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Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets drop sixth straight, as season unravels with 6-3 loss in Pittsburgh

By Brian Hedger- March 22, 2025

The Blue Jackets' impressive, encouraging, upstart season of unexpected resilience is coming apart at the seams.

Since peaking with a thrilling outdoor victory over the Detroit Red Wings on March 1 at Ohio Stadium in the NHL's 2025 Stadium Series, the Blue Jackets have dropped eight of nine games — including a 6-3 loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins on Friday night at PPG Paints Arena for their sixth straight defeat (0-5-1).

"We just gave them too much, especially early in the game," Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner said during a postgame interview shown on FanDuel Sports Network. "They got some juice off it and scored a couple goals off it. I think we just weren't hard enough on pucks, and obviously, they were able to capitalize off it. So, it's on us. We need to get better as a group."

The Blue Jackets (31-29-9) and Penguins (29-32-10) were the only teams playing, so Columbus didn't lose any ground in points during a tight race among a large group of teams vying for the Eastern Conference's second wild-card spot. The problem is they continue to lose games they could've won and again didn't gain ground while the rest of the East's playoff chasers were idle.

Only 13 games remain now.

"It's the time of year when you need points and you need results, and we haven't done that," Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski told reporters during a postgame interview shown by FanDuel Sports Network. "There's still a lot of hockey to be played. We have to stay positive and look at the bright side of things, and that's that we are playing well, but at the end of the day we have to get two points in these games."

Time is quickly running out on the Jackets' resurgent season, which has included an emotional backdrop after they were gutted by the tragic death of former Blue Jackets star Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, Aug. 29 in New Jersey. The Jackets just haven't been able to recapture momentum they appeared to gain by downing the Red Wings in front of 94,751 at Ohio Stadium, seizing control of the East's first wild-card spot.

Their only win since that magical night was a 7-3 rout of the New York Rangers on March 9 at Madison Square Garden. Otherwise, it's been nothing but frustration, terrible bounces and a string of shutouts. Coming into Friday's matchup, they'd dropped a fifth straight game Thursday night in a gut-wrenching 1-0 overtime loss to the Florida Panthers at Nationwide Arena.

Rather than carrying that defensive effort into Pittsburgh, the Blue Jackets made the short trip and experienced another nightmarish game against the Penguins at PPG Paints Arena — their own personal house of horrors for going back to 2015. After finally winning a 4-3 shootout Jan. 7 that ended a near decade-long road losing streak against the Penguins, the Jackets just went right back to allowing goals in bunches during their very next visit — despite finishing with a 48-34 edge in shots.

The Penguins raced out to leads of 2-0 and 3-1 in the first period, pushed it to 5-2 by the end of the second and polished it off in the third to give goalie Alex Nedeljkovic the goaltending win by making 45 saves. Elvis Merzlikins made 28 saves on 33 shots while taking the loss starting both ends of a back-to-back set for the first time this season.

Sidney Crosby led the Penguins with two points on a goal and assist, as usual. Pittsburgh's other goals were netted by Evgeni Malkin, Rickard Rakell, Noel Acciari and Bokondji Imama — who also fought Blue Jackets enforcer Mathieu Olivier. Bryan Rust sealed it by scoring the game's final goal into an empty net with 1:57 left to play.

The Blue Jackets' goals were scored by Kent Johnson, Justin Danforth and Jenner — who scored his first of the season in his 13th game since returning from shoulder surgery in October.

"We're getting quality (looks)," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason told reporters in Pittsburgh. "We're getting to the inside, for the most part, and they're just not going in the net. Sometimes it happens, right? It's just the flow. So, again, we've talked about it. We're not making excuses or anything like that. We've just got to get back after it and continue to do the right things."

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets' Elvis Merzlikins and his wife, Aleksandra, welcome second son

By Brian Hedger- March 22, 2025

A new Merzlikins has joined the Blue Jackets family.

According to social media posts Thursday by Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins and his wife, Aleksandra, the couple welcomed their second son, Jaxon John Merzlikins, into the world Sunday.

The baby required a stay in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit for undisclosed reasons before going home with his parents. Merzlikins and his wife gave thanks to Riverside Hospital and Nationwide Children's Hospital doctors, nurses and staff. They also thanked Merzlikins' Blue Jackets teammates, coaches and staff along with the team's "special welcome home."

A family friend also got a shout-out for watching their first child, son Knox, while the couple and baby spent time in the hospital.

"Thank you very much to @riversidehospital for taking amazing care of all of us, and especially (sic) huge thank you to all the nurses and doctors in the NICU department," Merzlikins wrote. "But the biggest thank you goes to my wonderful best friend in crime! @am.merzlikins Thank you for giving me another amazing and beautiful baby, you are the strongest and the best!"

According to Aleksandra Merzlikins' post announcing Jaxon's birth, the family's newest member was born at 10:59 a.m. Sunday.

"Sweet baby, you for sure came with a bang," she wrote. "Thank you to the amazing team at @nationwidekids NICU for taking care of our baby boy and making sure he's safe and stable to go home. ... Thank you to @merzly who has been a rock these past couple of days ... I could not have asked for a better partner to go through all of the rollercoaster of emotions – sorry for all the anxiety and stress."

As for hockey, Merzlikins returned to the Blue Jackets' net Thursday night at Nationwide Arena and played brilliantly against the Florida Panthers in a tough luck 1-0 overtime loss.

Columbus Dispatch / Marchenko misfortune: 5 takeaways from Columbus Blue Jackets' OT loss to Florida Panthers

By Brian Hedger- March 22, 2025

All Kirill Marchenko could do was stare out from the penalty box in disbelief.

His accidental tap of a puck over the glass Thursday night at Nationwide Arena led to a key penalty followed by Aleksander Barkov's winning goal for the Florida Panthers in a 1-0 overtime victory that dealt the Blue Jackets a fifth straight defeat.

After a 2-1 loss to the New Jersey Devils on Monday that included a weird bounce on the winning goal, Marchenko's misfortune was another stroke of bad luck for the Blue Jackets (31-28-9), who are clinging to slim playoff hopes.

"There's nothing you can do, right?" Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "Marchy's trying to do the right thing. He's just trying to whap it into the neutral zone, and it's just unfortunate, that's all. We see it all the time. ... It's just a bad break."

Here are five takeaways:

Columbus Blue Jackets keep pace within tight Eastern Conference playoff race

The OT loss added the Blue Jackets' first point since March 9. The Jackets have 71 points, which keeps them 11th in the tightly packed Eastern Conference standings. They trail the New York Rangers and New York Islanders, each with 72 points, and the Montreal Canadiens hold the conference's second wild-card spot with 74.

The Detroit Red Wings (70 points) and Boston Bruins (69) are still hot on the Jackets' heels.

Kirill Marchenko became the latest unlucky Blue Jackets player

Bounces in hockey are often unpredictable and gutting, which the Blue Jackets are learning the hard way.

After having a puck hop over goalie Jet Greaves' stick behind the net Monday for Jesper Bratt's winning goal that lifted the New Jersey Devils to a 2-1 victory, the Blue Jackets' poor luck continued against Florida. Late in the third, as the Panthers circled, Marchenko twice tried to tap the puck while it dangled in mid-air near the boards on the defensive left wing.

Florida's Anton Lundell slid over to pressure, and that's when Marchenko's second tap sent the puck over the glass. Television replays weren't conclusive on whether Lundell's stick first clipped the puck before it flipped out, so Marchenko begrudgingly headed to the penalty box.

That's where he watched Barkov net the winner in OT.

"He doesn't mean to do that, obviously," Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner said. "He's battling for a puck on the wall. The puck's in the air and he's just trying to whack it and get it out of the zone. It takes a bounce over the glass and that's a penalty, so it's a bad break."

It was also par for the course in Columbus.

Elvis Merzlikins dazzled in his return to the Blue Jackets' net following a two-game absence to be with his wife, Aleksandra, after her delivery of the couple's second child.

According to the couple's Instagram posts, Jaxon John Merzlikins spent time in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at Riverside Hospital before they could take him home. That was the reason for Merzlikins'

personal leave of absence, which lasted until his attendance at practice Wednesday. The Panthers forced him to be sharp Thursday night and Merzlikins met the challenge with 27 saves on 28 shots.

“He competed his (tail) off,” Evason said. “Made some huge saves, was calm, was a leader ... I’m very impressed, not only tonight but (with) the way he’s played the game the entire season.”

Adam Fantilli's scramble to erase mistake shows Columbus Blue Jackets' playoff mentality

The Blue Jackets’ desperation is easy to spot, as they now challenge all plays with sticks or body checks and sacrifice their bodies to block shots.

In short, they're playing like a team with its playoff hopes on the line.

Second-year center Adam Fantilli showcased it in the first period during one of the game’s most exciting sequences. After turning the puck over with an errant pass on a Blue Jackets power play, Fantilli hustled back to break up a short-handed rush with a diving stick check before scrambling to his feet to make a sliding block of Nate Schmidt’s shot attempt from close range.

Merzlikins immediately applauded his young teammate’s hustle and selflessness by pumping his arms and hollering in the crease.

“We all saw how (Fantilli) blocked it in the first period,” Merzlikins said. “He came from nowhere. I was surprised. It looked like a soccer game. That’s huge. He just showed to all of us that he really cares, and he brought his (butt) back and he blocked the shot. That was huge, and that’s what we need from everyone ... and that’s what we are doing.”

Columbus Blue Jackets' offense has become hit or miss

The Panthers swept a three-game season series against the Blue Jackets, including Sergei Bobrovsky pitching shutouts in the last two — a 3-0 victory March 6 in Sunrise, Florida and Thursday night’s 1-0 triumph in overtime.

Bobrovsky’s latest blanking of his former team was the Blue Jackets’ fourth shutout loss in their past seven games overall and third in the past four games. Mathieu Olivier’s goal in the third period Monday against New Jersey is the only one the Blue Jackets have scored in their past four games — which includes 12 periods plus Thursday’s short OT period.

That was their seventh shutout loss, which is somewhat stunning because of the Jackets’ offensive prowess most of the season. They’ve already set a new franchise record for a single season by scoring six-plus goals 12 times and could set a new franchise high in goals for one season.

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets' Adam Fantilli returns favor by sporting LeBron James jersey

By Brian Hedger- March 22, 2025

Adam Fantilli enjoyed seeing LeBron James wear a customized Blue Jackets NHL Stadium Series jersey Wednesday on the Los Angeles Lakers' bench.

In fact, the second-year center liked it so much that he returned the favor before the Jackets' 1-0 overtime loss to the Florida Panthers on Thursday at Nationwide Arena. Fantilli, 20, was pictured walking into the arena for the game wearing James' yellow No. 23 Lakers jersey over a shirt and tie.

James, who's from Akron, has played two separate stints with the Cleveland Cavaliers and has never been shy about his strong support for Ohio State athletics and other Ohio sports teams. Still, seeing the NBA legend wearing the Blue Jackets' outdoor jersey on the bench — giant cannon logo on the front — caused a stir when ESPN shared it on social media posts.

Fantilli, meanwhile, is no stranger to making fashion statements. When the Blue Jackets selected him third in the 2022 NHL Draft, he wore a customized suit on stage in Nashville that included the names of people he chose for their importance to his life and hockey career stitched into the fabric.

James' choice of hockey jersey Wednesday night caught attention for a couple reasons. He's not playing while injured, so that's why he wore in on the Lakers' bench.

The jersey also garnered national attention during the Blue Jackets' 5-3 victory over the Detroit Red Wings on March 1 at Ohio Stadium in the 2025 NHL Stadium Series outdoor matchup — which drew an attendance of 94,751 as the second-largest crowd for an NHL outdoor game plus impressive TV ratings for ESPN.

The game itself might've boosted sales of the Jackets' outdoor jersey, but an NBA icon proudly wearing it during a Lakers game?

Sales might skyrocket.

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets' loss to Pittsburgh Penguins leaves 13 games for glory: 5 takeaways

By Brian Hedger- March 23, 2025

If the Blue Jackets save their dimming playoff hopes with a miraculous finish to a remarkable season, it would be fitting if the numbers 13 and 21 ignite the hot streak.

Those numbers are featured on the back of their helmets, worn by their coaches as lapel pins and have provided ample motivation since the Jackets opened training camp with heavy hearts. Johnny Gaudreau's No. 13 and his brother Matthew's No. 21 worn at Boston College are reminders of an offseason tragedy that took their lives Aug. 29, 2024 in New Jersey. They also loom over the Jackets' season now, following a 6-3 loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins on Friday night at PPG Paints Arena.

After dropping eight of nine games and six in a row, the Blue Jackets (31-28-8) only have 13 games remaining to earn a playoff spot in the Eastern Conference. Should they earn 21 points out of 26 available to them, it might be enough to secure a wild-card spot.

Next up is another daunting challenge against the New York Islanders on Monday at UBS Arena in Elmont, New York, but the Blue Jackets are trying to remain positive.

"There's still a lot of hockey to be played," defenseman Zach Werenski said. "We have to stay positive and look at the bright side of things, and that's that we are playing well, but at the end of the day we have to get two points in these games."

Here are five takeaways from the Jackets' latest forgettable night in Pittsburgh:

Columbus Blue Jackets fumble another chance to gain ground

The Blue Jackets' game was the only one in the NHL on Friday, which presented a chance for them to briefly hop over the Islanders (72 points) and New York Rangers (72 points) into ninth place in the conference standings with 73 points — one point back of the Montreal Canadiens for the second wild-card spot.

Another regulation loss kept the Jackets in 11th place at 71 points and gave three teams behind them — the Detroit Red Wings (70 points), Boston Bruins (69 points) and Penguins (68 points) — a chance to either pass Columbus or squeeze the gap even tighter.

Columbus Blue Jackets' top scorers have gone silent

The Blue Jackets were one of the first teams to have five players reach the 20-goal mark this season, but they've largely been silenced during a nine-game skid following a 5-3 victory over the Red Wings on March 1 at Ohio Stadium.

Kent Johnson's goal in the third period Friday pulled the Jackets within 5-3, but it was just his second goal and fourth point (two goals, two assists) since the outdoor triumph. He's not alone. In the past nine games, Werenski's been limited to 2-3-5, Kirill Marchenko has 1-1-2, Dmitri Voronkov's at 0-2-2 and Adam Fantill's 3-2-5 was boosted by his second career hat trick March 9 in a 7-3 rout against the Rangers at Madison Square Garden.

"We are getting chances and we're just not scoring, right?" coach Dean Evason told reporters in Pittsburgh following the game. "We're getting quality (scoring chances). We're getting to the inside, for the most part, and they're just not going in the net. Sometimes it happens, right? It's just the flow."

Columbus Blue Jackets chase another lead against Pittsburgh Penguins

Evgeni Malkin's goal to give the Penguins a 1-0 lead just 5:28 into the game was the sixth straight time and eighth time in the Blue Jackets's past nine games they've allowed the first goal.

Their lone victory in that stretch was their 7-3 rout of the Rangers in New York, where Justin Danforth opened the scoring and Fantilli followed up with his hat trick. Scoring first is one of the biggest boosts toward winning games in the NHL, where goals generally get harder to score as the season progresses.

Falling behind 1-0 requires the trailing team to score consecutive goals at least one time to gain the lead, which isn't usually an easy task. The Blue Jackets are now 7-20-4 in games they've trailed 1-0 and 24-9-5 in games they've scored first.

Pittsburgh Penguins catch Columbus Blue Jackets 'cheating' for offense

After being shut out in three of their previous four games and scoring just one goal during those 12 periods, the Blue Jackets tried jump-starting their offense in Pittsburgh by seeking scoring chances too aggressively and not defending hard enough.

That's one of the quickest ways to turn games into back-and-forth "track meets" in the NHL, which didn't exactly work in the Blue Jackets' favor while facing Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and a Penguins lineup that's still capable of turning mistakes into goals.

"Tonight, we forced the issue," Evason told reporters in Pittsburgh. "We cheated and got on the wrong side of things ... the wrong side of pucks, wrong side of people and, consequently, it ended up in our net."

Columbus Blue Jackets' road woes continue against Pittsburgh Penguins

One thing that's remained consistent for the Blue Jackets is their inability to win road games. They're now 11-20-4 away from Nationwide Arena, where they're 20-9-5 despite a four-game home losing streak.

Most playoff-caliber teams break even or just under .500 in points percentage on the road, and that's ultimately what the Blue Jackets can circle if they miss the playoffs. It's something they must improve starting next season. Hypothetically, had the loss in Pittsburgh dropped their road record to 15-16-4, they'd still be sitting in the East's first wild-card spot with 78 points. It's a huge problem.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets get caught 'cheating' defensively as they lose sixth straight game

By Aaron Portzline- March 22, 2025

PITTSBURGH — Given their history in this city, it's hard to imagine that the Columbus Blue Jackets may have been guilty of looking at Friday's game against the Pittsburgh Penguins as a chance to get back on track and — just maybe — rediscover the goal scoring that has carried them all season.

The Blue Jackets, still clinging to playoff hopes, had been shut out in three of their previous four games, while the Pittsburgh Penguins, under no delusion of making the postseason, have been one of the NHL's worst defensive clubs this season.

Just what Columbus needed, right? Well, no.

The Blue Jackets lost their way defensively in an attempt to find their way on the other end, playing right into the Penguins' hands in a 6-3 loss before 17,222 in PPG Paints Arena. That's six consecutive losses (0-5-1), and eight losses in nine games for Columbus, and this one may sting worse than the others.

"If you were in the dressing room after the first period (when Pittsburgh led 3-1), (cheating) was the word," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "We were cheating to try and create offense. We've been creating offense and they haven't gone in, but tonight we forced the issue.

"We cheated. We got on the wrong side of pucks, the wrong side of players, and, consequently, it ends up in our net. We can't cheat. That's not how you play the game. That's now how we play the game."

Blue Jackets-Penguins was the only game in the NHL on Friday, so the Blue Jackets held their place in the Eastern Conference standings. The Jackets (71 points) are still three points behind Montreal (74) for the second wild-card spot, but they trail the New York Rangers (72) and New York Islanders (72), too.

NED SAYS NO! ❌ pic.twitter.com/wGoKHgGBMB

— Pittsburgh Penguins (@penguins) March 22, 2025

The six consecutive losses match a season high, and the loss on the second night of a back-to-back continues a trend that has hampered the Blue Jackets all season. They're now 1-8-0 in second games.

Here's a more troubling number from their recent stretch, however: the Blue Jackets haven't held a lead — by any score — for the last 360 minutes, 29 seconds of playing time, dating to their win over the Rangers in New York on March 9.

"It's coming down the stretch here," Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner said. "We need wins. We need to find a way to grind out a win and get that feeling back. We need to raise our level. We had a ton of shots tonight, but I think we gave them too much."

Jenner, Justin Danforth and Kent Johnson scored goals for the Jackets, who totaled 47 shots on goal, their second-highest total of the season. Goaltender Elvis Merzlikins, making a rare start on both sides of a back-to-back, made 28 saves.

The first gut punch came late in the first period. The Penguins were leading 2-0, but the Blue Jackets were getting tons of chances and finally cashed in on one at 14:07 of the first. Jenner extended his stick and deflected a Denton Mateychuk wrister past Penguins goaltender Alex Nedeljkovic.

But just 46 seconds later, Pittsburgh's Rickard Rakell deflected a Bryan Rust shot past Merzlikins to push the Penguins' lead back to two goals.

Danny gets the 2nd started right! 🤔 @fanaticsbook | #CBJ pic.twitter.com/xXhi5V4Y0p

— Columbus Blue Jackets (@BlueJacketsNHL) March 22, 2025

The Blue Jackets again made it seem like a comeback was possible early in the second when Danforth slid a puck through traffic from the slot, making it 3-2 only 1:35 into the second. But the Pens pushed it back to 4-2 midway through the second and 5-2 later in the period.

Johnson's goal early in the third period made it 5-3, but the Penguins scored an empty-net goal late to ice it.

The game had zero resemblance to the Blue Jackets' 1-0 overtime loss to Florida 24 hours earlier in Nationwide Arena. That was a tight-checking affair at all points on the ice. It was about as close to a playoff pace and style as you'll find in the regular season.

Friday's game ... not so much, even though that's what Evason was expecting.

"We weren't even close to duplicating it," he said. "We've probably talked too much about scoring goals here. We forgot to defend. It was an open game. We talked about not turning this into a track meet, or whatever you want to call it — a wide-open hockey game — but we did. And they did. And they got the better of us."

The Blue Jackets will take Saturday as an off day. They'll get back to work on Sunday, then fly to Long Island for a Monday game with the Islanders. The Blue Jackets have 13 games remaining.

What's been lost with the losing skid of the last two weeks is simple: the Blue Jackets no longer control their destiny as a playoff club, and they no longer have the bulk of their games in Nationwide Arena, where they've been so successful this season, at least until recently.

It feels like the Blue Jackets are running out of time.

Aaron Portzline is a senior writer for The Athletic NHL based in Columbus, Ohio. He has been a sportswriter for more than 30 years, winning national and state awards as a reporter at the Columbus Dispatch. In addition, Aaron has been a frequent contributor to the NHL Network and The Hockey News, among other outlets. Follow Aaron on Twitter @Aportzline

The Athletic / How to watch Blue Jackets at Penguins in Friday's only NHL action

By Sarah Jean Maher- March 22, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets visit the Pittsburgh Penguins in Friday's lone NHL action. Neither team seems headed for a playoff spot, but the reasons to watch this matchup are many, with Columbus already outperforming expectations and Pittsburgh home to one of the sport's brightest lights in Sidney Crosby.

How to watch Columbus Blue Jackets at Pittsburgh Penguins

Venue: PPG Paints Arena — Pittsburgh

Time: 7 p.m. ET, Friday

TV (U.S.): NHL Network, FanDuel Sports Network

TV (Canada): Sportsnet, TVAS

Streaming: Fubo (try for free)

Watching in-person? Get tickets on StubHub.

A string of recent losses put the Blue Jackets out of a playoff spot, with teams including the Ottawa Senators and New York Rangers jumping ahead in the tight Eastern Conference wild-card race. While the playoffs look unlikely for Columbus now, its performance this season defied odds and expectations, and despite its middle-of-the-pack standing, the future looks bright. Credit to coach Dean Evason, who's getting quite a bit of love in the Jack Adams race from The Athletic staff.

Defenseman Zach Werenski leads the Blue Jackets in points, and our most recent NHL staff predictions have him second in Norris Trophy contention behind superstar Cale Makar. Scott Wheeler has a nice feature here on Blue Jackets prospect Luca Marrelli.

Speaking of superstars, the Penguins are led by who other than captain Sidney Crosby with 74 points in 68 games. While all eyes are on Alex Ovechkin's chase toward Wayne Gretzky's goal record, let's not forget Crosby is also close to making one of The Great One's records his own. No. 87 is tied with No. 99 for 19 seasons with a point-per-game average and is on track to claim his record-setting 20th.

Pittsburgh has been well out of a playoff spot for a while and is on track to miss the postseason for a third straight year. Penguins coach Mike Sullivan recently spoke about just how grueling the season has been. But if you think it's time the team starts tanking, not so fast, says Penguins beat writer Josh Yohe.

In exciting news, the NHL announced earlier this week that the Penguins and Nashville Predators will be heading to Stockholm for the 2025 NHL Global Series. As Penguins beat writer Rob Rossi wrote, Swedes Rickard Rakell and Erik Karlsson are eager to show off their country's food, arts and culture and entertain family and friends. Rakell called the opportunity to showcase Crosby in his home country "hardcore."

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The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: Waddell is open to long contracts for Fantilli, others

By Aaron Portzline- March 24, 2025

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

Item No. 1: Let it grow

When general manager Don Waddell was hired by the Blue Jackets last May, there were three significant young players who needed new contracts. Center Cole Sillinger and wingers Kent Johnson and Kirill Marchenko — that's two first-round picks and a second-round pick, respectively — were all restricted free agents.

Waddell didn't know these players other than what he could see on a stat sheet or what he'd gleaned during scouting trips or through scouting reports with his previous club, the Carolina Hurricanes. It was made clear to agents that long-term deals were out of the question.

Now, almost a year later, Waddell has seen the Blue Jackets' nucleus of young talent up close. He's seen how they operate on the ice and off the ice, how they interact with teammates and how they perform at their worst and their best, in good times and tough times.

How the Blue Jackets handle contract negotiations with their young players may begin to look different as soon as this summer.

Over the course of 24 seasons, the list of Blue Jackets draft picks who signed contracts that carry them from their entry-level deals into unrestricted free agency is surprisingly short: Rick Nash and Alexander Wennberg.

There are two players — Seth Jones and Brandon Saad — who were acquired in trades while in their ELC years and were signed to deals that carried them to UFA status, but this organization has always preferred "bridge" deals that expire while the player remains an RFA.

Waddell isn't going to start handing out eight-year contracts like parade candy, but he will not hesitate, he said, going long-term — including the NHL's longest term, eight years — with players he sees as foundational parts of the organization.

"Every individual is different," Waddell said. "But, 100 percent, if we've got a 21- or 22-year-old guy, and you can get him for eight years, you're getting him through the prime of his career, and you don't have to worry about it again until they're 30 or 31 years old.

"It's all projection. You're not going to get one of these young guys for \$4 million a year for eight years, that's for sure. You're going to pay more off the start and hope that by the end of the contract it evens out for both sides."

In Carolina, Waddell signed Andrei Svechnikov to an eight-year contract in 2021 after his ELC expired. Last summer, before he joined the Blue Jackets, he laid the groundwork for Seth Jarvis' eight-year extension with the Hurricanes that was signed in August.

"The challenge, obviously, is finding that (salary and term) number that both sides can agree on," Waddell said. "But (in Carolina), we determined that we wanted to lock those guys (and Sebastian Aho) up for eight years. I'm not afraid of doing it, that's for sure."

Waddell figures to have a busy summer on all fronts, but there are contracts with some of the Blue Jackets' top young players that could be revealing.

Dmitri Voronkov is a restricted free agent this summer. Adam Fantilli, Cole Sillinger and Yegor Chinakhov won't be RFAs until after next season, but they're eligible to sign extensions when the NHL's new year begins on July 1.

Waddell was certainly intrigued by the Blue Jackets' young talent when he started interviewing with the team after the Hurricanes were bounced from the playoffs after last season.

"Our first meeting, I was asking them, 'Where are we at with this roster?'" Waddell said. "Are we rebuilding? Retooling? I sure didn't think we needed to rebuild, and at this point in my career, I wasn't looking for that, either.

"This is a close group of players. They're very much a team. I think if we do the right thing from a contract standpoint that we'll be able to sign the guys long-term that we want to sign long-term. It doesn't make sense for all the guys to get one, but there are a bunch of guys here I would have no trouble locking up long term."

The Blue Jackets are hoping to make significant changes on the blue line for next season, and there could be changes among the goaltenders, too. (More on that in the coming weeks.)

But the forward group is now in the hands of the Blue Jackets' young players. Three of those players signed deals last summer, with Waddell new on the job.

Marchenko signed a three-year deal worth \$3.85 million per season. Sillinger signed a two-year deal worth \$2.25 per season. Johnson signed a three-year deal worth \$1.8 million. All three of those deals look club-friendly after the seasons those players have had.

The next wave of contracts will hit this summer.

"We have a nucleus of young guys that we just have to keep together," Waddell said. "The key this summer is ... it's not a heavy free-agent list, as you know, but we have to add the right guys around the edges here."

Item No. 2: Help arrives

Center Sean Monahan (wrist surgery), out since early January, and defenseman Erik Gudbranson (shoulder surgery), out since mid-October, are both expected to return on Monday when the Blue Jackets play the New York Islanders in USB Arena.

It should be a beneficial boost for a club that has lost six straight games and eight of its last nine, tumbling out of a playoff spot in the Eastern Conference.

"(It's great) to have two veteran guys with their presence," coach Dean Evason said. "They've both been there and done that.

"The results haven't been there, but we've had plenty of opportunities to win hockey games. We believe it's going to turn around, and it has to do that (Monday) night. But to have those two guys in there will be great."

Monahan took practice line rushes on Sunday between Voronkov and Marchenko, reclaiming the spot he held on the Blue Jackets' No. 1 line when he was injured. He also took practice drills with the top power-play unit.

His return supplants Fantilli on both the top line and top power-play unit, shifting Fantilli to the second line with captain Boone Jenner and Johnson flanking him. Chinakhov, meanwhile, looks to be a healthy scratch Monday.

Gudbranson, meanwhile, skated on the right side of the third pair, with rookie Denton Mateychuk. Mateychuk has played with veteran Ivan Provorov on the second pair for almost three months, but Provorov was back on the left side — with Damon Severson to his right — on Sunday.

Evason said both players return with no restrictions, meaning Monahan and Jenner will take the majority of faceoffs Monday and beyond.

Jenner and Monahan haven't played together in a game this season. Jenner suffered a shoulder injury a few days before the regular season started and returned in early March. Monahan centered one of the NHL's best lines before he was injured in January, and he was out of the lineup when Jenner returned.

Now they have two of the top faceoff players in the NHL. And if Monahan experiences any issues, Jenner can take on a bigger role.

"We might have to be smart," Waddell said. "Does (Monahan) need to take every faceoff? Every neutral-zone faceoff? Let's be smart about it."

Item No. 3: No pull zone

The Blue Jackets' team save percentage — that's goaltenders Elvis Merzlikins, Daniil Tarasov and Jet Greaves combined — is .893, putting them in the lower third of the NHL. Only five teams in the league allow more goals (3.32 per game) than Columbus.

But, with only 13 games left in the regular season, the Blue Jackets are the only NHL club that hasn't pulled a goaltender from a start.

Turns out, this is part of Evason's coaching philosophy. It's not that he'd never pull a goaltender, but he tries to show the same patience with that position as any other, he said. If you've paid close attention this season, he's been more consistent than just about any Blue Jackets coach through the years.

"If we thought it was 100 percent the goalie's fault, then, yeah, we'd make a decision there," Evason said. "If we thought it might shake up the team, then we might try to do that, too."

"Personally — and I've talked to our staff about this — I would like the guys to work through it. If a guy is struggling, it's easy to just sit him and bench him, whatever. But I'd like to favor on the side of giving them an opportunity to work through it, push through it, and learn from their mistakes."

He rarely pulled goaltenders in his five-season run as coach of the Minnesota Wild.

"I can't remember the last time (I did)," Evason said. "It's not being a players' coach or anything like that. If a guy makes a mistake, talk to them about it and put them back in that spot to make it again. If they keep making the same mistake, they aren't going to play. But a hockey player is going to try not to make that mistake twice."

Item No. 4: Snacks

- The Blue Jackets have scored a total of seven goals during their six-game losing streak, three of them by tough guy Mathieu Olivier. Zach Werenski, who has been consistently productive all season, has just one assist (and a minus-6 rating) in the last six games, but he has 28 shots on goal in that span. Meanwhile, the top forward line — Fantilli between Voronkov and Marchenko — has a combined one goal, two points and a minus-14 rating. The players who have carried the Blue Jackets all season have settled into a spring frost at the worst possible time.

- Here's Werenski on the recent struggles: "I try not to think about it, personally. It's part of the game. It's crazier when it's happening to a lot of guys. If it was just me, nobody would be talking about it if other guys were scoring. It's me and it's Marchy and Mo (Fantilli). Guys haven't scored in a number of games now, and people are paying attention to it more. I've been doing that (firing 28 shots) for a number of games and nothing's working for me."
- A win is imperative, but the first step is much smaller: taking a lead. The Blue Jackets haven't held a lead (even 1-0) at any point during their six-game skid. In fact, they haven't led since their 7-3 win over the New York Rangers on March 9. They've gone 360 minutes, 29 seconds, without a lead, bringing them just about one game away from a record from the franchise's dark ages. According to the NHL, the Blue Jackets once went 420:37 without a lead from Nov. 11-26, 2005.
- Statistical oddity: In Friday's 6-3 loss in Pittsburgh, the Blue Jackets totaled 47 shots on goal, the second-most they've had in a game this season. It was the seventh time the Jackets have had 40 or more shots this season. Their record in those games? 1-4-2. The exception is a 7-6 overtime win vs. Tampa Bay on Nov. 21.
- The Gaudreau family has organized a Gaudreau 5K Run, Walk and Family Fun Day from 8 a.m. to noon on May 31, honoring the memory of former Blue Jackets star winger Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew. The event will be held in Sewell, N.J., but a "virtual 5k" will allow people across the country to organize groups to run in their city. All proceeds will help fund an adaptive playground for kids of all abilities at Archbishop Damiano School, where the Gaudreas attended.

Attention Columbus and beyond!

The first annual Gaudreau Family 5K run, walk & family fun day organized by family/friends to honor the legacies of Johnny and Matthew.

Proceeds will fund an adaptive playground at Archbishop Damiano School (ADS).

Info: <https://t.co/uteGCEwnhS> [pic.twitter.com/HDdlFH2Tc4](https://t.co/uteGCEwnhS)

— Aaron Portzline (@Aportzline) March 17, 2025

- It'll probably be a few years before we can fairly evaluate the Blue Jackets' trade in November that sent young defenseman David Jiricek to the Minnesota Wild for a minor-leaguer and four draft picks, including a first-round pick in June. But Minnesota has had just as difficult a time playing Jiricek as the Blue Jackets did under head coaches Brad Larsen, Pascal Vincent and Evason the last three seasons. Jiricek has played in only six games for the Wild since the trade. He was a healthy scratch in nine straight before being sent to AHL Iowa on Friday. One thing that has changed? Jiricek now seems much more receptive to a patient approach than he did in Columbus.
- Sergei Bobrovsky used to torment the Philadelphia Flyers after they traded him to Columbus in the summer of 2012. Now he's tormenting the Blue Jackets after leaving them to sign with Florida as a free agent after the 2019 season. Bobrovsky, who is 13-2-1 against Columbus with Florida, has recorded three straight shutouts against the Blue Jackets: a 1-0 overtime win (25 saves) this past Thursday, a 3-0 win (16 saves) two weeks earlier, and a 4-0 win (25 saves) on April 11, 2024. He has a personal shutout streak of 189 minutes, 16 seconds, against his old mates. The last Blue Jackets player to score against Bobrovsky? Alexandre Texier on Nov. 6, 2023.
- The only goaltenders in the modern era with more consecutive shutouts against a single opponent are Buffalo's Dominik Hasek, who had four straight shutouts vs. the New York Rangers in 1997-98 and 1998-99, and Detroit's Glenn Hall, who had four straight vs. Boston between 1953-55.

- The Blue Jackets last week signed goaltender Evan Gardner, their second-round pick (No. 60 overall) last summer, to a three-year entry-level deal beginning with the 2025-26 season. Gardner, 19, has had two banner seasons with Saskatoon of the Western Hockey League, going 23-13-5 with a .911 save percentage and a 2.82 goals-against average this season. He's twice been named the WHL's goaltender of the week, and in November he was honored as the league's top goalie of the month.

A little Evan Gardner robbery 🤨 pic.twitter.com/4C8hz5k3ES

— x — Saskatoon Blades (@BladesHockey) March 23, 2025

- Kudos to Columbus native Kiefer Sherwood, now playing for the Vancouver Canucks, who set an NHL record on Saturday. Sherwood had a whopping 12 hits against the New York Rangers in Madison Square Garden and now has 395 hits, a new single-season record. The previous mark (383) was set last season by Nashville's Jeremy Lauzon.

[BlueJackets.com / Blue Jackets drop 6-3 decision at Penguins](#)

By Wes Crosby- March 22, 2025

PITTSBURGH -- Sidney Crosby had a goal and an assist, extending his point streak to six games in a 6-3 win for the Pittsburgh Penguins against the Columbus Blue Jackets at PPG Paints Arena on Friday.

Crosby has 10 points (six goals, four assists) on the streak and 76 points (25 goals, 51 assists) this season. Because he can play a maximum of 80 games, he is four points from clinching a 20th season averaging at least a point per game, which would pass Wayne Gretzky (19) for the most in NHL history.

Rickard Rakell and Bryan Rust each had a goal and an assist, and Alex Nedeljkovic made 44 saves for the Penguins (29-32-10), who have won five of six to move within six points of the Montreal Canadiens for the second wild card into the Stanley Cup Playoffs from the Eastern Conference.

"I still think there's areas to grow," Pittsburgh coach Mike Sullivan said. "There are areas where we've got to get better, in particular, on the defensive side of the puck. I think that just boils down to details and commitment. I know we're capable of that."

Boone Jenner scored his first goal in 13 games this season, and Elvis Merzlikins made 28 saves for the Blue Jackets (31-29-9), who have lost six straight (0-5-1), including 1-0 in overtime to the Florida Panthers on Thursday. They are three points behind the Canadiens.

Columbus scored once in its previous four games.

"We were cheating to try to create offense," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "And we don't have to. We've been creating offense. They just haven't gone in the net. Tonight, we forced the issue. We cheated."

Evgeni Malkin put Pittsburgh ahead 1-0 at 5:28 of the first period, tipping the puck off the stick of Columbus defenseman Zach Werenski and in with a backhand at the backdoor.

"You give them time and space, you give them chances down low, they're going to make you pay," Werenski said. "They did that tonight. You give up five goals in a game, you're not going to win many."

Noel Acciari also scored on a backhand, making it 2-0 at 13:51.

Jenner, the Blue Jackets captain, scored 16 seconds later to cut it to 2-1 with a deflection at 14:07. He made his season debut Feb. 22 after having shoulder surgery Oct. 9.

"It feels good," Jenner said. "I definitely want to chip in offensively. Obviously, it's a big part of my game, to help us out offensively."

Rakell extended the Pittsburgh lead to 3-1 at 14:53, tapping in a pass from Rust for his team-leading 32nd goal. Crosby had the secondary assist to extend his home point streak to 12 games (17 points; six goals, 11 assists).

Justin Danforth pulled Columbus to within 3-2 at 1:35 of the second period, getting the last touch before Pittsburgh defenseman Conor Timmins chipped the puck into his own net.

Bokondji Imama made it 4-2 at 8:15 with a one-timer, his second goal in 29 NHL games across four seasons.

"It feels great," Imama said. "Obviously, there's a lot of work that we put into it. To see some results, it's always nice. ... The puck just came out, perfect pass from [Danton Heinen]. All I had to do was just put it on target, and it went in."

Crosby pushed it to 5-2 at 15:31, redirecting a shot from Matt Grzelcyk for his 25th goal. The Penguins captain became the 13th NHL player to have 15 or more 25-goal seasons, joining Alex Ovechkin of the Washington Capitals (19) as the only active players.

Kent Johnson ended a five-game goal drought, cutting it to 5-3 on a wrist shot for his 22nd this season at 3:45 of the third period.

Rust scored an empty-net goal at 18:03 for the 6-3 final.

"There's just always something to play for," said Nedeljkovic, who made his first start since March 7. "If not for yourself, for somebody else. It's part of being a good teammate. You play for each other and you're happy when the guy next to you has success because you know when you have your time, he'll be cheering for you as well. So, it's just part of being a good teammate, and we have a lot of those in this room."

NOTES: Merzlikins, who made 27 saves Thursday, started a second straight day because Daniil Tarasov had an illness. Goalie Jet Greaves, an emergency recall from Cleveland of the American Hockey League, was the backup. ... Malkin and Crosby had a point in the same game for the 545th time. The only duos that have done it more in NHL history are Gordie Howe and Alex Delvecchio (613 games) and Daniel and Henrik Sedin (587). ... The Penguins are 16-0-1 at home against the Blue Jackets since Dec. 21, 2015, for their second-longest home point streak against any opponent. They won 18 straight at home against the Winnipeg Jets/Atlanta Thrashers from March 24, 2007, to Jan. 4, 2019.

BlueJackets.com / Blue Jackets partnership adds buzz to spelling bee championship

By Jeff Svoboda- March 23, 2025

Avinav Prem Anand put in the preparation to win the Blue Jackets regional spelling bee championship, but he also had a little birdie on his side, too.

The Orange Middle School eighth-grader certainly knows his words – this is the fourth straight year he’s advanced to the Scripps National Spelling Bee – but also has a lucky charm that blessed him before Saturday’s competition at Nationwide Arena.

“My superstition really is if a cardinal comes to my house – because I have a pretty big tree (in my yard) – then I know I’m going to be pretty lucky,” Prem Anand said. “It’s just somehow magically the minute before I leave, I always see a cardinal in my tree. It’s just kind of luck.”

It’s good to have luck on your side, but preparation and experience are key, and Prem Anand has put in the work, studying using the online Merriam-Webster unabridged dictionary and learning the patterns and unique touches that can help him with even the hardest words.

He used those skills to emerge from the 35-speller regional field Saturday in the first such event sponsored by the Blue Jackets. Prem Anand advances to the national bee in May in Washington D.C., where his previous best finish was a tie for 22nd a year ago.

This year’s regional event was unique given the setting at Nationwide Arena – not to mention the post-championship photos with Stinger and the CBJ goal cannon – but Prem Anand said his confidence built as the day went on. He was able to correctly spell his word in the 11th round and then had little trouble with the final word in the championship round, building confidence as the words kept coming.

“It’s just like a rhythm,” Prem Anand said. “The first few words, you’ve just got in, and as soon as you start to ease into the atmosphere, you start immediately getting them from your memory. That’s why I feel like you need to stay as long as you can and you can start getting a hang on the words.”

Prem Anand was able to outlast a final group of three contestants that included Ananya Datta of Berlin Middle School and Alexis Rosa of Gahanna Middle School East.

This year’s Scripps National Spelling Bee will be the 100th anniversary year of America’s longest-running educational competition, and this year, the Blue Jackets became the first NHL team to partner with the event as part of the organization’s commitment to promote education and literacy in central Ohio.

“I feel very grateful I got to have such a good sponsor that can sponsor my trip to the National Spelling Bee,” he said. “I’m also thankful for my community – my parents, my teachers and my coaches. I feel very excited in this moment, but I know I have one big step left at nationals.”

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Should Prioritize Fabbro Extension Over Provorov's

By William Espy- March 22, 2025

When the trade deadline passed, the Columbus Blue Jackets kept two key members of their defensive corps who will be unrestricted free agents at the end of the season. General manager Don Waddell will undoubtedly try to keep both, but if it comes down to the organization only keeping one of Ivan Provorov and Dante Fabbro, it certainly won't be an easy choice.

Elevating an Elite Partner

Fabbro was acquired by the Blue Jackets early in November after the Nashville Predators placed the defenseman on waivers. Almost immediately, Fabbro was paired with Zach Werenski, who has had a phenomenal season for the Blue Jackets, and he elevated his name to talks for the Norris Trophy.

Fabbro's defensive responsibility has allowed Werenski to be more aggressive offensively than we've ever seen. Fabbro doesn't bring the same offensive production as Provorov, but he doesn't need to in order to make a major impact for the Blue Jackets. In fact, his ability to focus on the defensive side of the game is something that the organization doesn't have much of.

Too Much Offense From the Defense

Columbus has a lot of defensemen who like the puck on their stick and want to put points on the board. The team has scored at a high rate for most of the season, despite some struggles in that regard this month.

Werenski, Provorov, and Damon Severson are all fantastic offensive-minded defensemen, and although they do contribute defensively, none of them provide a shutdown option. It's hard to complain about players putting up points, ultimately, that's the point of hockey. With that being said though, the Blue Jackets already have a long-term commitment to the veteran Severson.

Committing long-term to Provorov would lock the Blue Jackets into a second-pairing that isn't the most reliable in key moments. Severson specifically has had some moments that have been hard to watch, especially with some key turnovers resulting in scoring chances for the opposition. As a result, if it was a choice between keeping Severson or Provorov, it would be clear at this point. However, since the Blue Jackets are going to have Severson on their roster for the foreseeable future, it would be wise to find a defensive-minded defenseman to play alongside him and clean up some of his shortcomings.

Provorov vs. Fabbro

In an ideal world, the Blue Jackets would lock down both Fabbro and Provorov to team-friendly deals with a respectable amount of term. However, at 28 years of age, this will likely be Provorov's last major contract if he's looking for a long-term deal, and he'll likely want to get as much out of it as possible.

Fabbro is a few years younger, which makes a shorter-term deal a bit more realistic. However, it may be worth giving him five or six years to lock him up. For Provorov, anything over three or four years has the potential to age very poorly. As a result, the priority for the Blue Jackets needs to be signing Fabbro first.

Fabbro is undoubtedly going to be looking for a significant salary increase from his current cap hit of \$2.5 million, however, it shouldn't be a colossal number like Provorov could be demanding.

As a younger, right-handed defenseman who has elevated his defensive partner's game to new heights, Fabbro is going to be a major part of the Blue Jackets moving forward if they're able to convince him to

stay. Provorov would be a great signing for a team looking to win now, and although the Blue Jackets are exceeding all expectations this season, risking the future for a player nearing the age of 30 wouldn't necessarily be the wisest move.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Unable to Overcome Slow Start in Loss to Penguins

By Mark Scheig- March 22, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets hoped to duplicate Thursday night's performance against the Florida Panthers. Instead, they got into a track meet with the high-powered Pittsburgh Penguins and fell short on Friday night.

Bokondji Imama scored his first goal with the Penguins while the top line of Bryan Rust, Sidney Crosby and Rickard Rakell had two points each to pace the Penguins to a 6-3 win over the Blue Jackets. Alex Nedeljkovic made 44 saves on the night.

The story of this game was the Blue Jackets inability to get out of an early hole.

Game Recap

The first period saw the Penguins get on the scoreboard first. A pass across the crease reached Zach Werenski. As he tried to make a play, Evgeni Malkin swiped the puck in from behind to open the scoring. Postgame, Werenski admitted thinking he had more time than he did. The rest of the night was a game of catch up.

The Penguins extended to 2-0 thanks to Noel Acciari. Blake Lizotte won a battle on the wall and drove the net. With the puck in front of Elvis Merzlikins, Acciari found the rebound to double the lead.

The Blue Jackets got a big goal from captain Boone Jenner just 16 seconds later. For the captain, it was his first goal in almost a year. There was extra zip in his celebration given what he's had to come back from.

The momentum of that goal wouldn't last for long. Just 46 seconds later, Rakell finished off a pretty passing play that started off a turnover. It was 3-1 after the first period. Nedeljkovic stopped 12 of 13 to lift the Penguins to that early lead.

Justin Danforth opened the second with a goal that was put in by defenseman Connor Timmins. That for a short period of time seemed to give the Blue Jackets momentum.

But midway through the second off a faceoff, Imama unleashed a rocket that went off the top of the net and out for his first Penguins' goal. It also made the score 4-2. Earlier in the game, he dropped gloves with Mathieu Olivier.

Sidney Crosby was able to extend the Penguins' lead to 5-2 off a nice pass from Matt Grzelcyk. Head coach Dean Evason postgame said that the Blue Jackets looked tired both physically and mentally. He also felt the team tried to cheat for offense.



"Tonight, we forced the issue," Evason said. "We cheated, got on the wrong sides of things and lost sides of pucks, wrong sides of people and consequently it ended up in our net. That's not how you play the game. That's not how we play the game."

The Blue Jackets got to within 5-3 early in the third on a nice play by Kent Johnson. But that was as close as they could get. Rust converted the empty netter to make it 6-3.

The Blue Jackets will get Saturday off before returning to practice on Sunday. They'll travel to New York to face the Islanders on Monday night. The Penguins will now head to Florida to take on the Panthers Sunday.

1st Ohio Battery / PIT 6, CBJ 3: Blue Jackets Finally Find The Back Of The Net — But No Points — In Friday Night Loss To Penguins

By Ed Francis- March 22, 2025

	1	2	3	F
	1	1	1	3
	3	2	1	6

CBJ GOALS:
Jenner (P1, 14:07)
Danforth (P2, 1:35)
K. Johnson (P3, 3:45)

For the sixth straight game, the Columbus Blue Jackets came up short — this time getting doubled up by the Pittsburgh Penguins in a 6-3 loss.

The Penguins scored three first-period goals, jumping out to a 3-1 lead through twenty minutes.

"We just gave them too much, especially early in the game," said captain Boone Jenner. "Obviously they were able to capitalize on it so it's on us."

Jenner scored the lone goal for Columbus in the opening frame, his first of the season coming in his 13th game of the season.

The Blue Jackets pulled to within one just 1:35 into the second period on Justin Danforth's eighth goal of the season, but the Penguins would add two more goals in the middle frame to take a 5-2 lead into the final period.

A third-period goal from Kent Johnson gave the Blue Jackets some life, but despite 18 shots on goal in the final 20 minutes, it was the only one to get past Penguins goalie Alex Nedeljkovic.

Nedeljkovic finished with 44 saves. Elvis Merzlikins, starting on back-to-back nights for the time in nearly two years, made 28 saves on 33 shots.

The Penguins converted on a late empty-netter to make it 6-3.

"It's the time of year where you need points and you need results and we haven't done that," said Zach Werenski.

The loss leaves the Blue Jackets three points behind the Montreal Canadiens for the second wild card spot in the Eastern Conference.

Here's how Columbus walked away empty-handed again:

1st Period:

(5:28 — PIT Goal): Evgeni Malkin knocks down Dante Fabbro in the slot as the puck is shot in from the point. It takes a perfect bounce off the boards behind Merzlikins, right to Philip Tomasino. He throws the puck in front of the crease, it gets by Zach Werenski and ends up with Malkin who scores to give the Penguins a 1-0 lead.

(11:49 — Olivier vs Imama): A solid scrap at center ice Mathieu Olivier and Bokondji Imama, but score it the victory to Olivier. He's had trouble finding a taker in recent games, with this being his first fight since March 6th.

(13:51 — PIT Goal): The Penguins win the faceoff and immediately get it in front of the net. The puck pings off Ivan Provorov's skate and right to Noel Acciari in the crease. At the same time, Denton Mateychuk inadvertently bumps Merzlikins away from any chance to make a save. The result is Acciari's fifth goal of the season and a 2-0 Pittsburgh lead.

(14:07 — CBJ Goal): Jenner's first goal since March 26th, 2024 puts the Blue Jackets on the board. Mateychuk receives a crisp pass from Provorov and fires the puck. Jenner is in the slot and tips it perfectly off his stick and past Nedeljkovic to cut into Pittsburgh lead and make it a 2-1 game. It was easy to see how much this goal meant to Jenner and the Jackets.

(14:53 — PIT Goal): A third goal in just over a minute as Pittsburgh answers Columbus' answer and restores their two-goal lead. What should have been a clear by the Blue Jackets instead leads to Rickard Rakell's team-leading 32nd of the season, giving the Penguins a 3-1 lead that they would take into the first intermission.

2nd Period:

(1:35 — CBJ Goal): Damon Severson takes a hard shot after the Blue Jackets win a faceoff in the Penguins zone. It's blocked by Acciari but still bounces to Nedeljkovic, who makes the save but gives up a rebound that is swatted at by both Danforth and Olivier. Danforth gets a stick on it and finds the back of the net to bring the Blue Jackets within one, at 3-2.

(8:15 — PIT Goal): The Penguins go up two for the third time in the game. One period after a center ice fight against Olivier, it's Imama getting his first goal of the season and second of his NHL career to put Pittsburgh up 4-2.

(15:31 — PIT Goal): Jack Johnson's clearing attempt from the corner fails, getting picked up by Matt Grzelcyk just inside the blue line. He floats it at the net and Sidney Crosby is right there, putting it past Merzlikins and giving the Penguins a 5-2 lead.

3rd Period:

(3:45 — CBJ Goal): The Blue Jackets get within two on Johnson's 22nd goal of the season. After Yegor Chinakhov keeps the puck in and throws it at the net, Johnson collects the puck behind Nedeljkovic and skates around the net. It looks like he's going to pass it but instead fires at the net and in, cutting Pittsburgh's lead to 5-3. Chinakhov's assist on the goal was his first point since returning to the lineup March 4th.

(18:03 — PIT Goal): Empty-net goal makes it 6-3 Penguins.

CBJ	GAME STATS	PIT
47	SHOTS	34
47%	FACEOFFS	53%
0/2	POWER PLAY	0/1
1/1	PENALTY KILL	2/2
17	HITS	27
12	GIVEAWAYS	9
7	TAKEAWAYS	7
7	BLOCKED SHOTS	24
ALL SITUATIONS ADVANCED STATS		
n/a	EXPECTED GOALS	n/a
94	SHOT ATTEMPTS	55
53	SCORING CHANCES	32
24	HIGH-DANGER CHANCES	15
Data via NHL.com & NaturalStatTrick.com		

Stat Chat:

- Columbus had 94 shot attempts in the game, a new season high. They had 90, their third-highest total of the season, in Monday's 2-1 loss to the New Jersey Devils.
- After an 0-for-2 performance in this one, the Blue Jackets are now 0-for-21 in their last nine games on the power play. They're 4-for-51 (7.9%) since Sean Monahan's injury in the team's last visit to Pittsburgh back on Jan. 7th.
- The Blue Jackets are now 1-8-0 this season on the second half of back-to-backs, being outscored 44-18 in those nine games. This was Columbus' first back-to-back since Jan. 30th and 31st; they have three remaining on the schedule.

Up Next:

If the Blue Jackets are going to stay in the playoff race, two points Monday night against the New York Islanders is nearly a must. Puck-drop is at 7:30 p.m.

1st Ohio Battery / Three Things: Penguins Offense Too Much, Jackets (Finally) Break Goose Egg, Flatlining

By Will Chase- March 23, 2025

At least they scored?

Sidney Crosby had a two-point night with a goal and an assist to spark the Pittsburgh Penguins over the Columbus Blue Jackets 6-3 at PPG Paints Arena on Friday night.

The Blue Jackets have lost six straight (0-5-1), matching their longest losing streak of the season Nov. 1-12 (0-5-1).

Penguins Offense Too Much

The Blue Jackets were able to score Friday night. It just wasn't nearly enough.

Columbus scored three in their loss to Pittsburgh after potting one goal during their recent 0-3-1 homestand. It's the first game they've scored multiple goals since their 5-3 loss at the New Jersey Devils on Mar. 11.

The Penguins scored three times in the opening period to take a 3-1 lead into the intermission.

Pittsburgh started the game's scoring when Evgeni Malkin tallied his 14th at 5:28 to make it 1-0 Penguins. Philip Tomasino (11) and Connor Dewar (4) had the assists.

At 13:51 Noel Acciari made it 2-0. Blake Lizotte added his ninth assist.

Boone Jenner answered moments later at 14:07 with his first of the year to make it 2-1. Denton Mateychuk had his fourth assist and Ivan Provorov picked up his 22nd.

However, Pittsburgh answered the answer with their third of the period to make it 3-1 at 14:53. Rickard Rakell scored his 32nd with Bryan Rust (28) and Crosby (51) picking up the assists. Crosby is on a six-game point streak (six goals, four assists).

Justin Danforth cut the deficit to a goal early in the second period at 1:35 with his eighth. Mathieu Olivier (11) and Damon Severson (19) picked up the helpers.

Then Pittsburgh added on again at 8:15, as Bokondji Imama got his first of the year and the second goal of his career. Danton Heinen (17) and Kevin Hayes (10) assisted on the goal.

It was that kind of night as 12 Penguins recorded a point including 11 different forwards.

Crosby made it 5-2 for his 25th at 15:31 — Matt Grzelcyk, 31st assist — and Rust added the empty net goal at 18:03 of the third period with Rakell adding his second point (29th assist) and Alex Nedeljkovic adding his second assist of the season.

Kent Johnson had a goal at 3:45 of the third period. Sean Kuraly (10) and Yegor Chinakhov (8) assisted.

Elvis Merzlikins made his second straight start in as many nights, the first time all season he's played both ends of the back-to-back. Daniil Tarasov is dealing with an illness and Jet Greaves, called up following Thursday's game, served as Merzlikins' backup.

Merzlikins made 28 saves on 33 shots.

Jackets (Finally) Break Goose Egg

Here are the lone highlights.

Mathieu Olivier and Bokondji Imama got into a scrap at 11:49 of the first period which might have provided energy for the Jackets. Down 2-0 at the time, Jenner wound up scoring his first of the season moments later at 14:07. Jenner's goal came just after Acciari's at 13:51.

Danforth made it a one-goal game early in the second period.

Kent Johnson scored to make it 5-3.

Columbus has made opposing goaltenders look like stars recently and quite literally, Nedeljkovic was the second star of the game with 44 saves on 47 shots.

Luke Kunin nearly had a goal late in the third period but couldn't cash in.

Columbus had the edge in shot attempts 72-50 at 5v5 and 94-55 in all situations. They had the edge in expected goals 4.13-2.4 at 5v5 and 5.7-3.04 in all situations according to Natural Stat Trick but made too many mistakes and turnovers.

Flatlining

The Columbus-Pittsburgh tilt was the only game around the league on Friday so the good news is the Blue Jackets didn't lose ground in their playoff chase but didn't do themselves any favors either.

The Penguins moved to within three points of the sinking Jackets.

Columbus is 1-8-0 in the second of back-to-back games this season. They're 5-12-1 in back-to-back sets.

Zach Werenski has gone a season-high five straight games without a point. He had a game-high eight shots on goal. Kent Johnson broke a season-long four-game pointless drought with the goal on Friday.

The playoffs seemingly on life support, the Jackets are still three points out of the final wild card spot with 13 games left to play.

Road Trip Conclusion

The Blue Jackets wrap up the quick two-game road trip when they play the New York Islanders from UBS Arena on Monday, Mar. 24 at 7 p.m. ET.

The Athletic / NHL Power Rankings: Jets retake top spot as we refine data to find the scary numbers for each team

By Dom Luszczyzyn and Mark Lazerus- March 22, 2025

Good morning, macrodata refiners!

It's been a while since the Power Rankings have been taken over by a pop culture vehicle, but the good news is that injustice ends today. It's "Severance" week at Rankings HQ and we have a devoted disciple of Kier, Mark L., joining us for the occasion.

In honor of the season finale (which we promise we won't spoil) we put on our macrodata refinement hats and got to work. Well, we got our innies to get to work.

Our innies pored through the data in each team's file, revealing one scary number that needs to be refined for reasons that are mysterious and important. Basically, what Dom L. already does here daily at The Athletic.

Scary Numbers Helly R GIF from Scary Numbers GIFs

Please try to enjoy each ranking equally, and not show preference for any over the others.

Data as of March 19

1. Winnipeg Jets, 48-18-4

Last week: 3

Mark L. rank: 2

Dom L. rank: 1

.875

It's extremely difficult to find a scary number for the Jets from this season, especially with Logan Stanley in the press box lately. The Jets have been that good this year. But one scary number from their past does loom large: Connor Hellebuyck's playoff save percentage. Over the last three years, it's .875, the worst among goalies who have started 10 or more games.

Hellebuyck has been amazing this season and continues to show why he's the best goalie in the world. But until the Jets are actually playing playoff hockey, there's still a small tinge of fear that history might repeat itself in April. A very, very small tinge — but a tinge nonetheless. We're hoping Hellebuyck proves us wrong with some series-stealing heroics, but if he's anything less than his usual self, Winnipeg's magical season could end quickly. Again.

via GIPHY

2. Dallas Stars, 43-21-4

Last week: 1

Mark L. rank: 1

Dom L. rank: 2

4

Miro Heiskanen's jersey number. And the revelation this week that the Stars' No. 1 defenseman could be out through the first round of the playoffs — a likely series against fellow Stanley Cup contender Colorado — should send a shiver through Stars fans' spines. Relying on 22 minutes a night from Cody Ceci — with whom Dallas is being badly outshot and out-chanced (though, oddly enough, not outscored) — isn't a recipe for success against the Avalanche. Heiskanen's presence, or absence, changes a lot.

Scary Numbers Severance GIF from Scary Numbers GIFs

3. Washington Capitals, 46-15-8

Last week: 4

Mark L. rank: 3

Dom L. rank: 3

11.2

The Capitals' five-on-five shooting percentage is the highest in the league, and, in fact, the highest we've seen since at least 2007-08. Alex Ovechkin's 17.8 percent is by far the highest of his career (by more than two percentage points!). It's lasted five months, so maybe it's silly to worry about sustainability. After all, the Capitals became the first team to clinch a playoff spot Thursday night. But we simply haven't seen shooting numbers like this in the cap era, and it's perfectly fair to wonder if the Caps can keep up this ridiculous pace in the postseason, when time and space become more scarce.

Severance Kier GIF from Severance GIFs

4. Florida Panthers, 42-24-3

Last week: 2

Mark L. rank: 5

Dom L. rank: 4

6-1

That's how much the Panthers are getting outscored by at five-on-five with Seth Jones on the ice since he was acquired from Chicago. In Jones' first four games, when he was on the second pairing, the Panthers gave up just one goal with Gustav Forsling on the ice (a 4-1 differential). In Jones' next four games, after Aaron Ekblad's suspension and elevated Jones to the top pairing, the Panthers have given up five goals with Forsling on the ice (a 3-5 differential).

Enjoy Each Fact Equally Severance GIF from Enjoy Each Fact Equally GIFs

5. Carolina Hurricanes, 42-22-4

Last week: 7

Mark L. rank: 4

Dom L. rank: 5

-0.19

Andrei Svechnikov is in a drought. Since the beginning of February, Svechnikov has just one goal and six points in 11 games, 43 percent of the expected goals and has been outscored 9-5. His average Game Score — the scary number above — is one of the worst marks on the Hurricanes over that stretch. It's clear something is up with Svechnikov considering he's missed some time with injury, but it's still a really

tough stretch for a team that needs its stars to be stars. With Mikko Rantanen gone, the Hurricanes are back to needing more offensive punch and it doesn't help that Svechnikov looked the way he did before injury. Can't depend on Mark Jankowski scoring on every shot he takes forever, but maybe it's time for Seth Jarvis to really step up on the top line.

Do It I Dare You Severance GIF from Do It I Dare You GIFs

6. Vegas Golden Knights, 39-19-7

Last week: 5

Mark L. rank: 6

Dom L. rank: 6

2.23

Since Jan. 1, no team has a higher expected-goals share than the Golden Knights, who have dominated play at five-on-five to the tune of 56.51 percent. Their record is strong and everyone is contributing which made it hard to find a scary number.

But as strong as their xG has been, actual goals do matter, and the Knights aren't getting nearly enough of them — especially on offense. In that same time span, Vegas is 19th in the league at just 2.23 goals scored per 60 minutes. Will a lack of finishing ability doom the Knights the way it's doomed possession monsters like the Hurricanes in the past? Maybe it wouldn't matter so much if Vegas' second-ranked power play got on the ice more often, but Vegas is dead last in the league with just 2.74 penalties drawn per 60 minutes.

Great Work Severance GIF from Great Work GIFs

7. Colorado Avalanche, 42-25-3

Last week: 6

Mark L. rank: 5

Dom L. rank: 6

48 percent

The Avalanche are a great team that got deeper at the deadline, but things get a little dicey whenever both Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar aren't on the ice together. Which is roughly 75 percent of the time.

With that duo on the ice the Avalanche are dominant with 63 percent of the expected goals and 60 percent of the goals. Any other time, those rates drop to 48 percent. While they may outscore teams with one of MacKinnon or Makar on the ice, the Avalanche do lose the possession battle in those minutes (especially with just Makar). And while they possess the puck a little better with both players off, they've been badly outscored during that time.

Depth has been a key issue all season and that spells it out pretty clearly. Are Brock Nelson, Charlie Coyle and Ryan Lindgren enough to fix the problem come playoff time?

Overestimated Contribute GIF from Overestimated GIFs

8. Toronto Maple Leafs, 42-24-3

Last week: 9

Mark L. rank: 8

Dom L. rank: 8

48.7

For the first time in the Auston Matthews era, the Leafs are under water in terms of expected goals. That they're still a plus-17 at five-on-five is a testament to their finishers, their power play and their top-five goaltending. But if this is indeed Mitch Marner's last hurrah with the Core Four, it'll take a better team game than we've seen from the Leafs so far to make it a memorable one, rather than an all-too-familiar one. Fans are hungry for a lot more than respect in the handshake line and it's tough to say that the current way can get them there.

Severance Cobel GIFfrom Severance GIFs

9. Tampa Bay Lightning, 40-23-5

Last week: 8

Mark L. rank: 9

Dom L. rank: 9

0.32

Brayden Point is an amazing offensive player, but when he's on the ice this season he's not exactly tilting it at five-on-five. That's despite spending a lot of time between Nikita Kucherov and Jake Guentzel. When Point is on, the Lightning give up 0.32 more xGA/60 this season compared to when he's off. That's the 19th-worst mark in the league among forwards and second-worst among top line centers. Tough minutes isn't much of an excuse either considering Anthony Cirelli soaks up the team's most challenging matchups.

Point's defensive game looks questionable going into the playoffs and that's not a comforting fact when Tampa Bay's two most likely opponents have Aleksander Barkov and Auston Matthews at the top of the lineup.

Severance Sissy GIFfrom Severance GIFs

10. Edmonton Oilers, 40-24-5

Last week: 10

Mark L. rank: 9

Dom L. rank: 11

118

The last time Connor McDavid paced for under 120 points was 2017-18 — seven years ago. This year he has 89 points in 62 games, a 117.7-point pace. For any other player that's an incredible season. For McDavid, a player who has paced for 143 points per 82 games over the previous four seasons, it's a disappointment.

While there are a plethora of scary things about this current iteration of the Oilers — forward depth, finishing, goaltending — they become even scarier without McDavid at the absolute peak of his powers. His immense value is the thing that makes the Oilers one of the top contenders where McDavid is so good that all those other problems don't really matter. We saw that in last year's Stanley Cup Final run.

Edmonton's scariest thought: what if those days are over and this — a sub-120-point McDavid — is the new normal?

Actually, after McDavid left the game with an injury, maybe there's an even scarier thought.

All Of Us Equally Were Famous GIF from All Of Us Equally GIFs

11. Los Angeles Kings, 37-21-9

Last week: 11

Mark L. rank: 11

Dom L. rank: 11

-34

Los Angeles has the league's worst penalty differential and that feels like a bad sign for two key reasons.

The first is that the Kings' power play is not great. Perhaps it's the team's lack of star power, but what was already an issue last season is an even bigger one with the Kings scoring only 5.4 goals per 60 on the man advantage. That's the fifth-worst mark in the league. The second is that the Kings will likely play Edmonton in the first round, again. While the Kings may be strong at five-on-five, they will be at a major special teams disadvantage against the Oilers. Again. Staying disciplined will be crucial, otherwise this season will end the same way the last three have.

You Came Back Severance GIF from You Came Back GIFs

12. Ottawa Senators, 36-27-5

Last week: 12

Mark L. rank: 12

Dom L. rank: 13

19

Should Senators fans be rooting for the provincial rival Maple Leafs? For entertainment value, absolutely, we all want to see a Battle of Ontario. But based on regular-season results, Ottawa (assuming it holds on to the first wild-card spot in the East after its six-game win streak this month) should be hoping the Leafs can win the Atlantic. In five games against Tampa Bay and Florida, the Senators have given up 19 goals, including consecutive 5-1 losses on an early February road trip. Against Toronto, however, Ottawa is a sparkling 3-0 with only three goals against.

via GIPHY

13. New Jersey Devils, 37-27-6

Last week: 13

Mark L. rank: 13

Dom L. rank: 15

.829

That's Jacob Markstrom's save percentage in his five games since returning from an MCL sprain. It's bad enough that the Devils' play has dropped off so precipitously since Jack Hughes and Dougie Hamilton were injured. With them, their expected-goals share was 52.28 percent, and their actual goal differential

was 117-105. Since they were injured, their expected-goals share is 45.28 percent, and they've been outscored 20-13. But that will hardly matter if they keep getting this kind of goaltending from Markstrom, the guy they brought in to finally stabilize the lineup's biggest weakness. Markstrom has given up 21 goals in five starts since returning March 2, including two six-goal games against Winnipeg and Pittsburgh. The Hurricanes must be licking their chops thinking about that probable first-round matchup.

Severance Baby Goats GIF from Severance GIFs

14. Minnesota Wild, 39-25-5

Last week: 14

Mark L. rank: 14

Dom L. rank: 14

46.7

Since the holiday break, the Wild have played all but three games without Kirill Kaprizov with the results being middling at best. While the team's record has been fine in that context, their underlying numbers have left a lot to be desired. Minnesota has just a 46.7 percent xG rate since that time, the seventh-worst mark in the league. Any team would struggle without their best player — and in Minnesota's case, the Wild have been missing a few other players too — but it's still striking how mid the team looks without Kaprizov.

via GIPHY

15. St. Louis Blues, 35-28-7

Last week: 22

Mark L. rank: 16

Dom L. rank: 12

6.5

No, this isn't about all the \$6.5 million deals that St. Louis has on the books, it's their power play xG rate per 60 since the 4 Nations break. It's the third-worst mark in the league and well south of the scintillating 11.5 goals per 60 mark they're actually getting. Usually, that's a regression indicator.

With how great the Blues are playing right now, perhaps that's much ado about nothing. But for a team on the playoff bubble, any red flag is worth pointing out. The Blues have been a terrifying team under Jim Montgomery and would be a terrifying draw as a wildcard team. With how they've played, it's a lot easier coming up with scary numbers for their competition. But there's still work to do and the team's power play could be a house of cards.

via GIPHY

16. Vancouver Canucks, 32-25-12

Last week: 15

Mark L. rank: 16

Dom L. rank: 15

18

Despite missing 14 games to injury, Quinn Hughes still leads the Canucks in points by a whopping 18. There's two ways of looking at that.

Wow, Hughes is awesome.

Wow, the rest of the team stinks.

Maybe "stinks" is the wrong word, but it's extremely rare for a good team to be led in scoring by a defenseman — no matter how good the defenseman is. Usually the simplest explanation is the correct one: this is not a good team.

What happened to the team with the Midas Touch we all loved so much last season? Vancouver's offense has felt anemic and stale all season with some games being almost painful to watch. The team just isn't very dangerous with the puck and it's that lack of offensive oomph that has the Canucks in the thick of the wildcard race instead of contending. Outside of Hughes, this is not a scary team.

Were Not Afraid Of You Severance GIF from Were Not Afraid Of You GIFs

17. Montreal Canadiens, 33-27-7

Last week: 19

Mark L. rank: 17

Dom L. rank: 17

106.1

Montreal's PDO since the 4 Nations break in all situations is sky high. The Canadiens' goals percentage at five-on-five is way ahead of expected, and the same goes for both the power play and penalty kill. Are the Canadiens a young team finding their way, or a team of young hot-shots flying too close to the sun? If it's the former, they'll need to start controlling the run of play more going forward.

Severance Seth Milchick GIF from Severance GIFs

18. New York Islanders, 32-28-8

Last week: 23

Mark L. rank: 20

Dom L. rank: 18

11.5

As it stands now, the Islanders' power-play percentage is the fourth-worst in the salary-cap era. The three that were worse (the 2020-21 Ducks, the 2013-14 Panthers and the 2020-21 Red Wings) all finished in last or second-to-last. The Isles, meanwhile, are fighting for a playoff spot.

Are they good? Are they bad? Are they a sleeping giant? Are they scrappy overachievers? Do they have a future? Will they attempt to retool this summer? Rebuild? Does Lou Lamoriello, the most secretive and unknowable general manager in the league, even know?

via GIPHY

19. Calgary Flames, 32-25-11

Last week: 20

Mark L. rank: 19

Dom L. rank: 19

76 percent

Calgary's current odds to make the playoffs are 16 percent. Calgary's current odds of finishing in the league's bottom 10 are eight percent. That leaves a very wide range of outcomes where neither happens which is unfortunately terrible news for Flames fans given the conditions of the first-round pick Calgary owes to Montreal. That pick was dealt to get out of Sean Monahan's contract and will be the earlier of Calgary's two picks (the Flames own Florida's 2025 first) if Calgary's pick lands outside the top 10. At 76 percent, that unfortunately looks to be the likeliest scenario.

Calgary's best bet right now is an outright tank job and that might not be too difficult given the way the Flames have played of late. Over the last month, Calgary's 45 percent xG at five-on-five is ahead of only Anaheim and Chicago. Then again, Dustin Wolf can certainly change the math on his own with how he's played this season.

via GIPHY

20. Utah HC, 31-27-11

Last week: 18

Mark L. rank: 18

Dom L. rank: 21

~12

That's the rough difference between the expected-goals percentage for both Logan Cooley and Dylan Guenther and their actual goals share. In other words, the two young Utah stars are significantly outplaying their underlying metrics. Maybe it's just two hyper-talented players showing their world-class finishing ability, each of them shooting better than 14 percent. Or maybe it's a bubble just waiting to burst, ruining one of the feel-good stories of the season. (Note: Feeling good does not apply to Arizona Coyotes fans watching from afar.)

It Was Cruel Irving B GIF from It Was Cruel GIFs

21. New York Rangers, 33-31-6

Last week: 17

Mark L. rank: 21

Dom L. rank: 20

12.6

Only the Ducks are giving up more high-danger scoring chances per 60 minutes than the Rangers. They gave up 15 in 49 five-on-five minutes in their loss to the Flames on Tuesday, an effort that was so poor that, had it been on the road, you could have envisioned Peter Laviolette taking Gerard Gallant's cab home.

via GIPHY

22. Columbus Blue Jackets, 31-28-9

Last week: 16

Mark L. rank: 23

Dom L. rank: 22

2

There's good news for the plummeting Blue Jackets in that they've had rotten puck luck — to the tune of a 968 PDO — in losing six of seven and losing their grip on a wild-card spot. But there are certainly warning signs, too. One of those is Kirill Marchenko, who has just one goal and two points in those seven games, shooting a mere 6.7 percent. In the 57 previous games, Marchenko was better than a point a game with 23 goals and 36 assists in 57 games, shooting 15.5 percent. Was the Marchenko that helped carry the Jackets into the playoff picture as the season's best story playing over his head, and is this the inevitable course correction? Or is it just a blip?

Craving More Severance GIFfrom Craving More GIFs

23. Detroit Red Wings, 32-30-6

Last week: 21

Mark L. rank: 22

Dom L. rank: 23

1.99

Since the 4 Nations break, the Red Wings are 4-8-1 and have basically kissed their playoff chances goodbye during that time. Detroit still has a shot of making it, but the road ahead is tough given the team's grueling schedule.

One major issue: not enough goals at five-on-five. The Red Wings are one of three teams scoring under two goals-per-60 this season and it's safe to say that the Flames and Predators aren't good company. Finishing has been a glaring problem all season, but it's been an especially big problem over this recent stretch. Since the break, the Red Wings are still scoring just 1.99 goals-per-60 despite raising their expected goals rate considerably from 2.21 to 2.91. That latter mark is the third-best in the league over the time frame, up from fourth worst beforehand. And it just hasn't mattered.

The Red Wings newfound chance generation may be a good sign for the future, but for the present they need real goals not expected ones. That was already an issue before Todd McLellan became coach and it feels like it's been exacerbated of late.

Unhappy Video Recording GIFfrom Unhappy GIFs

24. Boston Bruins, 30-31-9

Last week: 24

Mark L. rank: 24

Dom L. rank: 24

2.4

For the price of \$12.75 million, Dallas got Mikko Rantanen with some change to spare. A superstar for the foreseeable future. Boston has Elias Lindholm and Nikita Zadorov whose combined Net Rating this year is plus-2.4. Are the two players better than they're given credit for? Probably. Are they worth \$12.75 million combined? Absolutely not.

That's the thing about calling cap space valuable: it depends how you use it. In this league, it's very easy to misuse and Boston will be paying the piper for it for a very long time. In Year 1, the Bruins are already not getting what they paid for.

Severance Jame Eagan GIF from Severance GIFs

25. Anaheim Ducks, 30-31-8

Last week: 28

Mark L. rank: 25

Dom L. rank: 25

-5.3

We are still waiting for Anaheim's ducklings to be all grown up and the 2024-25 season has been another cruel reminder that there's still a long way to go. The Ducks have seven young core pieces on the rise — Mason McTavish, Cutter Gauthier, Leo Carlsson, Trevor Zegras, Jackson Lacombe, Pavel Mintyukov and Olen Zellweger — and only one, Lacombe, has been a difference-maker this year. The combined Net Rating of the seven this season is minus-5.3 which is decidedly below average. And that's with Lacombe's plus-5.6 factored in. The rest have averaged between fine (McTavish, Gauthier, Carlsson), to actively detrimental (Mintyukov, Zegras). Is there a light at the end of this tunnel?

Why Are You A Kid Severance GIF from Why Are You A Kid GIFs

26. Pittsburgh Penguins, 28-32-10

Last week: 27

Mark L. rank: 28

Dom L. rank: 26

17

That's how many players on the current Penguins roster are signed through at least the end of next season. And their average age is more than 30 years old. And Pittsburgh was 20th in Scott Wheeler's recent prospect-pool rankings. And they recently won four in a row, leaving them, at the moment, with a measly 6.5-percent chance of winning the draft lottery. Settle in, Pittsburgh. This is going to take a while.

Wins ruining the tank?

via GIPHY

27. Philadelphia Flyers, 28-34-8

Last week: 25

Mark L. rank: 27

Dom L. rank: 27

Minus-29.3

How bad have the Flyers goalies been this season? Replacement-level goaltending would have meant nearly 30 fewer goals-against. Samuel Ersson is dead last in the league at a minus-14.92 GSAx, and Ivan Fedotov and Aleksei Kolosov are both in the bottom 14, as well — out of 93 goalies to appear in the NHL this season. And guess what? All three of them are signed through next season.

Am I Trapped Here Helly R GIFfrom Am I Trapped Here GIFs

28. Seattle Kraken, 30-35-5

Last week: 29

Mark L. rank: 26

Dom L. rank: 28

\$37,500,000

Only two players have played over 500 minutes this season and have registered a worse xG rate than Chandler Stephenson's 37.1 percent: Nolan Allan and Mitchell Chaffee. Directly ahead of Stephenson are Barclay Goodrow and Cody Ceci's time spent on the Sharks. To put it lightly, that is not good company. Stephenson's 48 points in 69 games is nice, but getting absolutely crushed to that degree at five-on-five isn't excusable. Seattle's scariest number is how much money the Kraken still owe him over the next six seasons. Woof. What did they see in Stephenson to give him that deal in the first place?

via GIPHY

29. Nashville Predators, 25-35-8

Last week: 26

Mark L. rank: 29

Dom L. rank: 30

29.0

Opponents are averaging nearly 29 scoring chances per 60 minutes of five-on-five play with Brady Skjei on the ice this season, the worst rate for any regular Predators defenseman. Nashville has been outscored 57-39 during Skjei's minutes. Already at 30 years old, Skjei is in just the first year of a seven-year, \$49-million deal, and looks nothing like the reliable, productive performer he was in Carolina. All three splashy signings Nashville made last summer — Skjei, Steven Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault — aren't looking so hot right now, but Skjei's looks like it might age the worst.

Severance Natalie GIFfrom Severance GIFs

30. Buffalo Sabres, 27-34-6

Last week: 30

Mark L. rank: 30

Dom L. rank: 30

3

That's how many more goals the Sabres have scored this season than they've given up. Yes, Buffalo is in the black at five-on-five. That's better than the playoff-bound Wild and Senators, and the playoff-hopeful Canucks, Flames and Rangers. It's only three away from the Cup-contending Oilers and Avalanche. And yet here are the Sabres, 29th in the league in points percentage, missing the playoffs for the 14th consecutive season.

We know Sabres fans deserve better, but do the Sabres themselves? Are they simply victims of bad luck? Well, their PDO is 100.5. So if anything, the math suggests it could actually get a little worse. Sorry.

Severance Gemma Scout GIFfrom Severance GIFs

31. Chicago Blackhawks, 20-40-9

Last week: 31

Mark L. rank: 31

Dom L. rank: 31

10

That's how many pointless games Connor Bedard has had in his last 13 overall. That's also the length, in minutes, of the two misconduct penalties he received in consecutive games against San Jose and Vancouver. The frustration level is high, as evidenced by Bedard throwing his helmet down the hallway after his second such penalty.

Countless factors explain Bedard's stagnant scoring this season, most notably his replacement-level linemates and both his coaches' insistence on changing those linemates on a nearly nightly basis. The really scary thing is that if GM Kyle Davidson can't somehow convince Mitch Marner that Chicago is the place to be this summer, it might not be all that much better next season. Bedard is not the problem. But the Blackhawks have not been putting him in a position to succeed, to say the least.

via GIPHY

32. San Jose Sharks, 18-42-9

Last week: 32

Mark L. rank: 32

Dom L. rank: 32

-235

Last season the Sharks had a minus-146 goal differential. This year they're on pace for minus-89, giving San Jose a two-year average of minus-117. That's the worst mark in the analytics era with only five other teams at minus-100 or worse. If you want to understand just how bleak the last two seasons of Sharks hockey has been, that's the scariest number of them all.

The Athletic / Which NHL top defense pairs have been the best and worst in the 2024-25 season?

By Harman Dayal- March 23, 2025

Any NHL team with Stanley Cup contention aspirations needs its top players to be firing on all cylinders. If a contender has an elite top line and first pair, that foundation can often mask flaws and weaknesses further down the lineup.

Two weeks ago we analyzed how every NHL team's top line was producing. This time we're turning our attention to each club's first pairs. The goal is the same as it was with the forwards: Identify which teams have top pairs that are dominating and which ones are significantly trailing the competition.

Let's begin by laying out our criteria for defining a "top pair" and then explain our methodology for tracking performance.

My initial thought was to take each team's No. 1 defenseman and then look at that player's results with their most frequent partner (e.g., Cale Makar is the Avalanche's No. 1 defender and his most common partner is Devon Toews, so let's break down the Toews-Makar pair's numbers). That approach is great in theory, but the problem is that many teams haven't had a consistent two-man top pair this season. Many teams have a No. 1 defender as their anchor for the top pair and then a rotating cast of partners that are constantly changing.

The next best thing we can do is use the No. 1 defender as a proxy for the top-pair results. Here's a chart showing which No. 1 defender was used as each team's proxy, plus a breakdown of who their partner(s) have been this season. We counted Jake Walman for the Sharks' top pair despite his recent trade to Edmonton.

NHL first pairs

Anaheim

Jackson LaCombe

Radko Gudas (718 mins)

Boston

Charlie McAvoy

Nikita Zadorov (347 mins), Mason Lohrei (237 mins)

Buffalo

Rasmus Dahlin

Bowen Byram (598 mins)

Carolina

Jacob Slavin

Brent Burns (1001 mins)

Columbus

Zach Werenski

Dante Fabbro (810 mins), Ivan Provorov (330 mins)
Calgary
MacKenzie Weegar
Daniil Miromanov (537 mins), Joel Hanley (401 mins)
Chicago
Alex Vlasic
Connor Murphy (458 mins), Louis Crevier (310 mins)
Colorado
Cale Makar
Devon Toews (948 mins)
Dallas
Miro Heiskanen
Thomas Harley (328 mins), Esa Lindell (225 mins), Ilya Lyubushkin (209 mins)
Detroit
Moritz Seider
Ben Chiarot (722 mins), Simon Edvinsson (428 mins)
Edmonton
Evan Bouchard
Mattias Ekholm (950 mins)
Florida
Gustav Forsling
Aaron Ekblad (866 mins)
Los Angeles
Mikey Anderson
Vladislav Gavrikov (822 mins)
Minnesota
Brock Faber
Jake Middleton (807 mins), Jonas Brodin (285 mins)
Montreal
Mike Matheson
Lane Hutson (467 mins), Alexandre Carrier (267 mins), Kaiden Guhle (219 mins),
New Jersey
Dougie Hamilton

Brenden Dillon (711 mins)
Nashville
Roman Josi
Brady Skjei (253 mins), Justin Barron (228 mins)
Islanders
Noah Dobson
Alex Romanov (429 mins), Isaiah George (204 mins)
Rangers
Adam Fox
Ryan Lindgren (611 mins), K'Andre Miller (298 mins)
Ottawa
Jake Sanderson
Artem Zub (564 mins), Travis Hamonic (394 mins)
Philadelphia
Travis Sanheim
Cam York (842 mins)
Pittsburgh
Kris Letang
Matt Grzelcyk (390 mins), Marcus Pettersson (280 mins)
Seattle
Vince Dunn
Adam Larsson (748 mins)
San Jose
Jake Walman
Cody Ceci (537 mins)
St. Louis
Colton Parayko
Ryan Suter (469 mins), Cam Fowler (457 mins)
Tampa Bay
Victor Hedman
Darren Raddysh (515 mins), J.J. Moser (395 mins)
Toronto
Morgan Rielly

Oliver Ekman-Larsson (495 mins), Philippe Myers (252 mins)

Utah

Mikhail Sergachev

Olli Määttä (391 mins), John Marino (284 mins)

Vancouver

Quinn Hughes

Filip Hronek (483 mins), Tyler Myers (372 mins)

Vegas

Alex Pietrangelo

Noah Hanifin (729 mins), Nicolas Hague (270 mins)

Winnipeg

Josh Morrissey

Dylan DeMelo (1048 mins)

Washington

John Carlson

Rasmus Sandin (482 mins), Jakob Chychrun (367 mins), Martin Fehervary (259 mins)

We'll look at the goals for and against differential when that top pair is on the ice as a simple measure of performance. Goal differential obviously isn't a perfect instrument because of environmental factors (it can be skewed by the quality of the forwards that the pair shares the ice with, shooting/goaltending luck and overall team quality). But if we apply context by also looking at the pair's play-driving numbers (which we'll mention for a team if it's particularly relevant), we'll get a decent 200-foot view.

Here are the numbers so far, sorted by each pair's five-on-five goal differential rate. Note that all stats were compiled via Natural Stat Trick on March 20.

NHL First Pairs' 5v5 Goal Differential

Vancouver

3.19

2.24

0.95

Tampa Bay

3.03

2.16

0.87

Washington

3.14

2.28

0.86

Colorado

2.83

2

0.83

Buffalo

2.99

2.21

0.78

Columbus

2.86

2.13

0.73

Rangers

3.07

2.38

0.69

New Jersey

3.23

2.56

0.67

Edmonton

2.87

2.3

0.57

Florida

2.62

2.05

0.57

Islanders

2.51

1.94

0.57

Winnipeg
2.35
1.81
0.54
Calgary
2.3
1.85
0.45
St. Louis
2.83
2.49
0.34
Dallas
2.6
2.29
0.31
Boston
2.35
2.07
0.28
Carolina
2.49
2.29
0.2
Los Angeles
1.8
1.6
0.2
Detroit
2.07
1.93
0.14
Anaheim

2.45
2.34
0.11
Minnesota
1.99
1.94
0.05
Utah
2.5
2.45
0.05
Seattle
3.23
3.23
0
San Jose
3.14
3.22
-0.08
Vegas
2.65
2.76
-0.11
Toronto
2.27
2.47
-0.2
Pittsburgh
2.12
2.69
-0.57
Philadelphia
2.32

3.11

-0.79

Montreal

2.32

3.12

-0.8

Chicago

2.6

3.41

-0.81

Nashville

2.27

3.18

-0.91

Ottawa

1.63

2.62

-0.99

Vancouver Canucks

This is the second year in a row that Vancouver's top pair has ranked No. 1 in the NHL by five-on-five goal differential. The Canucks would frankly be closer to the draft lottery conversation than the playoff race without Quinn Hughes.

The 25-year-old captain leads the team in scoring by 21 points despite missing 14 games due to injuries. Hughes' defensive metrics are also elite, with the Canucks' top pair surrendering just 2.1 expected goals against per 60, a figure that ranks second-best in the NHL.

Filip Hronek and Tyler Myers have split time riding shotgun with Hughes. Hronek's puck skills and offensive IQ have unlocked the best of Hughes going back to last year. Interestingly, though, Vancouver's top pair has controlled a slightly better share of shots, scoring chances and actual goals when Myers has been elevated to play with Hughes this season.

Tampa Bay Lightning

With Ryan McDonagh's return allowing the Lightning's second pair to soak up the toughest defensive assignments, the Victor Hedman-led first pair is thriving. According to Puck IQ, Hedman's on track to spend about 20 percent fewer head-to-head minutes against "elite" competition at five-on-five compared to last season.

Tampa Bay's top pair has controlled 58.3 percent of goals, which is the club's best figure since Hedman's 2019-20 Norris Trophy finalist season. It's all the more impressive because Hedman hasn't had a high-

end partner to play with. J.J. Moser missed a large chunk of the season due to injury, leaving Darren Raddysh to log over 500 five-on-five minutes next to Hedman.

The defensive results for Tampa's top pair are slightly inflated by goaltending — Andrei Vasilevskiy has pitched a stellar .927 save percentage during the first pair's shifts — and Hedman's slowing foot speed is becoming a bit of a concern, but the main takeaway is that the Lightning's top pair is excelling now that the McDonagh-driven second pair is doing a lot of the heavy defensive lifting.

Washington Capitals

Washington's on-the-fly renovation of its top four over the last couple of years has been impressive. Longtime No. 1 defenseman John Carlson has been partnered with Rasmus Sandin and Jakob Chychrun, both acquired within the last couple of seasons, at various points on the first pair this season, and the results have been terrific.

This glow-up isn't a lucky, PDO-driven bender — the Caps' top pair has seen a night-and-day difference in how well it controls play below the surface.

Cale Makar is in a heated three-horse race for the Norris Trophy with Quinn Hughes and Zach Werenski. (John E. Sokolowski / Imagn Images)

Colorado Avalanche

Is anyone surprised to see Makar and Toews driving elite results again?

Makar is in a heated three-horse race for the Norris Trophy with Hughes and Zach Werenski. It's absolutely true that he has more help around him than Hughes and Werenski — it's a luxury to be on the ice with Nathan MacKinnon, and the first pair's underlying numbers fall off harshly in non-MacKinnon minutes — but matchup data also shows that Makar is tasked with tougher defensive assignments than Hughes and Werenski.

We all know what Colorado's top pair can do offensively, but their stellar defensive profile (sparkling expected and actual goals against rates) shouldn't be overlooked, either.

Buffalo Sabres

It's a shame that the Sabres are clouded in negative storylines because Rasmus Dahlin's ascension as a superstar defenseman probably deserves more league-wide recognition.

Buffalo's top pair is crushing opponents, controlling nearly 56 percent of shot attempts and 57 percent of goals. Dahlin is clicking at a near point-per-game rate while also driving high-end defensive numbers, which is impressive considering the club's overall defensive struggles.

Bowen Byram also deserves credit for excelling in a supporting role as Dahlin's partner for most of the season.

Columbus Blue Jackets

Columbus' electric first pair has played a massive part in the team's surprisingly promising season. Werenski isn't just the engine of this pairing but the best player on the team, period. He's played at a bona fide superstar level and is deserving of Norris votes and perhaps even some Hart Trophy consideration if the Jackets reverse their recent skid and storm back into the playoffs.

Werenski has also accomplished all of this without a high-end partner. Dante Fabbro has been Werenski's primary caddy, and while he's been a terrific find from waivers, he's not the same caliber of partner as Makar and Hughes' running mates, for example.

New York Rangers

It's been a bit of a strange year for Adam Fox.

The Rangers' star defenseman hasn't quite looked as dominant compared to years past when you watch him play. Part of that comes down to his longtime partner Ryan Lindgren's struggles prior to the latter's trade, but even individually, it feels like Fox has taken a bit of a step back. We even saw that at the 4 Nations Face-Off where he struggled at times.

Despite all those factors, New York's top pair has still decisively won its matchups. That matters for a team having a nightmare season. This isn't a case where the top pair's goal differential is being carried by Igor Shesterkin's spectacular play, either — the Rangers' top pair has controlled a commanding 56.8 percent of scoring chances at five-on-five.

New Jersey Devils

The Devils have a deep blue line with three pairs that are deployed in an ultra-balanced way rather than leaning on a workhorse top pair to do the heavy lifting. Five of New Jersey's six defensemen this season have averaged between 19:30 to 21:08 per game.

Dougie Hamilton and free-agent signing Brenden Dillon have spent most of the season together on the first pair, though the pairs have been totally reconfigured since Hamilton's injury.

The Hamilton-led top pair is scoring a league-best 3.23 goals for per 60, but they are also surrendering quality chances and goals against at high rates defensively. The offensive gains outweigh the defensive struggles for this pair, but it also helps that they get favorable matchups relative to most first pairs in the NHL.

Edmonton Oilers

Evan Bouchard and Mattias Ekholm haven't always passed the eye test with flying colors this season, but the numbers don't lie: They're still handily winning their minutes. The Oilers have controlled 58.7 percent of scoring chances and own a plus-12 goal differential with their top pair on the ice at five-on-five.

It obviously helps to share the ice with Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl's lines, but the first pair's results are strong even when deployed with the bottom six. Bouchard has played nearly 300 five-on-five minutes this season away from McDavid and Draisaitl, in which the Oilers have dictated nearly 55 percent of scoring chances and have a positive goal differential.

Florida Panthers

Florida's top pair led by Gustav Forsling and Aaron Ekblad has been formidable for most of this season. But with Ekblad suspended, newcomer Seth Jones has been elevated to play with Forsling and the early returns are disappointing.

Opponents have outshot and out-chanced the Forsling-Jones pair by a nearly two-to-one ratio, with the pair ultimately outscored 4-1. It's only a tiny eight-game sample size and Jones deserves time to settle in, but his fit in Florida's top four is a storyline to monitor.

Noah Dobson has rediscovered his elite form since coming back from injury. (Wendell Cruz / Imagn Images)

New York Islanders

Noah Dobson's offensive production (32 points in 57 games) has fallen precipitously after last season's monster 70-point breakout. But there are two promising developments to acknowledge.

Firstly, while the Islanders' top pair is having a tough time generating offense, they are defending at a high level. Dobson's pair ranks top five this season at suppressing expected and actual goals against per 60.

Secondly, Dobson has rediscovered his elite form since coming back from injury. The Islanders have owned a dominant 58 percent of high-danger chances and have outscored teams 11-5 with Dobson on the ice at five-on-five since his late February return.

Winnipeg Jets

Winnipeg's top pair has consistently ranked high in this exercise and this year is no different.

Josh Morrissey is a top-10 defenseman in the NHL. He manufactures a ton of offense, is a slick puck mover and has a lengthy track record of driving quality two-way results. Dylan DeMelo, on the other hand, has underperformed at times this year riding shotgun with Morrissey. Hopefully, he can return to the form he's shown in previous seasons.

The Jets' top pair has surrendered just 1.81 goals against per 60, which is the second-best mark in the NHL. They're probably due for slightly better luck offensively, too. Winnipeg's first pair has created 2.82 expected goals for per 60, but its actual goals for rate is just 2.35 per 60.

Calgary Flames

Dustin Wolf has earned a lot of credit for his spectacular play in net, but Calgary's first pair also deserves its flowers for defending exceptionally well in front of him.

The Flames' top pair owns the third-best expected and actual goals-against rates of all first pairs in the NHL.

MacKenzie Weegar has been the stud anchoring the first pair. He hasn't even had a true top-four caliber partner this season, as he's often played with either Daniil Miromanov, or more recently, Joel Hanley. This pair doesn't create a lot of chances or goals offensively, but that's understandable because the forward group they play with is pretty limited at attacking.

St. Louis Blues

Cam Fowler has been one of the league's most underrated midseason acquisitions. The 33-year-old's numbers looked shaky in Anaheim, but he's thrived with a fresh start and elevated the Blues' top pair significantly.

Fowler has notched seven goals and 25 points in 39 games for the Blues. Colton Parayko's results on the first pair have been miles better alongside Fowler than with any other defense partner.

Fowler has elevated top pair

Parayko with Fowler

51.7%

52.8%

Plus-10

Parayko without Fowler

44.9%

44.4%

Minus-3

Fowler has kept the top pair steady even with Parayko's recent injury.

Dallas Stars

It's too bad the Stars need to rely on Miro Heiskanen and Thomas Harley to drive separate pairings because if they were ever together full-time, they'd be hands-down one of the best first pairs in the NHL.

Heiskanen and Harley have controlled around a dominant 60 percent share of shots, expected goals and actual goals in over 300 five-on-five minutes together this season. Without Harley, Heiskanen's pair has only been about break even in terms of its numbers across the board.

Heiskanen with Harley

60.7%

59.2%

Plus-6

Heiskanen without Harley

50.4%

51.2%

Minus-1

Since Heiskanen's injury, Harley has effectively kept Dallas' first pair afloat. The results aren't spectacular, but they're holding their own in tough minutes, which is notable when you're missing your No. 1 defenseman.

Boston Bruins

Injuries have hammered Boston's blue line. Hampus Lindholm has only appeared in 17 games this season, and Charlie McAvoy is stuck at the 50-game mark and still out of commission since getting hurt at the 4 Nations Face-Off.

The McAvoy-led top pair has been decent but unspectacular this season. Boston's top pair has been above-average defensively, but they've mustered just 2.35 goals for per 60 offensively, which ranks 22nd among first pairs in the NHL.

McAvoy hasn't found an ideal partner this season, as he and Nikita Zadorov didn't have much chemistry. Mason Lohrei also got spot duty alongside McAvoy.

Carolina Hurricanes

The hockey world finally got an up-close look at Jacob Slavin's elite shutdown skills at the 4 Nations Face-Off. Carolina's top pair is still excelling defensively, but they're struggling to manufacture goals.

Slavin is doing his part, but Brent Burns' decline on the top pair has been quite noticeable. The 40-year-old's foot speed is slowing, his point production has dipped and his decision-making has been questionable at times. Slavin will likely need a new partner next season.

Los Angeles Kings

L.A.'s top pair has held up admirably considering Drew Doughty missed the first 48 games of the season with an injury. Vladislav Gavrikov exceeded all expectations while stepping up on the first pair. He and Mikey Anderson played terrific shutdown hockey.

The Kings' top pair is the most low-event group in the sport. They surrender just 1.6 goals against per 60, which is by far the best rate in the NHL, but the 1.8 goals for per 60 they generate offensively ranks 31st. Again, the Kings will happily take that because of how long Doughty was out, but long-term, they'll need the first pair to be a bit more involved offensively.

Detroit Red Wings

The Red Wings' lack of high-end defensemen beyond Moritz Seider and Simon Edvinsson is a problem. Seider and Edvinsson excelled together on the top pair, but the weak bottom four has necessitated splitting those two up.

Detroit's first pair results would be significantly better if Seider had a quality partner, but he's been stuck with Ben Chiarot, who is dragging the pairing's results down.

Chiarot dragging DET's first pair down

Seider with Chiarot

46.4%

45.9%

49.0%

Seider without Chiarot

53.9%

53.4%

59.4%

Detroit's first pair has conceded just 1.93 goals against per 60, which ranks top-five in the league, but they're well below average at driving offense.

Anaheim Ducks

Jackson LaCombe's breakout as the Ducks' No. 1 defenseman is one of the team's most positive storylines this season. He's a dynamic, gifted puck mover and offensive driver. LaCombe and Radko Gudas have been about break even at controlling shots, scoring chances and actual goals, which is respectable considering how weak the overall roster is.

Minnesota Wild

Brock Faber is an outstanding young talent, but the monstrous workload he's handling has taken a toll on his second-half performance so far.

The 22-year-old sophomore ranks second among all NHL players in average ice time since Feb 1, in large part because Jonas Brodin has been sidelined. Faber is showing clear signs of fatigue as he's driven just 43 percent of expected goals and has been outscored 13-5 in that timeframe.

Talent is not the issue for the Faber, Jake Middleton pair. Ease their workload, and the results will likely rebound.

Utah Hockey Club

Mikhail Sergachev was asked to do a ton of heavy lifting for Utah's top four because of John Marino and Sean Durzi's long-term injuries. The results weren't always pretty in the first half but Utah's first pair held up fine considering the injuries and overreliance.

Utah's top pair has reached a new level since Marino's return, however. Sergachev and Marino have logged nearly 300 five-on-five minutes together since mid-January, in which the club has controlled 54.4 percent of shot attempts and outscored teams by a wide 15-7 margin.

Seattle Kraken

Vince Dunn's pair has decisively won its minutes in previous seasons, but this year, they only have a neutral goal differential.

Seattle's first pair has been involved in driving plenty of offense, but the defensive results have been disappointing. Their 3.23 goals-against per 60 rate is second-worst in the NHL and they rank near the bottom in terms of their expected goals-against rate too.

San Jose Sharks

The Sharks top pair has delivered quality results relative to the barren, difficult environment around them. Jake Walman was an impressive offensive catalyst, with San Jose scoring 3.14 goals for per 60 during the first pair's shifts. They gave back a decent chunk of that value defensively, but their overall goal differential was right around break even, which is impressive considering the dire state of the overall roster.

San Jose has lost four of five games since the Walman trade. The new defacto first pair led by Mario Ferraro is underwater, but they're not being outshot and out-chanced by wide margins, which is a promising early sign.

Vegas Golden Knights

It may be a bit surprising to see that the Golden Knights' first pair has a slightly negative goal differential, but it's understandable for a few reasons.

Firstly, they've been unlucky to some extent. Vegas' top pair has controlled a healthy 53 percent of scoring chances but their on-ice save percentage is just .896 at five-on-five. With steadier goaltending, the top pair wouldn't be leaking as many goals against.

Secondly, Alex Pietrangelo hasn't been at 100 percent health this season. Don't forget that he was forced to withdraw from the 4 Nations Face-Off because of an undisclosed ailment.

Third, Noah Hanifin got off to a slow start this season on the top pair. He's been significantly better lately now that he's on the second pair.

Toronto Maple Leafs

You can debate what exactly the Leafs' "first pair" actually is. Some would consider it to be the Jake McCabe-Chris Tanev duo, which has been lights out defensively and by far Toronto's best pairing this season. Morgan Rielly, however, leads the blue line in five-on-five minutes per game and has long been considered the No. 1 defenseman so we looked at his pairing's results for this exercise.

Rielly's pairing has had a much rougher ride than Tanev's pair. Rielly's pair is having a tough time creating offense, as they've mustered just 2.27 goals for per 60. Individually, Rielly has just 15 five-on-five points this season, which is half the total he managed in 2023-24.

The good news is that he and his new partner, Brandon Carlo, have gelled well. The duo has controlled 64 percent of expected goals through seven games so far. Toronto's top four will be in really good shape if that pair can maintain their promising start, coupled with the McCabe-Tanev pair's continued defensive excellence.

Pittsburgh Penguins

It isn't too surprising to see the Penguins land this low.

Expecting Kris Letang to singlehandedly drive a top pair at 37 years old, with a rotating cast of subpar partners, just isn't fair. Letang's offensive production is declining, and his pair has scored just 2.12 goals for per 60 offensively. Matt Grzelcyk has spent the most minutes partnered with Letang this season, but the club is now experimenting with Conor Timmins in that support role.

Philadelphia Flyers

The Flyers' top pair probably doesn't deserve to rank this low. Travis Sanheim and Cam York have actually controlled a slightly positive share of shots and scoring chances this season. However, Philadelphia is plagued by some of the worst goaltending in the NHL, which has sunk the top pair's defensive results.

Philadelphia's top pair has conceded just 2.35 expected goals against per 60, which ranks 10th best in the NHL. But their actual goals-against rate has ballooned to 3.11 per 60 because their on-ice save percentage is just .880.

Montreal Canadiens

Lane Hutson is undeniably the Canadiens' best defenseman, but we still considered Mike Matheson's unit to be the "first pair" for this exercise. Why? Well, Matheson is top-10 among all NHL players in average ice time, he's been tasked with the toughest defensive assignments on the blue line, and he still takes line rushes as the first defense pair. Matheson's challenging deployment suggests that he still deserves first-pair designation for now.

Matheson's numbers are strong when he's been paired with Hutson — they've controlled 54.4 percent of shot attempts and 55 percent of goals together — but with every other partner, he's struggled statistically. For the season as a whole, Matheson's pair has a minus-16 goal differential at five-on-five. He only has 13 five-on-five points this season and the Canadiens have coughed up high-danger chances and goals against at a pretty alarming rate during his shifts.

Chicago Blackhawks

Alex Vlasic was one of the NHL's most improved players last season. The hulking 6-foot-6 shutdown defenseman chewed up difficult top-four minutes in 2023-24 and came away relatively unscathed. He posted terrific defensive metrics and his five-on-five goal differential was only minus-1, which is remarkably impressive considering how bad the Blackhawks were last year.

Unfortunately, Vlasic's second season handling top-pair duties has been much more up and down. The 23-year-old's point production has improved but the rate at which his pair is conceding scoring chances has spiked and they're giving up a league-high 3.41 goals against per 60.

Eating big minutes on a bad, rebuilding team is an exceptionally tough assignment, so this isn't meant to reflect too poorly on him individually. It's more of a sign that the Blackhawks need to surround him and Connor Bedard with a significantly better supporting cast.

Nashville Predators

After finishing second in Norris Trophy voting last season, I don't think anybody could have predicted that Roman Josi's pair would struggle to this extent.

Josi and newcomer Brady Skjei were a poor fit together at the start of the season. They didn't create as much offense together as you'd expect and their defensive breakdowns were costly, leading to their splitting up relatively early.

Bad luck is a big part of the story, too. Nashville's top pairing actually has decent underlying numbers — they've controlled 54 percent of shot attempts and scoring chances — but they haven't gotten any saves and aren't getting the bounces offensively in terms of their shooting luck, either.

Ottawa Senators

Jake Sanderson will be a star defenseman for a very long time. Unfortunately, he might be the unluckiest top pair player in the league this season.

The Senators have outshot and out-chanced opponents during Sanderson's five-on-five shifts — albeit only by a slim margin — yet his goal differential is deeply red. He's been submarined by some pretty bad PDO luck — the Sens are scoring on just 5.6 percent of their shots during his minutes and he isn't getting as many saves in net as his teammates.

Artem Zub's injury troubles have really hurt them, too. Travis Hamonic has been elevated to the top pair at times this year because of that and he's singlehandedly dragged the unit down. Hamonic and Sanderson have played nearly 400 five-on-five minutes together this season, in which the Sens have controlled just 44.2 percent of expected goals and been outscored by a whopping 16-5 score.

The Athletic / NHL playoff tiers: Where each team sits and what's at stake down the stretch this season

By The Athletic NHL Staff- March 23, 2025

The trade deadline is behind us and there are only 26 days until the end of the 2024-25 NHL regular season.

With each team having 15 or fewer games left, attention has shifted to the final stretch of the season. Whether a team is vying for a division title, in a tight playoff chase or looking to finish the season with momentum, the stretch run has a lot to offer for all 32 clubs.

This week, The Athletic asked its NHL staff to put teams into five playoff tiers — “not happening,” “long shot,” “bubble team,” “looks like a good bet” and “it’s a lock” — and highlight what’s at stake for each team down the stretch. Teams are listed alphabetically in their respective tiers.

Not happening

Boston Bruins

What’s at stake: Who will be the next captain?

The Bruins are sinking. They traded five players off their roster. It’s unlikely interim coach Joe Sacco will assume a permanent title behind the bench. Morale is low. So this is a good time for the organization to determine who will replace Brad Marchand as captain. David Pastrnak is currently wearing the only “A” with Charlie McAvoy injured. Pastrnak is known for his positivity and friendliness with his teammates. If Pastrnak can help the team hold its head high, he could be the next captain. — Fluto Shinzawa

Buffalo Sabres

What’s at stake: The direction of the rebuild

The Sabres will miss the playoffs for a 14th straight season and are going to be a lottery team in Kevyn Adams’ fifth season as general manager. But he’s still been speaking and operating like someone who will stay employed beyond this season. Buffalo still has a lot of questions to answer this offseason beyond Adams’ job security. Will Lindy Ruff stay on as coach? Will he bring in new assistants? Which players will be part of the future? The stretch run could help determine some answers to those questions. — Matthew Fairburn

Chicago Blackhawks

What’s at stake: Anders Sörensen’s audition for permanent coach

Time is running out for Blackhawks interim coach Anders Sörensen to prove he deserves a shot at being the permanent coach. The Blackhawks have had some highs and lows since he was promoted. Some consistency down the stretch would likely be helpful for his case. — Scott Powers

Nashville Predators

What’s at stake: Andrew Brunette’s future as coach

Predators general manager Barry Trotz has made public comments recently that suggest he expects Brunette back next season, but he then tried to walk back those comments and made clear there is no final evaluation at this point. The Preds are better off losing to increase their lottery odds, and the lineup

reflects that at times, but Brunette still must try to get the best he can out of these guys each night. Especially if Trotz is truly undecided. — Joe Rexrode

Philadelphia Flyers

What's at stake: Spots for the future

After dealing useful and young-ish players Morgan Frost and Joel Farabee to Calgary in late January, Flyers general manager Daniel Briere offered an unspoken reminder to the young guys still on the team that the bar is high to stick for the long term. Management will be keeping a close eye on the players who are still developing to determine whether to keep them or perhaps try and deal them in a trade this offseason. — Kevin Kurz

Pittsburgh Penguins

What's at stake: Sidney Crosby's point-per-game streak

Sidney Crosby needs four points over the Penguins' last 11 games to complete his 20th point-per-game season in a row, which would break Wayne Gretzky's record of 19. Other than hoping to show off a new and improved Tristan Jarry to potential summer buyers, there isn't a ton for the Penguins to play for at this point. Crosby missed two games earlier this season, so his magic number is 80 points. He currently sits at 76 points in 69 games played. — Josh Yohe

San Jose Sharks

What's at stake: Winning the draft lottery — again?

The only goals the Sharks had entering the season were playing a more competitive brand of hockey in Ryan Warsofsky's first year as coach and ushering Macklin Celebrini into the NHL. If success is seeing Celebrini already becoming their best player, Will Smith starting to blossom in the second half and William Eklund showing to be a core playmaking forward, then call it success for San Jose. The wins will come later, the future is now and that means seeing youngsters Shakir Mukhamadullin, Collin Graf and Luca Cagnoni progress down the stretch. Otherwise, why not try to land the No. 1 pick and think about adding Matthew Schaefer to a promising blue line? — Eric Stephens

Seattle Kraken

What's at stake: The team's lottery odds

Two years out from a fairy tale run to within a game of the Conference Final, the Kraken have been a massive disappointment, and nothing that occurs down the stretch can really change that. At least Shane Wright has taken a major step, and Kaapo Kakko has flashed some major potential. The Kraken made some serious moves to begin to rebuild, and given their lack of progress after both a coaching change and a pair of expensive win-now moves this offseason, are probably best served by improving their lottery odds down the stretch. The internal pressure to make real progress next season has to be significant. — Thomas Drance

Long shot

Anaheim Ducks

What's at stake: Momentum for 2025-26 with a strong finish

The Ducks will fall short of a wild-card berth, but they've reached the step of playing games of some importance in March for the first time in several years. They've got 13 games left to make a statement that they intend to be a playoff team next season. Their last playoff appearance came in 2018, which is also the last time they finished above .500. Great goaltending by Lukas Dostal and John Gibson has

powered them all season but now they're seeing Jackson LaCombe become a force on defense and Mason McTavish having a big second half. Trevor Zegras is starting to recapture his mojo as a point producer. Now is the time to play spoiler and then build on the roster in the offseason. — Eric Stephens

New York Islanders

What's at stake: Less than you'd think

Lou Lamoriello, who'll be 83 in October, doesn't seem to be in danger of being asked to leave by ownership. Patrick Roy is locked in behind the bench. The Islanders traded Brock Nelson for a good return at the deadline but would have some work to do to make other changes in the offseason. The playoffs would be nice, but we've known what this team is for a while now, and missing out won't alter that perception. — Arthur Staple

Utah Hockey Club

What's at stake: Building goodwill in a new market

The Utahns are only 4 points back of the final wild-card spot in the West, but they need to jump a couple of teams and don't hold the tiebreaker. Their chances are down to 9 percent and an absolute pounding by the Oilers (7-1 loss) on Tuesday and recent losses to Chicago and Seattle haven't helped. Keeping things close will be the goal, as no one's job is likely on the line, with the real test coming in the offseason for this front office. They'll have tons of cap space, a new name, rising young stars and a chance to make some noise in 2025-26. Year 2 in Salt Lake City will be the first with real pressure. — James Mirtle

Bubble team

Calgary Flames

What's at stake: Their own first-round pick

Calgary is playing with house money by being in contention thanks in part to their team MVP Dustin Wolf. One big question now is: Which first-round pick are they giving up to Montreal after this season thanks to that Sean Monahan trade? Where they finish in the standings will dictate which of their first-rounders they'll have to give up (not including the New Jersey pick). — Julian McKenzie

Columbus Blue Jackets

What's at stake: A truly inspirational story

The Blue Jackets aren't supposed to be here. They were expected to be among the dregs of the NHL, down there at the bottom of the standings with San Jose, Chicago, Anaheim, etc. Truth be told, in losing eight of their last nine, including six straight, the Jackets are probably closer to a long shot than a bubble team. They're three points behind Montreal for the final spot, but that murky middle of the Eastern Conference is quite the traffic jam. They've already overachieved, but this season won't be viewed through quite the same lens if they don't make the playoffs. — Aaron Portzline

Detroit Red Wings

What's at stake: A summer of discontent

Detroit has been much better since head coach Todd McLellan arrived at Christmas, getting back into the playoff race despite long odds. But even so, Red Wings fans' patience has slowly evaporated after eight long years without playoff hockey. Steve Yzerman is safe as general manager, but missing the postseason

for a ninth straight year certainly won't make it a comfortable summer in Hockeytown, where the pressure to win is now really ramping up. There aren't many obvious solutions in free agency, especially given Detroit's so-so track record there the last few seasons, but the Red Wings can't just keep waiting forever — especially with Montreal seemingly already having caught up to them. — Max Bultman

Montreal Canadiens

What's at stake: A great development opportunity

The Canadiens have already achieved their goal of playing meaningful games in March; the fact they largely have their playoff destiny in their own hands this late into the season is a bonus. But for the young core of this rebuild, to have an opportunity to experience the intensity of the playoffs would be an invaluable development moment. The Canadiens are far from a finished product, there are several pieces left to add and develop in this rebuild, but a playoff appearance would serve as an accelerator in many ways, and proof to their fans that brighter days are around the corner and their patience will be rewarded. — Arpon Basu

New York Rangers

What's at stake: Respectability

The Rangers have been a mess most of this season. Their defense is among the worst in the league, and Chris Drury has tried to remake the roster on the fly. They've dug themselves a hole in the standings, and the odds are stacked against them to make the playoffs. The rest of this season should be about committing to winning habits and seeing if results follow. If they don't (and perhaps even if they do) this offseason could feature plenty more changes to the roster, and maybe even the staff. — Peter Baugh

St. Louis Blues

What's at stake: How much of the core is kept

This will be Doug Armstrong's final offseason as Blues general manager. The organization announced last June that Alexander Steen will replace him after the 2025-26 season and Armstrong's sole title will be president of hockey operations. As his clock winds down, Armstrong indicated that he'd explore making changes to the Blues' core group of players if the results didn't improve. Well, those core players have responded well, and the results have been better. If the club can complete its late-season surge and end a two-year playoff drought, perhaps he'll consider keeping a couple of those players who he may have planned to move this summer. — Jeremy Rutherford

Vancouver Canucks

What's at stake: Pretty much everything

The club's overtime loss on Thursday in St. Louis will ding its odds, but the Canucks are in the mix for the second wild-card spot despite a season that's been defined by inconsistency, injury and off-ice dysfunction to this point. From a playoff berth to the team's overall direction, just about everything feels like it's on the line for the Canucks. — Thomas Drance

Looks like a good bet

Minnesota Wild

What's at stake: Making the playoffs

The Wild have a little cushion in their wild-card spot but it's getting tighter with a bunch of teams pushing. And Minnesota has a tough week ahead with a Dallas/Vegas back-to-back and then hosting the Capitals. Injuries have been a huge factor all season with Kirill Kaprizov and Joel Eriksson Ek still out for a

while. There won't be a regime change or coaching change if they miss the playoffs. But it's still very important, especially with the Wild having traded their first-round pick for David Jiricek. They could get a boost down the stretch or for the playoffs if top prospect Zeev Buium does indeed sign after the University of Denver season. — Joe Smith

New Jersey Devils

What's at stake: Setting a standard for the future

With Jack Hughes out, the Devils are hard to take seriously as a Stanley Cup contender. In many ways, the rest of this season is about laying the groundwork for the future. New Jersey needs to show it's a legitimate playoff team, even without Hughes, Dougie Hamilton and Jonas Siegenthaler. Making the postseason still matters. And who knows, if the Devils get in maybe they can push a team (Carolina is their likely opponent) in the first round and maybe steal a series. That would build good momentum heading into 2025-26, when the team hopes to be healthy enough for a more legitimate Stanley Cup push. — Peter Baugh

Ottawa Senators

What's at stake: The team's core

The Senators have a 93 percent chance of making the playoffs according to Dom Luszczyszyn's model. They caught fire at the right time and made essential moves at the deadline to improve their team. That includes trading away Josh Norris from their core to acquire Dylan Cozens. It's a move many might've expected in the offseason, but the Sens did it sooner. If they somehow miss now, it'll be a catastrophic end to their season and might necessitate further changes to their core. — Julian McKenzie

It's a lock

Carolina Hurricanes

What's at stake: Solidifying the lineup

The Hurricanes have new faces, injured players poised to return and prospects all vying for ice time. Coach Rod Brind'Amour will need to fit together all the pieces, determine if young defensemen Scott Morrow and Alexander Nikishin factor into Carolina's postseason plans and decide which goalie will lead the way in the playoffs. — Cory Lavalette

Colorado Avalanche

What's at stake: Home ice in the opening round

There are plenty of (justified) complaints about the current playoff format. It's unfortunate that two of the league's best in Colorado and Dallas are set to meet in the first round, but it's a reality. In all likelihood, we are heading for that heavyweight brawl, and in a series that could easily go seven games, home ice could be crucial. Winning Sunday's meeting in overtime was a good start, but the Avalanche still have some work to do to catch the Stars in the standings. — Jesse Granger

Mikko Rantanen has had a decent enough start to his Stars career. (Jerome Miron / Imagn Images)

Dallas Stars

What's at stake: Mikko Rantanen's comfort level

Miro Heiskanen's uncertain availability for the first round hangs over everything, but in the regular season, all that really matters is home ice against Colorado (meh, whatever) and making sure Rantanen is firing on all cylinders come the playoffs. He's had a decent enough start to his Stars career, but he needs

to be fully comfortable with the Stars' system, his linemates (Roope Hintz and Jason Robertson) and his off-ice life if Dallas is going to live up to its full potential and win the Stanley Cup. These last few weeks should be all about putting Rantanen in a good headspace entering the postseason. — Mark Lazerus

Edmonton Oilers

What's at stake: A Pacific Division crown

The Oilers will make their sixth straight playoff appearance dating to the 2020 bubble. The only thing to be determined is where they'll be slotted in the Western Conference bracket. Veteran defenceman Mattias Ekholm lamented in training camp that the Oilers had home ice in only one of their four playoff series last spring. To ensure at least two, they'll have to fend off Los Angeles and surpass Vegas to claim their first division title since 1986-87. — Daniel Nugent-Bowman

Florida Panthers

What's at stake: Trying to avoid the 2-3 matchup in Round 1

With another win over Columbus on Thursday night, the defending champs moved one step closer to clinching a playoff spot. Florida is playing without four key players right now — Matthew Tkachuk, Aaron Ekblad, Brad Marchand and Dmitry Kulikov — and it's been a bit of a bumpy stretch. The Panthers have a tough schedule left and really mainly want to try and enter the postseason without losing anyone else. But winning the Atlantic — and avoiding the Leafs or Lightning — matters, too, even if the top wild-card team figures to be coming into the playoffs red hot. — James Mirtle

Los Angeles Kings

What's at stake: Home-ice advantage in the first round

The Kings are too good defensively and too phenomenal at home to fall out of playoff contention, so they're a lock. The carrot that's in front of them is being able to start a series at home, which hasn't happened in three straight playoff defeats to Edmonton. With 11 of their final 15 at home, they've got a shot to overtake the Oilers for second place in the Pacific Division. Tracking down Vegas for the division title is probably out of reach but they need more offense throughout their lineup to support Darcy Kuemper, who's having a terrific comeback season. — Eric Stephens

Tampa Bay Lightning

What's at stake: Home-ice advantage

The Lightning's playoff standing is essentially locked up at this point. The only question is where they finish in the division. Jumping up (and maintaining) the second seed would ensure Tampa Bay at least has home ice in Round 1. But if this team can sneak into first place, it would solidify that standing through at least two rounds. Having home ice isn't everything, but having the ability to control the matchups to open a series can be a real advantage — whether Jon Cooper opts for a power-versus-power matchup with his top players or sends Anthony Cirelli and Ryan McDonagh out to shut down the opponents' best. — Shayna Goldman

Toronto Maple Leafs

What's at stake: The Atlantic Division title

The Leafs have never won the Atlantic. A win this spring would equal a lighter first-round matchup, which would equal a lighter path, theoretically, to the franchise's first Stanley Cup since 1967. Winning it will mean beating out Florida and Tampa Bay. The Leafs have dropped both games to the Panthers so far,

but still play them twice in April. They've won, on the other hand, both meetings with the Lightning with one more meeting still to go. Those games may well determine 1-2-3. — Jonas Siegel

Vegas Golden Knights

What's at stake: Fourth Pacific Division title in eight years

The Golden Knights have built a small lead over Edmonton and Los Angeles in chase of their fourth division title in eight seasons. Getting to the finish line would guarantee Vegas home ice for the first two rounds of the playoffs, and more importantly, avoid the Oilers and Kings — who have both played them well — in the opening round. The Golden Knights are 25-7-3 at T-Mobile Arena this season, the second-most home wins in the NHL. — Jesse Granger

Washington Capitals

What's at stake: A starting role in the playoffs

The easy answer here is Alex Ovechkin's goal chase. That is a major focus for both Washington and the entire league. But there is one other storyline to watch — the goalie rotation. The Capitals have had an even rotation all season, with Charlie Lindgren and Logan Thompson playing every other game until this week when Thompson started two straight. Teams tend to lean on one goalie in the playoffs, so it will be interesting to see if Thompson starts playing consecutive games more regularly to prepare, or if Lindgren can push for a look as the 1A. — Shayna Goldman

Winnipeg Jets

What's at stake: Multiple end-of-season awards and, more importantly: Cup-contending confidence

The Jets could win their first Presidents' Trophy. They're well on their way to their second straight William M. Jennings Trophy. Connor Hellebuyck has a great case to repeat as the Vezina winner, while a strong end-of-season push could get him on more people's radar for the Hart. Josh Morrissey will earn Norris votes, Adam Lowry will get consideration for the Selke, Scott Arniel should be considered for the Jack Adams and yet: the most important thing on the line for Winnipeg is its own self-confidence. The Jets haven't been out of the first round since 2021, so every game between today and the playoffs is about proving Winnipeg is ready to overcome recent playoff demons. This is meant to be the year. — Murat Ates

The Athletic / How Joshua Ravensbergen went from unknown to the 2025 NHL Draft's top goalie prospect

By Scott Wheeler- March 24, 2025

Joshua Ravensbergen has been in the right place at the right time a couple of very important times in his life.

He and four of his friends were in the right place on the Grouse Mountain slopes in North Vancouver in February 2019 to spring into action when they saw a young kid dangling from the chairlift.

"He's not going to be able to hold on for much longer," they said as a nearby adult, Peter Pian, grabbed some of the out-of-bounds netting. The boys grabbed some nearby padding protecting the chairlift posts and the group worked together to stretch them out. The boys told the 8-year-old skier to kick his skis off so that he didn't fall with them and they cushioned his landing when they caught him.

In the days after their act of heroism, the video was viewed millions of times. Then-Governor General of Canada, Julie Payette, visited them. Ravensbergen told The Athletic that they were even invited to appear on "Ellen," and attend "some press conference" with Barack Obama.

The second time Ravensbergen was in the right place at the right time was in the fall of 2023 at training camp with the Prince George Cougars. Ravensbergen was never going to be a professional snowboarder. "I used to snowboard all the time but my length doesn't help," he said. "All the pro guys are kind of short because you can spin quicker."

But he always felt he could be a professional goalie. And the right person believed in him. That person was his late goalie coach Sean Murray, who died in November 2023, the founder of Pro-Formance Goalie School in Vancouver's Lower Mainland.

He and Murray had worked together for years but Ravensbergen had gone undrafted in the WHL Bantam Draft. Murray, who worked with the Cougars, vouched for him, helping to get him an invite to their camp.

Entering camp, Cougars head coach and general manager Mark Lamb acknowledged on a recent phone call that he had two other goalies penciled in for his team, led by returning Canucks draft pick Ty Young.

But then Ravensbergen "just outplayed everybody in camp."

"We brought him to camp and all he's done in my eyes since I've seen him is play good," Lamb said. "He got everyone's attention, he came to training camp, we listed him, we followed him and then we didn't have any real expectations or anything like that at all, which is really cool in junior especially when you have someone come in and just make the team and outplay other people from honest work and honest effort. And we just thought 'How good is that going to be for Rav to learn off of Ty Young, an NHL signed and drafted goalie with a great work ethic?'"

Initially, he started as Young's backup. Then it became more and more of a tandem. By year's end, they split the starts evenly, with Ravensbergen, an undrafted rookie who'd begun the season as a 16-year-old and finished it as a 17-year-old, playing 38 games to the 19-year-old Young's 37, and to a 26-4-1 record and .907 save percentage to Young's 23-11-0 record and .903 save percentage.

When it came time to pick a starter for the playoffs, Lamb picked Ravensbergen.

Ravensbergen ran with it, going 9-2-1 with a .931 save percentage in the playoffs to lead Prince George past Spokane and Kelowna before losing in six games to Portland in the third round. His six shutouts that season were a WHL rookie record.

By year's end, he'd gone from an undrafted unknown to viewed as a first-round talent and the top goalie prospect in the 2025 NHL Draft class.

Ravensbergen became the Cougars' No. 1 goalie in the playoffs last season. (James Doyle / Prince George Cougars)

Before his draft year had even started, he was also the youngest goalie invited by Hockey Canada to the World Junior Summer Showcase.

A year later, as his second WHL season now wraps up, there was no tandem this time around, with Ravensbergen playing more than 50 games in his draft year for the Cougars. He also stopped 15 of 16 shots (.938) in his start in the CHL USA Prospects Challenge in November.

Today, when Lamb looks back on almost not having Ravensbergen on his team, he laughs. Ravensbergen, nicknamed Rav or Burger, never did look back, though.

"You always stay loyal but things change quick. And Younger is (a) real good goaltender but when you break it right down, even when we were going back and forth (Ravensbergen) was playing better," Lamb said. "We even went 'Is he just getting lucky? It'll work itself out.' And it did. He just turned into the No. 1 and he hasn't looked back."

As a young kid, Ravensbergen didn't even play hockey, he played street hockey. On the streets of North Vancouver, he gravitated to the net. But the only gloves they had were a right-handed catcher.

After eventually asking his parents, Ken (who works for a bus company called Epic Rides) and Charlene, if he could play ice hockey, they said "Sure." Only the goalie glove the local minor hockey program provided caught left.

After catching as a lefty early on in his minor hockey career, he never felt fully comfortable that way and eventually switched back to his road hockey origins. Today, he's pretty unique as a southpaw — a right-catching goalie (of the 95 goalies who've played an NHL game so far this season, only five have caught right).

He's also pretty unique in his size.

When he passed through the WHL draft, he was 6 feet but knew he would grow (Ken is 6-foot-4, Charlene is 5-foot-10, and one of his uncles is "like 6-foot-6 or 6-foot-7," he said).

It wasn't until he returned to minor hockey with the Vancouver North West Hawks that he grew a couple of inches, and then an inch in each of the two summers after that, sprouting up to his current listing of 6-foot-5.25 and 190 pounds.

Ravensbergen is now the top-ranked goalie in the 2025 class. (Eric Young / CHL)

He remains quite raw, too. Until last summer as he prepared for his NHL Draft year, he'd never actually spent a full summer skating and training. Last summer, he then joined Kaivo Hockey, a local development skate run by Seattle Kraken development consultant Justin Rai, taking shots all summer from players such as Connor Bedard, Kent Johnson and Andrew Cristall.

"I never did anything like that before," he said.

He's still never had a dedicated summer in the gym because he spent most of last summer working with his physio to deal with what he called "hip problems" that cropped up during his heavier-than-expected workload as a rookie with the Cougars.

Lamb said the hip problems are "not a problem" and that they had more to do with maintenance and a kid who was still "learning to do stuff before you get in the goal and learning how to stretch."

"All of the stuff was so new to him with the gym and all that and now he's like a pro. He's in the gym, he's a sponge, and he wants to get better," Lamb said. "I don't want to use the word immature because they're all just so young but he was maybe a little naive. When he first came here he didn't even realize that we supplied stuff for him like socks and so he was really naive to a lot of the things that he has done because he'd just never seen them before. More than any other kid that I've experienced."

Lamb also believes that timing played a role in Ravensbergen flying under the radar earlier in his career, though, too.

"It was the COVID year so that's maybe kind of why he went through the cracks a little bit and he wasn't drafted," Lamb said. "And then it was just all progression and it was all on him and it just became a real good story for the Prince George Cougars."

Ravensbergen was excellent in net in November's CHL USA Top Prospect Game. (Eric Young / CHL)

When Ravensbergen looks back, he shakes his head a little at how far he's come in such a short time.

"I signed but I think they kind of lied to me too because the scouting director was like 'If you sign you're on the team' and then I showed up to camp and I almost didn't make preseason, which is wild to think about," Ravensbergen said.

He's no secret anymore, though, and the talent is undeniable.

"He has a huge pro presence and plays big even when down in the butterfly with excellent low net coverage," reads NHL Central Scouting's scouting report (they've ranked him No. 1 among North American goalies). "He plays with a lot of confidence and moves extremely well throughout the crease with very good structure in his game. Utilizes quick reactions and recovery skills and has an excellent glove hand. He tracks the puck well through traffic — strong in tight and on the post, quick to eliminate any holes. A combination of size and ability, he has a good chance to become an NHL starter. A top-end goalie talent for the 2025 NHL Draft."

Lamb goes as far as to call him "Carey Price-like" because "everything in the crease just seems so natural" to him.

"He's just so smooth. He has quickness for a big guy. He really reads the plays. How he moves in there for his size is incredible," Lamb finished. "He's a skinny, lean kid but his work ethic is really high-end. And he's not cocky but he's very competitive."

"He'll be a real good goalie for somebody."

ESPN / NHL Power Rankings: 1-32 poll, fantasy playoff pickups

By Sean Allen, Victoria Matiash- March 22, 2025

The 2024-25 NHL regular season is another week closer to its end on April 17, and teams continue to solidify their playoff (or draft lottery) positioning.

The fantasy hockey playoffs also began this week in standard leagues. But don't fret if you're trailing; there's still plenty of time to turn things around in this two-week period.

In addition to the updated power rankings this week, Sean Allen (Eastern Conference) and Victoria Matiash (Western Conference) have identified the best playoff pickups, still reasonably available in your free agent pool, to help push your team to the finals.

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 March 14. Points percentages are through Thursday's games.

1. Washington Capitals

Previous ranking: 2

Points percentage: 72.46%

Pierre-Luc Dubois, F (available in 41.4% of ESPN fantasy leagues): Top-40 forward value from Dubois seemed like a long shot before the season, but the trade to Washington has revived his game. He's still available in some leagues, even though he ranks 39th in fantasy points among forwards since Dec. 1.

Next seven days: vs. FLA (March 22), @ WPG (March 25), @ MIN (March 27)

2. Winnipeg Jets

Previous ranking: 1

Points percentage: 71.43%

Dylan Samberg, D (available in 92%): Leading Winnipeg's blue line in blocked shots and shots on net these past couple of weeks, Samberg is sparkling as an under-the-radar fantasy performer. Partnered with new Jets defender Luke Schenn, the 26-year-old produced two goals and an assist in a recent three-game stretch. He's worth a whirl right now in deeper leagues.

Next seven days: vs. BUF (March 23), vs. WSH (March 25)

3. Carolina Hurricanes

Previous ranking: 8

Points percentage: 64.71%

Shayne Gostisbehere, D (available in 51.6%): Mark Jankowski's four goals on four shots are a fun story, but for sustainable fantasy value, Gostisbehere is the better bet. He continues to log big power-play minutes, where 22 of his 37 points have come this season.

Next seven days: @ LA (March 22), @ ANA (March 23), vs. NSH (March 25)

4. Dallas Stars

Previous ranking: 3

Points percentage: 66.18%

Casey DeSmith, G (available in 96.2%): After Thursday's game with the Lightning, the Stars play six in a span of 10 days, then another four in six through the first week of April. Jake Oettinger is bound to get some time off, and DeSmith is a viable streaming option when he's active. Since mid-January, DeSmith is 6-0 with a .931 save percentage and 2.01 goals-against average.

Next seven days: vs. PHI (March 22), vs. MIN (March 24), @ EDM (March 26), @ CGY (March 27)

5. Vegas Golden Knights

Previous ranking: 5

Points percentage: 64.71%

Pavel Dorofeyev, F (available in 59.4%): The forward duo of Dorofeyev and Tomas Hertl has been humming along nicely at even strength and with the extra skater, contributing to the scoresheet more games than not. But only one of the two is unspoken for in more than half of ESPN fantasy leagues.

Next seven days: vs. DET (March 22), vs. TB (March 23), @ MIN (March 25)

6. Florida Panthers

Previous ranking: 4

Points percentage: 63.04%

Mackie Samoskevich, F (available in 91.6%): Brad Marchand might return in the final weeks, but until then, Samoskevich is firmly entrenched near the top of the Panthers' depth chart. Since February, he ranks sixth for fantasy points per minute among players with at least 100 minutes of ice time ... just behind Auston Matthews and ahead of Leon Draisaitl.

Next seven days: @ WSH (March 22), vs. PIT (March 23)

7. Colorado Avalanche

Previous ranking: 11

Points percentage: 62.14%

Scott Wedgewood, G (available in 95.3%): In spelling Mackenzie Blackwood more often these days, Colorado's other netminder is posting frequent victories. Make that four straight in a recent run, including a shutout against the Blackhawks. As a goalie streaming option, Wedgewood is an appealing choice this fantasy postseason.

Next seven days: @ MTL (March 22), vs. DET (March 25), vs. LA (March 27)

8. Toronto Maple Leafs

Previous ranking: 6

Points percentage: 63.04%

Matthew Knies, F (available in 35.9%): This breaks the rule of recommending widely available players a little bit, but it's worth the indulgence. First, there really isn't another place to look on the Leafs' roster for a possibly available fantasy contributor. Secondly, Knies has so much potential, he should be universally rostered. In the 51 games this season in which both Knies and Auston Matthews played, Knies has 1.98 fantasy points per game.

Next seven days: @ NSH (March 22), vs. PHI (March 25), @ SJ (March 27)

9. Edmonton Oilers

Previous ranking: 9

Points percentage: 61.59%

Calvin Pickard, G (available in 96.7%): All told, Pickard has been the better netminder for the Oilers recently. If the Oilers get another dud or two from Stuart Skinner in the coming days, Edmonton's backup is going to be busier. Coming off two stingy showings, he could be worth a fantasy swing for managers with goalie issues.

Next seven days: vs. SEA (March 22), vs. DAL (March 26), @ SEA (March 27)

10. Tampa Bay Lightning

Previous ranking: 7

Points percentage: 62.50%

Oliver Bjorkstrand, F (available in 59.3%): The pendulum has swung toward Yanni Gourde for top-six minutes, but Bjorkstrand remains a fixture on the potent Lightning power play. That role offers more consistency for the final month, though Gourde on a scoring line is also worth monitoring.

Next seven days: @ UTA (March 22), @ VGK (March 23), vs. PIT (March 25), vs. UTA (March 27)

11. Los Angeles Kings

Previous ranking: 12

Points percentage: 61.94%

Quinton Byfield, F (available in 52.4%): In hindsight, acquiring Byfield before he scored in six consecutive games would have been more helpful, but better late than never. Logging heavy minutes, the 22-year-old has a few more in him as the Kings battle for playoff positioning in the Pacific.

Next seven days: vs. CAR (March 22), vs. BOS (March 23), vs. NYR (March 25), @ COL (March 27)

12. Minnesota Wild

Previous ranking: 10

Points percentage: 60.15%

Ryan Hartman, F (available in 77.3%): Hartman is reasonably walking the talk since pledging to be better post-suspension by pitching in three goals and three assists in eight games. He's now a candidate to sub in on the top line after Marco Rossi sustained a lower-body injury Wednesday.

Next seven days: vs. BUF (March 22), @ DAL (March 24), vs. VGK (March 25), vs. WSH (March 27)

13. New Jersey Devils

Previous ranking: 13

Points percentage: 57.14%

Luke Hughes, D (available in 56.3%): There are actually two injury openings at the top of the Devils' depth chart, at forward and on the blue line. Up front, Timo Meier never left most fantasy rosters this season, so he isn't really an option in most leagues. Hughes, on the other hand, has plenty of availability taking over for the injured Dougie Hamilton.

Next seven days: vs. OTT (March 22), vs. VAN (March 24), @ CHI (March 26)

14. Ottawa Senators

Previous ranking: 17

Points percentage: 56.62%

Dylan Cozens, F (available in 41%): Cozens is thriving in Ottawa, getting key ice time and playing with an edge. He averaged 2.8 hits per 20 minutes with the Sabres but has doubled that to 5.6 in six games with the Sens. With hits, points, and power-play access, there's a lot to love about Cozens after his change of scenery.

Next seven days: @ NJ (March 22), @ BUF (March 25), @ DET (March 27)

15. St. Louis Blues

Previous ranking: 21

Points percentage: 55.00%

Jake Neighbours, F (available in 83.9%): The young winger is sizzling on a line with Robert Thomas and Pavel Buchnevich. Accumulating three goals and four assists in five games, Neighbours should be accounted for in much more than 16.1% of ESPN fantasy leagues.

Next seven days: vs. CHI (March 22), vs. NSH (March 23), vs. MTL (March 25), @ NSH (March 27)

16. Vancouver Canucks

Previous ranking: 19

Points percentage: 55.07%

Kevin Lankinen, G (available in 39.8%): Even though Thatcher Demko is travelling with the team, a shot at a playoff spot will largely rest on the back of their current No. 1. Fortunately for Lankinen & Co., having Quinn Hughes back in the lineup -- and better play from Elias Pettersson and Brock Boeser -- increases Vancouver's chances.

Next seven days: @ NYR (March 22), @ NJ (March 24), @ NYI (March 26)

17. Montreal Canadiens

Previous ranking: 20

Points percentage: 54.41%

Patrik Laine, F (available in 35%): Laine's fantasy value fluctuates with how often his power-play one-timers find twine. Lately, they've been hitting more regularly, making him an intriguing option as the Habs chase a wild-card spot. That said, he needs to shoot more, as another attempt or two per game would go a long way.

Next seven days: vs. COL (March 22), @ STL (March 25), @ PHI (March 27)

18. Calgary Flames

Previous ranking: 15

Points percentage: 55.15%

Dan Vladar, G (available in 98%): In reality, the few truly valuable fantasy performers in Calgary -- and there aren't many -- are overwhelmingly rostered in ESPN leagues. So spare a thought for the Flames'

backup, who has risen to the occasion often enough to merit consideration as a streaming option when he's tapped to start.

Next seven days: @ NYI (March 22), vs. SEA (March 25), vs. DAL (March 27)

19. Utah Hockey Club

Previous ranking: 22

Points percentage: 52.90%

Nick Schmaltz, F (available in 68.5%): No question, there are jazzier fantasy options on Utah's forward roster, such as Clayton Keller, Dylan Guenther, and Logan Cooley. But when Keller's veteran linemate is in one of his productive grooves -- as Schmaltz is at present -- fantasy managers best take advantage.

Next seven days: vs. TB (March 22), vs. DET (March 24), @ TB (March 27)

20. New York Rangers

Previous ranking: 16

Points percentage: 51.43%

Will Cuylle, F (available in 67%): Since the 4 Nations Face-Off break, Cuylle has locked down a top-six role with the Rangers. Only 16 forwards have recorded at least 40 hits in that span, and only three -- Dylan Cozens, Juraj Slafkovsky, and Cuylle -- have also tallied nine or more points. Cuylle is a rare mix of physicality and production.

Next seven days: vs. VAN (March 22), @ LA (March 25)

21. New York Islanders

Previous ranking: 23

Points percentage: 52.94%

Kyle Palmieri, F (available in 51.2%): Only 13 forwards have more goals than Palmieri since the start of February. Palmieri is still riding with Bo Horvat on the top line and power play. With Mathew Barzal questionable to return before the end of the regular season, there's only one line on Long Island to mine for fantasy points.

Next seven days: vs. CGY (March 22), vs. CBJ (March 24), vs. VAN (March 26)

22. Columbus Blue Jackets

Previous ranking: 14

Points percentage: 52.21%

Adam Fantilli, F (available in 57.3%): Even when Sean Monahan returns, it's hard to see Fantilli giving up his top-line role. Since Monahan's injury, Fantilli ranks 37th among all forwards in fantasy points and 54th in total ice time. Not bad for a second-year player.

Next seven days: @ PIT (March 21), @ NYI (March 24)

23. Detroit Red Wings

Previous ranking: 18

Points percentage: 51.47%

Patrick Kane, F (available in 32.5%): Kane might not be widely available, but he's the best fantasy pick from the Red Wings you might still find on the wire, so at least double check. His five-point outburst last week highlights that he still has game-breaking potential.

Next seven days: @ VGK (March 22), @ UTA (March 24), @ COL (March 25), vs. OTT (March 27)

24. Boston Bruins

Previous ranking: 24

Points percentage: 49.29%

Mason Lohrei, D (available in 89%): Since the trade deadline sell-off, the Bruins' fantasy stock has dipped for everyone not named David Pastrnak. But if you're looking for an upside play, Lohrei ranks ninth in total power-play time among defensemen since the 4 Nations break as he fills in for Charlie McAvoy.

Next seven days: @ SJ (March 22), @ LA (March 23), @ ANA (March 26)

25. Anaheim Ducks

Previous ranking: 26

Points percentage: 49.28%

Leo Carlsson, F (available 64.1%): Carlsson is averaging 2.1 FPPG in ESPN standard leagues since the 4 Nations break, more than any other Anaheim forward. The 20-year-old also leads his club with seven goals in that stretch.

Next seven days: vs. CAR (March 23), vs. BOS (March 26)

26. Pittsburgh Penguins

Previous ranking: 27

Points percentage: 47.14%

Tristan Jarry, G (available in 87.2%): Better late than never, right? Jarry is making a push for some back-from-the-dead fantasy value at the close of the season. Did some time in the AHL get his game back in the right place? It sure looks like it. Before a loss Tuesday, he peeled off four consecutive victories, and earned positive fantasy points in all five games. Just know that this is a high-risk situation.

Next seven days: vs. CBJ (March 21), @ FLA (March 23), @ TB (March 25), @ BUF (March 27)

27. Seattle Kraken

Previous ranking: 28

Points percentage: 46.43%

Jordan Eberle, F (available in 89.0%): On a scoring line with Chandler Stephenson and Eeli Tolvanen, the veteran is endeavoring to make the most of what's left, after sitting out 40 games because of a pelvic injury. The two goals and six assists in Eberle's most recent six games -- 2.2 FPPG -- suggests he's on the right track.

Next seven days: @ EDM (March 22), @ CGY (March 25), vs. EDM (March 27)

28. Philadelphia Flyers

Previous ranking: 25

Points percentage: 45.71%

Matvei Michkov, F (available in 49.5%): The Flyers offer limited fantasy help, with no forwards among the top 100 fantasy point earners since the 4 Nations break. Michkov impressed early on a line with Owen Tippett and Sean Couturier, but the trio was broken up after struggling defensively. Still, Michkov remains one of the few players with the potential to get hot.

Next seven days: @ DAL (March 22), @ CHI (March 23), @ TOR (March 25), vs. MTL (March 27)

29. Buffalo Sabres

Previous ranking: 29

Points percentage: 44.78%

Josh Norris, F (available in 48.8%): New uniform, same story. When healthy, Norris is loaded with fantasy potential thanks to his deployment and linemates. That remains true in Buffalo, where he's set to skate alongside Tage Thompson once he returns from another stint on the sideline.

Next seven days: @ MIN (March 22), @ WPG (March 23), vs. OTT (March 25), vs. PIT (March 27)

30. Nashville Predators

Previous ranking: 30

Points percentage: 42.65%

Brady Skjei, D (available in 47.5%): Anchoring the top power play in place of Roman Josi while logging heavy minutes on the top pair, Skjei is posting points and firing on net with regularity. Toss in a few blocked shots and handful of hits, and fantasy managers have themselves a solid blue-line performer to wrap up 2024-25.

Next seven days: vs. TOR (March 22), @ STL (March 23), @ CAR (March 25), s. STL (March 27)

31. Chicago Blackhawks

Previous ranking: 31

Points percentage: 35.51%

Ryan Donato, F (available in 71.1%): On a squad not exactly bursting with flashy fantasy talent, Donato sports value in deeper leagues down the playoff stretch. Failing to contribute to the scoresheet only three times, the top-six and No. 1 power-play forward is averaging 2.0 FPPG in standard leagues since the 4 Nations break.

Next seven days: @ STL (March 22), vs. PHI (March 23), vs. NJ (March 26)

32. San Jose Sharks

Previous ranking: 32

Points percentage: 32.61%

Will Smith, F (available in 91.8%): The Sharks' most productive forward as of late not named Macklin Celebrini, Smith is averaging nearly 18 minutes of ice time split between his top-six role and spot on the No. 1 power play. The rookie is also shooting on net frequently.

Next seven days: vs. BOS (March 22), vs. TOR (March 27)

ESPN / NHL playoff standings: What to watch on Showdown Saturday

By ESPN staff- March 23, 2025

Reactions

There's something for just about everyone on Saturday in the NHL, with 14 games being played throughout the day. The first puck drops at 1 p.m. ET, and the last opening faceoff is at 10:30 p.m. ET.

Here's what is at stake in each contest:

Vancouver Canucks at New York Rangers

1 p.m., NHL Network

The Canucks dropped out of the second wild-card spot in the West with their loss Thursday to the Blues, but can jump right back over them (at least temporarily) with a win here. As for the Rangers, they are hoping to avoid being just the fourth team to miss the playoffs a season after winning the Presidents' Trophy (joining the 2014-15 Bruins, 2007-08 Sabres and 1993-94 Rangers).

Philadelphia Flyers at Dallas Stars

2 p.m., ESPN+

The playoff possibility train left the station long ago for the Flyers, but they'll look to maintain a strong position in the draft lottery standings. The Stars open the day 10 points and three regulation wins behind the Jets for first place in the Central Division, with two games in hand. Winning games like this one is an important step in mounting a challenge for that division title.

Buffalo Sabres at Minnesota Wild

2 p.m., ESPN+

It's another spring outside the postseason for the Sabres, but maybe the never-ending rebuild will end next season? The Wild seem to be stuck in the first wild-card position in the West, four points behind the Avalanche for third in the Central, but six points ahead of the Blues. Can they still make a move?

Chicago Blackhawks at St. Louis Blues

3 p.m., ESPN+

As noted in this space on Thursday, the Blues have a very favorable strength of schedule down the stretch. That obviously includes this game, as Connor Bedard & Co. remain one of the NHL's weakest clubs -- though could be closer to contention than some think. Officially eliminated from playoff contention, the Blackhawks are just jockeying for lottery position now.

Calgary Flames at New York Islanders

4 p.m., ESPN+

Can the Flames make it a clean sweep of all three NYC metro teams? They remain on the periphery of the Western wild-card race (thanks in large part to rookie goalie Dustin Wolf), and a win here helps that quest. As for the Isles, they've quietly crept back into the Eastern wild-card race, separated by just two points from the Canadiens, who currently hold the final spot.

Carolina Hurricanes at Los Angeles Kings

4 p.m., ESPN+

It would take a monumental collapse for either of these teams to miss the playoffs. But each has faced its share of trouble getting back to the Stanley Cup Final in recent seasons. Nevertheless, wouldn't this be a fun matchup in that series?

Florida Panthers at Washington Capitals

5 p.m., ESPN+

If the Panthers keep their streak of Stanley Cup Final appearances going this spring -- and maybe win it again? -- the dynasty debate will begin. They remain atop the Atlantic Division, and could be on a collision course with the likely Metro champ Capitals in the conference finals, with this game serving as a preview. And while Alex Ovechkin keeps chasing down Wayne Gretzky's goal-scoring record, Washington is actually one of the more complete teams in the field, officially clinching a playoff berth Thursday.

Tampa Bay Lightning at Utah Hockey Club

5 p.m., ESPN+

New season, same game plan: Tampa Bay made wise additions at the trade deadline -- this time, it was Yanni Gourde and Oliver Bjorkstrand -- as they appear quite likely to continue their streak of playoff appearances. The UHC didn't exist before this season, so wherever they finish this spring will start a new streak. They enter this game four points behind the Blues for the second Western wild card.

Colorado Avalanche at Montreal Canadiens

7 p.m., ESPN+

In recent seasons, it's been expected that the Avs will make the postseason field. Despite some rough going early on this season, that outcome appears likely again for Nathan MacKinnon & Co. On the other hand, not many predicted that the Canadiens would be in possession of a wild-card spot this late in the season. Every point counts from here on out!

Ottawa Senators at New Jersey Devils

7 p.m., ESPN+

The last time the Senators made the playoffs they made it all the way to the conference finals. Were they to play a series against Saturday's opponent, that's the round in which it would happen. The Devils have been a bit wobbly of late -- largely due to injuries to key players such as Jack Hughes, Dougie Hamilton and Jonas Siegenthaler -- but have been gutting out enough victories to remain in the Metro's No. 3 position. They hold an eight-point lead on the Islanders and Rangers ahead of this game.

Toronto Maple Leafs at Nashville Predators

7 p.m., ESPN+

If they had the power, the Predators would likely have pushed the reset button on this season quite a while ago. But while they continue to calculate their draft lottery odds, the Leafs are pushing to earn the No. 1 seed in the Atlantic Division bracket. They enter this game tied in points with the Panthers, but one regulation win behind.

Detroit Red Wings at Vegas Golden Knights

8 p.m., ABC/ESPN+

For a while there it looked like Dylan Larkin would parlay his strong play for the U.S. in the 4 Nations Face-Off into dragging his team into the postseason. The Red Wings have fallen off the pace a bit, but remain four points back of the Canadiens as play begins Saturday. Meanwhile, the Golden Knights are

looking to increase their lead in the Pacific Division over the Oilers; currently, they hold an 88-85 points lead, and a 37-29 edge in regulation wins (with a game in hand).

Seattle Kraken at Edmonton Oilers

10 p.m., ESPN+

Speaking of the Oilers, they have largely avoided the Stanley Cup runner-up hangover this season. Do they want another first-round matchup with the Kings -- who they have beaten three straight years? Or will they catch the Knights and (likely) take on the Wild? As for Seattle, management can use this game as another measuring stick for who will (and won't) be back next season as they continue to build a consistent contender.

Boston Bruins at San Jose Sharks

10:30 p.m., ESPN+

There was a time where this game would have a major impact on the postseason races. Sadly for these clubs, those days are past. The Sharks were eliminated earlier this week, and the Bruins are hanging on to slim playoff hopes; they'll need to catch fire and have five teams ahead of them hit the skids.

There is a lot of runway left until April 17, the final day of the regular season, and we'll help you track it all with the NHL playoff watch. As we traverse the final stretch, we'll provide details on all the playoff races, along with the teams jockeying for position in the 2025 NHL draft lottery.

Note: Playoff chances are via Stathead.

Jump ahead:

Current playoff matchups

Today's schedule

Yesterday's scores

Expanded standings

Race for No. 1 pick

Current playoff matchups

Eastern Conference

A1 Florida Panthers vs. WC1 Ottawa Senators

A2 Toronto Maple Leafs vs. A3 Tampa Bay Lightning

M1 Washington Capitals vs. WC2 Montreal Canadiens

M2 Carolina Hurricanes vs. M3 New Jersey Devils

Western Conference

C1 Winnipeg Jets vs. WC2 St. Louis Blues

C2 Dallas Stars vs. C3 Colorado Avalanche

P1 Vegas Golden Knights vs. WC1 Minnesota Wild

P2 Edmonton Oilers vs. P3 Los Angeles Kings

Saturday's games

Note: All times ET. All games not on TNT or NHL Network are available to stream on ESPN+ (local blackout restrictions apply).

Vancouver Canucks at New York Rangers, 1 p.m. (NHLN)

Philadelphia Flyers at Dallas Stars, 2 p.m.

Buffalo Sabres at Minnesota Wild, 2 p.m.

Chicago Blackhawks at St. Louis Blues, 3 p.m.

Calgary Flames at New York Islanders, 4 p.m.

Carolina Hurricanes at Los Angeles Kings, 4 p.m.

Florida Panthers at Washington Capitals, 5 p.m.

Tampa Bay Lightning at Utah Hockey Club, 5 p.m.

Colorado Avalanche at Montreal Canadiens, 7 p.m.

Ottawa Senators at New Jersey Devils, 7 p.m.

Toronto Maple Leafs at Nashville Predators, 7 p.m.

Detroit Red Wings at Vegas Golden Knights, 8 p.m. (ABC/ESPN+)

Seattle Kraken at Edmonton Oilers, 10 p.m.

Boston Bruins at San Jose Sharks, 10:30 p.m.

Friday's scoreboard

Pittsburgh Penguins 6, Columbus Blue Jackets 3

Expanded standings

Atlantic Division

Florida Panthers

Points: 87

Regulation wins: 35

Playoff position: A1

Games left: 13

Points pace: 103.4

Next game: @ WSH (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Toronto Maple Leafs

Points: 87

Regulation wins: 34

Playoff position: A2

Games left: 13
Points pace: 103.4
Next game: @ NSH (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 99.9%
Tragic number: N/A
Tampa Bay Lightning
Points: 85
Regulation wins: 34
Playoff position: A3
Games left: 14
Points pace: 102.5
Next game: @ UTA (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 99.9%
Tragic number: N/A
Ottawa Senators
Points: 77
Regulation wins: 27
Playoff position: WC1
Games left: 14
Points pace: 92.9
Next game: @ NJ (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 95.4%
Tragic number: N/A
Montreal Canadiens
Points: 74
Regulation wins: 24
Playoff position: WC2
Games left: 14
Points pace: 89.2
Next game: vs. COL (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 43.3%
Tragic number: N/A
Detroit Red Wings

Points: 70

Regulation wins: 24

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 14

Points pace: 84.4

Next game: @ VGK (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 5.7%

Tragic number: 25

Boston Bruins

Points: 69

Regulation wins: 23

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 12

Points pace: 80.8

Next game: @ SJ (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 1.3%

Tragic number: 20

Buffalo Sabres

Points: 60

Regulation wins: 21

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 15

Points pace: 73.4

Next game: @ MIN (Saturday)

Playoff chances: ~0%

Tragic number: 17

Metro Division

x - Washington Capitals

Points: 100

Regulation wins: 39

Playoff position: M1

Games left: 13

Points pace: 118.8

Next game: vs. FLA (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Carolina Hurricanes

Points: 88

Regulation wins: 37

Playoff position: M2

Games left: 14

Points pace: 106.1

Next game: @ LA (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

New Jersey Devils

Points: 80

Regulation wins: 33

Playoff position: M3

Games left: 12

Points pace: 93.7

Next game: vs. OTT (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 95.3%

Tragic number: N/A

New York Islanders

Points: 72

Regulation wins: 25

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 14

Points pace: 86.8

Next game: vs. CGY (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 24.8%

Tragic number: 27

New York Rangers

Points: 72

Regulation wins: 30

Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 12
Points pace: 84.3
Next game: vs. VAN (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 18.2%
Tragic number: 23
Columbus Blue Jackets
Points: 71
Regulation wins: 23
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 13
Points pace: 84.4
Next game: @ NYI (Monday)
Playoff chances: 15.9%
Tragic number: 24
Pittsburgh Penguins
Points: 68
Regulation wins: 20
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 11
Points pace: 78.5
Next game: @ FLA (Sunday)
Playoff chances: 0.1%
Tragic number: 17
Philadelphia Flyers
Points: 64
Regulation wins: 17
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 12
Points pace: 75.0
Next game: @ DAL (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 0.1%
Tragic number: 15

Central Division

Winnipeg Jets

Points: 100

Regulation wins: 38

Playoff position: C1

Games left: 12

Points pace: 117.1

Next game: vs. BUF (Sunday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Dallas Stars

Points: 90

Regulation wins: 35

Playoff position: C2

Games left: 14

Points pace: 108.5

Next game: vs. PHI (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Colorado Avalanche

Points: 87

Regulation wins: 36

Playoff position: C3

Games left: 12

Points pace: 101.9

Next game: @ MTL (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Minnesota Wild

Points: 83

Regulation wins: 31

Playoff position: WC1

Games left: 13

Points pace: 98.6
Next game: vs. BUF (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 93.8%
Tragic number: N/A
St. Louis Blues
Points: 77
Regulation wins: 25
Playoff position: WC2
Games left: 12
Points pace: 90.2
Next game: vs. CHI (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 56.5%
Tragic number: N/A
Utah Hockey Club
Points: 73
Regulation wins: 23
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 13
Points pace: 86.8
Next game: vs. TB (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 12.5%
Tragic number: 23
Nashville Predators
Points: 58
Regulation wins: 21
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 14
Points pace: 69.9
Next game: vs. TOR (Saturday)
Playoff chances: ~0%
Tragic number: 10
e - Chicago Blackhawks
Points: 49

Regulation wins: 17
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 13
Points pace: 58.2
Next game: @ STL (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 0%
Tragic number: E
Pacific Division
Vegas Golden Knights
Points: 88
Regulation wins: 37
Playoff position: P1
Games left: 14
Points pace: 106.1
Next game: vs. DET (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 99.9%
Tragic number: N/A
Edmonton Oilers
Points: 85
Regulation wins: 29
Playoff position: P2
Games left: 13
Points pace: 101.0
Next game: vs. SEA (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 99.6%
Tragic number: N/A
Los Angeles Kings
Points: 83
Regulation wins: 32
Playoff position: P3
Games left: 15
Points pace: 101.6
Next game: vs. CAR (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 99.6%

Tragic number: N/A

Vancouver Canucks

Points: 76

Regulation wins: 25

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 13

Points pace: 90.3

Next game: @ NYR (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 21.3%

Tragic number: N/A

Calgary Flames

Points: 75

Regulation wins: 26

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 14

Points pace: 90.4

Next game: @ NYI (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 16.8%

Tragic number: 27

Anaheim Ducks

Points: 68

Regulation wins: 22

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 13

Points pace: 80.8

Next game: vs. CAR (Sunday)

Playoff chances: 0.1%

Tragic number: 18

Seattle Kraken

Points: 65

Regulation wins: 24

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 12

Points pace: 76.1

Next game: @ EDM (Saturday)

Playoff chances: ~0%

Tragic number: 13

e - San Jose Sharks

Points: 45

Regulation wins: 13

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 13

Points pace: 53.5

Next game: vs. BOS (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 0%

Tragic number: E

Note: An "x" means that the team has clinched a playoff berth. An "e" means that the team has been eliminated from playoff contention.

Race for the No. 1 pick

The NHL uses a draft lottery to determine the order of the first round, so the team that finishes in last place is not guaranteed the No. 1 selection. As of 2021, a team can move up a maximum of 10 spots if it wins the lottery, so only 11 teams are eligible for the No. 1 pick. Full details on the process are [here](#). Matthew Schaefer, a defenseman for the OHL's Erie Otters, is No. 1 on the draft board.

1. San Jose Sharks

Points: 45

Regulation wins: 13

2. Chicago Blackhawks

Points: 49

Regulation wins: 17

3. Nashville Predators

Points: 58

Regulation wins: 21

4. Buffalo Sabres

Points: 60

Regulation wins: 21

5. Philadelphia Flyers

Points: 64

Regulation wins: 17

6. Seattle Kraken

Points: 65

Regulation wins: 24

7. Pittsburgh Penguins

Points: 68

Regulation wins: 20

8. Anaheim Ducks

Points: 68

Regulation wins: 22

9. Boston Bruins

Points: 69

Regulation wins: 23

10. Detroit Red Wings

Points: 70

Regulation wins: 24

11. Columbus Blue Jackets

Points: 71

Regulation wins: 23

12. New York Rangers

Points: 72

Regulation wins: 30

13. New York Islanders

Points: 72

Regulation wins: 25

14. Utah Hockey Club

Points: 73

Regulation wins: 23

15. Calgary Flames

Points: 75

Regulation wins: 26

16. Vancouver Canucks

Points: 76

Regulation wins: 25

ESPN / NHL playoff standings: Ranking top Stanley Cup contenders

By ESPN staff- March 24, 2025

After the 14 games of Showdown Saturday, a slightly smaller batch of teams is back at it Sunday.

One of those seven matchups features two recent Stanley Cup winners -- the Tampa Bay Lightning at the Vegas Golden Knights (8 p.m. ET, ESPN+) -- so what better time to stack up the top Cup contenders?

Per Stathead, the Golden Knights lead Western Conference teams at 12.4%. Close behind are the Colorado Avalanche (12.3%), who next play Tuesday against the Detroit Red Wings. The Winnipeg Jets (5.8%, hosting the Buffalo Sabres on Sunday) and Edmonton Oilers (5.4%, off until Wednesday) round out the top quartet.

Despite "winning" the trade deadline by acquiring Mikko Rantanen, the Stars are seventh among West teams at 3.1%, trailing the Los Angeles Kings (3.9%) and St. Louis Blues (3.5%).

The Lightning are second among Eastern teams (12.6%), behind the Carolina Hurricanes (15.3%), who continue their Western road trip against the Anaheim Ducks on Sunday (8 p.m. ET, ESPN+). Next up among Eastern contenders are the Washington Capitals (9.5%), who square off against the Jets on Tuesday. The Toronto Maple Leafs (5.5%, believe it or not), and the Florida Panthers (5.0%) round out the top five.

There is a lot of runway left until April 17, the final day of the regular season, and we'll help you track it all with the NHL playoff watch. As we traverse the final stretch, we'll provide details on all the playoff races, along with the teams jockeying for position in the 2025 NHL draft lottery.

Note: Playoff chances are via Stathead.

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A2 Toronto Maple Leafs vs. A3 Tampa Bay Lightning

M1 Washington Capitals vs. WC2 Montreal Canadiens

M2 Carolina Hurricanes vs. M3 New Jersey Devils

Western Conference

C1 Winnipeg Jets vs. WC2 St. Louis Blues

C2 Dallas Stars vs. C3 Colorado Avalanche

P1 Vegas Golden Knights vs. WC1 Minnesota Wild

P2 Edmonton Oilers vs. P3 Los Angeles Kings

Clinching scenarios

The Winnipeg Jets will clinch a playoff berth if:

They win, or lose in overtime/shootout to the Buffalo Sabres (3 p.m. ET, ESPN+)

Or if the St. Louis Blues lose to the Nashville Predators in any fashion (6 p.m. ET, ESPN+)

Sunday's games

Note: All times ET. All games not on TNT or NHL Network are available to stream on ESPN+ (local blackout restrictions apply).

Philadelphia Flyers at Chicago Blackhawks, 3 p.m. (NHLN)

Buffalo Sabres at Winnipeg Jets, 3 p.m.

Pittsburgh Penguins at Florida Panthers, 6 p.m.

Nashville Predators at St. Louis Blues, 6 p.m.

Tampa Bay Lightning at Vegas Golden Knights, 8 p.m.

Carolina Hurricanes at Anaheim Ducks, 8 p.m.

Boston Bruins at Los Angeles Kings, 9 p.m.

Saturday's scoreboard

New York Rangers 5, Vancouver Canucks 3

Dallas Stars 3 Philadelphia Flyers 2 (OT)

Minnesota Wild 4, Buffalo Sabres 1

St. Louis Blues 4, Chicago Blackhawks 1

Calgary Flames 4, New York Islanders 3 (OT)

Los Angeles Kings 7, Carolina Hurricanes 2

Washington Capitals 6, Florida Panthers 3

Utah Hockey Club 6, Tampa Bay Lightning 4

Colorado Avalanche 5, Montreal Canadiens 4 (SO)

Ottawa Senators 3, New Jersey Devils 2

Nashville Predators 5, Toronto Maple Leafs 2

Vegas Golden Knights 6, Detroit Red Wings 3

Edmonton Oilers 5, Seattle Kraken 4

San Jose Sharks 3, Boston Bruins 1

Expanded standings

Atlantic Division

Florida Panthers

Points: 87

Regulation wins: 35

Playoff position: A1

Games left: 12

Points pace: 101.9

Next game: vs. PIT (Sunday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Toronto Maple Leafs

Points: 87

Regulation wins: 34

Playoff position: A2

Games left: 12

Points pace: 101.9

Next game: vs. PHI (Tuesday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Tampa Bay Lightning

Points: 85

Regulation wins: 34

Playoff position: A3

Games left: 13

Points pace: 101.0

Next game: @ VGK (Sunday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Ottawa Senators

Points: 79

Regulation wins: 28

Playoff position: WC1

Games left: 13

Points pace: 93.9
Next game: @ BUF (Tuesday)
Playoff chances: 96.2%
Tragic number: N/A
Montreal Canadiens
Points: 75
Regulation wins: 24
Playoff position: WC2
Games left: 13
Points pace: 89.1
Next game: @ STL (Tuesday)
Playoff chances: 45.7%
Tragic number: N/A
Detroit Red Wings
Points: 70
Regulation wins: 24
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 13
Points pace: 83.2
Next game: @ UTA (Monday)
Playoff chances: 6%
Tragic number: 22
Boston Bruins
Points: 69
Regulation wins: 23
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 11
Points pace: 79.7
Next game: @ LA (Sunday)
Playoff chances: 1.4%
Tragic number: 17
Buffalo Sabres
Points: 60

Regulation wins: 21
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 14
Points pace: 72.4
Next game: @ WPG (Sunday)
Playoff chances: ~0%
Tragic number: 14
Metro Division
x - Washington Capitals
Points: 102
Regulation wins: 40
Playoff position: M1
Games left: 12
Points pace: 119.5
Next game: @ WPG (Tuesday)
Playoff chances: 99.9%
Tragic number: N/A
Carolina Hurricanes
Points: 88
Regulation wins: 37
Playoff position: M2
Games left: 13
Points pace: 104.6
Next game: @ ANA (Sunday)
Playoff chances: 99.9%
Tragic number: N/A
New Jersey Devils
Points: 80
Regulation wins: 33
Playoff position: M3
Games left: 11
Points pace: 92.4
Next game: vs. VAN (Monday)

Playoff chances: 95.8%

Tragic number: N/A

New York Rangers

Points: 74

Regulation wins: 31

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 11

Points pace: 85.5

Next game: @ LA (Tuesday)

Playoff chances: 18.9%

Tragic number: 22

New York Islanders

Points: 73

Regulation wins: 25

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 13

Points pace: 86.8

Next game: vs. CBJ (Monday)

Playoff chances: 26%

Tragic number: 25

Columbus Blue Jackets

Points: 71

Regulation wins: 23

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 13

Points pace: 84.4

Next game: @ NYI (Monday)

Playoff chances: 9.8%

Tragic number: 23

Pittsburgh Penguins

Points: 68

Regulation wins: 20

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 11
Points pace: 78.5
Next game: @ FLA (Sunday)
Playoff chances: 0.1%
Tragic number: 16
Philadelphia Flyers
Points: 65
Regulation wins: 17
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 11
Points pace: 75.1
Next game: @ CHI (Sunday)
Playoff chances: 0.1%
Tragic number: 13
Central Division
Winnipeg Jets
Points: 100
Regulation wins: 38
Playoff position: C1
Games left: 12
Points pace: 117.1
Next game: vs. BUF (Sunday)
Playoff chances: 99.9%
Tragic number: N/A
Dallas Stars
Points: 92
Regulation wins: 35
Playoff position: C2
Games left: 13
Points pace: 109.3
Next game: vs. MIN (Monday)
Playoff chances: 99.9%
Tragic number: N/A

Colorado Avalanche

Points: 89

Regulation wins: 36

Playoff position: C3

Games left: 11

Points pace: 102.8

Next game: vs. DET (Tuesday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Minnesota Wild

Points: 85

Regulation wins: 32

Playoff position: WC1

Games left: 12

Points pace: 99.6

Next game: @ DAL (Monday)

Playoff chances: 93.5%

Tragic number: N/A

St. Louis Blues

Points: 79

Regulation wins: 26

Playoff position: WC2

Games left: 11

Points pace: 91.2

Next game: vs. NSH (Sunday)

Playoff chances: 56.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Utah Hockey Club

Points: 75

Regulation wins: 24

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 12

Points pace: 87.9

Next game: s. DET (Monday)

Playoff chances: 12.2%

Tragic number: 21

Nashville Predators

Points: 60

Regulation wins: 22

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 13

Points pace: 71.3

Next game: @ STL (Sunday)

Playoff chances: ~0%

Tragic number: 8

e - Chicago Blackhawks

Points: 49

Regulation wins: 17

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 12

Points pace: 57.4

Next game: vs. PHI (Sunday)

Playoff chances: 0%

Tragic number: E

Pacific Division

Vegas Golden Knights

Points: 90

Regulation wins: 38

Playoff position: P1

Games left: 13

Points pace: 107.0

Next game: vs. TB (Sunday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Edmonton Oilers

Points: 87

Regulation wins: 30
Playoff position: P2
Games left: 12
Points pace: 101.9
Next game: vs. DAL (Wednesday)
Playoff chances: 99.6%
Tragic number: N/A
Los Angeles Kings
Points: 85
Regulation wins: 33
Playoff position: P3
Games left: 14
Points pace: 102.5
Next game: vs. BOS (Sunday)
Playoff chances: 99.6%
Tragic number: N/A
Calgary Flames
Points: 77
Regulation wins: 26
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 13
Points pace: 91.5
Next game: vs. SEA (Tuesday)
Playoff chances: 16.8%
Tragic number: 25
Vancouver Canucks
Points: 76
Regulation wins: 25
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 12
Points pace: 89.0
Next game: @ NJ (Monday)
Playoff chances: 21.4%

Tragic number: 22

Anaheim Ducks

Points: 68

Regulation wins: 22

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 13

Points pace: 80.8

Next game: vs. CAR (Sunday)

Playoff chances: 0.1%

Tragic number: 16

Seattle Kraken

Points: 65

Regulation wins: 24

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 11

Points pace: 75.1

Next game: @ CGY (Tuesday)

Playoff chances: ~0%

Tragic number: 9

e - San Jose Sharks

Points: 47

Regulation wins: 14

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 12

Points pace: 55.1

Next game: vs. TOR (Thursday)

Playoff chances: 0%

Tragic number: E

Note: An "x" means that the team has clinched a playoff berth. An "e" means that the team has been eliminated from playoff contention.

Race for the No. 1 pick

The NHL uses a draft lottery to determine the order of the first round, so the team that finishes in last place is not guaranteed the No. 1 selection. As of 2021, a team can move up a maximum of 10 spots if it

wins the lottery, so only 11 teams are eligible for the No. 1 pick. Full details on the process are [here](#). Matthew Schaefer, a defenseman for the OHL's Erie Otters, is No. 1 on the draft board.

1. San Jose Sharks

Points: 47

Regulation wins: 14

2. Chicago Blackhawks

Points: 49

Regulation wins: 17

3. Buffalo Sabres

Points: 60

Regulation wins: 21

4. Nashville Predators

Points: 60

Regulation wins: 22

5. Philadelphia Flyers

Points: 65

Regulation wins: 17

6. Seattle Kraken

Points: 65

Regulation wins: 24

7. Pittsburgh Penguins

Points: 68

Regulation wins: 20

8. Anaheim Ducks

Points: 68

Regulation wins: 22

9. Boston Bruins

Points: 69

Regulation wins: 23

10. Detroit Red Wings

Points: 70

Regulation wins: 24

11. Columbus Blue Jackets

Points: 71

Regulation wins: 23

12. New York Islanders

Points: 73

Regulation wins: 25

13. New York Rangers

Points: 74

Regulation wins: 31

14. Utah Hockey Club

Points: 75

Regulation wins: 24

15. Vancouver Canucks

Points: 76

Regulation wins: 25

16. Calgary Flames

Points: 77

Regulation wins: 26

[Sportsnet.ca / NHL Playoff Push: Would picture change in 3-2-1 system?](#)

By Sonny Sachdeva- March 22, 2025

With the playoffs less than a month away, the NHL's 32 general managers convened in Palm Beach County, Fla. on Monday, meeting with the league's brass to mull potential changes to the game.

An array of issues were discussed over the course of the three-day annual meeting, the NHL presenting GMs with data on league-wide trends, and offering some clarity on goalie interference ahead of the post-season, too. For fans, all eyes were on the potential changes to the league's overtime rules, after a trial run of a longer 3-on-3 period at the 4 Nations Face-Off seemed to go over well. But there was another aspect of the 4 Nations setup that sparked some interest among the hockey world as well — the points system.

Unlike the system currently in place in the league, wherein teams are awarded two points for a win and one point for getting to overtime and losing, the 4 Nations tournament opted for the 3-2-1 points system. In that setup, teams are given three points for a regulation win, two points for a win in overtime or a shootout, and one point for a loss in overtime or a shootout, the system rewarding teams who can deliver a decisive win without extra time.

It's a hypothetical that fans have seemed to wonder about annually in the wake of the NHL introducing a framework that rewards teams for losing: just how much would the playoff landscape change if this alternate system was in place? While the NHL leaned on the 3-2-1 system for the 4 Nations tournament, it appears those clamouring for the points-system revamp will have to keep waiting for the time being, with no discussion of such a change at this week's GM meetings.

If the league did take that swing and revamp its point system, how much of an impact would it actually have? For the latest iteration of Playoff Push, we look at how the standings, and potential playoff matchups, would line up if this alternate system was in place right now:

Above are the current standings in the West. And overall, if the 3-2-1 system was in place, the conference would look roughly the same at this moment. In that alternate reality, Winnipeg, Dallas and Colorado would still rank as the Nos. 1, 2 and 3 in the Central, while Vegas, Edmonton and Los Angeles would still slot in as the top three in the Pacific, the latter two jostling for home-ice advantage.

The wild-card race would still have Minnesota and St. Louis holding down both spots. And behind them, a number of playoff hopefuls would still be nipping at their heels.

CENTRAL

W

L

OTL

RW

PTS

Winnipeg

48

18

4

38

138

Dallas

43

21

4

35

125

Colorado

42

25

3

36

123

PACIFIC

W

L

OTL

RW

PTS

Vegas

40

20

8

37

125

Los Angeles

37

21

9

32

115

Edmonton

40

24

5

29

114

WEST WC

W

L

OTL

RW

PTS

Minnesota*

39

25

5

31

114

St. Louis*

35

28

7

25

102

Calgary

32

25

11

26

101

Vancouver

32

25

12

25

101

Utah

31

27

11

23

96

Anaheim

30

31

8

22

90

Seattle

30

35

5

24

The system currently in place has gifted us some hard-fought wild-card races this season, with plenty of clubs across the league still within striking distance of a ticket to the dance as we head into the final weeks of the season.

Currently in the West, Vancouver sits just one point back of St. Louis, while Calgary sits just one point back of the Canucks. In the 3-2-1 system, that race would be just as close — Calgary and Vancouver would sit tied with 101 points, the pair just a point behind St Louis's 102. But it would be a tougher gap to close for the teams behind them, like Utah — who sit just four points out of wild-card spot currently, but would see that stretched to six points in this alternate system.

In the East, it would be largely the same story. In either system, Washington, Carolina and New Jersey rank first, second and third in the Metro, while Florida, Toronto and Tampa Bay line up similarly in the Atlantic.

But the East's wild-card race would be more notably upended by the 3-2-1 system.

Right now, in the current system, that race is wide open. Ottawa is holding strong in the first slot, while Montreal currently has hold of the second. Behind Montreal, the Rangers, Islanders, Blue Jackets, Red Wings and Bruins sit just a handful of points back, all of those squads within five points of a playoff spot. With a month to go, every one of those clubs has a decent chance of getting hot and breaking into the playoff race before the year's end.

If regulation wins were the real prize, though, it would be the Rangers, not the Canadiens, holding on to that second spot. And the rest of the race would be all but an afterthought.

METRO

W

L

OTL

RW

PTS

Washington

46

15

8

39

139

Carolina

42

22

4

37

125

New Jersey

37

27

6

36

113

ATLANTIC

W

L

OTL

RW

PTS

Florida

42

24

3

35

122

Toronto

42

24

3

34

121

Tampa Bay

40

23

5

34

119

EAST WC

W

L

OTL

RW

PTS

Ottawa*

36

27

5

27

104

NY Rangers*

33

31

6

30

102

Montreal

33

27

8

24

98

NY Islanders

32

28

8

25

97

Detroit

32

30

6

24

94

Columbus

31

28

9

23

94

Boston

30

31

9

23

92

With more regulation wins than any other club in the wild-card race — including Ottawa — the Rangers would jump up into that second wild-card slot. Montreal would fall outside the playoff picture for the moment, with a four-point gap to close. And the clubs behind them would face an even more insurmountable hill to climb. The Islanders, sitting next-closest, would be in the mix, just one point back, but behind them, the Red Wings and Blue Jackets would have an eight-point hill to climb.

Taking it all in, the grass doesn't exactly seem much greener on the other side. The most significant change the 3-2-1 system would seemingly bring would be to take some of the air out of the competitive

wild-card races we're seeing right now, to have it all essentially locked up as we head into the final stretch of the campaign.

Some other alternate systems would throw even more chaos into the mix. Following the same principle that the 3-2-1 system is built on, rewarding regulation wins, what if the impact of extra time was minimized even more? Another alternate reality floating out there — though with far less chance of ever being implemented — is one that would do away with shootouts altogether. If teams were awarded two points for a win, and one point if a game couldn't be decided by open play (i.e. finishing as a tie rather than with a shootout), and zero points for a loss, how would it all shake out then?

In that scenario, we'd see some notably different potential matchups, at least on one side of the bracket.

In the West, the Jets would still be top dog in the division and the conference, with Dallas and Colorado behind them in the Central. We'd see Vegas still atop the Pacific, trailed by Edmonton and Los Angeles, and Minnesota and St. Louis as the wild-card clubs.

Out East, Washington would still reign, and Carolina and New Jersey would hold their current spots in the Metro. The wild-card race would still see Ottawa and Montreal on track to get into the dance.

But in the Atlantic, it would be Toronto sitting first in the division, with a bit of breathing room over the two Floridian clubs. The Bolts would sit second and the Panthers — the division leader in the current system — would drop to third.

With Montreal and Ottawa holding down wild-card spots in this alternate reality, that scenario would potentially see the Maple Leafs meet the Canadiens in the first round, rather than another nervy run-in with the Lightning.

The hypotheticals are endless. And the debate about how much of an impact shootouts, or losing games in extra time, should have on the number of points teams are awarded is a fair one. Still, the positive that comes with the current system seems fairly clear when lined up alongside the alternate options — it gives us meaningful games in late March and early April, a meaningful wild-card race to track down the stretch, and something to hold onto for fringe clubs hoping to throw some wrenches into the conference behemoths' plans.

Sportsnet.ca / Scout's Analysis: How good is top 2026 draft prospect Gavin McKenna?

By Jason Bukala- March 22, 2025

This week, my colleague Sam Cosentino presented his most recent rankings for the 2025 NHL Draft. This draft cycle is unpredictable, but I firmly believe Erie Otters defenceman Matthew Schaefer is at the top of the class. Beyond Schaefer, however, I'm expecting a lot of surprises come June.

The 2026 draft class, on the other hand, is unlikely to provide any sort of unpredictability at the very top as Medicine Hat Tigers forward Gavin McKenna is the consensus No. 1 pick. The electric talent is second in WHL scoring (37G-84A), trailing Spokane Chiefs forward -- and Washington Capitals prospect -- Andrew Cristall by five points heading into the last weekend of the regular season. McKenna has produced his 121 points in only 54 games.

Over the next year, McKenna's trajectory as a prospect will undoubtedly be compared to recent first overall selections Connor Bedard and Macklin Celebrini. One of the immediate differences is the fact McKenna plays the wing while Bedard and Celebrini play centre. NHL teams will generally select a centre over a winger when prospects present equal upside. High-end offensive talents who play the middle have the advantage of using the entire length and width of the ice to impact the game.

When it comes to McKenna, however, he's the kind of winger who corrals pucks and works to find open ice in all three zones. He always seems to be around the play and he's simply the most talented prospect in his draft class.

Here's a closer look at 2026 top prospect Gavin McKenna:

SCORING PROWESS

McKenna is currently riding a 38-game point streak, scoring 28 goals, 64 assists and 92 points since Nov. 6. He is averaging 2.42 points per game during the streak and doesn't look to be slowing down as the Tigers head into the playoffs as one of the top teams in the WHL.

Over McKenna's last 10 games has produced 9G-19A while averaging 22:04 of ice time and being deployed in all situations. He's scored goals at even strength (four), on the power play (four) and while shorthanded (one). He's an impressive plus-16 in the segment.

McKenna is uber aggressive directing pucks on net. In the 10-game segment he attempted 105 shots, connecting on 67, while 14 were blocked and 24 missed the net all together. His shot map reveals how he attacks the middle of the ice offensively. The majority of his scoring chances come from between the circles.

ELUSIVE

The most elite offensive talents in the game are elusive and creative. They attract pressure from opponents and have the ability to spin off checks and open up space for their teammates.

The following clip didn't result in a goal for Medicine Hat, but McKenna does exactly what I am describing. He works off the half wall, moves across the offensive zone and distributes the puck to his teammate. The entire sequence opened up several offensive options as a result of McKenna's ability to create open space.

QUICK STICK

Players with the offensive upside that McKenna has are gifted with unbelievable hand/eye coordination, puck touch, and the ability to read how plays are developing a step ahead of their opponents.

The following sequence displays all of the above. Watch closely as McKenna corrals a puck in mid-air before attacking up ice with speed, avoiding contact and finally making a quick dish to Tigers defenceman, and Nashville Predators prospect, Tanner Molendyk who finishes the play off the rush:

MOTION

Opponents prioritize attempting to kill McKenna's offensive zone entries before they become dangerous scoring chances against. It can lead to mixed results and, at times, chaos in the defensive zone. McKenna is always looking to find open space by keeping his feet moving after distributing pucks to teammates.

Here's an example of what I'm describing:

DEFENSIVE DETAIL

Like any developing prospect, especially ones with an elite offensive element, McKenna has some work to do defensively. He isn't a liability in his zone, but there are times he loses track of his responsibilities.

Here's an example of a defensive zone scenario that involved McKenna having to step in to take the face-off after his centreman, Oasiz Weisblatt, was kicked out of the dot. McKenna is tasked with trying to win the draw off Winnipeg Jets top prospect Brayden Yager:

COMPARISONS

By the time McKenna's name is called next year, several comparisons will have been made between him, Connor Bedard and Macklin Celebrini. With McKenna's regular season coming to an end this weekend, his stats are very impressive and stack up well next to these other two first overall picks.

Here's a look Bedard, Celebrini and McKenna's stats before being drafted. Reminder that McKenna still has one season left to play before he's draft eligible. So his stats this season are more comparable to Bedard in 2021-22 or Celebrini in 2022-23:

Gavin McKenna

Connor Bedard

Macklin Celebrini

TRAJECTORY

McKenna has experienced playing for Team Canada at the U17, U18 and U20 levels in addition to his already impressive career at the WHL level with Medicine Hat. By the time he is drafted he should be prepared to go straight into the NHL in 2026-27.

He has top line winger written all over him and a real chance to impact the game in a similar fashion to Patrick Kane when he broke into the league with the Chicago Blackhawks. He's a different type of player than Kane, but the potential is certainly in place.

WHAT OTHER SCOUTS SAY

I don't usually poll my colleagues about players, but since McKenna is still a year away from being drafted I thought I would reach out for some feedback. Here's a couple of quotes from crossover scouts who travel throughout North America and Europe in their current roles with their organizations:

"Elite prospect. A special player. Very few prospects I have viewed in my career, at any level, think the game the way he does. His vision is elite. Some players slow the game down, while others speed it up,

but he is a rare prospect who does both. He's an effortless skater whose top end speed and lateral agility is deceiving. He processes the game at another level compared to his peer group." -- Western Conference NHL Amateur Scout.

"McKenna is a dynamic, play driving, winger who makes everyone around him better. Turns pucks up ice quickly and challenges opponents in transition. Slippery. Hard to check. Shifty in small areas. His agility makes him elusive and difficult to contain. Creates off the rush and the cycle. Draws opponents to him which opens up space for his linemates. Top line upside at even strength and first power play unit all night long." -- Eastern Conference NHL Amateur Scout.