



**Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips
December 20, 2024**

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The Columbus Dispatch / Merzlikins' 40 saves help Columbus Blue Jackets' end five-game slide

By Brian Hedger – December 20, 2024

Elvis Merzlikins made sure the Blue Jackets gained a little traction Thursday night at Nationwide Arena in a season that's starting to slip away.

Backed by their goalie's sharpest performance of the season, a 40-save masterpiece while his team was outshot 42-20, the Blue Jackets ended a five-game winless streak that was part of a 1-6-2 stretch that started after a 6-3 victory Dec. 1 in Chicago.

Down 3-0 starting the third period, the Devils pinned the puck into the Columbus zone and peppered Merzlikins with 18 shots — including two goals on seven shots and 23 attempts in the final five-plus minutes played with an empty net for a 6-on-5 advantage.

"I was feeling the puck, I was feeling good," Merzlikins said. "Overall, the whole team, we did an amazing job. In the end, we were battling really hard. The guys were blocking a lot of shots. The first two periods were awesome. We were fast, quick, physical. We were playing our game, so that's good."

The Blue Jackets built their 3-0 lead in the first two periods with timely goals to go with Merzlikins' work in net.

Ivan Provorov gave Columbus a 1-0 lead at 7:55 of the first period, goals in the second by Zach Werenski and Sean Monahan created a three-goal cushion for the third, when Monahan's second goal of the game — scored into an empty net with 1:10 left to play — finally sealed the win after 6-on-5 goals by Luke Hughes and Nico Hischier that nearly spoiled Merzlikins' night.

Hughes' goal ruined a shutout bid, capping a frenetic scramble around the Jackets' net with 2:50 left to play. His brother, Jack Hughes, fired 13 shots on goal at Merzlikins on a jaw-dropping 22 attempts — matching former Chicago Blackhawks forward Patrick Sharp (Oct. 15, 2010) for most shots by an opponent against the Blue Jackets in a single game.

Merzlikins got a lift from the crowd at the end to help author the Jackets' upset of the top team in the Metropolitan Division, drawing a boost from hearing his name chanted. After backing up Jet Greaves in three of the previous four games, Merzlikins shined one day after his rookie counterpart was loaned back to the AHL's Cleveland Monsters.

Merzlikins made seven stops in the first period, a whopping 17 in the second and 16 more in the third to frustrate the Devils, who finished the game with dominant margins in shots (42-20) and attempts (97-42). Merzlikins' two biggest stops happened in the second to deny goals by Jack Hughes, the Devils' top center and second-leading scorer with 41 points on 13 goals and 28 assists.

The first was a glove save off a shot from the right circle, in which Merzlikins just got his arm up in time to snare the puck while sprawled on the ice. The second was a pad/blocker save made while lunging to his right while doing the splits to block Hughes' shot from the left wing.

"He responded by stopping the puck," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "That's his job, right? And he did it very well tonight. ... Yeah, he had a couple flashy saves, obviously, that he had to stretch over and get, but for the most part he was just calm and got the job done."

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets steal win with Merzlikins against New Jersey Devils: 3 takeaways

By Brian Hedger – December 20, 2024

Sometimes, the goalie just needs to steal one.

That's exactly what Elvis Merzlikins did for the Blue Jackets on Thursday night at Nationwide Arena while being showered with pucks in a 4-2 victory against the New Jersey Devils. The Jackets also blocked 24 attempts and scored timely goals to build a 3-0 lead after two periods, but Merzlikins was the biggest reason their five-game winless skid didn't reach six.

He was outstanding despite the Devils putting two 6-on-5 goals in the net in the game's final five minutes before Sean Monahan finally sealed the Blue Jackets' win with an empty-netter.

"(Merzlikins) kept us in there at times and he made timely saves, big saves, highlight reels ones that I'm sure we'll see a lot of," Monahan said. "He stepped up for us tonight and big credit to him."

Here are three takeaways:

Columbus Blue Jackets dominated by New Jersey Devils in everything except goals

Understanding how fantastic Merzlikins was requires a closer look at the Devils' dominance, particularly in the third.

New Jersey lost despite doubling up the Blue Jackets' totals in almost every offensive category except for goals. They finished the night with a 97-42 edge in total attempts (69.8%), a 42-20 margin in shots on goal (67.7%) and, according to Natural Stat Trick, sweeping advantages in unblocked attempts (68-33), scoring chances (55-18) and high-danger chances (23-7).

As percentages, that's a whopping 67.3% of unblocked attempts, 75.3% of scoring chances and 76.7% of high-danger chances while generating a 67.4% of expected goals (5.69-2.76). It's even more staggering when filtering to the third period, where the Devils scored two goals while creating a mind-boggling 93.1% of scoring chances (27-2) and 93.8% of high-danger looks (15-1).

New Jersey also pulled goalie Jake Allen with more than 5:30 remaining for a 6-on-5 extra-attacker edge that produced both Devils goals along with seven shots on goal, nine misses and seven blocked attempts for a whopping 23 attempts.

Individually, Devils center Jack Hughes didn't score a goal despite finishing with 13 shots in 22 attempts. His brother, Luke Hughes, scored one goal on six shots in 11 attempts. Combined, the siblings accounted for 24 of the Devils' 42 shots and 33 of their 97 attempts. Jack Hughes' shot total tied former Chicago Blackhawks forward Patrick Sharp for most in a single game by an opposing player against Columbus since Oct. 15, 2010, when he launched that many at Steve Mason in a 5-2 loss for the Blue Jackets.

"They were coming (at us) really hard," Merzlikins said. "They're a great team and ... (there were) players were all around the crease. There (were) too many sticks, too many skates. There was a point where I couldn't even understand what (was) going on there. We cleared it out there. We scored the last goal, which closed the game, and that's huge. Happy for the win."

Columbus Blue Jackets fare better in goals during second period

New Jersey pinned Columbus into its own zone for much of the second period, a season-long issue, and lopsided advantages resulted in everything but goals.

The Devils were outscored 2-0, trailing 3-0 starting the third, but it wasn't for lack of trying. New Jersey finished the game with huge margins in attempts (28-19), shots (17-8) and scoring chances (16-10). What the Devils didn't get was a single goal thanks to Merzlikins' handiwork – including twice robbing Jack Hughes on what looked like sure goals. The first was a desperation glove save off a great look from the right circle, while the second was a lunging pad/blocker combination against Hughes from the left wing.

The Blue Jackets took advantage of their goalie's heroics, pushing their lead to 3-0 on goals in the second by Zach Werenski and Sean Monahan, but that's not an advisable way to consistently win games. Still, outscoring an opponent like the Devils in the second period was at least a small sign of progress.

Zach Werenski, Kirill Marchenko and Sean Monahan not slowing down for Columbus Blue Jackets

Zach Werenski extended his home point streak to 10 straight games with a power-play goal, Kirill Marchenko's two assists made him the fourth fastest player in Blue Jackets history to reach 100 points (55 goals, 45 assists) and Monahan's 2-1-3 scoring line kept his strong start to the season going at 11 goals, 17 assists and 28 points in 33 games.

It was Werenski's 11th goal, putting him on pace to score 27 goals for the season. That would exceed his career-high of 20 goals in 63 games during the COVID-19 shortened 2019-20 season. Marchenko,

meanwhile, reached 100 points in 170 games, trailing only Pierre-Luc Dubois (142 games), Nikolay Zherdev (150 games) and Rick Nash (164 games).

Offensive output for the Blue Jackets was overshadowed by the Devils' dominance and Merzlikins on Thursday, but their top three scorers produced just enough to stave off the losing streak. Now, they'll need to do it more for a string of wins to stay in the playoff chase.

[The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets to expand TV coverage with five simulcasts on local affiliates](#)

By Brian Hedger – December 20, 2024

The Blue Jackets will broaden their television outreach by simulcasting five games on free local channels accessible via antenna, cable and streaming services.

Thanks to a partnership between the team, FanDuel Sports Network, Sinclair Broadcast Group and Gray Media, viewers in Columbus can watch the select games on ABC 6 or CW Columbus in addition to FanDuel Sports Network's regular broadcast. Other markets around the state plus areas of West Virginia and Kentucky will air the games on local CW affiliates.

"We're excited to work with Sinclair Broadcast Group, Gray Media and our partner FanDuel Sports Network to bring these games to fans across Ohio, West Virginia and Kentucky," Blue Jackets vice president of business intelligence and broadcasting Marc Gregory said in a statement. "By expanding access to these matchups, we're offering an additional opportunity for our passionate fans to engage with the team and experience Blue Jackets hockey."

The first simulcast game will be Jan. 2 against the Detroit Red Wings at Nationwide Arena. The other four to follow are Jan. 11 in St. Louis, Jan. 23 at the Carolina Hurricanes, Feb. 27 in Detroit and March 17 against the New Jersey Devils — who are visiting Columbus on Thursday for the first time this season. Locally, ABC 6 and CW Columbus are available for free via antenna or via cable and streaming providers that include Spectrum, DirectTV, DirectTV Stream, YouTubeTV, Dish and Breezeline.

It wasn't a random decision to simulcast two games against the Detroit Red Wings. The Blue Jackets will play outdoors for the first time when hosting the Red Wings on March 1, 2025 at Ohio Stadium in the NHL's 2025 Navy Federal Credit Union Stadium Series.

The games will still be produced and broadcast on the team's flagship FanDuel Sports Network, which also streams its broadcasts on the FanDuel Sports Network app. Markets outside of Columbus that will pick up the simulcasts include Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dayton and Portsmouth in Ohio, Charleston and Huntington in West Virginia, plus Louisville and Lexington in Kentucky.

"The Columbus Blue Jackets are a beloved team, and we are excited to expand their reach to a broader audience with these broadcasts," vice president and general manager of ABC 6, FOX 28 and CW

Columbus Tony D'Angelo said in a statement. "ABC6 and CW Columbus will provide a unique opportunity for fans to watch these games, and we are excited to be able to offer this coverage to Blue Jackets supporters in our community."

Cincinnati's Altafiber cable system dropped FanDuel Sports Network in late November, a week after Diamond Sports Group, formerly a subsidiary of Sinclair that runs the FanDuel Sports Network, ended its broadcast deal with the Cincinnati Reds as part of lengthy bankruptcy proceedings that concluded in November.

Cleveland Cavaliers and Blue Jackets games predominantly filled the broadcast schedule on FanDuel Sports Network in the Cincinnati viewing market during the Reds' offseason, so fans of those teams were forced to find other means to watch games. Having the Blue Jackets simulcast there on local channels is a way to meet that need, even if it's only five games.

The Blue Jackets are one of eight NHL teams that still have broadcast agreements with Diamond Sports Group, the nation's largest operator of regional sports networks. As part of its Chapter 11 bankruptcy restructuring, DSG agreed to new deals with its NBA and NHL teams in August that included lower rights fees, but specifics of the Blue Jackets' deal are not public.

The Columbus Dispatch / Here's why the Columbus Blue Jackets returned goalie Jet Greaves to the AHL

By Brian Hedger – December 19, 2024

The Blue Jackets aren't carrying three goalies anymore, but their goaltending situation isn't exactly settled.

Jet Greaves, a rookie who plays well whenever called upon, was loaned to AHL Cleveland on Wednesday after another impressive performance in the Jackets' 5-3 loss Tuesday at the Tampa Bay Lightning — their fifth straight loss. Greaves, 23, allowed four goals but made numerous quality saves to keep the game from getting out of control with the Lightning up 4-0.

Now, he's back in Cleveland thanks mainly to the Blue Jackets' growing list of injuries that now includes defensemen Dante Fabbro (right leg) and Jack Johnson (eye).

"I met with (Greaves) this morning and explained there's nothing that he did (wrong)," said Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell. "(Tuesday's) game could've been 7-0 if he wasn't so good. I said, 'Jet, this isn't about your performance. This is about roster management right now.'"

Elvis Merzlikins will start Thursday against the New Jersey Devils and struggling Daniil Tarasov will back him up after being a healthy scratch for three straight games. The Blue Jackets are expected to recall AHL reinforcements prior to that game due to injuries affecting multiple forwards and defensemen. The latest to leave the lineup was Fabbro, who took a knee to his right leg Tuesday on a hit by Lightning forward Conor Geekie.

Fabbro underwent imaging tests Wednesday, but Waddell said the defenseman likely escaped with a bone bruise/charley horse rather than a knee injury. Fabbro might not require a stint on injured reserve, which means he'll miss time while occupying a roster spot. The same could apply to defenseman Jack Johnson, who took a stick blade to the eye Sunday at the Carolina Hurricanes and didn't play Tuesday.

The Blue Jackets have also played the past four games without forward Justin Danforth (lower body injury), forward Mathieu Olivier is playing through a lower-body injury and the IR includes prominent forwards Boone Jenner (shoulder) and Yegor Chinakhov (upper body). A roster spot could be opened by placing Tarasov on waivers for the purpose of AHL assignment, but Waddell isn't willing to risk losing him.

The Blue Jackets also gained roster flexibility against the upcoming NHL holiday roster freeze that runs Dec. 19-28 after assigning and recalling Greaves and forward Mikael Pyyhtia to AHL Cleveland last Friday. All players who are recalled from the AHL after Dec. 11 and before the roster freeze are eligible to shuttle between NHL and AHL teams to continue playing.

"With the roster freeze, we're a little banged up, up front, and not knowing about Fabbro and (Johnson) for sure yet, we might need to call up a couple guys," Waddell said. "We're just waiting to see how the day shakes out here, so we can plan for it."

Greaves' departure leaves the goaltending to be handled primarily by Merzlikins with Tarasov going back to the backup role. Merzlikins' exhaustion during a home loss to the Philadelphia Flyers last week plus Tarasov's ongoing struggles are what prompted Greaves to be recalled in the first place. His numbers aren't much better than Merzlikins' or Tarasov's, but Greaves was sharp against the Washington Capitals, Anaheim Ducks and Lightning.

He went 0-1-2 with a 3.30 goals-against average, but his .896 save percentage ranks highest among the Jackets' three goalies — albeit during a smaller sample size. Merzlikins, who took the loss Sunday against the Carolina Hurricanes, is 9-9-2 with a 3.11 GAA and .887 save percentage, while Tarasov is 3-5-1 with a 4.26 GAA and .857 save percentage.

Tarasov could use a brief AHL stint to find his top form, but NHL waivers are blocking that from happening.

“Elvis is playing (Thursday), so there’s no reason for carrying three goalies just for the sake of carrying three goalies, if you’re not going to play,” Waddell said. “We’re not going to put (Tarasov) on waivers. You can’t just go by (his play) this year. His history has not been bad. He’s played some good hockey, so we’ve got to get his confidence back, eventually get him back in there and hope it goes well for us.”

[The Athletic / He’s rested and ready: Elvis Merzlikins’ 40-save masterpiece guides Blue Jackets’ win](#)

By Aaron Portzline – December 20, 2024

A week ago, the Columbus Blue Jackets decided to give starting goaltender Elvis Merzlikins a bit of a breather because they’d started to see signs of fatigue in his game. That’s why Jet Greaves was summoned from AHL Cleveland to start three of the previous four games.

Wednesday, the Blue Jackets sent Greaves back to the minors, a clear signal that Merzlikins is back in the No. 1 role and expected to make the next three starts before the NHL takes its annual three-day break for the holidays.

Merzlikins was not in the giving mood Thursday against the New Jersey Devils, making 40 saves — at least three of them worthy of a highlight reel — in the Blue Jackets' much-needed 4-2 win before 15,793 in Nationwide Arena.

Sean Monahan had two goals and an assist, and Zach Werenski and Ivan Provorov added goals and Kirill Marchenko had two assists as the Blue Jackets snapped a five-game losing streak. The Jackets had been 1-6-2 since Dec. 1.

But it was Merzlikins who was guilty of crimes: robbing the Devils' Hughes brothers, Jack and Luke, of golden scoring chances, and stealing a game in which the Blue Jackets were badly outplayed. It marked the 12th time in his career that he's made 40 or more saves.

"I've said it a few times already," Werenski said of Merzlikins. "He was awesome tonight. Obviously, with some of the saves that he made and how dominant he was, without him, it could have been a different outcome.

"I like the way we played, but I liked the way he played even more. It's a hell of a night for him."

The win was Merzlikins' 10th of the season, a figure he didn't reach until the middle of February last season. To get there, he needed to make 17 saves in the second period and 16 in the third while battling cramps down the stretch of the game.

At every stoppage, Merzlikins was guzzling water to keep them from getting worse.

"(Merzlikins) responded (to his lightened workload) by stropping the puck," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "That's his job, right? He did it very well tonight.

"He held us in there when we gave up some point-blank opportunities. He made some spectacular saves. More than that, he made the routine ones look routine. He looked really calm in there. He had a couple of flashy saves where he had to stretch over, but for the most part, he was calm."

New Jersey's Jack Hughes had 13 shots on goal, and Merzlikins denied every one of them. It marked a franchise record for the most shots on goal by a Columbus opponent, a record set more than 14 years ago by Patrick Kane, who played then for the Chicago Blackhawks.

Merzlikins made two incredible stops on Hughes about two minutes apart in the second period. The first was a glove save at 12:58, in which Merzlikins lunged to his left to nab Hughes' shot from the right circle. At 15:09, Merzlikins thrust his right pad out to deny Hughes again.

For good measure, Merzlikins started the third period by stealing a goal away from Luke Hughes, Jack's brother. Merzlikins kicked a rebound right out to Luke Hughes in the left circle, then sprawled to get his right pad in front of Hughes' put-back attempt.

Luke Hughes would later score. But the two Hughes brothers totaled 19 shots on goal and 33 shot attempts, and only one made it past the lanky Latvian.

"I didn't really care (who was shooting)," Merzlikins said. "I was just doing my part.

"They're a really great team. Those are the fun shots. (I) might get a little bit lucky on a couple of those, but still ... they're huge plays."

It can be said that the Blue Jackets, after a string of sleepy performances, played with a pace and energy that had been missing. But they were badly outplayed for much of the night, relying on Merzlikins to be the difference-maker.

The Devils had a 42-20 advantage in shots and a 97-43 edge (gulf?) in shot attempts. The Blue Jackets, to their credit, blocked 24 shots.

The Devils trailed 3-0 when they decided to pull goaltender Jake Allen with 5:32 remaining, and they almost crawled back into it. The Devils scored two extra-attacker goals — one with 2:50 remaining, the other with 1:25 remaining — to make it 3-2.

You could feel the nerves in Nationwide Arena, but the Devils decided to take their timeout before the ensuing face-off. That helped the Blue Jackets maybe more than the Devils.

“We were short (of energy) a little bit there at the end,” Evason said. “We were going with two lines, maybe a mixture of seven guys up front. It probably helped get (Werenski) on the ice for the whole time (the rest of the game). It probably helped Elvis as well.”

When play resumed, the Blue Jackets were able to clinch it. Cole Sillinger laid an open-ice hit on Luke Hughes, causing him to cough up the puck on his way out of the Devils’ zone. Monahan gathered it and scored into the empty net.

“We were fine,” Werenski said. “But once they get one or two (goals) you kinda start thinking a little bit.”

[The Athletic / How an NHL broadcaster prepares for a game, from name pronunciations to locker-room stories](#)

By Jeremy Rutherford – December 19, 2024

It’s Dec. 12, game day for the St. Louis Blues at Enterprise Center, and longtime TV broadcaster John Kelly pulls his truck onto 15th Street at 10:30 a.m. for the morning skate.

Normally, the Blues would be heading onto the ice now, but they’ve just returned home from a four-game, nine-day road trip. So today, they’ve swapped practice times with the San Jose Sharks ahead of their 7 p.m. game. The visitors will take the ice at 10:30 a.m., followed by the home team at 11:30.

“With the time change, the Blues felt it was better to adapt back to Central time by having the later skate,” Kelly says. “So we’ll talk to some of the folks from the Sharks, their announcers, a few of the players, and then we’ll work our way into the Blues locker room.”

Kelly enters the rink through the media entrance and zigzags his way to the lower bowl. The TV cameras are off and the seats that will be filled in about 8 1/2 hours are empty, but the 64-year-old Kelly is “on.” He’s got his black notepad in hand and is eager to get his hands on any information that can bring Blues fans closer to their favorite team.

This is Kelly’s 36th season broadcasting games in the NHL, including 23 in St. Louis. He was with the Blues for three years in the 1990s, and after leaving to call Colorado Avalanche games from 1995 to 2004, he returned in 2005 and has been home since.

“No. 1, I love the game of hockey,” Kelly says. “I played until I was 19 years old, and I got to sit next to one of — if not the — greatest hockey announcers ever, and he was my dad (Hockey Hall of Famer Dan Kelly). Not many people get a chance to live out their lifetime ambition, but ever since I was in junior high, I wanted to be a hockey broadcaster, and I’ve accomplished that. I’m very blessed. I don’t consider it a right because it’s my name. I consider it a privilege.”

Former Blues TV analyst Joe Micheletti, 70, who got his start in the business alongside Dan Kelly and later worked with John, sees a lot of similarities.

“What I learned from Dan, you can’t learn in the classroom,” Micheletti says. “The thing that always came through was, ‘Be a professional. Be fair.’ I don’t know if he ever had to talk to John about that, but that’s the way John has always been — same way, same attitude. He’s great at what he does.

To see for ourselves how Kelly prepares for a broadcast, The Athletic shadowed him ahead of the Blues’ game against the Sharks. Here’s a look at how his work throughout the day makes it onto the air later in the evening.

The Sharks are on the ice and Kelly spots their TV crew in the lower bowl. It includes play-by-play man Randy Hahn, color analyst Drew Remenda and former Blue Jamal Mayers, who’s doing select games for the team.

“So who’s in goal tonight?” Kelly asks.

Three days earlier, San Jose acquired goalie Alexandar Georgiev in a trade with the Colorado Avalanche.

“You might see Georgiev make his debut,” Hahn says. “You may also see (Shakir) Mukhamadullin’s first game of the season.”

“Mukhamadullin?” Kelly asks, trying to clarify the pronunciation. “You say it, ‘Mook’?”

“Yeah, Mook ... Mukhamadullin,” Hahn says. “He’s a first-round draft pick from the New Jersey Devils who we got in the Timo Meier trade.”

“OK, Mukhamadullin, that’s a tough one!” Kelly says.

“We call him ‘Shaq’ for short,” Remenda jokes.

John Kelly takes notes as he talks to Randy Hahn. (Jeremy Rutherford / The Athletic)

Kelly laughs, but he wants to make he has Mukhamadullin’s name down.

“I know most of them, but there are always players who are new to the team,” Kelly tells The Athletic. “I always go to the broadcaster because they know best how their player’s name is pronounced. If it’s a tricky name, I always write it out phonetically in case I forget.”

Next, Kelly asks Hahn and Remenda about something he heard on a recent San Jose broadcast. He likes to watch the Blues’ upcoming opponents, so when the team was in Western Canada, he watched the Sharks play the Carolina Hurricanes.

“So I heard you say on the air the other night, I was watching the game and you said, ‘Macklin Celebrini was a defenseman when he was younger,’” Kelly says.

“Yeah, he loved playing D!” Remenda says.

Kelly scribbles the note into his small black notebook.

“I wanted to confirm that because it’s pretty interesting that a No. 1 overall pick, who’s a dynamic offensive player, was a defenseman,” he tells The Athletic. “If I watch a game, I watch the broadcast of the team that we’re playing because they’re going to talk more about their own team. So our next game after tonight is Dallas on Saturday, and I’ll record their game (against the Nashville Predators) and watch that. You learn a lot by just watching and listening.”

Hahn, who’s been in the business for 33 years himself, says that he and Kelly talk ahead of every Blues-Sharks game, whether it’s at the rink or on the phone.

“John is definitely in that category of someone who goes to the next level, and it shows in the broadcast,” Hahn says. “He’s meticulous, particularly about pronunciations, which I think is a separator among broadcasters. It’s important to the player and their family watching at home. They’re going to say, ‘They don’t even know how to say your name.’”

Longtime Blues TV producer Tim Pabst says there was a game recently in which Kelly was pronouncing a name differently than the NHL’s audio recording on the league’s website.

“John goes, ‘You’re not wrong, but I went to the other team’s broadcaster who asked the player specifically,’” Pabst says. “I would never question John’s work ethic. When he says something on the air, he’s generally spent a lot of time researching it.”

At this point, San Jose has wrapped up its practice and a public-relations person announces Sharks coach Ryan Warsofsky’s morning interview will take place shortly and that players are available, too.

John Kelly listens in on a press conference with Ryan Warsofsky. (Jeremy Rutherford / The Athletic)

“I asked the coach about his brother David, who was drafted by the Blues, about what he’s doing now,” Kelly tells The Athletic. “He told me that he just retired from playing in Germany. Then I got the coach’s comments on playing the Blues, how they’re a great rush team. He thinks since the coaching change that they’re more connected and they have a great transition game.”

Kelly also caught up with Sharks forward Luke Kunin, who is from St. Louis.

“He told me that his parents, Mark and Sheri, are coming tonight,” he says.

As much as Kelly enjoys chatting with Kunin and getting that information, the 27-year-old who grew up watching Blues’ games is perhaps more thrilled to talk to him.

“Absolutely,” Kunin says. “You think NHL and having those hockey voices in your head and, for sure, being from here, that’s a big voice growing up. We’re just talking family, day to day, how everything is going, just catching up. That’s special!”

John Kelly visits with Luke Kunin, a St. Louis native. (Jeremy Rutherford / The Athletic)

Now it’s time to watch the Blues’ practice, during which Kelly jots down the line combinations and starting goalie. He chats with radio analyst Joey Vitale for a bit, and when the team’s morning skate comes to an end about 30 minutes later, the media starts making its way to the locker room.

“I want to talk to Brayden Schenn about changing the practice time and whose idea it was,” Kelly says. “It’s sort of a big storyline tonight because the Blues are coming off a long trip. How do you adjust to the time change? How fatigued is the team going to be? I also want to talk to Zack Bolduc about playing baseball growing up.”

Kelly walks into the locker room with Hall of Famer Bernie Federko and seeks out Schenn, who tells him that the decision to move the morning skate back to 11:30 a.m. was a combination of the coaches talking with strength and conditioning coach Ryan Podell.

“John is always prepared, he’s always detailed, he’s always asking questions,” Schenn says. “He’s always looking for little advantages to be the best he can be. I always enjoy my conversations with JK.”

Kelly then makes his way over to Bolduc. The 21-year-old is from Quebec, and while talking baseball, the two wonder aloud what year the Montreal Expos moved to Washington, D.C. (it was the 2005 season).

“He’s awesome to be around and a fun person to talk with,” Bolduc says. “He’s talking about everything: life, hockey. He’s got a lot of experience, so it’s always nice to talk to him. It’s good for me as a young guy to listen to him.”

John Kelly and Bernie Federko chat with Brayden Schenn after the morning skate. (Jeremy Rutherford / The Athletic)

As Kelly exits, he reflects on his chats with Schenn and Bolduc, saying, “I like talking to the players. Not always about the X’s and O’s. But I really like getting the background stories like that.”

Jamie Rivers has been on both the player side as a former Blue and on the broadcast side as Kelly’s color analyst.

“The players develop a relationship with the broadcasters, and in this particular case with John, his body of work and just the way he carries himself is what opens up them,” Rivers says. “You respect the opinion of someone who’s been around the game for so long. He works really hard, and they’re going to give him a nugget for the game that night.”

The media’s morning press conference with Blues coach Jim Montgomery is about to begin and Kelly pulls up a seat. It lasts about five minutes, but in that short time, it’s learned that injured Blues forward Radek Faksa is making progress and that Mathieu Joseph will be in the lineup. The coach also points out that after the long road trip, it’ll be a tough game against the Sharks.

“Jim is really good,” Kelly says. “He’s very concise in talking about what the Blues have done well, and what they need to do in that particular game.”

As Montgomery makes his way out of the room, Kelly gets his attention.

“I grabbed him because tonight is Hockey Fights Cancer night and I wanted to ask him how has cancer impacted his life,” Kelly says. “He said his brother-in-law passed away about 12 years ago and it was very tough for the whole family. And then he mentioned Kelly Chase and how Kelly is dealing with cancer, so I’ll use that in the broadcast tonight.”

It’s now 1 p.m. and Kelly is headed home for a few hours.

He’ll eat some turkey chili made by his wife, Jennifer, while he prepares for the night. He’ll go through his two black books — a little one for personal notes about players and a larger one for team notes.

“I spend about 1 1/2 hours going through the notes and other stat resources we have,” Kelly says. “I get the information from those sources and put them in my (larger) book.”

Then Kelly lays down, not for nap like the players, but some quiet time.

“It’s maybe a half-hour just to rest your mind,” he says. “You have to be at your very best at 7 o’clock and stay sharp until 10 p.m. It’s a unique situation because most people are winding down at 7 o’clock, but for the players, the coaches and even the broadcasters, that’s the peak of our workday, so you’ve got to be rested. I laid down until 3:45, then shaved and showered and came back.”

Kelly’s wife picks out his clothing combination, and as a breast cancer survivor herself, she chooses purple.

“It’s going to be a very impactful night with our family’s battles — my dad, my wife and others who have fought the disease,” Kelly says.

Dan Kelly died of lung cancer in 1989.

It’s 5 p.m., and Kelly is back at the rink to pre-tape an interview with a local high school hockey player, Cameron Samples, and rehearse the opening of the broadcast with Rivers. That takes about 45 minutes, after which he heads to the press box for a quick dinner: two mini-tacos and a salad.

“I eat light,” Kelly says. “I learned years ago that if I eat a heavy meal, it fatigues me a little bit.”

Then it's back to the booth for the pregame warmups and any last-minute lineup changes. There are no changes, so Kelly and the FanDuel Sports Network crew are ready to go to work.

John Kelly has two black books he writes notes in. (Jeremy Rutherford / The Athletic)

"We go into every game with a game plan, but sometimes you have to throw the game plan out the window," he says. "For example, maybe we want to talk about Zack Bolduc, but what if Jordan Kyrou gets a hat trick and the game is really fast and exciting? Sometimes you don't get to your stories and you can't just try to jam them in for the sake of getting them in. But everything being equal, we have two or three storylines that we'll try to get in tonight."

Let's take a listen and hear how it turned out ...

The pucks drops at 7:12 p.m., and shortly after, Kelly correctly pronounces Mukhamadullin's name for the first time.

Later, Kelly tells the story that he heard from the Sharks broadcasters about Celebrini playing defense growing up.

And before the end of the first period, Kelly mentions that Kunin's parents, Mark and Sheri, are in attendance to watch their son play the Blues.

In the second period, Kelly explains that the Blues' morning skate was later than normal because of the long road trip.

At 9:30 p.m., some two hours and 18 minutes after signing on the air, Kelly puts the final touch on a 4-3 loss to the Sharks.

"It was a close game," Kelly says. "Our job is to inform and entertain, and in a game like we just saw, I think our crew did a good job and we accomplished what we wanted to do in that broadcast."

[ESPN / NHL trade grades: Report cards for the Kaapo Kakko swap](#)

By Ryan S. Clark & Greg Wyshynski – December 19, 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, the Colorado Avalanche and San Jose Sharks swapping goaltenders, Cam Fowler to the St. Louis Blues and Kaapo Kakko to the Seattle Kraken.

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

Dec. 18: Kakko to the Kraken, Borgen to the Rangers

Another member of what was once considered the New York Rangers' future is now gone, with the club trading Kaapo Kakko to the Seattle Kraken.

The Kraken received Kakko in exchange for defenseman Will Borgen, a 2025 third-round pick and a 2025 sixth-round pick.

Here's a look at how both front offices performed with this trade and what it all means.

New York Rangers

Grade: C-

Shortly after the trade was announced, it was reported that Kakko's quote to reporters before the team's 2-0 loss Tuesday against the Nashville Predators played a role in the trade.

The 23-year-old forward was a healthy scratch in a 3-2 loss Sunday to the St. Louis Blues, which led to him saying, "I know you've got to do something as a coach when you're losing games, but I think it's just easy to pick a young guy and boot him out. That's how I feel to be honest."

Kakko had four goals and 14 points in 30 games. He was on pace for 11 goals and 37 points, entering the final season of his contract as a player who had yet to reach the heights of what was expected when he was the No. 2 pick of the 2019 draft.

Now Kakko is gone, and he becomes the latest personnel move in a season that has led to questions about where the Rangers go next -- and if it could still somehow result in the club reaching the Eastern Conference finals for the third time in four years.

The Rangers had lost five in a row and six of their past seven games around the time GM Chris Drury sent a memo to the rest of the league to inform them the Rangers were open for business. It led to them trading captain and defenseman Jacob Trouba to the Anaheim Ducks on Dec. 6, a move that added salary cap space with Trouba still having another year left on his contract worth \$8 million.

Moving on from Trouba meant Braden Schneider and Victor Mancini would receive more opportunities. Those plans changed with K'Andre Miller going on injured reserve Friday, which put a strain on a Rangers team that is 2-6 since Trouba was traded.

It's why Schneider was partnered with rookie Zac Jones on the second pairing, with Urho Vaakanainen, who was acquired in the Trouba trade, on the third pairing with veteran journeyman Chad Ruhwedel.

Losing on Tuesday to the last-place Predators gave the Rangers a third straight defeat, during which time they were outscored 10-3.

Then came the trade that saw them get Borgen, send Mancini to the AHL and recall forward Matt Rempe.

Adding Borgen gives the Rangers another right-handed defenseman who has shown he can play top-four minutes while logging heavy minutes on the penalty kill -- something the Rangers needed with Trouba still leading them in short-handed ice time as of Wednesday.

It's also a move that provides them additional financial flexibility going forward. One of the challenges facing Drury and his front office staff was figuring out their cap situation ahead of next offseason. And that was before they signed superstar goaltender Igor Shesterkin to a long-term extension worth \$11.5 million annually.

Jones, Kakko, Miller and Will Cuyll were all pending restricted free agents, while top-pairing defenseman Ryan Lindgren is a pending unrestricted free agent.

By flipping Kakko for Borgen, a pending UFA, it allows the Rangers another outlet to get money off their books with Borgen earning \$2.7 million this season. It now leaves the Rangers with a six-player UFA class that also includes Jonathan Quick and Reilly Smith, among others.

This allows Drury & Co. more money to play with as the Rangers seek to keep their coveted core together. A core that no longer features a player who was once thought to be one of the faces of the

future. And that's the bottom line here; while Borgen is useful to fill the Trouba-sized hole, Kakko might have some runway left in his development, which will now be revealed in a Kraken sweater.

Seattle Kraken

Grade: B

Kraken GM Ron Francis was able to take Borgen, who was the team's pick from the Buffalo Sabres in the expansion draft, eventually turn him into a top-four defenseman, and trade him (with Day 2 draft picks) for a potential top-six forward in Kakko.

The key word being potential.

Development is one of the items that makes the NHL distinctive -- and also makes it complicated. A 23-year-old in another professional sport would be met with the understanding that they're not a finished product at such a young age.

That's what the Kraken are banking on. It's what the Rangers were also banking on, before pulling the rip cord on a forward who has played the second-most games of his draft class yet is sixth in points; for context, his fellow Finland countryman, Matias Maccelli, was taken 96 picks later and is separated by nine points despite playing 131 fewer games.

Kakko's best season came in 2022-23 when he had 18 goals and 40 points in 82 games, averaging 15 minutes, 18 seconds in ice time. Since then, he has scored 17 goals and 31 points in 91 games, while averaging 13:16 in ice time.

Coming to Seattle should lead to Kakko receiving opportunities that were much harder to come by in New York. Whether it be with Matty Beniers, Tye Kartye, Ryker Evans and now Shane Wright, the Kraken have shown they are willing to give young players a chance to earn minutes. Especially with captain Jordan Eberle being on long-term injured reserve, while Yanni Gourde has been day-to-day since last playing on Dec. 10.

Getting the most out of young players is one of the reasons why the Kraken hired coach Dan Bylsma and assistant Jessica Campbell. The work they did developing and winning with quite a few of the Kraken's prospects at the AHL level could potentially lead to Kakko finding more continuity in Seattle.

Again, the key word here being, potentially.

Playing time isn't the only thing that's at stake. Kakko is a pending RFA who has one more year of team control before his UFA years start kicking in before the 2026-27 season.

How he performs this season could at least lead to a one-year deal, with the idea that the Kraken might also be tempted to give him more than that if he becomes a key player for them.

Entering Wednesday, the Kraken were four points out of the final Western Conference wild-card playoff spot. They played an extra game more than the team holding the last spot -- the Calgary Flames -- while the Utah Hockey Club is three points behind but has played three fewer games.

The Kraken were expected to be part of a grouping of teams that could potentially challenge for a wild card, with the notion they might have to decide their path (and role) ahead of the trade deadline.

Spending big money in the offseason to sign Brandon Montour and Chandler Stephenson signaled their intent about what they could do this season and beyond. Adding Kakko only adds to the belief of what this season could potentially mean for the Kraken. -- Clark

Dec. 14: Fowler traded to St. Louis

After 991 games wearing an Anaheim Ducks uniform, Cam Fowler will now wear a St. Louis Blues sweater.

The Blues acquired Fowler and a 2027 fourth-round pick from the Ducks in exchange for a 2027 second-round pick and prospect defenseman Jeremie Biakabutuka. The Ducks will also retain 38.4615385% of Fowler's salary.

Here's a look at how both front offices did with the trade.

St. Louis Blues

Grade: B+

There are two versions of the Blues in 2024-25: The first version was struggling under Drew Bannister; the second version is under the guidance of Jim Montgomery, who was hired to replace Bannister less than a week after his own dismissal by the Boston Bruins.

In Montgomery's eight games, the Blues have found a defensive cohesion that's been missing. That problem has been one of the largest challenges facing GM Doug Armstrong in his bid to get the Blues back into the playoffs.

Having four defensemen with no-trade clauses was also a massive hurdle when it came to making changes. What opened the door was when one of those defensemen, Torey Krug, sustained an ankle injury that required season-ending surgery in September.

That played a role in them adding Philip Broberg via offer sheet, with the idea that they could be tempted to potentially add more should a deal that fits within their parameters become available.

Enter Fowler, who now represents another potential change in a season that has already seen quite a few.

His future with the Ducks was already in question following the Jacob Trouba trade. To have another top-four option available at a price that could fit within their salary cap structure made Fowler an attractive option for St. Louis.

Now it's a matter of determining what sort of role Fowler, who has one more season after the 2024-25 campaign left on his contract, can play on a roster that's allowing the sixth-fewest goals per game since the Blues hired Montgomery on Nov. 25.

Part of what has helped the Blues is they now have a team save percentage that's fourth in the league in Montgomery's eight games in charge; they have risen to 14th for the whole season. They are allowing the eighth-fewest high-danger chances, while sitting 13th in fewest scoring chances allowed per 60 minutes, and are around league average in shots allowed per 60.

That's one area where Fowler could play a role. Another could be a power play that has struggled before and after they hired Montgomery. They are 20th since Montgomery took over and are 25th on the season.

This could be a win-win deal. Fowler gives the Ducks someone with experience operating a power play. The Blues provide Fowler with the ice time he wasn't receiving on the man advantage, as he had just 10:07 in power-play ice time this season after reaching the 100-minute mark in all but one season since making his debut in 2010-11.

Fowler could pair with Colton Parayko, a duo that could be the latest building block Montgomery could use to find more consistency.

The Blues entered Saturday four points out of the final Western Conference wild-card spot, and this is a move made with erasing that gap in mind.

Anaheim Ducks

Grade: B

Ducks GM Pat Verbeek knew what this season's climate was like for teams needing a top-four defenseman, having just acquired Trouba for Urho Vaakanainen and a 2025 fourth-round pick.

But the Ducks were facing a different situation with trying to move on from Fowler than what the Rangers were going through before they sent Trouba to Anaheim.

What helped Verbeek is that he had the necessary time to find what he felt was the strongest possible trade. And he made a deal that attained more draft capital for a franchise that's believed to have one of the NHL's brightest and strongest farm futures.

There's that word. Future.

The future is one of the major reasons the Ducks moved on from Fowler, who was less than 10 games from playing No. 1,000 for the club. Drafting and developing young defensemen has become a hallmark of what the Ducks have done over the past few years.

It's why they've brought up Jackson LaCombe, Pavel Mintyukov and Olen Zellweger. And while Drew Helleson was acquired in a trade, he's a 2019 second-round pick with promise and size.

The improvement by the young defensive core is why Fowler's power-play minutes significantly diminished this season. And once the Ducks got Trouba, it meant that playing Fowler came at the expense of not playing one of those younger defensemen like Helleson or Zellweger, given LaCombe and Mintyukov have already established themselves as nightly fixtures.

And for a franchise that has shown it is beyond comfortable giving young players a chance to play? Building that young core ultimately led the Ducks down the path to where Fowler was expendable. Getting Trouba, who has one more year left on his deal after this season, was essentially the final push that allowed the Ducks to feel comfortable moving on. -- Clark

Dec. 9: Blackwood to Colorado, Georgiev to San Jose

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 Helleson 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