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January 15, 2025

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The Columbus Dispatch / Werenski's two goals force OT, shootout and fifth straight win for Columbus Blue Jackets

By Brian Hedger – January 15, 2025

Make it five wins in a row for the Blue Jackets.

After getting a late tying goal from Zach Werenski to force overtime, his second goal of the game and 15th of the season, the Blue Jackets downed the Philadelphia Flyers 3-2 in a shootout Tuesday night at Nationwide Arena. Following an exciting 3-on-3 OT, Kent Johnson and Kirill Marchenko scored goals in the first and third rounds to give the Blue Jackets (21-17-6) their first five-game winning streak since January 2020.

The win also kept them in the second wild-card spot for the Eastern Conference.

"I think it just shows a lot about our team," Werenski said. "I didn't think we had our game tonight, fully, but we found a way to get a win. We faced some adversity there in the third with a goal by them and then a power play for them, and I thought we responded well. ... It wasn't pretty, but we found a way to get two points. That's the most important thing."

Bobby Brink and Owen Tippett scored for the Flyers (20-20-5), who got a strong performance from goalie Ivan Fedotov (27 saves). Werenski took care of the scoring for the Blue Jackets, who helped Daniil Tarasov (23 saves) earn his first win since Oct. 22 against the Toronto Maple Leafs. It was Tarasov's return from a two-game conditioning stint with AHL Cleveland this past weekend and he looked more like the goalie who finished last season on a tear before a season-ending injury in March.

"I'm happy that we got two points, and he was a part of it," coach Dean Evason said. "He did the work (in Cleveland), as we talked about, did the right things by committing to playing hockey and his game was ready."

Brink and Werenski traded goals in the first period, and it remained deadlocked at 1-1 until Tippett broke the tie with a wrist shot through Tarasov's pads 8:13 into the third.

Brink's goal started the scoring early in the first to make the Blue Jackets pay for a defensive breakdown that left him alone near the right post to redirect a pass from Nick Seeler into the net. Werenski's first of the game knotted it 1-1 at 10:27 of the first after he pounced on a turnover and scored on a breakaway.

Tippett's goal appeared to set the Flyers on a winning course until Werenski's second of the game and 15th of the season tied it 2-2 with 4:37 left in regulation. Kirill Marchenko got the puck in the neutral zone, skated it back into the Flyers' zone and sent Werenski a perfect cross-ice setup for a one-timer to beat Fedotov.

That sent the game to OT to secure at least one point for each team.

[The Columbus Dispatch / Daniil Tarasov, Zach Werenski key fifth straight Columbus Blue Jackets win: 3 takeaways](#)

By Brian Hedger – January 15, 2025

It wasn't the kind of game the Blue Jackets have grown accustomed to playing at Nationwide Arena.

Stick checking and intense pressure by the Blue Jackets and Philadelphia Flyers led to a stilted, wonky and at times ugly game. It favored "mudders," and the Blue Jackets showed they can muck it up effectively in a gritty 3-2 shootout victory to extend their winning streak to five straight games.

Zach Werenski, whose 14th and 15th goals forced overtime, didn't think the Blue Jackets played up to their new standard. His coach had a slightly different take.

"Did we have our typical game in an offensive game?" Dean Evason said. "No, but did we have our 'muck' game? Yeah. It was a grinding, in the mud, 'muck' game, and both teams were committed. It was a good hockey game. We're fortunate to get the shootout goals."

Here are three takeaways:

Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski still going strong

Werenski, who logged a game-high 31:30 for his second-highest ice time this season, is the Blue Jackets' leading scorer with 50 points and padded that lead with two more goals. He leads all NHL defensemen with 15 goals, extended a franchise record home points streak to 17 games and is tied with Colorado Avalanche star Cale Makar for the league's scoring lead among defensemen.

According to the NHL, Werenski's home points streak is also the seventh-longest of its kind for an NHL defenseman. Those with longer streaks on home ice include legends Bobby Orr, Paul Coffey, Phil Housley and Brian Leetch.

"The one thing that we talked about in (the coaches' room) is that I honestly don't think, on (his) first goal, anyone in the world catches him," Evason said. "I honestly don't believe that. He separated by like 10 feet maybe, by the time he got to the goalie. His effortless skating and his drive to lead his team and help his team have success is as good as I've ever seen."

Daniil Tarasov rebounds with strong performance for Columbus Blue Jackets

Convincing Daniil Tarasov to accept a short AHL conditioning assignment couldn't have worked out better for the Blue Jackets or their struggling goalie.

After starting Friday and Saturday for the Cleveland Monsters against former Blue Jackets coach Pascal Vincent's Laval Rocket, Tarasov got a boost prior to facing former Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella's Flyers. Tracking pucks, dealing with traffic and helping the Monsters kill penalties in a 5-0 loss and 2-1 overtime win prepared Tarasov for his NHL return to the net.

Despite allowing a goal from the high slot by Owen Tippett that put the Flyers up 2-1 in the third period, Tarasov was sharp most of the night. He stopped 23 of 25 shots plus one in the shootout he wasn't credited for, showing why the Blue Jackets wouldn't risk losing a big, athletic goalie while trying to get him through waivers for a standard AHL assignment.

Tarasov, 25, is still young by goaltending standards and takes up a lot of net at 6 feet 5. He just needed to work through a prolonged slump while restoring his confidence without the pressure of doing it for an NHL team that's surprisingly competing for a playoff spot.

“You don’t do things like this to demote people or show them up, and even when we sit guys out it’s not to embarrass them,” Evason said. “It’s to hopefully help the team and the organization. If you commit to it and you have a positive attitude, then you can have success. ... (Tarasov) had a positive mindset going (to Cleveland). He had a positive mindset coming back, and it showed tonight.”

Kirill Marchenko's ‘Magic Wand’ clinches shootout for Columbus Blue Jackets

Needing a goal to end the shootout for the Blue Jackets, Kirill Marchenko went with a slick move that was first unveiled at Nationwide Arena by Alexandre Texier.

The former Blue Jackets forward used it twice to beat goalies for the Florida Panthers and Nashville Predators, deftly stickhandling the puck to the end of the stick’s blade for a quick push through the goalie’s leg pads. Marchenko studied it while playing with Texier last season and pulled it off with aplomb against the Vancouver Canucks’ Casey DeSmith.

Texier said he first got the idea from watching a YouTube clip of former NHL forward Henrik Borgstrom attempting it in Finland. Prior to being traded to the St. Louis Blues in June, Texier agreed to a suggested name for the move after turning down multiple proposals.

He gave “Magic Wand” a thumbs up, which the Blue Jackets can adapt to “Marchy’s Magic Wand” now that he’s 2 for 2 using it. Marchenko, who threw his arms up to celebrate, attempted the risky move because the Blue Jackets were ahead 1-0 in the shootout on Kent Johnson’s leadoff goal.

He also joked about paying Texier for usage rights after the two became friends last season.

“I paid him a little bit, and I can do it,” Marchenko said, smiling. “Not that much, but, yeah, I paid him. I don’t think a lot about what’s in my mind (before shooting). I just think about how I need to score a goal, and we need the win. Just go in, try not to think and just do what I can do best ... and it’s worked.”

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets notes: Tarasov returns from AHL conditioning stint in 'game mode'

By Brian Hedger – January 14, 2024

Daniil Tarasov's brief conditioning stint in the American Hockey League had mixed results for the Cleveland Monsters at Rocket Mortgage Fieldhouse.

The Blue Jackets goalie allowed five goals on 30 shots Friday in a 5-0 loss to Laval before he shined Saturday with 34 saves in a 2-1 overtime victory to split a two-game weekend set against former Blue Jackets coach Pascal Vincent's new team.

Tarasov stopped 59 of 65 shots for a .908 save percentage in the two games before returning to the Blue Jackets for practice Monday at the Ice Haus. After playing just two of the Jackets' prior 25 games, getting work in back-to-back outings was a relief.

"The first game (Friday) was not that good, like my last one (in the NHL), but tracking pucks and getting the feeling back of playing in 'game mode' was good," Tarasov said. "It was good seeing shots, and (having) traffic and power plays ... all those small details you can't really simulate in practice."

Tarasov will return to the net for the Blue Jackets in one of their games this week, possibly Tuesday at Nationwide Arena against the Philadelphia Flyers.

Another former Blue Jackets coach, John Tortorella, runs Philly's bench but that's inconsequential to Tarasov. All he cares about is restoring his top form to help the Jackets keep winning.

"It's kind of a tough time," he said. "You're with the team, but at the same time, you're not (feeling) the big success of the group. We're playing different and way better. We stick together and we've actually got a chance to win every game now. So, I just want to be part of this success and help those guys get wins."

Tarasov has done that three times for the Blue Jackets this season, but he's just 3-6-1 with a 4.24 goals-against average and .857 save percentage (SV%) in 10 appearances. After playing five of their first seven games, including four in a row (Oct. 17-26), Tarasov's struggles limited him to just five games in the next 34 before his conditioning stint.

After having a chat with Blue Jackets goaltending coach Niklas Backstrom and head coach Dean Evason, he agreed to play in Cleveland for a brief stint. It was an option he'd declined earlier this season.

"I started to feel like myself, the movements (in net) and getting back those feelings, like, 'OK, one puck at a time,' and it was good getting success in the second game," he said. "This young group, our young core, they're starting to be men now. They're getting into leadership spots and improving because they're together all the time. This is the right time to show it. This young group can be something special here for a long time."

Tarasov included.

Cole Sillinger enjoyed brother Owen Sillinger's unique NHL debut

Cole Sillinger was so sick last Thursday that he had an IV in his arm when his cell phone pinged with several missed calls.

"I'm just sitting there with my IV, so I grab my phone, and I've got like four missed calls," he said. "I was like, 'Something's going on here.'"

Sillinger's illness and a move related to it were the reasons.

His absence from the Blue Jackets' lineup created a hole in the forward lineup, and Don Waddell had just the right guy to fill the void. The Blue Jackets' president of hockey operations/general manager used an emergency recall to replace one Sillinger with another — Cole's older brother, Owen, who made his NHL debut during a 6-2 victory over the Seattle Kraken.

Mike Sillinger, their father, played two seasons in Columbus during one of 12 NHL stops, so Owen was the third member of the family to wear the Blue Jackets' crest. Mike Sillinger and his wife, Karla, their mom, were visiting relatives in Arizona. There wasn't time to catch a flight to Columbus for the game, so they had a big family watch party.

Lukas Sillinger, the middle of three brothers, watched with some of his Arizona State University teammates.

"It was incredible," Cole Sillinger said. "It was an emotional night for Owen, our family and our friends. Everyone who knows Owen knows how hard he's worked to get to this point and how much he's wanted this ... how much he wanted to prove to everyone and himself that he can play in the NHL. It's kind of funny how it all worked out, but it was just a great thing to see."

Cole was also happy with how it all unfolded.

"I want to play with him as much as I can, but for his NHL debut and me not being there, it was all about him," the younger Sillinger said. "It wasn't about him and I playing together. For his first one, it's nice that it was all about him. It was awesome. He played really well, too."

After Cole Sillinger's health returned, Owen Sillinger returned to Cleveland for the Monsters' weekend set against Laval. He scored the overtime winner Saturday to reward Tarasov for a strong start.

[The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets injury updates: Monahan, Jenner, Gudbranson, Danforth and Chinakhov](#)

By Brian Hedger – January 14, 2025

Key injuries have been a subtext of the Blue Jackets' season for a third straight year.

The difference this time is their health-related absences hasn't sabotaged the season. The Blue Jackets aren't just getting by without captain Boone Jenner (shoulder surgery), Erik Gudbranson (shoulder surgery), Yegor Chinakhov (back), Justin Danforth (lower body) and, most recently, Sean Monahan (wrist).

They're thriving.

Going into a game against the Philadelphia Flyers on Tuesday night at Nationwide Arena, the Jackets occupied the second wild card spot in the Eastern Conference with a chance to overtake the Boston Bruins for the first wild card. Backed by a push from a handful of veterans plus a surging young core group, the Blue Jackets have become one of the NHL's most intriguing stories.

There's also good news developing with most of their injuries, which could mimic the boost that playoff contenders often seek from deals at the NHL trade deadline.

"I just said that internally, actually, with our scouts in town," said Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell. "I said, 'Our trade deadline additions will be Boone Jenner and hopefully Gudbranson and Chinakhov. That's our addition after not having those guys all year.'"

Here's a closer look at the Blue Jackets' injury situation:

Columbus Blue Jackets center Sean Monahan dealing with sprained wrist

After being cross-checked into the boards last week by Pittsburgh Penguins defenseman Kris Letang, Monahan left after taking one shift in the third period of the Blue Jackets' 4-3 shootout victory at PPG Paints Arena. He hasn't played since but received encouraging news after a bone scan showed no fractures. The injury is a "stretched" tendon that requires his wrist to be immobilized.

"It's not torn," Waddell said. "It's just stretched, so they immobilized his wrist for the next two weeks, and then when he gets that taken off, we'll see where he's at with it. It's not long term, but it's not 'day-to-day' either."

Monahan was averaging a point per game as the time of the injury and is still the Jackets' third-leading scorer despite missing his third game Tuesday against the Flyers.

Boone Jenner said to be ahead of schedule in shoulder recovery

After undergoing surgery in October for a torn shoulder labrum that occurred during a practice drill late in the preseason, Jenner may gain full medical clearance soon to take contact during his individual conditioning skates.

It can take up to five or six months for that type of surgery to fully heal, but the Blue Jackets didn't give an estimated recovery timeline after announcing the procedure. Now, it should surprise nobody that he's making great progress. There's even a chance Jenner may return to action just before or at the Jackets' outdoor game against the Detroit Red Wings on March 1 at Ohio Stadium.

“He’s going Jan. 17 to get full clearance from the doctor,” Waddell said. “He’s doing everything but contact now, so he’s ahead of schedule and doing very well. If everything goes well, I could see him maybe playing after the Four Nations Tournament.”

Erik Gudbranson not far behind Boone Jenner in shoulder recovery

Gudbranson collided with Monahan in the neutral zone during the Blue Jackets’ season-opener against the Florida Panthers. His awkward fall just 11 days after Jenner’s shoulder injury caused another key veteran to undergo shoulder surgery Oct. 21, which puts his return roughly two weeks behind the Blue Jackets’ captain.

Jenner and Gudbranson each have one year left in their contracts, so the Blue Jackets might take a more conservative approach before they put either into games.

“He’s a couple weeks behind Boone,” Waddell said of Gudbranson. “He’s doing well. Depending on how things are going for us, he could be back sometime in March, but we’ll have to make that decision carefully.”

Gudbranson eventual return will add a strong presence in the locker room and on the ice, not to mention size, grit and snarl to the third defensive pairing.

Justin Danforth may return to practice soon for Columbus Blue Jackets

Danforth has missed 16 games with a lower-body injury that has subtracted one of the Blue Jackets’ most versatile forwards.

Danforth can play any of the three positions up front, including center, and he’d become a key sparkplug for the third line prior to leaving the lineup. Waddell is hopeful Danforth returns to practice this week, which would put him close to returning for games.

Columbus Blue Jackets uncertain about return of forward Yegor Chinakhov

Chinakhov has missed 23 games while dealing with a lower back issue that also caused him to miss extended time two years ago. Waddell said there’s progress being made, but Chinakhov isn’t ready to get back on skates yet. Surgery hasn’t been discussed at this point.

Chinakhov had 14 points on seven goals and seven assists while skating primarily in a top-six role during the season’s first 21 games. When healthy, his combination of size, speed and hard shot make him one of the NHL’s best-kept secrets. Getting him back this season could give the high-scoring Blue Jackets yet another dangerous scoring forward.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets' Daniil Tarasov ends long drought after tough few months

By Aaron Portzline – January 15, 2024

The lasting memory of the Columbus Blue Jackets' 3-2 shootout win over the Philadelphia Flyers on Tuesday will probably be the latest stellar showing by defenseman Zach Werenski, who scored two more goals to creep closer to an NHL record.

But it could also be the two highlight-reel plays by Kirill Marchenko, who assisted on Werenski's late, tying goal and later scored the winner in the second round of the shootout, pulling off a move that might have involved copyright infringement.

Then again, it's hard to look past the fact the Blue Jackets have won five straight games for the first time since Jan. 11-22, 2020, almost exactly five years ago. For more than a week now, the Blue Jackets have held the final playoff spot in the Eastern Conference, something nobody would have expected when the 2024-25 season began.

But the biggest story of the night was probably less obvious, and it was pulled off by perhaps the quietest player in the dressing room.

Goaltender Daniil Tarasov, whose struggles led to his stagnation and eventually a conditioning assignment to AHL Cleveland last weekend, made 23 saves to earn his first win since Oct. 22 versus the Toronto Maple Leafs.

"I'm happy that we got 2 points and he was a part of it," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "He did the work, as we've talked about. He did the right thing by committing to playing hockey. His game was ready."

If the Blue Jackets are going to remain in the thick of the playoff race, they're going to need two goaltenders. And as much as Jet Greaves continues to impress at the AHL and NHL levels, the way the Blue Jackets have handled their goalie rotation this season couldn't be maintained.

Tarasov would not accept a conditioning assignment earlier this season, but when the Blue Jackets mapped out a plan and presented it to him last week — go to Cleveland, play back-to-back games and come back to Columbus to play — he accepted it.

That was music to the ears of coaches and management.

"We don't do things like this to demote people, to show them up ... even when we sit guys out, it's not to embarrass them, it's to hopefully help the team," Evason said. "If you commit to it and have a positive attitude, then you can have success.

"If you don't, and you think it's a negative, you're to have a negative mindset. (Tarasov) had a positive mindset going (to Cleveland), a positive mindset coming back, and it showed."

There are two ways of looking at Tarasov's struggles over the last two months. He had lost four straight games, but those were his only four starts since Nov. 10.

"It was kind of tough the last two months," Tarasov said. "I didn't get in enough games, and when I was in the games, I played not that great. This week starts pretty well, getting back on track with this kind of win. We were down 2-1 and 'Z' scored a big goal for us.

“It’s the coaches’ decision (when I play). You have to earn your opportunity to play here. Now I’m just focusing on my game, getting back on track, getting good practice sessions and being ready when I get in my next game.”

The play in front of Tarasov was mucky for most of the night, but it’s hard to look good against the Flyers. They block shots, like every John Tortorella-coached team. They pounce on turnovers and go the other direction with speed, so much care must be taken with the puck.

The Blue Jackets never led in the game. They tied the score 1-1 at 10:27 of the first period when Werenski bounced on a turnover at the blue line and pulled away from the Flyers for a breakaway goal.

The Flyers took a 2-1 lead at 8:13 of the third, forcing the Blue Jackets to respond again.

With 4:37 remaining, Adam Fantilli forced a neutral-zone turnover and quickly pushed the puck ahead to Marchenko, who skated behind the Flyers’ defense for a two-on-one with Werenski. Marchenko faked a shot, causing Flyers goaltender Ivan Fedotov to bite hard to the near post.

When Marchenko passed the puck instead, Werenski needed only to shoot into a gaping net.

“It’s a great play,” Werenski said. “He sells the shot really well and then slips it over to me. All I had to do was hit the net.

“Marchenko’s a really complete player. He can shoot, he can pass, his hands are great. All I had to do was get open, and a guy like that will find you.”

Werenski’s not so bad himself.

The two goals allowed him to reach 50 points (15-35-50) in only 44 games. The only Blue Jackets player in franchise history to hit 50 points quicker is Artemi Panarin, who needed 43 games during the 2018-19 season.

Further, Werenski extended his club record home points streak to 17 games, one of the longest in franchise history. Only six NHL defensemen in the league’s 100-plus year history — including Bobby Orr (twice), Paul Coffey, Brian Leetch, etc. — have had longer home point streaks.

Blue Jackets winger Kent Johnson scored in the first round of the shootout, and Adam Fantilli was stopped in the second. On the other end of the ice, Tarasov got a couple of breaks: Travis Konecny’s shot rang off the crossbar, and Matvei Michkov lost the puck off his stick before running into Tarasov’s stick.

That left Marchenko with a chance to win it. He got creative.

Marchenko came with speed through the left circle, and in one swift move left the puck in front of him and poked it forward through Fedotov’s pad like a firepoker for his second career game-deciding goal.

It’s a move former Blue Jackets forward Alexandre Texier, now with the St. Louis Blues, debuted a few years ago. Did Marchenko have permission?

“I paid him a little bit and he said I can do it,” Marchenko said with a smile. “Not much (money).”

It was a fitting end to an entertaining — and important — night at the rink.

“We’ve built confidence here,” Marchenko said. “We’ve learned (that) we can win every game. It’s so fun, and everybody wants to do it again and again. Keep going forward. No stop.”

The Athletic / Zach Aston-Reese, nomad no more, has a home with Blue Jackets after turbulent stretch

By Aaron Portzline – January 14, 2024

In the fall of 2022, Zach Aston-Reese signed a professional tryout offer to go to training camp with the Toronto Maple Leafs. He impressed enough in training camp to earn a one-year, one-way contract with the Leafs. He played 77 games and scored 10 goals that season.

It wasn't enough to build a future with the Leafs, so he wound up on a PTO the following season with the Carolina Hurricanes before signing a one-year, two-way contract with the Detroit Red Wings for the 2023-24 season. He played only three games with the Wings, spending almost all of the season in the AHL.

Then this fall, after signing a one-year, two-way deal with the Vegas Golden Knights, Aston-Reese landed on waivers at the end of training camp. The Blue Jackets, who had early dibs on the waiver wire, claimed Aston-Reese to help overcome a wave of camp injuries.

That's six different sweaters since 2022. But on Monday, it finally became safe for Aston-Reese, a 30-year-old forward with 352 NHL games on his resume, to unpack and make plans.

The Blue Jackets signed Aston-Reese to a one-year contract extension that will pay him \$775,000 through next season. That salary, the NHL's minimum, is the same he's making this season. A raise would have been nice, but he was looking for stability.

A two-year contract was discussed between Waddell and Aston-Reese's agent, Dan Milstein, before they settled on the one-year deal on Sunday.

"It feels really good," Aston-Reese told The Athletic. "I've always believed in myself, but it's nice to have a staff that believes in me as well. They've given me an opportunity. I'm so grateful and happy to be here. I love this team, and I'm proud to be a part of it.

"It's so good to know where I'm going to be. It's not just me anymore, either. I've got a girlfriend (Sasha) and we have two dogs, so that (stability) is really nice."

The Blue Jackets have played Aston-Reese up and down the lineup, but after the early weeks of the season he's settled into a bottom-six role with penalty-killing duties. In Saturday's 2-1 win over the St. Louis Blues, he skated on the third line with center Luca Del Bel Belluz and right wing Mathieu Olivier.

In 42 games, he has four goals and 11 points, 19 penalty minutes and a minus-6 rating. With his speed, size (6-1, 200) and physicality, he's one of the Jackets' top forecheckers, too.

Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell has a brief history with Aston-Reese. Waddell was the GM in Carolina when they signed him to a PTO before the start of training camp.

"During the summertime, as a GM, maybe you think you could do better, and you want to think you've got young guys in your organization who could do the job," Waddell said. "But then you watch him day in and day out — like we have here this season — and you find out why he's hung around for so long."

Aston-Reese's signing takes one of the Blue Jackets' pending unrestricted free agents off the market heading into the March 7 NHL trade deadline.

It's a balance, Waddell said, wanting to keep the right veteran players while still allowing room for the young talent that's percolating at AHL Cleveland and in the junior ranks across North America. The

closest to the surface would appear to be winger James Malatesta and Del Bel Belluz, who was called up following an injury to veteran Sean Monahan.

“We have a few guys coming,” Waddell said. “But I don’t see (Aston-Reese’s) signing as any kind of a roadblock.”

Aston-Reese said he was excited when the Blue Jackets claimed him on waivers on Oct. 7, three days before the season opener. He wasn’t quite sure what to expect, but he saw an opportunity on a club that has finished near the bottom of the standings the past two seasons.

“But after that first game (a 3-2 loss in Minnesota) this season, the way that we played, the pace and the skill that was right there ... I was like, ‘Man, we could be really good,’” Aston-Reese said. “It’s a great group of guys. It’s a really close room. Yeah, it’s a place I want to be.”

[NHL.com / Blue Jackets continue to overcome adversity, in mix for playoffs](#)

By Nicholas Cotsonika – January 13, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets are the most inspiring story in the NHL.

Maybe in all of sports.

Is there another team overcoming anything like Columbus is this season?

First and foremost, the Blue Jackets have had to deal with the death of forward Johnny Gaudreau.

Then, they've had a rash of injuries to key players. Still, they have won four straight games and are 8-2-1 in their past 11. They hold the second wild card into the Stanley Cup Playoffs from the Eastern Conference.

"I think the thing I'm most proud of is just how hard we work every night and how we do it for each other," defenseman Zach Werenski said. "It's been awesome."

Columbus (20-17-6) hosts the Philadelphia Flyers at Nationwide Arena on Tuesday (7 p.m. ET; FDSNOH, NBCSP+). The Flyers are one of seven teams within five points of the Blue Jackets in a tight playoff race.

Among the others are the Detroit Red Wings, their opponent in the 2025 Navy Federal Credit Union NHL Stadium Series at Ohio Stadium on March 1 (6 p.m. ET; ESPN, TVAS-D, SN360).

"It's going to be a fun night, an exciting night," general manager Don Waddell said. "But the game means something."

Waddell knew he was taking on a challenge when he was hired May 28. Columbus had missed the playoffs the past four seasons and finished last in the East last season (27-43-12). His goal was to play meaningful games in March for the development of the young players.

He had no idea what was to come. Nor did coach Dean Evason, who was hired July 23.

No one did.

"I think coming into the year before John's passing, I think it was refreshing to have new management, new coaches," Werenski said. "I think there was a lot of excitement just within our room, just to kind of have a new feel. We all kind of knew what we could be. It was just doing it. And then obviously with the circumstances and what happened, you're never really too sure how a team or a group is going to respond."

The big offseason moves were the signing of center Sean Monahan as an unrestricted free agent July 1 and the trading of forward Patrik Laine to the Montreal Canadiens on Aug. 19. Monahan came to Columbus thinking he was going to play with Gaudreau, his close friend and former Calgary Flames teammate. The Blue Jackets parted with Laine only to lose their leading scorer 10 days later.

Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, died Aug. 29 when they were struck by a car while riding bicycles at home in Salem County, New Jersey. Devastated, the team gathered for a candlelight vigil in Columbus on Sept. 4 and the funeral in Media, Pennsylvania, on Sept. 9. Training camp opened Sept. 18.

The Blue Jackets kept Gaudreau's image on the side of Nationwide Arena and his stall in the locker room. They put stickers on their helmets, patches on their jerseys and a No. 13 banner in the rafters.

When they took the ice for their home opener against the Florida Panthers on Oct. 15, they left an empty space on the left wing. Monahan won the opening face-off, and the teams stood still for 13

seconds with the puck at Gaudreau's spot. Monahan scored and pointed at his banner amid a 4-3 loss, a moment Waddell said will stick with him forever.

"We had lots of meetings with the leaders of this team and then with the team itself about, 'Nobody's going to feel sorry for us, so don't feel sorry for yourselves,'" Waddell said. "We've got to take the words that [Gaudreau's widow] Meredith used at the funeral: 'Johnny would want you guys to go play hockey. I want you to go play hockey. Go play hockey.' And we kept echoing those things over and over. 'This is what the Gaudreaus would want us to do.'"

Waddell said he has spent more time around the locker room this season than he ever has before, and the Blue Jackets have held more team-bonding events than usual, such as golf and curling.

"I like to come down every day and see the guys to see what the mood is," he said. "Dean and I talk all the time. Dean and his staff have done a tremendous job of keeping the guys focused on what they need to do. ...

"Everything we've done has been about the team, not about 'I.' It's about the team, and I think it's helped us along here for sure. Every day when I wake up, it's a new challenge. You never know what's going to be thrown to you."

Like injuries.

Captain Boone Jenner hasn't played this season. Defenseman Erik Gudbranson hasn't played since the home opener. Forward Dmitri Voronkov missed the first nine games. Forward Kent Johnson was out for a 14-game stretch. Forward Yegor Chinakhov has missed the past 22 games, Monahan the past two.

The Blue Jackets started 12-15-5. Less than a month ago, they were five points out of a playoff spot, last in the Metropolitan Division and 14th in the East.

Yet here they are now.

Columbus is scoring 3.40 goals per game overall, fifth in the NHL entering Monday, and 4.18 at home, first in the League -- remarkable, considering Waddell's main worry was offense.

Werenski leads the Blue Jackets with 49 points (13 goals, 35 assists) in 43 games and is one point behind Cale Makar of the Colorado Avalanche for the lead among NHL defensemen. He should be a candidate for the Norris Trophy, which goes to the League's best defenseman.

Voronkov, Monahan and Kirill Marchenko made up an excellent top line before Monahan got hurt. Voronkov has 30 points (17 goals, 13 assists) in 34 games. Amid the emotion of losing Gaudreau, Monahan has 41 points (14 goals, 27 assists) in 41 games. Marchenko has 47 points (18 goals, 29 assists) in 43 games.

Kent Johnson has 24 points (11 goals, 13 assists) in 29 games, forward Cole Sillinger 23 points (seven goals, 16 assists) in 41 games. Adam Fantilli, now centering the top line, has 21 points (10 goals, 11 assists) in 43 games.

Marchenko (24), Voronkov (24), Johnson (22), Sillinger (21) and Fantilli (20) each is 24 or younger.

"We've got good players," Sillinger said. "I don't think anyone really knows how good we are. I think it's starting to click in with some other teams now that we're in a playoff spot and we're holding our ground. We're gaining respect.

"Yeah, I just think we believe in each other. We believe in ourselves. We know we're good hockey players. If we play the right way, we can beat any team on any given night. That's what it is for me, and I think it's just having that mentality of believing and knowing that you can win every game."

Although Evason emphasizes defense, he plays an up-tempo, aggressive style. Werenski is free to jump up in the play. Young players are unafraid to make mistakes. Meanwhile, under Waddell, the Blue Jackets have added depth pieces like defensemen Jack Johnson and Dante Fabbro and forwards Zach Aston-Reese (who signed a contract for next season Monday), Kevin Labanc and James van Riemsdyk via free-agent signings and waiver claims.

“What Dean doesn’t worry about is the guys he doesn’t have,” Waddell said. “We meet every day, and he’s never come in and said, ‘Oh, can we go get this guy? Can we go get that guy?’ He says, ‘Give me the guys that I need to coach, and I’m going to get the best out of them.’ And certainly he’s done that, for sure.”

Should Evason be a candidate for the Jack Adams Award, which goes to the NHL coach of the year, if the Blue Jackets make the playoffs? Should he be one even if they don’t?

“I think Dean’s going to have to be in the mix regardless of what happens here because of the adversity that we’ve faced,” Waddell said. “I don’t think anybody would have thought after 43 games that we’d be still in the hunt. Whether we stay there or not is going to be decided in the next 39 games, but to be where we are at this point, I think, has been a pretty big surprise around the whole League.”

Imagine if the Blue Jackets are still in the hunt March 1 when tens of thousands of fans pack Ohio Stadium for Columbus’ first outdoor game.

“It’s really shaping up to be a special weekend,” Werenski said. “That was kind of our goal going into it, especially when [Jenner] and [Gudbranson] went down. ‘Let’s just stay in it until the Stadium Series. Let’s just be around and be in a position to kind of strike.’ And we’re doing that right now, so it’s exciting for sure.”

The Athletic / Halfway through the 2024-25 NHL season, what's real and what's not?

By James Mirtle – January 15, 2025

We've somehow reached mid-January already, which means it's been a little over 100 days since the NHL season started in Prague with games between the New Jersey Devils and Buffalo Sabres.

Since then, the league's 32 teams have played 693 games, or 53 percent of a full regular season.

Hockey's a funny sport, and this can be a weird league. Relatively unheralded players go on unbelievable scoring runs — i.e. Dmitri Voronkov right now. Goalies can come out of nowhere to steal games — hello, Jakub Dobeš!

And weak teams can pile up wins over a short period while powerhouses look like minnows over a stretch of a month or three.

To try and make sense of some of the unusual things that have happened so far, we'll check in on the trends regularly to break down the biggest outliers and whether they have sustaining power behind them. As a reminder of how this works, here is the breakdown of the first month of the season and here is last month's analysis.

Let's dig in.

How teams are on pace to change

I think it's fair to say the teams at the top and the bottom of that list constitute some of the biggest surprises in the NHL this season. Few, if anyone, foresaw the Capitals and Wild dominating the league, the rebuilding Blue Jackets fighting for a playoff spot, and the Predators, Rangers and Bruins crashing out so dramatically. Yet here we are.

Let's take a closer look at some of the biggest surprises and evaluate whether they'll hold up over another 40-ish games.

Wait, could the Capitals be the best team in the NHL?

With yet another win Tuesday, Washington sits atop the NHL with a .716 points percentage.

That's a long way from last season when they squeaked into the playoffs with a minus-36 goal differential, which was the sixth worst in the league. The Capitals did have an impressive offseason, adding up front (Pierre-Luc Dubois, Andrew Mangiapane), on D (Jakob Chychrun, Matt Roy) and in goal (Logan Thompson) in one of the biggest makeovers leaguewide.

Even still, the majority of projections had them outside the playoff race and an extreme long shot to hit the 100-point mark.

Part of what was hard to predict was just how many improvements from within the Capitals would get, including terrific first halves of 2024-25 for Aliaksei Protas and Connor McMichael (their two youngest players), as well as Tom Wilson and Dylan Strome.

The big question for this column, though: Is it sustainable?

The Capitals have scuffled a bit since a 21-6-2 start, winning only seven of their last 14 games entering Tuesday's tilt against Anaheim. They lead the NHL in shooting percentage, at a monster 13.2 percent in

all situations, and in even-strength PDO, both of which are indicators they're going to have a tougher go in the second half — especially offensively, where they've already been slowing down.

But the Capitals' underlying numbers are still those of a good team, as they sit eighth in five-on-five expected goals and seventh in scoring-chance share. They're also strong on both special teams, part of a case for coach Spencer Carbery taking the Jack Adams Award this year.

The big wild card is going to be in goal. Thompson has been one of the five best goaltenders in the league, setting himself up for a nice UFA payday. If that continues, the Capitals could certainly win the Eastern Conference, which remains wide open.

I probably wouldn't bet on the Presidents' Trophy right now, however. Not with the big players in the West heating up.

Wait, could the Blue Jackets make the playoffs?

DGB beat me to this one on Monday, but is there a better story in the league than Columbus right now?

In the player section below, when I ran the numbers on skaters who are having the most impressive first half, the list was filled with Blue Jackets. A big part of that movement is the young players up front — Kirill Marchenko on pace for 89 points, Voronkov not far behind, a breakout for Kent Johnson and solid campaigns for Cole Sillinger and Adam Fantilli.

The Blue Jackets finished 25th in scoring a year ago; they're up to fifth right now, producing more goals than high-octane teams like the Avalanche, Oilers, Panthers and Maple Leafs. They're one of my favorite teams to watch night to night, playing a high-event, roller-coaster style the NHL needs more of.

Can they keep this up?

In Dom's projections before yet another win on Tuesday, the Blue Jackets had a 23 percent chance of making the playoffs, narrowly behind the Bruins, Islanders and Rangers, who benefit from having more of a track record.

But Columbus isn't pulling this off as some percentage-driven fluke. In fact, with the second-worst save percentage in the league, it's somehow doing it without getting much help in goal.

Some of the kids aren't going to shoot 20 percent all year, and there are certainly unknown factors given how green a lot of the cast is, but they have a real chance if the East's wild-card race continues to be a turtle derby.

It may only take 88 points to get in, which means the Blue Jackets would have to go something like 20-18-0 to make it.

All of this makes for a tough trade deadline for GM Don Waddell, who will have to decide whether he should sell off his rentals given the bounty of picks Ivan Provorov, Mathieu Olivier, Dante Fabbro, Sean Kuraly and others could fetch.

No matter how this plays out, the future is finally bright in Columbus.

Wait, could the Predators be the worst team in the NHL?

Nashville feels like a regular guest here in the real-or-not column.

As fun and promising a story as the Blue Jackets have been, their late 1990s expansion cousins are the mirror opposite. The Predators have talent — some of it very high-end — but even with a few more wins lately, they're sitting only three points up on last place in the league.

The good news is they have not only their 2025 first-round pick but two others thanks to previous sell-offs. But Nashville entered the season as the NHL's second-oldest team and could have a hard time pivoting the way Columbus has given the caliber of its prospect pool.

The biggest problem isn't that the Predators might finish last; it's that they are way too good to be this far down the standings. Their competition in the tank department is going to sell off here shortly, leaving them with AHLish rosters, and Nashville's dead-last shooting percentage (under 6 percent at even strength before scoring five times on Tuesday) is primed for a sharp regression to the mean.

Which means the Predators are very likely going to score (and win) more in the second half.

But what good is a dead-cat bounce at this point other than to muddy what will already be difficult offseason decisions?

Those are some of the key team trends to watch. Let's drill down one level further to players having surprisingly effective starts (especially of late) and see if they have sustaining power.

Skaters with impressive first halves

Sean Monahan, Columbus

I didn't mention Monahan above only to save this section for his remarkable season.

It was only 2.5 years ago that Calgary shipped out Monahan's contract with a first-round pick as a sweetener to get out of the cap hit, a move coming on the heels of an injury-plagued eight-goal, 23-point campaign with the Flames.

Now 30 years old, Sean Monahan is having a career year with 14 goals and 41 points after the unimaginable tragedy of losing best friend Johnny Gaudreau right before training camp.

'You feel his presence': Sean Monahan, thriving with Blue Jackets, hopes to honor Johnny Gaudreau's legacy

Since this is the focus of the column, we do have to address whether it's sustainable or not. Sure, the percentages are going Monahan's way, with a more than 13 percent on-ice shooting percentage, but a lot of his production is also thanks to more opportunity on the power play and with good linemates. If he doesn't miss much more time, 25 goals and 70 points feel reasonable.

And, as our ace Blue Jackets beat reporter Aaron Portzline pointed out recently, there is no better candidate for the Masterton Trophy this season.

Alex Ovechkin, Washington

Even missing 16 games with a broken leg hasn't really slowed Ovechkin's chase of the NHL's all-time goals record. His 20 goals in 28 games mark his second-best-ever goals-per-game pace, the equivalent of 59 goals in 82 games.

He's converted on nearly 20 percent of his shots so far, which isn't reasonable to expect long-term given his historical numbers. But even if he reverts to his career-average shooting percentage the rest of the way, that would be good for around another 20 goals, potentially pushing him to the 40 mark for the 14th (!) time at age 39 (!!).

Only Wayne Gretzky has even had more than 10, and he stopped at 12 back in 1990-91.

More importantly, 20 more goals would put Ovechkin just one shy of Gretzky's all-time mark, meaning it's highly likely the Great Eight makes this very close down the stretch. Whether you're rooting for or against him, this should make for compelling theater come April.

Honorable mentions: Zach Werenski, Kirill Marchenko, Mats Zuccarello, Jackson LaCombe, Dylan Holloway

Goalies with impressive first halves

Mackenzie Blackwood, Colorado

What a trade this is turning out to be for GM Chris MacFarland.

Eyebrows were raised when the Avs gave Blackwood a five-year, \$5.25 million-a-season extension after playing just five games in his new home. All Blackwood has done since is win with Colorado, with a ridiculous .938 save percentage through 12 appearances.

He's now up to sixth in the NHL in goals saved above expected, putting him on track to be a Vezina candidate by season's end.

Safe to say no one saw that when he was dumped to the last-place Sharks for a sixth-round pick in the summer of 2023.

Goalies are notoriously difficult to project, and obviously no one is going to maintain a .938 for long, but Blackwood has shown significant promise at times in his career and appeared to come into his own under difficult circumstances in San Jose.

And it certainly helps that the Avs have been one of the league's better defensive teams as they've gotten a little healthier.

Honorable mentions: Karel Vejmelka, Logan Thompson, Filip Gustavsson, Dustin Wolf

Skaters with tough first halves

Elias Pettersson, Vancouver

Vancouver can be a tough place to play at the best of times. But when there are trade rumors and you're struggling with a big contract, it must be excruciating.

Pettersson's numbers are hard to believe given he put up 102 points only two seasons ago. He's on pace for just 60 this season, including a stretch of late with only five points in his last 12 games.

All told, since he signed his eight-year, \$11.6 million-a-season deal back on March 2 of last year, Pettersson is tied for 108th in NHL scoring with what would be a 22-goal, 62-point pace over 82 games.

Incredibly, he's managed that while being on for favorable on-ice shooting, meaning that — sadly for Canucks fans — those numbers are not the result of bad puck luck.

More and more, it's looking like something has to give with the Canucks and their high-paid young star.

Kevin Fiala, Los Angeles

The Kings have quietly been excellent this season, with the fourth-best record in the league and an incredibly stingy defensive game that has them leading the NHL in goals against.

Curiously, Fiala has not been part of that success. He is on pace for just 46 points after piling up 230 the previous three seasons, good enough to put him in the top 30 in scoring among all NHL players over that span.

Right now, he's tied for 171st.

Unlike Pettersson, Fiala has been on the receiving end of some bad luck from the hockey gods, with just an 8 percent on-ice shooting percentage in all situations. He's still getting big minutes but has at times been dropped down the lineup, which could further limit his ability to get out of this funk.

But expect a better second half from him regardless, even as the heat gets dialed up on L.A.'s second-highest-paid player.

Honorable mentions: Steven Stamkos, Morgan Rielly, Chris Kreider, Alexis Lafrenière, Jeff Skinner, Lawson Crouse

Goalies with tough first halves

Juuse Saros, Nashville

I don't think you can necessarily blame Saros for the Predators' misfortunes, but their star goaltender also has only nine wins at midseason.

Saros hasn't been bad so much as rather ordinary, which is a problem with your team counting on you to be elite. After years of dominating the advanced goalie metrics — he was the second-best goalie in the NHL statistically between 2020-21 and 2022-23 — Saros finished 32nd last season in goals saved above expected.

He's down to 33rd so far this season, which is starting to lend credence to those who wondered if his style of play may not fare well with age (a potentially large problem given he just signed an eight-year deal that doesn't even begin until next season).

Goal scoring has been Nashville's biggest issue, especially after all it spent to bring in more talent up front in free agency, but Saros can be a lot better, too.

ESPN / Grades for all 32 NHL teams at midseason of 2024-25

By Kristen Shilton and Ryan S. Clark – January 14, 2025

With most NHL teams having played 41 games this season, it's time for another round of report cards.

Some teams have far outpaced their preseason expectations -- the Minnesota Wild and Washington Capitals among them -- while others have fallen well short -- looking at you, New York Rangers and Nashville Predators.

In addition to an overall grade for each club at the midway point, we've also identified each team's class president and a player in danger of failing.

Note: Teams are arrayed alphabetically by letter grade. Ryan S. Clark graded the Pacific and Central Division teams, and Kristen Shilton graded the Metropolitan and Atlantic Division teams. Stats are through the games of Jan. 11. Preseason over/unders are courtesy of ESPN BET sportsbook.

A grades

Minnesota Wild

Record: 27-13-4

Preseason over/under: 93.5

Current points pace: 108.1

Class president: Kirill Kaprizov. Being on pace for a 50-goal and 100-point season only adds to the reality Kaprizov is one of the game's most dangerous players. There's also an argument to be had about him being one of the most valuable. The Wild aren't like other teams that have balanced scoring throughout their lineup. They have four players who have scored more than 50% of their goals and Kaprizov is among that quartet. His 23 goals and 27 assists -- with 15 of them being primary -- means he has played a role in being responsible for more than 40% of the Wild's goals.

In danger of failing: Yakov Trenin. Pointing the proverbial finger at Trenin is a bit repetitive, but it's that way because of the Wild's salary cap implications. The combined Zach Parise and Ryan Suter buyouts mean the club must spend judiciously. Signing Trenin to a four-year deal worth \$3.5 million annually meant the Wild were getting a player who could provide them with another double-digit goal scorer. Trenin had three goals through 37 games and is projected to score six goals after three straight seasons of more than 12 goals.

Grade: A+ (first-quarter grade: A+). Kaprizov is having the type of season that has him in the Hart Trophy discussion. Filip Gustavsson could end up being a Vezina Trophy finalist and Matt Boldy, Brock Faber and Marco Rossi continue to show why they're an important part of the Wild's present and future plans. It's enough to keep them in the race for the Central entering January. But will it be enough in the postseason?

Vegas Golden Knights

Record: 29-11-3

Preseason over/under: 97.5

Current points pace: 116.3

Class president: Jack Eichel. There's more to what Eichel has done this season beyond the fact he could reach 100 points for the first time. Eichel is proving to be one of the more well-rounded forwards in the NHL. He leads Golden Knights forwards in 5-on-5 ice time, power-play ice time and short-handed ice time. Eichel's contributions have made him Vegas' most valuable player and his performance could see him carve a place in the Hart Trophy discussion.

In danger of failing: Alexander Holtz. Being a top-10 pick comes with certain expectations and that has been the prism through which most view Holtz. It was thought that going to the Golden Knights could allow him to tap more into the potential that made him the No. 7 overall pick by the Devils in 2020. And perhaps it still could. But for now? Holtz is on pace for six goals and 20 points a season after finishing with 16 goals and 28 points.

Grade: A+ (first-quarter grade: A). There was a time in which the narrative around the Golden Knights was how they would manage after an offseason that saw them lose eight players from a group that also included Jonathan Marchessault and Chandler Stephenson. Instead, they have remained in a championship window. A top-five team in goals per game that's a top-10 team in fewest goals allowed is a formula that has powered the Golden Knights into position to finish with the NHL's best record and possibly more.

Washington Capitals

Record: 28-10-5

Preseason over/under: 89.5

Current points pace: 116.3

Class president: Dylan Strome. Don't let a recent dip in production fool you. Strome has been a beacon of consistency for much of this Capitals' season and will be back on his game again. Strome has carried Washington offensively, with 12 goals and 45 points in a top-line role, and he helped the Capitals stay on track when Alex Ovechkin was out because of an injury. The way Strome can take over key responsibilities at 5-on-5 and the power play has been a game-changer over not only this season but also last season. Coach Spencer Carbery has trusted Strome to be a leader and Strome has consistently delivered.

In danger of failing: Charlie Lindgren. Washington's goaltender has been mired in a few rough patches this season, and it's odd to see him facing such hurdles; now, he's out because of an upper-body injury. Last season, he was arguably the Capitals' best player, but there has been a marked shift in his consistency. Lindgren is 10-8-2, with a .900 save percentage and 2.70 goals-against average, while slipping into more of a backup role behind Logan Thompson. Lindgren is now 1-3-2 since mid-December, with four straight losses and only one outing with an above-.900 SV%. He has the talent to turn things around, and a proven track record to boot. Washington will need a strong tandem to stay on pace as a top Eastern Conference contender.

Grade: A+ (first-quarter grade: A+). Washington is more than just a Cinderella story this season. Did anyone expect they'd be second in the league offensively (3.63 goals per game) or pacing the entire Eastern Conference in points? The Capitals have exceeded expectations for a number of reasons (Thompson's emergence being one of them), but it boils down to a full team effort putting them over the top. Everyone is invested in Ovechkin's chase for Wayne Gretzky's goals record, but it's not a driving force in their success. What sets Washington apart is its depth, drive and ability to win battles when it counts. Granted, the Capitals have had their downturns (including a recent 5-2-3 stretch) but that feels like nitpicking. Washington has been as good as it gets this season -- and the second half could prove even better for this group with a healthy Ovechkin.

Winnipeg Jets

Record: 29-12-3

Preseason over/under: 95.5

Current points pace: 113.7

Class president: Connor Hellebuyck. Last season, Hellebuyck won his second Vezina Trophy while having what might have been the strongest individual campaign of his career. Yet he could be even better this season. As of Jan. 11, Hellebuyck led the league in GAA and wins while ranking second in save percentage. Nobody has faced more shot attempts, has made more saves and has more shutouts than the two-time Vezina winner, who also leads the NHL with a 25.7 goals saved above average (GSAA).

In danger of failing: Eric Comrie. Hellebuyck is projected to play 64 games, which would give him his fourth straight season of more than 60 games. That hypothetically leaves Comrie with the remaining 18 games. Finding consistency could be key for Comrie who has lost six of his 10 starts this season while having a .904 save percentage. It could prove crucial for the Jets in the games when they rest Hellebuyck while still fighting for the top seed in the Western Conference.

Grade: A+ (first-quarter grade: A+). The Jets are receiving consistent scoring from three of their four lines. They have numerous defensemen who are projected to finish with more than 10 points while having arguably the best goaltender in the NHL. The Jets are among the teams that came into January challenging for the NHL's best record and a top seed. Now, it's a matter of determining if their regular-season success can lead to them advancing beyond the first round for the first time since the 2020-21 season.

Toronto Maple Leafs

Record: 27-15-2

Preseason over/under: 102.5

Current points pace: 104.4

Class president: Mitch Marner. Where would the Maple Leafs be if not for Marner's stellar season? Toronto's top winger has 59 points in 44 games, and is as formidable a defensive player as he is on offense. Marner's ability to deliver on a nightly basis has kept the Leafs from falling off while Auston Matthews sat out considerable time because of an injury and the club struggled to find depth scoring (which remains an issue). Marner has made it look easy even without a potent power play on which to lean. He has been Toronto's most consistent and arguably most important player. And he has done it all in a contract season, proving the uncertainty about his next deal is no distraction at all.

In danger of failing: Max Domi. This is a case of simply wanting -- and expecting -- more from a quality player who can be a greater factor in the Leafs' offense. Domi has only three goals, and hasn't found a groove in coach Craig Berube's low-risk system. He has excelled with greater responsibility in past seasons, but that hasn't been true in the role Berube assigned to him -- which is carrying 14:37 of ice time per game in a third-line center slot. It's not that Domi is failing, per se. It's that Toronto needs its bottom six to contribute, and Domi is capable of leading the way there. He has ample runway to do so in the second half.

Grade: A (first-quarter grade: A-). Toronto could have taken a header when Anthony Stolarz -- their other team MVP candidate after Marner -- was sidelined for four to six weeks by an injury. Instead, the Leafs rallied and have stayed purposefully on track. Toronto isn't as fun to watch offensively under Berube as in recent seasons, but Marner, John Tavares and William Nylander have all been strong,

Matthew Knies is heating up and Matthews is trending back toward his usual high standard. Meanwhile, Joseph Woll is (mostly) standing tall in net and Chris Tanev has been an excellent addition to lead the Leafs' back end. The Leafs are atop the Atlantic standings for a reason -- they're solid in all three phases and don't let the slumps turn into long slides. An even stronger second half could be on tap, once Stolarz is back to split time with Woll.

Carolina Hurricanes

Record: 26-15-3

Preseason over/under: 100.5

Current points pace: 102.5

Class president: Martin Necas. This is shaping up to be a career-best season for Necas. He got off to a hot start, notching 30 points in his first 17 games, including a 13-game point streak, and currently leads Carolina in scoring with 15 goals and 48 points. It's not just how much Necas is contributing for the Hurricanes, but it's how he does it -- the 25-year-old is making timely, consistent contributions that have helped Carolina close out tight wins and masked some of the club's overall issues generating chances at 5-on-5. He also plays a significant role on Carolina's power play.

In danger of failing: Andrei Svechnikov. It has been a tough first half for Svechnikov. The third-line winger has struggled to produce offensively and, like some of his teammates, isn't finding much success at 5-on-5. Svechnikov has only five even-strength goals, and his 29 points through 41 games fall below expectations. The 24-year-old has endured too many scoring droughts to be a reliable presence up front, and it seems Svechnikov is lacking the confidence to turn a corner. It's not too late for him to snap out of his slump and establish himself as a threat again.

Grade: A- (first-quarter grade: A+). Carolina has stayed on track despite some recent setbacks, particularly with their goaltending and scoring. The Hurricanes got just four games out of Frederik Andersen before he was injured, and Pyotr Kochetkov has been expectedly solid -- if unspectacular. The Hurricanes have persevered through their injury issues and found ways to remain an Eastern Conference contender, mainly via solid team defense (Carolina is giving up 2.74 goals per game) and excellent special teams (with the top-ranked penalty kill and 13th-best power play). The second half is where Carolina has to rediscover its offensive mojo outside the man advantage.

Los Angeles Kings

Record: 24-12-5

Preseason over/under: 96.5

Current points pace: 106.0

Class president: Vladislav Gavrikov. A season that was already filled with questions added another in the preseason when Drew Doughty injured his ankle and required a surgery that has kept him sidelined this season. That has seen Gavrikov emerge to lead the Kings in 5-on-5 ice time and short-handed minutes, while also averaging 23:51 per game and scoring 16 points in 39 games.

In danger of failing: Phillip Danault. On the whole, Danault is doing nearly everything that the Kings could expect from him. He's creating for his teammates while logging the most ice time on the PK among Kings' forwards. It's just that he has had trouble consistently scoring goals, which is why he's on pace to finish with six goals. Failing to reach double figures would end a three-year streak in which he has scored more than 17 goals in each season. That said, he is on pace for what would be a fourth straight season of more than 40 points.

Grade: A- (first-quarter grade: B+). So much of the Kings' success to this point has been predicated on relying on the entire roster. They entered Jan. 11 with eight players who scored more than 20 points and 14 in total who have scored more than 10 points. Plus, they've continued to strike a balance with how they've used their goalie tandem of Darcy Kuemper and David Rittich. And with Doughty resuming skating, his eventual return could play a significant role in their chase for home-ice advantage.

New Jersey Devils

Record: 26-15-4

Preseason over/under: 101.5

Current points pace: 102.0

Class president: Jesper Bratt. A star was born this season in New Jersey and his name is Bratt. Yes, Bratt had a strong 2023-24, but his former career-best numbers are set to be surpassed in another incredible season. He's doing it all for the Devils, from even-strength dynamo to playing a dominant role on both the power play and penalty kill. Bratt is one behind Jack Hughes for New Jersey's lead in points (51) and though he might not pull as many headlines as his counterparts, Bratt deserves ample praise for how seamlessly he has built on previous success and continues to elevate his game in new ways.

In danger of failing: Brenden Dillon. The Devils have a solid defense -- one that would be improved by a second-half surge from Dillon. It's not that Dillon has been bad; it's that he stands out poorly among New Jersey's other defenders having stronger seasons. Dillon is a physical player -- he's top 10 among defenders in hits -- and his agitating presence is known to draw penalties. But the veteran is also prone to mistakes in his own end and doesn't add much offensively (Dillon has only two goals and 11 points to date). New Jersey should expect more out of its top-pairing player as it pushes toward another playoff run this spring.

Grade: A- (first-quarter grade: B). New Jersey finally seems to be in a groove -- outside of a recent seven-game hiccup (2-4-1). New coach Sheldon Keefe has put a system in place in which the Devils are beginning to thrive, and their offseason additions have (for the most part) transitioned well into the organization. Jacob Markstrom has been a particular bright spot, providing the consistent goaltending the team has lacked the past couple of seasons. The Devils are good in every facet, boasting exceptional special teams (including the league's third-ranked power play and eighth-best penalty kill) to complement their even-strength prowess.

B grades

Calgary Flames

Record: 21-14-7

Preseason over/under: 81.5

Current points pace: 95.7

Class president: Dustin Wolf. One of the reasons why the Flames are challenging for a wild-card spot is how they've managed Wolf. The plan was to always use him in tandem with Dan Vladar, so the rookie could receive starts without feeling overworked throughout his first full season. So far, that plan has allowed Wolf to emerge as one of the stronger goalies in the NHL this season with a 7.5 GSAA, which ranked 15th among all goaltenders. His .914 save percentage is 11th among goalies with more than 15 games.

In danger of failing: Andrei Kuzmenko. He had a lot of success last season after arriving in a trade with the Canucks. He scored 14 goals and 25 points in 29 games for the Flames, providing them with another

potential top-six option. This season, Kuzmenko has struggled by comparison. He has scored only once while having 10 points in 31 games and all of his production coming before he sustained a lower-body injury that kept him out of the lineup in late December.

Grade: B+ (first-quarter grade: A-). How the Flames perform over the next month could answer any question about their place in the wild-card race. There are the teams they're trying to chase in addition to the ones below them in the standings they're trying to fend off in an attempt to return to the postseason for the first time since 2021-22. Yet what might give them a potential edge is that according to PuckPedia the Flames have more than \$18 million in cap space along with the necessary draft capital to make a move at the deadline.

Colorado Avalanche

Record: 26-17-1

Preseason over/under: 102.5

Current points pace: 98.8

Class president: Mackenzie Blackwood. Four games. That's all the Avalanche needed before they signed Blackwood to a five-year extension worth \$5.25 million annually. What made the Avs' front office commit to Blackwood after a small sample size is the fact he provided more stability in net in his four games than they previously had all season. Their previous tandem of Justus Annunen and Alexandar Georgiev had a combined .873 save percentage that came at too high a cost. And that's with Nathan MacKinnon leading the NHL in points. Enter Blackwood. Through 10 games, he was already tied for the team lead in wins while posting a .940 save percentage and having a 15.6 GSAA that's in the top five in the NHL among goalies with 15 games.

In danger of failing: Sam Malinski. Having facilitators on the back end has been part of the Avs' formula the past few seasons. It's why their defensemen entered Jan. 6 with the most points of any blue line in the NHL. Malinski is another puck-moving option who has struggled to replicate what he did in 2023-24. Last season saw Malinski finish with three goals and 10 points in 23 games in addition to the 27 points in 46 games he had in the AHL. He has started the season with only one goal and five points through 40 games.

Grade: B+ (first-quarter grade: B-). A team that once looked as if it could be in for a wild-card fight now looks like one that could challenge for the Central Division title. The performances the Avs have received from Blackwood and Scott Wedgewood since acquiring them in separate trades have made them a different team. It's a team that has become even more formidable now that it is starting to gradually get players back from injuries.

Columbus Blue Jackets

Record: 20-17-6

Preseason over/under: 69.5

Current points pace: 87.7

Class president: Zach Werenski. The Blue Jackets' top defenseman is not only his team's best player, but one of the league's best blueliners. Werenski leads Columbus with 13 goals and 48 points, under a heavy workload that includes carrying his club at 5-on-5, on the power play and penalty kill. The 27-year-old is decidedly potent on both ends of the ice and is unfazed by any assignment or role doled out by coach Dean Evason. So it was hardly hyperbole when Evason said Werenski has been "everything" for the

team this season. And as an extra feather in Werenski's cap, he's closing in on Rick Nash's record for most assists (258) in franchise history.

In danger of failing: Elvis Merzlikins. Columbus' goaltending has been an issue in recent seasons, and this one is no exception. Merzlikins' .887 save percentage and 3.17 goals-against average are the type of middling results that have put the Blue Jackets second overall in goals against (averaging 3.51 per game) despite holding opponents to fewer than 30 shots on net per game. Merzlikins used his offseason for a mental reset after last season's similarly underwhelming performance, but the veteran hasn't been a difference-maker -- in fact, it's the Blue Jackets frequently outscoring their goalie problems. That trend can't continue in 2025 if Columbus wishes to stay in the playoff mix.

Grade: B+ (first-quarter grade: B-). The Blue Jackets are fun. And feisty. And -- as of late -- a verifiable postseason contender. Yes, Columbus recently slid into a wild-card spot thanks in large part to a contingent of young skaters -- namely Kirill Marchenko, Kent Johnson and Dmitri Voronkov -- driving the offense. Couple that with Werenski's magnificence anchoring the blue line, and seemingly full-team buy-in to Evanson's messaging, and Columbus is tracking for one of its most positive seasons in years. The trick now is to stay on course. This is one of the NHL's worst teams on the road (with only six wins away from home) and it's those details that can make or break a club's outcome.

Dallas Stars

Record: 27-14-1

Preseason over/under: 103.5

Current points pace: 107.4

Class president: Matt Duchene. If he's not leading one of the NHL's best teams in an offensive category, he's in the top three. What Duchene has done to this point has him on pace to finish with what would be just his second 80-point season. And the fact he's doing this while in the last year of his contract for a team that's seeking a third consecutive trip to the Western Conference finals? It could lead to another major decision for a Stars' front office that already has a number of them to make this offseason.

In danger of failing: Matt Dumba. An injury-riddled first season in Dallas has been compounded by other factors. For his career, Dumba has averaged more than 20 minutes yet this season has led to him averaging 15:36 in ice time. That's the lowest he has averaged since his rookie season. And though he has only two points in 23 games, he also has been limited in short-handed minutes. Last season, Dumba logged more than 200 minutes on the penalty kill and was limited to 15:22 through his first 21 games with the Stars.

Grade: B+ (first-quarter grade: B+). Balance is essentially the detail that has reinforced why the Stars are in a championship window. They possess the sort of balanced scoring that has them in the top 10 in goals per game. But there is also a consistency they have with their defensive structure and goaltending that explains why they're in the top three in fewest goals allowed per game while also having the NHL's top penalty kill on Jan. 11. Now it's a matter of determining how they can parlay that approach in the second half of the season and eventually the playoffs.

Edmonton Oilers

Record: 27-13-3

Preseason over/under: 108.5

Current points pace: 108.7

Class president: Leon Draisaitl. Both Draisaitl and Connor McDavid are in a position to pass 100 points again. Draisaitl is aiming for his fourth consecutive century mark and his sixth in the past seven years while McDavid is looking to extend his streak to five in a row. But what Draisaitl is on pace to do is finish with his first 60-goal season after scoring 50 or more three times.

In danger of failing: Jeff Skinner. Signing Skinner to a one-year deal worth \$3 million was intended to give the Oilers a reliable secondary scorer at a cut-rate price. That plan hasn't worked out as expected as Skinner, a 10-time 20-goal scorer, is on pace to finish with 14 goals and 30 points. If those numbers hold, it would be his lowest total since he had seven goals and 14 points in 53 games during the truncated 2020-21 season.

Grade: B+ (first-quarter grade: C+). Winning nine of their 13 games in December allowed the Oilers to climb the standings and enter January in a stronger position to challenge for a division crown. Between Dec. 1 and Jan. 11, there have been only three teams that have won more games than the Oilers. And while they were in the top five in goals per game during that stretch, they also allowed the eighth-fewest goals per game.

Florida Panthers

Record: 25-16-3

Preseason over/under: 102.5

Current points pace: 98.8

Class president: Sam Reinhart. There were doubts about whether Reinhart could match last season's career-best 57 goals and 94 points that earned him an eight-year, \$69 million contract extension. It turns out Reinhart might be even better than before. The Panthers' leading scorer has already pocketed 25 goals and 49 points, and continues to drive Florida offensively, both at 5-on-5 and on special teams. Reinhart's elite shot and competitive fire burn nightly, and when the Panthers need a pick-me-up, he's there to provide it. Any notion of Reinhart being "the great regressor" has been resoundingly put to bed.

In danger of failing: Carter Verhaeghe. This is not the player Florida has been used to the past two seasons. Instead of consistently lighting the lamp, Verhaeghe has been all sorts of snakebit -- he has scored only 10 goals and 30 points through 41 games, and endured long stretches (up to eight consecutive games) without finding the net. Coach Paul Maurice has moved Verhaeghe down the lineup accordingly, putting him in a third-line spot next to Anton Lundell. Maurice claims to be unconcerned with Verhaeghe's lack of production from that spot. Time will tell if Verhaeghe can rebound and provide some much-needed scoring depth for Florida.

Grade: B+ (first-quarter grade: A). The Panthers have been so good that even their average game is better than most. Florida just hasn't been consistently dominating the competition. The Panthers' top performers -- including Matthew Tkachuk -- have been hit or miss, and goalie Sergei Bobrovsky also struggled through mediocre spells. When the Panthers are excelling, it's through a full-team defensive effort. And despite a dearth of secondary scoring, Florida's offense still ranks in the top 10 -- proof that the Panthers, even outside their prime, have potential to pounce at any moment. Expect a strong second half from this group.

Montreal Canadiens

Record: 20-18-4

Preseason over/under: 76.5

Current points pace: 85.9

Class president: Lane Hutson. Perhaps there's a twinge of recency bias here. But the Canadiens' rookie defenseman has been so good of late, it's hard to argue he's not worthy of distinction (and well-deserved Calder Trophy buzz). After all, Hutson paces all NHL rookies in points with 32 -- impressive for any skater, let alone a blueliner. Hutson can take over a game, and he helped boost Montreal's playoff chances entering 2025. There's no denying Hutson's impact and the way he has been a genuine game-changer.

In danger of failing: Kirby Dach. In fairness to Dach, coming back from the ACL and MCL tears that cost him nearly all of last season wouldn't be easy on any player. Still, Dach needs to find his confidence in the second half. He has managed only six goals and 14 points, and is an abysmal minus-25. Coach Martin St. Louis has credited Dach for doing the extra work while also acknowledging his forward has markedly regressed. Dach has had a particularly hard time against fast-paced teams (which, let's face it, is most of them) and the lack of rhythm to his game is noticeable. Montreal has to hope that improving health will ultimately spawn better play from Dach in the coming weeks and months.

Grade: B+ (first-quarter grade: C-). Montreal is one of the league's potential Cinderella stories -- if it can continue tracking forward like it did to end 2024. The Canadiens won six of their final seven before the calendar turned, and earned points in four of their first five in 2025. Montreal ranks fourth overall offensively (averaging 3.58 goals per game) since mid-December, and it has done a better job limiting chances (sitting a respective 15th defensively). It's even good news for the Canadiens that production from their best players -- including Nick Suzuki and Cole Caufield -- can even be improved. Montreal is in the mix for the second wild-card spot, and if its upward trajectory continues there will be spring hockey in La Belle Province.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Record: 23-15-3

Preseason over/under: 98.5

Current points pace: 98.0

Class president: Victor Hedman. Sure, it's Nikita Kucherov leading the Lightning in scoring -- what else is new? But it's Hedman who has elevated every facet of Tampa Bay's game. The captain has been one of the league's best defensemen this season, with typically superb details at both ends of the ice. Hedman's 31 points in 38 games while managing a team-high 23:19 of ice time per game is impressive. The way Hedman can control pace and manage the puck at 5-on-5 has kept the Lightning humming along this season, and allowed stars such as Kucherov to do what they do best. He's the undeniable leader in every sense of the word.

In danger of failing: Erik Cernak. Really, Cernak should be trending better given that he's paired with Ryan McDonagh (who has slid comfortably back into a role with the Lightning since being reacquired). And skating alongside McDonagh has helped Cernak improve this season over his previous two. Still, the lack of offensive production (he has zero goals and only nine points this season) is concerning, and that is all the more apparent during games he's not with McDonagh. Cernak is just not contributing enough in a meaningful way for the Lightning; Hedman, McDonagh and the rest of the blue line could use a bit more help.

Grade: B+ (first-quarter grade: B+). This is a good team that can be even better. And that's not a bad thing. The Lightning are leading the NHL in offense (3.65 goals per game), and are aided significantly by their fourth-ranked power play (25.8%). But there's room to improve on the defensive side (Tampa Bay gives up nearly 30 shots against per game), and Andrei Vasilevskiy probably hasn't delivered his best yet either. The Lightning are leaning on top scorers to produce offensively, and that's always a dangerous

position to be in come playoff time. Tapping into secondary scoring in the second half will help the Lightning avoid being one-dimensional down the stretch -- and into spring.

Anaheim Ducks

Record: 18-20-5

Preseason over/under: 72.5

Current points pace: 78.2

Class president: Lukas Dostal. The 24-year-old showed last season that he could handle what comes with being in a goalie tandem. What he has done this season has allowed him to emerge as one of the best goaltenders in the NHL. No, really. Only Mackenzie Blackwood, Connor Hellebuyck and Logan Thompson have a better GSAA than Dostal as of Jan. 11. The Ducks' rebuild has seen them stockpile defensemen and forwards with the belief they could find someone who could emerge as their goalie of the future. It appears Dostal might be the answer.

In danger of failing: Mason McTavish. A rookie season that saw him score 17 goals and 43 points over a full 82-game season was amplified by second season with 19 goals and 42 points in 64 games in 2023-24. Averaging 0.66 points per game created expectations for McTavish. But he came into Jan. 11 averaging 0.49 points per game this season.

Grade: B- (first-quarter grade: B-). Are they closer to a wild-card spot than they are another high pick in the draft lottery? Or is the draft lottery the more likely path for the Ducks? The idea that these questions are being asked speaks to how the Ducks could be better than they were last season. A year ago they finished with 59 points whereas this season has seen them pick up 39 points through their first 41 games.

Detroit Red Wings

Record: 20-18-4

Preseason over/under: 90.5

Current points pace: 85.9

Class president: Lucas Raymond. The Red Wings have a burgeoning star in Raymond. He's Detroit's leading scorer -- with 16 goals and 41 points -- but that's not why he's ahead of the pack. He's been a jack-of-all-trades in Detroit, producing as a top-line performer and also trusted to be a second-line driver. Raymond's potential as a two-way player seems to grow on a game-by-game basis, and that confidence has translated not only on the scoresheet but in Raymond's overall leadership with the club. It's exactly what Detroit should be getting from a player they signed to an eight-year, \$64.6 million extension in September.

In danger of failing: Dylan Larkin. Detroit has been in a bind for scoring all season, and the captain could do more to help there. He's averaging less than a point per game -- with 16 goals and 33 points -- and while those aren't awful totals, it's not nearly enough to be setting a standard for Detroit's other forwards to follow. That said, Larkin could get on a heater at any time but needs to display a defensive effort to match. That's how he -- and Detroit -- can get back on track.

Grade: B- (first-quarter grade: C+). The Red Wings' poor start put coach Derek Lalonde out of a gig before midseason. That's about as suboptimal as it gets, especially when they have more than enough talent to be a playoff contender. And could it be that the Red Wings are actually starting to play like it? They're on a seven-game winning streak that has put them within striking distance of a playoff spot. The team will have to improve their offensive game at 5-on-5 (they're 23rd overall averaging 2.86 goals per

game) but its second-ranked power play is a true difference-maker. New coach Todd McLellan has Detroit turned in the right direction.

Ottawa Senators

Record: 21-18-3

Preseason over/under: 90.5

Current points pace: 87.9

Class president: Tim Stutzle. Full disclosure: Linus Ullmark has a case for this mantle as much as Stutzle. But the Senators' goaltender is currently out week-to-week because of an injury so Stutzle gets the nod. Ottawa's top center is going to be relied upon more than ever as they chug along without Ullmark. Fortunately, Stutzle appears up to the task. He's been carrying Ottawa's offense this season with 13 goals and 42 points, and his growth on both ends of the ice is evident. Stutzle might not be close to his ceiling yet, and that's excellent news for the Senators.

In danger of failing: Anton Forsberg. Ottawa is down one starting goaltender for the foreseeable future. It's on Forsberg to pick up the slack -- and his season to date doesn't suggest he's up to the challenge. He has posted a 4-8-1 record with an .883 save percentage and 3.10 goals-against average. Ottawa can't stay in the playoff mix with low-end goaltending. Forsberg gave up at least three goals in his first six starts this season, and his relative inconsistency should rightfully make Ottawa nervous. Beyond Forsberg, the Sens' options are promising: 22-year-old Leevi Merilainen or 24-year-old Mads Sogaard. Ideally though, it's Forsberg who's going to step up his game.

Grade: B- (first-quarter grade: D+). Ottawa would get a higher score here if not for a strikingly poor five-win November. The Senators have turned things around since then and positioned themselves to compete for an Eastern Conference wild-card spot. This would be the club's first postseason berth since a conference finals appearance in 2017. And frankly, it's about time. The Senators have a trifecta of surging forwards in Stutzle, Drake Batherson and Brady Tkachuk. Jake Sanderson is coming into his own on the blue line. And if Ullmark can return to form when he's healthy, there's plenty for Ottawa to look forward to in the second half.

San Jose Sharks

Record: 13-26-6

Preseason over/under: 63.5

Current points pace: 58.3

Class president: Jake Walman. Before going on injured reserve, Walman was proving to be arguably the most integral player in the lineup. He leads the Sharks in average ice time, he leads their defensemen in power-play minutes and he's one of the significant pieces of their PK. Walman emerged last season when he scored 12 goals and 21 points in 63 games with the Red Wings. He already has surpassed his point total from last season with 26 points in 32 games in the first year of a two-year contract he signed in the offseason.

In danger of failing: Alexandar Georgiev. His struggles with the Avalanche have also followed him to the Sharks. Georgiev had a .874 save percentage through 18 games with the Avs before going to the Sharks, where he has a .869 save percentage in his first five games. Furthermore, his time with the Sharks has seen him lose four of his first five starts with a 4.08 GAA in the final year of his contract.

Grade: B- (first-quarter grade: B-). For the Sharks, progress is the goal and it's something they've made since last season. They went from being a 19-win team with the NHL's worst record to entering Jan. 11

just seven wins away from passing that mark. They're watching their homegrown core of the future in Macklin Celebrini, William Eklund, Mario Ferraro and Will Smith provide promising results while the newest members of that core, Yaroslav Askarov and Nikolai Kovalenko, continue showing they're also central to what lies ahead.

Vancouver Canucks

Record: 19-13-10

Preseason over/under: 99.5

Current points pace: 93.7

Class president: Quinn Hughes. Last season's Norris Trophy winner is having the sort of season that could make him a repeat winner. The Canucks' captain leads his team in assists, points, power-play points, average ice time, 5-on-5 ice time and power-play ice time. And even though he has sat out four games, Hughes still remains on pace for what would be his second straight season of more than 90 points.

In danger of failing: Nils Hoglander. The Canucks were one of the biggest surprises of the NHL last season in part because of their supporting cast. Hoglander broke out for 24 goals and established an expectation that he could help lessen the scoring burden on some of the Canucks' stars. So far, Hoglander has scored twice in 38 games -- on pace for four goals a year before his \$3 million extension takes effect.

Grade: B- (first-quarter grade: B). There's what's going on -- or not going on -- with J.T. Miller and Elias Pettersson. There's the injuries. There's the fact that Thatcher Demko is gradually playing more games. But it all amounts to the Canucks needing to answer one major question: Can they work past these or any other challenges to show they're a perennial playoff team and not a roster that had one great season in 2023-24?

C grades

St. Louis Blues

Record: 20-20-4

Preseason over/under: 86.5

Current points pace: 82.0

Class president: Dylan Holloway. Nobody quite knew exactly what to expect from Holloway in his first year away from the Oilers. But there was a belief that going to the Blues could lead to a larger role, more minutes and potentially more production. The decision to sign him to an offer sheet has seen him emerge in St. Louis into a top-six option who is on pace for 29 goals. It's a contrast compared to his first two seasons with Edmonton when he split time between the NHL and AHL, scoring nine goals and 18 points in his first 89 games.

In danger of failing: Mathieu Joseph. Signing Joseph in free agency was supposed to give the Blues another bottom-six scorer whose two-way presence could be vital for a team that struggled with defensive consistency. Injuries have played a role in interrupting his season, but Joseph entered Jan. 6 on a 17-game pointless streak that dated to Oct. 26.

Grade: C+ (first-quarter grade: D). It's possible that in-season adjustments could be the reason the Blues remain in the wild-card chase. Firing coach Drew Bannister and hiring Jim Montgomery is a decision that has seemingly paid dividends. Look at how the Blues' performed through Montgomery's first 19 games.

They've given up the eighth-fewest goals per game while scoring the 10th most in that time. Then there's the trade for Cam Fowler, with the former Ducks defenseman recording 10 points in his first 12 games with St. Louis while averaging almost 23 minutes.

Utah Hockey Club

Record: 18-17-7

Preseason over/under: 87.5

Current points pace: 84.0

Class president: Mikhail Sergachev. Only one player in the NHL is ahead of him in average ice time. There's only one player who has logged more shifts, and as of Jan. 11, nobody has played more short-handed minutes than Sergachev. And he's on pace for the second-most points in his career. Utah's plan when it traded for Sergachev was that he could be its No. 1 defenseman. The two-time Stanley Cup champion has done just that in a season that has seen Sean Durzi play only four games because of an injury and John Marino not play at all.

In danger of failing: Lawson Crouse. Utah has four players who are responsible for a high percentage of its goals. Crouse is not among those players, which has proved to be a challenge for a team that was already on the cusp of being in the bottom 10 of goals per game. Crouse came into 2024-25 with three straight 20-goal seasons but now finds himself on pace to finish with 20 total points in 82 games.

Grade: C+ (first-quarter grade: C-). It was around this time last season when the Arizona Coyotes were in the wild-card chase only to lose 14 straight games. Utah GM Bill Armstrong said that experience left scar tissue and he was "excited to see what we do with that scar tissue." Utah lost its final five games in December and had lost six of seven before Jan. 6. Could this season be different or will Utah potentially face a repeat of last season?

Philadelphia Flyers

Record: 19-20-5

Preseason over/under: 95.5

Current points pace: 80.1

Class president: Travis Konecny. Auston Matthews recently called Konecny the league's most underrated player, and Toronto's captain isn't far off in his assessment. Konecny is a cornerstone of the Flyers' franchise and can be counted on to consistently produce. He leads Philadelphia with 20 goals and 50 points this season, and is at his best against the toughest competition; he scored both Flyers goals in their 3-2 loss to Matthews' Leafs. Konecny sets a tone with his energy and efficiency, and it's clear he's still evolving given how refined his habits have been at both ends of the ice. He makes good decisions and is a capable playmaker.

In danger of failing: Samuel Ersson. The Flyers' starting goalie job was Ersson's to lose, but he hasn't done enough to secure that No. 1 billing. Injuries certainly haven't helped, but when the netminder is available he's often performing below expectations (with a 10-7-2 record, .888 save percentage and 2.86 goals-against average). There have been surges throughout the season -- including right before he was sidelined by a lower-body issue earlier this month -- but a lack of consistency keeps Ersson from being a top goalie.

Grade: C (first-quarter grade: C). Philadelphia is taking the low-and-slow approach to rebuilding, and that comes with all manner of growing pains. But the Flyers have embraced their youth -- namely Matvei Michkov. The Calder Trophy contender has been genuinely good (with 13 goals and 30 points) and has

infused some fun into the season. The team needs more skaters like him, but the likes of Owen Tippett and Jamie Drysdale haven't been showing up often enough on the scoresheet. Philadelphia is outside playoff contention as a result of its various struggles, chief among them having the league's third-worst defense (giving up 3.47 goals per game) and 28th-ranked power play (15.8%).

Boston Bruins

Record: 21-19-5

Preseason over/under: 99.5

Current points pace: 85.6

Class president: Brad Marchand. The Bruins' captain could be faulted for a slow start -- multiple offseason surgeries will do that -- but Marchand still sets the tone for Boston. He rarely fails to deliver a complete effort, and his output has improved throughout the season; he has scored 10 goals and 18 points in the past 21 games and, at 36, is playing nearly 19 minutes per game. Marchand is (rightfully) the Bruins' heartbeat, and in a season of turmoil that has included a coaching change, his consistency as a leader can't be undervalued.

In danger of failing: Jeremy Swayman. This was not the Swayman anyone expected to see following his standoff with the Bruins in pursuit of the eight-year, \$66 million contract he signed in October. Swayman's first half has been average at best -- and dreadful at worst -- with an uncharacteristic lack of detail to his game. Swayman's sub-.900 save percentage hardly reflects what Boston deserves out of him. The Bruins must hope Swayman's slight uptick recently -- producing of late a 3-5-0 record with .918 SV% -- is a sign his second half will generate more promising results.

Grade: C- (first-quarter grade: D). Boston has toppled from third place in the Atlantic into a (highly contested) wild-card spot. And it's no wonder given the Bruins' clear deficiencies -- many of which were on display in their recent 0-5-1 skid. Boston has struggled all season for secondary scoring, the goaltending has been subpar, special teams aren't firing (the power play is 31st in the NHL and the penalty kill is 25th) and the team's collective malaise essentially cost Jim Montgomery his job. Also troubling is how Boston's stars (i.e. David Pastrnak) have failed to find a groove -- although, like Swayman, Pastrnak has taken a positive turn in 2025. Boston still needs more from everyone if it expects to stay in the postseason field.

Pittsburgh Penguins

Record: 18-19-8

Preseason over/under: 90.5

Current points pace: 80.2

Class president: Sidney Crosby. Pittsburgh's top forward didn't let a slow start weigh him down. Crosby has kickstarted his game offensively of late, and it was helping the Penguins look as if they, too, were finding a rhythm. Crosby leads the team with 12 goals and 47 points, all the while providing leadership Pittsburgh has needed to get on track for various stretches. It has been tough sledding for the Penguins, and Crosby's steadiness is one reliable thing they've been able to embrace. Where Pittsburgh goes from here will be largely dictated by what Crosby can do.

In danger of failing: Tristan Jarry. Let's caveat this selection by acknowledging Pittsburgh's turnstile defense is utterly appalling at times, and would be a hurdle for any goaltender to overcome. But Jarry deserves to shoulder responsibility for the Penguins' lack of goal-suppression prowess. He's 8-6-4 this season, with an .890 save percentage and 3.33 goals-against average, and is more often a liability than

difference-maker. It's tough to justify Jarry's continued issues at this stage, and backup Alex Nedeljkovic is no better option. Pittsburgh's goaltending is just one more problem it has been tasked with overcoming.

Grade: C- (first-quarter grade: D-). Pittsburgh gets a slight midseason grade bump because it is technically better off now than a few weeks ago -- but a recent four-game winless streak (1-2-3) hasn't helped its (meager) playoff ambitions. Pittsburgh has the league's worst defense (giving up 3.62 goals per game) and unless that changes in a hurry there will be no spring hockey yet again for the once-perennial contenders. The Penguins have a strong power play (fifth best, at 25.6%) and some solid scorers (Crosby, Rickard Rakell and Evgeni Malkin), but that won't be enough to make up for their putrid back end and often brutal goaltending. Pittsburgh has given up two or fewer goals in only four games since Dec. 1. There's no way that translates into any form of success from here.

Seattle Kraken

Record: 18-23-3

Preseason over/under: 87.5

Current points pace: 72.7

Class president: A healthy Vince Dunn. The key word: healthy. Dunn's arc with the Kraken is one that has been underlined by growth while simultaneously being somewhat hindered by injuries. Look no further than this season. When healthy, Dunn is capable of averaging more than 21 minutes a game while providing a puck-moving element for a roster that's in the bottom third of goals per contest. When injured, Dunn's eight goals and 18 points in 22 games are a level of production the Kraken have struggled to replicate in his absence.

In danger of failing: Andre Burakovsky. A few items make Burakovsky a complicated figure in that injuries have led to him never playing more than 49 games in a season since he signed with the Kraken three years ago. This season he has sat out only two games as of Jan. 11, but he has struggled to score goals. Burakovsky had three goals in his first 39 games for a projection of six goals over a 74-game season.

Grade: C- (first-quarter grade: C). Being as many points from the final wild-card spot as they are from the NHL's worst record once again puts the Kraken at crossroads. Do they still believe they have enough time to make a turnaround? Or are they better off moving on from this season with an eye on the future? Especially when they could add draft capital knowing teams could be interested in a pair of pending UFAs in Yannic Gourde and Brandon Tanev.

D grades

Buffalo Sabres

Record: 16-22-5

Preseason over/under: 88.5

Current points pace: 70.6

Class president: Rasmus Dahlin. There's probably too much on Dahlin's shoulders at this point, mainly that he's carrying Buffalo defensively. Dahlin has consistently lacked a partner to match his skill level, and opponents take advantage by trying to smother him, but Dahlin still comes through for the Sabres with quality performances. He leads Buffalo's blueliners with 28 points through 32 games and paces the team in ice time (24:31 per game). Dahlin also wears the club's captaincy well, and is willing to call out

the Sabres publicly, as he did following their abysmal showing against Vegas earlier this month. Dahlin is the all-around head of the class for a reason.

In danger of failing: Dylan Cozens. To whom much is given, much is expected. Buffalo inked Cozens to a seven-year, \$49.5 million contract two years ago, reflective of the 31-goal season he was putting together. Cozens is a shadow of that same player now. Without a decent power play to lean on -- Cozens scored 18 of his 31 goals with the extra man in 2022-23 -- he hasn't come close to delivering a solid offensive output. Cozens is a woeful minus-12 on the season, and a frequent liability in the Sabres' own end. It's no wonder the 23-year-old is constantly mentioned in trade rumors. Whether the Sabres choose to give up on him remains to be seen, though they'd definitely be trading low on his value.

Grade: D (first-quarter grade: B-). Buffalo won't be breaking that 13-year postseason drought this season -- or anytime soon -- if their current level of play continues. The Sabres have been free falling since the fall, going through a 13-game winless skid that punctuated an otherwise mostly abysmal first half. Every bright spot is swiftly darkened by another poor showing, and nothing GM Kevyn Adams has done off the ice, or new head coach Lindy Ruff has tried on it, is making much difference.

Chicago Blackhawks

Record: 14-28-2

Preseason over/under: 73.5

Current points pace: 55.9

Class president: Connor Bedard. Since the Blackhawks fired Luke Richardson on Dec. 6, they've seen a more consistent version of Bedard. He's averaging a little more than a point per game in the 16 games since the Blackhawks' coaching change. He also entered Jan. 11 on a nine-game points streak. It's a level of offensive consistency that now has Bedard on pace to finish with 74 points after producing 61 points last season.

In danger of failing: Philipp Kurashev. Scoring 18 goals and finishing with 54 points last season created the belief that the Blackhawks might have another young player for the future. How he has performed this season has led to questions about what has gone wrong. Kurashev had only three goals and five points in his first 30 games while his ice time has fallen from playing 19:01 last season to 15:05 this season.

Grade: D (first-quarter grade: D). The issues that were there before the Blackhawks hired Anders Sorensen are still a problem. Through Sorensen's first 14 games, the Blackhawks were giving up the most goals per game while being in the bottom 10 in scoring. Although they were not expected to be in the playoff push, there was an expectation they could be better than they were last season after adding several veterans in free agency. Instead? They're on pace to finish five points ahead of what they had last season.

New York Islanders

Record: 17-18-7

Preseason over/under: 91.5

Current points pace: 80.0

Class president: Anders Lee. The Islanders' captain is giving his all every night on a team that's consistently lacking in offense. Lee paces the club in goals (18) and points (32) while providing the leadership it will need to make the most of its second-half prospects (which are not burning brightly).

Lee and Bo Horvat have been leading the charge on attack, and it has provided some sense of hope the Islanders can rally toward better outcomes in a wide-open Eastern Conference wild-card field.

In danger of failing: Adam Pelech. It has been a rough go for Pelech this season coming off an injury, and he has yet to make a real impact since returning. Pelech is known to be a reliable force on the back end and that just hasn't been seen often enough when he's available. In recent seasons, it has been the Islanders' defensive acumen saving them from a perennial absence of scoring output, and Pelech would normally be a primary contributor there. But his uncharacteristic mistakes have been contributing to a major sore spot. Seeing Pelech back in form will go a long way.

Grade: D (first-quarter grade: D+). The Islanders are fully adrift this season. New York has the league's worst penalty kill and power play. Coach Patrick Roy has practically driven starter Ilya Sorokin into the ground -- and Sorokin's stats have plummeted as a result. And yes, the scoring volume is poor -- seventh worst in the league. It's little wonder the Islanders haven't managed a winning streak longer than two games, and struggle to hold onto leads they do manage to build. If Roy has an answer for what ails the Islanders he best put it into effect -- and fast.

F grades

Nashville Predators

Record: 13-22-7

Preseason over/under: 98.5

Current points pace: 64.4

Class president: Juuse Saros. All but nine of the games the Predators have played this season have had Saros in net. That's how consistent he has been in a season that has been anything but for the Predators. If not for Connor Hellebuyck. Saros would be leading the NHL in shots faced, saves, minutes and shutouts.

In danger of failing: Tommy Novak. Finishing with consecutive 40-point seasons showed Novak could operate as a top-six option for the Predators. Adding Jonathan Marchessault and Steven Stamkos in the offseason came with the premise that Novak could operate on a line with two veterans and see his production increase in the process. But Novak has struggled for offensive consistency. He went pointless in November and is projected to finish with 10 goals and 18 points.

Grade: F (first-quarter grade: D). A slow start became even slower and what was once thought to be a playoff team now looks like one destined for the draft lottery. Several questions have been raised with arguably the most looming being: How much of an active seller will the Preds be ahead of the trade deadline if they go that route? Especially when they could be among the strongest contenders to win the lottery and earn the No. 1 pick.

New York Rangers

Record: 20-20-2

Preseason over/under: 100.5

Current points pace: 82.0

Class president: Will Cuyllé. The Rangers have a rising star in Cuyllé and he has managed to provide the rapidly deteriorating Blueshirts with a feel-good story. Cuyllé has earned a bigger role through consistently strong play (he has scored 11 goals and 24 points this season), and pushed his way onto the team's second power-play unit to go along with some penalty-kill action as well. Cuyllé isn't a headliner

in New York but deserves recognition for regularly producing positive gains for a squad short on depth players doing anywhere close to the same.

In danger of failing: Chris Kreider. Kreider landing on IR recently because of back issues is just the latest setback in what has been a decidedly down season. His 15 points to date puts him on pace to finish with less than half of what he did a season ago, and a lack of success on the power play is only exposing his poor 5-on-5 output. Kreider isn't making the most of his opportunities with the puck and his zone entries also are noticeably off. Basically, the longest-tenured Ranger is a mess -- an unfortunate reflection of the team at large.

Grade: F (first-quarter grade: B+). Oh, how the mighty have fallen. It's nearly impossible to explain or remotely justify what has happened to the Rangers after winning the Presidents' Trophy last season. They've taken a nosedive to sit 24th overall with only six (!) wins since mid-November (6-16-1). Jacob Trouba and Kaapo Kakko have been traded, and the team might not be done selling. The Rangers are averaging fewer than three goals, their power play is below average (21st overall) and they are 22nd in goals against (3.12) with an average-looking Igor Shesterkin manning the net. There's all sorts of blame to be shared for this downturn. The question is whether the season can be salvaged.

USA Today / NHL hits halfway point: Surprises, disappointments and awards leaders

By Mark Brehm – January 10, 2025

The NHL hit the halfway point on Thursday night, though not every team has played 41 games. Here are the surprises, disappointments, award leaders and other categories from the first half of the 2024-25 season:

Best story: *Columbus Blue Jackets*. They're sitting in an Eastern Conference wild-card spot, despite dealing with the offseason death of Johnny Gaudreau. Injured captain Boone Jenner hasn't played this season. Defenseman Zach Werenski, Kirill Marchenko and newcomer Sean Monahan are helping carry the load. And when Monahan went on the injured list this week, the Blue Jackets crushed the Seattle Kraken 6-2 in their first game without him.

Most impressive story: Alex Ovechkin, Washington Capitals. After a so-so (for him) 31-goal season in 2023-24, he needed to total 42 goals between this season and next to break Wayne Gretzky's career goal record. But he got off to a red-hot start with 15 goals in 18 games before breaking his leg and missing 16 games. He's back and up to 19 goals now, putting him on pace to break the record this season.

Biggest surprise: Vegas Golden Knights. They appeared due for a dropoff after losing Jonathan Marchessault, Chandler Stephenson, Logan Thompson and others during the offseason. But they're leading the league in points. Jack Eichel is on pace for his first 100-point season, which is a good sign for Team USA at the upcoming 4 Nations Face-Off.

Biggest disappointment (tie): New York Rangers, Nashville Predators. The Rangers have dropped from first overall in 2023-24 to 24th overall and went through a slump that led to trades of Jacob Trouba and Kaapo Kakko. The Predators added Steven Stamkos and fellow 40-goal scorer Marchessault in the offseason but have dropped from a 2023-24 playoff team to 30th overall.

MVP: Leon Draisaitl, Edmonton Oilers. He's the first player to 30 goals this season and nine of those are game-winners, including four in overtime. He's second in points (61), is tied for second in plus-minus (+24) and wins 56.6% of his faceoffs.

Goaltender: Connor Hellebuyck, Winnipeg Jets. The two-time (and reigning) Vezina Trophy winner has 25 wins in 33 starts, both league bests. He's also tops in the league among No. 1 goalies in goals-against average and save percentage. Also a good sign for Team USA.

Defenseman: *Zach Werenski, Columbus Blue Jackets*. He's tied for the goal lead among defensemen with 13, and his 48 points are one behind leader Cale Makar, who has played one more game. Werenski also leads in average ice time (26:30) and has had a five-point and a four-point game this season. Also a good sign for Team USA.

Rookie: Macklin Celebrini, San Jose Sharks. He had a goal and an assist in his debut, then missed the rest of October. Despite that, he's just two points out of the rookie scoring lead while averaging nearly a point a game.

Coach: Spencer Carbery, Washington Capitals. The Capitals added a lot of players in the offseason and Carbery has them fitting together. That includes Pierre-Luc Dubois, who struggled last season in Los Angeles. The Capitals have the league's second-best record and went 10-5-1 while Ovechkin was out.

Washington, which had a minus-37 goal differential last season in Carbery's first season, is at plus-41. Columbus coach Dean Evason also gets a nod.

Best goal, Nazem Kadri, Calgary Flames. He leaped a fallen Tampa Bay Lightning defender, kept his balance, spun and ripped a shot past Andrei Vasilevskiy.

Best save: Jacob Markstrom, New Jersey Devils. Markstrom robbed the Kraken twice in the same game.