



Columbus Blue Jackets Media Clips September 24-25, 2025

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[NHL.com / Blue Jackets season preview: Coyle, Wood could help contend for playoffs](#)

By Dan Rosen – September 25, 2025

The 2025-26 NHL regular season begins on Oct. 7. Leading up to the season opener, NHL.com is identifying six things to watch for each team. Today, the Columbus Blue Jackets.

Last season: 40-33-9, fourth in Metropolitan Division; missed Stanley Cup Playoffs

Coach: Dean Evason (second season)

Biggest challenge

The Blue Jackets have to build on the progress they made last season, when they finished two points behind the New Jersey Devils for third place in the Metropolitan Division and the Montreal Canadiens for the second wild card into the playoffs from the Eastern Conference. Despite missing the playoffs, they authored one of the most inspiring stories of the season by battling all season for a berth while simultaneously celebrating the life of teammate Johnny Gaudreau and mourning his tragic death. The Blue Jackets improved by 23 points from 2023-24, when they finished last in the East with 66 points, but now they have to take the next step as a team and grow beyond one on the playoff bubble.

How they make playoffs

Columbus will contend for the postseason with improved overall team defense, led by Zach Werenski, who was a finalist for the Norris Trophy after the defenseman led the team with 82 points (23 goals, 59 assists) and was plus-12 in 81 games. Scoring was not a problem last season; the Blue Jackets averaged 3.26 goals per game, which tied for seventh in the League with the Toronto Maple Leafs. They scored more goals (267) than five of the eight Eastern teams that qualified for the playoffs, but also allowed 3.26 goals-against per game, which was 25th in the NHL. Improving in one-goal games will go a long way; they were 13-7-9 in games decided by one goal, a .448 winning percentage that was 22nd. Thirteen of the 16 playoff teams finished with a better one-goal winning percentage, all at least .545. Columbus also has to be a better road team; it was 27th in road points last season with 32, going 14-23-4 away from Nationwide Arena. The Blue Jackets were 26-10-5 at home, their 57 points tied with the Ottawa Senators for eighth.

Most intriguing addition

Forwards Charlie Coyle and Miles Wood were acquired in a trade with the Colorado Avalanche on June 27. Both are expected to be in the bottom six, but Coyle is expected to slot in as the third-line center, an important role on any team, especially one that needs to improve defensively. The 33-year-old right-handed shot had 35 points (17 goals, 18 assists) in 83 games last season split between the Boston Bruins and Avalanche. He has been defensively reliable in his career and can win face-offs. Coyle should be a fit behind Sean Monahan and Adam Fantilli, Columbus' top two centers.

Biggest potential surprise

The No. 1 goalie job is up for grabs, and for the first time in a long time it's possible Elvis Merzlikins could be pushed out of the role. Jet Greaves had a strong finish to last season, winning his last five starts with four goals-against and two shutouts, and it opened the door for him to challenge Merzlikins for the starting job. That will be determined in training camp, but it wouldn't be overly surprising considering Merzlikins' recent struggles; his .896 save percentage in 183 games since 2021-22 is last among the 18 goalies who have played at least 180 games in that span and his 3.41 goals-against average is 17th of 18. Greaves, 24, went undrafted and has 82 wins, a 2.87 GAA and .909 save percentage in 158 games the past four seasons with Cleveland of the American Hockey League.

Ready to contribute

Luca Del Bel Belluz, a 21-year-old forward, is a longshot to make the roster out of camp, but he could be one of the first recalls from Cleveland if he isn't in the lineup on opening night. Del Bel Belluz, a second-

round pick (No. 44) in the 2022 NHL Draft, had eight points (two goals, six assists) in 15 games for Columbus last season and 53 points (27 goals, 26 assists) in 61 AHL games. The Blue Jackets are bringing back 15 of their top 18 scorers from last season, including 10 forwards and five defensemen. They added Coyle, Wood and forward Isac Lundestrom up front, which will make it hard for Del Bel Belluz or anyone else to crack the lineup right out of camp unless there are injuries.

Fantasy sleeper with EDGE stats

Boone Jenner, F: He didn't make his season debut until Feb. 22 because of shoulder surgery, but the Blue Jackets captain was still productive with 19 points (seven goals, 12 assists) and 70 shots on goal in 26 games. Jenner (199 goals) is one goal away from joining Rick Nash (289) and Cam Atkinson (213) as the only players to score 200 goals for the Blue Jackets in their history. He has a high fantasy ceiling for Columbus, which led the NHL in 5-on-5 goals last season (201), especially given his strong hits coverage (2.24 per game in career). Per NHL EDGE stats, Jenner ranked among the League leaders in high-danger goals in both 2023-24 (18; 94th percentile) and 2022-23 (17; 92nd percentile). -- *Troy Perlowitz*

Projected lineup

Dmitri Voronkov -- Sean Monahan -- Kirill Marchenko

Boone Jenner -- Adam Fantilli -- Yegor Chinakhov

Cole Sillinger -- Charlie Coyle -- Kent Johnson

Miles Wood -- Isac Lundestrom -- Mathieu Olivier

Zach Werenski -- Dante Fabbro

Denton Mateychuk -- Ivan Provorov

Damon Severson -- Erik Gudbranson

Elvis Merzlikins

Jet Greaves

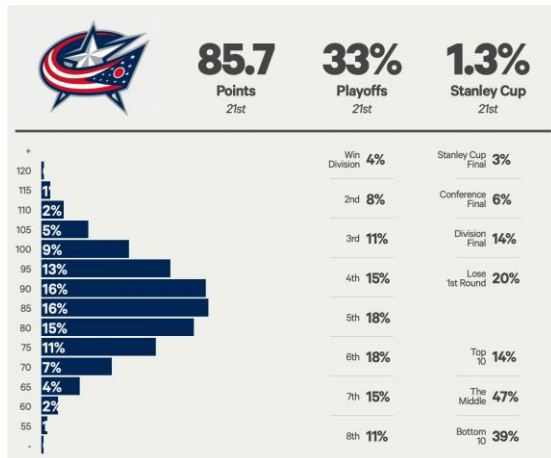
The Athletic / Columbus Blue Jackets 2025-26 season preview: Playoff chances, projected points, roster rankings

By Dom Luszczyszyn, Sean Gentile and Shayna Goldman - September 25, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets, top to bottom, deserve an immense amount of credit for their 2024-25 season. The grief that followed the tragic death of Johnny Gaudreau gave way to inspiration, appreciation and on-ice growth that quite nearly ended in a playoff berth.

“The other day, I was saying how grateful I am to have come to this team at the time I did,” center Adam Fantilli said before training camp. “I feel like as I’ve gotten here it’s been a progression, and that’s been really good to see.”

“I don’t know the best way to say it, but we’re a confident team right now. We expect to make the playoffs. If we don’t, it’s going to feel like a failure, and that does change the way you go into a season.” It changes the way they’re viewed going into a season, too.



The projection

Safe to say this projection is a lot kinder than last year’s.

While (almost) no one expected the Blue Jackets to sniff the playoffs (which [inspired](#) this year’s changes to the underlying simulation), the challenge will be in following it up. Can the Blue Jackets continue to grow or will they take a step back after a surprising surge?

Finding the balance between those two worlds isn’t easy. The Blue Jackets are in line for a market correction after overachieving last season, but they also had a lot of emerging players establish themselves as difference-makers. Further growth feels more than possible. Add a potentially large internal improvement in net and there’s a good chance the Blue Jackets can stay in the playoff hunt this season.

Anything more or less is possible in this sport, but at the very least, Columbus has raised its baseline. With newfound expectations, though, comes the rising pressure to meet them.

The big question

Is Adam Fantilli primed for another jump?

If you catch Fantilli at the right time, you’d swear that the jump had already taken place — and you might not be wrong. Last season, as a 20-year-old, he continued to build his case as a franchise player-in-waiting, a true No. 1 center with the physical profile and fine skills you see from an elite piece at the top of a contender’s lineup.

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The No. 3 draft pick in 2023, Fantilli scored 31 goals — including 26 at five-on-five, tied for second-most in the league, and 28 in the final 61 games of his second NHL season. The way he goes about scoring those goals, with a mix of size, skill and the ability to beat defenders one-on-one, can be striking. You're unlikely to find players who more decisively pass the eye test, in other words, and that helped Fantilli push his way into Player Tiers.

"You have to have Adam Fantilli on this list," one executive told us. "Who scores 30 goals at 20 years old, skates like the wind and hits like a truck?"

The question that follows, and it's a fair one, is why Fantilli needed to be argued into the top 150 in the first place. For one, he only narrowly missed; toward the bottom of the list, the players become a bit more interchangeable. We didn't forget about him, and we were glad to hear from NHL sources so firmly in his corner.

The more important point, though, is that while Fantilli leveled up in terms of putting the puck in the net, jumping from a 10.4 shooting percentage to 16.2, some elements of his game either stagnated or regressed a bit in Year 2. Those might not affect his long-term projection, but it's reasonable to wonder what kind of effect, if unaddressed, a dip in shooting percentage would have on the overall shape of his 2025-26 season.

The biggest cause for concern: The Blue Jackets, by several measures, were a less effective team with Fantilli on the ice at five-on-five than they'd been his rookie season. His expected goal share dipped, which was largely the result of less offense by the lines he centered. He carries some degree of blame there, because his on-ice contributions to shots and scoring chances went from above average among centers as a rookie to below average as a sophomore, according to All Three Zones tracking data. These aren't red flags. They're not reasons to bail on Fantilli as a short- or long-term difference maker. They're a helpful reminder, though, that development isn't always linear, and that there's more to production than simply putting the puck in the net.

A big reason to believe in another season's worth of positive steps: The possibility that Fantilli and Kent Johnson pick up where they left off. In roughly 335 minutes with them on the ice together, Columbus broke even in shot and shot-attempt shares, held a minor edge in expected-goal share, dominated in high-danger scoring chances and outscored opponents 21-13. Johnson, another high first-round pick, is only two years older than Fantilli and, as a play-making winger, certainly seems like a potential long-term partner. Both played for Canada (under coach Dean Evason) at the 2025 World Championships. Mix in all that — Fantilli's skillset, his production, his linemates, his age and his personality — and it's easy to see this season being even more of a breakout than 2025-26. He's projected to be a solid 2C behind Sean Monahan, but it's clear to all he's capable of much more.

The wild card

Can Jet Greaves push Columbus closer to the playoffs?

When the Blue Jackets' playoff chances dwindled down the stretch, a surprising name gave them a spark. Greaves gave Columbus a chance to win with five straight quality starts, earning a 0.975 save percentage and 13.1 GSAX.


Can he do it again?

Probably not to that degree. Those aren't sustainable numbers for the best goalies in the league, let alone a 24-year-old with 21 career NHL games.

Goaltending is a volatile position filled with ups and downs within a single season and year to year. So the expectation should be that Greaves' numbers will come back down to earth the more he plays. It's not like Columbus is a stout team that will insulate him, anyway.

But that doesn't mean that Greaves can't make a difference. His play across 11 NHL games last season indicates that he could be ready for the big leagues, and so does his 0.920 save percentage in 40 games in Cleveland. And there's space for him to grow and play pretty consistently in Columbus, considering how Elvis Merzlikins' game has trended.

Greaves' name came up in Player Tiers conversations as a riser to watch for good reason. If that can come together sooner than later, it should help move the needle for Columbus.

COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS				DEPTH CHART	
	Offensive Rating	Defensive Rating	Net Rating		
	-0.4	-7.5	-7.9	18th	21st
				22nd	22nd
					
Forwards					
	-5.9	-5.5	-11.4	22nd	22nd
Kirill Marchenko	+7.8	+1.7	+9.5	26%	
Sean Monahan	+8.3	+0.6	+8.8	44%	
Kent Johnson	+4.3	-0.4	+3.9	25%	
Dmitri Voronkov	+3.9	-1.1	+2.7	34%	
Boone Jenner	+1.8	-0.1	+1.5	51%	
Adam Fantilli	+2.9	-2.0	+0.9	74%	
Yegor Chinakhov	-1.4	+0.4	-1.0	77%	
Charlie Coyle	-4.7	-0.2	-4.9	24%	
Cole Sillinger	-4.2	-1.7	-5.9	27%	
Mathieu Olivier	-7.5	-0.5	-8.0	13%	
Isac Lundestrom	-9.6	+0.1	-9.5	18%	
Miles Wood	-7.2	-2.3	-9.5	53%	
Defensemen					
	+5.5	-2.0	+3.5	8th	11th
Zach Werenski	+15.4	+1.5	+16.8	94%	
Dante Fabbro	-0.3	+2.3	+2.0	36%	
Ivan Provorov	-1.6	-0.4	-2.0	18%	
Damon Severson	-0.4	-1.8	-2.2	47%	
Denton Mateychuk	-2.0	-1.8	-3.8	55%	
Erik Gudbranson	-5.6	-1.7	-7.3	39%	
Goaltenders					
			-0.0	23rd	
Jet Greaves			+3.7	30%	
Elvis Merzlikins			-3.7	45%	

The strengths

Zach Werenski is awesome. Going into 2025-26, only Cale Makar and Adam Fox have a higher projected Net Rating among defensemen (we all know Quinn Hughes is better, but his return from injury dinged his value). Werenski has essentially solidified himself as top-five at the position. His emergence into the league's upper echelon is what finally offers Columbus the hope of contention. Werenski is a superstar. That wasn't the case last season, when Werenski's projected Net Rating was half of that at plus-7, a byproduct of weaker offense and suspect defense.

On the offensive front, Werenski's primary point rate at five-on-five jumped from 1.03 to 1.27 (second to only Makar). He created more chances, and a stronger power play around him helped up his production further. Werenski's puck-moving in all three zones improved, too, leading to an increase in on-ice chances for the Blue Jackets.

The bigger change was a much tighter defensive game. Werenski went from being a more passive player at his blue line to someone who denied entries at a much stronger rate. His expected and actual goals against rate dropped despite him taking on the toughest minutes on the team. That arguably unlocked his entire game, allowing Werenski to dominate even more in the offensive zone. He had career-high xG numbers as a result. Werenski is the focal point of Columbus' entire operation, a true franchise star. It helps to have help, though, and Werenski might finally have that in Dante Fabbro. If Fabbro can repeat last year's performance, that is (a common theme for this team). Fabbro showed potential in Nashville next to Roman Josi, but last season, it felt like his game really blossomed next to Werenski. While Fabbro's current projection isn't quite up to par with an average No. 2, his work last year — when he had a plus-3.9 Defensive Rating — certainly qualifies.

Add potential improvement from 21-year-old Denton Mateychuk, the No. 12 draft pick in 2022, and Columbus' blue line is starting to take shape. Thanks mostly to Werenski, it sits just outside the top 10 in total value.

Werenski's value to the Blue Jackets is rock solid. You can set your watch to it. The team's other potential strength, its top six, is much more theoretical. It all depends on which way things break and how much of last season's breakthrough for a young group is the real deal.

On paper, Columbus' top five forwards are not good enough based on their current projected Net Ratings. Like Fabbro, though, they all qualify based on last season's work. If your glass is half full in Columbus, that's all you need to know.

Kirill Marchenko had a plus-14.9 Net Rating, easily No. 1 forward territory off the strength of a 74-point season, during which every line he was on dominated the puck. He looks like he could be a future star after taking massive leaps in his chance creation and defensive zone transition.

By Net Rating, Monahan was even better, pacing for plus-18.9 and playing the most inspired hockey of his career. Johnson was at plus-7.8 per 82, Dmitri Voronkov was at plus-5.7 and Boone Jenner was at plus-7.9. That doesn't even mention the breakout many expect Fantilli to have.

If Columbus' top five can channel last year's excellence, the top six will be loaded with value — 30 goals higher than forecast. That puts the Blue Jackets squarely in the postseason.

That's a massive "if," though, and it's what currently holds the Blue Jackets back from being on more solid playoff footing.

The weaknesses

The Blue Jackets are a very difficult team to trust going into the 2025-26 season. It's extremely rare for a team to fight for a playoff spot after starting the season with a sub-70 point forecast, and that surprise surge makes things tricky.

Part of that is a result of Columbus shooting 10.5 percent last season — the fifth-highest mark since 2007-08. That's a red flag after they shot 9.1 percent the year before. For those crediting Evason, it's worth mentioning his Wild shot 10.2 percent in his first full season, only to drop to 7.7 percent the following season.

All of that applies directly to the entire top six.

Marchenko's on-ice shooting percentage jumped from 10.1 percent to 11.6 percent. Johnson's went from 9.9 percent to 13.2 percent. Voronkov's went from 8.9 percent to 11.9 percent. Jenner's went from 9.5 percent to 12.7 percent. And the newcomer Monahan went from 10.3 percent in Montreal to 12.0 percent in Columbus.

That's probably not sustainable. While it's fair to assume there's real offensive talent that can create above-average chances that inflate shooting percentage, last season's efficiency went a little too far. What that means is that if Marchenko was on for 53 percent of the expected goals and 66 percent of the actual goals, something between 55 percent to 58 percent is a lot more reasonable. That applies across the board, since every top-six player had a goals percentage that was at least 7.5 percentage points higher than expected. Improving the baseline, in which Columbus had 49 percent of the expected goals, will be critical in offsetting that.

The issue is a lack of history. Marchenko, for example, jumping from a 44 percent xG rate to 53 percent might not be sustainable either. There was real growth in that leap, but that growth might represent 70, 80 or 90 percent of the jump — not all of it.

The relative age of everyone involved is what gives pause in all of this. That could lead to a situation in which the team continues to grow under the hood, even if the results don't follow as some might expect.

The model is merely providing a best guess based on all those factors, including age. In Marchenko's case, that places him somewhere between his minus-2.4 from his rookie year, his plus-2.3 from 2023-24 and last year's monstrous plus-14.9. The upside is clear for him as well as for Johnson, Voronkov and

Fantilli. But it's usually best to err on the side of caution and wait for players to prove they can do it again. Consistency is key.

Beyond the top six potentially regressing, though, the Blue Jackets have other concerns that will likely keep them out of the playoffs.

After Yegor Chinakhov, who may get traded, the bottom six is a sore spot. Charlie Coyle might be better than shown here, but at 33 he could be slowing down. Cole Sillinger took a big step last season, but still presents defensive issues for this role. And while Mathieu Olivier was a nice story, he's still just a fourth-liner.

On defense, the team desperately needs a real No. 2 or 3, depending on how good one feels about Fabbro. Ivan Provorov is better than his underlying numbers suggest; he just shouldn't be used to the extent he's used. He's closer to a No. 4 these days. The top four has a big hole that Damon Severson can't fill and Mateychuk is likely too green for.

In net, Greaves is a true wildcard and the fallback to Merzlikins isn't ideal. It's even worse if the Blue Jackets continue to roll with Merzlikins as the starter. We're currently expecting him to earn 53 percent of the starts and anything more only takes value away from Columbus.

If everything goes according to plan and the kids continue growing, Columbus could surprise again. But the worst case and even the medium case need to be accounted for, too. In both, the Blue Jackets probably don't have enough to be a playoff team.

The best case: 99 points

Last season was no fluke and Columbus' young core takes the next step. Fantilli is a star, Marchenko entrenches himself as one of the league's top wingers, Mateychuk enters the top four and Greaves does the rest. The Blue Jackets arrive as a threat in the East.

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The worst case: 74 points

Last season was a fluke, and shooting percentages regress across the board. The team's defense falls apart and the goaltending struggles as Greaves fails to replicate the flashes of excellence.

The bottom line

The Blue Jackets didn't just exceed expectations last year — they shattered them. That progression doesn't make the 2025-26 version of the team a playoff lock just yet, but it still matters. Columbus set the bar higher for this season, and now it's up to this growing group to meet it, or push it even further.

The Athletic / Veteran Blue Jacket Damon Severson hopes for new path forward after summer sit-down

By Aaron Portzline— September 24, 2025

COLUMBUS — Most of the Columbus Blue Jackets' established players — Zach Werenski, Sean Monahan, Boone Jenner, etc. — haven't yet played in a preseason game. But when they do, coach Dean Evason plans to tinker with different partners and pairings.

There are reasons Evason is getting creative. He wants to know what might work if injuries force him to change the lineup, but he also hopes to keep opponents on alert by developing wild-card options that can be kept in his pocket for certain situations.

It boils down to this, though: At forward, Evason has options. On defense, he has questions.

The Blue Jackets found success last season after they claimed right-handed defender Dante Fabbro off waivers to play with Werenski on the top pair, and after they elevated rookie Denton Mateychuk from AHL Cleveland to partner with Ivan Provorov on the second pair.

The harsh reality is that neither move may have been necessary if veteran Damon Severson was playing like the Blue Jackets expected after they lured him away from the New Jersey Devils with a massive contract two summers ago.

Severson fell so out of favor by the end of last season that he was a healthy scratch in the final nine games, just as the Blue Jackets were making a frantic push for a spot in the Stanley Cup playoffs. They fell just two points (or one win) short.

Much was made of the pre-training camp meeting Evason had with winger Yegor Chinakhov, whose summer trade request appears to have been put on hold. But another important meeting took place about a month before Chinakhov's.

GM Don Waddell and Evason, both entering their second seasons in Columbus, met with Severson in late July when he and half of the roster were back in town in advance of Werenski's wedding.

"The way the season ended, with a player like myself, (I don't think you) can go a whole summer and just expect things to be smoothed over, like, 'Yeah, it's all good,'" Severson said. "That's not really how things work, no matter if it's a hockey team or in life."

Understandably, neither side would divulge the specifics of what was discussed. But it's probably not difficult to figure out, either.

"We had a great meeting," Evason said. "We discussed how last year went and how we need to communicate moving forward. We have an understanding of his thought process, and he has ours in how we want him to play the game. He's a big part of our hockey team."

"Do we want him out of the lineup? Of course not. We're looking forward to us all getting on the same page and moving forward."

Severson is a fluid skater, who (when he's playing well) makes smart, quick, sharp passes to help move the puck quickly up the ice. He isn't a pure offensive defenseman necessarily. But he is opportunistic with the puck, and he creates most of his production with his first-pass ability.

But that player has only sporadically been seen with the Blue Jackets.

Severson, 31, surmised that he was "trying too hard" to be a massive addition to the Blue Jackets in 2023-24 after former GM Jarmo Kekalainen worked a sign-and-trade with New Jersey and signed Severson to an eight-year, \$50 million contract.

But last season, his second in Columbus, didn't look much different. Again, there were stretches where Severson played well. But there were some dreadful turnovers, which led to damaged confidence and a wave of self-doubt. He looked heavy and indecisive on the ice.

Severson would not argue any of that.

"When I watched my games and watched my shift to try and see what I can do better, it was just so evident," Severson said. "The first half (of the season) compared to the second half ... I wasn't the same player. That's the part that eats at you a little bit. You'd think you'd be able to say, 'Well, why wasn't I the same player? Snap out of it!' Well, it's not that easy.

"Confidence is the biggest thing. And when that gets taken away from you a little bit, you try to keep it super simple. When I get the puck on my stick, I want to make a play. But when the confidence isn't there, you're just shooting it away. Your forwards are looking at you like, 'We know you can make that play. Why aren't you?'"

Severson is signed through the 2030-31 season. But forget the contract for a moment. The Blue Jackets need to get him on track because he can help them get over the hump and end a five-year playoff drought.

Evason has tried to set up Severson for success from the first day of training camp. He's teamed with Provorov on the second pair, putting Provorov (left) and Severson (right) back in their comfort spots.

That pair made their preseason debut on Monday in a 4-0 loss to the Buffalo Sabres. Severson looked shaky in the first period on a couple of shifts, but seemed to settle in as the game moved along. (Hey, it's the preseason, right?) He played 23:09 with an even rating and two shots on goal.

Severson is ready to put last season — the last two seasons, really — in the rear-view mirror.

"I can only control what I control and take care of my business," Severson said. "(Last season) is the past. It sucks when you're going through it. But you go through it and you try to support the team. That's all you can do.

"Now it's a matter of doing it and proving I can do it every day, just be the person I know I can be and the person my teammates and everybody around this organization needs me to be."

The Columbus Dispatch / Greaves tops takeaways from Columbus Blue Jackets' preseason win over Pittsburgh Penguins

By Brian Hedger – September 24, 2025

The Blue Jackets have shown a little rust during their first four preseason games, but they've got three games left to tune things up.

They've also gotten excellent goaltending thus far, a trend Jet Greaves continued in a 4-1 victory over the Pittsburgh Penguins on Sept. 24 at Nationwide Arena.

Greaves played the entire game, making 24 saves to help the Jackets improve to 2-2-0 after playing their fourth game in four days. Yegor Chinakhov, Jake Christiansen and Kent Johnson scored goals to give the Blue Jackets a 3-1 lead before Dante Fabbro scored the fourth into an empty net with 3:04 left.

Here are three takeaways:

Greaves stays sharp for Columbus Blue Jackets

Greaves has now stopped 47 of 49 shots he's faced while playing 89:21 over four-plus periods in two of the Blue Jackets' first four exhibition games. That works out to a blistering 1.35 goals-against average and .959 save percentage that's best among the team's top three goalies.

Ivan Fedotov's 1.50 GAA and .950 is a close second, while Elvis Merzlikins is at 4.00/.800 after allowing two goals on 10 shots in his 29:59 while splitting the net with Greaves in the Jackets' 4-0 loss Sept. 22 to the Buffalo Sabres.

Merzlikins' numbers aren't reflective of the way he played in that game, since he played well and had little chance to stop either goal that beat him, but more can be read into what Greaves and Fedotov have done thus far. Each has faced a lot of shots already, and both look sharp while reading plays and tracking pucks.

"It's a different situation your first couple games after the summer," Greaves said. "The traffic is a big thing, so it's just nice to get those reps, see a lot of pucks, be in those situations and feel them out. I've felt comfortable, but things can still be cleaner."

Columbus Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins (90) watches the puck between defenseman Zach Werenski (8) and defenseman Dante Fabbro (15) during the first period of the NHL hockey game against the Philadelphia Flyers at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Tuesday, Dec. 10, 2024.

Werenski, Fabbro pick up where they left off for Columbus Blue Jackets

This was the first preseason action for a handful of veterans, including Zach Werenski and Fabbro. After becoming an effective top defensive pairing last season, they got right back to work in that capacity against the Penguins.

Werenski finished with two points on primary assists leading to goals for Chinakhov and Johnson, while Fabbro finished with two points on a goal and assist. Fabbro's ability to play the right side of that pairing as a right-handed shooter gives Werenski the kind of dependable partner he simply hadn't had since pairing with Seth Jones for the first five years of his NHL career.

Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Jake Christiansen (2) hits Washington Capitals center Aliaksei Protas (21) during the second period of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Dec. 12, 2024.

After re-signing Fabbro and Ivan Provorov to long-term deals in the summer, the Blue Jackets returned their nearly their full group of defensemen from last season. Jack Johnson, a veteran depth option, is the only one who wasn't re-signed, and that spot might be filled by veteran Brendan Smith.

That means Jake Christiansen, who played 68 games last season, came to training camp needing to solidify his NHL roster spot while also pushing to stay in the lineup. Thanks in part to Denton Mateychuk dealing with a minor injury, Christiansen has gotten plenty of ice time to state his case.

He skated on the right side of the second pairing against Pittsburgh, his "off" side as a left-handed shooter, and logged 23:55 while playing his third game in four days and second in a row. Christiansen also netted the game's deciding goal on a power play in the second period to give the Jackets a 2-1 lead.

"I've continued to work on my offense throughout the whole time (I've been a pro)," Christiansen said. "It's always going to be defense first for me, but I think as my game grows, I can keep tapping into that offense a little bit."

[The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Defeat Penguins to Close Four Games in Four Nights Stretch](#)

By Mark Scheig – September 24, 2025

The [Columbus Blue Jackets](#) will get their first off day of Training Camp on Thursday. They'll more than happily take advantage of it after finishing off a four games in four nights stretch with a win.

Yegor Chinakhov recorded a goal and an assist while Jet Greaves played the entire game and made 24 saves to pace the Blue Jackets [to a 4-1 win over the Pittsburgh Penguins](#) on Wednesday night. Jake Christiansen added a goal to continue his stellar camp while Dante Fabbro and Zach Werenski recorded two points each.

The story of this game for the Blue Jackets was several season debuts.

Game Recap

Werenski, Fabbro, Charlie Coyle, Sean Monahan and Boone Jenner all made their season debuts with Coyle's being his Blue Jackets' debut. As you might expect with most preseason games, the players were working to shake the rust off.

The Blue Jackets did give up the first goal of the game when Zach Gallant beat Greaves midway through the first. Then on a power play, Chinakhov picked a corner to tie the game.

Special teams were a big factor in this game. There were 12 total power-play chances between the two teams. The Blue Jackets converted on two of their seven chances. It turned out to be the difference in the game.

Christiansen scored on the power play in the second to make it 2-1. Then Johnson added a 5-on-3 goal in the third for some insurance. Fabbro ended the scoring by hitting the empty net from his own zone.

Postgame, head coach Dean Evason was asked what he thought of his team's progress to this point in camp. He said they like where they're at but have areas they want to improve on. With three more preseason games left more spaced out, things will start to normalize for the Blue Jackets in terms of their upcoming schedule.

Evason also shared an update on defenseman Denton Mateychuk saying that he's close to rejoining the team. There is expected to be one more skate on his own before Mateychuk comes back. That could mean he skates with his teammates Saturday morning.

The Blue Jackets and Penguins will meet again on Saturday night this time in Pittsburgh. The game will be televised on NHL Network. It's the game that Marc-Andre Fleury is expected to play a period in. PPG Paints Arena is expected to be sold out for this reunion.

The Athletic / Why these 4 NHL teams could bounce back and make the 2026 playoffs

By Harman Dayal – September 25, 2025

A new NHL season is around the corner, which means that hope and optimism are at their peak for every franchise. This is a unique season because most of the teams that missed the playoffs last year are trying to improve and get back into the dance, rather than selling off their impact players and committing to a tank/rebuild.

Reality will kick some teams in the teeth quickly once the regular season starts, but for now, there are probably 25 clubs or so that see themselves realistically fighting for the playoffs. But there are only 16 playoff spots to go around.

The NHL has played four 82-game regular seasons since the COVID-19 pandemic. Four or five new playoff teams have emerged in every one of those years, except for the 2023-24 season, during which only three new teams qualified. With that in mind, let's dissect four teams that missed the playoffs last year, who I believe have the best chance of bouncing back and qualifying for the 2026 Stanley Cup playoffs.

Utah Mammoth

Why they could make it: Utah's top-six offensive attack should be primed for a breakthrough. Last year, the Mammoth averaged only 2.93 goals per game, which ranked 21st in the NHL. Newcomer JJ Peterka, who scored 68 points last season, is a strong stylistic fit with Utah's rush-based offensive approach. Logan Cooley (65 points in 75 games) and Dylan Guenther (60 points in 70 games) are two of the best U23 players in the league; they could both break out as point-per-game stars this season.

Between Peterka's arrival, internal growth from Cooley and Guenther, and the superstar, 90-point level that Clayton Keller reached last year, Utah could have some serious star power offensively. Nick Schmaltz and Barrett Hayton are underrated players to round out the top six; Schmaltz has averaged 0.84 points-per-game over his last four years (a 68 points per 82 games pace) and Hayton has evolved into a defensive stud on top of being a 20-goal, 45ish point producer.

The Mammoth were very unlucky that both Sean Durzi (30 games played) and John Marino (35 games played) were injured for most of last season. Injuries affect every organization, but very few teams would be able to make the playoffs without their two best right-handed defensemen in the lineup. Durzi and Marino have historically been durable players, so this season could be our first extended opportunity to see what Utah's full, healthy defensive group looks like after the splashy upgrades they made in the 2024 offseason.

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Utah was also the only team in the top 10 in terms of five-on-five expected goal share to miss the playoffs. The Mammoth didn't always convert puck possession and scoring chances into wins last year — perhaps because they're a younger, inexperienced core — but I'd expect that to change this season. Just look at the impressive company they were in.

Weaknesses that could hold them back: Utah's bottom-six forward group isn't a strength on paper. There is some potential — Lawson Crouse, who only scored 18 points after three straight 20-goal

seasons, is a good bounce-back candidate — but if Crouse doesn't get going, the bottom six might struggle to contribute secondary offense, especially since Josh Doan and Matias Maccelli are gone. The Mammoth blue line is solid, but it's only about league average in quality.

Utah's goaltending could also be prone to ups and downs. Karel Vejmelka is a credible starter, but with the club ready to move on from Connor Ingram, Vitek Vanecek is poised to be the team's backup. Vanecek hasn't posted a save percentage above .900 since the 2022-23 season.

And finally, while there's a high probability that Cooley and Guenther break out, there's always a small but legitimate chance that they plateau this year. Young player development isn't always linear, and players sometimes hit their peak a little later than expected.

Columbus Blue Jackets

Why they could make it: After missing the final wild-card spot by just two points last year, the Blue Jackets could finally be ready to snap their five-year playoff drought.

Columbus is already a dynamic, high-end offensive team led by Zach Werenski's emergence as a bona fide superstar. The Blue Jackets were tied with the Maple Leafs as the seventh-highest scoring team in the NHL last season.

Years of drafting and developing have paid off, as Kirill Marchenko, Adam Fantilli and Kent Johnson all broke out as stars last season. Marchenko scored 74 points, Fantilli racked up 31 goals as a 20-year-old, and Johnson scored at a near 70-point pace. There's a high probability that Fantilli, almost 21, and Johnson, nearly 23, will take another step this year. Yegor Chinakhov could be a sneaky breakout candidate if he stays healthy, too, and you can't forget about Dmitri Voronkov, an underrated power forward, coming off a 23-goal campaign in 73 games. Add Sean Monahan and Boone Jenner as savvy, productive veterans, and you've got a scary top-nine forward group, even if the young players only show modest improvement this season.

The Blue Jackets scored on 10.5 percent of their five-on-five shots last year, which was the third-highest mark in the NHL. There is a chance that their finishing efficiency regresses, preventing the team from achieving elite-level offensive results. However, in polling hockey operations personnel on other teams, there's a belief that Columbus' young forwards are so fast, talented and lethal off the rush that they should maintain an above-average finishing clip, and that they'll only improve as play-drivers this season, too.

Charlie Coyle is a solid pick-up to solidify the Blue Jackets' third-line center role, even if the club arguably overpaid to trade for him.

Overall, this is an electric offensive team with an enviable mix of young, up-and-coming talent and quality veterans. They've become an exceptionally tight-knit team after the Gaudreau brothers' tragedy, and they're well-coached by Dean Evason, who has made this team greater than the sum of its parts.

Weaknesses that could hold them back: As tantalizing as the Blue Jackets' offensive profile is, their inability to keep pucks out of their own net is the last remaining hurdle to a playoff spot.

Defensively, Columbus gave up too much last year, ranking 26th in the NHL for five-on-five scoring chance suppression. Part of that is the growing pains of young players learning how to master their two-way responsibilities, and part of it is that the blue line was in a state of flux early on. The Blue Jackets weren't able to land a high-end top-four defenseman this offseason, but they may already have answers internally that could make their blue line playoff-caliber.

Columbus was in seventh place in the Metro Division, sitting at 5-6-2 when it claimed Dante Fabbro off waivers on Nov. 10. Fabbro was an excellent fit on the top pair with Werenski, and the Blue Jackets had the eighth-best points percentage in the East in their remaining 69 games. Denton Mateychuk's rise could be a game-changer, too. Drafted No. 12 in 2022, Mateychuk dominated the WHL for two years and produced at a near point-per-game clip as a 20-year-old defender in the AHL last season. He was called up to the NHL in late December and performed well in 45 games, averaging 18:02 of ice time per game. Mateychuk is a blue-chip talent and could become a needle-moving top-four driver as soon as this season.

Beyond that, there are the annual concerns in net. Elvis Merzlikins has had a sub-.900 save percentage in three consecutive years as a starter, with the team's save percentage ranking 29th in the NHL over the last three seasons. Jet Greaves, who was excellent in the AHL and spectacular in 11 NHL games at the end of last season (.938 save percentage), could break out and remedy some of those goaltending concerns, but they could be in trouble if he isn't ready for that step.

Vancouver Canucks

Why they could make it: Everything went catastrophically wrong for the Canucks last year. Vancouver's locker room was a dysfunctional mess due to the rift between J.T. Miller and Elias Pettersson. Pettersson mysteriously went from being a 90-100 point franchise centerman to not even cracking 50 points. The Canucks were one of the hardest-hit teams in the league in terms of man games lost, and worse, the effect was mainly felt at the top of the lineup: Quinn Hughes, Filip Hronek and Pettersson all missed significant time due to injury. Thatcher Demko went from being the Vezina Trophy runner-up in 2023-24 to appearing in just 23 games and posting an .889 save percentage because of injuries.

Despite all those worst-case scenarios unfolding, they were still a 90-point team that narrowly missed making the playoffs. If one of Pettersson or Demko bounces back and performs at an elite level (which they both did in 2023-24), that could squeak them into the playoffs. And if both return to form, then the club's postseason chances become even stronger.

Vancouver's blue line, led by Hughes, is probably one of the 10 best six-man units in the NHL. Hughes and Hronek are one of the best first pairs in the league. Behind them, the Canucks' bottom four saw a tremendous improvement after a series of midseason transactions beginning in late January. Marcus Pettersson was acquired from the Penguins and instantly stabilized the second pair. AHL All-Star defense prospect Elias Pettersson was called up and emerged as a standout on the third pair. Bringing those two in, while trading away Carson Soucy and Vincent Desharnais, made a night-and-day difference.

Before the bottom-four defense changes were made, the Canucks' results in non-Hughes minutes were comparable to the Chicago Blackhawks or San Jose Sharks. They were brutally outshot, outchanced and outscored (minus-21 goal differential). After the midseason renovations, however, Vancouver posted a plus-two goal differential in non-Hughes minutes, marking a gargantuan improvement.

You might be wondering: Why didn't the Canucks shoot up the standings if these changes were so impactful? Well, this is the same time that Hughes, who was playing through multiple injuries, faded down the stretch. Hughes was in and out of the lineup at times, and his performance, understandably, suffered as a result of his suboptimal health. Vancouver was outscored by 10 goals during Hughes' five-on-five shifts from Feb. 1 onward.

In other words, we haven't seen yet what this revamped bottom-four defense actually looks like behind a healthy Hughes. That, coupled with a tandem of Demko and Kevin Lankinen, is what the Canucks are banking on as the foundation for the team this season.

Weaknesses that could hold them back: Vancouver's forward group lacks elite, game-breaking talent. Last year, the Canucks didn't have a single forward who hit the 55-point mark, which meant the offense was overwhelmingly reliant on Hughes. It was a struggle all year to score goals, and the club wasn't able to land any substantial upgrades in the offseason — Evander Kane in and Pius Suter out is basically a wash.

Vancouver's center depth, in particular, looks shaky. Pettersson has been a bona fide No. 1 center for most of his NHL career, so you'd like to think he'll rebound, but he's been a shadow of himself since the 2024 All-Star break. This isn't a mini slump; it's been a year and a half since he's performed like an elite player. Filip Chytil played well after being traded to the Canucks and is skilled enough to be a low-end second-line center, but his durability is a huge concern. Chytil has had several concussions in his career (he most recently got another one late last season), which has resulted in him missing 98 games over the last two seasons. It feels like one bad hit could knock him out of the lineup at any time. Lastly, the club also lacks an established 3C with Suter gone.

It's also impossible to know whether Demko will be able to stay healthy all season. Vancouver's No. 1 netminder has a lengthy injury history, even prior to last year. The Canucks have a quality insurance option in Lankinen, who was solid as the club's starter last year, but this group is likely going to need top-10 goaltending to make the playoffs and that becomes a lot harder if Demko runs into injury troubles again.

New York Rangers

Why they could make it: On paper, this is a team with more than enough individual talent to make the playoffs. Between Igor Shesterkin, Adam Fox and Artemi Panarin, the Rangers have a superstar at every position. J.T. Miller and Mika Zibanejad also built some impressive chemistry in the top six after the former's trade to Manhattan. Miller scored 35 points in 32 games, the duo controlled 55 percent of scoring chances in their time together, and Zibanejad, who had struggled mightily in the first half, was rejuvenated by the shift to the wing, potting 33 points in his final 32 games.

Will Cuyllé, 23, is emerging as a premier power forward, and New York would get a huge boost if Alexis Lafrenière can return to the 28-goal, 57-point version of himself (if not better if he gets more PP1 time) that he was in 2023-24. Put all those ingredients together, and you've got the profile of a team that could be high-end offensively.

Vladislav Gavrikov's addition and his marquee shutdown ability should help Fox bounce back and settle down a defensive group that was chaotic and prone to big mistakes last season. Mike Sullivan is also the new coach and we've seen this core group thrive with a new head coach bump before.

Weaknesses that could hold them back: The Rangers were one of the most disorganized, dysfunctional defensive teams in the NHL last year. It was frankly shocking to watch at times. Players were lackadaisical and casual all over the ice, with brutal turnovers, half-hearted defensive efforts and rush breakdowns a common sight. It's one problem to be bad defensively, but it's a whole other issue when you look like you're playing as individual mercenaries rather than a team that's bought in and battling for one another.

It's also no secret that this is an aging veteran core, with Panarin, Miller, Zibanejad and Vincent Trocheck all at least 32 years old. There's always a risk that one or multiple of those players could take an unexpected step back.

Fox and Gavrikov should be a formidable top pair, but after that, New York's blue line has some question marks. Carson Soucy, for example, could be leaned on to play second-pair minutes on the left side when he's really best suited for a third-pair role.

A big X-factor that could make or break the Rangers is their power play. New York's power play was the fourth-best in the NHL from 2021-22 to 2023-24, but it plummeted to 28th last season. There should be enough dynamic skill on this roster to field a league-average or better man advantage this season, but we'll see.