



**Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips  
December 4-9, 2024**

**Columbus Blue Jackets**

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## Columbus Dispatch / Calgary Flames grind for Gaudreau, stop Columbus Blue Jackets' point streak at six

**By Brian Hedger- December 4, 2024**

A pregame ceremony to memorialize Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau on Tuesday night in Calgary was filled with stirring visuals that became instant memories.

The game that followed at Scotiabank Saddledome wasn't.

The Calgary Flames downed the Blue Jackets, 3-0, but it was a low-event grind that didn't exactly resemble the kind of skill game that made Gaudreau an NHL star for both teams. Trailing 1-0 starting the third period, the Blue Jackets (11-10-3) couldn't net an equalizer despite finally applying some heat against Flames goalie Dan Vladar — who earned a 16-save shutout while wearing a mask featuring black-and-white portraits of the Gaudreau brothers on each side.

It will now be auctioned off for charity by the Flames' foundation. Likewise, the Blue Jackets will sign the Gaudreau road jerseys they wore in warmups and bring them back to Columbus for their foundation to auction off for charitable funding.

As for the hockey played, the Flames were anything but charitable. They stifled a Blue Jackets offense that came into the game rolling after notching their seventh victory with six-or-more goals to start the road trip Sunday with a 6-3 victory over the Chicago Blackhawks. Calgary bogged them down with a relentless checking effort along the walls at both ends of the rink and through the middle of the neutral zone.

They finished with a 22-16 edge in shots that was, by far, the lowest amount for the Blue Jackets this season.

The Jackets finally got some good looks in the third, but Vladar made a few outstanding stops to keep the Blue Jackets from scoring. That was after he spent almost the entire second period not facing a single shot until three arrived during a late Columbus power play.

Rasmus Andersson's goal to cap a power play earlier in the second period was all Calgary needed to win, as it turned out, as the Flames ended a four-game slide with copious amounts of elbow grease and checking.

Elvis Merzlikins (19 saves) was outstanding in his seventh straight start for the Blue Jackets. He just didn't get any run support and took the loss in a game that also ended the Jackets' six-game point streak. It was also the first time a team has pitched a shutout against Columbus this season (24 games).

Kevin Bahl scored the second goal to pad the Flames' lead with 2:07 left in the third, capping yet another power play against a struggling Columbus penalty kill to seal it. During the ensuing action, Flames fans began chanting, "Johnny Hockey! Johnny Hockey!" until Nazem Kadri scored the game's final goal into an empty net with 19.8 seconds left.

Neither team scored in a tight checking first period, but the Blue Jackets did have a goal by Zach Werenski wiped away by a coaching challenge for a missed offside call. The review showed Adam Fantilli preceded the puck over Calgary's blue line before Kent Johnson carried it in to start the play.

The Flames also had one called back in the third for the same reason, wiping out a goal for Mikael Backlund.

Werenski's disallowed goal was a letdown that led to a near complete shutdown of the Blue Jackets' offense for a span of 23:41, stretching from Cole Sillinger's shot with 5:50 left in the first to Werenski's during a power play with 2:09 left in the second.

During that stretch, Calgary outworked Columbus along the walls in puck battles and eventually took a 1-0 lead with 9:46 left in the second on Andersson's slapshot to cap a power play with Justin Danforth in the penalty box for slashing.

Andersson, a former teammate of Gaudreau, turned to face the suite where the Gaudreau brothers' family watched — all wearing bright red No. 13 Gaudreau jerseys. The Flames defenseman raised his arms, gave them a wave and fought back tears after they waved back.

After the game, Andersson and Backlund celebrated being named the game's second and third stars by hugging Guy Gaudreau and having him wave to the crowd before they left the ice together.

## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets, Calgary Flames honor Gaudreau with emotional pregame ceremony

**By Brian Hedger- December 4, 2024**

Thirteen reigned supreme Tuesday night inside a hockey arena built in the shape of a saddle.

Johnny Gaudreau, and his younger brother, Matthew, were remembered with an emotional pregame ceremony at Scotiabank Arena in Calgary, where the elder of the two played the first 10-plus seasons of an NHL career that made him a star. Once again, just as they did prior to their home-opener against the Florida Panthers, the Blue Jackets turned into a team of No. 13 "Gaudreaus" for warmups.

The Flames did, too, providing a memorable look at the only two NHL uniforms Gaudreau wore. That was just the start.

The Gaudreau family — Johnny's wife, Meredith, their two young kids, Noa and Johnny Jr., parents Guy and Jane, and sisters Kristen and Katie — donned bright red Gaudreau jerseys while presiding over a ceremonial opening faceoff for the Flames' 13th home game of the season.

Taking the faceoff were two of Gaudreau's former teammates, Sean Monahan for the Blue Jackets and Mikael Backlund for the Flames.

A packed arena was asked to turn their cellphone flashlights on while the stadium lights dimmed, providing a "starry" backdrop for a power moment filled with tears. They streamed down the cheeks of Guy and Jane Gaudreau, whose pain from losing their sons in the same tragedy Aug. 29 in Oldman Township, New Jersey is heart wrenching for anybody who knows the awful story.

The Gaudreau family wasn't alone.

They were surrounded by memories of their sons, as tears fell down the faces of players, coaches and fans inside a packed arena filled with red No. 13s. As they left the ice to hugs, fist bumps and love from players on both teams, they were serenaded with a familiar chant they heard a lot during many visits to Calgary.

"Johnny! Johnny! Johnny!"

## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets, Calgary Flames grieve Johnny Gaudreau together with hugs, hits

**By Brian Hedger- December 4, 2024**

Three months ago, two tour buses rolled up to Saint Mary Magdalene Church in Media, Pennsylvania, prior to a joint funeral service for Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau.

They parked one behind the other. The first carried members of the Blue Jackets' traveling party. The second brought the Calgary Flames. As players, coaches, executives, staffers and even former members of each organization departed, they sought comfort in each others' presence.

Handshakes, hugs, tears and memories were shared before all headed inside for a service attended by many NHL dignitaries. Those within hockey often talk about a brotherhood that exists in the sport, covering all levels, but nothing drives the point home like the sight of two grieving NHL teams coping together during a tragic shared loss.

Part of that brotherhood, though, is what happens when the puck hits the ice in games between those same teams — which the Blue Jackets and Flames experienced Friday at Nationwide Arena. There was no special pregame or midgame ceremony to honor the Gaudreaus, but their presence was felt in the first game between the Blue Jackets and Flames since the brothers were killed in August by an alleged drunk driver as they biked along a two-lane road in South Jersey.

The Blue Jackets won 5-2, and the way the game unfolded was one of the most “hockey” things you’ll ever find. It had some big hits, heated emotions, three fistfights, at least one swollen eye socket and equal parts respect and disdain.

That's hockey in a nutshell, isn't it?

Four days later, on Tuesday in Calgary, they'll do it again in the building Johnny Gaudreau called home for the nine-plus seasons before signing with the Blue Jackets. The Gaudreau family, including parents Jane and Guy, are expected to attend what's likely to be another emotional remembrance in a city that loved their oldest son. Some Flames players, including Rasmus Andersson, said Friday's matchup in Columbus was difficult, skating around beneath Gaudreau's No. 13 banner at Nationwide Arena.

Imagine what Blue Jackets center Sean Monahan is going through after signing with Columbus on July 1 as a free agent to reunite with Gaudreau, his longtime friend and former teammate in Calgary. Despite having his heart ripped out, Monahan is off to a fantastic start with the Blue Jackets. He's one of their leading scorers, centers their top line and lockers next to the empty stall where his friend used to dress.

Now, Monahan and the rest of the Blue Jackets will again work through strong emotions prior to a big game. The Flames will do the same. It's something the Jackets already experienced before their home-opening loss to the Florida Panthers, when the game's first 13 seconds ticked by without a Columbus left wing on the ice.

All season, they've played amid reminders of the tragedy.

Helmet stickers. Their banner. The new donkey-hat postgame award. Gaudreau's No. 13 jersey hanging in his vacant locker stall every game. They couldn't escape it even if they tried, so instead they've embraced it all. It's the hockey way.

The brotherhood.

"It's been the outpouring of support and love and emotion, all of that," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "It's been incredible for the family (and) for the guys, but the players? They compete their asses off against each other, but when they leave, it's human beings and all those guys have friends on other teams, and there's coaching friends and everything."

Evason has spent most of his adult life in professional hockey as a gritty player and intense coach. He's done both tasks with a hardened edge that seeks success on the ice that leads to mutual respect away from it.

"You're going to compete," he said, "but once the game's over you can be a human. And there's been a lot of love and a lot of support."

Expect nothing less in Calgary, where an estimated 10,000 people attended a candlelight vigil in September at Saddledome. There, outside Nationwide Arena in Columbus and at the intersection near the crash site in South Jersey, fans built makeshift memorials for the Gaudreaus with hockey sticks, jerseys, signs, Skittles and bottles of purple Gatorade.

They chanted, "Johnny Hockey!" in Calgary and Columbus.

They're going to chant that again Tuesday night in Calgary until it rings off every corner of a cavernous arena with an iconic shape.

Then, they're going to drop the puck for the Blue Jackets and Flames to pick up any carryover hostilities where they left off four days ago in Columbus. Calgary is 0-3-1 in its past four games, so the Flames will play with urgency to end that winless skid. Meanwhile, the Blue Jackets are riding a six-game point streak that has them within reach of a playoff spot.

More carnage will be inflicted, but the Jackets and Flames are now eternally linked by their shared heartbreak and hockey's brotherhood.

"It's one of those things ... You say that you're not going to let it get to you, but it's inevitable," Flames forward Blake Coleman after facing the Blue Jackets on Friday. "It's a human emotion to feel and to look up and see (Gaudreau's banner). It's no excuse for (losing) the game, but I will say that life comes before hockey and we will always think of, and honor, Johnny."



## Columbus Dispatch / Calgary Flames honor Gaudreaus by outworking Columbus Blue Jackets: 3 takeaways

**By Brian Hedger- December 5, 2024**

Going into this season, the Blue Jackets knew that two games on their schedule would be tough to play.

The first was their home-opener against the Florida Panthers on Oct. 15 at Nationwide Arena and the second arrived Tuesday at Scotiabank Saddledome in Calgary. The reason for the challenge associated with those two games had less to do about hockey and everything to do with their emotions after experiencing powerful pregame ceremonies to honor Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau in both cities.

They lost both games, including a 3-0 Flames shutout that was the first time in the Jackets' first 24 games they didn't score a goal and stopped a string of scoring a goal in 16 consecutive periods. After working to handle their emotions during a ceremony that included the Gaudreau family presiding over a ceremonial puck drop, the Blue Jackets were outworked most of the night.

Here are three takeaways:

Calgary Flames find answer to slowing Columbus Blue Jackets' Zach Werenski, Kent Johnson

It took key saves by goalie Dan Vladar, a relentless grind while defending plus a video review for a missed offsides, but the Flames managed to do something rare.

They handed the Blue Jackets their first shutout loss of the season by also keeping Zach Werenski and Kent Johnson off the scoresheet entirely. Neither recorded a point, which ended a franchise record point streak by a defenseman at eight for Werenski and stopped Johnson's streak at five since his return from a shoulder injury.

Johnson had also scored a point in all nine games he'd played, which bookended his 14-game absence. The biggest factor in keeping them quiet was Calgary's impressive work ethic, which Flames coach Ryan Huska challenged after the Blue Jackets defeated them 5-2 on Friday at Nationwide Arena.

Unlike that game, the Flames outworked the Blue Jackets nearly start-to-finish in their own rink. They won puck battles along the walls, forechecked with ferocity and used poke checks through the full 200-foot length of the ice to frustrate Columbus. Werenski and Johnson still nearly kept their streaks alive, but Adam Fantilli was caught entering the Flames' zone too soon to negate the former's goal in the first and Vladar stopped the latter's redirection from the net-front in the third that could've tied it at 1-1.

Columbus Blue Jackets' penalty-killing is in crisis mode

The Blue Jackets are officially hemorrhaging short-handed goals now, and it threatens to spoil a lot of the encouraging things they've done a quarter of the way into the season.

The Flames went 2-for-4 on power plays to score the game's first two goals with a man-advantage before Yegor Sharangovich's empty-net tally completed the scoring with 19.8 seconds to play. It was their 10th straight game yielding a power-play goal, the fourth man-advantage goal they've allowed in the past two games — after going just 3-for-6 Sunday against the Chicago Blackhawks — and their third short-handed goal given up in four days to the Flames.

The Blue Jackets' PK is just 23-for-37 for a 62.7% success rate during their ugly 10-game streak and there's not a lot of encouraging signs for a turnaround anytime soon. Conversely, they're allowed only one 5-on-5 goal in the past three games and 17 goals at 5-on-5 during the ugly PK streak, which is just 1.7 per game.

Not having captain Boone Jenner and defenseman Erik Gudbranson following shoulder surgeries – two of their best penalty-killers – leaves a huge PK void the Blue Jackets are still trying to fill.

Neither is expected to return anytime soon, so it's up to the current roster configuration to figure it out.

The Blue Jackets used the start of their Gaudreau memorial night to honor his memory, symbolically leaving his starting spot at left wing vacant for the first 13 seconds against the Florida Panthers on Oct. 15 at Nationwide Arena.

The Flames left their symbolic gesture for the end, when they left the top slot on the official box score's "3 Stars" area blank before it lists Rasmus Andersson and Mikael Backlund — two of Gaudreau's former teammates — as the game's second and third stars.

In the arena, Gaudreau was announced as the game's first star and his father, Guy, accepted the honor on his son's behalf by joining Andersson and Backlund on the Flames' bench. After exchanging hugs, Guy Gaudreau smiled and waved before heading down the tunnel wearing his son's former Flames jersey.

He then headed into Calgary's victorious locker room, where he was awarded a game puck by Backlund and said a few words. Before leaving the bench, however, Gaudreau was serenaded with a chant of "Johnny Hockey!" to end another emotional night remembering Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau.

## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets' road woes continue with 6-3 loss to Edmonton Oilers

**By Brian Hedger- December 6, 2024**

The Blue Jackets' struggle on the road continues to give them nightmares.

After starting a five-game trip with a win over the lowly Chicago Blackhawks on Sunday, the Jackets lost their second straight game late Thursday at Rogers Place in a 6-3 loss to the Edmonton Oilers. Edmonton broke the game open with four goals in the second period to start the third with a 5-2 cushion.

Columbus, which also lost to the Calgary Flames on Tuesday, is only 3-8-2 on the road games. They're 8-3-1 at home.

Leon Draisaitl and Zach Hyman scored two goals each for Edmonton, which got four points on four assists from Connor McDavid – who was honored before the game for becoming the fourth-fastest player in NHL history to reach 1,000 points.

Mattias Ekholm and Jeff Skinner scored the other two goals for the Oilers, who helped Calvin Pickard (19 saves) pick up the goaltending victory. Kevin Labanc, Damon Severson and Cole Sillingers scored for the Blue Jackets, who started goalie Daniil Tarasov for the first time in almost three full weeks.

It didn't take long for Blue Jackets defenseman Werenski to get started on a new point streak, picking up an assist on Labanc's goal early in the first period for a 1-0 lead. After getting the puck, Werenski fed it back across the slot to Mikael Pyyhtia for a snapshot that sent the puck off Labanc into the net 2:31 into the game.

The assist was Werenski's 27th point in 25 games and his ninth game in the past 10 with a goal or assist. The problem was the lead lasting just 7:15 before Hyman tied it 1-1 at 9:46 of the first off a perfect drop from McDavid, who dragged the puck between Jake Christiansen and Jordan Harris before sending it to his teammate.

Nov 23, 2024; Edmonton, Alberta, CAN; The Edmonton Oilers celebrate a goal scored by forward Leon Draisaitl (29) during the third period against the Columbus Blue Jackets at Rogers Place. Mandatory Credit: Perry Nelson-Imagn Images

The score remained 1-1 starting the second, but the Blue Jackets couldn't capitalize on 1:20 of carryover time. Edmonton's four-goal period began with goals by Draisaitl and Ekholm for a quick 3-1 lead, which was aided by a curious coaching challenge for goaltender interference.

Despite the Blue Jackets' penalty skill scuffling in November, coach Dean Evason called for the review on Draisaitl's goal off a backhand from the low slot. Oilers forward Zach Hyman was in the crease when Draisaitl took the shot, but didn't initiate contact with the and the goal was allowed.

Edmonton also got a power-play goal by Ekholm out of it due to a lost challenge in the NHL resulting in a delay-of-game penalty for the team that challenges. Hyman's second goal of the game made it 4-1 at 6:53 of the second, and Jeff Skinner followed a Severson goal to give the Oilers a 5-2 lead after 40 minutes.

## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets drop third straight in confounding loss to Vancouver Canucks

By Brian Hedger- December 7, 2024

A full shakeup of forward lines and dominant start weren't enough to get the Blue Jackets a needed victory late Friday night in a back-to-back finale against the Vancouver Canucks.

Despite building a 17-2 edge in shots and 2-0 lead in the first period on goals by Mathieu Olivier and Damon Severson, the Blue Jackets failed to increase their lead, lost steam in the third and left town with a frustrating 5-2 loss at Rogers Arena.

"It was by far the best period of the year," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "I'm very proud of the way the guys played, came out, were ready. It was awesome. But, obviously, we didn't get the result, so it (stings)."

Trailing 2-1 in the second, Vancouver tied it 2-2 late in the period with assistance from Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins, who skated left his crease to clear a puck near the blue line and couldn't recover after Canucks forward Teddy Bluegar blocked his attempt. Bluegar hit New Albany's Kiefer Sherwood with a pass for a one-timer, and the Canucks (14-7-4) received a giant lift before the second intermission.

"That hurt, right?" Evason said. "I mean, it's a nothing play and it ends up in our net. Of course it's frustrating for everybody, and I know Elvis will be accountable for making that decision. Everybody makes mistakes. It's just unfortunate it ended up in our net."

Pius Suter made it 3-2 at 2:17 of the third for the Canucks, which was the eventual winner.

Dec 6, 2024; Vancouver, British Columbia, CAN; Vancouver Canucks forward Kiefer Sherwood (44) celebrates scoring with forward Danton Heinen (20) and forward Teddy Bluegar (53) against the Columbus Blue Jackets during the second period at Rogers Arena. Mandatory Credit: Bob Frid-Imagn Images

Jake DeBrusk added an insurance goal eight minutes later and Suter scored again into an empty net with 1:05 left to seal it. Merzlikins made a few fantastic saves in the game, but only faced 16 shots and allowed four goals. That included DeBrusk's tally to cap a power play, which extended the Blue Jackets' string of allowing a power-play goal to 12 straight games.

Kevin Lankinen, meanwhile, earned the win for Vancouver with 30 saves after his team was outshot 32-17 — including a deficit of 15 shots in the first period.

Lankinen improved to 8-3-0 in 12 career starts against the Blue Jackets (11-12-3), who dropped their third straight game during a road trip that began last Sunday with a 6-3 victory in Chicago. Since then, they were shutout Tuesday in Calgary, overwhelmed by the Edmonton Oilers on Thursday at Rogers Place and then caught from behind by the Canucks.

Dec 6, 2024; Vancouver, British Columbia, CAN; Vancouver Canucks goalie Kevin Lankinen (32) makes a save on Columbus Blue Jackets forward James van Riemsdyk (21) during the first period at Rogers Arena. Mandatory Credit: Bob Frid-Imagn Images

The Blue Jackets flew to Winnipeg after the game, escaping a crowded postgame scene near the arena with a Taylor Swift concert across the street. They'll finish the trip Sunday against the Jets, who blew them out Nov. 1 at Nationwide Arena.

"I'd say more the start of the third (was) more crucial for us (than Merzlikins' mistake)," Olivier said. "Even if they scored at the end of the second, it was 2-2 on the road. You give me that option, I'll take that any day. I think it's just our third (effort)."

Columbus also left Vancouver with unsettling health news after defenseman Ivan Provorov left early in the second period with an apparent thumb injury. Provorov didn't return and received X-rays on site for an issue the Blue Jackets are labeling an upper-body injury. Evason said he didn't have enough information to provide an update after the game.

## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets steamrolled by Edmonton Oilers: 3 takeaways

By Brian Hedger- December 7, 2024

Chalk up another frustrating road loss for the Blue Jackets.

After dropping their second straight game late Thursday in Edmonton, a 6-3 shellacking from the Edmonton Oilers, the Blue Jackets are just 3-8-2 in road games this season and must win Friday in Vancouver or Sunday in Winnipeg to avoid returning from a five-game road trip on a four-game losing streak.

Here are three takeaways:

Columbus Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason takes issue with failed video review that sparked Edmonton Oilers' onslaught

Dean Evason has mostly pushed the right coaching buttons during his first season running the Blue Jackets' bench, but a decision early in the second period to challenge the Oilers' second goal for goaltender interference backfired.

Leon Draisaitl scored it with a backhand at 2:22 that beat goalie Daniil Tarasov inside the right post, but the Blue Jackets' video staff spotted the crown of the goalie's mask brush Oilers forward Zach Hyman inside the crease. If you ever want to spark a heated debate about NHL rules, just mention the words "goaltender interference."

Unlike offside, which has a fairly clear definition, determining goaltender interference in the NHL is a bit like arguing over an abstract work of art.

"It's a boat. There's the oar right there!"

"No, that's not a boat or an oar. That's a giant piece of toast and that 'oar' is a butter knife!"

Debates over goaltender interference can last hours. Luckily for those who stayed up to watch the Oilers' drubbing of the Blue Jackets, officials decided this one in short order. According to their interpretation, it wasn't a boat, a piece of toast or goaltender interference.

Draisaitl's goal was upheld, which also gave Edmonton a power play for delay-of-game. Mattias Ekholm capped it to give the Oilers a 3-1 cushion, which was too much of a momentum swing. Evason labeled it the game's biggest unraveling point, and was still hot afterward.

"The big moment in the game was the goalie challenge," he told reporters at Rogers Place. "It was a 1-1 hockey game, and by the end of the whole sequence, it's 3-1. We were trying to get an explanation because our view is different from what (officials) said they've seen."

An overhead angle on FanDuel Sports Network showed Tarasov's head contact Hyman's backside just as Draisaitl pulls the puck to his backhand. Contact was minimal, and even Blue Jackets TV analyst Jody Shelley said it looked like Tarasov initiated it. Hyman, however, isn't supposed to be in the blue paint. So, the ruling was left to the discretion of the on-ice officials, who looked at it using an iPad.

"Honestly, I don't blame the refs because they're looking on a little iPad," Evason said. "When I came in (the locker room), our guys were adamant that (Tarasov) got hit in the head and that he couldn't move his stick. (Hyman) went freely into the crease a foot and a half. He can't get over to make that save."

Nov 23, 2024; Edmonton, Alberta, CAN; The Edmonton Oilers celebrate a goal scored by forward Leon Draisaitl (29) during the second period against the Columbus Blue Jackets at Rogers Place. Mandatory Credit: Perry Nelson-Imagn Images

Evason said the reason he issued the review was because his coaching staff was certain it was goaltender interference.

“(The officials) said that both them and (the NHL situation room in Toronto) did not see (Hyman) hit his head,” Evason said. “We’re trying to get an explanation right now, because if they can’t see that, they’re getting a different angle than we have ... and then we’ve got a serious problem. We were 100% that was goalie interference. It’s a big moment in the game. It was a 1-1 game. Now, it’s 3-1 when the whole sequence ends.”

It was a massive backfire. Tarasov, who hadn’t played in almost three full weeks, had to immediately face a power play with McDavid, Draisaitl and other threats. Combined with the Blue Jackets' struggling penalty-kill units allowing goals in 10 straight games, it felt like a certainty the Oilers would do exactly what they did by extending the streak to 11 games.

Edmonton used the two-goal boost to unleash a four-goal period that essentially decided the game. The ill-fated coach's challenge ignited the fuse.

Columbus Blue Jackets goalie Daniil Tarasov taking his lumps

Tarasov hadn’t played since Nov. 16 in Montreal, where he'd allowed five goals in a loss to the Canadiens. That’s a lot of time to iron out kinks in practices, and a long time to develop rust.

Tarasov’s reward for giving Merzlikins a night off was to face the high-flying Oilers and a star-studded lineup topped by McDavid and Draisaitl. Hyman was also a 50-goal scorer last season, and all three tormented Tarasov with multiple goals, assists and points.

The biggest thing working in the goalie's favor was his impressive performance against Edmonton last season in a 4-2 victory March 7 at Nationwide Arena. Otherwise, it was tough matchup. Tarasov has now allowed 21 goals combined in his past four outings. Merzlikins is expected to start Friday in Vancouver to conclude another difficult back-to-back.

Columbus Blue Jackets aren’t deep enough to consistently win road games

More than a quarter of the way into the season, one thing has become clear about these Blue Jackets.

They struggle, mightily, away from Nationwide Arena. There are multiple reasons, but the biggest appears to be the road forward and defensive pairing matchups that favor opposing coaches who get to make the last change during stoppages on home ice. This often leads to bad matchups for the road team on faceoffs and struggles for the Blue Jackets winning those draws because of it.

That’s where captain Boone Jenner is missed most while he recovers from shoulder surgery. It also didn’t help Thursday that skilled forward Yegor Chinakhov missed his fourth straight game with an upper-body injury. The issue of matchups isn’t nearly as big of a problem for the young Blue Jackets at home, where Evason gets to make the second line change.

As the Jackets’ young forwards continue to mature into consistent NHL impact talents, the home/road thing should diminish.

## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets waste impressive start in Vancouver: 3 takeaways

**By Brian Hedger- December 8, 2024**

There were moments when it looked like the Blue Jackets were on their way to one of their victorious six-goal performances Friday night at Rogers Arena.

They built a 17-2 edge in shots against the Vancouver Canucks, dominated every facet of the first period, raced out to a 2-0 lead and peppered goalie Kevin Lankinen. They just couldn't sustain it, possibly due to fatigued legs while finishing a back-to-back against the rested Canucks. Vancouver clawed back into it with physicality, rode Lankinen's hot hand and capitalized on a big mistake by Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins in a 5-2 victory.

It was the third straight loss for the road weary Blue Jackets (11-12-3), who keep finding ways to lose away from Nationwide Arena and have a daunting challenge Sunday in Winnipeg to conclude what's already been a draining trip to Western Canada.

Here are three takeaways:

Merzlikins is usually good for one or two head-scratching decisions every season that stem directly from his preferred style of goaltending — also known as the "hair on fire, fly by the seat of your pants," style.

Remember when he was penalized for throwing Washington Capitals forward Tom Wilson, an agitator of the highest regard, into the Blue Jackets' net last season — leading to an overtime loss on the resulting power-play goal?

Or how about Merzlikins learning a harsh lesson from former Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella during his rookie season, when he attempted to clear a puck straight up the middle of the ice. It was immediately knocked down by Andrew Copp, who then shot it past Merzlikins during an ugly loss to the Winnipeg Jets.

Rather than playing it safe and calculating, Merzlikins leans heavily on instincts, for better or worse. When it's for the better, those instincts allow him to make incredible saves or clutch plays outside his crease. Other times, they get the better of him and cost the Blue Jackets dearly.

That's what happened late in the second period Friday in Vancouver, where Merzlikins spotted a puck entering the Columbus zone with Canucks forward Teddy Bluegar in chase.

Zach Werenski had already won a foot race with Bluegar, but Merzlikins didn't give his defenseman a chance to make the play. He just charged out of his crease while the Jackets clung to a 2-1 lead and sent a clearing attempt off Bluegar's body. Bluegar quickly collected it, sent New Albany's Kiefer Sherwood a feed and watched a one-timer sail right past a scrambling Merzlikins and Werenski into a wide open net.

The Canucks went into the second intermission elated with the score 2-2, after being outshot 26-9 in the first two periods. It gave them a boost starting the third, when the first of Pius Suter's two goals gave Vancouver its first lead of the game. Only Merzlikins knows why he made such an impulsive decision, which contributed to a frustrating night in net. Merzlikins, who made some fantastic saves in the game, was tagged for four goals on 16 shots in a game that slipped away.

"There's a few things that we think (happened), but obviously we didn't keep the puck out of our net," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "That's the bottom line. We made some mistakes in some key areas of the game, and it didn't give us an opportunity to get back after it ... after that second period."



## Provorov injury creates big void for Columbus Blue Jackets

The Blue Jackets had a lot of good things happen in this game, but there was also bad news on the injury front.

Barely a minute into the second period, Provorov dove after a puck in the Blue Jackets' zone and his left hand slammed into the boards. His thumb took the brunt of impact, and was bent into an unnatural shape as he left the ice. The veteran defenseman, who's been a steady presence all season, headed back to the Blue Jackets' locker room for assessment.

Not long after he left, Blue Jackets head athletic trainer Mike Vogt appeared to inform Evason of the initial diagnosis on the bench.

Evason didn't have an update to provide after the game, but his in-game reaction to Vogt's news didn't exactly relay optimism for those who've grown accustomed to expecting the worst with Blue Jackets injuries. This could be another long-term loss that again tests a Blue Jackets defensive group already missing Erik Gudbranson (shoulder surgery). Jack Johnson, a veteran, will likely re-enter the lineup in Winnipeg, but the Blue Jackets could add a depth defenseman from AHL Cleveland next week if Provorov is out for a while.

Denton Mateychuk's name will likely surface among fans pining to see his NHL debut, but don't be surprised if Daemon Hunt is recalled instead. Recently acquired in the trade that sent David Jiricek to the Minnesota Wild, Hunt is a young NHL defenseman who's mainly biding his time in the AHL while waiting for an NHL opportunity.

This might be it.

After watching his team get shutout Tuesday in Calgary and overwhelmed Thursday in a 6-3 loss to the high-flying Edmonton Oilers, Evason did some major line reconstruction before playing the Canucks.

Dmitri Voronkov and Kirill Marchenko moved from Sean Monahan's first line to flanking Adam Fantilli with the second group. James van Riemsdyk and Kent Johnson became Monahan's new wingers on the top line. Cole Sillinger returned to center of the third line, while Justin Danforth went from that spot to the fourth — bumping Sean Kuraly from center to the left wing.

As Taylor Swift fans watched her "Shake It Off" at BC Place, Evason shook things up next door at Rogers Arena. It paid immediate dividends, including a dominant first period for the Blue Jackets. They built a 2-0 lead on goals by Mathieu Olivier and Damon Severson, forged that 17-2 edge in shots and backed off a Western Conference playoff contender for almost a full 20 minutes.

Underlying statistics on Natural Stat Trick were just as impressive. Columbus carved out big 5-on-5 advantages in attempts (31-10, 75.6%), unblocked attempts (27-7, 79.4%), scoring chances (12-1, 92.3%) and high-danger chances (4-1, 80%).

The Blue Jackets just couldn't blow the game open against Lankinen, who made several great saves and caught multiple breaks on a few attempts that just missed the net.

## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets surge past Winnipeg Jets to cap tough road trip with a boost

**By Brian Hedger- December 9, 2024**

Facing the potential of returning from a five-game road trip on a four-game winless skid, the Blue Jackets avoided that outcome Sunday against the Winnipeg Jets.

Despite falling behind 1-0 while allowing a power-play goal for the 13th straight game, the Jackets (12-12-3) fought back with three straight goals of their own — including one by Dmitri Voronkov on a power play — to finish a long, frustrating trip with a 4-1 victory at Canada Life Centre.

"I think it shows a lot of character," defenseman Ivan Provorov said in a postgame interview shown on FanDuel Sports Network. "I think (Friday in Vancouver), we deserved better, and for us to not feel sorry for ourselves, stay focused and play the right way on the last game on a road trip, it shows a lot about this team. I think we've grown a lot since last year and I think we're trending in the right direction."

Provorov played through a painful thumb injury that knocked him out of Friday's loss to the Vancouver Canucks in the second period. He left the ice with a left thumb bent at a shockingly unnatural angle, but played 23:07 two days later and assisted on the second of Kent Johnson's two goals that provided the difference.

Johnson's linemate, left wing James van Riemsdyk, assisted on both of his goals and center Sean Monahan contributed to the first. The Jackets' other goals were scored by Voronkov on a power play in the second and Sean Kuraly, who sent the puck into an empty net with 1:22 left to seal the victory. Elvis Merzlikins earned the goaltending win with 24 saves during an impressive rebound from a tough loss in Vancouver that partially swung on his aggressive decision to play a puck far out of his net with a 2-1 lead.

Johnson's goals were the difference.

He scored both in the third period, giving the Blue Jackets a 3-1 lead after Merzlikins made a series of stops to keep it tied 1-1 starting the frame. Johnson's first tally made it 2-1 after he poked the puck into the Winnipeg net off a Monahan deflection of Van Riemsdyk's shot. His second of the game, eighth of the season, capped a 2-on-1 rush with Van Riemsdyk that started with a perfect cross-ice feed and finished with a quick one-timer past Jets goalie Eric Comrie with 10:18 left to play.

Kyle Connor scored the lone goal for the Jets (20-9-0), who'd won three straight games against the Blue Jackets dating to last season. That string included the Jets' 6-2 blowout win Nov. 1 at Nationwide Arena, which pushed their combined margin of victory to a whopping 17-3 during the streak.

This game, finally, was a lot tighter for the Blue Jackets.

"It's just nice to back up what we did the other night (in Vancouver)," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said during a postgame interview shown on the television broadcast. "We were really, really happy with the start. We went in and challenged the group that we (had) to start the same way. We certainly played the same type of game."

Neither team made it easy through the middle of the ice, which is why it was knotted at just 1-1 starting the third on power-play goals by Connor and Voronkov. Connor's tally extended the Blue Jackets' dubious streak of allowing man-advantage goals to 13 games, but they'd already killed three against the NHL's third-ranked team on power plays before Merzlikins was finally beaten.

Connor's goal put the Jets up 1-0 with 8:09 left in the second, but the Blue Jackets tied it two minutes later with a power-play goal of their own.

Following a scrum behind the Winnipeg net, Sean Monahan sent a pass out to Zach Werenski high in the zone for a cross-ice setup to Kirill Marchenko on the left wing. Marchenko sent a slap pass toward the far post for Voronkov, who tucked the equalizer into the net for his seventh goal of the season.

That set the stage for a hotly contested third, which started with Merzlikins making a few big stops to keep the Jets from re-taking the lead on the first two shifts. Comrie returned serve at 6:50 of the third, denying Monahan with a dazzling glove save off a slapper to keep it 1-1, but the tie didn't last much longer thanks to the Blue Jackets' top forward line.

"It's definitely a good win," Merzlikins told reporters after the game. "We all remember how our trip was in California, right, and it was going on the same (winless) road here. I'm happy that we managed to handle it well, and, on the right note, finish this road trip."

## The Athletic / Sean Monahan, thriving with Blue Jackets, hopes to honor Johnny Gaudreau's legacy: 'You feel his presence'

**By Aaron Portzline- December 4, 2024**

CALGARY, Alberta — It was only natural to wonder how Sean Monahan would navigate the tragic loss of his best friend in life and hockey, Johnny Gaudreau. Could Monahan ever overcome the unbearable grief to live a life full of joy? Could he resume his NHL career with the same passion?

Could he play for the Columbus Blue Jackets, with whom he signed a five-year free-agent contract this past summer so that he and Gaudreau could not only play together again, but raise their kids and celebrate their growing families together?

To watch Monahan play this season has been nothing short of incredible. He's played some of the best hockey of his career, been one of the Blue Jackets' most important players and has emerged as one of the most impressive leaders the Columbus dressing room has ever housed.

And the more you talk with him and those around him, you begin to understand: Monahan isn't performing at such a high level despite the loss of Gaudreau, he's playing so well because of his strong desire to honor Gaudreau.

"You try to carry on his legacy as much as you can," Monahan said. "To do what he did (on the ice), I definitely can't do that. But I'm trying to make him proud.

"We wanted to be back together, playing on the same team. I definitely play for him."

Monahan spoke in a room just down the hall from the visitor's dressing room in Scotiabank Saddledome, where the Blue Jackets will play the Calgary Flames on Tuesday night. There will be a moving pregame ceremony, much like the one held by the Blue Jackets before their home opener on Oct. 15.

Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, were struck and killed while riding bikes in Oldmans Township, N.J., on Aug. 29, a tragedy that sent shockwaves through the entire sporting world.

It touched off vigils in Columbus, Calgary (where Johnny Gaudreau spent the majority of his career) and Boston (where the brothers played college hockey at Boston College), and it has led to memorials and tributes all over the world.

Now it's Calgary's turn, and while most details of the pregame ceremony have been held under wraps, it is known that Monahan will be dropping the ceremonial first puck for the Blue Jackets.

As they did in Columbus in October, the entire Gaudreau family has convened in Calgary for tonight's ceremony. Guy Gaudreau, the father, was on the ice with Flames for practice on Monday using one of Johnny Gaudreau's old sticks a Flames equipment staffer had kept.

After practice, he visited the Blue Jackets in the visitors' dressing room.

"Guy was a superstar here, too," Monahan joked. "(Being on the ice) probably brings back some crazy memories for him. I know he loved coming here and watching games and being in the city and just enjoying his time here with John, that's for sure.

"Him being out there, it was probably nice to reminisce and remember the special times together."

Blue Jackets veterans Boone Jenner and Erik Gudbranson, both out with long-term shoulder injuries, typically wouldn't travel with the club. But they wanted to be in Calgary for this game, which has long been circled on the calendar.

They're here as much for the Gaudreau family as for Monahan, who has quickly become an important part of the Columbus franchise.

One of the most moving and memorable moments in Nationwide Arena history came on Oct. 15, just a couple of hours after Gaudreau's jersey was memorialized and lifted into the rafters during a pregame ceremony. Monahan scored a second-period goal on the far end of the ice, and immediately turned and pointed up to Gaudreau's No. 13 in the rafters.

Monahan's grace and perseverance has been a model for younger players, many of whom are confronting this type of grief for the first time. But he's made no secret that he's dealing with his own grief.

The Monahans moved just a couple of doors down from the Gaudreaus in the Columbus suburbs, so he's often bringing his own young child down the street to play with the two little Gaudreaus. It's at once beautiful and heartbreaking.

What keeps him going?

"Playing hockey and being on the team you're supposed to be on," Monahan said, "and being able to be around his kids, and his wife (Meredith) ... you feel his presence every day. Having that is something that has helped me get by."

Monahan has been a vital part of the Blue Jackets' surprising 11-9-3 start to this season. He's thrived as a No. 1 center (8-14-22, plus-12 rating in 23 games) and has helped elevate his right winger, Kirill Marchenko. All of this while battling the most immense sadness he's ever imagined.

"Monny has played with a chip on his shoulder," Gudbranson said. "That was his best friend. He's playing for him.

"You can see the passion he brings to our room, the focus, the clarity, the leadership. It's all been amazing, just really amazing. And he's doing it for us, but I think deep down he's doing it for John."

This tragedy could easily have derailed this Blue Jackets season, and everybody would have understood. Instead, it's gone the other way.

Certainly GM Don Waddell and coach Dean Evason provided early guidance that has been invaluable. Evason has urged players and staffers alike to be open and free with their emotions, to speak freely of Gaudreau.

Boone Jenner, the captain, has been important, too. It was Jenner who urged all of the players to travel to Columbus as soon as possible after Gaudreau's death — training camp was still three weeks away — so that they could all be together.

One of the Blue Jackets' first team events this season, sadly, was attending Johnny's and Matthew's funeral mass as a group on Sept. 9. Together, they watched as Meredith Gaudreau and Madeline Gaudreau, Matthew's wife, delivered eulogies that were incredibly powerful and moving.

Part of Meredith Gaudreau's message was to the Blue Jackets players, urging them to approach the coming season and the rest of their careers as Johnny would have: with fun, energy, passion and hard work.

Those words gave the players — many of them still in shock — a purpose that they could carry forward.

"There were a lot of messages she gave us," Gudbranson said. "That one stands out: Go be free. Go enjoy yourself. We all saw John do it. John had fun playing hockey. He had fun. If you're not having fun playing hockey, it's probably not for you.

“That’s a challenge we’ve all accepted.”

Blue Jackets center Sean Kuraly said he thinks often of her words that day.

“The whole family, and Meredith in particular, is the one we’ve all looked to during this,” Kuraly said. “She’s telling us that ... well, she was the closest one to John, and she’s telling us what he would want. Those were impactful words. We all heard those words, yes.”

The Blue Jackets and Flames are forever linked by this tragedy. Gaudreau spent nine seasons with the Flames, then spent two seasons with the Blue Jackets. He was a beloved figure across the hockey world, and a close friend to many in those organizations.

When Columbus honored him earlier this season, Monahan and the Blue Jackets took the ice for the opening faceoff down a man. The left wing position, where Gaudreau would have aligned, was left vacant, a tribute to Gaudreau and among the most memorable scenes in Nationwide.

It’s Calgary’s turn tonight.

“We had so many great many great memories here together,” Monahan said. “A lot of years, a lot of big wins, big nights. We had a lot of fun playing together.”

## The Athletic / Johnny Gaudreau's family joins emotional tribute as Flames and Blue Jackets unite to celebrate his legacy

**By Aaron Portzline- December 5, 2024**

CALGARY, Alberta — Much like the Columbus Blue Jackets did nearly two months ago, the Calgary Flames celebrated the lives of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau on Tuesday with a stirring, emotional ceremony in Scotiabank Saddledome.

There were tears, on the ice and in the crowd. There were hugs, not just between the players from each club and the Gaudreau family but also among opposing players. These franchises — these cities — are an indelible part of Johnny Hockey's legacy, and they celebrated his life with a stunning combination of class and compassion.

Rarely has a final score, or a winner or loser, meant less. But the Flames rode two power-play goals and a stifling defensive effort to a 3-0 win over the Blue Jackets, snapping Columbus' six-game point streak and marking the first time the Jackets had been shut out this season.

The pregame ceremony included a video tribute to Gaudreau, who spent nine seasons with the Flames. It ended with a ceremonial puck drop from the red carpet. Gaudreau's parents, Guy and Jane, and his widow, Meredith, dropped the puck while the Blue Jackets' Sean Monahan and the Flames' Mikael Backlund — two of Gaudreau's closest former teammates — took the draw.

"I thought it was awesome," Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski said. "It was definitely hard to get yourself back into (game mode) right away. The video tribute was great. The fans were great for the Gaudreau family, and just seeing them on the ice was great.

"Definitely tough to gather yourself, but I thought it was very well done by them. It definitely took a few shifts, that's for sure."

The Blue Jackets and Flames players all wore No. 13 Johnny Gaudreau jerseys when they took warmups. Fans, many wearing Gaudreau's jersey, lined the on-glass seats of the Saddledome's lower bowl holding their homemade signs.

"It was nice to see the entire Gaudreau clan in Calgary," Blue Jackets center Cole Sillinger said. "Them being here. Them wanting to be here. They have all of the support in the world from both organizations.

"Just to see their faces and to get any type of smile is a true blessing."

It's no surprise Tuesday's game was nothing like the game played between the Flames and Blue Jackets in Columbus just last Friday. That game had three fights, several massive hits and plenty of acrimony between the sides.

Understandably, Tuesday's game was a bit more subdued.

The Blue Jackets had a season-low 16 shots on goal, including a 23:41 stretch from the end of the first period through most of the second period in which they failed to make Calgary goaltender Dan Vladar make a single stop.

The game also marked the end of Werenski's career-long eight-game point streak, as well as Kent Johnson's string of having scored in every game in which he's played this season. The Jackets got one puck past Vladar early in the first period (Werenski scored it); the goal was overturned when replays showed it was offside.

Coach Dean Evason noted the Blue Jackets “didn’t have the same pop we’ve had,” but it’s also true that whatever energy they had early seemed to fizzle when Werenski’s goal was overturned.

But the six-game point streak masked an issue that’s been percolating for the Blue Jackets for a while now: Their penalty kill is hurting them.

The Flames scored two power-play goals Tuesday, meaning the Blue Jackets have allowed at least one power-play goal in 10 straight games, matching a franchise record set late in the 2006-07 season. During that 10-game span, the penalty kill has allowed 14 goals on 37 chances, only a 62.2 percent success rate.

“We were just talking about it (as a coaching staff). It goes in flows, right?” Evason said. “Pucks are finding their way. We had some bounces (go against us). Maybe some clears are the biggest concern for us right now, in that when we have the pucks on our sticks, we have to get it cleared down the ice.

“That’s hurt us as of late. We have to clean it up, for sure. And we will.”

Just look at that. Amazing. <https://t.co/aohTcG5d3a>

— Aaron Portzline (@Aportzline) December 4, 2024

The Flames’ Rasmus Andersson scored a power-play goal on a one-timer at 10:14 of the second period to break the 0-0 tie. Kevin Bahl made it 2-0 with a power-play goal from above the left circle — Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins (19 saves) was screened on the play — which felt insurmountable.

“It’s on us to not have any cracks in the structure,” Blue Jackets center Cole Sillinger said. “The mistakes we’re making are little errors, but they’re costly. We have to be better, and we have to get tighter.”

Evason hinted that the Blue Jackets might get an off day Wednesday in Edmonton before a road back-to-back against the Oilers on Thursday and the Vancouver Canucks on Friday.

“We’re going to dive into it tonight and tomorrow, but we didn’t have the same pop that we’ve had,” Evason said. “We were just kind of a step behind all night, literally. We had a little push in the third period, but ... we didn’t have that extra that we’ve had consistently here of late. We have to figure it out.”



## The Athletic / Blue Jackets' goal challenge backfires as penalty-kill woes spell doom again

**By Aaron Portzline- December 6, 2024**

The Columbus Blue Jackets' challenge of a go-ahead goal by the Edmonton Oilers early in the second period Thursday backfired. But even after the Oilers pulled away for a 6-3 win, Jackets coach Dean Evason wasn't second-guessing his decision.

Evason and his coaching staff were convinced that Edmonton's Zach Hyman interfered with Blue Jackets goaltender Daniil Tarasov's ability to play the puck when Leon Draisaitl buried it inside Tarasov's stick-side post to put the Oilers ahead 2-1.

When NHL officials — the men in stripes on the ice in Edmonton and the league officials at the NHL's war room in Toronto — disagreed with Evason, it put the Oilers on the power play. And the way the Blue Jackets are going, that was double trouble.

The Oilers made it 3-1 on the power play, one of four goals Edmonton scored in the second period to pull away.

The play in question occurred at 2:22 of the second period.

"A big moment in the game was the goalie challenge," Evason told reporters in Edmonton. "It was a 1-1 hockey game, and by the end of the whole sequence it's 3-1. We were trying to get an explanation (after the game) because our view is different than what they said they'd seen. I don't blame the refs because they're looking at a little iPad. Toronto needs to ...

"When I came in here, our guys were adamant that (Tarasov) got hit in the head (by Hyman) and that he couldn't move his stick. He (Hyman) went freely into the crease by a foot and a half. (Tarasov) can't get over the make that save."

On-ice referees Dan O'Rourke and Kendrick Nicholson and the video-review staff in Toronto indicated to Evason that they didn't see Hyman make contact with Tarasov's head.

"We're trying to get an explanation right now because if they can't see that, they're getting a different angle than we have and then we've got a serious problem (with the process)," Evason said. "We were 100 percent that it was goalie interference. It's a big moment."

If Evason and his assistants were "100 percent" convinced that Hyman was guilty of goaltender interference, it's hard to question their decision to challenge. But you wonder if the major risk they were taking — given how bad the Blue Jackets' kill has been of late — was factored into the equation.

Sure enough, Edmonton's Mattias Ekholm scored with 20 seconds remaining in the power play to make it 3-1 Oilers. The Jackets never trailed by fewer than two goals the rest of the game.

"I think that moment took a lot out of us," Evason said.

It marked the 11th straight game in which the Blue Jackets have allowed at least one power-play goal, the longest streak in franchise history. It's the longest streak in the NHL since the 2005-06 Pittsburgh Penguins allowed a man-advantage goal in 19 straight games.

The NHL record would appear safe for a while: The 1985-86 New Jersey Devils went 22 games without being perfect in a game on their penalty kill.

The Blue Jackets have allowed 17 power-play goals during that 11-game streak, killing at only a 60.4 percent success rate. They've slid from 12th in the NHL on Nov. 12, when the streak began, to among the five worst clubs on the kill.

"If you can't kill 'em, you better not get in there (the penalty box)," Evason said. "We have to keep our sticks off people. We have to keep them on the ice and not get any stick infractions. We have to clean it up, for sure."

Kevin Labanc, Damon Severson and Cole Sillinger scored for the Blue Jackets. Tarasov, making his first start in three weeks, allowed six goals on 37 shots.

Severson's goal made it 4-2 at 10:02 of the second period, and it appeared as if the Blue Jackets might have some life. But just 3 1/2 minutes later, the Jackets went back on the penalty kill — this time a double-minor — after defenseman Dante Fabbro bloodied Oilers forward Kasper Kapanen near the net.

The Jackets actually killed both of those penalties. But less than a minute after the game returned to even strength, Edmonton's Jeff Skinner scored to make it 5-2.

Edmonton's Connor McDavid, who last month became the fourth-fastest NHL player to accumulate 1,000 points, was honored in a pregame ceremony. Then he went out and added four more assists and a plus-2 rating.

McDavid centered the Oilers' top line with winger Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and Hyman. Those three players totaled two goals, six assists and eight points.

## The Athletic / Goalie Elvis Merzlikins' critical error drains Blue Jackets after fast start

**By Aaron Portzline- December 8, 2024**

The first period couldn't have been much better for the Columbus Blue Jackets. The second period — both the first minute and the last — couldn't have gone much worse.

The Blue Jackets allowed five unanswered goals to lose for the 11th time in 14 road games this season, falling 5-2 to the Vancouver Canucks before 18,529 in Rogers Arena. After starting this five-game road trip with a win in Chicago, the Jackets have lost three straight.

After losing defenseman Ivan Provorov to an apparent broken thumb early in the second, the game changed dramatically in the final minute of the period when goaltender Elvis Merzlikins made a truly bizarre decision, given the score and the situation.

The score: The Blue Jackets led 2-1.

The situation: The puck was skidding back toward the Blue Jackets' end of the ice, the type of play that happens hundreds of times a game.

Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski was close to tracking and gathering the puck, and he appeared to have at least two strides on Canucks forward Teddy Blueger when Merzlikins inexplicably came charging out of his net to play the puck.

Merzlikins got to the puck first — Werenski backed off when he saw that his goaltender was committed to his read — and he tried to sail the puck off the glass and out of the zone.

Instead, the puck glanced off Blueger, bounced off the wall and fell at Blueger's feet. Werenski raced to cover the net in Merzlikins' absence while Jackets defenseman Dante Fabbro skated onto the scene to help a desperate situation, attempting to block the path to the net.

Blueger dropped the puck to Columbus native Kiefer Sherwood in the right circle, and Sherwood fired into the empty cage to tie it. As the Canucks celebrated and Rogers Arena roared, Werenski turned and skated toward Merzlikins to give him a hug.

"That hurt, right?" Columbus coach Dean Evason told reporters. "It's a nothing play and it ends up in our net. Yeah, of course it's frustrating. I know Elvis will be accountable for making that decision, but everybody makes mistakes, it's just unfortunate it ends up in our net."

Much like the Blue Jackets' failed goaltender interference challenge one night earlier in Edmonton, you could feel the energy get sapped from the Jackets after Merzlikins' mishap. Merzlikins allowed three goals on the final nine shots he faced.

As for Provorov, Evason said the Blue Jackets were waiting on X-rays to determine the extent of the injury.

At 1:16 of the second, Provorov was tripped and fell into the boards, using his left arm to break his fall against the wall. Provorov was quickly in distress, and FanDuel Sports Ohio cameras showed him removing his left glove to reveal a badly misshapen thumb.

Provorov did not return to the game, and Evason said he was going to have X-rays at the rink in Vancouver before the team traveled to Winnipeg after the game.

If Provorov's out for an extended period, it'll be a big loss for the Blue Jackets. Provorov has been a top-four fixture all season, most recently playing on the second pair and drawing 23 minutes, 55 seconds of ice time per game, second on the club to Werenski.

The Blue Jackets have an extra defenseman with them on the road trip, so they wouldn't have to recall a player from AHL Cleveland. Veteran Jack Johnson was a healthy scratch Friday for a seventh straight game.

Evason scrambled the Blue Jackets' lines before Friday's game. For the first time all season, No. 1 center Sean Monahan and right winger Kirill Marchenko were split up, with Monahan playing between James van Riemsdyk and Kent Johnson, and Marchenko joining a line with center Adam Fantilli and left winger Dmitri Voronkov.

For 20 minutes, Evason looked like a genius. The Jackets led 2-0 after the first period, outshooting the Canucks 17-2 and building a shot-attempts advantage of 31-10. Put another way, the Jackets had as many goals as the Canucks had shots on goal. Rogers Arena was whisper quiet.

Mathieu Olivier and Damon Severson scored for Columbus in the first period, and the Jackets had numerous Grade-A chances to take an even larger lead.

"(The first period) was by far the best period of the year," Evason said. "But, you know, we didn't get the result. So it sucks.

"When you have a start like that, you have the momentum going your way, you have to play an almost boring game and not allow anything to happen. We didn't do that, and obviously they gained momentum."

The Blue Jackets allowed a power-play goal for the 12th straight game, a franchise record. The power-play goal was scored by Jake DeBrusk at 10:22 of the third period and pushed the lead to 4-2. By then, the Blue Jackets looked defeated.

An empty net goal by Pius Suter — his second goal of the game — capped the scoring with 1:05 remaining.

This is the Blue Jackets' second five-game road trip this season. With one game remaining, Sunday in Winnipeg, the Jackets are 1-7-1 on those trips.

## The Athletic / Ivan Provorov toughs it out, Kent Johnson scores twice in gutsy Blue Jackets win

**By Aaron Portzline- December 9, 2024**

Two nights earlier, Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Ivan Provorov was seen grimacing in pain as he stared at his left hand and badly misshapen thumb. It was early in the second period; the veteran's night was finished, and his future health was in doubt.

It was a bit of a surprise, then, when it became evident Sunday morning that Provorov had been cleared by doctors and would be able to tape up his faulty phalanges if he could tolerate the pain.

Provorov's toughness became a theme for the evening.

The Blue Jackets, on a three-game losing streak and at the end of a five-game, three-time-zone trip, mustered up the energy to knock off one of the NHL's top teams in one of the league's most difficult arenas, scoring three third-period goals to win 4-1 over the Winnipeg Jets before a crowd of 13,887 fans in Canada Life Center.

Kent Johnson had the third two-goal game of his career only 2:27 apart in the third period to put the Blue Jackets ahead 3-1, and Sean Kuraly scored an empty net goal from 150 feet away with 1:22 remaining to give Columbus just its fourth road win of the season.

"It's definitely huge," Johnson said. "It's gonna make the flight home a lot more fun. It's definitely a big one for us."

Goaltender Elvis Merzlikins, whose gaffe during Friday's game at the Vancouver Canucks helped seal the Blue Jackets' demise that night, rebounded for a smart, controlled performance. He stopped 24 shots, including all 11 he faced in the third period.

And Provorov didn't just play through the pain. He assisted on Johnson's second goal, had a plus-3 rating and played 23:07.

If you know how Provorov's career has gone, it probably shouldn't be a surprise that he dressed. He has missed only three games (and played in 641) during his eight-plus seasons, and those were due to a positive COVID-19 test in 2021-22 when he played for the Philadelphia Flyers. He has never missed a game because of injury.

"I've played through a lot over my career," Provorov said. "Obviously, we looked at it and made sure it was OK. But dealing with some pain ... that's a normal part of hockey."

Perhaps. But that doesn't mean it wasn't impressive.

"It's awesome," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "Nobody thought he was going to play except him. He was ready to go. He had no issues. And it didn't look like he had any problems handling it or shooting. He's a tough guy."

This was the end of the Blue Jackets' second five-game trip this season. The first one, last month along the Pacific Coast, didn't go so well. The Jackets limped home with an 0-4-1 record, the only point coming in a shootout loss to the San Jose Sharks.

After opening this trip with a win at the Chicago Blackhawks one week ago, the Blue Jackets lost at the Calgary Flames, Edmonton Oilers and Vancouver. One could argue Winnipeg was the toughest test on

the trip, too. The Jets, after all, were 9-2-0 at home before Sunday, one of the best home records in the league.

“Definitely a good win,” Merzlikins said. “We all remember how our trip went in California. It was going down the same road here.”

The Jets opened the scoring with a power-play goal — what’s new, right? — at 11:51 of the second period. Kyle Connor, a certified Jackets killer, beat Merzlikins to the near post with a snap wrister from the right circle.

It marked the 13th consecutive game in which the Blue Jackets have allowed a man-advantage goal, the longest streak in the NHL since the Washington Capitals had a 13-game string in 2009.

The key Sunday is that the Blue Jackets had a quick answer. They scored a power-play goal of their own only 2:02 later when Dmitri Voronkov scored from in tight off a slap pass by Kirill Marchenko, Voronkov’s seventh goal of the season.

It was in the third period when the Blue Jackets took over.

The Jackets pounced on a Winnipeg turnover deep in the Jets’ zone and began a sequence that ended with the go-ahead goal. Veteran forward James van Riemsdyk, who assisted on both of Johnson’s goals, sent in a wrister from the right circle that was deflected by Sean Monahan in front of Winnipeg goalie Eric Comrie.

Comrie had trouble corralling it before Johnson got his stick on it, flipping it up and over Comrie and into the net. At 7:15 of the third, the Jackets had a 2-1 lead.

Just 2 1/2 minutes later, they expanded the lead, this time on a Winnipeg turnover in the neutral zone. It led to a two-on-one, with van Riemsdyk and Johnson perfectly spaced coming into the zone. Van Riemsdyk’s pass from the left circle was right on Johnson’s tape, allowing him to blast it past Comrie.

Johnson now has eight goals, six assists and 14 points in 13 games this season. He had six goals, 10 assists and 16 points in 42 games in 2023-24 before a shoulder injury ended his season.

“What we did after we got the lead, or even before we had the lead, is we made them go back and get pucks,” Evason said. “We didn’t turn it over. We didn’t feed into their game. Our guys were committed to doing the right things defensively, and it turned into some offense.”

Here’s one example of the Blue Jackets’ toughness Sunday: They blocked 24 shots in front of Merzlikins or the same number of saves by the goaltender. Justin Danforth alone had five blocks, and Zach Aston-Reese and Zach Werenski each had three.

Cole Sillinger had only one block, but it might prove costly. After kneeling in front of a Colin Miller shot with 1:13 remaining in the second period, Sillinger hobbled to the bench but stayed there for the remainder of the period. He tried it out in the third period but left after two shifts.

The Blue Jackets were scheduled to fly home after the game, arriving in Columbus in the wee hours of Monday. They had ice bags, heating pads, gauze and smiles.

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: What GM Don Waddell's pursuit of Jacob Trouba means

**By Aaron Portzline- December 9, 2024**

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

Item No. 1: Trouba pursuit

The Blue Jackets were among the clubs that pressed hard to acquire defenseman Jacob Trouba from the New York Rangers last week, but Trouba declined to remove Columbus from the list of clubs on the no-trade clause in his contract.

It was nothing personal. The Athletic has learned from a team official that Trouba refused to approve a trade to at least two other clubs in the Eastern Conference, including the Detroit Red Wings, before he signed off on a trade to the Anaheim Ducks on Friday.

Another reason it wasn't personal: Trouba's wife, Kelly Tyson-Trouba, is a doctor of osteopathic medicine at a hospital in New York, with a residency that reportedly runs through July. It was important to them that Trouba's next stop work well for both of their careers.

"Anaheim was one of the places my wife and I were interested in," Trouba told reporters in Anaheim.

It's unknown what the Blue Jackets were offering the Rangers for Trouba, but Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell's interest in the player makes two issues abundantly clear:

### 1. Waddell is not content

The Blue Jackets blue line has been significantly altered since Waddell was hired in late May, and he's still perusing the league for upgrades.

Waddell has acquired Dante Fabbro (waivers), Jack Johnson (free agent), Jordan Harris (trade with Montreal) and Daemon Hunt (trade with Minnesota).

Fabbro has found a home on the top defensive pairing with Zach Werenski, while Harris has settled into the left side of the third pair. Johnson has been in and out of the lineup on the third pair, and Hunt was assigned to AHL Cleveland just after the trade.

Meanwhile, Waddell moved Jake Bean, Nick Blankenburg, Adam Boqvist and David Jiricek in separate deals. Those four played a combined 164 games in Columbus last season, but Boqvist (Florida) and Bean (Calgary) are playing minor roles with their new teams, Blankenburg (Nashville) has mostly played in the minors, and Jiricek just landed with the Wild.

It's unclear what Waddell had in mind for Trouba if he had landed him via trade, but, at \$8 million per season, he likely would have played on the top pair next to Werenski.

Overall, it indicates Waddell is still active and willing to be aggressive.

### 2. More nasty needed

The Blue Jackets have Mathieu Olivier and Zach Aston-Reese, along with a few other forwards who can bring the heat in a physical game. But the Jackets aren't always difficult to play against — they don't initiate, for sure — and that's especially true on the back end.

Ever since veteran Erik Gudbranson went out with a long-term shoulder injury in October, the Blue Jackets have lacked a true physical presence on the blue line. Skill and talent, sure, but not a lot of jam.

Trouba, one of the NHL's few remaining open-ice hunters, would have changed the entire look of the Blue Jackets defense and, really, the entire roster. Olivier would have been a busy man.

#### Item No. 2: Thumbs up

It sure didn't look good when Blue Jackets defenseman Ivan Provorov crashed awkwardly into the sidewall early in the second period on Friday in Vancouver. It looked worse when Provorov, grimacing in pain, removed his left glove as he lay on the ice.

Provorov's thumb, captured by FanDuel Sports Network cameras, looked like he was trying to hitch a ride, 1970s style. He went straight to the Blue Jackets dressing room and did not return to the game.

It was an ominous sign, not only because the Blue Jackets rely heavily on Provorov, but because he's seen as one of Waddell's biggest trade chips should the Blue Jackets be sellers at the trade deadline in March.

After reviewing X-rays of Provorov's thumb, however, the Blue Jackets medical staff has cleared him to resume play as soon as he can tolerate the discomfort. Without getting into details, Waddell said Provorov couldn't do further harm to the thumb by playing.

If you know anything about Provorov, he's playing tonight in Winnipeg.

Provorov has never missed a game due to injury. The only three games he's missed during his NHL career — 640 games with Philadelphia and Columbus — were due to COVID-19 during the 2021-22 season, and he's made it clear that it was NHL protocols that kept him from playing, not sickness.

The Blue Jackets rely heavily on Provorov, who is second only to Werenski in ice time, playing 23:18 per game. He quarterbackes the second power-play units and its heavy minutes on the penalty kill.

The Jackets may also be counting on him later this season when Waddell has to decide — more likely the Jackets will decide for him with their play over the next three months — whether he wants to be a seller, a buyer or a mix of the two at the March 7 deadline.

Most suspect Provorov could fetch a first-round draft pick, which would give the Blue Jackets three first-round picks next June. In addition to their own, the Blue Jackets acquired Minnesota's pick in the trade that sent Jiricek to the Wild.

That trade with Minnesota also landed the Blue Jackets 22-year-old defenseman Daemon Hunt, who is currently playing with AHL Cleveland. Hunt and top prospect Denton Mateychuk are the reasons why Provorov, an unrestricted free agent this summer, may be deemed expendable later this season.

#### Item No. 3: Take 5 with Kuraly

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

##### 1. What part of Columbus is home and why?

Dublin. I'm from there. Home sweet home. There's not another area in the city I'd live (in). I love the drive to the rink down Riverside Drive. I always stop and get a coffee. If I need two, I'll stop at the other Starbucks and get a second. Perfect relaxing drive. No traffic. Beautiful in the fall, especially.

##### 2. Favorite restaurant in Columbus.



Oshio. It's a sushi place in Grandview. I went to kindergarten with the guys who own it and run it. I go there all the time.

### 3. What do you do on an off day Sunday?

Football on the couch. Walk the dog, have a coffee. Make some food or order some food. I was born in Buffalo, so I should maybe lean toward the Bills. But my fantasy team is the team I root for more than anything.

### 4. Favorite CBJ memory.

Rick Nash scoring that goal — yeah, yeah, the goal — against Arizona. They were Phoenix at the time. I remember Jeff Rimer's call. I recreated that goal as many times as I could when I was a kid.

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

It wouldn't be me. No way. Just, no way. You know what? Riemer (James van Riemsdyk) has a lot of really good ideas. He's got a lot of good stuff in his head. Let's go with Riemer.

### Item No. 4: Snacks

- Not since the days when Werenski and Seth Jones comprised the top defensive pairing have the Blue Jackets gotten this much pop from their back end. Heading into play today, the Blue Jackets were tied with Edmonton atop the NHL for goals (18) by defensemen. The Blue Jackets rank sixth with 64 points from their blueliners, trailing Colorado (77), Washington (74), Winnipeg (71), Tampa Bay (69) and Carolina (66). The Jackets are on pace this season to total 57-145-202 from defensemen, which would be a franchise best. In 2017-18, the Jackets scored 51 goals from their back end. The following season, they totaled 188 points from the blue line.
- The Blue Jackets head into tonight's game vs. Winnipeg hoping to snap an ugly streak. They've allowed a power-play goal in 12 consecutive games dating back to Nov. 10 in Anaheim. It's the longest streak in franchise history, and if it's extended today against the Jets, it'll be the longest in the NHL since the Washington Capitals gave up a power-play goal in 13 straight games from Jan. 6 to Feb. 5, 2009. Since that Nov. 10 game, the Blue Jackets have been short-handed 44 times and have allowed 17 goals, a 61.4 percent success rate that ranks last in the league during that span.
- There's no such thing as an easy road game for the Blue Jackets these days, but the schedule is going to be much kinder the rest of the way. In their first 15 games on the road schedule, including tonight's game in Winnipeg, the Blue Jackets have played only three times in the Eastern time zone. Five games have been in the Pacific, four in the Central and three in the Mountain. It's going to feel dramatically different the rest of the way, with 22 of the remaining 26 roadies in the same time zone (Eastern) as Columbus. Only twice (Vegas on Jan. 30 and Utah on Jan. 31) do they go further West than the Central time zone. In fact, after Feb. 2, the Blue Jackets won't leave the Eastern time zone.
- By the end of the month, Werenski, who will play in his 512th game for the Blue Jackets tonight in Winnipeg, will have passed Rostislav Klesla (515) and Jared Boll (518) to move into eighth place on the franchise's all-time games played list. By the end of the season, Werenski could be as high as sixth, as David Vyborny (543) and Fedor Tyutin (553) are now within sight.
- You have to admire a coach who can mix his metaphors as effortlessly as he mixes his forward lines. On Friday, before Dean Evason made sweeping changes on all four lines, he said this after the morning skate in Vancouver: "We're going to throw the ping pong balls in a blender ... and hopefully the combinations we come up with are good."

- Sunday Gathering trivia question: Mathieu Olivier, with eight goals and 47 penalty minutes heading into tonight's game, is on pace to score 25 goals and accumulate 148 penalty minutes. Which Blue Jackets player scored the most goals in a season in which he also had 150 or more penalty minutes?
- What a weekend — what a start to the season! — for Blue Jackets prospect Luca Del Bel Belluz, a second-round pick (No. 44) in 2022. On Friday, Del Bel Belluz scored two extra-attacker goals in the final 2:11 of regulation to lead AHL Cleveland back from a 4-2 deficit against Syracuse. The Monsters later won on a Corson Ceulemans goal at 2:36 of overtime. Then, on Saturday, Del Bel Belluz scored two more goals in the Monsters' 4-3 loss after a six-round shootout. Del Bel Belluz, who had a strong training camp in Columbus this fall, now leads the AHL in points and is third in goals, totaling 15-11-26 in 23 games. It may be time to start mentioning his name among the Blue Jackets' top NHL prospects.
- Hunt has three assists in three games so far with Cleveland. He's paired with Cole Clayton on the Monsters' second defensive pair and had assists on both of Del Bel Belluz's late goals on Friday. Jiricek, meanwhile, was recalled from AHL Iowa to the Wild shortly after the trade but has yet to make his Minnesota debut.
- Trivia answer: In 2011-12, Derek Dorsett scored 12 goals and totaled 235 penalty minutes. He also, remarkably, had two power-play goals that season.

## [BlueJackets.com / Werenski achieves goal of making Team USA](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- December 4, 2024

If you think Zach Werenski looked good this October and November, the reason is because of what happened in July and August.

“This summer, he might have been the hardest working guy I’ve ever been in the gym with,” offseason workout partner and CBJ teammate Adam Fantilli said. “Absolute animal. He was dragging me in for a sixth day a week, only doing Sunday off and then taking me in on Saturdays. On the ice, he was working as hard as he can every single time.

“He came in looking unreal. He killed the testing. He looked great. It’s translating into his game. He’s in the conversation for the Norris right now, so he’s playing amazing.”

As Fantilli noted, the results have been beyond impressive. Werenski hasn’t just been one of the best defensemen in the NHL, he’s been one of the top players in the league through the first two months of the season.

And while Werenski often doesn’t dwell on personal honors, preferring to focus on team success, the two-time NHL All-Star did check a major milestone off his list when he was named tonight to Team USA for the upcoming 4 Nations Face-Off in February.

He has often talked about how much he enjoys representing his country in top-level international competitions, and now he’ll be wearing the Red, White and Blue against the best players in the world as part of the tournament being put on by the NHL and NHLPA.

“It’s definitely something that was one of my goals coming into the year,” Werenski said. “It’s the first (best on best international hockey) has happened since I’ve been in the league. Guys have been itching for it. It’s great for the league. It’s great for hockey. I think whenever you can have best on best in any sport, it’s good for viewership. It’s good to grow the game. I think that part of it is awesome.

“As players, you want to play best on best at some point, and we finally get an opportunity here these next couple of years.”

As Werenski noted, it’s been a dry spell when it comes to the best in the world matching up against one another in their country’s colors. NHL players did not participate in the Winter Olympics each of the past two cycles, with an eye on returning in 2026, and the last big international event was the 2016 World Cup before Werenski made his NHL debut.

A two-time participant in the World Junior Championships in his teenage years, Werenski has twice suited up for Team USA at the IIHF World Championships, but many of the top players in the game are unable to take part because it takes place at the same time as the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

So you can see why Werenski was so interested in making the roster for the squad, and he’s proved his worth this season with a bevy of accomplishments. The Detroit-area native sits first among NHL players in ice time per game (26:06), is tied for sixth in the league in shots on goal (90) and is one of the leaders among defensemen in goals (eight, tied for first) and points (26, third).

Before Tuesday night’s shutout loss at Calgary, Werenski had an eight-game point streak in which he became just the third player in team history and first defensemen with 16 points in such a span.

On top of that, he’s earned high praise from the Blue Jackets coaching staff for his defensive abilities throughout the campaign.

"I think everybody sees the special things," head coach Dean Evason said. "You miss the little things. You miss the box outs. You miss the little pucks moving quickly. On the defensive end, we see on the video on a consistent basis that he's doing all of those things.

"We see him rushing up the ice and getting involved. We see him scoring an overtime goal. Those are all wonderful, but he is such a well-rounded player. I think you miss his defensive greatness, if you will, because it gets overshadowed by his offensive greatness."

And it all started this summer. Werenski has always been a physical freak, more floating around the ice than skating on it, but now in his ninth season in the NHL, he knew he had to reach another level to be capable of playing the way he wants at all times. It's worked, as not only does Werenski lead the league in ice time, he's able to keep his game at a high level no matter the situation.

"In years past, I've done a good job in terms of being ready for camp, but I feel like I wasn't as far along as I could have been," Werenski said. "Now I feel like I've done everything I could. I feel really good. My wind is good. My legs feel good, and I think the results are showing because I'm not as tired during games, in back-to-backs and whatnot. It allows me to play that 200-foot game and not even think about it."

The work put in during the summer has put him in a position to be among the league's best, and the recognition from Team USA is the latest sign of Werenski's standing in the NHL. For Blue Jackets assistant coach Steve McCarthy, who has coached Werenski the past four seasons, the honors are deserved given the level he's played at this season.

"It really is incredible," McCarthy said. "I've been fortunate enough to be around Z since I was still playing when he came into Cleveland from college, and I've been able to watch him grow and work with him. I've seen him play some really good hockey, but he has taken it to another level. He's a student of the game, and he's really mastered his craft. Now we're seeing what he can do."

## [BlueJackets.com / The last line of defense: Learning the blue line is no easy task](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- December 5, 2024

Few would argue that Zach Werenski is among the best defensemen in the NHL right now.

The Blue Jackets alternate captain has been a dynamo all season long, placing among the top blueliners in the NHL in multiple categories, posting a CBJ defenseman record eight-game point streak and making the Team USA roster for the upcoming 4 Nations Face-Off.

At age 27 and in his ninth NHL season, Werenski is at the peak of his powers. And he would argue there's a reason it's taken him this long to get to that point.

When you factor in everything that happens in the defensive zone, the effort it takes to play the position and the talent of those on the other side, the defenseman position is one of the hardest to master in sports.

"A lot goes into it that I'm sure a lot of people don't understand," Werenski said. "It's complicated. You're the last two guys on defense besides the goalie, so you have to make smart reads. And if you don't make smart reads, usually it ends up in a scoring chance the other way. It's being dialed in all over the ice, especially defensively, and understanding the whole flow of the game. There's a lot that goes into it."

As Werenski said, one mistake in a read, one misplay of the puck or one stride the wrong direction can be the difference between a perfect, routine clear that happens multiple times each game and a goal light going off behind a goalie.

Add in the speed of the game that's faster than ever, and it's no wonder it takes most defensemen years at the NHL level to truly master their craft, as CBJ assistant coach Steve McCarthy says.

The Blue Jackets have an interesting mix on the back end, led by Werenski, the alternate captain and two-time All-Star playing at the highest level in his career to this point. There are veteran pros like Damon Severson, Jack Johnson and Ivan Provorov; young players trying to fully establish themselves like Jake Christiansen and Jordan Harris; and an interesting new acquisition in Dante Fabbro, who has gone from a healthy scratch in Nashville to a top-pair player with Columbus.

And even with a recent trade of first-round pick David Jiricek, the Blue Jackets have such young blueliners developing in the American Hockey League as Denton Mateychuk, Stanislav Svozil, newly acquired Daemon Hunt and more, plus a pipeline of highly touted players coming.

It's a critical time for defensemen in the organization, so at times throughout the season, we'll be checking in with CBJ blueliners and the coaching staff to talk about what it takes to play the position at the highest level.

"When you're playing in the best league in the world, your mistakes are not forgiving," McCarthy said. "The speed of the game, it just takes longer (to master). You're playing against the best forwards in the world – the guys that handle the puck the best, the guys that have the best hockey minds, their speed. It really does take a long time to develop and get comfortable."

### Always Something to Learn

Think about the speed of Connor McDavid, who is capable of creating elite plays on the ice while traveling more than 20 miles per hour. Think about the shot of Auston Matthews, who scored 69 goals in 81 games last year. Think about the creativity of Jack Hughes, who seems to be able to dictate the entire game with the puck on his stick.

And then think about the fact we didn't even mention Nathan MacKinnon, Sidney Crosby, Alex Ovechkin, Nikita Kucherov, David Pastrnak, Cale Makar or any of the other prodigiously talented players defensemen go up against every night in the National Hockey League.

When a young blueliner comes into the league, there's nowhere to hide. If you're on the ice, at some point, you're probably going to have to match up against one of the best players in the world.

"It's a big shock for sure," said Severson, who is now in his 11th NHL season. "Well, not a shock – you expect it, but when you actually have to do it when you first come into the league as a defenseman, the people you have to defend and the players you have to defend are just that much more elite than what you just came from. You're at the highest level, so you have to raise your level.

"It's constantly learning every game, every day, every year. It's always going to be something different, so defending, it's definitely a skill. It's something you have to learn over the years. It takes time, but I guess I've been around a little while. I'm definitely still learning, but every day is a new challenge."

Severson noted there are specific things you learn about playing against the top players in the game, but it can also be difficult to spend too much time scouting the opposition in an 82-game season. Just this week, for example, the Blue Jackets will have to face the one-two punch of McDavid and Leon Draisaitl tonight in Edmonton, then head to Vancouver tomorrow to face the creativity of Elias Pettersson and Quinn Hughes.

There are things you know you'll see from the best on a regular basis – Severson pointed to the speed of McDavid on the rush, or the "chop tip" that Crosby has used with regularity to beat goaltenders from nearly impossible angles – but it's certainly no easy task to defend.

"It's a very unforgiving league," McCarthy said. "It's hard on older players, but young players, if you haven't mastered your craft, if you're struggling or there's a confidence issue or you're not sure, it's a real tough league to get your footing."

McCarthy pointed out that the toughest thing for defensemen as they come into the league isn't necessarily having the skill to play at the highest level, it's finding consistency. The speed of the game ramps up as the season goes on, and the grind of having to be at your best on a nightly basis – or, for example, when you play four road games in six days, as the Blue Jackets are right now – starts to take a toll.

"What we find in the NHL, the league just seems to get faster and faster every month, so a lot of time with young players, just the details of being a pro, sometimes it's hard to sustain," McCarthy said. "Most of the time, it takes time, and a lot of the things that we deal with as a coaching staff is the frustration, especially from a young player that thinks he can play in the league, which he can. It's just rounding out your craft."

It's a lesson players have to learn as their NHL careers start to blossom. Fabbro came into the league with Nashville as a highly touted player who was a star at Boston University, but then he went through the same ups and downs most blueliners do when they enter the league.

Now 26 years old, he's found there's no substitute for experience, and he comes to work every day trying to improve on what didn't go well the previous game.

"I think it goes to show if you take days off and you don't take things as seriously, that's when you start to see your game fall of a little bit," Fabbro said. "My approach has always been coming into the rink every day and putting my best foot forward and working on things I didn't really like the previous game.

“I think that’s just a way for myself to stay in it and stay mentally sharp. I enjoy that. I like coming to the rink early and putting in some of the work just to get myself feeling good and feeling ready for the next game.”

#### The Veteran Star

A first-round draft pick, Werenski came into the league at age 19 in 2016 and immediately showed he could be an elite player, tallying the sixth-most points (47) by a teenage defenseman in his rookie season in NHL history.

Now 27, he’s one of the best defensemen in the league, and Werenski said he’s heard that’s often when a player’s peak at the position starts in the NHL. That’s just how long it takes to master everything and to gain the experience needed to be a true dominant player, and he’s certainly had ups and downs along the way.

He’s a two-time All-Star, but he’s also had to miss extensive time with injuries. He went from a dazzling youngster known for his skill to someone who had to be counted on to play No. 1 minutes on a nightly basis.

For Werenski, that required a change in mind-set from his younger days when he judged his game largely on offensive production.

“I think when you’re touted as an offensive guy, it’s so hard to focus on the defensive side of the game,” Werenski said. “For me as a young defenseman, even my first three, four years in the league, all I thought was, ‘I need to get points. That’s what they want me to do. If I do that, the defensive stuff won’t matter.’”

“Then you start to become a No. 1 in a sense with (Seth Jones) leaving and all that, and you realize you have to be good all 200 feet. It was a process for me. It took a while. I think that’s the hardest part was to round out that 200-foot game, and I take a lot of pride in it. It hasn’t been perfect, but I think this year I’m definitely seeing that be a lot better.”

Along the way, he’s learned all that it takes to be a standout at his position. There are the little things in the defensive zone, like making proper reads, learning positioning, boxing out players, winning corner battles and everything else you have to do to keep goals off the board.

Then, being a player with offensive gifts, there’s learning when to go and join the attack and when you have to be smart and not expose your team to an odd-man rush the other way. Oh, and you also have to be in tremendous shape to be all over the ice and play upwards of 25 minutes per game on a nightly basis.

“In terms of creating offense, being good defensively, being a full 200-foot defenseman, I think it has to be one of the hardest things to do,” he said. “There’s just so much in terms of breaking pucks out, stopping rushes, 2-on-1s, 1-on-1s, 3-on-2s, closing players down in the corner, boxing out at the net.

“There’s a lot that goes into it, so I definitely think it takes some time. That’s why they usually say defensemen peak when they’re 27 to 30, somewhere in there. It takes a number of years to figure all that out.”

McCarthy has been there for most of Werenski’s journey, first playing on the same defensive corps when Werenski started his pro career in Cleveland back in 2016, then serving as his coach for the past four seasons.

“He’s just the ultimate pro,” McCarthy said. “He’s been through a lot here. He’s played some good hockey, he’s had some tough stretches, he’s had some long-term injuries that he’s had to deal with. So

I'm really happy for him, and happy as a team when he's playing like that. You get to see the things that he does, what he puts in in the summer, what he puts into the game, it's really nice to see him get rewarded."

#### Harris Growing on the Job

When the Blue Jackets acquired Harris from Montreal this summer, he had 131 NHL games under his belt over the past three seasons with the Canadiens.

At age 24, he's at the spot in his career where he's trying to cement himself as an everyday NHL player, skating in 15 of the Jackets' first 24 games this season. But Harris has been in the lineup for five straight games, and he said he's able to take something out of each and every one of them.

"There are so many great players in the league and teams, and the way that teams are constantly trying to find an edge, whether its faceoff plays, whether it's set breakouts, there's always something new and changing and evolving," Harris said. "I think as a player, you always have to go into season and games with that same sort of mind-set. I think if you're aware of what's going on and want to work on yourself, you can always learn little things. I think every game, there's a couple things you can take out."

That's the way the Haverhill, Mass., native and third-round draft pick has tried to approach his entire career, whether it be when he was a standout skater at Northeastern University, in his first couple seasons with the Habs or now in Columbus.

"I'm fortunate because that's how I was brought up by my dad was to pay attention to those little things," he said. "You always want to score goals and make plays, but the little stuff adds up, and that creates good habits and that leads to scoring goals and all that stuff."

Harris has a different pedigree from someone like Werenski, whose offensive genius was well established and made him a top-10 pick in the draft. Harris is a do-it-all blueliner who can add to the offense, but it's never been his top priority, topping out with six goals in a season at Northeastern and four in a campaign with Montreal.

So far this season, he's yet to get on the score sheet with Columbus, but he has the attitude that will come if he keeps doing the right things.

"I think as a defenseman, and especially the role that I've played since I've gotten to the league, I think points and goals have been a bonus on top of playing well in my zone and the little things," he said. "It's always nice to score goals and contribute offensively, but I think if you're doing the right things, I think they'll come."

"That's how I've felt lately. I feel as though my game has gotten better each game, and I'm doing a lot of good things. The points and stuff just falls in line."



## [BlueJackets.com / Oilers defeat Blue Jackets in Edmonton](#)

**By Gerry Moddejonge- December 6, 2024**

EDMONTON -- Zach Hyman scored twice in his return to the lineup, and Connor McDavid had four assists for the Edmonton Oilers in a 6-3 win against the Columbus Blue Jackets at Rogers Place on Thursday.

Hyman had missed the previous five games with an undisclosed injury.

"It was nice to get 'Hysey' back," McDavid said. "It was nice to create some chances. I thought 'Nuge' (Ryan Nugent-Hopkins) played well, as well. When you've got three guys playing well, it's fun out there."

Leon Draisaitl also scored two goals, and Evan Bouchard, Nugent-Hopkins and Adam Henrique each had two assists for Edmonton (14-10-2), which opened a stretch of eight out of nine games at home prior to the Christmas break. Calvin Pickard made 19 saves.

"Leading into the game, we were No. 2 in expected goals-for, and we've been pretty much two or three all season long," Oilers coach Kris Knoblauch said. "And just this last week or so, we've been able to put the pucks in the net.

"A little bit is about generating chances, and we've generated chances, but it's also about having the skill to finish."

Cole Sillinger had a goal and an assist, and Daniil Tarasov made 31 saves for the Blue Jackets (11-11-3), who will close out a back-to-back at the Vancouver Canucks on Friday.

"We started correctly, we played hard, we played well," said Blue Jackets head coach Dean Evason.

The Blue Jackets took a 1-0 lead at 2:31 of the first period. Mikael Pyyhtia's shot from the top of the right circle bounced off the stick of Oilers forward Mattias Janmark and the shin of Kevin Labanc before beating a sliding Pickard.

Hyman tied it 1-1 at 9:46. McDavid deked Blue Jackets defensemen Jake Christiansen and Jordan Harris in the low slot and sent a no-look backhand pass across the crease to Hyman for a one-timer.

"Being back is the best. To get a win and being able to contribute feels good," said Hyman, who has 10 points (five goals, five assists) in 21 games. "I think it was a good reset. I obviously didn't have the greatest start. It was a good first game back.

"When I say not the greatest start, I just wasn't scoring. I thought I was playing pretty good and getting looks and getting chances and whatnot. Eventually they were going to go in."

Draisaitl gave the Oilers a 2-1 lead at 2:22 of the second period. McDavid carried the puck around the back of the net and sent a centering pass to Draisaitl, who scored with his backhand past the outstretched pad of Tarasov.

Columbus unsuccessfully challenged the play for goaltender interference, resulting in a delay of game penalty.

"That happens. We obviously had a different opinion on what happened there and we made the decision to challenge," Sillinger said. "Unfortunately it didn't go our way. But that's part of the game, that's hockey. We didn't get it and we had to lean on our kill.

“The puck got into their best player's hands and they got going, they got rolling and we just had little cracks tonight. Obviously, when you give players like that those opportunities, they're going to capitalize.”

Mattias Ekholm then pushed it to 3-1 on the ensuing power play at 4:02. He picked up his own rebound off a one-timer from the slot and tucked the puck past Tarasov's right pad.

Hyman made it 4-1 at 6:53, finishing a tic-tac-toe passing sequence with McDavid and Nugent-Hopkins on an odd-man rush.

Damon Severson made it 4-2 at 10:02 with a shot that hit Oilers defenseman Ty Emberson and bounced up off Pickard's right pad and in.

Jeff Skinner put Edmonton ahead 5-2 at 18:30. He received a pass from Henrique from behind the net, pulled the puck to his backhand, and lifted a shot past Tarasov's glove.

“It always feels like you're playing better or executing better when you've got some confidence and things are going your way,” Skinner said. “Then you go through times when things aren't bouncing your way and you just have to fight through it.”

The Oilers outshot Columbus 16-7 in the second period.

Sillinger cut it to 5-3 at 6:10 of the third period, scoring with a wrist shot through traffic from the point that beat Pickard high stick side.

Draisaitl made it 6-3 at 13:37, burying a snap shot from the left face-off dot stick side for a power-play goal.

NOTES: A ceremony was held prior to puck drop acknowledging Connor McDavid becoming the fourth-fastest player in NHL history to reach the 1,000 points. ... McDavid has earned a point in 13 of his past 14 games against the Blue Jackets (seven goals, 22 assists). ... McDavid and Draisaitl have factored on the same goal 455 times, the eighth-most in NHL history.

## [BlueJackets.com / Canucks rally to down Blue Jackets](#)

By Kevin Woodley- December 7, 2024

VANCOUVER -- Pius Suter scored twice in the third period and Brock Boeser had a goal and an assist to reach 400 points in the NHL and help the Vancouver Canucks rally from down two goals to defeat the Columbus Blue Jackets 5-2 at Rogers Arena on Friday.

Quinn Hughes had two assists and Kevin Lankinen made 30 saves for the Canucks (14-7-4), playing the first game of a six-game homestand after going 4-1-1 on six-game road trip. It was the 15th time in 25 games Vancouver has given up the first goal, but the Canucks improved to 9-5-1 when falling behind 1-0.

"Something just clicks and we start winning our puck battles and playing our style of hockey, but it's obviously frustrating," Boeser said. "We've talked about this many times, and we're all pretty aware that our starts aren't good, and that was unacceptable again. I don't know if it's a lack of preparation or what, but we need to be ready to win our puck battles, and playing our style hockey, going through guys in the first period. Luckily we recovered and got two big points."

Mathieu Olivier and Damon Severson scored and Elvis Merzlikins made 12 saves for the Blue Jackets (11-12-3), who were playing back-to-back after a 6-3 loss at the Edmonton Oilers on Thursday.

It was the third game -- and third loss -- in four nights for Columbus despite outshooting Vancouver 17-2 in the first period.

"It was by far the best period of the year," coach Dean Evason said. "I'm very proud of the way the guys played, came out, were ready. It was awesome but obviously we didn't get the result so it [stinks]."

The Blue Jackets went ahead 1-0 at 7:10 of the first period after Cole Sillinger collected a pass behind the Vancouver net, spun back around and passed it out front, catching Lankinen moving the wrong way and leaving Olivier with an open half of the net.

Severson made it 2-0 while playing 4-on-4 at 12:18, taking a cross-ice breakout pass from defense partner Ivan Provorov at the blue line and wiring a slap shot past the blocker of Lankinen from just inside the top of right face-off circle.

Provorov left early in the second period with a crooked looking left thumb after getting tripped into the boards by Elias Pettersson and did not return.

"Obviously, it didn't look good," Evason said. "He's getting X-rays tonight and or whenever, right away, and I don't know if he's had them yet or not."

Boeser pulled the Canucks to 2-1 at 3:52 of the second period with a far-side one-timer after Hughes circled behind the net and passed up to the right face-off dot.

"When Quinn gets the puck, a lot of people just start focusing on him so just try and get open and he made a good play," Boeser said.

Kiefer Sherwood tied it 2-2 at 19:00 after Merzlikins came out of his net to play the puck near the top of the right face-off circle. Teddy Blueger knocked down his clearing attempt and passed to Sherwood for a quick shot before Merzlikins could get back to his crease.

"Yeah, that hurt," Evason said. "It's a nothing play and it ends up in our net. Of course, it's frustrating for everybody. I know Elvis will be accountable for making that decision but everybody makes mistakes, obviously."

Olivier was more concerned with how his team responded in the third.

Suter put Vancouver ahead 3-2 at 2:17 of the period, taking a pass from below the goal line and taking a quick wrist shot from the right hash mark that trickled in under the blocker arm of Merzlikins.

"I'd say more the start of the third would be more crucial for us. It's 2-2 on the road. Give me that option. I'd take that any day so I think it's just our third period there," Olivier said. "Third period, a lot of penalties, lost some coverage in the D-zone, lots of mental mistakes. You could blame the back-to-back, blame whatever you want, but it ends up being coverage mistakes and cost us the game."

Jake DeBrusk made it 4-2 on a power play at 10:22, deflecting a point shot that broke Hughes' stick for his team-leading 12th goal of the season and first at home. Boeser assisted on the goal, giving him 400 points (186 goals, 214 assists) in 497 NHL games, all with the Canucks.

"It means a lot just to do it with the guys in this room and the fan base," Boeser said. "I always say how much I love playing here so it's obviously special."

Suter scored into an empty net at 18:55 for the 5-2 final, giving him 11 goals this season, four shy of matching his NHL single season high in 2021-22.

"I think I'm just shooting a bit better for sure than the last two, three years, feeling more confident in my shot and it kind of pays off right now," Suter said.

Columbus finished 0-for-3 on the power play. Vancouver was 1-for-2.

"Special teams is hurting us," Severson said. "It's no secret. We have to clean that up if we're going to win hockey games. Special teams is key to win in this League and unfortunately right now our special teams isn't where we'd like it to be.

NOTES: DeBrusk has scored six goals during a four-game goal streak. ... Hughes has 12 points (two goals, 10 assists) during a six-game point streak. ... Pettersson had an assist to extend his point streak to five games and nine points (one goal, eight assists). ... Goalie Thatcher Demko was the Canucks backup, his first time dressing in a game since injuring his left knee in Game 1 of the Western Conference First Round in the 2024 Stanley Cup Playoffs on April 21.

## [BlueJackets.com / Catch him if you can: Johnson's puck protection fueling hot start](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- December 7, 2024

In another life, Kent Johnson could have been quite the three-card monte dealer.

His brain is always a step ahead of the opposition. His sleight of hand assures that he always has the upper hand. And just when you think you have him right where you want him, he gets away unscathed.

Johnson may stand a slim – but not as slim as it used to be – 6-foot, 180-pound frame, but he’s one of the best players at protecting the puck in the NHL.

It’s a combination of a few factors, including hard work and detailed game study, an uncanny ability to know where pressure is coming from and what his options are to get away from it, and the confidence to make something happen with the puck on his stick.

Add it all up and Johnson is a one-man zone entry, someone who is already one of the best in the game at age 21 in carrying the puck through the neutral zone or into the offensive zone and then creating offense from there.

That’s one of the main reasons Johnson was just the second Blue Jacket ever to start a season with points in his first nine games, and why he’s currently producing at a point-per-game pace (6-6-12 in 12 games) so far. He has the skill set to score goals and set up teammates as well as just about anyone, but it starts with the ability to keep the puck away from the opposing team and put it in advantageous positions for the Blue Jackets.

“I think any skilled forward, you don’t want to dump it in,” Johnson said. “Sometimes you have to, but it’s something I’ve worked a lot on, and when I was younger it was something I did.

“It’s something that not a lot of guys can do, so it’s definitely a calling card for me. I have to keep getting better at it and keep doing it.”

Count Blue Jackets head coach Dean Evason among his fans in that regard. Evason often refers to Johnson as a rink rat, someone who feels most at home on the ice, and Johnson describes himself as a hockey nerd.

But that detailed study of the game and relentless has allowed the Vancouver-area native to announce himself this season as a breakout player for the Blue Jackets.

Not only is he adept at keeping the puck on his stick through the bodies in the neutral zone, he’s able to keep possession once he gets in the zone and then find offensive options from there, something few players can master at the NHL level.

“He’s a great skater obviously, but his skill set, his hands are terrific,” Evason said. “And what he’s done is he hasn’t turned the puck over, right? You carry the puck in like that, like we see the analytic numbers, and you carry it in there, you’re bound to throw a couple away. And maybe he has, but you know, it’s not on a consistent basis. He protects it.

“We showed a clip (Tuesday) morning of him driving deep and hooking off down low as opposed to up high at the blue line so that he doesn’t turn the puck over. So that’s what we’ve really liked.

“We’ve talked to our entire group that it doesn’t matter how you get it in if you need to get it in. If that means dumping it and getting after it and forechecking, that’s wonderful. But if you can carry the thing in and not give it away and have to try to get it back, it’s even better.”

Johnson said he often studies skaters like his Blue Jackets teammate Johnny Gaudreau and Patrick Kane to see how they – two players also not known for their size – have been able to excel at the skill over the years. He also has coaches in Vancouver that put him through drills in the offseason that allow him to keep building his arsenal of moves.

“The big thing is skating at players early, getting them to where they can’t really get on angle on you,” Johnson said. “That’s a big thing that I think I’m good at. And then just adding the head fakes and stick fakes and your feet fakes. Sometimes it can look pretty easy when you get pretty good at it. It feels good, but you have to keep doing it.”

Blue Jackets defenseman Jake Christiansen considers himself a hockey nerd like Johnson, and as a fellow Vancouver-area native and friend of Johnson’s, they spend more than their fair share of time talking about, watching and playing the sport.

On the ice, they spend both offseasons and practices competing against one another. From experience, Christiansen can vouch for how hard it is to go up against Johnson when he has the puck on his stick.

“I think he protects the puck extremely well, and maybe you wouldn’t have thought that about him with his stature,” Christiansen said. “But it’s so hard to get the puck off him the way he protects it, his stick skills, keeping it away from you and stuff like that. He works a ton on it during the summer. We play a ton of small-area games, which is the best way to work on it.

“There’s times that 3x3 gets pretty heated. I think it’s more competitive than people think, and then there’s obviously times that you’re frustrated (with him). He’s really good at that side of the game for sure.”

And while Johnson has used that skill to his full advantage this year during his hot start, his confidence really started to bloom a season ago. While he was limited to 42 games and 16 points because of injuries and a stint in the AHL, Johnson looked at the numbers and realized he was one of the best in the league at zone entries.

“It’s funny, one of my coaches in the summer sent me the stats and it was like all the best players in the league and then me last year,” Johnson said. “It was basically like a funny thing for me, like, ‘I’ll be fine.’ But it was pretty funny seeing that. I was like a misfit toy last year, but now I think it makes sense.

“It’s something I have to keep doing and something that helps give me confidence. If you can do that stuff as a young player, you’ll be good probably.”

## [BlueJackets.com / Johnson scores twice to lift Blue Jackets past Jets](#)

By Darrin Bauming- December 8, 2024

WINNIPEG -- Kent Johnson scored two goals in a 2:27 span in the third period to lift the Columbus Blue Jackets to a 4-1 win against the Winnipeg Jets at Canada Life Centre on Sunday.

Johnson first gave the Blue Jackets a 2-1 lead at 7:15, knocking in a rebound with his backhand after Sean Monahan redirected James van Riemsdyk's initial shot.

"They're both just really good players and do some different things than me," Johnson said of his linemates. "[Monahan's] a really good center, like two-way, offense, defense, can make every play. And then [van Riemsdyk] can make every play, too, and he's so good around the net, bigger body, likes to be there. I think they're a really good fit with me."

Johnson made it 3-1 at 9:42 with a one-timer off a pass from van Riemsdyk on a 2-on-1 rush.

"It was a perfect pass, so pretty easy to one-time," Johnson said. "Definitely whenever you're the one-time guy on a 2-on-1 you want it slid over to you, so it was nice."

Dmitri Voronkov and Sean Kuraly also scored for the Blue Jackets (12-12-3), who ended a three-game losing streak. Elvis Merzlikins made 24 saves.

"We were really, really happy with the start," Columbus coach Dean Evason said. "We went in and challenged the group that we have to start the same way. We started extremely well the other night in Vancouver (a 5-2 loss on Friday). ... We certainly played the same type of game. We started properly. They were ready to go. Credit to our leadership group."

Kyle Connor scored for the Jets (20-9-0), who had won two in a row. Eric Comrie made 24 saves.

"Third period, made two mistakes. Turnover in our end, turnover in the neutral zone, they turned around and put them right back in our net," Winnipeg coach Scott Arniel said. "We're tied going into the third kind of like we've been the last few games, when (we) found ways to win hockey games. This one we made mistakes and it ended up in the back of our net."

Connor gave the Jets a 1-0 lead with a power-play goal at 11:51 of the second period, scoring with a wrist shot from the right face-off dot under the glove of Merzlikins.

"I think we had some offensive zone shifts where you're almost looking for the perfect play," Connor said. "By that time, they're able to collapse and take away the middle of the ice. I think being quicker to get pucks to the net and creating that chaos and those seam plays, everything else will come from that."

Voronkov tied it 1-1 with his own power-play goal at 13:53. Kirill Marchenko flubbed a one-timer in the left circle, but the puck went right to Voronkov, who jammed it in at the right post.

"We made [the Jets] continually go back and get some pucks," Evason said. "We didn't turn it over, we didn't feed into their transition game where they could get going and get their offense going. We got pucks out, we didn't let them have sustained pressure. Our guys were committed to doing the right things defensively, and obviously it translated into some offense here tonight as well."

After Johnson put Columbus in front, Kuraly shot into an empty net at 18:38 of the third for the 4-1 final.

"That's definitely a good measuring stick game. You know what kind of season those guys are having over there," van Riemsdyk said. "It was one of those games I felt like we stuck with it the whole 60. I

thought we played fairly consistent, no lapses in our game, and did the little things and took care of the details to win a game.”

Sunday was the conclusion of a stretch of five road games (2-3-0) in eight days for the Blue Jackets.

“I’m happy that we managed to handle it well, end on the right note to finish this road trip. It’s great,” Merzlikins said. “This win was really important. We’re tired from this long road trip, and [the Jets] had a back-to-back, so it was even. It was a good win. I’m really happy.”

NOTES: Winnipeg was coming off a 4-2 win at the Chicago Blackhawks on Saturday. ... Van Riemsdyk had two assists after being held without a point in his previous six games. ... Columbus forward Cole Sillinger sustained a lower-body injury in third period. There was no update postgame. ... Blue Jackets forward Kevin Labanc played in his 500th NHL game. ... The Jets had won each of the previous three games against the Blue Jackets, outscoring them by a combined score of 17-3.



## [BlueJackets.com / Winning Thoughts: Blue Jackets end road trip on a high note](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- December 9, 2024

After CBJ wins, we'll give three takeaways about what stood out or what we'll remember from the Blue Jackets victory.

BLUE JACKETS 4, JETS 1

1. There are certain wins that stand out a little bit throughout the season, and this was one of them.

Consider the following facts. Winnipeg became the first NHL team to 20 wins on the season Saturday at Chicago and had lost just twice in 11 home games coming into Sunday. The Jets have had the Blue Jackets' number in recent years, winning all three games over the past two seasons by a combined score of 17-3. And Columbus entered on a three-game losing skid while playing its fifth road game in eight days.

You could argue the stars aligned in a way that a Blue Jackets win seemed unlikely, but Columbus didn't think that way. The Blue Jackets came out of the gates strong, holding a 12-6 edge in shots on goal in the first period, and never really let the Jets get going on the way to the win.

"I think it shows a lot of character," defenseman Ivan Provorov said. "I think last game, we deserved better, and for us to not feel sorry for ourselves, stay focused and play the right way on the last game of the road trip, it shows a lot about this team. I think we've grown a lot since last year and I think we're trending in the right direction."

In the end, the Blue Jackets did a lot right in this game. The Jets are one of the hardest teams to play against in the league with a good mix of size, skill, grit and talent, and they often wear down opposing teams and play keepaway with the puck. But in this one, Columbus was solid defensively throughout, limiting the Jets to just 25 shots on goal, and the Blue Jackets handled game situations much better in this one as well.

While they gave up a power-play goal for the 13<sup>th</sup> straight game, the Blue Jackets killed the Jets' first three chances and ended up tying things up on the man advantage with Dmitri Voronkov's power-play goal 2:02 after Winnipeg's tally. Unlike in Vancouver, where Columbus went into the third period tied Friday before giving up three unanswered goals, this time the Blue Jackets got the tallies needed to win in the final frame.

"That's definitely a good measuring stick game," forward James van Riemsdyk said. "We know what kind of season those guys are having over there. It was one of those games where I felt like we stuck with it the whole 60. I thought we played fairly consistent, no lapses in our game, and did the little things, took care of the details to win a game. So that's obviously an encouraging thing."

2. The CBJ coaching staff struck some gold when it put the lines in a blender for Friday night's game.

Things had gotten a little stale up front as the Jackets lost games in Calgary and Edmonton midweek, so Dean Evason and his fellow coaches shook things up going into Friday in Vancouver. They got the start they wanted in a dominant first, but the Blue Jackets couldn't keep the momentum going for 60 minutes.

It was enough to run it back with the same combinations, though, and the Blue Jackets again were solid up and down the lineup Sunday. In particular, the top line of van Riemsdyk, Kent Johnson and center Sean Monahan got the job done, with Johnson tallying twice in the third period to turn a 1-1 tie into a 3-1 lead.

Through two games together, per Natural Stat Trick, the line has been on the ice for 19 scoring chances for at 5-on-5 and just six against.

“With KJ, we played together a little bit in training camp, and I could feel from our first game together there that we would have some good chemistry,” van Riemsdyk said. “We kind of thought on the same wavelength, I thought.

“And then Monny’s always someone over the course of my career that I thought I would love to get a chance to play with. He’s just a smart, reliable player, plays all facets of the game, and I feel like he’s a guy I always see when I have the puck so he’s always in the right spots.”

Johnson notched his second multigoal game of the season and ended a three-game scoreless streak, pushing himself back above a point-per-game pace (14 in 13 contests) on the season. He was consistently dangerous, something he attributed in part to his new partners.

“I thought we played good in Vancouver, just didn’t bury it, and that’ll happen,” Johnson said. “We got the bounces tonight. It was fun. They’re both just really good players and do some different things than me, I think. Monny’s a really good two-way center – offense, defense, can make every play. JVR can make every play, too, and is so good around the net. He’s a bigger body that likes to be there. I think they’re a really good fit with me.”

3. Ivan Provorov showed he’s tougher than the rest of us combined.

When he was tripped up early in the second period of Friday’s game in Vancouver and stood up with his thumb pointing at, shall we say, a unique angle, it appeared the CBJ defenseman would have to miss significant time.

But one has to remember Provorov has missed just three games in his nine-year NHL career, all because of COVID protocols, and is yet to be out for a game in CBJ colors. When tests showed there were no broken bones in his hand, it came down to whether he had the pain tolerance and feel to play through the injury, and Provorov did just that Sunday.

“As a competitor, I love the game,” Provorov said. “I love to compete. I love to do whatever I can to help the team win, play for my teammates. I guess today was another one of those games.”

Not only did Provorov play, he might have had one of his best games of the season. He skated 23:07, finished plus-3 and had an assist on Johnson’s second goal, moving the puck up the ice to van Riemsdyk and creating an odd-man rush with his breakout feed.

With the Blue Jackets looking to enhance a team-first culture under Evason, with players willing to lay it all on the line for each other, it’s clear the head coach appreciated Provorov’s dedication to the cause.

“Yeah, it’s awesome,” Evason said. “Nobody thought he was gonna play except him. He was ready to go, and he had no issues. It didn’t look like he had any problems handling it or shooting. He’s a tough guy.”

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Lose to Flames on Night Teams Honor Gaudreau's Legacy

**By Mark Scheig- December 4, 2024**

Tuesday night was sure to be an emotional night inside the Saddledome as the Columbus Blue Jackets and Calgary Flames met for the first time in Calgary since the passing of the Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau. The teams somehow had to play hockey after the pregame ceremony.

The Flames were able to get their revenge from their Black Friday loss to the Blue Jackets by pitching a 3-0 shutout. The big takeaway from this game was how the two teams came together to honor the legacy of the Gaudreau's.

### Game Recap

The teams gathered at center ice in an emotional pregame ceremony. The Gaudreau family including parents Guy and Jane along with sister Katie, wife Meredith and their two children Noa and Johnny Jr. partook in the ceremonial puck drop. The moment was emotional for everyone. The camera caught Blue Jackets' head coach Dean Evason fighting back tears.

The Flames like the Blue Jackets in their home opener met the moment. It was a job well done by everyone involved to honor the Gaudreau's and what they were about. Somehow the teams had to move forward and play a hockey game.

The Blue Jackets thought they drew first blood thanks to a Zach Werenski goal. However, the Flames used a coach's challenge for offside. Adam Fantilli was in the zone just before the puck. Turned out the Blue Jackets wouldn't find the back of the net again the rest of the night.

After a 0-0 first period, Rasmus Andersson was able to beat Elvis Merzlikins on the power play. Afterwards, Andersson pointed to the suite where the Gaudreau family was watching. It was a powerful moment showing what the night was about.

The Flames did a great job all night clogging the middle of the ice while not allowing the Blue Jackets to utilize their rush. This kept the game 1-0 into the third period. The Flames thought they made it 2-0 but were offside themselves.

Then on another power play, Kevin Bahl scored his first goal as a member of the Flames to make it 2-0 late. Yegor Sharangovich added an empty netter to get to the final score of 3-0.

Despite averaging the third highest shots per game, the Blue Jackets were held to just 16 shots on the night. They also allowed two power-play goals against. Their penalty kill has let them down of late. Merzlikins stopped 19 of 21 on the night.

The Blue Jackets will now get ready for Edmonton Thursday and Vancouver Friday in a tough back-to-back set. Meanwhile the Flames will host the St. Louis Blues on Thursday night as they continue their homestand.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Unable to Contain Oilers' Top Guns in 6-3 Loss

**By Mark Scheig- December 5, 2024**

The Columbus Blue Jackets were hoping to sweep the season series from the Edmonton Oilers on Thursday night. But it was the Oilers' big guns that stole the show.

On the night the Oilers held a pregame ceremony for Connor McDavid's 1000 points, he had four assists while Leon Draisaitl and Zach Hyman had two goals each pacing the Oilers to a 6-3 win. The Blue Jackets got into penalty trouble again.

### Game Recap

The first period started well for the Blue Jackets after coming off an emotional game Tuesday night in Calgary. Just 2:31 into the game, Kevin Labanc scored his second goal of the season. Mikael Pyyhtia's shot deflected off of Labanc and past Calvin Pickard. Zach Werenski recorded his 19th assist of the season.

The Oilers tied the game midway through the first. Hyman, who missed five games due to injury, scored his first of two on the night. McDavid made a vintage move to open the play up. From that point forward, it was all Oilers.

The Oilers scored four times in the second including three times in 4:31. Draisaitl gave them a 2-1 lead. The Blue Jackets tried to challenge for goalie interference saying Hyman was in the blue. The challenge failed putting the Blue Jackets shorthanded. Mattias Ekholm made them pay to make it 3-1.

Hyman then added his second of the night with a great shot to make it 4-1. Damon Severson was able to get one back to make it 4-2.

Dante Fabbro then clipped Kasper Kapanen with a high stick to give the Oilers a four-minute power play. While the Blue Jackets killed the double minor, they allowed Jeff Skinner to score with just 1:30 left in the second to make it 5-2.

In the third, the two teams traded goals with Cole Sillinger scoring his fourth of the season to cut it to 5-3. But then Draisaitl added his second goal of the night to get to the final score of 6-3.

Pickard stopped 19 of 22 to earn the win. The Blue Jackets started Daniil Tarasov for the first time in 19 days in a back-to-back situation. He made 31 saves on the night.

The Blue Jackets are right back at it Friday night in Vancouver. Meanwhile, the Oilers continue their long stretch of home games by hosting the St. Louis Blues on Saturday night.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Marchenko Becoming an Invaluable Asset

By William Espy- December 7, 2024

Kirill Marchenko has quickly become one of the Columbus Blue Jackets' most valuable assets, and his worth to the organization continues to grow as time goes on.

Before we dive into what Marchenko has become though, it's important to look back at what he used to be.

### A Unique Start

When Marchenko broke into the NHL during the 2022-23 season, his stat line created a buzz around him. Even when a player is touted as a "pure goal-scorer", there's often not a major discrepancy between their goal and assist numbers in a large sample size. It does happen occasionally, especially in smaller sample sizes.

There are a few examples of this type of imbalance so far this season, Brayden Point of the Tampa Bay Lightning and Cole Caulfield of the Montreal Canadiens. Point currently has a stat line of 16 goals and nine assists; it was 16 goals and five assists until a four-assist game against the San Jose Sharks.

Meanwhile, Caulfield's is slightly more balanced, but not by much, at 16 goals and seven assists. The most extreme example would be Chris Kreider of the New York Rangers, who has scored 10 times yet just recorded his first assist on Dec. 6. All three have played 26 games or less, and given their historical performances they'll find a balance at some point.

When a rookie breaks into the league in that fashion though, it makes waves in a different way. During Marchenko's rookie season, he scored 21 goals yet only recorded a total of four assists in 59 games. He quickly showed his goal-scoring talent, scoring his first NHL goal in his fourth game against the Los Angeles Kings in a 6-5 Blue Jackets win.

Historically, there have been some players with a similar start but the majority of them were in the early days of the league. Joe Malone, during the 1917-18 season, for example, had 44 goals and four assists in 20 games, however, the rules of the game were very different at that point, and as a result, it wasn't overly uncommon for assist numbers to be low. The most similar season to Marchenko's rookie season in recent memory would be Denis Gurianov with the Dallas Stars during 2019-20 when he had 20 goals and nine assists, but it still wasn't as mind-blowing as Marchenko's start.

### New-Found Parity

Things changed a bit in Marchenko's sophomore season. While he was still more prominent as a goal-scorer, he allowed his playmaking ability to shine through a bit. He reached the 20-goal plateau for the second time in a row, setting a career-high of 23. This time around though, he assisted on 19 goals as well.

So far in the 2024-25 season, Marchenko has continued down that same path. He's still leading the Blue Jackets in goals with 10, but he's second on the team in assists as well. Trailing only Zach Werenski, the 24-year-old forward currently has 15 helpers, narrowly putting him ahead of Sean Monahan and Cole Sillinger who have 14 each.

Despite Marchenko's increased playmaking, he's still shooting at the same rate. He's averaging 2.4 shots per game, which equals his performance from last season. During his rookie campaign, that number was slightly lower at 2.2 shots per game. His shooting percentage is almost identical to his rookie season

though, as he's currently at 15.9% compared to 16% in 2022-23. He's finding ways to improve his game, without sacrificing what's made him successful in the past.

The Blue Jackets also aren't giving up many goals, or chances for that matter, when Marchenko is on the ice. Per Natural Stat Trick, they've scored 28 times with him on the ice while only conceding 13 goals to the opposition. Marchenko has spent the majority of the season so far alongside Sean Monahan and Yegor Chinakhov. In the 12 games they played together, they scored eight goals and allowed only three. They also created 59 scoring chances, while only giving up 33. They drove offense considerably and kept their opponents away from the defensive zone.

Marchenko is playing more minutes than ever for the Blue Jackets and he's playing better than ever as well. The once pure goal-scorer has turned into a complete player who is on the verge of stardom in the NHL. As the team continues to improve, he'll quickly develop into a household name around the league if he can keep up his current development path. In the meantime, he'll have to settle for becoming one of the organization's most important, and complete, players.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Allow Five Unanswered Goals in Loss to Canucks

**By Mark Scheig- December 7, 2024**

The Columbus Blue Jackets were swept in Alberta and were looking to Shake It Off in British Columbia on Friday night. How did it end? It was not the love story the Blue Jackets were hoping for despite Taylor Swift playing that night at BC Place.

Pius Suter scored two goals including the game winner in the third period to help lift the Vancouver Canucks to a 5-2 win over the Blue Jackets. This loss will be a bitter pill to swallow for the Blue Jackets given the way they started the game.

### Game Recap

The first period was all Blue Jackets. It closely resembled how the first period went in Seattle. Mathieu Olivier opened the scoring off a great pass from Cole Sillinger. Then Damon Severson scored his second goal in two days to make 2-0.

The Canucks just got home from a long road trip and it showed. Shots in the first period were 17-2 for the Blue Jackets. Everyone knew the Canucks were going to push from the second period on. Eventually their push was too strong to be stopped.

Brock Boeser made it 2-1 just under four minutes into the second period. Before this goal, Blue Jackets defenseman Ivan Provorov was taken down by Elias Pettersson. Provorov had to leave the game due to an upper-body injury. Replay showed his thumb was not in a good place. With him out, the Blue Jackets had to play the rest of the game with only five defensemen.

While the Blue Jackets hung in for the most part in the second after Boeser's goal, the game seemed to turn late in the second period. With Zach Werenski seemingly in position to play a puck, goalie Elvis Merzlikins left his crease to play the puck. Eventually Kiefer Sherwood was able to score on this broken play. Although the Blue Jackets owned the shot clock, it was 2-2 after 40 minutes.

It only took the Canucks 2:17 to get the lead for good. Suter scored one that just got past Merzlikins and the goal line. Jake DeBrusk added a power-play goal midway through the third before Suter hit the empty net for his second of the game.

Kevin Lankinen made 15 saves in the first period to limit the damage. It could have been 4-0 easily if not for his play. He stopped 30/32 on the night. Merzlikins only saw 16 shots but made just 12 saves.

The Blue Jackets are now 1-3-0 on this long Western trip with one last game Sunday in Winnipeg to try and salvage a win. The Canucks will now get ready to host the Tampa Bay Lightning on Sunday afternoon.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Daemon Hunt Ready for Fresh Start After Trade

**By Mark Scheig- December 8, 2024**

The Columbus Blue Jackets and defenseman David Jiricek have finally gone their separate ways. Jiricek was dealt to the Minnesota Wild in exchange for defenseman Daemon Hunt and four draft picks including a 2025 top-5 protected first rounder.

The Blue Jackets are in position to improve for the future given the assets they now possess. Let's not forget about the player they got in the trade in Hunt though. He's motivated to prove he belongs in the NHL.

Hunt was assigned to the Cleveland Monsters after the trade was completed. He's appeared now in three games registering three assists in that time. He's someone familiar to head coach Dean Evason having gone through three of his training camps with the Wild.

Hunt spoke exclusively to the Hockey Writers on Saturday night after the Monsters' 4-3 shootout loss to the Syracuse Crunch. He opened up about the trade, reuniting with Denton Mateychuk and why there is a lot of excitement around the Monsters.

### In Conversation With Hunt

Hunt had never been traded before at any level of hockey prior to this deal with the Blue Jackets. Anyone who has been traded has a story about how they found out the news. For Hunt, he admitted he first thought he was being called up to the Wild.

"We were in Charlotte and I was about to go on the ice for warmups," Hunt said. "I was about two minutes from stepping on the ice and our GM Matt Hendricks (Iowa Wild) grabbed me aside and said Huntsy, you can't go out. My initial thought was I was getting called up. But then he sat me aside and said I got traded. It was out of nowhere. A lot of emotions, shocked. But yeah, it's a funny story."

Hunt didn't see the trade coming at all. He had appeared in 13 NHL games for the Wild including once this season. He says that he is grateful for what the Wild did for him despite not reaching the NHL full-time as of yet.

"I'm really thankful for what Minnesota did for me. They drafted me. I climbed the ranks there. It was out of nowhere, actually."

Hunt now gets to look forward to getting to the NHL through the Blue Jackets. Monsters head coach Trent Vogelhuber used one word to describe what he's seen early from Hunt in his three games with the team.

"I think I heard Dean say that he's just steady, and I think that's a good word for him," Vogelhuber said of Hunt. "Makes a hard outlet pass, competes hard. He's only 22 but he's pretty steady 200 feet all the way up and down the ice for a 22-year old. He's still getting used to systems in play and what our expectations are but through three games, I've been pleased."

Hunt says he plays a heavy and hard game, something that would sit well with head coach Dean Evason. Here's his self assessment of what his game is.

"I'm a puck moving defenseman. I like getting the puck into the forward's hands. And from there, getting into the rush being part of that fourth-man attack. But I think what makes my game so strong is my defensive play. I'm just hard in the defensive zone, making it hard on their top forwards. From there, I



think my offense has gone up. I'm still working on that but I think that strong D-zone is the fundamental to my game."

#### Fresh Start in Cleveland

Hunt saw the situation with the Wild. There was a lot of competition for just a couple of spots. While he was certainly in the mix when there was an opening, he was still working on his consistency to climb the ranks.

Hunt comes to the Blue Jackets' organization and see this as a fresh start.

"There wasn't a lot of spots in Minnesota. I feel like I can play in the NHL. I'm capable of it. There's no hard feelings there at all. They did so much for me and I'm grateful for them. I think it's just a fresh start here. I'm still young and still on my entry level."

The Monsters have welcomed Hunt with open arms. That was one of the first impressions that caught his attention after the trade was completed.

"So far, it's been great here," Hunt said. "Everyone's been amazing. I've only been here for a week now. It already feels like we're family actually. The guys have been so good and the coaching staff. This is my first-ever experience of being traded. It's tough mentally and getting used to new systems, team, location. It's not easy. I thought it's been a pretty good process so far."

#### Mateychuk Reunion

One of the things the Jiricek trade provided was an opportunity for Hunt to reunite with his junior teammate Denton Mateychuk. As you might expect, there was excitement.

"As soon as I heard I got traded to Columbus, I thought about Dents," Hunt said. "So we're reunited again I guess you could say. I was excited. I know Cole Clayton also. I work out with them and I know Zach Sawchenko too. There are some connections."

Mateychuk's rapid rise has caught the attention of a lot of people around the hockey world. He's one of the AHL's leading scorers as a rookie defenseman. We asked Hunt to name one thing about Mateychuk that people should know but maybe don't know yet.

"I think one thing for Dents is his vision. I don't think people understand how good he is seeing the ice. If he's in trouble, he always finds a way to get the puck into the forward's hands or he spins off a check. He sees the ice so well and I don't think he gets enough recognition for that."

#### Monsters' Excitement for Season

It's only been a week but Hunt can already see what has made this Monsters' team stand out in the early going. Here's his assessment on the team and what gives him reason to be excited.

"First thing that comes to my mind is speed and skill. We're a fast team. We're skilled," Hunt said. "When we play like we can, not many teams can compete with us. These guys are fast and want to play a fast-paced game. From there, I think it's just about the compete and the willingness to do that. If we compete, then our speed and skill will take over."

The Monsters were able to get a point on Saturday night before ultimately falling in a six-round shootout to the Syracuse Crunch by a 4-3 score. Vogelhuber said his team wasn't ready for the push the Crunch brought in the third period. Luca Del Bel Belluz scored two more goals including the game-tying goal in the third. He sits tied on top of the AHL scoring race after a four-goal weekend.

As for Hunt, he'll continue to adjust to his new surroundings while proving he deserves to be in the NHL. He now joins the list of potential callups when the Blue Jackets need reinforcements. His presence could

allow Mateychuk uninterrupted development time without a lot of back and forth. Low-key that's been one of the early storylines for the Monsters in 2024-25. Despite injuries in the NHL, the Monsters have been able to stay in tact for the most part. That has helped them to their good start this season.

We will hear from Hunt at some point in the NHL. The only question now is how soon?

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Power Past Jets Behind Kent Johnson's Two Goals

**By Mark Scheig- December 9, 2024**

After going 0 for Canada in their last three outings, the Columbus Blue Jackets were looking to end their long road trip with a much-needed win. Thanks to multiple strong performances including Ivan Provorov playing hurt, they did just that.

Kent Johnson scored twice in the third period while Elvis Merzlikins made 24 saves to power the Blue Jackets to a convincing 4-1 win over the Winnipeg Jets. The Jets lost for just the third time at Canada Life Centre this season.

### Game Recap

Both the Blue Jackets and Jets came into Sunday's game on the heels of a grueling schedule. The Blue Jackets played their third game in four nights while the Jets played their fifth game in eight days.

Despite no scoring, the Blue Jackets got the upper hand in the first period on the shot clock. They held a 12-6 edge in shots. They did that even while having to kill off two Jets' power plays. That seemed to give them some momentum going into the second period.

However, penalty trouble caught up to the Blue Jackets. It eventually allowed the Jets to open the scoring. Sniper Kyle Connor connected on his 15th goal of the season. With time in the right circle, he unleashed a wicked shot that gave Merzlikins trouble.

To the Blue Jackets credit, their game seemed to elevate after the Connor goal. Just over two minutes later on their own power play, Dmitri Voronkov scored what turned out to be a massive goal to make it 1-1.

The big story of the second was the status of Cole Sillinger. He blocked two mshots from Colin Miller. He was hobbled but tried to give it a go. He left the game and was unable to finish. The Blue Jackets needed someone to step up to salvage the road trip. Johnson did in a big way.

Johnson scored twice in the span of 2:27 in the third to make the score 3-1. His first goal was a greasy goal in front of Eric Comrie. His second goal was a patented blast from the right circle. He now has 14 points in 13 games this season.

The Jets tried to push late with Comrie pulled. The Blue Jackets hung in there and finally got an empty-net goal from Sean Kuraly to seal the game. Merzlikins had a chance at the empty net but couldn't get anything on the puck. Comrie finished with 24 saves on the night.

The Blue Jackets come back to Columbus with a .500 record and some home dates on the schedule. They host John Tortorella and the Flyers Tuesday. The Jets continue their homestand with a game Tuesday night against the Boston Bruins.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Three Things: Calgary Honors Johnny Gaudreau, Point Streak Ends, Bad PK Trend

**By Will Chase- December 4, 2024**

The point streak ends.

Rasmus Andersson and Kevin Bahl each scored power-play goals as the Calgary Flames shut out the Columbus Blue Jackets 3-0 on Tuesday night at Scotiabank Saddledome.

Yegor Chinakhov missed his third consecutive game with an upper-body injury.

Calgary Honors Johnny Gaudreau

Brothers Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau were honored Tuesday night before puck drop between the Blue Jackets and Calgary Flames.

Johnny Gaudreau spent nine years with the Flames before signing with the Blue Jackets in the summer of 2022.

Sean Monahan played with the Calgary Flames from 2013-22 and played alongside Johnny Gaudreau in 569 games. Monahan scored 462 points (212 goals, 250 assists) in 656 games as a member of the Flames.

Johnny Gaudreau was named the First Star of the Game.

Point Streak Ends

Following Sunday's 6-3 win over the Chicago Blackhawks in which Columbus scored a goal in all three periods, the Blue Jackets tied a franchise record with goals in 16 consecutive regulation periods.

That streak ended on Tuesday.

Werenski's first-period goal was nullified due to Calgary's successful offside challenge. The Jackets could never get on their game, as they were limited to 16 shots on goal — their lowest total this season — and shut down by Dan Vladar. It's Vladar's second shutout this season.

Columbus had three second-period shots on goal and went over 20 minutes without a shot on goal.

Several offensive streaks were snapped on Tuesday.

With the regulation loss, the Blue Jackets' six-game point streak is over. It's the first time this season Columbus has been shutout.

Bad PK Trend

The Flames scored twice on the power play. That means it's 10 consecutive games the Blue Jackets penalty kill has allowed an opposition power-play goal, dating back to Nov. 12 at the Seattle Kraken. Since then, Columbus is 32 of 32 teams on the kill (62.2%).

Andersson broke the shutout at 10:14 of the second period for his sixth goal of the season. Mikael Backlund (7) and Nazem Kadri (8) had the assists. Bahl scored his first goal at 17:53 of the third period with MacKenzie Weegar (11) and Jonathan Huberdeau (7) adding the assists.

Yegor Sharangovich's sixth of the year came via the empty net. Mikael Backlund (8) and Blake Coleman (6) picked up the assists.

Elvis Merzlikins made 19 saves on 21 shots.

Overall this season, Columbus' penalty kill ranks 28th (72.7%) in the league.

Looking For A New Streak

Columbus plays the Edmonton Oilers on Thursday, Dec. 5 at 9:00 p.m. ET from Rogers Arena.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Earned, Not Given: Zach Werenski Named To Team USA For February's 4 Nations Face-Off Tournament

**By Ed Francis-December 4, 2024**

He earned it.

Zach Werenski was named Wednesday to Team USA's roster for the 4 Nations Face-Off, a highly-anticipated international tournament between NHL players from the United States, Canada, Finland, and Sweden.

Werenski has long been in the upper echelon of NHL defensemen but is having a truly outstanding 2024-25 season. He has eight goals and 18 assists for 26 points through his first 24 games. The eight goals is tied for the most in the league by a defenseman.

He's on pace for 89 points, which would break the team record of 87 set by Artemi Panarin in the 2018-19 season.

Werenski is also the league leader in ice time averaging 26:06 per game – nearly 30 seconds ahead of any other player. He's been the catalyst for an upstart Blue Jackets team that, to this point, has surpassed expectations with a record of 11-10-3 entering Thursday's game in Edmonton.

Last week, Werenski told NHL.com's Nick Cotsonika that he felt he'd done all he could to earn a selection from Team USA GM Bill Guerin, a decorated American hockey legend who also serves as GM of the Minnesota Wild.

“They have really good players to choose from,” Werenski said. “I don’t know how they’re going to build it. But if I make it, I’ll be one of the happiest people, and if I don’t, I’ll be able to sleep at night just knowing I gave everything I had and did everything I could.”

Team USA will play Finland on Thursday, Feb. 13 at 8 p.m. ET, then face Canada two days later on Saturday, Feb. 15. That game will also feature an 8 p.m. ET puck drop and both games will take place at the Bell Centre in Montreal, Quebec.



The third and final game of the round-robin tournament for Team USA shifts to TD Garden in Boston, where the Americans will face Sweden on Monday, Feb. 17 – also at 8 p.m. ET.

The championship game will be Thursday, Feb. 20 between the two teams with the best record during round-robin play.

Rules for the tournament will be the same as NHL rules, with a twist on how points are handed out: a regulation win will be worth three (3) points; two (2) points will be given for an overtime or shootout win, and one (1) point will be given to the loser of an overtime game or shootout loss. Regulation losses will be worth zero (0) points.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Blue Jackets Score First, But Rough Second Period Sequence Flips Game In 6-3 Loss To Oilers

By Ed Francis- December 6, 2024

	1	2	3	F
	1	1	1	3
	1	4	1	6

CBJ GOALS:  
Labanc (P1, 2:31)  
Severson (P2, 10:02)  
Sillinger (P3, 6:10)

Two nights after their first shutout of the season, the Columbus Blue Jackets were able to find the back of the net every period Thursday night.

It just happened to be about half as much as the Edmonton Oilers.

Leon Draisaitl scored twice, including one as part of a four-goal second period for the Oilers, as the Blue Jackets were doubled up by a final of 6-3 on Thursday night.

Two of those four goals in the second from Edmonton came on a game-shifting series of events. After Draisaitl's first goal of the game to give the Oilers their first lead of the night, Columbus head coach Dean Evason would challenge for goaltender interference.

The challenge appeared to be questionable as best from the television replays, particularly given the circumstances: like it or not, it would need to a fairly egregious play for the officials to take a Draisaitl goal away at home against Columbus. Add to that Columbus' struggling penalty kill, and it was anxious moments for the Blue Jackets bench and fans as they awaited a decision.

The goal stood.

"We obviously had a different opinion on what happened there, and we made the decision to challenge," said forward Cole Sillinger. "Unfortunately, it didn't go our way. But that's part of the game."

The Oilers would connect on the power to play to double their lead, then add another goal less than three minutes later to go up 4-1.

Kevin Labanc, Damon Severson, and Cole Sillinger each scored for the Blue Jackets in the losing effort.

Daniil Tarasov, making his first start in nearly three weeks, allowed six goals on a total of 37 shots from the Oilers. The Blue Jackets were outshot 37-22, their second-largest margin of shots on goal in a game this season.

Here's how it all went down from the NHL's northernmost city:

#### 1st Period:

(2:31 — CBJ Goal): Columbus has not had a hard time scoring goals, but the weird bounces and deflections aren't really something that's gone their way this season... until here. Labanc's shot pings and pongs off the right spots and finds the back of the net for an early, 1-0 Columbus lead. It would be their only of the game. The goal is Labanc's second of the season, with the assists come from Mikael Pyyhtia — his first of the season — and Zach Werenski, his team-leading 19th (and team-leading 27th point) of the season.

(9:46 — EDM Goal): Sean Kuraly wins a faceoff to Tarasov's right against Connor McDavid — but the Blue Jackets aren't able to clear the puck to capitalize off Kuraly's win. Instead, less than ten seconds later, Zach Hyman connects to tie the game at 1-1 in his first game back since missing two weeks with an injury.

#### 2nd Period

(2:22, 4:04, 6:53— EDM Goals): This went from a 1-1 game to a 4-1 game in a matter of 4:31 in the second period. Edmonton takes a 2-1 lead on Draisaitl's first of two on the evening, then the failed Columbus challenge put the Oilers on the power play. Mattias Ekholm scored there to make it a 3-1 Edmonton lead, and less than three minutes after that, Hyman adds to the Oiler fun, scoring his second of the night to make it 4-1 in favor of the Oilers.

(10:02 — CBJ Goal): More puck-luck for the Blue Jackets, this time with Severson the beneficiary. This isn't one to write home about: Sevo gets an average shot towards the net, it takes an odd bounce that Edmonton goalie Calvin Pickard has some trouble with, and it ends up in the back of the net to make it a 4-2 game just two seconds past the mid-point of the game.

(18:30 — EDM Goal): After killing a four-minute, double minor from Dante Fabbro, the momentum looked to be turning Columbus' way to set up a competitive third period — until Jeff Skinner made it a 5-2 game with just 90 seconds left before the second intermission. The Oilers made a good play to keep it in the zone and followed that up with some good work on the boards behind the net, with Skinner ending up with the puck unchallenged right in front of Tarasov.

#### 3rd Period

(6:10 — CBJ Goal): Jordan Harris' first point as a Blue Jacket is a primary assist and starts with a hustle keep-in. He finds Sillinger just outside the high slot and he gets a shot off through traffic to cut into the lead and make it a 5-3 game in favor of the Oilers. It won't show up in the box score, but Justin Danforth and Mathieu Olivier did a great job of getting in Pickard's line of sight. It's probably a routine save for the Edmonton goalie without their efforts.

(13:37 — EDM Goal): It would take just nine seconds for Edmonton to strike on a late power play and make it a 6-3 game. It was their second power play tally of the game and Draisaitl's second goal of the game, putting the game out of reach for Columbus.



CBJ	GAME STATS	EDM
22	SHOTS	37
37%	FACEOFFS	63%
0/2	POWER PLAY	2/5
3/5	PENALTY KILL	2/2
15	HITS	12
11	GIVEAWAYS	10
4	TAKEAWAYS	2
17	BLOCKED SHOTS	16
ALL SITUATIONS ADVANCED STATS		
1.96	EXPECTED GOALS	4.11
49	SHOT ATTEMPTS	65
17	SCORING CHANCES	34
6	HIGH-DANGER CHANCES	18
DATA VIA: NHL.COM & NATURALSTATTRICK.COM		

Stat Chat:

- The Blue Jackets penalty kill went 3-for-5 in the game. It was the 11th straight game (a new franchise record) they allowed a power play goal, and the third consecutive game in which they allowed two (or more) power play strikes. That's a kill rate of just 62%.
- Meanwhile, on the Blue Jackets side of things, this marked the fourth consecutive game where they had two power plays or less. Can't score power play goals if you don't get power play opportunities.
- Werenski's 19th assist and 27th point of the season allowed him to keep the pace for an 89-point season. That would edge past Artemi Panarin's 2018-19 franchise record of 87 points.

Up Next:

Game four of the five-game road trip is a quick turn-around: the Blue Jackets travel to Vancouver for a Friday night battle against the Canucks. Puck drops from Rogers Arena at 10:00 p.m., Columbus time.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Waiver Wire Steal? Dante Fabbro Has Proven To Be A Real Lift In Columbus

By Will Chase- December 6, 2024

How about Dante Fabbro?

How great is it for the Columbus Blue Jackets to be the organization that might have unlocked the skill of a potentially hidden gem who was discarded on waivers?

Since being acquired off waivers by the Nashville Predators in November, Fabbro has six points (three goals, three assists) and is a +11 in 11 games for the Blue Jackets. A familiar pairing alongside Zach Werenski, below is how that defensive pairing has performed.

Werenski-Fabbro at 5v5 (per NaturalStatTrick.com)				
Corsi For/Against	Shots For/Against	Scoring Chances For/Against	High Danger Chances For/Against	Goals For/Against
191/177	90/73	84/79	37/43	13-5

On Wednesday, Werenski was announced as a starter for Team U.S.A. in February's 4-Nations Face-Off tournament. The nine-year pro has been on another level this season and had a career-high eight-game point streak (five goals, 11 assists) that was snapped Tuesday in Calgary.

And as good as he's been, maybe playing alongside Fabbro has provided even more of a lift for Werenski.

Per Blue Jackets Insider Jeff Svoboda, Werenski is the first Blue Jackets defenseman and third player overall to record 16 points in an eight-game span.

The Athletic's Dom Luszczyszyn wrote about the Blue Jackets' dazzling play under new head coach Dean Evason and talked about Fabbro's impact in Columbus since being acquired.

Sometimes a fresh start is what someone needs.

Werenski's average Game Score on November 11 was 1.38. Since then it's 2.52 and that might not be a coincidence either. That's the day the Blue Jackets picked up Dante Fabbro off waivers and immediately placed him on the top pair. Fabbro had a decent resume of success in Nashville next to Roman Josi, as a steady presence that allowed Josi to rove the ice at will. He's brought that same energy to Columbus and it's helped unlock Werenski, pushing his game to a new level. In 161 minutes together, the Blue Jackets have outscored teams 12-4 with the top pair on the ice while earning a 51 percent xG rate. Fabbro has six points since becoming a member of the Blue Jackets and is averaging 22:30 per night. Nashville putting Fabbro on waivers was a baffling decision at the time and looks even worse now.

Fabbro and the Blue Jackets keep going on their road trip with the next stop on Friday night against the Vancouver Canucks.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Three Things: Blending The Lines, Provorov Leaves Game, Another One Gets Away

**By Will Chase- December 7, 2024**

The road troubles continue.

Pius Suter scored two goals and the Vancouver Canucks came back to beat the Columbus Blue Jackets 5-2 on Friday night at Rogers Arena.

Yegor Chinakhov missed his fifth consecutive game due to an upper-body injury.

Kevin Lankinen stopped 30 shots on 32 attempts. Elvis Merzlikins made 12 saves on 16 attempts.

### Blending The Lines

It's everybody's favorite hockey phrase: The lineup blender.

After consecutive losses to the Calgary Flames and Edmonton Oilers, Friday was a perfect time to juggle the lines and throw them in the blender.

It might have worked.

Columbus had about as good a first period as you can hope for with goals by Mathieu Oliver (8) at 7:10 and Damon Severson (6) at 12:18.

Cole Sillinger (14), Zach Aston-Reese (5), Ivan Provorov (7), and Kirill Marchenko (15) assisted on the goals.

Columbus outshot the Canucks 17-2 in the first period.

### Provorov Leaves Game

Provorov left early in the second period following a trip by Elias Pettersson and an awkward collision into the boards. His thumb did not look well.

Provorov did not return to the game, forcing the Blue Jackets to play with five defensemen.

The rest of the period featured post-whistle scrums and Vancouver scored twice in the second to tie things 2-2. Brock Boeser (7) scored at 3:52 and Kiefer Sherwood (7) tied the game at 19:00 following a failed clearing attempt by Merzlikins.

Quinn Hughes (24), Vincent Desharnais (2), and Teddy Blueger (7) assisted.

We'll see how long Provorov is out of the lineup, but could Denton Mateychuk be a potential call-up?

In 22 games, Mateychuk has 22 points (seven goals, 15 assists).

### Another One Gets Away

The game tied 2-2 going into the third period, things further unraveled for Columbus.

Suter (10) scored the first of his two third-period goals to make it 3-2 at 2:17 and give the Canucks its first lead of the night. Jake DeBrusk (12) scored on the power play to extend the 4-2 lead at 10:22 and Suter (11) scored the empty net goal at 18:55 to complete the 5-2 win.

The Blue Jackets have allowed an opposition power-play goal for a franchise-record 12th straight game. They allowed two goals to the Edmonton Oilers power play in Thursday's 6-3 loss to set the franchise mark at 11 consecutive games.

Connor Garland (15), Hughes (25), Boeser (9), and Pettersson (17) assisted on the third-period goals.



It's the Jackets' third-straight loss following a six-game point streak as they fall to 1-3-0 on the road trip and 3-9-2 away from Nationwide Arena this season. The Columbus penalty kill is 29th in the league (71.4%). From the beginning of the season through Nov. 11, the Blue Jackets kill ranked 12th (82.5%) in the league. Since Nov. 12, they are last in the league (61.4%).

#### Jets Grounded

The Blue Jackets conclude their five-game road trip at the Winnipeg Jets on Sunday, Dec. 8 from Canada Life Centre. Puck drop is at 6:00 p.m. ET.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Blue Jackets Start Hot, Then Turn Ice-Cold In 5-2 Loss To Canucks For Third Straight Defeat

By Ed Francis- December 7, 2024

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	2	0	0	2
	0	2	3	5

CBJ GOALS:  
Olivier (P1, 7:10)  
Severson (P1, 12:18)

Mathieu Olivier and Damon Severson scored in a first period dominated by the Columbus Blue Jackets, but the Vancouver Canucks scored five unanswered goals over the last two periods to pick up the 5-2 win Friday night.

It was Columbus' third straight loss as part of a five-game road trip that will conclude Sunday in Winnipeg.

Olivier and Severson's goals, just over five minutes apart in the middle of the opening frame, gave the Blue Jackets a 2-0 lead. Columbus had 17 of the 19 total shots on goal for the period.

According to head coach Dean Evason, it was "by far the best period of the year."

"It was awesome," added Evason.

But Vancouver would answer early and late in the second period, tying the game at 2-2 before adding three third-period goals.

"You have a start like that and you have the momentum going your way, you have to almost play a boring hockey game at that point," said Evason. "We didn't, and obviously they (Vancouver) gained momentum."

Columbus had to play a majority of the game with just five defenseman following an injury to Ivan Provorov early in the second after being tripped by Elias Pettersson. The team called it an upper-body injury, though broadcast cameras showed what appear to be a clear injury to his left thumb. He did not return after the trip, which came just 1:16 into the middle period.

Evason did not have an update after the game on Provorov.

In net, Elvis Merzlikins made 12 saves on 16 shots. Vancouver's 17th shot (and fifth goal) was an empty-netter. It was the first time this season that the Blue Jackets held an opponent to less than 20 shots on goal in a game.

Here's the details of how it all went down in British Columbia:

#### 1st Period:

(7:10 — CBJ Goal): The Blue Jackets strike first on Olivier's goal that comes via a remarkable pass from Cole Sillinger. Great anticipation from Sillinger, who has the pass off his stick before he even looks towards Olivier waiting in front of the net. Jody Shelley called it an "elite play" on the FanDuel Sports Network broadcast, and that's about as good of a word to use as any. The goal was number eight on the season for Olivier; Sillinger gets the primary assist, Zach Aston-Reese the secondary.

(12:18 — CBJ Goal): Four-on-four hockey opens the ice up a little bit and that's exactly the catalyst behind this goal from Severson, his second in as many nights. Ivan Provorov finds Severson streaking down the ice and takes advantage of the open ice. Severson takes the puck near the blue line and a few strides later rips a 94mph shot past the stick side of Canucks goalie Kevin Lankinen. Provorov gets the primary assist but Kirill Marchenko's gets an assist too, his 15th of the season.

#### 2nd Period

(1:16 — Provorov Injury): Vancouver's Pettersson goes off for a trip on Ivan Provorov, but in the trip, Provorov lands awkwardly on his left hand and leaves the ice almost immediately. The broadcast cameras showed Provorov's thumb looking less than pleasant, and just a few minutes later viewers were shown head trainer Mike Vogt speaking into the ear of coach Dean Evason. The words were hidden, but Evason's disappointed face was not. Provorov did not return.

(3:52 — VAN Goal): Brock Boeser gets one of the two Canucks' goals of the period early on in the second. Vancouver wins a faceoff in the Columbus zone and goes D-to-D on the first pass. The second defenseman there is Quinn Hughes, who takes the puck behind the net and then finds Boeser waiting near where the original face-off was. He beats Merzlikins to make it a 2-1 game.

(19:00 — VAN Goal): Merzlikins takes a huge risk by playing the puck was outside of the crease, and it doesn't work out. Before he can get back in the crease, Vancouver's Teddy Blueger gets the puck and passes to Columbus-born Kiefer Sherwood, who picks up one of the easier of his now seven goals on the season.

#### 3rd Period

(2:17 — VAN Goal): Vancouver takes their first lead of the night on Pius Suter's 10th goal of the year. He gets a shot off from the low slot and Merzlikins gets a good piece of it, but not enough to stop it from slowly trickling into the back of the net to make it 3-2 Canucks.

(10:22 — VAN Goal): The Canucks get a fourth straight goal just over halfway through the third period, making it a 4-2 game. This time it's Jake DeBrusk on the power play, the 12th straight game in which the Blue Jackets have allowed a goal on the penalty kill. Hughes and Boeser get the assists, the second point of the night for both.

(18:55 — VAN Goal): Suter gets his second of the night, an empty-net goal with just over a minute left, to make it 5-2 Canucks.

CBJ	GAME STATS	VAN
32	SHOTS	17
41%	FACEOFFS	59%
0/5	POWER PLAY	1/2
1/2	PENALTY KILL	5/5
18	HITS	28
15	GIVEAWAYS	11
4	TAKEAWAYS	5
11	BLOCKED SHOTS	18
ALL SITUATIONS ADVANCED STATS		
2.66	EXPECTED GOALS	2.46
76	SHOT ATTEMPTS	45
36	SCORING CHANCES	20
11	HIGH-DANGER CHANCES	11
DATA VIA: NHL.COM & NATURALSTATTRICK.COM		

Stat Chat:





- Columbus outshot Vancouver by a 17-2 margin in the first period, their largest shot-margin of the season. The Blue Jackets also generated 31 of the 41 shot attempts, 12 of the 13 scoring chances, and had four of the five high-danger chances in the opening 20 minutes.
- Columbus ended the game with 76 shot attempts, compared to Vancouver's 45. But the Canucks were able to get more high-quality looks off, as evident by the 11-11 tie in high-danger chances for the game.
- Kent Johnson was on the ice for 21:57, a season-high and also the second-most of his NHL career. KJ nearly scored in the opening minutes of the game, but his shot on a bouncing puck went high of the open net.

Up Next:

One more on the road to conclude the five-game trip: the Blue Jackets are in Winnipeg for a 6:00 p.m. puck-drop Sunday against the Jets. Then it's back home for a Tuesday night game against the John Tortorella's Philadelphia Flyers.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Johnson Scores Twice, Merzlikins Sharp In Net As Blue Jackets Get 4-1 Win Over Jets In Winnipeg

By Ed Francis- December 9, 2024

	1	2	3	F
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	0	1	0	1

CBJ GOALS:  
Voronkov (P2, 13:53)  
Johnson (P3, 7:15)  
Johnson (2) (P3, 9:42)  
Kuraly (EN) (P3, 18:38)

Kent Johnson scored two third-period goals for the third multi-goal game of his career, James van Riemsdyk had a pair of assists, and Elvis Merzlikins stopped 24 of 25 shots by the Winnipeg Jets to lead the Columbus Blue Jackets to a 4-1 win Sunday night.

Merzlikins lone goal allowed came on the Jets fourth power play of the night, giving Winnipeg a 1-0 in the second period. It was the 13th consecutive game in which the Blue Jackets allowed a power play goal.

But they had an answer this time — Dmitri Voronkov scored on a power play just 2:02 later to make it a 1-1 game.

Johnson scored at the 7:15 mark of the third period to give the Blue Jackets their first lead of the game. Just 2:27 later, Johnson would get another goal — his 8th of the season — to expand the Columbus lead.

van Riemsdyk assisted on both goals, his third and fourth assists of the season in a new-found role playing alongside Johnson and Sean Monahan.

"We really like that line. It's nice to have some balance," said head coach Dean Evason. "It's nice to have some depth in our forward lines."

Ivan Provorov had the secondary assist on Johnson's second goal and was a +3 plus/minus in 23:07 of ice time. Provorov was a game-time decision after leaving the game Friday night with a thumb injury.

"Nobody thought he was going to play," said Evason. "Except him."

The injury bug may have bit the Blue Jackets again Sunday: Cole Sillinger left the game in the third period after blocking a shot and would not return. The team is calling it a lower-body injury.

Columbus concludes their five-game road trip with a 2-3-0 record, winning the first and last game of the trip. For the Jets, the loss was their third home defeat of the season.

Here are the details from Manitoba:

1st Period:

(4:41 — Fisticuffs): It was a relatively quiet opening period, but James van Riemsdyk and Neal Pionk share pleasantries less than five minutes into the game near the end of a Blue Jackets power play. Both got a roughing penalty, but van Riemsdyk got an extra two for tripping to make it a brief 4-on-4 before a Jets powerplay that they would not connect on.

2nd Period

(11:51 — WPG Goal): On their fourth power play of the night, the Jets finally connect for the first goal of the game. Kyle Connor gets his 15th of the season late in the man-advantage; no one near him on the right face-off dot and he gets a wrister off that goes right by the glove of Merzlikins.

(13:53 — CBJ Goal): The Blue Jackets answer right back on a power play strike of their own. Ivan Provorov takes a stick to the fact from Brad Lambert to give Columbus a 5-on-4. Werenski gets a pass off to Marchenko and he gets a good look from the left dot. Winnipeg goalie Eric Comrie makes the initial save but lets it trickle behind him and Voronkov is right there to put it away and make it a 1-1 game.

3rd Period

(7:15 — CBJ Goal): Johnson gets his first (but not last) goal of the game by being in the right place at the right time. van Riemsdyk throws the puck at net, seeing that both Sean Monahan and Johnson are near the net with plenty of traffic in front of Comrie. KJ puts it away on a backhand to give the Blue Jackets a 2-1 lead.

(9:42 — CBJ Goal): van Riemsdyk and Johnson take advantage of a Winnipeg turnover and quickly create a 2-on-1. The veteran finds the youngster for a one-timer and he beats Comrie's stick-side to make it a 3-1 Columbus lead.

(18:38 — CBJ Goal): Kuraly adds the empty-netter to give Columbus a 4-1 win — their first time scoring four goals this season.

CBJ	GAME STATS	WPG
28	SHOTS	25
34%	FACEOFFS	66%
1/2	POWER PLAY	1/4

CBJ	GAME STATS	WPG
3/4	PENALTY KILL	1/2
25	HITS	11
17	GIVEAWAYS	17
5	TAKEAWAYS	7
24	BLOCKED SHOTS	17
ALL SITUATIONS ADVANCED STATS		
2.89	EXPECTED GOALS	2.69
59	SHOT ATTEMPTS	68
25	SCORING CHANCES	25
6	HIGH-DANGER CHANCES	11
DATA VIA: NHL.COM & NATURALSTATTRICK.COM		

Stat Chat:

- The Blue Jackets only won 34% of the faceoffs, their lowest percentage of the season.
- The 4-1 final gives the Blue Jackets their first game this season in which they scored exactly four goals. An oddity, consider they average four goals a game.

Up Next:

After more than a week on the road, the Blue Jackets return to Nationwide Arena for a three-game homestand that kicks off Tuesday when they welcome the Philadelphia Flyers to town. Puck drops at 7:00 p.m.

## The Athletic / Canada 4 Nations roster: What we're hearing about who made the cut and why

By Chris Johnston and Pierre LeBrun- December 4, 2024

Team Canada's management team was basically given a clean slate to build a roster for the 4 Nations Face-Off.

With so much time having passed since the 2016 World Cup, hockey's last best-on-best event, there were bound to be only a handful of holdovers for a country that has emerged victorious in four of the past five men's tournaments featuring top players.

That gave general manager Don Sweeney plenty of leeway in finalizing a roster of 13 forwards, seven defensemen and three goaltenders for the Feb. 12 to 20 event. Working alongside a management team that featured 2026 Olympic GM Doug Armstrong, plus Jim Nill, Julien BriseBois, Kyle Dubas and Scott Salmond, Sweeney finalized the picks over the weekend.

On Wednesday, they will formally be announced across the United States and Canada on TNT and Sportsnet at 6:30 p.m. ET.

Narrowing down the list proved to be a comprehensive task that saw the management staff heavily scout the first eight weeks of the 2024-25 NHL regular season. The decision-makers also held regular status calls and met face-to-face over a couple of days in Toronto last month. The goal was to identify the group best suited to come together for a compressed event, rather than simply taking all the top scorers. Championship pedigree was also an important consideration when making selections.

"We're going to take the best players," Sweeney told The Athletic's Pierre LeBrun after accepting the job. "But they do have to be able to understand and embrace their roles. And personalities and character, all the things we all try to assess every day, will be important parts of all this."

The coaching staff, led by Jon Cooper, had input as well. There were debates around the fringes right up until the roster had to be submitted.

"If it was a horse race, it would be a photo finish. That close," Cooper told reporters in Tampa, Fla., over the weekend. "It's been a process, but a super cool process. It's amazing, the work that's been put in by management. And it's been extremely, extremely thorough."

So who made the cut?

Team Canada's management team has kept its cards close to the vest as the announcement approaches, but in speaking to dozens of sources across the league early this week, The Athletic has gotten a good sense of many of the inclusions — and the conversations around the final calls.

Sidney Crosby and Brad Marchand, who were among the initial six Canadian players announced in June, are believed to be the only returning forwards who were part of the 2016 World Cup win. Alex Pietrangelo is believed to be the only returning defenseman.

That makes for many new faces spread across the rest of the roster. Here's what we're hearing about how the team came together.



Forwards

Named in June: Sidney Crosby, Nathan MacKinnon, Brad Marchand, Connor McDavid, Brayden Point

Presumed shoo-ins: Mitch Marner, Sam Reinhart, Mark Stone

The only real question about Stone's inclusion came down to health because the Vegas Golden Knights captain has been sidelined since Nov. 6 with a lower-body injury.

On that front, it was encouraging to see him back on the ice at practice this week. Should Stone or any other player wind up being unavailable before the 4 Nations Face-Off begins, the Canadian management team has the option to call up a replacement. So he gets a roster spot.

  Mark Stone is skating with the team at practice today! [pic.twitter.com/mQb4W9Bhwg](https://pic.twitter.com/mQb4W9Bhwg)

— Vegas Golden Knights (@GoldenKnights) December 2, 2024

That leaves five more openings.

Brandon Hagel, the Tampa Bay Lightning left winger, almost assuredly has his hands on one of them. Playing for Cooper, he's trusted with significant penalty-kill and power-play responsibilities, and he's among the top point-producing Canadians to boot. A five-assist game performance against Colorado last week certainly didn't hurt his chances.

That leaves a potential top-nine that looks something like this:

Reinhart – McDavid – Marner

Marchand – Crosby – MacKinnon

Hagel – Point – Stone

There are plenty of deserving candidates for the four remaining spots, including Sam Bennett, Anthony Cirelli, Travis Konecny, Seth Jarvis, Zach Hyman, Mark Scheifele, Nick Suzuki, John Tavares, Tom Wilson, Matt Duchene, Steven Stamkos and Connor Bedard.

Tavares and Duchene have had strong starts this season and carry significant Team Canada experience, but we can't see them edging out a younger option at this stage of their careers. The same goes for Stamkos, who is still finding his footing after the move to Nashville.

Scheifele's elite offensive instincts don't slot him ideally as a fourth-liner.

The sense is that that role is more likely to be given to Cirelli, who regularly kills penalties and, like Hagel, has the trust of the Lightning coaching staff. Bennett's gritty game and Stanley Cup pedigree also hold appeal, while Konecny's versatility and strong start caught the attention of management. It scouted the Flyers extensively in recent weeks.

There is a philosophical question about how the 13th forward role is best filled, but it's believed to be going to Jarvis over someone like the 19-year-old Bedard, who will undoubtedly be a Team Canada mainstay down the road. Remember that Crosby was passed over as a teenager for the 2006 Turin Olympics.

Defense

Named in June: Cale Makar

Presumed shoo-ins: Alex Pietrangelo, Shea Theodore, Devon Toews

When you have the opportunity to take two sets of teammates with Stanley Cup rings and an extensive track record of playing together, you take it. No reason to overthink those selections even if Team Canada's coaching staff winds up running with different pairings.

Next up, Travis Sanheim.

The left-shooting Philadelphia Flyers defenseman lines up primarily on the right side but brings an added layer of versatility as someone who could comfortably be deployed on either. He also kills penalties and has logged more minutes in the NHL than any other Canadian skater this season, building on the massive steps he took in his game last season.

That leaves only two other spots.

Some candidates: Josh Morrissey, Colton Parayko, Drew Doughty, Evan Bouchard, Noah Dobson, Morgan Rielly, Dougie Hamilton, MacKenzie Weegar, Owen Power.

The challenge with this aspect of the roster is identifying the right fits since Makar will naturally slot as the team's power-play quarterback. Different elements were prioritized to round out the group.

Our belief is Morrissey and Parayko — two other big-minute munchers — get the nod here. Morrissey has been a big driver of Winnipeg's early season success and is a smooth skater who can be counted on for two-way play, while Parayko brings penalty-killing chops and is another player with big-game experience and Stanley Cup pedigree.

Doughty had an inside track to a spot on this team before suffering a fractured ankle in October. The two-time Olympic gold medalist could still be another six weeks away from returning to action with the Los Angeles Kings.

However, he'll remain on management's radar as a possible injury fill-in assuming he can get back up to speed before the 4 Nations Face-Off gets underway.

## Goalies

Presumed shoo-ins: Jordan Binnington, Adin Hill

While there has been considerable hand-wringing among Canadian fans and media about the state of the country's goaltending, the concern wasn't nearly as pronounced behind the scenes.

In Binnington and Hill, the team has two Stanley Cup winners.

The feeling is that a Canadian goaltender just needs to avoid allowing a bad goal in this type of event while playing behind an incredibly high-end and predictable team. There aren't likely to be major defensive breakdowns. The team won't be sending anyone out to the crease with the idea it needs to steal a game.

"I don't think we share that same angst," Sweeney told The Athletic in October. "We've got guys that have proven they can win at the highest level. And we'll have guys that are going to play well as we're going through it. So I don't think we quite see things the same way (as media and fans)."

There were many directions they could have gone for the final spot.

The candidates: Samuel Montembeault, Logan Thompson, Cam Talbot, Stuart Skinner, Marc-Andre Fleury, Darcy Kuemper, Joey Daccord.

While Montembeault's numbers may not have popped this season playing behind a Montreal Canadiens team that has had its defensive struggles, he's believed to have been tabbed for the No. 3 role.

At age 28, he's still relatively young and will be a candidate for future national team duty. Plus he was already the goaltender of record for Canada's gold-medal win at the 2023 IIHF World Hockey Championship.

This goaltending trio represents a departure on a number of levels from Team Canada's past. Not only does it not feature a surefire Hall of Famer like the country always did when it had Carey Price, Roberto

Luongo and Martin Brodeur donning the Maple Leaf, but also all three players have a legitimate chance of seizing the crease depending on their performance between now and Feb. 12.

#### Takeaways

Canada may not be the favorite entering the 4 Nations Face-Off, but no one should be surprised if it comes out on top.

Rolling out McDavid, MacKinnon, Crosby and Makar is a massive luxury.

While acknowledging recently that the United States is probably the team to beat on paper, Team Canada stalwart Shea Weber highlighted the challenge facing all four countries entering the event.

“I think the biggest thing will be which team can come together in a short little tournament like that and play like a team,” Weber said.

In the past, with a core of players accustomed to playing and winning together, that was always a Canadian strength.

The future is soon to be written.



## The Athletic / NHL Playoff Report: Maple Leafs and Devils on the rise, Rangers and Senators falling off

By Dom Luszczyszyn- December 4, 2024

Welcome back to another edition of the NHL Playoff Report, a monthly look at the league through the eyes of each team's chances of making the playoffs: who's up, who's down and why.

After each night's slate of games, our playoff projections page is updated taking into account the results from those games and fresh new data to feed into the model. Every night, everything changes and those changes add up quickly, especially if a team goes on a heater (or cooler). Those changes can also be difficult to view at a glance and it's good practice to take stock regularly of what's been happening.

Here's how things currently shake out in the East and West. As it stands, there are probably two spots up for grabs in the East, while in the West it would be a surprise if the eight spots weren't already spoken for based on what we know about the top eight teams.

On the rise

Los Angeles Kings

The Kings didn't exactly have a great month by any means, going 7-5-0. Still, they saw their playoff odds jump 17.5 percentage points amid a weakening Western Conference, the second-largest jump of any team. The Kings, now at 84 percent, should be relatively safe.

The real story is what happened under the hood, though, where the Kings are showing they're still a defensive juggernaut even without Drew Doughty. Over the last month the Kings led the league in expected goals, a 58.5 percent mark fueled mostly by allowing a league-low 1.83 expected goals against per 60. They're getting the five-on-five results to match too, and they also had one of the league's best penalty kills.

The top story there is the team's top pair of Vladislav Gavrikov and Mikey Anderson, with the latter arguably proving himself as one of the league's very best shutdown defensemen. A lot of people would've likely given Doughty most of the credit for the pair's work over the last few years, but the fact Anderson is doing it again without Doughty should show how strong he is in his own right. His projected Defensive Rating has moved up to plus-eight, a mark that now leads the league.

Over the last month, Anderson has held opponents to just 1.47 xGA/60, a mark made even more impressive given he gets the toughest assignments every night. Gavrikov is great too and deserves a lot of credit on that pair, but it's hard not to fawn over the guy leading the league in projected Defensive Rating over Jonas Brodin, Jared Spurgeon and Chris Tanev. Anderson is special. Gavrikov, for what it's worth, ranks 10th among defenders.

The Kings are probably not a legit contender in the West, but anyone who thought they'd fall apart completely without Doughty will likely be mistaken. They're still a playoff team.

New Jersey Devils

One of the chief concerns with the Devils going into this season was their defensive ability. Last season wasn't just a goaltending problem, it was a full scale defensive meltdown exacerbated by poor goaltending. While there's still room for improvement between the pipes, the team's defensive work of late is enough to promote optimism that the Devils are for real.

Over the last month, no team has seen a bigger rise in their Defensive Rating than the Devils, who have gone from slightly above average to a top 10 team. That's off the strength of allowing just 2.12 expected goals against per 60, the sixth-best mark in the league which helped the Devils put up a 57 percent xG rate, third-best in the league.

Here's where it gets interesting: the biggest driver of that was Jack Hughes.

One thing Sheldon Keefe doesn't get nearly enough credit for is how he helped develop both Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner into Selke-worthy players. While that lofty height might be a stretch for Hughes, he appears to be taking very real strides in his defensive game. Over the last month he was on for just 1.92 xGA/60 and 0.64 GA/60, both among the absolute best marks on the team. Managing that at the top of the lineup (where the pace is generally much faster) is really impressive — even if Nico Hischier is normally the one tasked with tough minutes. Funny enough, Luke Hughes has taken similar strides in his off-puck play too.

The best thing about Keefe's tenure in Toronto was his ability to turn a high-octane, offense-first team into one that controlled the game more and defended better. That's starting to play out in New Jersey as well and that it's being led by Jack Hughes (and to a lesser extent, his brother) is great to see. New Jersey had one of the biggest jumps in Stanley Cup odds because of it.

#### Toronto Maple Leafs

After a lull in October, the Leafs are back to where the model forecasted them to start the season: right around 108 points and the division favourite in the Atlantic. Only the Flyers saw a bigger bump in projected points and no team had a bigger rise in division odds. An 8-2-0 stretch will have that effect, especially with nine of those games coming without Toronto's best player.

Doing all that without Auston Matthews is the main reason the model held steady with the team's Offensive Rating despite some worrying trends with the team's five-on-five offense. The other top guys stepping up and a return to form for the power play certainly helped.

The major story in Toronto though is on defense, where the team's Defensive Rating is now plus-18. That puts the team fifth in the league thanks to an eight-goal rise only bested by the Devils. Over the last month the Leafs allowed just two expected goals against per 60 at five-on-five, the second-best mark in the league. The team's elite goaltending only made things more difficult for other teams on top of that, leading to 1.27 goals against per 60. That led the league by 0.35 goals.

Craig Berube's Leafs are starting to take shape and they now look like a true defense-first team, backed by one of the strongest goaltending tandems in the league. With Matthews back now, the Leafs look like a real threat. We'll see how much of that holds true come April.

#### Washington Capitals

Once again, we have to talk about the Washington Capitals, who simply won't stop rising. No team saw a bigger jump in playoff odds than the Capitals, going from 68 percent to 93 percent. It would take a lot going wrong for the Caps to miss now after going 9-3-1 over the last month. They're legit.

Despite leading the league in goal differential over that stretch against a difficult schedule (and without Alex Ovechkin for six games), the model hasn't really budged in its opinion of the Capitals. Washington's projected Net Rating only moved from plus-two to plus-three. That's... probably wrong. Bad model!

We'll see over the rest of the season whether the model was right to be this stubborn, but my personal feeling is it's not catching up to Washington's legitimate rise fast enough.

#### Philadelphia Flyers

The Flyers looked ready to tank for a draft pick one month ago but look suddenly frisky after a strong November, going 8-3-2 since the last playoff report. Philadelphia is still a playoff long shot, but that's still a much better position than the Flyers were in before the hot stretch.

Under the hood, the main thing to note is a stronger offense. The Flyers ranked top 10 in expected goals over the last month with a strong surge in particular from Travis Konecny. Over this stretch he's scored 20 points in 13 games, tied for second with Jack Eichel and one point behind Connor McDavid. Great company.

Also noteworthy: Sean Couturier and Travis Sanheim playing terrific hockey and Matvei Michkov blossoming into a game-breaker. The team's core has been good — will it be good enough to keep this hot stretch up?

Honourable mentions: Columbus Blue Jackets, Tampa Bay Lightning, Edmonton Oilers

Falling off

New York Rangers

The last few weeks have been rough for the Rangers, with the team's forecast taking a sharp turn going from near playoff lock (94 percent) to bubble team (66 percent). They're still likely to make it, but with how they've played lately the Rangers just don't look like a safe bet anymore.

The main reason for that is the team's underlying foundation collapsing. The Rangers don't look good anymore and the model has taken note. Interestingly enough, it took note while the team was still winning games, matching some of the fan base frustration at the time.

On Oct. 27, the Rangers sat 6-1-1 with a projected Net Rating of plus-35, a shade up from their plus-30 starting point. Over the next 10 games the model actually downgraded the Rangers to plus-17 despite going 6-4-0. The reason for that was a weakening five-on-five game specifically driven by the team's top players, all while playing an extremely soft schedule. A course correction felt likely. What was unexpected, though, was for that correction to happen in one fell swoop with a five-game losing streak. That drove the Rangers' projections even further down across the board. Over the month of November the Rangers had a 44 percent xG, 30th in the league ahead of only the Blackhawks and Sharks.

There's still a lot of season left to play and the hope is Saturday's win against Montreal could be the basis for a turnaround. Whether the Rangers can flip their current script depends largely on some of their best players getting back to their usual level. Before the season, the projected combined ratings for Artemi Panarin, Mika Zibanejad, Vincent Trocheck, Chris Kreider, Adam Fox and K'Andre Miller was plus-78. That group is at plus-57 now with all six seeing a noticeable drop in expected value.

Can the Rangers right the ship back to contender status or is wildcard team their new normal?

Ottawa Senators

Over the last month, no team saw a bigger drop in playoff odds than Ottawa, who went from a 50-50 bet all the way down to 18 percent. New season, same pain.

Since the last Playoff Report, the Senators are 4-7-2 and while their underlying numbers are fine, the team isn't executing. No team had a worse goals percentage than Ottawa's 39 percent, a full 12 percentage points worse than expected.

On offense, that means a lower opinion on the team's finishing talent. While some of the team's top players have been impressive (Tim Stütze, Brady Tkachuk, Drake Batherson and Thomas Chabot all saw their ratings increase), the depth is struggling. Shane Pinto has been especially disappointing with zero points in his last 11 games and just three in 16 games on the year.

More worrying perhaps is the team's goaltending. Linus Ullmark was supposed to be a big-time addition that fixed Ottawa's biggest flaw, but he's struggled heavily. Over the last month in particular, Ullmark has an .882 and has allowed 3.5 goals above expected. Anton Forsberg has been even worse.

The model still has some faith in Ullmark, just not as much as it did at the start of the season. That, plus the team's lack of finishing, has Ottawa looking like a below-average team. Again.

#### Nashville Predators

The Predators headlined this side of the ledger last month and unfortunately things have not improved since. Whatever was left of their already timid playoff chances has all but evaporated after the team somehow played worse, going 3-5-5, since the last playoff report.

Under the hood, the Predators just aren't clicking. At five-on-five they were one of the league's worst teams in November and now rank 23rd on the year in xG. Their 35 percent goal rate ranks last by five full percentage points.

Will the Predators keep shooting 5.4 percent at five-on-five forever? Probably not. But they also rank 24th in chance generation, which is far from ideal. Even if they regress, there's not a lot of upwards momentum for the team's offense. From start to finish, the team's top offensive threats — old and new — have simply been not good enough.

The model still views Nashville as an average team, but that's far from the dark horse they appeared to be at the start. The Predators will need to be a lot better than average going forward if they want to salvage this season.

#### Colorado Avalanche

The Avalanche are still a strong team and a very likely playoff bet, especially in a weak West. They'll be fine. But there is room for concern with the team's offense, especially at five-on-five.

There, the team has only scored 2.21 goals per 60, just a shade above the New York Islanders and good for 23rd in the league. The Avalanche have just three players scoring over 1.5 points per 60 and even the ones above that line are way below their usual mark. Nathan MacKinnon has oddly scored just 1.8 points per 60 at five-on-five this season.

The Avalanche still have the second-best Offensive Rating in the league and have clearly made some sacrifices in order to protect their weak goaltending. Still, it's a noteworthy drop and one worth keeping an eye on for the team that led the league in five-on-five goals per 60 last season. Colorado's superpower feels less overwhelming than usual and the tradeoff to stronger defense hasn't panned out quite yet.

#### Boston Bruins

Things have started to turn around for the Bruins since changing coaches (4-2-0), but not enough to escape the hole they dug themselves into to start the season. The Bruins saw a 10.5-goal drop in their Net Rating since the last playoff report, a trend that hasn't materially changed since Joe Sacco took over. The Bruins are now graded as a below-average team.

Boston is still in the thick of the playoff hunt and has some tantalizing star players that can carry the team in. But it's unlikely this team can go much farther than that.

Honourable mentions: Montreal Canadiens, Chicago Blackhawks, Utah HC

## The Athletic / Which NHL team's stock are you buying? How will Canada address goaltending? Crosby to the Avs? Ask CJ

By Chris Johnston- December 4, 2024

The trades have started during this 2024-25 NHL season before the snow has even started to fly in many of the league's markets, and there's still plenty of time for more moves before the holiday roster freeze kicks in on Dec. 20.

We put out the call for mailbag questions last week, and unsurprisingly many of you readers were wondering about players who could be on the move. There were also queries about TV rights and blackouts, the state of Canadian goaltending, salary cap growth, Macklin Celebrini's hot start and Sidney Crosby's future, among other topics.

As always, thank you for taking the time to read, engage and respond.

Let's get at it.

(Note: Some questions are edited for clarity and length.)

As someone who spends time in both Canada and the States: watching NHL hockey on TV is an awful experience. From regional blackouts to multiple expensive subscriptions needed, it shouldn't be this hard to watch the NHL. Is this on the NHL's radar as a problem? — William B.

They are aware of the challenges, for sure, but would probably take issue with characterizing it as a problem. Regional blackouts are put in place to protect the desire of cable providers to have exclusive broadcasting rights on their network. Individual teams sell those rights to the providers and in some cases receive a significant amount of money for doing so. While it's reasonable to envision a day when every NHL game is made available without blackouts, the path to getting there is murky given the number of existing agreements and obligations. Notably, Major League Baseball has set a target for eliminating most blackouts by 2028. If it can successfully pull it off, that may provide a roadmap for other leagues to follow.

If hockey teams were stocks and you were looking at investing for the next five years, what one or two teams would you consider a buy, hold and sell? — Jordan S.

Buy: San Jose Sharks. My only concern with this pick is the stock may not hit within the five-year window, but it's hard to ignore the impressive group of young talent the organization has amassed.

Hold: Dallas Stars. This stock has been a perennial top performer and there's no reason to forecast a fall-off because of the Stars' successful drafting-and-developing program. They're going to roll seamlessly from one generation into the next one.

Sell: Boston Bruins. There may be some recency bias at play after a sketchy start to the season, but it's hard to ignore the cracks in the foundation. All good things must eventually come to an end.

How have Macklin Celebrini's recent performances compared to expectations from draft day? — Taylor I.

It's still very early days, but Celebrini's first 15 NHL games have exceeded expectations by a wide margin. The Sharks have been a perennial bottom-feeder and don't have the ability to insulate him in the lineup, so they've rolled the teenager out as their top-line center and seen him score eight goals and 14 points. He was named November's rookie of the month. It's been particularly impressive because Celebrini's first month in the league was disrupted by injury. He's still going to face a steep learning curve, as every young player does, but he hasn't looked the least bit out of place so far.

Canada has taken a step back in the goalie market, with other countries (mainly Russia and the U.S.) being at the forefront of elite goaltending. Do you think Hockey Canada views this as an internal training issue and something they need to address? — Kurtis H.

The alarm bells have been ringing on this issue for at least a decade, but the solutions aren't easy. Speaking with those deeply involved in the Canadian goaltending community, the most common issue you'll hear is cost. One veteran goalie coach said it's become "a rich man's position." Unlike with many European clubs, the cost of equipment and specialty training is borne by the family of a goaltender in Canada. You can understand why some parents might not want (or allow) their kids to play goalie. The issue has certainly been on Hockey Canada's radar, and it's bound to get even more attention with the return of best-on-best hockey on the men's side.

What do you think about Joey Daccord as an option for Canada in the 4 Nations? I think it is a lame move, but it is apparently legit based on ancestry or something? Help on the thinking behind it — and your opinion — would be appreciated. — Joe K.

I certainly don't see any issue with the idea of it personally. Daccord is an American-born (and raised) son of a Canadian father and Swiss mother, so he has the ability to represent any of those countries. He's yet to play in a IIHF-sanctioned event, so he hasn't effectively declared which nation he'll represent internationally. Of particular note about the 4 Nations Face-Off is the fact it's a tournament being put on by the NHL — which means Daccord could theoretically represent Canada there and still be selected by the USA for a IIHF World Hockey Championship somewhere down the line. I don't expect him to be announced by Team Canada this week but wouldn't have any problem with it if he was.

Does Auston Matthews' trip to Germany potentially open the door to other athletes following suit when it comes to injury rehab? — Graeme N.

It could certainly open the door to more hockey players seeking treatment there. Matthews' trip to Munich in November made big headlines, and it's reasonable to expect world-class athletes to seek out the best possible care no matter where it's available. Truth be told, Matthews was following the lead of athletes from other sports — everyone from Kobe Bryant to Usain Bolt to Christian McCaffrey has previously sought treatment in Germany — and it wasn't the first time he's been over there for that purpose. Other NHLers have been there, too. Max Pacioretty credits German doctor Hans-Wilhelm Müller-Wohlfahrt for getting him back on track following his most recent Achilles injury, telling The Athletic's Jonas Siegel recently, "He has that magical touch. He saved my career."

You're Steve Yzerman. How do you handle the rest of the Detroit Red Wings season? Embrace the tank, try to adjust and turn things around, etc. — Kyle J.

After eight years out of the playoffs, there's no way Yzerman can embrace the tank. The Red Wings are desperate to take a tangible step forward and the general manager needs to do whatever he can to facilitate that. Whether that comes through trades or a coaching change, management has to consider everything. What Yzerman can't think about for even a second is waving the white flag in December.

Zach Werenski and Dylan Larkin. Is either player aging out of their team's rebuild? Would either team consider trading them for picks or younger players? — Michael B.

At this stage, the answer on both players is "no," but that doesn't mean it couldn't change over time. Detroit believes its rebuild is in the rear-view mirror and Larkin is in just the second season of an eight-year extension. He's the team captain and still performing at a high level. He's going to be around for a while. The Columbus Blue Jackets will face some kind of decision on Werenski a little sooner. They've had a stronger-than-expected start to the season fueled in large part by the defenseman's world-class play,

so perhaps there's hope the organization is building its way back to respectability. But if that doesn't end up materializing, Werenski's 2028 UFA status will start to come into focus. Stay tuned.

How do you think the Department of Player Safety reconciles a one-game suspension to first-time offender Timo Meier for a cross-check to the face that drew blood, with the five-gamer first-time offender Morgan Riley drew for a bloodless cross check to the side of the head of a player in Ottawa? — Ted D.

The biggest difference between the two incidents you mentioned was the circumstances when the foul was committed. Rielly's suspension was so punitive because he cross-checked Ridly Greig after the Senators forward scored into an empty net last season. That's obviously not a game state where any player is eligible to be hit or expecting to be hit. The play was supposed to be dead. In the Meier situation, he was engaged in a battle with Nashville's Zachary L'Heureux when his stick got high and he recklessly delivered a cross-check to the face.

Will the league ever adjust the playoff schedule so the Cup is awarded before mid-June, preferably by June 1? I have enjoyed playing and watching hockey for 60 years, but spring should be for gardening, fishing and lacrosse. Thanks! — Keith A.

You're far from alone in expressing this desire, Keith, but alas I must share that it's a bit of a lost cause. If anything, the schedule is likely going to keep pushing the Stanley Cup Final even later into June with plans to interrupt the regular season in February three of the next four years for international tournaments: 4 Nations Face-Off (2025), Milan Olympics (2026) and World Cup (2028). The real culprit is the fact that many NHL owners don't want to start the season earlier — say in September — because of concerns about going head-to-head with the NFL. The league has tabled the possibility of an earlier start and been rebuffed. So with 82 regular-season games to be played and a two-month playoffs, we're left with what we have. For what it's worth, the NHL has set aside June 23 as the last possible day this season's Cup Final can be played.

How much should GM Brad Treliving pay for another center? Do the Leafs have enough in the draft cabinet or prospect pool that they can afford anything that would move the needle? — Jonathan S.

If something is available that would truly move the needle, the Leafs need to consider it. You can't worry too deeply about the future when your stars are in their primes and you've got one measly series victory to show for eight consecutive trips to the playoffs. The Leafs don't own their first-round pick in 2025, but they can dangle a top selection in 2026 or 2027. They've also got a few prospects and young players who could be sacrificed for immediate help down the middle. Seize the day.

Do you think the potential increase over the anticipated value in the next two years of the salary cap will keep some of the current free agents this summer from signing extensions? If so, where do you see some of the contracts for the high-end players ending up? — Bill P.

Summer 2025 could be fascinating if the NHL's new collective bargaining agreement isn't in place by then. You've got multiple superstar-quality players eligible to sign extensions as of July 1 in Connor McDavid, Jack Eichel and Kirill Kaprizov, but it's going to be tough for those players to sign another contract without first knowing what kind of tweaks are coming to the system. Basically, it's not hard to imagine a scenario where they enter their final season before free agency without new deals. As for where those contracts are ultimately headed, I'd expect one or more of those players to leapfrog Leon Draisaitl's \$14 million cap hit. McDavid will almost certainly be underpaid no matter what he signs for, but if the salary cap jumps significantly, would \$17 million or \$18 million per season be out of the question? I don't think so.

Is there even the slightest chance that Sidney Crosby will ever play with Nathan MacKinnon in Colorado?  
— Eric M.

This feels like one of the questions of the moment, doesn't it? If you talk to anyone around Crosby, they'll give you zero indication he wants to play anywhere other than Pittsburgh during his NHL career. Remember that he elected to sign a two-year extension with the Penguins in September rather than waiting to see if the team was good enough to climb back into the playoffs this season. However, given that they now appear headed for a third straight year outside the postseason, it can't be ruled out entirely. There's a chance, however slight. If Crosby ever decided to move on, it would almost certainly happen during the summertime, and the expectation is he'd be choosing whatever destination he wanted. Given his close ties to MacKinnon and where the Avs are in their competitive window, Colorado is one of the five or six places that would likely hold some appeal.



## The Athletic / Ranking every NHL team's salary cap situation, from best to worst

By James Mirtle- December 4, 2024

The possibility that the NHL's salary cap could go up by as much as \$9 million this offseason looms large for all 32 teams and their front offices.

It will likely impact negotiations with every free agent, as player agents try to navigate a new world based on a cap that could climb well above \$100 million in the years to come. And it could also affect the trade deadline, as buyers and sellers attempt to make sense of how being flush with cash come July 1 should change their decisions in the short term.

At minimum, the NHL's cap will rise to \$92.4 million next year, which is a potential infusion of \$141 million into the system. At the high end, the new money total could hit \$288 million.

By my calculations, the average NHL team has already committed to \$68 million in spending for next season. The average team has also already signed 14.7 players to NHL contracts for next year, with 470 players having deals and likely to make rosters.

That new money, then, will go to the remaining six to eight players on every team.

The average NHL team has \$25 million in cap space remaining for next season but needs to set aside roughly \$7 million of that to re-sign their restricted free agents. The average team also has \$1.4 million in "dead" money — cash allocated to buyouts or retained salary transactions — and \$1.2 million to players expected to remain on LTIR for the full season.

Even with the RFAs, dead money and LTIR accounted for, however, there will be \$650 million in 2025-26 dollars available to spend overall in the next eight months.

For the purposes of this article, I've gone with a midpoint of a \$94 million cap for next season. I've also ranked all 32 teams based on how much cap flexibility they have going forward, their spending efficiency and lack of "dead" money, as well as the quality of the roster they already have in place.

This should give us a good idea of the teams best positioned to take advantage in this new world order of bigger cap increases and a new collective bargaining agreement in 2026.

### 1. Carolina Hurricanes

2025-26 salaries: \$65 million

RFAs estimate: Minimal

Dead money: None

Notable UFAs: Brent Burns, Frederik Andersen, Dmitry Orlov

Projected cap space: \$29 million (9th)

Biggest decision: How do they fill key openings on the blue line?

Carolina is basically in the ideal position in the NHL right now. The Hurricanes are consistently one of the best teams in the NHL (second in the standings), they have almost no bad contracts (other than maybe the Jesperi Kotkaniemi revenge deal), and all of their key stars are locked up.

Burns is 40 in March, so he represents a key decision, as he still leads the team in ice time and makes sense to bring back on a shorter-term deal. But the Canes have so much cap space that they can re-sign the whole gang and add reinforcements if they so choose.

## 2. Winnipeg Jets

2025-26 salaries: \$53 million

RFA estimate: \$11 million

Dead money: \$1.6 million (Nate Schmidt buyout)

Notable UFAs: Nikolaj Ehlers, Neal Pionk, Mason Appleton

Projected cap space: \$30 million (6th)

Biggest decision: Can they afford not to bring back Ehlers?

The Jets are at the very top of the standings after a remarkable 18-7-0 start. They've locked their superstar goaltender, Connor Hellebuyck, into a very reasonable contract, and he looks poised to win another Vezina Trophy. And they have a very minimal number of troubling contracts.

GM Kevin Cheveldayoff has some tough calls to make, with Ehlers at the top of the list, but the reality is he has eight members of his core locked in already and oodles of cap space to bring back the other free agents or find replacements. Expect Winnipeg to be active in the market going forward, as the Jets are going to be in win-now mode as long as Hellebuyck is playing like this.

## 3. Colorado Avalanche

2025-26 salaries: \$75 million

RFAs estimate: Minimal

Dead money: \$7 million (Gabriel Landeskog LTIR)

Notable UFAs: Mikko Rantanen, Alexandar Georgiev, Jonathan Drouin

Projected cap space: \$26 million (11th)

Biggest decision: Can they keep Rantanen?

The Avs are, like Carolina and Winnipeg, in great position in terms of having most of their stars locked up to reasonable contracts. Yes, Colorado has taken a hit in the standings this year due to all of the injuries and some issues in goal, but it remains among the ranks of the contenders, especially if newcomer Scott Wedgewood can help right the ship in net.

Where things may get tricky is the Avs only have 14 players signed for next season, and it's possible Rantanen's number eats up half their remaining cap space. Can they find a way to bring him back, get better in goal, and still fill out the roster?

The good news is they should have clarity on where Landeskog is at next season and be able to either move forward with him in the lineup or spend his LTIR money more than they have this year. (These cap calculations assume he's not on the roster for 2025-26.)

## 4. Florida Panthers

2025-26 salaries: \$72 million

RFAs estimate: Minimal

Dead money: None

Notable UFAs: Aaron Ekblad, Sam Bennett

Projected cap space: \$21 million (14th)

Biggest decision: Can they keep the band together beyond this season?

The Panthers are coming off a championship and have most of their core on reasonable contracts, well into the future. Getting Ekblad back feels like a wise decision, given he's somehow still only 28 and has been a franchise fixture forever. Bennett, meanwhile, is in the process of driving his UFA contract to the moon with the season he's having, so it's possible he's a cap casualty depending on how high the number gets.

Florida may not have a single bad contract on the books to a skater, but has committed nearly \$15 million to its goaltenders and currently has the third worst save percentage in the NHL. The Panthers have missed Anthony Stolarz's stabilizing presence this season behind Sergei Bobrovsky, who turns 37 next fall and may need to be in more of a tandem role to preserve him for the postseason. Perhaps Spencer Knight, 23, can continue to grow into that role and assume more starts going forward.

#### 5. Dallas Stars

2025-26 salaries: \$67 million

RFA estimate: \$11 million

Dead money: \$1.4 million (Ryan Suter buyout)

Notable UFAs: Jamie Benn, Matt Duchene

Projected cap space: \$15 million (19th)

Biggest decision: How do they handle their forward group in the offseason?

Another very strong team with a lot of core pieces locked in. The Stars are slightly different than some of the teams above them in that they do have some difficult contracts on the books with term — Tyler Seguin's \$9.85 million cap hit, in particular, stands out, even with his hot start this season — but with Benn's deal coming off, things look better in 2025-26.

What they won't have beyond this season is leading scorer Duchene on an absolute sweetheart contract. He's in line for a big raise in this higher cap environment, and combined with some of the Stars' other decisions, could be a tough player to keep in Dallas.

Getting Wyatt Johnston signed may not be simple, either, given how fast the 21-year-old's stock is rising. But Dallas has enough cap room to comfortably remain a contender no matter what happens here.

#### 6. Vancouver Canucks

2025-26 salaries: \$76 million

RFAs estimate: Minimal

Dead money: \$5.5 million (Oliver Ekman-Larsson buyout and Ilya Mikheyev retention)

Notable UFAs: Brock Boeser, Pius Suter, Kevin Lankinen

Projected cap space: \$16 million (18th)

Biggest decision: Can they find a way to upgrade their blue line?

The Canucks have less cap space than the teams above them here, and the OEL buyout number climbs to an ugly \$4.7 million for the next two seasons, which certainly hurts. But the new regime in Vancouver has done a nice job of otherwise cleaning up the organization's cap sheet, to the point that they lack much waste throughout the lineup.

That's not to say they don't have question marks. What happens with Thatcher Demko's health is one big one, as is the performance of Elias Pettersson since signing his huge new deal. To contend, the Canucks need both to be big contributors.

They likely also, in an ideal world, need help on defense; Tyler Myers will be 35 in the near future and shouldn't be a No. 3 at this point in his career.

Vancouver won't have Boeser, Suter and Lankinen for the relative discounts they're on now in the future, so some of its contract efficiency will be challenged in free agency this summer, even with the cap going up.

## 7. Utah Hockey Club

2025-26 salaries: \$70 million

RFAs estimate: \$2 million

Dead money: \$8.5 million (Shea Weber LTIR and Oliver Ekman-Larsson retention)

Notable UFAs: Nick Bjugstad, Karel Vejmelka, Alexander Kerfoot, Ian Cole

Projected cap space: \$30 million (7th)

Biggest decision: How aggressive should they be with all of their cap space?

The first non-playoff team on our list lands here for good reason. Utah has a lot of good young players and basically no anchors in terms of cap commitments to overpriced veterans. If they put Weber on LTIR, they have acres of cap space and 18 players already signed to NHL deals beyond this season.

So, yes, they can be pretty aggressive in trying to improve the roster. Perhaps as much as any team in the league.

They're going to have needs all over the roster, what with their struggles to score this season and with Vejmelka about to earn a big payday in goal, but better health on the blue line and smart use of their cap room should position them for a rise up the standings next season.

## 8. Vegas Golden Knights

2025-26 salaries: \$76 million

RFAs estimate: \$3 million

Dead money: None

Notable UFAs: Adin Hill, Ilya Samsonov, Victor Olofsson

Projected cap space: \$14 million (21st)

Biggest decision: What does the future look like in goal?

The kings of the Big Swing have some flexibility to make one at some point, if they so choose. Vegas' entire core up front and on defense is signed through at least next season, leaving only a couple decisions to make in net as its points of intrigue.

It'll be interesting to see if the Golden Knights are aggressive in adding either players with term or UFAs they can extend before the deadline, as they have some room to accommodate another scoring winger.

As for bad contracts, it's relatively thin pickings, although they'll have to be mindful of Alex Pietrangolo's and Mark Stone's age, given they still have two years remaining on their massive deals and, well, Father Time is undefeated. But the contention window remains very much open in Sin City.

## 9. Washington Capitals

2025-26 salaries: \$64 million

RFAs estimate: Minimal

Dead money: \$0

Notable UFAs: Jakob Chychrun, Charlie Lindgren, Logan Thompson, Andrew Mangiapane

Projected cap space: \$29 million (8th)

Biggest decision: Who do they go with in goal long term?

The fourth-best record in the standings right now, no RFAs to re-sign, Nicklas Backstrom and T.J. Oshie's contracts off the books, and nearly \$30 million to play with in free agency?

That all sounds pretty good for 2025-26.

Significant rebound seasons for players on huge contracts like Pierre-Luc Dubois and Tom Wilson move them up this ranking, as does the rise of Dylan Strome, Aliaksei Protas and Connor McMichael — a nifty trio who are all signed for a combined \$10.5 million through until 2026.

They do have some key parts they'll have to pay or replace in free agency, but new GM Chris Patrick has a lot to work with here, especially if Alex Ovechkin keeps producing the way he has early this season.

## 10. Toronto Maple Leafs

2025-26 salaries: \$64 million

RFAs estimate: \$10 million

Dead money: None

Notable UFAs: Mitch Marner, John Tavares

Projected cap space: \$20 million (15th)

Biggest decision: Do they bring back the Core Four yet again, including Marner on a mammoth new contract?

The Leafs are one of the harder teams to place on this list. They are having a very solid regular season, yet again, and they have some salary cap flexibility both now and in the offseason. They also have some solid bargain deals on the books, such as Anthony Stolarz (\$2.5 million).

But they have huge decisions to make on Marner and Tavares that will dramatically affect every category being measured on this list. If both are re-signed — combined with a new RFA contract for Matthew Knies — much of their flexibility will disappear. If both leave, suddenly the Leafs have two key holes up front and \$20 million to use in free agency.

Toronto doesn't have many bad contracts on the books for 2025-26 and beyond, but GM Brad Treliving will likely need to prioritize moving out a misfire or two like Ryan Reaves and David Kampf, who are overpriced for their roles, to create some better breathing room. Especially if they're going to go big on Marner.

## 11. Minnesota Wild

2025-26 salaries: \$73 million

RFAs estimate: \$6.5 million

Dead money: \$1.67 million (Zach Parise and Ryan Suter buyouts)

Notable UFAs: Marc-Andre Fleury, Marcus Johansson

Projected cap space: \$14 million (20th)

Biggest decision: What will they do with RFA Marco Rossi?

Anytime your dead money situation can drop from \$14.7 million to under \$2 million, it's a good year for your cap.

The poison pill years of the Parise and Suter twin buyouts end this coming offseason, and that'll mean a big chunk of extra cap space to get aggressive in free agency. I've included Rossi's cap hit on a new RFA contract in my calculations, but with his name again circulating in trade rumors, that would be another big chunk of cap space available for GM Bill Guerin in the summer.

The Wild aren't without bad contracts (Yakov Trenin and Marcus Foligno stand out) but overall their cap sheet is fairly clean, and they'll have one more year before Kirill Kaprizov really cashes in on a new UFA deal. That gives them an opening to bolster their forward ranks, especially, given they already have five defensemen locked in and two young goalies set to take over.

## 12. Edmonton Oilers

2025-26 salaries: \$76 million

RFAs estimate: \$11 million

Dead money: \$2.3 million (Jack Campbell buyout)

Notable UFAs: Jeff Skinner, Corey Perry, Connor Brown

Projected cap space: \$7 million (31st)

Biggest decision: How do they upgrade the blue line with so little to spend?

Big raises on the way for Leon Draisaitl (a \$14 million extension begins next season) and Evan Bouchard (2025 RFA) impact the Oilers' ranking here. As does the minimal amount of space they have left to make any improvements or replace the soon-to-be departed depth forwards who are UFAs.

Having Connor McDavid signed for \$12.5 million for this season and next is a huge win, but bargain hunting is again going to be the order of the day in 2025.

Edmonton isn't without more serious blights on its cap, either. The Campbell buyout combined with Evander Kane making \$5.1 million and Darnell Nurse earning \$9.25 million all chip away at the Oilers' contract efficiency, even with their stars delivering the way they do on reasonable contracts.

This is going to be a tricky puzzle to piece together every offseason, especially considering goaltender Stuart Skinner's struggles and that newcomers like Victor Arvidsson haven't worked out as planned.

And McDavid's monster new contract is due in 2026.

## 13. New Jersey Devils

2025-26 salaries: \$76 million

RFAs estimate: \$5 million

Dead money: None

Notable UFAs: Jake Allen, Tomas Tatar, Johnathan Kovacevic

Projected cap space: \$13 million (24th)

Biggest decision: How big should they go at the trade deadline with contention in sight?

Are the Brenden Dillon and Ondrej Palat contracts ideal? No. But the Devils balance that out easily with Jack Hughes signed for a long (\$8 million until 2030) and most of the rest of their young core under contract at reasonable numbers until at least 2027.

The Devils also have a nice youth movement that's going to make a bigger impact soon, especially on the blue line, where Seamus Casey and Simon Nemec have already offered glimpses in promising auditions and Luke Hughes is about to break through.

To score higher on this list, however, they need more from Timo Meier and Dougie Hamilton, their two highest paid players.

#### 14. New York Rangers

2025-26 salaries: \$67 million

RFAs estimate: \$16 million

Dead money: None

Notable UFAs: Igor Shesterkin, Jonathan Quick, Ryan Lindgren

Projected cap space: \$11 million (27th)

Biggest decision: How high is too high for Shesterkin?

So, \$11 million in projected cap space, if the cap goes up to \$94 million, and Shesterkin wants, what, \$12 million or more?

Good luck to GM Chris Drury on that front.

The Rangers have one of the tightest cap situations leaguewide right now in terms of flexibility, but the good news is they score well in our other categories. Even with the angst over their play so far this season, this is a playoff roster, and they lack many awful contracts. Moving out Jacob Trouba would solve some of the pain, although RFA negotiations with K'Andre Miller, William Cuyllie and Kaapo Kakko are shaping up to potentially be difficult.

And Mika Zibanejad's struggles this season are a bit of a red flag, given he's signed for another five years at \$8.5 million.

This isn't going to be easy to navigate, but it's also not an impossible situation as they do have a lot of talent.

#### 15. Calgary Flames

2025-26 salaries: \$52 million

RFAs estimate: \$11.5 million

Dead money: \$1.875 million (Jacob Markstrom retention)

Notable UFAs: Andrei Kuzmenko, Anthony Mantha

Projected cap space: \$30 million (5th)

Biggest decision: With their roster in transition, to what extent should they go big in free agency?

Probably the NHL's biggest pleasant surprise so far, the Flames have a really interesting outlook from a salary cap perspective. They have one truly awful contract (Jonathan Huberdeau's \$10.5 million), some aging pieces making OK money with term (led by Nazem Kadri, Blake Coleman and Mikael Backlund), and then some nice value plays (basically their whole blue line).

Top that off with Dustin Wolf putting up a star turn in net while making close to league minimum (\$850,000 for this season and next) and they're set up to be a team to watch as they retool their roster. The Flames are drowning in unused cap space this season, but there's a case to be made for them to be aggressive in free agency next year to push this group forward. Or, at minimum, to weaponize that cap space in some fashion more than they have this year.

#### 16. Tampa Bay Lightning

2025-26 salaries: \$82 million

RFAs estimate: None

Dead money: \$850,000 (Conor Sheary buried)

Notable UFAs: Nick Perbix

Projected cap space: \$12 million (25th)

Biggest decision: Does this group need a bigger shakeup?

No team has more committed to next season's cap than the veteran Lightning, who have 16 players locked in, including their entire core. In a way that's a good thing — this remains a solid team — but after a 13th-place finish (and early playoff exit) last season, they so far look relatively the same again this season.

There are bargains on this roster, led by Brandon Hagel's \$6.5 million contract as he's on pace for a 100-point season. But without some real heroics from Andrei Vasilevskiy in goal, the Lightning again feel more like a dark horse than a contender. And the core that won them those championships in 2020 and 2021 keeps adding miles to the odometer.

#### 17. Los Angeles Kings

2025-26 salaries: \$70 million

RFAs estimate: \$4.5 million

Dead money: \$600,000 (Mike Richards buyout)

Notable UFAs: Vladislav Gavrikov, David Rittich, Tanner Jeannot

Projected cap space: \$20 million (16th)

Biggest decision: How do they get out of the NHL's mushy middle?

It's fitting that the Kings land here, right about average, because that encapsulates what this team seems to be right now. They'll probably make the playoffs. They probably won't go deep. And they'll do it all over again next year.

This past offseason's handiwork in adding Darcy Kuemper and Joel Edmundson hurt their cap allocation more than any other moves they've made, although Father Time is starting to come for Drew Doughty, who turns 35 later this week and has an \$11 million cap hit for two more years.



But having Brandt Clarke on his entry-level deal for another season is a real boost, as is Adrian Kempe's bargain of a contract. The Kings have enough cap space to upgrade on their pending UFAs in the offseason, too, offering some hope for pushing the West's contenders more aggressively down the road.

#### 18. Boston Bruins

2025-26 salaries: \$69 million

RFAs estimate: \$6 million

Dead money: None

Notable UFAs: Brad Marchand, Trent Frederic, Justin Brazeau

Projected cap space: \$19 million (17th)

Biggest decision: How do they fend off what looks like a step back this season?

As has been well-documented, it's been a tough season in Beantown. They've made the coaching change, however, and started to put together some wins, so it's possible things turn around, especially if they get more saves from Jeremy Swayman.

Weighing them down some are the two additions from this past offseason, Elias Lindholm and Nikita Zadorov. Beyond that, however, the Bruins aren't saddled with many bad contracts.

They do have some money to play with in the offseason, but after bringing back Marchand and either re-signing or replacing Frederic and Brazeau, it's not going to be enough to make much of a transformation. They simply look rather ordinary unless their big money group — led by David Pastrnak, Charlie McAvoy and Swayman — can elevate them beyond average.

#### 19. Buffalo Sabres

2025-26 salaries: \$62 million

RFAs estimate: \$18 million

Dead money: \$4.44 million (Jeff Skinner buyout)

Notable UFAs: Henri Jokiharju, Jason Zucker, Jordan Greenway

Projected cap space: \$14 million (22nd)

Biggest decision: After 13 years out of the playoffs, is this season the time to make a bold move?

Heading into the weekend, the Sabres were on a rare run, going 7-3-0 and climbing into playoff position in the suddenly not-so-intimidating Atlantic Division. It's something the fan base has been waiting eons for, and the good news is it looks fairly sustainable.

Yes, at long last, Buffalo might be an average NHL team.

The Sabres' strength right now is really in their stars, as this is a top-heavy lineup. Rasmus Dahlin is one of the truly elite D-men in the game. Owen Power is starting to come into his own. They're getting saves from Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, who's 12th in goals saved above expected. And Tage Thompson and Alex Tuch drive the offense while out-earning their reasonable deals.

Almost everything else is a work in progress.

A lot is going to hinge on getting their key RFAs signed to reasonable contracts this offseason and then using the money left over to improve their depth. The good news is they're not drowning in expensive

commitments to underperforming players, even if they'd like to see more from Dylan Cozens and Jack Quinn right now.

#### 20. Columbus Blue Jackets

2025-26 salaries: \$48 million

RFAs estimate: \$7 million

Dead money: \$1.4 million (Alexander Wennberg and Adam Boqvist buyouts)

Notable UFAs: Ivan Provorov, Justin Danforth, Dante Fabbro

Projected cap space: \$39 million (2nd)

Biggest decision: How best can they accelerate their rebuild?

Columbus is second to only the Sharks in projected cap room for the summer. And with just 12 players under contract for 2025-26, the Blue Jackets are going to need to be aggressive with it to fill out their lineup and get to the salary floor, which could be as high as \$73 million next season.

They've played well this year versus expectations, getting strong offensive contributions from Kent Johnson and their three young Russians on the rise (Kirill Marchenko, Yegor Chinakov and Dmitri Voronkov), most of whom are signed cheap for next year.

There are some bad contracts on the books here, led by Erik Gudbranson and Elvis Merzlikins, but you can start to see the beginnings of a road up under new GM Don Waddell. Especially with so many good young pieces coming in the next few years and some real cash to start to fill in the gaps around them.

#### 21. Ottawa Senators

2025-26 salaries: \$75 million

RFAs estimate: \$5 million

Dead money: \$1.875 million (Joonas Korpi retention; Colin White buyout)

Notable UFAs: Claude Giroux, Travis Hamonic, Anton Forsberg, Adam Gaudette

Projected cap space: \$14 million (23rd)

Biggest decision: Do they need to trade a core piece to take a step forward?

It's been a tough start to the season in Ottawa. At U.S. Thanksgiving, they were tied for the seventh worst points percentage in the NHL, a 78-point pace that's identical to last year's disappointing season.

Part of that can be attributed to disappointing additions in the offseason. Linus Ullmark has yet to live up to his billing, let alone the \$8.25 million cap hit he'll have next season. Michael Amadio has just four points in 22 games after signing for \$2.6 million.

And question marks remain over whether some of the incumbents, such as Thomas Chabot and Josh Norris, can stay healthy and/or live up to their \$8 million cap hits.

It's not all bad news, as several of Ottawa's stars are fairly paid, but the Senators are simply not getting a lot of extra value throughout the lineup and they're committed to a lot of money for a roster performing this poorly.

#### 22. Montreal Canadiens

2025-26 salaries: \$78 million

RFAs estimate: Minimal

Dead money: \$10.5 million (Carey Price LTIR)

Notable UFAs: Joel Armia, Christian Dvorak, Jake Evans, David Savard

Projected cap space: \$27 million (10th)

Biggest decision: Can they weaponize their extra cap space to bring in more futures?

The Habs are another team that's difficult to categorize. They're young. They're rebuilding. And they're bad. But they also have some great contracts — like those for Sam Montembeault and Cole Caufield — and some reasons for hope for the future.

GM Kent Hughes will need to determine how he can best use all that room in the offseason to push this team forward, which may involve moving out more veterans with term to bring back assets. Players like Josh Anderson and Brendan Gallagher make more than they should, but they will have value to playoff teams, especially if Montreal decides to retain salary in any deals. And the Canadiens could get a haul for someone like Mike Matheson and his very reasonable contract (one more year after this one at \$4.9 million) if he goes on the block.

It's been a frustrating season in some ways in Montreal, but they're well-positioned to come out of this ahead if they make the right moves.

### 23. Anaheim Ducks

2025-26 salaries: \$47 million

RFAs estimate: \$14 million

Dead money: None

Notable UFAs: Brian Dumoulin, Frank Vatrano, Brock McGinn, Robby Fabbri

Projected cap space: \$33 million (4th)

Biggest decision: What do they do with Trevor Zegras as he heads into the final year of his contract?

The rise of Lukas Dostal into a No. 1 netminder is a pleasant surprise, but it also shines a light on the John Gibson situation, as he carries an awfully large contract (\$6.4 million cap hit for the next two seasons) for a middling veteran backup.

When The Athletic's Dom Luszczyszyn ran his contract efficiency rankings in the summer, the Ducks cap sheet was basically a sea of red, something that has to change as they attempt to move up the standings. Some of the bad deals are headed out to pasture as UFAs, but there remain some veteran eyesore deals on the books.

That said, Anaheim has so much cap room that it's hardly constrained by a wasted few million here or there. Like several other bad teams on this list, the Ducks are going to need to prioritize turning cap space into picks, prospects and young players on whom they can make savvy bets.

Getting the RFA contracts for Dostal and Mason McTavish right will be a good start, as they look like two solid pillars to build around.

### 24. Philadelphia Flyers

2025-26 salaries: \$75 million

RFAs estimate: \$17 million

Dead money: \$11.6 million (Ryan Ellis LTIR; Kevin Hayes retention; Cam Atkinson buyout)

Notable UFAs: None

Projected cap space: \$8 million (30th)

Biggest decision: Is now the time to help the roster make a playoff push before the deadline?

That is a lot of dead money. The good news is Ellis can go off the books on LTIR if they need the space, and the other black marks only have one season remaining, as the Flyers attempt to exit rebuild mode.

What makes their cap situation difficult to read is that while they have 19 players signed for next season, they're also clearly looking hard at the trade market. They also have a lot of RFAs who need new contracts, contracts that could end up eating up much of their 2025-26 flexibility. And it's unclear what exactly Morgan Frost, Tyson Foerster, Jamie Drysdale and Ivan Fedotov are going to become as NHLers.

Philadelphia also has a handful of overpriced veterans sprinkled on its cap sheet beyond this season (i.e. Sean Couturier and Rasmus Ristolainen), deals that take away from some of the positives like the play of Calder candidate Matvei Michkov and young defensemen Cam York and Emil Andrae.

The future looks bright, depending on how the Flyers navigate these financial hurdles over the next eight months.

## 25. Detroit Red Wings

2025-26 salaries: \$70 million

RFAs estimate: Minimal

Dead money: \$1 million (the never-ending Justin Abdelkader buyout)

Notable UFAs: Patrick Kane, Jeff Petry, Alex Lyon

Projected cap space: \$23 million (12th)

Biggest decision: What exactly is the Yzerplan here?

The Red Wings are once again a .500 team, as the rebuild approaches a decade. There are some flickers of hope in the play of the likes of Simon Edvinsson, who looks like he'll be a top-pairing D for years, but there's a lot of grimness here, too.

They've whiffed on a lot of free agents, many of whom have plenty of term left. Ville Husso's contract will finally, mercifully come off the books in July, but Andrew Copp, J.T. Compher, Vladimir Tarasenko, Justin Holl and Ben Chiarot are collectively eating up nearly \$25 million next season. Erik Gustafsson has been a low-level disaster, too, as yet another NHL coach doesn't trust him enough to give him real minutes.

The good news is they have one of the top prospect pools in the game, and at some point, reinforcements are coming. For now, however, they need to stop lighting money on fire in free agency and start to find some value propositions in the market. Perhaps they can even find a way to offload some of their mistakes along the way?

## 26. Chicago Blackhawks

2025-26 salaries: \$57 million

RFAs estimate: \$4 million

Dead money: None

Notable UFAs: Taylor Hall, Pat Maroon, Ryan Donato, Alec Martinez, Craig Smith

Projected cap space: \$33 million (3rd)

Biggest decision: How do you best support the young cast without more free-agent misfires?

We all know Chicago is still in the midst of a long teardown rebuild, so signing a few overpriced veterans to serve as mentors isn't the end of the world. That said, the Blackhawks have a lot of bad money on the books right now, which makes it hard to place them very high on a ranking like this.

In fact, the only really good contract they might have on their books that has term (other than Connor Bedard and the other ELCs) might be Alex Vlasic's.

This is a roster years away from contention, though. Perhaps the best play here will be to take on other teams' bad money as a way to continue to add future assets. It's hard to see many of these veterans being around the next time this group makes the playoffs.

## 27. San Jose Sharks

2025-26 salaries: \$52 million

RFAs estimate: \$6 million

Dead money: \$13 million (Logan Couture LTIR; Martin Jones, Erik Karlsson and Tomas Hertl retention; Nikolai Knyzhov buyout)

Notable UFAs: Mackenzie Blackwood, Vitek Vanecek, Mikael Granlund, Cody Ceci, Luke Kunin, Jan Rutta, Nico Sturm

Projected cap space: \$45 million (1st)

Biggest decision: Can they turn half a roster of cap space into something that will accelerate the rebuild?

Another team that was successful for ages that's now in the midst of an ugly teardown. The Sharks have enough cap space to do some serious damage on the free-agent market, but the question for the organization will be whether now is the time to spend big.

The good news is they're finally getting to the end of some of their legacy contracts like \$7 million a season for Marc-Edouard Vlasic that has only one year left. And as evidenced by the UFA list above, so many of their deals are only for this season that they'll have endless flexibility after a trade deadline purge and into free agency.

Keeping the contracts short-term going forward makes sense, as they don't want to have any more ugly commitments when Macklin Celebrini — who is already showing signs of being ahead of schedule — establishes himself as a superstar.

## 28. Nashville Predators

2025-26 salaries: \$79 million

RFAs estimate: \$3 million

Dead money: \$8.8 million (Matt Duchene and Kyle Turris buyouts, Mattias Ekholm retention)

Notable UFAs: Gustav Nyqvist

Projected cap space: \$12 million (26th)

Biggest decision: Can this roster contend or is it time for a new chapter?

When you go from making the playoffs to signing three of the biggest UFAs in the summer to suddenly sitting 31st a quarter of the way through the following season, with your GM wondering aloud if he should rebuild, that's ... not great. To put it mildly.

If the Predators continue to bomb out, they're going to face a real crossroads. This isn't a young roster — they were the NHL's second oldest team at season's start — and their splashy new additions all came with contracts that looked questionable at the time and appear even worse now that they're not producing.

Nashville's somehow already committed nearly \$80 million to this, with 17 players signed for next season, and it has some superstars (Roman Josi, Filip Forsberg and Juuse Saros) that should be able to elevate the team well beyond the league's basement over time. But you add in the massive buyouts still on the books that eat up nearly 10 percent of the cap, and it's a tough situation.

Maybe the stars get this turned around, but it's getting late early in Tennessee this year.

#### 29. Pittsburgh Penguins

2025-26 salaries: \$68 million

RFAs estimate: \$3.5 million

Dead money: \$917,000 (Jack Johnson buyout)

Notable UFAs: Matt Grzelcyk, Drew O'Connor, Marcus Pettersson, Anthony Beauvillier, Jesse Puljujarvi

Projected cap space: \$23 million (13th)

Biggest decision: Can you really rebuild with Sidney Crosby on the roster?

Nearly \$70 million in 2025-26 dedicated to one of the NHL's oldest rosters that's currently fourth last in the league. With one of the greatest players of all time on it, still playing well above his \$8.7 million cap hit.

The Penguins' downfall has been hard to watch over the last few years. This is a franchise that has needed to enter a rebuild for a while now, but with new ownership pushing back against a teardown, and Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and Kris Letang still playing solid hockey, what exactly do you do here?

Pittsburgh's bad contracts have started to look worse with age, beginning with Tristan Jarry, who has already spent time in the AHL this season and owns a gnarly .868 save percentage. Jarry combined with Ryan Graves, Rickard Rakell, Noel Acciari, Kevin Hayes and Erik Karlsson are making an eye-watering \$30 million-plus, and they all have term remaining beyond this season.

In fact, two of the Penguins' best contracts (Pettersson and O'Connor) are going UFA and those players may be trade deadline casualties.

It's not good, all around.

#### 30. Seattle Kraken

2025-26 salaries: \$79 million

RFAs estimate: \$4.5 million

Dead money: None

Notable UFAs: Yanni Gourde, Brandon Tanev, Daniel Sprong, Will Borgen

Projected cap space: \$10 million (28th)

Biggest decision: Is it time to stop chasing the overpriced UFA class?

The Kraken have been a bit of a strangely built club from their inception. How they handled the expansion draft was odd. A lot of their more recent signings have felt overpriced and misguided. Their prospect pool is middling. And their cap sheet is now cluttered to the point they really don't have a lot of flexibility.

Meanwhile, they're off to another below-average start, and the playoffs feel like a pretty steep long shot. It's hard to get a read on what the plan is in the Pacific Northwest right now.

Joey Daccord and Vince Dunn have been nice wins for the organization, but they've both now been paid and are overshadowed by contracts given to Chandler Stephenson, Philipp Grubauer, Andre Burakovsky and Brandon Montour.

The good news? They probably don't have enough cap room this summer to do any more damage on July 1.

31. St. Louis Blues

2025-26 salaries: \$86 million

RFA estimate: \$4 million

Dead money: None

Notable UFAs: Ryan Suter, Radek Faksa

Projected cap space: \$4 million (32nd)

Biggest decision: How do they get better with very little room to work with?

The Blues are almost already capped out for next season, despite being 24th in the standings and struggling desperately to score. They haven't picked higher than 10th in the draft since 2008, and their prospect pool ranks in the middle of the pack.

They have some impressive talent in Jordan Kyrou and Robert Thomas, and their twin offer sheets against the Oilers have worked out well, but there are a lot of over-the-hill players on this roster committed to too much term and dollars.

There aren't many wins on the Blues cap sheet right now. Or in the standings, for that matter.

32. New York Islanders

2025-26 salaries: \$67 million

RFAs estimate: \$18 million

Dead money: None

Notable UFAs: Brock Nelson, Kyle Palmieri

Projected cap space: \$9 million (29th)

Biggest decision: Is it time for a change at the top?

The Islanders have one of the worst records in the league and are third last in goals per game. They're brutal on the power play and the penalty kill. Their pricey goalie tandem is producing close to league average results. And they also have one of the NHL's oldest rosters and are committed with term to some of their worst overpayments.

They have some tough RFA calls to make, led by Noah Dobson, who's earned a massive raise. And their top two scorers, who are on two of the organization's better contracts, are about to go UFA and land huge paydays.

I'm not sure that \$9 million in cap space is going to be enough to right the ship here.



## [The Athletic / Ranking the 4 Nations Face-Off rosters: America's golden era is here](#)

By Dom Luszczyszyn- December 5, 2024

The rosters for the 4 Nations Face-Off have been unveiled. Now it's time to analyze them.

It's no small task assembling a team to represent Canada, Finland, Sweden or the United States. There are a lot of difficult choices to be made around the margins when it comes to fit and usage; it isn't as simple as picking the top scorers and saying "done." How each team comes together in a short tournament may matter more than how good each team is on paper.

Still, the actual talent assembled matters and that's what we're here to discuss.

From best to worst, here's how each country stacks up for the tournament. Projections for how the tournament is expected to unfold follow at the bottom.

### United States

This is America's golden era and its tournament to lose.

No team is deeper than Team USA, a group that has no holes throughout its lineup and is stacked at every position. There are no real flaws here as the U.S. finally has the high-end talent to match Canada, specifically with superstars down the middle and on defense.

The glut of centers (the U.S. is bringing seven) means some folks will be on the wing. Could that mean Jack Hughes (who isn't great at draws) on a top line with Auston Matthews and Matthew Tkachuk? It certainly feels like a perfect fit. There's a lot of versatility in America's forwards and a lot of interesting ways to make the pieces fit with a strong mix of varying skill sets. That should make chemistry easy to manufacture, which is a big plus.

That said, I think there might be some regret in not bringing Tage Thompson. The one area the U.S. still lacks relative to Canada is pure firepower — an area where Thompson's presence would've bridged the gap. Having both Vincent Trocheck and Brock Nelson — both great and worthy players — feels a little redundant.

Team USA's forwards come up a bit short of Canada's, but they more than make up for that on the back end and between the pipes. America's blue line is deep. Quinn Hughes and Adam Fox are top three defensemen in the world and Zach Werenski is playing like one this season. Charlie McAvoy, Jaccob Slavin and Brock Faber are all terrific shutdown defensemen who give the U.S. three excellent pairs with complementary skills. Put that in front of Connor Hellebuyck, the best goalie in the world, and this team will be extremely difficult to penetrate.

Hellebuyck, Jake Oettinger and Jeremy Swayman are the ultimate trump cards here, as the U.S. and Canada have otherwise equal rosters, according to their Net Ratings. And that's a helluva difference. It's the reason the United States is the team to beat.

### Canada

For the first time in a long time, Canada is not the team to beat. Not only have the Americans closed the talent gap, but also they have arguably surpassed the Canadians on paper.

Canada has a lot of firepower throughout the lineup and that will be its biggest edge in this tournament. Between Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar, Canada has three of the five best players

in the world — a massive advantage. Even after them, the team is loaded with offensive talent; the emergence of Sam Reinhart as one of the best players in the world is especially helpful. A growing identity of gritty skill is present throughout the lineup — especially with some of Canada's savvy bottom six choices — which should make Canada annoyingly difficult to play against.

There's obviously a lot of talent here and it's why Canada enters the tournament with the highest Offensive Rating of any team, narrowly edging USA. Where there's some comparative trouble is on defense, as Canada has the lowest Defensive Rating of any country.

That starts between the pipes, where Jordan Binnington might be Canada's best option but is probably the eighth-best goaltender at the tournament — a bad sign given there are only four teams.

The issues go beyond that with a back end that isn't as sturdy as what Canada used to tout during its golden era. Makar is great and Josh Morrissey, too — but everyone else carries question marks. Devon Toews hasn't looked himself this season, while Alex Pietrangelo and Shea Theodore have been getting buried at five-on-five in Vegas.

That may have led to some safe choices in Travis Sanheim and Colton Parayko, though it's debatable whether either has the dynamic high-end ability to make the most of Canada's offensive strengths. Leaning into Canada's overwhelming offensive advantage with Evan Bouchard on the back end (especially considering his improved defensive game over the last year) would've closed the gap considerably between Canada and the U.S. Instead, Canada played it safe with this era's Eric Brewer and, as a result, enters the tournament with the third-best blue line.

Canada is still loaded with talent, but the team definitely has some vulnerabilities that can be exploited. More so than usual. The Canadians are strong enough to win, but the Americans look a little bit better.

## Sweden

Sweden's biggest strength, as usual, lies within its back end. The chosen group still brings the heat, especially with how strong Victor Hedman has looked this season. He's at his best right now and should lead a deep blue line that features an elite shutdown trifecta of Mattias Ekholm, Gustav Forsling and Jonas Brodin. It's the second-best defense group in the tournament.

There's a reason Sweden is firmly third fiddle here to Canada and the U.S., though. Though its goaltending is better than Canada's, Sweden still greatly lags behind the U.S. between the pipes. The bigger issue, though, is up front, where Sweden lacks the same high-end talent that Canada, the U.S. and even Finland possess.

Elias Pettersson, William Nylander and Filip Forsberg are all terrific players — they're franchise-caliber. But they would not be top three forwards on any of the other three teams. That's a huge disadvantage when the team is going to be staring down McDavid, Matthews and Aleksander Barkov. As deep as the team's defense is, the same can be said there. Hedman has been amazing, but he's no Makar, Hughes or Miro Heiskanen.

Up front, Sweden also lacks secondary weapons beyond its big three. Jesper Bratt is a wonderful player, but the drop-off after him is quite stark. Mika Zibanejad's epic decline this season really hurts.

The Swedes will be a tough out, but there's a fairly large gap between them and the two North American juggernauts.

## Finland

The Finns have a strong nucleus of talent at the top of the lineup, more so than even Sweden. Between Barkov, Mikko Rantanen, Sebastian Aho, Roope Hintz, Miro Heiskanen and Juuse Saros, Finland has a

very special group of top-end talent that can rival some of the best that Canada and the U.S. have to offer. That much of it is concentrated down the middle helps, too, as the Finns are right there with Canada and the U.S. in center talent.

The problem is there just isn't enough elsewhere. Finland still lacks in secondary talent and that shows in both its bottom six and, well, every defenseman not named Miro Heiskanen.

Finland has a reputation for being frisky and has the will to make any game more interesting. Having the second-best Defensive Rating behind USA backed by the second-best goaltending can help with that, but that's probably Finland's only path to victory. The other three nations have more ways to get ahead and it's why Finland will enter every game in this tournament a sizeable step behind the competition.

The odds

It's no surprise the United States and Canada lead the pack here, winning the tournament 78 percent of the time. That doesn't mean Sweden and Finland shouldn't bother showing up, but given the talent disparity, their chances of making noise — even in a short tournament — are slimmer.

## The Athletic / Canada announces roster for 4 Nations: Snubs, surprises and expectations

**By Chris Johnston, Pierre LeBrun and Julian McKenzie- December 5, 2024**

Team Canada revealed its 23-man roster for February's 4 Nations Face-Off tournament on Wednesday.

Forwards Mitch Marner, Sam Reinhart, Anthony Cirelli, Brandon Hagel, Travis Konecny, Mark Stone and Seth Jarvis were added to Canada's roster, with Alex Pietrangelo, Shea Theodore, Travis Sanheim, Devon Toews, Colton Parayko and Josh Morrissey joining as defensemen.

Forwards Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon, Brayden Point, Brad Marchand and Sidney Crosby, along with defenseman Cale Makar had already been named as the first six members of Team Canada in June.

Canada's goaltending has been subject to much debate in anticipation of Wednesday's roster reveal. The Canadians' trio consists of Jordan Binnington, Adin Hill and Sam Montembeault.

Canada is being led by Tampa Bay Lightning head coach Jon Cooper behind the bench, flanked by assistant coaches Bruce Cassidy, Pete DeBoer, Rick Tocchet, Mishka Donskov and Lightning video coach James Emery. Cooper is also expected to lead Canada at the 2026 Olympic Games in Milan and Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy.

Every Team Canada has more qualified forwards than the number of available roster spots, so the most notable omissions can be found there in Zach Hyman, John Tavares, Mark Scheifele and Connor Bedard.

Hyman is coming off a 70-goal season (postseason included) spent playing alongside Connor McDavid. Tavares has been in a top form for the Toronto Maple Leafs this season and has a vast international resume that includes serving as Canada's captain at the IIHF World Hockey Championship in May. Scheifele is scoring at better than a point-per-game pace for the high-flying Winnipeg Jets. And Bedard is a 19-year-old wunderkind who rewrote the record book while representing his country at the world junior championship.

The snubs on the back end include Evan Bouchard and Noah Dobson, aged 25 and 24, respectively. They're both high-end puck distributors coming off big seasons. — Chris Johnston

### Surprises

Jarvis jumps off the page as the player least expected to battle his way onto this version of Team Canada. He doesn't have the resume of many other players left at home. And at 5-foot-10, he doesn't have the size, either.

But the 22-year-old Carolina Hurricanes winger does possess slick playmaking ability and a competitive spirit, which makes him a selection with upside. He could become a Team Canada fixture if things go well.

On the back end, few saw Parayko securing a spot among Canada's top seven, but as a big man with Stanley Cup-winning pedigree who is capable of logging tough minutes, he brought more security than some other choices.

Montembeault isn't a surprise, per se, but his save percentage this season is lagging behind Cam Talbot, Logan Thompson, Mackenzie Blackwood, Marc-Andre Fleury and Darcy Kuemper. Each of those other Canadian goalies will be watching the tournament from home. — Johnston

### Expectations

Fair or not, any player that pulls a Canadian national team sweater over their head is expected to win. That's especially true in best-on-best men's competition, where Canada has won four of the past five tournaments and nine of 13 overall.

Even with the country's decade of dominance now a long way in the rear-view mirror, the high hopes remain.

Canada will try to overwhelm opponents with its depth. Cooper can run out McDavid, Crosby, Point and Cirelli down the middle. If for whatever reason that isn't working, he's got MacKinnon and Bennett as ready-made options to slide to center.

And for good measure, Cooper's got Makar to serve as the heartbeat of a blue line that features a nice blend of size, smarts and elite decision-makers.

Even with the questions (or doubts) in goal, this is a roster built to execute at a high level that intends to keep opponents at bay in hard-fought games by limiting mistakes. Canada expects three goals to be good enough to win against any team in the tournament. — Johnston

## The Athletic / U.S. announces roster for 4 Nations: Snubs, surprises and expectations

**By Michael Russo and Julian McKenzie- December 5, 2024**

The United States' roster for the 4 Nations Face-Off has been revealed.

Team USA's management group, which consists of GM Bill Guerin, assistant GMs Chris Drury, Tom Fitzgerald and Bill Zito, and director of player personnel Chris Kelleher, announced Wednesday that forwards Jack Hughes, Matt Boldy, Brady Tkachuk, Kyle Connor, Jake Guentzel, Chris Kreider, J.T. Miller, Vincent Trocheck, Dylan Larkin and Brock Nelson are joining the team's roster for the international best-on-best event in February, as well as defensemen Jaccob Slavin, Zach Werenski, Brock Faber and Noah Hanifin.

Forwards Jack Eichel, Auston Matthews, Matthew Tkachuk and defensemen Quinn Hughes, Adam Fox and Charlie McAvoy were the first six players added to the roster, unveiled in June.

The Americans' goaltending trio will be reigning Vezina Trophy winner Connor Hellebuyck, Jake Oettinger and Jeremy Swayman.

Pittsburgh Penguins head coach Mike Sullivan is assuming the same duties for Team USA, joined by assistants John Hynes, John Tortorella and David Quinn.

The management and coaching staffs have been meeting virtually and in person since the summer to discuss the roster. Asked what it's like to be part of such a collection of characters, Sullivan said, "There are a lot of laughs, I'll tell you that. There's a lot of laughs. And nobody's funnier than Billy G. He just has an uncanny way to get everybody laughing ... at some of the most inopportune times.

"It's a fun a group to be associated with because nobody takes themselves too seriously. We get very serious about the business at hand, but the whole group likes to have a lot of fun. And everybody understands that this endeavor is way bigger than any one of us. All the egos are checked at the door. We just want to do the right thing and work hard to try to do our best to be the most competitive group we can to set us up for success."

The 4 Nations Face-Off will run Feb. 12 to 20 in Montreal and Boston.

Cole Caufield leads all American NHLers with 16 goals, yet despite the tournament starting in his home arena and having earned management's respect at the World Championship, the flashy scorer was left off the roster. Same with Tage Thompson, the 6-foot-6 center who has scored 13 goals this season.

These were tough choices, but the U.S. management group felt that Caufield would have to conform to being a fourth-liner and that other players would be better suited for that role, in addition to killing penalties. In essence, he was too much like Boldy and Jack Hughes.

As for Thompson, it's a similar rationale. Matthews, Eichel, who could be a Hart Trophy contender, and Hughes, who has been exceptional of late, are simply higher on the center depth chart, and management thinks other forwards are more versatile. Fair or not, management also wants battle-tested players, and the Sabres have been a perennial playoff outsider during Thompson's six years there.

If a center has to bow out before the tournament, he's likely first out of the bullpen.

Other snubs up front include future Hall of Famer Patrick Kane, Alex DeBrincat, Jason Robertson, Clayton Keller and Brock Boeser. On the back end, the most glaring are John Carlson, Neal Pionk, who is having a fabulous season, and Jake Sanderson.

Sanderson, 22, was close to making the team and could very well be an Olympian in a year's time. — Michael Russo

### Surprises

There was a lot of debate around Brock Nelson, Vincent Trocheck and Chris Kreider, and all three ended up on the roster because of the different roles they could play.

It may not be fair to call Nelson a surprise. He may be from the outside, but the U.S. management group and coaching staff adore the Islanders forward, considering him a chameleon who can play anywhere — up the lineup, down the lineup, taking big draws, wing or center, and killing penalties. That flexibility was too appealing to leave off.

Kreider and Trocheck have not had great years for a New York Rangers team that is spiraling out of control, but in a short tournament, the staff feels they'd be suited for fourth-line and penalty-kill roles.

Boldy played himself onto the team as point-per-game player for the NHL-leading Minnesota Wild, as did Zach Werenski, who may be playing better than any of the U.S. defensemen right now, and Noah Hanifin. — Russo

### Expectations

Plain and simple, the expectation is to win the tournament as a precursor to an Olympic gold medal in Milan in 2026.

The U.S. is elite up the middle, led by Matthews, the best goal scorer in the game, and Eichel, who may be the team's best matchup center.

The Americans also have tons of goal-scoring on the wing with the Tkachuk brothers, Connor, Guentzel and Boldy, plus a well-balanced blue line with elite power-play guys Fox and Quinn Hughes, as well as two-way, elite-skating defensemen like McAvoy and Faber. And they have the best goalie trio in the tournament.

What Guerin will be looking for is buy-in, and so far, so good.

On Thanksgiving, Fitzgerald called his Devils player, Jack Hughes, and cousin, Brady Tkachuk, to tell them they made the team. Guerin called everybody else — excluding the six named in June.

"Pure excitement from every single one of them," Guerin said. "It was awesome. Just the excitement, the appreciation to be part of this team. Every guy said, 'Whatever you need, whatever it takes, I'll do anything, play anywhere, play with anybody.'" — Russo

## The Athletic / Finland's game plan for 4 Nations glory: 'You have to be ready right away'

By Chris Johnston- December 5, 2024

More than half of the Finnish players who have suited up for an NHL game this season secured an invite to the 4 Nations Face-Off.

It's true! The 23-man roster, announced Wednesday, was curated from an available pool of just 45.

They are the underdogs of the Feb. 12 to 20 tournament, as noted by goaltender Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, who attached an important qualifier to that statement: "But there's some firepower, too."

Yes, but even with 100-point man Mikko Rantanen and Stanley Cup-winning captain Aleksander Barkov and the stirring return of sniper Patrik Laine, the Finns pose a threat to the bigger names from bigger nations not because of their own growing star power.

It's because they know exactly who they are.

Finns have been outpunching their weight at major international hockey tournaments for a couple of decades now. In the process, they've developed a unifying identity that gets passed from team to team no matter which names are stitched onto the backs of the Lions sweaters.

"In general, a Finnish player is a good team player," said head coach Antti Pennanen.

Following what he described as a "long process" to finalize the 4 Nations roster with a management staff led by general manager Jere Lehtinen — "lots of meetings," said Pennanen — the coach sketched out a vision for the team that could have been ripped directly out of the playbook of any of his predecessors.

"We have to have good defense," Pennanen said. "I mean overall good defense, not just D-men. ... We know that we don't have too many (defensemen) who are playing in the NHL, but still we have a good back end. Strong and big, and they are able to play against top forwards.

"I think we have a chance and are able to be a committed team."

In other words, the path they see through the USA, Canada and Sweden is paved through suffocation rather than trying to fight strength with strength. They will devise a patient game plan and expect even their most talented forwards to stick to structure. They will lean on a blue line built with players ranging from 6-foot-2 (Miro Heiskanen, Olli Määttä) to 6-foot-7 (Jani Hakanpää). And they will place faith in three goaltenders who are all filling No. 1 roles in the NHL so far this season: Juuse Saros of the Nashville Predators, Kevin Lankinen of the Vancouver Canucks and Luukkonen of the Buffalo Sabres.

"I would say it's pretty solid throughout the lineup," defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen of the Philadelphia Flyers said. "A lot of skill. A lot of speed. And then just good goaltending. I really think it's a strong group of guys, and I can't wait to get started."

The Finns will need to score too, of course, and Laine's selection can largely be chalked up to that need. He's only played one NHL game in the calendar year 2024 after entering the NHL/NHLPA Player Assistance Program last season and then suffering a knee sprain during training camp with the Montreal Canadiens in September.

However, Laine possesses a shot few in the world can match. He flashed it Tuesday while scoring in his Canadiens debut against the New York Islanders with a lethal wrister. What that can mean for the Finnish power play, in particular, helped earn him a spot on the roster despite the extended layoff.



“We know Laine, what he’s capable (of doing),” Lehtinen said. “Power play, what he can do there. And of course in a short tournament, the special teams are going to be a big part of that.

“Overall, there’s two months before the tournament starts so there’s a lot of games before then. I think it’s enough time to get him in a good game shape and playing well there.”

The Finns will find comfort in being able to roll out some of the best two-way centers in the world. That group is led by Barkov, a two-time Selke Trophy winner, and includes Sebastian Aho of the Carolina Hurricanes and Roope Hintz of the Dallas Stars.

Anton Lundell, the potential fourth-line center, is one of four members of this Finnish team who won a Stanley Cup alongside Barkov with Florida earlier this year and should be a notable depth contributor to look out for.

“We have lots of good leaders and characters,” Pennanen said.

“(That playoff experience brings) big value,” Lehtinen said. “You have a few who won and who have been in tough situations through their careers. It’s a quick tournament. You have to be ready right away and play good hockey if you want to succeed there.”

## The Athletic / Sweden announces roster for 4 Nations: Snubs, surprises and expectations

**By Pierre LeBrun and Julian McKenzie- December 5, 2024**

Team Sweden has released its full 23-man roster for February's 4 Nations Face-Off.

Forwards Elias Pettersson, Jesper Bratt, William Karlsson, Leo Carlsson, Lucas Raymond, Viktor Arvidsson, Elias Lindholm, Gustav Nyquist, Adrian Kempe and Joel Eriksson Ek, and defensemen Rasmus Dahlin, Mattias Ekholm, Jonas Brodin and Rasmus Andersson were added to Team Sweden's roster for the international best-on-best tournament.

Sweden had already named forwards William Nylander, Mika Zibanejad and Filip Forsberg, and defensemen Victor Hedman, Erik Karlsson and Gustav Forsling to its roster.

Jacob Markström, Linus Ullmark and Filip Gustavsson are Sweden's three goaltenders for the tournament.

Sam Hallam will lead Team Sweden as their head coach and former NHLer Daniel Alfredsson will be an assistant on the team's coaching staff.

The 4 Nations Face-Off will take place in Montreal and Boston from Feb. 12 to 20.

Full roster

(Note: Highlighted players had already been named to the roster.)

Snubs

With Forsling, Hedman and Karlsson already named in June, there were only four spots on the blue line open with more than double the choices available. It was never going to be easy to make those final few D picks.

Hampus Lindholm, Adam Larsson, Oliver Ekman-Larsson, Simon Edvinsson and Philip Broberg were among the good NHL blueliners passed over, and I do wonder how much Lindholm's injury status played into that final decision.

But it's hard to argue with taking any of Mattias Ekholm, Rasmus Andersson, Rasmus Dahlin and Jonas Brodin.

I probably would have gone with Lindholm over Brodin myself, but that's a close call, to be sure. Lindholm is still out a few more weeks for the Boston Bruins, so again, with the tournament two months away, I'm not sure why that injury should have overly mattered. Besides, Brodin himself is currently injured.

Perhaps some people would have taken Lindholm over Andersson, too, but the Swedes are short on right-handed D so that certainly played in Andersson's favor.

Up front, William Eklund was the top-scoring NHL Swede left off the 4 Nations roster. And I'm surprised veteran Flames captain Mikael Backlund was left off. — Pierre LeBrun, senior NHL columnist

Surprises

For me, it's no Backlund or Lindholm. Both are tremendous defensive players at each of their respective positions. I asked Hallam back more than a month ago about his team's overall philosophy entering the 4 Nations and he said this:

“It’s about winning. Getting to the final and winning,” Hallam said. “I won’t say that there’s an ideology that I stand for, I think we have to see the circumstances here. We get together for two days and then we have to play Canada. I think you know a couple of guys in their lineup (he chuckled). We need to be ready to play very well defensively and take our chances. I believe in that. Traditionally, Sweden has always had their biggest strengths in the team game. We want to keep on building on that tradition.

“We also have some offensive firepower in our lineup and of course want to put them in good situations,” he added. “But in a short period like this, it’s going to be a lot of smart plays, smart defensive plays, having the patience and having the structure to stay in the game and control some of the best players in the world.”

So that last part of smart defensive hockey just left me with the impression that guys like Lindholm and Backlund would have a role. — LeBrun

#### Expectations

Hallam is the only head coach in the 4 Nations event who has full autonomy on roster selection, and his decision-making was on full display Wednesday with the Swedish team reveal.

It is a talented squad that will try to win low-scoring games.

The expectation is to win it all, as Hallam shared with The Athletic. And the Swedes have the team to do it. They’re especially deep on the blue line and in goal.

I’m curious whether they will match up well enough offensively with Team USA and Team Canada. That’s where I would have concern.

But traditionally the Swedes come together quickly and that’s key in a short event. Don’t count them out. — LeBrun

## The Athletic / Finland announces roster for 4 Nations: Snubs, surprises and expectations

By Chris Johnston and Julian McKenzie- December 5, 2024

Team Finland's roster for the upcoming 4 Nations Face-Off has been released.

The Finns announced Wednesday that forwards Mikael Granlund, Artturi Lehkonen, Teuvo Teräväinen, Roope Hintz, Kaapo Kakko, Joel Armia, Patrik Laine, Anton Lundell, Erik Haula, Eetu Luostarinen have been added to their roster for the international best-on-best event, along with defensemen Niko Mikkola, Olli Määttä, Jani Hakanpää, Juuso Välimäki and Rasmus Ristolainen.

Kevin Lankinen and Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen have also been added as goaltenders.

Aleksander Barkov, Sebastian Aho, Mikko Rantanen, Miro Heiskanen, Esa Lindell and Juuse Saros were already named to the Finnish roster in June.

Antti Pennanen is Finland's head coach at the 4 Nations Face-Off. The 45-year-old will be joined by former NHLer Tuomo Ruutu as an assistant.

The 4 Nations Face-Off will run Feb. 12 to 20 in Montreal and Boston.

Full roster

(Note: Highlighted players had already been named to the roster.)

Snubs

Finland drew from the smallest NHL player pool of participating nations and was left with fewer tough roster choices as a result. This team is deep down the middle, and Carolina Hurricanes center Jesperi Kotkaniemi was squeezed out of the picture as a result.

Kotkaniemi has the ninth-highest point total among Finnish skaters this season with 13 — more than multiple players who were selected ahead of him.

The other notable omission is defenseman Henri Jokiharju, who has appeared in 19 games for the Buffalo Sabres this season and was the only everyday Finnish player at that position who was passed over. — Chris Johnston

Surprises

Patrik Laine played his first meaningful NHL game in nearly a year on Tuesday, which made his inclusion a mild surprise. While he is without question Finland's most dangerous shooter, the lack of game form initially had him on the outside of the roster looking in.

However, management recognized that this team may struggle to produce offensively, and with Laine returning to the Montreal Canadiens lineup a full two months ahead of the tournament there was added comfort that he'll have a good runway to ramp up.

The towering presence of Jani Hakanpää was perhaps even more unexpected. The right-shooting Toronto Maple Leafs defenseman has only been healthy enough to skate in two NHL games since last March because of a significant knee injury, but he's got built-in chemistry with former Dallas Stars teammate Esa Lindell. — Johnston

Expectations

You can set your watch to how Finland will show up at an international hockey event: They're going to play hard, they're going to be incredibly detailed and they're going to make sure that nothing comes easily to an opponent.

That formula has helped deliver a small but mighty nation an outsized amount of success on the world stage in recent years.

The Finns don't have as many front-line scoring stars to bring to the 4 Nations Face-Off as the teams they'll be going up against, and the seven defensemen they picked were taken from a group of just 10 Finnish defensemen that have played in the NHL this season. Goaltending remains a strength, but they may not even have the strongest crease in the tournament.

Still, the Finns will arrive in Montreal believing they can beat everyone. And they just might. — Johnston

## The Athletic / Which bad NHL teams' fans might be nearing a tipping point of hopelessness?

By Sean McIndoe- December 5, 2024

Somebody should probably check on Duane.

You remember Duane, the disgruntled Buffalo fan who reached his breaking point in January 2020. Frustrated after watching his beloved Sabres spin their wheels on their way to what would be their 10th straight playoff miss, Duane decided he had to do something. So he called into a local radio station, took a deep breath, and then opened up an emotional vein.

He went in on the players. He went in on management. He went in (especially) on ownership. It was a hard listen, but no real fan could turn away, because we've all been there at some point. As I wrote at the time, we were all Duane.

But some of us were more Duane than others, because some teams are more hopeless than others. And so a few days after Duane's meltdown, I went through the league to try to figure out which fan base would be the next to hit rock bottom. And almost five full years later, it's time to ask that question again.

We can start with some good news. Of the nine teams in that 2020 post, three have been reasonably good in the years since — the Rangers, Wild and Devils haven't won any Cups, but they've all had more ups than downs over the last five years. Sometimes, there really is a reason for hope.

Other teams haven't been as lucky. So today, we're going to use the same scoring system as last time to figure out which team's fans should be closest to a Duane-like nadir. To qualify for consideration, a team has to be in danger of missing the playoffs for at least a third straight season. You wouldn't think a league with as much parity as the NHL would have all that many teams on their way to a three-peat, but it's a longer list than you'd think, with 12 teams in all. It's a group that doesn't even include a few fan bases who probably feel pretty miserable right now, including the Bruins, Rangers, Islanders and Predators, since they all made the playoffs last year. All I can say is wait your turn, everyone.

This is always a tricky exercise, since (as you'll no doubt see in the comments), some fans insist on eternal optimism while others take pride in being as miserable as possible. The reality is that all of these fan bases have it bad. But who's got it the worst? Let's start counting down ...

### 12. Utah Hockey Club

Recent history: 7/10. OK, according to the league they have no history, and are a brand-new team. But we all know these are the Coyotes, and that team never won anything and last made the playoffs in 2020.

Lack of faith in ownership/management: 1/10. You mean the new owner who just managed to sneak a team into town out of nowhere? Yeah, we like that guy.

Future hopelessness: 3/10. They don't have a franchise-level stud to build around, but they're young, the pipeline is good, and the cap is reasonably clear.

Bonus points: -3, because if you're a fan in Utah and you're already complaining after two months, maybe this isn't the league for you.

Tipping point total: 8/30. Hey, somebody has to set the baseline for everyone else.

### 11. Chicago Blackhawks

Recent history: 6/10. They haven't made the playoffs since the 2020 bubble, and are on pace to be in the running for dead last for the fourth year in a row. Then again, most of their fans can remember multiple Cups.

Lack of faith in ownership/management: 4/10. Kyle Davidson gets a pass for most of those bad years, since he was very clearly tanking. But this year was supposed to be a step forward, so it's fair to say the temperature is starting to drift upwards.

Future hopelessness: 1/10. They have Connor Bedard, not to mention one of the best pipelines in the league.

Bonus points: -2. You're not near rock bottom until other fan bases feel sorry for you. In related news, the Hawks won three Cups in a decade and then the Bedard lottery.

Tipping point total: 9/30. But check back next year if Bedard hasn't snapped out of his slump and we're having the "Wait, is he a bust?" conversation.

#### 10. San Jose Sharks

Recent history: 8/10. Their last playoff appearance was in 2019 and they haven't been all that close since, including a dead-last finish last year.

Lack of faith in ownership/management: 4/10. Mike Grier is still relatively new to the job, and while he hasn't pulled off any miracles, he's been a steady hand at the wheel.

Future hopelessness: 1/10. Between the kids on the roster and the ones on the way, there may not be a team that's more stocked for the future.

Bonus points: -1. For how this season is going, with an opening nine-game losing streak followed by an impressive turnaround that has the Sharks looking like ... well, a very mediocre team, but that's still an improvement.

Tipping point total: 12/30. It's been rough, but right now the Sharks and their fans are right in that sweet spot where the future looks bright but there aren't any real expectations yet. (Unfortunately I can tell you from experience that this phase will feel very naive in hindsight.)

#### 9. Anaheim Ducks

Recent history: 7/10. They haven't made the playoffs since 2018, and haven't won a playoff game since the year before that.

Lack of faith in ownership/management: 4/10. Pat Verbeek has been fine as a rebuild GM, including swooping in on the Cutter Gauthier opportunity last year.

Future hopelessness: 2/10. There's plenty of youth, both here and on the way.

Bonus points: +1. For the ongoing Trevor Zegras situation, which has been frustrating. He's gone from a video game cover-level franchise prospect to slumping young player to trade bait to ... whatever he is now. For a fan base watching a rebuild, the only thing worse than a young bust is one who teases you with sure-thing vibes first.

Tipping point total: 14/30. The Ducks are a bit further ahead on embracing a full-fledged rebuild than comparable teams like the Sharks, which means the pressure to start seeing progress is just a bit higher.

#### 8. Montreal Canadiens

Recent history: 6/10. This will make it four years running without a playoff appearance, which isn't as long as some of the teams on our list, but will be the longest streak in franchise history since the pre-

NHL days. And of course, a Cup drought stretching past 30 years for a team that never used to go longer than seven seasons between championships.

Lack of faith in ownership/management: 3/10. According to our fan confidence survey, it's still reasonably high.

Future hopelessness: 3/10. You'd like to see more from 2022 No. 1 pick Juraj Slafkovský this year, but the pipeline is solid and there are good young players already on the roster. The bigger question in Montreal has always been the ceiling, but in terms of pure volume, they're in solid shape.

Bonus points: +1. For the potentially awkward Martin St. Louis situation, in which a coach everyone in the hockey world seems to love might be seeing his seat warm up. And another +1 just because it's Montreal, where the goal is supposed to be championships and not just sneaking into the playoffs like it is in other markets.

Tipping point total: 14/30. It's Montreal, so you're not going to be able to do a decade-long rebuild in front of an endlessly patient fan base. For now, though, the market seems to be going along with the plan. For now.

## 7. St. Louis Blues

Recent history: 2/10. They barely slip past our benchmark, having made the playoffs as recently as 2022. And of course, almost all of their fans have fresh memories of a Stanley Cup.

Lack of faith in ownership/management: 6/10. They finished in the bottom third of our fan confidence survey. It's hard to know how to factor in the predetermined GM switch that's coming in 2026, although I guess you at least give them credit for having a succession plan, which is more than most teams seem to be able to offer.

Future hopelessness: 9/10. The pipeline is middle-of-the-pack, which is not what you're looking for when you're heading toward a third straight playoff miss. To make matters worse, they've only got three picks in this coming draft, and Mirtle has them ranked as one of the very worst cap situations in the league.

Bonus points: -2. For the whole "Hey, we were in last place in January and still won a Cup" confidence that you could grab onto if you were a certain type of fan. That's delusional thinking, but hey, you take your optimism anywhere you can get it.

Tipping point total: 15/30. This score is actually a bit lower than I thought, and it feels like if we repeated this exercise in a year the Blues could be a team that had a big shift. Still, a recent Cup means there's a floor to any sense of true hopelessness.

## 6. Columbus Blue Jackets

Recent history: 8/10. They haven't made the playoffs since the 2020 bubble, and have only won a single seven-game series in franchise history.

Lack of faith in ownership/management: 4/10. This would have been significantly higher a year ago when Jarmo Kekäläinen was still in charge, but Don Waddell should get a chance to enact his own plan.

Future hopelessness: 3/10. The pipeline is strong and Adam Fantilli may be the best prospect the organization has had since Rick Nash.

Bonus points: +1. For just having traded away a No. 6 pick who, it turns out, could not skate.

Tipping point total: 16/30. Two decades without contending would be tough on anyone, but the vibe in Columbus these days seems to be more "circle the wagons" than "circular firing squad."



## 5. Philadelphia Flyers

Recent history: 6/10. They haven't made the playoffs since the 2020 bubble, although they hung around last year's race longer than anyone expected them to.

Lack of faith in ownership/management: 4/10. Stepping in after a decade of Ron Hextall and Chuck Fletcher will certainly buy a guy a little bit of patience.

Future hopelessness: 6/10. It's only a middle-of-the-pack pipeline, which isn't ideal given where they've been in the standings, and last year's surprisingly competitive season probably hurt more than it helped. Also, some key young pieces, like Morgan Frost, have been marginally disappointing lately. Still, they have Matvei Michkov, and your team doesn't.

Bonus points: +1. Because it's Philadelphia sports, and they don't do patience.

Tipping point total: 17/30. For context, the only other time the Flyers missed the playoffs for five straight years, they made the biggest trade in franchise history to start a new era with Eric Lindros. There seems to be a little more patience around the team this time, but it's still Philadelphia, so the clock is ticking.

## 4. Ottawa Senators

Recent history: 8/10. They haven't been to the playoffs since their surprise run to Game 7 of the conference final in 2017.

Lack of faith in ownership/management: 5/10. This is a tough one. For years, Senators fans had next to no faith in their owner, and rightly so. That lack of faith trickled down to GM Pierre Dorion and eventually coach D.J. Smith. But last year was a time of transition, theoretically clearing the way for progress. Instead, it's been more of the same. So it's not so much a lack of faith in the current regime as it is a lingering doubt as to whether the previous group was the entire problem after all.

Future hopelessness: 3/10. While there are legitimate questions about how high the ceiling is for the current core, it's still young and the pipeline remains solid.

Bonus points: +2 after reading the results of Julian's survey, in which 80 percent of fans say they're not making the playoffs and 70 percent (!) want a major move to the roster.

Tipping point total: 18/30. They have the third-longest playoff drought in the league, and I'm not sure if it makes it better or worse that the other two are in the same division. (By the way, I'm only now realizing how East-heavy the top of this list is. I'm not sure what to do with that information.)

## 3. Pittsburgh Penguins

Recent history: 2/10. This would be their third year without a playoff appearance, but they have multiple Cups in the semi-recent past. They've had worse stretches, including in the early 2000s and a long drought in the mid-80s.

Lack of faith in ownership/management: 8/10. They'll never push a 10/10 rating as long as Mario Lemieux is even vaguely associated with ownership, but stock in the Kyle Dubas era is plummeting. They ranked 29th in our front office confidence rankings, the worst of any team on today's list. (Somewhat weirdly, the three teams behind them — the Leafs, Kings and Islanders — have all regularly made the playoffs lately.)

Future hopelessness: 9/10. They were 26th in Corey's pipeline rankings, which again is the worst of any team on today's list. Even worse, with more than a few dicey contracts on the books, they'll probably need to take a step back before they can even begin a true rebuild.

Bonus points: +2 for the Sidney Crosby factor, as they risk an ugly ending to one of the greatest eras the lottery gods have ever gifted a franchise.

Tipping point total: 21/30. Look, it's the Penguins. The fan base went from Mario to Sid, with a dose of Jaromir and Geno sprinkled in. When your franchise players fall into the one-name category of stardom, nobody outside the fan base is going to feel sorry for you. But this isn't the Leaguewide Empathy rankings; it's about each fan base. And it could be about to get ugly in Pittsburgh.

## 2. Detroit Red Wings

Recent history: 8/10. They haven't made the playoffs since 2016, a stretch that includes a historically bad season in 2019-20. Most of their fan base will still remember the glory years, which helps, but there are Red Wings fans who weren't alive for the last Cup.

Lack of faith in ownership/management: 7/10. For years, it's been the conventional wisdom that the fan base would have essentially limitless faith in Steve Yzerman, because he was Steve Yzerman. I'm not sure that's true anymore; my sense is patience is wearing thin. If you're a Red Wings lifer, you may not want to see your hero get fired, but at the very least you're probably contemplating a move upstairs.

Future hopelessness: 7/10. They've nailed a few picks, but a total lack of help from the lottery gods has left them with a middle-of-the-pack pipeline. That would be good for some teams, but not one that's been this bad for this long.

Bonus points: +1. For the ongoing Derek Lalonde watch, which is somehow already in year four even though he's only in his third season.

Tipping point total: 23/30. There's a part of me that legitimately cannot believe Yzerman's so-perfect-it-was-practically-ordained return to Detroit has gone this poorly. But here we are.

## 1. Buffalo Sabres

Recent history: 10/10. Their last playoff series was in 2011. Since then, they've had zero appearances, which matches the number of championships in franchise history. Ah well, at least the franchise player they spent years tanking for became a villain, got traded to an expansion team and immediately won a Cup.

Lack of faith in ownership/management: 9/10. The clock seems to be ticking on Kevyn Adams. As for ownership, the only good thing you can say about Terry Pegula these days is at least the Bills are good.

Future hopelessness: 4/10. Corey had their pipeline just outside the top 10, but the core is young enough that you can find plenty of hope if you squint.

Bonus points: +1. For the fact that they're hanging right around the playoff bubble so far this season, which would be a good thing for most teams but for the Sabres just makes it feel like Lucy setting up the football for the 14th year in a row.

Tipping point total: 24/30. We'll end the way we began: Somebody should probably check on Duane.

## The Athletic / Two months into the NHL season, what's real and what's not?

By James Mirtle- December 5, 2024

It's been exactly two months since the NHL season started in Prague with games between the New Jersey Devils and Buffalo Sabres.

Since then, the league's 32 teams have played 404 games, or 31 percent of a season.

Yes, we're going to be one-third of the way through the 2024-25 campaign mark later this week.

Hockey's a funny sport, and this can be a weird league. Fringe players go on unbelievable scoring runs. Weak teams pile up wins over a short period, and powerhouses look like minnows over a stretch of a month or two.

To try and make sense of the unusual things that have happened so far, we'll check in on the trends monthly to break down the biggest outliers and whether they have sustaining power behind them. As a reminder of how this works, here was the breakdown of the first month of the season.

Let's dig in.

How teams are on pace to change

Minnesota Wild

88

125

37

Washington Capitals

91

118

27

San Jose Sharks

47

73

26

New Jersey Devils

81

105

24

Anaheim Ducks

59

82

23

Columbus Blue Jackets

66

85

19

Calgary Flames

81

95

14

Vegas Golden Knights

98

110

12

Toronto Maple Leafs

102

109

7

Chicago Blackhawks

52

59

7

Winnipeg Jets

110

114

4

Los Angeles Kings

99

102

3

Utah HC

77

79

2

Philadelphia Flyers

87

89

2

Seattle Kraken

81

79

-2

Carolina Hurricanes

111

108

-3

Ottawa Senators

78

75

-3

Dallas Stars

113

109

-4

Buffalo Sabres

84

79

-5

Tampa Bay Lightning

98

93

-5

Vancouver Canucks

109

103

-7

Montreal Canadiens

76

69

-7

Pittsburgh Penguins

88

79

-9

Florida Panthers

110

101

-9

St Louis Blues

92

82

-10

Edmonton Oilers

104

92

-12

Detroit Red Wings

91

79

-12

New York Islanders

94

79

-15

Colorado Avalanche

107

88

-19

Boston Bruins

109

88

-21

New York Rangers

114

92

-22

Nashville Predators

99

66

-33

We looked at the Minnesota Wild's and Washington Capitals' impressive ascents last month, so let's pivot to highlight a team in the wild-card race almost no one is talking about right now ...

Wait, are the Blue Jackets good now?

The Columbus Blue Jackets very quietly entered Tuesday night's game in Calgary sitting eighth in the Eastern Conference in points percentage, playing at a respectable 89-point pace.

This is a franchise that hasn't finished above .500 since 2019-20 and a team that, let's face it, no one was picking to be in the playoff race at the start of the season.

The Blue Jackets have been through an unthinkable tragedy this season, and it's been heartwarming watching the fans in both Columbus and Calgary rally around a group of underdogs as they've scrapped their way up the standings. They were on a 6-1-1 hot streak driven by the NHL's hottest offense (4.63 goals per game) heading into the Flames game, a stretch during which they've been one of the best teams to watch in the league.

While they've received strong play from a few veterans, led by Sean Monahan up front, the biggest story of their season is just how well the youth movement is paying off all at once.

It's hard to pick who has been the biggest revelation. Of late, it's been Kent Johnson, the 2021 No. 5 pick who stumbled in his first two NHL seasons but has piled up 12 points in 10 games this season when healthy. But the three Russians — Kirill Marchenko, Dmitri Voronkov and Yegor Chinakhov — deserve more attention, too, as the Blue Jackets amateur scouting staff has paid huge dividends with second-, fourth- and late-first-round picks in three consecutive drafts (2018, 2019 and 2020).

Add in Cole Sillinger and Adam Fantilli, and Columbus has six forwards between the ages of 20 and 24 producing significant offense. If the Blue Jackets can keep that up for a full season, they would become the first team since 1992-93 to have that many forwards that young producing 0.50 points per game or more, matching a Quebec Nordiques club that was loaded with high picks: Owen Nolan, Mike Ricci, Martin Ručinský, Joe Sakic, Mats Sundin and Andrei Kovalenko.

So can Columbus keep this going?

Well, the Blue Jackets are legitimately creating a lot of scoring chances (2.71 expected goals per 60 minutes at even strength, seventh-best in the NHL) and are a net positive in expected goals share (ninth in the NHL entering Tuesday's games).

They're not getting great goaltending, and both of their special teams are struggling. But this isn't all smoke and mirrors. If their young players continue to play this well, they have a chance to continue to

surprise teams and make things interesting deeper into the season, potentially until a pre-trade deadline selloff.

Until then, I say it's time to get on the Blue Jackets bandwagon.

Honorable mentions: The rebuilds in California are starting to pay off. The San Jose Sharks, for one, aren't going away right now. Another win, this time over the Capitals, on Tuesday, and they're amazingly 10-6-3 over their last 19 games, a top-10 record in the NHL in that span. Teenager Macklin Celebrini is leading the charge with 11 points in his last nine games.

And the Anaheim Ducks are on pace for an 23-point improvement of their own after an awful 2023-24 season. It's too early to say they're "good now," given where they are in the standings and their underlying numbers, but they're building something at least with kids like Olen Zellweger, Leo Carlsson and Cutter Gauthier — all 20 years old or younger — starting to contribute.

Wait, are the Rangers and Islanders bad now?

Two of the biggest tumbles in the standings are happening in New York.

After an ugly loss to the Devils on Monday, the New York Rangers are 1-6-0 in their past seven games and projected to drop 22 points from a year ago. That has them on track for the franchise's second-biggest points percentage drop year-over-year since the 1994-95 Stanley Cup slash lockout hangover team 30 years ago.

The New York Islanders, meanwhile, have won only three of their past 12 games after Tuesday's loss in Montreal. They don't have quite as far to fall as their rivals from Manhattan, but any dip from last season's 94 points would mean missing the postseason.

Neither team looks like a contender in many key metrics right now.

Rangers

Islanders

Possession

22nd

19th

Expected goals

20th

13th

Scoring chances

21st

16th

Offense

7th

18th

Defense

31st



4th

Save percentage

5th

12th

If anything, the Rangers' underlying numbers make them look a little fortunate to have as good of a record as they do, and the Islanders — given their very low shooting percentage — appear a little unlucky.

I wouldn't go so far as to say both teams are "bad" now, but they have clearly taken a step back towards average and need to rely on goaltending more than is ideal.

If the playoff race in the East picks up at all, they could miss — and have to watch the Devils represent the area in the postseason.

Honorable mentions: The Nashville Predators have only won three of 14 games (3-6-5) since we last went through this exercise, so their season is in real jeopardy. It's alarming that a team that added Steven Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault simply can't score. They remain dead last with only 2.32 goals per game this season.

Those are some of the key team trends to watch. Let's drill down one level further to players having surprisingly effective starts (especially over the past month) and see if they have sustaining power.

Skaters off to amazing starts

Zach Werenski, Columbus Blue Jackets: Yes, we're going heavy on Blue Jackets content this month. But it's deserved.

Werenski, 27, doesn't always get his due as one of the game's elite defensemen, in part due to playing on a non-contender and in part due to the number of injuries he's had. But he's eighth in the NHL in points per game from the blue line over the past five seasons, averaging 62 points per 82 games. He ranks sixth in ice time per game in that span.

This year? He's piled up 26 points in 24 games to lead Columbus, putting him third in defenseman scoring. And he's first in minutes played, with an incredible 26 per game. You can't watch one of the Blue Jackets' games and not notice him, as his skating allows him to be all over the ice at both ends.

The good news for CBJ is his production looks fairly sustainable, too: Werenski's underlying numbers are solid, and his point totals aren't just from a shooting percentage bender. He's been really good for this young, rebuilding club in his ninth season there.

The Athletic: Zach Werenski is off to a career-best start, one of the hottest defensemen — heck, players — in the #NHL.#CBJ star will learn soon if he's landed a spot on Team USA's 4 Nations Face-off roster

"I think about it every day, to be honest." <https://t.co/SqxG52ES4G>

— Aaron Portzline (@Aportzline) November 29, 2024

Jake Walman, San Jose Sharks: It was a strange trade when the Detroit Red Wings made it in June, dumping Walman with a second-round pick as a sweetener for nothing in return. (No offense to future considerations.)

All Walman has done as a Shark is pile up nearly a point per game (19 in 23), lead the team in ice time and tilt the ice in favor of his rebuilding club. In fact, he's the only San Jose player in the black in terms of controlling shot attempt, shot and expected goals share at even strength.

Meanwhile, other than their top pair, the Red Wings defense has been a mess.

Maybe they can trade another second to get Walman back?

Honorable mentions: Mason Marchment, Pius Suter, Anthony Cirelli, Conor Garland, Will Cuyllle, Stefan Noesen

Goalies off to amazing starts

Dustin Wolf, Calgary Flames: The Flames almost got a mention up top as one of the league's top surprise teams, but the reality is that a lot of Calgary's improvement has come in goal.

This is a team hanging onto a wild-card spot in the West despite sitting 23rd in scoring chance share and 18th in expected goals against at even strength.

Save percentage? They're second to only the Wild.

I've seen Matvei Michkov get a lot of the love for the Calder Trophy so far, but Wolf's sitting sixth in the NHL in save percentage and 10th in goals saved above expected. If Calgary makes the playoffs, it should be his to win.

Logan Thompson, Washington Capitals: There wasn't much fanfare last summer when the Vegas Golden Knights traded Thompson to the Capitals for a 2024 third-round pick and 2025 third-rounder.

The Capitals were looking for a cheap backup after Charlie Lindgren broke out in a big way last season, and they were able to dump Darcy Kuemper. Instead, Thompson is 10-1-2 and has heavily outplayed his teammate, with a .913 save percentage to Lindgren's .893.

The best part might be Thompson's cap hit: \$766,667 for one more year, until he presumably hits it big as an unrestricted free agent.

Honorable mentions: Filip Gustavsson, Joseph Woll

Skaters off to tough starts

The Robertson brothers, Dallas Stars and Toronto Maple Leafs: One brother broke out last season for the first time in the NHL, scoring 14 goals and 27 points in 56 games on the big stage with the Maple Leafs.

The other had produced the 11th most points of any NHL player the past two seasons, outscoring Sidney Crosby, William Nylander, Jack Eichel and a pile of other superstars to announce his arrival, at 24 years old, as one of the best offensive players in the league.

This season? Nick Robertson has just two points (and zero assists) in 21 games in Toronto. Jason Robertson, meanwhile, has scored just five times and is on pace for 48 points, less than half the 109 he had in 2022-23.

Now, some of this is percentage-driven. Out of 361 forwards who have played 200 minutes this season, Jason is 249th in on-ice shooting percentage and Nick is 352nd. But they're in a tough spot, one-third of the way through the season.

Jeff Skinner, Edmonton Oilers: The Oilers "winning" July 1 in free agency feels like a long way away right now.

Viktor Arvidsson has been hurt lately, but when healthy he has produced only two goals and five points through 16 games. Skinner has been even more impotent, with only eight points in 25 games.

And they've both played significant minutes with good players. (Arvidsson, in particular, has had a lot of time alongside Leon Draisaitl, who is hard not to score next to.)

It's still early, and there's been some bad luck at play for both players, but Edmonton sure looks like it could have used that \$7 million on something else as the Oilers sit 17th in the league in goal production.

Honorable mentions: Everyone in Nashville not named Roman Josi, Juraj Slafkovský, Vincent Trocheck, Lawson Crouse

Goalies off to tough starts

Linus Ullmark, Ottawa Senators: I'll admit it: I was sucked in to believing maybe the Senators had finally turned a corner when they came into Toronto and shut out the Leafs 3-0 on Nov. 12.

Since that win, however, they're have the third-worst record in the league, with only two wins in their past nine games. And the biggest reason is their new \$8.25 million goaltender not giving them enough saves, with an .869 save percentage in the six appearances he's made in that stretch.

In those nine games, Ottawa's expected goals against are ninth-best in the NHL, so the Sens haven't been getting caved in defensively. But they're dead last in number of pucks going in, with nearly four per 60 minutes of play.

Among the 50 goaltenders who have played the most this season, Ullmark currently sits 40th in goals saved above expected. The Senators aren't deep enough to overcome that and make the playoffs. They need him to be better.

Sergei Bobrovsky, Florida Panthers: Here's a team that can win with subpar goaltending.

The Panthers are piling up 3.65 goals per game right now, led by a ridiculously hot Sam Reinhart, so this isn't exactly a pressing concern. But Bobrovsky, 36 and coming off a short offseason, currently has the worst save percentage of his career (.890) and sits ahead of only three regular starters leaguewide in goals saved above expected.

The great news for Florida, however, is Spencer Knight is back and playing well after missing all of last season while dealing with an OCD diagnosis. The 23-year-old had a .920 save percentage over his previous eight appearances (prior to Tuesday's loss in Pittsburgh), including an impressive shutout against the Carolina Hurricanes last weekend.

Expect him to pick up more starts to allow Bobrovsky to settle into more of a tandem role the rest of the way. Might as well rest up for the playoffs at this point.

Honorable mentions: Spencer Martin, Justus Annunen

## The Athletic / Inside Haoxi Simon Wang's journey to the top of the 2025 NHL Draft from China

**By Scott Wheeler- December 5, 2024**

NOBLETON, Ont. — On a brisk but sunny fall Tuesday, the parking lot at the Nobleton Community Centre is full for a 1:30 p.m. puck drop between the Jr. A King Rebellion and Burlington Cougars. At the desk just inside the front doors, the scout's sign-in sheet fills an entire page. They're all here to see Haoxi Simon Wang, a 6-foot-5.5, 215-pound defenseman born, raised and developed in China.

On this day, scouts from the Capitals, Panthers, Stars, Red Wings and Jets are among those who've crowded into the small stands. Wang's adviser, John Walters of The Will Sports Group, and one of their consultants, Brett Valliquette, mingle and answer questions.

When the national anthems play, Wang stands a head taller than most of his teammates on the bench. This is one of the final games he'll play for the Rebellion in the Ontario Junior Hockey League before signing with the Oshawa Generals and jumping to the Ontario Hockey League.

He won't turn 18 until the end of July. By then, he'll be the third-ever Chinese-born player selected in the NHL Draft, following 2024 Jets fourth-rounder Kevin He and 2015 Islanders sixth-rounder Andong Song. He's expected to make history and become the highest-drafted Chinese-born player ever. When NHL Central Scouting released its players to watch list, they gave him a "B" rating, which indicates a "second- or third-round candidate."

Wang is the early story of the 2025 NHL Draft, with his hot start, Boston University commitment and "unique and special" skating for his size attracting 20-plus scouts to each of his games.

"I saw him twice and will again. He is for real," one director of scouting with an NHL club said via text early on this season.

How did Wang get here?

It starts in the west end of Beijing.

Haoxi Simon Wang was introduced to hockey at the age of 4 on the recommendation of a friend from kindergarten. (Courtesy Willa Wang)

Wang is driving home from school at Everest Academy, a small private school in the Vaughan Sports Village just north of Toronto, telling the story of how he found hockey. He was 4, and "at the time in China, hockey wasn't popular at all (and) there might have been two rinks in the whole city of Beijing." One of his friends from kindergarten told him, "Yo, you've got to check out this new sport, it's really cool."

Enamored by the Superman look of the skaters in their equipment after the friend's mother eventually invited him and his mom, Willa, out to watch a practice, Wang told his mom, "I gotta get out there, I feel something." It came shortly after Willa's father, a former speed skater and basketball player, died. Missing him and wanting her son to learn how to skate, she told him that if he came back to several more practices and kept coming she would consider enrolling him.

After he did, she eventually agreed. At the time, though, they lived on the west side of Beijing and the closest rink was in the east of the giant city.

Willa also worked at a state-owned company at the time. Her hours were strict, and she couldn't ever finish work early, so they were always late for his hockey because of the rush hour traffic.

“I would even cry in the car because I cannot go anywhere and there’s so many cars stopped,” Willa said. For years, she made noise about getting a rink in the west of the city, but nobody was willing to make it happen. After Beijing was awarded the 2022 Winter Olympics in the summer of 2015, though, the country ramped up investment in ice sports.

Determined to make the rink happen, she sought out that investment and used it to rent “a big place,” build a rink in it and hire a hockey coach and figure skating coach. With additional support from the government, she eventually opened two clubs, the Beijing Capitals Minor Hockey Club and the Beijing Miracle Figure Skating Club.

“The government put so much money and encouraged the children to (be involved) in these sports so I began to get involved in the business,” said Willa.

Over time, she opened more rinks (today, Willa owns multiple arenas in China as president of the Beijing Xinghongao Sports and Culture Co.).

Though he eventually got on the ice 3-4 times a week, Simon said the players were divided by position, with defensemen focusing solely on defending and forwards focusing only on one-on-one skills — and not taught to pass.

“In China, we don’t have a lot of systems and we’re missing the soul of hockey. It’s just trying to do your own thing, get the puck, curl around and do the Wayne Gretzky stuff,” he said, chuckling. “I was just running around. Looking back on it I feel like I wasn’t playing hockey, I was just there on the rink skating around.”

Though the sport has grown dramatically in the country since 2015 and Willa says there are roughly 5,000 minor hockey players in Beijing alone today, the programming scales back as kids get older.

“They just play from 4 years old to 12 years old and there’s many teams but not a high level,” Willa said.

When Wang turned 12, one of the parents of one of his friends, Zev Zekun Zhang, who’d moved to Canada a couple of years earlier to pursue hockey (Zhang now plays for the Vaughan Kings U18 AAA team), called Willa to tell her, “If Simon wants to keep on playing hockey, he (should) come to Canada to Toronto.”

When Willa raised it with Wang, his first thought was: “Oh, wait a second, I think I love hockey more than he does and I’m better at hockey than him.”

After talking it over, and knowing he wasn’t a very good student and hockey was his only sport, they made arrangements for Wang to move in with the Zhang family, enrolled him at Everest Academy, and he joined the AAA Toronto Titans. After a year with the Titans, though, the COVID-19 pandemic struck and he returned to China to continue his studies and play hockey in Beijing, where some rinks were still open.

Once things began to return to normal, Wang returned to Canada and boarded at St. Andrew’s College, a private school in a suburb north of Toronto. Unhappy with the coaching he’d received with the Titans, he also joined the AAA North York Rangers through a connection with their owner, Adam Henrich, and Walters.

At the start, it was tough and Wang found it hard to make friends. Though his English was passable (he’s completely bilingual now) from attending an international school taught by Canadians and Americans in China, it was teammate Will Muszynski’s friendship that made the difference.

“The culture was the biggest part that really shocked me, how people treated hockey here and having to wear a suit to games and in your daily life everyone is doing hockey,” Wang said. “In China, we just study and sports is more of like a fun thing.”

“He was 6-foot-6 but he was really sensitive in a good way,” said Neil Doctorow, Wang’s head coach with the AAA North York Rangers. (Courtesy Willa Wang)

On the ice, the AAA speed and quickness of the passing were also “definitely overwhelming.”

Valliquette said Wang “knew nothing about hockey three years ago.” As there were no games on TV in China growing up, he’d never actually watched hockey before either, only beginning to watch NHL highlights on YouTube every morning with his breakfast after he came over.

But he had the size (Wang said he was always tall) and he had the edges. After returning at 14, he and Valliquette began renting ice and skating at the local NTR rink at 7 a.m. before school every Tuesday and Thursday. Over the last couple of years, Valliquette has taught him to “understand the offensive game and all of these fakes and little techniques.”

In that last season of minor hockey with the Rangers in 2022-23, Walter’s dad, Joe, began driving him to his games and giving him tips. Wang said his hockey IQ began to take shape in those car rides.

“He was 6-foot-6 but he was really sensitive in a good way,” said Neil Doctorow, Wang’s head coach with the Rangers that season. “He wanted to please the coach and he wanted to do a good job but he also didn’t want to disappoint anybody.”

Wang was also “always eating.” That season, they gave him a hard time about it.

“Between periods he’d eat a full meal,” Doctorow said. “It was insane watching this guy eat.” (Wang said he “just love(s) to eat” and that he always has snacks like pretzels and beef jerky with him.)

On the ice, Wang “tried to out-skate and out-skill everybody,” according to Doctorow, who was tasked with teaching him how to play within a team.

“He could handle the puck really well, he was an excellent skater, unbelievable shot, but he was still growing into his body and when he made mistakes they were big ones,” Doctorow said. “So we really helped enforce the idea of identifying areas when you should move the puck and areas when you need to make a play. And it took a long time, it was probably the hardest thing that he had to overcome.”

Though it took time and Wang was skeptical at first, Willa stayed out of it and he grew more receptive to the heavy coaching. Once it clicked, he started putting up points on a weak team.

He also had to learn to use his size.

“He didn’t really want to hit guys, so it took a long time to get him to do that too,” Doctorow said. “But to be fair, I think Simon was like, ‘I don’t want to hurt anybody.’ He’s a big guy but he’s a very kind person and he was significantly bigger than 90 percent of the league and I think he was aware of that and didn’t feel like really badly hurting anybody so he just sort of backed off.”

As the year progressed, though, the pieces began to come together and “he looked like a skilled forward but he was this big 6-foot-6 D.” They even used him all over their power play, from the bumper to the net-front and the point.

“You just don’t see a lot of players when they grow into their bodies at that age have even the agility and speed. And I also think he’s pretty creative, so it just needed to come together and he just needed more in-game experience,” Doctorow said. “I think if you were sympathetic to where he came from then you

could see that as long as he was given opportunities and guys didn't quit on him that he would for sure put it together and there was no denying his skating and skill."

Though Wang only had seven points in 33 games at season's end, the Generals saw that potential and drafted him with the 83rd pick in the 2023 OHL Priority Selection. So did the Dubuque Fighting Saints, taking him in the ninth round of the 2023 USHL Entry Draft (those rights have since expired and he was re-selected in the ninth round of the 2024 draft by the Lincoln Stars, who tried to lure him south in advance of college).

That summer, Wang moved into a condo — living primarily by himself as Willa traveled back and forth between Toronto and Beijing — and began training with strength coach Stark Guo, who he said has been phenomenal for him, helping him with injury prevention, nutrition and adding even more speed and explosiveness.

He also went to the summer camps of some NCAA programs, attending Merrimack's, and then Harvard's, and then Boston University's, initially just for fun to see if he could get anything out of them.

He was a standout at a couple of them but played his best at Boston University's, catching the eye of Terriers associate head coach Joe Pereira in particular. After a visit to BU's facilities he said, "Yeah, this is the place."

After committing to BU in September 2023, his rookie season in the OJHL with the Brantford 99ers was another learning experience and saw him miss time both with a broken first rib and to play in an international event with China's U18 team.

In May, Willa purchased the 99ers, adding the team to her portfolio of rinks back in China, and after approval from the OJHL's Board of Governors relocated them to Nobleton.

After another summer of training in the gym with Guo and skating with folks like Valliquette, Wang came back for his draft year a completely different player.

Mark Joslin, the team's general manager and head coach with both Brantford and King, said he came into Jr. A "very, very raw," but there was clearly something there with his combination of size and skating.

Early on, like with the Rangers, he was also timid physically.

"Last year, I'm not sure he threw a hit," Joslin said.

As with Doctorow, though, he learned quickly. He did all the right things in the offseason. He got stronger. His zone exits really improved under the tutelage of Rebellion assistant coach and former NHLer Nikolai Borschevsky.

This season, before making the decision to join the Generals, he was playing 20-25 minutes per game as a big part of both special teams with the Rebellion. When he signed with Oshawa, his 17 points in 29 games led all Rebellion defensemen.

"His feet are good enough to play in the NHL right now and his brain is catching up with his body and his feet and everything else," Joslin said. "He's a very bright kid, he's very good in school, he was very raw maturity-wise last year in terms of fitting in with the boys and being one of the guys. but this year he has turned the page and fits right in. And he's sometimes trying to do too much on the ice but he just turned 17 and he's raw."

Brandvold has watched all of his games and has encouraged Wang to play more physically, which he has done and then some — sometimes too much so and at the wrong time, according to Joslin.

“He’s playing with an edge, he’s playing with confidence, he’s playing with poise. It’s very enjoyable to watch his growth ... the interest from the NHL got crazy,” Joslin said. “He’s definitely going in the right direction.”

“I miss the family time a lot,” said Wang, who tries to get back home to Beijing each summer. (OJHL Images)

These days, if you ask Doctorow if he’s surprised that the kid who needed so much coaching has become a top prospect for the NHL Draft, his answer is a firm no.

“At the beginning of the season, I would have said ‘yeah,’ because he was tough to get through to and over-handling the puck was so ingrained, but by the end of the season ... he was very easy to get along with,” Doctorow said. “He was like this super nice giant.”

Looking back on his journey, Wang believes it all started with his parents’ open-mindedness when the Zhangs first called.

“I’m really lucky I have very supportive parents that understand what I like,” he said.

He misses home, though. The last time he saw his dad was in February and it was only for a few hours between games with the Chinese U18 team. They try to talk often on the phone and he tries to get back every summer, but training has taken priority.

“I miss the family time a lot,” he said.

Home will always be a part of him and his hockey story, though. He’ll carry it with him when he hears his name called, and when he someday lives out his still-new dream in the NHL.

“It’s really exciting to have the chance to showcase my country,” Wang said. “I feel like I have a good chance to show people that Chinese people can do it at this level. They’ve just got to put in hard work, dedication and everyone can make it.”



## The Athletic / Who's the next man up for each 4 Nations team? A look at the top potential injury replacements

By Chris Johnston- December 6, 2024

So, you weren't selected to your country's roster for the 4 Nations Face-Off.

Time to start looking around for a nice mid-season vacation, right?

Not so fast.

There's an entire shadow list of American, Canadian, Swedish and Finnish players already on standby, officially and unofficially. The management staffs from those countries have had to start planning for the possibility — if not probability — that they'll need injury replacements before the tournament begins on Feb. 12.

"We have a lot of games between now and February," Team Canada general manager Don Sweeney said Thursday. "We hope we picked the team that's going to stay together all the way through, but we just don't know. So we have opened it back up to have a better understanding of who is going to play well between now and then.

"We've laid a lot of groundwork of players that we would feel very, very comfortable with because they were that close to making the team."

The Canadian management team intends to continue monitoring its player pool closely this month and next. Effectively, the auditions continue. And while some players received courtesy calls from Hockey Canada after being left off the initial 23-man roster, none are believed to have formally been promised they're next in line as injury replacements.

Sweden took a different tact.

"We let some of the players know that they're high on the list, pending injuries, to plan to be available," GM Josef Boumedienne said. "Two months to go until we're at that point, so a lot can happen."

Changes to the rosters — made up of 13 forwards, seven defensemen and three goaltenders — can only be made before the 4 Nations Face-Off gets underway. No additional in-tournament additions will be permitted.

"I bet you there will be 10 new players minimum," Canada coach Jon Cooper said. "If you're not named to that team, you know, stay ready because unfortunately there's probably going to be some spots open."

With that in mind, here's a look at our projected next man up at each position for each country:

Finland

Forward: Jesperi Kotkaniemi

Unable to claim a job where his country is arguably deepest at center, the 24-year-old would be a natural next call if the Finns needed to replace someone down the middle. Kotkaniemi has had a reasonably good start to his season with the Carolina Hurricanes and is currently on pace for his first 50-point campaign in the NHL.

The next next man: Joel Kiviranta

Defense: Henry Jokiharju

The only Finnish defenseman currently playing regular NHL minutes who wasn't selected to the team, Jokiharju has the inside track should an injury arise. The Buffalo Sabres rearguard should probably stay on high alert given that Jani Hakanpää cracked the roster despite only being healthy enough to play two NHL games this season because of ongoing knee issues.

The next next man: Ville Heinola

Goalie: Joonas Korpisalo

Off to a strong start in his first season with the Boston Bruins, Korpisalo could easily have claimed one of the three available roster spots. His limited national team experience at the senior level may have hurt his chances, but he's currently in the best form of the Finnish goalies not already on the team.

The next next man: Justus Annunen

Sweden

Forward: Mikael Backlund

A reliable two-way center and past world champion for Tre Kronor, Backlund brings the sort of experience the team's management group prized when assembling this team. He's a no-maintenance player and would be an easy addition if the need arises.

The next next man: Fabian Zetterlund

Defense: Hampus Lindholm

By far the best Swedish defenseman left off the roster, Lindholm's hopes of making the team were interrupted by a lower-body injury suffered on Nov. 12. He's not expected back in the Boston Bruins lineup for at least another couple of weeks. Sweden coach Sam Hallam hinted that they went with Jonas Brodin, currently out of the Minnesota Wild lineup with injury, over Lindholm in part because of a better prognosis.

The next next man: Adam Larsson

Goalie: Samuel Ersson

Not only is the 25-year-old off to a 5-2-2 start with the Philadelphia Flyers this season, but he's coming off a reasonably good showing for his country at the IIHF World Hockey Championship. He'd be an ideal fill-in as a No. 3 goaltender who could benefit from the experience of being around a best-on-best competition.

The next next man: Arvid Söderblom

Canada

Forward: John Tavares

Very few players of this generation have savored the opportunity to represent Canada more than Tavares. He's played at four IIHF World Hockey Championships, serving as captain earlier this year in Prague, and has had a turn-back-the-clock start to this season with the Toronto Maple Leafs. Should Canada need another trusted veteran who can win faceoffs and play down the middle, he'd be an easy call.

The next next man: Wyatt Johnston

Defense: Drew Doughty

Had Doughty not suffered a fractured ankle in preseason with the Los Angeles Kings, he would almost certainly be wearing the Maple Leaf again in February. He's among the players who received a personal call from Hockey Canada when he wasn't selected and will be viewed as a top injury replacement option provided he gets back up and running in time for the tournament.

The next next man: MacKenzie Weegar

Goalie: Joey Daccord

The fact that Daccord's citizenship status was so closely scrutinized in recent weeks speaks to the kind of season he's having for the Seattle Kraken. Yes, the Boston-born son of a Canadian father and Swiss mother is eligible to play for Canada at the 4 Nations Face-Off, and he's described by those familiar with his game as someone who consistently raises his performance to meet the biggest moments.

The next next man: Logan Thompson

United States

Forward: Tage Thompson

Off to a point-per-game start with the Buffalo Sabres, and with 13 goals through 20 games, Thompson appears to have regained the form he showed during his breakout campaign two years ago. What ultimately hurt him in the evaluation by Team USA management was a lack of playoff experience, but he remains very much on the radar as a possible injury replacement.

The next next man: Cole Caufield

Defense: Jake Sanderson

Unquestionably a future member of Team USA at best-on-best events, the 22-year-old Ottawa Senators defenseman got a long look this time around. He's a smooth skater with above-average mobility who has had an up-and-down start to the season. If he regains top form, he could still get the call before February.

The next next man: John Carlson

Goalie: Anthony Stolarz

While he doesn't have the pedigree of the three goalies picked ahead of him, Stolarz has performed well enough over the past two NHL seasons to keep company with them. He's among the league leaders with a .924 save percentage for the Toronto Maple Leafs this year.

The next next man: Dustin Wolf

## The Athletic / Rangers' Filip Chytil and the ongoing concussion question facing NHLers: When is enough enough?

**By Arthur Staple- December 6, 2024**

Pat Lafontaine doesn't remember who told him this, but it still resonates with him. Lafontaine is 28 years removed from the end of his Hall of Fame career, one that like many NHL players, was shortened in places and finally ended by concussions. When he sees a current player like New York Rangers center Filip Chytil miss time with a concussion and its aftereffects, he is reminded of the incredible desire to play and keep playing despite the repeated hits to the head.

And of this quote he heard long ago.

"An athlete dies twice," Lafontaine said. "There's the end of your actual life and then there's the end of your playing career. When you retire from something you love, something that's consumed your entire life to that point, it feels like a death. Letting go is one of the hardest decisions you're ever going to make."

As anyone on the medical side of hockey will tell you, no two concussions are the same. No two people are the same so it makes perfect sense. How a player reacts to a blow to the head or a concussion or even to repeated concussions varies from player to player.

What all players have in common is what Lafontaine talked about: the will. The desire to keep going in spite of injury or whatever other obstacles stand in their way.

When we see Chytil helped off the ice as he was after a collision with Rangers teammate K'Andre Miller on Nov. 14 and we know Chytil's history with concussions — how he missed all but 10 games last season following a high-speed collision with former teammate Jesper Fast — we can't help but wince. Fans post on social media about how Chytil, still only 25, should think about stepping away from hockey to preserve his quality of life down the road.

But to say that is to be dismissive of that defining trait that all professional athletes, hockey players in particular, have. They're different than us. That's why they've reached the highest level of the game.

"They've never taken no for an answer," said Rick Nash, who retired in 2018 due to concussion impacts after a 15-year career. "Especially when you've got guys who are early in their careers, guys who haven't lived out their full dreams in hockey, that definitely factors into it. When you're still trying to establish yourself, it's tough. As you get older, your priorities change."

"Some of the things I thought and even said when I was younger, I can't believe them when I think about them now," Kyle Okposo said with a laugh. "When I first met (my wife) Danielle, I told her, 'Hockey's always going to be first.' That's how you are growing up. You never think anything's going to be more important than that. If I'd had my first big concussion at 19 or 21, I'd have thought about things a lot differently than I did."

Lafontaine, Nash and Okposo had very public battles with concussions and their aftermath. Lafontaine's first big concussion came while playing for the New York Islanders in the 1990 playoffs on a shoulder to the head from Rangers defenseman James Patrick. Lafontaine was unconscious on the Madison Square Garden ice for nearly 30 seconds, according to the Islanders medical trainer back then; Rangers fans caught up in the rivalry actually rocked the ambulance carrying Lafontaine to a Manhattan hospital.

Nash can't recall his first concussion. Okposo's first big one came in a Sabres practice in March of 2017 and set off a chain reaction of symptoms and subsequent mental-health events that took months to recover from.

What all three of them had in common was that they continued playing. Okposo, who spent weeks in a Buffalo hospital trying to regain control of his life, eventually came to terms with the possibility of his career ending, but it never quite came to that.

"I was honestly prepped to be done after the initial one," said Okposo, who suffered two more concussions in games after that but didn't retire until last spring after winning a Stanley Cup with the Florida Panthers. "I was at peace if I never played another game again."

What helped all three and what helps current players like Chytil is how much neurology and the science around concussions have advanced. Lafontaine saw Dr. James Kelly and the two have been friends for three decades. Kelly has become a specialist in military head trauma, but he was Lafontaine's source of knowledge and confidence that he could keep playing each time he suffered a concussion during the 1990s.

Nash, Okposo and Chytil actually have their specialist in common: Dr. Jeffrey Kutcher, whose Henry Ford Kutcher Clinic in Michigan is the No. 1 destination for brain-injured NHLers. Sidney Crosby saw Kutcher when he missed a year and a half with concussion issues 13 years ago.

"It's important to have that specialist you can trust," Chytil said.

"Some young guys are still pretty naive about concussions, but there's so much more conversation around these issues, around mental health, at an earlier age," Okposo said. "There are just more people taking an interest in your health as a player, and there's a lot more information out there. It's not like I started out playing 30 years ago, but it's so different now, for the better."

The ultimate question for every player who's had one or more concussions and symptoms that have impacted their careers is: When do you stop? How do you know?

Lafontaine missed nearly all of the 1996-97 season, his last in a Sabres uniform, due to a concussion from a big hit. He signed with the Rangers that summer and was among the team's leaders in points when he collided with teammate Mike Keane.

He experienced the familiar aftereffects: headaches, sensitivity to bright light and fatigue. But it was Kelly, his specialist, who examined him and took the decision out of Lafontaine's hands in a way.

"Even when you trust the professionals and they say it's time, it's easier said than done," Lafontaine said. "I was 34, I'd played for 15 years, 1,000 games. I had a wife, three kids. If I hadn't been married, if it'd been 10 years earlier, I honestly don't know if I'd have listened to what the doctors were saying. But you understand what's going on in your life makes a huge difference."

Nash also had three kids when the 2017-18 season ended. He'd missed six weeks that March with a concussion just after the Rangers traded him to the Bruins. Nash played all 12 playoff games but wasn't the player he'd been. Even at that, there were plenty of offers that summer for him to continue.

"I'd had my hockey fix," said Nash, who is now the Blue Jackets' director of hockey operations. "My game wasn't in my prime, but there were definitely some good options to continue. My kids were young and you just never know what the next (concussion) is going to do. But I feel like with those things unless someone is directly telling you to stop, the decision is always going to be extremely difficult."

Okposo had a family too in 2017, but he was also only 29. When Kutcher and the Sabres medical staff cleared him to play, he was on board with it. And he was able to finish off his career the way he wanted, competing for and winning his first ring.

“When I had the second one (against the Senators), I was like, ‘What do I need to do to preserve my quality of life?’” he said. “But I went to see (Kutcher) and when you get that all-clear, there’s nothing holding you back.”

Chytil has spoken about not having any fear when he returned for the second round of the playoffs in the spring. “If I was scared,” he said, “I could play somewhere in the fourth league in Czech and enjoy my life.”

It’s a window into how players think. They’re used to dealing with all sorts of physical injuries and pushing through. Brains and concussions are different, and players understand that now. Even when Kutcher cleared Chytil after the Nov. 14 collision, Chytil still didn’t return to action until this past Saturday, a 16-day absence.

“I know my body. I know what’s going on, even with my head,” he said. “With what I went through last year as well, there have been hard moments. ... When there is an opportunity to be back and my whole body feels great, I jump back in.”

We as fans and observers will always cringe. We will always wonder how much more a player can take, even if it’s more about how much more we can take watching players potentially deteriorate before our eyes. And players, because they’re players, will always want to play.

“We’re brought up and taught to overcome,” Lafontaine said. “You overcome losses in games, you overcome adversity, you overcome a 3-1 deficit in a series. You find a way. There’s tremendous belief in overcoming that makes athletes who we are. And there’s knee injuries, there’s broken bones. Why should a concussion be any different?”

“We’ve learned so much about the brain and concussions over the years, but there’s no crystal ball. And if you leave even a little bit of room for a player, what’s he going to do? He’s going to play.”

## The Athletic / Swedish 4 Nations coach Sam Hallam on 'toughest decisions' in building his roster

By Pierre LeBrun- December 6, 2024

Sam Hallam was back at his Stockholm hotel Wednesday night, having finished meeting with the Swedish media following the release of his country's 4 Nations Face-Off roster.

Of course, there had been a lot of focus on who didn't make his team. That's a universal response, no matter the hockey country or media.

But as he settled into a late-night phone interview with The Athletic, Hallam wanted to focus on who did make the team, sharing his hope that he has found a 23-man roster that can lead Sweden to victory in the international best-on-best event in February.

"We tried to find a balance," said Hallam, who had full autonomy on the roster selection. "We have a lot of skilled guys on D but also at forward, but I think we have a team that should be able to handle every situation. We have good speed up front. And I think we have some good size and defensive edge.

"I also think at the moment we have three goalies where it's a real competition as to who makes the start."

No kidding.

Filip Gustavsson, Jacob Markstrom and Linus Ullmark are a formidable 1-2-3 punch in goal. And there has not been any kind of particular order decided on that goalie depth chart. The next two months of the NHL season will go a long way toward deciding who gets to start against Team Canada at the Bell Centre on Feb. 12.

"What we said is that the starting goaltending against Canada is up for grabs," Hallam said. "We can't determine that in late November and early December. Who is in the best shape late January, early February, is probably going to be who we start.

"It's a short tournament. You have to go with who really is at the top of his game."

Right now, one would imagine that would be Gustavsson for the first-place Minnesota Wild. But by the time February rolls around, it wouldn't surprise me if it's the veteran Markstrom who gets that starter's call.

But there is no wrong answer with all three choices. And I mean, they were the clear and easy three picks.

It got a little more complicated at forward and defense, where good players were forcibly passed over. I asked Hallam which decision was the hardest for him: picking the last forward or the last defenseman?

They were both difficult, final decisions. But up front, he specifically mentioned taking guys like Viktor Arvidsson and Gustav Nyquist as very calculated decisions to round out his forward group.

"They both have huge experience, speed and grit, but they both have showed that they can play higher up in the lineup, so that's also something that we value," Hallam said of both players' lineup flexibility. "Because changes can come quickly.

"But those were the toughest decisions, the ones we discussed the most," he added, regarding the final few forward spots.

There was never going to be a bad call on defense. Just difficult choices among very good players.

With Gustav Forsling, Victor Hedman and Erik Karlsson already having been named to the team in June, there were only four slots left, and Hallam ultimately went with Mattias Ekholm, Rasmus Andersson, Rasmus Dahlin and Jonas Brodin.

That meant leaving off Hampus Lindholm, Adam Larsson, Oliver Ekman-Larsson, Simon Edvinsson and Philip Broberg, among others.

Leaving off Lindholm, for me, was the biggest snub.

Again, the final defense decisions were going to be hard no matter what.

“It is hard, even more on a personal level,” Hallam said. “I know how much all the players want to be in this. I think some players that aren’t in our lineup at the moment think — and I hope — that they feel they should be on it. Because they’re competitive.

“We just tried to make the best possible decisions for the team. We talked to a couple of the guys that were just on the other, wrong, side of it and told them, ‘That’s the situation right now, but stay ready. Something can happen. We’re still following you closely.’”

And that’s just it. There may be injuries before February. Forwards such as William Eklund and Mikael Backlund could get the call if someone’s injured up front. Same for Lindholm, Ekman-Larsson and Larsson depending on a blue-line injury. They’re still in the mix despite not being named Wednesday.

Bigger picture, there’s the Olympics in Milan, Italy, just 14 months away. All the bubble players remain on that radar, too. That was all part of the messaging to those players this week.

“Absolutely,” Hallam said. “Now we’re focused on 4 Nations, but we also have the (IIHF) World Championship coming up in Stockholm (in May). That’s also a huge thing. You don’t get to play a World Championship at home that many times.

“And of course we have the Olympics in Milan. Right now it’s about 4 Nations and preparing to perform our best there. And afterward, it’s going to be analyzed. That’s what is encouraging for the guys that just missed out is that there’s something more coming up and if they perform and be the best they can be, they can maybe be on that list instead.”

That’s true for any bubble player who missed the 4 Nations rosters this week. The bigger stage comes in Milan in February ’26.

But deep down, every player who missed the cut also knows this: The opportunity to shine at the 4 Nations gives the chosen players an inside track on the Olympics.

The Swedes last won a best-on-best event in Torino, Italy, in 2006. It was a memorable gold-medal performance by a generational group of players led by Hockey Hall of Famers Nicklas Lidstrom, Peter Forsberg, Mats Sundin and Daniel Alfredsson.

There are some who see the 4 Nations roster announced this week as being the most talented squad assembled since then. I’m not convinced the Swedes are as talented offensively down the middle as Team USA or Team Canada and wonder how that may affect their ability to produce enough offense. But they’ve got the blue line and goaltending to stifle anyone.

There’s absolutely a path for Sweden to win it all in Montreal and Boston come February.



## The Athletic / Evaluating the NHL's 5 most surprising breakout teams: Are they contenders or pretenders?

By Harman Dayal- December 6, 2024

Which breakout NHL teams are built on a sturdy, sustainable foundation that will clinch them a playoff spot in April? Which ones are masquerading and likely to flame out the longer the season drags on?

It's an intriguing time in the league calendar to ask who's for real or not. If a surprise team is still in the playoff hunt past American Thanksgiving, you can't just scoff and dismiss them as frauds without taking a closer look. Thirteen of the NHL's top 16 teams by points percentage on Dec. 4 last season ended up making the playoffs. And yet with two-thirds of the season remaining, the races are tight and there's still plenty of time for teams to fall off.

There are six NHL teams currently in a playoff spot, or at least in the wild card hunt, who missed the postseason in 2023-24. One of those six, the New Jersey Devils, were widely expected to have a strong season this year because of their deep, talented roster and the club's tremendous success in 2022-23. The Devils aren't really a "surprise" so we won't be breaking them down in this piece.

Let's take a look under the hood at the other five teams to see who fits the profile of a realistic playoff contender.

### Minnesota Wild

Record: 17-4-4

Why they're excelling: Who thought the Wild would have the best record in the NHL 25 games in? Everything starts with Kirill Kaprizov, who leads the league in points and is the early favorite for the Hart Trophy.

Between the pipes, Minnesota's team save percentage has leaped from 23rd in 2023-24 to No. 1 so far this season. Filip Gustavsson is back to performing like an upper-echelon starter as his save percentage (.929) and goals-against average (2.04) lead all NHL goaltenders.

Minnesota's top-four blue line has been rock-solid. The return of Jared Spurgeon, who missed all but 16 games because of injury last season, is having a massive impact. Spurgeon's 1.57 expected goals against per hour rate at five-on-five ranks No. 1 among all NHL defensemen who've played at least 150 minutes this season.

Brock Faber continues growing as a bona fide No. 1 defenseman. Jake Middleton is enjoying a strong bounce-back year and Jonas Brodin was still humming along as one of hockey's best shutdown defenders up until his recent injury.

With elite defensive play and top-notch goaltending, the Wild are the stingiest defensive team in the NHL, allowing just 2.32 goals against per game.

Heat map via HockeyViz

Offensively, the top six is also getting a boost from improvements from Matt Boldy (24 points in 25 games) and Marco Rossi (20 points in 25 games).

Biggest question mark(s) and outlook: Minnesota is probably due for some offensive regression.

The Wild don't generate a high volume of quality scoring chances — they rank 27th with just 2.25 expected goals per 60 at five-on-five — and yet their actual five-on-five scoring rate ranks just outside the top 10. We should expect a bit of a slowdown there moving forward.

Minnesota's special teams are mediocre — its power play ranks below league average and the penalty kill has been a downright disaster. The Wild will also have to contend with Joel Eriksson Ek's week-to-week injury.

Big picture, however, the Wild are in a really good position. Last year's playoff miss was characterized by nearly everything possible going wrong — a slow start for Kaprizov, horrible injury luck, surprisingly bad goaltending and a top four that didn't live up to expectations outside of Faber. All those ingredients are tracking in a much better direction this season, and truthfully, there aren't any glaring red flags that their start is unsustainable or built on a fragile foundation.

The Wild have also banked so many early standings points that they could play at last year's mediocre 87-point pace the rest of the way and still comfortably cruise into the playoffs.

Making the playoffs confidence meter: 9/10

Columbus Blue Jackets

Record: 11-10-3

Why they're excelling: Columbus has unexpectedly emerged as a goal-scoring juggernaut, ranking top 10 in the NHL with 3.46 goals scored per game.

This offensive outburst isn't just the product of a fluky shooting percentage bender that's going to crash out over the remainder of the season. The Blue Jackets are creating shots and scoring chances at an elite clip — their five-on-five shot rate ranks third-best in the NHL and their five-on-five expected goals rate ranks eighth.

Dean Evason is getting incredible buy-in from the players.

Zach Werenski is playing at a superstar level, scoring eight goals and 26 points in 24 games. He's also driving excellent two-way results, including a sparkling 1.72 goals against per hour rate at five-on-five.

On the top line, Sean Monahan and Kirill Marchenko are one of the most underrated offensive duos in the league right now. Columbus has scored a whopping 22 goals while allowing just eight when that duo is on the ice at five-on-five. The underlying numbers tell you their success is fully legitimate too, as the Jackets are controlling a dominant 62 percent of expected goals in nearly 300 five-on-five minutes together.

Columbus is getting an abundance of secondary offense from plenty of its young, developing players. Cole Sillinger (15 points in 23 games), Kent Johnson (12 points in 10 games), Yegor Chinakhov (14 points in 21 games) and Dmitri Voronkov (11 points in 15 games) are all chipping in with key middle-six contributions. What's scary is that we haven't even seen the best of Adam Fantilli yet, who has another level or two he can reach.

Biggest question mark(s) and outlook: Can the Blue Jackets outscore their defensive concerns over an entire 82-game regular season?

Columbus has made notable defensive strides under Evason (from 31st to 19th in five-on-five expected goals-against rate), but its goaltending tandem of Elvis Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov ranks 30th in the NHL for team save percentage in all situations.

The Blue Jackets can't count on goaltending to bail them out and don't suppress scoring chances well enough yet to adequately insulate their netminders. That's going to be a difficult environment to overcome.

Columbus' 28th-ranked penalty kill is a concern, too.

Even with a lot of things breaking in their favor, the Blue Jackets are only on pace for 85 points. In other words, they still need to find another gear to clinch a playoff spot as opposed to simply hanging around the race and keeping things close. That's going to be tough to accomplish because it already feels like this team is significantly outperforming its talent level on paper. But that's OK because staying competitive, developing the young players and rebuilding the vibes and culture of this franchise would already be more than enough for this to qualify as a wildly successful season.

Making the playoffs confidence meter: 3/10

Washington Capitals

Record: 17-6-2

Why they're excelling: Every single member of Washington's top six is obliterating expectations. It's not just that their top-six forwards are slightly beating them, it's by a massive margin.

Connor McMichael is on pace for more than 45 goals after scoring 18 the season prior. Dylan Strome is on pace for more than 110 points. Aliaksei Protas is scoring at a near-point-per-game clip. Alex Ovechkin, who slipped to 31 goals last year and has seen his defensive numbers crater in recent seasons, was not only leading the league in goals before his injury but also decisively winning his two-way matchups. PL Dubois has bounced back and Tom Wilson is on pace for a career high in goals and points.

It isn't just the results, but the process under the hood that's taken a huge leap. The Capitals badly struggled to control five-on-five play last year when they squeaked into the playoffs, but this year their five-on-five expected goal share ranks top 10 in the NHL, in large part because of how many chances they generate as a team offensively.

Heat map via HockeyViz

Spencer Carbery's staff has done a remarkable job with this group since taking over.

Washington's blue line has also been outstanding. The Caps boast four defensemen (John Carlson, Jakob Chychrun, Rasmus Sandin and Trevor van Riemsdyk) who are already in double-digit point totals. Chychrun has been an excellent fit, and we haven't even seen the peak version of Matt Roy yet, who missed a chunk of games with injury.

Logan Thompson, meanwhile, has given them top-notch goaltending which has been huge because Charlie Lindgren, a huge driver of their success last season, has taken a significant step back.

Biggest question mark(s) and outlook: The Capitals have scored on nearly 13 percent of their five-on-five shots, which is by far the highest mark in the NHL. Washington has talented finishers but no team over the last five seasons has come close to sustaining a near 13 percent shooting clip for an entire season.

The Caps' shooting efficiency will slow down at some point, but I'm not worried about their offense dramatically falling off a cliff. Not only does Washington create a ton of shots and scoring chances, which gives them a reasonably high offensive floor, they're currently averaging well over four goals per game — a modest decline to that goals per game average would still leave them one of the league's more potent offensive teams.

This is kind of similar to the Canucks' scorching-hot offensive start last season. People were pointing out that Vancouver's league-high five-on-five shooting percentage and PDO was due to regress (which it did) but the club's record didn't crash because they were a legitimately good team at controlling play. It's just that the margins became tighter in the second half of the season, with fewer one-sided blowout victories. That's what I'd expect from Washington this year.

Making the playoffs confidence meter: 9/10

Calgary Flames

Record: 13-9-4

Why they're excelling: The Flames are surrendering just 1.76 goals against per 60 at five-on-five, which ranks third-best in the NHL. Dustin Wolf's brilliance is the biggest reason for that. The 23-year-old rookie has notched a .918 save percentage. Calgary has an 8-4-1 record during Wolf's starts and is 5-5-3 in all other games.

Between Wolf and Dan Vladar, Calgary's getting a .939 save percentage at five-on-five, second-best in the NHL.

Rasmus Andersson is enjoying a strong bounce-back season and was particularly hot in October. He and MacKenzie Weegar are helping keep the Flames' blue line together despite the Noah Hanifin, Chris Tanev and Nikita Zadorov departures from last season.

Biggest question mark(s) and outlook: Give Calgary credit for being resilient and competitive, but it feels like this Cinderella start is overwhelmingly reliant on goaltending.

The Flames are scoring just 2.54 goals per game, which ranks 28th in the NHL. Their leading scorer, Nazem Kadri, is only on pace for 50 points, which reflects the lack of high-end talent on the roster. They have a minus-five goal differential despite their promising record. Calgary's below league-average at controlling five-on-five shots and scoring chances. The Flames have a shot to remain in the hunt if they continue getting elite goaltending, but if the netminding slips even slightly, it could all come crashing down quickly given the club's scoring woes.

I'd bet that Colorado, currently two points back of Calgary for a wild card spot, will eventually leapfrog the Flames and push them out of a playoff spot.

Making the playoffs confidence meter: 2/10

Philadelphia Flyers

Record: 12-10-3

Why they're excelling: Just like last year, this is a classic underdog John Tortorella team. What the Flyers perhaps lack in talent compared to other playoff contenders, they make up for with their will, determination and togetherness as a team.

Travis Konecny is putting the Flyers on his back offensively. The feisty 27-year-old winger has racked up 13 goals and 30 points in 25 games, 11 points clear of the next-highest-producing teammate. He ranks top five among all NHL players in points since Oct. 25.

Rookie Matvei Michkov has emerged as a game-breaker, recording 19 points in 23 games. He's had some ups and downs at even strength, but his arrival has provided a desperately needed injection of elite skill and creativity.

Philadelphia's dominant penalty kill ranks third-best in the NHL. This isn't some kind of fluke, either, as the Flyers' PK ranked fourth last season too. They're remarkably efficient at applying heavy pressure and giving opposing power plays such little time and space to operate.

On the back end, Travis Sanheim has been a two-way monster. He's an all-situations workhorse and has contributed 15 points in 25 games.

Impressively, Philadelphia's continued winning games despite starter Sam Ersson's injury keeping him on the sidelines for the past nine games.

Biggest question mark(s) and outlook: The Flyers could realistically hang around the race, but clinching a wild card spot seems like a long shot for a few reasons.

Philadelphia was a genuinely good even-strength team last year, ranking in the top half for controlling five-on-five shot attempts and scoring chances. This year, however, the Flyers are controlling just 44.9 percent of shot attempts and 47.3 percent of expected goals, which rank 29th and 25th in the NHL respectively. It's uncommon to see teams that get outshot and outchanced by these types of margins end up making the playoffs.

Secondly, there's a decent chance the Flyers will be deadline sellers, with players like Scott Laughton and Rasmus Ristolainen potentially departing. We saw how similar deadline selling hindered Philadelphia's playoff chances last season.

Third, they have a minus-10 goal differential. Now, this doesn't automatically doom them because the Capitals made the playoffs last year despite a deeply negative goal differential, but it is a sign that they're probably not a playoff-caliber team on paper and will need a lot of breaks to punch a ticket into the postseason.

Making the playoffs confidence meter: 2.5/10

## The Athletic / Which NHL players are the best at each age right now? Who are the best all-time?

By Max Bultman, Sean Gentile and Sean McIndoe- December 6, 2024

If you're a sports fan, you're familiar with the adage "Father Time is undefeated."

It's ubiquitous because it's true. It's why we talk about the dreaded "wrong side" of 30, and even fret over long-term deals signed by 29-year-olds; even the greatest athletes on earth are still subject to aging.

But some athletes do give Father Time a run for his money. We've seen that this NHL season with Alex Ovechkin, who, through the first several weeks of his age-39 campaign, wasn't just producing for the Washington Capitals — he was scoring goals at the best rate of his legendary career.

Ovechkin, of course, is out right now with a broken leg. But his amazing play as he nears 40 is a reminder of just how long some of hockey's legends have been able to hang onto their greatness.

In that spirit, this story is about the NHL's best players at every age — 18 through 40 — both right now, and all-time.

Some of them are obvious (there's only one 40-year-old in the league right now) but going through each year was an interesting way to look at some of the league's best players currently and to appreciate some of the incredible achievements throughout history.

Of course, certain luminaries of the game would have dominated many years on the all-time list, so we decided to limit each player to just one appearance in that category. That made picking just one season for players such as Wayne Gretzky and Bobby Orr tough.

The end result is a museum of some of the most impressive seasons in hockey history, alongside the best players today's league has to offer.

Here's where we landed.

Note: To determine a player's age, we went with the age they would be on Jan. 1 of a given season.

### Age 18

The best right now: Macklin Celebrini, San Jose Sharks

Celebrini has made an immediate impact for the Sharks as the league's youngest full-timer this season. It's not looking like he'll have a Sidney Crosby-type of 18-year-old campaign, but he could finish similarly to (or maybe even slightly ahead of?) how Connor Bedard did last season. He looks every bit the part of what you expect from a No. 1 pick and franchise pillar.

The best ever: Tom Barrasso, Buffalo Sabres (1983-84: 26 wins, .893 save percentage, 2.85 GAA)

These days, fans are used to seeing a goalie get drafted at 18 and then disappear to take the journey of 7,000 steps to High Hrothgar before finally entering the NHL as a 26-year-old. In the '80s, a teenager from Boston showed up and won the Vezina Trophy as a rookie.

### Age 19

The best right now: Connor Bedard, Chicago Blackhawks

The legends Bedard is most frequently compared to (Crosby and Connor McDavid) made quantum leaps when they were his age, and that hasn't happened yet for Bedard. Still, a couple tough months can't take the bloom off the rose. He's too good not to figure it out, and he's already an excellent player.

The best ever: Sidney Crosby, Pittsburgh Penguins (2006-07: 36 goals, 84 assists, 120 points)

Crosby swept the Hart, Art Ross and Ted Lindsay at the NHL Awards, then turned 20 later that summer.

Age 20

The best right now: Matvei Michkov, Philadelphia Flyers

This was shaping up to be another debate between Logan Cooley and Juraj Slafkovský, but Michkov has wasted no time bursting onto the scene as the kind of go-to scorer Flyers fans hoped he would be. He's also shown a flair for the dramatic, with three game-winning goals already. He technically won't turn 20 until Dec. 9, but that meets our cutoff and slides him in narrowly ahead of Cooley.

The best ever: Wayne Gretzky, Edmonton Oilers (1981-82: 92 goals, 120 assists, 212 points)

If it weren't for our rule about each player only appearing once on the "best ever" list, Gretzky would dominate the 20s. Instead, the debate is over which of his historic seasons to use. Let's go with the one that established a single-season goals record that nobody has even come close to in decades.

Age 21

The best right now: Wyatt Johnston, Dallas Stars

Did some folks jump the gun on penciling Johnston in as a reliable first-line force for the Stars? Perhaps, and his slow start to the season is testament to that. Still, it's easy to forget how young he still is and impossible to forget what he's already shown. Johnston is well-rounded, smart and accomplished beyond his years. That gives him the slight edge for now over Utah's Dylan Guenther, who is scoring in bunches to start the year.

The best ever: Dale Hawerchuk, Winnipeg Jets (1984-85: 53 goals, 77 assists, 130 points)

You could make a case for Hawerchuk in the 18-year-old slot too, but this was his career-best year that saw him finish as runner-up to Gretzky in the Hart race.

Age 22

The best right now: Tim Stützle, Ottawa Senators

After a slight dip in production last season, Stützle is back to being a force for the Senators, and he's doing it with drastically improved play-driving numbers, especially defensively. He has the look of a top-10 center in the league, and may even be more than that. His current pace would threaten 100 points this season.

The best ever: Bobby Orr, Boston Bruins (1970-71: 37 goals, 102 assists, 139 points)

While Orr is another legend who could offer up multiple seasons, this one was his best and saw him take home not only his fourth straight Norris but also his second consecutive Hart.

Age 23

The best right now: Jack Hughes, New Jersey Devils

Six seasons into his career, and with a 99-point campaign under his belt, it's hard not to believe Hughes' best hockey is ahead of him. He's a walking highlight reel, one of the league's most electrifying stars and (still) should be in the Hart conversation for most of the next decade — as long as he can stay healthy.

The best ever: Mario Lemieux, Pittsburgh Penguins (1988-89: 85 goals, 114 assists, 199 points)

Still the single greatest offensive season in NHL history by anyone not named Gretzky, and one of the only seasons that could knock Rocket Richard's 50-in-50 year out of consideration.

Age 24

The best right now: Rasmus Dahlin, Buffalo Sabres

It'll be a little easier to give Dahlin his flowers once the Sabres break that never-ending playoff drought. But even still, he has evolved into the No. 1 defenseman he was drafted to be, as a high-end producer whose defensive impact is starting to catch up.

The best ever: Mike Bossy, New York Islanders (1981-82: 64 goals, 83 assists, 147 points)

This was Bossy's best season in terms of total points, but somewhat amazingly only his third-best in goals scored.

Age 25

The best right now: Quinn Hughes, Vancouver Canucks

For the eldest Hughes brother, 2023-24 was about proving he belonged in the tippy-top of the Norris conversation. Mission accomplished, with authority. Now, amid a situation that has seen him grow into even more of an all-situations force, he's showing he's not just one of the few top defensemen in the league — he's one of the very best players, period.

The best ever: Connor McDavid, Edmonton Oilers (2022-23: 64 goals, 89 assists, 153 points)

It feels like McDavid might be the sort of player who'll lay claim to multiple spots on this list as he ages. For now, we'll slot in the most productive regular season of his career.

Age 26

The best right now: Cale Makar, Colorado Avalanche

Being the league's best at one of the true "peak prime" ages is steep competition, so it's a testament to Makar that there was hardly any debate here. He's dynamic offensively, and could very well challenge for 100 points this season, but he backs it up with great play-driving numbers, too. Simply put, Makar is one of the true game breakers in the sport.

The best ever: Brett Hull, St. Louis Blues (1990-91: 86 goals, 45 assists, 131 points)

Nobody aside from Gretzky has ever scored this many goals in a season. It was the middle of three seasons in which Hull led the league in goals, and it was enough to earn him his only MVP.

Age 27

The best right now: Connor McDavid, Edmonton Oilers

Here's an interesting thought exercise: What would McDavid have to do (or not do) to lose this particular title? Play the rest of Edmonton's schedule without scoring a point? Build a time machine and prevent huge chunks of the first nine seasons of his career? Erase himself entirely, Marty McFly-style? Absent that, he's the best player at his age — just like he always has been, and just like he'll continue to be.

The best ever: Bernie Nicholls, Los Angeles Kings (1988-89: 70 goals, 80 assists, 150 points)

Huh. After starting our list with a virtual who's who of NHL legends, I was not expecting to run into a guy who isn't even in the Hall of Fame. It's hard to argue with the numbers, though — only five other players



have ever crossed the 150-point threshold, and the 70-80 club consists of Nicholls, Gretzky, Lemieux, and that's the end of the list. If anything, it set an unbreakable record for most points without receiving a single MVP vote.

#### Age 28

The best right now: Mikko Rantanen, Colorado Avalanche

This age group was a gauntlet, with superstars such as David Pastrnak and Brayden Point also considered. We were leaning Pastrnak for a while, but as the season has progressed, Rantanen has made himself too tough to deny, on pace for his third consecutive 100-plus point season with a chance to score 50 goals. In a contract year, he looks like one of the best players on the planet.

The best ever: Phil Esposito, Boston Bruins (1970-71: 76 goals, 76 assists, 152 points)

Esposito's best season saw him shatter the NHL's single-season records for both goals and assists. Somewhat amazingly, he didn't even win the MVP that year, since you may have noticed teammate Bobby Orr's 1970-71 season was also on our list. The Bruins lost in the first round, in case you were wondering.

#### Age 29

The best right now: Nathan MacKinnon, Colorado Avalanche

We're not going to say MacKinnon has lapped the field — Leon Draisaitl was, in fact, also born in 1995 — but what Colorado's alternate captain has done so far in 2024-25 made the decision a little less difficult. Once again, MacKinnon is carrying the Avs on his back to a Hart-caliber degree and, maybe more impressively, continuing to raise the bar for himself.

The best ever: Marcel Dionne, Los Angeles Kings (1980-81: 58 goals, 77 assists, 153 points)

This wasn't the year he beat Gretzky for the Art Ross on a tiebreaker; that was the season before. But this one was arguably even better for a guy who retired as the second-leading scorer in history and is still somehow underrated.

#### Age 30

The best right now: Jake Guentzel, Tampa Bay Lightning

This was a tough call, and we gave heavy consideration here to Andrei Vasilevskiy, who as recently as two years ago would have been a slam-dunk answer for this birth year. The last two years have seen Vasilevskiy's numbers dip just enough to open the door to challengers like Guentzel, who is still a point-per-game player, and a complete one at that. If this was a question of best career or value to their team, it'd be Vasilevskiy all day. But in terms of who's the best right now, we'll (hesitantly) give it to Guentzel by the narrowest of leans.

The best ever: Nikita Kucherov, Tampa Bay Lightning (2023-24: 44 goals, 100 assists, 144 points)

I've been bombarding you with old-timers, and rightly so because you kids need to respect your elders. But we'll switch it up to mark a new decade with the most recent season on our list. Kucherov's brilliance saw him become just the fifth player — and history's only winger — to hit the 100-assist mark.

Gee, I wonder if we'll see him again anywhere in this post.

#### Age 31

The best right now: Nikita Kucherov, Tampa Bay Lightning

All apologies to Connor Hellebuyck, but we're going with the defending Art Ross winner, the preeminent power-play force of his generation and the offensive engine for a pair of Stanley Cup-winning teams. Kucherov is back near the top of the points list, and he's scoring goals more frequently than he has in several seasons.

The best ever: Dominik Hasek, Buffalo Sabres (1996-97: 37 wins, .930, 2.27 GAA)

The only question on Hasek is whether to use this season or hold off for one more year. I went with this, the first of back-to-back years that saw him win the Hart and Vezina, if only because I'm still not ready to talk about what he did to Canada in Nagano in 1998.

Age 32

The best right now: Mark Stone, Vegas Golden Knights

Stone's battled injuries once again this season, but when he's been on the ice, he's on pace for one of the best offensive seasons of his career — even if some of the shutdown defensive numbers that typically define Stone have cooled. It also helps the competition isn't too steep in this age group. Zach Hyman could have made a dark horse run with a repeat of last season, but that hasn't happened.

The best ever: Erik Karlsson, San Jose Sharks (2022-23: 25 goals, 76 assists, 101 points)

Wait, this was only two years ago? It feels like longer, but we have to give Karlsson credit for waiting until his 30s to have his best offensive season, becoming just the sixth defenseman to hit the 100-point mark in a season.

Age 33

The best right now: Artemi Panarin, New York Rangers

Panarin's mid-career Renaissance has been fun to watch. After settling into a playmaker-first role with the Rangers, he came into 2023-24 with a renewed interest in shooting the puck, and his production has increased accordingly. He's on track to set another career high in goals/60, and he's had stretches where he once again looks like someone who'll end up on Hart ballots come spring.

The best ever: Alex Ovechkin, Washington Capitals (2018-19: 51 goals, 38 assists, 89 points)

It's harder than you might think to slot Ovechkin into the all-time list, if only because he's been so consistent across his 20 seasons. Before his injury, his 2024-25 season was making a strong push for the age-39 honors, but for now, we'll settle for (ho-hum) a 50+ goal season.

Age 34

The best right now: Victor Hedman, Tampa Bay Lightning

Hedman turns 34 later this month, squeaking into this category before the Jan. 1 cutoff. But if he keeps up his stellar play so far, he might actually have a chance to threaten for the all-time age-34 honor by season's end. He's not the Norris favorite, but he remains at least a challenger as a supremely productive, play-driving star for the Lightning.

The best ever: Martin Brodeur, New Jersey Devils (2006-07: 48 wins, .922, 2.18 GAA)

Brodeur's another legend that gave us plenty of seasons to choose from, but I'll go with the one that saw him set the NHL record for wins in a season while winning the third of what would end up being four Vezinas in a five-season span.

Age 35

The best right now: Chris Tanev, Toronto Maple Leafs

Had Drew Doughty not broken his ankle back in September, this spot would've likely been his. Without knowing how he'll look when he returns, we turned to Tanev — and man, that's a solid contingency plan. Toronto added him for his still-effective play as a defensive defenseman, and he's been as advertised.

The best ever: Johnny Bucyk, Boston Bruins (1970-71: 51 goals, 65 assists, 116 points)

Yes, it's our third member of the 1970-71 Bruins, a team that spent a lot of the year filling the net against recent expansion teams. Still, this wasn't just the best season of Bucyk's hallowed career, but one of the most productive ever by an NHL winger to that point in history.

Age 36

The best right now: Sergei Bobrovsky, Florida Panthers

The 1988 birth year has some of the generation's best players, including Patrick Kane, Claude Giroux and Brad Marchand, all of whom are still good, upper-lineup players in the league. Any of them has a case here. Only Bobrovsky, though, played a massive role with the Stanley Cup winner six months ago, which we felt was a significant enough differentiator to overlook a quieter statistical start to 2024-25.

The best ever: Tim Thomas, Boston Bruins (2010-11: 35 wins, .938, 2.00 GAA)

Factoring in his Conn Smythe-winning performance in the playoffs, there's a very strong case to be made that this is the single greatest goaltending season we've ever seen. And it came from a 36-year-old who'd been a ninth-round pick and hadn't even become an NHL regular until he was well into his 30s.

Age 37

The best right now: Sidney Crosby, Pittsburgh Penguins

For the last few years, Crosby dragged a profoundly flawed roster to some degree of relevance. That's not happening with the 2024-25 Penguins, and individually, he's showing some signs of his age — particularly in his own end — but still, there's no other possible choice. He's still a high-end first-line center, even as the caliber of his teammates has deteriorated.

The best ever: Nicklas Lidstrom, Detroit Red Wings (2007-08: 10 goals, 60 assists, 70 points)

Was the Norris win a bit of a lifetime achievement award? Maybe, but the fact Lidstrom was still one of the league's best defensemen this deep into his career was a testament to his remarkable consistency.

Age 38

The best right now: Evgeni Malkin, Pittsburgh Penguins

Even with the disaster unfolding around him in Pittsburgh, Malkin has remained highly productive, which, at 38, is about all you can hope for. Jonathan Quick got some consideration for how good his numbers have remained at this age, but his limited usage in New York tilts the scales in Malkin's favor.

The best ever: Ray Bourque, Boston Bruins (1998-99: 10 goals, 37 assists, 47 points)

Speaking of consistent defensemen, it's fitting that Bourque slots in right after Lidstrom. This would turn out to be his final full season in Boston and saw him named a Norris finalist for the 14th time. No, that's not a typo.

Age 39

The best right now: Alex Ovechkin, Washington Capitals

Even a pretty serious knee injury wasn't enough to knock Ovechkin out of this seat. He spent the first 18 games of the season chasing Gretzky's goal record with passion and substance, and he was on pace to get it done in a hurry. And hey, if he winds up with half a season to score 27 goals? Don't bet against him.

The best ever: Al MacInnis, St. Louis Blues (2002-03: 16 goals, 52 assists, 68 points)

One more legendary defenseman. MacInnis is remembered for his slap shot, but he was so much more than that. This would essentially be his last season (he played just three games in 2003-04) and he went out as a Norris runner-up who also finished sixth in Hart voting.

Age 40

The best right now: Marc-Andre Fleury, Minnesota Wild

Fleury had this spot by default — the NHL's only 40-year-old as of Nov. 28 — but he's also had some decent success in limited action for the Wild this season. The big question, at this point, is whether he'll play enough games to pass Roberto Luongo (1,044) for second-most games all-time among goaltenders. At 1,031, he's within striking distance.

The best ever: Gordie Howe, Detroit Red Wings (1968-69: 44 goals, 59 assists, 103 points)

You didn't think we'd forget about Mr. Hockey, did you? The standard bearer for longevity in pro sports could also lay claim to the age-51 crown since he's the only NHL player to make it that far. But we'll go with what somewhat amazingly stands as the only 100-point season of his career.

Plus a few more old-timers ...

While Fleury is the league's oldest current player at 40, we wanted to add a few more mentions from NHL history.

The best 41-year-old ever: Jacques Plante, Maple Leafs (1970-71: 24 wins, .944, 1.89 GAA)

This is the single-best save percentage in NHL history. And he did it in a season in which offensive records were being shattered around the league.

The best 42-year-old ever: Mark Messier, Rangers (2003-04: 18 goals, 25 assists, 43 points)

Another star who played forever, we'll honor Messier for still being productive in what would be the last of his 25 seasons.

The best 43-year-old ever: Jaromir Jagr, Panthers (2015-16: 27 goals, 39 assists, 66 points)

Not an especially tough call here; there have only been seven skaters who have seen the ice in their age-43 seasons, and Jagr put up more points than all the others combined.

The best 44-year-old ever: Zdeno Chara, Islanders (2021-22: 2 goals, 12 assists, 14 points)

The real achievement here is that Chara managed to play 72 games at his age. And he was still the scariest guy on the ice for every one of them.

The best 45-year-old ever: Chris Chelios, Red Wings (2007-08: 3 goals, 9 assists, 12 points)

Not only did Chelios play 69 games in the regular season and 14 more in the playoffs while helping the Red Wings to another Cup, he stuck around for parts of two more NHL seasons after this.

## The Athletic / Wayne Gretzky rookie card case sells for record \$2.52 million after first buyer failed to pay

By Brooks Peck- December 7, 2024

A one-of-a-kind case of unopened 1979 O-Pee-Chee hockey cards, likely containing dozens of highly coveted Wayne Gretzky rookie cards, sold at auction for \$2.52 million on Thursday night. It was the second time this year that the case was put up for sale by Heritage Auctions after the winner of the first auction back in February failed to pay the \$3.72 million he owed for it.

Despite the significant decrease in price, the new sale still set a record for being the most valuable unopened package of trading cards.

According to Heritage, the unnamed consignor of the cards didn't know he had them until he went through "a long-forgotten pile of boxes in his home in Saskatchewan, where deadstock cards from the late 1970's and early 1980's had been gathering dust since he had bought them directly from a wholesaler." The case includes 16 boxes of '79 O-Pee-Chee hockey cards, each containing 48 packs and a total of more than 10,000 cards.

"I'm not so passionate about it as I've seen, like, other people in the sports collecting world, like how they're so into it," the winner of the first auction, Jack Arshawsky, told CBC News in April, after changing his mind about the purchase. He said he paid \$3 million of the purchase price before reconsidering, but Heritage confirmed to The Athletic that "no payment or deposit of any kind was ever made to Heritage by the winning bidder."

Prior to the second auction, the Director of Sports Auctions for Heritage, Chris Ivy, said that the issues around the first attempted sale weren't expected to impact the value of the item. In Heritage's catalogue for the auction, an estimated value of "\$3,000,000+" was listed. However, the final sale came in 32 percent lower than the original sale.

What's next

The unnamed buyer now has the option to keep the cards in their current state as a unique and highly valuable collectible filled with an unknown configuration of cards in unknown condition, or the buyer can open them in search of the Gretzky rookie cards. To date, only two examples of the '79 O-Pee-Chee Gretzky rookie card have been deemed to be in gem-mint condition by leading trading card grader PSA (Professional Sports Authenticator). The last sale of one of those cards, graded a PSA 10 (on a scale from 1-10) came in March 2021 for \$3.75 million. It's possible that this case contains one or more Gretzky cards that could also grade a PSA 10, but given that only two out of the many in existence have achieved that grade, it remains unlikely. A '79 Gretzky graded a PSA 9 (there are 95 of those in existence) last sold for \$122,000 in September of this year. So it's a big drop off in value from virtually perfect to almost perfect.

As for Arshawsky, the fact that the item sold for far less than what he originally agreed to pay could open up the possibility of legal action.

"The initial winning bidder more than likely had a contract with Heritage to participate in its auctions, and although I have not seen the contract, it's safe to assume the winning bidder was contractually obligated to pay for any item he won," says Paul Lesko, a Missouri-based lawyer who tracks legal cases involved collectibles. "By choosing not to pay, the initial winning bidder would then be in breach of contract, and the damages that Heritage could seek are at least the difference between last night's sale

versus the prior sale. I'm sure Heritage's contract probably has other provisions in there too (including an attorneys' fee provision). So, there's a good chance there will be some type of legal action in the very near future. But, depending on the contract (if there's an arbitration clause), the future legal action might take place in secret rather than publicly in court."

There is also the possibility that the consignor could bring legal action against both Heritage and the Arshawsky, but Lesko says that seems less likely to happen since the consignor and Heritage have aligning interest.

## [The Athletic / NHL Power Rankings: A new No. 1, plus all the 4 Nations snub talk you can handle](#)

**By Sean Gentile and Dom Luszczyszyn- December 7, 2024**

On Wednesday, the 4 Nations Face-Off rosters were finally revealed and, naturally, we're going to milk all the content we can out of that news.

After eight years without best-on-best hockey we've been extremely deprived — so deprived that a contrived and meaningless four-team cash grab is starting to feel exciting. USA! Canada! Sweden! Finland! Let's go!

At Power Rankings HQ we racked our brains all night after the reveal to find the perfect 4 Nations angle for this week's edition. A bold, fresh take no one else has thought of. A theme so daring that it may completely revolutionize coverage of this tournament.

Anyway, here's one snub from every team.

1. Minnesota Wild, 17-4-4

Last week: 3

Sean's ranking: 1

Dom's ranking: 1

Notable absence: Kirill Kaprizov

This isn't a snub in the same way as most of the players on this list, because he is not in the tournament as Russia has faced bans from international competition since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. But is it really best-on-best without Kaprizov, the best player in the league this season?

Here's what a Team Russia might have looked like. Kaprizov and Nikita Kucherov on the same line would've been nasty and the Russian blue line is in a much better place than it used to be too. If they were in the tournament, Russia would slot between Sweden and Finland with a plus-124 Net Rating.

2. Carolina Hurricanes, 17-8-1

Last week: 1

Sean's ranking: 3

Dom's ranking: 2

Snub: Jesperi Kotkaniemi

There's no denying that Kotkaniemi has had a disappointing career so far after being picked third in 2018. At 24, he still hasn't proven himself as a top-six player both in his scoring and play-driving ability. He just doesn't move the needle. Still, to be left off the roster entirely in favor of guys like Joel Armia and Erik Haula feels like a new low. Whether that snub is deserved is in the eye of the beholder.

3. Washington Capitals, 17-6-2

Last week: 4

Sean's ranking: 2

Dom's ranking: 5

Snub: Everybody

If you thought that the Eastern Conference's leader in points percentage would've snuck someone into the tournament, you thought wrong. Dylan Strome, at the moment, would be the highest-scoring Canadian to stay home. Tom Wilson would've made sense on the bottom six. Zach Werenski's monster season in Columbus might've squeezed John Carlson out of the Team USA roster. Logan Thompson, Rasmus Sandin ... the list goes on. Guess those guys are stuck going on a mid-February vacation instead.

4. Vegas Golden Knights, 17-7-3

Last week: 5

Sean's ranking: 4

Dom's ranking: 3

Notable absence: Tomas Hertl

All the Vegas guys who could've made it did, so no true snubs here. Hertl will have to watch from home, however, knowing he'd be Czechia's top-line center. You can find their projected roster below next to their would-be top player (Boston's David Pastrnak).

5. Toronto Maple Leafs, 16-7-2

Last week: 8

Sean's ranking: 5

Dom's ranking: 4

Snub: John Tavares

It is a little sad to see Tavares' Team Canada story likely end here. He wasn't ready to make the Olympic team in 2010 and was injured before the medal round in 2014. No NHL participation at the 2018 and 2022 Olympics hurts, too. The 4 Nations isn't the Olympics, obviously, but it is our first taste of best-on-best hockey since the 2016 World Cup. Eight years is a long time to create missed opportunities that the best players of that era won't get back.

Tavares has been really good for the Leafs this season, scoring at a 38-goal and 76-point pace while outscoring teams heavily at five-on-five. It just wasn't quite good enough, especially with how the pieces fell in Canada's bottom six.

6. Winnipeg Jets, 19-8-0

Last week: 2

Sean's ranking: 6

Dom's ranking: 7

Snub: Mark Scheifele

The NHL's absence from the Olympics has been bad news for everyone, but players in their 30s probably have been hit hardest — many have basically watched their primes come and go without a real opportunity to play best-on-best hockey. Scheifele is their poster boy; he'd almost certainly have been on one (or both) of the rosters in 2018 and 2022. Now, he's on the outside looking in — and on paper that's the right call, given his ongoing issues as a five-on-five play driver, but that doesn't make it an easier pill to swallow.



## 7. Florida Panthers, 16-9-2

Last week: 9

Sean's ranking: 8

Dom's ranking: 6

Snub: Carter Verhaeghe

Did Verhaeghe deserve serious consideration for Team Canada? On merit, probably not — good as he is, the competition is stiff. If you value the Fun Factor, though, that's another argument entirely. He's got a knack for doing big stuff in big games that could play well in a tournament like this one.

## 8. New Jersey Devils, 17-9-2

Last week: 6

Sean's ranking: 7

Dom's ranking: 8

Notable absence: Switzerland

Between Nico Hischier, Timo Meier and Jonas Siegenthaler, New Jersey has apparently become the unofficial Swiss HQ of the NHL. In other words, expect a big play for Roman Josi at this year's trade deadline. (Dougie Hamilton, Simon Nemec and a first, who says no?!)

Unfortunately, a Switzerland entry in the tournament was always unrealistic given there are only nine active NHLers. But that won't stop us from dreaming about the Devils creating their own little Switzerland to compete in a more important tournament that starts in April.

## 9. Dallas Stars, 16-9-0

Last week: 7

Sean's ranking: 10

Dom's ranking: 9

Snub: Jason Robertson

All due respect to Matt Duchene, who forced himself into the discussion over the last two months, but Robertson has to be the choice. He picked a heck of a time to play some uninspiring hockey, with scoring rates (0.67 goals per 60, 2.02 points per 60) more than halved from his peak in 2022-23. Team USA's top six was crowded, though, and Robertson's game doesn't quite fit what they were going for further down the lineup.

## 10. Tampa Bay Lightning, 13-9-2

Last week: 13

Sean's ranking: 11

Dom's ranking: 10

Notable absence: Nikita Kucherov

Did you know that Kucherov is averaging 10.56 points per 60 on the power play this season? Because he is. Going back to the 2007-08 season, nobody getting regular power-play minutes outside of Edmonton has done that. He's never been better.

#### 11. Los Angeles Kings, 15-8-3

Last week: 11

Sean's ranking: 9

Dom's ranking: 13

Snub: Drew Doughty

At the start of the season, you can bet that Doughty's name was written in pen on Jon Cooper's roster. Or marker. Or paint. Something that couldn't be erased. He'd just turned in some of the best defensive work of his career last season, after all. Injuries happen, though, and while Doughty's rehab from a broken ankle is on schedule, it's still a little too early to just assume he'll be ready. As a potential replacement down the line, though? That's another story.

#### 12. Vancouver Canucks, 13-7-4

Last week: 14

Sean's ranking: 12

Dom's ranking: 12

Snub: Thatcher Demko

Poor Thatcher Demko. Who knows what would've happened if he was healthy enough to start the season on time? Even then, it was always a numbers game between the pipes for the USA. Someone was always going to be the odd one out between him, Connor Hellebuyck, Jeremy Swayman and Jake Oettinger; Demko's injury unfortunately made the choice a lot easier. On talent, he's right there.

#### 13. Edmonton Oilers, 14-10-2

Last week: 12

Sean's ranking: 13

Dom's ranking: 11

Snub: Evan Bouchard

Canada leaving Bouchard at home is by no means a surprise given how they've operated in the past with similarly perceived high-risk defensemen (P.K. Subban and Kris Letang come to mind). Still, given the state of the team's defense corps, it does feel like a misstep considering Bouchard's all-world offensive ability and cleaned-up defensive game. There's only one Canadian defenseman that outshines Bouchard with the puck and there was plenty of room for both at the tournament.

Bouchard brings a lot to the table at five-on-five, not just on the power play. Defensively he has his share of blunders, sure, but anyone who watched him in last year's playoffs knows he's a big-game player who has greatly reduced the big mistakes that probably give the Canadian front office nightmares. Bouchard was by far Canada's biggest snub.

#### 14. Boston Bruins, 14-11-3

Last week: 18

Sean's ranking: 14

Dom's ranking: 14

Notable absence: David Pastrnak

This has to be a real bummer for Pastrnak in particular. The tournament is being held in Boston! That's just cruel.

Would Czechia be a good team? Absolutely not. But they've got some talent and it would've been cool to see Pastrnak shine for his country.

Who knows, maybe Dostal would've given his best Jonas Hiller impression to make things interesting? He's certainly used to it in Anaheim.

15. Colorado Avalanche, 14-13-0

Last week: 10

Sean's ranking: 15

Dom's ranking: 15

Snub: Joel Kiviranta

Not a lot of options here. We'll always have Kiviranta's clutch performance in the bubble — an out-of-nowhere Game 7 hat trick (including the overtime series winner!) against the Avalanche to send the Stars to the third round. It was his first game of the series! Imagine not bringing those heroics to the 4 Nations. For shame, Finland. For shame.

16. Calgary Flames, 13-9-5

Last week: 15

Sean's ranking: 16

Dom's ranking: 16

Snub: MacKenzie Weegar

If you don't think Bouchard was an egregious snub, perhaps we can sell you on Weegar. Plenty of point production, play-driving in tough minutes, the ability to play both sides — that sounds like a great guy to have around as a spare, especially if something happens to Cale Makar. He's six inches shorter than Colton Parayko, though, so what can you do?

17. New York Rangers, 13-10-1

Last week: 16

Sean's ranking: 17

Dom's ranking: 17

Snub: Alexis Lafrenière

After the superstar showing Lafrenière had in last year's playoffs, it did feel like his potential inclusion for Team Canada was gaining some serious traction. That's especially true given how well he produces at five-on-five. He'll surely be on the shortlist for the Olympics, though it would help if he cleaned things up without the puck. That's still a work in progress and an apparent factor given who Canada ended up selecting.

18. Philadelphia Flyers, 12-11-3

Last week: 22

Sean's ranking: 18

Dom's ranking: 18

Snub: Gritty

The only question is where Gritty's allegiance lies. Is he America-first or will he be proudly alternating between Travis Konecny and Travis Sanheim jerseys? Perhaps a Frankenstein jersey foul that features both? These are the real hard-hitting questions, and we expect them to be answered.

19. Columbus Blue Jackets, 11-11-3

Last week: 21

Sean's ranking: 19

Dom's ranking: 20

Snub: Sean Monahan

It's nearly impossible to find Monahan a legit spot on Team Canada, but we're still going to use this space to remind everyone how good he's been this season. He's hovering around a point per game on Columbus' top line, and the Blue Jackets are winning his five-on-five minutes 23-10.

20. Pittsburgh Penguins, 11-12-4

Last week: 30

Sean's ranking: 21

Dom's ranking: 20

Snub: Tristan Jarry

Just kidding.

21. Buffalo Sabres, 11-12-3

Last week: 17

Sean's ranking: 20

Dom's ranking: 22

Snub: Tage Thompson

The fact that Thompson played himself so firmly into the Team USA discussion is a great, great thing for Sabres fans. Where he might've made the most sense was as a spare; the U.S. has plenty of positional versatility across its forward group. Why not add some heavy offensive artillery?

22. St. Louis Blues, 13-12-2

Last week: 25

Sean's ranking: 22

Dom's ranking: 21

Snub: Robert Thomas

If Canada was truly dedicated to playing a defensive 4C behind Connor McDavid, Sidney Crosby and Brayden Point, Thomas was working at a disadvantage. It's a shame, though, because he's one of the

league's gifted playmakers, and seeing him play with elite linemates would be a blast. He should be in the mix as an injury replacement.

23. Seattle Kraken, 13-13-1

Last week: 19

Sean's ranking: 23

Dom's ranking: 23

Notable absence: Joey Daccord

Daccord is a Canadian citizen — he just needs his paperwork. He also has a higher save percentage (.912) than any of Canada's goaltenders and more goals saved above expected (9.69) than the three of them nearly combined. Are we sure Doug Armstrong and company didn't try to sneak him a passport?

24. Ottawa Senators, 11-12-2

Last week: 23

Sean's ranking: 21

Dom's ranking: 24

Snub: Jake Sanderson

At the start of the season, Sanderson felt like a legit dark horse along the U.S. blue line. Things haven't gone according to plan — the Sens, with a major assist from Linus Ullmark, are getting outscored in Sanderson's minutes 21-8. At 22, though, he's still on track to have plenty of chances.

25. Detroit Red Wings, 10-12-4

Last week: 20

Sean's ranking: 25

Dom's ranking: 24

Snub: Simon Edvinsson

He may not be national-team-ready just yet, but Edvinsson is showing that he will be soon. He's been a defensive revelation with Detroit on an elite pair with Moritz Seider. The pair has been crushing tough minutes and it's easy to imagine Edvinsson growing into a real stud worthy of Team Sweden one day. We're betting he'll be seriously considered for the 2026 Olympics — he looks that good already.

26. Utah HC, 10-11-4

Last week: 26

Sean's ranking: 26

Dom's ranking: 26

Snub: Clayton Keller

A tough choice, but arguably the correct one given what Team USA was going for in the bottom six. Keller is an obviously talented scorer, but there were better options for those roles with Keller's defensive upside coming into question. It's a testament to just how deep USA Hockey is right now that an omission as big as Keller's isn't that controversial.

27. Anaheim Ducks, 10-11-3

Last week: 24

Sean's ranking: 27

Dom's ranking: 28

Snub: Troy Terry

To be honest, we're just curious about how good he would look on a real team.

28. New York Islanders, 9-11-7

Last week: 27

Sean's ranking: 29

Dom's ranking: 27

Snub: Mathew Barzal

Barzal is another tough-luck injury case. As good as he was last season, hitting the 80-point mark for the first time since he was a rookie in 2017-18, he didn't regain quite enough caché to make the initial roster in the midst of a long-term absence.

29. San Jose Sharks, 10-14-5

Last week: 31

Sean's ranking: 28

Dom's ranking: 29

Snub: William Eklund

Sweden decided to carry Leo Carlsson as its spare young guy. Makes sense — he's a center and all that. Still, Eklund has 23 points in 28 games and would've added some offensive creativity to a group of wingers where it's in relatively short supply.

30. Montreal Canadiens, 10-13-3

Last week: 28

Sean's ranking: 30

Dom's ranking: 30

Snub: Nick Suzuki

There were a few people dunking on Habs fans for Suzuki's omission, but he was likely right in the mix for that 4C job for Team Canada. Suzuki plays tough minutes and is strong enough defensively to feel comfortable putting him in that role. Canada has no shortage of penalty-killing forwards, too, which makes Suzuki's low involvement there a likely non-issue. As good as Suzuki is, though, it was always going to be tough beating out Anthony Cirelli for that job. He's a perfect shutdown center who's having a Selke-level season for the head coach's team. That's tough to beat.

31. Nashville Predators, 7-14-6

Last week: 32

Sean's ranking: 31

Dom's ranking: 31

Snub: Ryan O'Reilly

In a parallel universe, O'Reilly is crushing it in all situations and playing Selke-level hockey for a playoff-bound Predators team. He's picked as the slam dunk 4C for Canada and everyone's like "Yeah, that makes sense."

We don't live in that universe. We live here where the Predators are really bad and O'Reilly has taken a step back after a resurgent 2023-24 season.

32. Chicago Blackhawks, 8-16-2

Last week: 29

Sean's ranking: 32

Dom's ranking: 32

Snub: Connor Bedard

If Bedard were having a Crosby/McDavid-caliber Year 2, you can bet he'd have made the initial roster. He isn't, so he didn't. He gets it though, and his time is coming. Soon.

## The Athletic / Baggy nets and blue undershirts: 6 more things I miss from the NHL's ancient days

By Sean McIndoe- December 7, 2024

Exactly one year ago today, I wrote a column about being old, and the subtle things I miss about what hockey used to be. No big issues, to be clear – we're talking stuff like how the water bottles used to pop off the nets, and how linesmen used to have to climb the glass to avoid the puck. If I'm being honest, I figured it would be a bit of a throwaway, the kind of midseason filler that's fun for a day and then fades quickly. Instead, it became one of my more popular columns of the season, and I decided to make it a regular feature.

Then I forgot. Because I am old.

But if there's anything us old fogies do better than the occasional memory lapse, it's celebrating the random anniversary of things that weren't all that important to begin with. So today, one year later, I'm bringing the gimmick back, with a half dozen new items. Well, old ones. You'll figure it out.

But first, just like last time, a disclaimer: This is all in good fun, and very much not meant to be some whiny screed about how much better things used to be, and how Gary Bettman has ruined everything by dragging the game into the 20th century. If you have strong feelings about that stuff, please take them elsewhere, because I am decrepit and fragile.

Let's get old.

I miss when the nets were loose and baggy

How it used to be: A player would carry the puck through the neutral zone, with nobody in his way because the trap hadn't been invented yet. Then he'd skate to the top of the circle and wind up for a slap shot because gap control hadn't been invented yet. Then he'd rip a howitzer past a terrified tiny man because goaltending hadn't been invented yet.

And then the puck would stay in the net. Somewhere.

You see, kids, back in the old days the nets were loose and baggy. That made sense to us because their job was to stop the puck when a goal had been scored. So even if you lost track of the puck, which you definitely did thanks to the 14-inch standard-definition TV the whole family was crowded around, you'd see a big bulge in the back of the net and know that goal had been scored.

Why it changed: Presumably because the linesmen complained about having to go elbow-deep in fishing twine to retrieve a puck while everyone else waited for the game to start. And sure, I get that. But at some point, net-tightening technology got out of control, to the point where the things barely seem to have any give at all anymore.

Why I miss it: First of all, because I'm tired of being confused about whether a goal was even scored because the puck goes into the net at 95 mph and comes out at roughly 96, eventually embedding itself in the boards at the opposite end of the rink.

But there was also just something cool about the visual. In last year's comment section, reader Tom L. once described it as "Like catching a comet in a butterfly net," at which point he was immediately perma-banned for writing something better than I ever could.

I miss when a team's three best forwards were on the top line



How it used to be: There was a time when a team's first line was made up of its best center and its two best wingers. The second line was the next best center and next two best wingers. And not only did this not seem weird, we couldn't even imagine a different way of doing it.

For the record, this wasn't a hard and fast rule across the entire league, and you'd occasionally get guys playing higher up the lineup than you'd expect. (This was especially true when somebody like Dave Semenko would get to ride shotgun for Wayne Gretzky, just in case anyone needed to be taken for a canoe ride.) But occasional exceptions aside, it was pretty much the default setting.

That started to shift around the time the cap came in, as teams moved toward spreading their best players across three or even four lines. Often, that meant the top center would have one top winger who'd regularly play with him, and then a rotating cast of depth guys who'd fill out the third spot. Sometimes it clicked, and you'd even occasionally discovered a star-in-the-making like Zach Hyman this way. But loading up the team's three best forwards on one line for an entire game? These days, it's rare.

Why it changed: My guess is that two main factors came into play, both of which made balanced lineups more important. The first was the cap, and the parity it forced on the league. It's one thing to put your three best forwards on the top line, and something else entirely when those are your only three good forwards. We also saw the game evolve to a much higher tempo than we saw back in the olden days, where players took longer shifts and rarely went full speed. With everyone mashing the turbo button at all times these days, you can't play that top line for 25 or 30 minutes like you could before, so spreading out the offense becomes a priority.

Why I miss it: Because it was just cool to see all that talent on the ice at once, especially when teams matched top lines and there were six all-stars facing off against each other. And it was fun when your team acquired a star player and you'd start mentally shifting the lines around in your head, rather than finding out he'd been slotted in for third-line duty because the top line with the 12-goals-a-year plugger has too much chemistry to disrupt.

I miss when all the players wore the same light blue undershirts for some reason

How it used to be: I don't know why or when it started, but when I was growing up, every NHL player wore the same light blue undershirt. (OK, yes, except for Rob Ray.)

If you looked closely, you could see them peaking out from beneath the jersey pretty much all the time. But you really got a good look under two sets of circumstances: Any time a player was interviewed in the dressing room, or whenever a guy got into a fight and had his jersey pulled off.

A significantly rarer third option that nonetheless helps illustrate our point: When players were forced to take part in intermission comedy sketches.

Why it changed: I have no idea, although I'm going to assume that somebody invented a better moisture-absorbing material that was lighter and/or more comfortable, and the modern generation adopted that because they are soft.

Relatedly, I have no idea when this changed. I know those shirts were everywhere in like 1993, and they're not around now, but you could tell me that they disappeared gradually or in some specific year in between there and I would have no choice but to believe you.

Why I miss it: I have no idea. My brain may be broken.

I miss when referees would announce the result of goal review with a dramatic point

How it used to be: A goal would be scored, or maybe it wouldn't, and nobody would be quite sure. So we'd go to replay review, which always worked great and everybody loved, to try to figure it out. That

meant the referee would have to skate over to the penalty box area, where they'd try to hand him a beige phone with a comically long extension chord through a little hole in the glass, which was always peak comedy. He'd listen, somebody somewhere would watch a replay, and we'd all wait as the suspense mounted.

And then, the decision would arrive – at which point the ref would nod solemnly, return the phone, and then take a few confident strides toward center ice before either pointing to the faceoff dot (for a goal) or waving his arms (for no goal). It was emphatic, decisive, and the only way that made sense.

Why it changed: Because the NHL realized that the NFL had its officials actually announce their calls into microphones and thought, “Hey, I bet our guys could do that too.” Spoiler alert: No they could not.

Why I miss it: First are foremost, because today's NHL microphones seldom work. And on the rare occasions that they do, every referee who isn't Wes McCauley clearly hates having to do the announcement and rush through the entire thing like a scared third-grader getting his public speaking presentation out of the way. Half the time the crowd is just confused about what the ref is even trying to tell us, especially since a lot of these guys don't know how to just get to the point and say goal or no goal. It's a mess.

But even beyond that, the point-or-wave dynamic was just better. It was more dramatic. What's that old saying when it comes to screenwriting, show don't tell? The NHL was better when they'd show us with an emphatic motion instead of telling us with rambling expository dialog.

One bit of good news: Unlike just about all of the other items I complain about in this column, where there's no reasonable path back to how it used to be, we could fix this one at any time. Just call up the referees union and tell them the broken mics are history, and we're back to pointing. I'm pretty sure they'd be thrilled. All we'd need to do is provide a little bit of training to remind them how it's done. Maybe Auston Matthews could volunteer.

I miss when cool moments were punctuated with flashbulbs going off

How it used to be: Some key moment would come along, especially around the net, and the darkened arena would explode with camera flashbulbs.

If you've ever wondered why those “ol' hockey pictures” looked so cool, here's how they did it:

I slowed down the Mahovlich goal from '72. You can see the flash bulbs mounted on the glass going off simultaneously to take the pic. The resulting pic is in the thread BELOW.. [pic.twitter.com/VVXQK3ctn6](https://pic.twitter.com/VVXQK3ctn6)

— Old Hockey Cards (@oldhockeycards) December 2, 2023

It was like a mini-fireworks show, one that you came to associate with “something very important just happened.”

Why it changed: I don't know enough about photography to say for sure, but I'd assume that better camera technology is to blame here, as well as better lightning in arenas.

Why I miss it: Because flashbulbs automatically increase the drama of a given sports moment by roughly 300 percent.

This isn't an NHL-specific issue, by the way. Other sports have also lost their bulbs, with nighttime baseball and football being especially affected. If you're feeling generous with your definitions, it's possible that no “sport” has suffered more here than pro wrestling. But hockey had its moment too, and I miss them. Photography was just better back then. With one notable exception.

I kind of miss when random fans would jump on the ice to celebrate with the players

How it used to be: You'd be sitting at home, watching your team win the Stanley Cup. The final buzzer would count down, and the bench would empty in an explosion of joy and relief, as the superstar forward and stud defenseman raced down the ice pile onto the starting goalie. And then you'd look up and Gord from accounting would be there too.

Why it changed: Because it was one of the stupidest things ever, and I can't believe there was a time when we let this happen in pretty much every sport.

Why I miss it: I know I shouldn't because it was dumb and also legitimately dangerous. It was also unfailingly hilarious, and it only gets funnier with time, since you get to enjoy those wonderful '70s and '80s fashions.

The whole thing is fascinating to me as an introvert who doesn't enjoy making eye contact with my own children. I can't get inside the head of somebody who sees their team celebrating a huge win and thinks, "You know what I bet would make this even better? Me. Hold my popcorn, I'll be back in a bit..."

Today, anyone who tries to jump on the ice at the final horn would be immediately tackled, arrested, and barred from the arena for life. And for the record, I have no issue with that, other than we should do it to the glass-bangers too. But there was a weird time when we all just accepted it, and I kind of miss it.

## The Athletic / NHL 2024-25 bold predictions: Revisiting our preseason prognostications

**By The Athletic NHL Staff- December 8, 2024**

Utah will be one of the NHL's highest-scoring teams? The Stars Stanley Cup winners? Dylan Larkin — and many others — 40-goal scorers?

Heading into the 2024-25 NHL season, The Athletic asked its hockey staff for bold predictions, and two months later, some are holding up well while others look to have been a bit too bold.

Here's a progress report on each prediction, from the writers ready to take a victory lap to the many who need a mulligan.

Anaheim Ducks

Preseason bold prediction: Trevor Zegras will not be traded this season

Outlook: Still in play

It feels like there have been two factions at work here: those who feel like a Zegras trade is inevitable and those (i.e., Zegras/Ducks fans) who are beyond tired of seeing his name in trade-related/hypothesized/predicted stories. Mind you, it's hard to peg what his value is or could be. He had been healthy until he got injured this week and his return date is uncertain. Those who've watched him closely can see he is playing a more responsible 200-foot game under Greg Cronin. But he's also on a 34-point pace. Zegras might be a distressed asset, but GM Pat Verbeek isn't going to move a highly skilled 23-year-old forward for another team's throwaways. — Eric Stephens

Boston Bruins

Preseason bold prediction: Jeremy Swayman will struggle early

Outlook: Lock it in

This one was easy. It wasn't just that Swayman missed all of training camp before signing his contract. He had to adjust to the physical and mental strain of being the go-to goalie following the trade of Linus Ullmark. On top of that, most of his teammates struggled out of the gate. It's no wonder Swayman wasn't himself. — Fluto Shinzawa

Buffalo Sabres

Preseason bold prediction: Owen Power will double his previous high-goal total

Outlook: Still in play

Power is already almost halfway to a career high in points 26 games into the season and has three goals. He needs nine more in the final 66 games to get to my preseason bold prediction. Given that he plays 22 minutes a night and has a role on the power play, 12 goals is still a number that's in play, but it's not quite a lock. — Matthew Fairburn

Calgary Flames

Preseason bold prediction: Jonathan Huberdeau will crack the 80-point plateau

Outlook: So far, not so good. But there's time ...

While Huberdeau's goal totals look more promising compared to last year (he had one point in all of December 2023), we kind of figured his assists would be up. However, he isn't trending toward an 80-point season, per Hockey Reference. But if he goes on some kind of scoring run between now and the end of the season, maybe that changes. — Julian McKenzie

#### Carolina Hurricanes

Preseason bold prediction: Seth Jarvis will get a shot at center

Outlook: So far, not so good. But there's time ...

The Hurricanes still haven't figured out who will be their second-line center, but so far it hasn't been Jarvis. Coach Rod Brind'Amour has bounced between using Jesperi Kotkaniemi and Jack Drury in a more featured role, while Jarvis has remained on the wing. Jarvis has also not been used much on faceoffs — a key for any Brind'Amour center — since returning from an upper-body injury. — Cory Lavalette

#### Chicago Blackhawks

Preseason bold prediction: The Blackhawks will finish 25 points better than last season

Outlook: It's a long shot

This season hasn't gone as expected for the Blackhawks, which was apparent with Luke Richardson's firing on Thursday. They're more competitive than a season ago — they've led, been tied or within a goal in the third period in 25 of 26 games — but their record is even worse. Does a new coach change that? We'll see. But they have to win a lot to meet the bold prediction. — Scott Powers

#### Colorado Avalanche

Preseason bold prediction: Cale Makar will have 100 points

Outlook: Still in play

This prediction is looking solid through the first two months of the season. Makar leads all defensemen with 34 points, which ranks 13th amongst all players. He's on an 82-game pace of 103 points, so he's right on track. As expected, Makar is getting a lot of his production done on the power play, where he's tied for fourth in the NHL with 14 points. — Jesse Granger

#### Columbus Blue Jackets

Preseason bold prediction: Yegor Chinakhov will bloom as a goal scorer

Outlook: Still in play

Chinakhov threatened to make this prediction look like pure genius with three goals and seven points in the Blue Jackets' first five games. He's since cooled off and is currently out of the lineup day to day with an upper-body injury. But once he returns, the 23-year-old Russian will get a top-six role on a club that's been surprisingly productive. He has seven goals in 21 games, meaning our prediction of 25-plus is still in play. Our prediction of increased ice time? He's gone from 15:10 last season to 17:01 under coach Dean Evason. — Aaron Portzline

#### Dallas Stars

Preseason bold prediction: The Stars will win the Stanley Cup

Outlook: Still in play

Top 10 in goals per game, top five in goals-against per game, top five in penalty kill and a top-10 goalie in Jake Oettinger. The Stars are right where we expected them to be, among the league's best teams, and

they're doing it with an underperforming power play and relatively slow starts from Jason Robertson and Wyatt Johnston, all of which likely will positively regress to the mean. Even with Tyler Seguin's potential season-ending surgery (something which likely will make the Stars more aggressive in the trade market), Dallas remains a leading contender for the Stanley Cup. — Mark Lazerus

#### Detroit Red Wings

Preseason bold prediction: Dylan Larkin will score 40 goals

Outlook: Still in play

This season hasn't gone how the Red Wings would have hoped, but Larkin is indeed close to being on pace to threaten 40 goals. There's a lot of season left, of course, but he's been a force, particularly on the power play. Detroit could really use some more offense from down the lineup, but their top players (Larkin, Lucas Raymond and Alex DeBrincat) have been scoring to begin the year. — Max Bultman

#### Edmonton Oilers

Preseason bold prediction: Stuart Skinner will finish top five in Vezina voting

Outlook: Not happening

Skinner went from perhaps the presumptive starter for Team Canada at the 4 Nations tourney entering the offseason to not making the team because of his subpar start. Skinner sports an .889 save percentage in 17 appearances. He's also surrendered 5.26 more goals than expected in all situations, per Natural Stat Trick. His last start before rosters were due was one of his best, but it was too little too late. — Daniel Nugent-Bowman

#### Florida Panthers

Preseason bold prediction: Adam Boqvist will break out

Outlook: It's a long shot

It's not that Boqvist has been horrendous — an expected goal rate of around 50 percent for a cheap, third-pair defenseman could be worse — but he hasn't come close to a breakout, either, and actually played his way out of the lineup for most of November. He's back, though, and scored in consecutive games through Thursday. More than anything, that prediction was based on Boqvist getting a whole bunch of power-play time, and that's once again Aaron Ekblad's job to lose. Probably not happening. — Sean Gentile

#### Los Angeles Kings

Preseason bold prediction: Quinton Byfield will become the Kings' best player

Outlook: Not happening

Can I say I was kidding? No? Hey, I bought into the idea of Byfield building on his breakout season. Seeing him with just three goals and 11 points nearly a third of the way into the season is a bit baffling. He's back at his natural position but the transition from playing on wing with Anze Kopitar and Adrian Kempe to centering his own line hasn't been seamless. It's not that he's hurting their lineup but the Kings becoming a real threat in the Western Conference will look more realistic if he starts to look more like a leading player on their roster like Kopitar and Kempe are. — Eric Stephens

#### Minnesota Wild

Preseason bold prediction: Matt Boldy will score 40 goals and 40 assists

Outlook: Still in play

This felt like a lock in mid-November when he had 10 goals in his first 16 games, but Boldy has gone six games without a goal and has one in his past nine. Still, he was on pace for 36 goals and 43 assists for a 79-point total through Thursday, which would establish career highs. This is a guy who has a tendency to get white hot, especially because he is a high-volume shooter (93 in 25 games this season, 3.7 per game). — Michael Russo

Montreal Canadiens

Preseason bold prediction: Juraj Slafkovský will hit 70 points

Outlook: So far, not so good. But there's time ...

Slafkovský has 14 points in 23 games and has 56 games left to get 56 points. Doesn't seem ideal. But last season at this point, Slafkovský had 7 points in 25 games and finished with 43 points in his final 57 games. Putting up a point per game from here on out is a high bar, but Slafkovský has not yet reached the level we saw from him last season. There is a lot of room for him to grow. I'm not willing to write off this prediction just yet, though it's not looking great so far. — Arpon Basu

Nashville Predators

Preseason bold prediction: Juuse Saros will win the Vezina Trophy

Outlook: Not happening

Saros is the absolute least of the Preds' concerns. He's having a fine season — you might even call it an extraordinary season, given the utter lack of help he's getting. But he isn't standing on his head enough to deliver wins for the league's worst offensive team. Or is this just the worst team, period? Team failure to this extent repels individual awards. — Joe Rexrode

New Jersey Devils

Preseason bold prediction: The Devils will finish with the East's best record

Outlook: Still in play

The Devils' offseason overhaul has led to a successful start to 2024-25. Their position in the East standings is a bit inflated by games they have in hand, but they were still fourth in points percentage through Thursday. One hot streak and they could be right in the mix with the leaders. — Peter Baugh

New York Islanders

Preseason bold prediction: Noah Dobson will score 70 points again — and get a big extension

Outlook: It's a long shot

The 70-point thing is a pipe dream with Dobson sitting on 12 points through 27 games. And the eight-year \$8-million-or-so extension might be a pipe dream too. Dobson is still just 24, but he's hit a plateau this season for the middling Islanders. Whoops. — Arthur Staple

New York Rangers

Preseason bold prediction: Igor Shesterkin will win the Vezina Trophy

Outlook: Still in play

The Rangers are in a bit of a rut, but Shesterkin has had a good year. His 8-9-1 record isn't overly impressive, but he has taken most of the Rangers games against playoff teams and had a .908 save

percentage through Thursday with better underlying numbers. He's not among the Vezina front-runners at this point, but him winning the award isn't impossible. He also now doesn't have any contract talk hanging over him. He agreed to a record-setting eight-year extension Friday. — Peter Baugh

#### Ottawa Senators

Preseason bold prediction: Travis Green will win the Jack Adams Award

Outlook: It's a long shot

If the Senators reverse their fortunes after a less-than-ideal start, Green's case for the Jack Adams could be made. When Ottawa plays at its best, it looks like a playoff team. The issue is consistency. That's on Green to help instill in his own group. But right now, we don't think Green will end up on many ballots for coach of the year honors. — Julian McKenzie

#### Philadelphia Flyers

Preseason bold prediction: The Flyers will have a top-15 power play

Outlook: It's a long shot

It looked so promising early. The Flyers converted on eight of their first 31 power-play chances through eight games, good for eighth in the NHL. Since then it's resumed its place at the bottom of the league. Since Oct. 27, only the Bruins have a worse power play than the Flyers' 10.4 percent success rate. At some point, perhaps soon, the Flyers may be forced to make a decision on assistant coach Rocky Thompson, who just can't seem to get this part of the Flyers' game going. — Kevin Kurz

#### Pittsburgh Penguins

Preseason bold prediction: Marcus Pettersson will become a trade-deadline commodity

Outlook: Lock it in

Pettersson was No. 2 on our big board and would-be UFAs that high on a trade list don't usually end up staying with their teams. The Penguins won four consecutive games before Friday, their best run of the season. They're within striking distance of a playoff spot — and it's possible that means they hold on to Pettersson. But a case can be made for striking while the iron is hot. There are no indications a long-term extension is on the table here in Pittsburgh. The Penguins are in the mushy middle but closer to the bottom than the top. Keeping a player like Pettersson doesn't make much sense. — Rob Rossi

#### San Jose Sharks

Preseason bold prediction: William Eklund will lead the team in scoring

Outlook: So far, not so good. But there's time ...

With his 18 assists and 23 points, Eklund is second in those categories to Mikael Granlund so the possibility does exist of the 22-year-old overtaking the veteran. The chances of that will greatly increase if the Sharks were to move Granlund before the trade deadline. Eklund can build up his goal total as he has only five in 28 games, and he may have to hold off a hard-charging Macklin Celebrini who's nearly at a point per game since returning from injury. But the left wing in his third full season has become the front-line core player the Sharks imagined when taking him at No. 7 in the 2021 draft. — Eric Stephens

#### Seattle Kraken

Preseason bold prediction: Matty Beniers will score 30 goals

Outlook: Not happening



I'm ready to capitulate early on this prediction. After what appeared to be a snake bit, sophomore slump campaign for the 2023 Calder winner, the gifted Kraken center has somehow remained in shooting-percentage hell this season. Through 27 games before Friday, Beniers had scored just four times on 51 shots and is carrying a 7.8 percent shooting clip that's less than half of the conversion rate he managed in his electric rookie season. Beniers would have to score at a 44-goals per 82-game pace over the balance to hit 30, which is a massive stretch for a player that has scored just 19 goals in his most recent 104 games played through Thursday. — Thomas Drance

St. Louis Blues

Preseason bold prediction: Philip Broberg and Dylan Holloway's success will lead to more offer sheets

Outlook: Lock it in

I'm more confident about this now than I was at the start of the season. Broberg missed 12 games with an injury, but when in the lineup, he's been arguably the Blues' best defenseman. Likewise, Holloway has perhaps been their most versatile productive forward. There may not be an identical situation where two talented players are available on a team — in this case the Oilers — that can't afford to match an offer sheet. But with the way Broberg and Holloway are playing, the vultures will be out. — Jeremy Rutherford

Tampa Bay Lightning

Preseason bold prediction: Andrei Vasilevskiy will be a Vezina Trophy finalist

Outlook: It's a long shot

Vasilevskiy may have more two-way support this season, but he isn't in the Vezina Trophy race right now. That's a conversation led by the likes of Connor Hellebuyck, Lukas Dostal and Filip Gustavsson. Vasilevskiy is having a fine season so far — he has saved 3.97 goals above expected through 20 games while earning a .909 save percentage — but those numbers aren't sparkling like some of the league's best or even his peak years. The season isn't over yet and he tends to heat up as the pressure rises, but he has a lot of ground to make up. — Shayna Goldman

Toronto Maple Leafs

Preseason bold prediction: Mitch Marner will score 40 goals

Outlook: Still in play

Marner had one goal in October. Then, a heater shooting the puck in November. He had eight goals in 12 games. Marner is still off the 40-goal pace though. He appears headed more for his third 30-goal season than his first 40-goal campaign. If head coach Craig Berube gets his way though and Marner starts shooting the puck more aggressively, there's still a chance Marner comes close to or even hits 40 goals. During the back half of the 2021-22 season, Marner shot the puck more aggressively than ever and punched in 29 goals during a 46-game stretch. That's what he'll need the rest of the way to hit 40. — Jonas Siegel

Utah Hockey Club

Preseason bold prediction: Utah will finish as one of the NHL's highest-scoring teams

Outlook: Not happening

Did anyone here whiff as much as this prediction? Other than an early flurry to start the season, Utah has struggled mightily to score this season, sitting 23rd in goals per game and 24th on the power play through Thursday. A lot of the Hockey Clubbers' young talent has failed to break through, with Logan

Cooley on pace for fewer than 20 goals and a lot of their 20-goal producers from last season coming up well short of those projections in the early going. Connor Ingram's struggles in goal and injuries on defense have hurt their record, but regressing offensively to this extent is the bigger surprise given the cast up front. — James Mirtle

#### Vancouver Canucks

Preseason bold prediction: Elias Pettersson will bounce back and lead the team in scoring

Outlook: Still in play

It certainly hasn't been an out-of-the-gate, no-doubt-about-it, he's-back-like-John-Wick level bounce back for Pettersson this season, but the star Canucks center has found his form of late. He's back to controlling play and still has a chance to lead all Vancouver players in scoring. Through Thursday, he ranked first in points and points per game among Canucks forwards, but what I didn't expect was Quinn Hughes to hit even another level of preposterous form this season. Through Thursday, Hughes was holding a six-point lead over Pettersson in the point production department this season, so Pettersson still has some catching up to do. — Thomas Drance

#### Vegas Golden Knights

Preseason bold prediction: Pavel Dorofeyev will finish second on the team in goals

Outlook: Still in play

The hope with this prediction was that Dorofeyev would take advantage of a bigger opportunity than he's had to this point in his career, and that's exactly what has happened through two months. Through Thursday, Dorofeyev was second on the Golden Knights with 12 goals, only one behind team leader Ivan Barbashev. He has contributed both at even strength and on the top power-play unit, and has been an integral part of Vegas' seventh-ranked offense. — Jesse Granger

#### Washington Capitals

Preseason bold prediction: The Pierre-Luc Dubois deal will pay off

Outlook: Still in play

There's plenty of road left before I can do a victory lap, but I feel good about predicting good things for Dubois. Is he playing to a 70-point pace, as I said he would? Not quite. Has he been a major catalyst for the Caps' early-season success? Absolutely. He's crushing most of his minutes as the 2C, which allowed Washington to set up favorable matchups for Alex Ovechkin's line, and has helped Connor McMichael get off to a scorching start. So far, so good. — Sean Gentile

#### Winnipeg Jets

Preseason bold prediction: Nikolaj Ehlers will play out the season and then walk as a UFA

Outlook: Still in play

Ehlers is a point-per-game player now, mostly because he's been every bit as good on the top power play as advertised: helpful on entries, good in the high slot, creative with options in the zone. He's also hurt, nursing a lower-body injury suffered against Vegas on Nov. 29. It's difficult to say what any of this means for his future, though. I believe the "self-rental" option is still on the table for Winnipeg. If recent call-up Brad Lambert bursts offensively, Ehlers could become a trade chip. (For the right return, it might not take that Lambert burst.) An extension does not appear to be a front-burner, midseason option, but must also be considered a possibility. — Murat Ates

## [The Athletic / NHL Board of Governors meeting agenda: CBA, cap projection, expansion and more](#)

By Pierre LeBrun- December 9, 2024

MANALAPAN, Fla. — There are years when you arrive at the NHL's Board of Governors meeting thinking it's going to be rather quiet on the news front.

And then commissioner Gary Bettman walks into the media room after Day 1 and announces a market-gauging ticket drive for the city of Las Vegas and everyone's jaw drops.

That was the scene 10 years ago, on Dec. 8, 2014, when Bettman tried his best to downplay the significance of what he was surprising everyone with.

"Please do not make more out of this than it is," Bettman stressed to the assembled media.

And, to be fair, he really wasn't 100 percent sure at the time how Bill Foley's ticket drive to feel out the Las Vegas market would go. But the rest is history, as they say.

The point is you never know what can come out of the annual meeting, which goes Monday and Tuesday here at a posh Palm Beach resort.

Having made a few inquiries regarding the agenda, here are some of the topics that are expected to be discussed.

### CBA update

The league is expected to update owners on where things stand as far as the desired hope to begin collective bargaining talks with the NHL Players' Association sometime in the New Year. The league actually delivered that news to owners on Oct. 1 when the Board of Governors last met for a quick, preseason get-together in New York.

At which time Bettman raised eyebrows by telling media regarding a potential CBA extension: "I don't want to speculate, but if we had it done by my media avail at the Stanley Cup Final, everybody would be very happy."

The current CBA doesn't expire until September 2026, but there seems to be a mutual desire from the league and NHLPA to get an extension done way earlier.

So there's a CBA update on the agenda this week, although I suspect it won't be as much about specifics but rather about the process. The league can't really have a more meaningful update until CBA talks get underway.

### Salary cap projection

This is the meeting where the league gives owners a projected cap number for next season. Bettman already said back on Oct. 1 that the preliminary cap number for next season looked to be around \$92.5 million (up from the current \$88 million), which is the basic 5 percent increase as stipulated by the current CBA formula.

It could get more interesting in the coming months, though, if the league and NHLPA decide in CBA talks there's mutual interest in building in a "phase-in" to a higher cap over time and what would be involved in that exactly. Because hockey-related revenue is expected to jump aggressively over the next few years, the idea of the phase-in cap jump is to mitigate against one massive jump all at once in two years' time.

The phase-in would be a higher jump than the current formula calls for, which could potentially be on the table when the league and NHLPA start CBA talks.

I suspect that will be explained to some degree to a very intrigued audience of owners this week.

#### No expansion

There is no formal expansion discussion on the official agenda. But to the extent there may be questions from governors about it, the expectation is that the league would reiterate what it has said for the past year or so, that there have been expressions of interest from a number of markets but that there is no current plan to expand.

That will change one day. It would be a shock if the league doesn't expand again. One of the reasons it makes sense to delay the next shoe dropping on it is, from a practical point of view, the need to focus first on a CBA extension. Not that the league necessarily sees those two things firmly linked — they're not, in the league's eyes — but in terms of the league's focus, it would want to get the CBA extension done first.

#### International play

The governors will get an update on Global Series plans for next season and, more importantly, there will be an international competition report with logistics and more details on the upcoming 4 Nations Face-Off event and where things stand with the IOC and IIHF for the February 2026 Olympics in Milan. All sides (which includes the NHLPA) seem close to wrapping up an Olympic agreement for Milan, but there are still some details to iron out.

Just to be clear, neither the NHL nor the NHLPA sound worried at all that the Olympic agreement isn't wrapped up yet.

#### Schedule tweak?

I've reported several times over the past year about the possibility of the NHL changing the schedule to start and end earlier, reducing the amount of preseason games and expanding the regular season to 84 games per team.

The NHL and NHLPA, as reported before, had very preliminary discussions about it last season, but it hasn't really gone anywhere since. And I suspect it's because that would be yet another item to be hashed out in CBA talks in the New Year.

The league may mention the possibility of this being part of talks with the NHLPA to owners this week. The idea is to have the Cup awarded about two weeks earlier in June. To which every single hockey fan should be saying, "Yes!"

#### Canadian TV deal

The league is expected to present a report to governors on the Canadian media national rights deal and where the NHL stands in that process. There will probably be some keen ears from owners on that one. Sportsnet's 12-year NHL deal as sole national rights-holders expires after the 2025-26 season.

Governors will no doubt be interested to hear what the league thinks will play out there in this new world of streaming services potentially entering the fray — and whether Bell Media (and TSN, my other employer) could reenter the picture as a partner in one form or another. Amazon is expected to be another player.

#### Executive committee meeting

It doesn't happen every year, but often the Board of Governors' executive committee meets Monday morning before the full board meeting. That will be the case this year. The executive committee will get a preview of the agenda among other topics.

This is the smaller, more powerful group that consists of chairman Jeremy Jacobs (Boston Bruins), along with owners Murray Edwards (Calgary Flames), Mark Chipman (Winnipeg Jets), Craig Leipold (Minnesota Wild), Ted Leonsis (Washington Capitals), Geoff Molson (Montreal Canadiens), Henry Samueli (Anaheim Ducks), Larry Tanenbaum (Toronto Maple Leafs), Jeff Vinik (Tampa Bay Lightning) and David Blitzer (New Jersey Devils).

## The Athletic / Goalie Tracking: The top storylines in net from the second month of the season, including early Vezina contenders

By Jesse Granger- December 9, 2024

Ever listen to a podcast at 1.5x speed, so you can squeeze an entire episode into your morning commute?

That's what it's like watching Dustin Wolf tend goal.

The rookie netminder has been brilliant for Calgary, climbing the NHL leaderboards in nearly every metric. Wolf ranks fifth in the league with a .918 save percentage and 11th with 7.35 goals saved above expected despite making only 13 starts.

He is the first of four goalies we'll look at today. In case you missed the first edition, welcome to Goalie Tracking — a column in which we dig into the technical aspects of goaltending and examine how and why goalies are doing what they're doing.

Back to Wolf, who at times looks like he's playing in fast forward. Everything he does is fast. He has quick feet, quick hands, quick reactions and quick recoveries.

Just look at the speed of this slide to get across for a backdoor chance against Nashville on Nov. 15.

Wolf's butterfly slide across the crease is so quick that he actually has time to find his edges before the shot is released, standing tall and making a prompt blocker save.

Wolf's edgework is special. He skates with speed and precision, but what really unlocks those skills is how quickly he processes the play.

It was all on display in this save he made midway through the second period of the game against the Islanders on Nov. 19. Wolf transitioned seamlessly to several different positions in a span of less than two seconds.

First, Wolf squares himself to Islanders forward Kyle Palmieri (No. 21) in the left circle using a position called "overlap," which is just a fancy way of saying he stays on both feet and moves his right skate outside of the nearside post (overlapping it) to stay square.

When Palmieri releases the puck, Wolf quickly drops into a butterfly, sealing the ice in case the threat to his right — Islanders forward Maxim Tsyplov — tips the puck on net. Once Tsyplov catches the pass, Wolf realizes he's now in an awkward spot with his right skate well outside of the post. He nimbly pops back to his skates and tucks it inside the post.

That alone is an impressive reaction, but it gets better.

As Tsyplov starts to release the puck, Wolf lifts his left skate completely off the ice. This takes away Tsyplov's option of banking the puck off his skate blade and into the net, and perfectly sets Wolf up for his next move.

At this point, he appears to defy the laws of gravity, with his entire body weight loaded onto the toe of his right skate. That gives him maximum leverage to explode across and make a huge left-pad save on Simon Holmstrom's one-timer from the low slot. All together, it's an impressive sequence of edgework from the rookie.

We're only 30 games into Wolf's NHL career, but he's already showing his speed translates. He has also shown well in comparison to his goalie partner, veteran Dan Vladar, and should be considered among the early favorites for the Calder Trophy.

A glimpse inside the mind of a goaltending savant

We transition from a quick-twitch goalie to one who has been perfecting a "big and boring" style since he was a teenager.

Connor Hellebuyck thinks the game at a high level, and verbalizes it a thoughtful, unique way. He leads all goalies this season with an impressive 22.03 GSAx. He's made plenty of big saves through the first two months, but one of the more memorable ones came in the final minutes of Winnipeg's 1-0 win over Colorado on Nov. 7.

It was a great reactionary kick save with some old school flare to preserve the shutout, which was the 40th of Hellebuyck's career, moving him into a tie for 46th all-time. Hellebuyck's recollection of the save after the game is fascinating.

"I had my hands in front of me and my core was activated," Hellebuyck replied when asked to take reporters through the save. "When I made eye contact with that puck, I had a really good jump and I had all my weight moving that way and was able to get my blocker down as well. When the puck hits you, it hits you."

Most would look at that save and focus on the dramatic, spectacular kick, but Hellebuyck sees the basic fundamentals that put him in position for it.

He uses weight shifts and balance incredibly well. He doesn't slide into saves unless absolutely necessary. He gets to his spots early and sets his feet. When he drops into butterfly, he keeps his weight forward and his gloves projected in front of his body. Those two things distribute his weight across a wider base and improve balance.

All of these small, simple details add up to extra milliseconds of reaction time, and are the difference between saves and goals.

Gustavsson joins the Vezina Trophy conversation

Hellebuyck is the clear favorite to win the Vezina Trophy. Oddsmakers currently have him even money. The goalie with the second-best odds is Minnesota's Filip Gustavsson at plus-200. He's done it with really technical goaltending behind a solid defensive team that allows predictable chances.

A goalie coach once told me that he doesn't necessarily mind if his team gives up several two-on-one rushes per game, as long as that's primarily the type of chances they give up. They prefer that over giving up a couple odd-man rushes, a few chances from the cycle, a low-to-high one-timer and a tip in front.

Goalies want to face predictable shots. Not only does it make for simpler reads, but the goalies can practice stopping those types of shots in particular.

This season, Minnesota has allowed the fewest high-danger chances at even strength, which has maximized Gustavsson's strengths. This save in the final minute of a shutout win over Buffalo on Nov. 27 shows off Gustavsson's patience.

The Wild are caught outnumbered after a failed attempt at a clearance. Alex Tuch gets the puck along the boards and passes it to Buffalo's most dangerous shooter, Tage Thompson, in the slot. Thompson toe-drags around Wild defenseman Brock Faber to get into a prime shooting position.

Thompson has a passing option to his right, Buffalo forward JJ Paterka, and at this point, it would be easy for Gustavsson to sink deeper into his crease to prepare for a pass, or at least stop following Thompson's toe drag.

Gustavsson resists and stays with Thompson the entire way. He even makes one last mini-shuffle just before Thompson's release to square up perfectly to the shot. That minor adjustment can make a world of difference in making the save easier. It also makes controlling the rebound easier. Spilling a rebound in this situation could've turned this into a tie game.

Gustavsson has a habit of making tough saves look easy. He remains calm and within his structure even when plays break down or unexpected bounces happen. This sequence from Minnesota's win over Vancouver on Tuesday is a good example.

Gustavsson stays fully committed to the shooter, Jake DeBrusk, and makes the save at the top of his crease. When the rebound goes back to DeBrusk, it creates a scramble situation. Some goalies panic here, diving head first or flopping to their side to throw as much of their body in front of the net as possible.

Gustavsson is calm, realizes he has time to dig his right skate in and get two powerful butterfly pushes. He ends up making what looks like a relatively routine kick save with a flick of his right toe. Equally important, he was in better position to face a third shot (if one had come) than if he had flopped onto his side.

#### Georgiev's early struggles

It's been a rough couple of months for Alexandar Georgiev. His minus-9.51 GSAx and .867 save percentage both rank last among qualifying goalies.

He hasn't looked comfortable in net, and lack of confidence could be compounding the issues. This goal by Vegas' Pavel Dorofeyev on Nov. 27 is an example.

It was an excellent shot by Dorofeyev, but Georgiev made it possible with passive, poor positioning.

When a goalie and the team in front of him are struggling, it becomes harder to be patient and read the play. Goalies start guessing, which is what Georgiev did here. He is reading pass all the way, rather than staying square to the shot as Dorofeyev closes in. Georgiev starts to flatten out along the goal line in preparation for a cross-ice pass. In this picture, the red line represents square to the shot, while the blue line is where Georgiev's skates are, flattened out.

The result is too much space in the top of the net. Georgiev also isn't the biggest goalie, so positioning errors like this hurt him more than most.

This is a product of not only a lack of confidence in his own game, but also a lack of trust in his defense to not allow the pass across. To be fair to Georgiev, he has also made some spectacular saves this season employing the same move, like this one against Carolina's Martin Necas on Nov. 9.

That clip is both an example of why a goalie cheats toward the pass option, and how athletic and intuitive Georgiev can be. It's important to remember that while he's struggling at the moment, this is the same goalie who led the league with 78 wins over the previous two seasons.

Georgiev may not be a difference-making, high-end starting goalie, but he's much better than he has played this season. Hopefully, newly-acquired backup Scott Wedgewood can stabilize the crease and help Georgiev find his game.



## ESPN / Everything to know about the NHL/NHLPA 4 Nations Face-Off

**By Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton, Greg Wyshynski- December 4, 2024**

In lieu of having an All-Star Game this season, the NHL and NHLPA are staging the 4 Nations Face-Off, which will run Feb. 12-20. This is a round-robin tournament that will feature four national teams -- Canada, Finland, Sweden and the United States -- with NHL players from those nations filling rosters.

What's the schedule and format for the tournament? Who is on the rosters? What are the players saying? And what does it mean for the 2026 Olympic Games?

Read on for answers to those questions and more, courtesy of Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton and Greg Wyshynski.

What is the format and rules of the tournament?

Each team will play three games, with the top two teams playing in a winner-take-all final. Teams will receive three points for a win in regulation, two points for an overtime or shootout win, one point for an overtime or shootout loss and zero points for a loss in regulation.

Overtime will be a 10-minute, 3-on-3 sudden-death period. If the game is not decided in OT, there will be a three-round shootout. Once the tournament reaches the final game, overtime will be held in the more traditional playoff format, with 5-on-5 play in consecutive 20-minute periods. -- Clark

Where are the games being held?

The 4 Nations Face-Off will be held in North America, splitting games between Bell Centre in Montreal and TD Garden in Boston.

Initially, the proposed format for the midseason tournament would have had the U.S. and Canada play two games in North America, while Sweden and Finland would play two games in either of those two nations. The winners of those matchups, either by points or aggregate goals, would face the second-best team from the other matchup -- most likely in North America. The winners of those semifinals would then meet for the tournament championship, leaving open the possibility that the U.S. and Canada could meet in that final game.

But the logistics and schedule for the tournament proved too difficult for something that adventurous. There's no semifinal round anymore. Instead of a global staging, it's being held between two Original Six hockey markets.

There are four games held at Bell Centre, including a rivalry doubleheader:

Wednesday, Feb. 12: Canada vs. Sweden (8 p.m. ET)

Thursday, Feb. 13: USA vs. Finland (8 p.m.)

Saturday, Feb. 15: Finland vs. Sweden (1 p.m.)

Saturday, Feb. 15: USA vs. Canada (8 p.m.)

There are three games scheduled for TD Garden:

Monday, Feb. 17: Canada vs. Finland (1 p.m.)

Monday, Feb. 17: Sweden vs. USA (8 p.m.)

Thursday, Feb. 20: Championship Game (8 p.m.)

The possibility is there for the U.S. and Canada to meet in both cities, including for the championship. -- Wyshynski

Why only four nations? And why these four?

In a word, practicality. The NHL is putting the 4 Nations tournament together on its own and not in concert with the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF), whereas the league and IIHF do have a partnership that's bringing NHL players back to the Olympics in 2026 and 2030.

For this tournament, there are only four countries represented because there must be enough NHL skaters to complete each roster. That's why Germany, for example, isn't involved. The Czech Republic and Russia both technically have the NHL representation to craft a team, but the league will not have a Russian squad involved because of its war with Ukraine.

The league choosing to go with Canada, the USA, Sweden and Finland means their event incorporates the largest number of NHL stars for now, and in time -- if all goes well -- the NHL will get more players and countries in the mix. -- Shilton

When was the last time there was a best-on-best international tournament with NHL players?

The year was 2016, and the event was the World Cup of Hockey. The tournament was started in 1996, and staged again in 2004 before it returned in 2016.

The 2016 edition included eight teams total, including national teams from Canada, Czechia, Finland, Russia, Sweden and the USA. There was also a Team Europe -- for players from nations such as Germany, Switzerland and Slovakia that didn't have full rosters -- while the tournament also introduced Team North America. The roster for Team North America featured under-24 talent from Canada and the United States, including future superstars such as Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon, Auston Matthews and Connor Hellebuyck.

The 16-game tournament was ultimately won by Canada, beating Team Europe in a best-of-three format. -- Clark

What are the players saying about it?

The reaction has been overwhelmingly positive.

"It's great for the game of hockey," Canadian forward Connor Bedard told ESPN. "Great for everyone to see the best players in each country going against each other. It's going to be awesome and people are going to love watching."

"It's going to be incredible for fans and players," U.S. defenseman Brock Faber said. "It's best-on-best, which hasn't happened in a while, and that's going to be so cool."

While the younger contingency of NHL skaters might have many opportunities to represent their countries, for some league veterans this 4 Nations event could be their best shot at such a chance.

"I would love to play in it," U.S. defenseman John Carlson said. "To represent your country is cool; it's a different animal than what we're used to. And it's fun to play against some of your teammates, play with some of your opponents. And obviously I think it'll be awesome for the game of hockey." -- Shilton

Are there some players who aren't raving about it?

While many players understand why the 4 Nations Face-Off exists, it doesn't change the fact that it's just four nations.

The World Cup of Hockey was more all-encompassing, to the point where the tournament had Team Europe, just to get those players whose national teams didn't make the cut into the spotlight.

Russia and Czech Republic were both in the World Cup, and are not in the 4 Nations. In the case of the latter, at least one star player feels like his nation should have gotten an invite. Boston Bruins star David Pastrnak led Czechia to an IIHF world championship this year. After winning the title, he posted a photo of himself holding the trophy with the caption: "Maybe Four Nation invite now?"

Pastrnak called exclusion a "huge disappointment," but said he could understand that there was a limited time and parameter to putting the 4 Nations tournament together.

Wait till 2026, Pasta. -- Wyshynski

What does the winning country get?

There will be a trophy for the tournament champion, which is in the final stages of design. The plan is for only the winning team to receive medals, but there hasn't been too much discussion about that yet behind the scenes.

As of this week, it's clear the players will be compensated but the dollar amounts have not been determined.

It's unclear if there is bonus money for the winning teams, but that doesn't mean there aren't financial incentives for making this tournament a success. Like the World Cup of Hockey, this tournament is an NHL and NHLPA presentation. The players will get a split of the profits, which will then be split among NHLPA members. The New York Post reported in 2016 that there was a 70-30 revenue split between players who played in the World Cup and those that did not. -- Wyshynski

Who is on the rosters?

The teams announced an initial group of six players each in June:

Canada: Cale Makar (D, Avalanche); Sidney Crosby (F, Penguins); Nathan MacKinnon (F, Avalanche); Brad Marchand (F, Bruins); Connor McDavid (F, Oilers); Brayden Point (F, Lightning)

Finland: Juuse Saros (G, Predators); Miro Heiskanen (D, Stars); Esa Lindell (D, Stars); Sebastian Aho (F, Hurricanes); Aleksander Barkov (F, Panthers); Mikko Rantanen (F, Avalanche)

Sweden: Gustav Forsling (D, Panthers); Victor Hedman (D, Lightning); Erik Karlsson (D, Penguins); Filip Forsberg (F, Predators); William Nylander (F, Maple Leafs); Mika Zibanejad (F, Rangers)

United States: Adam Fox (D, Rangers); Quinn Hughes (D, Canucks); Charlie McAvoy (D, Bruins); Jack Eichel (F, Golden Knights); Auston Matthews (F, Maple Leafs); Matthew Tkachuk (F, Panthers)

The full rosters will be announced Wednesday. -- ESPN Staff

What does all of this mean for the Olympic Games, and future tournaments?

NHL commissioner Gary Bettman called the 4 Nations tournament "a bit of an appetizer" for the Olympics and World Cup events. The league hasn't shut down and allowed its skaters to participate in an Olympics since the 2014 Games in Sochi (meaning players missed out on the 2018 and 2022 showcases).

Top NHLers like Connor McDavid have been championing a return to the Olympics, and finally the league acquiesced and partnered with the IIHF to make that happen in 2026 and 2030. The plan is for the NHL to put on 4 Nations in February, go to the Milan Games in 2026, hold a World Cup in 2028, represent at the 2030 Games and then host another World Cup in 2032. The 2034 Winter Games will be hosted by Salt Lake City.

This tournament is a precursor to all of that, and it should be engaging for fans and give players a taste for that best-on-best style of play, which many haven't experienced since the NHL last put on a World Cup in 2016. -- Shilton

## ESPN / Grading 4 Nations Face-Off rosters, plus snubs and surprises

By Greg Wyshynski- December 5, 2024

The first-ever NHL/NHLPA 4 Nations Face-Off is many things.

It's a midseason exhibition tournament that replaces the NHL All-Star Game for a change of pace. It's an antipasto of international hockey ahead of the Italian feast of the 2026 Winter Olympics in Milan. It's also the first time that a generation of Canadian and American superstars get to battle for bragging rights and a championship -- although Sweden and Finland will have something to say about that.

On Wednesday, those four nations revealed their rosters for the 4 Nations Face-Off, taking place from Feb. 12-20 in Montreal and Boston. Some of the names are very expected, and some of the selections are a bit surprising.

Here's how the rosters grade out -- at each position group and overall -- and which NHL players might be feeling snubbed by their home nations after these roster reveals.

Canada

Note: Players are listed alphabetically within each position group. Players listed with an asterisk were on the original selection lists in June.

Forwards

Sam Bennett, Florida Panthers

Anthony Cirelli, Tampa Bay Lightning

Sidney Crosby, Pittsburgh Penguins\*

Brandon Hagel, Tampa Bay Lightning

Seth Jarvis, Carolina Hurricanes

Travis Konecny, Philadelphia Flyers

Nathan MacKinnon, Colorado Avalanche\*

Brad Marchand, Boston Bruins\*

Mitch Marner, Toronto Maple Leafs

Connor McDavid, Edmonton Oilers\*

Brayden Point, Tampa Bay Lightning\*

Sam Reinhart, Florida Panthers

Mark Stone, Vegas Golden Knights

Having Connor McDavid as the fulcrum of one scoring line with the prides of Cole Harbour, Nova Scotia -- Sidney Crosby and Nathan MacKinnon -- anchoring a second line is an unfathomable advantage. Having the three of them join defenseman Cale Makar on a power play feels like it should violate an international hockey bylaw or something. It's that potent.

Hockey fans have waited throughout McDavid's 10-year NHL career for the chance to see Canada's two generational talents represent that nation in a best-on-best tournament. Crosby set the bar rather high as the face of the national team, what with the "Golden Goal" in 2010 and another gold medal in 2014

followed by a stroll to the World Cup championship in 2016. The true torch-passing moment won't happen until 2026, assuming a 39-year-old Crosby makes that roster. But this is still going to be one of those "tell your grandkids you were there" moments for Canadian fans.

Some of the roster calls around that holy trinity of forwards were rather easy. Reinhart has been on the league's top goal-scorers. Marchand played with Crosby at the World Cup. Point, Marner and Stone are elite two-way players -- assuming Stone is healthy enough to suit up for this tournament.

Things get a little more interesting beyond these players. Cirelli isn't a pure defensive play, as he popped for 20 goals last season and has 10 in 23 games this season. But his inclusion here has "we have to defend against Auston Matthews and Jack Eichel" written all over it. Hagel, another one of coach Jon Cooper's players on the Lightning, can play on both special teams and is an above-average defender to go along with a blockbuster point-producing season.

When Bruins GM Don Sweeney and Blues GM Doug Armstrong are driving forces behind a team's construction, there's undoubtedly going to be some sandpaper on the roster. Sweeney has witnessed first-hand how Bennett can impact play (and opponents) during those Boston vs. Florida playoff series. Konecny had back-to-back 30-goal seasons to go along with a penchant for agitation.

At 22 years old, Jarvis fills the classic role of a talented young player gaining important experience ahead of an Olympics roster spot. Although, admittedly, we all thought that was going to be another talented young player for Canada in this tournament...

Overall forwards grade: A-plus

Defensemen

Cale Makar, Colorado Avalanche\*

Josh Morrissey, Winnipeg Jets

Colton Parayko, St. Louis Blues

Alex Pietrangelo, Vegas Golden Knights

Travis Sanheim, Philadelphia Flyers

Shea Theodore, Vegas Golden Knights

Devon Toews, Colorado Avalanche

The defense corps for the 2010 Canadian Olympic team was absolutely sick. Within a mix that included Shea Weber, Drew Doughty and Dan Boyle were two previously established pairings that Team Canada was able to simply import onto its roster: Blackhawks teammates Duncan Keith and Brent Seabrook, along with Chris Pronger and Scott Niedermayer from their days with the Ducks.

The tradition continues with Canada in the 4 Nations Face-Off. Cale Makar and Devon Toews have been perhaps the NHL's top defensive pairing over the last few seasons with the Avalanche. Alex Pietrangelo and Shea Theodore have experience as a pairing with the Golden Knights; or, if Cooper wanted to mix it up, Pietrangelo and Parayko played together when the duo were together in St. Louis.

Some of these choices were quite predictable, including Morrissey from the Jets, who has 23 points in 26 games this season. Parayko and Sanheim might not have been on many fans' radar for Team Canada roster spots, but both made sense in context. Sanheim has grown into a No. 1 defenseman for the Flyers, while Parayko brings size and physicality for a blue line that could use more of it against hard-charging forechecks like that of the Americans.

Overall defensemen grade: A-minus

#### Goaltenders

Jordan Binnington, St. Louis Blues

Adin Hill, Vegas Golden Knights

Sam Montembeault, Montreal Canadiens

After months of debate, conjecture, lamenting and checking the citizenship status of Seattle Kraken goalie Joey Daccord, the Canadiens have settled on these three netminders as their goaltending trio.

Binnington was never in doubt. He's a Stanley Cup champion for the Blues with nearly 300 games of NHL experience. He might be the most eye test vs. analytics goalie in the league: Stathletes has him at minus-2.7 goals saved above expected, while St. Louis fans swear he saves their bacon on a nightly basis. (His save percentage is just under league average as well.)

Binnington is one of the few Canadian goalies that have thrived in pressure situations. Hill is another, having backstopped the Golden Knights to the Stanley Cup in 2023. Hill was a classic "you don't need to win us a series, just don't lose it for us" playoff goaltender. Looking at the team in front of Binnington and Hill for this tournament, the same standard might apply.

Montembeault has improved after a really lousy start, and is just under expected via the analytics. He's an insurance policy that Team Canada is hoping not to cash.

Overall goaltending grade: C-plus

#### Surprises

Brandon Hagel. The preseason roster projection for Team Canada had a few names that don't appear on this roster, including two from the Western Conference champion Edmonton Oilers: McDavid's linemates Zach Hyman and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins. The Nuge feels like he could have slotted in where Hagel is on this roster as a two-way, do-everything player, but he's had a heck of a Stanley Cup Final hangover with just 12 points in 25 games. Hagel, meanwhile, has 29 points in 23 games during an outstanding start. Plus, Team Canada's coach knows him pretty well.

Sam Montembeault. The Canadiens goaltender might have also been the beneficiary of the Oilers' rough start. This seemed like a spot for Stuart Skinner, given how doggedly competitive he was during Edmonton run to Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final last season. But his extremely inconsistent play this season for the Oilers probably scared management away: If the mantra is "just don't lose us the game," it's impossible for justify putting a goalie with minus-9.1 goals saved above expected on the roster. Hence, Montembeault makes the cut instead.

Colton Parayko. This was a name no one was talking about until about a week ago, when dlibs and drabs of news about this roster started leaking out. Part of the initial shock about his selection was that no one's really talked about Colton Parayko for about three seasons, outside of St. Louis and occasional trade deadline speculation. Once you get past that shock, you see the logic: right-handed, kills penalties, starts the vast majority of his shifts in the defending zone, knows Binnington's tendencies and has experience with Pietrangelo.

Travis Sanheim. While Flyers teammate Travis Konecny made sense from a "pest who can score" perspective given the teams Canada will be facing, Sanheim getting the nod here was unexpected. Players like Evan Bouchard, Calgary's MacKenzie Weegar, New Jersey's Dougie Hamilton and others were in the mix. But he's been outstanding for the Flyers this season, including 25:30 in average ice time per game, which is fourth in the NHL.

## Snubs

Connor Bedard, F, Chicago Blackhawks. 'Twas a time when Canada decided to go with a veteran team in an international tournament, which meant leaving a teenage phenom off the roster in a move that would come back to haunt them after a disastrous showing that fell well short of a championship.

The year was 2006 and the Turin Olympics, where Canada didn't even play for a medal. The player was Sidney Crosby.

So Connor Bedard has good company in being snubbed by the national team at 19 years old. Of course, this is only considered a snub because everyone assumed Bedard would ride shotgun with Canada's greatest players to prepare him for 2026 and beyond. Based on merit and performance, Bedard hasn't earned a spot on this team: His five goals through 25 games are one of the most disappointing stats for any player this NHL season, although he does have 19 points in total. Some of that can be attributed to the Blackhawks being so lousy, but not all of it. His incremental improvement on his defense wasn't enough to warrant a spot in the bottom six.

(In contrast, Minnesota defenseman Brock Faber, who finished second to Bedard in the Calder Trophy voting, continues to progress to the point where he earned a Team USA roster spot.)

Look, Canada's not here to entertain us. They're here to win a round-robin tournament against three really good teams. But we'd be lying if we said that not having the reigning rookie of the year, a phenom on an Original Six team and a future Team Canada star in this tournament is a bit of a bummer. It's still a midseason exhibition tournament and Bedard is still worth the price of admission -- especially with all of these potential superstar linemates.

Evan Bouchard, D, Edmonton Oilers. Bouchard had 82 points last season in 81 games. That's incredible. In the playoffs, he had 32 points in 25 games for a plus-14 to lead all postseason players. That's remarkable. And yet, Evan Bouchard is not on Team Canada.

If the argument that those point totals are a product of having McDavid and/or Leon Draisaitl on the ice when Bouchard is compiling them, that's not an argument against his inclusion here. It's an argument that he can excel with and enhance the performance of elite talent, which would seem pertinent to this endeavor. He's a great puck-mover and an outstanding passer.

It may have ended up being a numbers game. Morrissey and Sanheim likely provided more well-rounded games than Bouchard, while Canada obviously wasn't keen to leave Toews or Theodore off the roster given their partners. Maybe 2026 will be a different story for Bouchard if he keeps improving the totality of his game. Or perhaps his one dimension will be enough then.

Zach Hyman, F, Edmonton Oilers. It's hard to bypass a winger who has potted 90 goals in the last two seasons with Team Canada's No. 1 center. But that becomes a bit easier when that winger follows up a 54-goal campaign on McDavid's flank with three goals in 20 games, while currently missing time with an undisclosed injury.

Alexis Lafreniere, F, New York Rangers. The 23-year-old winger had 28 goals in 82 games last season and has 17 points in 24 games this season -- a bit off the point-per-game projections many had for him. He's not quite there yet defensively at 5-on-5 and doesn't get anywhere near a penalty kill, so a bottom-six role didn't fit.

Mark Scheifele, F, Winnipeg Jets. This has to sting for Scheifele, who started the season with 13 goals in 26 games and 27 total points on the juggernaut Jets. While U-24 Team North America World Cup teammates like McDavid, Parayko, and MacKinnon all graduated to play for Team Canada, Scheifele was passed over here for a confluence of reasons. He wasn't going to crack the top six. His defense has



always been the subject of criticism, so a bottom-six role wasn't likely. But that was especially the case when Canada decided tailor the lower part of its roster with a player like Cirelli. So Scheifele remains at the kids' table, despite now being 31.

Logan Thompson, G, Washington Capitals. For a national team that thought so long and hard about who could solidify the weakest part of their roster, not selecting Logan Thompson as a Team Canada goalie is a bit of a head-scratcher.

Thompson, 27, is 10-1-2 this season, with a .913 save percentage and 6.2 goals saved above average. Perhaps they credit coach Spencer Carbery's system with Thompson's breakout season. More likely, Team Canada was scared off by his lack of experience: Just four NHL playoff games in his career, and four world championship games in 2021-22. Although please note that Montembeault has yet to appear in the playoffs.

Steven Stamkos, F, Nashville Predators. After getting snubbed for the Olympics in 2014, Stamkos finally suited up for Team Canada at the 2016 World Cup. There was some expectation he would do it again for the 4 Nations Face-Off, but his challenging start in Nashville -- seven goals, six assists and a minus-14 through 25 games -- probably scuttled that.

Overall team grade: A-minus

The path to victory for Team Canada is to play so well in front of its average goaltending that the goaltending being so average isn't a factor. They obviously have the roster to pull that off, from the generation talents and accomplished two-way players at forward to two stout defensive pairings on the blue line that can combine to play 50 minutes of the game if needed.

What Canada has that their American counterparts lack is significant championship experience. Sure, Matthew Tkachuk, Jack Eichel and Jake Guentzel have Stanley Cup rings. They don't have Crosby. They don't have the holdovers from the 2016 World Cup. They don't even have a goalie that played for a Stanley Cup on their roster, while Canada has two who won it.

But those Stanley Cup rings aren't worth the diamonds that encrust them when it comes to the 4 Nations Face-Off. Canada needs competent goaltending in this tournament. If Canada gets that, it could add another trophy to the case given everything else this team has going for it, from McDavid to Makar to perhaps the NHL's best coach in Cooper.

## FINLAND

Note: Players are listed alphabetically within each position group. Players listed with an asterisk were on the original selection lists in June.

### Forwards

Sebastian Aho, Carolina Hurricanes\*

Joel Armia, Montreal Canadiens

Aleksander Barkov, Florida Panthers\*

Mikael Granlund, San Jose Sharks

Erik Haula, New Jersey Devils

Roope Hintz, Dallas Stars

Kaapo Kakko, New York Rangers

Patrik Laine, Montreal Canadiens

Artturi Lehkonen, Colorado Avalanche

Anton Lundell, Florida Panthers

Eetu Luostarinen, Florida Panthers

Mikko Rantanen, Colorado Avalanche\*

Teuvo Teräväinen, Chicago Blackhawks

Having Barkov and Rantanen is an excellent starting point for building out a forward group. Since 2020-21, only four players in the NHL have more points than Rantanen's 402 in 315 games. He can score goals and create them, a menace at both even strength and the power play. Please note that Rantanen does not have a contract beyond this season. Dropping the mic at 4 Nations with a team-best performance would be a strong argument for earning the blockbuster bucks he's seeking.

Barkov, meanwhile, is in the conversation for best all-around player in the NHL. His play during the Panthers' Stanley Cup run last season underscored what an absolute gamer Barkov is when the pressure is on and the opponents are challenging. As his Patrice Bergeron-esque run of Selke Trophies might be starting, Barkov is also an immovable object in the offensive zone.

The other two names here that are vital to Finland's offense are Aho, putting up another season of better than a point-per-game pace; and Laine, who recently returned from injury for the Canadiens. Aho's goal-scoring pace has taken a hit this season, but he's still a dangerous playmaker. Laine is one of the better pure scorers on this roster -- and frankly, an exceptionally compelling player from a personal standpoint, given all he's experienced with his mental health and the honesty with which he's discussed it.

The rest of this group has players that have surged this season like Granlund (10 goals in 26 games); dependable two-way threats like Teräväinen and Hintz (10 goals in 23 games and a plus-58 over the past three seasons); and a slew of experienced, talented grinders who are tenaciously annoying to play against, like Haula and Lehkonen.

Two players ready for their spotlight moment: Lundell, the 23-year-old "Baby Barkov" on the Panthers; and Kakko, rewarding the Rangers' patience with 13 points in 24 games this season and some solid play. But seeing Kakko earn this roster spot is also a reminder that the Finnish forward depth doesn't compare to that of the other teams in this tournament.

Still, a very tough group to compete against, as is this proud hockey nation's lineage.

Overall forwards grade: B

Defensemen

Jani Hakanpää, Toronto Maple Leafs

Miro Heiskanen, Dallas Stars\*

Esa Lindell, Dallas Stars\*

Niko Mikkola, Florida Panthers

Olli Määttä, Utah Hockey Club

Rasmus Ristolainen, Philadelphia Flyers

Juuso Välimäki, Utah Hockey Club

When Heiskanen and Lindell have played together in Dallas this season, they've posted an outstanding expected goals percentage of 59.5%. But Heiskanen's scoring output is a bit down this season, particularly on the power play, where he has three points in 24 games despite a team best 3:22 of ice time with the man advantage per game.

Ristolainen and Mikkola bring considerable size to the back end and will help on the penalty kill, as will Hakanpää. Välimäki is a good puck-moving defenseman.

Määttä is 30 years old but feels like he's been around for about 20 seasons: He won two Stanley Cups with the Penguins, and Olympic bronze in Sochi along with Barkov and Granlund. Utah acquired him from Detroit after injuries to their blue line, and he has given them a solid 20 minutes per game.

It's not a group with considerable depth or offensive pop, but they do have some players who will make the other three teams pay a physical price.

Overall defensemen grade: C

#### Goaltenders

Kevin Lankinen, Vancouver Canucks

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, Buffalo Sabres

Juuse Saros, Nashville Predators\*

Saros leads the NHL in goals saved above expected (11.9) through 21 games, where he also has a .911 save percentage. Whatever has malfunctioned in Nashville this season is decidedly not his fault. Of the goalies here, he's the star and the only one who can be counted on to win a game on his own.

Luukkonen has that ability too, depending on the night. Consistency can be a challenge for the talented 25-year-old, but he's coming off a breakout season in Buffalo and has played well again in 2024-25.

Lankinen's underlying numbers find him playing just below expected, but Vancouver fans couldn't care less. He has given the Canucks 18 games at a time when Thatcher Demko is injured and Arturs Silovs has turned back into a pumpkin. His 12-3-3 record and .906 save percentage are more than enough to earn him a spot on this roster.

All that said: We're a long way away from the two-headed monster of Tuukka Rask and Pekka Rinne that commanded the Finnish crease at the 2016 World Cup of Hockey.

Overall goaltending grade: B

#### Surprises

Jani Hakanpää. A genuinely shocking choice. Hakanpää, listed at 6-foot-7, signed a one-year free-agent deal with the Leafs last offseason. His season with Dallas was cut short after 64 games following arthroscopic knee surgery. The 32-year-old made his Leafs debut in November, playing in two games before leaving the lineup. Toronto confirmed on Dec. 2 that Hakanpää is out with a lower-body injury. If he can't go, one assumes Buffalo Sabres defenseman Henri Jokiharju is the next option.

Joel Armia. The 31-year-old Montreal winger had a career-high 17 goals last season but just two goals in 25 games for the Habs this season. His best virtue is his penalty-killing, and perhaps that's why he made the cut despite being off the radar on many roster projections.

#### Snubs

Jesper Kotkaniemi, F, Carolina Hurricanes. The Hurricanes center is having a decent bounce-back season after his points per 60 minutes dropped from 2.1 down to 1.6 over the previous two seasons. He's at 2.3

points per 60 minutes through 25 games with Carolina. This could be a situation where his offensive upside doesn't compensate for his defensive liabilities. He's also not as versatile as others on the roster, as he doesn't kill penalties for the Carolina.

Joonas Korpisalo, G, Boston Bruins. Only Saros (371) has played more games than Korpisalo (286) among active Finnish goaltenders. But his experience wasn't enough to earn him a spot over either UPL or Lankinen, despite a relatively strong first season in Boston: 6-2-1, a .909 save percentage and on the positive side of goals saved above expected on most publicly available advanced stats sites -- although Stathead does have him at minus-2 goals saved above expected. A curious snub, considering his experience.

Overall team grade: B-minus

Stop us if you've heard this one before: The Finns aren't as talented as the Canadians, Americans and Swedes, but they bridge that gap with their drive, tenacity and goaltending that can be the difference in a close game. This might as well be added to Finland's national anthem, it's so ingrained in the country's hockey identity.

But let's not shortchange Barkov, Rantanen, Aho and Heiskanen, a quartet of the best players in the world, who will lead this team into the 4 Nations Face-Off. That's a sturdy foundation for an underdog seeking to make life miserable for the other three teams in the tournament. If 4 Nations is a party celebrating a potential Canada and the U.S. championship game in Boston, Finland loves nothing more than to be the party pooper.

## SWEDEN

### Forwards

Note: Players are listed alphabetically within each position group. Players listed with an asterisk were on the original selection lists in June.

Viktor Arvidsson, Edmonton Oilers

Jesper Bratt, New Jersey Devils

Leo Carlsson, Anaheim Ducks

Joel Eriksson Ek, Minnesota Wild

Filip Forsberg, Nashville Predators\*

William Karlsson, Vegas Golden Knights

Adrian Kempe, Los Angeles Kings

Elias Lindholm, Boston Bruins

William Nylander, Toronto Maple Leafs\*

Gustav Nyquist, Nashville Predators

Elias Pettersson, Vancouver Canucks

Lucas Raymond, Detroit Red Wings

Mika Zibanejad, New York Rangers\*

The Swedish forwards can be described as a veteran group with a considerably high ceiling.

Only two players were born after 1998: Carlson (19 years old) and Raymond (22). Both players have exceptional offensive skill despite their inexperience. Also bringing the elite skill: Pettersson, Forsberg, Bratt and Nylander. All of them are game-changers who are dangerous on any shift. Forsberg brings some national team experience, as well as an exceptional mustache.

Kempe is right there with this group, having scored at a point-per-game pace. Nyquist and Arvidsson have a wealth of experience as veteran wingers -- in fact, The Goose played in the 2014 Olympics for Sweden.

Sweden has some accomplished two-way forwards on the roster in Eriksson Ek, Karlsson and Lindholm, all of whom can thrive in different roles.

The key to the lineup is going to be the center spot. The Canadians and Americans are incredibly deep at that position. The Swedes have Pettersson, Zibanejad, Lindholm, Karlsson, Eriksson Ek and Carlsson if necessary in the middle. If they can find a foursome that holds its own or outplays either the U.S. or Canada, the Swedes will be in business.

An aside: Would Zibanejad have made Team Sweden if he hadn't been one of the initial six players named to the roster in June by their hockey federation? Given his iconic status among Swedes and his 18 points in 24 games, probably. But he has been perhaps the Rangers' worst defensive forward this season, skating to a minus-14 in 24 games. It would have been an interesting debate.

This is going to be a puck possession group that boasts some speedy skill and strong finishers. But unlike when the Sedins ruled this part of the roster, there isn't one line you can count on for sustained dominance. And this group isn't in the same conversation with the offensive talent the Americans and Canadians are rolling out in this tournament.

Overall forwards grade: B-minus

Mika Zibanejad: 'It's an honor' to play for Team Sweden

Mika Zibanejad details the feelings he has suiting up for Team Sweden in the 4 Nations Face-Off.

Defensemen

Rasmus Andersson, Calgary Flames

Jonas Brodin, Minnesota Wild

Rasmus Dahlin, Buffalo Sabres

Mattias Ekholm, Edmonton Oilers

Gustav Forsling, Florida Panthers\*

Erik Karlsson, Pittsburgh Penguins\*

Victor Hedman, Tampa Bay Lightning\*

Any defense that can deploy Hedman and Forsling on their top two pairings is doing pretty good for itself. The expectation is that the Lightning captain will be paired with Dahlin while Forsling will play with the adventure that is Erik Karlsson, although obviously we hope this ends up being Karlsson with Hedman, so they can conjure their inner pirates.

Logic would then dictate that Ekholm, the savvy 34-year-old who has finally earned his flowers after being traded to Edmonton in 2023, will be paired with Andersson, who has 15 points in 26 games for the surprising Flames. Brodin waits in the wings.

Just a ton of experience here, especially in the postseason. The wild card is Karlsson. Yeah, most of Pittsburgh says he's washed. But give the 34-year-old three or four games in a short-track tournament while repping the Tre Kronor, and he could rekindle that offensive magic. Karlsson's been a national team star in the past, including eight points in six games in the 2014 Olympics.

Overall defensemen grade: B

Goaltenders

Filip Gustavsson, Minnesota Wild

Jacob Markström, New Jersey Devils

Linus Ullmark, Ottawa Senators

If you're going on the merits of the entire NHL season, Gustavsson should have the Swedish crease. He's fourth in goals saved above expected (via Money Puck) and has been the backbone of the Wild's scorching start in the West.

But Markström is starting to find his form for the Devils. He was a part of Swedish world championship and World Cup of Hockey teams. The 34-year-old has the experience edge -- Gustavsson has five postseason appearances to Markström's 26 -- and the ability to take over when he's on.

Before the season, this was Ullmark's crease. But his time in Ottawa has been mediocre at best and a bust at worst: .888 save percentage, a record below .500 and in the negative in goals saved above expected.

Overall goaltending grade: B

Surprises

Viktor Arvidsson. The 31-year-old winger got the nod over some younger Swedish forwards, despite his injury-plagued lackluster season in Edmonton (five points in 16 games). When healthy, he's a solid, complementary offensive winger whom the Swedes can pair with any of their centers.

Gustav Nyquist. The Predators winger wasn't even in the conversation for a roster spot according to many Team Sweden projections. But the 35-year-old is a proven goal scorer with considerable international experience: The 2014 Olympics, and three world championship appearances. His 15 goals in 27 games at worlds might have outweighed his middling 2024-25 season with Nashville (six goals in 25 games).

Snubs

William Eklund, F, San Jose Sharks. The real stunner here. There were multiple reports in Swedish media that the 22-year-old winger had made the cut for Team Sweden. Despite 23 points in 27 games this season, he's not on the roster. But national team director Anders Lundberg clearly skewed this roster older, as just three players were born after the year 2000. Was Eklund seen as a defensive liability? Was Lundberg concerned about him wilting in the spotlight? Whatever the justification, that's a whole lot of offense sitting back home during the tournament -- and a roster "sure thing" who turned out to be anything but that.

Hampus Lindholm, D, Boston Bruins. One of the more prominent names left off the roster, there is at least justification for Lindholm not to make the cut. The 30-year-old has been limited to 17 games this season because of a lower-body injury, which Bruins interim coach Joe Sacco said could sideline him for weeks. How many weeks? No one's sure. Rather than play the waiting game, Sweden went with its other blue-line options, such as Minnesota's Jonas Brodin, instead.

Rickard Rakell, F, Pittsburgh Penguins. The winger is having a very strong season at both ends of the ice this season, with 16 points in 27 games and a plus-2 rating -- one of only five Penguins that have skated to a plus rating through 27 games. The 31-year-old appeared in worlds twice for Sweden, although his first stint in 2018 (14 points in 10 games) was much better than his second in 2021 (two points in seven games). But given his play this season and his versatility, it's a bit of a swerve here from Sweden -- although perhaps they credit Sidney Crosby more than Rakell for the latter's strong campaign.

Fabian Zetterlund, F, San Jose Sharks. Zetterlund isn't as young as his teammate Eklund, at 25 years old, but he just came into his own last season after coming over from New Jersey in the 2023 Timo Meier trade. He scored 24 goals in 82 games last season and followed up with 19 points (including nine goals) through 27 games this season. Analytics indicate he is one of the most effective Sharks forwards offensively, although his defense isn't nearly as good. Another strong offensive player who couldn't make the cut.

Overall team grade: B

The Swedes have what it takes to pull an upset or two in this tournament, given their experience and the potential of their goaltending. Throw in some of the shutdown types they boast at forward and two solid defensive pairings, and one could see Sweden playing the U.S. or Canada tightly until someone like Pettersson, Bratt, Nylander or -- yes, indeed -- Erik Karlsson has their moment. As usual, count the Swedes out at your own peril.

United States

Note: Players are listed alphabetically within each position group. Players listed with an asterisk were on the original selection lists in June.

Forwards

Matt Boldy, Minnesota Wild

Kyle Connor, Winnipeg Jets

Jack Eichel, Vegas Golden Knights\*

Jake Guentzel, Tampa Bay Lightning

Jack Hughes, New Jersey Devils

Chris Kreider, New York Rangers

Dylan Larkin, Detroit Red Wings

Auston Matthews, Toronto Maple Leafs\*

J.T. Miller, Vancouver Canucks

Brock Nelson, New York Islanders

Brady Tkachuk, Ottawa Senators

Matthew Tkachuk, Florida Panthers\*

Vincent Trocheck, New York Rangers

The last great championship moment for USA Hockey -- world junior championships notwithstanding -- was in the 1996 World Cup of Hockey. It was also one of the most impressive assemblages of talent in the nation's history: Hockey Hall of Famers like Brian Leetch, Chris Chelios, Brett Hull and Phil Housley; star scorers like Keith Tkachuk and John LeClair; and at least one future general manager in Bill Guerin.

The top two centers on that team were Mike Modano and Pat Lafontaine, and you'd be hard-pressed to find another one-two punch with that kind of potency in the program's history. Until, potentially, now.

Matthews is already one of the most prolific goal-scoring centers in NHL history. Eichel has blossomed into a two-way superstar in Vegas, a driving force behind a Stanley Cup win. If you wanted to swap Eichel for Jack Hughes, fine: Now Matthews is playing in front of an absolute puck wizard whose defensive game continues to improve annually.

This might be the most talented group of scorers the U.S. has ever put together for an international tournament. The tenacity and skill of the Tkachuk brothers. The scoring prowess of Connor and Guentzel, who have excelled in top-line roles for years. Boldy and Larkin bring more offensive depth. Miller, assuming his off-ice issues are resolved, is that rare player that can pop 103 points, get Selke Trophy votes and be the most physical player on the ice.

This is the first group since at least 1996 that feels like it could have equal footing with the Canadians from a talent perspective. The U.S. had even more young offensive players with whom they could have populated the roster. But GM Guerin went in a slightly different direction: Rather than hope that young players known for scoring could adapt into new roles with lower ice time, he picked veteran players already adept at those roles -- who can also fill the net.

Assuming he's healthy, Kreider is a valuable asset on the power play and the penalty kill. Nelson and Trocheck are players who can be cast in a variety of roles. It's certainly a choice to leave home some of the most accomplished young scorers in the NHL, but this is hardly the kind of egregious overcompensation we've seen from USA Hockey in the past, where skill players were snubbed for gritty blue-collar forwards because the Miracle on Ice gave brain worms to three decades of U.S. national team executives. These "grunts" have 30-goal seasons to their credits.

This group has been a generation in the making, the one that watched players like Patrick Kane in the Olympics and wondered what would happen if there were six more guys like him on Team USA. Wonder no more.

Overall forwards grade: A

Defensemen

Brock Faber, Minnesota Wild

Adam Fox, New York Rangers\*

Noah Hanifin, Vegas Golden Knights

Quinn Hughes, Vancouver Canucks\*

Charlie McAvoy, Boston Bruins\*

Jacob Slavin, Carolina Hurricanes

Zach Werenski, Columbus Blue Jackets

While there was debate about the forwards, both philosophically and positionally, the top six defensemen for Team USA were really never in doubt.

Hughes and Fox are Norris Trophy winners who excel in both zones, quarterback a power play and log considerable minutes. It's assumed they'll each anchor a pairing, perhaps putting Hughes with McAvoy and Fox with Jacob Slavin. (Wonder if Adam Fox and a current Carolina Hurricane have anything to reminisce about?)



Like the rest of his team, McAvoy has had a substandard season with 10 points in 27 games, but remains one of the NHL's better blueliners. Slavin has also had a rough go of it this season, as the Hurricanes average 2.67 expected goals against per 60 minutes with him on the ice. His stats relative to his teammates don't blow you away. But like McAvoy, there's just too much outstanding play in Slavin's history not to put him on this roster as one of the NHL's best defensive D-men.

Werenski, 27, is one of those players whose greatness was been obscured by injuries and playing on some also-ran Blue Jackets teams. But he has grabbed the spotlight -- and a roster spot here -- with 26 points in 24 games, skating to a plus-11.

Faber, 22, isn't just here because his boss put together the team. He was second behind Connor Bedard for the Calder Trophy last season, has 13 points in 25 games this season and logs a ton of ice time (24:51). Sure, you could argue that a second-year defenseman hasn't earned it yet. We'd argue that he has, and that using this experience to inform his performance when it really matters -- on the 2026 Olympic national team -- is well worth the roster spot.

Hanifin closes out the group, having won over management despite some other worthy candidates.

Overall defensemen grade: A-minus

Goaltenders

Connor Hellebuyck, Winnipeg Jets

Jake Oettinger, Dallas Stars

Jeremy Swayman, Boston Bruins

It's not hyperbolic to say that Hellebuyck is the best goaltender in hockey. He's 15-5-0 with a .927 save percentage and three shutouts for the Jets, coming off his second Vezina Trophy win last season. There are just some nights when opposing teams and fans shrug and say, "We got Hellebuyck'd." That was the sort of reaction that legends like Dominik Hasek used to evoke.

Oettinger is another goalie who can win a game on his own, as he has done in the playoffs. He has a 13-4-0 record with a .915 save percentage, with 6.8 goals saved above expected. Were it not for Hellebuyck, he's probably the starter.

Thatcher Demko's injury misfortune is a break for Swayman. The Canucks goalie is probably No. 3 on the American depth chart, but has yet to play this season because of a lower-body injury. Swayman, 26, missed training camp because of a prolonged contract negotiation with Boston and is only now rounding back into form. Overall, he has an .892 save percentage and leads the NHL in goals allowed. Being part of this trio could help him for the 2026 Olympics, and while the U.S. had other options -- Dustin Wolf, Anthony Stolarz, Charlie Lindgren, Joey Daccord -- seriously, the U.S. can't swing a trade with Canada for one of these guys? -- it's not like Swayman hasn't proved his case in years past.

Overall goaltending grade: A-plus

Surprises

Noah Hanifin. A mild surprise. The top six defensemen for the U.S. were fairly cemented coming into this process, especially with the way that Werenski closed the deal this season in Columbus. But the final roster spot had a handful of contenders. There was John Carlson, at 34 having a resurgent season with the Capitals and a 2014 Olympian. There was Jake Sanderson, 22, the promising blueliner with the Senators. There was 29-year-old Neal Pionk, who is having a good season with the Jets. And then there was Hanifin, the 27-year-old D-man logging 21 minutes per game in Vegas. He has not had a particular stellar season defensively, but the brain trust saw enough to add him here.

Brock Nelson. Within context, Nelson makes complete sense. He's a Swiss Army knife who can play up or down the lineup, at center or on the wing, win faceoffs, play on either the power play or the penalty kill. He's a guy who has played 14 minutes per game and 19 minutes per game, and the fluctuation in ice time or role has never resulted in a lack of effort. To have all of that and the ability to score 34 or more goals -- which he's done for three straight seasons -- made him an obvious veteran fit for Guerin and the brain trust.

Vincent Trocheck. Last season's run to the conference finals was probably the clincher for Trocheck. As Rangers coach Peter Laviolette said about his center: "He touches every part of the game." In the regular season, he was second on the Rangers behind his linemate Artemi Panarin with 77 points (25 goals, 52 assists) in 82 games. He was New York's leading scorer in the postseason (20 points in 16 games). Like Nelson, this is a player who can thrive up or down the lineup. That he excelled in the most pressure-packed time of the hockey season only bolstered his case. Don't forget: Rangers GM Chris Drury is an assistant GM for this team. Never a bad thing to have an advocate behind closed doors.

#### Snubs

Cole Caufield, F, Montreal Canadiens. With 16 goals in 25 games, Caufield cemented his status as one of the most dynamic young American scorers in the NHL. But that offensive spark is counterbalanced by his being a defensive liability -- Montreal averages 3.2 expected goals against per 60 minutes at 5-on-5 with Caufield on the ice. Simply put: He wasn't going to crack the top six, and USA Hockey clearly wanted to have a certain kind of experienced, defensive-oriented player in the bottom six. That's not Caufield. If we wanted to boil it down to a 1-for-1 scenario: Matt Boldy is a more well-rounded player than Caufield at this point.

Clayton Keller, F, Utah Hockey Club. The Utah center has 22 points in 25 games, coming off back-to-back 30-goal campaigns. He has put in the time with USA Hockey, whether it was coming up through the National Team Development Program or playing in world juniors or competing at worlds. Slightly below average defense and a lack of penalty-killing probably hurt him, but Keller seemed like the kind of player amenable to a new role on a deeply talented team. Team USA opted to hand that role to someone already playing it instead.

Jason Robertson, F, Dallas Stars. Did Robertson, 25, play himself off this roster? It was hard to imagine the Dallas winger not being a part of the U.S. national team in 2023 when he was completing his second straight 40-goal season. Even as his numbers declined last season, it was assumed he'd make the cut, and now they've declined again, so he didn't. Robertson has five goals through 24 games, threatening to finish under the one-goal-every-60-minutes standard for the first time in his career.

Tage Thompson, F, Buffalo Sabres. This is where roster-building philosophy collides with pure offensive dynamism. Thompson is a 6-foot-6, point-per-game center for the Sabres, two years removed from a 47-goal campaign. Although he has been better at 5-on-5 this season under coach Lindy Ruff, defense is not one of Thompson's virtues: He stinks on faceoffs and doesn't kill penalties. Like Caufield, he didn't crack the top six, and got caught up in the philosophical approach to this roster, wherein a Nelson or a Trocheck was seen as more vital to success than a tall center who can score. This is one of those snubs where you look like a genius if things go right, or a fool if the U.S. loses 1-0 to Canada while Tage Thompson is watching from his living room.

Overall team grade: A

This is the team for which American fans have been waiting. Previous national teams have had a few scattered offensive stars. This one has superstars and scoring threats on every line. The U.S. used to have solid defensemen who played their roles. This one has two Norris winners. The U.S. has always had

strong goaltenders, whether it was Ryan Miller or Jonathan Quick or Mike Richter. They've never had this kind of depth.

Even with Guerin turning over some roster spots to veteran role players, success will still require highly skilled young players to modulate their games and their ice time. It will require maturity and calm under pressure. If coach Mike Sullivan can get this roster to jell, if they can pass the chemistry test ... there's a chance that a version of this group can do something in 2026 that no American men's hockey team has done since 1980.

But first thing's first: Winning the 4 Nations Face-Off and, in the process, sending a message to Canada that the balance of power is shifting.

## [ESPN / How Team USA built its NHL 4 Nations Face-Off roster](#)

By Emily Kaplan- December 6, 2024

### Reactions

A few days before Thanksgiving, Minnesota Wild GM Bill Guerin was in Columbus to scout the Blue Jackets. After the game, he went for dinner and drinks with Chris Kelleher, his assistant general manager.

As the restaurant started emptying out, a few Blue Jackets players walked in, including defenseman Zach Werenski and his fiancé, Odette Peters. The couple said hello before sitting at their table.

"Should we tell him tonight?" Kelleher asked. "We won't be able to tell many of the guys in person."

So Guerin summoned the couple back. "I just need you guys to pick up the check, I forgot my wallet," Guerin joked. "His fiancé was great, she said, 'I'll buy your dinner if you put him on Team USA!'"

"All right, you're buying," Guerin said. "Because he's in."

As Guerin relayed the moment -- which was followed by hugs, smiles and Guerin indeed paying his own tab -- he couldn't help but feel sentimental. On Thanksgiving, the Team USA GM made calls to the rest of the players who made the 23-man 4 Nations roster.

Reactions were priceless. Rangers forward Chris Kreider told Guerin he'd do whatever it takes -- even scrub the floors. Detroit Red Wings captain Dylan Larkin wanted the nod badly but wasn't sure until he got the call. When Larkin heard he was part of Team USA's plans all along, the center called it one of the greatest achievements of his career. "Noah Hanifin was like, 'let's goooo!'" Guerin said. "He couldn't believe it."

Then there was J.T. Miller, who is currently on a personal leave with the Vancouver Canucks.

"He's working on things," Guerin said. "But for us to stick with him, I think that meant a lot. It was a great conversation."

There hasn't been a best-on-best international tournament with NHL players since the 2016 World Cup of Hockey. The 4 Nations tournament in February -- replacing the NHL's typical All-Star Weekend -- is an overdue showcase of how much the game has grown, especially in the United States. Cultivating a 23-man roster was no easy task for Guerin's management team, which worked closely with Pittsburgh Penguins coach Mike Sullivan, who will serve as Team USA coach.

"We have arguably the deepest pool of players in a long time in terms of guys who were in the conversation to make this team," Sullivan said.

Guerin and Sullivan spoke to ESPN on a Zoom call this week about how they built the USA roster. Many of the decisions were tedious. They needed a roster not only to win a short-order tournament, but also to build chemistry for the 2026 Winter Olympics in Milan; the first Olympic hockey tournament to feature NHL players in 12 years.

Sullivan stressed that they will only have three practices as a team, which is why the group often used the term "plug and play" in evaluations.

"The biggest thing was hockey sense and versatility," Guerin said. "There's hardly any practice time. High hockey sense people. Guys that can play on the first to the fourth line."

They put a premium on players who could toggle from center to wing, knowing an injury or illness bug is inevitable.

"I would add that competitive spirit was also a high priority," Sullivan said. "Every team is going to have talent. It's going to take more than talent to win this tournament."

Team USA first had to consider the right blend of experience and rising talent.

"We did discuss the Patrick Kanes, the Ryan McDonaghs, guys like that," Guerin said. "But you know, there's some accomplished guys on this roster, so we felt like we didn't really need to do that. The roster spaces were just so precious that hey, look, Jack Eichel has won a Stanley Cup. Matthew Tkachuk won a Stanley Cup. Charlie McAvoy has gone deep into the playoffs every year. So has Adam Fox, so has Jaccob Slavin."

Sullivan jumped in to mention his former Penguins player, Jake Guentzel, who led Pittsburgh through its 2017 Stanley Cup run with 13 goals, including five game winners in his rookie season.

"These guys are the next generation, and they have won," Guerin said. "Those are our older guys now, they're 27 and 28. [Guentzel is] an old man at 30 now, but they have such great experience."

Leaving off the 36-year-old Kane was especially difficult for Guerin. Kane is considered by many as the all-time greatest American-born player. He's a two-time Olympian whose many clutch Stanley Cup playoff moments have led to his nickname "Showtime."

Guerin made a point to meet Kane in person to tell him he wasn't going to be included. The meeting took place in Detroit within the past two weeks.

"For Patrick, it was especially hard. It was difficult," Guerin said. "He's going to be a Hall of Famer, but he's a Hall of Fame human being, too. He's smart and understands it and he couldn't have handled it any better. Very supportive. I can't say enough about how great he was and that was not a great conversation to have, but I just have so much respect for him. I just hated delivering that news, but he understood."

Guerin said they were down to about three spots undecided over the past two weeks.

"We wanted to give the last couple guys an extra look," Guerin said. "To make sure we were making the right decisions."

They resorted back to the same question: Who is going to make up the best team?

"This is where the hard decisions come in because there are some guys who are having very good years. We easily have just taken the top scorers or whatever trying to put together a team," Guerin said. "But our staff needed to supply Sully and his staff with the type of players they need to carry out a certain game plan."

That meant leaving off 23-year-old Cole Caufield, who ranks third in the league this season with 16 goals. Buffalo's Tage Thompson, who has 13 goals through 20 games, was also left out. Both will still be in consideration for the 2026 Olympic team in Milan.

Team USA kept its selection process secretive, and Guerin's work isn't done.

"After the announcement, I'll start reaching out to some players because we're going to need some guys to be ready [as injury replacements]," Guerin said. "I think there's some players that really have earned that phone call and explanation of why you're not on the team."

Guerin said there were a couple of players who were on the bubble from the start that "exploded into great years, and really just forced themselves on to the team, which we love."

When asked for an example, Guerin didn't hesitate: Winnipeg Jets wing Kyle Connor.

"We didn't know if we had that type of player already; could we get that from another player?" Guerin said of Connor. "And he just absolutely took off and it was a no-brainer."

One player who didn't appear on many mock rosters was the New York Islanders' Brock Nelson. But Sullivan called Nelson someone who "personifies versatility."

"Sully and I went to the world championships together this past May and he was on the team and just talked about it," Guerin said. "He's a Swiss Army knife. He could do everything. He can play center, he can play wing, he can take faceoffs, he can kill, he can power play."

The roster ultimately features two players from Guerin's Minnesota Wild team: 22-year-old defenseman Brock Faber and 23-year-old winger Matt Boldy.

Guerin said there's a "maturity" to Faber that's hard to describe. He competed at the 2022 Olympics in Beijing as a college player and led Team USA in ice time. Boldy burst onto the radar because of his performance at last spring's World Championships.

"Matt played on a line with Johnny Gaudreau and Brock Nelson, and ended up leading the tournament scoring," Guerin said. "Then he came back to Minnesota and had a really good start to his year. But at some point in time too, as we kept getting down to it, he stayed on the list. [Team USA management team] Chris Drury, Billy Zito, Tom Fitzgerald and Chris Kelleher, all guys that are not afraid to speak their mind, they're not afraid to challenge me and they all think differently and that's why I have them on the staff. I said, 'Guys, come see our games. Tell me I'm not doing this just because they're my players.' And they're like, no, we don't need to. They're on."

The team features two sets of brothers -- Matthew and Brady Tkachuk and Jack and Quinn Hughes.

"It's a great story for American hockey and a great story for families," Sullivan said. "None of us get here alone, and the people who support us most are our families."

The tournament will also be the first time Sullivan gets to coach his son-in-law; McAvoy is married to Sullivan's daughter, Kiley. "I'd much prefer to be playing [with] him on my bench than playing against him," Sullivan said.

Speaking of families, the team will have decals on their helmets honoring Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau, who tragically died in August. Johnny had competed for several USA Hockey teams, including at the World Championships in May.

As for the plan on net, Guerin said "whoever gives us the best chance to win will get the net." Winnipeg's Connor Hellebuyck, Dallas' Jake Oettinger and Boston's Jeremy Swayman were near unanimous decisions -- it would have been a bigger debate had Vancouver's Thatcher Demko started the season healthy. (He has yet to play this season with a lower body injury.)

Sullivan said performances leading up to the tournament will dictate the goaltending plan. But it's widely believed that Hellebuyck has the inside track to be the U.S. starter -- though anything could change in two months.

The U.S. will open with a game against Finland on Feb. 13 before a much-anticipated prime-time showdown with Canada on Feb. 15 at the Bell Centre in Montreal, broadcast on ABC. Group play concludes against Sweden on Feb. 17. The championship is on Feb. 20 in Boston.

"I think in the past there's been this whole focus, 'We got to beat Canada.' We don't want to think like that," Guerin said. "There's four teams in the tournament. We have to play three other teams. We need

to just worry about us and our game and carry out our game plan. And that in my mind, that's what's really going to give us success."

Sullivan had a Zoom call with his coaching staff -- John Tortorella, John Hynes and David Quinn -- on Monday and gave them a homework assignment: formulate line combinations and a reasoning for why. "We'll have that discussion," Sullivan said. "I have my thoughts on it, but what I will tell you is just like here in Pittsburgh, we might start out with certain line combinations, but those things are sketched in pencil, not pen."

Sullivan wants the team to play a speed game. That doesn't necessarily mean just skating; speed to Sullivan also means ability to move the puck quickly and change the point of attack.

Sullivan and Guerin both have an infectious enthusiasm when talking about the potential of their team.

"We all feel a certain responsibility to bring our very best because these types of events don't come around very often," Sullivan said. "To represent your nation as an incredible honor. I also think the culmination of this group of players is a tribute to a whole lot of volunteer people around the country who have helped these guys along the way get to where they're at. And those are thankless jobs and there's a lot of people in rinks all over the United States right now that are doing the same thing for the next generation. And I don't think they get the credit they deserve."

## ESPN / Ranking NHL overachievers, underperformers in 2024-25 so far

By Neil Paine- December 6, 2024

### Reactions

Hockey, perhaps more so than any other sport, thrives on the unexpected. Whether it's a journeyman suddenly breaking out for a career season, an established star mysteriously going cold in the middle of his prime, or a goalie playing out of character (in any direction), the NHL is rarely short on surprises. And through the first few months of the 2024-25 season, we've already seen plenty of examples for each type of performance.

We can measure which players have defied expectations -- for better or worse -- relative to their previous careers using my adjusted Goals Above Replacement (GAR) metric. Specifically, we'll be comparing players to their established level of production, which is an average of their previous three seasons of adjusted GAR, with more recent seasons receiving increased weight.

Some players have blown past their earlier track records and become unexpected stars of the season -- they have the largest positive differentials between actual and established GAR -- while others have seen their once-reliable production plummet -- causing them to fall far short of their established GAR.

Let's dive into a starting lineup (three forwards, two defensemen and a goalie) of biggest overachievers and underperformers of the season so far and explore what might be driving these surprising trends.

### Forwards

Connor McMichael, C, Washington Capitals

2024-25 age: 24

Basic stats: 24 GP, 14 G, 10 A, 24 Pts, +10, 17.6 TOI/G

3-year established GAR: 1.1 Offense | 1.1 Defense | 2.1 Total

Actual GAR pace: 18.5 Offense | 3.8 Defense | 22.3 Total (+20.2)

Who had Connor McMichael down for more goals (14) than Connor McDavid (12) through the first two months of the 2024-25 season? Certainly nobody who thought the Caps would struggle this year -- which was pretty much everyone, as Washington opened the season tied for the seventh longest Stanley Cup odds of any team.

Fast forward to today, however, and no team has gained more playoff probability (+60%) than Washington, thanks in no small part to the scoring touch of the No. 25 pick from 2019.

Though it's fair to question whether McMichael can continue scoring on nearly 20% of his shots -- his previous career mark was 11% -- and he's not adding very much playmaking to go with his goals, he has massively improved his two-way indicators from a year ago, a sign of growth for a player who might lead the Caps' next generation into its post-Alex Ovechkin era.

Martin Nečas, C, Carolina Hurricanes

2024-25 age: 26

Basic stats: 24 GP, 12 G, 25 A, 37 Pts, +6, 18.2 TOI/G

3-year established GAR: 7.1 Offense | 3.8 Defense | 10.9 Total



Actual GAR pace: 24.5 Offense | 4.8 Defense | 29.4 Total (+18.5)

Nečas has long carved out his reputation as a reliably decent offensive producer, with 20 or more adjusted goals in three of the previous four seasons. But after a very good campaign (27 adjusted goals, 68 adjusted points, 14.7 GAR) at age 24 in 2022-23, he failed to keep ascending -- dipping to just 23 adjusted goals, 51 adjusted points and 9.9 GAR. A minus-9 rating and reduced ice time on the penalty kill also spoke to Nečas' seemingly diminished 200-foot game.

This season, though, Nečas has snapped back to the level of play many were expecting last season, and then some. He's on pace for career highs across the board, including 41 adjusted goals, 84 adjusted assists, 125 adjusted points and an MVP-like 29.4 adjusted GAR. It's no surprise to see Carolina currently rate as a top contender; they've been teasing this for years. But with Nečas achieving his full potential, the Canes are looking as scary as ever.

Kirill Marchenko, RW, Columbus Blue Jackets

2024-25 age: 24

Basic stats: 23 GP, 10 G, 14 A, 24 Pts, +16, 18.2 TOI/G

3-year established GAR: 3.2 Offense | 0.6 Defense | 3.8 Total

Actual GAR pace: 15.6 Offense | 5.1 Defense | 20.6 Total (+16.8)

The Blue Jackets' inspirational start to the season -- rallying to an 11-9-3 record after the deaths of team star Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew in an August crash caused by an allegedly drunken driver -- has many heroes, from coach Dean Evason to a surprisingly deep roster of contributors that ranks as sixth youngest in the NHL. But in the absence of Gaudreau, few would have expected that Columbus would rank sixth in the league in goals per game, up from 24th a year ago. And the main credit for that might just belong to Marchenko, the Russian forward now in his third NHL season.

Marchenko made some progress at both ends last season, scoring 22 adjusted goals with 40 adjusted points and an improved on-ice goal differential, but he has taken a massive leap this year. He is currently tracking for 35 adjusted goals (all at even strength), 84 adjusted points and 20.6 GAR, finding his form playing off the right wing of veteran center Sean Monahan on the Jackets' top line. Columbus needed a breakout from Marchenko this season, and that's exactly what it appears to have gotten.

Honorable mention

Dylan Strome, C, Washington Capitals

Alex Laferriere, RW, Los Angeles Kings

Aliaksei Protas, C, Washington Capitals

Defensemen

Zach Werenski, D, Columbus Blue Jackets

2024-25 age: 27

Basic stats: 23 GP, 8 G, 18 A, 26 Pts, +12, 26.0 TOI/G

3-year established GAR: 6.6 Offense | 1.2 Defense | 7.8 Total

Actual GAR pace: 20.1 Offense | 7.2 Defense | 27.4 Total (+19.5)

Speaking of the Blue Jackets, the other player most responsible for Columbus exceeding expectations resides on the blue line, where Werenski has put up remarkable numbers so far this season. The

homegrown defenseman had shown signs of elite all-around potential before, amassing 24 adjusted goals and 18.2 adjusted GAR at age 22 in the 2019-20 season. Through that year, Werenski's most similar career players by GAR were Larry Murphy, Glen Wesley, Drew Doughty, Scott Niedermayer and Brian Leetch -- three Hall of Famers, a likely future HOF member and a highly respected 20-year vet.

But injuries had limited Werenski ever since, calling into question whether he would develop into that caliber of superstar. So far this season, though, he has reclaimed his potential with 28 adjusted goals, 91 adjusted points and 27.4 adjusted GAR. The latter of those figures has Werenski vying with Cale Makar and Quinn Hughes to be the top defenseman in the league, heady company indeed.

Brandt Clarke, D, Los Angeles Kings

2024-25 age: 21

Basic stats: 25 GP, 3 G, 13 A, 16 Pts, +6, 18.7 TOI/G

3-year established GAR: 0.7 Offense | 0.2 Defense | 0.9 Total

Actual GAR pace: 7.8 Offense | 7.8 Defense | 15.7 Total (+14.8)

Draftniks and prospect mavens were already familiar with Clarke, the No. 8 pick in the 2021 draft, but he had only played 25 games (with 8 points and 1.4 GAR) across parts of two NHL seasons before this season. Clarke was, however, set for an expanded role on L.A.'s second D-pairing and power play unit in 2024-25, and he has taken that opportunity and skated away with it.

Clarke currently ranks among the league's top 20 defensemen in adjusted points (52) and adjusted GAR (15.7), and in his age-21 season he is the youngest member of either list. It's an impressive initial breakout for a big talent that is widely viewed as Doughty's successor on the Kings' blue line.

Honorable mention

Jakob Chychrun, Washington Capitals

Neal Pionk, Winnipeg Jets

Ryker Evans, Seattle Kraken

Goalie

Filip Gustavsson, Minnesota Wild

2024-25 age: 26

Basic stats: 18 starts, .929 SV%

3-year established GAR: 9.8 Total

Actual GAR pace: 42.6 Total (+32.8)

Goalies are a funny bunch, always and forever. For the latest proof, look no further than Gustavsson, who was drafted by the Penguins, broke into the NHL with the Senators, was traded twice by the time he was barely 24 years old, had an excellent debut for the Wild in 2022-23 -- ranking third in the league in Goals Saved Above Average -- and was decidedly mediocre the following season.

Against that backdrop, it was unclear what Minnesota could expect from Gustavsson in 2024-25, especially since he was seemingly caught in the middle between veteran future Hall of Famer Marc-Andre Fleury and prospect Jesper Wallstedt. So what has Gustavsson done so far? He only ranks first among regular goalies in save percentage, second in GSAA and (relatedly) he leads all players in adjusted GAR this season.

While Minnesota's defense does a good job of making Gustavsson's life easier -- he faces the league's fifth-lowest rate of expected goals against per 60 minutes -- Gustavsson has done an excellent job of stopping the shots the Wild do allow, exceeding expectations in the early going.

#### Forwards

Zach Hyman, LW, Edmonton Oilers

2024-25 age: 32

Basic stats: 20 GP, 3 G, 5 A, 8 Pts, 0, 19.2 TOI/G

3-year established GAR: 14.0 Offense | 4.1 Defense | 18.1 Total

Actual GAR pace: -0.9 Offense | 3.1 Defense | 2.1 Total (-16.0)

Alongside the stellar play of McDavid, Leon Draisaitl and Evan Bouchard, Hyman's career-high 54 adjusted goals, 76 adjusted points and 21.5 adjusted GAR was a major reason why Edmonton weathered a shaky early start last season and eventually made it to Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final. That's what makes it so shocking to see his production fall off this much in 2024-25, down to just 10 adjusted goals, 27 adjusted points and 2.1 adjusted GAR (including -0.9 on offense).

Hyman has been battling an undisclosed ailment since the last week of November, costing him a handful of games, but he was doing surprisingly little even before his absence. The saving grace is that Hyman's underlying metrics for possession quality suggest he is still capable of creating a high volume of offensive chances -- but he must begin to finish those opportunities at a far higher clip.

Auston Matthews, C, Toronto Maple Leafs

2024-25 age: 27

Basic stats: 15 GP, 6 G, 8 A, 14 Pts, +6, 20.7 TOI/G

3-year established GAR: 21.4 Offense | 4.6 Defense | 26.0 Total

Actual GAR pace: 6.7 Offense | 3.4 Defense | 10.1 Total (-15.9)

In maybe the most startling decline of all, Matthews -- one of the most prolific goal scorers in NHL history, the man who flirted with 70 goals a year ago -- has dipped from 68 adjusted goals to 20, from 105 adjusted points to 47, and from 29.4 adjusted GAR to just 10.1 this season. Yes, that's partly because Matthews missed nearly a month with an upper-body injury, returning to the lineup last Saturday for the first time since Nov. 3.

He has a goal and two assists in two games since coming back, so there are signs of Matthews regaining last season's scoring momentum. But he wouldn't reach 45 goals this season even if he plays every remaining game for the Leafs and scores at his previous career rate of 0.65 goals per game, and he would land at 55 goals on the number -- a 14-goal decline -- if he scored at last year's career-high pace from here on.

In other words, Matthews is pretty much destined for one of the league's biggest year-over-year dips in offensive production no matter what he does next.

David Pastrnak, RW, Boston Bruins

2024-25 age: 28

Basic stats: 26 GP, 9 G, 14 A, 23 Pts, -4, 19.6 TOI/G

3-year established GAR: 20.5 Offense | 4.7 Defense | 25.2 Total

Actual GAR pace: 8.4 Offense | 2.6 Defense | 11.0 Total (-14.2)

If a surprise season takes players like McMichael and Marchenko drastically outplaying their previous track records, a disappointing year like the one Boston is mired in -- which recently got coach Jim Montgomery fired, just 513 days after accepting NHL Coach of the Year honors -- requires stars such as Pastrňák undershooting their established levels by substantial amounts.

For most other players, a season like Pastrňák's 2024-25 wouldn't be all that bad; he is still on pace for 28 adjusted goals, 71 adjusted points and 11.0 adjusted GAR. But those would represent Pastrňák's worst outputs in a season since he was a 19-year-old in 2015-16, before he grew into one of the NHL's most lethal wingers.

While it's hard to imagine Pastrňák will keep shooting 8.6% the rest of the season -- his previous career rate was 13.9% -- he also hasn't been driving positive play anywhere near as much as in the past. It's almost unthinkable that Boston would rank 30th in scoring with Pastrňák logging 20 minutes every night.

(Dis)honorable mention

Steven Stamkos, C, Nashville Predators

Jason Robertson, LW, Dallas Stars

Mika Zibanejad, C, New York Rangers

Defensemen

K'Andre Miller, D, New York Rangers

2024-25 age: 25

Basic stats: 24 GP, 1 G, 3 A, 4 Pts, -8, 21.5 TOI/G

3-year established GAR: 3.0 Offense | 6.5 Defense | 9.5 Total

Actual GAR pace: -2.7 Offense | -1.3 Defense | -4.0 Total (-13.5)

Just a few years ago, Miller was looking like one of the NHL's best up-and-coming defensemen on both ends. He was one of just 19 D-men in the league to be worth at least 5.0 adjusted GAR on both offense and defense -- and along with Dallas' Miro Heiskanen and Vancouver's Quinn Hughes, the youngest of the bunch at age 23. But Miller regressed last season, finishing with fewer adjusted GAR than either of the two previous years, and his offensive output was next to nonexistent in the playoffs (4 points in 16 games).

That unfortunate trend has carried over to the 2024-25 regular season as well, with Miller checking in at 4 points (1 goal, 3 assists) in his first 24 games while also carrying a minus-8 rating on a team with a plus-6 goal differential overall. Miller has too much talent to keep posting numbers so poor, but it remains shocking to see him mired in such a deep and extended slump.

Noah Dobson, D, New York Islanders

2024-25 age: 25

Basic stats: 25 GP, 1 G, 9 A, 10 Pts, -9, 24.4 TOI/G

3-year established GAR: 9.4 Offense | 4.4 Defense | 13.8 Total

Actual GAR pace: 0.5 Offense | 1.3 Defense | 1.8 Total (-12.0)

Turning our attention from midtown Manhattan to Long Island, we find another slumping D-man in Dobson. The Islanders' anchor on the back end was previously the model of consistency, finishing with between 10-15 adjusted goals and adjusted GAR in each of the previous three seasons, culminating with a career-best 69 adjusted points and 14.9 adjusted GAR at age 24 last season.

But so far in 2024-25, Dobson's production has dipped to levels not seen since he first joined the NHL full-time; he's tracking for just 3 adjusted goals, 32 adjusted points and 1.8 adjusted GAR, with his numbers falling off at both ends.

The Isles are off to a rough start, especially on offense, and their playoff odds are below 20% after making it each of the previous two seasons. If they are to turn that around in coach Patrick Roy's first full season beyond the bench, Dobson must return to the form that used to have him looking like one of the game's top young defensemen.

(Dis)honorably mention

Brent Burns, Carolina Hurricanes

Vince Dunn, Seattle Kraken

Devon Toews, Colorado Avalanche

Goalie

Cayden Primeau, Montreal Canadiens

2024-25 age: 25

Basic stats: 7 starts, .844 SV%

3-year established GAR: 5.5 Total

Actual GAR pace: -26.0 Total (-31.5)

Because they have such an outsized effect on a team's chances of winning or losing, goalies are often on the extreme ends of the GAR leaderboard in any given season -- for good or bad. And the latter end of the spectrum belongs to Primeau for his league-low (among regulars) .844 SV% early this season.

Primeau has been all over the place in his six-year NHL career: Once he was considered the heir apparent to Carey Price in Montreal's net, then played at a sub-replacement level for three straight seasons (2020-21 to 2022-23), then rebounded to be above-average last season. The young and still-rebuilding Habs felt comfortable with Primeau and Sam Montembeault sharing starts this season, but a performance by Primeau already worth nearly 14 goals below average in just seven starts has helped Montreal rank dead last in goals allowed per game.

The team's defense is doing him zero favors; they've saddled him with the fifth-highest rate of high-danger chances seen per 60 minutes at 5-on-5, as well as the seventh-highest rate of shots off the rush per 60. But even after adjusting for the quality of his shots faced, Primeau is an order of magnitude worse than any other netminder in the league this season.

## ESPN / NHL trade grades: Who comes out ahead on Trouba swap?

By Ryan S. Clark and Greg Wyshynski- December 7, 2024

### Reactions

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

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

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

Jump to a trade:

Trouba to ANA

Jiricek to MIN

Trouba to the Ducks

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

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

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

New York Rangers

Grade: A

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

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

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

Please recall when the Rangers placed forward Barclay Goodrow on waivers in June, clearing the last three years of his contract off their books when the San Jose Sharks claimed him in a prearranged move.

There's no question that GM Chris Drury pointed to that example and told Trouba, "This could happen to you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

play

0:52

Rangers trade Jacob Trouba to the Ducks

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

Anaheim Ducks

Grade: B

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jiricek traded to the Wild

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

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

Minnesota Wild



Grade: B+

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

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

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

As for what this all means for this season?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Columbus Blue Jackets

Grade: B+

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## ESPN / NHL Power Rankings: 1-32 poll, each team's 4 Nations players

By ESPN staff- December 7, 2024

### Reactions

From Feb. 12-20, best-on-best international hockey featuring NHL players is back. The 4 Nations Face-Off event will pit the best NHLers from the United States, Canada, Finland and Sweden against one another in a round-robin tournament followed by a championship game.

Which teams are most well-represented at the event? You'll find that intel below, along with an updated set of power rankings following a one-week Thanksgiving hiatus.

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 Nov. 22. Points percentages are through Thursday's games.

### Team grades, snubs

### Everything you need to know

#### 1. Minnesota Wild

Previous ranking: 3

Points percentage: 76.00%

Wild GM Bill Guerin served in the same capacity for Team USA for this event, and he chose two of his young stars for the club: Matt Boldy and Brock Faber. They'll be joined by three teammates that made the cut for Sweden: forward Joel Eriksson Ek, defenseman Jonas Brodin and netminder Filip Gustavsson.

Next seven days: @ ANA (Dec. 6), @ LA (Dec. 7), @ UTA (Dec. 10), vs. EDM (Dec. 12)

#### 2. Washington Capitals

Previous ranking: 4

Points percentage: 72.00%

Despite some worthy candidates -- goaltender Logan Thompson seemed like a no-brainer for Canada -- the Capitals did not have any players selected for the 4 Nations rosters.

Next seven days: @ TOR (Dec. 6), @ MTL (Dec. 7), @ CBJ (Dec. 12)

#### 3. Winnipeg Jets

Previous ranking: 1

Points percentage: 70.37%

One player from each position group will represent the Jets this February: Forward Kyle Connor (USA), defenseman Josh Morrissey (Canada) and goaltender Connor Hellebuyck (USA).

Next seven days: @ CHI (Dec. 7), vs. CBJ (Dec. 8), vs. BOS (Dec. 10), vs. VGK (Dec. 12)

#### 4. Vegas Golden Knights

Previous ranking: 10

Points percentage: 68.52%

Vegas is home to many a Canadian star, and four of them will wear the maple leaf in this tourney: Mark Stone, Alex Pietrangelo, Shea Theodore and Adin Hill. Joining them are William Karlsson (Sweden), as well as Jack Eichel and Noah Hanifin (USA).

Next seven days: vs. DAL (Dec. 6), @ WPG (Dec. 12)

#### 5. Toronto Maple Leafs

Previous ranking: 9

Points percentage: 68.00%

The Leafs put one player on each of the four squads: Captain Auston Matthews will represent the U.S., William Nylander suits up for Sweden, Mitch Marner skates for Canada and Jani Hakanpaa made the blue-line group for Finland.

Next seven days: vs. WSH (Dec. 6), @ PIT (Dec. 7), @ NJ (Dec. 10), vs. ANA (Dec. 12)

#### 6. New Jersey Devils

Previous ranking: 7

Points percentage: 64.29%

A resurgent Devils club will be sending four players to this event: Jesper Bratt (Sweden), Jacob Markstrom (Sweden), Jack Hughes (U.S.) and Erik Haula (Finland).

Next seven days: vs. SEA (Dec. 6), vs. COL (Dec. 8), vs. TOR (Dec. 10), vs. LA (Dec. 12)

#### 7. Carolina Hurricanes

Previous ranking: 2

Points percentage: 67.31%

Expanding the tournament to more than only four teams might have resulted in more Hurricanes participation. As it stands, Canes fans can root for the USA (Jacob Slavin), Canada (Seth Jarvis) or Finland (Sebastian Aho).

Next seven days: @ NYI (Dec. 7), vs. SJ (Dec. 10)

#### 8. Dallas Stars

Previous ranking: 8

Points percentage: 64.00%

Jake Oettinger is a superb option as the No. 2 goalie for the U.S., and he's joined at the tournament by Finnish teammates Miro Heiskanen, Esa Lindell and Roope Hintz.

Next seven days: @ VGK (Dec. 6), vs. CGY (Dec. 8), vs. NSH (Dec. 12)

#### 9. Los Angeles Kings

Previous ranking: 11

Points percentage: 63.46%

The Kings' sole representative for the tournament is Sweden's Adrian Kempe -- although injured defenseman Drew Doughty could have potentially been in the mix for Canada if he were healthy.

Next seven days: vs. MIN (Dec. 7), @ NYI (Dec. 10), @ NJ (Dec. 12)

#### 10. Florida Panthers

Previous ranking: 5

Points percentage: 62.96%

Unsurprisingly, the reigning Stanley Cup champs are sending a large number of players to this superstar-laden event. Sam Bennett and Sam Reinhart will represent Canada; Aleksander Barkov, Anton Lundell, Eetu Luostarinen and Niko Mikkola made Team Finland; Gustav Forsling will patrol the blue line for Sweden; and Matthew Tkachuk will skate for the U.S.

Next seven days: vs. SJ (Dec. 7), @ SEA (Dec. 10), @ VAN (Dec. 12)

#### 11. Vancouver Canucks

Previous ranking: 13

Points percentage: 62.50%

Defenseman Quinn Hughes will join his brother Jack on Team USA, where they'll be joined by forward J.T. Miller. Elsewhere, Elias Pettersson made the cut for Sweden, and Kevin Lankinen is in the goaltending battery for Finland.

Next seven days: vs. CBJ (Dec. 6), vs. TB (Dec. 8), vs. STL (Dec. 10), vs. FLA (Dec. 12)

#### 12. Calgary Flames

Previous ranking: 15

Points percentage: 57.41%

Still a bit of an under-the-radar star nationally, Rasmus Andersson made the cut for Sweden -- and could turn a lot more heads with a big performance.

Next seven days: @ DAL (Dec. 8), @ NSH (Dec. 10), vs. TB (Dec. 12)

#### 13. Edmonton Oilers

Previous ranking: 14

Points percentage: 57.69%

The Oilers will send three players to the tournament -- despite some projecting there should have been a few more. Connor McDavid is the lone Canadian to make the roster, while Viktor Arvidsson and Mattias Ekholm will skate for Sweden.

Next seven days: vs. STL (Dec. 7), vs. TB (Dec. 10), @ MIN (Dec. 12)

#### 14. Boston Bruins

Previous ranking: 20

Points percentage: 55.36%

Captain Brad Marchand will run it back one more time for Canada, with forward Elias Lindholm joining Sweden, and Charlie McAvoy and Jeremy Swayman getting the nod for Team USA.

Next seven days: vs. PHI (Dec. 7), @ WPG (Dec. 10), @ SEA (Dec. 12)

#### 15. Tampa Bay Lightning

Previous ranking: 12

Points percentage: 58.33%

With head coach Jon Cooper behind Canada's bench, he'll have three familiar faces in the mix in Brayden Point, Brandon Hagel and Anthony Cirelli. He'll be facing his long-time defensive stalwart Victor Hedman (Sweden), and 2024-25 addition Jake Guentzel (U.S.).

Next seven days: @ VAN (Dec. 8), @ EDM (Dec. 10), @ CGY (Dec. 12)

#### 16. New York Rangers

Previous ranking: 6

Points percentage: 56.25%

Given the Rangers' red, white and blue uniforms, it's a similar color scheme for Chris Kreider, Vincent Trocheck and Adam Fox. And they'll be joined by Mika Zibanejad (Sweden) and Kaapo Kakko (Finland).

Next seven days: vs. PIT (Dec. 6), vs. SEA (Dec. 8), vs. CHI (Dec. 9), @ BUF (Dec. 11)

#### 17. Colorado Avalanche

Previous ranking: 16

Points percentage: 51.85%

The Avs' top defense pairing of Cale Makar and Devon Toews will pull the same duty for Canada alongside teammate Nathan MacKinnon, while Mikko Rantanen and Artturi Lehkonen were selected for Finland.

Next seven days: @ DET (Dec. 7), @ NJ (Dec. 8), @ PIT (Dec. 10), vs. UTA (Dec. 12)

#### 18. Philadelphia Flyers

Previous ranking: 24

Points percentage: 51.92%

Defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen will feature for the Finnish defense, while the Trivises (Konecny and Sanheim) made the roster for Canada.

Next seven days: @ BOS (Dec. 7), vs. UTA (Dec. 8), @ CBJ (Dec. 10), vs. DET (Dec. 12)

#### 19. St. Louis Blues

Previous ranking: 25

Points percentage: 51.85%

Unlike some other players slated to start for their country in goal at this tournament, Jordan Binnington has his name etched on the Stanley Cup. He's joined by reliable defenseman Colton Parayko.

Next seven days: @ EDM (Dec. 7), @ VAN (Dec. 10), vs. SJ (Dec. 12)

#### 20. Columbus Blue Jackets

Previous ranking: 27

Points percentage: 50.00%

Thanks to a wonderful start to the season, Zach Werenski secured a spot on the blue line for the U.S.

Next seven days: @ VAN (Dec. 6), @ WPG (Dec. 8), vs. PHI (Dec. 10), vs. WSH (Dec. 12)

#### 21. Pittsburgh Penguins

Previous ranking: 28

Points percentage: 48.15%

At some point, Sidney Crosby and Erik Karlsson will stop making national teams. But that point is not 2025, as Crosby will play for Canada and Karlsson for Sweden.

Next seven days: @ NYR (Dec. 6), vs. TOR (Dec. 7), vs. COL (Dec. 10), @ MTL (Dec. 12)

#### 22. Seattle Kraken

Previous ranking: 17

Points percentage: 50.00%

Although many were calling for goaltender Joey Daccord to make Team Canada, he was not one of the three chosen for this event -- joining the rest of the Kraken for an extended vacation in February.

Next seven days: @ NJ (Dec. 6), @ NYR (Dec. 8), vs. FLA (Dec. 10), vs. BOS (Dec. 12)

#### 23. New York Islanders

Previous ranking: 18

Points percentage: 46.30%

One of the surprises of roster announcement day was Islanders veteran Brock Nelson -- until one considers his versatility and goal-scoring consistency.

Next seven days: vs. CAR (Dec. 7), @ OTT (Dec. 8), vs. LA (Dec. 10), vs. CHI (Dec. 12)

#### 24. Buffalo Sabres

Previous ranking: 21

Points percentage: 48.08%

Sabres captain Rasmus Dahlin joins an impressive group of Swedish defensemen, while netminder Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen made the battery for Finland. No bid for Tage Thompson this time.

Next seven days: vs. UTA (Dec. 7), vs. DET (Dec. 9), vs. NYR (Dec. 11)

#### 25. Utah Hockey Club

Previous ranking: 22

Points percentage: 48.00%

Who knew there was a Finland-to-Utah pipeline for defensemen? The recently acquired Olli Maatta and Juuso Valimaki will rep the UHC at the tournament.

Next seven days: @ BUF (Dec. 7), @ PHI (Dec. 8), vs. MIN (Dec. 10), @ COL (Dec. 12)

#### 26. Detroit Red Wings

Previous ranking: 26

Points percentage: 46.15%

Dylan Larkin was reportedly always in the plans for Team USA, and he'll spot familiar face Lucas Raymond skating for Sweden in this event.

Next seven days: vs. COL (Dec. 7), @ BUF (Dec. 9), @ PHI (Dec. 12)

27. San Jose Sharks

Previous ranking: 31

Points percentage: 43.10%

One day, phenom rookie Macklin Celebrini will be in the mix for a spot on Team Canada, but for now the lone Shark on a 4 Nations roster is Finnish forward Mikael Granlund.

Next seven days: @ FLA (Dec. 7), @ CAR (Dec. 10), @ STL (Dec. 12)

28. Anaheim Ducks

Previous ranking: 23

Points percentage: 47.92%

Leo Carlsson's trajectory has been strapped to a rocket ship this season, and that continues with his inclusion on Team Sweden for this event; at age 19, he's the youngest player to make one of the four rosters.

Next seven days: vs. MIN (Dec. 6), @ MTL (Dec. 9), @ OTT (Dec. 11), @ TOR (Dec. 12)

29. Ottawa Senators

Previous ranking: 19

Points percentage: 48.00%

Brady Tkachuk gets to play with his brother Matthew for Team USA, while netminder Linus Ullmark is part of the dynamite Swedish goaltending group.

Next seven days: vs. NSH (Dec. 7), vs. NYI (Dec. 8), vs. ANA (Dec. 11)

30. Montreal Canadiens

Previous ranking: 29

Points percentage: 44.23%

The initial host city's fans will get to cheer on their favorites in most games, as Canada (Sam Montembeault) and Finland (Patrik Laine, Joel Armia) selected Canadiens to fill out their groups.

Next seven days: vs. WSH (Dec. 7), vs. ANA (Dec. 9), vs. PIT (Dec. 12)

31. Nashville Predators

Previous ranking: 30

Points percentage: 37.04%

In an alternate world, Steven Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault are off to fantastic starts for the Preds and they make Team Canada. In this world, the Preds will be repped here by two Swedes -- Filip Forsberg and Gustav Nyquist -- and Finnish netminder Juuse Saros.

Next seven days: @ OTT (Dec. 7), vs. CGY (Dec. 10), @ DAL (Dec. 12)



32. Chicago Blackhawks

Previous ranking: 32

Points percentage: 34.62%

There was some thought that Canada would select Connor Bedard for this event; that didn't come to pass. But teammate Teuvo Teravainen will be on hand to represent Finland.

Next seven days: vs. WPG (Dec. 7), @ NYR (Dec. 9), @ NYI (Dec. 12)

## [Sportsnet.ca / Team Canada at 4 Nations Face-Off: Final roster projection](#)

By Justin Bourne- December 4, 2024

The below is not my personal Team Canada, as I've written in the past, but rather what I expect will actually be the makeup of this year's Team Canada at the 4 Nations Face-Off. This is my first actual "projection," if you will.

The final spots on Team Canada's 4 Nations team have been decided, the players have been told, and really only one thing has changed: we thiiiiink we know that a couple of borderline players — a couple of the "maybe" names that have been so hotly contested — have leaked into the public consciousness. I can't pretend I haven't seen the reports, or that they haven't affected my thinking.

As recently as Monday a series of tweets said the below regarding the red-hot Travis Konecny (30 points in 25 games), and Travis Sanheim (15 points and 25 mins-plus of TOI per game):

So, it seems like they've made the team.

Upon further review, the Sanheim thing makes an insane amount of sense.

He's got 15 points in 25 games, which is great and all, but more than that, he's everything Team Canada would want in a bottom-pair guy. He's playing over 25 minutes per game, totalling over 100 more minutes than the next-busiest Flyer. He leads them in PK ice time by a wide margin. He's six-foot-four and 222 pounds. He's playing top competition and driving play effectively compared to his teammates.

Given all the question marks after about four D on Canada, he makes sense.

Konecny can get the same treatment I gave Sanheim above. Another prime-aged player having a career year who can play down the lineup. He plays a ton and has had great success pushing the play the right way for the Flyers. He's competitive as hell. These guys are good.

And so, let's just lay it out the way I think it will show up, and then I'll give some quick thoughts.

Forwards

Point-McDavid-Reinhart

Hagel-MacKinnon-Marner

Marchand-Crosby-Konecny

Stone-Cirelli-Scheifele

Bennett

Close: Wilson / Hyman ... Bedard / Lafreniere / Verhaeghe

Defence

Toews-Makar

Morrissey-Pietrangelo

Sanheim-Theodore

Doughty

Close: Parayko / Weegar / Hamilton / Bouchard / Rielly / Montour / Dobson

## Goalies

Thompson

Hill

Binnington

Close: Fleury / Talbot / Daccord

Sportsnet unveils the full cast of superstars set to represent their countries at the 4 Nations Face-Off. Watch the Canada and USA roster reveals on Dec. 4 before Wednesday Night Hockey at 6:30 p.m. ET / 3:30 p.m. PT.

Broadcast schedule

## REFLECTIONS

### Forwards

Among those forwards, Brandon Hagel played himself out of “maybe” territory over the course of this season. He was this good last year, but the sample size wasn’t there yet. It’s there now.

I’m curious if the team will take Mark Stone, given his injury concerns, but I assume they will, and will lean on alternates if and when they find out he can’t play.

I’m torn on the final spot, as I’m sure Canada has been. Tom Wilson seems like somebody Hockey Canada would love, right? The huge guy who intimidates people and can score? But Sam Bennett does those things too, and he’s producing at a higher clip this year. I’d argue Bennett is more effective shift-to-shift, while Wilson has bigger one-off moments.

The only question mark I have is how much they believe in Zach Hyman, who is hurt and off to a slow start. He’s supposed to be back soon and had 54 tucks last season. He was creating those same chances this year, and they’re going to go in at some point for him. He’s also a great PK and end-of-game option, to say nothing of the forechecking he does for linemates.

### Defence

Nobody has outright claimed any of the bottom D spots, and picking Drew Doughty allows you to pick him, and drop him if he’s not healthy by the tournament. There is the risk that you pick him, and he’s not good when he’s back, but a bad Doughty as your seventh D probably isn’t a crisis considering his competitiveness and leadership. There are worse guys to have in the pressbox if he’s not playing well. And he should be back with at least a month of games to play before the tournament.

That said, I do think that the men in charge of making these decisions (such as Doug Armstrong of the St. Louis Blues) are cognizant of the rift that was formed between Martin St. Louis and Steve Yzerman when the latter didn’t initially select the former for Team Canada, despite St. Louis being on Yzerman’s NHL team. If it’s close, tie will go to the player on the manager’s team, and I think Colton Parayko has done well despite being handed a crap sandwich with the Blues. All he does is start in the D-zone against top competition, and he’s been good in those minutes. He’s a big guy, a right shot, and he’s got experience playing calm in high-pressure minutes. In the end, nobody has taken that job, so he could well get the nod.

Otherwise, Dougie Hamilton stands out as a talented, big option for them to select, and MacKenzie Weegar is a great all-around choice.

## Goalies

I don't think this debate is all that close, as these three seem like the obvious answers to me. After that, you just play whoever is playing best, which is unsexy and scary, but with three Stanley Cup champions listed here, you have to feel good knowing they've handled high-stakes moments in the past.

We'll know the answers on Wednesday and we're down to grinding over a name or two. Whoever is selected, Canada is going to be loaded and should be a blast to watch come February.

## [Sportsnet.ca / 'A photo finish': How Jon Cooper helped pick Team Canada](#)

By Luke Fox- December 4, 2024

TAMPA, Fla. – Jon Cooper’s heart sank right around Christmastime.

The year was 2021.

The world was spinning upside-down and standing still all at once.

We were all confused and cautious and cranky and triple-guessing our decisions.

So, yes, the National Hockey League was going to participate in the 2022 Beijing Winter Games. And who better to coach the Canadian national team than that boy from Prince George, B.C., who had just guided his club team to back-to-back Stanley Cups?

Then, no, the NHL pulled out six weeks before the torch got lit. Canada’s original choice for coach would remain in North America, his dream deferred.

The late December news hit Cooper like a lump of coal jammed in the toe of a hung stocking.

“I’ve been on the wrong side of two Stanley Cups, where I’ve had to watch the team on the ice throw their gloves up and cheer, where you have to wait to stand in line (for handshakes). It’s as bad as that or worse,” Cooper recalled.

“It was gutting to not be able to go.”

Sportsnet unveils the full cast of superstars set to represent their countries at the 4 Nations Face-Off. Watch the Canada and USA roster reveals on Dec. 4 before Wednesday Night Hockey at 6:30 p.m. ET / 3:30 p.m. PT.

### Broadcast schedule

So, for Cooper to be re-selected by Hockey Canada for the gig, is a privilege (and extra workload) he doesn’t take for granted.

The man who will be behind our country’s bench at both February’s 4 Nations Face-Off warmup and the 2026 Italy Games remembers Henderson in ’72, Gretzky and Lemieux making magic at the ’87 Canada Cup, and Crosby’s golden touch in ’10.

“These are moments that just are etched in stone, and it’s all on the grand stage of representing your country best-on-best. I think it’s going to be phenomenal for the sport,” Cooper said. “To be one of the guys leading the charge for our country — especially since there hasn’t really been a best-on-best since 2014 — you gotta pinch yourself.”

Once the pinching is over, however, the work begins.

Cooper has been a vocal stakeholder, alongside 4 Nations GM Don Sweeney and Olympic GM Doug Armstrong, in the hotly debated roster decisions Team Canada finalized Sunday evening for this February’s tournament.

“If it was a horse race, it would be a photo finish. That close,” Cooper said Saturday of filling out the final spots. “It’s been a process, but a super cool process. It’s amazing, the work that’s been put in by management. And it’s been extremely, extremely thorough.”

When time permits, Cooper has started to form personal relationships with Canada’s surefire Olympians.

“Colorado for example. They’d come play Tampa, I go sit down with, say, Cale (Makar) or Mac (Nathan MacKinnon) for a little while, and get to know these players,” Cooper explains. “Otherwise, you probably wouldn’t get to see what they’re like.”

The 57-year-old coach has been blown away by the quick camaraderie between members of rival NHL clubs. The experience has been as educational as it’s been rewarding.

Sweeney and Cooper are major shot-callers of two great Atlantic Division rivals, and both the Bruins and Bolts will be well-represented at 4 Nations. Yet they share info openly, knowing it’s for the good of the country.

“Other than him giving me Boston’s systems, where we’ve pretty much exchanged everything,” Cooper said.

As Cooper travels with the Lightning, he’ll meet with GMs and coaches from rival teams to pick their brains on their candidates for Canada’s roster.

“Probably the biggest thing I’ve taken out of this is the honesty,” Cooper said. “There’s just so much honesty, even with other coaches in the league talking about their guys. And not afraid to pump them up, but also talk about potential weaknesses of the player — and you might be playing them that night. But it’s been a fabulous experience to be part of.”

Toronto Maple Leafs coach Craig Berube, for example, has a few Team Canada hopefuls in his room: Mitch Marner, John Tavares, Morgan Rielly and Chris Tanev.

“I talked to Coop a couple of times,” Berube said. “It’s just questions about certain players, about what you think. Can he kill a penalty? Can he check? Because you’ve got to find roles for all these guys, right? Not everybody can play on the top line. I do, of course, talk our players up.”

We’re assuming Marner is a lock:

Cooper was, of course, tight-lipped about the Canadians who have made the cut, but he did offer a peek into management’s thinking. And management has made it clear they aren’t just going to foist players onto Cooper and ask the coach to figure out roles for them afterward.

Which should give a couple of two-way Lightning forwards, Brandon Hagel and Anthony Cirelli, a slight edge for Canada’s deepest position.

“They’ve really played well for us this year. Whether it’s power play, penalty kill, five on five, trying to protect the lead, trying to get the lead — every aspect of the game, those two guys have really kind of stirred the drink for us for the entire year,” Cooper said.

“And it’s not to take away from anybody else. But you ask anybody in the locker room, those two guys have been really good for us.”

Canada’s 4 Nations roster, which will be announced Wednesday evening, has been constructed knowing that they’ll play three games against three different teams.

More than two months will pass between the naming of the roster and puck drop, and injury-necessitated substitutions can be made anytime up to and including the start of the tournament on Feb. 12.

“I bet you there’ll be 10 new players, minimum, from the four teams,” Cooper said. “If you’re not named to that team, stay ready. Because, unfortunately, there’s probably gonna be some spots open.”

## [Sportsnet.ca / 'This one's for him': Flames earn win on emotional night for Gaudreau family, Calgary](#)

By Eric Francis- December 5, 2024

CALGARY — Sandwiched between Rasmus Andersson and Mikael Backlund, who were arm in arm with the father of their dear friend, Guy Gaudreau fought through the emotion of an unforgettable evening to bare his soul.

On a night which revolved entirely around allowing the team, the fans and the city a chance to honour Johnny Gaudreau and his visiting family, Guy's son had just been named first star in a 3-0 win.

Asked on the Sportsnet broadcast for a few words, Guy responded much like his son so often did, with brilliance.

"These two guys, and the team, and the city have always loved my son," said Guy, buoyed by the love and support showered upon him all evening.

"I know if he's looking down he's smiling, happy that these guys played hard for him. It's been a hard time for my family, but these guys are hurting too, you know, and they've got to play. The way they played tonight, with heavy hearts, was pretty impressive to me.

"I love these guys, and a lot of the guys in the locker room, and it was fun to watch them perform the way they did.

"At centre ice when they dropped the puck, Backs here, and Monny (Sean Monahan) are both bawling, and I'm crying, like, 'how are they going to play a hockey game?' I couldn't barely get up the stairs. These are tough guys, and they're great hockey players, and I'm proud of them. John's looking down at them and proud of them also."

From the chilling, "John-ny Hock-ey" chants in the final minute to a pre-game warmup that featured 40 no. 13s on the ice, the Flames' 13th home game of the season dripped with all the emotion and tributes befitting the moment.

An opening video tribute in which George Canyon's slow, acoustic version of Johnny B. Goode provided a stirring backdrop, was followed by a standing ovation made only louder when both the Flames and Blue Jackets gathered around the Gaudreau family for a puck drop ceremony that brought everyone to tears.

Shortly after Johnny and brother Matthew were killed by an alleged drunk driver while cycling on a rural road in late August, a love-in like this was in the works, sparked by the seismic outpouring of support shown on and around the Saddledome stairs.

On Tuesday, the city was given a chance to wrap its arms around the family in person.

They felt it, just as they did back in Jersey while watching the candlelight vigil at which 10,000 fans showed up.

"It was both healing and very therapeutic to come back," said Johnny's mom, Jane, doing well to hold it together for an intermission chat with Sportsnet's Ryan Leslie.

"Just to see everyone and know everyone really cared for us, and not just John, our whole family was really welcomed and it just meant so much to us."

She said people stopped them in hallways and at the mall in Calgary, thanking them for coming back.

“But we want to thank them for welcoming John and us to their wonderful city,” she said, clutching a Johnny Hockey friendship bracelet given to her by a fan.

Guy said a ride with Matt Stajan earlier in the day included a heartwarming exchange at a stoplight.

“A gentleman rolled his window down and said, ‘hey, welcome home Guy,’” he smiled.

“It was really special.”

“It’s nice to have people hug you and tell you they love you.

My son John loved it here, and created something here, and our family, we love it here.”

As they finished their interview on the concourse level, fans screamed, “we love you,” and applauded the duo that became such familiar faces during Johnny’s nine years in town.

One day earlier, the unveiling of a bench made by season ticket holder Murray Ledene out of sticks from the memorial was powerful for the family, who watched with tears as Johnny’s kids, Noa and Johnny Jr., sat on it.

It prompted Guy to ask for a template so he too can make benches for Jersey rinks like the one he ran and taught Johnny how to skate in.

Johnny’s pregnant wife, Meredith, revealed before the game that her emotional return to Calgary included her first tattoo on Tuesday, a copy of Johnny’s autograph on her wrist.

So many other things here this week will leave a mark, including the significance of the game stars, who just happened to be Gaudreau’s closest of teammates.

There was Andersson, scoring the game-winner, on a pass from Backlund, as Blake Coleman screened the goalie.

Andersson, whose daughter was babysat by the Gaudreau’s at Andrew Mangiapane’s summertime wedding, immediately pointed up at the family, later saying it was the most emotional goal of his life.

Another Gaudreau teammate, Dan Vladar, earned the shutout while wearing a mask customized just for the game. It included pictures of Johnny and Matthew selected by their wives.

It’s destined for a charity auction, reminding everyone once again the gifts of Johnny Gaudreau keep on giving.

“Lots of emotions,” said Vladar of an evening that opened with a heaviness few will forget.

“At that point you don’t really want to play hockey, but then you remember how Johnny always wanted to play hockey with a smile on, so this one’s for him.

“It was a huge honour to have those guys on both sides.”

Honouring was what the night was all about, and from start to finish the city, the team, the organization and the family all did themselves proud.

“It’s unbelievable to see them here, and it’s such a special night,” said Andersson.

“I hope everyone felt how loved Johnny was, and still is. It’s a night I’ll never forget.”

He’s not alone, which is exactly what a night like Tuesday was designed to demonstrate to a family and a hockey community.

It shows the best way to heal is by being together.



## [Sportsnet.ca / 32 Thoughts: Some surprises on 4 Nations Face-Off rosters](#)

By **Elliotte Friedman**- December 6, 2024

- Could this be the best Team USA ever?
- How the Rangers have to manage turbulent times
- Major change might be hard to accomplish for struggling Predators

After Canada's 4 Nations team was revealed, Sportsnet posted a "Canada Snub Squad" with 21 more players on it. Seconds after it aired, people were sending social media posts wondering why Adam Lowry, Morgan Rielly, Stuart Skinner and John Tavares weren't included.

Welcome to Canada, where even the snubs have snubs.

One interesting difference for this tournament: the commercial breaks will be one minute longer than the 90 seconds in a regular NHL game. If coaches want, they will be able to ride top guys even more. And you know those players will demand it, feeling extra rested with the lengthier pause.

As if it already wasn't hard enough to bet against Sidney Crosby, Nathan MacKinnon and Connor McDavid. You can picture MacKinnon staring lasers at Jon Cooper, standing up on the bench the moment someone approaches for a change.

Cooper, by the way, wasn't giving away who will play with Crosby.

"That's a question we will have to wait until February 12," he laughed.

Generally, I don't get too worked up over who makes it and who doesn't. There are so many good choices. Canada clearly prioritized determined two-way forwards, same-team defencemen and Stanley Cup pedigree — 16 of their 23 players have a ring.

Like everyone else, I do get surprised. Seth Jarvis is a great player and deserves his spot. Maybe it's the rest of us who are idiots for not seeing him on the radar. I was shocked that Zach Hyman was left off after establishing great chemistry with McDavid, but injury cost Robert Thomas a spot, too.

Another trend is what happened deeper down the defence pairs. With Cale Makar (Canada), Adam Fox and Quinn Hughes (USA), other blueliners primarily recognized for power play talent were squeezed out. The era of the pure defensive defenceman is over, but the edge went to Colton Parayko and Travis Sanheim — who coaches/management feel are more dependable in their own end. Sanheim's bonus is being able to play either side, critical if someone else is hurt mid-tournament.

Canadian GM Don Sweeney's made it clear he doesn't see the same concerns others do about goaltending, and you can see the philosophy: Jordan Binnington and Adin Hill won Stanley Cups by doing what they needed to do for strong teams. (Sweeney pointed out how good Hill looked in Tuesday's 1-0 win over Edmonton.)

We'll see what happens on the ice, but in advance, this reminds me a bit of the 1991 Canada Cup. The Canadians had a similar makeup, elite Hall-of-Fame talent surrounded by driven two-way stars who accepted roles, and a goalie (tournament MVP Bill Ranford), who'd won the Stanley Cup a year earlier. They overcame Wayne Gretzky's injury in Game 1 of the best-of-three Final to sweep the United States.

We're nine weeks away, but it's another step towards something we've missed for too long. Best-on-best and I'm excited to see it.

## 32 THOUGHTS

1. Only one Canada player is from an NHL team with a below-.500 points percentage — Sam Montembeault (Montreal, .420). One executive, watching frustration pour out from Connor Bedard and Steven Stamkos over the past week, said Wednesday he felt their disappointment multiplied knowing the lack of team success would hurt their Team Canada chances.

2. Let's look at the other countries. On paper, this might pass the 1996 World Cup champions as the best Team USA I've ever seen. But you've got to win to truly snare that honour. My biggest surprise was no John Carlson. He's a great player, and watching Washington without him last season convinced me even more he's one of the best defenders in hockey.

The biggest criticism coming GM Bill Guerin's way was that he didn't select offensive sensations like Cole Caufield and Clayton Keller (I'll get to Tage Thompson in a minute). A theory: Guerin knows scoring won't be the problem. His back-end isn't the biggest, so he went with the likes of Chris Kreider and Brock Nelson because he may need that size to disrupt opponents before they even get to the net.

3. Okay, Tage Thompson. Of anyone who wasn't picked, he was the guy who shocked me the most. Kreider's got 123 playoff games, Nelson 78, Vincent Trocheck 56 (including 20 points in 16 games last year). Thompson is still waiting to make his NHL playoff debut. Making the post-season is bigger than any one player, but I couldn't help but watch Buffalo's collapse Tuesday against Colorado and wonder if the Sabres' inability to build momentum penalizes Thompson.

4. A proud Swedish reader says Canadians and Americans have tunnel vision about this tournament, completely disrespecting the Scandinavian opposition. The Swedes are very, very strong — more than capable of reaching the final. It's a short tournament where two teams won't even get a championship shot, so you have to feel good about your goaltending. Sweden does.

What also struck me was they didn't go as young as they could have. Victor Hedman said he's played with almost everyone on the roster internationally. Yes, there's Leo Carlsson, but no William Eklund, no Fabian Zetterlund — both rising with Macklin Celebrini in San Jose. By choosing Viktor Arvidsson and Gustav Nyquist, Sweden's sending a message that this tournament isn't about prepping for the future. The time is now.

5. Finland's going to be Finland: greater than the sum of its parts, a pain in the butt to play. They are consistent in best-on-best: Bronze in 1998, Silver in 2006, Bronze in 2010, Bronze in 2014, runner-up at the 2004 World Cup. Their biggest obstacle is it's hard for them to outscore anyone. Aside from the 1998 semifinals, where they lost 7-4 to Russia, the defeats that eliminated them from a gold medal saw them score a combined six goals in four games. You can't complain about any of its roster decisions, but they have to keep scores low — which they've proven they can do.

6. Biggest team snub: Washington. Tied for second in the NHL, zero Capitals were selected. Options included Carlson, Logan Thompson and Tom Wilson. Brian MacLellan and Chris Patrick might never admit it, but they won't be sad to see Carlson on a beach. And Spencer Carbery will use it as a motivator.

7. Injury replacements: anyone with a "legitimate injury" can be replaced up to and including Feb. 12, the opening day of the event.

8. I'm even less qualified to judge world junior rosters, but I've never heard louder complaining about snubs from an invitation camp than this year's from Team Canada. We'll see in January.

9. Not sure how Tyler Seguin's four-to-six month timeline is going to play out, but I can tell you what Dallas's Western Conference competition is thinking: the Stars are going to take advantage of that LTIR space and aim for Seguin to return in the playoffs. "That's not good for anyone else," one exec grimaced.

10. As the Rangers figure out where they are going from here, I realized how bad things were during their 6-2 loss in Edmonton two Saturdays ago. Watch Jonathan Quick on the goal that makes it 2-0 Oilers. He's one of my favourites, re-inventing himself from two-time Stanley Cup champion starter, two-time Vezina finalist and 2012 Conn Smythe winner into Igor Shesterkin's sturdy backup. But he maintains a high standard, demanding a lot of himself. When Nurse's shot beats him, he's mad at himself, at first. But then he lifts his mask — which is rare — looks up and, well, you can see the disbelief.

Quick stopped the first 18 shots he faced in Edmonton's first-period deluge, until the Oilers finally broke through at 17:34. The second one, the one that had Quick so upset, was shorthanded with nine seconds remaining in the period. A total breakdown allows Nurse to walk right in, alone. That's a massive mistake at the end of a period, something you cannot allow.

11. The Rangers have lost six of seven, and held on for dear life for their one victory, 4-3 over Montreal. Two of those defeats came before GM Chris Drury let teams know he'd be willing to discuss Kreider and Jacob Trouba, the rest as the team absorbed the aftershocks. Clearly, Drury saw 12-4-1 as a mirage, with underlying numbers indicating the Rangers bleed chances and were trending badly. It's Drury's job to have big-picture vision. Players think differently. They care about Ws and Ls, especially these Rangers, knowing they will be judged in April, May and June, not November.

12. A few thoughts on the overall picture: first, there's been talk about this re-opening old wounds from Barclay Goodrow's release last summer — not that he was cut, but that he wasn't given proper notice it was coming. I work in a business (sports media) where we are similar to the athletes we cover in one key area: in the vast majority of cases, we don't write our own exits. I've been around long enough to know it's very likely that when my day comes, I'm not going to be thrilled about how it happens. I've been through it before and seen it happen to others. That's life in the big city and very real. When players see that occur, they don't only think about the guys who are named, they look at Trouba (captain) and Kreider (longest-serving Ranger) and think, "If it happens to them, it can happen to me."

Go back to Trouba's comments at the start of camp. He knew this was going to be his last season in New York, he had time to process it and was prepared for the reality. You have time to process things in the summer. When it happens in-season, you still need to process things, but you also have games to play and it can screw with your head. That's all real, and you can see it with them.

13. All of that said, there comes a point where you have to move past it and do your job. You have to show pride in yourself and for your friends/teammates. Even if you motivate yourself to win in spite of management, you do that. It isn't unreasonable for the Rangers to expect with three days off that the players re-set and re-focus.

14. Drury is working to figure out what he actually can do, up and down the roster. Trade protection — limited or full — is a hurdle. Ottawa is being very careful about what it says, but I do think that's a team the Rangers have talked to.

15. Things haven't really changed with Trouba since the summer. Even if he can't block a trade to a particular destination, how interested is someone going to be if he will be unhappy with a trade before next season? As for Kreider, the initial reaction was, "Why would they want to trade this guy?"

16. Other stuff to keep an eye on: I do not believe JT Miller has asked for a trade. It is a huge vote of confidence in his game that Team USA took him as planned even though he is on hiatus.

17. Despite a typically manic Vancouver season, the Canucks are holding strong. One reason is Pius Suter, admirably filling some of Miller's minutes. There's a great story about Suter from when he was 17, and agent Georges Muller invited him to a party at the latter's home. "One player asked, 'Who's this guy?'" Some people thought I was (supposed to be) serving food," Suter laughed. He wouldn't name who it

was, but added when that player (an NHLer) “saw me at the camp, he said I was pretty good.” Suter had options in the summer of 2023, but one of the reasons he chose Vancouver was Rick Tocchet. “Straight shooter, no mind games, you know where he’s at” and likes it there because, “You want to play where everybody cares.”

18. I think Pittsburgh has real interest in Nils Hoglander. Meanwhile, the Penguins have shoppers for Drew O’Connor.

19. Teams who like Trent Frederic — and playoff-bound clubs love this type of player — are debating how serious Boston is about signing him.

20. The goalie market is high-stakes poker. Carolina is looking, but they are patient. Are there more goalies available than teams looking for one? If so, the Hurricanes can afford to wait. Colorado’s also very deliberate, and are going to give Scott Wedgewood a run.

21. Nashville’s players talked confidently on Wednesday morning, saying there was plenty of season remaining and things were getting better. They are shocked at their lack of scoring, disbelieving how they have such a poor record with the league’s best penalty kill and Juuse Saros 10 points above the league-average save percentage. The Predators made a couple of systemic changes, allowing their defencemen to pinch in the offensive zone and not being as solely focused on getting the puck up-ice on the breakout. (Sometimes, going d-to-d is not a bad thing.) I liked their attitude. Then, they lost 3-2 to Toronto, the 17th time in 26 games they haven’t scored more than twice. I didn’t see this coming, that’s for sure.

22. Jonathan Marchessault: "I didn't sign here for one year, I signed for five. So I'm committed to working this out.

23. I’m not sure how much radical surgery can be done. Like the Rangers, there are a lot of no-move clauses in Nashville. They’ve also seen Dante Fabbro and Philip Tomasino show renewed energy in Columbus and Pittsburgh, which always has teams re-evaluating what went wrong. Juuso Parssinen isn't playing right now, and if that doesn't change, it will get to a point where he'll want a fresh start, too. It's not selfish, players want to play. But I'd be worried about that if I was Nashville.

New additions means someone on the existing roster gets squeezed and wishes for a new existence. Coach Andrew Brunette hasn’t sat one of his major players, which is one of the few cards he’s still got to play. But that’s not easy. When a major free agent picks you, it’s not easy to make them the scapegoat. And, when you’re struggling, the other managers throw anvils, not life preservers, and GM Barry Trotz doesn’t want to make things worse.

24. There is definite interest in Hit King Jeremy Lauzon, currently out with injury. He's signed for one more year at a very reasonable \$2 million. But the organization loves him and has zero desire to go down that road.

25. The Panthers, re-establishing themselves as the team to beat, will look to add a right-shot defender at some point.

26. Kyle Bukauskas told a great story on the pod last week. After Toronto lost 5-1 in Florida, a few of the ex-Panthers playing for the Maple Leafs said hi to the Panthers. One of them greeted a former teammate with, “You caught us at the wrong time.” That ended a four-game losing streak for Florida.

27. Rasmus Sandin was hilarious on the Nylander brothers being together in Toronto: "Alex, that's good for him to have Willy close-by. He's really good at getting the best out of both of them," Sandin paused. "Kinda weird," he laughed. Remember: when the defenceman was traded to Washington, William put his arm around Sandin and walked him out of practice. "Willy is Willy, swagger and cool, but he's the

nicest guy ever. But sometimes he is, like, he is five. Same thing with his brother, he's younger, so it's like he's three. But they are as they are, they're fantastic and I love those two guys.

28. Worst injury of the week: Trevor Lewis getting hurt in career game number 999. Apparently, his family was already in Los Angeles preparing to celebrate the millennial milestone, which was to be Wednesday night versus Dallas. The good news is he will return sometime in January and get there. Lewis has scratched and clawed to get here.

29. Draft guru Sam Cosentino says that after the recent CHL vs. USA prospects games, there are four contenders for the first overall pick: James Hagens (Boston College), Porter Martone (Brampton Steelheads), Michael Misa (Saginaw Spirit) and Matthew Schaefer (Erie Otters).

30. From the 32 Thoughts podcast with Kyle Bukauskas and David Amber, the 4 Nations Rosters accuracy test: Team Finland: Kyle 16 (of 17 named on Wednesday), Dave 15, me 14. Sweden: Dave 15, me 14, Kyle 13. USA: Kyle and I 15, Dave 12. Canada: Me 12, Kyle 11, Dave 10. Overall: Kyle and I 55, Dave 52. Fifty-five of 68 is 81 per cent, which is kind of weak for this, to be honest. Amber makes a point of saying he ignores my work, so please tweet the low score at him.

31. Now that Calgary and Columbus have played their two games against each other, it has to be said: they — especially the players — did an exceptional job honouring the Gaudreau brothers and hosting their families. Shout out to teammate Ryan Leslie, who did several first-class interviews.

32. Wife is a huge Sebastian Maniscalco fan, so we went to see him a couple weeks ago in Toronto. Great standup, well worth it. Not only was he good, but so were the opening acts — Pat McGann and Pete Correale. McGann riffed on being a hockey parent, joking about tournament weekends hoping your child's team loses so "you can have your life back," adding, "Do you know what a tryout is?" He paused, then said, "Do you have \$2,500?" That one brought a big laugh.

## [Sportsnet.ca / Team Canada 4 Nations roster breakdown: Lines we'd love to see](#)

By Justin Bourne- December 6, 2024

Let's talk about a few of the decisions that some might find surprising when it comes to Canada's 4 Nations roster, shall we? And then I'll draw up my first look at how I'd like to see them deployed.

Seth Jarvis: He's just 22, and five-foot-10, and there was a ton of competition for what most assume to be the final spot. But he fits the bill of what they're looking for, in that he can play up and down the lineup, he spends two minutes per game killing penalties, he scored 33 times last year, and he's competitive as hell. That pretty well encapsulates what has been considered "Canadian hockey" in the past, doesn't it?

Sam Bennett: He was having a great offensive season at the perfect time. A guy like him is picked because when you play against him, you're so aware of how he shifts the tone and energy of games because half your team is worrying about where he is and what's he going to do next, while Bennett himself seems utterly unafraid. Jon Cooper will love to have Bennett on his side for a change.

Travis Konecny: The one common thread amongst the guys Canada picked at the fringes is that they're fiercely competitive. Konecny is another "not afraid of anyone" guy, despite being smaller. But beyond that, if you go back and combine this season and last, only Sam Reinhart, Brayden Point, Sidney Crosby and Nathan MacKinnon have more goals than Konecny among guys named to Team Canada. In points, he's ninth among the guys on the team. He's playing extremely well right now.

And on defence...

Colton Parayko: I wrote about how I saw him making the team in my projections Tuesday, though listed Drew Doughty ahead of him because I believe Canada does want the Kings captain there if he's able. In the end, Parayko will be there for the reasons I listed. He handles top competition with his reach and poise, he can manage heavy D-zone starts, he's big, he skates well, has won the Cup, and of course, has a relationship with Doug Armstrong, who helped pick the team. They trust him, which matters.

Travis Sanheim: As written in my projection as well, this one feels like a true miss by people like myself in earlier versions of my roster analysis. Sanheim has been stellar for a while now, he's huge, he gets points, he kills penalties, he really is exactly what Canada would want on their third pair. His name may not have been as revered as some of the others in consideration, but I'm willing to bet that after this pick, it will be.

And finally, the goalies...

Sam Montembeault: The Canadiens goalie was the only real surprise pick, but I'm less surprised about his selection and more surprised they snubbed Logan Thompson, who's having just about the best season of any Canadian goalie (Cam Talbot has a case there, too). Thompson is way up there in save percentage and goals saved above expected. But in the end, it's what I said about Parayko in reverse: I'm told the trust just isn't there from some of the decision-makers. And with Montembeault, they've clearly tried to divorce the players from their context, as in, would the Habs goalie have better numbers behind Washington's defence (yes), and how would Thompson look on Montreal (worse)? Montembeault at 28 years old could well be Canada's top option by the time we get to the Olympics in 2026.

Now, how do you want to see these players deployed? Below is my two cents.

THE LINES WE'D LIKE TO SEE

Sam Reinhart - Connor McDavid - Brayden Point

To build a roster I believe you work off the best guys you have and construct super lines around them. So starting with McDavid, I want guys who can finish any of the myriad chances he creates for his linemates, and both of Reinhart and Point can. I want cerebral players, experienced guys who can think at McDavid's elite level. Check and check here.

Brandon Hagel - Nathan MacKinnon - Mitch Marner

I like the idea of Marner with MacKinnon in that it kind of gives you a fastball and an off-speed pitch from the same release point, like those crazy baseball GIFs. You get two totally different players in one line, yet they're both elite in their own ways.

MacKinnon just punches holes in the defence with his skating and size, and with Marner using his brain to take advantage of those breakdowns, I think they'd create a ton of offence. I like Hagel here because his speed and tenacity will get him up the ice and on pucks at the same speed as MacKinnon, which makes this trio a load to handle. You'd hope Hagel would be at the paint to clean up rebounds and cause general chaos.

Mark Stone - Sidney Crosby - Brad Marchand

Here you've got three players who are absolute gamers with nearly unparalleled hockey IQs, have won Cups, and know where to be -- and when -- on the ice. This is the "work smarter not harder" group. I think the early parts of these games are going to be frenetic, which these three can handle mentally without getting overwhelmed. As the games settle in, I can see them being reliable and coming up with some big goals.

Sam Bennett - Anthony Cirelli - Travis Konecny (extra: Seth Jarvis)

Here you've got a line that just sucks to be on the ice against. They'll contest every puck, finish every check, and fall on your goalie. Oh, and they've all got double digit goals in 25 or fewer games, so they can make it count on the scoreboard too. It's a great energy line.

#### THE DEFENCE PAIRS WE'D LIKE TO SEE

Devon Toews - Cale Makar

Let's not overthink this, because we've seen what they can do in Colorado. Makar is on a 101-point pace and should quarterback PP1.

Josh Morrissey - Alex Pietrangelo

I trust these two together, as they're both a nice mix of all-around skill-sets. They're smart, skate well, can make a breakout pass, and create offence. I like the odds of them getting the puck up the rink and into the hands of some of Canada's potent forward groups, away from their goaltending.

Shea Theodore - Colton Parayko

I have Theodore there over Sanheim for now, as I think skating is going to be at a premium in this event, and Theodore should excel going back on pucks and getting them going the other way. But truth be told, I'd be open to a few different options with this blue line, including flipping Theodore and Morrissey above, as well as putting Sanheim into the bottom pair for either guy. A lot here will depend on how Cooper wants to deploy his guys. If he's looking for a pure shutdown and PK group, Sanheim-Parayko could handle those minutes.

#### THE GOALIE ROTATION

Adin Hill

He's 10th in goals saved above expected per game (amongst goalies who've played 10 games) and recently won a Stanley Cup. He's the guy to start, for now.

Jordan Binnington

Another Cup winner who, some early struggles aside, is known for his competitive nature and doesn't fear big moments. He's posted four straight games above a .900 save percentage, is on the right side of the "goals saved above expected" ledger, and has the belief of his manager. If he's hotter come February, he could yet be the starter.

Sam Montembeault

Will likely get the baton third if he gets it at all, but Montembeault is a quality keeper unaccustomed to playing behind excellent defence. He may thrive in that spot, and if he's the hottest of the group come February, I think they'd be happy to have him get out there and prove himself.

All told, there are a lot of ways to make this cake. But the good news is, Canada has all the right ingredients for success, and that's a great place to start.



## [Sportsnet.ca / Which 4 Nations Face-Off squad has edge at each position?](#)

By Sonny Sachdeva- December 6, 2024

The rosters have been named, and the stage is set. Two months from now, four international powerhouses will take the ice under the lights of Montreal's Bell Centre and Boston's TD Garden in the 4 Nations Face-Off, looking to send a message before the 2026 Olympic Games.

It's the first step in a return players and fans alike have long craved — the best of the best representing their nations, doing their thing on the world stage. We'll get our first look at Canada, the U.S., Sweden and Finland when February's tournament arrives, bringing with it the chance to finally see how dominant a Canadian squad stocked with faces of the league can be, how Team USA's golden era fares against its North American rival, and how the new generations of greats for two ever-dangerous European sides measure up, too.

With the rosters now taking shape, attention turns to how the squads stack up against one another. Here's a look at which nation has the edge at each position heading into the tournament.

### FORWARDS

All four rosters are dotted with all-world talent. Still, it's tough to argue against the potential offensive dominance of a Canadian team built around Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon and Sidney Crosby. That's not even where the elite centre depth ends, with Brayden Point and Anthony Cirelli named to the roster, too, meaning any one of those top-tier pivots could move over to the wing and pair up with another game-breaker.

The combination options including just those key names are wild enough — defences trying to contain McDavid and MacKinnon, flying down the ice together at breakneck speed, or how about MacKinnon teaming up with Crosby and Brad Marchand for an all-Nova-Scotia line?

Then there's the natural wingers the Canadians will bring — the scorers, led by current league goal-scoring leader Sam Reinhart, the two-way talents like Mitch Marner and Mark Stone, the bite brought by depth options like Sam Bennett and Travis Konecny. Canada seems to have a little bit of everything up front, highlighted by two of the most prolific offensive talents in the game, Nos. 97 and 29.

Sam Reinhart – Connor McDavid – Mitch Marner

Brad Marchand – Sidney Crosby – Nathan MacKinnon

Brandon Hagel – Brayden Point – Mark Stone

Sam Bennett – Anthony Cirelli – Travis Konecny

Seth Jarvis

That said, Canada's potential edge over the tournament's second-best forward corps, the Americans, is slim. The U.S. boasts some elite centre depth of its own in Auston Matthews, Jack Eichel, and Jack Hughes, and just as talented a group built around that trio, highlighted by the Tkachuk brothers and a couple proven snipers in Jake Guentzel and Kyle Connor.

Both North American entrants have all they need to dominate offensively, and Canada and the U.S. will bring forward corps with more depth than the Swedish and Finnish sides, both of which are led by top-end talents too, but ultimately more top-heavy overall. The edge goes to Canada here simply because of

the absurd skill at the core of its lineup, the number of leaders who have proven time and time again that they can take over a game in the dying moments, with a win on the line.

## DEFENCE

The Americans' blue line is flush with elite puck movers, headlined by Norris winners Quinn Hughes and Adam Fox. But it's the complexion of the group around them that ensures the opposition will face a tough matchup regardless of who comes over the boards in a USA jersey, with Jaccob Slavin, Zach Werenski and Noah Hanifin the other options on the left side, and Charlie McAvoy and young Brock Faber rounding out those manning the right. A group with no shortage of offensive skill, dotted with steady defenders and some physicality, too.

Quinn Hughes – Charlie McAvoy

Jaccob Slavin – Adam Fox

Zach Werenski – Brock Faber

Noah Hanifin

If the Canadians have an edge, it might be familiarity, with a top four likely to be comprised of two pairs of defenders with plenty of experience alongside each other: Colorado's duo of Cale Makar and Devon Toews, and Vegas's Shea Theodore and Alex Pietrangelo. Still, the American group seems stocked with more true top-end, all-around blue-line talents, led by a particularly lethal top four.

The true biggest rival for the U.S. on that front would seem to be the Swedes. Led by a pair of veteran Norris winners in their own right in Victor Hedman and Erik Karlsson, the Tre Kronor also boasts some top-end shutdown defenders in Gustav Forsling and Jonas Brodin, the steady veteran presence of Mattias Ekholm, and some young high-flyers in Rasmus Dahlin and Rasmus Andersson.

Both squads will have what they need to control games from the blue line, but the top end of the Americans' defence corps — led by two marquee talents squarely in their prime — seems to give the U.S. the edge here.

## GOALTENDING

This one doesn't seem particularly close. While goaltending was the biggest question mark for the Canadian squad in the lead-up to the roster announcements, its greatest rival seems best equipped at the position.

Connor Hellebuyck — the reigning Vezina winner — and Jake Oettinger have both been excellent so far this season. The third member of the U.S. trio, Jeremy Swayman, has found himself mired in a tough 2024-25 campaign — that said, he's fresh off a 2024 post-season that made clear his ability to make waves in big games.

Much like its defence corps, Sweden seems not far behind, with a goaltending trio of Linus Ullmark, Filip Gustavsson and Jacob Markstrom leaving the team with plenty of strong options, too. The Finns have a solid No. 1 in Juuse Saros, backed up by Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen and Kevin Lankinen.

For Canada, the question mark in the cage remains, with Adin Hill, Jordan Binnington and Sam Montembeault getting the call. Hill's post-season performances have proven he can find a higher level when the lights are brightest as the 28-year-old played a key role in his Golden Knights' run to the Stanley Cup a year and a half ago. But there's little question that the Americans boast a far better trio between the pipes.

And given the strength of the American blue line, too, and the all-world talent leading their forward corps, there's an argument to be made that the U.S. enters the 4 Nations Face-Off with the deepest lineup on paper. The Finns, meanwhile, will enter as the resident underdogs, looking for another Cinderella run on the world stage, while Sweden's skillful, well-balanced lineup figures to make more noise than most have predicted to this point.

For Canada, the top-end talent is undeniable. The question is whether its all-world offence will be enough to outscore issues that might arise elsewhere on the roster as the tournament rolls on.

## [Sportsnet.ca / What a Team Canada 'B' squad for 4 Nations Face-Off could look like](#)

By David Morassutti- December 6, 2024

After months of debating who will represent Team Canada at the 4 Nations Face-Off, we finally know which players have made the cut.

Some tough decisions came down to "a photo finish" head coach Jon Cooper said. But in the end, the management group believes this squad can lead Canada to victory.

Picking a roster for a best-on-best tournament is never easy. Sometimes, there is second-guessing, and in the end, someone is bound to be disappointed.

Think back to the 2014 Winter Olympics when Team Canada announced its roster, and Steve Yzerman did not include Martin St. Louis. It was the second time the former Lightning general manager did not pick St. Louis for the Olympic roster, and it led to a rift between the two.

Fortunately for Canada, there doesn't appear to be another St. Louis situation, but there are definitely players who are disappointed that they won't be representing their country.

Canada's management team had no shortage of options for the upcoming tournament. Some would even say enough to fill two rosters.

So what would a second roster of Canadian players look like?

Here is a look at Canada's 'B' roster for the 4 Nations Face-Off.

4 Nations Face-Off

4 Nations Face-Off

With the inaugural edition of the 4 Nations Face-Off fast approaching, be sure to catch up on all the latest news about the highly-anticipated best-on-best event. Puck drops on Feb. 12, 2025, on Sportsnet.

[Read more](#)

Forwards

Alexis Lafreniere-Mark Scheifele-Connor Bedard

Steven Stamkos-John Tavares-Matt Duchene

Tom Wilson-Dylan Strome-Wyatt Johnston

Zach Hyman-Nick Suzuki-Macklin Celebrini

Carter Verhaeghe

Honourable mentions: Adam Lowry, Jonathan Marchessault, Connor McMichael

It's no secret that Team Canada has an abundance of options at forward, which is why this second squad includes a pretty impressive lineup.

A case could have been made for John Tavares and Mark Scheifele to land on Canada's roster. Both have enjoyed great seasons so far and have made the trip to Europe to play for Canada at the World Championship when they were available.

We also included a pair of Washington Capitals players who have had impressive starts to the season. Dylan Strome is currently 10th in scoring with 34 points in 25 games, while Tom Wilson would provide some sandpaper and secondary scoring. You could even make a case for a third Capital, Connor McMichael, who has 14 goals in 25 games this season.

Unfortunately, for a few players on this list, like Zach Hyman, Steven Stamkos and Alexis Lafreniere, their subpar starts to the season pushed them out of the picture for this year's team. However, their body of work still had them in the conversation for a roster spot.

While not having young players like Connor Bedard, Macklin Celebrini and Wyatt Johnston on this year's roster is understandable, denying them in future tournaments will be tough. Bedard is a phenom who should only see his stock rise when the Blackhawks improve the talent around him, Celebrini's numbers this season prove that he was worthy of being a first-overall pick, and Johnston has been a big-time contributor in the playoffs with the Stars.

#### Defence

Morgan Rielly-Dougie Hamilton

Mackenzie Weegar-Aaron Ekblad

Owen Power-Evan Bouchard

Noah Dobson

Honourable mentions: Drew Doughty, Brandon Montour, Chris Tanev

#### Defence

One surprise on the blue line was seeing Dougie Hamilton not included after an impressive start to his season with 26 points in 28 games. While Hamilton will be disappointed about not making the team, the New Jersey Devils will be happy that their No. 1 defenceman will get a chance to rest, given his struggles with injuries.

Canada chose to take four lefties to the 4 Nations but two others were deserving of consideration. Powerplay specialist Morgan Rielly would help drive offence for the 'B' squad while big Owen Power has taken major strides this season as a do-it-all defenceman for the Sabres.

There are so many right-shot Canadian defencemen that talents like Brandon Montour and Chris Tanev had trouble cracking the 'B' team. However, reuniting Mackenzie Weegar and Aaron Ekblad makes too much sense, considering how dominant they were as a pairing when Weegar was in Florida.

It was tough to leave Drew Doughty off another Team Canada roster, but if he had been healthy the veteran defenceman would have been a lock for the 'A' team.

Evan Bouchard's upside as an offensive defenceman will also come in handy for the 'B' team, especially on the power play, and it's tough to ignore his performance during the Oilers' run to the Stanley Cup Final. Noah Dobson's tough start to the season, especially in late-game situations, likely led to his omission from the main roster, but there is too much talent there not to have him as an option.

#### Goalies

Logan Thompson

Marc-Andre Fleury

Stuart Skinner

Honourable mentions: Cam Talbot, Darcy Kuemper, Mackenzie Blackwood

### Goaltending

This is where the 'B' squad looks to right a wrong.

How Logan Thompson didn't factor into the mix for Canada is certainly puzzling, given the numbers suggest he was more than deserving of a spot. Thompson's stats this season far exceed the trio of Adin Hill, Jordan Binnington and Sam Montembeault.

Binnington and Hill bring Stanley Cup-winning pedigree to Team Canada but Thompson's 8.1 goals saved above expectation is in the top 10 among goaltenders this season, according to Mike Kelly of Sportlogiq.

Stuart Skinner's numbers this season (.889 save percentage, eight wins in 17 starts) certainly played a factor in him not making Canada this time around. But back in the summer, there was definitely a case for him to be on the team after he helped the Oilers reach Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final.

Fleury's experience plays a factor in making the 'B' roster. The 40-year-old future Hall of Famer has won everything you can win in hockey.

## [Sportsnet.ca / NHL Power Rankings: Future international-hockey hopefuls](#)

By Ryan Dixon- December 6, 2024

For every high-five slapped over being named to a national team, there's a hung head belonging to a really, really good hockey player who hoped to wear his country's colours.

Every best-on-best roster selection comes with its share of snubs and Wednesday's 4 Nations Face-Off reveal was no exception.

The good news for the disappointed Canadians, Americans, Swedes and Finns is that — after an eight-year hiatus from best-on-best action — hockey is about to enter an international golden era, with NHLers heading to the 2026 Winter Olympics in 14 months, followed by a World Cup of Hockey in 2028 and another Olympics two years after that.

So, just as we're about to make up for lost time on the international hockey calendar, players are going to get multiple opportunities in the next half-decade to don that national team sweater.

With that in mind, we're using this week's edition of the Power Rankings to peer into the crystal ball and find some guys on each NHL team — including those with passports that say something other than Canada, Finland, Sweden or the United States — who won't be at the 4 Nations, but could be picked to play with his countrymen either at the 2026 Milano Cortina Olympics in Italy or the 2028 World Cup.

1. Washington Capitals (17-6-2) It's hard to imagine Canada's crease situation won't remain wide open next year, so with more strong work, Logan Thompson could push his way onto the Olympic roster. At 27 years old, he figures to get a couple more kicks at the can. Tom Wilson will continue to be a bubble guy for Canada and, who knows, with another step, maybe Connor McMichael gets in the discussion. Martin Fehervary is a slam dunk D-man for Slovakia at the 2026 Games and Lars Eller will be on the Danish squad that also qualified for Italy.

2. Minnesota Wild (17-4-4) Minnesota just traded for David Jiricek and, if he's the defenceman they hope, he'll almost certainly be skating for Czechia at the '26 Olympics.

3. Toronto Maple Leafs (16-7-2) Matthew Knies' big body has changed the complexion of Toronto's top-six mix. Could his unique package and built-in chemistry with Auston Matthews get him on a Team USA roster in the next couple years?

4. Vegas Golden Knights (17-7-3) Tomas Hertl is a shoo-in for Czechia in 2026. Akira Schmid will likely be the man in the Swiss goal.

5. Winnipeg Jets (18-8-0) Mark Scheifele is too good not to get strong consideration for Canada again. Maybe two young Finns — forward Brad Lambert and D-man Ville Heinola — could push onto that team by 2028. Nik Ehlers will headline the Danish entry in '26 and Nino Niederreiter will be called upon to score for the Swiss.

6. Los Angeles Kings (15-8-3) Quinton Byfield hasn't taken off this year, but his size-and-strength combo could see him on a Canadian team by 2028. Maybe Drew Doughty has represented Canada for the last time — and that's still a maybe — but look for Brandt Clarke to be the next right-shooting Kings defenceman who becomes a national team staple in Canada. Kevin Fiala will be counted on to shine for the Swiss.

7. Carolina Hurricanes (16-8-1) Martin Necas — currently tied for the scoring lead — is suddenly the most lethal Czech in the NHL. If Frederik Andersen happens to be healthy when the Olympics occur, he'll be in the Danish crease.
8. New Jersey Devils (17-9-2) The Swiss Devils? Nico Hischier, Timo Meier and Jonas Siegenthaler will all suit up for Switzerland in 2026. Luke Hughes could absolutely join brothers Jack and Quinn on Team USA in the next couple years. Could Dougie Hamilton replace Alex Pietrangelo on the right side of Canada's blueline in 2026 as the latter hits the back half of his 30s? Tomas Tatar, Simon Nemec (Slovakia) and Ondrej Palat (Czechia) will surely wear their countries' colours.
9. Florida Panthers (15-9-2) As you'd expect, the defending champs are well represented at the 4 Nations with eight Cats — more than any other NHL squad — set to participate in the event. Could Aaron Ekblad — who is still just 28 — ever squeeze onto Team Canada? Uvis Balinskis will be the go-to D-man on the Latvian squad that qualified for the '26 Games.
10. Dallas Stars (16-9-0) Thomas Harley, Wyatt Johnston and Logan Stankoven are all young Canadians who, by 2028, could be firmly in the mix for World Cup spots.
11. Vancouver Canucks (13-7-4) Any year Thatcher Demko is healthy, he's going to be in the crease conversation for Team USA. Brock Boeser is in tough to crack that American forward group, but maybe he gets over the line one year if he's on a scorching heater when they name the team. Pius Suter will suit up for the Swiss, while Arturs Silovs and Teddy Blueger will be a huge part of Latvia in 2026.
12. Edmonton Oilers (13-10-2) If Zach Hyman is back to being a 50-goal guy next year, he probably gets onto Team Canada for the Olympics. Stuart Skinner should also remain in the Canadian goalie mix. Hard as it is to wrap your brain around leaving a weapon like Evan Bouchard off, Cale Makar just figures to be running PP1 on Canada for at least another half-decade. Leon Draisaitl will surely captain Germany's entry at the '26 Games.
13. Tampa Bay Lightning (12-9-2) Canadians Brandon Hagel and, to a lesser degree, Anthony Cirelli are great examples of how a player can — in the span of a year or so — go from not being discussed at all for a national squad to making one of the best teams in a tournament. J.J. Moser will be a linchpin of the Swiss defence in 2026, same for Erik Cernak with Slovakia and Zemgus Girgensons will be on the Latvian team.
14. Boston Bruins (14-11-3) Pavel Zacha and David Pastrnak figure to bring their Bruins chemistry to one of Czechia's top lines at the Olympics.
15. Philadelphia Flyers (12-10-3) Back in the summer, you'd be hard-pressed to find a single person who would have thought both Travis Konecny and Travis Sanheim would make Canada's 4 Nations squad. But here we are. Could Cam York take off and make an American squad in the next couple years? Maybe, but it's really hard to see who he would squeeze off of a loaded and fairly young blueline.
16. Colorado Avalanche (14-12-2) Undrafted Ivan Ivan has already done incredible work simply to make the NHL. At 22, he could be representing Czechia for years to come.
17. Calgary Flames (13-9-4) Could Calgary's goalies square off against each other at the 2028 World Cup? It's a longshot, but Czechia's Dan Vladar and young American Dustin Wolf might just make it happen. Martin Pospisil will surely lineup for Slovakia in 2026.
18. St. Louis Blues (12-12-2) Robert Thomas's fractured ankle this season scuttled any shot he had at making Team Canada. It would surprise nobody if he's there in '26 or '28. Philip Broberg will surely work his way into the Team Sweden conversation as he establishes himself as a top-4 blue-liner in Missouri.



19. Columbus Blue Jackets (11-10-3) By the time 2027-28 rolls around, if Adam Fantilli isn't in the mix to make Canada it will be a huge disappointment for Jackets fans. Elvis Merzlikins could man the Latvian crease in 2026.
20. New York Rangers (13-10-1) Alexis Lafreniere is going to keep pushing for a spot on Team Canada in the next couple years.
21. Pittsburgh Penguins (11-12-4) Who knows, maybe 22-year-old Joel Blomqvist bumps veteran Swedish netminders like Jacob Markstrom or Linus Ullmark by 2028.
22. New York Islanders (9-10-7) At 24, defenceman Noah Dobson figures to get lots of looks for Team Canada down the road.
23. Utah Hockey Club (10-11-4) Clayton Keller is already right there for Team USA. If picking the likes of Vincent Trochek and Brock Nelson backfires in February, Keller's skilled game could well be at the Olympics 14 months from now. Logan Cooley has loads of talent, too, and should push into the conversation in the next couple years. And don't bet against Dylan Guenther cracking a Canadian squad in 2026 or '28. Karel Vejmelka is part of the Czech crease equation.
24. Detroit Red Wings (10-11-4) A couple years ago, you would have assumed Alex DeBrincat would be a Team USA fixture through the back half of this decade. But back-to-back 27-goal seasons (he's on pace for 32 this season) are not going to cut it when you're trying to make a stacked USA roster as a sniper. Moritz Seider will anchor the German defence in 2026 and Simon Edvinsson could be a Swedish mainstay soon.
25. Seattle Kraken (12-13-1) Hey, Canada has already looked into getting Joey Daccord a passport, so who knows! Seattle's other goalie, Philipp Grubauer, will surely backstop Germany. It feels like Matty Beniers has a long way to go to push into the Team USA conversation and Brandon Montour is on the outer fringe of Canada's defence corps. Oliver Bjorkstrand will be a huge part of the Danish squad.
26. Ottawa Senators (10-12-2) Tim Stutzle will be a go-to guy for the Germans in Italy and Jake Sanderson is going to keep pushing for a spot on the Team USA blue. Mads Sogaard will surely be one of Denmark's goalies.
27. Buffalo Sabres (11-12-2) Tage Thompson is already a bubble guy for Team USA, so maybe he gets there next time out. Owen Power feels like an eventual lock for Canada, perhaps even as soon as next year. J.J. Peterka will be relied on to score goals for Germany in 2026 and Jiri Kulich could certainly represent Czechia next winter.
28. San Jose Sharks (10-13-5) Macklin Celebrini on Team Canada at the 2026 Games? Maybe. Macklin Celebrini on Team Canada at the 2028 World Cup? No doubt. Will Smith could well be a centre for Team USA at that point, too and Nico Sturm will surely be on the German club in Italy.
29. Anaheim Ducks (10-11-3) Lukas Dostal is already the man for Czechia in goal and that doesn't figure to change any time soon. Countryman Radko Gudas will likely be on Czechia's blueline for a couple more tournaments. Mason McTavish needs to get moving to become a real consideration for Canada and Cutter Gauthier may be a scoring threat for the Americans by 2028.
30. Montreal Canadiens (9-13-3) American Cole Caufield and Canadian Nick Suzuki could both be on their national teams in '26 or '28. Juraj Slafkovsky will be central to a Slovakian side that won a surprise bronze medal at the 2022 Games. Don't be surprised if two defencemen — American Lane Hutson and Canadian Kaiden Guhle — are part of their national team discussions in the next couple years.
31. Nashville Predators (7-13-6) Roman Josi will be the face of Switzerland in 2026.

32. Chicago Blackhawks (8-16-2) Connor Bedard could, literally, be on every Canadian best-on-best team from next winter to 2040. Petr Mrazek is in the Czech goalie mix and Adam Gajan — a 2023 second-rounder — has already sparkled for Slovakia at the World Junior Championship and could be at the Olympics as a 21-year-old puckstopper next winter. Philip Kurashev will rep the Swiss and Lukas Reichel will try to scare up some goals for the Germans.

## [Sportsnet.ca / Scout's Analysis: Thoughts on Canada's WJC selection camp roster](#)

By Jason Bukala- December 7, 2024

It's been an eventful and exciting week in Canadian hockey, with the 4 Nations Face-Off roster being revealed and the world junior training camp roster announced. The process both management groups have gone through is thorough and exhausting. Canadian hockey fans expect to win gold at every international event, so the pressure is always immense.

Next week from Dec. 10-13, 32 junior prospects will descend on Ottawa for Team Canada's selection camp for the WJC team, including four goaltenders, 10 defencemen and 18 forwards. As always, the camp roster is being debated for its strengths and potential weaknesses, but this year's list also arrived with some surprising omissions.

Here's our look at the training camp roster, and more:

### PLAYERS TO WATCH

Easton Cowan, 5-foot-11, 180 pounds, F, London Knights (OHL)

Drafted: Toronto Maple Leafs, first round (28th overall) in 2023

Cowan is on the verge of OHL history. He has registered a point in 55 straight OHL games, tying him with Leafs legend Doug Gilmour, and will have a chance to break the record Friday night in London's last game before the selection camp opens. Cowan is a returning player for Team Canada after he was generally deployed in a depth role last year. I expect him to skate in Team Canada's top-six forward group this time around, but he will have to establish himself in training camp. Cowan is at his best when he combines his skill with relentless compete on and off the puck.

Jett Luchanko, 5-foot-11, 191 pounds, F, Guelph Storm (OHL)

Drafted: Philadelphia Flyers, first round (13th overall) in 2024

Luchanko started the season in the NHL with the Philadelphia Flyers and will be one of the most reliable three-zone prospects at Canada's training camp. Luchanko can be deployed in all situations and he's very responsible off the puck. Canada's coaching staff could end up relying on Luchanko to match-up against, and shut-down top lines or spill over the boards when the group needs to win a draw and produce offence.

Andrew Cristall, 5-foot-9, 175 pounds, F, Kelowna Rockets (WHL)

Drafted: Washington Capitals, second round, (40th overall) in 2023

Cristall wasn't part of Team Canada's roster last year, but didn't let the disappointment slow him down. Cristall is a dynamic forward who scores goals almost as much as he sets up linemates, producing 40G-71A last year for the Kelowna Rockets. He's currently second in WHL scoring with 18G-29A. Cristall is one of my favourite personalities. The kid lights up a room with his presence. Players like Cristall can lighten the mood and provide results between whistles in high leverage games.

Caden Price, 6-feet, 190 pounds, D, Kelowna Rockets (WHL)

Drafted: Seattle Kraken, third round (84th overall) in 2023

Price has been a workhorse in the WHL where he's averaging over 28 minutes per game and is used in all situations. He leads WHL defencemen in scoring with 6G-25A, but more impressive are the sacrifices he

makes on defence. Price gets in the lane to block shots and his quickness allows him to kill plays in the defensive zone before opponents have a chance to work off the cycle.

Sam Dickinson, 6-foot-2, 203 pounds, D, London Knights (OHL)

Drafted: San Jose Sharks, first round (11th overall) in 2024

Dickinson arrives at Team Canada camp playing the best hockey of his junior career. He's being deployed in all situations in London. His size and length allow him to take away time and space for opponents quickly and effectively. Dickinson is a fantastic skater with an effortless stride in open ice and the ability to lead the rush on his own or join the attack as an extra layer. He's also a power play quarterback who's equally defined as a passer and shooter. Dickinson leads all OHL defencemen in scoring and is third overall in the OHL with 15G-30A.

#### THE GOALTENDING OUTLOOK

Team Canada will go as far as their netminding takes them. Rarely does a team medal at this event without steady results between the pipes. I don't see a clear-cut favourite entering training camp; all of the candidates have very similar statistics with their junior clubs so it will be a battle between Carson Bjarnason, Carter George, Jack Ivankovic and Scott Ratzlaff. If Team Canada prefers a larger body, Bjarnason is the biggest of the three (6-foot-3, 208 pounds), but the others are compact and very athletic choices.

The youngest of the group is draft eligible Ivankovic from the Brampton Steelheads (OHL). I anticipate him pushing for a spot. Ivankovic backstopped Canada's gold medal U18 team at the Hlinka Gretzky tournament in August. He's not tall (5-foot-11, 179 pounds), but he's quick and athletic.

#### THE YOUNGER PLAYERS

Canada's training camp roster includes some intriguing draft eligible prospects. The WJC is a difficult stage for draft eligibles, but forward Porter Martone, defenceman Matthew Schaefer and previously mentioned goalie Ivankovic will give it their best shot. There's also a 16-year-old (turning 17 just before the tournament begins) who isn't eligible for the NHL Draft until 2026, trying to crack this year's roster:

Matthew Schaefer, 6-foot-1, 183 pounds, D, Erie Otters (OHL)

NHL draft eligible in 2025

And, on the defensive side as well:

Porter Martone, 6-foot-2, 208 pounds, F, Brampton Steelheads (OHL)

NHL draft eligible in 2025

Martone is the leading scorer in the OHL (20G-30A). His combination of skill and will could lead to a roster spot on Canada. His stature and power helps create space for himself and his linemates. I'm curious to see how Martone handles the elevated pace of this training camp. He is currently my third-ranked draft eligible prospect.

Gavin McKenna, 5-foot-11, 162 pounds, F, Medicine Hat Tigers (WHL)

NHL draft eligible in 2026

Another youngster to keep close tabs on is McKenna, who leads the WHL scoring race with 19G-38A, and is 10 points ahead. He also has experience on the international stage representing Canada. Last spring, at the U18 World Championship, McKenna produced an incredible 10G-10A in only seven games. He's a

game-changing offensive talent who can carry shifts on his own. If he makes this team expect him to play an elevated role offensively. At worst he slots in as a power play specialist for Team Canada.

#### SURPRISE OMISSIONS

As I said from the outset, Team Canada's management group has a plan for how they want to play and a vision for the type of roster they believe will lead them to gold.

Having said that, I was surprised to see some players omitted from the training camp roster. Zayne Parekh was initially on this list, but he's since been added to the selection camp after Harrison Brunicke was ruled out to injury.

Michael Misa, 6-feet, 184 pounds, F, Saginaw Spirit (OHL)

NHL draft eligible in 2025

I felt Misa (25G-24A), an elite draft eligible prospect, was deserving of an invite. Misa can play both centre and the wing to produce offence while paying attention to his defensive details.

Carter Yakemchuk, 6-foot-4, 210 pounds, D, Calgary Hitmen (WHL)

Drafted: Ottawa Senators, first round (seventh overall) in 2024

I'm sure there are others who deserved mentioning, but I'm including Ottawa Senators first round pick Yakemchuk as my last omission. Yakemchuk is a towering right-shot defenceman who has a mean streak and an ability to produce offence. He posted 4G-7A in his most recent 10-game segment while averaging over 23 minutes of ice time per game and being deployed in all situations.

## [TSN.CA / Flames, Blue Jackets honour Gaudreau in emotional pregame ceremony](#)

**By Salim Valji- December 4, 2024**

"I hope the people of Calgary can remember me not only as a hockey player, but also as a good person with good values.

"Thank you for supporting me over the years, and making my family a part of yours."

On their 13th home game of the regular season, the Calgary Flames paid tribute to Johnny Gaudreau, the longtime star who donned the number for nearly a decade with the organization.

Johnny and his brother, Matthew, died in August after they were struck by a car driven by an alleged drunk driver while riding their bikes in Oldmans Township, N.J.

The Flames' tribute video on Tuesday led with those words from Gaudreau, which he wrote in a letter he penned to Calgary fans after he signed in Columbus in 2022. The clubs were facing each other in Calgary for the first time since his passing.

Johnny's father, Guy, and mother, Jane, were at the game, along with his wife, Meredith, and kids, Noa and John, Jr., as well as members of their extended families. Flames fans, many in Gaudreau shirts and jerseys, gave them a rousing ovation when they were shown on the jumbotron.

The video tribute mostly featured Gaudreau away from the rink, with several shots of him in the Calgary community. One of the first images is of a young Gaudreau signing his entry-level contract with the team back in 2014. Jane and Guy were shown celebrating one of his many iconic moments at the Saddledome. There was a picture of him playing hockey with kids and another of him at the Calgary Stampede. Gaudreau's Game 7 overtime goal versus Dallas and post-goal hug with Monahan in 2022 were shown as well.

All players were wearing Gaudreau jerseys during warmups and gathered on the ice for the ceremonial puck drop. Sean Monahan, the Columbus forward who became one of Gaudreau's closest friends during their time together on the Flames, took the faceoff.

Monahan was in tears as Guy, Jane, and Meredith (with Noa in her arms) dropped the puck, which was hand-painted by a young fan named Maddyn and left Gaudreau's memorial outside the Saddledome back in September. They were accompanied by Gaudreau's sisters, Kristen and Katie.

Loud chants of "Johnny" then broke out.

Flames forward Blake Coleman embraced Guy as the teams took a group photo together with the Gaudreau family. The applause continued as Monahan was shown on the jumbotron. The ceremony ended as Meredith walked off, embracing Flames head coach Ryan Huska and equipment manager Mark DePasquale while fans continued to stand, cheer, and show the Gaudreau family that they will forever be part of the Flames family.

Before puck-drop, a young fan with a sign was shown on the jumbotron. The sign read, "Fly high, Johnny. Heaven gained an angel."

The game started seconds later.

