etc., have all been catastrophic. He shouldn’t get points for caring too little about the Rangers to destroy them as much as he’s destroyed everything else.”

Often referred to as “the Boston guys” in hockey circles, FSG has had a controlling interest in the Penguins franchise for only a few years, and with an aging roster and new GM, it’s been a bumpy ride. An attempt to retool rather than rebuild has gone poorly, to the point Pittsburgh sits at the bottom of the standings this season, and a fan base that has been spoiled with so much success is already souring on the ownership group.

FSG scored especially poorly under “franchise vision,” where fans ranked them 24th. Organizational stability wasn’t much higher, at 21st.

Fan perspective: “We all miss Mario and are skeptical that these guys want to really win.”

“FSG is still new to hockey, and while it shows, it’s tough to really give them fair grades. They purchased the team entering a difficult period of the team’s cycle, so we’ll have to see how they come out of it.”

“They should have bought the Bruins instead.”

In the decade since winning their second Stanley Cup in three years back in 2014, the Kings have won just seven playoff games. That’s led to a fan base that is largely angry or apathetic, depending on who you ask.

More of their ire is directed at management, but ownership gets some shrapnel by association. Fans voted the Kings harshly in every category in our survey, but they finished especially poorly in franchise vision, where they ranked ahead of only the Buffalo Sabres.

Fan perspective: “Very hands-off but willing to spend. But lacking in vision. Too committed to legacy players in management and less focused on where the game is going.”

The Flyers have unbelievably only made it out of the first round once since 2012, a span of 13 seasons of futility that is more pronounced than anything that’s come before in their long, storied franchise history.

That, understandably, does not sit well with a very passionate fan base, which did not hold back in our survey. The Flyers’ worst marks were reserved for “organizational stability,” where they ranked 28th. Many fans also complained about having corporate ownership after the passing of Ed Snider in 2016 and some of the management mistakes under previous regimes.

Fan perspective: “The lack of vision has been apparent for years and the team’s wallowing in mediocrity is a direct result of ownership refusing to tear it down and rebuild properly.”

“They need to spend less time concerned about doing things ‘the Flyers way’ and more time concerned about doing things the best way.”

For decades, the Ilitches were the gold standard in NHL ownership, as the Red Wings built a dynasty in the late 1990s and into the early 2000s. But the rebuild years have hit hard, with eight consecutive playoff-less seasons, and the Motown faithful are restless with the next generation of the family (led by Chris Ilitch), which continues to own the club.

The Red Wings were given low scores in every department in our survey, but the fact 66 percent of fans said they had lower confidence in ownership than a year ago stands out as the worst mark in that category in the NHL. There were plenty of complaints about the organization’s inability to finish the new arena district, along with its perceived apathy over the team’s struggles on the ice.

Detroit has a lot of good young talent coming, but it’s clear the Red Wings desperately need to get back in the playoffs to give their fans more hope.

Fan perspective: “Not sure he cares about the fan/entertainment side of things; we’ve heard about the ‘Detroit District’ for a decade now and everything is still a parking lot.”

“His stewardship of both the Red Wings and the Tigers has been driven by squeezing the fan base for every nickel possible. Preaching for patience during a rebuild while charging top dollar is a shame.”

Hope has finally arrived in Columbus with the Blue Jackets surprising rise up the standings this year. They have a roster filled with young stars and a good chance at making the playoffs for the first time since 2020 (and only the seventh time in their 24-year history).

But the fans are still lukewarm on the McConnell family’s ownership, given all of the ugly twists and turns they’ve been through since the franchise was founded as an expansion team at the turn of the millennium. Fans ranked the Blue Jackets second last for organizational stability, ahead of only the Sabres, although 54 percent of fans said their confidence in ownership was higher than a year ago.

Many fans complained ownership is too hands-off when the organization has been struggling, which unfortunately has been much of the team’s tenure.

Fan perspective: “While having an owner who doesn’t meddle is a strength, it often comes across as apathy. The hiring of Mike Babcock should have been vetoed by ownership, and when it blew up in their face, the GM should have been fired immediately. The owner may be patient to a fault as the team has lacked identity and vision. Are they rebuilding with young players? If so, quit bringing in so many vets and high-priced free agents.”

“The McConnells are notoriously hands-off owners, which is a blessing and a curse. They’ve shown they’re committed to winning and aren’t agonizingly cheap to the extent of some other small market

owners, but tend to leave all the details to hockey ops. ... They've shown they're willing to spend to the cap to make it happen and won't interfere in the decision making. The problem is hockey ops have made some questionable, if not at times horrible, decisions that did not get questioned or overruled. ... The fan base has deserved better than being the league's punchline for the better part of two decades."

Once the toast of the league — they won three titles in six years (2010, 2013 and 2015), creating a mini-dynasty — the Blackhawks have fallen on hard times due to scandals, cover-ups and mismanagement. Their current rebuild has them bottomed out in the standings, and the fan base remains unhappy with the direction from the top.

Fifty-five percent of fans said their confidence in ownership was lower than a year ago, partly because the fan base is incredibly unhappy with the team's TV broadcast setup.

Fan perspective: "Low payroll, shrinking crowds, irrelevant in the city? He hit the triple crown. Danny (Wirtz) has done one thing his grandfather could only dream of — he found a way to not televise the home AND road games."

"Hawks fan and former longtime season ticketholder. The Wirtz family's handling of the Kyle Beach situation was one of the most disappointing responses I have ever seen in pro sport. Completely classless. Not sure where we go from here."

The Flames have lost a lot of hockey games over the past 30 years. Other than their surprise run to the Final in 2004, Calgary has made it further than the first round only twice in the past 35 years and missed the playoffs entirely 10 of the past 15 seasons.

A new building is finally coming and the team appears to be trending up on the ice thanks to the play of rookie goaltender Dustin Wolf, but the fan base is clearly disgruntled after so many years in the wilderness.

Fans ranked the Flames near the league basement in every ownership category we surveyed — including third last in treatment of the fan base and franchise vision.

Fan perspective: "Edwards needs to let (GM Craig) Conroy rebuild the way he wants without nixing trades, otherwise the Flames will be in mediocrity territory forever. Not good enough for the playoffs but not bad enough for a good pick."

"Embrace the tank. Flames have been mediocre for the last 30-plus years, with the odd one-off season of doing well in the regular season to failing in the playoffs. Embrace the rebuild Edwards, take a few years of revenue losses and go younger. Let the new rink get built, then sell off the team to someone who wants to win at all costs and is not worried about being a profitable organization instead of a championship-caliber organization."

One of the most intense fan bases in all of pro sports, Canucks supporters have had to deal with a lot in recent years. Vancouver has missed the playoffs in seven of the past nine years, and the GM tenure of Jim Benning (2014-21) was one of the most disastrous in NHL history.

Even with more stability in place now and the front office cleaning up a lot of the mess, the fan base hasn't forgiven or forgotten, ranking ownership 30th in franchise stability and 31st in treatment of the fan base. It's likely going to take a period of sustained success for Aquilini to win over the market.

Fan perspective: "He's a fine owner when the team is winning but needs to stop meddling and let his GMs work when the team is rebuilding. Or at least let them rebuild instead of retool."

"If I could erase the eight years of Benning hell that Aquilini directly caused, this would be a very different survey, as (former GM) Mike Gillis took us to the finals and (new president) Jim Rutherford is killing it. But alas, those scars run too deep."

It's a sad state of affairs in Buffalo right now. This season is the franchise's 14th consecutive out of the playoffs, the NHL's longest drought in history and one that doesn't appear to be ending any time soon.

The Sabres were voted dead last in every category in our survey by a large margin and 61 percent of fans said their confidence in ownership was lower than a year ago. Buffalo fans filled our survey en masse, with more entries than every franchise except Minnesota, and the hundreds of responses were filled with vitriol. Many were pleas for the owner to sell the team.

Things are about as bad as they can get in Buffalo.

Fan perspective: "He seems averse to hiring GMs and coaches with actual NHL experience and makes abrupt hiring and firing decisions. The franchise still appears to have a haphazard plan for putting together a winning roster. Part of this is that there is no team president or other executive with NHL experience to guide these decisions."

"His entire ownership tenure has been a disaster. He used to have competition as the worst owner in the league in Eugene Melnyk and Alex Meruelo, now he is the last one of those remaining."

"Hockey Heaven he said. Instead, Terry Pegula's ownership has put Buffalo in Hockey Hell."

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[Sportsnet.ca / NHL Playoff Push: Round 1 matchups we want to see](#)

By Emily Sadler – March 18, 2025

We are officially one month away from the conclusion of the 2024-25 NHL regular season, and as the stretch run of the campaign is laid out before us we're seeing the playoff picture shift every night.

This weekend brought a few possible first-round matchup previews between rivals in the Atlantic and Central divisions, too. The Senators topped Toronto to keep Ottawa's remarkable win streak alive — and add to the Maple Leafs' pile of March losses — on Saturday, while on Sunday, the Dallas Stars visited the Colorado Avalanche in a game that not only brought the well-traveled Mikko Rantanen to his old stomping grounds but showed us a glimpse of the high-octane matchup we could see go down in the Central Division next month.

From now until the end of the season, all the wins and losses and momentum swings will be under a brighter spotlight as we get a clearer sense of which matchups we're most likely to see in Round 1. But what about the matchups we most want to see?

That's what we're looking at in this edition of the Playoff Push, which is all about putting a word in with the Hockey Gods and highlighting the first-round series we'd love to see if the stars align.

Senators vs. Maple Leafs

Three straight playoff meetings starting in the spring of 2000 — and four post-season series clashes in the first five years of the new millennium — saw the Toronto Maple Leafs and Ottawa Senators go from provincial NHL neighbours to fiery rivals. Toronto became Ottawa's biggest roadblock over that stretch, stumping the Senators each time.

While there's no love lost between these franchises, separated by a 450-kilometre stretch of the 401, for much of the past two decades the Battle of Ontario has been a rivalry more or less in name only. Rotating rebuilds have seen the clubs hit and miss the playoffs at different times, limiting the rivals to regular-season bouts. While those have brought some entertaining affairs, nothing re-ignites a rivalry like a best-of-seven showdown.

If we are to finally strike up another Battle of Ontario in the playoffs this spring, the Maple Leafs will need to take a note from the Senators' book and start winning again. Toronto has been comfortably sitting in the top three of the Atlantic Division standings but after losing five of six — including Saturday's loss to Ottawa, their final head-to-head of the regular season — that position could soon be in peril. Four points separate them from the surging Senators, who have won six straight games to jump into the playoffs and apply more than a little pressure to the Maple Leafs and Lightning. A string of three losses for the Lightning prior to Saturday's win in Boston has Tampa Bay at risk of being leap-frogged, too.

Another path to a Toronto-Ottawa first-round meeting is if the Maple Leafs can shake off their dysfunction and catch the Panthers atop the Atlantic should the Senators maintain their WC1 spot.

Fans in Ottawa and Toronto aren't the only ones who could greatly benefit from a little movement around the Atlantic Division standings. We're four points in any direction away from seeing a Battle of Florida, too.

Capitals vs. Rangers

Last spring, the Capitals just barely squeaked into the second wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference and didn't stand a chance against the conference-topping Rangers. New York outscored the Capitals by a combined 15-7 and kept Alex Ovechkin off the scoresheet entirely, the captain's first time ever being shut out in a playoff series.

It felt like Washington's window was slamming shut.

But oh, what a difference a year can make. Now, one month shy of the season finale, Washington is the heavyweight favourite, the league's most prolific offence, with a commanding lead atop the Eastern Conference and just two points shy of the overall league lead as Ovechkin's thrilling hunt for history thrusts their every game into the spotlight.

The Rangers, meanwhile, have fallen from grace amid a season of struggles and are in and out of the post-season window as part of a four-team fight for the final wild card spot that's looking like it'll go down to the wire.

Cue the revenge tour. If the playoffs started today, these two teams would officially embark on a rematch with the roles completely reversed from a year ago. If the Rangers can fend off the Canadiens, Blue Jackets and Red Wings over the next month, it'll be a reality. Proof once again that parity is alive and well in the NHL.

Avalanche vs. Stars

When Avalanche brass traded away star Mikko Rantanen to Carolina at the end of January, no one expected he'd wind up landing with a division rival instead. If the Rantanen saga, which saw him flipped from the Hurricanes to the Stars at the deadline, wasn't already intriguing enough, how about we add a familiar first-round playoff bout into the mix?

The Stars and Avalanche gave us a glimpse of what a Round 1 series could look like when they met on Sunday — the 4-3 Avalanche win brought no shortage of offence and needed overtime to solve.

Put that into the post-season, and we've got a thriller between two of the game's highest-scoring offences. Of course, there's plenty of recent playoff familiarity between these two clubs of late. They met in the second round last spring, with Dallas claiming the series in six games before losing to the Oilers in the Western Conference Final. Before that, they met in Round 2 of the 2020 playoffs, with the Stars again winning en route to the Cup Final.

Despite Dallas' success against Colorado, the Stars have yet to hoist the Cup with this core, and are among the favourites to finally get there this year. It would feel like a fitting start to a Cup run to see them topple the 2022 champs with Rantanen on Dallas' side this time.

Jets vs. Canucks

If the playoffs started today, we'd be bracing for an interesting clash between the Jets and Canucks. Not since the early 1990s have these teams met in the post-season (Vancouver took both division semi-final series in 1992 and 1993). That's not exactly a recent rivalry, but this all-Canadian matchup would certainly be intriguing.

Everything has gone right this season for the Jets, who sit atop the NHL, thanks to a deep lineup and MVP-calibre netminder Connor Hellebuyck. Few things have gone right for the Canucks, meanwhile, as locker room turmoil and piled-up injuries have halted any signs of momentum. And yet, the team with legitimate playoff expectations going into the season finds itself within the window despite those struggles.

We're about to get a taste of what this playoff matchup could look like as the Jets visit Vancouver Tuesday night as the Canucks near must-win mode if they're to fend off the Blues, Flames, and Utah hot on their tail. (The Jets and Canucks are set to play again March 30.)

Sportsnet.ca / NHL provides clarity to GMs on goaltender interference ahead of playoffs

By Eric Engels – March 18, 2025

MANALAPAN, Fla. — The NHL says that after the coach's challenge for goaltender interference was initially instituted 10 years ago, there were upwards of 200 of them per season.

On Monday, at the Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa in Palm Beach County, Fla., they presented data to all 32 general managers (and the media thereafter) that showed only 105 calls pertaining to goaltender interference had been challenged so far this season.

It's more than there were last season — it's actually the most there have been since 2019, when it was deemed an unsuccessful challenge would cost teams a minor penalty rather than a timeout — and 60 calls have been overturned versus the 48 that were overturned then.

But Kay Whitmore, who represents goaltenders as one of the four executive managers of the NHL Situation Room that rules on the challenges, provided a simple reason for why the numbers have significantly decreased over time while the percentage of successful challenges has risen.

"The coaches have a better understanding of how the rule is applied," Whitmore said.

Still, he was the one who referred to Rule 69.5 as "a convoluted rule to begin with" earlier, and he said that because he knows it'll remain the NHL's most controversial one no matter how well executives and coaches come to understand it.

There's subjectivity necessarily baked into every aspect of it — from whether or not a player incidentally or purposefully makes contact with the goaltender, to whether contact is sufficient enough to impede the goaltender from playing his position, to where contact with the goaltender is made and whether the goaltender has enough time to reset if contact initially did impede him — and that's why the NHL spent more time on it Monday than it did going over other challenges for offsides, kicked pucks, pucks sent out of play, pucks touched by high sticks and gloved pucks.

There may never be a consensus amongst GMs on every call. It's rare two of them will see one the same way in a game involving their teams, and even the decision-makers in the Situation Room said they aren't always unanimous.

But the process involves the four executive managers — and at least three other people on every decision — and majority rules, with the same principles consistently applied. They run through their elaborate checklist and refuse to overturn a call unless there's conclusive evidence it should be overturned.

Still, 60 of 105 have been overturned because a rule with so many conditions is naturally the hardest one to apply in real time.

The NHL starts there with its officials when a challenge is issued. The Situation Room shows the sequence in real time to officials on first review because it wants them to relive it as they saw it live and hear how they processed the play.

Then they provide overhead replay before going through all the other angles.

Ultimately, a retired official is on every call with the on-ice officials, and that person relays the final decision rendered by the Situation Room.

The goal on Monday was to ensure every general manager was up to date on the elaborate deliberation process, and that they were given the opportunity to review upwards of 70 challenges from this season and provide feedback.

“It was really interesting,” said one general manager, who added he gained equal insight from the people running the Situation Room as he did rival general managers he met with in his smaller breakout group.

We found it interesting to hear an NHL PR representative say a decision questioned by one reporter in the media session was deemed to have been correctly assessed by seven out of eight GMs who were shown the play in one of the breakout groups.

“These aren’t black and white,” said vice president of hockey operations Kris King. “There’s a lot of judgment that goes into these... They’re never the same. They’re snowflakes. There’s a lot of different things that go into it.”

He was repeating what senior VP and director of hockey operations Colin Campbell said several times in the one-hour media session.

“Anytime you have a coach’s challenge, someone’s going to be mad,” Campbell added.

He understands it’s doubtful that’ll change following Monday’s information session, but that didn’t make holding it any less important.

The Stanley Cup Playoffs are rapidly approaching, and the league wants to ensure the people running its teams have the clearest understanding of how coach’s challenges are processed.

These meetings also provided an open forum for the general managers to suggest rule changes or tweaks, and their input on removing any further grey from a naturally “convoluted” rule is encouraged.

No rules will be changed in season, and any tweaks would have to be approved by the players before going into effect.

The NHL also briefed the GMs on league-wide trends, including average goals per game being above six for the fourth straight season.

- Even strength scoring accounts for 77.8 per cent of all scoring, which is the highest percentage since the 1972-73 season.
- Meanwhile, as the debate rages outside of these meetings on whether to extend three-on-three overtime and eliminate the shootout, 74 per cent of games that have gone to overtime this season have ended in overtime, making it the lowest total of shootouts since the shootout was adopted in 2005-06.
- Seventy-five per cent of this season’s games have been decided by a goal — or two because of an empty-netter — which is the highest rate of close games in NHL history.
- We’re looking at the second-highest rate of comeback wins in the history of the NHL so far this season.
- The Eastern Conference Playoff race hasn’t just felt tight, it’s been insanely tight, with 14 of 16 teams occupying a playoff spot at one point or another since American Thanksgiving. Eight different teams have occupied a wild-card spot since Jan. 1.

[Sportsnet.ca / Weekend Takeaways: Don't count out those pesky Blues just yet](#)

By Ryan Dixon – March 18, 2025

When trade talk really picked up in late January and early February, we wondered if the teetering St. Louis Blues would tip and fall into some kind of retool. Now, halfway through March, the Blues are on the edge of a playoff spot, charging hard at the teams above them.

The Blues' most recent work saw them dunking all over Anaheim and Minnesota, beating Minny 5-1 on Saturday and destroying the Ducks 7-2 just 24 hours later to make their weekend margin of victory a cool 12-3. St. Louis now has the same number of points (73) as the Vancouver Canucks squad that sits in the second wild-card spot and has played one fewer game than St. Louis. Oh by the way, the Blues are also only six points behind the scuffling Wild for the first wild-card spot.

Although the team is rolling, there's been no shortage of transition born of tumult in Missouri the past couple years. St. Louis has missed the playoffs in each of the past two seasons, which is one more time than it whiffed on the post-season in a 10-year period from 2012 to 2022.

This is the second straight campaign the Blues have made an in-season coaching change and everything that happens around the team occurs with the knowledge that Doug Armstrong — the longest-tenured general manager in the league — is handing off the GM duties to Alex Steen in the summer of 2026.

When we broke for the 4 Nations Face-Off on Feb. 10, St. Louis was eight points out of a playoff spot and trending the wrong way with a 6-9-1 record in its previous 16 games.

What a difference an international tournament where your goalie steals the show can make.

OK, so Jordan Binnington really had only one spectacular game at the 4 Nations, but he picked the most important one to shine. And, to be fair, it's not as though Binnington has been on fire since leading Canada to a win over Team USA: in eight games since the break, Binnington has a .904 save percentage.

A bunch of other Blues, though, have definitely been hitting the high notes since the 4 Nations ended.

Brayden Schenn, the player most often rumoured to be on the move when we thought St. Louis could sell hard, has five goals — including one on Sunday versus the Ducks — and six assists for and 11 points in a dozen games since play resumed after the break.

Jordan Kyrou was at the centre of the weekend scoring, popping a hat trick against Minnesota and dropping three apples on Anaheim. In fact, seven Blues are playing at or near a point-per-game pace since the 4 Nations, from Robert Thomas (14 points in 12 games) to defenceman Cam Fowler (10 points in 11 contests).

The latter has been a revelation in St. Louis since being picked up just after his 33rd birthday in December, not long after Jim Montgomery took over from the deposed Drew Bannister as coach. Fowler is playing a tick over 22 minutes a night for the Blues and has 24 points in 37 games — a 53-point pace — with St. Louis.

Of course, the big off-season story was St. Louis successfully leveraging offer sheets to snag Dylan Holloway and Philip Broberg from the Oilers. Broberg is playing 20 minutes per game in the Blues' top four, while Holloway has been an absolute monster for St. Louis, recording 43 points in 46 games since late November.

As a team, the Blues have a .750 points percentage since the break, driven by a suddenly surging offence that is tied with the high-flying Washington Capitals for tops in the NHL during that time at 3.92 goals

per game. Heading into the 4 Nations, St. Louis was scoring 2.70 goals per game, good for 27th in the league.

Much of this has come against the backdrop of the Blues losing a top defenceman in Colton Parayko, who played seven games with St. Louis after winning the 4 Nations with Canada and injured his left knee in a March 5 game versus the Kings.

If Parayko plays again this season, it will likely have to be in the post-season. And the way the Blues have been scoring, that suddenly looks like a real possibility.

Weekend Takeaways

- St. Louis' .750 points percentage since the 4 Nations is the third-best mark in the league; Colorado's .773 is No. 2 and the top number is the .800 showing (7-1-2) by the Montreal Canadiens. The Habs — who had one win in nine games going into the break — have climbed right back into the thick of the Eastern Conference playoff chase thanks in large part to the play of their captain, Nick Suzuki. Though he was held off the scoresheet in Saturday's 3-1 win over Florida, Suzuki's 17 points in 10 games since the 4 Nations trail only one man — Leon Draisaitl and his 18 in 12 — for the most in the NHL during that span. "Slick Nick" has stepped up in a big way.

- How do you put a five-game losing streak behind you? By ripping off five consecutive wins, of course. The Kings — who stumbled through five straight losses, from Feb. 26 to March 5 — beat Nashville 1-0 in overtime on Saturday to record their fifth win in a row. The game also marked Darcy Kuemper's second straight whitewash, as the goalie now has an outrageous .969 save percentage in his past five outings. Equally scorching, Quinton Byfield tallied the extra-time winner against the Preds to run his goal-scoring streak to a half-dozen games. If Byfield, after scoring just 11 goals in his first 59 games, is coming alive, this club is going to be even less fun to play. Los Angeles is now engaged in a battle for second place in the Pacific Division with Edmonton and home-ice advantage would mean a lot for the Kings, who — with the win over Nashville — boast a league-best .833 points percentage (23-3-4) in their own barn.

The Week Ahead

- The NHL's general managers are meeting on Monday and Tuesday in Palm Beach, Florida. According to Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman, one topic for discussion could be the toll the schedule has on players, especially with a number of international tournaments on tap in future winters.
- The Leafs will be clad in their best St. Patrick's Day greens on Monday, as they welcome in the Calgary Flames. Meanwhile, in Minnesota, the Kings will go for their sixth straight win.
- Tuesday brings a huge tilt in the Eastern Conference wild-card race as the Sens are in Montreal to battle Montreal. A win would mark the Sens' seventh straight victory and have them feeling extremely good about locking down a post-season berth. Later that night, the Oilers will welcome in Utah Hockey Club and see if Leon Draisaitl can record his 50th goal of the year.
- The East's top two clubs do battle in D.C. on Saturday, as the Panthers come to town for a date with the Caps.

Red and White Power Rankings

1. Winnipeg Jets (47-17-4) With a huge win Friday night over Dallas and two more points Sunday night in Seattle, the Jets have all but locked up the top seed in the Western Conference. Now it's just a matter of duking it out with the Capitals for the Presidents' Trophy, an award the Jets have never won in either the 1.0 or 2.0 eras.

2. Edmonton Oilers (39-24-4) Corey Perry picked up his 15th goal of the season during Sunday's 3-1 win versus the Rangers at MSG. Not bad for a guy who turns 40 in mid-May.

3. Toronto Maple Leafs (39-24-3) Since Jan. 1, the Leafs rank 17th in shots per game (27.8) and 25th in shots allowed (29.1).

4. Ottawa Senators (36-25-5) Following a 60-minute win in Toronto on Saturday, the Sens conversation has shifted from making the playoffs to overtaking the Leafs (or Tampa) for third place in the Atlantic. Ottawa has 77 points in 66 games, while Toronto and Tampa have 81 in the same number of contests.

5. Montreal Canadiens (32-27-7) As was the case last season, Juraj Slafkovsky has really come alive in the second half. After snagging an assist in Saturday's win over Florida, the big Slovak has six goals and six helpers for 12 points in his past 11 games.

6. Vancouver Canucks (31-25-11) After hosting Winnipeg on Tuesday, the Canucks set out on a six-game roadie that will go a long way in determining their playoff fate. Vancouver's .576 points percentage away from home is the sixth-best mark in the league, so we'll see if its success as the visitors continues.

7. Calgary Flames (30-24-11) The Flames hold games in hand on everyone around them, but are suddenly two points behind both Vancouver — which holds the final wild-card spot in the West — and ninth-place St. Louis. Utah has also pulled even with the Flames on 71 points. Calgary has to come up big during a four-game road swing that kicks off Monday night in Toronto.