



Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips
August 2-4, 2025

Columbus Blue Jackets

- PAGE 02: The Athletic: When Blue Jackets begin contract talks with Adam Fantilli, what term makes sense?
- PAGE 05: The Hockey Writers: Projecting the Blue Jackets' 2025-26 Power Play Units
- PAGE 07: The Hockey Writers: Blue Jackets News & Rumors: Potential Moves, Brennan & More

Cleveland Monsters/Prospects

- PAGE 10: Yahoo Sports: Lindstrom, Koivu And Hagens Lead Standouts At The World Junior Summer Showcase

NHL/ Websites

- PAGE 12: The Athletic: No more beer league: Why NHLers are choosing sleep optimization over alcohol during the season

The Athletic / When Blue Jackets begin contract talks with Adam Fantilli, what term makes sense?

By Aaron Portzline – August 4, 2025

This current Columbus Blue Jackets roster may be the most talented collection of players the organization has ever assembled. They have two 30-goal scorers under the age of 25. They finally have talent and depth at center. They have a Norris Trophy-level defenseman.

To be sure, there is still considerable work to do for GM Don Waddell. But the bigger question for many is not whether Waddell can add the right players to continue building over the next few seasons, but if he can keep the core of this current group together.

That's been the issue in Columbus over the last decade. And it'll be against that backdrop that Adam Fantilli's next contract, which could be signed as soon as this fall, will be judged.

Waddell and Pat Brisson, Fantilli's agent, both told The Athletic they expect negotiations to begin later this month when they can gather face-to-face during an international hockey tournament in Plymouth, Mich.

It would calm the nerves of many in the Blue Jackets fan base if Fantilli, who is entering the final year of his entry-level contract, signed an eight-year, maximum-term extension with the Blue Jackets, which would begin in 2026-27 and keep him in Columbus through the 2033-34 season.

One of the attractive things about such a lengthy deal is that 2025-26 is the final year NHL clubs and players can agree to contracts with an eight-year term. Per the league's new collective bargaining agreement, which takes effect next July 1, the maximum contract will be seven years.

But there's another element to the CBA — how the salary cap is established as a percentage of the league's revenue — that makes such a massive term between the Blue Jackets and Fantilli seem unlikely.

After years of stagnation, the NHL salary cap has taken a big step forward this summer, from \$88 million per team in 2024-25 to \$95.5 million this coming season. That trend will continue for at least the next two years, with the cap hitting \$104 million in 2026-27 and \$113.5 million in 2027-28.

If NHL revenues continue to soar, imagine what the salary cap would be — and what the league's top players would command — by, say, 2030. Fantilli scored 31 goals as a 20-year-old last season, and he already carries himself like a leader in the Blue Jackets' dressing room.

Fantilli, the No. 3 pick in the 2023 entry draft, has established himself as a top-six center in the NHL, which is a rare commodity. It's a matter of time, given his current trajectory, before he unseats Sean Monahan as the Blue Jackets' top pivot.

After missing the final three months of his rookie season, Fantilli needed time to get up to speed last season. But the light came on in mid-December, and Fantilli was one of the NHL's most productive players the rest of the way, scoring 26 goals and logging a plus-14 rating in the final 51 games.

"With young players, it can be hard to do long-term deals, because he might feel like he's leaving money on the table," Waddell said. "The good thing in dealing with (Brisson), he's very much a straight shooter. I've known Pat for years, and we've done a lot of deals together. He's going to tell me how (Fantilli) feels, what he's thinking, that stuff. There's always a way to get contracts done. It's give-and-take in every deal."

Waddell's preference, of course, would be to sign Fantilli for as long as possible. Is eight years too long? "I'd be delighted," Waddell said with a chuckle, "depending on what the other number is."

Brisson declined to discuss the possibilities of Fantilli's next contract, at least until the negotiations are underway. But The Athletic reached out to two prominent NHL agents to get their thoughts on how they would proceed in talks with Waddell.

Both agents requested anonymity because they didn't want to involve themselves in another agent's negotiations. They also didn't want to discuss a Fantilli contract specifically, preferring instead to speak generally about a young entry-level player with the pedigree of a top-line center.

One agent said he'd "absolutely" be willing to sign a long-term contract, even with the salary cap set to skyrocket. The contract would be predictive in nature, obviously, with a salary cap hit in the near term that would seem like an overpayment, but would allow the player to "grow into" the salary as his performance and productivity improve.

The guarantee of money, no matter where the player's career goes, provides a security that is worth a few million dollars at the end of the contract. Plus, the player would still be in his late 20s or early 30s at the end with a chance to sign another multi-year contract.

There are recent examples of high-level players who have chosen to sign eight-year contracts coming out of their entry-level deals:

- The Ottawa Senators' Jake Sanderson signed an eight-year, \$64.4 million contract on Sept. 6, 2023, about one month before he began playing under the final year of his entry-level contract.
- The Montreal Canadiens' Cole Caufield signed an eight-year, \$62.8 million contract on June 5, 2023, after he played out his ELC and was a restricted free agent.
- The New Jersey Devils' Jack Hughes signed an eight-year, \$64 million contract on Nov. 30, 2021, about one month into the final season of his ELC.

It's important to note, however, that all three of those deals were signed before it was announced that the salary cap was going to increase at such a rapid rate.

In late July, Carolina's Jackson Blake — though not considered on the level of a Sanderson, Caufield, Hughes or Fantilli — signed an eight-year, \$40.9 million extension with one year remaining on his ELC.

But the other agent landed on the other side of the argument. There's no way, he said, that he'd advise his client to lock up several seasons into the future.

"I would advise clients in this cap environment to sign nothing longer than a three-year deal," he said.

"While the NHL has announced a \$104 million and \$113.5 million cap the next two years, I think it's going to go even higher in those years.

"Anything longer than three years is signing away your ability to achieve market value, considering the reality of the marketplace."

For instance, if Fantilli signed an eight-year, \$64 million contract extension this summer — a salary cap of \$8 million per season — many would decry that as an overpayment after only one productive NHL season. That would represent just under 7.7 percent of the salary cap next season, when the contract would start. But if the salary cap continues to climb at even a five percent rate — and the increase from 2026-27 to 2027-28 represents a 9.1 percent climb, so this is a conservative estimate — Fantilli's value could quickly outgrow his contract if he continues to perform and produce.

If the cap rose at a five percent rate beginning in 2028-29 — again, that's a conservative guess — the salary cap would be \$152 million by 2033-34. By then, an \$8 million salary for Fantilli would be 5.2 percent of the cap, or the equivalent of a \$4.97 million player today.

Waddell and Brisson have both been at this a while. They're both regarded as dealmakers, so there likely won't be any posturing. Waddell has said repeatedly that he has the full backing of Blue Jackets ownership and that he's always willing to pay elite-level players commensurate with their market value.

But that market is changing dramatically. That's why a short-term contract, one that gives Fantilli a short-term raise and expires with the club still maintaining player control with Fantilli as a restricted free agent, might make the most sense.

The NHL will be watching to see if Fantilli is the first member of the 2023 draft class to sign a second contract. Chicago's Connor Bedard, the No. 1 pick in that 2023 draft, is eligible to sign an extension this summer, too.

"I'm good with a bridge," Waddell said. "I could go either way, but I think a bridge makes a lot of sense. It gives (Fantilli) a couple of years here to put up numbers."

The Hockey Writers / Projecting the Blue Jackets' 2025-26 Power Play Units

By Matthew Buhrmann – August 3, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets finished the 2024–25 NHL season with a power play success rate of 19.5%, placing them 22nd overall in the NHL. The power play struggled in the final two months of the season during their playoff push, failing to generate momentum when it mattered most.

Over the six-game losing streak in March, the power play scored zero goals, a big part of why the team couldn't catch back up in the playoff race, despite a six-game winning streak to end the season.

Columbus closed with a final record of 40–33–9, collecting 89 points and finishing fourth in the Metropolitan Division, the closest they've been to making the playoffs since the COVID-shortened 2020 campaign. They fell just two points behind the New Jersey Devils for the final Metropolitan Divisional spot and two points shy of the Montreal Canadiens for the second Eastern Conference wild card, converting 12.5% of their power-play chances in their final 16 games.

Now let's take a look at how the Blue Jackets ran their power play, the units they ran with, and what to expect in 2025–26.

Power-Play Units to End Last Season

Below was the top power-play unit the coaching staff ran with to close out last season.

Boone Jenner – Sean Monahan – Kirill Marchenko

Zach Werenski – Kent Johnson

Monahan is the clutch faceoff man who can win a high percentage of draws, and Jenner can also slot in on the dot when needed. At the point, Werenski is great at walking the blue line, firing heavy wrist shots through traffic, allowing his own teammates to open up shooting lanes.

When looking at this unit's best stretches last season, they excelled at getting pucks on net and creating second and third-chance opportunities. They screened goalies well and drew a solid amount of power plays all season. The power play was rolling in November and December, scoring nearly every game over those two months. While it was rolling, players would attack the zone and dump well back to the blue line, making it hard for penalty killers to stay in position and even get set up at times.

Columbus typically set up with three players across the middle and two at the points; once the puck was in motion, one forward crashed the net front (Jenner), while three others cycled in a row in the middle, with another at the blue line, essentially a 1-3-1 style.

Down the stretch, Columbus couldn't get clean zone entries or hang onto the puck in the offensive end. The healthy mix of one-man and four-man drop looks that sparked their power play earlier in the season dried up, and they fell into predictable patterns that penalty killers took advantage of.

Their shots rarely got through traffic, as opponents blocked attempts and found easy clears. With the attack stalled on the perimeter, the Blue Jackets couldn't crash the net, leaving them frustrated.

Here was the second power-play unit the coaching staff put on the ice in the back half of last season.

Yegor Chinakhov – Adam Fantilli – Dmitri Voronkov

Ivan Provorov – Denton Mateychuk

They didn't see much ice time, like most second units, but faced the same struggles for the most part.

Projecting the 2025-26 Power-Play Units

I don't see any changes coming to the first power-play unit; the switch happens in the second unit for me.

Projected First Unit:

Jenner – Monahan – Marchenko

Werenski – Johnson

Projected Second Unit:

Cole Sillinger – Fantilli – Voronkov

Mateychuk – Dante Fabbro

With Chinakhov's future in Columbus uncertain, I'd slot in Sillinger, but if Chinakhov remains, I wouldn't be shocked to see him rotate in and out of the second unit.

I'd swap in Fabbro and rotate out Provorov, banking on Mateychuk's offensive upside.

Mateychuk had a few big goals last season and plays a defensively sound game, whereas Provorov's push up the ice sometimes made him a liability to odd-man rushes. That offensive upside pushed Mateychuk into PP2 for me.

The second power-play unit doesn't see as much ice time, obviously, but I expect those three defensemen to rotate in and out throughout the season.

Consistency and climbing into the NHL's top 15 to 20 power plays will be very important going forward. Special teams as a whole will always be important, especially in close games late with a small margin for error, so improvements are needed if this team is to finally get back into the playoffs.

Stay tuned for my preview of the penalty kill next here at The Hockey Writers.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets News & Rumors: Potential Moves, Brennan & More

By Mark Scheig – August 3, 2025

Welcome to August. We are one month closer to the start of the 2025-26 regular season. While it is mostly quiet in the way of news, things are never quiet in the general manager's seat.

This is especially true for Blue Jackets' GM Don Waddell. Everyday presents a different challenge even if it isn't something that always makes the news cycle.

Waddell has had to make decisions on his roster. He's had to navigate what his staff in other areas will look like. And thanks to a recent interview on Vancouver radio, he left open the door for other things to happen before the season. That's where we'll begin this edition of Blue Jackets' News & Rumors.

Blue Jackets Want to Address Certain Things

On Wednesday, Waddell did a radio hit in Vancouver on the Halford and Brough in the Morning show on Sportsnet 650. One of the things he was asked was how does he like his team at this stage of the offseason. This was an interesting response.

"Our jobs never stop," Waddell said. As I sit in my office here in Columbus, it's everyday you're looking for ideas. You're looking for how you can make your team better. We have a couple of players that we potentially could move for the right positions. We're trying to address a couple of things that we still feel that need to be addressed."

As we recently said in our Blue Jackets Roster Projection 3.0, it wouldn't surprise anyone if the team came to camp with what they currently have. For Waddell to admit they're trying to address things that need to be addressed leaves the door wide open for multiple moves before the start of the season.

Let's play what do we know. We know the Blue Jackets are in the market for a goaltender. Elvis Merzlikins and Jet Greaves appear to be the two who will start with the Blue Jackets. Zach Sawchenko will be with the Monsters. But there is an opening for someone who can play in both the NHL and AHL. This could be a trade if the right one is available or more likely a waiver claim during training camp.

Waddell was asked if he was in the market for a goaltender. "I go to bed looking for goalies," he said. But then he reinforced he has confidence in both Merzlikins and Greaves.

Waddell also said the goaltending market didn't have a lot of names available. "We're always looking" was what he said in regards to a goaltender.

We also know that Yegor Chinakhov made a public trade request through his agent. This could be addressed if the right trade comes about. It could also be addressed if the two sides come together and work out their differences before the season.

We know the Blue Jackets tried to trade for Noah Dobson. While he's a bigger name that would obviously improve the team, it reinforces the desire the Blue Jackets have in improving their blue line. Remember when they were in on Jacob Trouba last season?

It begs the question what do the Blue Jackets feel needs addressed before the season? Looking at the totality of the offseason, it appears the team had bigger things in mind but then had to pivot to re-signing their own players given how the market played out.

If you add it all up, you can see where an argument can be made the Blue Jackets are looking to improve in all areas of their team. They have potential pieces they could part with (Chinakhov, maybe Voronkov if you believe the reports.) What will be interesting to see is what area the team feels is the biggest need to address.

A lot can happen between now and the start of the season. If Waddell has his way, there will be a couple additional moves made to help improve the Blue Jackets. If nothing happens, it won't be for a lack of trying.

Brennan Hired as Strength & Conditioning Coach

The Blue Jackets still had an important opening to fill on their staff. On Thursday, the team announced who was replacing Kevin Collins as Strength & Conditioning Coach. It's a name familiar to many Blue Jackets' fans.

Waddell announced the hiring of Barry Brennan in that role. Brennan served in the same role for the Blue Jackets from 2005-10. The following season, he joined the Atlanta Thrashers under Waddell.

Brennan has been in the KHL since including spending six seasons as the Strength & Conditioning Coach for CSKA. He worked with former Blue Jacket Sergei Fedorov in that role.

Here is what Waddell had to say about the hiring of Brennan.

"Barry Brennan is a well-respected, experienced leader in his field and we are very pleased to welcome him back to the Blue Jackets. Ryan Gadbois has done a phenomenal job for us as our assistant strength & conditioning coach, and we believe our players will benefit greatly from working with Barry and Ryan."

Overall, Brennan has over 30 years of experience in multiple sports and multiple leagues. He has spent time with AHL Syracuse as well as OHL Ottawa, Kingston and London.

Brennan was in this role during Rick Nash's prime with the Blue Jackets. Nash raved about how much Brennan helped him in his hockey career.

"Following Barry's advice in off-ice conditioning had me completely prepared to compete in the NHL, World Championships and Winter Olympics. His training approach helped me to become a stronger and more explosive player. Barry's extensive experience makes him an invaluable asset for anyone looking to improve their game."

Brennan runs his own program that tackles everything from effective exercise to nutrition and much more. Although enrollment is currently utilizing a wait list, you can see what all is involved in his program [here](#).

What's interesting to note about this hiring is the fact that Waddell decided to move on from Collins this offseason. Injuries have been a prevalent storyline for the last several seasons with the Blue Jackets. Waddell turned to someone that he and other members of his staff are familiar with.

Brennan has a proven track record of results over a long period of time. If the Blue Jackets are able to do a better job of injury risk management, that could be an important component for them to get over the playoff hump. The team cited injuries as a major factor last season in how things played out.

Brennan is excited to be back. The early reaction on this hiring has all been positive. We'll see over time what changes are made and what impact that will have on the team's performance.

Side Dishes

The World Junior Summer Showcase is taking place in Minnesota. The Blue Jackets have Tanner Henricks, Cayden Lindstrom, Charlie Elick and Evan Gardner all there representing their countries.

Need hockey? The 2025 Hlinka-Gretzky Cup will start up Aug 11 in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia. You'll be able to get your first look at several top 2026 NHL Draft prospects.

Speaking of Lindstrom, he clearly has a fan in Team Canada coach Dale Hunter. In an interview with TSN, Hunter told Mark Masters "He's been flying out here. He can really skate. I didn't know he could skate that fast. So, it opens your eyes up." Certainly a lot of work ahead for Lindstrom but it does put into perspective why the Blue Jackets were so high on him in 2024.

Yahoo Sports / Lindstrom, Koivu And Hagens Lead Standouts At The World Junior Summer Showcase

By Tony Ferrari – August 3, 2025

The World Junior Summer Showcase is the unofficial kick off to each hockey season, beginning the run of summer hockey tournaments that international organizations use to evaluate their group. This year, with the World Junior Championship set to take place in St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minn. in December, the WJSS wasn't in its typical location of Plymouth, Mich. at USA Hockey Arena, opting to go to Minnesota to familiarize some of the players with the area.

Although it is just summer hockey and things are typically less structured and more free flowing, the WJSS has become a tournament where fans are able to check in on their team's latest draft pick or get the chance to see some of their team's European prospects that they don't typically get to see. It's also a chance to see some of the top draft eligibles for the following season.

Let's dive into some of the standouts from the festivities in Minnesota, where plenty of talent showed up and showed out.

Cayden Lindstrom, LW/C, Canada (Columbus Blue Jackets)

Columbus fans rejoice, your prize prospect looks like he's returned to form! While he wasn't dominant in every single game, the combination of power and skill rose to the surface once again. The unrelenting speed was really the most impressive part of this event for Lindstrom. He was absolutely flying around the ice.

When he returned to Medicine Hat at the end of last season, he looked good but there was clearly some tepidness in his game at times. At the WJSS, that was gone and Lindstrom was unleashed. If this is a sign of things to come for Lindstrom this year, he could very well be in line for a very good season at Michigan State.

Aatos Koivu, C/RW, Finland (Montreal Canadiens)

There may not be a player who has had a more impressive tournament than Aatos Koivu when you take into account the expectations coming in. Finland didn't have Konsta Helenius so there was a question of who would step up in his absence, especially since they might not have him in the winter for the world juniors. The answer was Aatos Koivu who has been a goal scoring machine at the WJSS.

He's shown off his one-timer on the powerplay and his ability to stalk open ice at even strength. Koivu has just been a step ahead whenever he is on the ice, making smart plays with the puck and supporting play without it. He's even made a few nice defensive plays. He should be one of the most important Finns in December.

James Hagens, C, USA (Boston Bruins)

Whenever James Hagens was on the ice, it seemed like he was trying to prove that he was the best player in the 2025 NHL draft class. The dynamism, pace and skill that was constantly on display when Hagens was taking his shift was incredible. He asserted himself as the top American at the WJSS and if we're being honest, it wasn't close.

Hagens' ability to dictate what was happening on the ice was as impressive as anyone at the event. We all kind of knew that heading into the WJC, Hagens was going to be 'The Guy' but his performance here showed that he should probably go into the tournament in December as the favorite to take home the MVP, especially if he pushes this U.S. team to a third straight gold medal.

Ryker Lee, RW, USA (Nashville Predators)

The name Ryker Lee is quickly becoming more well known in the prospect world and it's for very good reason. Lee had truly fantastic stretches of play at the WJSS. His skill with the puck on his stick is tantalizing to watch at times, and he can often make something out of nothing. What was truly impressive at the WJSS though, was his ability to create at pace and showcase the offensive tools that he has when playing against some of the best U20 players in the world.

Lee's issue has always been his ability to ramp up when things really got going, but the WJSS showed that not only can he keep up, but he can thrive. He could be a sneaky name to play in the top six in December for Team USA.

Ivar Stenberg, LW, Sweden (2026)

In an event that featured surefire first-overall pick, Gavin McKenna, and superstar Swedish scorer, Viggo Bjorck, it was Ivar Stenberg who stood out as the most impressive 2026 NHL draft-eligible player. Stenberg plays the game with the intention of taking everything head-on. He has the puck handling and skill to deke and dangle or play a less structured brand of hockey but he doesn't. He plays with purpose, attacking up ice and going to the high-danger areas every time he's on the ice.

Despite not scoring after his opening game hat trick, Stenberg was a constant source of offensive creation. The top pick in 2026 might already be locked up, but if anyone is going to give McKenna a run for his money, it might be Stenberg.

Michael Hage, RW/C, Canada (Montreal Canadiens)

Throughout the week, Hage kept finding himself involved in the action for Canada. Whether he was scoring a big goal or getting into it with fellow Montreal prospect Aatos Koivu, this was a great event for Hage. His speed and puck handling were evident throughout the WJSS and he even made the decision to become more involved in puck pursuit and on the forecheck. Simply put, Hage was involved all over for Canada and was often their most consistent attacker. If he has a good start to the season at Michigan, Hage should be a shoo-in for the WJC roster.

Cole Reschny, C, Canada (Calgary Flames)

It was an impressive showing for Cole Reschny who will need to have a good start at the University of North Dakota to earn a spot on the final roster. The reality is, the passing and vision that Reschny

possesses should get him a spot as is but as an undersized center who isn't a blazing fast player, Reschny is going to have to keep proving his worth.

While he wound up with four goals and an assist at the WJSS, Reschny's real strength is as a playmaker who finds the smallest seam and hits it with precision passing. There aren't many players for Canada who can facilitate play at such a high level. Reschny deserves a spot on the WJC squad and this event was just one piece of evidence as to why.

Daniel Nieminen, D, Finland (Nashville Predators)

It's tough to stand out in a summer tournament for defensemen. The play is so loose and it's easier to stand out as a goal scorer or forward who is having a big week. What made Nieminen's week impressive was that not only was he putting together some really nice moments with his puck moving on display but he was also playing pretty solid two-way hockey. He's an excellent skater who gets himself into positions to succeed. For a Finnish team that lacks star talent, Nieminen could wind up being a very useful piece on the back end come WJC time.

Victor Johansson, D, Sweden (Toronto Maple Leafs)

The development of Victor Johansson over the last couple of years has been impressive. He remains a bit thin and undersized but his fluidity and willingness to engage were both traits that impressed during the WJSS. Despite being on the smaller side, he was throwing some hits and fighting for pucks in corners.

The most encouraging sign for Johansson was his ability to finally put the flashes of impressive offensive play together in a bit of an extended run. His puck handling, passing and breakout vision were all on display at the WJSS. If Johansson can keep this up, he could very well be one of the sneakiest additions to any WJC roster in December, playing a larger than expected role for the Swedes.

Luke Osburn, D, USA (Buffalo Sabres)

I don't know if there was a more well-rounded, impressive blueliner for Team USA than Luke Osburn. He was taking shifts on the powerplay and showing that he can be a creator and not just a facilitating presence at the top of the zone.

In the defensive zone, Osburn was shutting play down before it even had a chance to develop. This was an excellent showing from a defender many don't think will be on the roster in December. If he keeps this kind of play up at the University of Wisconsin, maybe this will have left a big enough imprint on the Team USA staff to change that.

The Athletic / No more beer league: Why NHLers are choosing sleep optimization over alcohol during the season

By Fluto Shinzawa – August 2, 2025

Summer rolls on. For hockey players, it is the window for golf, weddings, Stanley Cup celebrations, vacations and cookouts. Alcohol can be a common companion.

But come October, when the 2025-26 NHL season begins, some players will turn off the taps for one specific reason.

Charlie Coyle had yet to be drafted when Tony Amonte, his cousin, concluded his NHL career in 2007. But what the veteran of 1,174 NHL games shared years ago with Chuck Coyle, the center's father, left an impression.

"You go out, you drink, you have a good time, you won't be the same for a month. That's what I always remember him saying when I was younger," the Columbus Blue Jackets forward recalled his dad's telling of Amonte's belief. "Maybe that's an exaggeration. Maybe not. But I have that in my head."

Amonte's formula may not be scientific. But part of the reason the 33-year-old Coyle rarely drinks during the season is that he wants to avoid, whenever possible, any disruption to a key part of his life as an athlete: sleep.

How alcohol affects sleep

According to Dr. Alen Juginovic, a sleep consultant and Harvard Medical School postdoctoral fellow, the general rule is that it takes one hour for alcohol dehydrogenase, an enzyme in the liver, to metabolize a five-ounce glass of wine. The process, however, does not commence immediately upon consumption. If a player drinks at night, metabolism usually takes place after he falls asleep.

"If you take a glass of wine or beer 30 minutes or an hour before sleep, it's probably going to get metabolized around midnight or 1 a.m.," Juginovic said. "That's when the problems can actually start."

It's common to think that alcohol, which is a sedative, can help people fall asleep quickly. The issue comes later during the window in which metabolism would occur. It would be within the typical 100-minute sleep cycle: Stage 1 (light sleep), Stage 2 (slightly deeper), Stage 3 (deep sleep) and rapid eye movement. Were it to take place within Stage 3, it would disrupt the cycle's most restorative segment.

Juginovic explains that sleep becomes very light and fragmented during alcohol metabolism. Some people even experience micro-arousals. As a result, it's very likely, according to Juginovic, that alcohol will decrease the length of deep sleep and REM.

"Your brain actually goes, in a very brief moment, to an awake state. Even though you're not consciously aware you're awake," Juginovic said. "Those are those micro-arousals that happen many, many times

during the night. Unfortunately, then the brain doesn't get enough deep sleep, and you feel even worse during the morning."

This would be one thing for anyone on a normal schedule. NHL schedules are anything but normal.

Consider the player who wakes up in a hotel room after postgame travel. It's not easy to fall asleep quickly after a late-night flight. The hotel bed may not be as comfortable as the one at home. There may be a morning skate scheduled for that day. Perhaps that night's game is an important one in a playoff race.

The circumstances are already stacked against restful sleep. Alcohol would be just another variable. Sleep requirements vary between players. But in general, Juginovic recommends professional athletes sleep at least eight hours per night. Alcohol-caused interruptions could prevent that threshold from being met.

"You're not going to be as concentrated," Juginovic said. "You're not going to be as focused. Your energy levels are going to be down. You're not going to feel your typical self. When you don't feel your typical self — the energy, concentration, all that stuff — you most likely aren't going to be performing at the top level in training, let alone during competition in a game."

The chances of a missed read, a blown assignment or a shot off net, in other words, rise upon alcohol-affected sleep. In the NHL, where job security is unstable for players on the margins, self-inflicted performance dips are green lights for management to consider alternatives.

Seeking an edge

The first two years Mark Kastelic was eligible to be drafted, not one NHL team was interested. It was only in 2019, after he recorded a team-leading 77 points and 122 penalty minutes for the WHL's Calgary Hitmen, that the Ottawa Senators took Kastelic in the fifth round.

Kastelic, now 26, has since become a fourth-line Boston Bruins forward. He's done so by chasing marginal gains in saunas, ice baths and hyperbaric chambers. They've helped the 6-foot-4, 227-pounder optimize his time in the gym. Physicality is Kastelic's calling card.

"I love training," Kastelic said. "I love getting better and seeing the results and improvements. That's something that's satisfying to me in the offseason, just seeing the progress from Day 1 to the end of the summer — how I feel, how strong I feel, how explosive."

During the season, Kastelic goes to bed between 10 and 10:30 p.m. on non-game nights and wakes up at 8 a.m. He sets his bedroom's temperature at 66 degrees. He uses a fan for white noise.

Falling asleep and staying put is no problem. It's not as easy for Kastelic after games. So, given how Kastelic chases every advantage, he is not one to drink during the season aside from occasional social situations.

“I’m always trying to figure out how not to leave any stone unturned and figure out ways I can maximize recovery from little gadgets or different tools — different things that are available out there — to feel my best,” he said.

Personal technology allows players to learn more about their progress. The Toronto Maple Leafs’ Vinni Lettieri swears by his Oura ring. It measures, among other things, how many hours the forward sleeps.

By Lettieri’s clock, he sleeps for approximately nine hours per night. But the ring can inform him how many of those were quality hours.

“If you have one drink, it might screw up your HRV levels,” Lettieri said. “It’s crazy what it does to you.”

Lettieri, 30, has 155 games of NHL experience. He has played 324 in the AHL. For a player fighting for every varsity appearance, anything that would compromise NHL shifts is not under consideration.

“It’s not even a thought,” Lettieri said of regular in-season drinking. “I just want to try to recover as much as possible.”

Earlier the better

Coyle understands why team dinners are times when players order drinks to facilitate socialization. In fact, some veterans believe the decline in drinking has come at a cost to team bonding.

But Coyle chooses, in most cases, to abstain.

“I think it just affects you so much. Especially if you don’t do it often,” Coyle said. “You try to have a few drinks, you’re feeling it. Then the next day, you’re probably feeling it. Our schedule is so condensed that one night of bad sleep, we’re already against the grain because we play late. So you’re not going to bed until certain times. Sometimes we’re on the road traveling, so you don’t get in until a certain time. To throw another bad night’s sleep into that equation, that’s going to affect you that much more.”

On occasions when a player does choose to drink, Juginovic recommends one drink per 60 minutes, consumed at least three to four hours before bedtime. This allows metabolism to take place before sleep.

But Juginovic cautions that abstention is preferable to controlled consumption.

“I know it’s socially acceptable to have a glass of wine in the evening,” Juginovic said. “But that is undeniably going to impact your sleep. If you’re a high-performing athlete, I don’t think you can afford to not perform in tomorrow’s game or tomorrow’s training because of a glass of alcohol.”