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

By Brian Hedger- December 21, 2024

Sometimes, the goalie just needs to steal one.

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

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

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

Here are three takeaways:

Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins makes a save against the Devils on Thursday.

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

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

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

After a massive scrum in front of the net, Devils defenseman Luke Hughes scores a goal in the third period against the Blue Jackets on Thursday.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was Werenski's 11th goal, putting him on pace to score 27 goals for the season. That would exceed his career-high of 20 goals in 63 games during the COVID-19 shortened 2019-20 season. Marchenko, meanwhile, reached 100 points in 170 games, trailing only Pierre-Luc Dubois (142 games), Nikolay Zherdev (150 games) and Rick Nash (164 games).

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

## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets crumble in stinging overtime loss to Philadelphia Flyers

**By Brian Hedger- December 22, 2024**

It became a game of resilience Saturday night at Wells Fargo Center, where Owen Tippett and the Philadelphia Flyers had a little more than the Blue Jackets.

Despite starting the third period up 2-0, the Blue Jackets coughed up the lead three times in the final period of regulation and again on Tippett's winner 3:30 into overtime to give the Flyers a 5-4 OT comeback victory. Tippett led all players in scoring with four points on his goal and three assists, which set up three of the Flyers' four goals in the third period.

Mathieu Olivier, Mikael Pyyhtia, Kirill Marchenko and Jake Christiansen scored goals for the Blue Jackets (13-15-6), who coughed up leads of 2-0, 3-2 and 4-3 in the third after goalie Elvis Merzlikins stopped all 16 shots he faced in the first two frames. Morgan Frost scored two goals for the Flyers (15-15-4), who also got goals in the third from Noah Cates and Tyson Foerster.

Christiansen scored a big goal for the Blue Jackets with 4:11 left in the third period, scoring from distance to break a 3-3 tie after the Flyers rallied from down 2-0 starting the game's final period. Tyson Foerster, however, tied it again, 4-4, by scoring at 6-on-5 with 1:44 left in regulation and the Flyers' net empty.

Merzlikins, who was outstanding in the first two periods, struggled in the third after Morgan Frost and Noah Cates beat him with goals separated by almost two minutes to erase the Jackets' 2-0 lead. He allowed four goals in the third on 12 shots, including a second goal by Frost and Foerster's equalizer that forced OT.

Prior to the game, the Flyers invited the Gaudreau family onto the ice for a ceremonial puck drop to honor the lives of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau — who were killed by a vehicle while riding bikes Aug. 29 near their homes in South Jersey. It was the third such ceremony this season for the Blue Jackets, who also memorialized the Gaudreau brothers along with the Gaudreau family Oct. 15 during their home-opener at Nationwide Arena and prior to a game against the Calgary Flames on Dec. 3 at Scotiabank Saddledome — where Johnny Gaudreau played the first 10 years of his NHL career.

The Blue Jacket also got an injury scare early in the third when star defenseman Zach Werenski slammed his left knee into the bottom of the boards. He stayed on the ice until play stopped, hobbled off and returned to the game several minutes later.

Following the pregame ceremony, Philadelphia had a better start and controlled the action for much of the game's first 10 minutes despite an early Blue Jackets power play. The Flyers just couldn't get a shot past Merzlikins, which allowed Olivier to give the Blue Jackets a 1-0 lead with 4:13 left in the opening period for his ninth goal of the season.

Merzlikins, who stole a victory for the Blue Jackets on Thursday against the New Jersey Devils, again was sharp to start out against the Flyers. He made multiple saves against high-danger looks in the first two periods, including a sprawling pad save in the first to deny a 2-on-1 goal by Tippett.

Pyyhtia pushed it to 2-0 for the Blue Jackets early in the second with his third goal of the season, scored after Sean Kuraly collected the puck behind the Flyers' net with Ersson caught way out of position trying to play it. That was the lone goal of the middle frame, which finished with the Blue Jackets outshooting the Flyers 7-6 despite most of the play happening inside the Columbus zone.

Philadelphia had a goal by Olle Lycksell taken away for a missed offside in the second after the Blue Jackets issued a coaching challenge. Replays showed the puck just barely escaped the Jackets' zone before being sent back into it with a pass to Lycksell for a great scoring chance he slid between Merzlikins' pads. Otherwise, Merzlikins stayed sharp with six more saves in the second that included a big one against Scott Laughton four seconds before the horn sounded to end the period.

The Flyers finally clawed back into it in the third on goals 1:55 apart by Frost and Cates, who scored at 6:53 and 8:48 to tie it 2-2. Marchenko put the Blue Jackets back up, 3-2, just 1:13 later on his 12th goal of the season, but Frost scored his second of the game 1:50 later to tie it again at 3-3, beating Merzlikins with a wrist shot from the left circle. Christiansen and Foerster then exchanged goals to force OT, where Ersson topped Merzlikins with a big save to help set up Tippett's winner.

## Columbus Dispatch / Werenski injury a concern after Columbus Blue Jackets' OT meltdown: 5 takeaways

**By Brian Hedger- December 23, 2024**

Three blown leads in the third period of a game that ended up a loss in overtime should've been the main storyline for the Blue Jackets on Saturday night.

Instead, their stinging 5-4 OT loss to the Flyers in Philadelphia takes a back seat to the health of star defenseman Zach Werenski, who was injured early in the third period and gutted through it while slowed by limited mobility in his left leg.

Elvis Merzlikins was also torched for five goals after going 16 for 16 in the first 40 minutes, Owen Tippett was a one-man wrecking ball when it mattered most, the Blue Jackets continued to struggle with puck possession and the Flyers memorialized Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau with a pregame ceremony that included their family.

Here are five takeaways:

Columbus Blue Jackets hoping for the best with Zach Werenski's knee

Less than two minutes into the third, Werenski got tangled up hitting Tippett and crashed hard into the boards. His left knee slammed directly into the plastic kick plate, leaving him down in pain and barely able to stand on his own.

Somehow, he returned 4:26 later with limited mobility and finished the game, still skating 27:27 that included three overtime shifts. Werenski was also defending during the Flyers' four goals in the third, all scored after his injury. The question now is how his knee will react before a home game Monday against the Montreal Canadiens.

"I'm hoping he doesn't seize up now, because he was at the end and in overtime," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said during a televised postgame press conference. "He's obviously a massive part of our hockey club, and to have him (come) back, I mean, we were down to four (defensemen) there for a little bit. Hopefully he can go."

Werenski is the Blue Jackets' second highest scorer with 32 points in 34 games on 11 goals and 21 assists, which ranks third among all NHL defensemen in scoring.

Columbus Blue Jackets had no answer for Philadelphia Flyers forward Owen Tippett

Tippett is a swift skating forward with a great shot, but his playmaking skills incinerated Merzlikins and the Blue Jackets in the third and OT. He assisted Morgan Frost's two goals, picked up another assist on Tyson Foerster's 6-on-5 equalizer to force overtime and then dragged the puck around Merzlikins' right pad in overtime.

Finding a way to slow Tippett and his line during even one of the Flyers' goals could have made the difference, but the Blue Jackets couldn't do it.

Dream sequence for Columbus Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins becomes nightmare in loss to Philadelphia Flyers

Elvis Merzlikins' razor-sharp focus from an outstanding performance Thursday against the New Jersey Devils carried into this game. The Blue Jackets' netminder stopped every shot he faced in the first two

periods, including multiple sprawling denials against odd-man rushes, but his night became nightmarish in the third.

Tippett's incredible reverse pass to Frost got it started in the third, igniting an avalanche of goals that snowballed on Merzlikins and the Blue Jackets down the stretch. After the smoke cleared, Merzlikins sprawled out face down in his crease. He symbolized the frustrations of his team and its fans, who've all dealt with too many losses like this one the past few years.

"We have a couple glorious chances in overtime, too, right?" Evason said. "It could've been a completely different chat right now. Listen, do we want the extra point? A hundred percent. We didn't get it. We got one. We'll move forward."

Columbus Blue Jackets' possession struggle continues in OT loss to Philadelphia Flyers

It's been almost two weeks since the Blue Jackets have dictated play by keeping the puck inside the opposing blue line. Their ability to do that has completely disappeared since an impressive win Dec. 8 in Winnipeg, which felt like a key win that might kickstart a hot streak.

Instead, the Blue Jackets since have become one of the NHL's worst teams at generating attempts, shots, scoring chances and goals amid a frustrating 1-3-3 stretch that continued in Philadelphia. According to Natural Stat Trick, the Flyers finished with 61% of the game's attempted shots, 55% of its shots, 58% of scoring chances, 55% of high-danger chances and 58% of the expected goals in all situations.

Even worse news is that things could get worse if Werenski has to miss time.

Columbus Blue Jackets, Philadelphia Flyers honor Gaudreaus

Prior to the game, the Gaudreau family gathered on the ice for a ceremonial puck-drop wearing Gloucester Catholic jerseys representing the school where Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau played in nearby South Jersey during high school. Flyers players also arrived wearing Gloucester Catholic jerseys to honor the Gaudreau brothers, who were killed in late August when struck by a vehicle while biking near their hometown in South Jersey.

The ceremony was the third of its kind for Blue Jackets, who previously participated in one before their Oct. 15 home-opener at Nationwide Arena and another Dec. 3 in Calgary — where Johnny Gaudreau became an NHL star while playing the first 10 years of his professional career.

There aren't any remaining Gaudreau ties with other teams left on the Blue Jackets' schedule, but it wouldn't be a surprise if the brothers and the Gaudreau family are somehow honored March 1 prior to an outdoor game at Ohio Stadium against the Detroit Red Wings.

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: Dmitri Voronkov's impressive skill, missing menace

**By Aaron Portzline- December 23, 2024**

COLUMBUS, Ohio — A collection of notes, insights, ruminations and did-you-knows gathered throughout the week that was for the Columbus Blue Jackets:

Item No. 1: Where's the menace?

Dmitri Voronkov has become quite a goal scorer for the Blue Jackets. He's shown soft hands and high-end vision that belie his 6-foot-5 frame. The big man sets one heck of a screen in front of opposing goaltenders, too. Yes, his list of attributes is longer than his in-seam.

But the Voronkov that has emerged is different than the menacing, malevolent power forward he was projected to be when he left Russia for the NHL two seasons ago.

Who can forget Kirill Marchenko's stellar scouting report the spring before Voronkov made the leap: "I am a happy Russian boy," Marchenko said. "(Yegor) Chinakhov is a cute Russian boy. But (Voronkov) ... he is like tough Russian boy."

Nobody questions Voronkov's toughness. But in 25 games this season, Voronkov has just 16 hits. His hits per 60 minutes (2.38) is 18th among Blue Jackets players and 368th among NHL forwards. That's staggering.

Asked if he's been surprised by Voronkov's lack of combativeness, Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason was blunt.

"Yes," he said. "And to be honest with you, we've talked to him about it several times, and we'll continue to do that."

"I'll be honest with you: He has to get into even better shape than he is to arrive (on time for hits). That, to us, is the biggest issue, and he's committed to doing that. He's doing extra work after practice. It's not a desire thing."

Former Blue Jackets coach Pascal Vincent said many times last season that Voronkov's energy would fade toward the end of a normal shift, that he was wearing down as the season moved along and the games piled up.

When Voronkov returned this fall for camp, he was noticeably trimmer, dropping from 240 pounds to his current 227. The Blue Jackets were pleased with his progress, but it might take another summer, or another couple of seasons, before he's trim and fit enough to play at his highest level.

"We've asked him to do that, to get going so that you can be that physical presence," Evason said. "You can see it when he's down low in a battle, a confrontation, a one-on-one ... he's really hard to handle, physically. We want him to get in on the forecheck and start bumping and grinding."

Voronkov has eight goals, nine assists and 17 points in 25 games. He has a plus-4 rating and is playing 16:04 per game, up from 13:27 last season. And two plays in recent games have highlighted his impressive offensive touch.

In a 5-3 loss to Tampa Bay last Tuesday, Voronkov made a brilliant touch pass back to Cole Sillinger for a power-play goal in the third period. On Saturday, his pass across the "Royal Road" to Marchenko for a go-ahead third-period goal showed a vision few power forwards possess.



Now, imagine if Voronkov can add a physical edge to his other attributes. That's a rare player, indeed.

"To put that whole package together," Evason said, "it could be dominating."

Item No. 2: 'Brutal couple of days'

One week ago today, Blue Jackets defenseman Jack Johnson was stuck in the face by an inadvertent high stick. The stick blade found its way behind Johnson's visor, striking his face and his right eye. It was a scary scene in Raleigh, N.C., as Johnson rushed off the ice and went straight to the dressing room.

"I couldn't open my eye," Johnson said. "The first person I thought about was Chris Pronger."

Pronger, one of the best defensemen of his generation, retired in 2011 after a series of concussions and an eye injury suffered when he, too, was struck in the eye with a stick blade.

Johnson was able to return to last Sunday's game vs. Carolina — he was back later in the first period, actually — but after two shifts he pulled himself from the game.

"It was pretty clear I wasn't doing anybody any good," he said.

Johnson missed a game two days later in Tampa Bay but has been in the lineup the past two games. For three days he had to wear a protective contact lens on his right eye to help protect a scratched cornea, but the injury has begun to heal quickly.

There's still a pool of blood on the edge of his sclera.

"It's definitely weird," Johnson said. "It's like half of my eye sees in high-def and the other half is VHS."

Still, Johnson was feeling fortunate.

"It's unlucky that it even happened," he said. "I mean, the stick went up under the visor and it still got me. That's why I wear a visor, and it still happened. But I also know I'm lucky it wasn't worse. It could have been way worse, right?"

"The rest of your life flashes in front of you, really. It was a brutal couple of days, the first time I've been through something like this. I asked Nates (Blue Jackets trainer Naoto Goto) to call my wife. I put everybody else on the backburner cause it was painful just to read a text right after it happened."

Item No. 3: Take 5, Mathieu Olivier

Take 5 is a quick, breezy sitdown with a Blue Jackets player, coach or front-office staffer. This week's features Mathieu Olivier:

1. What part of Columbus is home and why?

We're up in Dublin. We thought the location was just right, the area was just right ... but especially for my son, Liam, who is on the spectrum. They had a really good preschool program for kids like him, so that was a big reason.

2. Favorite restaurant in Columbus.

Local Cantina is our casual place. The Nashville chicken tacos. As far as a high-end place, there's a place near us that just opened this summer called Butcher & Rose. We've been there twice. It was fantastic.

3. How do you spend an off day Sunday?

Kids, kids, kids. Whatever they want to do. They're starting to skate and do a bunch of different sports, and they're showing an interest in all kinds of things. So we're trying to keep them active. If I get a little time by myself, I'll hop on the PlayStation 5, but that doesn't happen very often.

#### 4. Favorite CBJ memory.

Hmm. A lot of stuff already from this year comes to mind, personally. I'd say 'Z' (Zach Werenski) breaking the record (for points by a Columbus defenseman) last year vs. Carolina in the last game of the season was pretty cool. There will definitely be more.

#### 5. Which teammate should have a podcast?

I've heard about this (question). Everybody's telling me I've been the answer. Or (Erik) Gudbranson. Or Jack Johnson. JJ would have a good "What's grinding my gears?" podcast. But I'd say Guddy. He's pretty knowledgeable on a lot of topics and he loves to talk. He can do it all.

#### Item No. 4: Snacks

- Defensemen Zach Werenski returned to Saturday's game after suffering a left leg injury when he slammed into the boards early in the third period. He returned to play but was clearly hobbled. The Philadelphia Flyers scored all five goals with him on the ice. Evason had an alarming quote after the game, saying Werenski's injury "seized up" in the third period and overtime. As of Sunday morning, the Blue Jackets did not have an update on Werenski. They aren't scheduled to practice, either.
- If goaltender Elvis Merzlikins starts, as expected, on Monday vs. Montreal, it'll mark the 10th straight game Daniil Tarasov has watched either from the bench or the press box. The most obvious target for his return is the back-to-back, home-and-home vs. Boston on the Friday-Saturday following Christmas, but Evason said that wasn't etched in stone. "We're trying to get him to a place where he can have success with the team," Evason said. "And that means watching video, taking extra practice, trying to find where he's most comfortable to play and help us win. There's no question about his desire, his drive, his attention to detail ... his work ethic is fantastic. He'll get back in there and he'll find his way."
- One might think that Tarasov, with one start since Nov. 16 and an .857 save percentage, would be on the verge of hitting the waiver wire. Not so, said Waddell. "There's too much there, too much talent. He's shown some good signs in the past, obviously. It hasn't started well for him this year. He's gotta work his way back. He's working his ass off in practice, and he's gotta keep doing that. Eventually, he's going to play a game and we'll see where he's at."
- If anybody can empathize with Johnson and his eye scare, it's Waddell. In the summer of 1984, Waddell was injured in a pickup game in Ann Arbor, Mich., when a disgruntled opponent slammed the butt end of his stick into Waddell's face. "I spent 28 days in the hospital," Waddell said. "They call it a blowout fracture of the orbital bone." Waddell, who still has a "plastic plate" around his eye, said he had an eye patch over both eyes for 15 days — effectively blinding him — so that the eye with a detached retina could remain still and allow it to reattach and heal. "It was a long process for sure," Waddell said. "I'd hear people come in the room and I'd have no idea who it was until they spoke." Waddell was planning to return to Switzerland to resume a career in Europe, but he didn't get cleared to play until October, after the season in Europe had started. He spent that season split between Flint and Toledo in the now-defunct International Hockey League. "I still have blind spots in that eye," Waddell said.
- Sunday Gathering trivia question: Adam Fantilli played in his 82nd game with the Blue Jackets on Thursday, the equivalent of a full NHL season. He had 18-23-41 in that span, only four points fewer than franchise icon Rick Nash (22-23-45) in his first 82 games with Columbus. Which player has had the most goals and which player has had the most points in their first 82 games with the Jackets at the start of their NHL career?
- Over the last two games, there have been even more signs of Olivier's growing influence. On Thursday, in a 4-2 win over New Jersey, he played a career-high 20:23, more than any other Blue Jackets forward.

On Saturday, in the loss to Philadelphia, he was on the ice with Fantilli and Ivan Provorov during three-on-three overtime.

- Marchenko had two assists on Thursday vs. New Jersey, giving him 100 career points (55-45-100) in what was his 170th NHL game. That made him the fourth-fastest player in Columbus franchise history to reach the century mark. Pierre-Luc Dubois (142 games) reached 100 points the fastest, followed by Nikolay Zherdev (150) and Nash (164).
- Word around Nationwide Arena this week was that Blue Jackets players had a chance to look at the sweaters they'll wear on March 1 in the NHL's Stadium Series game against the Detroit Red Wings at Ohio Stadium.
- The Blue Jackets will have two prospects competing in the World Junior Championship beginning Dec. 26 in Ottawa. Forward Luca Pinelli, a fourth-round pick (No. 114) in 2023, will play for Team Canada, while goaltender Melvin Strahl, a fifth-round pick (No. 156) in that same draft, will represent Team Sweden. Strahl currently plays for Youngstown of the USHL.
- Trivia answer: Marchenko scored 28 goals in his first 82 games with the Blue Jackets at the start of his NHL career, more than Nash (22), Cam Atkinson (21) and Dubois and Voronkov (20). Werenski had 50 points in his first 82 games, leading a list that includes Dubois (48), Oliver Bjorkstrand (47) and Nash, Zherdev and Derick Brassard (45).
- The Blue Jackets announced plans this week to simulcast five of FanDuel Sports Network's broadcasts on local channels ABC 6 and CW Columbus (Ch. 53). That makes the games available via antenna, but also on some streaming networks that don't currently carry FanDuel Sports Network, formerly known as Bally's. The games are Jan. 2 vs. Detroit (CW), Jan. 11 at St. Louis (ABC 6), Jan. 23 at Carolina (CW), Feb. 27 at Detroit (CW) and March 17 vs. New Jersey (CW).

## [BlueJackets.com / For Provorov – and his family – passion is the key to the game](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- December 21, 2024

Sometimes it seems like a player is born to play hockey, and there might be some truth to that.

But for Ivan Provorov, his life in the game came through much hard work as much as anything else.

There's the fact the CBJ defenseman left his home country of Russia full-time at age 14 to chase his dream of playing in the NHL. There's the fact he's the first player to arrive at Nationwide Arena for every game, all to make sure he is as prepared as possible for that night's tilt. And there's the fact he's missed only three games in his NHL career, a testament to his durability and passion for the game.

He's a hockey player through and through, starting from when he first played as a kid in his hometown of Yaroslavl, Russia.

"I played a bunch of different sports growing up, but hockey was always the one sport," said Provorov, who has three goals, 12 points and a plus-1 rating this season for the Blue Jackets. "I love everything about the game. I enjoy every part of it. Obviously, to be able to do that for a living is awesome."

And it's not just Ivan who carries that gene in the Provorov family; his brother, Vladimir, is 11 years younger but hopes to follow in the same footsteps. Just like his older brother, Vladimir has moved to the United States to chase his dream, as the 16-year-old forward plays for the New Jersey Rockets AAA team.

Earlier this week, Vladimir made the announcement that he plans to go the college hockey route – and doing it in Columbus, pledging to join the Ohio State program for the 2027-28 season.

"Obviously, ever since he was born, he's been fully in hockey mode because I was playing and traveling, and it's always been on TV," Ivan said. "He has the same love of the game. He watches all the games like I did and trains extremely hard, and he's actually an incredible player."

"We have an 11-year (age) difference, but I think he looks up to me. For myself as an older brother, whatever knowledge I have, I try to pass it on. When he has games, I try to watch it and if there's something to be corrected or encouraged, then obviously I try to do that."

And as daunting as it may sound to move overseas to chase a career as a teenager, it's clear the Provorovs have no problem with doing what is best to make it to the highest level. Growing up in the hockey-crazy city of Yaroslavl, home to a KHL team, their father, also named Vladimir, always enjoyed the game.

Now, with two brothers in the sport – one in the NHL, the other trying to get there – Provorov said they're one of those families "that hockey is like a second religion." As Provorov describes it, making it to the NHL was a goal that required him to put in whatever it took to make it, starting with his move to Pennsylvania at age 14.

"As bad as it is to say, it's not that I didn't have a plan B, but I knew that I was going to put in everything I can to succeed and be able to make it to the NHL and play in the NHL," Provorov said. "That was one of those steps that we thought was going to get me closer to being able to play here, and it paid off."

That passion has allowed Provorov to become one of the most dependable players in the league, one who has missed just three games – all because of COVID protocols in 2021-22 – in his entire nine-season, 647-game career. That was put to the test earlier this month in Vancouver, when he suffered a grotesque thumb injury on the first shift of the second period that ended his night.

It looked to everyone, including head coach Dean Evason, like Provorov might be out for a while, but two days later, he was back in the lineup against Winnipeg.

“I think one of the best availabilities is availability, and obviously I take pride in being able to every game through things,” said Provorov, who noted that was about as close as he’s come to missing a regular-season game in his career. “I take pride in my preparation and doing everything I can on the ice and off the ice – recovery, training, all that stuff, to be ready to be able to play.

“As a guy who is competitive, you want to be out there and you want to play every game.”

And if that durability continues, his hope is to be able to have some special moments in the future with his brother. Ivan is still just 27 years old with the potential to play many years into the future, and while Vladimir is 11 years behind, the dream is the two can share an NHL career together down the road.

“Hopefully we’re going to be able at some point to be able to play against each other – or together,” Provorov said.

## [BlueJackets.com / Blue Jackets get a point in Philadelphia](#)

By Adam Kimelman- December 22, 2024

PHILADELPHIA -- Owen Tippett scored at 3:30 of overtime and had three assists, and the Philadelphia Flyers rallied for a 5-4 win against the Columbus Blue Jackets at Wells Fargo Center on Saturday.

Noah Cates broke the puck out of the Philadelphia zone and found Tippett driving to the net, and the forward deked and scored around Elvis Merzlikins after Tyson Foerster tied it 4-4 with 1:44 left in the third period.

It was Tippett's first four-point game in the NHL.

"He flies around," Foerster said of Tippett. "It's great to watch and everybody on the bench is thinking the same thing so it's pretty cool."

Morgan Frost scored twice, and Cates and Foerster each had a goal and an assist for Philadelphia (15-15-4), which scored four goals in the third and ended a three-game skid (0-3-0). Travis Konecny had three assists, and Samuel Ersson made 21 saves.

"Just goes to show the group we have in here," Tippett said. "We knew in the second intermission we weren't out of it. Just feeling the confidence and glad we got the job done."

Mathieu Olivier, Mikael Pyhtia, Kirill Marchenko and Jake Christiansen scored for Columbus (13-15-6), which has lost six of seven (1-3-3). Merzlikins made 25 saves.

"We played the game hard," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "We maybe ran out of a bit of steam at the end and made a couple mistakes they capitalized on."

Columbus led 2-0 entering the third but Philadelphia began its rally when Tippett skated through the slot, spun and passed back to Frost alone in the left-faceoff circle at 6:53.

"That play was pretty special," Frost said. "The vision for that ... I've missed my fair amount of empty nets this year, so I had to hold on to that one and make sure it went in."

Tippett made another smart play on Frost's second goal that tied it 3-3 at 11:51. He shot the puck into the left corner, then tied up the stick of Blue Jackets defenseman Damon Severson to give Frost an open lane to shoot from the left face-off dot.

"I saw [Frost] was there," Tippett said. "He was in good position right when I shot that puck, and it was a good job for him to stop and just had to kind of take that guy out of it. So it's a great job by him and happy to see him put one in."

Tippett scored an NHL-best 28 goals last season and has scored seven in his past 10 games, but it was his playmaking that keyed the Flyers on Saturday.

"I think that needs to be his next stage, as far as becoming a better player," Philadelphia coach John Tortorella said. "I think that's a big part of him getting better, not just being a shooter but a guy that can make a play."

Olivier made it 1-0 at 15:47 of the first period on a shot from the right circle set up by Kent Johnson's pass from behind the net.

Philadelphia forward Olle Lycksell appeared to score a goal with 5:39 remaining in the second period, but it was overturned after a Blue Jackets coach's challenge determined the play was offside following video review.

Pyyhtia made it 2-0 at 7:05 of the second. Ersson went behind his net to play a puck, but it bounced over his stick and went to Columbus forward Sean Kuraly, who found Pyyhtia in front of an empty net.

After Frost scored his first goal, Cates tied it 2-2 at 8:48, banging in a loose puck in the slot.

Marchenko put the Blue Jackets back ahead 3-2 at 10:01 when he scored from in close.

After Frost's second goal, Christiansen scored his first of the season on a shot from the right point to give Columbus a 4-3 lead at 15:49.

"It's been a while, so it felt good," he said. "Nice play by [Dmitri Voronkov] and the goalie was pretty screened. You want to try to contribute to helping the team win. Felt good for a little bit there and try to focus on the next one."

Foerster tied it 4-4 at 18:16 with Ersson pulled for the extra attacker. The forward got to the net and tipped a shot by Konecny past Merzlikins.

NOTES: Cates has goals in three straight games for the first time in the NHL. ... Konecny's third assist was his 250th in the NHL. ... The Flyers scored three game-tying goals in the third period for the third time in franchise history (also March 26, 2024, and Oct. 16, 2001). Saturday was the first time they accomplished the feat and won. They also became the first team in NHL history to score three game-tying goals in the third period of a game multiple times in the same calendar year. ... Christiansen's only other NHL goal came March 1, 2022. ... Voronkov, in his 100th NHL game, had two assists to give him five points (one goal, four assists) during a four-game point streak. ... Marchenko has seven points (two goals, five assists) during a five-game point streak that matches his best in the NHL. ... Flyers captain Sean Couturier missed the game for personal reasons. ... Lycksell, who was called up from Lehigh Valley of the American Hockey League earlier Saturday, had three shots on goal in 10:58 of ice time in his season debut for Philadelphia.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Unable to Hold Third Period Lead in Loss to Flyers

By Mark Scheig- December 21, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets were in control of things for over 40 minutes on Saturday night. Then all heck broke loose in the third period. The end result was a familiar one in overtime for the Blue Jackets.

Owen Tippett scored the game-winning goal in the extra session to lift the Flyers to a comeback 5-4 win over the Blue Jackets. Morgan Frost scored twice in a four-goal third period for the Flyers to erase a 2-0 deficit.

### Game Recap

The Flyers had the better of the play early in the game. They controlled possession and had the better of the scoring chances. But as the period went on, the Blue Jackets found their legs. They also found an opening goal.

Mathieu Olivier scored his ninth of the season. Jamie Drysdale couldn't clear the puck. Olivier's initial shot got to Kent Johnson. Johnson found Olivier with the pass from behind the net. Flyers goalie Sam Ersson couldn't do much with it.

The Blue Jackets were able to double the lead in the second. Ersson misplayed the puck behind the net to Sean Kuraly. He then found Mikael Pyyhtia in front to score his second goal in his last three games. Things after 40 minutes seemed under control for the Blue Jackets. They even got a Flyers' goal wiped away thanks to an offside. But the third period opened the flood gates.

Thanks to four goals in under five minutes in the third, a 2-0 game turned into a 3-3 thriller. Noah Cates and Kirill Marchenko's goals were bookended by both of Frost's goals. The Blue Jackets seemed to run out of steam a little. Head coach Dean Evason said as much postgame.

The real scare came when Zach Werenski got into an awkward collision with Tippett on the wall. Werenski needed help to the locker room but was able to return. That coupled with another defenseman injury allowed the Flyers to push as the Blue Jackets had 4D for part of the game.

To the Blue Jackets' credit, they took the lead on Jake Christiansen's first of the season with just 4:11 left. But with the goalie pulled, it was Tyson Foerster deflecting a Travis Konecny shot with the goalie pulled to tie it 4-4. Overtime was needed.

Although the Blue Jackets dominated possession in overtime including a near-miss from Marchenko, the Flyers got a 2-on-1 with Tippett winning it. That now marks six losses in seven overtimes for the Blue Jackets this season.

Elvis Merzlikins made 25 saves while Ersson made 21 saves. The Flyers led the final shot count 30-25.

The Blue Jackets head home for one last game before the break against Montreal. The Flyers head to Pittsburgh for their last game before the break before heading out west after Christmas.



## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Tarasov Missed His Chance To Be Long-Term Solution

**By William Espy- December 21, 2024**

For years, Daniil Tarasov was touted as the Columbus Blue Jackets' goaltender of the future. Now it's clear, he missed that opportunity.

The Blue Jackets have always struggled to develop high-end goaltenders. The one exception is current Florida Panthers netminder Sergei Bobrovsky as he took a major step forward in Columbus but some of that can be attributed to his time with the Philadelphia Flyers as well.

Steve Mason, the only player in organization history to have won the Calder Memorial Trophy as the NHL's rookie of the year, is a prime example of a failed opportunity. The list goes on with Anton Forsberg, Oscar Dansk, Joonas Korpisalo, and even current goaltender Elvis Merzlikins. None of them lived up to their high expectations, and now it seems there's another name joining the growing group: Daniil Tarasov.

### Tarasov's Early Doubts

When the Blue Jackets drafted Tarasov in the third round of the 2017 NHL Draft, there were some doubts about him but it wasn't centered around his skill level. Experts were worried that he may not be able to stay healthy, and it could hinder his development. He missed his entire draft year due to an injury, and some teams thought it may be a lingering issue moving forward.

It's starting to seem that those critics may have been right after all, as Tarasov has struggled to stay healthy over the entirety of his NHL career.

As time has progressed, Tarasov has yet to play more than 28 games in a single season, which he accomplished during the 2022-23 season. After making the move to North America during the 2020-21 season, he showed some signs of promise but they were typically short-lived and statistically, he's never lived up to the hype around him over a longer sample size.

### What's Next for Tarasov?

Just a few months ago, there was still the belief that Tarasov would be the next big thing for the Blue Jackets. He then went on to have his best North American season in 2023-24, putting the thought in the head of many that he could surpass Merzlikins and become the starting goaltender as early as this season. That hasn't been the case whatsoever. To this point, he has a .857 save percentage and a goals-against average of 4.26 through nine games. His best performance came against the Toronto Maple Leafs on Oct. 22, when he stopped 26 of 28 shots but it has been a flash in the pan for an otherwise disappointing season.

Despite Merzlikins' struggles, Tarasov has been even worse and now it appears the new management team prefers to roll with Merzlikins and Jet Greaves instead. Tarasov hasn't played in over two weeks, and although neither of the other goaltenders has been phenomenal in their own right, they've been better.

Moving forward, it seems like the best-case scenario for Tarasov's career would be a late breakout season, similar to what Forsberg did with the Ottawa Senators during the 2021-22 season.

If Tarasov is going to do that though, it's seeming less and less likely that it will happen in Columbus. While Greaves likely shouldn't be expected to become the Blue Jackets' long-term starting goaltender, he seems like a much more likely option at this point in time.

With Tarasov hitting restricted free agency this summer, Don Waddell will have to decide whether or not it's wise to continue investing in the Russian goaltender's future. If he thinks that's no longer the case, then the Blue Jackets general manager may opt to not tender a qualifying offer to him.

Tarasov's future is definitely a toss-up at this point, but if he doesn't turn things around soon, it wouldn't be overly surprising to see him depart from Columbus when his contract expires at the end of the season.

## The Hockey Writers / 2024-25 Blue Jackets Will Always Be Remembered As Extraordinary

**By Mark Scheig- December 21, 2024**

The Columbus Blue Jackets play their first game in Philadelphia since the tragic passing of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau. The game is the 34th of the season for the Blue Jackets overall.

I thought this would be a good time to write a reflection of the season piece that quite honestly, has nothing to do with hockey on the ice. It has everything to do with what's really important.

Flyers head coach John Tortorella said on Saturday morning that the Gaudreau family will be at Wells Fargo Center for their game against the Blue Jackets. There will be some sort of a pregame ceremony as the Flyers are the team closest to where the Gaudreau's grew up.

"I'm gonna see Guy and his family before the game," Tortorella said. "We stay in touch. He's been great for the team. They've done a little traveling. They've been out in Calgary. It's been a lot. (The) holidays. It's hard I'm sure for the family. We're gonna try to make him as comfortable as possible when he comes into obviously a circumstance that's a hell of a lot bigger than a damn hockey game."

This is Bigger Than Hockey

Tortorella said it best. This circumstance is a lot bigger than a game of hockey. While being able to play hockey has helped normalize things to a degree, there is nothing normal about this season for the Blue Jackets and beyond.

We could talk about the team's record. We could talk about how they've struggled on the road and in second periods. We could talk about the state of the goaltending or what might the team do to address several needs.

None of those things are even remotely close to the biggest story here. Being there for the Gaudreau family is the story. Doing anything possible to help comfort them while dealing with one of the most unimaginable things is the story. With the Blue Jackets in town, the Flyers are doing their part to be a comfort for the Gaudreau's.

The Blue Jackets are more than doing their part too. We'll have plenty of time to go through their issues on the ice. But right here and right now, we're going to talk about the way they've conducted themselves this season.

That is the reason why no matter how the rest of the 2024-25 season shakes out, these Blue Jackets will always be remembered as extraordinary. They've had to play an entire season through something in which there isn't a playbook for.

Reflections of the Blue Jackets

GM Don Waddell and head coach Dean Evason deserve a lot of credit for the leadership they've been able to provide in trying circumstances. They've help to foster a culture around the Blue Jackets that has made the team tighter than ever.

In talking to several Blue Jackets' players over the course of the season, there's been one common theme. "The room is tighter than ever." In the face of tragedy, the Blue Jackets have come together in a way that Evason has wanted.

Evason has been and always will be a team first coach. That was his message from the moment he was hired by the Blue Jackets. Individual things were put behind for the benefit of the team, even down to the photos in the locker room.

Each picture over a player's locker stall is one that has multiple teammates on it. Also, the players were put in positions in the room that were away from the usual which made them get to know other players. This has helped foster that culture of team.

This is the first way that the Blue Jackets' have honored the legacy of the Gaudreau's. Johnny and Matthew were always team first.

The second way the Blue Jackets have honored the legacy of the Gaudreau's is by playing most nights with maximum effort. That was another of Waddell's and Evason's messages when they were first hired. The team might not be the most skilled every night, but they're committed to being the hardest working.

This is exactly how Johnny would want the Blue Jackets to play. Records and results aside, the play on the ice would make the Gaudreau's proud. They would want the team to play hockey. Meredith Gaudreau reflected that when she shared her thoughts before the season. They've taken her message to heart.

Imagine how hard that is for a moment. We cannot even begin to fathom what the Blue Jackets have endured so far and what they will continue to endure. Those emotions will come up again pregame in Philadelphia where they're going to have to try to find a way to play hockey after a pregame ceremony. Those few minutes before the game will be more important than the two and a half hours after puck drop.

The Blue Jackets promised that Johnny and Matthew will always be with them. No matter if it's been at Nationwide Arena or on the road, Johnny's jersey is with them. It's hung in a locker stall as a reminder that he's always around. Most postgame interviews at home have been conducted in front of where Johnny's stall is located at. It's not hard to imagine the kind of smile Johnny would have if he was here to see all of this.

#### Always Extraordinary

Why will these Blue Jackets always be extraordinary? It's simple. They are doing what they promised they'd do. They're playing hockey in a way that keeps the memory of the Gaudreau's at the center of what they do.

The Blue Jackets lost their captain Boone Jenner in Training Camp to an injury while doing a drill. They could have had every excuse in the world to not be motivated, to not give maximum effort and to not try to make something out of this season. Johnny wouldn't have wanted any of that. He would have wanted them to play and give it their all. Mission accomplished to this point.

Then even if we turn our attention on the ice, the record might not show it, but there have been major improvements in several areas. The Blue Jackets have done that knowing that there's a huge hole no one can ever replace.

What stands out in all of this is the things we don't see on camera. Behind the scenes, the Blue Jackets have made it a point to honor the Gaudreau family in everything when possible. Remember when Noa's second birthday party happened? The turnout was fantastic for the occasion. In the darkest of moments, the team rises up to meet the moment.

Imagine what Sean Monahan has gone through here. He came to the Blue Jackets to play with his best friend. Imagine the heaviness he's played with each game. He's been everything and so much more to

the team on and off the ice. His involvement with the Gaudreau family today just shows the quality of person he is. Truly extraordinary.

Erik Gudbranson was one of the reasons Gaudreau came to Columbus. He's there for the Gaudreau's like Monahan is, like most of the Blue Jackets are. Despite being injured, Gudbranson is around the team helping in any way he can. He's been a true leader through all of this.

Yet, we don't know each and every story that has happened behind the scenes. There have been very emotional moments. There have been moments of team bonding that have helped shape the current culture of the Blue Jackets. The stories we do know make them extraordinary. Just imagine how much more so if we knew everything they've done to honor the Gaudreau's.

Saturday night in Philadelphia is more than a hockey game. It's a moment to reflect on the impact and legacy of the Gaudreau brothers in the neighborhood they grew up in.

No matter what happens the rest of this season, the 2024-25 Columbus Blue Jackets will always be remembered as an extraordinary hockey team. Their approach on the ice, the way they conduct themselves off the ice and the way they are there for a family hurting more than anyone can know will ensure they are a team that will never be forgotten.

These Blue Jackets won't be forgotten because they made sure the Gaudreau's weren't forgotten. Not now. Not ever. That's the very definition of extraordinary.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Three Things: Elvis Encore Goes Awry, Depth Scoring, Loser Point Keeping Them In It

By Will Chase- December 22, 2024

It was a brutal end to an exhilarating third period.

Owen Tippett scored the overtime game-winner and had three assists to help the Philadelphia Flyers overcome a 2-0 third-period deficit and beat the Columbus Blue Jackets 5-4 from Wells Fargo Center on Saturday night.

The Flyers honored the Gaudreau brothers, Johnny and Matthew, pregame.

### Elvis Encore Goes Awry

Head coach Dean Evason kept the lineup the same following Thursday's 4-2 win over the New Jersey Devils which meant going back to Elvis Merzlikins in net.

Thursday's victory featured Merzlikins' best game of the season and one of the best of his career as he made a season-high 40 saves.

Through two shutout periods on Saturday against Philadelphia, Columbus was on its way to securing a rare road win.

Instead, a combined six third-period goals sent this one to overtime:

(6:53 — PHI Goal):

- Morgan Frost (5) scored to make it 2-1 Jackets, assisted by Tippett (9) and Travis Konecny (22). Tippett is on a three-game point streak (two goals, four assists).

(8:48 — PHI Goal):

- Noah Cates (5) tied the game 2-2, assisted by Tyson Foerster (7) and Cam York (3). Cates is on a three-game point streak (three goals, one assists). Foerster is on a three-game point streak (three goals, three assists).

(10:01 — CBJ Goal):

- Kirill Marchenko (12) gives Columbus its second lead, assisted by Dmitri Voronkov (8) and Ivan Provorov (10). Voronkov is on a four-game point streak (one goal, four assists).

(11:51 — PHI Goal):

- Morgan Frost (6) tied the game 3-3, assisted by Tippett (10) and Travis Konecny (23).

(15:49 — CBJ Goal):

- Jake Christiansen (1) scored the go-ahead goal, giving Columbus its third lead, assisted by Voronkov (9) and Ivan Provorov (10).

(11:51 — PHI Goal):

- Foerster (9) tied the game 4-4, assisted by Konecny (24) and Tippett (11).

In overtime, the Flyers broke the alternating goal-scoring pattern.

(3:30 — PHI Goal):

- Tippett (11) scored the game-winner, assisted by Cates (6).

Merzlikins made 25 saves. In all situations, Philadelphia outshot Columbus 70-45 and held the advantage in expected goals 2.7-1.98 per Natural Stat Trick. Samuel Ersson made 21 saves on 25 shots.

#### Depth Scoring

The Blue Jackets got their goals from a variety of guys.

Mathieu Olivier continues to deliver offensively as he scores his ongoing career-best ninth goal at 15:47 of the first period to start the scoring.

Kent Johnson added his 10th assist. Olivier is one point from matching his career-best 15 points.

Mikael Pyyhtia scored his third goal, making it 2-0 at 7:05 of the second period. Sean Kuraly added his sixth assist.

All three goals have come this season and he has two in the last three games.

Kirill Marchenko stayed hot with his team-leading 12th goal at 10:01 of the third period. He's on a five-game point streak (two goals, five assists) and has 34 points in 34 games.

Christiansen's goal at 15:49 was his first this season and the second of his career.

#### Loser Point Keeping Them In It

Columbus came into the game with an opportunity to leapfrog Philadelphia and tie the New York Rangers for fifth with 33 points in the Metropolitan Division.

Instead, the Flyers take over sole possession of fifth place and Columbus last place in the division. However, only three points separates Columbus from the Pittsburgh Penguins for fourth.

Columbus is 1-6 in overtime this season and has lost four straight overtime games but that extra point has kept them close to the competition. They're six points out of a wild card spot.

#### One More Before Break

The Blue Jackets will entertain Patrik Laine and the Montreal Canadiens from Nationwide Arena on Monday, Dec. 23 before the NHL goes on their Christmas break. Puck drop is set for 7 p.m. ET.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Denton Mateychuk Recalled by Columbus, Could Be on The Verge of Making His Long-Awaited NHL Debut

**By 1OB Staff- December 22, 2024**

Could it be Denton Mateychuk time?

It certainly appears close – if not inevitable. The Blue Jackets recalled their prized prospect from the Cleveland Monsters (AHL) on Sunday, a day after both Zach Werenski and Jake Christiansen sustained injuries in the team's 5-4 overtime loss in Philadelphia.

Both Werenski and Christiansen left the game briefly but did return. Head coach Dean Evason said the team is cautiously optimistic about Werenski's outlook, saying post game that they're hoping his injury doesn't "seize up."

Christiansen blocked a shot off his foot and spoke to the media after the game. The Blue Jackets were off Sunday and did not provide a status update on either player.

But at least in the short term, the much-anticipated recall of Mateychuk has generated excitement in the Blue Jackets' sphere. The 20-year-old was Columbus' first round pick (No. 12) overall in 2022, and since turning pro this spring, has done nothing but dominate at the AHL level. At the time of his recall, Mateychuk leads all AHL defensemen in goals (9) and points (25). He also has four power play goals and 54 shots on goal in 27 games with Cleveland in 2024-25.

Other roster moves from the Blue Jackets on Sunday:

- Justin Danforth was placed on injured reserve retroactive to Dec. 10. He's missed six games with a lower body injury.
- Jet Greaves was added to the roster on emergency recall.
- James Malatesta was loaned back to the Monsters



## The Athletic / NHL Power Rankings: Capitals stay on top, plus each team's best of 2024

**By Sean Gentile and Dom Luszczyszyn- December 21, 2024**

The holiday season is here and 2024 is about to come to a close. It's a perfect time to reflect on the year that was and celebrate the best of the best.

Every team, no matter how bad, had some bright spots and we here at Rankings HQ wanted to champion that. We tallied all the numbers for every player over the calendar year and are ready to wrap things up for the year. Here's each team's MVP from January-to-December, the best of 2024. As always, points percentage is the tiebreaker.

### 1. Washington Capitals, 21-8-2

Last week: 1

Sean's ranking: 1

Dom's ranking: 1

Dylan Strome

2024 stats: 83GP 26-60-86, +14 Net Rating

We knew Strome could be a competent top-six center on a terrible team. That's what he was in his final season with the Blackhawks — flawed, certainly, but productive in spurts, and a guy who seemed capable of derailing the tanks in 2022. Thus, Chicago dumped him for nothing.

It was a sketchy move at the time, and Strome has spent the past three seasons making it look stupid. This season, he seems to have leveled up once more. He's not a competent top-sixer on a terrible team — he's a pretty good first-liner on a legitimate contender, thanks in part to high-end playmaking and a defensive game that is, if nothing else, passable for his role. When Alex Ovechkin breaks the goal record, Strome will have a lot to do with it.

### 2. Vegas Golden Knights, 21-8-3

Last week: 2

Sean's ranking: 2

Dom's ranking: 2

Jack Eichel

2024 stats: 64GP 27-50-77, +13 Net Rating

The totals may seem modest compared to other stars on the list, but that's an availability issue, not a skill issue for Eichel. Thanks mostly to a torrid start to this season, Eichel is sitting on a 99-point pace for the calendar year — that's firmly franchise-caliber.

That availability issue is a real one, though, for Eichel. Over his nine-year career, Eichel has missed 15 games or more six times. For 2025, we're hoping those issues are finally put to rest. A perfect bill of health could make him a Hart Trophy dark horse.

### 3. Florida Panthers, 20-11-2

Last week: 7

Sean's ranking: 3

Dom's ranking: 4

Sam Reinhart

2024 stats: 101GP 63-44-107, +29 Net Rating

The Panthers had three legit contenders, and the other two would have been fine choices. With all due respect to Aleksander Barkov and Matthew Tkachuk, though, neither scored 63 goals. That's all Reinhart, whose production in the calendar year has set him apart from ... well, nearly everyone.

On top of that, Reinhart carries legit defensive value. It comes with a bit of an asterisk, since he's a winger who plays a large chunk of his minutes alongside Barkov, but it's still a big part of Reinhart's game, a big part of what makes him an elite NHL player and a big part of what makes the Panthers the defending champs.

#### 4. Toronto Maple Leafs, 20-10-2

Last week: 6

Sean's ranking: 6

Dom's ranking: 3

Auston Matthews

2024 stats: 76GP 51-38-89, +25 Net Rating

Not even a bafflingly slow start to the 2024-25 season could keep Matthews away from the top spot here — he was that good to close the 2023-24 season. In 48 games he scored 40 goals and 63 points while playing Selke-level defense. He finished fourth in MVP voting for good reason after a special season where he almost scored 70.

Where is that guy this year? We're still not sure. The massive drop-off (from a Net Rating per 82 of plus-34 last year to plus-17 this year) is likely an indication that Matthews is still not 100 percent healthy. Or maybe he's saving it for the playoffs. Either way, Matthews remains Toronto's best player and it's only a matter of time before he starts showing it again.

#### 5. Carolina Hurricanes, 20-10-1

Last week: 5

Sean's ranking: 4

Dom's ranking: 4

Sebastian Aho

2024 stats: 86GP 34-58-92, +19 Net Rating

We gas up the Canes' approach quite a bit around here, and for good reason — they've become one of the most reliably successful franchises in the league. That approach wouldn't work, though, without Aho at 1C. He brings skill and reliability in equal parts, and his productivity gives Carolina the leeway necessary to focus on other priorities farther down the lineup.

#### 6. Tampa Bay Lightning, 18-10-2

Last week: 11

Sean's ranking: 5

Dom's ranking: 5

Nikita Kucherov

2024 stats: 76GP 32-105-137, +26 Net Rating

Kucherov probably had this one locked up back in April, with the Art Ross Trophy win and whatnot, but he's basically carried his scoring pace over to this season; his points per 60 has fallen from 4.93 to 4.9. Only Kirill Kaprizov has a higher average Game Score in 2024-25 than Kucherov's 2.13. When it comes to carrying the offensive load, he has a little more help this season than last, but he remains the Lightning's engine at five-on-five and on the power play.

7. Minnesota Wild, 20-8-4

Last week: 3

Sean's ranking: 8

Dom's ranking: 7

Kirill Kaprizov

2024 stats: 72GP 55-55-110, +29 Net Rating

Was there any call easier than this one? Probably not. What Kaprizov does on a night-to-night basis — generating constant offense from the wing on a fringe contender that's dangerously short on impact forwards — deserves some sort of award. This season, he's back on the Hart Trophy shortlist, and it's well-deserved. He's gone pointless in just six of Minnesota's games.

8. New Jersey Devils, 21-11-3

Last week: 8

Sean's ranking: 7

Dom's ranking: 8

Nico Hischier

2024 stats: 81GP 35-44-79, +18 Net Rating

There was a bit of uproar before the season when we listed Nico Hischier as a franchise player for our Player Tiers project after a down year. After a strong start to the 2024-25 season, we're feeling pretty good about that decision. Hischier ranks 12th in Net Rating on the season and has firmly planted himself in the Selke conversation earning 60 percent of the expected goals this season. A point-per-game center who is one of the game's best without the puck? Sign us up.

9. Winnipeg Jets, 23-10-1

Last week: 4

Sean's ranking: 9

Dom's ranking: 10

Connor Hellebuyck

2024 stats: .918 SV%, 41 GSAs

There are only two guys on this list who contributed over 40 goals of value over the calendar year: The best skater in the world and the best goalie in the world. Hellebuyck's work over the last year has been sensational, with league-best numbers to end last season and league-best numbers to start this season. There was no question that he would be Winnipeg's 2024 MVP. Not even a weak playoff showing could stop him from being the league's most valuable goalie in 2024.

10. Edmonton Oilers, 19-11-2

Last week: 10

Sean's ranking: 11

Dom's ranking: 9

Connor McDavid

2024 stats: 97GP 41-129-170, +42 Net Rating

Who else?

We all know McDavid is the best player in the world, and his 2024 statline is proof of that. Scoring 170 points over 97 games is absolutely absurd, considering that includes 25 playoff games, where he still scored at a 137-point pace against the best the league has to offer. The Oilers played four elite defensive teams en route to the Stanley Cup Final, and McDavid still managed to put up numbers only matched by Wayne Gretzky and Mario Lemieux.

McDavid is on another planet and it shows with a league-leading plus-42 Net Rating in 2024. As usual, it's McDavid and then everyone else.

11. Los Angeles Kings, 19-9-4

Last week: 9

Sean's ranking: 9

Dom's ranking: 10

Anze Kopitar

2024 stats: 84GP 21-53-74, +11 Net Rating

No center born in August 1987 is having a 2024-25 season as good as Kopitar's. Think about that for a second. In fact, Kopitar is producing points at the highest rate of his career (3.51 per 60, nearly 0.5 more than second place). Remarkable stuff from a no-doubt Hall of Famer.

12. Dallas Stars, 19-12-0

Last week: 12

Sean's ranking: 12

Dom's ranking: 12

Miro Heiskanen

2024 stats: 86GP 15-44-59, +21 Net Rating

Fun fact: Miro Heiskanen has never finished higher than seventh in Norris voting. Ask anyone in hockey to name seven defensemen better than Heiskanen, though, and they would all struggle. Heiskanen deserves more shine — he just doesn't produce enough to get it. We're giving him some flowers here

though as Dallas' MVP. The Stars don't make the conference finals last year without him and they're not a perennial contender without him either. Heiskanen is their most important player.

#### 13. Vancouver Canucks, 16-10-6

Last week: 13

Sean's ranking: 13

Dom's ranking: 13

Quinn Hughes

2024 stats: 90GP 14-80-94, +29 Net Rating

The first half of 2024 was about Hughes sealing the deal on the first Norris Trophy of his career. Mission accomplished. The second half has been about laying the foundation for a second Norris — and maybe more. Hughes, as we've said a few times since October, should be in the MVP conversation.

He's leading the league's defensemen in Net Rating for a second straight season at plus-10.7, a hair ahead of Cale Makar, and has closed the gap on Makar in the scoring race, too. He plays huge minutes and Vancouver wins them decisively. What more can you want?

#### 14. Ottawa Senators, 17-13-2

Last week: 24

Sean's ranking: 14

Dom's ranking: 15

Brady Tkachuk

2024 stats: 80GP 36-43-79, +18 Net Rating

Amazon's docuseries "FACEOFF: Inside the NHL" is returning for a second season and Tkachuk was the first player revealed to be part of it. Exciting stuff and completely deserved given how he's establishing himself. He's following right in his brother's footsteps as a premier power forward and this might be the year the younger Tkachuk finally drags the Senators to the playoffs.

#### 15. Boston Bruins, 17-13-4

Last week: 15

Sean's ranking: 16

Dom's ranking: 14

David Pastrnak

2024 stats: 93GP 41-60-101, +32 Net Rating

Pastrnak is another guy who locked this one up sometime in the spring. Has he been at his best since October? Recent production aside, not really. He turned in an MVP-caliber season in 2023-24, though, showing that he can be The Guy on his own Patrice Bergeron-less line. Outside of Kucherov and Kaprizov, you won't find a winger who's more capable of running the show.

#### 16. Colorado Avalanche, 19-15-0

Last week: 14

Sean's ranking: 15

Dom's ranking: 16

Nathan MacKinnon

2024 stats: 89GP 49-97-146, +32 Net Rating

Last year's MVP is currently leading the league in scoring and making a pretty decent case for a repeat performance this season. The one thing stopping him? He may not be the team's MVP this season — that would be Cale Makar. MacKinnon takes the cake for the calendar year on the back of his Hart Trophy-winning effort in 2023-24, but Makar is making things interesting this year.

17. Utah HC, 15-11-5

Last week: 19

Sean's ranking: 17

Dom's ranking: 17

Clayton Keller

2024 stats: 74GP 31-44-75, +9 Net Rating

Keller might not be in this spot much longer — Dylan Guenther is an offensive dynamo and Mikhail Sergachev sure looks like a No. 1 defenseman in his first season with Utah — but he still deserves some credit for turning into a well-rounded, reliable producer on the wing. He's helped Utah stay in the thick of the wild-card race.

18. Calgary Flames, 15-11-7

Last week: 18

Sean's ranking: 18

Dom's ranking: 19

MacKenzie Weegar

2024 stats: 78GP 16-32-48, +8 Net Rating

Weegar has always been a great defenseman, but the second half of last season felt like the moment he really blossomed into a No. 1. Weegar became an all-situations stud with a role on the top power play and started to put up some big offensive numbers. Combine that with his solid work defensively and there aren't many defenders ahead of him. Calgary's got a good one.

19. Philadelphia Flyers, 14-15-4

Last week: 17

Sean's ranking: 20

Dom's ranking: 18

Travis Konecny

2024 stats: 72GP 32-42-74, +8 Net Rating

If the Flyers want to take the next step in their rebuild, Matvei Michkov will probably have to be their best player. For now, that honor belongs to Konecny — and while he's not a franchise talent, he's still quite good. At the moment, he's in the midst of his most productive offensive season in the NHL (3.28

points per 60) and showing that his spot on Team Canada isn't a fluke. Any roster would be lucky to have his offensive toolkit in the mix.

20. Pittsburgh Penguins, 15-14-5

Last week: 23

Sean's ranking: 19

Dom's ranking: 22

Sidney Crosby

2024 stats: 80GP 30-59-89, +13 Net Rating

He's 37 years old. He just went 10 games without scoring a goal. He's been in some degree of defensive decline for a few seasons. And still, nobody on the Penguins' roster comes close to touching Crosby in terms of 2024 impact. Does that help explain why Pittsburgh has hovered around mediocrity? For sure. Crosby, though, bears none of the blame.

21. New York Rangers, 15-15-1

Last week: 16

Sean's ranking: 22

Dom's ranking: 20

Igor Shesterkin

2024 stats: .913 SV%, 35 GSAX

Before the Rangers completely imploded, they were a team to be feared. That's almost entirely because of Shesterkin, a top-two goalie with plenty of good arguments to not be No. 2 on that list.

His work in the playoffs is the best example: 15.6 GSAX in just 16 games thanks to a .926 save percentage. Shesterkin's big-game ability is what separates him from the pack and is what helped give him the second-best GSAX of any goalie over the last year.

In order to show that off, though, the Rangers will have to actually get there first and that's looking shockingly precarious right now. It's time for Shesterkin to lock in and drag them to the playoffs.

22. St. Louis Blues, 15-16-3

Last week: 20

Sean's ranking: 21

Dom's ranking: 21

Jordan Binnington

2024 stats: .913 SV%, 33 GSAX

Lucky for Binnington, voting for MVP closed Thursday afternoon before he allowed three goals on 10 shots. Woof.

Kidding aside, it wouldn't have mattered because it wasn't even close. Last season Binnington finished second in GSAX at plus-29.7 and that was almost entirely driven by a second half where he saved 28.5 in 31 games. Binnington has predictably regressed to start this season, but hey, maybe he's just a second-half guy. If last season was any indication, the best is yet to come.

### 23. Detroit Red Wings, 13-14-4

Last week: 27

Sean's ranking: 23

Dom's ranking: 25

Lucas Raymond

2024 stats: 76GP 33-44-77, +11 Net Rating

On one hand, Detroit indeed got shafted by the lottery gods back in 2020. On the other, they still walked away from that draft with Raymond, who just might be their best forward for a second straight season. Detroit's roster is a mess overall, but they're set at Raymond's spot.

### 24. New York Islanders, 12-14-7

Last week: 22

Sean's ranking: 24

Dom's ranking: 24

Bo Horvat

2024 stats: 83GP 28-30-58, +10 Net Rating

Picking an MVP from the Islanders over the last year is not easy. Mathew Barzal is their best player, but has missed a lot of time and hasn't looked great this year even when he has played. Noah Dobson has brought in the most value, but many Islanders fans seem to not hold him in high favor. So we're going with Horvat, who has consistently been a strong five-on-five driver for the team. This year he's earned 57 percent of the expected goals while outscoring opponents 24-10. Good stuff. Maybe with Barzal's return and an actually competent power play, Horvat can get back up to his usual 70-point pace.

### 25. Seattle Kraken, 15-17-2

Last week: 21

Sean's ranking: 26

Dom's ranking: 23

Joey Daccord

2024 stats: .914 SV%, 23 GSAx

Daccord kept the Kraken afloat for huge chunks of last season, and he's maintained that level of play so far in 2024-25. Seattle's lack of offensive firepower seems to be a feature, not a bug, but Daccord at least gives them a puncher's chase to overcome it. If nothing else, they can stop crossing their fingers and hoping that Philipp Grubauer figures things out.

### 26. Anaheim Ducks, 12-14-4

Last week: 29

Sean's ranking: 25

Dom's ranking: 27

Lukas Dostal



2024 stats: .912 SV%, 23 GSAs

Not much has gone right in Anaheim outside of Dostal. Maybe most impressively, he seems to have greased the wheels for a John Gibson trade.

27. Columbus Blue Jackets, 13-15-5

Last week: 25

Sean's ranking: 27

Dom's ranking: 26

Zach Werenski

2024 stats: 68GP 20-43-63, +10 Net Rating

It's been fun to watch Werenski cook for a second straight season; the toolbox always seemed full, but injuries had been an issue. Now, though, he's playing at a consistently high level — and he's somehow still just 27. Columbus has plenty of issues, but Werenski isn't one of them. Get him some help.

28. Montreal Canadiens, 12-16-3

Last week: 30

Sean's ranking: 28

Dom's ranking: 29

Sam Montembeault

2024 stats: .902 SV%, 24 GSAs

The Canadiens were one of the league's worst defensive teams in 2024. That was true last season and it's true again this season. Thank goodness for Sam Montembeault papering over those issues and saving 24 goals above expected, one of the highest marks for any goalie. If not for him, the Canadiens would be an on-ice disaster. Well... more so.

29. San Jose Sharks, 11-19-5

Last week: 28

Sean's ranking: 30

Dom's ranking: 28

MacKenzie Blackwood

2024 stats: .910 SV%, 19 GSAs

Farewell, MacKenzie Blackwood: you were the only reason the Sharks didn't lose 7-1 most nights. A .910 save percentage in San Jose is a miracle.

By the way, the top two skaters over the last year are two guys who weren't even on the Sharks last season: Jake Walman and Macklin Celebrini. That's pretty funny.

30. Chicago Blackhawks, 12-19-2

Last week: 32

Sean's ranking: 29

Dom's ranking: 31

Jason Dickinson

2024 stats: 78GP 16-12-28, +1 Net Rating

It is an extremely telling sign about the state of Chicago's rebuild that the top guy for Net Rating on the Blackhawks is their shutdown center.

To Dickinson's credit, he has legitimately blossomed into a Selke-caliber player. His modest plus-1 Net Rating hides the fact that he had a plus-6.2 Defensive Rating over the calendar year, one of the highest among all forwards. Dickinson is the real deal.

This time next year, it'll likely be Connor Bedard in this spot — not weighed down by a slow start to 2024-25 or genuinely poor defense to close 2023-24. But the reason he's not here has something to do with the team's next-best player being Dickinson. This kid needs some serious help.

31. Nashville Predators, 9-17-7

Last week: 31

Sean's ranking: 31

Dom's ranking: 30

Roman Josi

2024 stats: 80GP 23-59-82, +20 Net Rating

The Predators are such a disaster that even Josi is getting squeezed; he's scoring nearly a half point per 60 less than last season, and he's posting his worst defensive impacts in some time. On top of that, he's missed a few games due to injury.

None of that erases just how good he's been overall, of course; it's just one of those seasons in Nashville. Flush it, move on and hope those 30-something stars reverse course.

32. Buffalo Sabres, 11-17-4

Last week: 26

Sean's ranking: 32

Dom's ranking: 32

Rasmus Dahlin

2024 stats: 69GP 16-33-49, +13 Net Rating

The Sabres have been without Dahlin since Dec. 3 — they're 0-5-2 in those games and have been outscored 32-17 in those games. Were they already on a four-game losing streak when he was injured? Yes. But with Dahlin, there's no way that stretches to 11 games. Dahlin is without question Buffalo's most important player and the Sabres have nowhere to go but down without him.

Dahlin's offense may have declined a bit over the last year, but his defensive growth has been exemplary. He's a two-way force and the Sabres desperately need him back.

## The Athletic / After cancer diagnosis, former PWHL goalie Erica Howe finding support, raising awareness through hockey

By Hailey Salvian- December 21, 2024

Former Toronto Sceptres goalie Erica Howe was at work in early July when she first noticed the lump in her breast.

She was at the Mississauga fire station where she'd been a full-time firefighter since her retirement from professional hockey, wiping her shirt when she noticed it.

"I was honestly brushing some jelly doughnut dust off," Howe said. "And I was like, 'Oh that's weird.'"

She wasn't worried about it at first; a quick Google search told her that it's not uncommon for women in their thirties to get breast lumps. But at the urging of former teammates and friends — along with her wife, Kelley — Howe agreed to see her doctor.

On Aug. 26, at 32 years old, Howe was diagnosed with stage two invasive ductal carcinoma, a form of breast cancer that she later found had spread to her lymph nodes. In September, she had the lump removed, and later found the cancer had spread to her lymph nodes, which meant chemotherapy would be required.

"I had plans for this year. Maybe I'd play forward in a Senior A (hockey) league. Maybe be the Toronto Sceptres' emergency backup if they needed me to. My wife and I were trying to get pregnant," Howe said. "I can't do these things: I physically can't, I mentally can't.

"I think that is one of the most challenging parts for me ... It's almost like my life came to a full stop."

In the months since her diagnosis, Howe has used her platform to raise awareness and money for cancer research. An online fundraiser she started last week has already raised over \$21,000 for the Canadian Cancer Society. And, on Saturday afternoon, the Sceptres will host a Cancer Awareness game, where the team will help raise additional funds and rally around Howe, who is planning to attend the game.

"Saturday will be a great opportunity for the community to show their support," said Howe's longtime friend and former goalie partner Liz Knox. "As much as she may not like it, I know that it will give us all a great sense of accomplishment to show her that there's lots of people thinking of her and rooting for her."

When Howe was first diagnosed, she only told her closest friends and did not share anything publicly until an Instagram post in October. Howe has never been a fan of the spotlight, and she wanted time to process the news in private. When she was ready to share her story, she sent a group text to her inner circle first.

"I'm ready to post on the Internet," she said. "Thank you guys for keeping my secret and keeping me safe and supporting me. I want to have some fundraising ideas. I want to make a difference."

One of Howe's original ideas was to raise a set amount of money and have Sceptres goalie Carly 'CJ' Jackson give her a mullet before she began chemotherapy. Because treatment was to begin quickly, that idea turned into more of an intimate event than a fundraiser.

Teammates, friends and colleagues gathered at the fire station in late October; people wore pink, and the station brought out its pink breast cancer awareness truck. Jackson cut Howe's hair into their signature mullet, and former Sceptres forward Jess Jones shaved her head to support Howe, who was told she'd likely lose her hair in chemo.

“I still can’t believe she did it,” Howe said. “I joked that if the roles were reversed, I don’t know if I would have been able to do it with her.

“To have my best friend sitting there with me — and cutting her hair alongside me — it was something I’ll never forget.”

Since then, Howe has launched her fundraiser and the Sceptres have planned its Cancer Awareness game to help support the cause. Members of her fire crew have been selling toques to raise additional funds and will be giving them out to people who make donations at the game on Saturday. In going public with her diagnosis, Howe has made herself a face of breast cancer, at least in the women’s hockey circle she’s in.

“It’s just a really selfless thing to do because she doesn’t want to be in the spotlight,” said Knox. “And I think it’s made us all reflect because Howie is the healthiest human that I know. If this can happen to her, it can happen to anybody.”

Through it all, Howe has been undergoing biweekly chemotherapy treatment, which leaves her tired and nauseous for a few days afterward. Howe said she was having a good day on Thursday when she spoke to a few members of the media, including The Athletic, and that her treatment plan is set with “an end date.”

“Right now, I feel like myself,” she said on the call.

The hardest part, she said, has been the mental side. Because she is immunocompromised, Howe cannot work, play hockey, or be in any environment where there’s a chance of infection.

“Every week is a battle (and) I go through the cycle of the symptoms, but I have all these people there to support me,” she said. “And I think that’s part of why I want to make a difference for others because I can only imagine what it would be like if I didn’t have all that.”

On Saturday, Howe is planning to arrive at Coca-Cola Coliseum before thousands of fans get into the building and will be in a private suite, wearing a mask to keep her safe. It will be the first PWHL game she’s attended this season — and her first as a fan since retiring from the PWHL in June.

“I’m looking for any kind of normalcy in my life right now, so to be in the rink and to be in Coca-Cola, especially, I think I’ll feel like home,” Howe said. “I’m getting chills down my back and emotional just thinking about playing in those (playoff) games last year.

“I’m excited to be in the building this year and feel the atmosphere.”

## The Athletic / Canada rallies to beat Sweden in second World Juniors pre-tournament game: Who stood out?

**By Corey Pronman- December 22, 2024**

Canada beat Sweden 4-2 on Saturday night in their second pre-tournament game ahead of the 2025 World Juniors. Canada's Easton Cowan (Toronto) and Calum Ritchie (Colorado) and Sweden's Theo Lindstein (St. Louis) and Otto Stenberg (St. Louis) had multi-point games.

Cowan stood out again following his hat trick against Switzerland. He's the clear driver on Canada's top line, constantly competing to be around the puck and making plays with pace. He looks like the go-to player on this Canadian team. I also praised Matthew Schaefer's performance versus Switzerland. One bad turnover aside that led to a goal against, he was excellent again. The 2025 draft-eligible may be Canada's best defenseman right now.

Canada's second line didn't get a point, but I liked the play of Berkly Catton (Seattle) a lot in this one. He was involved in a number of chances, and with his great skating he always kept the play going up the ice quickly.

In what was a tight-checking game, the play of Swedish defenseman Tom Willander (Vancouver) was notable. He's an excellent skater, and closed on a lot of Canadian forwards to break up plays and nullify scoring opportunities. His puck-moving was good enough, too. I don't think it's his calling card, but interestingly he was on Sweden's first power-play unit. I'm unsure whether that will be his spot all tournament, though.

## The Athletic / NHL wish list 2024-25: What gift each team needs most this holiday season

**By The Athletic NHL Staff- December 22, 2024**

What's at the top of your favorite NHL team's holiday wish list?

Is it a trade to fill a need? Or a star player to find his game? Or, the classic: health in the new year?

The Athletic asked its NHL staff for one last-minute gift idea per team. Here's what they said.

### Anaheim Ducks

Trevor Zegras looking like his old self: It's ridiculous to think we're talking about an inventive 23-year-old playmaker whose star should still be on the rise. Zegras has run into tough luck on the injury front, as he's recovering from knee surgery after a 2023-24 season wrecked by groin issues and a broken ankle. When he's been healthy over the last two years, Zegras has averaged only 0.45 points per game after putting up points at an 0.81 clip in his first two full seasons. Though inroads have been made toward the Ducks' wanting him to be a more responsible player, the offensive creativity that was at the heart of his game doesn't surface as often as it did as a rookie.

### Boston Bruins

No. 1 center: The Bruins invested \$54.25 million in Elias Lindholm with hopes he would be a good top-line center for David Pastrnak. So far, this has not been the case. Lindholm has been centering the No. 2 line. Even there, the first-year Bruin's offense is muted. Pavel Zacha has more chemistry with Pastrnak than Lindholm, but he is not a dynamic first-line center.

### Buffalo Sabres

Leadership: The Sabres' 11-game winless streak (now 12) recently prompted Lindy Ruff to call this the "toughest solve" he's been around. Owner Terry Pegula spoke to the team this week and expressed confidence in the group assembled by general manager Kevyn Adams. But the Sabres are in a funk that has dropped them to last place in the Eastern Conference. The words of their owner, GM and coach haven't snapped them out of it. It's going to take on-ice leadership, and Rasmus Dahlin's return should help. Outside help would be beneficial, too.

### Calgary Flames

An NHL youngster 23 and under: It's been on Craig Conroy's wish list for some time. A young, budding NHL talent with untapped potential who can be part of the Flames' solution. There are a handful of reclamations they could invest in, with varying asking prices. The Flames have some draft capital to play with to get that piece. The question is, who? Trevor Zegras (when healthy)? Dylan Cozens? Marco Rossi? Nick Robertson?

### Carolina Hurricanes

Stability in net: It's not even January and the Hurricanes have already matched their franchise record for goaltenders played in a season with five. Frederik Andersen, Pyotr Kochetkov, Spencer Martin, Yaniv Perets and Dustin Tokarski have all seen time in the Carolina crease, and it's still unclear who the two goalies will be come the postseason. More than anything, the Hurricanes need Kochetkov and Andersen to get healthy and stay that way — if that's possible.

### Chicago Blackhawks

Connor Bedard's play improving: The Blackhawks' rebuild is centered on Bedard. As far as he improves, the Blackhawks will likely improve. He had a strong rookie season, but his second year hasn't gone as many, including him, expected. After a recent dip, he seems to be finding his game again. The Blackhawks have to hope he continues trending in that direction under interim coach Anders Sorensen.

#### Colorado Avalanche

Saves: That's all the Avalanche want for Christmas. The Avs have already climbed out of the NHL's bottom spot for team save percentage since acquiring Scott Wedgewood and Mackenzie Blackwood, but they still have quite a way to go. The two new netminders have a .934 save percentage since joining Colorado. They won't stay that hot, but if they can maintain anything close to it, the Avalanche will be among the favorites to win it all.

#### Columbus Blue Jackets

Improved defensive play: The Blue Jackets have to get better in their own end. That includes but is not limited to, the goaltending, which has the second-lowest team save percentage (.882, through Thursday's games) in the NHL. But the tandem of Elvis Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov could use some help, too. The Jackets have allowed 328 high-danger scoring chances this season, according to Natural Stat Trick, the third-highest figure in the league (through Thursday). Some of it is the Blue Jackets' getting used to new coach Dean Evason's aggressive system. Some of it is the relative youth of the Blue Jackets roster, which is dotted with players under age 25. We know this team can score goals. Can they prevent them? Please, Santa, send a little help.

#### Dallas Stars

A return to form for Jason Robertson: Robertson has been producing more as of late, but he still has just four goals in his last 24 games. This is a two-time 40-goal scorer on pace for just 19, a 109-point guy on pace for just 56. The Stars are a top-10 team in goals per game and comfortably in a playoff spot, so it'd be a case of the rich getting richer, but imagine where they'd be if Robertson (and Wyatt Johnston, for that matter) was on top of his game.

#### Detroit Red Wings

A long-term second pair D: The Red Wings appear to have found their top defense pair for the next decade in Simon Edvinsson and Moritz Seider, who have been excellent together this season. But there's still plenty of questions behind them, both this season and for the future. Swedish RHD prospect Axel Sandin Pellikka could be part of the answer in a couple of years, but Detroit has work to do to identify at least one more two-way building block on the back end.

#### Edmonton Oilers

Continued good health: It's not like the Oilers haven't had their share of injuries. Connor McDavid, Darnell Nurse, Zach Hyman and Viktor Arvidsson have all been sidelined. But they've been a fairly healthy crew and are at full strength now that Arvidsson's back from a 15-game absence. The Oilers could benefit from the status quo extending for a few more weeks. They're trying to accrue as much cap space as possible ahead of the trade deadline to help facilitate improving the roster. Keeping a lean roster without injuries is how they'll stay out of long-term injured reserve.

#### Florida Panthers

Something from the bottom of the lineup: The Panthers needed to steady the ship after a rough start to their western swing, but things are generally going according to plan. Their primary issue remains a general lack of quality minutes from their fourth line and third pair; none of the players who've taken

regular shifts in those spots has done much, and all of them have negative overall Net Ratings. The big guys shouldn't have to do it all, night in and night out.

#### Los Angeles Kings

A more potent power play: The Kings are solidly in playoff position thanks to some solid goaltending that has backed a team-wide defensive effort good enough to put them first in the NHL with the fewest goals per game allowed. But they're at the middle of the pack offensively, even after scoring seven in Philadelphia on Thursday. Any improvement for a disappointing 28th-ranked power play would make them more dangerous and push them closer to elite status. Though they've done well to cover for Drew Doughty's absence defensively, Brandt Clarke hasn't impressed in the quarterback role after some early success. Perhaps Doughty could help there when he returns to action from a broken ankle.

#### Minnesota Wild

Better health: An incredible run of injuries has finally caught up to the Wild as they're patching together a lineup on a nightly basis right now, currently involving Brendan Gaunce, Travis Boyd, Ben Jones, Devin Shore and Jesper Wallstedt. For a team that previously had the best record in the league, the result was losing four of six heading into Friday's game against Utah. With so many missing bodies, the Wild have lost their mojo, and even when they get bodies back, they'll have to rediscover their style and structure.

#### Montreal Canadiens

Playing to potential: It has been the dominant storyline of the first half of the season, how Kirby Dach and Juraj Slafkovský, two players vital to the rebuild, are underperforming. Both players have talked endlessly about it because both have been asked endlessly about it, and both know talking about it is not the solution. Perhaps the Christmas break will provide a valuable little reset for both Dach and Slafkovský, allowing them to come back focused on playing to their identities and doing the things necessary to produce consistently.

#### Nashville Predators

A do-over: Maybe if the Preds, who are finally showing faint signs of improvement, could go back to the start of the season they'd have ideas to compete from the jump. Or if general manager Barry Trotz could go back to the summer, he'd avoid this mix of players. As is, this team is going to have to perform Santa-like feats to even be relevant in March. — Joe Rexrode

#### New Jersey Devils

Jacob Markstrom to keep it up: In Markstrom's first seven games with the Devils, he had an .891 save percentage. In the 17 games since, he is 13-3-1 with a .918 save percentage. With him playing like that, the Devils are formidable. They have a young, vibrant core complete with star players, and GM Tom Fitzgerald supplemented the roster with good pieces over the summer.

#### New York Islanders

Health: Anthony Duclair is the last of four important regulars (Mathew Barzal, Adam Pelech and Alex Romanov) to return this week after missing significant time. Backup goalie Semyon Varlamov is still out, forcing Ilya Sorokin into a too-long run of starts. There are plenty of other issues with this team, but if the Islanders can get healthy, it might not be too late for them this season.

#### New York Rangers

An easier schedule: The Rangers are going through it right now. They were 3-11-0 in their previous 14 games heading into Friday night, and the team has been spiraling since Chris Drury told other GMs he was open to moving roster players, mentioning captain Jacob Trouba and Chris Kreider by name. The



Rangers ultimately traded Trouba and Kaapo Kakko, and they might not be done. Starting with Dallas on Friday, they have seven consecutive games against teams currently in playoff spots. That's not a good recipe for them considering their free fall in the standings.

#### Ottawa Senators

Right-shot defenseman and/or scoring winger: The Senators have looked better as of late. But they're still one player away from solidifying themselves as a playoff contender. Whether it's acquiring a player for their back end or a top-six scoring winger who can help Tim Stützle, Brady Tkachuk, Drake Batherson and company, the Senators still need some help to reach their elusive playoff goal. But you have to give to get.

#### Philadelphia Flyers

A center for Matvei Michkov: The rookie winger has already shown he has a bright future, but he hasn't developed enough chemistry with any of the Flyers' centermen on a consistent enough basis. Coach John Tortorella has lately had Michkov with Morgan Frost, but acknowledged recently he's not sure whether "that's the right marriage." Perhaps Michkov's unexpected early arrival this season will hasten general manager Daniel Briere's attempt to fix what is the Flyers' biggest positional issue. If he can find the right center it could speed up Michkov's development, too.

#### Pittsburgh Penguins

Goals from Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin: The Penguins are on an 8-2-1 run and received a grand total of three goals from Malkin and Crosby during that stretch. Those two remain the Penguins' best and most dangerous players, but they haven't been scoring goals at anywhere near their career paces. That's probably going to change soon. The Penguins' Two-Headed Monster is generating scoring chances and going to the hard areas, but they're not reaping the rewards. That tends to happen as even iconic players age. Crosby and Malkin have aged better than most all-time scorers. They're going to get going in the goal-scoring department — but puck luck makes a nice gift.

#### San Jose Sharks

Continued good health for Macklin Celebrini: The 12-game injury absence after his terrific NHL debut is probably the only thing keeping Celebrini from being out in front in the rookie scoring race and the Calder Trophy front-runner. Even so, the 18-year-old looks like he'll be in a duel with Philadelphia's Matvei Michkov for the league's top rookie honor. (We get it, Montreal defenseman Lane Hutson and Calgary goalie Dustin Wolf are in the mix as well.) Celebrini was the no-doubt No. 1 pick last summer and has already looked every bit like the franchise player he appears destined to be.

#### Seattle Kraken

A reliable backup goaltender: The Kraken have won only three of Philipp Grubauer's nine starts this season, and though a team's record isn't a stat that necessarily reflects the performance of a goaltender, in this case, Grubauer's play is the reason. Grubauer is struggling enormously, with a save percentage under .880. Even more troubling, he has one of the lowest save percentages in the NHL on low-danger shots this season, according to Clear Sight Analytics. At this point, if the Kraken are going to catch up to Utah, Calgary, Vancouver and Colorado and make a realistic push for a playoff spot, they're going to need to find a relief starter to back up Joey Daccord. Hopefully, they find one under the tree.

#### St. Louis Blues

Dalibor Dvorsky proves he's ready to shine: By all accounts, Blues prospect Dvorsky's first season in the AHL is going well. The 19-year-old center, who was the No. 10 pick in the 2023 NHL Draft, was leading

Springfield in goals (11) and points (20) through Thursday. The Blues desperately need a No. 2 or 3 center but understandably don't want to rush him. If fans had a wish list, it would be that Dvorsky has a dynamic World Juniors for Slovakia, continues to play well in the AHL and his performance gives the parent club no choice but to call him up.

#### Tampa Bay Lightning

A healthy blue line: JJ Moser's game isn't flashy or eye-catching, but his presence has helped solidify Tampa Bay's top four. The Lightning have earned a 57 percent expected goal rate with Moser and Victor Hedman paired together, with even better results to match. Darren Raddysh should be a fine temporary injury replacement for Moser who is out for the next eight to 10 weeks. But any further injuries could strain this team, which would be really discouraging considering how well they have hit their stride at five-on-five lately.

#### Toronto Maple Leafs

Better health: If we're talking about additions to the roster, it's another center. What this team could use in the interim is a healthier group. It's been one thing after another, from a lengthy Auston Matthews absence to injuries to a whole bunch of forwards, plus top-four defender Jake McCabe and now 1A goaltender Anthony Stolarz. Now the lead guy in the crease, Joseph Woll, also missed some time to start the season. What the Leafs would love is a chance to see their team in full.

#### Utah Hockey Club

A return to full health: Utah has been red-hot lately, pulling off a 7-1-2 run to get back into playoff contention in the West after a very tough first 20 games. They're scoring a lot, getting great goaltending and strong special teams, despite a pile of injuries. If they can play like this and then get reinforcements when John Marino, Sean Durzi and Connor Ingram are healthy, they could really surprise in the second half. The good vibes are back in Salt Lake City.

#### Vancouver Canucks

A puck-moving defender: The Canucks have struggled more than any other NHL team to generate offense five-on-five over the past month — a 17-game stretch in which they've managed a measly 22 shots on goal per hour at five-on-five. No matter how good your goaltending is or how stout your defensive structure, that isn't going to get it done. That the Canucks' issues offensively have accelerated in the absence of Filip Hronek (and with the downturn in the form of Erik Brännström) is a telling indicator of what the real issue is. As much as Vancouver's top forwards have struggled, the primary concern has to be its inability to move the puck well enough to control play and generate looks five-on-five.

#### Vegas Golden Knights

A time machine to mid-April: The Golden Knights have looked like a true contender lately, going 10-2-1 since Nov. 21, and seem to have found their strong, defensive structure that has made them such a formidable playoff opponent for years. The penalty kill has rounded into form and the power play is still humming along at the best rate in franchise history. Everything is clicking. If they could just start the playoffs now, with the team mostly healthy, that would be an excellent Christmas gift.

#### Washington Capitals

A hot stick for Connor McMichael: McMichael's production helped fuel the Caps' early-season run. They've kept it going overall, looking like one of East's best teams on most nights, but he has tailed off, with 12 goals in his first 16 games and three in the ensuing 15 through Thursday. McMichael's expected

goal total, ironically, was about the same in both chunks. His shooting percentage, though, swung from incredibly high (about 26 percent) to disappointingly low (about 7 percent). Settling in the middle would be a good thing for Washington.

#### Winnipeg Jets

The ghost of Dustin Byfuglien past: The ghost of Byfuglien past could play so many roles for the Jets, who are just 5-4-1 in December after a record-setting start to the season. He could show the Jets what they were capable of in October and in most of November, when they usually controlled flow of play and scored a lot of timely goals, or take the Jets on a tour of Byfuglien's historical highlight reel — wherein one player dominated the game and its physical battles, too. Honestly, the idea of a brand new Byfuglien sounds like the dream acquisition for this Jets roster. One problem? Players like him are rare at the best of times (and the worst of times) so Winnipeg will need to shop in another, more realistic aisle.

## The Athletic / Which NHL goalies are best at stopping high-danger shots — and why are they so good?

By Jesse Granger- December 23, 2024

Several factors determine the statistical likelihood of a given shot finding the back of the net. Whether or not there was a pass leading to the shot plays a big factor, as does the goalie's view of the shot release. Over large samples, the biggest determining factor of a shot's chances of scoring is its distance from the net.

From a goaltending perspective, saves on shots closer to the net are more difficult, and therefore more valuable. League-average save percentages drop dramatically as shots get closer, so the goalies who excel at those saves give their teams a big advantage.

Thanks to the NHL's player- and puck-tracking technology, we now have the exact locations of every shot taken since the start of the 2021-22 season. We went back and compiled all of that data to reveal which goalies are making the most difficult saves at the highest rates.

The NHL separates shots into three main distance ranges: high-danger, mid-range and long-range.

High-danger shots come from the area within 29 feet of the center of the goal and inside imaginary lines drawn from the faceoff dot to two feet outside each goalpost. Mid-range shots follow those same imaginary lines, but are between 29 and 43 feet from the center of the goal, and long-range shots are more than 43 feet from the center of the goal while still inside the offensive zone. Here's what the zones look like on the ice:

These stats only account for shots taken inside this cone, and exclude any from sharp angles along the walls. The league-average save percentages from each range vary.

There aren't many surprises on this list. These are six of the most talented — and athletic — netminders in the league, so it makes sense they have stopped the most high-danger shots. The one who may stand out to some is Carolina's Frederik Andersen, who isn't often ranked among the elite due to the myriad injury problems he's faced.

When Andersen is on the ice, he's an outstanding goalie. His overall save percentage of .919 since 2021 is third in the league behind only Linus Ullmark and Igor Shesterkin. The difference is that during that span Andersen has faced only 848 high-danger shots in his 104 starts, while Shesterkin has faced 1,626 in 188 starts and Ullmark has faced 1,136 in 147 starts.

Since returning from a lengthy layoff in March, Andersen is 12-2-0 in his last 14 starts (dating to last season) with an incredible .949 save percentage and 21.41 goals saved above expected. He's currently out of the lineup for Carolina after undergoing a knee procedure in November, but if he can remain healthy for any extended stretch, he should be considered amongst the elite. He's particularly good on shots from in close because of his size, athleticism and calm demeanor.

What else makes these other goalies so well-equipped to stop the most difficult shots? Athleticism certainly plays a large role, and these goalies have plenty of that. Look no further than this acrobatic save by Thatcher Demko on Dec. 10 against St. Louis.

This was Demko's first game back from a lower-body injury that held him out of the first two months of the season, and yet he went full-splits to rob Dylan Holloway with ease. That level of flexibility from a 6-

foot-4 goalie with Demko's range is almost not fair, but these goalies aren't relying on pure athleticism. There are details to their games that allow that ability to shine.

Patience is key. Playing a guessing game with shooters can leave goalies out of position, but these elite netminders wait out shooters, forcing them to make the first move. This breakaway save by Shesterkin on Chicago's Ryan Donato on Dec. 9 is a perfect example.

The closer the puck gets to the net — especially in a one-on-one situation — the more difficult it is to remain patient. Goalies get antsy, worried that a low-shot can beat them five-hole, and bite on fakes and dekes. Donato tried baiting Shesterkin with several fakes on this play, but Shesterkin stayed completely still through all of the misdirection, keeping his edges and his nose on top of the puck until Donato's final deke to his forehand. Shesterkin then exploded to snuff the shot with his pad.

A big reason Shesterkin is able to remain so patient in these situations is because he is so strong on his edges with a wide stance, so he has less fear of getting beat by a low shot. The wider a goalie's skates get, the closer their pads are to the ice, making them less susceptible to a five-hole shot. The tradeoff is most goalies lose mobility in a wide stance, with less leverage to explode laterally, but not Shesterkin (or his elite counterparts).

Shesterkin made an impressive glove save on Dec. 6 against Pittsburgh star Evgeni Malkin that showed off this specific skill.

First, Shesterkin squared up to Penguins forward Philip Tomasino (No. 53) in his relaxed stance, with his skates shoulder-width apart. As Tomasino cut in and became more of a shooting threat, Shesterkin entered an aggressive, ready stance with his skates much wider.

Some coaches might dissuade a goalie from entering this wide of a stance with a dangerous passing option on the back side of the play, but Shesterkin is still able to get an explosive push across to snare Malkin's one-timer even from that wide, shot-ready position. The rare ability to get into the most optimal position to make a save on a shot, while still maintaining that mobility, is part of what makes Shesterkin special.

If there's a single trait that equips a goalie to make high-danger saves, it's probably lateral explosion. One of the best at it is Islanders goalie Ilya Sorokin. The 29-year-old has stopped high-danger shots at the third-highest rate since 2021, many of which were backdoor one-timers like this backhand attempt by Los Angeles forward Quinton Byfield on Dec. 10.

Not only does Sorokin have the quickness to get his left pad across, he also maintains good structure, with his glove hand extended along the top of his pad to maximize net coverage. Goalies obviously don't have the time to react to a shot from this close, so getting as much of their body in front of the puck is crucial.

Demko provided a good example of this on a game-saving stop in the final minute of Vancouver's game against Utah on Dec. 18. The initial shot from the point was blocked by Canucks defenseman Vincent Desharnais and bounced straight to Utah's Michael Carcone, who unleashed a slap shot from close range.

Demko tracked the puck through the traffic and saw Carcone winding up for a shot. Rather than reaching with his limbs, Demko held his structure, planted his right skate and pushed his entire body across. By the time Carcone shot, Demko had nearly the entire net covered — which was the only way to make this save. The angle from behind the net really highlights Demko's poise.

Because high-danger shots come from too close for a goalie to have much reaction time, play-reading ability is crucial to stopping them. It's probably the biggest reason Ottawa's Ullmark finds himself near

the top of this list. Over the last four years, Ullmark leads all goalies with a .923 overall save percentage, and he has never posted a high-danger save percentage below the league average.

There's plenty of athleticism on display on this lunging blocker save he made Dec. 14 on Sidney Crosby, but it's Ullmark's play-reading intuition that put him in position to make it.

During every rush chance, the goalie plays a game of depth management. The further out of the crease he ventures, the better chance he has of making a stop on a shot, but it also gives him more distance to cover in the event of a pass. It's an art, and it's different for every goalie depending on their size, lateral speed and reaction time.

Ullmark played this situation perfectly, identifying Crosby as a passing threat on the back side of the play, and retreating into his crease to give himself a chance to get across for the save. From inside his crease, he only needed to move a couple feet to make the stop.

Notice the difference in how he plays this rush chance against Nashville a week earlier. This time, Ullmark realizes there's no passing threat and telescopes well outside of his crease to give Predators forward Cole Smith nothing to shoot at.

Combine all of these traits, and you get the best goalies on the planet. It's no wonder they're the best at stopping the most difficult shots. Out of curiosity, we did look to see which goalies have the worst save percentage against high-danger shots, with San Jose's Vitek Vaněček and Seattle's Philipp Grubauer "topping" the list (among goalies with at least 100 starts).

Jeremy Swayman and Adin Hill have been incredibly efficient at stopping shots from long range. Swayman has yet to allow a goal from that distance this season, stopping all 147. Last year, Hill stopped 199 of 200.

It's interesting because they're not similar stylistically, but they do have a common trait that could be leading to this. Hill and Swayman patrol the top of their crease with aggression. Neither is afraid to join their defensemen in the physical nature of protecting the net-front, often shoving potential screeners with a swift blocker to the back.

This does two things that could be leading to success on long-range shots. First, it leads to less screens that they have to look through. Not only are they more active in getting around screens, the way they play those situations could dissuade players from screening them in the first place. Nearly all of the goals scored from this distance are a result of a screen. Second, their aggressive nature on these plays draws them further out from their net, cutting off the already limited shooting angles from the point.

Overall, these findings aren't groundbreaking. It's no surprise that the league's elite goalies are atop these lists. Shesterkin and Ullmark were the only two to make the top five from all three shooting ranges, but the overall lists are littered with the best goalies in the NHL. It does highlight the importance of large sample sizes when it comes to evaluating goalie stats. While it's easy for the best to have a rough stretch — or even a rough season — statistically, over time the talent bears out.

## The Athletic / NHL Draft stock WATCH: How is the 2025 top 5 shaping up ahead of World Juniors?

By Corey Pronman- December 23, 2024

With the World Juniors around the corner, let's take a look at how the top of the 2025 NHL Draft is shaping up and what the tournament could mean for that conversation.

Depending on which NHL scout you talk to, you could get a different answer on who the best prospect is in the draft. As it stands now from my conversations, I would say 50 percent favor Erie Otters defenseman Matthew Schaefer, 20 percent of scouts favor preseason favorite and Boston College center James Hagens and 20 percent like Brampton Steelheads winger Porter Martone. Some outliers lean toward Saginaw Spirit center Michael Misa, Brandon Wheat Kings center Roger McQueen (who is currently injured) or Djurgarden forward Anton Frondell.

Today we'll highlight the front-runners who will be facing off against each other on New Year's Eve and their case for the top position. There is currently a lack of clarity at the top of the draft as to what order these players will be selected. I expect by Jan. 6 we will have more clarity, especially since neither Hagens nor Martone will be at the World U18s.

Who could go No. 1?

Matthew Schaefer, LHD, Canada (Erie)

The scouts who favor Schaefer see a defenseman with the potential to be the next Miro Heiskanen. He's been excellent in big moments this season. He was arguably the best player at the Hlinka Gretzky this summer and at the CHL/USA Prospects Challenge in November. Given how good he's looked internationally, I could see him playing a big role for Team Canada at the World Juniors even though he's 17 years old.

Schaefer is a player without any notable flaws. He's an excellent skater with size, a high compete level and very good offensive touch who is expected to run a power-play unit for Canada. His offense may not be elite, but that wasn't the case with players like Heiskanen or Jake Sanderson at Schaefer's age, either. Schaefer is also miles better than the next-best defenseman in this draft class. If this ends up being a draft in which the team picking first thinks it's close among the candidates but has a more pressing need for a stud young defenseman, position could become a significant variable. Quite a few scouts view him not just as the best prospect in the draft, but as the clear best. If the draft was today, I believe Schaefer would be the top pick.

James Hagens, C, USA (Boston College)

Hagens entered the season as the favorite for the No. 1 spot after an outstanding two years with the U.S. NTDP. His season has been very good as a leading member of a top team at Boston College. He's lost his clear claim to the top spot partly because he's been playing at a high-but-not-elite level, but also because the OHL players are having tremendous seasons. Hagens' biggest argument for the top spot in NHL circles is his position. He has the potential to be a first-line center in the NHL. He's a great skater and playmaker with dynamic qualities, but he's undersized. It would be easy to compare him to Jack Hughes, but he's not perceived to have quite that level of offensive talent. He's expected to be USA's first-line center and put in a position to make an impact in the tournament.

Porter Martone, RW, Canada (Brampton)

Martone has started this season on a tear in the OHL, scoring at a two-points-per-game pace for Brampton. He is a player with a ton of skill, size and compete. His projection as a big winger who can win a lot of puck battles and score at major levels is highly attractive for NHL clubs. The question with Martone for NHL teams is his pace. I don't think his skating is that big of an issue for his size, but he plays slowly, which could be a concern for higher levels. NHL teams will be highly curious to see how he fares in the tough World Junior games where the pace will be at its highest. If he shows he can play at those tempos, it would bolster his case for the No. 1 spot. He is expected to be a middle-six forward for Canada to start the tournament.

The other candidates

McQueen would have been in the mix for several NHL scouts before the season started. He's a huge center who can move quite well for a big man and is very skilled. He's been working through a back injury for months, though, and it's unclear when he will return to action.

I mentioned Schaefer and Martone above, but some OHL observers have argued Misa is at the same level as those two. Statistically, he is; he's dominating the OHL this season, displaying similar production to Martone but as a center and a better skater. I don't have his pure offensive talent or compete level graded quite as high as Martone's, though.

Finally, there is Frondell. He's gotten off to a slow start this season after missing time due to injury, but NHL teams still love this player. He has a ton of skill, has a great motor, can skate well and can score. His pure production hasn't jumped off the page like the other candidates, which is why I don't think he's in the 1A mix currently, but some scouts still see a player who can work his way back into that conversation in the second half.

I wouldn't rule out Moncton center Caleb Desnoyers going ahead of several of the names mentioned above either.



## ESPN / Six logical trades that NHL teams should make in January

By Rachel Doerrie- December 21, 2024

### Reactions

The NHL's roster freeze for 2024-25 kicked in last night. GMs: put your pencils down. Although no trades can be made until the freeze lifts on Dec. 27, that will not stop teams from having discussions to improve their rosters.

Some real doozies have happened over the past couple of weeks: Jacob Trouba, Kaapo Kakko, Cam Fowler and Mackenzie Blackwood all have new addresses. The ESPN Big Board features some big names this season, and while we don't expect the likes of Mitch Marner or Mikko Rantanen to be moved, could Chris Kreider be traded if the New York Rangers continue their free fall?

Instead of speculating on which players can be moved, let's have some fun. Looking at teams around the league, from contenders to tank commanders, let's find some new homes for players with trades that would make some sense, or have percolated in the rumor mill already.

### Chris Kreider ships up to Boston

The Bruins are thin up front, particularly on the left. Their power play is anemic, ranking 31st at 12.9%. The Bruins are struggling to produce offense in a significant way.

Kreider has been a staple on the Rangers' power play, leading the franchise in man-advantage goals. No one is the leader in power-play goals for an Original Six franchise by accident, and Kreider is a particularly effective net-front presence. He brings an element of speed too, and he would immediately become the Bruins best left winger, likely playing alongside Pavel Zacha and David Pastrnak.

Things have gone horribly awry in New York this season and Kreider is under contract for two more seasons at \$6.5 million per year. While Kreider has a 15-team no-trade list, it is hard to imagine the Bruins being on the Massachusetts native's list.

As mentioned in the Big Board, one executive tossed around the idea of a Brad Marchand-for-Chris Kreider trade. While it seems like an unlikely possibility given Marchand's standing in the Bruins organization as the team captain, Kreider is younger and faster, and the Rangers might like Marchand's pending UFA status as they look to reconstruct their roster.

The one-for-one trade would certainly be a jaw-dropper, but it solves two problems: giving the Rangers flexibility past this season, and providing Boston with a legitimate threat on the left side.

### Vancouver gets a young puck mover for Brock Boeser

It is no secret the Canucks are looking for a young, puck-moving defenseman. Outside of Quinn Hughes, the Canucks struggle in transition. They struggle to defend the rush, and in moving the puck up ice from the back end.

Meaningful talks between Boeser's camp and the Canucks have not made much progress, and Boeser is likely looking for a contract worth \$8 million per year, coming off a 40-goal season. The reality of the NHL is that wingers, especially on expiring deals, do not garner the trade return that fans believe they are worth.

So what are the options?

The Canucks have had interest in Bowen Byram dating back a few seasons, and it isn't a secret the something has to give in Buffalo. Byram has taken a step forward with the Sabres, playing top-four minutes and filling in on the power play in Rasmus Dahlin's absence. He would be a good option for the Canucks' second power-play unit.

K'Andre Miller's name has been floating around recently, and he is another player in whom the Canucks would have interest. Rick Tocchet likes big defensemen, and the Canucks have their own forest with all the trees on the back end. Miller will be 25 in January, and the 6-foot-5 blueliner is a pending RFA with arbitration rights. Miller is averaging the most 5-on-5 time on ice per game for the Rangers this season, at over 17 minutes. He moves the puck effectively, kills penalties and fits the archetype of a Tocchet defenseman.

Currently on injured reserve, Miller is someone whom multiple teams have interest in, and Boeser makes sense in a trade because he is a big goal-scoring threat on the right side -- and the Rangers have the cap space to extend him.

Whether it is Byram or Miller, the Canucks need a top-four defenseman under team control, and they could use Boeser to acquire such a player if they do not believe they can sign him to an extension.

The Elias Pettersson gambit

Let's make something very clear: I think this is a very bad idea and would not do it. But, let's ponder what the Canucks could get in return for a player of Pettersson's caliber, if Vancouver wanted to solve the rumored rift between Pettersson and J.T. Miller.

Pettersson is an elite player in the NHL who is under contract through 2031-32, with an annual cap hit of \$11.6 million. His no-trade clause does not kick in until this coming July, meaning the Canucks can trade him without his approval (hello, PK Subban).

As noted above, Byram is a young, puck-moving defenseman who would likely become the Canucks' second-best blueliner upon arrival. Alex Tuch is another player the Canucks would have interest in because he brings speed, size and skill at a very reasonable price. However, Tuch is a Western New York native, and the Sabres do not seem keen to move him.

The player of interest instead is Dylan Cozens, a 23-year-old, right-handed center with five years remaining on his current contract at an annual cap hit of \$7.1 million. The cap numbers could work out as a wash, too; Byram needs a new contract this summer, and it is likely that he and Cozens would combine for a number in the neighborhood of Pettersson's \$11.6 million per year.

If the Canucks were to trade Pettersson -- and again, let me be clear in saying I do not think they should! -- acquiring a second-line center and top-four defenseman (both 23 years old) would be a fair return.

Ivan Provorov balances Edmonton's blue line

Provorov is in the final year of his deal and can be acquired on a double-retention deal for the Oilers at \$2,362,500. Adding the veteran makes sense because of how the Oilers are deploying their defense pairs currently.

Mattias Ekholm with Evan Bouchard on the top pairing with Darnell Nurse with Brett Kulak on the second pair has been successful. Slotting in Provorov on the third pair at under \$2.5 million with Troy Stecher or Ty Emberson on the right side provides the Oilers with more balanced depth heading into the playoffs.

Provorov plays in every situation, can eat considerable minutes and can take the matchup load off some of the other defensemen in the Oilers' lineup as needed. He retrieves and moves the puck very well, a skill set that is vital in the playoffs.

Columbus is well within its right to ask for a first-round pick, top prospect or proven young player in return. While acquiring Provorov won't be cheap, the Oilers came as close as a team could last season and should be all-in again this season while Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl are firing on all cylinders.

Yanni Gourde shores up Toronto's third line

Under Craig Berube, the Toronto Maple Leafs have been one of the best defensive teams in the NHL. However, they have struggled with injuries this season and can ill afford another early playoff exit.

Yanni Gourde would fit perfectly as their third-line center; he forechecks well, can kill penalties and contributes offensively. When Berube won the Stanley Cup in St. Louis, Tyler Bozak was the third-line center; Bozak was a solid two-way center who possessed similar qualities to Gourde (who won the Cup with the Tampa Bay Lightning).

Toronto's current situation sees Max Domi in this 3C spot. Moving him to the wing alongside John Tavares and Matthew Knies is an option, meaning a third line of Bobby McMann, Gourde and the newly physical Max Pacioretty could provide the forechecking, tough-to-play-against combination that Berube prefers.

Nick Robertson has long been rumored as a player who could be moved the other direction in this type of deal. Seattle's recent acquisition of Kaapo Kakko shows it's willing to take chances on players who are out of favor with their clubs. However, Toronto would need to move more money out than Robertson's hit to make the cap work, even if Seattle retained on Gourde.

Mikael Granlund brings scoring punch to the Lone Star State

After losing Tyler Seguin to injury for the rest of the season, the Dallas Stars have \$9.85 million worth of cap space to use -- and the need to fill a major offensive hole.

Granlund is on an expiring deal in San Jose, producing a point per game, and would be the perfect fit for Dallas. His ability to play center and wing makes him attractive to the Stars. Granlund can produce at even strength and on the power play. He gets the top-line minutes in San Jose but should be capable of providing secondary scoring and remain a power-play threat in a smaller role for the Stars.

Dallas has both the cap space and the prospects to make a trade worthwhile for San Jose. This one makes too much sense.

Looking ahead

There are surely more depth players to be moved ahead of the March 7 deadline, and one thing is certain: there will be some eye-popping returns for some of those players.

A few eyebrow-raisers have already happened, and perhaps we will see earlier movement this season. Teams do not want to be left without that "final piece" this season, and it seems as though a few teams are willing to make moves they have not been willing to do in the past.

The upcoming IIHF World Junior Championship in Ottawa will be a seeding ground for many trades. It is easier there for GMs to fly in, watch players and meet their teams and colleagues than it would be if the tournament was held overseas. It's an opportunity for many to get together and discuss things, get viewings on players of interest and formulate a plan. For now, we'll have to wait for the roster freeze to end and all the excitement to begin.

## ESPN / NHL Power Rankings: 1-32 poll, betting trends for every team

By Sean Allen, Victoria Matiash- December 21, 2024

With the NHL schedule set to soon hit the holiday break -- with no games on Dec. 24, 25 or 26 -- it's the perfect time to examine some betting trends from the first three calendar months of the 2024-25 campaign.

Which teams are best when favored at home? Which underdogs are overperforming? Find out the answers there, along with an updated set of Power Rankings, voted on by the ESPN hockey family.

How we rank: A panel of ESPN hockey commentators, analysts, reporters and editors sends in a 1-32 poll based on the games through Wednesday, which generates our master list.

Note: Previous ranking for each team refers to the previous edition,

Published Dec. 13. Betting stats are through Wednesday's games; points percentages are through Thursday's games. Victoria Matiash identified betting trends for the West, while Sean Allen handled the East.

### 1. Washington Capitals

Previous ranking: 2

Points percentage: 70.97%

The Capitals excel as underdogs, with a 9-3 record (75.0%) against the spread on the road (61.5% is the league average) and a 5-1 record (83.3%) at home (62.6% league average).

That's a fun trend, but how often are the Caps going to be considered underdogs as they continue to flirt with the NHL points lead? They are still beating the spread as favorites better than the league rate (6-7 overall), but it's not as stark as when they are the dogs.

Next eight days: vs. CAR (Dec. 20), vs. LA (Dec. 22), @ BOS (Dec. 23)

### 2. Winnipeg Jets

Previous ranking: 3

Points percentage: 69.12%

This week's 3-2 loss in Anaheim stands out as even more uncommon in light of the Jets' money-line returns as the road favorite. But while 10-2 remains impressive overall, Winnipeg has a losing 5-7 record on the road altogether since Nov. 14.

Next eight days: vs. MIN (Dec. 21), @ TOR (Dec. 23)

### 3. New Jersey Devils

Previous ranking: 5

Points percentage: 64.29%

If the Devils are rolling into town, watch out! With their punishing top power-play unit, the Devils deliver on the road regardless of favorite status. As road favorites, they've won nine of 12 games (75.0%), outperforming the 59.1% league average. Even as road underdogs, they excel, going 3-1 (75.0%) -- nearly doubling the overall road underdog win rate of 39.1%.

Next eight days: vs. PIT (Dec. 21), vs. NYR (Dec. 23), vs. CAR (Dec. 27)

#### 4. Minnesota Wild

Previous ranking: 1

Points percentage: 68.75%

When favored, Filip Gustavsson & Co. tend to win in tight fashion at home. A strong 8-3 (72.7%) as the favorite, the Wild are a symmetrically opposite 3-8 (27.3%) against the spread when expected to secure the victory at Xcel Energy Center, including two straight losses this week.

Next eight days: vs. UTA (Dec. 20), @ WPG (Dec. 21), vs. CHI (Dec. 23)

#### 5. Vegas Golden Knights

Previous ranking: 4

Points percentage: 70.31%

With a 9-2 record when the home favorite -- they've lost only three times at T-Mobile Arena altogether -- Vegas manages just fine when their top producer doesn't contribute. The club is 7-2 when Jack Eichel doesn't register a point.

Next eight days: vs. SEA (Dec. 21), vs. ANA (Dec. 23), @ SJ (Dec. 27)

#### 6. Carolina Hurricanes

Previous ranking: 7

Points percentage: 66.13%

Defense first in Carolina. That hasn't changed. The Hurricanes have shown clear trends when it comes to game totals. When the line for the Canes is set at 6.5, the game hits the under 17 of 24 times (70.8%), much more often than the 57.4% league average. However, at 5.5, it flips, as Carolina has gone over five of seven times.

Next eight days: @ WSH (Dec. 20), @ NYR (Dec. 22), @ NSH (Dec. 23), @ NJ (Dec. 27)

#### 7. Los Angeles Kings

Previous ranking: 8

Points percentage: 65.63%

By the numbers, the Kings are much more successful when their captain contributes. A rollicking 15-9 when Anze Kopitar collects at least one point, the Kings are only 3-4 otherwise. They're also 7-2 when favored at Crypto.com Arena.

Next eight days: @ NSH (Dec. 21), @ WSH (Dec. 22)

#### 8. Florida Panthers

Previous ranking: 6

Points percentage: 63.64%

The Panthers haven't been broadly viewed as underdogs since they knocked out the Bruins in 2023, but they embrace the moniker whenever it comes up in games. At home, they've won two of three as underdogs (66.7%), and they shine even brighter on the road, going 4-1 as underdogs (80.0%), nearly doubling the league's road underdog win rate of 39.2%.

Next eight days: vs. STL (Dec. 20), @ TB (Dec. 22), vs. TB (Dec. 23)

#### 9. Toronto Maple Leafs

Previous ranking: 9

Points percentage: 65.63%

The Maple Leafs have been dominant at home, winning 13 of 17 games (76.5%) as the favorite and also earning the W the one time they were considered home underdogs. That strong home play is based in limiting goals, as games at Scotiabank Arena have also gone under 14 of 18 times on home ice. The unders are a much stronger trend for the Leafs at home, as their games have been under only four of 14 times on the road.

Next eight days: @ BUF (Dec. 20), vs. NYI (Dec. 21), vs. WPG (Dec. 23), @ DET (Dec. 27)

#### 10. Dallas Stars

Previous ranking: 10

Points percentage: 61.29%

Another club that clearly enjoys the comforts of home, the Stars are 12-2 (85.7%) at American Airlines Center when deemed the favorite.

However, it's a very different tale against the spread on the road, where Dallas -- sporting a losing record altogether -- is 2-9 (18.2%) to cover when backed to win.

Next eight days: vs. NYR (Dec. 20), @ UTA (Dec. 23), vs. MIN (Dec. 27)

#### 11. Edmonton Oilers

Previous ranking: 11

Points percentage: 62.50%

Unimposing against the spread when expected to win all season long -- 5-11 (31.2%) -- the Oilers are improving in this category in recent play. Connor McDavid & Co. have beaten the opposition by a minimum of two goals in four of their past five at Rogers Place.

Next eight days: vs. SJ (Dec. 21), vs. OTT (Dec. 22)

#### 12. Tampa Bay Lightning

Previous ranking: 14

Points percentage: 63.33%

The Lightning have been solid as home favorites, winning eight of 11 games (72.7%), surpassing the 60.9% league average. But it's notable that at this juncture, more than two months into the season, the Bolts are largely untested against their own division. They've played only three games against Atlantic Division opponents, losing all three while failing to cover.

Next eight days: vs. FLA (Dec. 22), @ FLA (Dec. 23)

#### 13. Vancouver Canucks

Previous ranking: 12

Points percentage: 59.38%

The Canucks' remarkable road résumé (10-2-2) is translating into an equally outstanding record as the straight-up favorite. They've lost only twice when backed by sportsbooks to win in 10 tries, including a narrow 3-2 defeat in Salt Lake City on Wednesday night.

Next eight days: vs. OTT (Dec. 21), vs. SJ (Dec. 23)

#### 14. Boston Bruins

Previous ranking: 15

Points percentage: 55.58%

The Bruins hanging in near the top of the Atlantic has not come through dominance of opponents at home. While they may be 9-8 overall on familiar turf, they've covered the spread only three of 16 times when the sportsbooks have favored them at TD Garden (18.8% compared to league rate of 38.5% for home teams).

Next eight days: vs. BUF (Dec. 21), vs. WSH (Dec. 23), @ CBJ (Dec. 27)

#### 15. Calgary Flames

Previous ranking: 16

Points percentage: 56.06%

The Flames are cooking at the Saddledome when holding a perceived edge. Forward Nazem Kadri -- sizzling hot of late with a four-game goal streak -- and his team have lost just the once in six tries (83.3%) when dubbed the home favorite.

Next eight days: vs. CHI (Dec. 21)

#### 16. Colorado Avalanche

Previous ranking: 13

Points percentage: 55.88%

When favored, this team doesn't often cover the spread at home. The Avs' dismal 3-11 record (21.4%) under such circumstances serves as stark contrast to their 8-1 success rate straight up when perceived as the better team on the road. More oddly, they sport a winning record when Nathan MacKinnon doesn't earn a single point.

Next eight days: @ ANA (Dec. 20), vs. SEA (Dec. 22), @ UTA (Dec. 27)

#### 17. Ottawa Senators

Previous ranking: 24

Points percentage: 56.45%

The Sens rank fifth in their own division, but you wouldn't know it based on their record against their rivals. The Sens are 5-2 when facing opponents from the Atlantic and, strangely enough, the two losses are to teams with worse records. They've even managed a 4-3 total against the spread while beating up on their divisional foes.

Next eight days: @ VAN (Dec. 21), @ EDM (Dec. 22)

#### 18. Utah Hockey Club

Previous ranking: 21

Points percentage: 56.45%

Enjoying a 4-0 road record, Utah is 5-0-1 since Dec. 7, relishing victories over at least one team from every division. The common denominator? Forward Dylan Guenther has registered a minimum of one point in every one of those contests.

Next eight days: @ MIN (Dec. 20), vs. ANA (Dec. 22), vs. DAL (Dec. 23), vs. COL (Dec. 27)

19. St. Louis Blues

Previous ranking: 18

Points percentage: 48.53%

The Blues are having a tough time with their divisional opponents, securing the victory only once in six contests. Outside of an early-December 4-1 victory over the Jets, they've been outscored 17-8 by other members of the Central.

Next eight days: @ FLA (Dec. 20), @ DET (Dec. 23), vs. NSH (Dec. 27)

20. Pittsburgh Penguins

Previous ranking: 25

Points percentage: 51.47%

The Penguins have been successful as home favorites, winning four of five games. However, they've struggled to cover, doing so just once in those opportunities (20.0%), below the 38.5% overall rate for home favorites. Their struggles stem from matchups with division foes, where Sidney Crosby and friends are 1-6 on the line and 2-5 against the spread.

Next eight days: @ NJ (Dec. 21), vs. PHI (Dec. 23)

21. Philadelphia Flyers

Previous ranking: 19

Points percentage: 48.48%

Which came first, the Travis Konecny points or the Flyers covering the spread? They manage to cover more often when Konecny gets on the scoresheet (14-10) than not (2-6). The Flyers also vary from league trends for over/under outcomes at home, with the under coming in at a much higher rate at Wells Fargo Center (68.8%) than the league average (53.7%).

Next eight days: vs. CBJ (Dec. 21), @ PIT (Dec. 23)

22. New York Rangers

Previous ranking: 17

Points percentage: 50.00%

They've avoided the home underdog label mostly, being favored in all but one of their home games, but they have not delivered. They are 7-8 on money line and a woeful 3-12 against the spread as the home favorite.

As they ship off players to the West Coast, eventually the books will start leaning toward the visiting side at Madison Square Garden if this slide continues.

Next eight days: @ DAL (Dec. 20), vs. CAR (Dec. 22), @ NJ (Dec. 23)



### 23. Seattle Kraken

Previous ranking: 20

Points percentage: 47.06%

Straight up, the Kraken are proving an undesirable play as a home underdog with a 4-7 record (36.4%) while enjoying more success against the spread, covering in seven of 11 matchups (63.6%). It helps when Jared McCann contributes to the scoresheet; Seattle has won only three times when he has failed to do so.

Next eight days: @ VGK (Dec. 21), @ COL (Dec. 22)

### 24. New York Islanders

Previous ranking: 22

Points percentage: 46.97%

The Isles are two different teams on the road. First, there are the underdog Islanders, a scrappy team that is 6-6 (50% win rate compared to league average 39.1%) and 9-3 against the spread. But then there are the favored Islanders on the road, a team that is a brutal 0-6 on the money line and ATS. For the Islanders to do well, we need to think they are going to lose. Sounds about right.

Next eight days: @ TOR (Dec. 21), vs. BUF (Dec. 23)

### 25. Detroit Red Wings

Previous ranking: 26

Points percentage: 48.39%

The Wings can keep things tight when playing in their own division. While they are 3-5 against their rivals, Detroit has covered the spread at a 5-3 rate. Additionally, they've covered the spread 10 of 13 times as dogs (76.9%) and eight of 13 times as favorites (61.5%) at home.

Next eight days: vs. MTL (Dec. 20), @ MTL (Dec. 21), vs. STL (Dec. 23), vs. TOR (Dec. 27)

### 26. Columbus Blue Jackets

Previous ranking: 23

Points percentage: 46.97%

The Blue Jackets consistently buck league trends on 6.5 totals. While the league hits the under 57.4% of the time, games with Columbus have gone under in 11 of 32 games (34.4%). Notably, they've yet to be involved in a game with a total set at 5.5, showing sportsbooks trust Elvis Merzlikins about as much as fantasy managers (Thursday night's heroics aside).

Next eight days: @ PHI (Dec. 21), vs. MTL (Dec. 23), vs. BOS (Dec. 27)

### 27. Montreal Canadiens

Previous ranking: 29

Points percentage: 43.55%

Just ask a fantasy manager with Sam Montembeault about this tidbit: When the line is set at 5.5, games with Montreal have gone over five of seven times (71.4%), well above the league's 51.5% over rate. Also, if the sportsbooks back them, get on board: The Habs are 2-0 as favorites this season.

Next eight days: @ DET (Dec. 20), vs. DET (Dec. 21), @ CBJ (Dec. 23)

#### 28. Anaheim Ducks

Previous ranking: 28

Points percentage: 46.67%

One might be advised to take the under, particularly when the bar is set at 6.5 goals. Games involving the Ducks, who have scored the second-fewest goals this season, have slid below that total mark on 15 of 20 occasions (75%).

Next eight days: vs. COL (Dec. 20), @ UTA (Dec. 22), @ VGK (Dec. 23)

#### 29. San Jose Sharks

Previous ranking: 30

Points percentage: 38.57%

More like "undersharks," am I right? Though they have not once been labeled the favorite home or away this season, Macklin Celebrini and the rebuilding Sharks are 11-4 (73.3%) against the spread as the home dog and 13-6 (68.4%) away from SAP Center.

Next eight days: @ EDM (Dec. 21), @ VAN (Dec. 23), vs. VGK (Dec. 27)

#### 30. Buffalo Sabres

Previous ranking: 27

Points percentage: 40.63%

The Sabres are unreliable at home, whether favored or not. That's not a shocking statement for a team winless in its last 11, but even as home favorites, they've won just three of seven games (42.9%). That said, when it is the underdog, Buffalo does manage to beat the spread at home (8-3 for a 72.7% rate that trumps the leaguewide 62.6%).

Next eight days: vs. TOR (Dec. 20), @ BOS (Dec. 21), @ NYI (Dec. 23), vs. CHI (Dec. 27)

#### 31. Chicago Blackhawks

Previous ranking: 31

Points percentage: 39.39%

Not astonishing, considering they've scored the third-fewest number of goals in the league, but the Blackhawks have hit the under 13 times and the over five times on the road (72.2% under rate). They also don't much care for too much rest, posting a 1-8-1 record in games following a break of two days.

Next eight days: @ CGY (Dec. 21), @ MIN (Dec. 23), @ BUF (Dec. 27)

#### 32. Nashville Predators

Previous ranking: 32

Points percentage: 37.88%

While the disappointing Predators don't often overcome the odds while traveling, they repeatedly cover. Only 2-10 (16.7%) as road underdogs -- including a recent 4-1 win over the Stars in Dallas -- Nashville is 8-4 (66.7%) against the spread.

Next eight days: vs. LA (Dec. 21), vs. CAR (Dec. 23), @ STL (Dec. 27)

## [Sportsnet.ca / Through long season, pain is motivation for NHL players: 'Bleeds through the lineup'](https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/story/through-long-season-pain-is-motivation-for-nhl-players-bleeds-through-the-lineup)

By Mark Spector- December 21, 2024

EDMONTON — My favourite story about pain and hockey played out over 40 years ago in a Hartford hotel room. There, an old defenceman named Lee Fogolin — a second generation NHL pain-tolerator — was having an issue with a tooth that was abscessing underneath a cap.

It was game day, and back in 1981, they didn't rush dentists to the Ritz Carlton at the whim of some player with a toothache. Fogolin wanted to play that night against the Whalers, and he needed that cap removed — stat!

So he grabbed a curtain hook off the hotel drapes, sidled up to the bathroom mirror, opened wide, and used the sharp end of the metal hook to pry that cap off of his aching tooth. Look it up kids: a curtain hook.

They wouldn't let you on a plane with one of those today.

Hockey's culture of playing through pain has been passed down through the ages. And on the same Thursday night this week, we witnessed Ottawa's Brady Tkachuk speak through a butchered upper lip about the OT winner he'd just scored — even though he couldn't feel his own face — while in Edmonton Zach Hyman scored a goal with a freshly broken nose. Afterwards, teammates Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and Mattias Ekholm sang Hyman's praises from behind a freshly stitched upper lip and a few-days-old nose zipper, respectively.

"Hockey players," began Boston's Brad Marchand, "they want to play through anything. You have to. I mean, you're rarely healthy in a season of hockey."

Every player in the game has an example of some incident through which their own pain tolerance was heightened through osmosis, because a teammate played through pain. The longer the playoff run, generally, the more grim the tale.

"I know when I came in, I saw guys like Rex (Mark Recchi) play through a kidney stone one day. Bergy (Patrice Bergeron) played with a punctured lung, and (after) he'd had surgery on his jaw," Marchand said. "You break a bone, you get a cut, you pull a muscle — you don't feel good sitting out for things like that. So you just don't. You play through it.

"That's always how it's been here, and it just bleeds through the lineup."

Get it? Bleeds through the lineup?

Hyman took a deflected Bouch Bomb off the beak on Monday, leaving halfway through the second period with his nose shifted noticeably to the right side of his face. He was back on the bench when the third period began wearing a face shield, with watery eyes and gauze the size of a two small mice jammed up each nostril.

"I was really fortunate, all things considered," said Hyman, noting that he could have been struck in the cheek or eye, perhaps breaking a bone that really matters.

What was that third period like for Hyman?

“It wouldn’t stop bleeding,” he said. “We stuffed gauze up there, but the hardest part is you can’t breathe, and you’re dealing with blood. And if (the blood) can’t get out your nose, it’s going into your mouth.”

It was the “fifth or sixth” time Hyman has broken his prodigious proboscis, including an incident when he was jumping on his parents’ bed as a kid, and at a paintball facility during a birthday party.

On Tuesday, he went to the doctor to have his nose re-set — a more pleasant term for “re-broken.”

When the doctor grabbed Hyman’s nose and relocated it to its proper location, Hyman said, “It sounded like a bag of chips.”

This is the point where we are supposed to denigrate the other sports by comparison. Where we reference the baseball pitcher with a blister, or Joel Embiid missing at least a week with a “sinus fracture.”

But for me, what makes hockey unique is how the duty to play through pain has wormed its way into the sport’s culture. One player’s pain threshold has become a lever that raises many players’ devotion.

That busted nose becomes an opportunity for Hyman to provide added motivation to his team during a long, tedious season.

“It gives the team a big boost,” Marchand said. “When guys are playing through injuries like that, and are willing put their body on the line, those are big moments for a group. They bring you together, and it shows a lot of respect between teammates. You build off of that.

“But you know, that’s just always kind of been the way it is. Guys want to play through injuries for each other.”

Hey, what’s a busted nose between friends?

“It’s the lower body stuff that is difficult. Back injuries, hip injuries, knee injuries — that’s where it gets hard, because it affects your skating,” Marchand said. “Cuts, broken bones in the face, stuff like that, it doesn’t affect your skating. Which is where the game is played nowadays.”

We’ll close on another of my favourites, an old utility forward named Brent Gilchrist, who had a chronic abdominal-groin muscle issue. The Detroit Red Wings were on a Stanley Cup run in 1998, and Gilchrist was receiving pre-game injections prior to every game in the Final so he would be able to play.

When the needle went into Gilchrist’s gut back in the trainer’s room, legend has it that his teammates could hear his screams of pain in the dressing room. It became, a Red Wing once told me, a unifying force before each game.

As in, “Look what Gilly is willing to go through to win the Stanley Cup.”

It’s a hell of a tale, but personally, I have my doubts about that story.

I mean, who ever heard of a hockey player screaming in pain like that?

## [Sportsnet.ca / Scout's Analysis: Goaltending will be key to Canada's success at WJC](#)

**By Jason Bukala- December 23, 2024**

With world junior rosters now set for all competing countries, prognosticators are lining up with their predictions for each team's potential for success.

The host Canadians, along with Team Sweden and defending champion Team USA, seem to be garnering the largest number of votes as favourites to medal. My experience, from attending 13 previous world juniors, tells me to never rule out the pesky teams from Finland and Czechia. Both countries are never an easy out in world championship events.

One thing that is certain is the fact any team hoping to walk away with a gold medal draped around their necks after the final whistle on Jan. 5 in Ottawa will rely on heavily on elite goaltending.

Team Canada has three goalies rostered for the tournament. Carter George (Owen Sound Attack) and Jack Ivankovic (Brampton Steelheads) stop pucks in the OHL while Carson Bjarnason tends net for the Brandon Wheat Kings in the WHL.

Here's a closer look at the three Team Canada netminders and what their roles could be.

### CARTER GEORGE

Height: Six-foot-one

Weight: 190 pounds

Catches: Left

Team: Owen Sound Attack (OHL)

NHL Draft: Los Angeles Kings, second round, 57th overall (2024)

George was the second-rated goalie for the entry draft last summer. He ended up the third netminder off the board when the Kings selected him with the 57th pick overall.

His athletic ability and crease quickness provide him the ability to track the play moving side to side and make saves that some goaltenders aren't programmed to make. He fronts shooters very well, making him as big as possible between the posts. He also possesses a fantastic glove hand and the ability to fight through screens to find pucks in traffic.

An additional element that George provides is his ability to play the puck. He can step outside his crease to outlet pucks long-range and launch the attack offensively for the group.

George led Team Canada to gold medals at the Hlinka Gretzky Cup and World U18 Championship in 2023-24. He was named the top goaltender at the worlds and was also named to the OHL all-rookie team. As impressive as he is on the ice, George excels in the classroom as well. He was awarded the top scholastic player in the OHL last season.

George is well-rounded and uber-focused. He has a history of success with Team Canada and appears to have the inside track for the starting job. He's up for the challenge, but Canada boasts a couple of additional options if George falters.

### CARSON BJARNASON

Height: Six-foot-four

Weight: 207 pounds

Catches: Left

Team: Brandon Wheat Kings (WHL)

NHL Draft: Philadelphia Flyers, second round, 51st overall (2023)

Bjarnason gives opponents a different look between the posts. He's by far the biggest of Canada's three netminders. Bjarnason plays a hybrid style. Like all goalies, he's at his best when he maintains composure and doesn't wander outside his posts. The good news is he has the length to make pad save, laterally, with his stature. Bjarnason is having a solid season in Brandon, posting a 2.90 GAA and .913 save percentage in 16 games.

Here's an example of Bjarnason using his size to his advantage and keeping his composure between his posts. He squares up very well to make the first save and positions himself responsibly to make a second stop if required. His head is on a swivel surveying how the play develops in front of him:

Bjarnason has won a Hlinka Gretzky Cup gold and a World U18 Championship bronze medal representing Canada in the past. He too is up for the task if called upon in Ottawa.

JACK IVANKOVIC

Height: Five-foot-11

Weight: 178 pounds

Catches: Left

Team: Brampton Steelheads (OHL)

NHL Draft: 2025 Eligible

Ivankovic is the youngest of the three Team Canada goaltenders. He's eligible for the draft next June and is one of the top-ranked goaltenders in the world. Ivankovic was fantastic for Team Canada at the Hlinka Gretzky Cup in Edmonton this past August. He led the Canadians to gold, posting an incredible 0.75 GAA and .967 save percentage in his four starts.

Ivankovic makes up for his current lack of size with his athleticism and read/react quickness around his crease. Similar to Dustin Wolf from the Calgary Flames, Ivankovic closes on opponents when they are locked and loaded around his net. His aggressive style, and overall low net coverage, takes away shooting options for his opponent.

Here's a sequence that displays what I'm describing:

I'm not sure Canada will have to go to Ivankovic in this tournament, but I have confidence in his ability if his number is called.

It's more realistic to think he will gain very valuable experience from this experience and look forward to future starting assignments for Team Canada at the world juniors.

## [TSN.CA / Canada's Cowan looks like a man on a mission ahead of World Juniors](#)

**By Staff- December 21, 2024**

London Knights forward Easton Cowan is on a 56 game regular season point streak in the Ontario Hockey League. Fifty-one of those games came after last year's World Juniors and, apparently, that's not a coincidence.

"That was kind of the start of this whole streak that he's been on," said Knights defenceman Sam Dickinson. "That's been a big fuel lighter under him for a full year now. And to get back to this point, for him, he's even more fired up for it."

Cowan looks like a man on a mission ahead of his second crack at the World Juniors. Last year in Sweden, the Toronto Maple Leafs prospect was held to one goal and one assist as Canada finished a disappointing fifth place.

"I know he's dying to get a win here and experience that winning feeling," said Team Canada assistant coach Chris Lazary. "It's his last chance at a World Juniors."

Lazary is the head coach of the Saginaw Spirit, who beat the Knights in the Memorial Cup final last season.

"There's footage of him sitting on one knee watching the celebration," Lazary recalled. "I think that stung him. He even said to me that he looked up at his parents to give the head shake like he's heartbroken. I don't think he wants that feeling again."

Cowan played a depth role with Team Canada last year. This time around he's playing on the top line with Oshawa Generals centre Cal Ritchie and Chicago Wolves winger Bradly Nadeau, and on the flank of the top power-play unit. As one of four returnees, Cowan will be counted on for leadership. He certainly set the tone in Thursday's first pre-tournament game against Switzerland. Cowan scored three goals in the 7-1 win.

What's it like to produce a hat trick in a Team Canada sweater?

"I'm pretty sure it's my first one in juniors," said Cowan, who has eight two-goal games in the OHL. "It's pretty special, but hopefully I can do it in a real game."

Canada opens the World Juniors against Finland on Boxing Day. Based on his current form, Cowan certainly looks capable of producing some big numbers.

"I'm speechless," said Owen Sound Attack goalie Carter George. "He's so good out there."

"Easton's driving that line right now," said Team Canada head coach Dave Cameron. "They were fun to watch."

Cowan was fun to watch in the OHL playoffs last season. He produced 34 points in 18 games while leading London to a title.

"I feel like I play my best hockey on the big stage," said Cowan, who was named playoff MVP. "I feel like I've always had that in me. I'm super excited to show what I have and compete night in, night out, and do whatever it takes to win a gold medal."

Cowan insists he doesn't feel pressure to produce offensively.

"I feel like I can provide more than scoring goals," he stressed. "Even last night I feel like I was hitting when I could, back checking, you know, having good tracks. I feel like my defence led to my offence. Even if I didn't have three goals, I still had a good game."

"His play without the puck is not talked about as much as it should be," said Lethbridge Hurricanes centre Brayden Yager, who is Canada's newly-named captain. "His play in the D-zone is something I've noticed is a lot better and I think his 200-foot game has really grown."

Team Canada will be leaning on Cowan's complete game and tireless work ethic in Ottawa.

"He can dominate when he's locked into a game," said Lazary. "He's a competitor. He can manipulate the outcome just based on his skill. He was dragging guys into the fight. Just an elite player. We will need him to bring that every game. We're counting on that game out of Easton."

Cowan is used to having his play dissected thoroughly. That's what happens when you get drafted in the first round by Toronto.

"There's going to be lovers and haters, especially in the Leafs market," the native of Mount Brydges, Ont. said with a smile. "Obviously there's a lot of attention anywhere you go so it's really matured me a lot."

Cowan had hoped to be playing in the NHL this season, but couldn't gain much traction at training camp.

"No rush," he said. "I'm still 19-years-old. I'm still a kid, you know, learning the ways of life. It's probably a good thing I got an extra year of junior and can learn to cook more, get my mom to help me to cook, my billet mom too. Obviously it sucks. You want to make the team, but it's right for my development."

How's the cooking coming?

"It's alright," Cowan said sheepishly. "I've learned to make tacos, chicken now, chicken parm, caesar salad, so nothing too special. I know [Toronto Marlies centre Fraser Minten] is a good cook, so hopefully he'll be able to cook me up some stuff next year."

Cowan has received messages of support from Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner as he prepares for the World Juniors.

"Showing that they're behind me," Cowan said. "It means a lot."

Marner is a Knights alumnus.

"He likes to chirp me here and there," Cowan says with a grin. "He's just saying, 'Good luck' and 'Play your game' and 'Do your thing.' Coming from him it means a lot."

When Matthews reached out, Cowan couldn't help but point out the Leafs captain has a pretty good track record at the Canadian Tire Centre, which will host Canada's games at the World Juniors.

"He just said, 'Good luck, score some goals.' Obviously he's had a lot of goals in that rink with his [four goal] debut there. I was chirping him about that. He just said, 'Do your thing, play your game and good things will come.'"

Minten, who served as Canada's captain last year, also sent a message.

"He's behind us," Cowan said. "Wished me the best of luck. He said, 'Play your game, play hard and leave no regrets.'"

Cowan nearly had his own four-goal game on Thursday, but couldn't quite convert after a beautiful set-up from Medicine Hat Tigers winger Gavin McKenna.



"Coming off the wall, I saw the guy's heels were turning the wrong way so attacked the opposite," McKenna said. "I saw Easton on the side there, and maybe I could have held onto it a big longer. I kind of gave him a tough angle there. If I would have held onto it a little longer and baited the defender over a bit he would have had a better chance."

When you lead the Western Hockey League with 60 points in 30 games, you have high standards.

McKenna, who celebrated his 17th birthday on Friday, is the youngest player on Team Canada. He started Thursday's game as the 13th forward.

"I thought as it went on I got more comfortable," he said. "Early on I was gripping my stick pretty tight, but I started making a few plays and started getting my confidence back ... Obviously being in that 13th forward spot, you don't want to mess up. Being a young guy you want to fit in. I'm not used to playing that [role]. [Getting] that first shift pretty late in the game there, it's kind of natural for me to be kind of nervous."

Cameron gave McKenna a mixed review.

"In puck battles he looked young," the coach said. "With the puck he looked real good."

It looks like McKenna may have a regular role in Saturday's second pre-tournament game against Sweden. With Brampton Steelheads winger Porter Martone staying off the ice for maintenance on Friday, McKenna took his spot on a line with Spokane Chiefs centre Berkly Catton.

"Everyone knows he's going to work his way up," Cowan said. "He's a great player, great guy off the ice too so that helps. Everyone knows he'll eventually be playing a big role for this team."

McKenna led Canada to gold at the 2024 under-18 World Championship while setting a new national scoring record at the event (20 points in seven games). He added a Hlinka Gretzky Cup gold medal to his trophy case in the summer.

Still, there's nothing like the World Junior stage, especially on home ice in Canada.

"There's a lot of pressure and everyone's got their nerves," said Lazary. "I thought he did a lot of good things, and when he needed to compete, we thought he did. It's going to be a process for him going through this tournament."

If McKenna ever feels like the pressure is getting to him, he can look down at a tattoo on his arm.

"Me and my mom and sister, we all got matching tattoos," he said. "It's the co-ordinates of my cabin, and then the mountains at my cabin. I grew up at that cabin. It's super important to me and my family. We all grew up there. It's a very special place."

The cabin is located four hours north of McKenna's hometown of Whitehorse.

"It just brings calmness for sure," he said. "My grandpa, he built that himself ... It's pretty much in the middle of nowhere. We go hunting up there and we dirt bike and stuff so it's a place I'll remember forever. I love hanging out up there."

During the wintertime, though, the hockey rink is his happy place.

"Most of my birthdays, we would rent the rink and have a little hockey game with all my buddies and team," McKenna said.

What's it like to celebrate with Team Canada?

"Nothing better," he said. "It's a dream come true. Every birthday you kind of look forward to watching the World Juniors after Christmas so for me to be here, it's pretty exciting."

Do teammates have anything planned?

"I don't know what we're going to do," Cowan said with a sly smile. "Maybe the older guys have some pranks for him or something like that. We'll see."

Canada got one power play on Thursday and it didn't take long for them to convert.

"They fired me from the power play," said Lazary, who oversees the units. "All the boys said, 'We don't need you anymore, Laz.'"

Lazary's game plan was executed to perfection on the goal, which capped Cowan's hat trick.

"We've been focusing on an attack mentality and the pace of our puck and our movement and wanting to get shots off passes and get shots early to create chaos," he said. "I thought they did a great job. They made about five really hard, crisp, quality passes and then Easton shot off a pass and it's exactly what our focus has been. We don't want to over pass and kill our own power play. We want to have an attack mentality."

But it was only one power play so Team Canada still dedicated plenty of practice time to special teams on Friday.

Draft-eligible defenceman Matthew Schaefer, 17, is quarterbacking the top unit despite being the team's youngest blueliner. Why?

"His ability to scan before he gets a touch and, really, his desire to distribute when it comes up, and just keep it on the flanks and let those guys do their thing," explained Lazary. "He's shown he's committed to that for us. And when he does shoot the puck, he shoots it to a good area of the net, so we have a lot of threats with him up top. We're curious to see how he's going to do going along. The stage gets bigger, but he loves it. He's thriving in it, and we'll really be counting on him"

Schaefer picked up the primary assist on Cowan's man-advantage marker.

"Most people would just think that's an easy pass, but he faked, no looked, gave it me," Cowan said. "An elite play."

Most of Canada's forwards operate on the flank of the power play with their club teams. That includes Ritchie, who is moving to the middle of the ice on Canada's top unit.

"I think any team that pre-scouts us is going to look at him as a shot threat," said Lazary. "He's a dangerous player. It's going to commit PK guys to him and open up other stuff and, if they leave him alone, you look at Cowan's analytics and he's in the 86-per-cent range of a flank pass into the bumper being successful, which is one of the best in the CHL. So, if they leave Ritchie alone and Cowan can make a play into the middle then we got a dangerous player with a shot."

Ritchie pointed out that he played the bumper spot a bit during his pre-season games with the Colorado Avalanche.

Nadeau is looking forward to facing off against Swedish winger and Wolves teammate Felix Unger Sörum on Saturday night in Canada's second pre-tournament game.

"I've been playing with him all year so I know what he tends to do on the ice," said Nadeau, who has six goals and nine assists in 22 games in the AHL this season. "I might tell the other players what to watch and what to expect and hopefully we'll be able to shut him down."

Unger Sörum has two goals and five assists with Chicago this season. What's the scouting report?

"He likes to hold onto the puck," Nadeau noted. "He's got really good puck control. He's a good playmaker, but if you stay on him and don't give him time, that's how you'll be able to shut him down."

Bragging rights are on the line.

"He would always bring it up," Nadeau said with a grin. "He was like, 'Oh, we'll play each other. That will be a fun game. I hope the team gets together to watch us play.' We haven't talked since we left so we'll see each other tomorrow and hopefully we'll get the win here."

Nadeau is the only Canadian player going from professional hockey directly to the World Juniors this year. He's noticed one significant difference between the levels.

"They move the puck in the neutral zone faster in the AHL," he said. "But skating, goalies, everything else is pretty much the same."

Nadeau's new teammates here have noticed that his professional habits have remained as he transitions back to the junior level.

"The little details he has in his game really stand out to me," Cowan said. "And he's got that quick shot that he can get off from anywhere."

George got the start for Canada on Thursday.

"To be able to show that the hard work's been put in, it just means the world to me," the 18-year-old from Thunder Bay, Ont. said. "Just going to keep going from here, take the momentum from [this game], and keep going with it."

George stopped all 11 shots he faced in two periods of action. He's facing 35 shots per night in the OHL this season while playing behind a young Attack team.

"It's a little bit of an adjustment, but just staying in the moment and enjoying it is the key to this," he said. "I just stayed consistent with it and made the saves when it was called upon. We didn't give up too much and our team's pretty good defensively, so it's kind of nice playing back there in front of those guys."

The feeling was mutual.

"Just the timely saves," said Yager when asked what stood out about George. "That's really all you can ask for in a goalie is just those big timely saves. There were times where we kind of broke down in the first two periods and he just sat there calm, cool, collected and made some pretty tough saves look easy."

## [TSN.CA / Canada faces biggest pre-tournament test as rivalry with Sweden heats up](#)

**By Mark Masters- December 22, 2024**

Team Canada held a media availability at the hotel on Saturday in Ottawa.

Two of the favourites in the World Juniors will clash on Saturday when Canada faces Sweden in pre-tournament play.

"It's the closest you're going to get to a real tournament game in exhibition," said Team Canada defenceman Tanner Molendyk.

"It's going to be a tight game. It's going to be tight-checking and a step up from last game, but I think we're ready. We know what's coming."

Canada beat Switzerland 7-1 on Thursday in its exhibition opener.

"The level of competition is going to be a little bit higher, no disrespect to Switzerland," Team Canada head coach Dave Cameron said. "If the competition is higher you have to elevate every part of your game, the speed, the positional play, the execution off it, so we're just looking to get better."

They're also looking for some payback. Sweden beat Canada 3-2 in a shootout on July 31 in Windsor, Ont. at the World Junior Summer Showcase. After that game, Canadian players expressed displeasure with how Swedes Felix Nilsson and Otto Stenberg celebrated their shootout goals.

"They did some things that are not going to sit well with us," Molendyk said back in July. "It's the middle of the summer, but we're still going to take that into Christmas."

Nilsson made a kissing motion at the Canadian players after scoring while Stenberg stared down the bench.

"It's definitely on guys minds," Team Canada forward Tanner Howe confirmed on Saturday morning. "We're looking to get a little revenge, but we're not going into the game with that mindset."

Molendyk eventually shared a laugh with Nilsson, a fellow Nashville Predators prospect, about the game and is downplaying the revenge angle ahead of the rematch.

"When it happened, it was a little bit of a touchy subject," he said. "But it's over with and it's a clean slate."

Melker Thelin starts for the Swedes on Saturday. He was the first star of the game in the summer making 44 saves before slamming door in the shootout. Carson Rehkopf scored both Canadian goals.

"We don't like to lose," newly-named Canadian captain Brayden Yager said after the game in the summer. "It leaves a little bitter taste in your mouth regardless that it's July 31st. It motivates us for December. We know they're a good hockey team and we know what we're capable of. With the group that we have we can build a special hockey team here, and come December be ready to give it back to them."

Jack Ivankovic and Carson Bjarnason will both see action in the Canadian net on Saturday.

With 46 points in 26 games, Sam Dickinson arrived at Team Canada's selection camp as the leading scorer among Ontario Hockey League defencemen. But the London Knight found himself as a healthy scratch in the first pre-tournament game.

"I understand this is the World Junior team for Canada, like, there's a lot of guys not here who could be on this team," Dickinson said. "I understand roles and all that kind of stuff. I'm just here to play my role and if that's going to be my role I'm ready for it, and if my time comes to get in the lineup, I'll be ready for it."

Dickinson will get his first chance on Saturday. The 11th overall pick to the San Jose Sharks in June's draft will slide into the third pair beside Barrie Colt Beau Akey.

"Sam's the whole package in terms of being big, strong, physical, and with real good offensive instincts," Cameron said. "We just need him to not force the offence. He's strong at that. He'll read that. That will happen. And just use that big body to defend."

At 6-foot-3, 210 pounds Dickinson is the second biggest blueliner on Team Canada behind only Soo Greyhound Andrew Gibson. He made it clear that his focus is on defence, first and foremost.

"Play a tough, hard game," Dickinson said of his mindset. "Obviously we're going to be playing a lot of good teams here so just focusing on the defensive side of the game and taking care of that side is going to be the thing that separates me when I get in the lineup."

Luca Pinelli, who plays for Cameron's 67s in the OHL, will draw in up front. He's expected to start on a line with Spokane Chiefs centre Berkly Catton and Medicine Hat Tigers winger Gavin McKenna.

"Play to the style that got you here," Cameron advised the fresh bodies coming in. "That's easier said than done, especially when you've sat out."

Brampton Steelheads winger Porter Martone will miss the game after watching Friday's practice from the glass.

"The hockey word is 'maintenance day,'" Cameron said. "It was a tweak day. The guys out today are not performance related."

Vancouver Canucks prospect Sawyer Mynio practised on Friday but will be the odd man out on defence.

Dickinson on starting as scratch with Team Canada: 'I'm here to play my role'

Dickinson on starting as scratch with Team Canada: 'I'm here to play my role'  
Sam Dickinson was a healthy scratch for Canada in its pre-competition victory over Switzerland on Thursday but the defenceman is not discouraged and vows to be ready to play any role that is asked of him by the coaching staff.

Howe left the summer game against Sweden after just one period.

"We were on the penalty kill, I was in the middle of the ice and got a slap shot right to the teeth and lost a coupe jibs and broke my palette," the Pittsburgh Penguins prospect said. "So, that wasn't fun. I'm still missing this [front] tooth."

Howe was forced to leave Hockey Canada's summer camp early as a result of the injury. He's been limited to 16 games so far this season after suffering a broken hand in the Western Hockey League. But the 19-year-old still earned a spot on Team Canada thanks to his gritty game.

"I bring a lot of energy," the native of Prince Albert, Sask. said. "I'm really good on the forecheck. I can turn over pucks. I can be that energy boost for the team, and score the odd goal."

Howe credits his father Jason, who works as a mechanic for farming store Redhead Equipment, for instilling a blue-collar approach.

"He coached me until Pee-Wee hockey," Howe said. "I remember getting benched in Atom hockey because I wasn't trying or something. Yeah, he was always hard on me and now I look back on it and I'm very grateful for that."

Now, Howe doesn't stop working. He didn't pick up a point on Thursday, but still earned a shout out from the coach.

"One of the highlights for me was we're up 7-1 and Howey's tracking back like it's a 1-1 game," Cameron said.

Teammates appreciate how the Calgary Hitmen workhorse never backs down despite standing just 5-foot-11, 182 pounds.

"I've never seen a guy get in the corners as much as he does," Molendyk noted. "It's a different game. Not a lot of guys will go there any more, but to see a guy like him go in there and get dirty, he's coming out with a lot of bruises. It's something you need on your team."

'I remember getting benched in Atom': Howe's blue-collar style comes from dad

'I remember getting benched in Atom': Howe's blue-collar style comes from dad  
Team Canada forward Tanner Howe spoke about growing up in Prince Albert and his dad's influence, which helped him on the ice. Head coach Dave Cameron and defenceman Tanner Molendyk talked about his work ethic, physicality, and ability to get into the corners.

Howe needed to improve his skating to make it to this stage.

"In the past three years I've worked on it lots," he said. "To make the next level, I needed to be a way better skater. It's something I've put a lot of work into and I think it's come a long way."

Molendyk, meanwhile, has always been known for his skating. Teammates marvel at how he moves on the ice.

"Hockey just looks so easy for Moly," Yager said. "It's like he's floating around on the ice. He's just going way faster than everybody. It just looks easy for him."

"I think a lot of people say this, but he could be a top-10 skater in the NHL," said Knights winger Easton Cowan, who scored three goals on Thursday. "His skating's unreal. It's actually very cool to watch."

Molendyk can only shrug when asked about the secret to his smooth stride.

"I never took power skating, never did any of that, so I got no answer for you," he said.

Molendyk eventually theorizes that growing up in tiny McBride, B.C. may have helped. The village in the Robson Valley region is home to just 588 people, per the 2021 census.

"I was on the ice almost every day," he recalled. "I mean, in McBride we had no one really skating so I was always out there with my grandpa, my dad [Jamie Molendyk who played in the BCHL]. My dad, he was always a pretty good skater so maybe it was just watching him and seeing how he does it."

Who's he watching now?

"I like Miro Heiskanen. Just the way he skates and moves, it's second to none. He's so shifty and he's not always pushing off, but I just like how smooth he is. It's crazy to watch."

Canadian fans will enjoy watching Molendyk dance all over the ice at the World Juniors. He's got 21 points in 21 games this season with the Saskatoon Blades.

And Molendyk is already on the scoresheet with Team Canada in Ottawa. He picked up the primary assist on a goal by defence partner Gibson on Thursday. Molendyk ended up below the net on the sequence leading to the goal.

"I'm just covering for him, honestly, making sure if they come back the other way I'm defending it," Gibson said with a smile. "We both got down low a couple times. At one point I remembering seeing him and both of us were below the tops of the circles. We had a lot of good movement there, a lot of chemistry going, so it's been good."

Defenceman Caden Price also scored against the Swiss. Canada will be looking for its defencemen to generate offence throughout the World Juniors.

"That's the game now," Cameron said. "Teams defend really well, you have to get your D up in the rush and we did that. The one thing about our defence is we're mobile."