



Columbus Blue Jackets Media Clips

August 28-29, 2025

Columbus Blue Jackets News

PAGE 2	FOX28 / One year later, Gaudreau brothers' legacy lives through family, fans, charity efforts
PAGE 4	The Athletic / A year after Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau's tragic deaths, their legacy grows
PAGE 6	The Columbus Dispatch / Dean Evason's first job as coach of Columbus Blue Jackets was to help everyone grieve
PAGE 15	The Columbus Dispatch / After Johnny Gaudreau's death, Sean Monahan felt at home with Columbus Blue Jackets
PAGE 17	The Columbus Dispatch / One year after his death, Johnny Gaudreau's memory still drives Columbus Blue Jackets
PAGE 21	The Columbus Dispatch / How the Columbus Blue Jackets continue to keep Johnny Gaudreau's spirit alive
PAGE 23	The Hockey Writers / Gaudreau Family, Blue Jackets Kept Promise of Perpetuating John & Matthew's Lasting Legacy
PAGE 27	The Hockey Writers / 2025 Blue Jackets' Summer Q&A: Boone Jenner
PAGE 32	The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' 3 Potential PTO Targets
PAGE 34	RG / Waddell on Fantilli Contract Talks, Provorov, Offseason Additions

Cleveland Monsters / Prospects News

PAGE 38	The Athletic / Columbus Blue Jackets rank No. 8 in NHL Pipeline Rankings for 2025
---------	---

NHL News

PAGE 43	NHL.com / Gaudreaus 'still present' for Team USA members 1 year after deaths
PAGE 46	NHL.com / United States determined 'to get over this hump,' win Olympic gold medal

Multimedia

FOX28 / One year later, Gaudreau brothers' legacy lives through family, fans, charity efforts

By Tyler Corbit – August 29th 2025

Friday marks one year since the death of Columbus Blue Jackets star Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew.

The pair were struck and killed by a suspected drunk driver while riding bicycles near their hometown in New Jersey, the day before their sister's wedding.

A year later, the focus is on how the brothers lived, and how their legacy lives on through their families and the fans who chanted their names for years.

The brothers were devoted family men, and at the time of their deaths, both of their wives were pregnant.

Johnny's wife Meredith had just learned they were expecting a third child; she made that announcement during her eulogy at his funeral.

She gave birth to Carter Michael in April. He shares the same middle name as his late father.

Matthew's wife Madeline was a few months along at the time of their passing. She gave birth to Tripp Matthew in December.

Meredith and Madeline started the John and Matthew Gaudreau Foundation. It will help hockey initiatives and support hockey families who've faced tragedy. It also will help other families affected by drunk driving.

On Aug. 15, Meredith and Madeline rang the opening bell at the New York Stock Exchange to celebrate the foundation.

Gaudreau's CBJ teammate Zach Werenski and NHL star Matthew Tkachuk asked for guests at their recent weddings to donate to the foundation in lieu of gifts.

The entire Gaudreau family also organized a 5K race in the brothers' memory back in May. It raised more than \$500,000.

More than 1,000 people participated in person in southern New Jersey, and 1,000 more took part virtually. The money raised is being used to build an adaptive playground at Archbishop Damiano School in New Jersey, where the boys' mother Jane and sister Kristen work.

The sister who was supposed to get married last year, Katie Gaudreau, married her now-husband Devin Joyce last month. There were tributes to her brothers during the wedding. The brothers were supposed to be groomsmen, but their two best friends stood in for them.

Katie's bouquet featured 21 standard roses and 13 spray rose blooms, a nod to the brothers' jersey numbers. Her veil also had messages in the brothers' handwriting.

The Blue Jackets paid tribute to their star winger all year long last season; the team almost made the postseason for the first time since 2020.

Johnny Gaudreau's No. 13 now hangs from the rafters at Nationwide Arena. His jersey also hangs in a stall, whether at home or on the road. CBJ coach Dean Evason has said the jersey won't leave the dressing room so long as he's here.

The Gaudreau family led the team out before the Stadium Series game against Detroit at Ohio Stadium back in February, and Meredith would later announce the team's first-round pick in the NHL Draft.

The boys' father, Guy, also has been a frequent guest of the Jackets, Flyers and Team USA. He spent much of his life coaching hockey, and both teams have had him help at practice.

The man charged in the brothers' deaths, Sean Higgins, is still in jail awaiting trial. He's facing numerous charges, including reckless vehicular homicide and aggravated manslaughter.

Higgins has pleaded not guilty and turned down a plea deal that would've kept him locked up for 35 years. He could face up to 70 years in prison if convicted.

The Athletic / A year after Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau's tragic deaths, their legacy grows

By Aaron Portzline – Aug. 29, 2025

The sticks have been brought in from the front porch. The memorials have mostly been picked up and packed away. As the Columbus Blue Jackets make their way through the NHL this season, there won't be moments of silence or heart-wrenching ceremonies before games.

Today is the first anniversary of the tragedy that took the lives of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau. The sports world will pause, remember their lives and solemnly look back on that horrible day when the unthinkable became real and all of the emerging details just made the tragedy that much more devastating.

The Gaudreau family will never be able to "move on" from their loss, and neither will the close friends and former teammates of Johnny and Matthew. That's the thing about grief: you can't ever put it away, you just learn how to carry it. And sometimes it gets heavy.

But, as has so often been the case over the last 12 months, the rest of us can take our cues from the strength and grace of Meredith Gaudreau, Johnny's widow.

It was Meredith at the memorial service last September who delivered a stirring and powerful eulogy, one that allowed Johnny Gaudreau's former teammates to find meaning and, yes, joy in coming to the rink every day last season and play with a purpose.

And it was Madeline Gaudreau, Matthew's wife, who recently told *The Athletic's* Peter Baugh what her main objective is now. There will never be a way to make sense of such a tragedy, but there is great power and meaning in finding a way forward with purpose.

"A lot of times when Matt and John are spoken about, it's with a lot of sadness and heaviness, and rightfully so," Madeline told Baugh. "But I want to change the narrative, and rather than talking about the tragic way we lost them and how they should be here, talking about the foundation and what we're doing with it is what I'm trying to do."

In the wake of the tragedy, fans all over the hockey world were shocked and saddened. The kind people of the world expressed a strong desire to do something — anything — that could help in any way possible, even though it seemed like there was nothing that could be done.

There were vigils in Columbus and Calgary, where Johnny was a star NHL player. There was a vigil in Boston, where Johnny and Matthew starred for Boston College. There were vigils in southern New Jersey and Philadelphia, the area where the brothers were raised.

Then, as the hockey season played out, there was tribute after tribute to the brothers — the NHL, the Blue Jackets and Flames, Team USA at the 4 Nations Face-Off, the World Championship, etc. Several NHL coaches, starting with former Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella, have had the brothers' father, Guy, join their clubs for off-day practices and even morning skates.

The Blue Jackets hung No. 13 in the rafters of Nationwide Arena and in the dressing room, where it remains. The Gaudreau family — parents, wives, siblings, kids — led the Blue Jackets out onto the ice at Ohio Stadium before the outdoor game against the Detroit Red Wings. Meredith announced the Blue Jackets' first-round draft pick earlier this summer.

In a Blue Jackets season full of highlights and surprises, was there anything more beautiful or memorable than the crowd in Nationwide Arena singing happy birthday to Johnny and Meredith's son, Johnny Gaudreau Jr.?

The Gaudreaus have acknowledged repeatedly that all of these remembrances and outreaches, though some have been difficult emotionally, have helped remind them of how much Johnny and Matthew are loved and how much they meant to the hockey world.

It is important to Meredith that Johnny and Matthew always be remembered, that their legacy in the hockey world and beyond not fade over time. That's her promise and it's our directive — fans and players together. It's already begun, too.

At his wedding earlier this summer, Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski and his wife had Johnny and Meredith's daughter, Noa, serve as their flower girl and asked guests to make donations to the John and Matthew Gaudreau Foundation in lieu of gifts.

The first annual Gaudreau 5k was held this summer, with groups in Columbus and all over the world joining remotely and running a race in their community. It raised over \$500,000 to build an adaptive playground at Archbishop Damiano School in Westville, N.J.

I've already heard from two groups planning golf events in Columbus, including one from the Columbus chapter of Hockey Players in Business, that are donating all of the money they raise to the Gaudreau Foundation.

If you want to help the Gaudreau family now, this is your job.

The sticks have been brought in from the front porch. The memorials have mostly been picked up and packed away. But the legacy must never dim.

And, as Meredith told *The Athletic* recently, it will help if everyone looks forward, not back.

"I look at it as, 'I have an opportunity to do a lot of good and help people who need help,'" Meredith said. "That's what feels good to me."

The Columbus Dispatch / Dean Evason's first job as coach of Columbus Blue Jackets was to help everyone grieve

By Michael Arace – August 29, 2025

The upcoming season will be the 25th in the history of the Blue Jackets. It's difficult to count exactly how many head coaches they've had in this span. There were two interim coaches, Gary Agnew and Claude Noel, who coached fewer than 25 games apiece. There was another, Mike Babcock, who was definitely not an interim and never coached a game. Such is Blue Jackets history. It's confusing.

Enter Dean Evason. We'll call him the 11th head coach, excluding the interims and including Babcock. He was hired by Jackets president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell just over 13 months ago. He took the helm of a team that was largely anonymous in the world of major professional sports, save for its association with losing.

Then, on Aug. 29, 2024, as Evason was looking ahead to his first training camp in Columbus, Blue Jackets star Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, were killed by an accused drunk driver while riding their bicycles in South Jersey.

A year later, Evason looks back on the jobs he interviewed for and did not get and believes there were greater forces at work, pushing him to Columbus.

"I've thought about this, about faith and what have you, whatever you want to call it," Evason said. "Things happen for a reason. I do think and believe that Don and I, and or staff, and so on, that this was the right place and time to be here.

Evason lives blocks away from Nationwide Arena and walks to work. He cooks, but he burns everything because he likes everything well-done. He has a bunch of tattoos, each of them imbued with personal meaning. He has been married twice and has three grown children, Bryce, Brianne and Brooke. The kids send him gift cards for restaurants to explore in Columbus. He has two grandsons, Connor and Hudson. He is a scratch golfer and a hot yoga enthusiast.

Evason has a reputation for being fiery in his modes of motivation and his approach to winning hockey games. His visage on the bench feeds into this perception, especially when his blue eyes flash like lasers. His vocabulary, which is not 100% of the Queen's English, also abets the stereotype. Among his many tattoos is the Tasmanian Devil holding a hockey stick, which makes you go "Sure, I get that," until he tells you the story about how all of his old buddies on a long-ago beer league team have the same tattoos. The devil is in the details.

"The way his eyes light isn't the whole story," Blue Jackets television analyst Jody Shelley said. "I watch him on the bench and, when you get past the eyes, you begin to see what he's holding in. He's pretty calculating. He's holding back. And at the end of the game, he lets it all out.

"I think more than anything, what he loves is being a teammate. He loves it. Loves it."

Evason can't put it into words, but he had a sense of what the Blue Jackets needed after losing their ultimate teammate. This sense is the product of his 61 years on this earth, the experiences that he has had, the people he keeps close. That is why he is here.

Dean Evason and the prairies of Manitoba

Evason was born in the summer of 1964 in Flin Flon, Manitoba, by the Saskatchewan border. He spent his formative years in Thompson, a town of 15,000 located about five hours northeast of Flin Flon. It's not like being in the Yukon, but it's up there.

"There was no road north," Evason said. "Just a road south."

In Thompson, chances are you learn to skate before you walk. Evason was one of those kids born with blades on their feet. Everyone in his neighborhood had a backyard rink, and it was on those sheets that Evason and his brother, Dan, who was a year older, twirled away their pre-pubescence.

Evason's father, Allan, worked for a company that rented, sold and serviced heavy machinery, and his job would take the family to Winnipeg and then to Brandon. With a population of 50,000-plus, Brandon, or "Wheat City," is the second-largest city in the province (after Winnipeg) and an important railroad hub amid the vast Manitoba prairie. How flat is it? The locals say, "You could watch your dog run away for three days."

Evason worked his first and last job as a "garage monkey" at a Ford dealership in Brandon. He did oil changes, took out the garbage, cleaned out cars and so forth. Since, all he has done is play and coach the game he loves, and these things he does not consider work.

"Early in my coaching career, I used to love skating the guys – because I would do it with them," Evason said. "I loved the fact that you could get on the ice and grind and sweat and do all the skill stuff, or whatever, that we did when we played. Pretty cool."

Evason went west as a teenager to chase his dream. He starred for a minor-junior team in British Columbia, was drafted to play for the Kamloops (B.C.) Junior Oilers of the major-junior Western Hockey League and never let up in his chase. He was part of a team that won Canada's first gold medal at the World Junior Championships in 1982, during an era when the Soviet Union dominated the international stage. Evason half-jokes that the only reason he made the team was because Mario Lemieux got hurt. "I pretty much filled in for him," Evason said with that look of his, the one with the blue-eyed twinkle and winsome smile.

He put up gaudy offensive numbers and won a WHL championship in Kamloops in 1984. A fifth-round draft pick of the Washington Capitals, he bounced between the AHL and the NHL for a year-plus before he was traded to the Hartford Whalers. In Hartford, he found himself among an extraordinary collection of young men.

"You go up and down that entire roster and people are still in the game. It's extraordinary," Evason said. "Everybody on that team gets asked, 'Why?' To this day, I don't think anybody knows why."

The top-line center, Ron Francis, was a Hall of Fame player who went on to become a general manager. Future coaches flecked the roster – Joel Quenneville, Dave Tippett, Kevin Dineen, Evason, just to name a few. Quenneville is second all-time, behind Scotty Bowman, in coaching victories. Tippett is 18th.

Goaltender Mike Liut became a powerful agent. Paul MacDermid turned into an Ontario Hockey League franchise owner. Ray Ferraro rose to the pinnacle of his future profession as a color analyst on television. It goes on and on and on.

For all of that, what the 1980s Whalers are best known for is their 1986 loss to the Montreal Canadiens in Game 7 of the Adams Division final in overtime, after which they were feted with a parade through the streets of downtown Hartford.

Those who were on that team attempt to find a balance between the joy of a captivated city and the joke of throwing a parade for a team that fell nine wins short of a championship. They remain haunted

by the memory of Claude Lemieux, lifting a backhand and beating Liut for the series-winning goal. They still wonder what could have been.

Those Canadiens, led by rookie goaltender Patrick Roy, lost five games over four rounds en route to the Cup. Three of the losses were to the Whalers and the aggregate score for the series was 16-15. The winner had an easy path to ultimate victory. The loser ...

"If we win that game ..." Evason said.

The Whalers win the Cup, ownership stabilizes, Hartford turns into the Green Bay of the NHL and the team doesn't move to Carolina 11 years later. There is an alternate history that boggles the mind.

"Shortly after that, stuff started happening, and then there was the trade."

March 4, 1991: Francis, Ulf Samuelsson and Grant Jennings to the Pittsburgh Penguins for John Cullen, Jeff Parker and Zarley Zalapski. It was one of the most lopsided trades in NHL history. Francis and the Penguins won the Cup in 1991 and 1992. The Whalers veered off into irrelevance.

"If we win that game and at least advance, I think ...," Evason said.

Evason let that dangle. The "why" of Game 7 is a tough one. Or it's as simple as Roy, who in 1986 became the first rookie goalie to win the Conn Smythe Trophy.

Dean Evason, Ray Ferraro: Brothers from another mother

Evason spent six-plus years in Hartford and is still remembered well in the abandoned city. "Ronnie Franchise" centered the Whalers' first line and Ray Ferraro the second. Evason centered the line that was matched against the strongest opposing line. Evason was good for 30 to 40 points a year, but his greatest asset was his ability to read the game. He was a first-rate penalty killer.

"He was an undersized guy who could score goals, take faceoffs and check," Dineen said. "Honest player. Character. Grit. Hard guy to play against."

While Evason was (and remains) 5 feet 10 and 175 pounds, if/when the time was right to drop the gloves, he'd go with anyone.

"People think they understand animosity in today's game," Ferraro said. "Back then, we played the Quebec Nordiques (and other divisional opponents) eight times in a span of six months. Friction developed. One night in Quebec, Dean fought Dale Hunter three times in the first period."

Hunter racked up 3,655 penalty minutes – second all-time in NHL history behind Tiger Williams – in 1,407 NHL games. Tough customer.

"For some reason, that night they'd just had enough of each other," Ferraro said. "I remember thinking, 'Oh my god, they're going again.' And they'd just gotten out of the penalty box."

Ferraro and Evason are cosmically connected. They were born a day apart in August 1964. They were drafted back-to-back in the fifth round – Ferraro went No. 88 overall to the Whalers and Evason No. 89 to the Washington Capitals – in the 1982 NHL draft. When Ferraro was traded from the Portland Winter Hawks to the Brandon Wheat Kings in 1983, it was Evason's brother, Dan, then an assistant coach with the Wheat Kings, who picked him up at the airport in Winnipeg for the two-hour drive to Brandon.

Ferraro scored a record 103 goals and was the WHL Player of the Year in 1984, when Evason's Kamloops Junior Oilers won the league title and competed for the Memorial Cup, the championship of major-junior hockey. In the fall of '84, they became roommates while playing for AHL Binghamton, a minor-league affiliate shared by the teams that drafted them.

When the Caps traded Evason to Hartford in 1985, he didn't even have to change locker rooms. And when both Evason and Ferraro were called up to the big leagues, their last minor-league action was an attempted car theft.

They wondered what to do with all the cheap stuff that had piled up in their dumpy, \$460/month (furnished!) apartment in Binghamton. Evason jammed all of their stuff in the trunk of a 1976 AMC Matador, which they'd bought for \$600, and left the car in a parking lot with the keys in the ignition and the windows open.

"That car was a pile of junk and we wanted to get rid of it," Ferraro said, "but nobody stole it."

Both played for expansion teams, Evason with the San Jose Sharks in the early 1990s and Ferraro with the Atlanta Thrashers near the end of his 18-year career.

Ferraro went into broadcasting and is now the top color analyst for NHL games on ESPN/ABC.

Evason played 803 NHL games and had 139 goals, 372 points and 1,002 penalty minutes. He wrapped up his playing career in Europe and transitioned into coaching.

Dean Evason: Forged into a coach

Evason had a 20-year climb through the coaching ranks before he got a top job in the big leagues. He spent six years in the WHL, seven years as an assistant with the Capitals and seven years with the AHL's Milwaukee Admirals. He was an assistant with the Minnesota Wild for two-plus years before he was given the team to run – first as an interim, and then officially.

Evason's first model was Bill LaForge, a prolific winner at the junior level, including in 1982-84 with Kamloops. He flamed out when he got his NHL shot with the Vancouver Canucks, but LaForge was rugged. His teams took on his persona.

"I would've never played in the NHL without this man," Evason said. "He taught me to play with bite, with heart, toughness. He hung a heavy bag in the locker room. Every day after practice, you had to grab the jersey on the heavy bag and, with the music cranking, you had to learn how to punch – 30 seconds with the left, 30 seconds with the right.

"He preached to us to play hard, but to play together, and for each other. We had some guys who weren't that tough, but every guy knew we would stick up for the other guy. Every guy on that team. He taught us to be team-first and tough."

If those Kamloops teams were Philadelphia Flyer-like, then Evason could be likened to another Flin-Flon-born captain, Bobby Clarke.

Daryl Reaugh, a former Whaler and longtime color analyst for the Dallas Stars, was the Kamloops goaltender back then.

"The coach would give us, say, a 10:30 curfew on Friday night," Reaugh said. "It would get to 10:27, and Dean would phone the coach to ask for an extra half hour. Dean could talk to him. No other guy on the team could. LaForge would say, 'OK, 11, but you better be home by then. I'll be calling.'"

This was before cell phones. LaForge would be calling their billets, and he was a man of his word.

"At 10:57, Dean would call the coach and weasel out another half hour," Reaugh said. "Then, as it got close to 11:30, Dean would call, the conversation would be brief, and he'd hang up and say, 'Guys, we gotta go now.' And the place would empty."

Hall of Famer Bob Gainey, a mainstay for the dynastic Montreal Canadiens of the 1970s, coached Evason with the Dallas Stars in one of Evason's final NHL stops. He's another model.

Of Gainey, Evason said, "Be straight up, be honest and don't mess around. ... In your face. Honest. To this day, I don't put scratches up on the board – I talk to the players I'm scratching, personally."

Andy Murray, another Brandon native, came along late in Evason's playing career, when Evason was weighing his chances of latching on with another NHL team against offers from minor-league and European teams. Murray, who was coaching the Canadian national team, had a different pitch – join Team Canada as a player/assistant coach.

If the WHL and World Junior titles in 1984 were one bookend to Evason's playing career, this was the other. Evason captained Team Canada to a gold-medal victory in the 1997 World Championships. The team included Rob Blake, Sean Burke, Jarome Iginla, Keith Primeau, Sean Pronger, Mark Recchi and Geoff Sanderson.

"It was a little different then, winning the World Championships, because the Russians and Czechs were so dominant," Burke said. "You never think about a guy coaching while he's still playing, and I don't really think of Dean as a coach on that team – he was the captain. He had that way about him as a leader and, when you think about it, a lot of guys who are wired that way go on to become coaches."

Evason just couldn't imagine stepping off the ice. He not only enjoyed designing drills, but he was also thrilled that he could participate and grind and sweat along with the players.

"It's just such an incredible game," Evason said. "It's team. It's skill. You have every element. Toughness. You can fight. It's unbelievable. There's that old saying about if you find a job you love, you're never going to have to work a day in your life. It's so true."

Dean Evason's brother died with his boots on

Danial Alan "Heavy" Evason, died suddenly on March 6, 2004. This is how his younger brother tells the story:

"I was coaching the Vancouver Giants (of the WHL) at the time," Dean Evason said. "It was in the afternoon. We'd finished pregame skate and he called me. We talked for about 45 minutes. He'd played a hockey game in an old-timers tournament, with all my buddies back home. They're called the Kinsmen. He called me.

"He goes, 'We finished the first game. The guys were all going to the bar, having a few beers. I didn't feel like going. I'm staying in the (locker) room, waiting for them to come back.'

"We all have tattoos. Seven of us do. It's a Tasmanian Devil with a beer and a hockey stick. I put a team together when I was playing. We called ourselves the Old Guys. I started it to stay in shape because I'm playing in the NHL. I'd go back to Brandon, Manitoba, I'd get all my buddies, and then we'd get a couple of other guys, like, (former NHL forwards) Sheldon Kennedy and Jeff Odgers played for us. I had all of my friends together and we'd play against the Wheat Kings.

"We'd play for ice time, which was like \$200 bucks for an hour. Losers had to buy the ice. I'm playing with my buddies. I'm playing with my brother, who's 300 pounds and can still skate and play. I had to work so hard. It was the best training I could ever get because I had to work my a-- off, just playing. Anyway ...

"So, my brother is playing in this old-timers tournament with those guys. Plays a game. Sits in the room. Calls me. I found out later he called my mom. Just talking for 45 minutes, an hour. I knew afterward that he was probably feeling it was going to be his time. Then, he goes back, plays the second game, takes a shift, comes back to the bench and has a massive heart attack. He was (41 years old). Playing with all my buddies.

“Back in Vancouver, I’d just finished a meeting. My assistant coach comes into my office and says, ‘Dean, you’ve got to call your mom right now.’ I’m thinking, ‘My mom doesn’t call me before a game. She gets it. She knows what’s going on.’

“So, I call her. She says, ‘I know you’ve got a game tonight. You know how I do things. You know I don’t sugarcoat anything. Your brother is dead.’

“My assistant coach comes in and says, ‘What are you going to do?’ I said, ‘I’m going to do what I do. I’m going to coach the game.’ So, we played the game. We win in overtime. I held it all together. Then I walked off the bench, went straight to my car, drove home, my wife, my kids, all there. And the next day we flew to Brandon, Manitoba.”

For the funeral.

Among Evason’s many tattoos is one that says, “One day at a time,” and it is scripted in an imitation of his mother’s penmanship, across his heart. Evason says that’s where he gets his toughness, from Sheila, 87. As Evason describes it, “one day at a time” is Sheila’s way of absorbing life’s hardships and having the perseverance to move forward.

Another of Evason’s tattoos is a pair of skates, etched down one side of his torso. The skates are hanging on a peg. It’s a tribute to Dan “Heavy” Evason.

“He literally died with his boots on,” Evason said.

Heavy coached, scouted for and/or managed numerous Canadian junior teams in the Ontario and Western leagues. It’s not a stretch to say he was a legendary character in his corners of the world.

Here is one example:

Heavy coached a pro team, the Peterborough Pirates, in the United Kingdom’s Elite League in the early 1990s. The owner of the rink where they played, who had cashed in on the English hockey craze of the 1980s, came to a point where he wanted to break the Pirates’ lease. He wanted the team out so he could turn the place into a warehouse. To this purpose, the refrigeration units were removed, pipes in the floor beneath the ice surface were torn up and, in a wickedly Grinch-y move, the Zamboni entrance was torched.

The fans rose up with Heavy by their side. Heavy kept the team together and they played an entire schedule on the road. Back home, fans worked in volunteer shifts to rebuild the floor of the building. Every chance he got, Heavy was right there with them, wielding a pneumatic drill.

Evason and his brother Heavy and their father Al are in the Manitoba Hockey Hall of Fame. Their old man is also in the provincial baseball hall of fame. The boys got their athletic genes from the old man. The fire, Evason said, came from Sheila.

'Johnny's gone'

“I view Dean as straight-up, direct, tough, chin-up and walking into the wind,” Ray Ferraro said. “That’s why when Dean took the job in Columbus and faced the tragedy, I thought he was the right guy in the right place. Because he’s not the same man today that he was 10 years ago, or 20 years ago. He has seen enough in his life to shape him in a way where he was perfect for Columbus last year. I was really happy for the city that both he and Don Waddell were there, together.”

Ferraro played for the Atlanta Thrashers (now the Winnipeg Jets) in the early 2000s, at a time when Waddell was the team’s general manager. On Sept. 29, 2003, a Ferrari driven by Thrashers star Dany Heatley lost control on a winding, narrow road near Atlanta and crashed into a wrought-iron fence.

Heatley was seriously injured. His passenger, teammate Dan Snyder, was killed. Waddell had to deal with the aftermath and, as he and others have said, there is no playbook.

Evason's regular-season record of 147-77-27 over four-plus seasons with the Minnesota Wild was exemplary. But the Wild never got past the first round of the playoffs. A seven-game losing streak preceded his demise amid speculation that his teams lacked on-ice discipline. When Wild general manager Bill Guerin delivered his decision, both he and Evason cried. And they hugged.

Evason drew interest from a number of teams during his nine months in the wilderness. He thought he had a job with the Seattle Kraken, the team Ron Francis serves as president of hockey operations. He went through multiple rounds of interviews and was stunned when the Kraken demurred. Instead, AHL coach Dan Bylsma was promoted to the big-league bench. Bylsma was hired on April 21, 2023. He was fired on May 28, 2024.

The very day Bylsma was sacked in Seattle, Waddell was named president and general manager in Columbus. Waddell has had a long and varied career on both the hockey and business sides of NHL front offices. Likely, the Blue Jackets are his last stop before retirement, although he's not the retiring type.

In the four seasons prior to Waddell's arrival, the Blue Jackets had a record of 110-155-40 and didn't get a whiff of the playoffs. In that span, the Jackets had four coaches, including Babcock, who was hired and fired before he got to his first training camp in Columbus.

Waddell hired Evason on July 22, 2024.

Thirty-eight days later, on Aug. 29, 2024, the Gaudreau brothers were killed. The Gaudreaus' sister was to be married the next day. The tragedy sent shock waves through the hockey world. One family and a host of communities – Columbus, Calgary, Boston, South Jersey, USA Hockey and so on, and on – were shattered.

Evason and his daughter were in Denver to see country musician Dierks Bentley at the Red Rocks amphitheater when word reached him. Evason was in a hotel room. His phone rang.

"Johnny's gone," Waddell said.

"When I got hired, I said I'd heard everything about (captain) Boone Jenner and Goody (veteran defenseman Erik Gudbranson) and Z (longtime Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski) as our leaders," Evason said. "But I thought it was important I show my face to Johnny Gaudreau. Sit down with him. I flew to Philadelphia. He was skating with his dad at 10 o'clock in the morning. I met him at noon. He picked the restaurant.

"We were talking for two and a half, three hours. Talking about hockey, his expectations, my expectations, the team, all that kind of stuff. So, I was just blown away that night when Don called. I was like, 'It can't be true. I just sat with him.'"

What do the Columbus Blue Jackets do next?

Waddell celebrated his 67th birthday on Aug. 19. Evason turned 61 three days later. These are men who have lived long enough to have absorbed many tough times. How do you go about healing a team, a community, a city in the wake of an unfathomable tragedy? They can't say, not exactly. But they knew who they are, and that's a start.

"You reach a certain age, you've seen some things," Evason said. "Don Waddell had gone through it in Atlanta. He said, 'I don't know, really, what to do. We just support.' There were no instructions. He was just calm.

“What we decided – not decided, because we really didn’t decide anything – is that we were going to be really transparent, completely open, allow everyone to just do what they need to do.”

The first time Evason met most of the players was when Jenner called the team together in the days after the tragedy. The first time Evason shook Gudbranson’s hand, the 6-foot-5, 250-pound defenseman burst into tears, and then Evason did the same, and they hugged it out. The first time Evason saw Sean Monahan in the Jackets’ locker room, he was standing in front of his late best friend’s stall, staring at the empty space.

“He just looked at me and I looked at him,” Evason said. “It was a moment after the candlelight vigil on the plaza (at Nationwide Arena). I gave him a big hug, and that was it. Never said a word. It was all surreal. Nobody could really say anything because there were no words that could ...

“Basically, we just supported each other.”

Evason’s contemporaries, those who were contacted for this story, each sounded a similar note. They all echoed Ferraro.

“Last year, he looked like he was comfortable,” Reaugh said. “I was so happy for him. Sometimes he’s a little too raw for some people. But he’s so real. He has been through some things, you know? And at his core, I think, is ‘What’s the right thing to do here?’ ”

Reaugh recalled the passing of their Kamloops coach, LaForge, who died suddenly of an apparent heart attack in 2005. This was a year after Evason buried his brother.

“When coach died, we were sitting around and I said, ‘Dean, I don’t know if I can go to the funeral,’ ” Reaugh said.

There was a softer side of LaForge in a family setting, Reaugh said, but as a coach, LaForge was a hard man.

Reaugh: “Dean said, ‘There are some things in life that if you don’t do, you’ll regret it the rest of your life. You should go to the funeral.’ And he was right. It’s natural for him. He has got a natural ethic. Yes, he’s got fire. He can get fiery, man. He’s hyper competitive. He wants to win. But he always insists things be done the right way, and that he does right by people. I think that was the best thing for the group.”

Once again, an assistant coach came to Evason and said, ‘What do we do?’ And once again, the answer was the verb, “Coach.” Evason and his staff – it’s always a collective, with a lot of delegating – went to work.

The story of the 2024-25 Columbus Blue Jackets was among the most compelling in sports. As a group, and led by the players, the Jackets honored Gaudreau by embracing his soulfulness and his love for the game, on and off the ice. They didn’t shy away from talking about him. They weren’t afraid to appear vulnerable. They shared the journey with the Gaudreau family and, in a very real sense, kept the spirit of Johnny Hockey alive. It was beautiful.

On the ice, these Jackets became everyone’s favorite – or, at least, second-favorite – hockey team. The class and dignity they showed, combined with their unforeseen success, appealed to the hearts of human beings. These Jackets posted a 40-33-9 record, set franchise records for scoring and weren’t eliminated from playoff contention until the penultimate day of the season.

What do they do next?

“I think we just have to move forward,” Evason said. “I’m so excited about all these young guys whose careers have, basically, just started. We had to do a lot of teaching last year. I don’t have to teach these guys much anymore. They know.”

Back to work.

The Columbus Dispatch / After Johnny Gaudreau's death, Sean Monahan felt at home with Columbus Blue Jackets

Brian Hedger – August 29, 2025

Sean Monahan's first foray into unrestricted free agency ended with him [putting his signature](#) on a five-year contract with the Blue Jackets.

It was signed and announced July 1, 2024, and Johnny Gaudreau was the primary reason.

The two met as Calgary Flames teammates at the start of their NHL careers, spent nearly a decade becoming close friends and were eager to reunite in Columbus after spending the previous two years on different teams — Gaudreau with the Blue Jackets and Monahan with the Montreal Canadiens and Winnipeg Jets.

"For me, personally, I was coming to a new team," Monahan said. "I went through being a UFA for the first time, and obviously 90% of the reason I went there was because of John. It was a time in my life and time in my hockey career where probably I was the most excited I've ever been."

Two months later, their NHL fairy tale became a nightmare.

Gaudreau and his younger brother, Matthew, were killed riding bikes in Oldmans Township, New Jersey, not far from their family's home. Their younger sister, Katie, was set to marry her high school sweetheart the next day, and they were going to be part of the wedding party along with Johnny's wife, Meredith, who revealed at their memorial service that she was pregnant with the couple's third child.

An alleged drunk driver, who remains behind bars awaiting trial, struck the Gaudreau brothers while trying to make a pass on the right shoulder of a two-lane road, causing their deaths and grief throughout the NHL and hockey world. Blue Jackets and Flames players were especially gutted, none more than the one who had just signed in Columbus to play with his best friend.

Monahan met most of his new teammates and coach Dean Evason during an emotional vigil at Nationwide Arena in the days after the tragedy and the week before the memorial service near Pennsylvania. Two weeks after that, the Blue Jackets opened a somber training camp without a dear friend, teammate and their leading scorer.

"There's no manual for that situation," Monahan said. "Honestly, I wasn't sure what was going to happen for me. It took a lot of different things just to get me to the rink. I was getting pushed by my wife, by Meredith and other teammates, and when I went ... I felt like the moment I stepped in that rink, it was the place I was supposed to be."

That feeling never waned.

It lasted throughout his first season in Columbus and was a two-way street with grieving Blue Jackets fans, who gave Monahan a warm ovation before his first appearance in a preseason game. It carried into his play as the team's top center, where he spurred a line missing Gaudreau to become one of the NHL's most potent combinations.

Monahan clicked with Russian wingers Dmitri Voronkov and Kirill Marchenko, prodding each to utilize their size and skills to increase the line's possession time and output. They were so good that Marchenko, a jovial breath of fresh air who scored 31 goals, gave Monahan a new last name with a Russian twist: "He's Monahanov now."

Monahan also slid into a key role for the top power play as a sorely missing spark plug, instantly bringing out skills in the group that were too often dormant. He became so vital that a strong argument could be made that Columbus would have earned a playoff spot had he not been forced out of the lineup for two months with a severe wrist injury in January.

They finished two points short, one regulation win, and weren't eliminated until after they had played 81 of 82 games. Meanwhile, off the ice, Monahan bonded with his new teammates in a season that was therapeutic for all of them. Monahan also found joy in helping his wife, Brittany, with their baby boy, Leo, who was born May 27, 2024.

Gaudreau's locker stall, where his jersey hung on game days, was situated right next to Monahan's, and photos of Gaudreau adorned the walls at Nationwide Arena. Monahan felt at home.

"It's a special place to play hockey," he said. "That was something Johnny convinced me to do, and I'm so happy he did because I got to hear so many stories from when we weren't playing together."

Monahan's efforts to assimilate to Columbus amid tragedy earned him the Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy, which is awarded annually to the NHL player "who best exemplifies the qualities of perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to ice hockey."

Meredith Gaudreau joined forces with Monahan's wife, Brittany, to surprise him at home with a recorded trophy presentation that brought tears to his eyes. Gaudreau and his family remain in Monahan's heart and on his mind, but each new day brings reminders of why his friend said he should sign with the Blue Jackets.

"It was just day-to-day," Monahan said. "You'd wake up in the morning and just do what you had to do to put your best foot forward. I tried my best to be the same guy I always was, but it was a tough time. Thankfully, we had so many good teammates and people around Columbus to help us get through it all."

The Columbus Dispatch / One year after his death, Johnny Gaudreau's memory still drives Columbus Blue Jackets

By Brian Hedger – August 29, 2025

After spending most of his life around hockey as a player and coach, Dean Evason developed a theory about locker room dynamics that long preceded his acceptance of an offer in July 2024 to coach the Blue Jackets.

"I believe the quicker you give the room to the players, the better off you're going to be, because they will feel that it's theirs," Evason said. "It's their team, it's their call, and they're going to work or push harder because it's on them a lot of times."

Evason kept that approach with the Blue Jackets despite his phone chirping with calls and texts from friends and colleagues around the NHL warning him about a toxic "culture" in Columbus that awaited his arrival. It's one of the reasons he was eager to meet the Blue Jackets' veteran leadership group, including Johnny Gaudreau, the team's leading scorer and highest paid player.

"There were people who'd said to me, 'You've got to change the culture in Columbus, but when I got here, I was like, 'I'm not changing anything,'" Evason said. "We had guys like Boone Jenner and Goody (Erik Gudbranson) and Z (Zach Werenski); and Monny (Sean Monahan) was coming into the group; and you can keep going down the list with veteran guys here as good leaders."

He didn't mention Gaudreau, who was killed Aug. 29, 2024, while biking with his younger brother, Matthew, in Oldmans Township, New Jersey. An attempted pass on the shoulder of a two-lane road by an alleged drunk driver took both of their lives not long after Evason had flown to nearby Philadelphia to meet his new top forward. Just that quickly, his strong locker room theory was tested in gutting ways.

The Blue Jackets, a team Gaudreau had – to the surprise of many – chosen two years earlier as a free agent, were suddenly reeling from his death and the many layers of grief attached to it.

He and his brother were both excited to stand up in their younger sister Katie's wedding. Johnny's two young children were also in the wedding plans, and both brothers' wives were pregnant – including Matthew's wife, Madeline, expecting their first just months after losing a pregnancy to a miscarriage.

But the night before the wedding, Madeline and Meredith Gaudreau, Johnny's wife, lost life partners. Their children lost adoring fathers. Guy and Jane Gaudreau became parents who had lost their only sons. Sisters Katie and Kristen, the eldest Gaudreau sibling, lost their brothers. Widening the scope, the NHL lost a superstar who was admired and beloved by players, coaches and others across the league, while the Blue Jackets felt his death like the sudden passing of a brother.

The Blue Jackets were just a couple of weeks from opening training camp at Nationwide Arena, where they joined fans in a plaza outside for an emotional vigil to honor the Gaudreau brothers and their grief-stricken family. Several days later, they traveled as a team to a Philadelphia suburb for a joint funeral service.

At that point, the Blue Jackets could have gone in diametrically opposite directions. Gaudreau's death could have become an emotional wave that washed them out before a pending season had even begun or it could have brought them closer than ever.

They chose the latter path, and Evason gave them the locker room after consulting general manager Don Waddell about grief management. As GM, Waddell had helped the Atlanta Thrashers navigate the death of player Dan Snyder in a car crash.

“Don and I chatted about it, and, obviously, there’s no playbook,” Evason said. “There’s no structure to handling these things. I just think the more open you are, the more communicative you are with everybody, the easier it’s going to be. Our players and staff knew they could do and say or ask for absolutely anything they wanted, and I think that was the area that helped us get through it. Everything is just communication.”

Trust, too.

Gaudreau’s presence was key to Columbus Blue Jackets’ resurgence

Gudbranson, a hulking sheriff of a defenseman who can challenge entire teams to fight and not get a single taker, shook his new coach’s hand and melted into a puddle of tears. Monahan, who signed with Columbus to rejoin his longtime friend and former Calgary Flames teammate, stared vacantly into Gaudreau’s locker stall.

All of them let their emotions take over, including Evason, who cried along with his players despite meeting Gaudreau just that one time after taking the job. It didn’t take long to realize all the warnings about the Blue Jackets’ culture were wrong.

“We have tremendous people in that room,” Evason said. “There was some tweaking and adjustments that we did in the room, but we didn’t ‘change’ anything. Culture isn’t the biggest word for me, so we just enhanced the atmosphere.”

They also embraced grief, dealt with it together and approached last season head on, keeping Gaudreau at the forefront of nearly everything they did. Just as Evason predicted, players who felt ownership of the team’s direction took the lead.

They decided to start their home opener against the Florida Panthers with only four players on the ice, keeping Gaudreau’s spot at left wing open for the first draw. They chose a new postgame locker room award, switching from the Union Army kepi hat to a cartoonish donkey cap in honor of Gaudreau’s favorite term of endearment for his friends, teammates and his brother.

They chose to dress like Gaudreau for their arrival to the franchise’s first outdoor experience at Ohio Stadium. They shared their favorite Gaudreau memories, drew boosts from remembering his quirks and took inspiration from seeing his jersey hanging in their locker room from start to finish of the season.

It was felt by every player, coach and staffer. Veterans led the charge, while an impressive young core eagerly followed. The Blue Jackets came up two points short of qualifying for the playoffs, but where they finished was far ahead of dire prognostications about their fate going into last season, especially following Gaudreau’s death.

“It was our expectation of ourselves going into camp to make the playoffs, even with the tragedy and how much that sucked, and how much we wish that never would’ve happened,” said Adam Fantilli, a 20-year old center scored 31 goals. “You couldn’t have expected it, but it did, in a way, bring our team closer together.”

Columbus Blue Jackets surged despite losing Johnny Gaudreau

Evason was also told something else about the team he agreed to coach.

“People always said to me, ‘It’s young and it’s skilled,’ and I kept harping, like, ‘Wait, we’ve got older guys with bite, and we’ve got guys who can play defense, too,’” he said. “But it did come to fruition that

the skill set is extremely high on this team, which will just naturally score goals, and their togetherness allowed them to work together to score even more.”

In defeating the New York Islanders 6-1 to finish the season, the Blue Jackets established the new franchise single-season record as 267 goals. They also led the NHL by scoring six or more goals in a game 16 times, getting scoring surges from Fantilli, Werenski, Monahan, Kirill Marchenko, Kent Johnson and others. There were a couple of lengthy scoring droughts, too, but the Jackets took a major stride forward in their rebuild by forcing opponents to take them seriously.

Those who didn’t often paid a price on the scoreboard, and there was always an unspoken thought that loomed over the Blue Jackets whenever that happened: Imagine what Johnny Gaudreau could’ve done in that lineup.

“Honestly, it’s something I would think about every day,” Monahan said. “It wasn’t just about his offense and his creativity and how good of a player he is, but also what he does for a locker room and his personality, just being a good teammate. You can’t have enough of those guys around.”

The Blue Jackets had traded Patrik Laine to the Montreal Canadiens about a week before Gaudreau’s death, which meant they lost two-thirds of their top line and two-fifths of the first power-play group.

“I’m not a guy who goes, ‘This guy’s going to get 20 goals, this guy’s going to get 10, this guy’s going to get whatever,’ but if you did that last season, you’re like, ‘How are we going to score 30-plus goals?’ ” Evason said. “Who was going to do that, right? Johnny could throw his stick on the ice and score 30 goals, so ... were we concerned about where the goals were going to come from? Yeah, but we knew the collective skill set we had was still extremely good.”

They just a chance to show it, along with something rally around.

Blue Jackets will keep Gaudreau's legacy going: 'He's part of us'

Not long after training camp opened last season, Evason and his staff ran into a quandary. Gaudreau was included in a lot of the instructional video clips they’d prepared for the Blue Jackets as a way to teach Evason’s preferred systems and strategies.

“We were taking clips from the previous few years, and we had a whole bunch with Johnny in there, not all positive, either,” Evason said. “We had a tracking clip where he doesn’t track properly. He just stops, so we were going to call him out, but then we’re like, ‘Should we keep it in? Can we keep it in?’ And we just decided that, like ... why wouldn’t we?”

Gaudreau’s spirit provided power for the Blue Jackets, even through his flubs.

“The idea, the whole idea, is that Johnny is a presence,” Evason said. “He’s going to be with us if he’s not here physically, so he’s going to help us and he’s going to teach. So, that was one of my first chats with the group. I wanted them to not just talk about him, but tell stories and remember him in all the ways he could be remembered.”

In the end, Gaudreau stayed in the video clips. Photos stayed up in the locker room. Evason even kept his usual post-practice conditioning skate – but with a twist. It now included a nod to Gaudreau’s No. 13 jersey. Depending on whether a chosen shooter missed or made a full-length shot at an empty net, the Jackets skated either one hard lap around the rink or three.

The day Guy Gaudreau skated with them at Nationwide Arena, his inner coach took over. He announced that he’d miss on purpose, and then fired a shot that wasn’t even close. The ensuing three laps might’ve been the hardest the Blue Jackets skated all season.

“We made some of those things fun,” Evason said, “and it was little things throughout the year that kept us going. It was the Johnny skate or the jersey in the locker or the donkey hat or (Guy Gaudreau) coming to skate with us and his mom joining us on the mom’s trip. There was always a presence.”

There always will be, too, as long as Evason’s the coach and the Blue Jackets’ core group of leaders remains. Last season was powerful, sure, but it wasn’t the last you’ll see of Gaudreau, his family, the No. 13 or donkey imagery.

Presence is power. Players know the locker room is collectively theirs. Their goal is unchanged and preserving Gaudreau’s memory is part of it.

“We’ll continue to play for him,” Jenner said. “He’s not leaving our locker room. He’s part of us, a part of our team, so that will continue. There’s a lot of things we still want to do as a team, and we want him to be part of it.”

The Blue Jackets as a whole gained strength from a shared trauma. It could have ransacked their season and torn them apart just weeks before training camp, but they didn’t let that happen. They were galvanized by it, instantly, and that’s why last season didn’t fall off the rails.

Despite the heart-wrenching loss of a teammate, their top scorer, and several key injuries that challenged their lineup even more, the Blue Jackets persevered. Their veterans provided leadership, a skilled young core blossomed with breakouts and a new franchise records were set.

“There’s a lot that goes into it, but I think it was just the locker room we had, coaches included,” Jenner said. “We knew there was only one way to approach it, and that was to stick together to play for John and play for each other. We all just bought into it, and it was about the team.”

It still is heading into a new season.

Some things have changed – there are some new staffers and players – but the Blue Jackets are largely the same group as last season. Powered by the sting of falling just short of the playoffs, they’re returning feeling more motivated than ever.

They’re playing for Gaudreau and each other.

“He’s a part of us,” Jenner said. “He’s our teammate. We continue to be with (Meredith) and John’s family to support them just as we would any other teammates’ family, and we’ll continue to play for him. We miss him. He’s a part of our locker room. He’s a part of our team, so that will always continue.”

The Columbus Dispatch / How the Columbus Blue Jackets continue to keep Johnny Gaudreau's spirit alive

By Brian Hedger – August 29, 2025

Johnny Gaudreau's death on Aug. 29, 2024, took the Blue Jackets' top scoring forward and a beloved friend away.

They were forced to deal with the gravity of his loss in the same car/bike crash that took his brother Matthew's life and was caused by an alleged drunk driver.

"There's no manual for that situation," said center Sean Monahan, who signed with the Blue Jackets to reunite with Gaudreau. "He's going to be missed for the rest of my life and by all the guys on the team, but I still think about it every day."

The Blue Jackets never let Gaudreau's memory fade, keeping his spirit alive by incorporating memories and reminders of him throughout a season that nearly led to a playoff berth. That's not changing for the upcoming season.

"The whole idea is that Johnny is a presence for us," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "He's going to be with us if he's not here physically, so he's going to help us and he's going to teach."

Here are some ways they kept Gaudreau's spirit with them:

Johnny Gaudreau taught Blue Jackets through video

Evason and his coaching staff had a moment while putting together videos when they debated whether to keep the ones with Gaudreau or cut them. They opted to keep him in there regardless of the clip's intention.

"Keeping him in our video was one of my favorite things we did," center Adam Fantilli said. "We'd see him on video all the time, and it would be a quick reminder of something that sucks, but also how amazing he was at the game. It was really cool to see."

The Johnny Skate

After most practices, the Blue Jackets line up in a corner at one end of the ice. Down at the other end is an empty net that a chosen shooter tries to hit from about 200 feet out. A goal gives the Blue Jackets one lap around the rink. A miss nets three.

It's an homage to Gaudreau's jersey No. 13.

"I've always done that type of thing, where you shoot it and you get either one or two laps, or one and four," Evason said. "As we chatted as a staff, we said, 'Why don't we make it the Johnny Skate, one or three?' I think (Monahan) shot the first time."

Guy Gaudreau, Johnny and Matthews' father, also fired a shot after a practice he attended as a special on-ice guest. Prior to shooting, he announced that he would purposely miss his shot to give their legs a workout.

Once a coach, always a coach.

Columbus Blue Jackets introduce Gaudreau donkey hat award

Before Gaudreau's death, captain Boone Jenner had already planned to switch the Blue Jackets' postgame award after wins from a Civil War-era kepi hat to something else.

After Gaudreau's passing, Jenner was speaking with Dustin "Dusty" Halstead, an equipment manager and Halstead joked that he should put a donkey on a piece of Erik Gudbranson's equipment, since Gaudreau often called the hulking defenseman a donkey.

"I was just like, 'Boom, there it is. Donkey hat for player of the game,' " Jenner said.

He went home, ordered a handful of styles and picked one out.

Monahan wore it first, barely able to get it pulled over a mane of hair after helping the Blue Jackets stun the Colorado Avalanche to split a two-game road trip that opened the season.

"He'd call me a donkey every day," Monahan said. "It was a bit of a group decision, and it was pretty special. I remember the first time I got that hat in Colorado. It's still a moment I think about quite a bit. It's honoring him, but I'm sure he was laughing at me when I put it on."

Blue Jackets adopt Johnny Gaudreau's wardrobe

When it came to fashion, Gaudreau was low maintenance. The guy loved hoodie sweatshirts, sweatpants, ballcaps and Uggs – often wearing all in one outfit.

Incorporating those items into the look the Blue Jackets wore to their NHL Stadium Series matchup against the Detroit Red Wings was a unanimous decision. Meredith made sure they were authentic, too, ordering powder blue hoodies from Avalon Surf Shop in Avalon, New Jersey.

They wore black sweatpants, Uggs and black designer ballcaps to complete a look that Gaudreau wore countless times. It sent chills down their spines to see each other dressed like him, while Monahan's wife, Brittany, couldn't hide her reaction.

"I got dressed at home," Monahan said. "I walked out of the room and my wife broke out laughing because it was spot on."

That wasn't the only time the Blue Jackets wore those outfits. Following their outdoor victory, players randomly wore the ballcaps, sweatpants and/or hoodies around Nationwide Arena.

"I was just hanging out with (Jake) Christiansen recently and he was wearing the hat, and I saw Silly (Cole Sillinger) wearing it a couple weeks ago. I still wear it, too, in the summer. It's cool to have those clothes, and you think of him every time you put it on."

The Hockey Writers / Gaudreau Family, Blue Jackets Kept Promise of Perpetuating John & Matthew's Lasting Legacy

By Mark Scheig – August 29, 2025

One year later, it still doesn't feel real.

It was on August 29, 2024 that the very foundation of the hockey world was shook to the core. On that day, the hockey world lost two of its brightest lights.

Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau were tragically killed while riding their bikes by a suspected drunk driver. They were home in New Jersey at the time to be a part of their sister's wedding the next day.

The suspected drunk driver, Sean Higgins, was arrested as he was behind the wheel of a Jeep Grand Cherokee that struck the brothers. He failed a subsequent sobriety test at the scene. He currently remains in prison as he awaits trial. The next hearing is scheduled for September 18.

Meanwhile, the Gaudreau family and the entire hockey world had to somehow come to grips with what happened. Shock. Anger. Extreme sadness. Those were just some of the emotions that were being dealt with when trying to process everything.

When news spread around the world, tributes started pouring in. It was abundantly clear just how universally loved Johnny and Matthew were. They were family men first who had an abundance of love to share with everyone who knew them best.

While there was no playbook for how to handle a situation like this, one thing became clear to the Gaudreau family, the Blue Jackets and the rest of the hockey world. They were all going to do everything in their power to honor the legacies of John and Matthew.

One year later, everyone has kept their promise of keeping those legacies alive. Not only have those promises been kept during the year, they're going to be kept indefinitely throughout several generations.

Need the definition of immeasurable strength? Just look at what the Gaudreau family, the Blue Jackets and the hockey world have done in the last year to ensure John and Matthew's light continues to shine for everyone to see.

Promises Kept

At the funeral, the Rev. Tony Penna made a statement on the true impact that John and Matthew had. All anyone had to do was look around the church to see the scores of people in attendance.

"By the overwhelming presence and overwhelming number of people here today, they're sending a message to you loud and clear that John and Matthew's lives mattered, that they were noticed on this earth, they were loved on this earth and they were valued on this earth," Penna said at the funeral.

Among those in attendance at the funeral that day were NHL commissioner Gary Bettman, current Montreal Canadiens Cole Caufield, the entire Columbus Blue Jackets' team as well as former Blue Jacket Patrik Laine along with several players and others from the league.

Then the profound words of Ed Morris, the father of Meredith Gaudreau, spoke to what would have made John and Matthew happy.

"John and Matty will be so happy if the world learned about how they lived their life and we all improved our lives as a result," Morris said. From there, the work began to keep their legacies alive.

In October, the Gaudreau family shared their vision of making sure the legacies of John and Matthew were carried forward.

Jane Gaudreau, the mother of John and Matthew, said “They did so much good during their short lives. That, as a family we want to make sure that their legacy lives on.”

Katie Gaudreau, the sister of John and Matthew, said “They did so much good in such a short period of time and I just think we need to capitalize on that and keep going. That is what they would want. The goal is to just do as much good as we possibly can for my brothers.”

It is safe to say that the family kept their promise and capitalized. They have ensured that John and Matthew’s impact will be seen for years to come.

Immediate Impact

That impact was first seen in tributes around the world. Whether it was in Calgary or Columbus, at Hollydell rink or at Gloucester Catholic High school, at Boston College and elsewhere, fans came in mass to show their support for the Gaudreau family.

Then the family went to work to honor the brothers. It started locally with a couple of fundraisers to help two schools close to their heart in Gloucester Catholic and Archbishop Damiano School. Recall that Johnny donated \$10,000 to Archbishop Damiano after his hat trick in the 2023 NHL All-Star Game.

Archbishop Damiano is a private school for students with disabilities. There was a need for a new adaptive playground on site that would take hundreds of thousands of dollars to fund. The Gaudreau family chose to honor the brother’s legacies by helping raise funds for this playground.

Thanks to the recent Gaudreau family 5K Walk/Run at Washington Lake Park, over \$500,000 was raised to help fund the building of the playground. Coupled with other donations made in John and Matthew’s memory, enough funds were raised to meet the need. Groundbreaking is expected soon with the build tentatively scheduled to start this October.

While Jane and Kristen were at the center of this initiative, Meredith and Madeline were putting important work in on another project: The John and Matthew Gaudreau Foundation.

The Foundation launched in March to “honor the enduring legacy of John and Matty by supporting projects and initiatives that align with the values and passions that they championed.” Through donations and the selling of merchandise, funds raised go towards specific projects such as expanding youth hockey opportunities, providing support to hockey families dealing with tragedies and assisting families affected by drunk driving.

The Foundation was officially launched on Aug 13, the day that Johnny would have turned 32. Meredith and Madeline appeared on Good Morning America to announce the official launching.

Anyone can help support the mission of the John and Matthew Gaudreau Foundation by making a donation or by shopping for merchandise inspired by the brothers. Many families will be positively impacted because they will have access to much-needed support.

Other Promises Kept

There have been a lot of things done to keep the brother’s legacy alive. The Gaudreau family will continue to ensure their impact will help turn tragedy into positive contributions.

Meredith and Madeline each gave birth to a son in the last year. Carter Michael Gaudreau was born in April while Tripp Matthew was born in December. The families have said the children will grow up knowing how impactful their fathers were.

The Columbus Blue Jackets have also done numerous things to keep the legacy of the brothers alive. Here is a small listing of things they did throughout last season.

- The Blue Jackets' players wore a '13' patch on their jerseys and wore a blue sticker on their helmets displaying "Gaudreau" and doves between the numbers 13 and 21.
- A '13' banner was lifted to the rafters at Nationwide Arena which had Johnny's name on it.
- A video montage was played at the home opener which included the family walking the blue carpet.
- The home opener started with a "missing-man formation." Johnny's spot on the left wing was left empty and 13 game seconds came off the clock while silence was observed.
- A memorial was setup inside Nationwide Arena for fans to see the impact that Johnny and Matthew had on the hockey world.
- Inside their locker room, an empty stall was left for Johnny and his number 13 jersey hung there. Players would usually do postgame interviews near that stall.
- The team ensured Johnny travelled on the road too with his jersey being prominently displayed on a stall in the road locker room.
- Blue Jackets' players constantly spoke of the impact Johnny and Matthew had. They shared stories and would constantly ask what would Johnny do?
- Several road cities offered moments before the game to remember the brothers. There were some extended ones in Calgary (Johnny's first NHL team) and in Philadelphia (The Gaudreau's local team.)
- The Blue Jackets, Flyers and others invited Guy Gaudreau on the ice with them at practices and morning skates.
- The Blue Jackets invited Jane Gaudreau on the mother's trip in Detroit. Head coach Dean Evason escorted her to center ice for the team photo.
- The Gaudreau family led the Blue Jackets out to Ohio Stadium at the Stadium Series.
- Meredith Gaudreau presented Sean Monahan with the Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy. She also announced the Blue Jackets' first-round pick at the 2025 NHL Draft. It was a moment Jackson Smith will never forget.

The Blue Jackets will continue to honor the brothers indefinitely. Captain Boone Jenner told the Hockey Writers this week that Johnny will always be with them everywhere.

"For us, for myself and my teammates, there's not a day goes by that we don't honor and remember him," Jenner said. "We constantly talk about him and his stories and what would Johnny do. We'll continue to do that. He'll always be a part of our team. He'll always be in that locker room with us, away from the rink with us, everywhere with us."

There were plenty of other examples too showing the brother's legacy being remembered. Cole Caufield switched his number from 22 to 13 to honor his hero Johnny. The Flames warmed up wearing number 13 jerseys. Team U.S.A. wore decals with the names and numbers of the brothers. They have put Johnny's Men's National Team jersey over the IIHF World Championship trophy after winning for the first time in 92 years. Boston College held moments of silence to honor the brothers. And Hollydell Ice Arena renamed one of the rinks the "John and Matthew Gaudreau Rink" to remember their local impact.

Again, this is a small sampling of some of the ways the Gaudreau brothers have been honored and remembered. No matter which memory sticks out to you most, the theme is the same. The Gaudreau family, the Blue Jackets and others promised to keep their memories and legacies alive. One year later, there is no question everyone has done that.

Pain Still Heavy

Friday will be a hard day for many people. The pain of the tragedy still exists. Jenner said it best when describing what was truly inspiring in all of this.

“But the truly inspiring thing is Meredith and Madeline and the Gaudreau family, what they’ve done to help other people and communities,” Jenner said. “They did the 5k, but Meredith and Madeline and everything that they’ve gone through and how they’ve handled it is just truly inspiring every day. Now they have the John and Matt Foundation. It’s extremely going to be so powerful. And knowing that it’s going to help so many kids and families in Johnny and Matty’s name, just truly inspiring. When I look at them and Johnny’s kids, that’s real strength.”

Jenner couldn’t have said it better. Real strength. What the Gaudreau family has had to endure in the last year is almost unfathomable. Yet, the family found the strength to endure thanks to the overwhelming support of the community and the hockey world.

That strength has led to today and all the different ways that Johnny and Matthew are being remembered. They may be gone but they will never be forgotten.

They say the true sign of love and respect is what other people say about someone. Just look at what has been said about John and Matthew. What stands out? They were family men. They were men who loved passionately. Their example has touched the lives of countless people in the world.

Thanks to the prevailing memories of John and Matthew, countless lives have been improved by thinking of them, learning from them and emulating their example.

It was always their love that stood out the most. On this one-year anniversary of the tragedy, let’s focus on their example of love and how many lives it will eventually transform.

Thanks to the tireless work of the Gaudreau family, the Blue Jackets and many others keeping their promise, Johnny and Matthew’s legacy shines brighter than ever. Let that give you a reason to smile today.

The Hockey Writers / 2025 Blue Jackets' Summer Q&A: Boone Jenner

By Mark Scheig – August 28, 2025

Columbus Blue Jackets' captain Boone Jenner has literally seen it all. As he enters his 13th season with the team that originally drafted him, he has enjoyed some of the highest of highs and some of the very lowest of lows during his time.

Each game Jenner plays now will extend his own record of games played with the franchise. He will start the 2025-26 season just 59 games away from 800 in his NHL career. His next goal will be his 200th in his career.

It is quite possible assuming Jenner plays for a few more seasons that he could become the first Blue Jacket to play in 1,000 games for the franchise. He just needs 259 games to reach that mark. As of this writing, only 34 players in NHL history have played at least 1,000 games in their career while playing for only one franchise.

As much as things have changed in Columbus over the years, Jenner has been the constant. His presence and leadership has been a steadying force inside the locker room. It's no wonder he has the ultimate respect of his teammates, coaches and management.

Jenner was kind enough to spend 25 minutes in a Q&A with the Hockey Writers on Wednesday to discuss a wide variety of topics. We discussed everything from how he spent his summer to how he and his teammates are getting ready for the season. He also opened up about his future with the team entering the last year of his contract, spoke about the impact of the Gaudreau's one year after the tragedy and then looked ahead to why they're excited for this new season to start.

As with the conversation with GM Don Waddell, our conversation with Jenner has been cleaned up for clarity and conversation.

Boone Jenner Q&A

THW: Boone, thanks for doing this. How have you been able to enjoy your summer? Have you been able to do anything fun before having to really pick things up getting ready for the season?

Jenner: "Yeah. The last few summers have been busy with weddings and stuff. So we really just wanted to enjoy our time at home. We didn't do too many trips or anything. We've kind of done that in the last couple years. This summer, we wanted to hang out more and chill and see family and friends back home. And now we've been in Columbus for the past month. So just getting ready to go and enjoying summer here as well. A couple concerts here. I think probably the highlight was the Coldplay concert my wife and I went to. And we had Zach's wedding. That was a fun weekend. But otherwise, just been hanging out. Since then, we've been here. Nothing crazy this summer."

THW: Now that you're getting ready for the season, what does a typical day look like for you in terms of going on the ice, hitting the gym etc.? What is your current routine at this point in the summer?

Jenner: "At this point in the summer for me and other guys, the focus starts becoming the ice and feeling good out there. This summer just with myself, I got on the ice very early with not playing a ton of games last year. I thought it was a good time to get on the ice early, but we focused more on the gym and strength early in the summer. At this point, a lot of the gym work's been done and it's staying sharp in there and staying fresh. But focusing on the ice, ramping up the battles, the up and down, getting the skating legs as they say back, and ramping up battles in small area game through two on two's or more

game-like situations just to get yourself prepared for camp. Then mixing in some tough skates just to get the lungs and the legs back to where they need to be on the ice.

As much as you do in the gym, you have to skate to get that feeling in your legs. We've been here working with guys that are in town already and skating four days a week. So a typical day, either going down or working out before or after a skate and then working out after and trying to stay as fresh as you can. You want to hit your peak come September in training camp and feel good for that heading into the season."

THW: How many guys are in town right now?

Jenner: "Right now, (Ivan) Provorov, Elvis (Merzlikins), (Mathieu) Olivier, Brendan Smith just got here. That's pretty much it. I'm sure guys will start coming in either this weekend or I think by the end of this weekend, a lot more guys will be here."

THW: Do you get to stay in contact with a lot of the guys throughout the offseason?

Jenner: "For sure. I've talked to a lot of guys in the summer whether it's a phone call here or there, text messages or group chats too. But we always stay in touch. And with Werenski's wedding, it was a great week to have everyone back in town. That doesn't happen every summer for all the guys to come back mid-summer. You can see everybody again, do some workouts and then have the wedding. It was great to see everybody. And then before you know it, everyone will be back for good and we're getting ready to go. I always like keeping up and seeing what everyone's doing. And on social media, you can see where guys are on trips and what they're up to a little bit more. It's been good that way."

Jenner Addresses His Future

THW: You're just 59 games away from 800 in your NHL career. You are entering the final year of your contract. Your desire to stay with the Blue Jackets and potentially finish your career as a Blue Jacket. Is that something that you've put a lot of thought into?

Jenner: "Yeah. I've been a Blue Jacket my whole career. It means so much to me. I love being a Blue Jacket. I love playing in front of our fans and being a part of what we're building here. (I've thought) a lot to stay here and be here my whole career. I've been fortunate thus far. (I) want to keep building. At the end of the day, I want to win here. I don't think I want to stop being here until we can win here and bring a championship to Columbus because through everything I look back on, I think our fans and the city definitely deserves that and that's what we're working towards. I think it's something special we got going here. It's about the group and being with the fans and the community here. It's a great place to play and (I) want to have that success here."

THW: You've been through a lot here and seen a lot with the team. Have you had any time to reflect on everything you've been through with the Blue Jackets and just how impactful the rise of the Blue Jackets has been from the time they drafted you until now?

Jenner: "Yeah. Definitely. It goes by pretty quickly. Going into my thirteenth year here, but you're always focusing on the season coming up and I think coming off last year, the hunger is at an all-time high of where this group can get to. That's the focus right now. I think as much as the past is the past, it's the ups and downs. I think if you don't learn from them, it's your mistake. You have to learn from those hardships.

But looking ahead for our group, it's about this year and what we can do as a team. After the steps we took last year, it was awesome, but obviously not where we want to be. That's the hunger that I think all of us had going into the offseason with. I'm excited to get going right on day one of training camp. And I

know we're champing at the bit here. When you look back over the years and so many teammates and really good teams and playoff runs and different things like that. But right now, I'd say my focus is on this year and what's at hand coming up here September 17."

THW: If the contract isn't done by the start of the season, how do you make sure it doesn't become a distraction?

Jenner: "I don't think it's a distraction either way. This happens a lot with guys going into their last year of their contracts. It is what it is. It's part of the game. I'm not really focused on that as much as I am of getting out there at training camp and helping this group. I think at the end of the day, I love being a Blue Jacket. I want to be a Blue Jacket. I think whatever happens, happens. I'm going to do my best for this team. That's what I've always done and what I will always continue to do. As far as a distraction, I don't think it'll be distraction at all.

Changes on the Team

THW: The team was able to add Charlie Coyle, Miles Wood and Isac Lundestrom among others. How excited are you to have them in the fold now?

Jenner: "Yeah. Very, very excited. Those are huge pickups for us. I don't know any of them on a personal level, but the hockey world's small and everything I've heard from guys who have played with them or crossed paths with them are just tremendous things. First and foremost, tremendous teammates and guys in the locker room that care about team first. That's exactly what we want and take pride in in our locker room. So there's no doubt they're just going to fit in well there.

But what they bring on the ice playing against them for years now. You know how tough of an opponent they can be and what they brought to their teams. To add those three guys I think that's huge for us up front. They're experienced guys. Coyle's almost up to a thousand games and had a great career in what he's done on every team he's gone to and the impact he has there. I think all three of them will come in and have that impact with us. Knowing they're great teammates, they're going to fit in no problem."

THW: The team elected to move on from long-time strength and conditioning coach Kevin Collins. Just from a player's perspective when you see a change like that, there's now a new voice in that role. What changes can you expect, and what adjustments, if any, do you make when you know that someone else is leading a very important area of your team?

Jenner: "Yeah. It's obviously a big change. For me, I've had "killer" my whole career. So it's a change that I haven't been through. But speaking with Barry (Brennan) and speaking with people who have crossed paths with him in the hockey world, we're very excited to have him join us and his knowledge. He's been around the game for so long. I've had many conversations with him already, and he's excited to get down there and get going. We're excited to see what he has to offer in that department. He'll come up with different things that he knows and how he's operates in the gym or nutrition or whatever it may be that is just going to help us.

At the end of the day, we want the same thing. We want the best performance on the ice by each player, and collectively, that's going to make our team better and win more games and win more in the playoffs. So we're very excited to get to work with him and have the group together and see how his program is. Obviously, you don't know until you get going. But we're very excited though."

THW: The NHL and the NHLPA (Jenner is the Blue Jackets' rep) were able to ratify the new CBA. How exciting is that for you to know that there is labor peace? Was there anything in particular that you were

pushing for?

Jenner: "Yeah. It doesn't kick in until next year. But to have that extension is great for both sides knowing that there's not going to be any lockouts or anything crazy come next hockey season. I think the PA did a tremendous job of getting us players certain things that we wanted. And I think they did a great job negotiating and getting it done early. It's out of the way. We can focus on hockey. To have that lingering all year could have been stressful. I think we're in a good spot and hockey continues to grow. We can keep growing it. I'm very happy to see and hear those conversations. All in all, just happy that there's an agreement."

The Gaudreau's One Year Later

THW: Just how tough is Friday going to be as that marks one year since the tragedy that claimed the lives of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau?

Jenner: "Yeah. It's going to be very hard, obviously. Thought about it a lot. It's going to be a day that you remember the rest of your life. Personally, I think about Johnny every day and it's probably going to be no different on Friday how much I miss him or how much I think about him. So yeah. It's a tough day. His birthday just passed. But every day, it's tough without him.

I've continued to just honor him and share his legacy. We continue to do that as teammates and friends and support his family. Just the fact that we were able to have the time with them and those memories, (I'm) forever grateful for it. I'm sure Friday, I'll just be speaking to people or just trying to remember them and those good stories and share those, how great of a guy and father and teammate he was."

THW: How proud are you of everybody involved in the sense of just being able to keep the promise and keeping Johnny and Matthew's legacy alive? I remember when you said last year there's no playbook for this. But just how proud are you of the response and the fact that Johnny and Matthew's light still continues to shine brightly today?

Jenner: "I'm extremely proud from all aspects as far the teammates, the staff, management, the Blue Jackets, our fans, incredible. You guys, the media, the way you guys handled it. But the truly inspiring thing is Meredith and Madeline and the Gaudreau family, what they've done to help other people and communities. They did the 5k, but Meredith and Madeline and everything that they've gone through and how they've handled it is just truly inspiring every day. Now they have the John and Matt Foundation. It's extremely going to be so powerful. And knowing that it's going to help so many kids and families in Johnny and Mattie's name, just truly inspiring.

When I look at them and Johnny's kids, that's real strength. For us, for myself and my teammates, like I said, there's not a day goes by that we don't honor and remember him. We constantly talk about him and his stories and what would Johnny do. We'll continue to do that. He'll always be a part of our team. He'll always be in that locker room with us, away from the rink with us, everywhere with us. So I'm extremely proud looking back on what's almost been a year of the way everybody's handled it."

Confidence This Season

THW: Last one. Going into the team's 25th anniversary season. There seems to be a lot of momentum. Given the way last year ended, you guys were close to making the playoffs. What gives you the confidence to know that your team can get over the top this year in 2025-26?

Jenner: "I think we believe in each other in that room where it's all about the team the way we built that last year. I think we're going to continue to grow on that and learn from lessons whether it's a point here or there and how much of a difference that is in November or December and how that impacts what could be a spot in the playoffs. I think you have to learn from that as a group. I love the way we

fought right to the end, but we came up short. For us, it was extremely disappointing. We want to get into the playoffs and do some damage. I think that's where our heads are at.

We took a good step last year, but we're taking a bigger one this year. We know it's going to take a lot of work. That's what I'm excited for come training camp is to get it right after it again. I know the guys have been putting in tremendous work this summer and guys will be ready. We're going to push each other. We're going to push ourselves as a group of let's go, we have to get in. We have to make some make some noise this year."

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' 3 Potential PTO Targets

By William Espy – August 28, 2025

The season is slowly approaching for the Columbus Blue Jackets, and they've already announced their first professional tryout signing, defenseman Brendan Smith. As training camp draws closer, let's take a look at who else may make sense to earn a tryout with the Blue Jackets.

Forward: Robby Fabbri

Robby Fabbri's career, unfortunately, has followed a path that Blue Jackets fans will know well. He had high expectations early in his career, but consistently failed to live up to them, whether it was due to injury or other factors. During his time with the Detroit Red Wings, he produced at a decent rate and seemed to be establishing himself as a legitimate NHLer for the long-term future. After being traded to the Anaheim Ducks last summer, though, he took a substantial step back.

Fabbri's a prototypical example of what a professional tryout player should look like; he's shown glimpses of talent in the past but has just struggled to put things together for a long period of time, mainly due to injury. His knees, in particular, have caused him quite a bit of trouble over the years, but he's a solid option when healthy. As a result, even if they don't end up signing him to a deal, Fabbri could be worth a look for the Blue Jackets as a depth option.

Defenseman: Jani Hakanpaa

A massive right-handed defenseman, Jani Hakanpaa's size and physicality could be valuable; however, there's quite a bit of unknown surrounding him. He missed almost the entirety of last season due to injury, and at one point, there was hope he'd make a comeback during the playoffs, but that never came to fruition.

Considering the fact that skating has always been viewed as one of Hakanpaa's weaknesses, having multiple knee injuries in recent memory will definitely be concerning to any teams interested in his services.

Signing Hakanpaa to a professional tryout, though, would allow the Blue Jackets to evaluate a potential depth option who plays a different role than the majority of their roster without committing to him if he's unable to keep up. While they likely wouldn't see him as an everyday player at this stage, unless he proved that he could handle the workload, he could be an effective option to fill in whenever another player is banged up temporarily.

Forward: Craig Smith

The Blue Jackets went out looking for a right-handed center this summer, and they found one with Charlie Coyle. However, if general manager Don Waddell wanted to add another, Craig Smith could be an option.

Regarded as a two-way forward, Smith has taken a step back from his days with the Nashville Predators, as he is nearing the end of his career. His offensive production in particular has dropped off substantially in recent seasons, but he would still be an effective depth option who could fill in either at center or on the wing in the bottom-six forward group as needed. At this stage in his career, Smith isn't a game-changing addition by any means, but he could still get the job done in a pinch.

While the Blue Jackets' roster seems to be mostly set before training camp even begins, late offseason tryouts can generally lead to some strong depth additions. While none of the three players mentioned

above are guaranteed to earn an NHL job for the 2025-26 season, they could be worth a short look through training camp and preseason.

Smith was an interesting addition for the Blue Jackets, but now we just have to wait and see if Waddell wants to explore any other options as well.

RG / Waddell on Fantilli Contract Talks, Provorov, Offseason Additions

By James Murphy – Aug. 28, 2025

Adam Fantilli with Blue Jackets teammates (Photo by Emilee Chinn/Getty Images)

The Columbus Blue Jackets just missed qualifying for the Stanley Cup Playoffs last season, and now they're poised to finish the job and advance to the postseason for the first time since 2020.

A year ago this Friday, Blue Jackets star winger Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew were killed by a drunk driver in New Jersey as they rode their bikes on the eve of their sister's wedding. The tragedy stunned the hockey and sports world, but in the face of tragedy, Blue Jackets players rallied around their fallen teammate and went on a late-season Cinderella run before being beaten out by the Montreal Canadiens for the final Eastern Conference playoff seed by two points.

Instead of going big-game hunting on the NHL free agent and NHL trade markets, Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell decided to address some depth needs and keep two impact free agents of his own in defensemen Dante Fabbro and Ivan Provorov. Now Waddell is hoping his team can build off the chemistry and momentum they built last season.

In an exclusive one-on-one with RG, the Blue Jackets GM discussed last season, this past offseason, Adam Fantilli contract talks, and how he is navigating through the changing salary cap and upcoming CBA extension:

Interview With Don Waddell

On offseason transactions:

"The off-season, I think, changed this year, and I think it's going to change going forward just because with the cap rising and teams making a big effort to keep their own players, as we did," Waddell told RG.

"We did address a couple of needs that we felt our hockey club needed, though," Waddell pointed out. "Picking up Charlie Coyle, right-hand shot center, we had all left shot guys and thought that it was important to get a right shot guy and get somebody with Charlie's experience that will make our team stronger up the middle. The homework on him that we did and my staff did told us he is an outstanding person, an outstanding teammate, a great leader. We got so many good young players and so many good veterans right now to add another veteran, this kind of piece to our team, we thought was important to us. So I always say you need good players, but you need good people, and when you have good people, you have a better chance of having success together as a team. And I think Charlie brings that to us.

In that same deal, we got Miles Wood. I know the player, well, watched him for a long time in New Jersey, and the energy he brings, and he's got more skill than I think what happened last year for him in Colorado. So we think he's an effective player.

We also picked up Isac Lundestrom from Anaheim. He's a free agent. He's a guy that we kind of identified early on that if he became free that there's more to his game depending on the situation he's put in, but he's a very responsible player. If he doesn't score ten goals, but he plays the game the way we feel like he'll play defensively, that could even be a bigger plus for our hockey club."

On how he got the Ivan Provorov contract done despite all the noise about him leaving via free agency:

“Well, the good thing is I was in dialogue regularly with Mark Andler, his agent, and there's a lot of outside noise, but Mark kept telling me, and Provorov too, that his first choice was to stay here in Columbus,” Waddell said. “And certainly as we got closer to July 1st, we knew what was out there, and we knew that he was our best option a hundred percent, not only as a player but as a person. Here's a guy who's missed three hockey games in the last five years and only because of COVID. He plays every game, plays every shift, plays hard, is a great teammate, and very big family guy.

So sometimes you look around and you say to yourself, this is what we know. Let's make this happen. Obviously, the contract was some people thought was too high, some people thought it was all right, as the cap continues to go up, and you're going to play a guy that he's been here all summer, by the way, and he works out every single day. He's a maniac that way. So to have him for the next seven years, we didn't think it was an issue. So as the cap continues to rise and he's going to fit in well with our group here in the next seven years.”

On players wanting to stay and others wanting to come there:

“I've seen it because there's been more guys in town on a pretty regular basis here,” Waddell pointed out. “Guys have come in, work with our strength and conditioning guys, and the players want to be here. I got a whole slew of players that are here already. A lot of guys stayed here this summer. [Boone] Jenner has been here most of the summer. Mathieu Olivier's been back for a while. Sean Monahan has been in and out. [Damon] Severson has been here, Erik Gudbrunson, I could go on and on.

So the guys, I think, enjoy Columbus. I always said Columbus is a little bit of a sleepy city until you live here, and it's a very, very easy city to get around. Great people, great restaurants, all that. And I've always said that in all my years, the best resource for us recruiting players is the players themselves. Not that they're out there talking to players about coming to Columbus, but they can talk about how their lifestyle is in Columbus, and I think that's very important.”

On the health of Boone Jenner (who underwent shoulder surgery the day before the 2024-25 season opener and played just 26 games), and Sean Monahan (who played just 54 games thanks to a wrist injury):

“Yeah, they both have had good summers and are ready to roll,” Waddell replied. “As I sit here today, we don't have anybody who won't be ready for camp, and that's always a plus. So hopefully we'll get through our exhibition series and be ready to start in October.”

On contract negotiations with Adam Fantilli:

“We're going to talk here in the next couple of weeks,” Waddell said. “Pat Brisson is his agent, and we're going to do some face-to-face meetings. When these kinds of players are up and these kinds of deals need to be made, I think you need to be in front of each other. I think you make a lot more progress than just over the phone. So that's always been my theory, and Pat's the same way. I've done a lot of deals over the years with Pat, so we'll be fine and sit down face-to-face and get this done. As we get closer to training camp, I think we'll be much further ahead, and we have some dates already planned that we'll meet, so let's go from there.”

On what he loved most about Fantilli's game (31g, 23a) last season:

“I think taking the pressure off him as the 1C, we had Sean Monahan who played that role, and so Adam could fit right in that 2C role really easily, and it took the weight off his shoulders, being the only guy there,” Waddell pointed out.

“We scored a lot of goals last year, which was helpful, but what I really saw it is through the whole season. I just saw him getting better and better. Then, unfortunately, we lost Sean for six weeks to his

wrist injury, and Adam stepped right into that role. I think if he had just started in that role, I don't know if it would have gone as well for him. So I think having that opportunity to watch Sean be there and him in that 2C provided him the opportunity to, when he got the chance, jump right into that 1C role and never miss a beat."

On the season Zach Werenski had and how he carried the team:

"He was outstanding!" Waddell said. "I had some history with him with the World Junior team and some other USA teams, but what I saw from game one, he took this team on his shoulders, obviously with everything that happened to this team (with Johnny Gaudreau), and then losing Jenner the day before opening night, I could see he was on a mission to take this team as far as he could. He's another guy who has a great work ethic, and just an outstanding player, and I don't know where it would've been at the end of last year if he hadn't had the type of year he had.

So the first three, four months, I think he carried our team on his back, and then as guys got going, they were able to chip in. But without Zach, we would not have been playing for a playoff spot with two games left this season."

What was it like to see how the team responded to the Gaudreau tragedy?

"That speaks for the character in that locker room, and that's why we'll go back to one of your earlier questions where I said I didn't feel like we need to make a lot of changes this offseason, really," Waddell said.

"I think we got a group of guys that came together really good as a team. There were no individual efforts that were called out by team members. Like I said, coaches and managers, we don't spend nearly as much time as the players spend together, and these guys were a close-knit team. They did a lot of stuff together on and off the ice, and I think that was reflected in our results.

I also have to say that Meredith [Gaudreau] made it so much easier because she's such a strong person, and she said multiple times: 'Johnny wants you to play hockey, I want you to play hockey, go play hockey!' So that never left my mind or any of the players' minds throughout the season. But again, the group of leadership we have here. Werenski, Monahan, Jenner, even [Mathieu] Olivier doesn't get enough recognition. These guys all took that step as far as leaders. They were all guys that our young guys could look up to, and we're very fortunate to have those types of players."

With the new CBA set and the salary cap rising dramatically, have you found the agents approaching contract talks differently?

"I think we all look back at some of the deals that have been done in the last few years, and now agents are looking to say, okay, that was done under this cap, so the percentage of the caps gone up, so we should get that percentage, and I don't blame 'em," Waddell pointed out. "I'd be doing the same thing as an agent, but we also, as we know here, have a lot of good young players that going forward we are going to have to pay a substantial amount of money to. So we've still got to keep an eye on the future. And to me, as we continue to grow as a hockey team, we have to remember this is a business also. We have to grow. Our revenues can grow if we can start to get into the playoffs every year, and that enables you to have more revenue to pay your players.

So it all goes hand in hand where the cap's going in the next few years and is exciting for the players, but not so exciting for me. You see this year how many teams, teams are really up against the cap now, and still, because of COVID. There were those years that it was planned out, and now it's back to where the players, the 50/50 that the league has worked out with the union. And so I think you're going to see over the next, while I can't tell you how long, but it's going to be a while, years that there's going to be a lot

less cap teams and more teams working off either team budgets or they're just like this summer there's a lot of money, but there wasn't a lot of players to spend that money on and I think you're going to see this going forward and you're going to continue to see teams lock up their own players before they hit the market. And July 1st might become a boring day for the media."

The Athletic / Columbus Blue Jackets rank No. 8 in NHL Pipeline Rankings for 2025

By Corey Pronman – Aug. 28, 2025

There have been a lot of dark days in Columbus and a lot of versions of their perpetual rebuild. Finally, though, there may be a way for them to be a consistent playoff team. The Blue Jackets' NHL roster is solid, led by a ton of highly gifted young players at a variety of positions. Adam Fantilli is the key to it all. If he becomes the star I think he could be, the Blue Jackets could finally deliver a winner to their patient fans.

2024 ranking: 4

2025 NHL Draft grade: B-

Player Ranking

1. Adam Fantilli, C

Oct. 12, 2004 | 6-foot-2 | 198 pounds | Shoots left

Drafted: No. 3 in 2023

Tier: NHL All-Star

Skating: NHL average

Puck skills: High-end

Hockey sense: NHL average

Compete: Above NHL average

Shot: High-end

Analysis: Fantilli took positive steps in his second NHL season, highlighted by hitting the 30-goal mark. He's had ups and downs to start his career, but he has the makings of a future star. He's got a huge frame, skates well and competes hard. He wins a lot of battles, will lay into opponents and gets to the net to create offense. He has excellent hands, often beating defenders with his one-on-one play, and the pace at which he can get by players can break open shifts. His playmaking isn't the main thing that gets you excited about his game, but Fantilli can make difficult passes. He's more of a goal scorer, with an excellent wrist shot that can and has beaten NHL goalies from range.

2. Kent Johnson, LW

Oct. 18, 2002 | 6-foot-1 | 168 pounds | Shoots left

Drafted: No. 5 in 2021

Tier: Top of the lineup player

Skating: Below NHL average

Puck skills: High-end

Hockey sense: Above NHL average

Compete: NHL average

Shot: Above NHL average

Analysis: Johnson took major steps forward this season, becoming a very important part of Columbus' offense. He's a player with truly dynamic offensive touch. He has elite hands, beats defensemen one-on-one at a high rate and has the ability to create chances out of nothing. He can make consistently difficult

plays to others and has a good shot from range. The pure athletic tools in his game aren't amazing. He has average size and foot speed, isn't overly physical and plays too much on the outside. The pure puck game will allow him to score a lot and play high in a lineup with potential star upside, even if his style of play will frustrate coaches at times.

3. Jackson Smith, D

May 13, 2007 | 6-foot-3 | 190 pounds | Shoots left

Drafted: No. 14 in 2025

Tier: Bubble top and middle of the lineup player

Skating: NHL average

Puck skills: Above NHL average

Hockey sense: Below NHL average

Compete: Above NHL average

Shot: Above NHL average

Analysis: Smith is a 6-foot-3 defenseman who skates quite well. He's funky-looking at times, going 10-2 with his edges a bit too much, but he's a powerful, fluid skater who can easily get by checkers and skate pucks up ice. Smith often tries to attack with his skill and can break down players one-on-one easily. Smith's decision-making isn't the best at times, and I wouldn't call him a natural playmaker, but he creates a lot of offense and has a good point shot. Defensively, he's decent due to his frame and feet, and when he's leaning into checks, he can be a two-way force. His defensive play is inconsistent, in part because he's often up in the attack, but he has the potential to be a top-four defenseman who can play on both special teams.

4. Cayden Lindstrom, C

Feb. 3, 2006 | 6-foot-4 | 214 pounds | Shoots left

Drafted: No. 4 in 2024

Tier: Bubble top and middle of the lineup player

Skating: Above NHL average

Puck skills: NHL average

Hockey sense: Below NHL average

Compete: High-end

Shot: Above NHL average

Analysis: Lindstrom missed almost the entire season due to a back injury and corresponding surgery, but he came back right at the very end of Medicine Hat's playoff run. When healthy, he's an elite athlete. He has the quick-twitch feet of a smaller forward who could blow by NHL defenders. He's a big, powerful center with a ton of physicality in his game. Lindstrom has good offensive skills and can score goals. His playmaking is something I've questioned at times, though. He projects as a highly likable top-two-line forward who can be a playoff-style player, even if he's not a for-sure center in the NHL.

5. Cole Sillinger, C

May 16, 2003 | 6-foot-2 | 203 pounds | Shoots left

Drafted: No. 12 in 2021

Tier: Middle of the lineup player

Skating: Below NHL average

Puck skills: Above NHL average

Hockey sense: NHL average
Compete: High-end

Analysis: Sillinger had his best season in the NHL to date. He played a lot of minutes, including on both special teams, for Columbus. Sillinger is a skilled center who can provide offense, but what makes him truly appealing is his compete. He plays with an edge and isn't afraid to throw around his body. He creates offense at the net and is responsible off the puck. He has a scoring touch, even if the natural offense in his game is a minor question in terms of whether he'll be a big-time scorer who makes a ton of plays. His foot speed is also not great. He's a player coaches will want to play a lot due to his compete and could be a great long-term second-line center.

6. Denton Mateychuk, D

July 12, 2004 | 5-foot-11 | 185 pounds | Shoots left

Drafted: No. 12 in 2022
Tier: Middle of the lineup player

Skating: Above NHL average
Puck skills: NHL average
Hockey sense: NHL average
Compete: Above NHL average
Shot: High-end

Analysis: Mateychuk impressed in his first pro season. He stood out in the AHL and quickly earned a call-up to Columbus, where he stuck. He's an excellent skater, with clear NHL edge work and speed to be able to skate pucks up ice at the top level, evade pressure and close on checks. Mateychuk is a skilled puck handler who makes a lot of tough plays at full flight. I wouldn't call him a true top-tier playmaker, but he projects to get his points in the NHL due to having enough skill and sense and a big point shot. He gives a good effort, and with his feet he should be a competent defender as a pro, even though he's on the smaller side. Mateychuk projects as a top-four defenseman.

7. Luca Marrelli, D

Oct. 4, 2005 | 6-foot-2 | 185 pounds | Shoots right

Drafted: No. 86 in 2024
Tier: Projected to play NHL games

Skating: NHL average
Puck skills: Below NHL average
Hockey sense: Above NHL average
Compete: NHL average
Shot: Above NHL average

Analysis: Marrelli was one of the top defensemen in the OHL this season and was the second leading scorer in the OHL playoffs. He's a strong skating defenseman who can close on pucks defensively well and is able to attack with speed. Offensively, he has very good skill and playmaking in his game. Marrelli can activate off the blue line, create off the rush, has a good point shot and shows instincts to hit seams as well. He competes fine, but isn't overly physical and is average-sized. He lacks a clearly defined role in the NHL, even if he has a lot of positives. He has a real chance to play games.

8. Pyotr Andreyanov, G

Jan. 22, 2007 | 6-feet-2 | 207 pounds | Catches left

Drafted: No. 20 in 2025
Tier: Projected to play NHL games

Skating: Above NHL average
Hockey sense: NHL average

Analysis: Andreyanov has outstanding quickness in his lower half. He makes a ton of highlight-reel-type saves due to his athleticism plus his compete level. He never seems like he's out of a play due to his effort. Andreyanov is also a good technical goalie who can make smooth, efficient saves with good reads. NHL teams' only concern with him will be his size. He's a small goalie by NHL standards, and will need to prove he's not just very talented but especially talented to be an NHL goalie. I've seen enough flashes of special to think he could be a backup in the league.

9. Luca Del Bel Belluz, C

Nov. 10, 2003 | 6-foot-1 | 185 pounds | Shoots left

Drafted: No. 44 in 2022
Tier: Projected to play NHL games

Skating: Below NHL average
Puck skills: NHL average
Hockey sense: Above NHL average
Compete: Below NHL average
Shot: Above NHL average

Analysis: Del Bel Belluz had a great second pro season, which earned him a lengthy call-up to the NHL level. He's a talented center with high-level skill and vision to make a lot of plays inside the offensive zone and run a power play. He has the puck game to play in the NHL, but his iffy foot speed and tendency to shy away from physical play will make it tough for him to get a full-time NHL job.

10. Kirill Dolzhenkov, RW

April 20, 2004 | 6-foot-6 | 223 pounds | Shoots left

Drafted: No. 109 in 2022
Tier: Projected to play NHL games

Skating: Poor
Puck skills: NHL average
Hockey sense: Below NHL average
Compete: Above NHL average
Shot: Above NHL average

Analysis: Dolzhenkov has a unique toolkit with his massive 6-6 frame to go with strong offensive skills. There aren't a lot of big guys who can dangle like he can, to go with being a legit goal-scoring threat from range. Dolzhenkov doesn't shy from using his big body as well in terms of physical play. He's quite slow, and if he misses, it will likely be due to his skating. There's a lot in his game that makes me think he will be a good pro with a real chance to play NHL games in a bottom six.

Has a chance to play*

There are some legit pro talents among this group of names. Charlie Elick is huge, physical and mobile, but his puck play is a major question. The same goes to an extent for 2021 first-round pick Corson Ceulemans. Evan Gardner is a technically sound and quick goalie who's been good in the WHL but isn't the tallest netminder.

Corson Ceulemans, D

May 5, 2003 | 6-foot-2 | 198 pounds | Shoots right | Drafted: No. 25 in 2021

Jordan Dumais, RW

April 15, 2004 | 5-foot-9 | 174 pounds | Shoots right | Drafted: No. 96 in 2022

Charlie Elick, D

Jan. 17, 2006 | 6-foot-4 | 203 pounds | Shoots right | Drafted: No. 36 in 2024

Evan Gardner, G

Jan. 25, 2006 | 6-foot-1 | 176 pounds | Catches left | Drafted: No. 60 in 2024

Advertisement

Sergei Ivanov, G

April 3, 2004 | 6-feet | 157 pounds | Catches left | Drafted: No. 138 in 2022

Oiva Keskinen, C

Feb. 28, 2004 | 6-feet | 181 pounds | Shoots left | Drafted: No. 194 in 2023

Luca Pinelli, C

April 5, 2005 | 5-foot-9 | 168 pounds | Shoots left | Drafted: No. 114 in 2023

Stanislav Svozil, D

Jan. 17, 2003 | 6-feet | 181 pounds | Shoots left | Drafted: No. 69 in 2021

Malte Vass, D

March 28, 2007 | 6-foot-2 | 194 pounds | Shoots left | Drafted: No. 76 in 2025

** Listed in alphabetical order*

Player eligibility: All skaters who are 22 years old or younger as of Sept. 15, 2025, regardless of how many NHL games they've played, are eligible. Player heights and weights are taken from the NHL.

Tool grades: Tool grades are based on a scale with six separate levels, with an eye toward how this attribute would grade in the NHL (poor, below-average, average, above-average, high-end and elite). "Average" on this scale means the tool projects as NHL average, which is meant as a positive, not a criticism. Skating, puck skills, hockey sense and compete for every projected NHL player are graded. Shot grades are only included if a shot is notably good or poor.

Tier definitions: Tiers are meant to show roughly where in an average NHL lineup a player projects to slot in.

[NHL.com / Gaudreaus 'still present' for Team USA members 1 year after deaths](#)

By Bill Price – August 29, 2025

It's been one year since Johnny Gaudreau and Matthew Gaudreau were killed while riding bicycles near their home in Salem County, New Jersey.

The tragic events of Aug. 29, 2024, sent shockwaves throughout the entire sports world, an NHL superstar in Johnny, 31, and his brother Matthew, 29, dying when they were struck by an alleged drunken driver who has been charged with two counts of death by auto.

Players at the United States Men's Olympic Orientation Camp on Tuesday and Wednesday made it clear that the memory of Johnny and Matthew, and the impact they made on hockey and the world in general, will never be forgotten.

"Definitely a year of a lot of emotions, one I'll never forget," said Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski, Johnny's teammate from 2022-24. "I learned a lot about myself, about our team, about friendship and family, and how that's the most important thing. It's crazy it's already been a year here. I can't really wrap my head around it."

Jeremy Swayman and Johnny Gaudreau had the same agent, Lewis Gross. The Boston Bruins goalie said "Johnny Hockey" is "still so present in my life."

"Just how much that (Gross) talks about him," Swayman said, "and ways that he's seen me replicate things that he's done, that's the ultimate honor, is living up to the standard that Johnny had on hockey."

Johnny Gaudreau played his first full eight NHL seasons with the Calgary Flames and was getting ready for his third with the Blue Jackets after he signed a seven-year, \$68.25 million contract July 13, 2022. Matthew Gaudreau was preparing for his third season as an assistant coach for the Philadelphia Rebels in the North American Hockey League.

The night before they were to attend the wedding of their sister, Katie, the brothers, who played together at Boston College, were killed. What followed were vigils in Columbus and Calgary, moments of silence before face-offs at NHL games, and helmet stickers during the first few weeks of the regular season.

When the United States team gathered in Montreal for the 4-Nations Face-Off in early February, a Johnny Gaudreau jersey hung in their locker room. The same was done during the 2025 IIHF World Championship in Denmark and Sweden, where the U.S. won gold.

"We just want to celebrate his life," said Ottawa Senators forward Shane Pinto, a member of the World Championship team. "We dedicated our Worlds to him last year, and I think we should dedicate most of USA Hockey to him because he was such a big part of it."

When the Blue Jackets played the Detroit Red Wings in the 2025 Navy Federal Credit Union NHL Stadium Series at Ohio Stadium on March 1, each team honored Johnny with their attire upon arrival. The Blue Jackets walked into St. John Arena for a pep rally wearing Johnny's signature outfit -- black Ugg boots, black sweatpants, light blue sweatshirt from Avalon Surf Shop in New Jersey and black AMIRI ballcap with three black stars in the front.

The Red Wings stepped off the bus in jerseys that Johnny and Matthew wore during their hockey careers. For Johnny, they represented Dubuque of the United States Hockey League, Boston College and

USA Hockey; for Matthew, Omaha of the USHL and BC. Each had a Gaudreau nameplate and number on the back.

"I think the outpouring of support for the family, for [Gaudreau's friend Sean Monahan], for our team, for all John's friends and family, like, it was really incredible to see all the tributes, just the support that we had," Werenski said. "I felt like, in a weird way, we could kind of feel the support from all teams across the League, all fan bases, just hockey in general.

"He's a special person and deserves that. I mean, he was Johnny Hockey. I think what he did for the game of hockey, he was on pace to be one of the greatest Americans of all time. He is one of the greatest Americans of all time."

Red Wings captain Dylan Larkin wore a United States World Championship jersey at the Stadium Series. He was teammates with Johnny at Worlds in 2017 and 2018.

"I just wish them (the Gaudreau family) nothing but the best," Larkin said. "I know that Friday is going to be hard, and it's continued to be hard all year."

Johnny Gaudreau was a seven-time NHL all-star, represented the United States five times at Worlds and won gold at the 2013 IIHF World Junior Championship. His 115 points (40 goals, 75 assists) with the Flames in 2021-22 is the third-highest single-season mark for a player born in the United States behind Pat LaFontaine (148) in 1992-93 and Kevin Stevens (123) in 1991-92.

Still, when asked about Gaudreau and his brother, players at Olympic camp spoke about the men, not the hockey players.

"I just hope that he is remembered for the person that he is, because he was the best guy to be around," Pinto said. "Everyone just wanted to be around him, just a down-to-earth family dude. We just want to celebrate his life."

Winnipeg Jets defenseman Neal Pionk and Johnny won bronze at the 2018 Worlds. Like most, he remembers how kind he was.

"I guess the one memory or take I have from that the World Championships is just how easy going and laid back he was off the ice," Pionk said. "He kind of played that way on the ice too, just kind of easy going, and then boom, he would burst and make a highlight reel play, and then off the ice he was very easy going, very welcoming, and obviously, at the time, a superstar too. So, that was cool for me to see."

New York Rangers defenseman Adam Fox said he was 18 years old and at Flames development camp when he first met Johnny, who by then was already an NHL star.

"He treated me like I was his best friend," Fox said. "I think that was Johnny's personality and I think that is why everyone was so devastated because those two were widely known as great people.

"He definitely left an impression on me. Hockey-player wise he was one of the best in the NHL, but he was even better as a person. It puts everything in perspective. Hockey comes and goes but relationships, he was one of the best at building those."

With NHL players participating in the Olympic Winter Games Milano Cortina 2026 this February, Swayman has no doubt Johnny Gaudreau would be part of the U.S. team going for gold.

"He would be right here with us right now, everyone knows it," Swayman said. "So even being a part of World Championships, it was just looking around that room, seeing his jersey there.

"He's present in our lives every day. And I think that's the biggest honor that we can give him, is understanding that he's with us every day, and he's set the standard. It's our job to continue that legacy."

NHL.com / United States determined 'to get over this hump,' win Olympic gold medal

By Nicholas J. Cotsonika – August 27, 2025

Gold or bust? Bill Guerin didn't put it like that. But the general manager of the United States men's Olympic hockey team made his expectations clear at the team's orientation camp this week ahead of the Olympic Winter Games Milano Cortina 2026.

"We're just trying to reach our ultimate goal," Guerin said Wednesday. "That's it, and we're going to do whatever we have to, to do it.

"Everybody's got great careers going on, and [you] play a big role on your team and this and that. It's not about [that]. It's about our flag, it's about our colors, and it's about our country. That's it. We're playing for our country, and that's the most important thing. Just keep thinking of that.

"We have to make a push to get over this hump."

The United States hasn't won Olympic gold in men's hockey since 1980 and a best-on-best men's tournament since the 1996 World Cup of Hockey. But it took Canada to overtime in the 4 Nations Face-Off championship game last season, after defeating Canada in Canada earlier in the tournament.

It has a chance to prove something and leave a legacy in the Olympics.

The big questions: Considering how close it was to winning the 4 Nations and how tight the margins are, how much needs to change to put it over the top? What specifically?

The 4 Nations was an intense tournament, and the executives, coaches and players jumped back into the NHL season immediately afterward. They needed time to decompress and process everything.

"I'll tell you what," Guerin said. "It was hard. That was emotional. I was [messed] up for a couple days. It was crazy."

Guerin, also GM of the Minnesota Wild, said the executives had a long dinner together at the NHL GM meetings in March. He said they asked each other, "What do you think we could have done differently, better? What's got to change, or did we do a pretty good job?"

"I was extremely happy with the coaching staff," Guerin said. "I was out-of-this-world happy with how the players performed. I don't have any complaints. ...

"I am proud of the way everybody worked and played and all that stuff. But we missed, and that's where we have to find an edge. That's where we can't just sit here and say, 'Hey, great job. It was close.' That's just not good enough. We have to figure a way out to get over the hump, and we're looking at a lot of different things."

Coach Mike Sullivan -- then the coach of the Pittsburgh Penguins, now the coach of the New York Rangers -- said he asked his staff to jot notes while their feelings were fresh and then let the emotions settle. The coaches met at orientation camp here Tuesday and talked a lot about the process they implemented ahead of the 4 Nations.

"Was there anything we would do different?" Sullivan said. "Did we like it? Everything from how we communicated with our players and some of the things we did to roll out our team concept with them to our roles and responsibilities as a coaching staff, what we were all responsible for and how that went."

Sullivan tried to keep things in perspective.

"That [championship] game was very evenly matched," Sullivan said. "I mean, we had, for example, three Grade A scoring chances before they scored in overtime, and we had it on the sticks of guys that, if we could select the guys to have the opportunities, we would want those guys to have them."

"So you know, I think sometimes we've got to be careful that we don't overthink stuff. That team performed extremely well. In one game, anything can happen."

The United States named the first six players to its roster June 16: forwards Jack Eichel, Auston Matthews, Brady Tkachuk and Matthew Tkachuk, and defensemen Charlie McAvoy and Quinn Hughes. The first five played in the 4 Nations. Hughes did not because of injury.

"From a sheer identity standpoint and style of play, we're trying to implement a game plan to set our core group of players up for success," Sullivan said. "That core group is going to be the core of the Olympic team also. They're America's best players, and you know the guys that we're talking about, right? I think from that standpoint, you're going to see a similar team."

"From a personnel standpoint, will there be some change? Possibly. I think a year in hockey is a long time."

The United States brought 44 players to orientation camp (Matthew Tkachuk did not attend). Sullivan said he wanted the takeaway to be that they are in the running to make the team.

Guerin said the executives and coaches have "identified a number of players that we've got to really kind of get eyes on early and often" during the first half of the NHL season. Players can emerge, and injuries can occur before the 25-man roster is named in early January. The tournament will be Feb. 11-22.

"Listen, the guys that played in [the 4 Nations] did a great job, but we have to go back to the drawing board and start over again," Guerin said. "Guys have to be playing well. They've got to be healthy. So it's really tough to say, like, 'How much is the roster going to change?' I don't know, and we'll see as time goes on."

Guerin said the United States will not try to assemble the 25 best players. It will try to build the best team.

"It's not a full-time team," Guerin said. "You don't get all these practices and this and that, so you've got to have guys buying into roles and positions and things like that. I mean, every guy downstairs is on their first power play or their first penalty kill or whatever (on their NHL teams), and that's just not the case when it comes to teams like this, so you need the chemistry. Player-wise, we could just pick, but you have to make sure it really fits."

The good part is, the United States has developed so much depth, it feels it could ice two or three competitive teams.

"The [tough] part about it is, you're going to disappoint some people, and that's tough," Guerin said. "Those are brutal phone calls to make."

Sullivan said Milan represents a chance to prove the United States is at the pinnacle of hockey. It also represents a chance for these players inspire a generation the way the 1980 and 1996 teams did.

"I think they did it already at the 4 Nations, but if you win, you win a gold medal, that's legacy stuff," Sullivan said. "They all have a unique opportunity to put their stamp on history, to write their own story, both as individual players but also maybe more importantly as a team, and that's what's at stake. So from that standpoint, yeah, the stakes are high. They don't get higher."

“But how much fun is that? That’s the way I look at it.”