



**Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips
December 30, 2024**

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Columbus Dispatch / Tarasov's struggles top 3 takeaways from Columbus Blue Jackets loss to Boston Bruins

By Brian Hedger – December 29, 2024

Playing on the road wasn't the reason the Blue Jackets lost 4-0 to the Boston Bruins on Saturday night at TD Garden.

The Jackets' biggest issue was making things hard on themselves with too many mistakes, especially with a struggling goalie who could've used a boring evening between the pipes. Instead, Daniil Tarasov was tagged for four goals that included three that directly followed Blue Jackets turnovers.

It was another ugly result on the road, but the Blue Jackets (15-16-6) left this one knowing it could have been a lot different had they taken care of the puck.

Here are three takeaways:

Daniil Tarasov struggles in return to Columbus Blue Jackets' net

There's a reason Tarasov hadn't played a single minute since allowing six goals Dec. 5 in a loss to the Edmonton Oilers on the road at Rogers Place. He's struggling mightily this season with the sporadic nature of an NHL backup's playing time, which led to poor numbers going into his outing against the Bruins.

After facing Boston, Tarasov is now 3-6-1 in 10 starts with an ugly 4.23 goals-against average and stunningly low .857 save percentage on 294 shots. The Blue Jackets hung him out to dry by coughing up too many pucks for good scoring chances, but three of the four goals he allowed could have been stopped by a sharper netminder.

Tarasov's slump has contributed significantly to a goaltending conundrum for the Blue Jackets, who've twice recalled rookie Jet Greaves from AHL Cleveland to play while Tarasov watched as a healthy scratch. Elvis Merzlikins, the Jackets' highest paid and most experienced option, is hanging onto his No. 1 role mainly by default, and inconsistencies during his 22 starts have saddled him with a pedestrian 10-9-3 record, 3.13 GAA and .889 save percentage.

Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell has said he won't put Tarasov on waivers while seeking an AHL stint in Cleveland, but that's starting to feel like the only option left to help Tarasov regain confidence. It comes with the risk of another GM claiming him off waivers as an intriguing project, but the Blue Jackets' goaltending situation might be nearing a point where Waddell must strongly consider it.

Damon Severson didn't help his own cause in Columbus Blue Jackets' loss to Boston Bruins

The Blue Jackets' coaching staff went with seven defensemen and just 11 forwards for the third straight game, leaving only Jordan Harris out of the defensive playing mix.

That meant Damon Severson played his second straight game since sitting as a healthy scratch in a 5-4 win against the Montreal Canadiens prior to the NHL's holiday break. Severson's errant pass in the second period Saturday missed its target in the Blue Jackets' end, was picked off and quickly turned into a costly goal by Morgan Geekie in the slot that put Boston up 2-0.

Severson, 32, was benched for the remaining 13:31 of the period before Evason cleared his return in the third for six shifts. Severson takes a lot of criticism due to the term left on the eight-year, \$50 million contract he signed to complete sign-and-trade deal with the New Jersey Devils in June 2023.

His contract has a \$6.25 million charge against the NHL's salary cap, so the expectation is for Severson to provide a steady two-way defenseman for the right side of a top four defensive pairing. He's split time between playing with Zach Werenski on the top pairing and Ivan Provorov on the second pairing, but the problem from the start has been inconsistent play with and without the puck.

There are nights when he stands out as one of the best players on the ice for either team, but also nights when he stands out for errors that often lead to costly goals. He's in another rut right now, but Severson also has a solid stat line of six goals, 11 assists, 17 points and a +1 plus/minus rating in 35 games. Along with the seven-defenseman setup, Severson's status Tuesday against the Carolina Hurricanes could be something to watch after his turnover against the Bruins.

Columbus Blue Jackets' errors overshadow solid road game in loss to Boston Bruins

The easy description after a 4-0 loss on the road is saying the Blue Jackets played poorly or even were abysmal while being shut out by Jeremy Swayman on 18 shots. Those just aren't accurate descriptions of what happened.

The Bruins did a much better job taking away shooting and passing lanes than they did Friday in a 6-2 blowout at Nationwide Arena, but Saturday's postgame analytical breakdown by Natural Stat Trick meshed with how the Blue Jackets felt about their play outside of three major puck management errors.

Adjusting for score effects to track how the game was played at 5-on-5 while close, the Blue Jackets generated a significantly higher percentage of shot attempts (56%), scoring chances (68%), high-danger chances (65%) and expected goals (62%). They just couldn't beat Swayman, who made a couple great stops and received help from the Blue Jackets ringing attempted shots off goalposts, the crossbar and missing entirely with Swayman out of position.

Columbus did squander a four-minute power play trailing 3-0 in the second, but this wasn't the Jackets' typical faceplant away from the cannon blasts of home ice.

The Columbus Dispatch / Boston Bruins strike back with 4-0 win to extend Columbus Blue Jackets' road woes

By Brian Hedger – December 28, 2024

The Blue Jackets boarded a flight Friday night after an impressive win over the Boston Bruins with a goal of improving on the road in a rematch 24 hours later.

Instead, after a 4-0 loss to the Bruins on Saturday night at TD Garden, the Jackets' frustrations away from Nationwide Arena continued with a spate of key turnovers that led to settling for a home-and-home split after the NHL's holiday break.

"I thought we handled it really well until we gave them four goals ... or three, for sure," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason told reporters in Boston during a televised postgame interview. "We knew (the Bruins) were going to push, for sure. We knew they were going to have a (good) start, and we thought we handled it really well. You just can't turn two pucks completely over (in the second period) and just give them two goals, one a breakaway and a pass into the slot. It's crazy, right? We did this to ourselves."

Daniil Tarasov started for the Blue Jackets (15-16-6) and took the loss in net while allowing four goals on 28 shots in his first action since allowing six goals in a 6-3 loss Dec. 5 in Edmonton. Jeremy Swayman pitched his second shutout of the season for the Bruins (20-14-4), improving to 5-1-0 in seven career games against Columbus with an 18-save outing.

Boston's goals were scored by Justin Brazeau, Morgan Geekie, David Pastrnak and Cole Koepke.

Brazeau put Boston up 1-0 just 2:29 into the game on the Bruins' second shot against Tarasov, who lost track of the puck after making a save. Brazeau tapped it into the net before Blue Jackets forward Mikael Pyyhtia could swat it away from the goal line.

The Bruins' 1-0 lead lasted into the start of the second, when it moved to 3-0 on goals by Geekie at 6:29 and Pastrnak at 8:18 on a breakaway. Both tallies were preceded by Blue Jackets turnovers that put Tarasov in tough spots to make saves.

Geekie's wrist shot following Damon Severson's errant pass into the slot, which probably could've been stopped by the Blue Jackets' goalie. Pastrnak, however, was gifted a two-zone breakaway after Dante Fabbro's pass inside the Boston blue line hit defense partner Zach Werenski in the skates and sent the puck to Geekie for a quick exit pass springing the break.

"We played a lot of good hockey here tonight, but when you're out on the road and you're not having success, you need to really simplify your game and not turn it over," Evason said. "We didn't. We did turn it over and it went in the net."

Another turnover by Blue Jackets defensemen Ivan Provorov and rookie Denton Mateychuk in the third left the puck on the Bruins' blue line for a rush up ice that Koepke capped with his goal at 6:06 for a commanding 4-0 lead. Outside of their turnovers, the Blue Jackets generated enough scoring chances despite being outshot 28-18 for the game.

Swayman just came up with several big saves and the Blue Jackets also failed to convert a few great scoring chances into goals — including Sean Monahan hitting the left post from close range in the first period and Kirill Marchenko hitting the crossbar on a breakaway early in the second, when the Bruins

clung to a 1-0 lead. The loss dropped the Blue Jackets to just 4-12-3 on the road, but four of their next five games are at home.

That stretch begins with a tough New Year's Eve matchup Tuesday against the Carolina Hurricanes.

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets takeaways: Top line, power play shine in rout over Boston Bruins

By Brian Hedger – December 28, 2024

The Blue Jackets saved one of their best games for the largest home crowd of the season Friday at Nationwide Arena.

A standing-room-only crowd of 18,821 included a sizable number of Boston Bruins jerseys, but the Blue Jackets didn't give them much to cheer during a 6-2 romp returning from the NHL's holiday break.

Scoring four goals in the second period, the Jackets (15-15-6) busted open a tight game against the Bruins (19-14-4) and now have a chance to sweep a back-to-back set Saturday at TD Garden in Boston. Nobody outside of the Blue Jackets forecast them as a playoff contender this far into the season, but they're hanging around.

"We're only (two) points back of a wild card spot," defenseman Zach Werenski said. "We've even let some games slip away, so it could be a lot better. Now, it's on us to go on the road and win some hockey games, because we're doing it at home. We're right in it and it's a fun spot to be for sure."

Here are four takeaways from the Blue Jackets' rout of the Bruins:

Columbus Blue Jackets capitalize on Boston Bruins' travel challenges

The NHL does this every season after its mandated holiday break as part of a collective bargaining agreement with the NHL Players' Association. Road teams aren't allowed to travel on Dec. 26, so they schedule early flights the day of the game if scheduled to play Dec. 27.

The Bruins left at 7:30 a.m. Friday, had a morning skate at Nationwide Arena, returned to their hotel for naps and headed back to the arena for the game.

They looked like an exhausted team after the first 20 minutes, watching the Jackets take control with four goals in the second period. The second period has become a source of frustration for the Blue Jackets, but it wasn't against the Bruins. Their play in the middle frame was exactly how a young team needs to capitalize on NHL scheduling quirks that lean heavily in their favor.

Columbus Blue Jackets have game-changing forwards in Kirill Marchenko, Dmitri Voronkov

Teams undergoing rebuilds need talented young players to start "popping" into impact players, which is how Blue Jackets senior advisor John Davidson defined it last season.

That's now happening with multiple players for the Blue Jackets, led by Kirill Marchenko and Dmitri Voronkov. Flanking center Sean Monahan on the top line, the Russian wingers are starting to regularly draw the attention of opposing coaches and players.

Marchenko's goal and two assists for three points against the Bruins extended his career-long point streak to seven games, while Voronkov's two goals, one assist and three points pushed his point streak to six in a row, which matched his career-long set earlier this season.

Marchenko, who leads the Blue Jackets in scoring with 14-26-40 in 36 games, has added 4-9-13 during his streak. Voronkov has added 5-5-10 during his heater to lift his season totals to 12-10-22 in just 27 games. Monahan, meanwhile, scored two goals in the 800th game of his NHL career to bring his season scoring line to 13-20-33 with a +15 plus/minus as their primary center.

Columbus Blue Jackets' Dmitri Voronkov shows off skill against Boston Bruins

Voronkov's size at 6 feet 5 and 227 pounds is what usually gets noticed first by those who aren't familiar with him. He's still working on using that size and strength while forechecking, but Voronkov's skill level is high.

His pass to spring Adam Fantilli on a breakaway that made it 2-1 in the second was the result of impressive hands to slip the puck past a defender, while Voronkov's first of two power-play goals in that period was a "Goal of the Year" candidate. Standing in front of former Blue Jackets goalie Joonas Korpisalo, he received a pass from Kent Johnson and quickly flipped the puck with a backhand in tight space under the crossbar for a 4-1 lead.

"(He's) not the fastest guy, but I think just the way his brain works making plays ... it allows him to have a lot of success," Werenski said. "You saw his skill on that goal. That's a tough goal. I mean, not many guys can do that."

Columbus Blue Jackets power play has become a threat

The Blue Jackets went 3 for 3 on power plays, which was their first game with more than one this season and first time they've netted two on the man-advantage since a 6-2 loss March 26 of last season against the Arizona Coyotes.

It was the first time the Blue Jackets have scored three power-play goals in a game since Feb. 23, 2021 in a 6-5 shootout loss to the Chicago Blackhawks, and they're now 10 for 30 (33.3%) in the past 10 games — tied for third in the NHL with the Pittsburgh Penguins.

Columbus is also tied with Utah for 14th in the league at 21.7% for the season (21 for 97), which is a welcome change.

Three of Werenski's four assists against the Bruins led to power-play goals, which pushed his scoring line for the season to 11 goals, 28 assists and 39 points in 36 games as the NHL's third-leading scorer among defensemen. Werenski also joined former Blue Jackets forward Artemi Panarin as the only two players in Blue Jackets franchise history to have five career four-point performances and multiple four-assist games. The Jackets' rapidly improving power play played a big role in those accomplishments.

"I don't think we've really had a good power play here since my first year," Werenski said. "It's been a lot of fun being on it. The hard part's just doing it for the rest of the season and keeping it going, but I like where we're at right now."

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets return from NHL holiday break with 6-2 romp over Boston Bruins

By Brian Hedger – December 27, 2024

The Boston Bruins had a long day returning from the NHL's holiday break and the Blue Jackets made the most of it Friday night at Nationwide Arena.

Scoring four goals in the second period, including three power-play goals, the Blue Jackets (15-15-6) turned a tight game into a 6-2 blowout over the third place team in the Atlantic Division. Columbus pulled within two points of the Ottawa Senators for the second wildcard in the Eastern Conference and one point back of the Pittsburgh Penguins for fourth in the Metropolitan Division.

"I think we were excited to get back to play after the break," Blue Jackets center Sean Monahan said. "Guys were moving the puck well, and we were finding the back of the net. We've got to keep that up and be consistent with that."

Dmitri Voronkov and Monahan led the way with two goals apiece, while Zach Werenski tied his single-game career high with four assists. Kirill Marchenko extended a career-high point streak to seven straight games with a goal and two assists, Adam Fantilli scored his seventh goal of the season and Elvis Merzlikins earned the win in net with 23 saves.

Pavel Zacha and Charlie Coyle scored for the Bruins (19-14-4), who boarded a flight back to Boston after the game to complete a day that started there for them with a 7:30 a.m. flight to Columbus coming out of the league's break. They'll host the Blue Jackets on Saturday at TD Garden.

"We fully expected us to compete and we did," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "We did a lot of really good things in this hockey game. Forget about the score. We did a lot of things managing the game, but the game's over and we've got to do it again (Saturday night in Boston)."

Monahan and Zacha exchanged goals in the first period, but the game's 1-1 tie didn't last long in the second. Ending a frustrating trend of getting outplayed in second periods, the Blue Jackets smashed that tendency with a four-goal outburst. After the dust cleared, they had a 5-1 lead starting the third on goals by Fantilli, Monahan and two from Voronkov to cap power plays.

Voronkov gave the Blue Jackets their first game with more than one power play goal since March 26, 2024, when they scored two in a 6-2 loss at the Arizona Coyotes — who've since moved to Utah. It was the Jackets' first game with three power-play goals since Feb. 23, 2021 in a 6-5 shootout loss to the Chicago Blackhawks.

Marchenko's 14th goal made it 6-1 early in the third before Coyle finally got one back for Boston about a minute later to get it back to a four-goal difference. The Blue Jackets improved their home record to 11-4-3, which stands as a stark contrast to their 4-11-3 mark in road games.

"We just have that confidence here at home right now," Werenski said. "I think we're keeping it simple. Our fans are obviously giving us a boost, but we have to translate to the road now and get some wins on the road. We're doing our job at home and if we want to get to where we want to go, we have to win some games on the road. We'll take the home wins, but now it's time to do it on the road."

The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: Jordan Dumais activated and sent to AHL Cleveland

By Aaron Portzline – December 29, 2024

A collection of notes, insights, ruminations and did-you-knows gathered throughout the week that was for the Columbus Blue Jackets:

Item No. 1: Dumais activated

On Thursday, it will be one year since forward prospect Jordan Dumais, the Blue Jackets' third-round pick (No. 96) in the 2022 draft, played in a competitive game. On Jan. 2, 2024, Dumais and Team Canada lost to Czechia in the quarterfinals of the World Junior Championship in Sweden, a major upset after back-to-back gold medals for the Canadians.

On Saturday, the Blue Jackets activated Dumais from the injured/non-roster list and sent him to AHL Cleveland, where he will begin practicing with the Monsters and ramping up his skating and conditioning, eyeing his pro debut with the club later this season.

Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell told The Athletic earlier this season that Dumais was returning to Columbus from Canada and would have another abdominal surgery that would likely keep him off the ice for at least another six weeks. But he never had the surgery.

The details of Dumais' travails have been murky at best, but here's what we know in timeline form:

- Jan. 19, 2024: Dumais had surgery in Columbus to repair a lower abdominal hernia.
- March 1, 2024: Police in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, arrested Dumais for impaired driving. He was later charged with two counts related to the incident and faces a trial date this coming summer. The Quebec Maritimes Junior Hockey League suspended him five games, effectively ending his regular season.
- Early April 2024: Dumais was eligible to return, but was held out of the Halifax Mooseheads' first-round series because of nagging post-surgical issues that doctors said needed more time to heal. The Mooseheads were swept in the first round.
- July 1-5, 2024: Dumais skated on a limited basis (no contact drills) at Blue Jackets development camp before he was held off the ice after complaining of nagging abdominal discomfort. The Blue Jackets sent him to a specialist in New York for further evaluation.
- July-September 2024: Dumais began dealing with other health issues that neither Waddell nor Dumais has disclosed, but they prevented him from taking part in offseason workouts and kept him from attending Blue Jackets training camp in September.
- November-December 2024: Doctors allowed Dumais to return to the ice on a limited basis, and his workouts revealed his abdominal issues had perhaps solved themselves with the added time and rest.
- Dec. 28 2024: Dumais joined AHL Cleveland.

The Blue Jackets have their fingers crossed that Dumais won't endure a return of the abdominal issues when he starts pushing harder in practice. Hernias can be notoriously tricky to diagnose and correct.

"He's had so much time off (to heal), and he feels really good," Waddell told The Athletic on Saturday. "So let's try it. He wants to try it. Doctors are OK with it."

“He’s been doing about half of what he should be doing, so he’ll put on full gear and see in the next couple of weeks how he responds.”

Dumais has never been considered an elite-level prospect, mostly because of his size (5-foot-8, 173 pounds) and his average skating. But, as Dumais told reporters at the Jackets summer development camp, he was nagged for several months by the abdominal discomfort before deciding to get it fixed.

Dumais’ status soared in 2022-23 when he put up absurd numbers with Halifax: 54 goals, 86 assists and 140 points in only 64 games. Only Connor Bedard, the No. 1 pick of the Chicago Blackhawks later that year, had more points than Dumais.

That seems like a long time ago now.

Item No. 2: Tarasov’s play

There was a two-week stretch in late October when it looked as if Daniil Tarasov was ready to challenge Elvis Merzlikins for the Blue Jackets’ No. 1 goaltending job. Nobody would have enjoyed a goalie competition more than coach Dean Evason.

Since then, Tarasov has only played his way out of playing time. But he’s avoided a trip to the minor leagues, in part due to his own refusal.

A team source confirmed to The Athletic this week that the Blue Jackets asked Tarasov to head to AHL Cleveland on a conditioning assignment as a way to get his game back together. Those assignments, which do not require a player to clear waivers, can last up to two weeks, or they can be as short as one start.

Tarasov refused the assignment, which is well within his rights per the collective bargaining agreement between the NHL and NHL Players’ Association.

But that explains why the Blue Jackets recalled Jet Greaves for a series of starts before the holiday break. In fact, Tarasov was sent home to Columbus from the Blue Jackets’ road trip to Carolina and Tampa Bay (Dec. 15-17) so that he could get heavy practice minutes, which can be difficult to achieve on the road.

The Blue Jackets knew Tarasov’s return to the lineup would require them to bite the bullet. On Saturday, he looked plenty shaky — especially at the start of the game — in a 4-0 loss to Boston. He stopped 24 of 28 shots, and it can be said that his teammates did him no favors with their sloppy play.

It was his first start since Dec. 5 and only his fifth game since Oct. 26, a span in which the Blue Jackets played 30 games. Here’s why: In his last five outings, Tarasov is 0-5-0 with an .828 save percentage and 5.05 goals-against average.

This is a situation that bears watching.

Now that Tarasov has started a game, does he go back into a regular backup routine behind Merzlikins? Including the weekend home-and-home with Boston, the Blue Jackets play 17 games in 36 days so they will need two goaltenders. (The next back-to-back, however, isn’t until Jan. 22-23.)

Tarasov would need to clear waivers, and Waddell told The Athletic last week that he was reluctant to expose him to the rest of the league because he believes he has NHL talent and doesn’t want to lose him without getting something in return.

But his season stat line is alarming. Tarasov is 3-6-1 with an .857 save percentage and a 4.23 goals-against average. The only player below him is Montreal’s Cayden Primeau, who has an .836 save percentage and 4.70 goals-against average in seven games.

Primeau was placed on waivers Saturday.

Item No. 3: Take 5, Jean-Luc Grand-Pierre

Take 5 is a quick, breezy sitdown with a Blue Jackets player, coach, front-office staffer or broadcaster. This week we caught up with former Blue Jackets defenseman Jean-Luc Grand-Pierre, now an analyst with FanDuel Sports Network and a local realtor:

1. What part of Columbus is home and why?

We live in New Albany. After my first season in Columbus (2000-01), I bought a house there and spent my first offseason there. I made a lot of friends there. It's quiet. It's close to the airport. It's completely different now, almost 25 years later, but I still love the area.

2. Favorite restaurant in Columbus.

For convenient/quick, I'd go with Brassica (Sandwiches & Salads). Chicken with falafel. Love that stuff. And BIBIBOP (Asian Grill) is my other place. For a nicer place, I'd go with Jeff Ruby's (Steakhouse). Food is great, but the atmosphere — a lot of steakhouses, they feel like man caves. Ruby's is different.

3. What do you do on an off day Sunday?

I'm probably on the (video game) simulator with my son, Dennyn. Virtual racing. We bought two simulators during COVID. Will sit on those for hours, playing iRacing, and drive my wife (Jennifer) crazy. (laughing) When Hélio Castroneves was here at the rink (earlier this month), I was probably a pain in his ass because I followed that guy everywhere.

4. What's your favorite Blue Jackets memory?

It's gotta be the sweep of Tampa Bay in 2019. I wasn't working for the team then, but as a former player and a fan ... it just showed you the potential of this market. I want to see it again, too.

As a player, that (inaugural) season was just magical. The love affair with the city, that team that played so hard. We stuck together, we exceeded expectations. There were so many great guys in that room, and Kinger (Dave King) was the perfect coach for us. It's the most fun I've had playing hockey.

5. Which player or broadcaster should have a podcast?

I'm a big podcast guy. I'd probably say Mathieu Olivier. I do a lot of radio back home (Montreal) on a lot of different platforms, and I've been on shows either before or after him. He does a bunch of stuff and he's really good. He's not afraid to give his opinion ... in both languages!

Item No. 4: Snacks

- Blue Jackets winger Kirill Marchenko had his career-long seven-game point streak snapped in the 4-0 loss to Boston on Saturday. Marchenko, who had 4-9-13 during that streak, has 14-26-40 and a plus-17 rating in only 36 games. The 26 assists are already a career high. He's just two points short of matching last year's career high set in 78 games.

- The Blue Jackets' power play is the best they've had in at least eight seasons, and Sean Monahan has been a key component. Evason spoke glowingly about Monahan, not just about his play with the man advantage but his acceptance of a role — "the bumper" — that many players find less than ensuing. The bumper sets up in the slot, his back to the net when the puck is on the perimeter and his face to the goalie when the puck is on net. The job requires plenty of tenacity and a willingness to play in traffic, but it doesn't reward the player with many clean looks on net. Monahan is third on the team with four power-play goals and fourth in points (six), but he's done plenty of work to help open the ice for others.

- Here's Evason on Monahan's "bumper" play: "I've been on so many teams — coached and played — where guys are like, 'I'm not going to play on the bumper. Why would I play on the bumper? It's not a scoring position.' Not once has he ever asked to play on the flank. He's phenomenal at it because he's committed to it. The team asks him to play the bumper, so he plays the bumper, and he does it to the best of his ability. It's leadership. That person on the power play keeps pucks alive down low. They support everybody on the ice. he's rotating and getting everybody involved."
- Tough times for defenseman Damon Severson, who was a healthy scratch on Dec. 23 vs. Montreal and was benched during the second period on Saturday after an egregious turnover in his own end led to the Bruins' second goal. Severson is one of the most experienced players on an exceedingly young Blue Jackets roster, but he's been among the club's most inconsistent players, a trait that has nagged him throughout his NHL career. In 36 games, he has 6-11-17 with a plus-1 rating, which are decent numbers for a second-pairing player. But there have been some rough nights at the rink this season. The Blue Jackets have to make this work with Severson, though. He's only in his second year of an eight-year, \$50 million contract signed before he was traded by New Jersey to Columbus in the summer of 2023.
- Former Blue Jackets GM Jarmo Kekäläinen has a new gig over the next couple of weeks: He's serving as an analyst for Discovery's Max, a Finnish TV network that owns the broadcasting rights to the World Junior Championship, currently being played in Ottawa. Kekäläinen, fired by the Blue Jackets last spring, did broadcasting work earlier in his career, he said. It's a great way for him to keep apprised of the NHL's next wave of talent. Look for Kekäläinen to latch on with an NHL club in the near future.
- Sunday Gathering trivia question: Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski had his second career four-assist game in Friday's 6-2 win over Boston. Only two Blue Jackets players have had five assists in a single game. Name them.
- Dmitri Voronkov had his career-long six-game point streak snapped on Saturday. He had 5-5-10 in that span, putting him at 12-10-22 in only 28 games. He is on pace to shatter his career numbers, too. He had 18-16-34 in 75 games.
- Forward Justin Danforth, out since Dec. 10 with a lower-body injury, has resumed skating. He's missed eight games since getting injured against Philadelphia.
- Trivia answer: The two Blue Jackets players to have had five-assist games are Espen Knutsen and Artemi Panarin. Knutsen assisted on goals by Jamie Heward (two), David Vyborny, Deron Quint and Alex Selivanov in a 6-4 win over Calgary on March 24, 2001. All five of Panarin's assists were primary assists. He set up Pierre-Luc Dubois, Lukáš Sedlák, Scott Harrington, Alexander Wennberg and Werenski in a 5-3 win over New Jersey on Dec. 8, 2017.
- After leaving Montreal's 5-4 loss to Columbus after one period on Dec. 23, former Blue Jackets forward Patrik Laine returned to the lineup on Saturday vs. Florida.
- Montreal goaltender Jakub Dobeš, who made his NHL debut on Saturday with a 33-save shutout of the Panthers, spent two seasons (2021-22 and 2022-23) at Ohio State before turning pro. He's the fourth Montreal goaltender to begin his career with a shutout, the first since Yann Danis had 32 saves vs. Atlanta on Oct. 12, 2005.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets too careless with the puck to end road woes: 'We did this to ourselves'

By Aaron Portzline – December 29, 2024

Obviously, the Boston Bruins were going to be dialed in Saturday when they hosted the Columbus Blue Jackets in TD Garden, just 24 hours after the Blue Jackets delivered a welcome-back-from-the-break 6-2 beatdown in Nationwide Arena. The Blue Jackets knew it was coming.

They also had to understand that back-up goaltender Daniil Tarasov, rust and all, was back in the net after a 3 1/2-week break to get his game in order. With that as the backdrop, it was all the more imperative the Jackets play the type of hard, smart road game that has been such a challenge for them this season.

Instead, the road woes — and Tarasov's personal woes — continued.

The Bruins scored on their first chance against a shaky Tarasov, then took advantage of some eye-popping turnovers by the Blue Jackets to cruise to a 4-0 win before 17,850. It marked the second time this season Columbus has been shut out and dropped the Jackets to 0-6 in the second half of back-to-backs.

"We did this to ourselves," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason told reporters in Boston. "We played a lot of good hockey here tonight, but when you're out on the road and you're not having success ... you really need to simplify your game. Not limit the turnover; (but) not turn it over."

Evason has stressed that the Blue Jackets' path to turning around their road results — they're 4-12-3 away from Nationwide Arena — is to play a hard, smart style. When the puck is on your stick, especially in the defensive zone, let your decision-making be guided by the Hippocratic Oath: First, do no harm.

They played hard Saturday. They did not play smart.

The Bruins scored on their first scoring chance of the game. Tarasov was all elbows and knees on a wrist shot by Boston's Brandon Carlo only 2:29 into the game, allowing the puck to skid behind him in the crease before Justin Brazeau swept it home.

Tarasov, who stopped 24 of 28 shots, seemed to settle in a bit after that, but his teammates did him no favors.

"(On Friday), we were taking care of pucks," Blue Jackets defenseman Dante Fabbro said. "Today we kind of shot ourselves in the foot. You look back at some of the goals, even the one I coughed up at the blue line, and they end up going down and scoring.

"Things like that can't be in the game. There's time and space to try and make plays, but in those danger areas, that's where it hurts teams."

At 6:39 of the second, with the Jackets trailing 1-0, Damon Severson tried to make a backhand pass from off the wall in the defensive zone to Adam Fantilli to his left. But there's a reason most defensemen don't take the chance of sailing a backhand pass off the wall under duress.

Severson's pass missed Fantilli and instead landed perfectly in stride to Boston's Morgan Geekie, who had a clean look at Severson roaring through the slot. It was 2-0, and Severson was stapled to the bench by Evason for the rest of the second period.

Fabbro's faux pas came only two minutes later when he fired a bullet pass to Zach Werenski from fairly close range, the puck kicking off Werenski's skates and shooting toward the Blue Jackets' end of the ice. Worse, it was chipped ahead by Geekie to David Pastrnak, one of the NHL's top finishers.

Pastrnak made it 3-0 at 8:18 of the second.

"We're on the road and we're talking about doing the right things, playing the right way," Evason said. "We gave up the first one (by Tarasov). Then we turned two pucks completely over and just give them two goals. One on a breakaway and one on a pass into the slot. It's crazy, right?"

The Blue Jackets were granted a prime opportunity to get back into the game just after Pastrnak's goal when Sean Kuraly was bloodied by a high stick, giving Columbus a four-minute power play.

But, a night after going 3-for-3 with the man advantage, the Jackets could muster only one shot. And it was part of an offensive fizzling the rest of the way. In the final 30:01, the Blue Jackets mustered only six shots on goal.

The Bruins capped the scoring at 6:06 of the third when both defensemen on the second pair — rookie Denton Mateychuk and veteran Ivan Provorov — overskated a puck high in the offensive zone, leaving it sitting still on the blue line.

Boston's Cole Koepke scored off the rush to cap the scoring.

One further detail you may have expected from a proud, veteran club like the Bruins after they were "embarrassed" — their words — a night earlier in Columbus: some old-school physicality.

Blue Jackets' forward Mathieu Olivier and Boston's Mark Kastelic fought on the ensuing faceoff after the 1-0 goal. Later in the first period, Boston's Brad Marchand took exception to a high shoulder from Columbus' Kirill Marchenko and chased him all over the ice before the two were separated.

Then, in the third, Olivier rattled Boston's Charlie McAvoy with a hit along the wall and was challenged to a fight by defenseman Nikita Zadorov.

The Hockey Writers / 24 Observations of the 2024-25 Blue Jackets' Season So Far

By Mark Scheig – December 29, 2024

We have almost reached the end of calendar year 2024. For the Columbus Blue Jackets, it's time for them to flip the calendar to 2025 and on to bigger things in the coming years.

At just short of the halfway point of their regular season, we thought this would be a good time to take inventory on the Blue Jackets. We will share 24 thoughts around the team from overall team thoughts to some thoughts on individual players as well as GM Don Waddell and head coach Dean Evason.

We will try to mention at least one notable thing on each player along the way. Then at the end, I will offer a mid-term grade on the Blue Jackets so far.

24 Blue Jackets Observations

Let's start with this. As of this writing Sunday Dec 29, the Blue Jackets are just two points out of a playoff spot in the Eastern Conference. That in and of itself should be the biggest takeaway of the first half of the 2024-25 season. This team needed to take steps. There needed to be some level of success. They are far from a finished product but they have shown tangible evidence of progress. That says a lot not only about the leadership but the guys in the locker room.

So Waddell and Evason. We knew their experience would be a huge asset for the Blue Jackets. But it's the stability both have brought to different levels of the organization that should be called out. The season began in the most unfathomable way. For them to be able to navigate all of the challenges without having an instruction manual says everything about the kind of leaders they are. Waddell has brought a set of qualities to the team that makes him the right person for the job at this time. He's seen many things. He's also not afraid to make his team better when opportunity presents itself. Evason brings the right blend of intensity and honesty to the bench. He's also not afraid to make changes as situations arise. At least for the first half of 2024-25, Waddell and Evason have done their job. We'll learn a lot more about both once they each get a full offseason to mold the team in their image.

We'll speak more in depth about this in our Blue Jackets' trends mini series. We already know about the road woes. But how about the woes in both overtime and in the second half of back-to-back games? They are 1-6 in the 3-on-3 overtime and 0-6 in the second half of back-to-backs. The Blue Jackets have six more sets of back-to-backs this season. They must find a way to better execute in that second game when energy levels could be down some.

The Blue Jackets have just one road trip left this season that takes them west of the central time zone. Those are games in Vegas and in Utah. Everything else is in the east or central. Travel should not be an excuse at any point for the rest of this season.

The goaltending. We'll speak of Elvis Merzlikins, Danill Tarasov and Jet Greaves as one unit. Overall, this group has to get better. Each goalie has had some individual circumstances but it doesn't change the fact that the group as a whole needs to not only improve, but drastically improve. This is one area I could see the team address in the offseason should that improvement not come. The Blue Jackets will have options outside the organization should they choose to go down that road. While it seems Merzlikins is in the number-one spot for now, he needs to take the next step and lock it down consistently. Also the goaltending rotation needs smoothed out somehow. While it's good the team

recognized the need for improvement by calling up Greaves, they need to find a way to get Tarasov going where he's not sitting for long stretches either.

From here, we'll go in numerical order based on who's currently on the roster. Jake Christiansen earned his role in the top-four to start the season. His TOI has dwindled down of late and now finds himself out of the top-four. He had games of just 6:33 and 9:12 in recent outings. The Blue Jackets have played 7D of late. Not sure how much longer that should last. Christiansen has work to do if he wants to get back to a more prominent role.

Jack Johnson has spent a lot of time recently as a healthy scratch. But when he did get back in, the one area of improvement for the team was the penalty kill, an area of massive struggle while he was out including that 14-game streak of allowing at least one power-play goal against. Without Erik Gudbranson, Johnson is the one defender that can play a heavy game. For now, he has a role on this team. I would expect him to be in and out of the lineup based on need the rest of this season. Speaking of Gudbranson and Boone Jenner, my understanding is that Gudbranson is questionable to return this season while Jenner is probable to return. Jenner has started to skate but there is no timeline for a return.

Cole Sillinger is on pace for a career-high in points, is playing more per game than ever and has noticeably improved in faceoffs. He's taken the next step to become a two-way center. He's had a good start to his season. The next thing for him is to become more of a shutdown center. He's played both second and third-line center this season and occasionally sees some tough competition. He's on the right track though. He's gaining confidence with each passing game.

Denton Mateychuk in a small sample size has shown he's not intimidated by the big stage. While he over-skated the puck Saturday in Boston that led to a goal against, his poise and composure really stands out. He's also good in tight spaces where he can read a play and get the puck where it needs to go. Evason said he's earned a longer stay. We'll see how long that lasts. But his arrival is no accident.

The one noticeable thing about Sean Kuraly this season is that his average TOI has been cut by almost three minutes per game this season. He's still playing his usual fourth-line center role and is around 52% at the dot while playing on the penalty kill. As he's a pending UFA after the season, one has to wonder what is in his future. Potential playoff teams would love to add someone like him to help in key defensive situations and to bolster their penalty kill. Kuraly has never hid his love for playing for his hometown team. But deep down, he'd love a chance to chase a Stanley Cup too. Let's see how Waddell handles this situation. Several guys in Cleveland are competing for a potential spot should a trade happen.

The only defensemen in the league that have a legit case for the Norris outside of Zach Werenski are Cale Makar and Quinn Hughes. If the Blue Jackets were to make the playoffs, we should then talk about Werenski in the Hart conversation.

What will the Blue Jackets do with Ivan Provorov? He's been good this season. He doesn't miss games and is over 23 minutes a game. For me, the potential issue is term. This next contract will be Provorov's best chance to really cash in. The potential return in a deadline trade could prove to be too much to pass up. This is one where the Blue Jackets would accept a 2026 first rounder given they got an extra 2025 first rounder in the David Jiricek deal. That potentially boosts the number of suitors. I still think a trade happens but we can't rule out a return either if the sides can agree on money and term.

Dmitri Voronkov has changed the dynamic of the Blue Jackets. A big man with good hands and who can use his body in front of the opposing goalie, he's been a headache to deal with. The power play has seen a boost thanks to his presence. What will be interesting to see is the next contract. He is an RFA with

arbitration rights. Recall last year there was some homesickness. He by all accounts seems happy with the Blue Jackets. He's put himself on the map as an important part to this team's future.

What were the Nashville Predators thinking when they waived Dante Fabbro? All he's done is go to the top pair and help stabilize things. He's also allowed Werenski the freedom to play his game. A pending UFA after this season, this is one where the Blue Jackets should strongly consider an extension.

Things have been a little frustrating for Adam Fantilli. But in the grand scheme, he's far down the list of immediate worries for the Blue Jackets. The flashes are still there. The speed is evident. What he's going through is what many players early on go through. The NHL is the best league in the world for a reason. He's not going to consistently beat defenders as they can keep up with him. He's learning the team concept under Evason and is making strides. His skill will eventually win out. But this patch should ultimately help him as he continues to learn the league. His breakthrough will come soon enough. Low key playing with James van Riemsdyk on a line is exactly the veteran presence Fantilli needs around him.

Jordan Harris has been in and out of the lineup. He scored a big goal against his old team Montreal before Christmas. But being on the outside looking in when the team plays seven defensemen does say something about where the team feels he's at.

We could write a book about the impact of Sean Monahan this season. He's been everything for the Blue Jackets on the ice, inside the room. Literally everything. He's low key and humble just like his best friend Johnny Gaudreau. Then to be there for the Gaudreau's on top of everything. What Monahan has been able to do with the heaviest of hearts makes his season one of the best in recent memory. He has helped unlock Kirill Marchenko's potential. That duo along with Voronkov has been one of the best lines in the NHL this season. Monahan said he'd honor Gaudreau in everything. He's kept his promise in spades.

Only a matter of time before the Blue Jackets and Mathieu Olivier find common ground on an extension. This may go down as one of Jarmo Kekalainen's best moves acquiring Olivier for a fourth-round pick. His presence is recognized around the NHL. Oh and he's got skill too. The Blue Jackets aren't going to be pushed around with him patrolling the ice.

Another shrewd move by Waddell was when he brought on Zach Aston-Reese. Always known as a good defender, he's found himself at times in the top-six. Most recently, he's played with van Riemsdyk and Fantilli. He's another veteran presence that has helped some of the younger players on the Blue Jackets. It remains to be seen what his future looks like but he's been an important presence in the locker room.

Do you sometimes get the sense when a player and a coach don't quite see eye to eye on things? I wonder if that's where things stand with Evason and Kevin Labanc. The Blue Jackets have elected 11-7 over playing Labanc in recent games. His turnover in Tampa Bay earned him a seat on the bench and hasn't played since. He'll get chances later on if he's earned them. But the leash appears very short as of now.

Damon Severson was a healthy scratch recently and now was benched in game for a brutal turnover Saturday night in Boston. While he came back for the third period, a message is clearly being sent by Evason. Severson needs to be better given his experience and contract. He's known as an up and down player. When he's good, he's really good. But when he's bad, it's really bad. What will be worth watching is what Evason tries to do to get more consistency out of Severson's game. That contract has a lot of life left in it. Ideally the Blue Jackets just want him to simplify his game. If things like this keep going for a longer period of time, then it gets interesting. Don't think we're at that point yet of trying to trade him. But seeing how he'll respond to the benching will be worth watching.

Mikael Pyyhtia has been serviceable while the injured are healing. Justin Danforth and Yegor Chinakhov are expected back some time in the near future. When that happens, Pyyhtia likely heads back to Cleveland. He's the kind of player that can come in and play for periods of time when situations arise.

Perhaps one of the biggest developments this season for the Blue Jackets has been the emergence of Kent Johnson. He's on pace to shatter career highs in goals, assists and points. He's an important part of the power play. The way he can carry pucks into the zone is also a thing of beauty. Johnson has firmly established himself as part of the core of this team for years to come.

It's now time to assign a letter grade to the team. This season was always going to be graded on a curve given the circumstances. With that said, the Blue Jackets get a B for the 2024-25 season so far. The way they've overcome an immense challenge while remaining in the playoff race works in their favor. Some individual performances have stood out too. What bumped them down from an A to a B is their road and overtime records coupled with their defense and goaltending. These components simply have to be better. All-in-all, the Blue Jackets are in a good position knowing they have work to do in key areas. But to be in this position with a massive hole on their team and in their hearts is worth every praise that can be thrown their way. They've exceeded many of the expectations levied on them. The Blue Jackets are playing meaningful games as the calendar flips to 2025. That's a good start. Now it's on them to continue on that path towards better days. That work is only just beginning.

[The Athletic / NHL's 10 biggest stories of 2024: Panthers win a Cup, Ovechkin's chase, remembering the Gaudreaus](#)

By Sean Gentile and Hailey Salvian – December 30, 2024

If you searched for bright spots in the year that was for the NHL, you could find them.

We saw a franchise win the Stanley Cup for the first time, immediate impact from another No. 1 pick, the (pending) return of NHL players to the Olympics and the arrival of a new team in a fresh locale. The hockey world also, though, dealt with the tragic deaths of Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew.

Here is a look back at those events and five more of the NHL's most impactful stories from 2024.

Panthers win the Cup

At various points in the Florida Panthers' first 30 NHL seasons, a Stanley Cup win seemed to be a pipe dream. They went 24 years between playoff series victories, after all. Doesn't get much further than that.

Ahead of Game 7 against the Edmonton Oilers, too, it was fair to wonder whether the Panthers had already blown their best shot; choking away a 3-0 series lead shouldn't inspire much confidence.

Ultimately, though, the Panthers handled business. Carter Verhaeghe and Sam Reinhart each scored in a 2-1 win, extending the Canadian Cup drought to 31 seasons and (temporarily?) denying Connor McDavid (who still won the Conn Smythe Trophy, despite the loss) from reaching his final form.

The win, most of all, was a testament to a profoundly talented roster built through the draft (Aleksander Barkov), big-time trades (Reinhart, Matthew Tkachuk) and astute acquisitions (Verhaeghe, Gustav Forsling). Florida has maintained that momentum into 2025, too. More playoff wins are on the way.

Celebrini lands in San Jose

After a season in which they finished with a league-worst 47 points, the San Jose Sharks had their rebuilding efforts rewarded when they won the draft lottery. It was the first time the organization held the No. 1 pick.

GM Mike Grier played coy in interviews, but it was a foregone conclusion that he would select Macklin Celebrini, the consensus No. 1 prospect. Celebrini had just won the NCAA's Hobey Baker Award in his freshman year at Boston University, becoming the youngest player to win it at 17 years old.

On June 29, San Jose made Celebrini the first pick on stage — broadcast on the outside of Sphere — in Las Vegas. According to the Associated Press, the organization had the highest rate of season tickets renewed since after it made the Stanley Cup Final in 2016.

In his first three months, Celebrini has lived up to the hype. He scored a goal and an assist in his NHL debut, and since returning from injury has been a point-per-game player for the Sharks.

NHL Draft at the Sphere

Is it too late to lobby for the NHL to institute Sphere as its permanent draft home? Because it was tough to come away from this summer's event thinking about much else. The scene in Las Vegas is special enough on its own — and that goes triply when you're incorporating a brand-new, space-age, state-of-the-art venue featuring the world's largest and highest-resolution LED screens.

We knew the draft was going to look good. We assumed it was going to be fun. What unfolded, though, was close to perfect; the on-site experience was remarkable, and the televised product was about as good as you could expect. Overall, the event was proof that the NHL can think outside the box and create crossover moments for this particular era in the United States. If nothing else, it was a cool party to throw for its most avid fans and a nice way to close the book on the centralized draft. The 2025 event, by the way, will be held at the Peacock Theater in downtown Los Angeles.

The tax debate

The debate about NHL teams' income-tax advantages isn't new, but it seemed to hit a new level in 2024.

Nashville, Florida, Tampa Bay, Dallas, Vegas and Seattle — the six teams in the NHL in states with no income tax — combined to spend nearly a quarter of the \$1 billion-plus in salaries handed out when free agency opened on July 1. Some players — like Jake Guentzel, who signed a \$63 million deal with the Tampa Bay Lightning — defected to no state income tax. Others, like Steven Stamkos or Jonathan Marchessault, went from one team with no state income tax state to another.

That, coupled with recent Cup wins by the Panthers, Golden Knights and Lightning, guaranteed the tax issue would stay on the front burner, particularly for Canadian fans who see it as some sort of fundamental inequity within the sport given the tax law surrounding Canada-based athletes. The conversation commanded so much attention that The Athletic reported the NHL was keeping an eye on the situation.

It's a complex issue, as outlined by The Athletic's Dan Robson in July, and it's not going away anytime soon.

Hello, Utah

How did the NHL wind up leaving Arizona? To borrow a line from Ernest Hemingway: gradually, then suddenly. At the start of 2024, it was easy to look at the Coyotes' history, top-lined by a series of unstable owners and failed attempts to secure an ideal venue, and wonder whether enough would ever truly be enough. The sunk-cost fallacy, if nothing else, seemed to be in play.

In the background, though, was Utah Jazz owner Ryan Smith, who'd emerged as a major player in bringing an NHL franchise to Salt Lake City. So too was the ongoing farce of professional hockey teams playing in a 4,600-seat rink; failed ballot measures in May 2023 meant that if the Coyotes were to stay in Arizona, they'd have to spend several more seasons using Arizona State's Mullett Arena as a lifeboat. That was a non-starter for all involved. Cue the six-month sprint to SLC.

So, here we are; the Utah Hockey Club is having a nice first season at Delta Center, hanging around the periphery of the wild-card race and basking in the glow of its new home. Arizona hockey, meanwhile, is stuck in a different form of limbo.

Ovechkin's quest for No. 895

A year ago, Alex Ovechkin's historic chase wasn't necessarily in jeopardy, but it was starting to get at least a bit dodgy. He woke up on Jan. 1 with seven goals in 34 games, 66 away from breaking Wayne Gretzky's record. Given Ovechkin's age (38) and how old he looked on most nights (38), it was fair to wonder.

At the end of January, though, Ovechkin started on a heater that has been paused only by the offseason and a broken tibia. He finished 2023-24 with 23 goals in 36 games, then kicked off 2024-25 with an incredible 15 in 18, scoring No. 16 after 40 days on the shelf. If he scores 27 more in Washington's final 47 games this season, the record will be his.

The icing on the cake? The Caps are terrific, thanks in part to an outstanding offseason and a few key breakouts. They (and their captain) look like one of the stories of 2025, too.

Campbell makes history

When the Seattle Kraken made their 2024-25 season debut on Oct. 8 against the St. Louis Blues, Jessica Campbell officially became the first woman to coach in the NHL, as an assistant.

She was hired by the Kraken on July 3, joining Dan Bylsma's bench (again) after working on his staff with the Coachella Valley Firebirds in the AHL. For two years in Coachella, Bylsma saw firsthand what would make Campbell a good NHL coach.

In Coachella Valley, she ran the Firebirds' power play and focused on player development with the team's forward group, which included first-round pick Shane Wright, Ryker Evans and Tye Kartye, an undrafted free agent who was named AHL Rookie of the Year and earned a call-up to Seattle in Campbell's first season.

"She has something to provide to players, and they immediately recognize what she has to offer to them and their careers and their growth and development," Bylsma said. "She's all in with them and you immediately get that sense and feel from her when she's coaching you."

A roller coaster at the Garden

The New York Rangers are here for reasons both good and very, very bad.

We'll start with the positive. They won a Presidents' Trophy! That's tough! Along the way, they seemed to look the part of a true Stanley Cup threat, led by a Hart Trophy candidate (Artemi Panarin), a Norris Trophy winner (Adam Fox) and an elite goaltender (Igor Shesterkin) with plenty of other contender-quality pieces throughout the lineup.

Again, though, they fell short, kicking off a bizarre offseason that began with an ominous message from GM Chris Drury, continued with the controversial waiver-wire dump of Barclay Goodrow and then ... just sort of ended. No real change and plenty of awful vibes.

Things devolved in a hurry, of course: Drury finally dealt captain Jacob Trouba, but only after another round of drama, and they hit the holiday break as losers in 13 of 17 games. They're at the bottom of the Metropolitan Division these days, and it's fair to wonder how much further they can fall.

NHLers to return to the Olympics

In February, during All-Star weekend, NHL commissioner Gary Bettman made the announcement fans and players had been waiting for: NHL players will return to the Olympics in 2026 and 2030.

We're still more than a year out from the 2026 Milan Olympics, but when NHLers ultimately suit up for their national teams, it will have been 14 years since the last true best-on-best Olympic Games — the 2014 Sochi Olympics, which Canada won in dominant fashion.

NHL players have been vocal about their desire to return to Olympic competition, especially McDavid, who called the opportunity to represent Canada at the Olympics — as if he's not a roster lock — a "dream come true."

The league, NHLPA and IIHF also announced an expanded international calendar that includes the upcoming 4 Nations Face-Off and the return of the World Cup of Hockey in 2028.

Remembering Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau

On Aug. 29, Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau were killed when they were struck by a car while riding bicycles in Oldmans Township, N.J. Johnny was 31 and Matthew was 29.

There was an outpouring of love for the brothers across the sporting world. NBA star LeBron James extended his condolences, as did MLB star Mike Trout. Fans left flowers at Nationwide Arena in Columbus, where Gaudreau signed in 2022.

Johnny and Matthew were laid to rest in September and eulogized by their wives, Meredith and Madeline. They have been honored and remembered by teams and players throughout the NHL season.

The man accused of killing the brothers, Sean M. Higgins, is facing two counts of first-degree aggravated manslaughter and two counts of second-degree reckless vehicular homicide, among other charges related to their death.

Teams held video tributes and moments of silence before games. Players on all 32 teams wore decals on their helmets. Philadelphia Flyers coach John Tortorella invited their father, Guy, to skate with the team. Montreal Canadiens forward Cole Caufield, who grew up idolizing Johnny, changed his jersey number to 13, the same number Johnny wore.

At the Blue Jackets' home opener, the team lined up without a left winger where Johnny would have played. When the puck dropped, neither the Blue Jackets nor the Florida Panthers made a move, instead letting the puck come to a rest for exactly 13 seconds where Gaudreau would have stood.

They were honored in ceremonies in Calgary, where Johnny played nine seasons, and Philadelphia, near the family's hometown in Salem, N.J.

The Athletic / Team Canada disappoints again, Czechia emerges as a contender on Day 4 at World Juniors

By Corey Pronman and Scott Wheeler – December 30, 2024

Day 4 at the 2025 World Juniors was the best slate of games yet, with the top eight seeds coming into the tournament all in action. Here are the day's standouts and analysis from The Athletic's prospects writers Scott Wheeler and Corey Pronman.

- Sweden defeated Switzerland 7-5 in a chippy game that saw 18 minor penalties assessed. Red Wings prospect Axel Sandin-Pellikka, Hurricanes prospect Felix Unger Sorum and Canucks prospect Tom Willander all had three points apiece for the Swedes. Capitals D prospect Leon Muggli had three assists for the Swiss.
- Finland defeated USA 4-3 in overtime. Golden Knights prospect Tuomas Uronen scored the overtime winner and the Finns outshot the Americans 44-33.
- Czechia defeated Slovakia 4-2 to improve to 3-0. Kraken prospect and Czechia captain Eduard Sale scored twice. The Czechs now have the best goal differential in the tournament (+18) heading into their New Year's Eve matchup with Sweden.
- Canada beat Germany 3-0, playing a game close enough with the Germans that an empty-netter was scored for a second straight year. Kings goalie prospect Carter George stayed perfect, pitching his second shutout of the tournament and making 25 saves. Defensemen Oliver Bonk (Flyers) and Caden Price (Kraken) scored for Canada. Mathieu Cataford (Golden Knights) had the empty-netter.

Canada lays another egg

It took Canada 120 minutes to score a five-on-five goal against Latvia and Germany at the World Juniors. It bounced off the back boards and in off German goalie Nico Pertuch's skate.

Read that again. One five-on-five goal in six periods. Five goals in total. Against Latvia and Germany.

And in both games, almost the entire team looked aimless and disorderly, like they didn't know where to be or how they wanted to play. The shots have been perimeter and the selection has grown increasingly forced.

Their most talented players, the ones who had to make plays for them when they brought so few playmakers, don't look like themselves. Sam Dickinson, who has dominated the OHL by playing a freewheeling style — sometimes to a fault — looks like a timid shell of himself and like he has been told not to be himself. They brought all of these mobile D and none of them are getting up in the play or killing plays early in the neutral zone, often retreating.

Bradly Nadeau is in a second unfamiliar spot on the power play now (moved from the bumper to the net-front) and didn't make his first real skill play until a flash in the offensive zone to set up a Tanner Howe chance midway through the second period of their third game. If you're an NHL club, after how poorly things went for Matt Poitras on last year's team and now Nadeau on this year's, why would you want to loan your kids to play for Hockey Canada instead of for you right now?

Two nights ago, head coach Dave Cameron talked about 6-8 goals worth of chances in a 3-2 overtime loss to a team they beat 10-0 a year prior. He gave "credit" and "full marks" to Latvia and their goalie. Do the Germans, who Team USA pumped 10 goals past on Boxing Day in a game they didn't look good in themselves, also get "credit" and "full marks?" — Scott Wheeler

Group A wide open

We're four days into the tournament and every team in Group A has now lost a game, leaving the door wide open for any seeding 1-3 into New Year's Eve. Here's where things stand:

T1. USA (3 GP, 2-0-1-0, 7 PTS)

T1. Canada (3 GP, 2-0-1-0, 7 PTS)

3. Finland (3 GP, 1-1-0-1, 5 PTS)

4. Latvia (2 GP, 0-1-0-1, 2 PTS)

5. Germany (3 GP, 0-0-0-3, 0 PTS)

And here's the remaining schedule for the group:

Dec. 30: Latvia vs. Germany at 3:30 p.m. ET

Dec. 31: Finland vs. Latvia at 2:30 p.m. ET

Dec. 31: Canada vs. USA at 8 p.m. ET

Germany has to beat Latvia in regulation to give themselves a chance to avoid playing for relegation. And if a rested Finland beats a tired Latvia in regulation on New Year's Eve, then the loser of Canada-USA could finish third in the group, setting up a quarterfinal matchup with the loser of Sweden-Czechia. The winner of Czechia-Sweden could also be the top seed for the semifinals if that game ends in regulation. — Scott Wheeler

Eklund raising draft stock

Sweden has plenty of high draft picks throughout their lineup, with the returning defensemen and forwards being top players for them as expected. But Victor Eklund's boost to their top six and top power-play unit has been very important too. He's an excellent skater and competitor with a high skill level. He's not that big, but he's shown he can win battles versus bigger players at this level, and create offense in the difficult parts of the ice. He looks like an easy top-15 pick in the upcoming NHL Draft and may be elevating his stock enough to go in the top 10 like his brother William did a few years ago. — Corey Pronman

Hutson in early conversation for top D award

The pre-tournament favourites for the top D award were undoubtedly Wild star prospect Zeev Buium and the award's reigning winner, Swedish captain and Red Wings star prospect Axel Sandin-Pellikka. Sandin-Pellikka has had a strong tournament and leads the Swedes in goals (four), points (seven), shots (22) and plus-minus (+6) through three games. But Capitals second-rounder Cole Hutson and not Buium has been Team USA's best defenseman.

He has been outstanding with the puck on his stick all tournament long, making things happen with his feet and creating the inches of space he needs to execute. After scoring a beautiful bar-down goal surfing across the offensive zone against Finland on Sunday, he now has six points of his own through three games. But it's his calm, steady play defensively that has most impressed me. He has defended at a high level and the results match the eye test, too: Team USA has outscored the opposition 9-0 at five-on-five through three games with Hutson on the ice. The only two goals against he's been on the ice for came on the power play on Sunday after he'd just stepped onto the ice for a bad change as Trevor Connelly turned a puck over, and at three-on-three in overtime after he blew a tire. He was still named USA's player of the game.

I know Hutson has talked, despite having 14 points in 16 games as an 18-year-old freshman at BU (tops among all under-19 D in college hockey and fifth among all under-19 skaters) about how he wants to be better than he has for the Terriers at points. But he has been good for them and excellent for Team USA here in Ottawa. He plays a more competitive style defensively than his older brother Lane does and while there are questions to ask about whether that will work against NHLers, he defends hard at this level. I've seen NHL upside this week. — Scott Wheeler

Czechia emerges as a contender

Coming into this tournament, Czechia was thought to be in the clear second tier of teams, and likely not to challenge Sweden for the top spot in Group B. We will find out how their game goes on New Year's Eve, but all indications are it's going to be very competitive. Czechia's performances against Switzerland, and today against Slovakia, have been arguably more impressive than what Sweden did to those teams. Czechia isn't a star-studded team, but they've shown they have quality depth. A blue line full of mobility, size and smarts, and three lines of forwards who can make plays. On top of that they have a top-tier goalie in Michael Hrbal (Utah). Fellow Utah prospect Vojtech Hradec and Blues prospect Jakub Stancl have been surprise top scorers in the tournament to date. Czechia looks like a legit medal contender. — Corey Pronman

The Athletic / NHL New Year's resolutions: One way each team needs to better itself in 2025

By The Athletic NHL Staff – December 28, 2024

The New Year is almost upon us, and with it comes optimism and determination for self-improvement. For NHL teams, like anyone, that can mean anything from fixing a bad habit to getting around to renovations to making decisions about the future.

This week, The Athletic asked its NHL staff to identify one critical resolution for each team for 2025. Here's what they said.

Anaheim Ducks

Develop a consistently productive offense: Some of the Ducks' faithful fans would want a replacement for coach Greg Cronin, but that'll be up to GM Pat Verbeek to decide if a change is needed. What the two must work on is developing a team that can score more than it does and has a responsible system encouraging offense to turn more close games in their direction. Anaheim's offense has been at or near the bottom of the league for years. Players such as Troy Terry, Trevor Zegras and Frank Vatrano have had strong individual seasons but as Cronin said, "We're not blessed with like a go-to goal scorer" and their offense must come from "community scoring." But they need to develop someone into that or secure one externally. — Eric Stephens

Boston Bruins

Trade Trent Frederic: Frederic will be unrestricted after this season. It's unknown whether the Bruins will be able to re-sign the 2016 first-rounder. He has been a good multi-position forward, but his ceiling as a Bruin is as a third-liner. If a team sees more in Frederic and is willing to trade significant draft or futures capital, the Bruins have to move the left-shot forward. — Fluto Shinzawa

Buffalo Sabres

Make a decision on Kevyn Adams: The Sabres are likely to miss the playoffs for a 14th straight season. This is the fifth season with Adams as GM. The direction the Sabres take beyond this season depends, in part, on who is making roster decisions. Will Terry Pegula let Adams see his rebuild through for another season or hand the keys to another decision-maker to try to end Buffalo's drought? That's the central question facing this franchise in 2025. — Matthew Fairburn

Calgary Flames

Prioritize obtaining elite young talent: Even if the Flames remain in the mushy middle, there's reason to be optimistic about the progression of players like Connor Zary, Matthew Coronato and Dustin Wolf. The Flames still need a superstar to put them over the top, though. They might only get there by either flipping assets via trade or having patience through the draft. If the Flames aren't going to put themselves in a better draft position to obtain such talent, then it's on Craig Conroy to pick up the phone and make moves to acquire them. — Julian McKenzie

Carolina Hurricanes

Goalie stability: The Hurricanes already have matched a franchise high by playing five goalies this season — Frederik Andersen, Pyotr Kochetkov, Spencer Martin, Yaniv Perets and Dustin Tokarski — and they don't want a sixth unless it's an upgrade. Andersen, barring any setbacks, should be back sometime in

February, and that should give him the runway to at least be a viable option with Kochetkov down the stretch. — Cory Lavalette

Chicago Blackhawks

Sign a major UFA forward: This all depends on who hits the market come the offseason, but if there's a major name available (i.e. Mitch Marner, Mikko Rantanen), the Blackhawks should pursue them. It's clear again this season they need someone of that caliber for Connor Bedard to play with. — Scott Powers

Colorado Avalanche

Re-Sign Mikko Rantanen: If they can't find a way to work out an extension between now and then, the Avalanche risk losing the first major piece of their core, with Rantanen set to hit unrestricted free agency this summer. He's fifth in the NHL in goals over the last three seasons, and while Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman reported the Avs would prefer not to sign Rantanen for more than Nathan MacKinnon's \$12.6 million, that seems inevitable with the projections for a rising salary cap. He's averaging nearly 50 goals over the last two seasons and is only 28. — Jesse Granger

Columbus Blue Jackets

Play better on the road: If the Blue Jackets could play all 82 games in Nationwide Arena, they might be among the top teams in the Eastern Conference. Not only is Columbus 11-4-3 in the friendly confines, but the team is averaging 4.06 goals per game in those games, which is tops in the NHL. But on the road ... the Blue Jackets have won only four games (4-11-3), one of the worst road records in the league. The Jackets average more than one fewer goal per game (2.72) on the road. — Aaron Portzline

Dallas Stars

To snap out of it: The Stars have the third-best goal differential in the West, so let's not be melodramatic here, but they're not as comfortably ensconced in a playoff position as they should be. And you can blame a bevy of underachieving forwards. Jason Robertson, Wyatt Johnston and Jamie Benn are all well behind their scoring pace of recent seasons, and Logan Stankoven hasn't been the offensive force he was expected to be. If they snap out of it and get back to their usual pace, the power play won't be among the league's worst anymore and the Stars will be back near the top of the standings, where they belong. — Mark Lazerus

Detroit Red Wings

Re-energize the locker room: This seemed to be a driving factor of the decision to fire Derek Lalonde midseason and bring in Todd McLellan as head coach, with Detroit underperforming for the first half of the season. A new coach should bring some spark to the Red Wings roster, and McLellan is expected to be a demanding boss behind the bench. But the energy can't all come from the coaching staff, either: Detroit's players will need to find a way to find that energy within themselves, too. — Max Bultman

Edmonton Oilers

Re-sign Evan Bouchard to a long-term contract: Bouchard has had an uneven season so far with a few major defensive gaffes while having less success on the power play — a big team issue. Still, he continues to drive play and remains the Oilers' best offensive defenseman. Bouchard is coming off a fifth-place finish in Norris Trophy voting and has been excellent the last three playoff runs. He's an RFA with arbitration rights in July and is eligible to hit the open market in 2027. Negotiations shouldn't be problematic since the team's CEO of hockey operations, Jeff Jackson, used to work hand in hand with Bouchard's agent, Dave Gagner. But a contract isn't done until it's signed. — Daniel Nugent-Bowman

Florida Panthers

Patent their hangover cure: When we talk about the Stanley Cup hangover, it's shorthand for a few different things. Successful teams get complacent, sure, but they also often have their rosters raided. The short summer doesn't help, and neither do the travel demands of an 82-game season. Florida has managed all that, plus an early injury to Aleksander Barkov. They came into the holiday break winning 10 of 13 games and look highly capable of defending their title. — Sean Gentile

Los Angeles Kings

Re-sign Adrian Kempe: Sure, the Kings still must get out of the first round (and maybe beat Edmonton if it comes to that) and find that true successor to Anze Kopitar as their No. 1 center but let's take this in a different direction. Kempe has the 2025-26 season left on a four-year deal that has a \$5.5 million AAV. The Kings can begin to negotiate his next contract on July 1 and hammer an extension out, so he doesn't head into a potential walk year without one. His price tag is soaring, especially with a rising cap. The 28-year-old's resume now includes a 75-point season along with scoring 35, 41 and 28 goals while authoring another possible 30-goal campaign. He's simply one of their best players. — Eric Stephens

Minnesota Wild

Fix the penalty kill: Maybe Friday night was the start. The Wild's penalty kill has been a problem all season and will inhibit their ability to make the playoffs, let alone go on a run, if they don't fix it. But in Friday's come-from-behind win against the Stars, the Wild went 3-for-3 on the penalty kill and held Dallas to two shots on goal. They disrupted plays in the neutral zone, blocked shots and got two big saves from Filip Gustavsson. For goalies who have played at least 11 games, Marc-Andre Fleury's short-handed save percentage of .786 ranks 50th in the NHL and Gustavsson's .844 ranks 34th. So much time has been devoted to fixing the penalty kill that destroyed them last year, and this season it's continued to let them down. The Wild have killed 70.5 percent of opposing power plays (the Red Wings and Islanders are actually worse). But Friday night, the penalty kill finally helped win them a game. — Michael Russo

Montreal Canadiens

Ensure a smooth transition for Ivan Demidov: The most important thing that will happen for this franchise in 2025 will be the arrival of top prospect Demidov. It could be argued it's the most important thing that's happened in the last several years. Making sure that transition goes as smoothly as possible for him should be the No. 1 priority in 2025 for the Canadiens, both on and off the ice. — Arpon Basu

Nashville Predators

Keep Steven Stamkos at center and ride the wave: Stamkos with Jonathan Marchessault and Filip Forsberg has been a revelation for the Preds — 13 goals in 11 games — and Forsberg is in a goal drought. Get him scoring again and this could really be something. Too little too late? Probably. But it's the Preds' first signs of offensive life, and the rest of this season is about 2025-26, too. — Joe Rexrode

New Jersey Devils

Supplement forward depth: GM Tom Fitzgerald has the Devils in a good spot entering 2025. Sheldon Keefe has been a good fit as coach, and the club looks bound for the postseason. Without a clear favorite in the Eastern Conference, Fitzgerald is in position to bolster his roster and potentially go on a run. He's mentioned adding forward depth, so that's worth monitoring as the trade deadline approaches. — Peter Baugh

New York Islanders

Choose a direction: The Islanders have been bobbing along the past three-plus seasons, sticking to their roster but also sticking to a seeming plan of trying to run back the calendar to 2020, when the team outworked various opponents on a regular basis. The roster has gotten older and slower, beset with injuries and without much spark. Owner Scott Malkin has been hands-off with Lou Lamoriello, but now Malkin needs to choose a new path. Fast. — Arthur Staple

New York Rangers

Get Mika Zibanejad back on track: Zibanejad has seven points over the Rangers' past 17 games and a minus-14 rating. He's signed through 2029-30 and on a difficult-to-move contract, so him finding his game again is vital for the Rangers long-term. He might never again be the offensive force he was a few years ago, but New York at least needs him to be strong defensively and contribute some offense. — Peter Baugh

Ottawa Senators

Make a win-now move: Whether or not the Senators make the playoffs, GM Steve Staios will eventually have to make some kind of major move. The kind of move that will take the Senators from playoff hopeful to contender. It could be a trade or a free-agent signing in the summer. If the Senators fall out of a playoff spot, that need for a major move will be emphasized to help their team take the next step. — Julian McKenzie

Philadelphia Flyers

Take a big swing on a center: Flyers GM Daniel Briere has remained patient, but has made no secret that the team will need to address the center position at some point over the next little while if they are going to contend in a few years. Now that Matvei Michkov is here two years ahead of schedule and already looks like a future star, the timeline to try and acquire a pivot to match with Michkov has probably moved up. Maybe it's Dylan Cozens. Maybe Trevor Zegras. Heck, maybe it's even Elias Pettersson. But this year, it's time to take a chance on someone. — Kevin Kurz

Pittsburgh Penguins

Focus on the future: The Penguins' 9-3-1 surge into the holiday break has placed them in contention for a playoff spot. And the Eastern Conference isn't great. But Kyle Dubas must stay the course with not moving promising assets to make the playoffs. He must still move veterans such as Marcus Pettersson and Rickard Rakell for more assets. Basically, Dubas must do what he did in 2024 — swap out veterans not in the big picture of a quasi-rebuild while also doing just enough to give Sidney Crosby a chance to get the Penguins back into the postseason. It's a frustrating middle ground, but it's his only play if Crosby is ever going to get another Cup run in Pittsburgh. — Rob Rossi

San Jose Sharks

Turn Will Smith into an impact top-six forward: One-half of their potential franchise dynamic duo is in place. Macklin Celebrini is making a run at the Calder Trophy. Having him at a point per game as a rookie helps a major rebuild along. Now they've got to work on the 19-year-old Smith. Smith's creativity and cerebral play have been evident in flashes and moments, but he's also struggled at times early on with the speed of the NHL game. He can use more work on his play away from the puck and his body will mature, but the skill to become a point producer and important player for San Jose is there. — Eric Stephens

Seattle Kraken

Keep shooting for upside: Sometimes the New Year's resolution you make is something you've been thinking about for a while, and have even started to implement in earnest into your life, only to ratchet up and take it to a new level as a resolution. The Kraken, for example, dealt for Kaapo Kakko before the holiday freeze, adding an upside forward with precisely the sort of profile that this Kraken team needs long-term, in exchange for a 4/5 caliber defender in Will Borgen. That should be the start of a longer resetting project to graft upside into this Kraken lineup. — Thomas Drance

St. Louis Blues

Stick to the retool — keep assets: The Blues have a record nine prospects participating in the World Junior Championship this year, as well as other top prospects who aren't playing in the tournament. In other words, the Blues have a lot of young potential. Meanwhile, GM Doug Armstrong wants to compete for a playoff spot, which may mean adding at the deadline. He has said that he'll stick to the retool plan and hang onto his draft assets, and that should be the resolution — not moving them for immediate help for a club that likely won't go far in the postseason if it makes it. — Jeremy Rutherford

Tampa Bay Lightning

Improve against the Atlantic Division: There's a lot to like about the Lightning right now. They've improved in many metrics, including five-on-five defensively. Jake Guentzel has been a terrific addition. They're right in the playoff picture in the East. They've won seven of their past 10. But Tampa Bay is just 1-4-0 within the Atlantic Division, with the lone win coming against the Panthers right before the break. They have regulation losses against the Senators and Maple Leafs (twice). The resolution for the Lightning is to perform better in their remaining 21 in-division games. — Joe Smith

Toronto Maple Leafs

Score more goals in the playoffs: It's been the issue for this team in the playoffs year after year, the one that's been so confounding for everyone involved. A team with so much star power, a team that scores so easily in the regular season, hasn't scored enough, and enough when it really matters, in the postseason. This year's Leafs squad is trying to play differently under first-year coach Craig Berube to change that. The general idea: Play better defensively, so that fewer goals are required to win a game. A big part of the approach is the elimination of rush chances against. The cost of that though is fewer rush chances for the Leafs on offense. Berube believes the trade-off will be worth it. — Jonas Siegel

Utah Hockey Club

Begin renovations on the bowls of Delta Center: The Smith Entertainment Group did an amazing job last summer renovating the bowels of Delta Center to give the home and visiting teams tremendous locker room areas. But there are still 5,000 seats that have obstructed views. President of hockey operations Chris Armstrong says the team has plans to renovate the arena over the next two or three summers depending on how far UHC and the Jazz go. This offseason, they'll begin the process of renovating the bowls to add more unobstructed viewings for fans by the start of next season. "We're going to try and do it as expeditiously as we can, but we also want to get it right for the fans," Armstrong said. — Michael Russo

Vancouver Canucks

Play Creatively: The Canucks entered this season trying to play a more dynamic, positive, attacking brand of hockey, but as key absences piled up — Brock Boeser, then J.T. Miller and now Filip Hronek — the Canucks have hunkered down and become one of the most stylistically negative, defensive teams in hockey. In the short term, they've mostly got away with it. They've racked up 20 points in 18 games since Miller first took his leave, for example, the 13th-best point percentage in the league, despite

having the league's lowest five-on-five shot rate and shot attempt differential across that stretch. If they continue to play this way, however, the results are going to start to swing. They need to attack more. — Thomas Drance

Vegas Golden Knights

Re-sign Adin Hill: It's been a year of extensions in Las Vegas, with the Golden Knights already signing pending UFAs Shea Theodore, Brayden McNabb, Keegan Kolesar and Brett Howden beyond this season. The only major piece remaining is goaltender Hill, whose game has rounded into form lately. Entering Friday, he was 9-2-1 with a .927 save percentage since Nov. 13, and had climbed into the top 10 in GSAX. Hill is the clear-cut top goalie for the 2025 free agency class and could demand a high price on the open market, especially with another successful playoff run. With Ilya Samsonov also on an expiring contract, re-signing Hill should be the next priority for Vegas. — Jesse Granger

Washington Capitals

Thread the needle: At the start of the season, it became clear in a hurry that the Caps didn't have to choose between Alex Ovechkin's record chase and a playoff push for the rest of the roster. They can have both, and until Ovechkin broke his left fibula in November, they did. More of that balance would be a great thing; Ovechkin can break the record, and Washington can make plenty of noise in the Eastern Conference. — Sean Gentille

Winnipeg Jets

Avoid a second-half collapse: The Jets have led the NHL in January before. We're less than a year removed from deep-diving their 2023-24 excellence, highlighting aspects of their game that implied a playoff run was within their reach. Instead, the Jets were reverse-swept by the Avalanche a year after being reverse-swept by the Golden Knights: Despite genuine quality, Winnipeg couldn't get it done at crunch time. Winnipeg is a quality NHL team — again — with a playoff seed (and home ice) likely in its future, again. The Jets' 2025 will be defined by their ability to get better between now and the playoffs — not just in wins, but in structure, team game, and process — and more by their ability to win at least one round. — Murat Ates