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ABC 6 / Gaudreau's widow thanks Team USA for honoring late Blue Jackets star in gold celebration

By WSYX Staff – February 24, 2026

Meredith Gaudreau, the widow of late Columbus Blue Jackets star Johnny Gaudreau, said she is thankful for Team USA after the team included her husband in its gold medal celebration at the Olympics.

Team USA defeated Canada 2-1 in overtime Sunday. After the final buzzer, players skated around with Johnny Gaudreau's jersey and took pictures on the ice with his daughter and son. Meredith Gaudreau and Johnny Gaudreau's parents were emotional as they watched from the stands. She said it was a classy and heartwarming moment for her family.

"Yeah, I was really, really proud of that whole team. They didn't have to do that," Gaudreau said in an interview with ABC News. "And it seemed like as soon as the game was over and they won the game, it was almost like the first thing they did was grab John's jersey and skate around with his jersey. And then my phone was ringing, and they wanted to bring the kids out on the ice for a photo. And I was so thankful for that."

"I felt really proud of John because everything they did and that they continue to do is out of respect and love for him," She added.

Johnny Gaudreau was an 11-year NHL veteran and was likely to play for Team USA in Milan.

He and his brother, Matthew, were killed in August 2024 when police said they were struck by an alleged drunk driver while riding their bicycles in New Jersey the night before their sister's wedding.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets stretch drive primer: What to expect, what to know as playoff push resumes

By Aaron Portzline – February 25, 2026

COLUMBUS, Ohio — It's been three weeks since the Columbus Blue Jackets last played. It might feel like three months. The hockey world's focus drifted to Milan for the Olympics, but now it's time to get back into NHL mode.

The Blue Jackets have been practicing since the middle of last week, with coach Rick Bowness cranking up the pace and length of practices to make sure the Blue Jackets are ready for the resumption of the season. Their goal is to play with the same resolve and defensive tenacity that allowed them to crawl back into the Eastern Conference playoff picture.

Here's a thumbnail look at what you need to know when the stretch drive begins Thursday in Boston.

NHL's hottest club

That's right, the Blue Jackets headed into the break on an 11-1-0 burner that included seven straight wins, making them the hottest club in the NHL. It has allowed them to climb from last place in the Eastern Conference (16th) to the first club on the outside looking in.

The Blue Jackets trail the Boston Bruins by four points for the second wild-card spot, but it's wise to keep an eye on the Metropolitan Division, too. Columbus sits just four points back of the New York Islanders.

The first two games out of the gate? Boston and the Islanders.

Mixed into that string of wins is a five-game road winning streak, just three short of a franchise record set 10 years ago.

Welcome back, Z

A few Blue Jackets players mentioned sending text messages to defenseman Zach Werenski, but for the most part, they've left him alone to bask in the glow of winning a gold medal with Team USA at the Olympics.

It will be quite a reunion when Werenski meets up with the club in Boston.

Werenski had a strong tournament, with 1-5-6 and a plus-8 rating in six games, even though he played far fewer minutes for Team USA (16:23) than he has this season for the Blue Jackets (26:21).

“I’m not worried about the ice time,” Bowness joked. “I’m worried about the last couple of days, the celebration. That’s what I’m worried about.”

Werenski and Team USA had quite a party in Milan on Sunday before flying to Miami on Monday. On Tuesday, Werenski and some other players went to the White House to meet with President Donald Trump in the Oval Office and to attend the State of the Union address.

“The last couple of days and the travel,” Bowness said. “That’s a big jump from Italy back to North America, and that’s gonna catch up to him at some point. I’ll have a discussion with him Thursday (in Boston) to see where he is, and we’ll go from there.”

Bowness said his understanding and expectation is that Werenski will play Thursday. He went into the break on a seven-game point streak (2-8-10), two short of matching his career high.

Done in 60

The added bonus to the seven-game winning streak heading into the break is that all of them were won in regulation, the franchise’s longest string of regulation wins ever. Why does that matter?

If two teams have the same number of points after 82 games, the first tiebreaker is regulation wins, not overall wins. When the Blue Jackets started their charge up the standings, they were dead last in regulation wins, too.

Remember the lesson learned last season and at the end of 2012-13: Every point matters.

Marchenko, Monahan healthy

Well, they’re healthier.

Kirill Marchenko missed a couple of games before the break with an illness, but he was also slowed a couple of weeks earlier by a foot injury that had him wearing a protective boot off the ice.

As of Tuesday, Bowness said he was 100 percent healthy. Marchenko has been flying in the Blue Jackets’ mini-camp this week, setting the pace in the contact drills. That is key for Columbus, as Marchenko is the club’s most polished goal-scorer.

You could argue that Sean Monahan is just as important. He’s been battling upper and lower-body injuries this season, and it’s rumored that he might not be fully healthy until after the season.

In any case, the three weeks without games were beneficial.

Boone Jenner ... on the fourth line?

Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner was playing on the fourth line heading into the break, and that’s where he’s been all week at practice. Bowness said he spoke with Jenner about it a couple of days ago.

Before that, Jenner was playing left wing, usually in the top six. But with Adam Fantilli, Monahan and Charlie Coyle set in the middle of the top three lines, Jenner takes over the fourth.

“He’s been a center most of his career, and I’ve liked him there,” Bowness said. “You look at it as a fourth line. I’m not. We need four good lines because of all the games and all of the travel. We need four balanced lines, and putting Boone there gives us that balance.

“He’s still going to play his 14-16 minutes per game. He’s gonna kill penalties. He’s going to be on the power play sometimes. Don’t even label him a fourth liner. That’s not how I look at it. We need four lines, we need him to play important minutes, and he’ll play important minutes.”

Bowness said Jenner may switch to left wing in games when the Blue Jackets are protecting a late lead.

Quiet on contracts

General manager Don Waddell said earlier this season that he’d hoped to use the three-week Olympic break to get at least some of his pending unrestricted free agents under contract. However, late last week, he told The Athletic he hasn’t extended offers to any of the four.

In fact, he said, he was fairly certain that forwards Coyle, Jenner and Mason Marchment, and defenseman Erik Gudbranson wouldn’t have contract extensions before the March 6 trade deadline.

That doesn’t mean he’s going to trade them, though. Unless the Blue Jackets fall flat on their faces — think 0-5, 0-4-1 or something similarly catastrophic — he’s likely to keep them and let the Blue Jackets take a run at the playoffs and beyond.

It’s risky because they could all walk as free agents after the season, but the Blue Jackets under Bowness showed something to Waddell, making it a risk he appears willing to take.

Deep breaths

Due to the three-week Olympic break, this season’s schedule has been a bear for all 32 NHL clubs. If you thought the first 58 games were tough, get ready.

The Blue Jackets will play 17 games in March, with only one two-day break between games. They’ll also play their remaining 26 games in only 48 days, including five back-to-backs, meaning this will be a sprint to the finish.

Bowness has been impressed with his club’s ability to grasp new concepts and make adjustments via video. That will be vitally important the rest of the way, as there won’t be any time for significant practices.

The good news: More than half (14) of those 26 games are in Nationwide Arena, and the Blue Jackets don't leave the Eastern Time Zone for the rest of the season, which ends April 14.

Special teams clicking

The Blue Jackets' power play and penalty kill have both improved under Bowness, and, if that continues, it could be a big boost to them down the stretch, especially on nights when tired legs can't get going.

Since Jan. 12, the Blue Jackets are 13th in the NHL in both power play (24.0) and penalty kill (81.3), both stark upgrades from where they were before Bowness was hired: 18.8 percent on the power play (20th) and 76.4 percent (29th) on the kill.

Former Blue Jackets coach Ken Hitchcock is credited with being the first coach to look at the two numbers (power play and penalty kill) combined as a way to measure special teams health.

If your power play wasn't great, but your penalty kill was lethal, you'd be OK, and vice versa. Since Bowness took over, the Blue Jackets' specialty sum is 105.3, which means they're doing well.

During the break, Bowness had power-play coach Mike Haviland and penalty-kill coach Scott Ford take deep dives into the top power-play and penalty-kill units in the NHL to see if the Blue Jackets could add some wrinkles the rest of the way.

That will be the focus of today's practice before the Blue Jackets fly to Boston.

Shutout streak

Blue Jackets goaltenders Jet Greaves and Elvis Merzlikins each had shutouts in their final starts before the break, giving the Blue Jackets an active team shutout streak of 146:25 when the puck drops on Thursday.

That's the seventh-longest streak in franchise history.

The Blue Jackets have defended with much more resolve and intensity under Bowness, and that has helped make life easier on the goaltenders. While Greaves has been consistently good all season, Merzlikins' awakening under Bowness has been key.

Merzlikins, just back from an Olympic run with Latvia, is 5-1-0 with a .925 save percentage since Bowness was hired.

The Blue Jackets' shutout streak won't last forever, but having two goaltenders playing well during the stretch drive would be a huge advantage.

The Columbus Dispatch / Zach Werenski discusses honoring Johnny Gaudreau after winning gold

By Dan Aulback – February 25, 2026

Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski thought celebrating the U.S. men's hockey team's gold medal victory with Johnny Gaudreau's kids was the perfect way to honor his late teammate.

In an interview with "FOX and Friends" on Feb. 24, Werenski said he and the team had thought about Gaudreau all tournament; the U.S. team had hung his jersey in the locker room. After beating Canada, Werenski, with teammates Auston Mathews and Matthew Tkachuk, skated Gaudreau's jersey around the ice in triumph

Then, members of Team USA skated over to find Meredith Gaudreau, Johnny's widow, to retrieve Gaudreau's 3-year-old daughter Noa and son Johnny for a photo with the team.

"It felt like it was super special," Werenski said in the interview. "This is something John would have been at, and we wanted to make him proud. And to have his kids on the ice, to celebrate with us, it just felt right.

"Obviously, it was our lifelong dream, but it was also John's, and we wanted to honor him the best that we could."

Werenski and Gaudreau were teammates for two seasons before Gaudreau and his brother Matthew were struck by an alleged drunk driver while biking through Oldmans Township, New Jersey, on Aug. 29, 2024.

Gaudreau was a staple of U.S. hockey. He led the U.S. junior team with seven goals during their 2013 IIHF World Junior Championship run. He was also a bronze medalist during the 2023 IIHF World Championships and was likely to compete in this year's Olympics.

"He really embraced what it meant to be a USA hockey player, and a lot of us wanted to follow in his footsteps," Werenski said. "A lot of guys that played for USA hockey really looked up to John and felt like that was just the right thing to do was to have his kids on the ice, have his family there and to have his jersey in our picture."

During overtime against Canada, Werenski had the game-winning assist to New Jersey Devils forward Jack Hughes, securing the first U.S. gold medal in men's hockey in 46 years. Werenski finished the tournament with a goal, five assists and a +8 plus-minus, tied with Jack Hughes for the highest rating on the team through the Olympic run.

"You get reminded of how great the United States of America is when you get back here, and we love representing our country. We love wearing those colors," Werenski said. "We're allowed to live out our dream because of the military, the people that serve, the first responders. ... You definitely get an appreciation for it when you go overseas and play."

Werenski and a majority of the U.S. men's team were in attendance for the State of the Union address on Feb. 24 in Washington, D.C., Earlier that day, the team visited the White House on President Donald Trump's invitation.

The Blue Jackets star is expected to play in the Feb. 26 game against the Boston Bruins when the NHL season resumes.

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets may hang onto free agents past trade deadline

By Brian Hedger – February 24, 2026

Don't expect the Blue Jackets to go shopping for big-ticket rentals before the NHL's trade deadline passes at 3 p.m. ET on March 6. Not in the traditional sense, anyway.

"The way I look at it right now, our UFAs are kind of like our rental players, unless something pops here in the next little bit," Blue Jackets president/general manager Don Waddell said. "One phone call can change that a little bit, but to trade a guy right now for a second-round pick ... we've got [eight] picks in this draft. We don't need any more picks. It's more important that we win games."

The Blue Jackets have six pending unrestricted free agents, including captain Boone Jenner. They also have loads of space beneath an NHL salary cap ceiling expected to jump from \$95.5 million to \$104 million in 2026-27.

Blue Jackets forwards Boone Jenner (38) and Charlie Coyle (3) talk during the second period of a Jan. 20 game against the Senators. Both are pending unrestricted free agents.

That should leave plenty of room to re-sign any of the Jackets' preferred UFAs while also reaching agreements with three key restricted free agents: center Adam Fantilli, forward Cole Sillinger and goalie Jet Greaves.

Topping the UFA list are Jenner, center Charlie Coyle, forward Mason Marchment and defenseman Erik Gudbranson. All four are 30 years old or older. The Jackets also have veteran depth players like forward Danton Heinen and injured defenseman Brendan Smith as pending UFAs.

Coming out of the NHL's three-week pause for the 2026 Winter Olympics, the Jackets trail the New York Islanders by four points for third in the Metropolitan Division, a guaranteed playoff spot. Columbus trails the Boston Bruins by four points for the second wild card in the Eastern Conference, another playoff ticket.

They also play those two teams right off the hop, starting with the Bruins on Feb. 26 at TD Garden in Boston before hosting the Islanders on Feb. 28 at Nationwide Arena. Those games, plus the three others before the trade deadline (March 2 at the New York Rangers, March 3 against the Nashville Predators and March 5 against the Florida Panthers), could determine what Waddell ultimately does.

Dropping all five and quickly dropping out of playoff contention could prompt a UFA sell-off to acquire picks and/or prospects with the future in mind. Staying in the playoff chase will likely keep the Jackets intact with the possibility of Waddell "working around the edges," to add low-cost UFA depth rentals.

That would mirror last season's trade deadline in Columbus, when Waddell hung onto his pending UFAs while adding depth forwards Luke Kunin and Christian Fischer.

“If somebody says, ‘I’m going to give you ‘Player X or Y’ for this guy, and it’s somebody that’s going to help us, who we can control and helps us down the road, you’d have to look at it,” Waddell said.

“There’s not too many of those out there, though, and with the high-end UFAs, we already have a bunch of them. So, I’m not going to pay a price (to add more).”

Blue Jackets left wing Mason Marchment and goaltender Jet Greaves celebrate a 4-0 win over the Blackhawks on Feb. 4.

Expect to see a patient, almost quiet, approach to the deadline for the second straight year. Waddell said he’s contacted agents who represent the Blue Jackets’ UFAs and spoken to a couple of players over the break to gauge their interest in re-signing.

Now comes the waiting period for the deadline to pass.

“We showed (patience) last year, when we went to the deadline and kept our guys,” Waddell said. “We ended up signing the guys we wanted to keep at the end of the year, so the March 6 trade deadline is not a deadline to keep your players or lose your players. Just because you keep them and they’re still UFAs doesn’t mean they’re all going to walk at the end of the year.”

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' "The CannonBall" Celebrates Bright Future Ahead in Columbus Community

By Mark Scheig – February 25, 2026

Mathieu Olivier spent 30 minutes Tuesday night at Nationwide Arena as a bartender. Dante Fabbro did the same on the other side of the floor while rocking some 2000s shades.

Meanwhile, Kirill Marchenko, Dmitri Voronkov and Egor Zamula were taking pictures with guests inside an actual box. In the middle of the floor, Adam Fantilli and Kent Johnson were rocking their best Y2K look while posing with guests for pictures.

That was just some of the fun guests had as the Blue Jackets hosted "The CannonBall". It's the biggest event of the year for the Columbus Blue Jackets Foundation. The night was full of dancing, great food, themed drinks and much more. Guests were able to mingle with Blue Jackets' management, coaches and players as part of the festivities.

Since the theme was "2000s vibes", attendees were asked to wear wardrobe signifying the turn of the century. Music from Britney Spears and NSYNC among others filled the dance floor. It was a night full of fun and vibes.

At the heart of the matter on this night was the continued work of the Blue Jackets Foundation. Being that this was "The CannonBall" for their 25th Anniversary Season, it came as no surprise that it was one of their biggest celebrations yet.

As part of the night's festivities, a special announcement was made that the Foundation was donating an additional \$1.5 million to Nationwide Children's Hospital. Of that amount, \$500,000 was going towards renovations of the CBJ Foundation Family Resource Center. The other \$1 million was being given to the Heart & Glory Fund, which offers different support to patients and their families during their stay at the hospital.

Among the initiatives as part of the Heart & Glory Fund are the availability of therapy dogs, care journals as well as the use of a new patient app that will help guide families throughout their stay.

So far this year, a total of \$2.5 million has been donated by the Blue Jackets' Foundation to different initiatives benefiting the health and wellness of children in Central Ohio.

The Hockey Writers was graciously invited to spend the night at The CannonBall to take in the sights and sounds of an unforgettable night. We got to speak to Foundation Executive Director Tara Battiato as well as general manager Don Waddell and a few players to discuss the meaning of the night, the work being done in the community and why the future in the community is bright thanks to the tireless work of many people.

Special Meaning of “The CannonBall”

“I believe this entire season, since we’re celebrating 25 seasons of Columbus Blue Jackets’ hockey, has been really special,” Battiato said. “The games have felt extra special. So taking that momentum and going into the planning The CannonBall Gala, getting to reflect on the 25 seasons, all the lives that we’ve changed, the money that we’ve been able to raise, to be able to put right back into Central Ohio, it’s been just really special. It’s all come together and it’s going to be fabulous.”

“These events are put on for a reason,” Waddell said. “People love to come out to them and meet the players and coaches. But more importantly, they’re here to give back to the community because what our Foundation does for the whole community, people want to be a part of that. That’s what makes me feel so good.”

The CannonBall is the one event on the Blue Jackets’ calendar that brings everyone on the team together. It’s an occasion everyone looks forward to.

No matter if a player has been here for over a decade like Boone Jenner or if it was their first time like it was for Jet Greaves and Charlie Coyle, the players fully embrace the night while giving an experience to fans they’ll never forget.

“It’s super special,” Jenner said. “What the McConnell’s started in Columbus 25 years ago with the CBJ Foundation and the work they do around the community, it’s really cool being part of the community and seeing where all that goes. When you have special nights like this, it really makes you feel like you know us as players with the community and we’re all striving for the same thing. That is to make life better for a lot of families and kids and different things around Ohio. (I) really can’t say enough good things about what this Foundation does and how it’s grown. You can see it tonight.”

Coyle couldn’t help but be impressed with everything the night had to offer.

“I think I was one of the first ones to come in before the crowd came in,” Coyle said. “Seeing the setup in the arena here, I thought they did an awesome job there, at the stage. You can tell a lot of music now. It’s a good atmosphere in here. When we were up there and they had the fire going up and the confetti, that was a nice touch. It seems like everyone’s just having a really good time and everyone’s nice and respectful. (We) chat with a lot of nice people who support us and are here for a great cause. What’s not to love?”

Greaves has been with the Blue Jackets for parts of four seasons. But this was his first “The CannonBall” experience. It was a night he won’t soon forget.

“It’s been so fun,” Greaves said. “Just meeting so many people, seeing so many familiar faces. That whole social experience for the night has been so amazing. What we’re here for, the Foundation, (it’s) so

much greater. Seeing the money that's been raised for the Foundation, for the hospital. It's just so cool to see everybody's contribution (and) the impact this can have in the community."

This "The CannonBall" marks the fourth for Johnson since being drafted the by Blue Jackets. He has seen firsthand the growth and evolution of the Foundation. He's excited to see where things go.

"It's really cool always," Johnson said. "Bigger year, bigger venue. It's cool to do that on the ice here. It's kind of weird but it's also really cool. (Author's note: The CannonBall was held over the covered ice surface.) I just think the speeches put into perspective that there's so much more to the Blue Jackets' organization and the city than just what we do on the ice. It's cool just talking to people whether they work upstairs and help out the business flow. We're all one team here."

Bright Future

Towards the end of the night, the Blue Jackets all went on stage including the players, Waddell and head coach Rick Bowness. Once they were done with the speeches on stage, fire and confetti rained down signifying the importance of the night.

As it turned out, it was also a sign of great things to come with the Foundation.

"You think about, Cathy (Lyttle's) talked about 25 years being up there. She does a tremendous job," Waddell said. "You think about where it's come from day one to 25 years and where it's headed in the next 25 years, it's going to be amazing."

"It excites me even more to think about our future 25 seasons and all of the incredible impact that we still have to make," Battiato said. "Our four pillars are pediatric cancer, education, health & safety and then of course, growing the game of hockey. What does the community need? How can we recognize that and how can we use this incredible platform to help them?"

The night was a celebration of 25 years of excellence coupled with what the next 25 years and beyond could look like in the Columbus community. Thanks to the efforts of many people within the Blue Jackets' organization including leaders like Battiano, the Foundation has a very bright future ahead of them.

Central Ohio is in good hands moving forward thanks to the work of the Columbus Blue Jackets Foundation.

The Athletic / NHL Playoff Report: Sabres and Bruins on the rise, Panthers and Oilers falling

By Dom Luszczyszyn – February 25, 2026

The Olympic break is over, which means we're back for the NHL's stretch run. With roughly 25 games to go, the NHL's playoff race is coming down to the wire in what should be an electric race to the finish.

After each night's slate of games is finished, our playoff projections page is updated taking into account the results from those games and fresh new data to feed into the model. Every night, everything changes and those changes can add up — especially if a team goes on a heater (or cooler). Those changes can also be difficult to view at a glance and it's good practice to take stock regularly of what's been happening.

This is the Playoff Report, a monthly check-in of each team's chances of making the playoffs, the trends within the race and why the biggest movers are on the rise or declining.

Here's how the race currently shapes up. As you can see, it's a beautiful mess.

Eastern Conference

Last time around I told you I had no idea what would happen in the East. One month later, it's still extremely unclear. The Tampa Bay Lightning and Carolina Hurricanes are locks, and the Montreal Canadiens are probably safe too. The New York Rangers are out while the New Jersey Devils and Philadelphia Flyers look unlikely. The other 10 teams are still in it to varying degrees.

The best shots belong to three teams that didn't make it last year: the Buffalo Sabres, Detroit Red Wings and Pittsburgh Penguins. While their positions look firm, difficult schedules and weak track records warrant slight caution. The Penguins are one to watch depending on how much time Sidney Crosby is forced to miss and they have the league's toughest remaining schedule.

In the next tier, the red hot Blue Jackets look poised to take the playoff leap while the model still has faith in the Capitals to turn things around. That really depends on the Islanders and Bruins crashing back to earth. Boston has been a streaky team all season, but was fantastic in January.

As for the three Atlantic teams that made the playoffs last year, it's getting to a point where a return feels unlikely. Florida has the easiest remaining schedule of the three while the Senators have the strongest underlying numbers this season.

Western Conference

As has been the case all season, the West is a lot more cut-and-dry than the East. The Colorado Avalanche, Dallas Stars and Vegas Golden Knights have been virtual locks all season while the Minnesota Wild joined them after acquiring Quinn Hughes.

After them, the Utah Mammoth, Los Angeles Kings, Anaheim Ducks and Edmonton Oilers look likely, although there is some room for surprise. The Kings added Artemi Panarin and have the league's easiest remaining schedule, while the Ducks aren't far behind. The Oilers have the toughest schedule of the four, which is what makes their position the most precarious at the moment.

The Seattle Kraken are currently in a playoff spot, but their underlying numbers and schedule make them tough to bet on. Ditto for a Sharks team that's slowing down and a Predators' team poised to sell. And while it's probably too late for the Jets, it's not hard to envision Connor Hellebuyck's Olympic greatness spilling over to a stretch run winning streak.

On the rise

Anaheim Ducks

After a December crash, the Ducks are back on the rise, looking like the up-and-coming team we all witnessed in October. Anaheim went 9-2-0 into the break to leap back into the playoff picture and put itself on very strong footing. It would take a lot going wrong for the Ducks to miss now, especially with one of the league's easiest schedules coming up.

There were two keys to Anaheim's return: Lukáš Dostál getting back up to speed and the team controlling play.

Dostál had trouble in the immediate aftermath of his injury where he was getting shelled on a nightly basis. Over the last month, though, he was able to lock in and get back on his elite goalie trajectory. Dostal posted a .924 during the last month and had the league's third-best GSAX.

It helps to have support and it's starting to look like the team in front of him is gelling in that regard. They had a 53 percent xG share, the seventh-best mark in the league, over the last month. And that was despite missing Leo Carlsson for all but two games. Beckett Sennecke really stepped up in his absence.

The Ducks are back on track and saw the biggest Net Rating increase of any team as a result — along with the largest playoff odds bump on top of that.

Buffalo Sabres

After a decade-plus of bad beats, bad vibes, bad bounces, bad players, bad management and other bad Buffalo-isms, the tide has finally turned for the Sabres. For the first time in a long time, the Sabres finally look like a legitimate threat (and long-time readers will remember that was not the case from this model in 2022-23). A 10-4-2 run over the last month amidst a 21-5-2 heater will have that effect.

The Sabres aren't out of the woods yet, but they are damn close if they can finish the regular season strong. Their playoff odds raced above 50 percent and peaked above 80 percent on the back of the team leaning into its offensive identity. No team scored more goals per 60 over the last month than Buffalo's

4.09, which was a big part of the team's increase in Offensive Rating. Sure, some of that was shooting-percentage-induced, but this is still a team that's become loaded with offensive weapons.

While I'm a little unsure about how Buffalo's defense is trending during that same stretch — third-last xGA/60, leading to just a 46 percent xG rate — the offensive vibes are too good to ignore. If they can tighten things up while keeping up the goal-scoring binge, the Sabres' long playoff-less nightmare may actually come to an end. For real this time.

Boston Bruins

One month ago I said to pencil the Bruins out. Shows what I know.

While I still expect the Bruins to fall out of the mix, they've become impossible to ignore over the last month as their latest hot streak extended further and further. It felt unlikely that the Bruins as constructed could put together a 10-1-3 stretch, but here they are. And to their credit, it looked genuine enough to warrant a healthy upgrade in their underlying strength. Only Anaheim saw a higher increase in their Net Rating over the last month.

After months of being one of the league's lesser possession teams, the Bruins were above-average in January. They executed well on top of that and their power play continues to be a legitimate source of strength. David Pastrnak in particular has been especially good, leading the team every night while becoming one of the league's best playmakers. Over the last month Pastrnak had 20 assists in 14 games, tied for the league lead with Nikita Kucherov. Add an elite starting goalie to that (Jeremy Swayman was top-10 in GSax) and the Bruins have the makings of a team that could make the playoffs. They'll just need to find a way to get there beyond putting up a 107 PDO.

Columbus Blue Jackets

For much of this season it felt like the Blue Jackets had more to give, as my model stubbornly refused to push their playoff odds down even as the losses piled up. The talent was there, the execution wasn't. Still, an 18-19-7 record was not enough to deter the model from believing in Columbus. A 20 percent shot for the last place team in the East is pretty high for a team that didn't make the playoffs last year.

Enter Rick Bowness, who has coaxed a 10-1-0 record out of Columbus that has the team back on track. Columbus' playoff odds jumped 30 percentage points over the last month, the fourth-most in the league.

The big news is that what the Blue Jackets are doing looks genuinely sustainable too. Their 54 percent xG at five-on-five ranks fifth and their power play has been fantastic on top of that. With a genuinely strong goalie tandem at their disposal, the Blue Jackets look legit and now look like a favorite to make the playoffs. The model never stopped believing and you're seeing exactly why now.

Honorable mentions

Pittsburgh Penguins

The only reason the Penguins land in the 'honorable mentions' section is because of how difficult the road ahead is. They have the toughest schedule going forward and may have to figure things out without their captain for the next little bit. But given their recent pay, they may be actually equipped to do so. Pittsburgh's fundamental process has been sound most of the year and was taken a step further over the last month with a 55 percent xG rate and an elite penalty kill. That manifested into a 9-3-3 record; will that be enough for one last playoff run with Crosby, Malkin and Letang?

Seattle Kraken

The Kraken continue to hang onto a playoff spot and are slowly gaining respect for that. Seattle's xG rate was still not great over the last month, but at 46 percent it was a step in the right direction with some decent defensive numbers backing that up. The Kraken face the league's second most difficult schedule going forward which dulls their playoff odds, but they have a real shot to keep defying the odds.

Falling off

Florida Panthers

There are two main things the Panthers have had to deal with this season: untimely injuries and bad goaltending.

The injuries have been a real killer as the team has not been able to ice a full non-Barkov lineup yet. Even with Matthew Tkachuk returning, the Panthers then had to deal with injuries to Seth Jones, Brad Marchand and Aaron Ekblad — all difference-makers. It's left the team wanting often and led to an ugly month where the team went 7-8-0, with merely average xG numbers behind it. Losing five of the last six is what really caused their odds to nosedive.

It's goaltending, though, that's been the story. We warned before the season that Sergei Bobrovsky might struggle to shoulder the load after some so-so regular seasons and lengthy playoff runs. That's exactly what's happened so far, with January being his toughest month. Bobrovsky had one of the worst GSAX numbers in the league which manifested in a 38 percent goal rate at five-on-five for the month.

If there's any solace for the Panthers, it's that almost every team they're chasing has a brutal schedule coming up while the Panthers have one of the easiest. Still, the team is far enough back that it may be too little too late. For the first time all year the Panthers fell below 50 percent playoff odds, dropping a league-worst 35 percentage points in January. It may be time to count the two-time defending champions out.

New Jersey Devils

The Devils already looked like an unlikely playoff bet at the start of the month. Things have only gotten worse since, to the point that it would take a near-miracle for the Devils to salvage this season. New Jersey is down to a 1-in-20 shot at making it after going 6-8-0 over the last month.

Getting Olympic hero Jack Hughes back and 100 percent healthy is a start. But it's become clear this season (and last) that the Devils have tried too hard to become something they're not. The Devils used

to have one of the league's most dynamic offenses, but have struggled to create to the same degree over the last two years. That's come to a head lately where the team's Offensive Rating has now been downgraded severely from average to minus-17.5. That ranks 26th in the league. Was that offensive sacrifice worth it to create a just-barely-above-average defense? Probably not.

Watching Hughes consistently create offense from nothing in an Olympic setting amidst low usage made it feel like a Devils problem more than a personnel problem. He wasn't the only one showing more offensively, either. This team should be better, but it's time to face reality that it just isn't working as currently constructed. Whatever they're doing led to a disappointing 91-point season last year. This year has been even worse.

Washington Capitals

I keep expecting the Capitals to turn things around, and the team keeps struggling. The Capitals went on a middling 7-7-1 run over the last month while every other team around them got hot, leading to the team being pushed farther down the East. Their playoff odds took a real downturn at the start of the month, pushing the Capitals right into the playoff bubble.

For Washington, the problem really comes down to poor sequencing where the Capitals haven't won as many close games as they've needed to. Their plus-12 goal differential is tied for sixth in the East and yet they sit 12th in points percentage. Tough.

It's possible the Capitals can be better going forward with the return of Pierre-Luc Dubois to the lineup. But in a competitive East, it will take more than that to leapfrog four teams. A once-safe bet now looks closer to a coin flip. That some unexpected teams continue to have playoff staying power has made it difficult for last year's surprise contenders to keep up.

Edmonton Oilers

A team with Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl and Evan Bouchard on it playing at this level should not be this mid.

At the start of the season the excuse for that was goaltending and lately ... well, it's still partly goaltending. Trading for Stuart Skinner at the bottom of a cold streak for Tristan Jarry at the height of a hot streak did not feel wise and that's played out over the last month.

What that kerfuffle ignored, though, was that one of Edmonton's biggest problems was the defensive structure in front of those goalies; it's tough for any goalie to thrive in this environment. The Oilers were fourth in xGF/60 over the last month, but seventh-last in xGA/60. And their penalty kill was among the worst in the league.

That's caused Edmonton's projected team strength to continue spilling down as we reckon with the fact that the Oilers simply may not be a contender. The depth after the big guns remains an issue and the blue line lacks defensive stopping power with the decline of Mattias Ekholm. It's possible reinstating

Paul Coffey behind the bench can fix the team's defensive issues, but right now it's the biggest thing holding Edmonton back. Going forward, the Oilers are projected to have the league's third-best offense, but a bottom-10 defense. That's not good enough.

Honorable mentions

New York Rangers

The Rangers lost a bunch of games (2-11-1) without Adam Fox and Igor Shesterkin and traded Artemi Panarin for a weak haul, all but cementing their spot at the bottom of the league. No team's point projection or expected win percentage dropped more over the last month.

Philadelphia Flyers

If I got one thing right about the East (for now anyways), it's the Flyers falling back down to earth. The Flyers went 3-8-4 over the last month, dropping towards the bottom of the East. The big problem: too many starts for Samuel Ersson, who had an appalling .837 save percentage in nine games and a league-worst GSAX.