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Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets keep playoff hopes going with 3-0 win over Philadelphia Flyers

By Brian Hedger- April 16, 2025

PHILADELPHIA – The Blue Jackets' playoff hopes are officially back on the Montreal Canadiens' sticks.

Needing a fifth straight win to keep their postseason hopes afloat — this time in regulation — the Blue Jackets got the job done Tuesday night at Wells Fargo Center. Backed by another sterling shutout performance from rookie goalie Jet Greaves, they moved to 87 points with a 3-0 victory over the Philadelphia Flyers.

The Blue Jackets (39-33-9) trail Montreal by two points for the second wild card in the Eastern Conference and could gain that final playoff spot through a regulation wins tiebreaker if the Canadiens lose in regulation Wednesday and they defeat the New York Islanders on Thursday at Nationwide Arena for their sixth straight win — again in regulation.

"I feel like we've done it all year," defenseman Dante Fabbro said. "It's just the makeup of our team and the belief of our team. There's never any quit and never any doubt in our game. Obviously, there's highs and lows in a season and it's how you manage those. But I feel that for the most part, we've responded really well in tough situations."

Greaves made 29 saves to notch his second career shutout, both in the span of the past three games. Since joining the team last Thursday as an emergency recall from AHL Cleveland to replace injured starter Elvis Merzlikins, Greaves has stopped 119 of 122 shots for a .975 save percentage, posted the first two shutouts of his career, earned the league's First Star of the Week honors and allowed just one goal in the past three games by Alex Ovechkin — the NHL's new all-time goal king.

"He might be the hottest guy in the NHL right now," center Adam Fantilli said. "He's got one goal against him in the last three games, and it's Ovi? I mean ... that's pretty good. There's not much else you can say."

Fabbro, Fantilli and Kent Johnson scored the goals for the Blue Jackets, while Zach Werenski and Sean Monahan added two assists each. Samuel Ersson made 31 saves for the Flyers (33-38-10), who are currently being directed by interim head coach Brad Shaw — a former Blue Jackets assistant who worked with John Tortorella in Columbus and Philadelphia.

"It's coming right down to the wire, isn't it?" Fabbro said. "Ever since I got here, there's never been any doubt. There's been nothing but belief and resilience. It's just a lot of fun to be a part of. It's an unbelievable culture. Everyone wants to win, and there's no selfishness whatsoever. It's about winning, and that's the best part of it."

After an exciting first period that ended with the score deadlocked at 0-0, Fabbro got things rolling for the Blue Jackets with his eighth goal of the season — extending his career high. Raising his stick high above his head while standing above the right circle, he smacked a slapshot through traffic to beat Samuel Ersson 2:32 into the second for a 1-0 lead.

It stayed that score until late in the second, when Zach Aston-Reese knocked the puck into the neutral zone from inside his own blue line and hustled after it to draw an interference penalty. That put the Blue Jackets on a power play that Johnson capped seven seconds after it began with his 24th goal of the season.

That made it 2-0 after two periods, setting the stage for an all-out effort in the third to protect the lead and attempt extending it. Greaves, who was sharp from the outset, came up huge with several big saves. Two that stood out most were a dazzling glove save in the second to deny Travis Konecny a goal off a hard wrist shot plus another "10 bell" effort in the third to stop Tyson Foerster with a pad save following a turnover.

"I think the guys are just playing great," Greaves said. "They're doing a great job in front of me, making my job pretty simple, so it's been a team effort. Obviously, it's an important time of the year. These games matter a lot, but all the guys are doing a great job."

Leading 2-0 with 9:05 left in the third, Fantill was sent off with a delay-of-game penalty for sending the puck over the glass in the defensive zone, presenting what turned out to be the Jackets' last big challenge to their lead.

Greaves and his penalty-killers thwarted the Flyer's power play and Fantilli stayed on the ice after exiting the penalty box to rejoin play. He soon made it 3-0 with 6:34 left after Kirill Marchenko shot the puck off him into the net while he drove down the slot. It was the second-year center's his fifth goal in the past three games and 30th of the season, but he'll remember it for a more touching reason.

Fantilli rejoined the team April 15 after attending his grandfather's funeral April 14 in Toronto.

"Yesterday, I flew back to Toronto and I buried my grandfather," Fantilli said. "His favorite team was Philly. It's going to sound like I'm jokin' when I say that, but I swear his favorite team was Philly, and coming back ... I'm pretty sure that one was him just giving me a lucky bounce there."

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets nominate Zach Werenski for King Clancy Memorial Trophy

By Brian Hedger- April 16, 2025

Zach Werenski will likely be included on a lot of ballots for the Norris Trophy, which goes to the NHL's top defenseman, but his leadership has also drawn award consideration.

The Blue Jackets announced Tuesday that Werenski is the team's nominee for this year's King Clancy Memorial Trophy, which is awarded annually to the NHL player, "who best exemplifies leadership on and off the ice, and has made a noteworthy humanitarian contribution to his community."

Nominees from all 32 teams are considered by a committee that includes NHL commissioner Gary Bettman, past King Clancy winners and winners of the NHL Foundation Player Award. This is the second year in a row the Blue Jackets nominated Werenski, an alternate captain whose leadership was critical after captain Boone Jenner and alternate captain Erik Gudbranson underwent shoulder surgeries in October.

Werenski is the second Blue Jackets player to be nominated for an NHL award for this season, joining Masterton Trophy nominee Sean Monahan.

While helping the Jackets establish a higher playing standard as a locker room presence, Werenski has put together the best statistical season of his NHL career — setting franchise records that he'd previously held in goals (22), assists (56) and points (78).

Werenski also set a franchise record with a 22-game home point streak that placed him among a select few NHL defensemen who'd eclipsed 20 straight home games with a point. The streak ended in a tie for third-longest in league history with Phil Housley's 22-game streak for the Buffalo Sabres in 1991-92 and trails only Paul Coffey's 23-game streak in 1985-86 for the Edmonton Oilers and Bobby Orr's 25-game streak in 1973-74 for the Boston Bruins.

Werenski also represented the U.S. at the NHL's 4 Nations Tournament and led all players in scoring with six points on six assists in four games — helping his country advance to overtime of the gold medal game before falling to Canada.

Werenski has also established ties to the Columbus area through community programs, including his "Z-Suite" to give special groups a memorable evening watching the Blue Jackets play from a suite he purchased in 2023. Among the 2,000 children and families who've enjoyed a game from the "Z-Suite" were kids battling life-threatening illnesses, military families, first responders, youth hockey players and young people from underserved communities.

Werenski's father, Ken, was a police officer and first responder whose service-oriented profession inspired his son's involvement in multiple charitable efforts throughout central Ohio.

Nick Foligno, a Blue Jackets' former captain, is the only player in franchise history to win the King Clancy Memorial Trophy. He was named the award's recipient following the 2016-17 season, when Werenski was a standout rookie.

The Blue Jackets play the Philadelphia Flyers on April 15 at Wells Fargo Center with another chance to extend their playoff hopes.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets' playoff dreams extend another day, thanks to Jet Greaves

By Aaron Portzline- April 16, 2025

One week ago, the Columbus Blue Jackets needed a miracle — maybe a series of miracles — to qualify for the Stanley Cup playoffs. Now, after surviving a fourth consecutive game on the brink of elimination, the Blue Jackets can almost see themselves jetting off to the playoffs later in the week.

Maybe goaltender Jet Greaves is one of those miracles.

Called up from AHL Cleveland just last Thursday, he's given the Blue Jackets a late-season boost that, coupled with the Montreal Canadiens' late-season struggles, has given Columbus a shot — with one more stumble by the Canadiens — to lock up their first postseason berth since 2020.

Greaves made 29 saves for his second shutout in three games and his fourth straight win overall, leading the Blue Jackets to a 3-0 win over the Philadelphia Flyers on Tuesday before 19,105 in Wells Fargo Center. The Jackets needed to win in regulation to keep their season alive.

"He's incredible," Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski said. "The way he played tonight, the way he's played since he's been up. I said a couple of days ago that we see how hard he works every day when he's up here (in the NHL). It's well-deserved.

"We're super happy for him, and he gives us a lot of confidence, as well. Really happy for Jet."

Dante Fabbro, Kent Johnson and Adam Fantilli scored, while Werenski and Sean Monahan each had two assists for the Blue Jackets, who have won five straight games in regulation for the first time since Jan. 22, 2020.

Now it's your turn, Montreal. You can almost feel the pressure building in that hockey-mad city.

The Canadiens, who have lost three straight (0-1-2), need to gain at least a point vs. the Carolina Hurricanes on Wednesday in Montreal to clinch the final playoff spot in the Eastern Conference. A win of any kind — regulation, overtime or shootout — would do, but so would a loss in overtime or shootout.

What the Blue Jackets need is for the Canadiens to lose in regulation. If that happens, the Blue Jackets will drop the puck on Thursday in Nationwide Arena against the New York Islanders needing a regulation win — it can't be in overtime or a shootout, only regulation — to advance.

"The team is feeding off each other," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "They're saying and doing the right things. It's not an individual game, guys. It's a team game and everybody is pulling in the same direction. They're all on the same page.

"We've been fortunate to get some wins here. We need to get one more."

JET STAYIN' STRONG 🐼 pic.twitter.com/I0gRRJOOYT

— Columbus Blue Jackets (@BlueJacketsNHL) April 16, 2025

One of the first changes Evason made when he was hired by the Blue Jackets last summer was to replace the pictures that hang above each player's stall in the dressing room. They captured on-ice highlights of the player who dressed below, and that drove Evason crazy.

He had them taken down immediately, replaced with photos of players that didn't correspond with the locker owner. The message, delivered bluntly, was "team first." That's why he's been reluctant to praise Greaves — or any other player specifically — after these recent wins.

Greaves isn't big on talking about himself, either. But the numbers he's hanging up are speaking volumes. In wins over Buffalo, Washington (twice) and now Philadelphia, he's stopped 120 of 123 shots, a .976 save percentage. His goals-against average: 0.75.

Early in the third period on Tuesday, when the Blue Jackets were ahead 2-0, he made a pair of brilliant saves to protect the two-goal lead.

Philadelphia's Tyson Forester fired a one-timer off the rush from the left circle, which Greaves blocked with his left pad, sending the puck to the left circle. That's where Nate Seeler stepped into a slap shot that Greaves was in place to stop on the other post.

He deflected postgame praise with as much ease.

"All the guys are doing a great job," Greaves said. "Just a really good job in front of the net, boxing out, clearing away second plays, spending a lot of time in the offensive zone, scoring a lot of goals. I could go on and on. They're doing a great job."

The Blue Jackets took a 1-0 lead at 2:32 of the second period when Fabbro stepped into a pass from Werenski and scored from the right circle. The lead grew to 2-0 on a power-play goal by Johnson, who dropped to a knee to one-time a pass from Monahan.

Werenski assisted on Johnson's goal, too, giving him 22-58-80 on the season and making him just the second player in franchise history to total 80 or more points in a season. Artemi Panarin, who did it twice, was the other.

The Blue Jackets made it 3-0 at 13:26 of the third period, only 31 seconds after Fantilli emerged from the penalty box. He scored off the rush by ramping up a centering pass from Kirill Marchenko.

That goal was Fantilli's 30th of the season. Marchenko has 31 goals. They're only the second Blue Jackets teammates to score 30 in the same season, and the first to do it since Brandon Saad (31) and Boone Jenner (30) during the 2015-16 season.

GOAL NO. 30 FOR ADAM FANTILLI! 🥳

And this one is a big one! pic.twitter.com/22sIFT7CWV

— NHL (@NHL) April 16, 2025

The goal meant something more to Fantilli, though.

On Monday, when the Blue Jackets enjoyed an off day in Philadelphia, Fantilli was in suburban Toronto for the funeral of his maternal grandfather, Dan Andrusky. Fantilli said his grandfather was a lifelong Flyers fan, but that all changed when Fantilli was the No. 3 overall draft pick by the Blue Jackets in 2023.

"I'm pretty sure that (goal) was him just giving me a lucky bounce there," he said.

These Blue Jackets have been through a lot this season, after the death of teammate Johnny Gaudreau, and they've spoken openly — Sean Monahan, Boone Jenner, and plenty of others — about the feeling that something larger is at work here.

On Wednesday, the Blue Jackets will practice late in the morning in Nationwide Arena. Then they'll try to have a normal night before a game, but there is scheduled viewing: Montreal vs. Carolina from Bell Centre.

"I'm sure guys will be texting about it and keeping in touch," Werenski said. "It's out of our control. It's going to be a normal day, but come 7 p.m., we'll be watching."

The Athletic / Motion to dismiss several charges against man accused of killing Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau denied

By Hailey Salvian- April 16, 2025

NHL star Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, were denied in a Salem County (NJ) court on Tuesday afternoon.

Lawyers for the accused, Sean M. Higgins, argued that some, if not all, of the grand jury indictment should be dismissed because the prosecution failed to present the evidence of the case completely. According to a state brief filed last month, evidence presented to a grand jury does not need to be sufficient for a conviction, only to establish that a crime has been committed.

In January, a grand jury indicted Higgins on two counts of first-degree aggravated manslaughter and two counts of second-degree reckless vehicular homicide. He was also indicted for tampering with physical evidence (fourth-degree) and leaving the scene of a fatal accident (second-degree).

The brothers died on Aug. 29 after being struck by a Jeep driven by Higgins while they were bicycling home the night before their sister's wedding. Johnny was 31 and Matthew was 29.

At Tuesday's hearing, Higgins' attorneys, Richard F. Klineburger and Matthew Portella, argued that there was insufficient evidence for the aggravated manslaughter charges — meaning Higgins' actions manifested an extreme indifference to human life — and the charge for leaving the scene.

Assistant prosecutor Michael Mestern said evidence was provided to the grand jury over two and a half hours, with two witnesses testifying and 13 exhibits, which included photographs of Higgins' Jeep, Johnny and Matthew's bicycles and diagrams from New Jersey State Police of the crash scene. Mestern said dismissal of the charges would be unwarranted.

Superior Court Judge Michael J. Silvanio agreed that it was a "very thorough" indictment and that the grand jury had heard the relevant evidence it needed to make "a sound decision."

In a March court filing, the defense also argued that the indictment should be dismissed for the "State's failure to advise the grand jury of possible contributory negligence" that could have led to the brothers' deaths. That specific motion was not argued in court on Tuesday, but Silvanio said there was no basis for that argument and upheld every count of the indictment.

A February court filing made by the defense revealed that the brothers were intoxicated the night of the crash. In briefs filed last month by the prosecution, Mestern argued that the defense presented "a false premise" that the brothers were breaking the law on the night they died, as there is no law against bicycling while intoxicated in New Jersey.

On Tuesday, Mestern said bringing up the brothers' blood alcohol level was "a red herring," adding it "was not something that contributed to their deaths."

Portella said during the hearing that he and his co-counsel were fulfilling their obligations to represent Higgins and not trying to disparage the brothers.

"We are not blaming the two bicyclists for the incident," he said. "That would be ridiculous. That would be wrong."

An April 3 motion, made public last week, provided the most comprehensive details of the Aug. 29 crash to date.

According to the filing, witnesses said Johnny and Matthew were riding in a single-file line on the fog line (the solid white line painted along the right edge of the road). At the same time, Higgins — who admitted to drinking five or six beers, plus two more two while in the car driving — approached two cars he described as “driving slowly,” and decided to pass them, as he was “impatient.”

As Higgins passed the first vehicle (a Ford Focus) on the left, the lead vehicle (a Ford Bronco) had moved into the southbound lane he was in. According to the filing, Higgins said he thought the driver of the Bronco was trying to prevent him from passing. The driver of the Bronco told police they moved partially into the southbound lane of travel to give Johnny and Matthew room as they passed.

Higgins, according to multiple court documents, moved back to the right lane in an attempt to pass the Bronco and struck the brothers. Witnesses told police, according to the April court filing, that Higgins’ Jeep had been halfway on the grass shoulder area when he struck the brothers, who were thrown from their bicycles.

According to the filing, after the first 911 call was made, a New Jersey State Police sergeant found Higgins around a quarter mile away from the crash site.

The filing states their bicycles were heavily damaged on the side of the road. There was also severe damage on the passenger side of Higgins’ Jeep, to the front bumper cover, fender, windshield and headlight. The autopsy report, according to the April filing, said the brothers died from “blunt force injuries as a result of being struck by a vehicle while riding their bicycles.”

Higgins’ blood alcohol level, according to court documents, was 0.087 percent, which is above the legal limit.

BlueJackets.com / Blue Jackets shut out Flyers, push race to Game 82

By Adam Kimelman- April 16, 2025

PHILADELPHIA -- Jet Greaves made 29 saves for the Columbus Blue Jackets, who stayed in contention for the Stanley Cup Playoffs with a 3-0 win against the Philadelphia Flyers at Wells Fargo Center on Tuesday.

The Blue Jackets (39-33-9) are two points behind the Montreal Canadiens for the second wild card from the Eastern Conference. They can still reach the postseason if the Canadiens lose to the Carolina Hurricanes in regulation on Wednesday and they then defeat the New York Islanders at home Thursday.

"We knew a lot of things had to happen for us to make the playoffs, and we're just trying to do our part, and we're doing a great job of it," Blue Jackets forward Adam Fantilli said. "We've had great goaltending stepping up. Everybody's been playing great, so it's really good to see."

Dante Fabbro, Kent Johnson and Fantilli scored for Columbus, which won its fifth straight game. Sean Monahan and Zach Werenski each had two assists.

"I think the guys are just playing great," Greaves said. "They're doing a great job in front of me, making my job pretty simple. I think it's been a team effort. Obviously, it's an important time of the year. These games matter a lot, but I think all the guys have been doing a great job."

Samuel Ersson made 31 saves for Philadelphia (33-38-10), which had been 5-1-1 in its previous seven games. The Flyers have been eliminated from playoff contention.

"I thought our start was good," Flyers coach Brad Shaw said. "I thought we started a lot like we have the other games recently. I just didn't think we had the resilience. I don't think we had the ability to stay with it and thought they sort of pulled away the second half of the game."

Fabbro put the Blue Jackets ahead 1-0 at 2:32 of the second period with a slap shot from the top of the right face-off circle.

"[Werenski] and I actually talked in between the first and second about some space we had saw coming off the draw and allow him to walk and kind of make a read and I'd just kind of slipped in behind him," Fabbro said. "He made the read to pass it over to me and I stepped in a couple feet and was able to shoot it."

That goal was all Greaves needed. Making his fourth straight start, he improved to 4-0-0 with a 0.75 goals-against average, .976 save percentage and two shutouts.

"He might be the hottest guy in the NHL right now," Fantilli said. "He's got one goal against him last three games, and it's [Alex Ovechkin]. I mean, that's pretty good. There's not much else you can say."

Greaves said he's the beneficiary of strong defensive play.

"I think just doing a really good job in front of the net, boxing out, clearing away secondary plays, obviously spending a lot of time in the offensive zone, scoring a lot of goals," he said. "I could go on and on. They're doing a great job."

Johnson made it 2-0 with a power-play goal at 17:01, one-timing a seam pass from Monahan from the right face-off dot past Ersson.

The Flyers had chances to get back into the game but went 0-for-3 on the power play.

"I think there were some chances, we just didn't finish," Flyers forward Sean Couturier said. "I think we're trying to play a little too skilled, we were a lot of one-and-done's. We get pucks there but there's not much traffic or we're trying to be on the outside and trying to make plays. Sometimes we've got to simplify it and get some dirty goals. We can't always expect to make highlight reel goals."

Fantilli's 30th goal of the season made it 3-0 at 13:26 of the third period. He was skating to the net when Kirill Marchenko's shot deflected off his knee.

It was the fifth goal during a three-game goal streak for Fantilli, who had left the team Monday to travel to Toronto for the funeral of his grandfather.

"Yesterday I flew back to Toronto and buried my grandfather," Fantilli said. "His favorite team was Philly. It's going to sound like I'm joking when I say that, but I swear his favorite team was Philly. And coming back, I'm pretty sure that one was him just giving me a lucky bounce there."

NOTES: The Blue Jackets now have 261 goals, the most they've scored in a season. Their previous high was 258 goals in 2021-22. ... Johnson's goal gave him seven points (two goals, five assists) during a five-game point streak. ... Monahan (two goals, five assists) and Werenski (two goals, four assists) each extended his point streak to five games. ... Philadelphia had its four-game home winning streak end.

BlueJackets.com / Winning Thoughts: Blue Jackets' belief shows in win over Flyers

By Jeff Svoboda- April 16, 2025

After CBJ wins, we'll give three takeaways about what stood out or what we'll remember from the Blue Jackets victory.

BLUE JACKETS 3, FLYERS 0

1. The Blue Jackets are getting closer to authoring one of the most incredible stories we've seen in the NHL.

Columbus has been through so much this season – a horrible tragedy before the season started, injuries to multiple top players, and a cold streak down the stretch that threatened to undo all their hard work – but along the way it's become clear this is a special group.

Whether the Blue Jackets' late-season push to make the playoffs is achieved remains to be seen, but you have to tip your cap to what this team is about. It's an easy group to root for, with players talking all season about the tight-knit nature of the locker room and their belief in one another.

Which might explain why the Blue Jackets have been able to push the season to game 82. They've needed to win each of their last five games to keep their postseason hopes alive, and they've done just that. They still need two results to go their way – Carolina must beat Montreal in regulation on Wednesday night and the Jackets have to down the Islanders in regulation in the home finale Thursday – but the Blue Jackets have defied the odds to get to this point.

No team in NHL history has ever erased a five-point deficit in its final three games to make the Stanley Cup Playoffs, but what once seemed impossible now at least is plausible.

"It's coming right down to the wire, so yeah, ever since I got here, there's never been any doubt," said Dante Fabbro, who scored the opening goal against the Flyers. "There's been nothing but belief and resilience, and it's just been a lot of fun to be a part of. It's an unbelievable culture, and everyone wants to win. There's no selfishness whatsoever. It's about winning, and that's the best part."

Jet Greaves made 29 saves in Philadelphia while earning his second shutout in three games, while Adam Fantilli reached 30 goals on the season with his third-period tally that shut the door. Kent Johnson also scored, while Sean Monahan and Zach Werenski posted two points apiece, with Werenski becoming just the second CBJ player to notch 80 points in a season.

Those were the highlights, but the reality is this was another team effort where everyone did their part. Columbus has outscored its last five opponents by a 22-5 margin, and you don't do that without everyone playing as a team, as head coach Dean Evason noted postgame.

"I think the team is feeding off each other," Evason said. "I think the team is saying, doing the right thing. It's not an individual game, it's a team game, and everybody is pulling in the same direction. They're all on the same page, and we've been fortunate to get some wins here. We need to get one more."

2. Fantilli's milestone marker carried a much more personal meaning.

The 20-year-old center wasn't with the team Monday or for Tuesday's morning skate, having returned home to Canada for his grandfather's funeral. He returned to Philadelphia before the game and got the clinching goal in the third period when Kirill Marchenko's pass kicked off his leg and deflected past goalie Samuel Ersson.

It might have looked like a bit of luck, but to Fantilli, more was at play.

"Yesterday, I flew back to Toronto and I buried my grandfather," he said postgame. "His favorite team was Philly. That's going to sound like I'm joking when I say that, but I swear his favorite team was Philly. Coming back, I'm pretty sure that one was him, just giving me a lucky bounce there."

The goal made him just the ninth player in team history to reach 30 in a season, as well as the second youngest to do so (Rick Nash was 19 when he tied for the NHL lead with 41 in 2003-04). He and teammate Kirill Marchenko (31 goals) are just the second group of CBJ teammates with 30 tallies in the same season, joining Brandon Saad (31) and Boone Jenner (30) in 2015-16.

To get there, Fantilli has been on an absolute heater down the stretch, following up his consecutive two-goal games over the weekend vs. the Caps with his goal against the Flyers. That gives him 23 goals in his last 42 games, good for a tie for eighth in the NHL in that span.

The Blue Jackets believed they had a franchise cornerstone when they selected the University of Michigan product third overall in the 2023 draft. More and more, it's looking like they were right on the money.

3. Greaves' unlikely story just continues to get better.

The Blue Jackets have known for some time that Greaves has the makings of an NHL goalie. He's been a standout in Cleveland over the past four seasons, backstopping the Monsters to within one game of the Calder Cup Final a season ago. He's impressed in each of his NHL stints the past three seasons, and the 24-year-old's calm nature in net and affable personality have made him a favorite of both teammates and fans alike.

But who could have predicted what he's been able to do over the past six days? Recalled on Thursday after an injury to Elvis Merzlikins, Greaves has gone into the net and taken the league by storm, winning all four starts, giving up just three goals in that span and posting his first two NHL shutouts.

He's allowed just one goal in his last three games, and the streak is even more impressive when you consider he blanked Buffalo for the last two periods Thursday as well. In the last 11 periods, Greaves has faced 115 shots on goal and stopped 114 of them, a save percentage of .991 that borders on the absurd.

"He might be the hottest guy in the NHL right now," Fantilli said. "He has one goal against in the last three games, and it's (Alex Ovechkin). That's pretty good. There's not much else you can say."

For his part, Greaves has continued to have the same mind-set that has allowed him to get to this point. He's developed a reputation as one of the hardest and most diligent workers on any team he's on, and he's often pointed to his disciplined mental outlook that's all about living in the moment and not getting too high or too low as his success has built the past two seasons.

He's not the kind of person to let this moment go to his head, but Greaves did admit he is enjoying the ride – though mostly because of what it's doing for the team.

"It's been a lot of fun," Greaves said. "It's always great to be playing important games this time of the year, and I think we're enjoying that, just enjoying every day. ... It's pretty cool. Obviously growing up, you always think about playing those games at the important time of the year and hopefully winning them. Just try to keep that going."

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Excel in All Phases to Defeat Flyers

By Mark Scheig- April 16, 2025

Once again, the Columbus Blue Jackets faced elimination. Once again, they staved off elimination. On Tuesday night against the Philadelphia Flyers, it was a textbook performance in all facets of the game that kept the Blue Jackets' season alive.

Jet Greaves, who was named the NHL's First Star for last week, stopped all 29 shots he faced. Dante Fabbro's second-period goal held up as the game winner. The Blue Jackets defeated the Flyers 3-0.

Tuesday night's win was a total team effort.

Game Recap

The Flyers had several chances to open the scoring. Greaves answered all of them. Although the shots in the period were 9-9, the Blue Jackets had to kill two penalties. Going into the locker room 0-0 seemed to calm the team down.

The Blue Jackets came out in the second and took control of the game. Just 2:32 in, Fabbro's blast over the shoulder of Samuel Ersson gave them a 1-0 lead.

Just like in the first, the Flyers had several chances to score. The moment of the period was when Greaves casually gloved down a blast from Travis Konecny. It showed just how much in control Greaves was. His calming influence has been paramount to this late season run for the Blue Jackets.

Before the end of the second period, Emil Andrae took an interference call against Zach Aston-Reese. The Blue Jackets immediately made them pay. Kent Johnson scored seconds into that power play to make it 2-0.

Knowing that the Blue Jackets needed to win in regulation, Johnson's goal was a huge goal to give them some extra cushion. Then to finish things off, Adam Fantilli connected on his 30th goal of the season joining Kirill Marchenko in the 30-goal club. That was the exclamation point giving them a 3-0 lead.

Zach Werenski assisted on the first two goals and has seemed to find his energy again. He also reached 80 points on the season. Only Artemi Panarin has had more points in a single Blue Jackets' season doing it twice.

Tuesday night was just a textbook performance by the Blue Jackets. They took the slot away from the Flyers and were in control throughout. They got good special teams, timely saves and clutch scoring.



Now the pressure goes squarely back on the Montreal Canadiens. They host the Carolina Hurricanes Wednesday night. One point for the Canadiens will clinch the final playoff spot in the East eliminating the Blue Jackets. If the Canadiens lose in regulation to Carolina, then the Blue Jackets can clinch Thursday with a regulation win against the New York Islanders.

Should this happen, it would mark the first occurrence in NHL history of a team coming back from five points down with three games to go.

The Blue Jackets have overcome so much in 2024-25. Do they have one more favor given to them? See you Wednesday night.

1st Ohio Battery / CBJ 3, PHI 0: Greaves 29-Save Shutout Propels Blue Jackets Closer To Improbable Playoff Berth

By Ed Francis- April 16, 2025

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CBJ GOALS:

Fabbro (P2, 2:32)

K. Johnson (P2, 17:01)

Fantilli (P3, 13:26)

Jet Greaves stopped all 29 shots for his second shutout in three games and Adam Fantilli scored for the fifth time in three games as the Columbus Blue Jackets beat the Philadelphia Flyers 3-0 Tuesday night, moving one step closer to a spot in the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

After a scoreless first period, Dante Fabbro got the Blue Jackets on the board in the opening minutes of the second period with his 8th goal of the season.

Kent Johnson connected in the closing minutes of the middle frame with a power play goal, doubling the Blue Jackets lead to 2-0.

Both goals came within seconds of huge faceoff wins by Sean Monahan, who won 19 of 26 draws (72.1%) for the game. Zach Werenski also assisted on both goals.

Columbus put the game out of reach with less than seven minutes left in the third period on Fantilli's 30th goal of the season, the third straight game with a goal for the 20-year-old.

Fantilli became the second-youngest Blue Jacket to score 30 goals in a season; only Rick Nash was younger.

Greaves, named the First Star for the second time in three games and one of the Three Stars for the fourth straight, made a number of big saves throughout the game.

"It's been a team effort," said Greaves. "Obviously it's an important time of year, these games matter a lot, but I think all the guys are doing a great job."

The win was Columbus' fifth straight and put them just two points behind the Montreal Canadiens for the final playoff spot.

Columbus can make the playoffs with just two more results falling their way: a regulation loss Wednesday for the Montreal Canadiens, and a regulation win Thursday night for the Blue Jackets in their regular season finale against the New York Islanders.

"We're in a good spot right now," said Werenski. "Obviously we need tomorrow to go our way but we're just trying to win hockey games. That's all we can do and that's all we can control."

Here's how the Blue Jackets continued to captivate the league — and put immense pressure on the Canadiens:

1st Period:

No scoring in the first period. The Blue Jackets had a slight advantage on shot attempts at 22-19, but shots on goal were tied at 9-9. Philadelphia had a pair of power plays as Justin Danforth went off for tripping at 9:54 and Dmitri Voronkov for a hook at 13:35, but Greaves turned away all three shots between the four minutes of power-play action for the Flyers.

2nd Period:

(2:32 — CBJ Goal): Fabbro gets the first goal of the game and puts the Blue Jackets up 1-0. Sean Monahan wins a faceoff to the left of Philadelphia goalie Sam Ersson and slides it over to Zach Werenski at the point. He and Fabbro cross over and Werenski passes to Fabbro, who skates in a bit before firing from the back of the circle. The puck gets through two Flyers and past Ersson, giving Columbus a 1-0 lead.

(17:01 — CBJ Goal): The Blue Jackets take a 2-0 lead with around three minutes left in the second on Johnson's power play goal only seven seconds into the man-advantage. Just like with the first goal, the scoring sequence starts with a faceoff win by Monahan. The win isn't as clean this time around but he pushes it over to Werenski, who is near the half wall. He flips it back to Monahan, who uses his skate to stop the puck and bring it to his stick before a dot-to-dot dish to Johnson, who rifles it home for a huge goal.

3rd Period:

(3:45 — Jet! Jet! Jet!): Two more big saves by Greaves, protecting Columbus' 2-0 lead in a crucial sequence for the Blue Jackets.

(13:26 — CBJ Goal): Another great two-way play from Fantilli to extend the Columbus lead to 3-0 and put the game out of reach. He starts by dodging a check from the Flyers and clearing the puck out of the Columbus zone ahead to Marchenko, who then bursts ahead along the boards. Fantilli hustles back into the play and into the slot, where Marchenko finds him with a great pass. The shot from Fantilli beats Ersson to seal the deal for the Blue Jackets.

CBJ	GAME STATS	PHI
34	SHOTS	29
52%	FACEOFFS	48%

CBJ	GAME STATS	PHI
1/2	POWER PLAY	0/3
3/3	PENALTY KILL	1/2
15	HITS	33
9	GIVEAWAYS	16
6	TAKEAWAYS	4
9	BLOCKED SHOTS	20
ALL SITUATIONS ADVANCED STATS		
3.27	EXPECTED GOALS	2.64
63	SHOT ATTEMPTS	49
29	SCORING CHANCES	26
20	HIGH-DANGER CHANCES	8
Data via NHL.com & NaturalStatTrick.com		

Stat Chat:

- Werenski's first assist of the night was his 79th point of the season, tying him with Rick Nash for third all-time in franchise history. On his second assist, he passed Nash and became the only Blue Jacket other than Artemi Panarin to hit 80 points in a season. Panarin had 87 and 82 in his two seasons with Columbus.
- With Greaves 29 save shutout, he's now stopped 119 of 122 shots over his last four starts, a save percentage of .975. In that are a pair of shutouts and an active streak of 114 saves on 115 shots (.991), with the only goal coming from Alex Ovechkin.

- Fantilli's 30th goal of the season puts him and Kirill Marchenko (31) as just the second pair of Blue Jackets in club history to each record 30 goals in a season. Brandon Saad and Boone Jenner had 31 and 30, respectively, in the 2015-16 season.

Up Next:

The regular season finale is Thursday night against the Islanders at Nationwide Arena with puck-drop slated for 7 p.m. Whether or not that game is merely a sendoff to the 2024-25 Blue Jackets or a potential playoff-clinching game will be decided Wednesday when the Hurricanes face the Canadiens; that game also has a 7 p.m. puck-drop.

The Athletic / Matthew Schaefer, Anton Frondell lead NHL Central Scouting's final 2025 NHL Draft rankings

By Corey Pronman and Scott Wheeler- April 16, 2025

NHL Central Scouting released its final rankings for the 2025 NHL Draft class on Tuesday morning.

Erie Otters defenseman Matthew Schaefer and Saginaw Spirit exceptional status center Michael Misa headlined the list of North American skaters, while Djurgarden center Anton Frondell leapfrogged teammate Victor Eklund for the top spot on the list of international skaters.

Here are the rankings and some takeaways from The Athletic's draft experts, Corey Pronman and Scott Wheeler.

NHL Central Scouting has released its final rankings presented by BODYARMOR Sports Drink for the 2025 Upper Deck #NHLDraft:

No. 1 N.A. Skater: Matthew Schaefer

No. 1 ITL Skater: Anton Frondell

Full rankings: <https://t.co/e9iTvRmx1e> [pic.twitter.com/w97kHHWr97](https://t.co/w97kHHWr97)

— NHL Public Relations (@NHLPR) April 15, 2025

North American Skaters Rankings (NHLCS)

1

Matthew Schaefer

LHD

Erie

OHL

2

Michael Misa

C

Saginaw

OHL

3

James Hagens

C

Boston College

NCAA

4

Jake O'Brien

C

Brantford

OHL

5

Radim Mrtka

RHD

Seattle

WHL

6

Porter Martone

RW

Brampton

OHL

7

Caleb Desnoyers

C

Moncton

QMJHL

8

Roger McQueen

C

Brandon

WHL

9

Kashawn Aitcheson

LHD

Barrie

OHL

10

Carter Bear

LW

Everett

WHL

Top North American goalie: Joshua Ravensbergen (Prince George, WHL)

International Skaters Rankings (NHLCS)

1

Anton Frondell

C

Djurgarden

HockeyAllsvenskan

2

Victor Eklund

RW

Djurgarden

HockeyAllsvenskan

3

Milton Gastrin

C

MoDo

J20

4

Vojtech Cihar

LW

Vary Karlovy

Czechia

5

Alexander Zharovsky

RW

Ufa

MHL

6

Eddie Genborg

RW

Linkoping

SHL

7

Eric Nilson

C

Djurgarden

J20

8

Jakob Ihs Wozniak

C

Lulea

J20

9

Kurban Limatov

LHD

Dynamo Moscow

MHL

10

Theodor Hallquist

RHD

Orebro

J20

Top international goalie: Pyotr Andreyanov (CSKA, MHL)

Pronman's thoughts

Jake O'Brien's rise into the top five players in North America tracks from what I've seen and heard from NHL sources. I don't know if I personally would have him there yet, but he's close. He's a 6-foot-2 right-shot center with high-end offensive traits. He started the season off slow but has been great in recent months. His trajectory reminds me in some ways of Beckett Sennecke's last year.

Caleb Desnoyers, in my view, is being underrated. He's the best player on arguably the best team in the CHL, and I expect he'll be a top-five pick on draft day. He's a center who does everything well. He has a lot of offense and a great motor.

Schaefer is still the No. 1 ranked prospect and the favorite to go first but isn't an absolute lock to be the top pick.

Wheeler's thoughts

There has been a lot of debate amongst scouts this year as to who the second-best D in the draft is, and so the rankings of the next cluster of consensus North American D was the first place I looked. Removing their ranking on the overall list, the top five D in North America were slotted as follows:

Matthew Schaefer

Radim Mrtko

Kashawn Aitcheson

Logan Hensler

Jackson Smith

Mrtka was their No. 2 D at midseason as well, but Aitcheson jumped past both Hensler and Smith on the final list. He's viewed as a pretty singular D in this class and, with Brady Martin, one of its fiercest competitors. He finished the season really strong and has been excellent in the OHL playoffs for Barrie, too. Scouts still covet his throwback brand of hockey.

People will notice Porter Martone's slip from No. 4 in North America at midseason to No. 6 here as well. He got off to a torrid start but plateaued in the second half. Scouts like his combination of size, skill and competitiveness but there are some concerns about his skating/pace.

I was happy to see Ryker Lee rise from No. 40 to No. 28 in North America. I'm very high on his skill level.

The Athletic / Stanley Cup Checklist 2.0: Analyzing the rosters of the last 15 NHL champions

By Dom Luszczyszyn- April 16, 2025

There's no exact formula for winning the Stanley Cup, but there are common elements between champions. That was the vision behind the Cup Checklist introduced five years ago. Now it's time for an update.

The vision this time? Accounting for roles.

While a checklist that breaks down the thresholds previous Cup winners hit at certain positions is good practice, two problems arose.

The first is comparing the wrong players due to position rigidity. Nikita Kucherov was the best forward on the two Lightning championship teams and should probably be compared to other Cup-winning best players, not just the best wingers.

The second is looking only at total value and then comparing the wrong values. Some players provide one-dimensional offense, some are shutdown forces, and some are complete, 200-foot players. Those distinctions matter when finding the right pieces for a Stanley Cup contender.

With the introduction of Offensive and Defensive Rating in 2023 and the necessary usage adjustments made in 2024, the distinctions that matter are also easier to spot. It's what made this update necessary, with five extra seasons of data to boot.

The new Cup Checklist focuses on role more than position and looks at the appropriate values that define that role. It also looks at each item on the checklist with a five-point scale, allowing for a bit more nuance if a team is stronger or weaker in one role compared to another.

Here's how that works.

Luxury (>90%): A player in the top 10 percent of his role relative to other Cup winners. Someone who brings an exceptional amount of value that allows a team some significant slack in other areas. Or, it's the kind of difference-maker who puts a team over the top.

Ideal (70-90%): A player who is above average for his role relative to other Cup winners. This is where champions find sources of strength on their roster. They're players to lean on who add more to their role than expected, making up for some weaknesses elsewhere.

Solid (30-70%): A player right in the middle of the range of other Cup winners. Nothing fancy here, just the average expectation with a fair bit of leeway above and below the mean.

Passable (10-30%): A player who is below average for his role relative to other Cup winners. It's not ideal, but teams have still won with a player at this level. It's a potential weakness that should be countered with a source of strength elsewhere.

Exception (<10%): A player in the bottom 10 percent of his role relative to other Cup winners. Essentially, they're the 'exception to the rule.' It's not that a team can't win with an exception to the rule (some already have!), it just means that player has to play above his means when it matters, or the team has to make up ground elsewhere. It's a potential liability that could be the team's downfall. On the more hopeful side, it's where a team needs a playoff breakthrough. The postseason is where legends are born and a lot of great stories start here: with a player who went above and beyond expectations.

As always, none of this is meant to be a hard-and-fast rule. But previous patterns can help show us which teams are currently built best to win — and which ones have their work cut out for them.

Here's the new Cup Checklist, separated into three cores: elite, support and depth. There are 13 roles to fill; for the 'too long, didn't read' crowd, here's a chart summarizing those roles and where each threshold lies. All values are normalized to six goals per win to account for different scoring environments over the last 15 years.

Elite Core

Franchise Forward

The most obvious piece needed is an elite forward: ideally, one who can play at an MVP-caliber level. Usually, this is a team's top-line center — Sidney Crosby, Jonathan Toews, Nathan MacKinnon — but sometimes it's a winger. Kucherov was the most important forward in Tampa Bay's back-to-back wins and looks right at home here, sandwiched between Crosby and Toews. Alex Ovechkin in 2018 also grades out well.

One key here: two-way play. While Ovechkin is the exception to the rule, every other player had an above-average Defensive Rating, with the majority at least clearing a 2.0 rating. On average, teams are looking for a plus-14.0/plus-2.5 split between Offensive and Defensive Ratings, but any Net Rating above 15 is usually good to go.

There are also two 'types' of players here who can inform the rest of the lineup. Column A is Hart Trophy-caliber offensive studs: Crosby, Kucherov, MacKinnon, Ovechkin. Column B is Selke Trophy-caliber two-way studs: Aleksander Barkov, Toews, Anze Kopitar, Ryan O'Reilly. Both are valid avenues.

As for the lack of luxury forwards, think Crosby and Connor McDavid in their primes. Crosby, as great as he still was when he won, wasn't quite at the level of his 2007-2013 self.

The exception to the rule: The 2011 Bruins owe a lot to Tim Thomas, which is highlighted by their best forward being David Krejci. No disrespect to Krejci, but at that point in his career, he was a 60-point forward. While he didn't look the part during the season, Krejci played closer to a franchise forward in the playoffs. He put up 23 points in 25 games while earning 65 percent of goals at five-on-five. If a player doesn't project to qualify, that kind of elevation needs to be seen.

Star Forward

If the franchise forward is usually the team's best offensive weapon, there's usually a star forward behind him to help. Toews had Patrick Kane, Crosby had Evgeni Malkin and MacKinnon had Mikko Rantanen. Every team has a Robin for their Batman.

That means a player whose Offensive Rating is, on average, north of plus-12, but anything above plus-10 works. For these guys, defense is important, but it is less of a priority. That's usually because a lot of these players are wingers, or the centers of a scoring line rather than a shutdown line. On average, their Defensive Rating is plus-0.9. Still good, but it does pale in comparison to the franchise and shutdown forwards.

Here, creating offense is the primary source of value. The franchise forward needs a sidekick whose motive is attacking.

The exception to the rule: The Golden Knights were tricky to fit. They're the only team for which I decided to not put the best player (according to the model, anyway) in the franchise spot. It just didn't work with Jack Eichel and Mark Stone flipped for anyone who knows hockey. Either way, it also left an awkward fit in the star forward category. Chandler Stephenson's projected Offensive Rating that year

was plus-6.2. That's a strong mark, sure, but one that doesn't quite compare to the Kanes and Brayden Points of the world. To Stephenson's credit, he was second on the team in points with 65 and was close to a point-per-game player in the playoffs. But there's a reason he graded out a little lower than the rest. With how good Eichel was with Jonathan Marchessault in the playoffs though, it didn't matter. A deep team can find new players to fit the necessary roles, which allowed Stephenson to take a back seat toward the support core instead.

Franchise Defenseman

Just as important as the franchise forward is the franchise defenseman. Almost every Stanley Cup champion had a leader on the back end, someone they could lean on in any situation all over the ice. These were minute-eating 200-foot players who could do it all with few exceptions. Even Justin Schultz, taking over for Kris Letang, was rocking a plus-8.5 Net Rating in 2017. That's the bar, at the very least, and it's a necessary one to clear as it's very difficult to win without that kind of player.

That's notable at both ends of the ice where the average Offensive and Defensive Rating split is plus-9.2/plus-2.1, but something closer to plus-7.5/plus-1.0 can also work. It's not just that the team's best defenseman has to be good — they also have to be multi-dimensional forces. Cale Makar is a luxury in that vein, but it applies all the same to Victor Hedman, Duncan Keith, Drew Doughty, Alex Pietrangolo, Zdeno Chara and Kris Letang. Those teams won because their best defenseman was also one of the best defensemen in the world.

They could score, they could defend, they could move the puck, they could drive play, they could push the pace. They were everything.

The exception to the rule: If there's any exception here, it has to be Schultz. Offensively, he certainly filled in well enough in Letang's absence. But his minus-1.0 Defensive Rating is telling to the player he was — even at his very best. The Penguins managed, and one other team also won with a below-average defender as their No. 1, but doing so is still playing with fire. Schultz's 2.66 xGA/60 during the playoffs in 2017 was the worst among Penguins defensemen.

Shutdown Forward

Like the franchise defenseman, it's necessary to view the team's shutdown forward at both ends of the ice. Locking down the opposition's best is the main job, but they have to deliver some semblance of offense, too.

While this may feel like an odd category given a lot of teams' franchise forwards are usually also their top defensive guys, it makes some sense in conjunction with the star forward. Both are usually sidekicks, with opposing leans toward offense (the star) and defense (the shutdown-er).

Point and Anthony Cirelli are both important pieces around Kucherov. Kane and Marian Hossa are both important pieces around Toews. Matthew Tkachuk and Sam Reinhart are both important pieces around Barkov. It's a big three and pretty much every championship team has had one.

The goal here is a plus-8.0/plus-2.5 split for Offensive and Defensive Ratings — essentially a player in the 90th percentile league-wide at both ends of the ice. A plus-6.0/plus-2.0 split also works.

How good a shutdown forward needs to be depends on how good the top two forwards are above him, or how strong the back end is. But it's their strength that can really help put a team over the top. They help anchor the forward group.

That's either by forming a shutdown line with the franchise forward and allowing the star to dominate (Chicago, Florida) or by soaking up tough minutes on the second line, allowing for an offensively focused top line (Tampa Bay, Washington). Both strategies work.

The exception to the rule: There aren't many. Almost every team had a player whose splits were at least plus-4.0/plus-1.5 — a very good two-way forward. By total Net Rating, only two players were below plus-7.5. The one exception might be the 2021 version of Cirelli. He thrust himself into the Selke conversation in 2020, but 2021 was a down year by his standards with the Lightning earning just 46 percent of goals in his minutes. He made up for it, though, with a vintage performance come playoff time when he was the two-way force we expect him to be.

Star Goalie

Goalies are goalies. You can plan for them to be as good as possible, but in the small sample world of the playoffs, anything can happen.

Still, a true starter lowers the margin for error. The higher the baseline, the more dependable a goalie is to deliver as expected. The average Cup-winning starter was projected to save 7.7 goals above expected per 82 games and the list is littered with guys you can count on. Having a superstar — like Andrei Vasilevskiy or Jonathan Quick — really helps, especially if they catch fire when it matters.

The exception to the rule: It's not that Adin Hill was necessarily an average goalie in 2023, it's just that he didn't have a large body of work. His light resume made him less of a safe bet. That season, though, Hill did save 7.5 goals above expected in 27 games and looked to be Vegas' best goalie option. It was a complete reversal from his career to date, over which he allowed 8.3 goals above expected in 74 contests. All Vegas needed was Hill to keep up what he did in 2022-23 — no regression. That's exactly what the Golden Knights got, and more: a .930 save percentage in which Hill saved 13 goals above expected in 16 games.

Support Core

Scoring Forward

The best teams have serious firepower. That's where the scoring forward comes in: as another weapon. It can't just be on the team's top-scoring duo to deliver — they need a third and fourth legit top-line threat to help out.

The Lightning won because they had Steven Stamkos behind Kucherov and Point. The Panthers won because they had Carter Verhaeghe behind Barkov and Tkachuk. The Avalanche won because they had Nazem Kadri behind MacKinnon and Rantanen. The Blackhawks won because they had Patrick Sharp behind Toews and Kane.

The list goes on and the goal is a team's third- (or fourth-, depending on the strength of the shutdown forward) best offensive threat delivering an Offensive Rating north of plus-7.5. Anything above plus-5.0 works.

The exception to the rule: With Stamkos out for the 2020 playoffs, the Lightning needed somebody to step up in his place. As you can see above, there's a massive chasm between Stamkos in 2021 and Alex Killorn in 2020 — a nine-goal difference in offensive value. While other 'exception to the rule' stories show a player rising to the occasion, this one doesn't. Killorn wilted, scoring just 10 points in 24 games while getting outchanced and badly outscored. The Lightning were so great otherwise, thanks to transcendent performances from their elite core, that it didn't matter — but lesser-built teams would not have been so lucky. It's the exact reason why it really helps to have a few players in the 'ideal' or 'luxury' category. When a player like Killorn fails to step up, the others cover.

Scoring Defenseman

Offense from the blue line matters — it can't just come from one source. Every past champion had at least one defender after the franchise guy who delivered above-average offense, with the majority having an Offensive Rating above plus-3.0. That doesn't have to mean a defenseman who scores points, it just means someone who can help create and add pressure up ice. Offense is a numbers game and it helps to have a defender who can join the fun.

Mikhail Sergachev is a perfect example of this archetype, especially because the Lightning used him on the third pair. Having a guy of this caliber crushing sheltered minutes is a huge luxury, one only afforded by having other key pieces playing at a high level. The Blues also had this with Vince Dunn in 2019. Usually, though, this type of player is on the second pair, balanced by a defensive defender on the other side.

While offense is the name of the game here, defensive responsibility also matters. The majority of scoring defensemen carried an above-average Defensive Rating, with an average of plus-0.4. This is a No. 2 or 3 defender who shouldn't be one-dimensional. After all, they'll usually have some shutdown responsibilities in the top four.

The exception to the rule: Bowen Byram sticks out here, but anyone who remembers the 2022 playoffs knows how much of an offensive force he was. He stepped up after Samuel Girard's injury, looking like a future offensive force from the back end. Byram was one of Colorado's most valuable players during that run, scoring nine points in 20 games while tilting the ice heavily at five-on-five. The 3.99 goals per 60 the Avalanche scored with Byram on the ice was on par with their numbers with Makar.

Shutdown Defenseman

The goal of this Cup Checklist refresh is to highlight that the shutdown defenseman is particularly key. This player type — whether he's No. 2 or 3 on the depth chart — is present on almost every Stanley Cup champion. Accounting for that is crucial in a list of roster pieces necessary to win.

Niklas Hjalmarsson, Colton Parayko, Ryan McDonagh — they're key cogs to a champion. Given how strong opposing playoff teams are offensively, teams need two pairs that can handle the heat. The franchise defenseman does his part on one pair and the shutdown defenseman usually does his part on another. There are certainly instances when they man the same pair (like Toews with Makar), but spreading the wealth defensively in the top four is helpful. Keith and Hjalmarsson, Pietrangelo and Parayko, Hedman and McDonagh — you get the picture.

The playoffs are loaded with some of the league's best offensive stars. Having a shutdown defender capable of stopping them in their tracks is vital. Also important is a team not stifling its own offense in the process. What's sometimes missed about the league's best shutdown defensemen is that they're not usually offensive black holes. The majority listed here are above average and Hjalmarsson, who makes up for it by being one of the best shutdown defensemen, is the only one below a minus-1.0 Offensive Rating.

That small detail is usually what separates the best shutdown defenders from other regular defensive defenders lower in the lineup. Considering how often they play with a team's top two lines, being offensively capable is necessary. The average Defensive Rating of plus-4.4 is the selling point here (and anything above 2.5 is worthwhile), but the average Offensive Rating is also plus-0.9. They're not one-dimensional and that's an important distinction.

The exception to the rule: It's still a bit mystifying that the Penguins won it all in 2017 without Letang. They are the only below-average defensive team to win the Cup, and having Ron Hainsey as one of the

better defensive options is a testament to that. And yet they made it work and Hainsey was a big part of that. Hainsey was one of their most used defenders and allowed just 2.02 xGA/60 in tough minutes. That was the best mark on the team alongside partner Brian Dumoulin.

Support Forward

You know exactly who this forward is. He's not the most valuable, he's not the most dynamic, he's not the most responsible and he's not the most productive. What he often is, however, is the engine. He's the elite grinder who can play two-way hockey, forechecks hard and does the little things well. He's the guy who makes life easier for teammates — and sometimes hell for opponents.

The names above make sense in that vein: Valeri Nichushkin, Brandon Saad, Sam Bennett, Chris Kunitz, Ondrej Palat, Andrew Ladd, Dustin Brown, Brad Marchand. These guys all filled a similar niche on their championship teams, providing a strong mix of offense and defense and usually adding some edge. That last part is vital, and though it's not explicitly measured by Net Rating, I do think it shows in these players' ability to drive play. It leads to a player that usually delivers over four goals of value.

The exception to the rule: Before Marchand was the admirable rat king we love to hate, he was a rookie on the rise who had just put up a 20-20 campaign, still learning the defensive ropes. Marchand's defensive game in his rookie season was below average and he wasn't much of a scorer yet — but in the playoffs, he came alive. In 25 games en route to the Cup, Marchand scored 11 goals and 19 points while earning a 54 percent xG rate. The Bruins outscored opponents 19-9 with Marchand on the ice as he continued the chemistry he was building with Patrice Bergeron during the season's second half. The rest is history.

Depth Core

Offensive Forward

When the games get tighter, depth scoring becomes critical. The average Cup champion had 6.7 above-average offensive forwards, with the majority having at least seven. That seventh forward who can deliver above-average offense is the ultimate luxury. It allows teams to spread enough offense through the top three lines. Phil Kessel is the perfect example of that as a top-six scorer in an advantageous role. Reilly Smith's 14 points in 22 playoff games in 2023 for Vegas is another.

Here, strong defense isn't required — especially if the rest of the team is up to par. The best teams can get away with a one-dimensional scorer. While the average Offensive Rating for these types is plus-1.9, the average Defensive Rating is minus-0.5, with the majority below average. And given how much emphasis there is defensively elsewhere, it's an acceptable trade-off.

The exception to the rule: The 2012 Kings were a defensive powerhouse. Rather than supplement that with offense down the lineup, their depth doubled down defensively. The Kings, in both 2012 and 2014, were the only team with fewer than six above-average offensive forwards. But that's OK if someone like Dwight King makes up for it defensively. His plus-1.2 Defensive Rating is the luxury here, making up for his below-average offense.

Defensive Defenseman

The shutdown pair is a key part of any Cup champion and the team's No. 4 generally plays an important role in locking things down. A shutdown pair is only as strong as its weakest link — it pays to have two guys a team can lean on defensively.

For contenders, at least three members of the top four should be above-average defenders. Only two champions — the 2017 Penguins and 2022 Avalanche — didn't have that, but they had more than

enough firepower to manage. It's even more beneficial if that trio's defense is a significant strength. Chicago having Keith, Hjalmarsson and Johnny Oduya is the blueprint and Oduya's value shows up clearly here.

A plus-2.0 Defensive Rating is the goal, but anything above 1.0 is solid.

The exception to the rule: The model wasn't a fan of Josh Manson's defensive game relative to his reputation when the Avalanche acquired him in 2022. The model was wrong: He fit perfectly. In the playoffs that season, the Avalanche gave up just 1.74 xGA/60 with Manson on the ice, a big improvement over his 2.44 rate during the season. Manson was a rock.

Depth Forward

At the very least, we're looking for an above-average third-line forward here to beef up the top nine. The Lightning looked extremely deep with Yanni Gourde manning this role, but being just an average forward is enough, as that's already above what most teams trot out on their third line.

Usually strong defense is a prerequisite here, as 11 of 15 teams had an above-average Defensive Rating. But I wanted to leave some wiggle room for teams with a great top-nine forward who was more offensively inclined. That's where Gourde's status as a luxury in 2021 really shines. Yes, he was a shutdown force for the Lightning that year, but his ability to also drive offense helped.

The exception to the rule: One of the reasons the Capitals were overlooked a little in 2018 was their depth. Brett Connolly, their eighth-best forward based on Net Rating, didn't grade out well relative to other top-nine staples from past champions. He played a key role in the team's championship run, scoring 1.93 points per 60, fifth on the team. His timely scoring provided a big boost and the Capitals won their minutes with Connolly on the ice — something they didn't do during the season.

Defensive Forward

Last but not least is a defensive specialist. Teams usually have their true shutdown center in the top six along with a sidekick, but it also helps to have a defensive focal point to patrol the bottom six. Marcus Kruger and Jarret Stoll are prime examples of that during the Blackhawks' and Kings' Cup runs. It's the classic checking line staple. The goal is a Defensive Rating of plus-1.0 where offense is secondary. It's an acceptable trade-off in this slot come playoff time.

The exception to the rule: Lars Eller was a terrific defensive player in his prime, whether the model recognizes it or not. That season was Eller's "worst" though, thanks to a career-worst 2.7 xGA/60 allowed that was one of the lesser marks on the Capitals. Thankfully, he locked in for the playoffs, surrendering just 2.27 xGA/60. That improvement was vital to Washington's Cup win.

How past Cup winners stack up in total

One last thing: How this all adds up. First, a summary of the above.

Of the 15 teams here, 14 had a solid piece or better half the time and only two teams had more than one "exception to the rule." The last six champions have been especially strong by this rubric, with the Avalanche and Panthers hitting "ideal" or better 69 percent of the time.

While the Cup Checklist focuses on individual pieces, it's also informative to see how those pieces came together (and to account for the pieces that aren't part of the list). Here's how the last 15 Stanley Cup champions look according to their total Offensive and Defensive Ratings.

Almost every team is strong at both ends of the ice; nine of 15 champions have at least a plus-20 Offensive and Defensive Rating. When it's all said and done, the final product should at least hit those benchmarks to be considered a contender. And on average, the number at both ends is even higher.

As for the teams that lacked in one area, many were at least well-equipped in the other. The 2012 and 2014 Kings and the 2017 Penguins are prime examples of that. One-dimensional? Absolutely. But what a dimension it was — enough to win it all.

In all, just two teams — the 2011 Bruins and 2018 Capitals — won with a Net Rating lower than plus-40.

All of this is to say that these are guidelines and benchmarks, not rules and regulations. A team doesn't have to have every single piece playing at a certain level, nor does it have to reach a certain overall rating to win. But it is telling that many champions over the past 15 years do.

The best teams, the ones that have gone all the way, have mostly followed a similar script up and down the lineup. It's not impossible to win in other ways, but the path that has already been forged by others is probably worth following.

It's tried and true — the Cup Checklist helps to outline it.

The Athletic / Inside the NHL's wild world of quirky postgame victory trophies passed from player to player

By Scott Powers, Julian McKenzie and Mark Lazerus- April 16, 2025

Brad Richards had no idea he was starting a long-standing New York Rangers tradition when he presented a fedora to a teammate after a win 14 years ago.

He purchased the fedora during the Rangers' trip to Sweden in 2011. On the phone with The Athletic this week, Richards didn't want to get into the specifics, but the story is out there.

That part isn't important anyway. It's about what followed.

"We got it and took it home, I kind of decided what we'd do," Richards said. "We called it the Broadway Hat. It's kind of taken a life of its own now."

That life has included the Rangers continuing to hand out a Broadway Hat to this day. There's a Broadway Hat social media account that has more than 20,000 followers. It's become synonymous with the Rangers.

Richards couldn't recall exactly who named it the Broadway Hat, or why they did, but being in Manhattan, it's easy to connect the dots. What Richards did remember was how it all began with one victory.

"I just remember the first game that we won, I was like, let's keep it," Richards said. "We won again. I was like, let's start handing it out every game. Not necessarily the player of the game, but the guy who made a big play, whatever the story was going to be. It wasn't just about goals. It could be a blocked shot. It could be a big save, whatever it was. Just kind of went with it. ... It's just good memories. We had a few good runs there."

Today's Rangers Broadway Hat isn't the original. The first one was much smaller.

"The original one didn't fit everyone's head," Richards said. "It's funny to see people try to put it on. I remember Mike Rupp, a big boy, tried to put it on one time and barely got over the brow of his head. Just good memories. It's cool to see that it's still going. Now it's got some fancy ones. Now they look a lot more expensive than the one we got originally."

The Rangers' Broadway Hat is probably the longest-running victory trophy around the league, but nearly every team has something it hands out. Some "trophies" have great meaning, some less so, but they're part of nearly every team's postgame victory ritual.

Here's what each NHL team passes around after a win.

Philadelphia Flyers

From the neutral-zone trap to four-forward power plays to the Reverse VH, the NHL is nothing if not a copycat league. That goes for victory awards, too. The Venn diagram between hockey fans and wrestling fans sometimes feels like a circle, so it shouldn't be a big surprise that the players love a wrestling-style championship belt. At least some of the teams personalize the belt with little touches, from logos to winners' names.

Seattle Kraken

Edmonton Oilers

The Oilers have two trophies, and both are common. The top offensive contributor in a win gets the championship belt, while the top defensive contributor gets a hard hat. As you'll see, NHL players can be as original with victory trophies as they are with nicknames. Preschools don't have as much construction-themed equipment as these guys do.

Anaheim Ducks

The Ducks chose a hard hat because it signified the way they wanted to play. Ryan Strome provided the hat.

"It's part of us playing simple, hard-nosed hockey," Ducks captain Radko Gudas said. "I think it's a blue-collar statement of hard workers, so for us, it was a simple choice. It was an easy choice to give the guy that worked his back off as the hardest-working guy out there that game. The most blue-collar representative of the game, as the way it should be played. It was an easy choice for us."

Nashville Predators

Given how downtown Nashville has been overwhelmed by hotel construction over the past decade, it shouldn't come as a surprise that the Predators stuck to the theme. They give out a small shovel to their player of the game. As Roman Josi explained early in the season, it represents the group needing to "dig in." The only surprise is that Connor McDavid didn't think of it first.

Minnesota Wild

(Courtesy of the Minnesota Wild)

The Wild adopted the word "hard" to enforce a specific mentality this season and, through the craftwork of forward Ryan Hartman, created a chain with that word on it to award after victories.

"It goes to the guy who not necessarily puts up the most points in a game," Wild forward Marcus Foligno said.

As Hartman said: "Otherwise, Kirill (Kaprizov) could win it every game. Sometimes you want to spread it out."

Chicago Blackhawks

The Blackhawks may have pioneered the championship belt more than a decade ago, an idea that came to defenseman Brent Seabrook over beers on an off night in Glendale, Ariz. The belt was passed around for years but was retired after it became filled up with names and dates. From there, the Blackhawks began passing around a chain with a puck on it. But beginning this season, captain Nick Foligno began a new tradition of handing out a Blackhawks-themed tool belt. Get it? Rebuild? Tool belt?

"I just think it's something to change it up," Foligno said. "Something has to be personal. It was cool with the puck, but, you know, personal touch. I thought the tool belt, we're trying to build something here. You need one of those to build. Just something tacky but funny."

Boston Bruins

The Bruins keep it simple during the regular season and hand out a game puck following wins. In the playoffs, however, they break out an old-school Bruins leather jacket. With the way things are trending in Boston, we might not see that one for a while.

Colorado Avalanche

Oversized hats seem to be having a moment with sports fans. The Avalanche adopted one as their postgame trophy. You can even follow the award winners on the Avalanche's Reddit by searching "big ass Avs hat," a series of words that is now on a New York Times-hosted website forever.

Detroit Red Wings

The Red Wings used to give out a football helmet to their player of the game. That has since changed to a fedora first brought in by Dylan Larkin. Kid Rock's restaurant at Little Caesars Arena may have closed back in 2019, but his legacy lives on in the Red Wings locker room. Well, maybe?

"I think people said that it belonged to Kid Rock," defenseman Justin Holl said. "I don't know if that's true or not. But I think that's the story is that it's Kid Rock's fedora. But maybe we just say that because Kid Rock wears a fedora sometimes."

Dallas Stars

Dallas keeps it very on-brand with its postgame cowboy hat. But that's just for the public, though — something the organization's social media team came up with. There's another victory award. A secret one.

"We're not that big on that (cowboy hat)," Stars forward Matt Duchene said. "I've been on a lot of teams where that thing is a big deal, and you make a big thing out of it. Well, we do have one other thing that people don't know about, but I can't talk about it. That one's kind of our thing. But the hat goes to the guy that gets that initial thing. Some teams have that culture where that stuff is a big part of it. For us, it's not really as much. We have a ton of fun as a group, and I guess that's something that we don't do maybe as much as other teams. I've had it both ways, and it's whatever is organic to the group."

Vegas Golden Knights

Vegas has a local flavor to its postgame award, too. Alas, it's not a rhinestone-and-feathers headdress, but rather a bedazzled replica of the famous "Welcome To Fabulous Las Vegas" sign on a chain.

Washington Capitals

What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. But what happens in an NHL locker room is supposed to stay there, too. So, there is some secrecy around a number of the teams' trophies. We know what the Capitals give out: an oversized gold chain. We just don't know why. They prefer to keep the backstory internal.

New Jersey Devils

The specter of Lou Lamoriello must still haunt the Devils' dreams because they keep their trophy completely secret. A team spokesperson did give at least a little hint, saying the award is something related to Prague, where the Devils started the 2024-25 season. A Pilsner Urquell? A trdelník? A rye bread bowl filled with piping-hot goulash? The mind reels with possibilities.

Carolina Hurricanes

Most of these trophies are handled by the players, with the previous winner choosing that night's honoree. But Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour is the one responsible for the Hurricanes' award. He hands out hats after wins. He makes his way through the entire team, and no one gets it twice. Once everyone has received a hat, he starts giving them to the assistant coaches, medical staff, trainers, equipment staff, etc. Eventually, Homer Simpson might finally get his turn.

Montreal Canadiens

Laner, un homme de peu de mots 😊

Laner said what he needed to say #GoHabsGo pic.twitter.com/S1o5MSmPkP

— Canadiens Montréal (@CanadiensMTL) March 19, 2025

The Canadiens get some points for originality. They once had a Conan the Barbarian sword. Last season, they had two trophies: a helmet with antlers and an actual trophy marked the “Golden Nut Sack.” This year, whoever is deemed player of the game just wears a pair of fun glasses.

Ottawa Senators

Drake Batherson on @ComingInHotSens explaining why the Senators don’t celebrate their own player of the game in the locker room. They were supposed to but...@jasonyork33 @localpodcaster pic.twitter.com/QTub9bDeCI

— Julian McKenzie (@jkamckenzie) March 12, 2025

The Senators were supposed to have a postgame award, but it got lost after a night out in Dallas. The award? A large branch that fell on Tyler Kleven’s head.

“We’re sitting under this tree outside on the patio, I’m sitting next to (Tyler) Kleven,” Senators forward Drake Batherson told the “Coming in Hot” podcast in March. “This branch snaps off the tree, comes down, cracks him in the head. He was hurt, he had a bag of ice the rest of the time just sitting there. We were like, ‘That’s it, boys, it’s the branch.’ We’re carrying that branch around. It was an old branch. We bring it to dinner after and we give it to the valet guy. The valet guy lost it.”

Utah Hockey Club

Bjugy passed the game 🏀 to Crouser last night 🔥 pic.twitter.com/reG00MvFZg

— Utah Hockey Club (@utahhockeyclub) April 9, 2025

Utah Hockey Club’s players wanted to give something out after wins, but they hadn’t put much thought into it. So, when the time came, they just grabbed something that was around. It’s how an ordinary basketball became their player of the game trophy. Hey, what do you want from a franchise that had only a few months’ notice that it even existed?

St. Louis Blues

This is only the beginning. #stlblues pic.twitter.com/rAbyPsLaat

— St. Louis Blues (@StLouisBlues) November 26, 2024

Some awards have been given some deeper thought and meaning. In November, the Blues began dedicating their postgame award to former Blues player and commentator Kelly Chase, who is battling leukemia. The team hands out Chase’s shoulder pads.

Columbus Blue Jackets

In remembrance of Johnny Gaudreau, the Blue Jackets are giving out a donkey hat after wins. Gaudreau was known to call his friends and teammates “donkeys” as a term of endearment. They found the hat on Etsy.

“He called me a donkey probably a million times,” Sean Monahan said when he was interviewed on TV early in the season.

Los Angeles Kings

The Kings have two awards they hand out. They began the season with just a racing helmet, but they also added a firefighter’s helmet after the fires that broke out in Southern California later in the year.

They were given the helmet by Boston natives who have worked in the LAFD for many years. They give out the racing helmet on the road and firefighter's helmet at home.

"You look at the firemen's helmet, that's something that signifies something I think everybody can grab onto," Kings defenseman Kyle Burroughs said. "I think that's something important for us, that we are obviously super privileged to have that relationship. We have a lot of respect for the fire (department), and I think it kind of digs in deep with the person that gets it in that game. It's an unsung hero, maybe. It's someone that pushes every day. Might not be the sexiest results all the time, but they're doing the right stuff. They're locking us down, whether that's offensively or defensively.

"You see Kuempfs (Darcy Kuemper) wearing that hat a lot because he does lock us down. It's something that I think is really cool to do, and it's a really cool item. And for us to be able to honor not even just the firefighters – obviously it is a fire helmet – but first responders. Obviously, because it was a tough time going through L.A. with all the families (affected) and stuff like that, if we can shine a light on that anytime, it's kind of twofold. It's pretty freakin' cool to get that helmet and it's cool for us to be able to also show that we're with them."

Buffalo Sabres

The Sabres have a victory vest that was made in Germany when the team visited as part of the NHL's Global Series last fall. Whose idea was it to have it made and get his team invested?

"It came from Lindy (Ruff)," Sabres captain Rasmus Dahlin said. "It's about being invested in what we're doing here. If you are doing the right work. It's for whoever has the best game, obviously, but does their job, playing the right way."

San Jose Sharks

The Sharks chose to hand out a football helmet this year. Aside from the San Francisco 49ers being nearby, there isn't much more significance to it. Asked how it came about and what it meant, veteran Marc-Edouard Vlasic shrugged and said, "No idea."

Winnipeg Jets

The Jets used to have their own helmet they handed out. With Rick Bowness as coach, they started a tradition of awarding players bomber jackets. They have one that they call a mechanic's jacket that goes to the game's unsung hero. The other is given to the player of the game.

New York Islanders

Couldn't get a picture of the Islanders' rubber chicken in the dressing room last night, but this is what it looks like. Mat Barzal won it last night after scoring the game-winning goal. pic.twitter.com/Rp0dqvnKzH

— Ethan Sears (@ethan_sears) January 12, 2025

The Islanders are secretive about most things, including what they give out, but they reportedly pass around a rubber chicken this year. Don't tell Lamoriello.

Pittsburgh Penguins

The Penguins' leaders often switch it up after every year. They landed on a racing helmet for this season. Fenway Sports Group, which owns the Penguins, also owns RFK Racing, so the Penguins have adopted one of its NASCAR helmets this season. That helmet is signed through the end of the 2028-29 season and has a full no-movement clause.

The rest

The Calgary Flames, Florida Panthers, Tampa Bay Lightning and Vancouver Canucks do not have a trophy this season.

NHL teams' traveling trophies

Anaheim Ducks

Construction hard hat

Boston Bruins

Game puck (regular season); leather jacket (playoffs)

Buffalo Sabres

Custom German-made "Victory Vest"

Calgary Flames

None

Carolina Hurricanes

Hats handed out by coach (no repeats)

Chicago Blackhawks

Tool belt

Colorado Avalanche

Oversized hat

Columbus Blue Jackets

Donkey hat

Dallas Stars

Cowboy hat (public); secret internal trophy

Detroit Red Wings

Fedora

Edmonton Oilers

Championship belt (offense); hard hat (defense)

Florida Panthers

None

Los Angeles Kings

Racing helmet (road); firefighter helmet (home)

Minnesota Wild

HARD chain

Montreal Canadiens

Fun glasses

Nashville Predators
Small shovel
New Jersey Devils
Secret trophy tied to Prague
New York Islanders
Rubber chicken (reportedly)
New York Rangers
Broadway Hat
Ottawa Senators
Tree branch ("Kleven Branch" – now lost)
Philadelphia Flyers
Championship belt
Pittsburgh Penguins
NASCAR racing helmet
San Jose Sharks
Football helmet
Seattle Kraken
Championship belt
St. Louis Blues
Kelly Chase's shoulder pads
Tampa Bay Lightning
None
Toronto Maple Leafs
Championship belt
Utah Hockey Club
Basketball
Vancouver Canucks
None
Vegas Golden Knights
Bedazzled Vegas sign chain
Washington Capitals
Oversized gold chain
Winnipeg Jets

Bomber jacket (unsung hero); mechanic's jacket (player of the game)

—The Athletic's Eric Stephens, Aaron Portzline, Michael Russo, Daniel Nugent-Bowman, Jeremy Rutherford, Murat Ates, Matthew Fairburn and Cory Lavalette contributed to this report

ESPN / NHL playoff standings: Guide to 10 games on Tuesday schedule

By ESPN staff- April 16, 2025

With the Montreal Canadiens on the precipice of punching their playoff ticket Monday night, the Chicago Blackhawks shocked the world by pulling off the shootout victory. So the Columbus Blue Jackets remain in the hunt for the final Eastern Conference wild card.

In the West, there was no movement in the three-way wild-card race between the Minnesota Wild, St. Louis Blues and Calgary Flames on Monday, but all three play Tuesday.

Here's everything you need to know heading into what could be a highly consequential evening:

New Jersey Devils at Boston Bruins

7 p.m. (ESPN+)

This is the Devils' penultimate tuneup before beginning their first-round series against the Carolina Hurricanes. On the other side, the Bruins enter this matchup in the fourth slot for the draft lottery order; they cannot catch the Predators at No. 3, but they are one point ahead of the Kraken and Flyers, and two ahead of the Sabres.

Toronto Maple Leafs at Buffalo Sabres

7 p.m. (ESPN+)

The Maple Leafs have a four-point lead atop the Atlantic Division, but with two games left for the team chasing them (the Lightning), nothing is resolved. However, with a win or an overtime/shootout loss against their cross-border neighbors, the division title is theirs. Buffalo has closed the season out strong, but past foibles have the Sabres in the No. 7 spot in the draft lottery heading into Tuesday night; they are in a jumble of teams from No. 4-9, all between 75 and 78 points.

Chicago Blackhawks at Ottawa Senators

7 p.m. (ESPN+)

The Blackhawks' win Monday did not alter their final standings result, as they are locked into the No. 2 spot in the draft lottery. The Senators are locked into another part of the standings, the first Eastern Conference wild card, with a matchup against the Atlantic Division champs (either the Maple Leafs or Lightning) on the docket in Round 1.

Columbus Blue Jackets at Philadelphia Flyers

7 p.m. (ESPN+)

Montreal's loss in the shootout on Monday kept the Blue Jackets' playoff door open just a crack. Columbus needs regulation wins in both of its final two games (it hosts the Islanders on Thursday), PLUS the Canadiens to lose in regulation against the Hurricanes on Wednesday to earn the second wild card. The Flyers are part of the above-mentioned jumble of teams between 75 and 78 points; they begin the evening in the No. 6 spot with 76.

Florida Panthers at Tampa Bay Lightning

7:30 p.m. (ESPN)

The most likely postseason scenario in the Atlantic includes these in-state rivals squaring off in Round 1. The Panthers cannot catch the Lightning (they can tie in standings points, but Tampa Bay is well ahead in

regulation wins); the Lightning can catch the Maple Leafs, but need to win their final two and have the Leafs lose their final two in regulation. In other words, this game might involve some "message-sending" ahead of their upcoming game rather than any additional standings shuffling concerns.

Washington Capitals at New York Islanders

7:30 p.m. (ESPN+)

Locked in as the No. 1 seed in the Eastern Conference, the Capitals may not be, ahem, as honed in as we've seen them in recent weeks as they were chasing that clinched position (and Alex Ovechkin was still chasing Wayne Gretzky's record). On the Islanders side, they sit 10th in the draft lottery order with 82 points, four behind the Ducks (78) with two games to go, and one point ahead of the Rangers and Red Wings at 83.

Utah Hockey Club at St. Louis Blues

8 p.m. (ESPN+)

With a win of any variety and a Flames loss of any variety, the Blues clinch a playoff spot; with any other set of results, it's a little more complicated. In the franchise's first season, the Hockey Club remained in the playoff mix quite long, but they'll be in the draft lottery this May. Currently 14th, they can fall behind the Canucks for 15th if they win tonight.

Anaheim Ducks at Minnesota Wild

8 p.m. (ESPN+)

A win of any variety for the Wild clinches their playoff spot (regardless of what the Flames do); the Wild can also clinch if they lose in OT/shootout and the Flames lose in any fashion. The Ducks are at the tail end of the 75- to 78-point teams in the draft lottery order, sitting ninth as play begins Tuesday.

Vegas Golden Knights at Calgary Flames

9 p.m. (ESPN+)

Every game is a must-win for the Flames, and regulation wins will be critical; they are currently two points behind the Blues and one RW, so if the Blues win in regulation Tuesday and the Flames win in OT/shootout, that eliminates the Flames (they could tie in standings points with a win Thursday, but couldn't catch up in RW). If the Blues lose in any fashion, that leaves the door open for Calgary. The Knights are locked in as the No. 1 seed in the Pacific -- and will play whichever team winds up in the first wild-card spot when the playoffs begin. If they don't want to see Calgary in a series this spring, they can end that possibility by beating them on Tuesday night.

Los Angeles Kings at Seattle Kraken

10:30 p.m. (ESPN)

The Kings' win over the Oilers on Monday clinched home-ice advantage for them in the first-round series against those very same Oilers. Seattle is our final team in that 75- to 78-point mashup, beginning play on Tuesday night as the No. 5 team in the draft lotto order with 76 points and 28 regulation wins.

Note: Playoff chances are via StatHletes.

Jump ahead:

Current playoff matchups

Clinching scenarios

Today's schedule

Yesterday's scores

Expanded standings

Race for No. 1 pick

Current playoff matchups

Eastern Conference

A1 Toronto Maple Leafs vs. WC1 Ottawa Senators

A2 Tampa Bay Lightning vs. A3 Florida Panthers

M1 Washington Capitals vs. WC2 Montreal Canadiens

M2 Carolina Hurricanes vs. M3 New Jersey Devils

Western Conference

C1 Winnipeg Jets vs. WC2 St. Louis Blues

C2 Dallas Stars vs. C3 Colorado Avalanche

P1 Vegas Golden Knights vs. WC1 Minnesota Wild

P2 Los Angeles Kings vs. P3 Edmonton Oilers

Clinching scenarios

The Montreal Canadiens will clinch a playoff berth with any result in the Columbus Blue Jackets-Philadelphia Flyers game other than a Blue Jackets regulation win.

The Minnesota Wild will clinch a playoff berth if:

- They win or lose in overtime/shootout to the Anaheim Ducks

- The Blues lose to the Hockey Club in any fashion

- The Flames lose to the Golden Knights in any fashion

The St. Louis Blues will clinch a playoff berth if:

- They defeat the Utah Hockey Club in regulation

- They defeat the Hockey Club in OT/shootout, AND either the Wild lose to the Ducks in regulation OR there is any result in Flames-Golden Knights other than a regulation win for Calgary

- They lose in OT/shootout, AND the Flames lose to the Golden Knights in any fashion

- The Flames lose to the Golden Knights in regulation

Tuesday's games

Note: All times ET. All games not on TNT or NHL Network are available to stream on ESPN+ (local blackout restrictions apply).

New Jersey Devils at Boston Bruins, 7 p.m.

Toronto Maple Leafs at Buffalo Sabres, 7 p.m.

Chicago Blackhawks at Ottawa Senators, 7 p.m.

Columbus Blue Jackets at Philadelphia Flyers, 7 p.m.
Florida Panthers at Tampa Bay Lightning, 7:30 p.m. (ESPN)
Washington Capitals at New York Islanders, 7:30 p.m.
Utah Hockey Club at St. Louis Blues, 8 p.m.
Anaheim Ducks at Minnesota Wild, 8 p.m.
Vegas Golden Knights at Calgary Flames, 9 p.m.
Los Angeles Kings at Seattle Kraken, 10:30 p.m. (ESPN)
Monday's scoreboard
Chicago Blackhawks 4, Montreal Canadiens 3 (SO)
Detroit Red Wings 6, Dallas Stars 4
New York Rangers 5, Florida Panthers 3
Utah Hockey Club 7, Nashville Predators 3
Los Angeles Kings 5, Edmonton Oilers 0
Vancouver Canucks 2, San Jose Sharks 1 (OT)
Expanded standings
Atlantic Division
x - Toronto Maple Leafs
Points: 104
Regulation wins: 40
Playoff position: A1
Games left: 2
Points pace: 106.6
Next game: @ BUF (Tuesday)
Playoff chances: 100%
Tragic number: N/A
x - Tampa Bay Lightning
Points: 100
Regulation wins: 40
Playoff position: A2
Games left: 2
Points pace: 102.5
Next game: vs. FLA (Tuesday)
Playoff chances: 100%

Tragic number: N/A

x - Florida Panthers

Points: 98

Regulation wins: 37

Playoff position: A3

Games left: 1

Points pace: 99.2

Next game: @ TB (Tuesday)

Playoff chances: 100%

Tragic number: N/A

x - Ottawa Senators

Points: 94

Regulation wins: 34

Playoff position: WC1

Games left: 2

Points pace: 96.4

Next game: vs. CHI (Tuesday)

Playoff chances: 100%

Tragic number: N/A

Montreal Canadiens

Points: 89

Regulation wins: 29

Playoff position: WC2

Games left: 1

Points pace: 90.1

Next game: vs. CAR (Wednesday)

Playoff chances: 89.6%

Tragic number: N/A

e - Detroit Red Wings

Points: 83

Regulation wins: 29

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 2

Points pace: 85.1
Next game: @ NJ (Wednesday)
Playoff chances: 0%
Tragic number: E
e - Buffalo Sabres
Points: 77
Regulation wins: 28
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 2
Points pace: 78.9
Next game: vs. TOR (Tuesday)
Playoff chances: 0%
Tragic number: E
e - Boston Bruins
Points: 75
Regulation wins: 26
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 1
Points pace: 75.9
Next game: vs. NJ (Tuesday)
Playoff chances: 0%
Tragic number: E
Metro Division
z - Washington Capitals
Points: 109
Regulation wins: 42
Playoff position: M1
Games left: 2
Points pace: 111.7
Next game: @ NYI (Tuesday)
Playoff chances: 100%
Tragic number: N/A
x - Carolina Hurricanes

Points: 99
Regulation wins: 42
Playoff position: M2
Games left: 2
Points pace: 101.5
Next game: @ MTL (Wednesday)
Playoff chances: 100%
Tragic number: N/A
x - New Jersey Devils

Points: 89
Regulation wins: 36
Playoff position: M3
Games left: 2
Points pace: 91.2
Next game: @ BOS (Tuesday)
Playoff chances: 100%
Tragic number: N/A
Columbus Blue Jackets

Points: 85
Regulation wins: 28
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 2
Points pace: 87.1
Next game: @ PHI (Tuesday)
Playoff chances: 10.4%
Tragic number: 1
e - New York Rangers

Points: 83
Regulation wins: 34
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 1
Points pace: 84.0
Next game: vs. TB (Thursday)

Playoff chances: 0%
Tragic number: E
e - New York Islanders
Points: 82
Regulation wins: 28
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 2
Points pace: 84.1
Next game: vs. WSH (Tuesday)
Playoff chances: 0%
Tragic number: E
e - Pittsburgh Penguins
Points: 78
Regulation wins: 23
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 1
Points pace: 79.0
Next game: vs. WSH (Thursday)
Playoff chances: 0%
Tragic number: E
e - Philadelphia Flyers
Points: 76
Regulation wins: 21
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 2
Points pace: 77.9
Next game: vs. CBJ (Tuesday)
Playoff chances: 0%
Tragic number: E
Central Division
p - Winnipeg Jets
Points: 114
Regulation wins: 43

Playoff position: C1
Games left: 1
Points pace: 115.4
Next game: vs. ANA (Wednesday)
Playoff chances: 100%
Tragic number: N/A
x - Dallas Stars
Points: 106
Regulation wins: 41
Playoff position: C2
Games left: 1
Points pace: 107.3
Next game: @ NSH (Wednesday)
Playoff chances: 100%
Tragic number: N/A
x - Colorado Avalanche
Points: 102
Regulation wins: 40
Playoff position: C3
Games left: 0
Points pace: 102
Next game: N/A
Playoff chances: 100%
Tragic number: N/A
Minnesota Wild
Points: 95
Regulation wins: 33
Playoff position: WC1
Games left: 1
Points pace: 96.2
Next game: vs. ANA (Tuesday)
Playoff chances: 98.4%
Tragic number: N/A

St. Louis Blues

Points: 94

Regulation wins: 31

Playoff position: WC2

Games left: 1

Points pace: 95.2

Next game: vs. UTA (Tuesday)

Playoff chances: 91.3%

Tragic number: N/A

e - Utah Hockey Club

Points: 89

Regulation wins: 30

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 1

Points pace: 90.1

Next game: @ STL (Tuesday)

Playoff chances: 0%

Tragic number: E

e - Nashville Predators

Points: 66

Regulation wins: 23

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 1

Points pace: 66.8

Next game: vs. DAL (Wednesday)

Playoff chances: 0%

Tragic number: E

e - Chicago Blackhawks

Points: 59

Regulation wins: 20

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 1

Points pace: 59.7

Next game: @ OTT (Tuesday)

Playoff chances: 0%

Tragic number: E

Pacific Division

y - Vegas Golden Knights

Points: 107

Regulation wins: 45

Playoff position: P1

Games left: 2

Points pace: 109.7

Next game: @ CGY (Tuesday)

Playoff chances: 100%

Tragic number: N/A

x - Los Angeles Kings

Points: 103

Regulation wins: 42

Playoff position: P3

Games left: 2

Points pace: 105.6

Next game: @ SEA (Tuesday)

Playoff chances: 100%

Tragic number: N/A

x - Edmonton Oilers

Points: 99

Regulation wins: 35

Playoff position: P2

Games left: 1

Points pace: 100.2

Next game: @ SJ (Wednesday)

Playoff chances: 100%

Tragic number: N/A

Calgary Flames

Points: 92

Regulation wins: 30
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 2
Points pace: 94.3
Next game: vs. VGK (Tuesday)
Playoff chances: 10.3%
Tragic number: 3
e - Vancouver Canucks
Points: 90
Regulation wins: 28
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 1
Points pace: 91.1
Next game: vs. VGK (Wednesday)
Playoff chances: 0%
Tragic number: E
e - Anaheim Ducks
Points: 78
Regulation wins: 24
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 2
Points pace: 80.0
Next game: @ MIN (Tuesday)
Playoff chances: 0%
Tragic number: E
e - Seattle Kraken
Points: 76
Regulation wins: 28
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 1
Points pace: 76.9
Next game: vs. LA (Tuesday)
Playoff chances: 0%

Tragic number: E

e - San Jose Sharks

Points: 52

Regulation wins: 14

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 1

Points pace: 52.6

Next game: vs. EDM (Wednesday)

Playoff chances: 0%

Tragic number: E

Note: A "p" means that the team has clinched the Presidents' Trophy as the top team in the regular season. A "z" means that the team has clinched the top record in the conference. A "y" means that the team has clinched the division title. An "x" means that the team has clinched a playoff berth. An "e" means that the team has been eliminated from playoff contention.

Race for the No. 1 pick

The NHL uses a draft lottery to determine the order of the first round, so the team that finishes in last place is not guaranteed the No. 1 selection. As of 2021, a team can move up a maximum of 10 spots if it wins the lottery, so only 11 teams are eligible for the No. 1 pick. More details on the process are [here](#). Matthew Schaefer, a defenseman for the OHL's Erie Otters, is No. 1 on the draft board.

1. San Jose Sharks

Points: 52

Regulation wins: 14

2. Chicago Blackhawks

Points: 59

Regulation wins: 20

3. Nashville Predators

Points: 66

Regulation wins: 23

4. Boston Bruins

Points: 75

Regulation wins: 26

5. Seattle Kraken

Points: 76

Regulation wins: 28

6. Philadelphia Flyers

Points: 76

Regulation wins: 21

7. Buffalo Sabres

Points: 77

Regulation wins: 28

8. Pittsburgh Penguins

Points: 78

Regulation wins: 23

9. Anaheim Ducks

Points: 78

Regulation wins: 24

10. New York Islanders

Points: 82

Regulation wins: 28

11. New York Rangers

Points: 83

Regulation wins: 34

12. Detroit Red Wings

Points: 83

Regulation wins: 29

13. Columbus Blue Jackets

Points: 85

Regulation wins: 28

14. Utah Hockey Club

Points: 89

Regulation wins: 30

15. Vancouver Canucks

Points: 90

Regulation wins: 28

16. Calgary Flames

Points: 92

Regulation wins: 30

[Sportsnet.ca / Biggest breakout players of the 2024-25 NHL season](#)

By Rory Boylen- April 16, 2025

The NHL season is winding down, which means the best time of the hockey schedule is near with the ups and downs of the Stanley Cup Playoffs arriving this coming weekend.

It's our last opportunity to have a look back at what unfolded in the 2024-25 NHL season -- who surprised us, which teams over or under achieved, which off-season pickups panned out or not -- and we'll have a series of pieces that explore all of that this week.

Below, you'll find a list of players who surprised us with how they broke out and took a step forward to measurably help their teams in a big way.

For this exercise, we avoid using rookies, who are first arriving and have their own award for the best first season. Rather, our breakouts look at players who have spent some time in the NHL, aren't first-year players, and took a sharp turn up in their production in a way that has us thinking there is a sustainably great player here.

In mid-December, the Ducks made a couple trades involving veteran defencemen. On Dec. 6, they acquired bruiser Jacob Trouba from the Rangers and, eight days later, they traded out Cam Fowler to St. Louis.

Why do this shuffling at the blue line?

One of the more notable reasons was that Trouba is a right shot, Fowler a left, and the Ducks had a few younger defencemen who they wanted to create space for that were blocked by Fowler on the depth chart. The biggest beneficiary of the move was LaCombe, who went from averaging 18:40 of ice time per game in the first two months of the season, to 23:34 after the trade.

After scoring 17 points in 71 games as a rookie last season, it became obvious early in 2024-25 that LaCombe was on his way to a career year, as he already had 14 points through December. But with more ice time came even more production and LaCombe is now just outside of the top 20 scoring blueliners in the NHL with 43 points in 73 games.

At 5-on-5, LaCombe is one of just 10 defencemen to score at least 10 goals this season. In fact, LaCombe trails only Zach Werenski and Cale Makar in individual high danger chances per 60 minutes of 5-on-5 play.

LaCombe has one more season left on his \$925,000 contract and would be eligible to sign an extension as of July 1.

It's been a huge step up season for Sanderson, whose point total has increased by nearly 20 even though he averages more defensive zone starts than any other Ottawa blueliner.

If the playoffs started today, Ottawa's 5-on-5 offence would be the worst of every qualifying team, so the success of their power play is crucial to generating goals. This is one place where Sanderson has had a huge impact -- he's one of six NHL defencemen tied for second with five power-play goals on the season and his 28 power-play points rank third, seven behind Makar and one behind Quinn Hughes.

His offensive game has taken such a big step and now complements a defensive game that has always had a presence on Ottawa's blue line. This season again Sanderson has shone at that end. Among all NHL defencemen with at least 1,000 minutes played, Sanderson is tied for 19th in expected goals against per 60 minutes of 5-on-5 play, ahead of the likes of Makar and Josh Morrissey.

Don't be surprised if Sanderson gets some love on Norris Trophy ballots, which has five finalists. He won't win the award this season, but the 22-year-old put together a season that has him on the radar for the future now.

Aleksei Protas, LW, Washington Capitals

In the back half of last season, en route to a 29-point campaign, Protas signed an extension with Washington for five years at a \$3.375 million AAV. No one batted an eye, and certainly, no one was predicting that in another year, Protas would have one of the most valuable contracts in the NHL.

But that's exactly what's happened.

At even strength, Protas averages the second-most ice time per game among all Caps forwards, and leads the team in even strength scoring. In fact, Protas is having such a huge leap in production despite not having a place on Washington's power play. Protas' 60 even-strength points are tied for 14th-most across the entire NHL and his number of primary assists at 5-on-5 ranks 11th league-wide.

He's a huge player at six-foot-six, 247 pounds, but doesn't play a bruising style. Another power forward on the heavy set Capitals, Protas is just 24 in his breakout season and set to be a bargain for years to come. If there is one potential sustainability flag in Protas' season, it's his 21.13 shooting percentage, which is nearly 10 points higher than his career average and well above league average.

In his second NHL season a year ago, Marchenko enjoyed a little bump in production during his first full NHL season and then began this season with 11 points in nine October games. For those who thought that might have just been a hot start that cooled, Marchenko followed with 12 points in 13 November games, and before you knew it, he was on base for a breakout and an important part of one of the best lines in hockey early in 2024-25.

When Marchenko shared 5-on-5 ice with Sean Monahan and Yegor Chinakov, Columbus controlled nearly 60 per cent of the shot attempts, 62 per cent of the high danger chances, and outscored opponents 9-3. Marchenko went on to spend more 5-on-5 time with Monathan and Dmitri Voronkov and that line outscored opponents 29-12. And when Monahan was out with injury, the Marchenko-Voronkov duo still outscored opponents 21-10.

While Zach Werenski is Columbus' leading scorer and an award hopeful, Marchenko came out of this season as a star forward in the making, with 31 goals and 72 points in 77 games. His shooting percentage of 15.2 was not egregiously high compared to the rest of his career (it was 11.9 last season). Marchenko ranks 24th in the NHL in even-strength points and tied for eighth in even-strength goals.