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The Athletic / True to form, Blue Jackets choke away late lead in frustrating OT loss to Penguins

By Aaron Portzline – January 4, 2026

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Everybody knew it was coming. The Columbus Blue Jackets were a disjointed mess, and nobody wanted the puck. The Pittsburgh Penguins were on their toes and circling, pelting goaltender Jet Greaves with puck after puck.

And the denizens of Nationwide Arena — a sold-out crowd of 18,212 — were frozen quieter than usual in an aura of angst and dread, especially for a Blue Jackets-Penguins game.

The Penguins have treated the Blue Jackets like their little brothers ever since Columbus entered the NHL, and so it was again on Sunday.

Pittsburgh's Rickard Rakell scored with 14 seconds remaining in regulation to tie the score at 4, and Penguins legend Sidney Crosby — quiet for most of the night — scored at 2:22 of overtime for a 5-4 win.

It's been a season full of gut punches and self-inflicted groin kicks for the Blue Jackets, who are likely to miss the playoffs for a sixth straight season due to their inability to protect leads in the third period. Sunday's loss was the ninth time in 23 losses — that's regulation, overtime and shootout losses — in which the Blue Jackets have held a third-period lead. They've blown multi-goal third-period leads in all three games against Pittsburgh.

"Our energy dropped, and when your energy drops, your body drops and you kind of sit back, and that's what happened," Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner said. "You're just kind of watching them take it to us. It's on us in here. We can control our energy and our energy drops in the third. We give them chances to get back into the game. When you're up two at home, we have to close one out. There's no doubt it's on us in here."

It's a fitting way for the Blue Jackets to reach the midpoint of the season. They are last in the Eastern Conference because of these giveaways. It's only fair to wonder how many points they may have cost themselves — Ten? Twelve? Fifteen? More?

Two games ago, they lost a 2-0 lead against New Jersey by giving up three goals in the span of 1:56 early in the third period. This was different. The Blue Jackets lost the lead in the third period, but the great erosion of confidence and competence started in the second.

Zach Werenski's goal only 47 seconds into the second period gave the Blue Jackets a 4-1 lead. For the rest of the period, though, the Penguins — who weren't playing anywhere near their top level, especially with Evgeni Malkin out of the lineup — gave Columbus every chance to grab hold of the game.

Instead, the Blue Jackets fell into their own malaise.

They didn't finish checks. They didn't move their feet; they used their sticks. The forecheck went limp. The Blue Jackets would gather the puck in their own end, look around for passing options and find none, leaving them to chuck the puck off the glass or lob it up the middle. As Werenski noted after the game, they get disconnected in games like these.

Penguins-Blue Jackets games used to be played at a fevered pitch. Now, they're played as if both teams have a fever. There were no scrums, barely any big hits and absolute zero sense of disdain from one bench to the other.

If anything, there remains a sense of awe among Blue Jackets players when given the opportunity to share the ice with Crosby and that Penguins sweater. Former Blue Jackets center Brandon Dubinsky, who lived for Penguins games when he played for the Blue Jackets, would have been disgusted by this game and how meaningless and run-of-the-mill it seemed.

Late in the second period, the Blue Jackets, still leading 4-1, continually butchered the puck in their own zone, almost presenting it to the Penguins as an offering. The final botch was Adam Fantilli's turnover along the wall as he attempted to clear the zone. Pittsburgh's Connor Dewar gathered it high in the zone and fed it forward to a wide-open Noel Acciari to make it 4-2.

"We turned it over three times, and it ends up in their net," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "If we get out of that period 4-1 ... you know? We gave them life by very unintelligent decisions. Yeah, they go into the room with some belief, and we went in there with some doubt now, right? And as much as you can talk and try to, you know, say 'everything is fine, let's keep going and whatever' ... they add momentum and they just rode it, and a special player (Crosby) made a special play (in OT)."

The Penguins held a 34-14 shots-on-goal advantage and a 67-28 shot attempts advantage in the final two periods.

Early in the third period, Blue Jackets forward Dmitri Voronkov was checking with his stick instead of his body when he was called for tripping former Blue Jackets forward Yegor Chinakhov. The Penguins scored on that power play — Thomas Novak got it — to make it 4-3 at 3:28 of the third.

Former Blue Jacket Yegor Chinakhov chats with goalie Elvis Merzlikins before the game.

Pittsburgh pulled its goalie with just under two minutes to play and spent most of the rest of regulation in the Blue Jackets' zone. Rakell was left wide open in the slot and beat Greaves to make it 4-4.

It seemed inevitable.

On Oct. 25, the Blue Jackets had a 4-2 third-period lead against the Penguins in PPG Paints Arena. Kris Letang and Bryan Rust scored late goals to tie it before the Blue Jackets won the game in a shootout, 5-4.

On Nov. 28, the Blue Jackets had a 3-1 third-period lead in Nationwide before Rust and Crosby scored third-period goals to force OT. Letang won it in overtime.

Then came Sunday.

Greaves, playing for the 12th time in 13 games and the second time in 24 hours, made 20 saves in the second period. He finished with 38 saves, but could only hold the fort so long.

The game ended on an odd note. The Penguins filed off the bench to celebrate Crosby's 25th career overtime winner. However, instead of filing into the dressing room, the Blue Jackets remained on the bench. Apparently, some of the players felt Crosby was offside on the winner.

As NHL officials Chris Lee and Cody Beach skated off toward the Zamboni tunnel, Columbus players were shouting to get their attention, including one player who was banging his stick on the boards. The

officials stopped briefly, but then continued to their quarters, prompting Werenski to skate over to the off-ice officials between the penalty box. Eventually, a referee emerged, put on the headphones and looked at the replay on an iPad.

After a brief review, he skated back to the referee's room. Nothing to see here. Reviews of the play showed Crosby was clearly onside.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets dial up checking to snap Sabres' 10-game win streak

By Aaron Portzline – January 3, 2026

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The Columbus Blue Jackets are in last place in the Eastern Conference as they near the midpoint of their season, so it's not as if they should approach any game needing extra motivation.

But the Buffalo Sabres arrived in Nationwide Arena as the hottest club in the NHL, owners of a franchise record-tying 10-game win streak. And that presented quite a challenge for a Blue Jackets club that can't wait much longer to make a move.

The Blue Jackets had one of their better checking games of the season — body and sticks — and made quick work of the Sabres, relying on five goal scorers and a sterling outing by goaltender Jet Greaves to win 5-1 before a beyond-capacity crowd of 18,809.

"It's a great challenge," said Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski, who returned from a four-game injury absence. "I feel like a team like that has a lot of confidence. You just have to meet it head-on, and I feel like we did that today."

"We weren't caught up in their streak or anything like that. We just went out there and wanted to play our game and play confidently. When we play like that, we can beat anyone, so it's definitely a good game for our group."

Greaves improved to 3-0 with a .946 save percentage and a 1.97 goals-against average in his young career against the Sabres. He stopped 32 of 33 shots and made enough big saves early to take the starch out of the Buffalo attack.

Denton Mateychuk, Brendan Gaunce, Dmitri Voronkov, Mathieu Olivier and Cole Sillinger scored goals for the Blue Jackets, who have won four of their last five games, all in regulation. Werenski and Damon Severson each had two assists.

Gaunce's goal was a short-handed one in the first period and the game winner. Sillinger's was scored into an empty net midway through the third.

It was the Sabres' first loss since Dec. 8.

"(Buffalo) is playing extremely well, and we talked about it here today," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "We wanted to check first, right? I mean, we needed to give ourselves a chance right from the start, and I thought we did a good job of establishing that."

"We got on the wrong side a few times a little bit in the second period, but for the most part, we took away time and space and we were on the right side. If you're not on the right side, you're not checking; you're chasing."

The Blue Jackets had their first three-goal first period of the season, quickly becoming the first club in seven games to score more than two goals against the Sabres. It was 4-1 after two periods, and the Jackets played a drama-free third period.

Even so, there were big saves by Greaves, who was making his 11th start in 12 games. Greaves was especially sharp with his pinball-flipper pads. Usually, it's his effortless glove that stands out, but the Sabres tested him low when they had time to pick their approach.

With the Blue Jackets leading 3-1 and the Sabres carrying play for most of the second, Greaves made a huge stop on Buffalo's Noah Ostlund, who was alone behind the Columbus defense. Seconds later, Olivier scored off a lob pass from Zach Aston-Reese to make it 4-1.

"Regardless of how many saves you make in a game, it's the ones you make at key moments, and I thought there were a few early as well where they had some looks on the power play," Evason said. "Yeah, he's a very calm guy. He allows us to, you know, follow that."

The Blue Jackets welcomed Werenski back into the lineup, but with ease. He played *only* 23:12 — about 3 1/2 minutes below his season average — but still led Columbus in shots on goal (five) and had a plus-1 rating.

They also welcomed forward Danton Heinen, who made his Blue Jackets debut after being acquired earlier this week in the trade that sent forward Yegor Chinakhov to the Pittsburgh Penguins.

Heinen debuted on the Blue Jackets' second line with Voronkov at left wing and Sillinger at center. With Werenski back in the lineup, defenseman Dysin Mayo was made a healthy scratch.

With forwards Miles Wood (lower body, week to week), Isac Lundeström (lower body, week to week) and Sean Monahan (undisclosed, day to day), the Blue Jackets are starting to get low up front.

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Unless Wood, Monahan or Lundeström makes an unexpectedly quick recovery, the Blue Jackets will need to recall a forward before they leave Monday for the last long trip of the season: a four-game, six-day jaunt through San Jose, Vegas, Colorado and Utah.

Saturday, the Blue Jackets welcomed former general manager Jarmo Kekäläinen and assistant GM Josh Flynn back to Columbus. Kekäläinen, who was fired by the Blue Jackets after 11 seasons on Feb. 15, 2024, was hired to replace Kevyn Adams in Buffalo on Dec. 15.

There will be another reunion of sorts Sunday, when the Penguins play the second straight 3 p.m. matinee in Nationwide.

Chinakhov, a 2020 first-round NHL Draft pick of the Blue Jackets, was traded to Pittsburgh after five seasons with the organization. He scored his first goal as a Penguin on Saturday in a 4-1 win over the Detroit Red Wings.

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets fall 5-4 to Pittsburgh Penguins in overtime

By Dan Aulbach – January 4, 2026

The Blue Jackets built a 4-1 lead on Jan. 4 but failed to pressure the Pittsburgh Penguins on offense past the first period. The result was a 5-4 overtime loss, the third time the Jackets have lost against the Penguins this season after holding a multi-goal lead.

After Rickard Rakell pushed the puck past Columbus goalie Jet Greaves with 12.8 seconds remaining in regulation, Penguins star center Sidney Crosby delivered the game-winner in overtime.

"I feel like sometimes when we get a lead, we just resort to almost playing too simple and just giving the puck to the other team," Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski said. "Obviously, good teams will make you pay like that."

The Penguins scored at the 1:50 mark with Ville Koivunen converting an unassisted shot. The Jackets turned on the afterburners shortly after. Getting the puck in the offensive zone, defenseman Denton Mateychuk fired a shot from the left side of the ice that Dmitri Voronkov tipped in for his 15th goal of the season.

Less than a minute later, Kirill Marchenko found Adam Fantilli, who pushed the puck to the goalie. The shot was blocked, but Mason Marchment converted the rebound to give the Jackets a 2-1 lead.

The Jackets got another boost before the end of the first period. Werenski fired a perfect pass to Marchenko on the left side of the net for his 15th goal of the season.

Werenski delivered again to begin the second period. Jackets captain Boone Jenner played physically behind the Penguins' net to regain possession on a forecheck and passed it to a swerving Werenski in the center of the ice. Werenski took it to the net himself to score.

After Werenski's goal, the Penguins surmounted offensive pressure. Taking advantage of sloppy Blue Jackets' clearing efforts, Penguins fourth-line winger Noel Acciari received a through pass from Connor Dewar. He cut the deficit to two goals against a cooling Blue Jackets' offense.

A key to the Blue Jackets' late-December success was penalty kill, as they prevented goals on over nine power-play minutes against the Buffalo Sabres on Jan. 3. But the Blue Jackets had a breakdown on the Penguins' first power play minutes of the third period. Despite winning a faceoff in the defensive zone, Mateychuk lost the puck while the Penguins found a wide-open Tommy Novak to make it a one-score game.

With 12.8 seconds remaining, the Penguins got their clutch moment from the first line with 12.8 seconds remaining when Rakell scored directly in front of the net.

"We extended our shift at the end, too. We should have had more jump," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "We've got to trust our teammates in that situation as well."

Ex-Blue Jacket Yegor Chinakhov makes return to Columbus after trade to Pittsburgh Penguins

Last month, Yegor Chinakhov was playing on the second line for the Jackets. On Jan. 3, he entered Nationwide Arena as a visitor for the first time in his career, playing third line for the Penguins six days after being traded for draft capital and Danton Heinen.

Chinakhov scored his first goal for the Penguins Jan. 3 against the Detroit Red Wings. He received some boos in the first period when shown on the Blue Jackets' jumbotron sitting on the bench. He finished with 12:39 time on ice and a +1 plus-minus rating.

Who was scratched for the Columbus Blue Jackets game against the Pittsburgh Penguins?

The Blue Jackets scratched Sean Monahan and Dysin Mayo in back-to-back games against the Sabres on Jan. 3 and Penguins Jan. 4.

Monahan was a late scratch for "maintenance" ahead of the Blue Jackets' road game against the Senators Dec. 28 and has yet to return to the lineup. Mayo, a defenseman, remains on the roster because of Brendan Smith's lower-body injury, but Mayo was scratched because of the return of Zach Werenski. Smith went on IR on Jan. 2.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Unable to Hold 4-1 Lead, Lose in Overtime to Penguins

By Mark Scheig - January 4, 2026

Anytime the Columbus Blue Jackets and Pittsburgh Penguins get together for a game, crazy stuff seems to happen. It did again on Sunday afternoon in front of a sellout crowd at Nationwide Arena.

Sidney Crosby scored the game-winning goal in overtime to help lift the Penguins to a 5-4 win over the Blue Jackets. Rickard Rakell tied the game with just 14 seconds left in regulation to complete a comeback from down 4-1 in the second period.

The story of this game was how the Blue Jackets again let a three-goal lead slip away against a division rival.

Game Recap

It was the Penguins, coming off an impressive 4-1 win in Detroit on Saturday, who got the scoring started. Ville Koivunen, who entered the lineup in place of Ruter McGroarty, finished a rebound just 1:50 into the game.

The Blue Jackets didn't have a shot on goal up until the first TV timeout. They were able to find their game and momentum thanks to a timely goal by Dmitri Voronkov.

Denton Mateychuk's shot was tipped by Voronkov to make it 1-1. The Blue Jackets then quickly made it 2-1 thanks to another goal by Mason Marchment. He scored just 27 seconds after Voronkov did.

Before the first was over, Zach Werenski made a great pass to an open Kirill Marchenko to make 3-1 Blue Jackets after 20 minutes. Then just 47 seconds into the second, Werenski scored to make it 4-1 becoming the first Blue Jacket defenseman ever to record multi-point games in five consecutive games.

From then on, the Penguins turned up the energy and dictated the pace. Jet Greaves was great keeping 4-1 until a big turnover opened the door for the Penguins to start their comeback.

With 3:09 left in the second, Noel Acciari beat Greaves to cut it to 4-2. A sequence of three consecutive turnovers led to the lead being cut to two. The moment had the here we go again feeling. It played out exactly like that.

It took the Penguins just 3:28 into the third for Tommy Novak to make it 4-3. The Blue Jackets didn't have the puck much. Even when they did, they were unable to make enough plays.

The Penguins pulled goalie Arturs Silovs down 4-3. While the Blue Jackets got an initial clear, they needed one more. They didn't get it. They paid the price.

Rakell scored with 14 seconds left to tie it. Crosby then won it in overtime. Charlie Coyle tried going to the bench on a change and couldn't get back into the play. Some Blue Jackets' players stayed on the ice thinking the play was offside. That wasn't the case. It was another golden opportunity wasted to get a big regulation win.

The Blue Jackets will spend Monday traveling to San Jose and will play the Sharks late Tuesday night. Meanwhile, the Penguins sweep the weekend and will enjoy Monday off. The Penguins will enjoy a few days off before hosting the New Jersey Devils on Thursday night.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Once Maligned Penalty Kill Becoming a Strength

By Mark Scheig - January 4, 2026

The Columbus Blue Jackets ended the 10-game winning streak of the Buffalo Sabres on Saturday afternoon. Five different goal scorers contributed to their 5-1 win.

A big part of this win for the Blue Jackets was their penalty kill. They killed all five Sabres' power plays while outscoring them 1-0. Brendan Gaunce took advantage of Tage Thompson falling and beat goalie Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen on the breakaway.

Remember how awful the Blue Jackets penalty kill was to start the season? It seemed like every power play against them would result in a goal against. It operated at 50% for a handful of games. It looked messy and discombobulated.

However, since the middle of December, it's been a much different story for the Blue Jackets' penalty kill. While they enter play on Sunday still 28th in the NHL at 76.1% on the season, that's a noticeable improvement.

Since Dec 20, the Blue Jackets have killed 19 of 20 penalties for a 95% success rate. Going back to Dec 13, that rate is 89.3%. There is more flow to that area of their game as well as confidence.

What has gone into this turnaround? Defenseman Zach Werenski, goaltender Jet Greaves and head coach Dean Evason all shared their thoughts.

Player Perspectives

"I think we're all on the same page right now," Werenski said. "I feel like maybe early on, there was a little gray area, maybe a little miscommunication from guys. If there was one breakdown, it seemed like we'd compound it with more breakdowns. I feel like now we really have a grasp on what we're doing out there and guys are reading off each other. They're not compounding mistakes with other mistakes. And we're just being patient and it's working for us."

"That's a huge part of the game is the penalty kill, both special teams. Tonight, we only got one power play but I feel like our kill is a big reason why we win 5-1."

Early on, it seemed like the Blue Jackets were reacting to plays letting other teams dictate the pace. Now, the Blue Jackets are being more aggressive and dictating the pace to other teams.

The Blue Jackets smothered the Sabres on Saturday. No matter who had the puck, a Blue Jacket was attacking. Even when the Sabres got setup, the Blue Jackets were in good positions to block shots and allow Greaves to see shots coming at him.

Greaves echoed Werenski's thoughts on the penalty kill and what he's seeing in front of him. In his mind, the team is more in line now than at the start of the season.

"I think there's just a lot of cohesiveness right now," Greaves said. "I think everyone understands what we're supposed to be doing and I think it's been effective. I think the compete level is good. And I think there's a lot of those details that sometimes, you're doing things well and pucks end up in the net. Sometimes, you're doing them well and they don't."

“I think we’ve been having good results lately. But I think the process has been good too.”

Coaching Perspective

For Evason, he and his staff are constantly evaluating all areas of the penalty kill. Good teams are able to clear pucks with consistency. That has been a much-improved area in the head coach’s eyes.

“I think our clears have been way better,” Evason said. “I think when we were getting in trouble early in the year, we were struggling to get pucks out of our zone. We were giving them second, third opportunities. We’ve been able to get pucks down fairly early in the penalty kills that’s killing them 20 seconds or so. It’s a big chunk. If you remember earlier in the year, we were getting scored on right at the end there. If we could have bit off a little bit more earlier in the penalty kills, maybe that wouldn’t have happened.”

“But I think guys are very prideful. Obviously, it wasn’t good for a stretch there. I think they’ve really concentrated a lot on doing the right things to kill penalties.”

Final Thoughts

The resurgence of the Blue Jackets’ penalty kill has allowed them to get important momentum in games. Outscoring the Sabres 1-0 while shorthanded on Saturday puts that into perspective.

This is a more confident group that better knows their assignments. It shows by how aggressive they are attacking teams not just in their own zone, but in all areas of the ice.

This area of their game will have to continue being a strength for them if they want to climb back into the playoff race. They will get a chance to do it again against the Pittsburgh Penguins, a team that is operating at 29.6% on the power play, third in the NHL.

Three weeks is a small sample size to be sure. But it does indicate that things are trending in the right direction. It’s also led to some important wins of late.

But if there is an important takeaway in this, it’s that the players believe they are on the same page now unlike earlier in the season. That should ultimately give everyone more confidence moving forward.

The Hockey Writers / 3 Takeaways From Blue Jackets' Complete Team Win Over the Sabres

By Matthew Buhrmann - January 4, 2026

The Columbus Blue Jackets bounced back in a big way over the visiting Buffalo Sabres on Saturday at a final score of 5-1. After blowing a 2-0 lead in the third period a few nights before against the New Jersey Devils, the Blue Jackets were dominant for a full 60 minutes over the Sabres to open January.

The Sabres came in on a 10-game winning streak, tying the longest in franchise history, and the Blue Jackets ended it emphatically.

Five different skaters scored for the Blue Jackets: Denton Mateychuk, Brendan Gaunce, Dimitri Voronkov, Mathieu Olivier, and Cole Sillinger, while Jet Greaves stopped 32 of 33 Sabres shots on goal. In his return from injury, Zach Werenski finished with two assists and logged 23:12 of ice time, a little less than his usual workload. Mateychuk also finished with two points.

Here are three takeaways from the 5-1 win.

A Full Team Effort

This was a true team win. The top line of Mason Marchment – Adam Fantilli – Kirill Marchenko was held off the scoresheet, but the Blue Jackets still got five goals from five different players. The sold-out crowd appreciated the effort, and the team delivered one of its most complete performances of the season.

The Blue Jackets also got traffic in front and drove toward the net, which paid off on Olivier's goal as he cut to the crease on his backhand and finished. The defense helped by breaking pucks out cleanly and getting the forwards moving up ice with speed, seen in a few of the goals Saturday.

The Blue Jackets played with more jump and pace in all three zones and were the harder forechecking team for most of the 60 minutes. They avoided the costly mistakes that have hurt them throughout the season, protected a multi-goal lead, and weathered Buffalo's push late in the second and early third periods.

Greaves Continues to Prove Himself

Greaves delivered another calm and steady performance and continues to look like the clear number-one option in net. He stopped 32 of 33 shots and stayed composed throughout the night, especially during Buffalo's late push in the second period.

The defensive play in front of him was solid, and the team did a much better job limiting costly turnovers. They did not hang him out to dry the way they did in the third period on New Year's Eve against the Devils. It was a complete team effort in all three zones, and Greaves benefited from the structure and support around him.

According to moneypuck.com, Greaves faced 48 low-danger shot attempts, 13 medium-danger attempts, and only two high-danger attempts. The lone goal scored on him in the first period came on a medium-danger chance. Overall, the Blue Jackets kept the Sabres to the outside, cleared pucks out of the crease, and blocked shots throughout the game. The team finished with 13 blocked shots, led by

Gaunce with three. Marchment added two and continues to provide much-needed forward depth with his defensive effort, offensive ability, and toughness.

Greaves remained calm, collected, and consistent between the pipes, giving the Blue Jackets exactly what they needed. He is the clear number-one goalie moving forward this season.

PK Success Continues

The Blue Jackets' penalty kill was aggressive and a major factor in the win. Columbus finished a perfect 5-for-5, including an important kill on the Dante Fabbro penalty to start the third period with a 4-1 lead. This was at a critical juncture of the game, and the Blue Jackets did not allow the Sabres to gain any momentum.

The turning point came earlier in the game. After a bad turnover led to Josh Doan's tying goal, the momentum could have shifted. Instead, Gaunce responded with a shorthanded goal that swung the game back in the Blue Jackets' favor and turned out to be the game-winner.

Both of Gaunce's goals this season have come shorthanded, and they are the only two shorthanded goals of his 205-game NHL career.

Gaunce explained the mindset on the penalty kill post-game.

"I think the way we're killing, we're applying some pressure up top, so anytime there's a bobble, we're trying to apply pressure."

He also added more about his momentum-swinging shorthanded goal.

"I think obviously there was a little bit of a mishap there, and I just tried to capitalize. I was waiting for him (goaltender Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen) to take a step back and trying to catch him a little bit by surprise, but as soon as he started to back up, I tried to shoot it five-hole."

The Blue Jackets put pressure on the Sabres throughout their power plays, blocked shots, got clears when they needed them, and won important faceoffs to slow Buffalo's momentum. It was one of their best penalty-killing efforts of the season and was one of the reasons they were able to stop a red-hot Sabres squad.

The penalty kill now sits at 76.8% on the season, still ranked 28th in the NHL, but drastic improvements have been made.

The Blue Jackets will host their rival Pittsburgh Penguins Sunday (Jan. 4) for another 3:00 PM EST start, which will also mark Yegor Chinakhov's return to Nationwide Arena after being traded earlier this week.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Put Decisive End to Sabres' 10-Game Winning Streak

By Mark Scheig - January 3, 2026

The Columbus Blue Jackets started a huge weekend of home games when the Buffalo Sabres and their 10-game winning streak came to Nationwide Arena. It started as well as it could have with a decisive win.

Brendan Gaunce scored what turned out to be the game-winning goal shorthanded in the first period and the Blue Jackets cruised from there. They put an end to the Sabres' winning streak with a 5-1 win in front of a sellout crowd of 18,809 Saturday afternoon.

The story of this game was the Blue Jackets' work on the defensive end in multiple areas of their game.

Game Recap

It only took the Blue Jackets three minutes to open the scoring. Denton Mateychuk accepted a drop pass from Boone Jenner. Mateychuk's shot was perfectly placed at the far post. It beat Sabres' goalie Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen for the 1-0 lead.

The Blue Jackets were in early control until a turnover in their own zone led to the tying goal. The Josh's connected as Norris found Doan across the crease for a 1-1 game.

Then in what turned out to be the key turning point in the game, the Blue Jackets made it 2-1. Goalie Jet Greaves made a big save at one end. Then while shorthanded, Gaunce took advantage of Tage Thompson falling. The breakaway goal was converted and gave the Blue Jackets momentum they ultimately wouldn't relinquish.

Just three minutes later, Dmitri Voronkov scored through Luukkonen's pads. The puck just barely cleared the line before Bo Byram swept it away. 3-1 was the score after the first.

The Blue Jackets played a solid second period defensively not allowing the Sabres much time or space. At 8:04 of the period, Mathieu Olivier drove down the ice and beat multiple Sabres' defenders and Luukkonen for a 4-1 lead. Shots after two were 27-21 Blue Jackets.

Would the Blue Jackets finally figure the third period out after what happened Wednesday night? Not only did they figure it out, they put on a clinic locking the Sabres and the game down.

The only goal of the third was scored on an empty netter by Cole Sillinger. After Ivan Provorov and Zach Benson got offsetting penalties, coach Lindy Ruff pulled Luukkonen for a 5-on-4 advantage. Sillinger took advantage for a 5-1 lead.

Greaves made that hold up. He finished the game with 32 saves and is now 3-0 all-time against the Sabres. The Blue Jackets' penalty kill, which was awful at the start of the season, turned in a 5 for 5 performance Saturday. Since the middle of December, they've been one of the best penalty kills in the NHL.

Postgame, Zach Werenski said their penalty kill was a big reason for their win. He also recorded two assists making it four games in a row with multi-point games.

The loss marked Jarmo Kekalainen's first loss as general manager of the Sabres.

The Blue Jackets are right back at it Sunday afternoon when they host the Pittsburgh Penguins at Nationwide Arena. The Sabres will now get a couple days off before hosting the Vancouver Canucks Tuesday night looking to start a new streak.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' News & Rumors: Olympian Werenski, Heinen & More

By Mark Scheig - January 3, 2026

It was widely expected. But Columbus Blue Jackets' defenseman Zach Werenski got the call he's waited his whole life for.

Werenski is now officially a member of Team U.S.A. for the upcoming Olympic Games in Milan and Cortina. He became the second member of the Blue Jackets to get a call for these games along with goaltender Elvis Merzlikins who will suit up for Team Latvia.

For an NHL player, there are two professional dreams in life. One is to win the Stanley Cup. The other is to win gold at the Olympics. Werenski will finally get his chance to add a gold medal to his collection.

The moment he found out certainly wasn't lost on him either.

Werenski's Rise

Even though Werenski's inclusion on the U.S. Olympic Team was expected, the gravity of the moment for him could be heard in the way he initially reacted to the news.

GM Bill Guerin called Werenski and asked him if he was ready for Milan. Just listen to the reaction before saying he was more than ready.

It was in that moment that one of Werenski's lifelong dreams became a reality. It was the culmination of a lifetime of hard work and dedication to becoming a better hockey player.

In particular, Werenski's performance in the NHL and on the international stage showed everyone that is he among the best in the world. Consider for a moment what he has accomplished of late.

- 2025 Norris Trophy finalist, finished runner up to Cale Makar.
- Helped Team U.S.A. win the Men's World Championship in 2025 for the first time in 92 years.
- Finished as the leading scorer in the 4-Nations Faceoff with six points.

Werenski could be on his way to another Norris finalist nomination. He leads his team in scoring going into Saturday by nine points. He's second in goals by a defenseman with 14 and leads all defensemen with 13 goals at even strength. He's tied for second in points by a defenseman with 40. He averages 26:48 per game.

Werenski spoke with the media on Friday about getting the call to the Olympics.

"It's an incredible feeling," Werenski said. "It's an incredible honor. I had an idea, I guess I hoped I made the team based on play the last few years and how I played in the U.S.A. events. But to actually get the phone call and hear from Billy and it's official, nothing can really prepare you for that feeling."

What makes this moment even more special is that it's the first time in the career of several players including Werenski that he'll get to partake in the Olympics. Not since 2014 has there been NHL players at the Winter Olympics.

Werenski will get his moment in Milan. For now, his focus is a return to the Blue Jackets. He is expected to play on Saturday against the Buffalo Sabres and their 10-game winning streak. A regulation win here would put the Blue Jackets within four of the Sabres who hold the second wildcard spot going into Saturday.

Heinen's Expected Debut

The Yegor Chinkahov trade finally happened. He's off to the Pittsburgh Penguins. Meanwhile, the Blue Jackets got three assets in return. Two of them were future draft picks. The other could make his Blue Jackets' debut on Saturday.

Danton Heinen is now on his fifth NHL team after spending time with the Boston Bruins, Anaheim Ducks, Pittsburgh Penguins and Vancouver Canucks. He entered Saturday three games short of 600 in his NHL career.

Heinen was assigned to the AHL right after the trade. The Penguins put him on waivers before the deal. Because he cleared waivers, any team who acquired him could immediately assign him to the AHL.

However, the injury to Miles Wood opened the door for the Blue Jackets to call up Heinen. While Heinen has been known as a dependable bottom-six player, he has multiple double-digit goal seasons on his resume.

If Heinen takes Wood's spot in the lineup, he could open as a top-six winger playing with Cole Sillinger and Dmitri Voronkov. Since it's a week-to-week injury for Wood, Heinen could see significant game action in the near term.

Side Dishes

- Mason Marchment has six points in his first five Blue Jackets' games. He'll look to continue an already historic start with the team Saturday.
- In Werenski's absence, Denton Mateychuk averaged 25:29 TOI per game.
- Werenski enters Saturday with a streak of three consecutive games with multiple points and four of his last five games. He has 29 points in his last 19 games.
- Jet Greaves' December stats in 10 games: 2.29 goals against and a .922 save percentage.
- Big matchup to watch Saturday. The Sabres have the NHL's second-best penalty kill. The Blue Jackets are 6 of their last 14 on the power play against the Sabres overall. Special teams could go a long way in deciding if the streak lives on.