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## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Have Options With 2 First Round Draft Picks

**By Nicholas Arnold – June 20, 2025**

With the conclusion of the Stanley Cup Playoffs on Tuesday, we are getting closer and closer to the next marquee event on the NHL calendar: the 2025 Entry Draft in Los Angeles on June 27-28. It's been the most exciting event on the hockey calendar for the Columbus Blue Jackets over the last several seasons for several reasons. Partially because the team has used the opportunity to get in on some trade fun, going back to the Seth Jones trade of 2021, or the Alexandre Texier trade of last summer.

Mostly, the Blue Jackets' excitement at the draft has been because they've been in the running for one of the top prospects, having picked a player in the top six selections in each of the last four drafts. After taking over as general manager before the 2024 Draft, Don Waddell made some trades and put his stamp on the organization, adding a lot of size to the prospect pool. This season, he dealt top defensive prospect David Jiricek to the Minnesota Wild and received a first-round pick for this upcoming draft in return.

Once the dust of the regular season and the first round of the playoffs had settled, the Blue Jackets were informed they would be picking 14th overall with their pick and 20th with the one they received from the Wild. When it came to what they will ultimately do with those selections, there are a few question marks.

Our Mark Scheig had a discussion with the GM earlier this offseason, and this is what Waddell had to say on the possibility of trading one or both of the picks:

"Yes, 100%," Waddell said. The Blue Jackets want to get over the hump into the playoffs. If they can acquire players to help that cause with both first-round picks, they are available in a potential deal. Ultimately, they have options; let's explore them.

### **Blue Jackets Could Draft at Both of Their 14th and 20th Overall Selections**

The 2025 NHL Entry Draft is widely considered one of the weaker draft classes in years. To be clear, it's not that it's bereft of talent, simply there are fewer guaranteed impact players projected than in other seasons. The consensus seems to be that there is a drop-off in talent after the sixth overall selection, so anyone picking seventh or later will have to look a little harder to find those draft gems.

For Columbus, sitting at 14th and 20th in a thinner draft, things could go a couple of different ways. It could actually be helpful that there's not much separation in talent. For example, a guy that the Blue Jackets have projected to go in the top ten could slip to them at 14 or even 20 because teams selecting ahead of them could have a completely different ranking of the mid-level of the first round. However, the opposite could happen too, and the Blue Jackets could get left holding the bag if they don't trade those picks and have to select a couple of guys that they aren't as excited about. It's much riskier to hold both picks in a draft that could be hit or miss.

I would be more of an advocate for this strategy in most other draft classes for one reason. Generally, there is a goalie that stands significantly above the rest. Think along the lines of Jake Oettinger, who was picked 26th in 2017, Yaroslav Askarov, who went 11th in 2020, Jesper Wallstedt at number 20 in 2021 or even as far back as Andrei Vasilevskiy at 19th in 2012. There simply is not a goalie in this draft who many believe to be worthy of a first-round selection. Since that's the Blue Jackets' biggest question mark, it's hard for me to advocate they use both of these picks when they could use them to go out and find an answer on the trade market.

### **Blue Jackets Could Trade Either 14th or 20th Overall Selections**

With how close they came to making the playoffs this season, the Blue Jackets have made it clear they would like to take a step forward, not backward, in 2025-26. That could mean they'll be aggressive to add talent that can immediately impact their roster. Depending on who they're after, that could lead them to give up either of these picks.

There are a couple of recent trades that have given me pause ahead of the draft. One is the most recent, Mason Marchment from the Dallas Stars to the Seattle Kraken. I didn't see Marchment on anyone's trade board, did you? Almost out of nowhere, a really productive and big-bodied middle-six forward was traded for two mid-round picks.

Those are the types of guys the Blue Jackets should be looking for. Someone off the board who is a real contributor. Particularly, they'll be able to find those guys for pennies on the dollar because there are some teams looking to shed salary to keep some of their bigger names in-house ahead of free agency (that's exactly what happened in Dallas). Or it could be a team that's looking to pre-emptively create cap space to add one of the marquee free agents.

The other trade I think about is the Logan Thompson trade from the Vegas Golden Knights to the Washington Capitals last summer. Minimal cost, for a goalie who received a lot of attention as a top player at his position. The goalie market is really thin in free agency this silly season. If the Blue Jackets can find a legitimate number one option in net, that's certainly worth trading one of those first-round picks.

I think this is the best case scenario for the team: add a young prospect who they like in this draft class, and also find someone on the trade market – preferably a goalie – that will make an immediate impact. It is the perfect middle ground and doesn't sell too much of their future for the present, if this season's leap forward was just a mirage.

### **Blue Jackets Could Trade Both 14 and 20 Overall Selections**

This option is kind of nuclear, packaging both picks for one big haul. Or I suppose they could trade both in separate deals to add a couple different pieces, if Waddell really doesn't believe in this draft class.

For one big haul, think of the crème de la crème. Jason Roberson from the Stars, or Rasmus Andersson from the Calgary Flames, with a contract extension in place to sign on July 1. Not sure that young stars like Buffalo Sabres J.J. Peterka or Minnesota Wild forward [Marco Rossi](#) would make sense with that type of package going the other way. They would need to be established and capable of taking a leadership role in the organization immediately to justify parting with both picks. That's where Columbus could get creative and try to find someone of stature that's a bit off the board to trade for.

Regardless of what the Blue Jackets do with their two first-rounders, they should be able to do something to add value to their organization. Be it through drafting a couple of young prospects, trading one for a pretty good player, or packaging both for a really good player, Waddell has a lot of options for what to do before the names get called in Los Angeles on June 27-28.

## The Athletic / After reaching NHL elite status, Blue Jackets' Zach Werenski craves winning even more

By Aaron Portzline – June 20, 2025

As if missing the Stanley Cup playoffs by one win wasn't tantalizing enough, Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski has had two moments since the end of the season that have intensified his desire to play for a contender in Columbus.

The first pangs struck in late May, when Werenski and the United States won the gold medal at the IIHF World Championship in Stockholm, Sweden, the first gold for Team USA since 1933.

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"I forgot how much fun winning was," said Werenski, who was named the tournament's top defenseman. "I won the Calder (Cup) when I first signed out of college (with AHL Cleveland in 2016), but I didn't really understand then what it meant to win and how hard it was.

"After Worlds, I texted some people who are close to me. I think this is verbatim: 'I love winning and I want more of it.'"

The second instance was earlier this week, as he watched the Florida Panthers hoist the Stanley Cup for a second straight year. That included his former teammates, goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky and defenseman Seth Jones, as well as Panthers GM Bill Zito, who worked previously in the Blue Jackets front office.

Jones, who once partnered with Werenski on the Blue Jackets' top pair, was traded from Chicago to Florida in early March. He was the third player to hold the Cup in the on-ice celebration after Florida captain Aleksander Barkov and veteran defenseman Nate Schmidt.

"I'm really happy for Jonesy," Werenski said. "With his situation in Chicago, it obviously wasn't the best with what was going on there. For him to get a fresh start and be reunited with Billy and Bob and be part of that team in Florida, it's awesome.

"And, in a way, you wish that was you. I texted (Jones) after (Tuesday's Game 6), just saying how much he deserved it. But that adds more motivation, right? You want to be in that position after seeing one of your friends there. It was the same with Savvy (David Savard) when we traded him to Tampa Bay (2021).

"You're so happy for him, but deep down you're like, 'F—, I kinda want that to be me.'"

Werenski is coming off the best season of his career. He set multiple personal and franchise records, finishing with 23 goals, 59 assists and 82 points in 81 games. He finished second in voting for the Norris Trophy and seventh in voting for the Hart Trophy.

The 27-year-old was a driving force for a Blue Jackets club that became one of the best stories in the NHL. Columbus was expected to be a lottery team, but instead was the league's last club to be eliminated from the playoffs, making a 23-point improvement from 2023-24.

He was also Team USA's leading scorer and a standout player at the 4 Nations Face-off.

But Werenski said he hasn't taken much time to look back on the season. After a short break, he changed his mind and decided to play for Team USA in the World Championships, then stayed in Europe to take a pre-marriage honeymoon — he and his fiancée are marrying in July — so that he'd have time to train and prepare for training camp.

"I'm more motivated now than ever," Werenski said. "I'm back in offseason mode, and I really haven't had much time to think about our season, and I don't think I will.

"The one thing that stood out to me, watching (Tuesday's Game 6) was how much fun Florida was having, that atmosphere. That's the next step. It's great to have some individual success, but ... "

As he watched Florida play during the last two postseasons, Werenski said, he couldn't help but wonder what the Blue Jackets needed to do to reach that standard.

The Jackets are a very young team, but will those young players mature into the rugged, battle-tested players that the Panthers have up and down their lineup? GM Don Waddell wants to make bold moves to move the Blue Jackets forward, but will he be able to land the right pieces like Zito has in Florida?

"You definitely think about it," Werenski said. "That's the standard, right? They've been to three Finals in a row, won two Cups in a row. Their core is pretty much staying together. They're the team to beat again next year, and so you have to think about that.

"We have to get (to the playoffs) first, but if we do get there, these are the teams we have to go through. I would assume every GM, coach and player, top to bottom, thinks that way: Can we beat this team? Are we built good enough to beat this team?"

It might have sounded ridiculous to ask that question one year ago. It's still a reach, but the Blue Jackets had several of their young players bloom dramatically last season. Adam Fantilli, 20, and Kirill Marchenko, 24, each had 31 goals. Kent Johnson, 22, was third on the team in goals (24) and tied for third in points (57).

Waddell had the second-most cap space in the NHL (\$40 million) and two first-round draft picks to use as trade chips, so there's a chance the Blue Jackets' lineup will be bolstered by this time next month.

There is still a *ton* of work to do in Columbus, but one could argue that the future — if Waddell can keep this group together — has never been brighter with the Blue Jackets.

Werenski said he started skating earlier this week. He'll skate three times a week until August, then ramp up to four days a week until September. In late August, he'll head to Plymouth, Mich., for Team USA summer Olympic camp, with the expectation that he'll play for the red, white and blue in Italy next winter.

For the next couple of weeks, he'll help put the finishing touches on the wedding plans while watching closer as Waddell makes his roster moves. A few players are certain to leave via free agency, but Waddell is intent on making upgrades, too.

Werenski's not in full-blown hockey mode just yet. The offseason is important, too. But he's begun to look forward to next season, and there's optimism in his gaze.

"We have the culture in place," Werenski said. "I know we've said that for years, that we have a great group, and we did. But I don't think we had the culture like we did this past season. It was obvious in how we played, how we handled ourselves, how hard we competed. We truly have that now.

"You don't lose that togetherness in three months. We'll build off it next season. But I don't think we're going to have any issues in training camp with guys understanding their roles, or understanding the expectations, or how we have to play.

"Last year was a great year for us, but we fell short of the playoffs. Next season, the expectations are going to be higher."

## The Athletic / Could Sabres' Bowen Byram get traded again? 8 teams that should be interested

By Matthew Fairburn and Shayna Goldman – June 19, 2025

When the Buffalo Sabres traded Casey Mittelstadt to the Colorado Avalanche in exchange for defenseman Bowen Byram, general manager Kevyn Adams didn't know exactly how Byram would fit. The Sabres already had two young, left-handed defensemen anchoring their top two pairs. There wasn't an obvious spot for Byram, another offensively-minded lefty.

"We were willing to kind of make that bet and say, 'Let's bring in a really, really good hockey player and see how it shakes out,'" Adams said after the season.

The bet was that the Sabres would either end up with another top-end defenseman to strengthen their blue line or they would have a quality trade asset to move later on. In terms of performance, the Sabres have gotten the better end of the Mittelstadt for Byram swap.

Byram, now 24, played 82 games last season and was, at times, an excellent defenseman for the Sabres. He looked his best when playing alongside Rasmus Dahlin. When Dahlin and Byram were on the ice together at five-on-five, the Sabres had 54 percent of the expected goals. Together, it was a pair of two elite puck-movers who helped drive play in Buffalo from the back end. His time in Buffalo on that top pair with Dahlin was the opportunity he never had in Colorado — to show he can shake it in more meaningful minutes.

The trouble is, when Byram was on the ice without Dahlin at five-on-five, the Sabres had 44 percent of the expected goals. Given the injuries and lack of depth on Buffalo's blue line, that number isn't a complete indictment on Byram, since his other partners included Connor Clifton, Jacob Bryson and Henri Jokiharju. And in his minutes away from Dahlin, he didn't share the ice as often with the Sabres' top forwards, either.

Some of those struggles may have been because Byram doesn't make as many puck touches in the defensive end. When he plays with Dahlin, it's his partner who tends to retrieve pucks to help shift play from defense to offense, and then either defender can break out with control and start rushing up the ice. So the big question is whether Dahlin was the driver of Byram's success in Buffalo this year, or if he can carry his own pair (without playing alongside replacement-level defenders).

The potential is still there for Byram at 24 years old, just entering the prime of his career, according to aging curve work done by *The Athletic's* Dom Luszczyszyn. The contract situation just adds pressure to the situation.

Byram is a restricted free agent. He's due for a significant raise on his \$3.85 million salary. An extension in Buffalo, according to *Evolving-Hockey*, could be as high as eight years, at \$7.99 million a year, on average. That would come in above his current market value, which doesn't project his full ceiling, either, since there isn't an obvious path to more power-play time in Buffalo. The other path is a shorter-term contract; a two-year deal, with the Sabres or elsewhere, which would come in around the \$5.4 million mark.

Some of his top comparables give insight into the player he can become. If he develops like Brandon Montour or Ryan Pulock, he could be worth investing in despite Buffalo already committing big money on long-term deals to Dahlin and Owen Power.

But on the flip side, players such as Zach Bogosian, Jamie McBain and Andrej Meszaros show how south things can go. That trajectory, plus the Sabres' investments in their blue line, makes Byram a potential trade candidate, one that would have legitimate value around the league.

Now it's decision time for the Sabres.

Teams that could/should be interested in Byram:

### **Calgary Flames**

The Flames were better than expected last season, but this is still a rebuilding team. They've avoided tearing down the roster, but adding a 24-year-old defenseman with the offensive skill set Byram has would give them a valuable building block to pair with 2024 first-rounder Zayne Parekh. It would also fit in line with some of management's recent moves to add younger talent, just entering their prime.

Byram would be a candidate to run Calgary's top power play. The Flames also have a lot of players who would interest the Sabres, who need a right-shot defenseman. Building a trade around Byram and Rasmus Andersson, who has one year left on his contract before unrestricted free agency, might make sense. Byram is also from Western Canada and would likely welcome the move.

### **San Jose Sharks**

The Sharks have the No. 2 pick in the draft, so they're likely going to miss out on getting Matthew Schaefer as a potential No. 1 defenseman to build around. Sam Dickinson, San Jose's first-round pick from 2024, had a fantastic season in junior, but the Sharks could use another top-end defenseman after moving Jake Walman to Edmonton at the deadline. At 24, Byram's age fits into the core San Jose is building. The tricky part about the Sharks as a trade partner is what they have to offer that fits Buffalo's needs. The No. 2 pick is an attractive asset, but the Sabres would need to send more than Byram to get that pick. Mario Ferraro could add some defensive stability to the back end, but doesn't solve the left-handed logjam, either. Otherwise, the Sharks mostly have futures to offer, and the Sabres need to win now.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets**

If Ivan Provorov departs as a free agent, Columbus will be in the market for a left-handed defenseman. And the team should target someone more offensively inclined, like Byram. The tricky part is that there isn't a path to the top power-play unit or prime offensive minutes, with Zach Werenski leading the way. But Byram could still add a much-needed boost at even strength. Behind Werenski's 82 points, the next-best scoring defender in Columbus was Provorov at 33.

The Blue Jackets have the cap space to sign Byram to a long-term deal. But most returns likely surround future assets, considering how many picks and prospects Columbus has. In the right deal, the Sabres may be able to target Cole Sillinger to add an up-and-coming forward ready to contribute.

### **Philadelphia Flyers**

The Flyers acquired Jamie Drysdale in 2024, but a player like Byram would still be a nice addition to their top pair. Byram's path to being a top-pair player who gets power-play minutes would be clear in Philadelphia, based on how that blue line is constructed. He and Drysdale could even play together, potentially at even strength. The power play is one area that needs a major lift, after ranking last in expected goal generation last year, with an even lower goal rate of 5.14 per 60 to show for it.

Philadelphia, another rebuilding team, has some pieces that could interest the Sabres. Owen Tippett doesn't have a no-trade clause in his contract that carries a \$6.2 million cap hit for the next seven years.

He would bring some much-needed edge to Buffalo's forward group. That could be the start of a trade conversation.

### **New York Rangers**

A left side of Carson Soucy, K'Andre Miller and Urho Vaakanainen is not going to cut it in New York if the Rangers have any hopes of getting back into the playoff picture. Byram would add much-needed puck skills to the back end behind Adam Fox, whether he slots alongside the Rangers' number one or is tasked with being the driver of the second pair with Will Borgen. He just wouldn't get to quarterback the first unit in New York, and would instead only see PP2 time.

The key to the Rangers being in on Byram is a Miller trade, which seems like a real possibility this summer. While the Sabres likely aren't in the market for a lefty, a Miller for Byram trade could make sense, considering how different their strengths and roles are. Otherwise, the Sabres could try to get creative since there aren't many untouchables in New York.

### **Detroit Red Wings**

Speaking of teams that need help on the left, Detroit is high on that list. The depth seriously lacks behind Simon Edvinsson. Byram would be a real step up from a defensive group that includes Ben Chiarot and Erik Gustafsson.

The Red Wings' defensive woes have been well-documented, and sometimes, along with their red-hot power play, overshadows their even-strength offensive struggles. Detroit generated 2.38 expected goals per 60 in the regular season at five-on-five, which ranked 25th; the team's actual scoring rate of 2.08 per 60 was second-to-last. Byram could be a spark from the back end to help the team pick up the pace. Whether he could jump onto the top power-play unit is a question mark. It wouldn't hurt to take that off Moritz Seider's plate, considering how much the team leans on him, but that top unit had so much success last season that the team may want to build on.

That's if these teams could find a fitting return — the Red Wings' NHL-caliber pieces aren't the most enticing, and the Sabres probably need more than just futures back.

### **Los Angeles Kings**

The Kings have a need for a younger, puck-moving defenseman on the left side. Whether Byram would have an obvious path to more power-play time would be a question with Drew Doughty and Brandt Clarke there. But for a team that only scored 6.45 power-play goals per 60 in the regular season, the Kings should be willing to mix up their deployment.

But Byram would be a top-four defenseman for them, whether he pairs up with Clarke as a more offensive duo, or even with Doughty for two balanced pairs split across the top-four. Since the Kings also have a surplus of right-handed defenseman, Jordan Spence would have the potential to pair with Power on Buffalo's second pair in return.

### **Carolina Hurricanes**

The Hurricanes are positioned to have a big offseason, with a lot of cap space and trade assets at their disposal. While Carolina's top priority may be adding a true second-line center and another top-six winger, there's room for improvement on the back end.

Byram could replace Dmitry Orlov in the top six, alongside Jalen Chatfield. While the Canes have two other lefties to choose from in that role, the coaches may prefer keeping Shayne Gostisbehere in a sheltered third-pair role and also might want to ease Alexander Nikishin in. The Canes aren't locked into



a No. 1 quarterback on the top power-play unit, either. So there is room for Byram to take over that role.

The Sabres could swing big and try to scoop up right-handed defenseman Scott Morrow. Or, maybe Buffalo could target center Jesperi Kotkaniemi plus draft capital that can be used in future dealings.

— Data via The Stanley Cap, CapWages, Evolving-Hockey, Hockey Stat Cards and Dom Luszczyzyn.