



**Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips  
December 10, 2024**

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## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets show resilience in Winnipeg: 5 takeaways

By Brian Hedger- December 10, 2024

One of the biggest differences between this season's Blue Jackets and recent iterations is resilience.

This version has already faced a lot of adversity, but the Jackets are keeping up with a group of Eastern Conference teams all chasing a wild card spot.

Most NHL analysts don't seem to consider Columbus a contender to stay in that chase, but the Jackets are 27 games into the season, past the quarter mark, and they've shown no signs of caving. In fact, their latest pushback might have been their most impressive.

Facing a team that had won the previous three head-to-head meetings by a combined 17-3 margin, the Blue Jackets concluded a challenging five-game road trip Sunday with a 4-1 victory over the Winnipeg Jets to snap a three-game losing streak. They hadn't won in Winnipeg since Dec. 2, 2022, roughly two full calendar years.

The Blue Jackets are officially resilient now, and they're hanging in there against some of the NHL's top competition. Here are five takeaways from the Jackets' latest stand:

Kent Johnson, Sean Monahan, James Van Riemsdyk clicking for Columbus Blue Jackets

The first hockey move Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell made after the death of Johnny Gaudreau was signing James van Riemsdyk. While the 35-year old veteran hasn't secured a regular lineup spot, he has developed a bond quickly with the Blue Jackets' young forwards.

Since he arrived just before training camp, Van Riemsdyk hung out with Kent Johnson, Adam Fantilli, Cole Sillinger and Jake Christiansen, who have enjoyed picking his brain about playing with Toronto Maple Leafs stars Auston Matthews, Mitch Marner and William Nylander as they cut their NHL teeth.

It didn't take long for Van Riemsdyk to realize the Blue Jackets have their own core of young stars, and now he's skating with one of them – Johnson, on Sean Monahan's top line. It's a sample size of just two games, but Van Riemsdyk, Monahan and Johnson have dominated since joining forces.

Johnson scored two goals in the victory over the Jets, both assisted by Van Riemsdyk, and the underlying statistics for that line's past two games are striking. According to Natural Stat Trick, in 19:37 of 5-on-5, the Blue Jackets have compiled large edges in attempts (34-14), unblocked attempts (24-9), shots (15-7) and scoring chances (19-6). Van Riemsdyk's speed has taken a hit since his prime years, but in the past two games he's been fantastic with Johnson and Monahan.

It might not last long term, but the Blue Jackets' coaching staff might have just gained two more skilled wingers who can successfully play with Monahan.

Columbus Blue Jackets' Ivan Provorov guts it out against Winnipeg Jets

Hockey players often deal with pain to stay in the lineup, but Blue Jackets defenseman Ivan Provorov is dealing with an extreme case. After leaving the game Friday in Vancouver with a thumb injury, the defenseman logged 23:07 on 25 shifts Sunday in Winnipeg.

He assisted on Johnson's second goal and didn't appear to be limited much. Toughing out an injury is nothing out of the ordinary for Provorov, who has missed only three games in his NHL career due to COVID-19 protocols. His appearance Sunday was his 641st out of 644 games he could have played.

### Cole Sillinger injury would be huge loss for Columbus Blue Jackets

Near the end of the second period, Sillinger braced for Colin Miller's slapshot from the right point in the Columbus zone. The puck appeared to strike one of his skates, which immediately hobbled him.

Sillinger tried getting in front of another shot a couple moments later before limping off to the bench. He came back for the start of the third period, skated two shifts and left the game with an undisclosed lower-body injury. Should it keep Sillinger out for more than a game or two, it will become a big void up front for the Blue Jackets.

Sillinger is the fourth-leading scorer on the team with 18 points on four goals and 14 assists, and his recent move back to center of the third line showed strong returns while skating with Zach Aston-Reese and Mathieu Olivier. Look for Justin Danforth to fill Sillinger's role on that line if needed, while Sean Kuraly likely moves back to center from left wing on the fourth line.

The Blue Jackets won't practice Monday, so the next official update on Sillinger's availability may wait until Tuesday's morning skate before hosting the Philadelphia Flyers.

### Elvis Merzlikins rebounds from costly turnover against Vancouver Canucks

After an aggressive decision to play the puck far from his net backfired Friday in the Jackets' loss to the Vancouver Canucks, Elvis Merzlikins rebounded impressively against the Jets.

He stopped 24 of 25 shots, including several from high-danger areas, and outdueled Winnipeg goalie Eric Comrie – who was 3-0-0 in three appearances against the Blue Jackets prior to the game. The only goal he allowed was off a great shot by Kyle Connor to cap a power play in the second period.

"I'm definitely not happy about the (Vancouver) game," Merzlikins said. "It was my mistake over there. It's going to happen and it's still going to (happen). I'm (an) aggressive goalie and I'm always going to play the puck, but I (made) a mistake there, and then a couple bounces (went) in, and I felt awful that game. Here, I had to change, and this win was really important."

### Columbus Blue Jackets paying steep price for increase in penalties

Connor's goal extended the Blue Jackets' string of games allowing an opponent to score on a power play to 13 in a row. While that's a hideous number to be saddled with, it should also be consumed with a serving of context.

The goal Sunday was on Winnipeg's fourth power play, after the Blue Jackets killed the first three. Their success in those short-handed situations is something the Blue Jackets hope to foster, but they could also stand to take fewer penalties. They're currently the NHL's 10th-most penalized team at 9:26 minutes served per game in the penalty box, which is surprising given the Blue Jackets' ability to avoid penalties in recent years.

Columbus has averaged 7:57 per game over the past three years combined (2021-2024) while being one of the league's least penalized teams. They're significantly more aggressive under Evason's watch, but they've got to lessen trips to the penalty box for the sake of their struggling PK units.

## The Hockey News / Columbus Upsets Heavy Favorite Winnipeg At Home; Lose Cole Sillinger To Injury

By Jason Newland- December 10, 2024

Dmitri Voronkov(7), Kent Johnson(7, 8), and Sean Kuraly(3) scored the goals, and Elvis Merzljikins made 24 saves, including 6 on the PK in the 4-1 Columbus win. Merzljikins even tried to get in on the scoring when he took a puck while the Jets' net was empty and tried to get himself a goalie goal. Unfortunately he kind of whiffed on it, but it was fun to see nonetheless.

The Blue Jackets didn't make this game very easy. Columbus gave Winnipeg four power plays in which they scored one goal. With that goal, the Jackets have now given up a power-play goal in 13 straight games. That's the longest streak in the league since 2009.

Kent Johnson powered the Jackets passed the Jets by scoring twice in 2:27. The young forward is blossoming into the superstar that everyone wanted him to be. With those two goals, he now has 14 points in 13 games played this season.

But with this big win, comes a big loss. Cole Sillinger was lost to a lower-body injury after blocking a shot in the second period. He finished out the second period, came back for the third, but left for the locker and would not return. He was visibly hobbled when he left. Hopefully, it's nothing serious and just needs to rest it for a day.

The Blue Jackets have now scored 76 5-on-5 goals, which is good enough for 3rd in the league behind Washington and Vegas.

Kent Johnson was the "Donkey of the Day."

Final Stats

FINAL		1	2	3	T
	CBJ	0	1	3	4
	WPG	0	1	0	1

  

GAME STATS		CBJ	WPG
4	GOALS	4	1
28	SHOTS	28	25
24	BLOCKED SHOTS	24	17
24	HITS	24	11
15	FACEOFFS	15	29
1	POWERPLAY	1	1
10	PIM	10	6

### Player Stats

- Dmitri Voronkov scored his 7th goal.
- Kent Johnson scored his 7th and 8th goals. He now has 14 points in 13 games.
- Sean Kuraly scored his 3rd goal of the season.
- Zach Werenski recorded his 20th assist of the season.
- Kirill Marchenko got his 16th assist.
- Sean Monahan now has 15 assists after assisting on Johnson's goal.
- James van Riemsdyk recorded his 3rd and 4th assists.
- Ivan Provorov got his 8th assist on Kent Johnson's second goal. He was also a plus-3.

### Team Stats

- The Blue Jackets have now scored 76 5v5 goals on the year. That's third in the NHL.
- The Blue Jackets power play went 1/2.
- The Columbus PK stopped 3 of 4 Jets' power plays.
- The Blue Jackets won 34.1% of the faceoffs.

What's Next - The Blue Jackets are back for a brief three-game home stand starting Tuesday against the Philadelphia Flyers.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Three Things: Solid Dub, Twice As Nice For KJ, Sillinger Leaves

**By Will Chase- December 10, 2024**

A solid win to cap off the road trip.

Kent Johnson scored two three-period goals in 2:27 as part of a three-goal third, and four unanswered goals in total, as the Columbus Blue Jackets beat the Winnipeg Jets 4-1 on Sunday at Canada Life Centre.

Kevin Labanc played in his 500th career game. Yegor Chinakhov missed his sixth consecutive game with an upper-body injury. After blocking a shot, Cole Sillinger left the game due to a lower-body injury and did not return.

### Solid Dub

A win to cap off a five-game road trip is always nice.

Especially after dropping three straight games and getting even with a Jets team who schooled you in your own barn 6-2 in early November.

In addition to Kent Johnson's two third-period goals (7 and 8), including the eventual game-winning goal at 7:15 of the third period to make it 2-1, and the insurance marker moments later at 9:42, the Jackets also had Dimitri Voronkov's power-play goal to tie the game 1-1 at 13:53 of the first period and Sean Kuraly's (3) unassisted empty-net goal at 18:38.

Elvis Merzlikins made 24 saves on 25 shots and Eric Comrie made 24 saves on 27 shots.

Columbus didn't face Connor Hellebuyck in the first meeting between these clubs on Nov. 1 and didn't have to face him again on Sunday as he started in Winnipeg's 4-2 win over the Chicago Blackhawks on Saturday.

Ivan Provorov played after leaving Friday's game in Vancouver to a gruesome-looking thumb injury that looked like he would miss significant time.

Winnipeg lost at home for only the third time this season.

### Twice As Nice For KJ

You've read about it and now you should see it.

Johnson No. 1 from Sean Monahan (15) and James van Riemsdyk (3):

Johnson No. 2 from van Riemsdyk (4) and Provorov (8):

Johnson is up to 14 points (eight goals, six assists) in 13 games.

### Voronkov Awakens Power Play

For the first time on the road trip, Columbus finally converted on the power play with Voronkov's tally at 13:53 of the first period. Kirill Marchenko (16) and Zach Werenski (20) had the assists.

Columbus had been 0-for-9 on the power play on the trip with their last power play goal coming in the 5-2 win over the Calgary Flames on Nov. 29.

While Columbus was 1-for-2 with the man advantage, Winnipeg also converted a man-up with Kyle Connor's (15) goal at 11:51 of the second period, assisted by Josh Morrissey (24) and Mark Scheifele (17). That's 13 straight games that the Blue Jackets have allowed an opposition power play.

Overall this season, Columbus' power play is 24th in the league (17.4%).

#### Friendly Confines

The Blue Jackets return home to Nationwide Arena to start a three-game homestand. They play the Philadelphia Flyers on Tuesday, Dec. 10, at 7:00 p.m. ET.

## The Athletic / Weekend NHL rankings: Kings roll, Sabres spiral and a wild weekend in New York

By Sean McIndoe- December 10, 2024

Remember a few years ago when the NHL had that weird marketing campaign promising “no soap operas, just hockey”? I don’t think they got the memo in New York.

The Rangers have been tumbling down the standings lately, but they’ve shot to the top of the rankings of the league’s most interesting teams. Just two months into the season, we’d already had a hot start, a losing streak, a mysterious trade memo and all sorts of rumors. Then Friday rolled around, and it all blew up.

Let’s work our way through some thoughts on some of the news.

5. The Jacob Trouba trade — Viewed purely as a hockey trade, it’s not especially interesting. A team moves out a decent player on a big contract, sending him to a rebuilding team that needs some veteran stability and has the cap room to make it work. If anything, it’s mildly surprising that the Rangers got assets back, although the price wasn’t high. Ultimately, it makes sense for both teams.

But of course, “purely as a hockey trade” doesn’t work here because of the far more interesting piece of the puzzle ...

4. The Jacob Trouba threat — Trouba was the one who used the word “threat,” and he’s right. The Rangers played this one a bit dirty, using the potential of a waiver claim to strongarm their own captain out of his no-trade protection. If you’re a Rangers fan, you probably don’t mind seeing Chris Drury prioritize the ultimate goal over playing nice, especially in a league where teams like the Golden Knights and Lightning have had plenty of success with that approach. But as Arthur Staple explains, there’s a potential cost to this way of doing things, and Drury better hope that the move is worth it.

3. The Igor Shesterkin extension — We waited all year for the news, and then it dropped on a day when it might not have been the most interesting story of the day. It will definitely be the most important one, though, as the Rangers lock down their superstar on a contract with all sorts of potential to go bad down the line. Did they have a choice? Probably not, and Drury probably knows that any worst-case scenario will be some other GM’s problem.

2. The Brady Tkachuk subplot — Apparently the New York market didn’t want to have all the fun, so they decided to rope in an Ottawa Senators fan base that was just trying to mind its own business. It’s fair to say Senators management was not impressed, and I can’t come up with any reasonable scenario where the Sens would move their captain, but we can at least appreciate the added drama.

1. Where this is all goes from here — OK, now what? Shesterkin’s extension is a relief and maybe takes an emotional load off of his shoulders, but it doesn’t change anything for this year. And while the Trouba drama needed to find a finish line, his trade is still a case of a team subtracting a player off the roster, not adding. All the weekend’s news does is put the Rangers in a better position to execute part two of the plan. We’re not sure what that is, but “sit back and just hope for better results” doesn’t seem like it fits Drury’s current approach.

Honorable mention: They actually played some hockey too — It couldn’t crack the top five, but we should probably mention that the Rangers capped off that wild Friday with a win over the Penguins, then fell apart against the Kraken on Sunday. In other words, they’re not fixed quite yet. And if they lose to the Blackhawks and/or Sabres this week, maybe we do this all over again next weekend.



Spoiler alert: The Rangers will not be in this week's top five. But a new team will be, so let's have a look ...

## Road to the Cup

The five teams with the best chances of winning the Stanley Cup.

The Stars drop out of our top five for the first time this year after a pair of regulation losses, but the bigger news in Dallas is Tyler Seguin going on the LTIR with the potential for a Vegas-style playoff return. Jim Nill covered that and more with Pierre.

5. Winnipeg Jets (20-9-0, +28 true goals differential\*) — They're hanging by a thread after five losses in seven, including last night's regulation loss to the Blue Jackets. Worse, their only wins have come against Buffalo and Chicago, so they barely count. This is their seventh straight week in the top five, and it kind of feels like it could be the last.

4. Washington Capitals (19-6-2, +35) — It's time. Sometimes a hot start is just a fluke streak, but we're a third of the way into the season and the Caps are still sitting in first place. They've got points in seven straight, and Alexander Ovechkin on the way back.

We're giving the Caps the Metro spot this week, nudging out a Hurricanes team that's gone cold but has the Sharks, Senators, Blue Jackets and Islanders coming up on a get-right homestand. Up next after that: The Capitals, in the second meeting of the season between the two teams.

3. Minnesota Wild (18-5-4, +23) — Well this is vaguely terrifying:

Kirill Kaprizov games this season

0 points: 4

1 point: 7

2 points: 7

3 points: 7

— Dimitri Filipovic (@DimFilipovic) December 7, 2024

By the way, Minnesota fans who think I should have them even higher, the Friday folks have the Wild as their unanimous choice in the top spot.

2. Vegas Golden Knights (18-7-3, +17) — After an impressive 3-0-0 week that included wins over the Oilers and Stars, they're the only division leader to hold a lead of more than two points. They'll have their work cut out for them this week with road games in Winnipeg, Edmonton and Minnesota.

1. Florida Panthers (17-9-2, +14) — The teams with the best records still don't necessarily feel like Stanley Cup favorites, and the teams that are supposed to be Cup favorites don't have the best records, so I'm just going to keep the defending champs in top spot like a coward.

\*Goals differential without counting shootout decisions like the NHL does for some reason.

Not ranked: Los Angeles Kings — It didn't feel like there was much buzz around the Kings heading into the season, and whatever there was seemed mostly negative. Their biggest offseason move involved dumping Pierre-Luc Dubois, which was a nice bit of work to correct a mistake but still reminded everyone just how bad the mistake had been. Their fan base had pretty much lost all faith in the front office. And after three straight years of first-round exits at the hands of the Oilers, it felt like we knew that the Kings were: A playoff team, sure, but not any kind of actual threat to the teams that mattered.

Two months later, it might be time to reevaluate. The Kings keep banking points, with a five-game win streak moving them up to second in the Pacific. They're solidly in the top 10, right there with teams like Florida and Carolina in points percentage, and doing it without Drew Doughty. And this week included home wins over the Stars and Jets, so it's not all empty calories.

Saturday night brought another opportunity against a Central contender with the Wild in town, and the Kings turned it into another impressive win.

And sure, maybe they're just headed to another first-round matchup with the Oilers that everyone will pick them to lose. Nothing about the roster necessarily screams elite, with the possible exception of Anze Kopitar not realizing he's 37. And it's worth thinking back to last December — a year ago today, the Kings were tied for the best points percentage in the league, and they'd end up firing their coach just a few weeks later. Things can change.

But for now, don't sleep on the Kings, even if you wrote them off at the start of the season. They've got something going in L.A. right now.

The bottom five

The five teams headed toward dead last, and the best lottery odds for James Hagen, or maybe someone else.

A reminder that if your team is always in this section, you could always just find a new league to watch for the next few months.

5. Anaheim Ducks (10-12-3, -15) — It sounds like Trouba will make his debut Monday in Montreal. They could use the help, with just one regulation win in their last seven. Eric Stephens has more on how Trouba will fit in Anaheim.

Meanwhile, the news isn't great on Trevor Zegras. We don't have details on the exact injury, but it didn't look good and he's headed to the IR.

4. Nashville Predators (7-15-6, -27) — The losing streak is up to seven games, and it feels like it's going to take more than a canceled U2 concert to turn this around. We keep seeing reports that Barry Trotz doesn't want to overreact or panic, but at some point, you're just conceding a season, no?

3. San Jose Sharks (10-15-5, -22) — They've lost two straight in regulation since Mirtle tweeted this. Season turning point? Probably too early to tell, but if they lose to the Hurricanes tomorrow then yes, definitely.

2. Montreal Canadiens (10-14-3, -22) — It was very cool to see Patrik Laine return to the lineup, especially with goals in each of his first two games. If you're wondering, he'll get a chance to make a return to Columbus in the team's last game before the Christmas break.

1. Chicago Blackhawks (8-17-2, -21) — This week featured a fired coach, an injured goalie and Laz on the team's "slow slide into irrelevance." That column features the question "Does anything matter at this point when it comes to the Blackhawks?" in case you were wondering how bleak things are in Chicago right now.

Not ranked: Buffalo Sabres — It's been a rough week in what some are calling the NHL's most hopeless market. They've lost six straight, and their GM is trying to calm nerves. That part is not going well.

Here is the full bite where Adams mentions "we don't have palm trees, we have taxes in New York."

“Look at the bills, they are a perfect example. I’d assume this wasn’t a destination or a place people were signing up to when they were in a 17 year playoff drought....you get Josh...  
[pic.twitter.com/CJru2gn4fz](https://pic.twitter.com/CJru2gn4fz)

— Sara Holland (@SaraaHolland) December 6, 2024

I’ll be honest, that doesn’t sound unreasonable to me. But I’m not a frustrated Sabres fan who hasn’t seen a postseason in going on 14 years, so I might be feeling just a bit more charitable than others. And the money line about palm trees and taxes came in the context of a defensive availability that may have tip-toed a little too close to making excuses.

It all led to fans showing up to Saturday’s loss with inflatable palm trees, which is pretty fantastic. They also chanted “Fire Kevyn,” which isn’t as funny as well-executed prop comedy but probably matters quite a bit more. It definitely feels like we’re nearing some sort of tipping point in Buffalo, yet again.

This week starts with tonight’s matchup with the Red Wings, a fellow self-proclaimed Atlantic playoff contender that’s crashing and burning to the tune of five straight losses. And if that wasn’t enough of a Hopelessness Bowl for you, the Sabres’ next opponent is the Rangers.

That could be two wins that take some of the heat off. It could also be two losses that crank the temperature in Buffalo even higher. Not quite palm-tree high, mind you, but still pretty high. If you see a Sabres fan, hug them. They could use it these days.

## ESPN / NHL trade grades: Who wins the Avalanche-Sharks goalie swap?

By Ryan S. Clark, Greg Wyshynski- December 10, 2024

The NHL trade deadline for the 2024-25 season is not until March 7, but teams have not waited until the last minute to make major moves.

For every significant trade that occurs during the season, you'll find a grade for it here, including David Jiricek to the Minnesota Wild, Jacob Trouba to the Anaheim Ducks, and the Colorado Avalanche and San Jose Sharks swapping goaltenders.

Read on for grades from Ryan S. Clark and Greg Wyshynski, and check back the next time a big deal breaks.

With goaltending being a major problem for the Colorado Avalanche, could Mackenzie Blackwood be the solution?

The Avalanche acquired Blackwood and forward Givani Smith in a trade with the San Jose Sharks that sees goalie Alexandar Georgiev, forward Nikolai Kovalenko, a 2025 fifth-round pick and a 2026 second-round pick head to the Bay Area. The Avs also retained 14% of Georgiev's salary.

How did both GMs fare in the trade? Let's find out.

Colorado Avalanche

Grade: B

The Avalanche's defensive structure ranks in the top 10 of fewest scoring chances allowed per 60 minutes and shots allowed per 60. Unfortunately, their save percentage as a team is second worst in the NHL.

That defensive zone disconnect is why changes needed to be made for an Avs team that's fighting for a wild-card spot as mid-December draws closer -- despite its status as a preseason Stanley Cup favorite.

But it's also symptomatic of a larger problem with the Avs in that they've had issues building a consistently strong supporting cast around their core led by Nathan MacKinnon, Cale Makar and Mikko Rantanen.

Having that supporting cast is what helped them win a title in 2022. Lacking that cast is why they were knocked out of the first round a year later and lost in the second round last season.

Georgiev averaged 39 wins per season in his first two with the team. But that came with questions: Was Georgiev the sole reason he won so many games in Denver? Or was it the structure around him that led to his success?

All Avs GM Chris MacFarland needed was 18 games this season to answer those questions.

It started when Colorado traded Justus Annunen to the Nashville Predators to get Scott Wedgewood. But it became even clearer when Wedgewood's first win came in relief of Georgiev on Dec. 3 -- when the latter allowed four goals on eight shots in the Avs' 5-4 win over the Buffalo Sabres.

Now the Avalanche are turning to Blackwood and hope he can steady the ship. His .911 save percentage is 12th among goalies with more than 10 games played, while his goals saved versus average is in the top 20.

Blackwood is not perfect, and there are questions about the newest Av:

Is he the answer for a team that has Stanley Cup aspirations? Is he different from the goalie who forced the New Jersey Devils to find alternatives when they made the playoffs in 2023? And while the Avs needed to make a move, was the price they paid to add Blackwood too much given he has never played in the postseason?

We'll find out the answers to all of these in the coming weeks and months.

San Jose Sharks

Grade: B+

Every move Sharks GM Mike Grier makes for the foreseeable future is about building a better tomorrow for the Sharks. The return package for Blackwood will play a role in those plans.

Go back to when Grier acquired Blackwood in 2023. The Sharks parted with a 2023 sixth-round pick to get him from the Devils. Now fast-forward to Monday, and the return Grier received goes well beyond the sixth-round pick he sent to the Devils.

And he still has two pending unrestricted free agent goalies on the roster.

Georgiev's arrival will impact the Sharks at the NHL level and beyond. He will join a tandem with Vitek Vanecek for a team that came into Monday seven points behind the Avs for the final wild-card spot and seven points ahead of the Chicago Blackhawks for the NHL's worst record.

Adding Georgiev gives the Sharks seven pending unrestricted free agents. It's possible that the Sharks could attain additional draft capital ahead of the trade deadline if there's a team seeking goaltending depth. That's another reason getting the Avs to retain 14% of his salary was crucial.

All three of the Sharks' retained salary slots are filled because of previous trades involving Brent Burns, Tomas Hertl and Erik Karlsson. It's what makes the need for the Sharks to present their pending UFAs as affordable to playoff hopefuls even more crucial.

But where it gets more captivating is how the Sharks now have two experienced options in net, meaning they can take their time with developing top goalie prospect Yaroslav Askarov, who had a 1.96 goals-against average and a .927 save percentage in two games before he was returned to the AHL.

Kovalenko is another player who could also help the Sharks this season and possibly beyond. He gives the Sharks a ninth player younger than 25 on the roster, in a group that includes Macklin Celebrini, William Eklund, Mario Ferraro and Will Smith, among others. Kovalenko, who has four goals and eight points in 28 games, could possibly challenge for a top-nine role. He's also a pending restricted free agent, which means the Sharks could look to sign him to a new deal or move on from him via another trade.

All in all, another tidy piece of business for Grier. -- Clark

Dec. 6: Trouba to the Ducks

The New York Rangers traded defenseman Jacob Trouba to the Anaheim Ducks, ending a tense few months of speculation about their captain's future.

The Ducks sent defenseman Urho Vaakanainen and a conditional 2025 fourth-round pick to the Rangers for Trouba. Anaheim takes on all of Trouba's contract, which carries an \$8 million average annual value against the salary cap through the 2025-26 season.

The Rangers will receive either the Ducks' or the Detroit Red Wings' fourth-round pick, depending on which one is lower in the draft order.

New York Rangers

Grade: A

The marking period for this trade began on July 19, 2019. That's when then-Rangers general manager Jeff Gorton signed defenseman Jacob Trouba to a seven-year, \$56 million contract to avoid salary arbitration.

Despite being one of the league's most effective defensemen at that point -- which is why the Rangers acquired him from the Winnipeg Jets in the first place -- many thought that Trouba's \$8 million annual cap hit was overcompensation, considering the bell curve of a physical defenseman's effectiveness in the NHL. The Rangers certainly took that into account: That overcompensation bought them flexibility in the final two years of Trouba's contract, which carried a no-movement clause from 2020-24 before switching to a 15-team no-trade clause.

That no-trade clause still gave Trouba some agency over his future, as the Rangers discovered last summer when his refusal to submit a list of approved teams early reportedly torpedoed a potential trade with the Detroit Red Wings. But it couldn't protect him from the Rangers using their nuclear option, which is what ultimately led to Trouba's trade to Anaheim.

Please recall when the Rangers placed forward Barclay Goodrow on waivers in June, clearing the last three years of his contract off their books when the San Jose Sharks claimed him in a prearranged move. There's no question that GM Chris Drury pointed to that example and told Trouba, "This could happen to you."

You could be on a rebuilding Chicago Blackhawks team that just fired their coach. Or the San Jose Sharks. Or the Red Wings, with whom you didn't want to play last summer. Or shuffle back up to Canada, not as a Winnipeg Jet but as a Montreal Canadien. Such was the waiver wire.

Or Trouba could select from the potential trade destinations placed in front of him, waiving his no-trade clause for one of them.

With that, the captain of the New York Rangers is now a member of the Anaheim Ducks.

Part of this grade goes to the Rangers' front office in 2019, when Drury was an assistant GM, for having the foresight to create this pressure point. And part of it goes to Drury, who exerted that pressure to move Trouba's cap hit off the books, remove an ineffective defenseman from his blue line and send a shock to the system of a struggling team.

The Rangers are 13-10-1 this season. They're in a wild card. But they've lost six games in regulation out of their past seven. Drury was so displeased with what he saw that he put out a memo to 31 other NHL teams telling them he was open for business and mentioning Trouba by name.

Trouba has been a liability all season. He's in the negatives across the board analytically relative to his teammates, including a 47.5% expected goals percentage. He has just six assists in 24 games, skating to a minus-3. Even the one thing the Rangers used to depend on from Trouba -- physicality -- was down, as he averaged 4.87 hits per 60 minutes after averaging 7.81 last season.

Of course, it should be said that Drury basically made him a lame duck, and that has to impact his performance.

In the immediate term, the trade opens up ice time for Braden Schneider and Victor Mancini, two players the Rangers are eager to see develop.

(Vaakanainen, whom they received from Anaheim, is a spare at this point, and was a healthy scratch for the Ducks this season.)

But taking the long view, we've now seen the other shoe drop for the Rangers: Clearing Trouba's salary allowed them to finally sign goalie Igor Shesterkin to his new contract worth \$11.5 million against the salary cap -- a record for NHL goalies. Which certainly alleviates one point of long-term planning stress for Drury and only increases this grade

Whether or not the roster shake-up goes beyond Trouba remains to be seen. Don't forget, Chris Kreider's name was in that Drury memo, too.

But getting Trouba off the books and off the ice was something the Rangers had been attempting for months. With more than a gentle nudge, he has sailed to the Pacific.

Nothing like trading your captain through pitiless means to get a locker room's attention.

Check out some numbers behind Jacob Trouba's time with the Rangers as he is traded to the Anaheim Ducks.

Anaheim Ducks

Grade: B

I don't hate this from the Ducks' perspective.

Trouba is a better defenseman than the majority of the blueliners on the Anaheim roster. That's assuming some of his poor play was due to the Rangers basically standing in the doorway with his bags packed for six months, which will certainly weigh on a guy.

At least now he's with a team that he begrudgingly picked, with a couple of former teammates (Ryan Strome and Frank Vatrano) and a general manager in Pat Verbeek who says kind things such as "on the ice, he competes every shift, leads by example and is a presence on the blue line every night."

Verbeek also called him "a big part of our future success," and hopefully that means as a mentor to young defensemen rather than signing Trouba until he's 37 when his contract runs out after the 2025-26 season. The Ducks have up-and-comers such as Pavel Mintyukov, Olen Zellweger, Drew Helleison and Jackson LaCombe on the roster, with players such as Stian Solberg and Tristan Luneau in the pipeline. Trouba can be a "lead by example" type, having excelled offensively and defensively during his career. After six seasons in Winnipeg and six more in New York, he has seen some things.

It's safe to say that Trouba is in decline at 30 years old. He might have been a liability with the Rangers, but the bar is set rather lower in Anaheim. This is an atrocious defensive team. The Ducks are giving up 3.14 expected goals against per 60 minutes at 5-on-5, last in the league and the only NHL team over three expected goals against on average this season. They earn only 45% of the shot attempts in a game, 31st in the NHL. No one gives up more high-danger shot attempts (13.5 per 60 minutes) than Anaheim -- although please note that the Rangers were right behind them (13.1).

The Ducks have prioritized physicality, and Trouba can bring that. The idea that Anaheim can roll out Radko Gudas and Trouba on the same defense should have Western Conference opponents already reaching for the Advil.

They didn't give up anything for him. Even if Vaakanainen was playing, which he wasn't, the Ducks were dealing from a position of depth. The fourth-rounder is expendable, given they had two. The \$8 million salary cap hit shouldn't impact them much next season: While Mason McTavish will need a new deal this summer, Leo Carlsson's big-ticket second contract won't be until after Trouba's expires.

Plus, if he finds his game in Anaheim and the Ducks aren't in the playoff mix next season, they could always retain salary and flip Trouba at the 2026 trade deadline. He's exactly the kind of defenseman who has value for contenders at the right price.

Verbeek said, "It's rare you are able to acquire a player with Jacob's experience, stature and ability."

Despite this decline and the growing flaws in his game, that's undoubtedly true, and especially for this compensation. The Ducks need more adults in the room. They landed themselves an NHL captain, who can hopefully find more effectiveness in a place where he's wanted. -- Wyshynski

Nov. 30: Jiricek traded to the Wild

In need of a change, defenseman David Jiricek found one Saturday when the Columbus Blue Jackets traded the former No. 6 pick to the Minnesota Wild.

The Wild received Jiricek and a 2025 fifth-round pick, with the Blue Jackets receiving a top-five protected 2025 first-round pick, a 2027 second-round pick, a 2026 third-round pick, a 2026 fourth-round pick and defenseman Daemon Hunt.

Minnesota Wild

Grade: B+

Last season allowed the Wild to draw two conclusions about the state of their defense.

The first was that they appear to have a legitimate franchise cornerstone in Brock Faber, who finished second in Calder Trophy voting. The second was that the team needed to figure out how to continue to get younger on the back end, especially with injuries ravaging a unit that had quite a few players -- Zach Bogosian, Jonas Brodin, Jon Merrill and captain Jared Spurgeon -- all older than 30.

That process began in 2021 when they used one of their two first-round picks to select Winnipeg Ice defenseman Carson Lambos. They acquired Faber in 2022 in the Kevin Fiala trade with the Los Angeles Kings. In June, they used their first-round pick (No. 12) to draft University of Denver defenseman Zeev Buium. Now, they have added Jiricek, the sixth pick in the 2022 draft.

As for what this all means for this season?

Much of that could depend upon Jiricek. Part of what made him available in the first place was the belief that he was unhappy with his role in Columbus. He was averaging 11:11 in six games while logging less than 10 minutes over what became his final three contests before he was sent to the AHL.

Jiricek will remain in the AHL, where he will use his time with the Wild's affiliate to push for a role at the NHL level. Jiricek is a 6-foot-4 puck mover, and those traits have come through in the AHL, where he's scored 15 goals and 60 points in 88 games. This season, he has two goals and three points in four games.

Whether he can find a way to translate his AHL production to the NHL is the looming question. If he can, he'll give the Wild another facilitator with size who could be trusted to play key minutes. Beyond that, he could give the Wild those minutes on his entry-level contract, which is important for a franchise that's had to become adept at spending cap space because of the combined Zach Parise and Ryan Suter buyouts that currently cost \$14.7 million but will fall to \$1.66 million next season.

The Wild (15-4-4) were two points behind the Winnipeg Jets for the best record in the NHL and the Western Conference entering Saturday. They're allowing the fewest goals per game in the NHL this season, the fewest high-danger scoring chances per 60 and rank in the top 10 in the fewest scoring chances allowed per 60.

Not only have they established consistency, but the Wild also have the depth to go with that continuity. Faber is one of three defensemen who have played in every game, while four of their defensemen have appeared in more than 16 games this season.



Maintaining that level means the Wild don't have to be in a rush to call up Jiricek and can let him settle into their system. And if the Wild can remain in the hunt for a top seed, they've essentially added a one-time top-six pick for what will ultimately become a first-round selection that's toward the bottom of the draft.

#### Columbus Blue Jackets

Grade: B+

Moving on from a one-time top-10 pick such as Jiricek comes with the question about if a franchise has received or has come close to receiving a return of equal value.

It appears that Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell was able to achieve that by getting a sizable haul along with a defenseman who can play right now with Hunt.

At the time of the trade, the Blue Jackets (10-9-3) look as if they could go in a few directions this season. On Saturday, they were two points out of the final Eastern Conference wild-card spot while also being within five points of having the NHL's worst record.

The fact Jiricek struggled to get minutes and was sent to the AHL before being traded shows that the Blue Jackets were comfortable with their dynamic in the interim. But how this could work out for them in the future is where it gets interesting.

Waddell's time in charge of the Carolina Hurricanes saw the club rely upon the draft to build a roster that has since become one of the NHL's perennial favorites to win the Stanley Cup. One of the ways the Hurricanes reached that destination was to have as many draft picks as possible.

With this trade, the Blue Jackets now have 27 draft picks over the next three seasons.

Another detail that could factor into the decision to move on from Jiricek is the defensive youth the Blue Jackets have on their NHL roster and in their farm system. Five of the seven defensemen on the Blue Jackets' active roster are younger than 27. That does not include Hunt.

They also have youth in their system. They used one of their three first-round picks in 2021 to draft Corson Ceulemans. A year later, they used one of their two first-rounders to take Denton Mateychuk. Of course, the other player they drafted in the first round that year was Jiricek. They also used four of their six picks to draft defensemen in 2024, with the most notable being Charlie Elick, who went in the second round. -- Clark

## [Sportsnet.ca / Gretzky says Canada will matchup well at 4 Nations Face-Off](#)

By Eric Engels- December 10, 2024

MANALAPAN, Fla. — On Monday, after taking part in a brief presentation TNT Sports gave the NHL governors at the Eau Palm Beach Resort and Spa, Wayne Gretzky carved out a few minutes with media to talk about the one thing that makes him just like the rest of us — being a hockey fan.

In February, Gretzky's insatiable appetite for the sport will be filled with the first best-on-best competition we've witnessed since the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games, and he is as excited as any hockey fan to see it.

For so long Gretzky was the driving force of Canadian hockey success — as the country's greatest player from 1981-1998, and also as architect and manager of the gold-medal winning teams at the 2002 Olympics and 2004 World Cup of Hockey — but now he's just looking forward to being a spectator for the upcoming 4 Nations Face-Off being held in Montreal and Boston.

"You always miss that competitive spirit," Gretzky said. "What I don't miss is the controversy of who didn't make the team, because we have so many great players on Canada, our team, and everybody's got an opinion... I did it, I'm happy. I love the game, and I'm happy that I was part of it, but I'm enjoying what I do. I live down here, I'm happy. I'm almost 64 and the stress and the pressure of it is tougher than people think."

You think it's high for Don Sweeney, who assembled Team Canada for this tournament?

Imagine how it'll be for Jon Cooper to coach it.

In this short exhibition, the temptation to balance things out to give Canada its best chance against the United States, Finland and Sweden would be understandable. But everyone watching will be clamouring to see the three best players of a generation lineup together, including Gretzky, who played alongside Mario Lemieux during the 1987 Canada Cup and believes a line of Sidney Crosby, Connor McDavid and Nathan MacKinnon being assembled is what a competition like this is all about.

He, like the rest of us, would like to see it at one point or another. Even if it's just for a shift.

"You always want to see the best players play together and the best players play against the best players," Gretzky said. "I can remember training camp in '87, Mario and I didn't play much together at the beginning. (Coach) Mike (Keenan) didn't put us together until near the end, and part of his reason was Mario was 21 years old at the time and he didn't want to make him too nervous at the beginning. So he waited a few games just to get his feet wet and get him comfortable, and when he put him there he was our best player. He fit in like a glove.

"But I had the same feeling in '81. I got to play with Flower (Guy Lafleur) and Gilbert Perreault, and I was a 19-year-old kid thinking these are the two guys I watched every night and now I'm centring these two guys, (so) don't mess it up, make sure I get them the puck."

The calculation will be similar for any player — no matter their age — if they're fortunate enough to line up with any one of Crosby, McDavid or MacKinnon.

The challenge for all of them will be significant, with Finland and Sweden icing teams loaded with talented players who have been playing with each other at international events for years and with the U.S. bringing what many people believe is the strongest team they've ever assembled.

But Gretzky still sees Canada as the team to beat.

"I will say this: The Americans are a very good team and maybe I'm biased, but I think the Canadians match up really well against the Americans," Gretzky said. "It's going to be tremendous hockey. I'm not sure who's going to win, but I'm just saying as a Canadian, I think our team matches up really good against the Americans."

Gretzky keeping his eyes on Ovechkin

As Alex Ovechkin continues to take significant steps towards returning from a fractured fibula suffered 21 days ago, Gretzky remains one of many people cheering him on.

Ovechkin has 15 goals in 18 games this season and is now just 27 away from passing Gretzky as the most prolific scorer in NHL history. The Great One is not only convinced the Great 8 will do it, he wants to see it happen.

"What he's done is really incredible, what he's done is remarkable, what he's done is great for the game," Gretzky said of the 39-year-old Ovechkin, who has 868 goals in 1,444 games to his 894 in 1,487. "He's good for the sport, he's great for the game, and hopefully I'm there to shake his hand the night he breaks the record."

Whether that happens this season, or not, Gretzky thinks Ovechkin will eventually do it and doesn't believe the pressure of becoming the greatest goal scorer of all time will get to him.

"He'll be fine," Gretzky said. "I talk to Alex periodically and I always wish him the best. He'll be fine. He's handled the pressure, he's won a Stanley Cup, he's been a big part of the success of the NHL, and he's been a huge part of the Washington Capitals, he's fine."

"He's human, he'll get a little bit nervous by the end, but he's been nothing but positive for our sport, and that's what's most important. And good for him, man."

"He hasn't changed his game much. I think his coaching staff has done a great job of utilizing him and moving him on the power play. He's a bull. His shot is as good as anybody who ever played the game. I always say, I got to play with Jari Kurri and Brett Hull, and one of the greatest compliments I can give both of them (is) they never missed the net. If you miss the net, you can't score, and Ovechkin doesn't miss the net. All the more power to him. He's been tremendous this year, and I know how hard it is at that age — it gets tougher and tougher, but he's hung in and he's a trooper. Good for him."