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The Athletic / On the job a week, Rick Bowness sees flaws in Blue Jackets' preparation, competitiveness

By Aaron Portzline – January 22, 2026

COLUMBUS, Ohio — At the end of practice on Wednesday, Columbus Blue Jackets coach Rick Bowness brought together four of the club's top young forwards — Adam Fantilli, Kent Johnson, Kirill Marchenko and Cole Sillinger — for a conversation.

“It was a little bit of a pep talk,” Bowness said. “Those four guys, you know, they haven't played in the playoffs, and they've got to understand how hard it is to get into the playoffs in this league. Only eight out of 16 (in each conference) are going to get in. It's hard, and every night is hard. You've got to learn to play hard every night. You have to learn to play hard every shift, and you've got to recognize when you don't. So that's my job, to bring that up and address it with them. And it's their job to accept it and push themselves.”

Bowness was not pleased with the way the Blue Jackets — supposedly desperate to make a second-half push to the playoffs — started so slowly and lost 4-1 to the Ottawa Senators on Tuesday.

His on-ice meeting with the young forwards was only an exclamation point to a day's work filled with the same message: The Blue Jackets can't expect to win many games when they aren't more physically engaged.

This season's NHL schedule doesn't allow for coaches to have the type of punishing skates they would have run in years past — the Jackets, right back at it, host the Dallas Stars on Thursday — so Bowness has had to drive the point home via video before they take the ice to run some drills and stretch legs.

Asked if his players see the same issues he does, Bowness smiled. And then he reminisced about two of his former captains, perhaps setting the bar for the players who consider themselves leaders in the Blue Jackets' room.

“If they didn't see it today,” Bowness said, “then they had earmuffs on and they weren't paying attention.”

“You know there's a team coming in here (on Thursday) in Dallas ... (captain) Jamie Benn drags a lot of them into the fight. Jamie Benn's a wonderful guy, I love him. He's a great captain. (Mark) Scheifele in Winnipeg, he dragged them into the fight. That's who they are.”

Almost on cue, the Blue Jackets welcomed winger Mason Marchment back to practice on Wednesday, who made it clear he'll be returning to the lineup on Thursday against one of his former clubs. Out since Jan. 4, Marchment was acquired by Columbus in a trade with Seattle last month to bring a little sandpaper and grit to the lineup, but he's also brought a scoring touch, with five goals in only seven games. Bowness had him skating on the Blue Jackets' top line on Wednesday alongside Fantilli and Marchenko. The hope is that he can bring energy and be a disruptive force.

“My game is getting into other guys' faces,” Marchment said. “So, if I'm not playing that kind of game, then I'm not engaged.”

Marchment was asked somewhat jokingly when he became comfortable with other people not liking him.

“Pretty early, actually,” Marchment said. “Earlier in my career, it was way worse. I was a better rat, for sure, back when I was first coming into the league. That’s really how I got my foot in the door, and then I was able to expand my game once I got (to the NHL).”

Bowness said he has one concern about Marchment coming back: that others in the lineup will expect him to provide the grease, as they often look to Mathieu Olivier as the guy who does the fighting.

Nah, Bowness said. It’s on everybody.

“That’s going to be (Marchment’s) job, but it’s not one guy, right?” Bowness said. “We need them to drag everybody into the fight. He’s gonna do it, and so are you. We expect him to do it. We expect every one of them to play that way. And when we don’t, we talk about it.”

Bowness isn’t looking for fighting majors and match penalties. He’s not looking for dirty hits or cheap shots. He just wants the Blue Jackets to push back, finish checks and stop ceding the area in front of both nets to the opponents.

Years ago, Blue Jackets coach Ken Hitchcock was asked why NHL teams get away from playing the “right way” so frequently. His answer: “Because it hurts. It hurts to play this game, at this level, the right way. It hurts.”

Truth be told, Bowness can’t be sure he’s going to be able to mold these Blue Jackets into the club he wants them to be. But he’s just getting started in trying, he said.

The Blue Jackets will want to play well on Thursday for myriad reasons. Among them: Veteran center Charlie Coyle — quickly one of the most respected players in the room — will play his 1,000th NHL game.

It won’t take long to know whether the Blue Jackets have received Bowness’ message. After underwhelming starts the last two games, the first 10 minutes will be key. There’s only so much a coach can say, though.

“It’s their preparation,” Bowness said. “Listen, no one forced them to sign these contracts. They signed a pro contract to be a pro hockey player. All right, there’s responsibility that comes with it, and that is preparation.

“I’m not going to walk around holding their hand all day. ‘Are you ready? Are you ready?’ It’s their job as a professional athlete to get ready and go and be ready to compete and recognize, ‘OK, we’re not playing as well.’ Then get into the fight. Do something to get yourself into the fight.”

The Athletic / Blue Jackets start slow again, suffer first defeat under new head coach Rick Bowness

By Aaron Portzline – January 21, 2026

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Rick Bowness has spoken repeatedly about how much he enjoys the atmosphere on an NHL bench — the pace, the passion, the contentiousness, he said, is where the Columbus Blue Jackets' new coach feels most calm.

But Tuesday might have challenged those feelings. For the first time since he came about early last week, Bowness might have wished he was back on that boat in Florida, the one he left behind — along with his retirement — to return to coaching.

The Blue Jackets were dreadful Tuesday, the worst they've looked under Bowness and as bad as they looked under previous coach Dean Evason.

This was supposed to be a matchup of two lower-tier Eastern Conference clubs that expect (hope?) to make second-half climbs up the standings. But only the visiting Ottawa Senators wore that look.

The Senators won 4-1 before an announced crowd of 13,278 in Nationwide Arena, taking advantage of the slow-starting Blue Jackets, who never held a lead and never seemed to find their game.

"Our slow start really hurt, so that's been addressed already, and we'll continue to address that, because I hate slow starts," said Bowness, who grouched for two days about the Jackets' slow start in Saturday's shootout win at the Pittsburgh Penguins, too.

"The difference tonight ... we had 10 scoring chances in the second period, and we didn't score. We get to the third period, and they've got a two-goal lead. They're sitting on it."

The loss snapped the Blue Jackets' winning streak at a season-long four games.

Bowness said he hoped the players in the Blue Jackets' dressing room would have addressed Saturday's slow start in Pittsburgh and come out with the necessary verve and pace versus the Senators.

But ...

The Senators led just 3:34 into the first period after a series of long shifts in the Blue Jackets' zone. The Jackets tied it a few minutes later, but Ottawa reclaimed the lead on a goal that pretty much defined the night.

Senators center Tim Stützle skated an entire lap in the Blue Jackets' zone — they chased him, but never caught him — before scoring a soft goal on goaltender Elvis Merzlikins, the puck sailing between his pads from 10 feet.

It was 2-1, and the Blue Jackets were lucky it was still a one-goal margin.

“Listen, we have a good leadership group, and that’s (on) the leadership group to take that room,” Bowness said. “It’s their room. We’re the coaches. It’s the players’ room. I can address it, which I have. And now it’s on them. If I didn’t address (it), then that’s on me.”

“It’s a good group. It’s a good team. I still don’t believe they know how good they can be. You become good when you put some bite and you put some nastiness in your game, and when the puck drops, you’re ready to go.”

“We’ll develop that. If that’s what we have to do, that’s what we’ll do.”

There were multiple issues percolating for the Blue Jackets in the first period.

Merzlikins started his third straight game, but only after talking his way into the lineup during the afternoon. Merzlikins told coaches he was feeling under the weather, but when he returned to the rink before the game, he said he was feeling slightly better.

That feeling didn’t last long.

Merzlikins allowed two goals on seven shots in the first period and did not come out for the second period.

“He’s been playing really well, and the guy comes and says, ‘I want to play,’” Bowness said. “We let him play. And it didn’t work out.”

“So we’ll keep him away from the team tomorrow. We’ll see about Thursday (versus Dallas) ... but I give him credit for trying to play. He’s a fighter.”

Jet Greaves took over for Merzlikins and stopped 12 of 13 shots in the final two periods. The lead pushed to 3-1 early in the third on Ridly Greig’s goal, and Ottawa capped the scoring with an empty-netter with 3:06 to play.

Bowness wants a physical, aggressive club that initiates that style of play and sets the tone in every game. That’s how the Blue Jackets played last season, even when ravaged by injuries in the first few months of the season.

But this year’s club has never found that gear, not consistently. It wades into games. It allows opponents to dictate how a game is going to be played and tries to match it. On Tuesday, it let the Senators skate circles around it, and it simply couldn’t catch up.

“We had a real slow start in the first period, and it was tough to move forward from that point on,” Blue Jackets defenseman Erik Gudbranson said. “We did a good job in the second, but, you know, you lose 20 minutes ... it’s hard to impose your will once the game has already started.”

Bowness was asked whether a lack of confidence explains the slow starts and the tendency to lack assertiveness. He wasn’t buying it. The Blue Jackets might not know who they are, but Bowness plans to define it, he said.

“Confidence is an overused phrase,” he said. “You know where confidence comes from? Preparation, hard work and practice. Get ready to go, right? That comes from within.

“Sometimes that confidence thing is an easy out. I’m not believing we’re an easy out. We’re paid to play hard.”

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets takeaways: 'Our slow start really hurt us'

By Brian Hedger – January 21, 2026

The Ottawa Senators defeated the Columbus Blue Jackets 4-1, ending the Jackets' four-game winning streak.

Coach Rick Bowness attributed the loss to a slow start, a recent trend for the team.

Starting goalie Elvis Merzlikins left the game after the first period due to an illness.

The Blue Jackets struggled to convert scoring chances, particularly in the second and third periods.

Add another troubling habit for the Blue Jackets after a frustrating 4-1 loss to the Ottawa Senators on Jan. 20 at Nationwide Arena.

Along with struggling to finish games they're leading and converting prime scoring chances into goals, they're now starting games poorly. It's a troubling recent trend, especially when the Jackets can't overcome a poor start with better play in the second and third periods, as was the case against Ottawa.

"If you look at the whole 60 minutes, it's probably an evenly played game," Blue Jackets coach Rick Bowness said. "Our slow start really hurt us, so that's been addressed already ... and we'll continue to address that because I hate slow starts. I hate it."

Bowness, who replaced Dean Evason as coach Jan. 12, suffered his first loss as the Blue Jackets' bench boss. They had strung three straight wins together after the switch to build a four-game winning streak.

Despite overtime losses in their previous two games while dropping six of eight, the Senators (23-19-7) played with more desperation off the opening draw and imposed their will on the Jackets while taking a 2-1 lead in the opening 20 minutes. Things shifted a bit in the second and third periods, when the Jackets created more scoring chances, but their inability to convert any into goals in those two periods against journeyman goalie James Reimer was their undoing.

It all stretched back to the start.

"It just sets the tone for the game when you're able to impose your will right off the hop," Blue Jackets defenseman Erik Gudbranson said. "You get in their faces, set the tone of the game and you make them adjust to you. That's a big part of playing hockey is starting on time."

That's exactly what the Senators did, following a pattern set by the Pittsburgh Penguins, Vancouver Canucks and Calgary Flames in the Blue Jackets' previous three games. The difference this time is the Jackets couldn't overcome their early malaise.

"'Xs and Os' is structure and (strategy) and that's one thing," Bowness said. "Will is another one. Will is a skill. It is on its own, and we've shown lots of will. We haven't in the first periods of the last two games, but we can fix that and we'll fix it."

Their next chance to look under the hood is during the Jackets' second practice of the week Jan. 21 at Nationwide Arena, where forward Mason Marchment (upper body) and center Isac Lundestrom (lower body) are expected to be full participants.

Here are two more takeaways:

Elvis Merzlikins made his third straight start in net for the Blue Jackets but didn't make it past the first period. After allowing two goals on seven shots in the game's first 20 minutes, Merzlikins left due to illness and Jet Greaves made 12 saves on 13 shots in relief.

Merzlikins and Greaves participated in the Jackets' optional morning skate at Nationwide Arena, and Merzlikins was healthy enough to engage in casual conversation with reporters at his locker stall afterward.

Bowness said Merzlikins asked to keep the start despite informing the Jackets' coaching staff that he wasn't feeling great in the morning.

"We (knew) this morning, but he wanted to give it a go," Bowness said. "He felt a little bit better. He's been playing really well, so when a guy comes to you and says, 'I want to play,' you let him play. It didn't work out, so we'll keep him away from the team (Jan. 21) and we'll worry about (the Dallas Stars on Jan. 22), but I give him credit for trying to play. He's a fighter."

The Blue Jackets issued an official update on Merzlikins' status during the second period, saying he was "questionable" to return. That sparked a question about what would've happened had Greaves left with injury or illness?

Would Merzlikins have returned to finish the game, or would the Blue Jackets have gone to their emergency backup goalie, Tyler Murphy, a former Miami University club hockey goalie from 2009-2012?

"The start killed, and more importantly, the second period, we could've taken the lead but didn't score," he said. "We had two guys wide open in the slot ... trying to make a play. I don't understand that, right? I don't. You're in the slot looking to make a backdoor play to your partner? Get that out of our game. Shoot the (darn) thing."

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' 3 Biggest Games Left in the 2025-26 Season

By Wesley Minke – January 21, 2026

The Columbus Blue Jackets dropped the first game of a five-game homestand on Tuesday night, losing 4-1 to the Ottawa Senators. However, the Blue Jackets have a lot of big games left on their schedule. To make the playoffs, Columbus will need to nail this homestand, earning all eight remaining points. They might feel comfortable at least walking away with six points before they hit the road for three games, but it will make their postseason climb that much harder.

With Mason Marchment and Isac Lundestrom, hopefully, returning by the end of the week, the team has a chance to improve its offense and boost its forward lines. However, some players have stepped in their absence. Cole Sillinger has been bumped to the top line and has made an impact alongside Kirill Marchenko and Adam Fantilli. With reinforcements on the way, here's a look at three big matchups that remain on the Blue Jackets' schedule this season.

February 28 – New York Islanders

The New York Islanders have been a struggle for the Blue Jackets all season, and they sit in second place in the Metropolitan Division. This game will be played at Nationwide Arena, and the last time these teams met in Columbus, on Dec. 28, the home team rallied with three third-period goals to win 4-2. That game was a turning point for the Blue Jackets' third-period struggles this season.

Given how close the standings are, every game against a division rival will be critical after the Olympic break. However, if the Blue Jackets can handle this game and beat a team ahead of them in the standings, one that will likely be in a playoff spot, it might give them some life down the stretch.

March 17 – Carolina Hurricanes

This game lands in the midst of a five-of-six game stretch against Metropolitan teams. The Blue Jackets have struggled against division rivals this season, to the tune of a 4-7-3 record through 14 games. Columbus has also struggled mightily against the Carolina Hurricanes in general. They are 3-7-0 against them in their past 10 meetings, and with a minus-16 goal differential.

According to the projections of Dom Luszczyszyn of The Athletic, the Blue Jackets are projected to miss the postseason by just two points, while the Hurricanes are looking for bigger prizes than winning the Metropolitan, like returning to the Stanley Cup Final for the first time since 2006. The Blue Jackets will need to take advantage of this matchup. These two points, with a month left in the regular season, could be the difference.

April 4 – Winnipeg Jets

This will be Blue Jackets Head Coach Rick Bowness' first game against his former team, the Winnipeg Jets – the team he coached from 2022 to 2024 before he announced his retirement. It is also the last game Columbus plays before a three-game road trip against three Eastern Conference opponents who will all likely be in the playoff race.

The Jets have found success against Columbus in their last 10 meetings, although the Blue Jackets lead the series, 5-4-1, despite a goal differential of minus-6. The previous result this season was a 5-2 win for the Jets in Winnipeg.

This game will be circled for Bowness, but the Blue Jackets have to handle these Western Conference opponents, especially at home this late in the season.

If at this point, Columbus is close to a playoff berth, every game will be critical. Too often, the Blue Jackets have slipped too far out of the playoffs too early, and games down the stretch don't matter. This season, they are in a position to strike, but they need to start piling up points, and they must take these three games seriously. The Blue Jackets will be back on the ice on Thursday night when they host the Dallas Stars.

NBC4 / Blue Jackets top draft pick working on healthy recovery

By Joe Nugent – January 21, 2026

COLUMBUS, Ohio (WCMH) – The Columbus Blue Jackets practiced Wednesday before a home game Thursday night, when the team hosts Dallas, and one of the Jackets' top draft picks was in town recently with the Michigan State Spartans.

Cayden Lindstrom was the fourth overall pick a year and a half ago. At 19, he's still very early in his hockey career, playing his first season of college hockey.

There are certainly great expectations for every player who goes that high in the NHL draft. Lindstrom is working his way back from a nerve issue in his back. He had a procedure a little more than a year ago and missed last season with his team in the WHL.

He's made the move from Canadian junior hockey to the Big Ten, a different deal with players who are older, stronger and faster. The season is shorter, which means games mean even more.

Lindstrom is staying on top of his health.

"I definitely think I'm where I want to be," he said. "I think I have a lot more to, to bring and a lot more in my toolbox and whatnot, but yeah, I think I just need to work on my all-around game. Just, just being heavy and being that skilled power forward that, that I've always been to."

"Start the year was to be healthy, right?" Michigan State Head Coach Adam Nightingale said. "When he got to us, he was still in return to play. So, we got to get healthy and then stay healthy and then, I just think playing the winning habits, you know, our job is to want to help them develop. He's got to help us win hockey games, but you know, at the end of the day, Columbus picked them to help them win hockey games. And, you know, we're trying to make sure that he plays winning hockey."

Lindstrom has company at Michigan State, with 14 other players who have been drafted by NHL teams.