



**Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips
November 28- December 2, 2024**

Columbus Blue Jackets

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Columbus Dispatch / Werenski's big night not enough in Columbus Blue Jackets' OT loss to Montreal Canadiens

By Brian Hedger- November 28, 2024

Four in a row wasn't in the cards for the Blue Jackets, but Zach Werenski made it interesting.

After putting together their first three-game winning streak since March 2022, it came to a halt Wednesday in a 4-3 overtime loss to the Montreal Canadiens in front of 15,485 at Nationwide Arena. Nick Suzuki scored 42 seconds into OT, capping a 3-on-2 rush by scoring off his own rebound, to give the Canadiens (8-11-3) the win.

The Blue Jackets (9-9-3) left with a point thanks to Werenski's heroics, which included a tying goal that forced OT in the third, an assist and a fight against Brandon Gallagher in the second period.

"It wasn't for lack of effort tonight," Werenski said. "I think guys played hard. Even in the third period, we found a way to get a goal, tie it up. Marchy hits the crossbar (late in regulation), I just miss high on the power play. We had chances to win, for sure, but it's just not our best for 60 minutes."

Mathieu Olivier and Yegor Chinakhov scored the first two goals for the Blue Jackets and Elvis Merzlikins (19 saves) took the OT loss in net. Juraj Slafkovsky had two points on a goal and assist for the Canadiens, who also got a goal from Cole Caufield.

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason was upset about nothing being called in OT on a play that preceded the Canadiens' goal, when a rush up the right wing by Kent Johnson ended with him on the ice and the puck headed the other direction. Evason felt Suzuki, who scored the winning goal, should've been penalized for pulling Johnson to the ice.

"He's got a step on Suzuki," Evason said. "He's going and he's fast, and the guy reaches in, grabs him and pulls his hip, spins him, (he) falls down, (Suzuki) gets the puck, they get a 3-on-2. It's crazy. That can't be 'not a penalty.' It just makes no sense."

It wouldn't have gotten to that point had it not been for Werenski, who tied it 3-3 with 7:38 left in the third — about four minutes after Montreal surged in front on a goal by Emil Heineman. It was Werenski's second point of the game, 22nd point of the season to take the team scoring lead and his second career "Gordie Howe Hat Trick" with a goal, assist and fighting major.

That's equal to the number of Gordie Howe Hat Tricks that Gordie Howe himself had in 1,767 NHL games.

"It's going to happen," Werenski said of fighting. "Sometimes you've got to stand up for yourself and that was a chance for me to do just that. It's part of the game."

Each team scored once during a disjointed first period that finished with eight shots a side.

Olivier put the Blue Jackets up 1-0 at 9:08 with his seventh goal of the season, which he scored from the low slot with a redirection of a beautiful pass from Werenski in the right corner. The goal pulled Olivier into a tie with Sean Monahan for the team lead in that category and Werenski's assist moved him into first on the Blue Jackets in scoring with 21 points.

Slafkovsky tied it 1-1 about four minutes later, scoring his second goal of the season after Blue Jackets forward Kevin Labanc turned the puck over in the neutral zone. The Canadiens forward scooped it, skated it into the left circle and fired a laser over Merzlikins' shoulder into the top left corner.

The second looked a lot like the first, with the exception of Werenski dropping the gloves to fight Brendan Gallagher near the end of it. Each team scored a goal during stilted action, Chinakhov for the Blue Jackets and Caufield for the Canadiens, and the game went to the third knotted at 2-2 with one more 20-minute frame left.

Columbus Dispatch / 4 takeaways from Columbus Blue Jackets' OT loss to Montreal Canadiens

By Brian Hedger- November 29, 2024

Dean Evason is a fairly calm guy, usually.

There are times, however, when even the patience of the serene among us gets tested, and that's what happened to Evason in overtime on Wednesday night at Nationwide Arena. His indignance about an officiating decision in OT drew the spotlight after the Blue Jackets' 4-3 loss to the Montreal Canadiens, who took the second point on a goal by Ryan Suzuki.

Depending on which side of the rink you stood, Suzuki either did or didn't haul down Blue Jackets forward Kent Johnson during a developing 2-on-1 to spring a 3-on-2 for the Canadiens. Evason strongly felt that a penalty should've been called, while referees Mike Sullivan and Brian Pochmara saw it differently based solely on their lack of a call.

"KJ's fresh on the ice," Evason said. "He's fresh. He's got a step on Suzuki. He's going and he's fast, and the guy reaches in, grabs him and pulls his hip, spins him, (Johnson) falls down, (Lane Hutson) gets the puck, they get a 3-on-2. It's crazy. That can't be, 'not a penalty.' It just makes no sense."

It also made for a disappointing finish for the Blue Jackets (9-9-3), who had a three-game winning streak halted.

Here are four takeaways:

Columbus Blue Jackets left with more questions than answers after Montreal Canadiens' OT goal

Three questions come to mind after hearing Evason's argument that Suzuki should've been called for holding prior to his goal in overtime. Was it a penalty? Why wasn't it called? Will Evason get fined by the NHL?

Replays show that a penalty for holding could've been called. Trailing Johnson on a race up the right wing, Suzuki reached out with his right hand and grabbed Johnson's left leg, just as Evason said, as it was coming forward in stride. Johnson spun out, tumbled to the ice and lost the puck.

Nothing was called, Canadiens defenseman Lane Hutson got the puck, carried up the left wing into the Columbus zone and sent a return feed to Suzuki trailing the play at the point to create the 3-on-2 opportunity. Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins stopped the initial shot from between the circles, but Suzuki darted between Sean Monahan and Ivan Provorov to whack the rebound into the net.

During his postgame comments, Evason was asked whether he felt Johnson made a sound decision trying to outrace Suzuki. Monahan was uncovered on the left wing, so a clear 2-on-1 was developing.

Evason's answer dripped with sarcasm.

"You mean at the end, when they didn't call the penalty when the guy grabbed his hip and pulled him back, and then the guy then went and scored?" Evason said. "It's ridiculous."

One explanation for why it wasn't called could be that each ref, Sullivan and Pochmara, was stationed at opposite ends of the rink. There's a chance neither had a clear angle to spot Suzuki's reach at Johnson's leg. It was also overtime, when referees tend to swallow their whistles because they prefer the winner is decided without a power play, if possible.

Sep 30, 2024; Columbus, Ohio, USA; Columbus Blue Jackets head coach Dean Evason watches from the bench during the second period of the NHL hockey game at Nationwide Arena. The Blue Jackets lost 3-2.

Johnson is also young and doesn't carry much weight with NHL officials, which is both a lame excuse for not calling the rulebook and a fact of life in this league. That leads us to Evason, who could potentially be fined and/or draw rebuke from the NHL — which is known for its ultra sensitivity to public officiating complaints by coaches and players.

Evason's rant wasn't exactly a replica of John Tortorella's top meltdowns, but he was incensed.

"Monny's wide open on the other side," he said. "They're going. They've got an opportunity to score, and a guy gets hauled down. So ... do they let it go? Probably, I guess. I don't know, but it doesn't make a whole lot of sense if they get a clearcut 3-on-2 because of something that happened. Unless (the refs) thought, maybe, it's a dive, but if it's a dive, then just call them both and then they don't get a 3-on-2 scoring chance to put in our net. It's ridiculous."

Zach Werenski, who led the Blue Jackets with a goal, assist and fighting major, agreed but with slightly less conviction.

"That's a tough play for (Johnson)," Werenski said. "He's got a guy on him all the way up the ice. I kind of feel like it's a hold, a little bit, but it's in overtime, so those are tough calls. It's a ref's judgement, and we can't leave it up to that."

Zach Werenski unleashes a different kind of 'Zach Attack'

Hockey is a team sport, but good teams usually have individual catalysts who ignite the group and lead the charge. That's become Werenski for this iteration of the Blue Jackets, especially with captain Boone Jenner and alternate captain Erik Gudbranson both recovering from shoulder surgeries.

Werenski, who missed all but 13 games two years ago with his own shoulder surgery, is doing everything he can to forge a path to victories for the Blue Jackets. Against Montreal, he zipped an elite backhand pass to Mathieu Olivier for the game's first goal, won a fight against Brendan Gallagher and tied it 3-3 in the third period on his seventh goal and 22nd point — which now leads the Blue Jackets in scoring.

It was the second "Gordie Howe Hat Trick" of Werenski's NHL career — a goal, an assist and a fight — after racking up his first one in the Blue Jackets' sweep of the Tampa Bay Lightning in Game 2 of their first-round sweep in the 2019 playoffs.

He does it all.

"We want every 'D' to (add offense), but it seems like he has the ability to just do it at another level," Olivier said. "He's a rover out there, and he's really good at it ... and a 'Gordie Howe Hat Trick' tonight. What else do you want to say?"

Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski had a good reason to drop the gloves with Brendan Gallagher

Prior to fighting Werenski, Gallagher was spoiling for a scrap.

He'd gotten into the faces of multiple Blue Jackets, including Werenski, before going a bridge too far. Gallagher got his stick between Werenski's legs and lifted it to spear the Blue Jackets defenseman in what Evason called, "an area you don't want to get speared in."

Welp.

Werenski retaliated with slashes at Gallagher's stick before they dropped the gloves. Werenski said Gallagher invited him to fight, so he accepted and ragdolled the Canadiens forward during a convincing win.

"I think you saw what happened," Werenski said. "I got a stick between my legs, which I wasn't happy about. Then I laid a few (slashes) on him, and I kind of knew it was coming. He asked and I was ready for it. It's just part of the game. I kind of knew it was coming at that point. We talked in the box about it a little bit, but it is what it is, and it's over now."

Werenski, who's from the Detroit suburb of Grosse Pointe, Michigan, has as many career "Gordie Howes" to his credit as the man they were named after — legendary Detroit Red Wings forward Gordie Howe. Along with a loud ovation from Blue Jackets fans, he got a round of support from teammates for handling things himself.

Olivier, an NHL heavyweight scrapper, was especially impressed.

"I was probably the most fired up I ever was on the bench," Olivier said. "It was unbelievable. He (was) unreal. It looked like he's been doing this for years. Had the left, the right going. He had everything. That was unbelievable. It's nice to get a break."

Columbus Blue Jackets' Kuraly doesn't play after two penalties vs Montreal Canadiens

Sean Kuraly was called for hooking at 5:57 of the second period, which put Montreal on a power play that led to Cole Caufield's tying goal about two minutes after Yegor Chinakhov gave the Blue Jackets a 2-1 lead. It happened inside the Canadiens' zone, an offensive-zone penalty, and the center of the Blue Jackets' fourth line didn't play another shift.

The team didn't make any injury announcement, so it appears Kuraly was benched for extended time after taking his second of two penalties. He skated 4:02 on eight shifts, not playing after taking the hooking penalty at 5:57 of the second.

The Blue Jackets used the other three centers — Monahan, Adam Fantilli and Justin Danforth — to fill the void on Kuraly's line, skating with James van Riemsdyk and Kevin Labanc. It was Kuraly's 501st career NHL game, so that's a loud statement by Evason if a proven veteran known for his work ethic and leadership can sit that long without an injury forcing it.

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets TKO Calgary Flames on a fight filled afternoon

By Brian Hedger- November 30, 2024

Black Friday became a black and blue Friday afternoon at Nationwide Arena, where the Blue Jackets got back to winning with a raucous, fight-filled 5-2 victory over the Calgary Flames.

Four of the Blue Jackets' five goals were scored by guys who played at the University of Michigan, a school whose football team visits Columbus on Saturday for the annual Ohio State-Michigan feud, but the pro-Buckeye crowd didn't care until Adam Fantilli said this during his postgame bench interview: "I love Ohio, but Go Blue tomorrow."

That drew boo birds, nor surprisingly, but emotions for the Blue Jackets ran high most of the afternoon among the 17,035 in attendance. Fantilli led the charge with two goals, which were sandwiched around goals from Kent Johnson and Zach Werenski to help the Blue Jackets (10-9-3) build a 4-1 lead early in the third period.

Kirill Marchenko scored the fifth into an empty net to seal it.

"Like I said last year, when we went on a bit of a losing skid, you never want to get used to losing," Fantilli said. "Having a bit of a winning culture in here, and with how much fun we have with each other and how tight of a group we have, it makes it way more enjoyable to come to the rink every day."

Columbus Blue Jackets left wing James van Riemsdyk (21) celebrates his goal with Columbus Blue Jackets center Adam Fantilli (19) against Calgary Flames during the first period of the NHL game at Nationwide Arena on Nov. 29, 2024.

Blake Coleman and Nazem Kadri scored goals for the Flames (12-8-4), who lost their third straight game. Elvis Merzlikins started in net for the Blue Jackets, improving to 7-5-2 with 27 saves. Dustin Wolf took the loss for the Flames.

"It's nice," Merzlikins said of the game's intensity. "It's fire. They're a good team. They're physical and we are standing there. We are going to protect each other, and that's what we did, and I think it was super fun today."

Columbus Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins (90) tries to make a save on a Calgary Flames left wing Ryan Lomberg (70) shot during the second period of the NHL game at Nationwide Arena on Nov. 29, 2024.

Columbus controlled the first period, taking a 2-0 lead into the first intermission on goals by Fantilli and Johnson.

Fantilli scored with a wrister from the left-wing circle just as a power play expired at 11:56, his fourth goal of the season, and Johnson made it 2-0 by netting his fifth goal of the season almost five minutes later to cap a 3-on-1 rush.

The Blue Jackets, who outshot the Flames 34-29 for the game, built a 16-10 edge in shots through the first period and held a 26-18 edge in attempts going into the first intermission. Each team scored a goal in the second, but they were overshadowed by extracurricular action that included three fights.

Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Jake Christiansen (2) and Calgary Flames center Martin Pospisil (76) fight during the second period of the NHL game at Nationwide Arena on Nov. 29, 2024.

Jake Christiansen was forced to fight after leveling Andrei Kuzmenko with a great check to break up a scoring chance inside the Columbus blue line, prompting a bare knuckle confrontation with Martin Pospisil. Mathieu Olivier then got into two fights for the Blue Jackets after he boarded Calgary's Joel Hanley with 8:06 left in the period.

Pospisil went after him following the hit, taking the brunt of Olivier's fists until Calgary defenseman Brayden Pachal entered the fray to hold the Blue Jackets forward's arms while his teammate landed free punches. Pachal was penalized for roughing, but wasn't ejected for being a third man into a fight.

Columbus Blue Jackets right wing Mathieu Olivier (24) and Calgary Flames center Martin Pospisil (76) fight during the second period of the NHL game at Nationwide Arena on Nov. 29, 2024.

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason was not thrilled with the way referees Brandon Blandina and Carter Sandlak handled it.

"It's so dangerous," Evason said. "We asked. They stated that it wasn't enough to give a third man in (ejection). If you watch it, 'Ollie' gets his arm tied up and takes two solid punches to the face that he cannot defend himself (from). His arm is locked, so he takes two off his face. It's so dangerous. It's crazy."

After serving his portion of those penalties, Olivier then got into another scrap with Ryan Lomberg after getting challenged prior to a faceoff with 23 seconds left in the period. He won that tilt with ease, knocking Lomberg's helmet off while landing numerous punches that made the Flames forwards' hair whip around like a 1980s hair band music video.

Columbus Blue Jackets right wing Mathieu Olivier (24) heads off the ice after fighting Calgary Flames left wing Ryan Lomberg (70) during the second period of the NHL game at Nationwide Arena on Nov. 29, 2024. It was his second fight of the period for Olivier.

Olivier left the ice pumping his arms, which brought the crowd to a roar and set the stage for the third.

"I don't know if you'd call that a good time, but it was definitely entertaining for the fans," Olivier said. "The game just kind of developed that way. I threw a hit that I didn't think was that bad at the time. Looked at it. Kind of questionable, so it kind of just derived from there. You've got to be ready to answer the bell when that happens."

Merzlikins answered two bells in the third, so to speak. A poke from MacKenzie Weegar between his legs, where he had the puck covered, set off the Blue Jackets goalie. He went after Weegar, was penalized for roughing and two minutes later watched Fantilli step out of the penalty box after serving the penalty into a 2-on-1 rush with Kirill Marchenko.

Columbus Blue Jackets center Adam Fantilli (19) celebrates after scoring a goal against Calgary Flames goaltender Dustin Wolf (32) during the third period of the NHL game at Nationwide Arena on Nov. 29, 2024.

A perfect feed from Marchenko to Fantilli's stick made it 4-1 at 4:46 of the third, which made Kadri's goal for for the Flames with 9:00 left a moot point.

"We're definitely going in the right direction," Olivier said. "We're still missing some big pieces, but everyone that's playing is doing a really good job. We've just got to find ways to win every night, and that's what we're doing right now."

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets trade Jiricek to Minnesota Wild for depth defenseman, four picks

By Brian Hedger- December 1, 2024

The wait is over to see if David Jiricek gets traded.

The Blue Jackets traded their disgruntled young defenseman plus their 2025 fifth-round pick to the Minnesota Wild on Saturday for a return package of four draft picks plus 22-year old depth defenseman Daemon Hunt. The picks include a conditional 2025 first-round pick from the Wild plus their 2027 second-round pick along with picks in 2026 that initially belonged to the Colorado Avalanche (third round) and Toronto Maple Leafs (fourth round).

"We're in the 'asset building' mode," Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell said. "I wasn't going to trade a 20 or 21-year old player for a 27-year old guy. That didn't make any sense. So, as we build up assets, you can use those assets in multiple ways. At the draft, everybody is always looking for picks, and there's always players available. But if you don't have the assets, you can't get 'em. So, we feel like we put ourselves in a good position to, at some point — whether it's today, tomorrow or at the draft — use picks to continue to help build our team."

A little more than two years ago, Jiricek walked on stage at Bell Centre in Montreal as the 2022 NHL Draft's sixth overall pick. His smile beamed, he kissed the Blue Jackets' logo on the front of the jersey he pulled over his head and it felt like Columbus might've finally found a future replacement for Seth Jones on their top defense pairing. He was supposed to become a major part of building a winning NHL roster under former GM Jarmo Kekalainen, but now he's headed to Iowa to play for the Wild's AHL affiliate.

"I wasn't here when they picked him, and I wasn't here last year," Waddell said. "I can only go on how things have gone this year for us with 'Jiri.' Watching him, I think he's going to be a good player in this league, but right now he needs to play in the American league and work on his skills."

The hope was that Jiricek would get on board with that plan for the Blue Jackets, who spent two-plus years helping him adjust to life in North America and sharpen his skills professionally. The first sign of discontent cropped up early last season, when the Blue Jackets kept Jiricek on the NHL roster and told him to get a place in Columbus — usually a way for teams to give young players confidence they'll remain in the NHL for a full season.

That's not what happened.

It became clear quickly that Jiricek wasn't ready for the NHL defensively, and his diminished ice time held his scoring impact down. Unable to outscore his liabilities, Kekalainen and John Davidson, the Jackets' previous president of hockey operations and now senior advisor, reassigned him to Cleveland. At first, it was only for a weekend while the Blue Jackets went on a short road trip. Later in the season, Jiricek was hastily pulled off an NHL road trip in Calgary and returned to the Monsters for the remainder of the season.

Jiricek wasn't thrilled. Neither was his agent, Allan Walsh, one of the NHL's most vocal player representatives.

It turned into a point of contention that critics across the NHL landscape used to smack the Blue Jackets' front office multiple times. Walsh hasn't replied to multiple attempts by the Dispatch to contact him, but has made it known via his Twitter/X account and conversations with NHL "insiders" that neither he nor his client were happy.

After Waddell replaced Kekalainen and Davidson last summer, the Blue Jackets hoped that change would put a salve on those wounds. It didn't.

Jiricek made the NHL roster to start this season as a little-used eighth defenseman, despite a middling training camp and preseason, and he often watched games as a healthy scratch. That's no way for a young defenseman to grow into an NHL impact player, so he was recently sent back to AHL Cleveland. That's when trade speculation took off, forcing Waddell to address the worst kept secret in the league.

It should be noted that Waddell made a point to note that Jiricek never requested a trade, but that can't be said of Walsh. The agent made it clear that a trade may be the best resolution.

"The only thing Allan always told me was, 'If there's not gonna be an opportunity there, maybe we should explore others?'" Waddell said. "I told him, 'I'm not just giving him away. If we get what we think is fair value, then we'll look at that — and we'll look at that with any player. In this case, we felt that was the case — that we were getting a good value back. And that's why we made the move.'"

What are the Columbus Blue Jackets getting from the David Jiricek trade?

Jiricek was the sixth pick off the board in 2022, but that's already been two years ago.

All but one or two defensemen from that class' first round are still playing with AHL teams — including Jiricek, New Jersey Devils defenseman Simon Nemec (second overall), Chicago Blackhawks defenseman Kevin Korchiński (seventh) and Blue Jackets prospect Denton Mateychuk (12th). Waddell hoped to get equal value to what Jiricek is worth, but not where he was drafted. Time makes a big difference.

"You've got to forget where players are drafted," Waddell said. "The day after the draft, you've gotta forget where a player was drafted, because it's just like driving a new car. If you draft a player sixth overall two years ago, and try to trade him the next day, you're not getting a sixth overall (back). It's just the way the market goes, so I never worry about that. What I worry about is getting fair value for what we think the asset's worth (now), and in this case, we feel that we got that."

That return package's ultimate value is predicated on the draft picks, which may come in handy during trade talks. The Wild's first-round pick in 2025 is top-five protected as the only condition, which means it becomes an unprotected first-rounder in 2026 if Minnesota unexpectedly tumbles into a top-five lottery position this season.

The others cover picks in the second, third and fourth rounds in different years, giving the Blue Jackets a combined total of 27 picks in the next three drafts. That's a lot of assets to use in multiple ways, including trades to supplement the NHL roster with experienced players.

Hunt, meanwhile, is a left-handed shooter selected by the Wild in 2020 (third round). He will report to the AHL's Cleveland Monsters to replace Jiricek, and has played 13 NHL games. Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason knows him a bit from his previous stint coaching the Wild.

"He's more of a defensive guy, and we think he's going to be an NHL player here soon," Waddell said. "You can never have enough good, young (defensemen), and it takes defensemen, just like with 'Jiri,' it takes defensemen longer than it does a forward to learn this position and play at the NHL level. It's such a tough position as a young player, so we see the upside in (Hunt) and that's why we wanted him in the deal."

As for forking over Jiricek?

"The way things have gone and the way things are right now, it's nothing personal against David at all," Waddell said. "He didn't do anything wrong from his end, other than we just thought it was time move on and pick up those assets."

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets rough up Calgary Flames: 6 takeaways

By Brian Hedger- December 1, 2024

You almost felt sorry for Ryan Lomberg.

Watching the long, stringy hair of the Calgary Flames forward become that of a troll doll while Blue Jackets forward Mathieu Olivier rained blows down upon him stirred memories of the “Seinfeld” episode when Frank Costanza explained his origin story of Festivus, the fictional holiday sparked by a scuffle over a Christmas gift.

“There has to be a better way,” was one thought that came to mind as Olivier whaled on Lomberg, who for some reason felt obligated to challenge the Blue Jackets heavyweight enforcer over a hit that had already been addressed in the Blue Jackets’ 5-2 victory Friday at Nationwide Arena.

Olivier, who “blacked out,” in the scrap, turned to the crowd and pumped his arms with the Blue Jackets leading 3-1 going into the second intermission. The building roared. Welcome to the 2024-25 rendition of the Blue Jackets, a team that was universally discarded as nothing more than a “bottom feeder,” and is now 10-9-3, above .500, after smothering the Flames (12-7-4).

The rest of the NHL hasn’t awoken to what’s happening in Columbus yet, but if that ever happens, the shock may resemble Lomberg’s flying locks.

The Blue Jackets now face a daunting five-game road trip to Chicago and Western Canada, but they’ve built up strength, resolve and confidence during their first five game point streak (4-0-1) since 2020-21. They’re also in a 5-1-1 stretch that began with a 6-2 shellacking of the Pittsburgh Penguins on Nov. 15 in Columbus with additional victories over the Boston Bruins, Tampa Bay Lightning, Carolina Hurricanes and Flames.

Here are six takeaways from a black and blue Friday:

Columbus Blue Jackets center Adam Fantilli rewarded for ‘sound’ play

Fantilli hadn’t scored a goal in 13 games, which was a dry spell that weighed heavily on his mind despite playing just his 71st NHL game Friday. He expects himself to be an elite center, an offensive force and one of the league’s top goal-scorers, so stretches of “learning” while not scoring goals are tough to stomach.

Putting two pucks into Calgary’s net clearly felt good, but they also were rewards for something else. Fantilli is trying to improve his defensive game at the same time he’s trying to produce offensively, which is no small task. It will eventually make him a formidable two-way talent atop the lineup, which is why it’s important to take a few lumps early in his career.

“He’s been committed to doing the right things in the right areas,” Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. “Has he sacrificed maybe a little bit of risky offensive play to be a good defensive, sound player? Maybe, but we know in the long run (and) he knows in the long run ... if he plays the right way, defensively and sound in all areas, the scoring will come.”

Zach Werenski’s headed for NHL First Star of the Month consideration

Zach Werenski put the Blue Jackets up 3-1 early in the second and added an assist on Kirill Marchenko’s empty-net goal to seal the victory.

Those two points moved his scoring line to 24 points on eight goals and 16 assists in 22 games, which is higher than a point-per-game average. Werenski's contributions against the Flames pushed his point streak to seven games, which ties his career high and the franchise record by a defenseman previously reached by Jaroslav Spacek in 2002-03 and Bryan Berard in 2005-06.

Werenski's scoring line during his point streak is a jaw-dropping 5-9-14, which is an average of two points per game. That's Cale Makar stuff, for a comparison. Werenski is the NHL's reigning "First Star of the Week" and is now putting himself into the discussion for the same monthly honor in November.

Columbus Blue Jackets' Kent Johnson could post a surprising point total

Despite missing 14 games with a shoulder injury, Kent Johnson has a chance to put up scoring totals that could surprise many in the NHL. His goal against the Flames was his fifth of the season, in eight games, and he also has six assists for 11 points.

That's a scoring rate of roughly 94 points in 68 games if Johnson plays all of the Blue Jackets' remaining games at that pace. His point production will almost certainly dip, but Johnson has earned a spot on the second line and plays in all situations now. More ice time means more opportunities to do what he does best.

Kirill Marchenko showed elite skill on Adam Fantilli's second goal

Marchenko is one behind Werenski for the team scoring lead after adding three points on a goal and two assists against the Flames. His first assist was the result of hard work, accidentally sending the puck to Werenski for a goal while trying to stuff it inside the left post, but his second assist was a thing of beauty.

Getting the puck in the neutral zone as Fantilli left the penalty box, Marchenko created a 2-on-1 before zipping a pass across the ice to the young center's stick for a snapshot that gave the Blue Jackets a 4-1 lead.

"I didn't move my stick," Fantilli said. "It just hit me, and I just ended up having it there, so it was a great pass."

Jake Christiansen's fight was unnecessary after hit on Calgary Flames' Kuzmenko

Early in the second, Calgary's Andrei Kuzmenko skated into the Blue Jackets' zone with the puck and soon paid a hefty price, courtesy of Jake Christiansen.

The Blue Jackets defenseman, an offensive-minded player in his junior days, has spent the past few seasons playing primarily in the AHL while adding grit and physicality to his repertoire. It showed with his hit on Kuzmenko, which was delivered with a textbook shoulder to the chest that freed the puck and sent the Flames forward to the ice. Pospisil skated over and challenged Christiansen to a fight, which has become the expected response now in the NHL to all big hits, even the clean ones.

Fighting remains part of hockey, but it's also a contact sport that should allow for legal body checks to go without having to defend them. Christiansen deserves credit for the hit and fighting Pospisil, especially at the end of a marathon 1:53 shift.

He also did a respectable job holding off Pospisil's right arm, but that was a needless bout.

Calgary Flames defenseman Brayden Pachal should've been ejected

The NHL's department of player safety ought to take a closer look at the actions of Flames defenseman Brayden Pachal during a fight between Olivier and Pospisil.

The latter two squared off after Olivier rammed Flames defenseman Joel Hanley into the end boards in the Calgary zone, and it spilled into a scrum where Pachal pinned Olivier's arm for Pospisil to land two

overhand rights. Evason was incensed that Pachal was only assessed a roughing minor rather than being ejected for acting as a third man into a fight.

Referees Brandon Blandina and Carter Sandlak told Evason that Pachal's actions didn't constitute being a third man in, which further angered the Blue Jackets' bench boss.

"His arm is locked, so he takes two off his face," Evason said. "It's so dangerous. It's crazy. I don't understand how that's allowed to happen, when there are two linesmen out there and two refs out there, and if it does happen, then you have to penalize something like that, or it may happen again. And that is such a dangerous situation. We're very fortunate that he didn't get hurt in that play."

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets continue offensive onslaught in 6-3 victory over Chicago Blackhawks

By Brian Hedger- December 2, 2024

Now, that's how to start a five-game road trip.

Playing their second straight game with an afternoon start, the Blue Jackets downed the Chicago Blackhawks 6-3 at United Center to earn their second straight victory and improve to 5-0-1 during a six-game point streak.

Ivan Provorov, Kent Johnson, Sean Monahan, Dante Fabbro, Kirill Marchenko and Dmitri Voronkov scored goals for the Blue Jackets (11-9-3), who got multi-point performances from Monahan, Damon Severson (three assists), Cole Sillinger (two assists), and Zach Werenski (two assists).

Werenski's assists pushed his point streak to eight straight games to set a new franchise high for a Blue Jackets defenseman. Werenski, Jaroslav Spacek and Bryan Berard shared the previous record at seven straight games.

"We just played simple," Werenski told reporters in Chicago. "We played hard. We didn't give up much 5-on-5. Obviously, they had (three) power-play goals that we'd like to clean up, but I thought we just played a steady game. ... I'm really happy with how we played today."

Connor Bedard, Craig Smith and former Blue Jackets captain Nick Foligno scored goals for the Blackhawks (8-14-2), who dropped their second straight game. Elvis Merzlikins made 28 saves to pick up the goaltending win for Columbus, while Chicago's Petr Mrazek took the loss.

Chicago opened the scoring on Bedard's goal to cap a power play 2:59 into the game, but Columbus carried a 2-1 lead into the first intermission on response goals from Provorov and Johnson.

Dec 1, 2024; Chicago, Illinois, USA; Chicago Blackhawks center Connor Bedard (98) looks to pass against the Columbus Blue Jackets during the first period at United Center. Mandatory Credit: David Banks-Imagn Images

Provorov's second goal of the season tied it 1-1 less than two minutes after Bedard's goal, and that was followed by Johnson's one-timer from the right wing with 8:37 left in the first to give the Blue Jackets a 2-1 lead. Smith pulled Chicago into a 2-2 tie at 3:00 of the second by scoring during the Blackhawks' second power, which made the Blue Jackets pay for Dmitri Voronkov's 17 minutes of penalties following his response to a hit by Connor Murphy that bloodied Marchenko's mouth.

Voronkov was given an instigating minor, a 10-minute misconduct for instigating plus a fighting major for a scrap that included Murphy pulling his jersey over his head. The resulting penalties angered Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason, who'd just watched Calgary Flames forward Martin Pospisil get only a fighting major while doing the same thing just two days earlier in the Jackets' 5-2 win at Nationwide Arena.

Dec 1, 2024; Chicago, Illinois, USA; Chicago Blackhawks defenseman Connor Murphy (5) and Columbus Blue Jackets left wing Dmitri Voronkov (10) fight during the second period at United Center. Mandatory Credit: David Banks-Imagn Images

The game, however, stayed tied for just 1:50 before Monahan put Blue Jackets back on top, 3-2, on his eighth goal of the season. That became a trend in the game, as Columbus responded to all three Chicago goals in short order.

"We kept battling," Evason said. "We had some adversity and some penalties in different situations, and some things that probably could've rattled our group and it didn't. So, it was a good win in that regard, for sure."

Fabbro pushed it to 4-2 at 3:08 of the third on his third goal of the season, all scored for Columbus in nine games after being claimed off waivers from the Nashville Predators.

The Blackhawks pulled within one goal again, 4-3, on a tap-in to cap a 5-on-3 power play by their captain, Foligno, but Marchenko's 10th goal of the season restored a two-goal cushion for Columbus, 5-3, with 9:08 left in the third.

Voronkov also netted a "response" goal of sorts by getting to a loose puck and firing it from his own zone into an empty net for a 6-3 lead with 1:26 left. It was the seventh time in the season's first 23 games the Blue Jackets have scored at least six goals in a game, and they're 7-0-0 in those tilts. Their offense is scorching since a six-game winless skid to start November that included an 0-4-1 road trip and no games with more than two goals despite generating plenty of shots and scoring chances.

"I think we're just groovin' right now," Fabbro said. "The team's in a good spot right now, but we're hungry and it's a lot of fun to be out there on the ice."

The Athletic / Blue Jackets' Dean Evason infuriated by non-call in overtime loss: 'It's ridiculous!'

By Aaron Portzline- November 28, 2024

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Zach Werenski reached his boiling point late in the second period. Coach Dean Evason lost his cool when the Columbus Blue Jackets lost in overtime.

Montreal Canadiens captain Nick Suzuki emerged from a three-zone puck battle with the Blue Jackets' Kent Johnson — that's not exactly how Evason would describe it — before scoring off his own rebound when the puck went the other way.

It gave the Canadiens a 4-3 win only 44 seconds into overtime, the end of a messy, frustrating game before 15,485 in Nationwide Arena.

Werenski had the second Gordie Howe hat trick of his career — a first-period assist, a second-period fight with Montreal's Brendan Gallagher and a third-period goal that forced overtime — but the Blue Jackets couldn't overcome a listless start.

The Blue Jackets had their modest three-game winning streak snapped but extended their point streak to four games (3-0-1) for the second time this season.

That was little solace for Evason, though.

The pivotal play in overtime happened right in front of the Blue Jackets' bench, and Evason could be seen raising his arm, incredulous that NHL officials Brian Pochmara (ahead of the play) and Mike Sullivan (behind it) swallowed their whistles.

Johnson had the puck and had a step on Suzuki as they left the Blue Jackets' zone in the open ice of three-on-three, and he tried to skate away from Suzuki as they entered the neutral zone. Jackets veteran Sean Monahan joined the rush and was skating in open ice to Johnson's left.

There was contact in the neutral zone, as Johnson tried to protect the puck and Suzuki tried to pry it free. Johnson spun out and tumbled to the ice as they entered the Canadiens' zone.

"You mean at the end when they didn't call the penalty, when the guy (Suzuki) grabbed (Johnson's) hip and pulled him back and then that guy went down and scored?" Evason said. "It's ridiculous! You know what? It's a human game, and I'd hope that we'd have a couple of the refs (available) — or at least one of them — to ask them what they see?"

"We have a two-on-one (with Johnson and Monahan). KJ is fresh. He's fresh on the ice. He's got a step on Suzuki. He's going and he's fast, and the guy reaches in, grabs him, pulls his hip, spins him, (Johnson) falls down, (the Canadiens) get the puck, they get a three-on-two (the other way) ... it's crazy."

Montreal's Lane Hutson grabbed the puck off Johnson's stick and headed the other way with Suzuki as Johnson scrambled to his feet and tried to join the play. Hutson set up Suzuki in the high slot and he followed his initial shot to the rebound that beat Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins.

Evason wasn't finished.

"That can't be not a penalty," Evason said. "It makes no sense. I don't care if it's the first (period) or overtime, you cannot reach your hand in and grab a guy. Even if they're even, but (KJ) is ahead of him."

"The only reason they get even is because he gets yanked back. It makes no sense. I just don't ... I don't understand it. The refs have been fantastic. Fantastic. But that was not a good play."

The Blue Jackets also had goals from Mathieu Olivier and Yegor Chinakhov, while Merzlikins, who had won four straight starts, stopped 19 of 23 shots.

Werenski now leads the Blue Jackets with 22 points (7-15-22) in 21 games, but it was his second-period scrap with Gallagher that will be most remembered.

Replays showed Gallagher slam his stick forcibly between Werenski's legs away from the play. Werenski responded with a couple of whacks with the stick before the gloves went flying.

"Sometimes you have to stand up for yourself," Werenski said. "That was a chance for me to do just that. It's part of the game. There was nothing to it other than we were battling for it. I didn't want to take any sh— from him.

"It doesn't happen very often, but I'm definitely not afraid to do it. I think it's good for our team to see that, too, to know that we're all in this together and we all have each other's back."

It was Werenski's third career fight, second in the regular season. He fought Detroit's Dylan Larkin on Jan. 18, 2021. He also had a playoff fight with Tampa Bay's Brayden Point on April 12, 2019, which was Game 2 of the Blue Jackets' first-round playoff sweep over the Lightning. That, too, was a Gordie Howe hat trick.

Evason, no stranger to fighting during his playing days, liked what he saw from Werenski, who has drawn praise from his coaches and teammates for stepping forward as a leader this season.

"You get speared in the area you don't want to get speared in, then you react like he reacted," Evason said. "I was happy with the way he reacted."

The Blue Jackets seemed to get a lift, too. The third period was their best period. Werenski scored on a low wrister through traffic at 12:22 to tie the score at three.

But the Blue Jackets should have been the more energized team, given they hadn't played since Saturday. The Canadiens, who have won seven in a row against Columbus, had more jump early in the game despite playing at home on Tuesday and traveling late into the night to Columbus.

Sure, the game swung on the overtime call (or non-call). But you could argue it swung much earlier in the game than that.

"I don't think we got to our forecheck tonight," Werenski said. "We didn't play our game. We weren't bad, but we weren't good, and that's what happens in this league if you don't play your game. Credit to them. That's a tough back-to-back and they came in here and played hard. But I definitely thought we could have played better tonight."

The Athletic / Why the Wild are in hot pursuit of Blue Jackets defense prospect David Jiricek

By Michael Russo- November 28, 2024

The cool part of every one of Jared Spurgeon's birthdays is he gets to celebrate the anniversary of making his NHL debut. That anniversary, 15 seasons later, occurs Friday when the Wild captain turns 35.

I'll never forget Nov. 29, 2010, being Spurgeon's 21st birthday. That's because the night of Nov. 28, knowing Clayton Stoner had gotten hurt two games before and Justin Falk had just gotten hurt the night before in Colorado, I figured the Wild would need to rush a defenseman to Calgary.

I texted a team source asking if he could tell me the callup. He wrote back, "Spurge."

I got the reply as I got into the elevator at the Calgary Marriott preparing to go to dinner.

The reason why I remember exactly where I was? I wrote back, "LOL."

Embarrassing, eh?

In fact, I was so convinced the source was kidding, I didn't write or tweet the "scoop." After all, when Spurgeon – a training camp invitee who wasn't signed by the Islanders after they drafted him in 2008 and was a whisker from signing a pro contract in Austria – signed with the Wild in Sept. 2010, the news was barely a dot, dot, dot at the end of my notebook when I was still at the Star Tribune.

So I never envisioned the Wild calling up a 5-foot-9 defenseman fresh off the Western Hockey League ice with Spokane so soon into his pro career. I figured we'd see Marco Scandella or somebody like that.

Not Spurgeon.

Well, here we are 14 years later, and Spurgeon is the franchise's blue line leader in virtually every statistical category and, outside of his first two games this season, has analytically been one of the team's best defensemen since returning from missing six games due to injury.

According to MoneyPuck, the Wild are controlling play with a 65.7 percent expected goal rate with his shutdown pair with Jonas Brodin and have only allowed 1.37 expected goals per 60 minutes with Brodin and Spurgeon on the ice. That's third best in the NHL (minimum 90 minutes).

Why do we bring this history lesson up?

A reminder that Spurgeon, even though he obnoxiously still looks 25 and plays like he's 25, does in fact turn 35 Friday and only has two years left on his contract beyond this season.

Because of the fact he was limited to 16 games last season and had to miss six earlier this season due to the "healing process" of last year's season-ending hip and back surgeries, the Wild are clearly starting to plan for what life after Spurgeon could look like.

This brings us to David Jiricek, the hulking right-shot defenseman who will celebrate his 21st birthday Thursday – one day before Spurgeon's 35th birthday and 14 years after Spurgeon celebrated his 21st birthday with his NHL debut.

David Jiricek with the OT game-winner! What a goal... [@DavidJiricek](#) [@OctagonHockey](#)
pic.twitter.com/vRW3MoK2z8

— Allan Walsh  (@walsha) November 24, 2024

If you've listened to my Worst Seats in the House podcast, I've mentioned his name a handful of times dating to before the summer as one of the Columbus Blue Jackets prospects I could see the Wild pursuing after a new GM arrived and had a chance to examine his players.

The Wild have had all sorts of conversations with Don Waddell since before the draft about everybody from Jiricek and Kent Johnson to Cole Sillinger and, as you surely know by now, Patrik Laine.

Remember, the Wild thought they had a deal done for Laine, but he wouldn't waive his no-trade and was subsequently dealt to Montreal late in the summer.

A few pods ago, I mentioned Jiricek's name again because it's a name that I keep hearing the Wild are motivated to acquire. And I subtly hinted I'd understand the deal ... as long as a trade doesn't include Marco Rossi.

And I don't think it would.

The Blue Jackets have held talks with a significant number of NHL teams about Jiricek. One is definitely the Wild, and if they can get this done, I'd think it would be for a prospect and perhaps a pick or NHL throw-in.

In terms of prospects, the only untouchables are likely Danila Yurov, Jesper Wallstedt and Zeev Buium.

Would Daemon Hunt get it done? He's the closest defenseman to being NHL ready, but with Brodin, Jake Middleton and Buium locked up into the future, he's expendable if one assumes Buium signs after his sophomore season at University of Denver.

Or maybe Liam Öhgren, the Wild's most NHL-ready forward down in Iowa.

The Wild also have a couple talented young forwards prospects like Riley Heidt and Hunter Haight.

If NHLers are included in a package, Declan Chisholm is expendable once Buium arrives, and at 24 years old, the puck-moving defenseman could be appetizing to Columbus. And we know how much Dean Evason loves forward Freddy Gaudreau, although he has played well this season and if he continues to do so, his \$2.1 million a year contract for three more seasons beyond this one is reasonable.

The Blue Jackets were initially asking for a similar top prospect back in return for Jiricek but have since reportedly shifting to considering offers on package deals. That's probably because Columbus, understandably, aimed high for blue-chip prospects in each interested franchise only to be rebuffed.

So why do the Wild want Jiricek, the sixth overall pick in the 2022 draft?

Upside and, if he hits, a Faber-Jiricek right-shot tandem on the top two pairs for years beyond Spurgeon's time in Minnesota.

All teams covet right-shot defensemen, and Jiricek is a two-way blue liner with a heavy shot who plays hard and would bring much-needed size to a blue line that doesn't have a ton of it. While mobility has long been his weakness, Jiricek is a decorated junior player with lots of international experience and success.

Have him work with Andy Ness, the Wild's skating guru, and perhaps Ness can do wonders for Jiricek. Plus, we know Faber is a world-class skater, as are Brodin and Buium. If Jiricek's skating is an issue, a left-shot like Brodin or Buium in the future could act as a safety net.

Jiricek was named the Best Defenseman of the 2023 World Junior Championship while helping lead Czechia to a silver medal. In a league where it's extremely different for teenagers to function, Jiricek had 38 points in 55 games his first-year pro with AHL Cleveland in 2022-23. That was the same year he was assigned to the world juniors.

Columbus 6th overall pick David Jiricek's game-tying goal with a bomb from the point that sent Team Czechia to OT. This team is a very special group...

 @DavidJiricek  @ehshockey  @OctagonHockey  pic.twitter.com/xDZlwm6JlX

— Allan Walsh  (@walsha) January 5, 2023

Last season, after the then-Blue Jackets' coaching staff was limiting his ice time or sanctioning him to the press box, Jiricek was assigned to the Monsters, helped them make the playoffs with 19 points in 29 games and then was a huge contributor toward the Monsters getting to the Eastern Conference final with 11 points in 14 games.

Evason is now Columbus' coach and nothing has changed in terms of Jiricek's NHL usage, which surely could be considered a red flag when you consider this is the third staff that didn't feel he was NHL ready. But the D coach, Steve McCarthy, is a staff holdover, so maybe that partly explains why Jiricek has only played six games, averaging 11:12 a game.

WHAT A FINISH.

 Jiricek sends it to OT

 Svozil send us home

 @TonyBrownPxP pic.twitter.com/eS6Rxc0r3z

— Cleveland Monsters (@monstershockey) March 17, 2024

Wednesday night in Rochester, Jiricek played his third game for Cleveland since being reassigned. He had a goal and assist, including an overtime winner with a long reaching poke of Owen Sillinger's centering pass.

If the Wild do get this done, it may actually make sense for the team to initially assign him to Iowa. The Wild have had a strong start to this season and the blue line has played well, yet Jiricek has only played six NHL games and three AHL games this season.

It wouldn't be fair to the team or to Jiricek to put him right into the NHL lineup until he can get his game in order with huge minutes at even-strength and in all special teams situations. That can only happen initially in Iowa.

So we'll see what happens here, but in the past few days, I've seen a lot of questions from Wild fans why the Wild would even be interested in a right-shot defenseman when the Wild are playing so well and the blue line is largely set this season.

It's because while Spurgeon may look like he can play forever, he won't, and the Wild are trying to set up shop for after his time in Minnesota comes to an end.

The Athletic / Why the Blue Jackets may trade David Jiricek, and what would they seek in return?

By Aaron Portzline- November 28, 2024

COLUMBUS, Ohio — A trade involving prospect defenseman David Jiricek may not be imminent, but the Columbus Blue Jackets and their former first-round draft pick appear headed that way as soon as Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell gets the trade return he's seeking.

Waddell acknowledged last week that he was willing to listen to trade offers after sending Jiricek to AHL Cleveland. It marked the third straight season Jiricek, who turns 21 on Thursday, has been sent to the minors after failing to secure an NHL lineup spot.

How did they reach this point? It's pretty simple.

Jiricek, the No. 6 pick in 2022, believes he's NHL-ready and deserves a prominent role, not just significant ice time but a spot on the power play. This is not a new level of confidence for Jiricek. He bristled last season when the Blue Jackets, then managed by Jarmo Kekäläinen, sent him to the AHL for the final months of the season.

The Blue Jackets, meanwhile, don't think Jiricek is polished enough defensively — yet — to be an NHL regular. Coach Dean Evason is the third different Blue Jackets coach to reach this conclusion, as seen by Jiricek's frequent healthy scratches (12) and his limited ice time (11:12 per game) in the six games he dressed.

For now, both sides are making it work. And, to be clear, Jiricek has not requested a trade. But it's hard to imagine him accepting a long stay in Cleveland.

The Blue Jackets host the Montreal Canadiens at 7:30 p.m. on Wednesday in Nationwide Arena, while Jiricek and AHL Cleveland play in Rochester, N.Y. It will be Jiricek's third game since being sent down by Columbus. He debuted last weekend.

Evason said he heard positive reports from AHL coach Trent Vogelhuber and the Cleveland staff. Evason and the coaching staff actually streamed the first two periods from the coaches' offices in Nationwide Arena because Cleveland's game on Saturday started two hours before the Jackets hosted Carolina.

"Good. Really good," Evason said. "He did a lot of really good things on both sides of the puck, which we want him to do on a consistent basis down there. He scored an overtime goal (on Sunday), which is fantastic. We know his offensive side.

"As we've talked about before, we need him to dial in when he doesn't have the puck. It looked as if he's committed to doing that. We've talked to Trent and the staff, and they're committed to teaching the same way we're teaching here. Everything is really positive."

Jiricek's overtime winner for Cleveland — set up by an Owen Sillinger pass off the rush — is the type of aggressive, up-the-ice play Jiricek seemed reluctant to make in the NHL. Pittsburgh Penguins GM Kyle Dubas was in Cleveland to watch the game, ostensibly to scout Jiricek.

Fixy ties it, Jiri wins it 😊 pic.twitter.com/n4kxzLdNBG

— Cleveland Monsters (@monstershockey) November 24, 2024

Waddell did not respond to messages from The Athletic seeking comment on Tuesday, but he has made it clear that Jiricek — still considered by many to be a top NHL prospect — was not considered untouchable. Keep in mind, Waddell didn't draft the 6-foot-4, 220-pound Czech.

"As a GM, I have to listen to every trade offer," Waddell said. "It doesn't matter what the player's name is, if we could make our team better, we always have to look at those options.

"I've gotten calls. We'll continue to talk to whoever is interested in whichever player, and if something makes sense for the organization — I've never made a personal decision in my career, it's always what works best for the organization — we'll look at it."

According to a team source, the Blue Jackets told clubs last week that they wanted to make a top prospect-for-top prospect trade involving Jiricek. Those trades aren't always easy to swing, but they can be done, as seen by two deals within the last year.

On Jan. 8, 2024, the Philadelphia Flyers traded disgruntled prospect forward Cutter Gauthier (No. 5 in 2022) to the Anaheim Ducks for defenseman Jamie Drysdale (No. 6 overall in 2020) and a second-round pick in 2025.

Then, this summer (Aug. 22), forward Rutger McGroarty (No. 14 in 2022), who refused to sign with the Winnipeg Jets, was traded to the Pittsburgh Penguins for forward Brayden Yager (No. 14 in 2023).

If Waddell can't land a top prospect in return, he may be willing to expand his demands. A team source told The Athletic on Tuesday that he was willing to consider a trade package that would start with a first-round draft pick but may also include a depth defenseman.

The Blue Jackets never wanted to be in this spot. It was hoped that a new GM (Waddell) and new coach (Evason) would not only be a fresh start for Jiricek but would allow both parties to repair a relationship that frayed early last season.

When training camp opened, Jiricek was aligned on the second pair with veteran Ivan Provorov, and he remained there well into the preseason. But as his struggles continued and the coaching staff lost confidence in his play, he was bumped down the lineup, settling into an on-again, off-again role on the third pair.

In six games, he had no goals, one assist, four penalty minutes, and a minus-2 rating. His ice time dwindled over his last three games, landing at 8:14 on Nov. 18 in Boston.

That 5-1 win over the Bruins may have been Jiricek's last game in a Columbus sweater.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets embrace Dean Evason's style, and the physical response it demands

By Aaron Portzline- November 30, 2024

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Three seasons ago, the Columbus Blue Jackets tried to get through an NHL season without a tough guy on the roster, and they paid dearly.

By the end of the season, they were getting bullied with regularity, including two games in March that season against the Minnesota Wild. It was ugly. It was difficult to watch, frankly.

The coach back then for Minnesota was Dean Evason. The Blue Jackets' response the following offseason was to trade for winger Mathieu Olivier in a draft-pick deal with the Nashville Predators.

It was impossible to miss the irony Friday, when the Blue Jackets played fast and physical in a 5-2 win over the Calgary Flames in Nationwide Arena, a display that clearly invigorated a post-Thanksgiving crowd that spent the final minute of regulation chanting O-H-I-O!

Evason is now the Blue Jackets' coach, and his new team played his style to a T — fast in all three zones, relentless on the puck, and unflinching in sticking up for yourself and your teammates. Just as it did when Evason coached the Wild, that speed often led to confrontation.

And that's where Olivier stepped in, winning two decisive fights and skating off the ice with a king-of-the-jungle, two-hand pump-up that thrilled a crowd of 17,035. The Blue Jackets are on a 4-0-1 uptick, their first five-game point streak since April 25-May 5, 2021.

"Our whole thought process was to play fast," Evason said. "There was some physicality in the game and we held our own, stuck up for each other, and that's the right thing to do.

"I think ... well, I know our team will do that all the time. That's a standard. But we really liked how we played in all three zones."

Adam Fantilli, who had gone 13 games without a goal, led the way offensively with two goals, while Zach Werenski and Kent Johnson added goals. Werenski's second-period goal extended his points streak to a career-long seven games. He has 5-9-14 and a plus-11 rating in that span.

Until Kirill Marchenko scored an empty-net goal with 1:40 to play, all of the Blue Jackets' goals were scored by former Michigan Wolverines, who typically aren't made to feel welcome in Columbus, Ohio (especially less than 24 hours away from The Game).

But the biggest cheers Friday were sparked when the play turned nasty, and the Blue Jackets more than held their own.

At 3:46 of the second period, Blue Jackets defenseman Jake Christiansen stepped into a thunderous shoulder-to-chest hit on Calgary's Andrei Kuzmenko at the blue line.

Calgary's Martin Pospisil stepped in and challenged Christiansen, who obliged, even though he'd never been in a fight and had just been on the ice for a 1-minute, 45-second shift, about twice the normal shift length for a defenseman.

"I probably can't express how much I liked it," Evason said with a smile.

About eight minutes later, Olivier went into the corner with Calgary's Joel Hanley and checked him hard from behind, prompting Pospisil to respond again. Olivier was all too willing to accept, and the fight did not go well for Pospisil.

While Olivier was pounding Pospisil, the Flames' Brayden Pachal grabbed Olivier and held back his arms, allowing Pospisil to land two punches. The Blue Jackets were furious that Pachal wasn't penalized for being the third guy in on a fight.

"It's so dangerous," Evason said. "(Officials) stated that it wasn't enough for a third-man-in penalty. But Ollie gets his right arm tied up and takes two solid punches to the face that he cannot defend. He takes two off his face. It's so dangerous. I don't know how that's allowed to happen."

Christiansen's fight and Olivier's first fight were just the undercard, however.

On Olivier's first shift after the fight, Calgary's Ryan Lomberg skated up next to him before a faceoff for a conversation. They weren't exchanging turkey tips.

"It was (about) my hit," Olivier said. "He felt it needed to be addressed. I don't mind it."

When the puck dropped, four gloves went sailing. Olivier pummeled Lomberg, whose long hair whipped with each of Olivier's heavy rights. As Olivier left the ice, he leaned back on one skate, looked up to the crowd and thrust his arms up in the air, only amplifying the crowd noise.

There was another skirmish early in the third, when goaltender Elvis Merzlikins came roaring out of his crease with fists flying after Calgary's MacKenzie Weegar appeared to jab his stick between Merzlikins' pads. Merzlikins had to be pulled away and pinned against the wall by a linesman in order to restore peace.

"Every goalie knows that it's not a nice feeling," Merzlikins said. "I just reacted. He totally deserved it. There was no need to do what he did. I don't care. I just reacted."

Evason didn't mind it, either. He expressed that, he said, in a brief interaction with officials after Merzlikins was given the only penalty out of the incident.

"I asked three officials the same thing: what would you do if you got speared in the ... that area? What would you do? How would you react? I don't blame Elvis."

As goaltenders don't serve penalties, the Blue Jackets sent Adam Fantilli to the penalty box in Merzlikins' stead. Like most things on this night, it worked out very well for Columbus.

When the penalty expired, Fantilli jumped from the penalty box to join a two-on-one rush with Marchenko, who feathered a perfect pass through traffic across the hashes, setting Fantilli up perfectly.

"I didn't have to even move my stick," Fantilli said. "Right on the blade."

The Blue Jackets (10-9-3) didn't gain their 10th win last season until Dec. 14. It feels like they're light years ahead of last year's pace, not just two weeks.

[The Athletic / Zach Werenski revels in Blue Jackets growth, seeks spot on U.S. 4 Nations roster](#)

By Aaron Portzline- November 30, 2024

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Zach Werenski's biggest joy is what's happening around him in the Columbus Blue Jackets dressing room.

Not only does the veteran admire and appreciate new coach Dean Evason's exacting style, but he delights in the fact the club's young cadre of talent — forwards Kent Johnson, Cole Sillinger, Yegor Chinakhov, Adam Fantilli, Kirill Marchenko, Dmitri Voronkov, etc. — are beginning to bloom with increased responsibility.

The Blue Jackets (9-9-3) hit Thanksgiving with a .500 record — not great, obviously, but worlds better than the past two seasons — which feels to Werenski as if the house is in order within Nationwide Arena.

There's something else Werenski wants to get out of this season, though.

One week from now, the rosters will be announced for the NHL's 4 Nations Face-Off, the midseason best-on-best showdown from the U.S., Canada, Finland and Sweden. Werenski, from Grosse Pointe, Mich., wants a spot on the U.S. roster.

"I think about it every day, to be honest," Werenski said. "That was one of my goals coming into the year. I've got goals first within the team — win games, make the playoffs, all that stuff — and individually, my goal is I want to be on that team.

"If I make it, I'm going to be the best version of myself there. But if I don't, I feel like I've put myself in a spot where I can sleep at night, knowing I gave it everything I have."

Werenski was projected by most to make the U.S. roster even before the season, but he's made quite the statement in the first quarter.

The 27-year-old has 7-15-22 in 21 games, leading the Blue Jackets in points and ranking third among the NHL's defensemen.

His 79 shots on goal are tied for eighth in the NHL and second among blueliners. He leads the league in averaging 26 minutes per game and has had a career-high five-point game (Nov. 21 vs. Tampa Bay, including the overtime winner) and a Gordie Howe hat trick (a goal, an assist and a fight Wednesday vs. Montreal).

When the Blue Jackets host the Calgary Flames at 3 p.m. today, Werenski will try to extend his point streak to seven games, which would match a career high.

Werenski has long been viewed as a leader in the Blue Jackets dressing room; not a big talker, necessarily, but a guy the younger players would be wise to emulate. He's become much more verbally engaged this season, however, in the absence of captain Boone Jenner and veteran Erik Gudbranson, both out long-term with shoulder injuries.

Several players, starting with his locker neighbor Kent Johnson, have opined that Werenski probably deserves more attention across the league as one of the game's top defensemen. Why not the Norris Trophy, Johnson wondered, and he probably has a point.

It's hard for a small-market player like Werenski to get noticed in a league with Cale Makar (Colorado), Quinn Hughes (Vancouver), Roman Josi (Nashville) and others. The only time he's ever received votes for the Norris was in 2019-20 when he finished eighth.

Evason, who turned 60 in August, had watched Werenski only from afar before he was hired to coach the Blue Jackets this summer. He doesn't throw around easy compliments, but Evason, after the 7-6 overtime win vs. Tampa Bay last week, dropped the word "amazing" when talking about Werenski.

"Everybody sees the special things," Evason said. "You see him rushing up the ice, scoring an overtime goal ... those are all wonderful. (But) he's such a well-rounded player. I think you miss the defensive greatness, if you will. It gets overshadowed by his offense."

Evason said it really shows up on film. The benefit of slo-mo and replay are helpful, because hockey happens fast.

"His hands ... those hands that score goals, that make him offensively great, they also dislodge pucks all over the place," Evason said. "He's got his stick on pucks and you can't get around him. If you do, if he misses the puck, he's got a big body and he gets in the way and boxes out very well. He keeps people from getting to the net.

"His skill set works in an offensive capacity, but it also is fantastic defensively."

Werenski is also good at deflecting attention. When asked about being "nominated" by his teammates or complimented by his coach, he took it in a different direction.

"It's been (21) games," he said. "The hard part is doing it for 82 games.

"The best part about it is we've been winning some games here lately. It's unfortunate, in one sense, that we have this much high-end talent from so many high-end picks because that means we haven't been good in a while. But, in saying that, the exciting part is seeing it come to life now.

"The young guys are taking big steps all over the ice. It seems like we're in every game."

The NHL will announce the 4 Nations rosters on Dec. 4, but Werenski said he expects to hear over the weekend or early next week.

Here's an indication of how much this means to him:

While the rest of the players are planning midseason vacations — the NHL will go dark from Feb. 11-21 — Werenski is only pondering backup plans. He's hoping he'll be draped in red, white and blue that week.

[The Athletic / For Blue Jackets, David Jiricek's skating concerns were enough to trade him](#)

By Aaron Portzline- December 1, 2024

COLUMBUS, Ohio — It's rare for a player like David Jiricek — a 21-year-old, right-shot defenseman with a big frame and a big shot — to even land on the trade market, especially a little more than two years after being drafted with the No. 6 pick.

But there are two things to consider in the wake of the Columbus Blue Jackets dealing Jiricek to the Minnesota Wild for defenseman Daemon Hunt and a collection of draft picks, including a conditional first-round pick in next June's draft:

First, he wasn't drafted by current Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell, so Waddell can evaluate him without wearing the blinders of a general manager who needs his first-round draft picks to work out.

Second, the Blue Jackets would have never taken calls on Jiricek if his skating wasn't a major concern about his ability to be an impact defenseman in the NHL. It was an issue when he was drafted, but it hasn't improved much — if at all — in the last 2 1/2 seasons.

Waddell, who engaged in trade talks regarding Jiricek ever since the Blue Jackets sent him back to AHL Cleveland on Nov. 20, wasn't about to bash the young defenseman on his way out the door. Jiricek, despite his disappointment in returning to the AHL again this season, was always good to deal with, Waddell said.

But it was clear by coach Dean Evason's usage — the 12 healthy scratches Jiricek endured, the limited minutes he drew when he did dress — that the NHL was seen as a little rich for Jiricek at this stage of his career. And that's all about his skating.

"I watched him play in Cleveland last (spring) and I thought he played well," Waddell said. "Training camp didn't go as well as anybody wanted it to. I can't say where I had him projected, but it's a hard league for a 20- or 21-year-old player. It's tough to come in and have an impact right away.

"And after a couple of years, you have to forget where guys were drafted and just evaluate them."

The words that are used most often to describe Jiricek's skating are "awkward" and "clumsy." Those are not compliments, especially in the modern NHL where defensemen are expected to join the play and keep up with smaller, quicker players.

When Jiricek has the puck on his stick — when he's determining the direction of the play — his skating is not a concern at all. But when he's defending, especially when the puck changes direction abruptly, his ability to quickly adjust is not smooth.

The Blue Jackets want their defensemen to join the rush and push the play, which sounds like a perfect fit for Jiricek, given his offensive prowess. But he struggled to be aggressive, most believe because he was so concerned about being out of position when the puck went the other way.

He looked tentative and indecisive, which are death sentences in Evason's system. In training camp, he was jumped on the depth chart by Jake Christiansen. Once the season started, he was surpassed by Jordan Harris and 37-year-old veteran Jack Johnson.

When the Blue Jackets claimed Dante Fabbro off waivers from the Nashville Predators on Nov. 10, it became that much harder for Jiricek to crack the lineup.

It makes sense for the Wild to take a chance on Jiricek, although a bit surprising that they would spend a first-round pick on an unproven prospect at this juncture. Conventional wisdom says a team like Minnesota, currently one of the best in the NHL, would use that pick as a major chip at the trade deadline.

It's possible that Jiricek can fix his skating. A different system, one that's less taxing than Evason's could help. Continued offseason work by Jiricek could help him become more agile. The passage of time may help, too, as 6-foot-4, 205-pound defensemen, like a puppy, have to grow into their feet.

The Blue Jackets initially asked potential trade partners for one of their top prospects, hoping to make a one-for-one swap. When those players weren't available, the Blue Jackets adapted their demands for a first-round pick and a depth defenseman.

Waddell spent much of the past 10 days on the phone, but by Saturday he had at least two more teams enter the fray, he said, with offers of a first-round pick and depth defensemen. That demand forced the Wild, who were in hot pursuit of Jiricek from the start, to up the ante, which they did.

The fact that NHL GMs were unwilling to go prospect-for-prospect in a trade for Jiricek could be an indication that they shared the same concerns about his skating. Maybe Waddell was wise to move on Jiricek at this juncture before his inability to crack the NHL became a bigger concern.

The Blue Jackets, in return, received 22-year-old defenseman Daemon Hunt, 6-1 (201), who has played 13 games in two seasons with Minnesota. Evason, who coached the Wild until he was fired last November, coached five games with Hunt in the lineup early last season.

The Jackets also got a first-round pick in 2025, a second-round pick in 2027, and third- and fourth-round picks in 2026. The first-round pick next June is protected in the unlikely event that Minnesota ends up picking in the top 5 of the draft.

The Blue Jackets traveled to Chicago at mid-afternoon Saturday in advance of Sunday's 3 p.m. game. Waddell didn't join the flight because he knew the Jiricek trade was coming to a head. He'll fly later to join the team at the start of a five-game trip.

"It's a trade we've been working on for a while," Waddell said. "It got to a point this weekend where I thought we were getting fair value and we could say yes."

The Athletic / NHL trade grades: David Jiricek deal is a poor return on investment for Blue Jackets

By Corey Pronman- December 1, 2024

David Jiricek struggled to earn the trust of the Blue Jackets coaching staff despite his success at the AHL level. He's still a young player though with plenty of tools and time to develop. He's very skilled, especially for a big man, and combined with a strong point shot, he should provide offense in the NHL. He was an excellent two-way defenseman at lower levels, although his defense has been tested at the NHL level due to his so-so footspeed. I also thought when Jiricek was playing at his best, he had a lot of bite in his game, but that part of his game has been more inconsistent lately. I still see a potential top-four defenseman, but I'm much less certain about that projection than I was a few years ago. I also think it's fair to question whether Jiricek is a true top prospect given he could not crack a middling Columbus lineup consistently.

Daemon Hunt is a mobile defenseman who plays hard and can move pucks well enough. He's gotten some NHL games over the past two seasons for Minnesota. I wouldn't call him the most dynamic player in the world, but coaches will appreciate his compete level. He projects as a third-pair defenseman.

I would say the main asset Columbus gets back is the first-rounder over Hunt, even if it is likely a late first-round pick.

This is a poor return on investment for Columbus after investing the 2022 No. 6 pick in Jiricek. However, the fact the player wanted out likely hurt his value, combined with the fact some NHL personnel have soured on the player due to his inconsistent play as a pro plus the fact he's seemed to rub his team the wrong way through the process. The Athletic's Aaron Portzline believes it mostly came down to Jiricek's skating concerns. In that way, it resembles in part the rationale for why Washington traded then-top prospect Filip Forsberg in 2013, which aged poorly.

Time will tell if a change of scenery brings out a better Jiricek like the promising player he was as a draft-eligible and the season following his draft where he dominated the AHL and World Junior levels, and whether he adjusts to the NHL pace.

Minnesota: B+

Columbus: C+

[The Athletic / Blue Jackets trade David Jiricek to Wild for Daemon Hunt, draft picks](#)

By Aaron Portzline, Michael Russo- December 1, 2024

COLUMBUS, Ohio — After a week of swirling rumors, the Blue Jackets traded David Jiricek and a 2025 fifth-round pick to the Wild for Daemon Hunt, a 2025 first-round pick (top-five protected), a 2027 second-round pick, a 2026 third-round pick and a 2026 fourth-round pick Saturday.

The condition on the 2025 first-round pick:

Hunt, 22, the Wild's most NHL-ready defense prospect, was supposed to play Saturday afternoon against the Checkers but was pulled from the lineup just before the game.

Jiricek, who turned 21 on Thursday and was assigned to AHL Iowa by the Wild Saturday, was selected with the No. 6 pick in the 2022 NHL Draft, but his awkward skating and erratic play kept him from grabbing a lineup spot under three different Blue Jackets coaches, including current bench boss Dean Evason.

The Blue Jackets had demoted Jiricek last week to the AHL's Cleveland Monsters after he'd appeared in only six of Columbus' games this season. In those six games, Jiricek averaged only 11 minutes, 14 seconds of ice time.

GM Don Waddell, who joined the Blue Jackets in late May, and Evason, who came aboard a month later, provided Jiricek a fresh start in his third pro season. While it hasn't been contentious, as it was last season, Jiricek and the organization remain at loggerheads over his NHL readiness.

Jiricek and his camp have felt since last season that he was ready for a prominent role in the NHL — top-four ice time, a spot on the power play, etc. The Blue Jackets have given him chances to grab a lineup spot, but his defensive reads and clumsy skating have relegated him to the third pair — and often to the press box as a healthy scratch.

Unable to see eye to eye, the two opted to part ways, but Waddell wasn't going to simply accept the best offer for Jiricek and move forward. The Blue Jackets have been in that spot before with Pierre-Luc Dubois, Patrik Laine and others, but that wasn't the case here.

Waddell wasn't trading Jiricek until he heard the right trade offer, some combination of prospect(s) and pick(s) that he felt was commensurate with Jiricek's value. After several days of listening to offers and making counteroffers, the Wild finally met the bar on Hunt and a bunch of picks.

Why does this make sense for the Wild?

Brock Faber's eight-year extension kicks in next season. While the Wild still have right-shot defenseman David Spacek — the son of former Blue Jackets defenseman Jaroslav Spacek — in the pipeline, the opportunity to add a prospect as highly decorated as Jiricek was too good of a chance to pass up. The Wild envision Faber, 22, and Jiricek on the right side in the top four for a decade-plus. In essence, they are planning for life after Jared Spurgeon, the Wild captain and 15-year vet who was limited to 16 games last season due to shoulder, hip and back injuries and has two years left on his contract after this season.

All teams covet right shots, and Jiricek is a two-way defenseman with a heavy shot who plays hard and will bring much-needed size to a blue line that doesn't have a ton of it. While mobility has long been his weakness, the Wild believe their skating expert, Andy Ness, could do wonders for him. Jiricek is a decorated junior player with lots of international experience and success. He was named the best

defenseman of the 2023 World Junior Championship, helping lead Czechia to a silver medal. In a league that's awfully unkind to teenage defensemen, Jiricek had 38 points in 55 games in his first year pro with AHL Cleveland in 2022-23 and helped lead the Monsters to the Eastern Conference final last season with 11 points in 14 games.

Jiricek's camp accepts that he will begin his Wild career in Iowa. While it shouldn't be long before the Wild make room for him on the big club, he has barely played this year (six NHL games and a four-game stint in Cleveland where he has scored two goals and an assist) and the Wild want him to get his game in order in the minors. Of course, with Jonas Brodin hurt, the Wild will need to tap into an extra defenseman and Hunt was their top recall candidate. — Michael Russo, Wild beat reporter

What are the Blue Jackets getting in Hunt?

Wild coach John Hynes has said since the start of training camp that Hunt was ready for the NHL. They just couldn't get him in the lineup because of seven defensemen on NHL contracts ahead of him. He played one game earlier this season.

He's a smart, mobile, left-shot defenseman with size. Hunt played 12 games last season for the Wild with one assist.

On Nov. 13, Hunt told The Athletic, "I want to be in the NHL, simple as that. But everyone's path is different, and right now mine is to be in the American League. Time will tell, but I'm hoping someday I'll be here full-time. But right now everybody's playing well and the team's winning, which is great to see." — Michael Russo, Wild beat reporter

[The Athletic / Blue Jackets' rout of Blackhawks suggests this five-game road trip may go better](#)

By Aaron Portzline- December 2, 2024

It's only one game, but already this five-game road trip is more successful than the one that nearly derailed the Columbus Blue Jackets' season in early November.

Six players scored goals, four had multi-point games, and 10 players hit the scoresheet in the Blue Jackets' 6-3 win over the Chicago Blackhawks before 17,393 on Sunday at United Center. The Jackets scored three times in the third period to pull away.

The Blue Jackets (11-9-3) extended their points streak to six games (5-0-1), their longest since January 2021, and scored five or more goals for the 10th time in only 23 games. It also marked the first time Columbus has won consecutive road games this season.

"We're playing a more mature game," Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski told reporters in Chicago. "Nothing is really fazing us. We know in any situation ... we can come back in games. We can hold leads. We can kinda do anything right now.

"We have a lot of confidence. We just have to keep going."

TOP SHELF MARCHENKO 📸 @FanaticsBook | #CBJ pic.twitter.com/vRf7ljFTQd

— Columbus Blue Jackets (@BlueJacketsNHL) December 1, 2024

Ivan Provorov, Kent Johnson, Sean Monahan, Dante Fabbro, Kirill Marchenko and Dmitri Voronkov each scored goals, while Damon Severson had three assists and Cole Sillinger and Werenski each had two assists.

Goaltender Elvis Merzlikins, who has made every start during the point streak, had 28 saves to improve to 8-5-2 on the season. He had 13 wins all of last season.

Werenski's points extended his point streak to a career-best eight games, the longest for a defenseman in franchise history. During those eight games, he has 5-11-16 and a plus-14 rating.

What does the hottest run of play in his NHL career mean to Werenski?

"Nothing really," he said. "This is a great start to our trip. We're going out west now, and nothing makes me feel better than a win."

All three goals scored by Chicago were power-play goals, marking the first time in franchise history the Blue Jackets have won a road game in regulation despite allowing three man-advantage goals.




On Sunday, the Blue Jackets had a quick answer every time the Blackhawks scored.

Just 1:28 after Connor Bedard gave Chicago an early lead, Provorov answered with a wrister from the slot to tie it at 1. Just 1:50 after the Blackhawks' Craig Smith scored to make it 2-2 early in the second period, Monahan scored to restore the Columbus lead.

And just 2:44 after former Blue Jackets captain Nick Foligno pulled Chicago to within 4-3 midway through the third period, Marchenko scored an unassisted goal to make it 5-3. Voronkov's empty-net goal with 1:26 to play sealed the win.

Connor Murphy 📸 Kirill Marchenko • #HFhits

Blackhawks  Blue Jackets • NHL 2024 DEC 01

Voronkov's tilt  Connor Murphy  <https://t.co/b1f1qP027i>  pic.twitter.com/EiT9CFFqEe

— hockeyfights (@hockeyfights) December 1, 2024

Voronkov deserved the empty-net goal, too.

At 1:26 of the second period, the big Russian took exception to a hit Chicago's Connor Murphy laid on Marchenko as he tried to carry the puck over the blue line. While Marchenko went hard to the ice, Voronkov went hard after Murphy, his gloves sailing.

Voronkov came into the game with just four penalty minutes, but picked up 17 minutes in a flash. He was given a 10-minute misconduct and a two-minute minor for instigating, plus a five-minute major for fighting.

The Blackhawks scored a power-play goal just 1:34 later, but that did not change Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason's view of Voronkov sticking up for Marchenko.

"Do we not like what Ronny did?" Evason said. "No. We love it."

For the Blackhawks, Bedard scored his fifth goal of the season and assisted on a later Chicago goal, but finished with a minus-4 rating.

The Blue Jackets flew after the game to Calgary, where on Tuesday they'll meet up with the Flames in the Saddledome just four days after a nasty, fight-filled game in Nationwide. It's game two of a five-game trip that also swings through Edmonton, Vancouver and Winnipeg.

No matter what happens over the next four games, it'll be better than the five-game trip they took to Washington, San Jose, Los Angeles, Anaheim and Seattle in early November. The Jackets went 0-4-1 on that trip while a scoring slump gripped the roster.

They limped home from that trip with a 5-8-2 record, frighteningly similar to the slow starts of the previous two seasons. They're 6-1-1 since then, giving them a surge of confidence.

"It's just growing together," Evason said. "It's the process and it's playing the same way, learning to play the same way consistently and being predictable in all areas of our game. If we do that, we give ourselves a chance."

The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: Don Waddell discusses value of picks in David Jiricek trade

By Aaron Portzline- December 2, 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: The Jiricek return

Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell kept telling his rival GMs that he wasn't dead-set on trading defenseman David Jiricek. This wasn't like the Patrik Laine trade months earlier, where the best offer would get him.

"We had some pursuers (on Jiricek) immediately, yes," Waddell told The Athletic. "But I was not there with any of the offers. So I told (Jiricek's agent, Allan Walsh) that if we get a deal, great. But if we don't, we'll keep plugging along."

Waddell spoke with Walsh and Minnesota Wild GM Bill Guerin almost daily throughout the process, as the Wild were relentless in their pursuit of Jiricek. It wasn't until this weekend when other clubs made offers similar to Minnesota's that the Wild were forced to up their ante.

The Jackets traded Jiricek and a fifth-round pick in 2025 to Minnesota for defenseman Daemon Hunt, a first-round pick in 2025, a second-round pick in 2027 and third- and fourth-round picks in 2026. Hunt was immediately assigned to AHL Cleveland.

Waddell and Guerin have known each other for years — they worked together in Pittsburgh before Waddell joined the Carolina Hurricanes front office — but there are no favors among GMs.

"It took a while," Guerin told The Athletic. "Donny, he played with me a bit. He's one of my old mentors, but he made me work for it. He's the best."

"It's a lot like working with (longtime NHL GM) Jim Rutherford. You just have to work through it. And it takes time. And if you come up with something fair, and it makes sense for both sides ... there's a lot of give and take, and that takes time. I love the process. It was great."

The Blue Jackets were initially looking for a trade partner with a prospect similar to Jiricek's age and pedigree that they'd be willing to swap. Failing that, Waddell wanted a first-round pick, a depth defenseman with some promise and a series of additional draft picks.

go-deeper

GO DEEPER

Portzline: David Jiricek's skating concerns were enough for Blue Jackets to trade him

Hunt, 22, can probably help the Blue Jackets this season, more than they felt Jiricek could. He's a left-side defender, which could make it easier to trade veteran Ivan Provorov, a pending UFA next summer, if Waddell gets the right offer ahead of the trade deadline.

But the picks are what Waddell wanted.

The Wild's first-round pick is protected in the event that it's a top-five pick this summer, but that's highly unlikely barring a historic collapse by Minnesota. The Wild are currently tied with the Winnipeg Jets for the most points (36) in the league.

Chances are that first-round pick from the Wild will be in the 20s, but it could be paired with the Blue Jackets' own first-round pick to move higher in the order. Or it could be used in a draft-floor trade to acquire an established player. The second-round pick, while still three drafts away, is a nice chip, too.

Waddell made significant changes this past summer even though he wasn't hired until late May. There will be more moves next summer, especially now that Waddell is getting a better read on his young players and the nucleus of the Blue Jackets roster.

"Draft picks, whether we use them to take players or use them as assets to add players, those are good to have," Waddell said. "Players are always available at the draft, and you need assets to acquire those players.

"It's not like July 1, where it's just straight-on free agency. Some of the best shopping I've done as a GM has been at the draft."

Item No. 2: Fantilli's focus

Adam Fantilli was 0-for-November in goal scoring before he netted two on Friday in the Blue Jackets' 5-2 win over the Calgary Flames in Nationwide Arena.

Dean Evason and the entire coaching staff have stressed to Fantilli, who recently turned 20, that his performance this season isn't being measured by goals and points, but in how he defends and how he plays within the Blue Jackets system.

Still, the 13-goal drought was weighing on him. Asked if it felt good to get the "monkey off his back," Fantilli made it sound as if it was more like a gorilla.

"Pretty huge," he said. "It was tough to think about (the scoring drought). I'm glad to get it off."

Fantilli has 5-7-12 and a minus-1 rating in 22 games. He's playing 16:48 per game, most often in a No. 2 center's capacity, and drawing time on both the power play and penalty kill. He's winning only 44.5 percent of his faceoffs, but that's up from 43.6 percent as a rookie.

Do you know how rare it is for a just-turned-20-year-old to be able to play center in the NHL, much less eat almost 17 minutes per night? Evason does, which is why he's ecstatic about Fantilli's development.

And it's why he's tried to give Fantilli more ways to measure his play, rather than just offensive production.

Mo's second goal in last night's epic win earned him the @FanaticsBook Goal of the Game!
pic.twitter.com/111HtvJqHZ

— Colu  bus Blue Jackets (@BlueJacketsNHL) December 1, 2024

Fantilli scored a power-play goal in the first period on Friday to give the Jackets a 1-0 lead. He also scored a crucial third-period goal off a two-on-one with Kirill Marchenko that pushed the lead to 4-1.

After the game, Evason literally shrugged when asked how delighted he was to see Fantilli finally get off the schneid. Before the two goals Friday, he last scored Oct. 28 vs. Edmonton.

"It's great," Evason said. "But it's not necessarily great that Fantilli did it. It's just great that the Columbus Blue Jackets did.

"Fantilli has been committed to doing the right things in the right areas. Has he sacrificed a little bit of risky offensive play to be a good, defensive, sound player? Maybe. But we know in the long run — he knows in the long run — if he continues to play like he has played literally all year ... the scoring will come.

“It came (Friday). Maybe it won’t next game. Maybe it won’t be super consistent, but it will be there because he has that natural ability. His work in the other areas has been fantastic.”

Much was made of the top of the draft board in 2023, when Connor Bedard went No. 1 to Chicago, Leo Carlsson was Anaheim’s surprise No. 2 pick and Fantilli landed in Columbus at No. 3. All three players have endured challenges in their second seasons.

Bedard has 4-13-17 and a minus-5 rating in 23 games with the Blackhawks. He is playing 19:25 per game, is winning just 28.7 percent of faceoffs and was recently moved to the wing.

Carlsson has 6-5-11 and an even rating in 20 games with the Ducks. He’s playing 16:43 per game and winning 31.5 percent of draws.

Item No. 3: Take 5 with Johnson

Take 5 will be a new weekly feature within the Sunday Gathering; a quick, five-question sitdown with a Blue Jackets player, coach or front-office staffer. We start this week with Kent Johnson:

1. What part of Columbus is home and why?

I live in the Short North. I wanted to be close to the rink and live in an apartment. (Former Blue Jacket Nick) Blankenburg suggested the building ’cause he was there. It seemed like a good building. I’ve been there ... this is my second season living there.

2. Favorite restaurant in Columbus.

Lindey’s in German Village. I like the steak and a bunch of the appetizers — the calamari, especially.

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

Just hang out with some of the guys. We go to church in the morning and then go get some lunch and watch football. We do have a lot of Sundays off, it seems.

4. Favorite CBJ memory.

I feel like that game in Colorado, our second game of the season (a 6-4 win). That was a good moment for our team. There was a little feeling like, ‘Wow, we can be a good team!’ We finally beat a really good team on the road. That was a big one for me.

5. Which teammate should have a podcast?

(Laughs) Good question. Ollie (Mathieu Olivier) could have one, for sure. He could just talk about sports, especially the UFC. Christy (Jake Christiansen), I think, is hilarious, but he wouldn’t want to have a podcast. I’d go with Ollie, and I’d listen to that one.

Item No. 4: Snacks

- The Blue Jackets were off on Saturday other than a mid-day flight to Chicago, where they open a five-game road trip on Sunday at 3 p.m. You may recall that the five-game roadie at the start of last month did not go well. The Jackets went 0-4-1, the only point an overtime loss in San Jose. They’ll face tougher competition on this trip. After playing today in Chicago, they play Calgary (Tuesday), Edmonton (Thursday), Vancouver (Friday) and Winnipeg (Sunday). Those final four clubs are a combined 54-30-9 and all sit in playoff spots as of today.

- Here’s Olivier on the challenge ahead: “It wasn’t that we were playing badly (on that trip) except for the Seattle game (a 5-2 loss on Nov. 12). We actually were playing decent hockey, we just weren’t scoring and a couple of mistakes were costing us games. When we’re at home, we score. Now we have to do it on the road.”

- To Olivier's point: The Jackets are 8-3-1 in Nationwide Arena, averaging 4.25 goals per game. They're 2-6-2 away from Nationwide, the worst road record (and fewest points) in the league, and averaging just 2.6 goals per game.

KJ BURIES OUR SECOND 🧨 @FanaticsBook | #CBJ pic.twitter.com/1A67FftvRj

— Colu ~~X~~ bus Blue Jackets (@BlueJacketsNHL) November 29, 2024

- Johnson has scored at least a point in all eight games he's played this season, totaling 5-6-11 with an even rating. It doesn't count as an eight-game point streak because Johnson missed 14 games from mid-October to mid-November (the middle of the streak) with an injury. But one way to look at it: Johnson had just 6-10-16 in 42 games last season before he suffered a shoulder injury.
- Upon arriving in Chicago on Saturday, Johnson was planning to meet up with Bedard, his longtime friend from back home in British Columbia, for a Friendsgiving version of Thanksgiving.
- The Gordie Howe hat trick — a goal, an assist and a fight in the same game — is named after the legendary Detroit Red Wings power forward who played 1,767 games over 25 NHL seasons. You may be surprised to learn, however, that Howe had only two Gordie Howe hat tricks in his illustrious career. That's the same number Blue Jackets' Zach Werenski has after his big night last week against Montreal. Werenski and Rick Nash, who had three Gordie Howes with Columbus, are the only players who've had more than one with the Blue Jackets. Fedor Tyutin is the only other Jackets defenseman to accomplish the feat.

go-deeper

GO DEEPER

Zach Werenski revels in Blue Jackets growth, seeks spot on U.S. 4 Nations roster

- Sunday Gathering trivia question: The trade of Jiricek on Saturday made him the 10th Blue Jackets first-round draft pick to move on without having played the equivalent of two NHL seasons (164 games) with the club. Which first-round pick who is no longer with the organization played the fewest games in a Columbus sweater?
- After missing Friday's game with an illness, goaltender Daniil Tarasov is back to health and traveled with the Jackets to Chicago on Saturday. Goaltender Jet Greaves, called up in Tarasov's absence, was returned to Cleveland.
- The Blue Jackets must be delighted with AHL Cleveland. The Monsters' 2-0 win over Toronto on Friday marked their 10th consecutive win, a franchise record. Plus, Cleveland has three players within the league's top five in scoring, including first-year-pro defenseman Denton Mateychuk, the No. 12 selection at the 2022 draft. Mateychuk, 20, is third in the AHL — not among defensemen, but all players — with 6-15-21 in 19 games. He has 3-7-10 during a six-game point streak. The other top scorers are Rocco Grimaldi (6-17-23, plus-10 in 15 games) and Trey Fix-Wolansky (10-10-20, plus-3 in 19 games). Not far behind is Luca Del Bel Belluz, who, at 10-9-19 in 19 games, has already surpassed his goal total (nine) from last season (58 games).
- Joseph LaBate, who signed a player tryout agreement with AHL Cleveland in early October, was signed to a two-way contract by the Blue Jackets on Friday, a one-year deal that would pay him \$775,000 in Columbus or \$100,000 in Cleveland. Immediately after the signing, LaBate was placed on waivers. He cleared on Saturday and was "sent" to Cleveland, even though he never physically left Cleveland. The 6-foot-5, 225-pound forward is a veteran of 410 AHL games. He spent last season in Russia's KHL.

- Grimaldi, who turns 32 in February, is not on a PTO. On Saturday, the Monsters announced they'd signed him to an AHL contract for the remainder of the season.
- The Blue Jackets' win on Friday improved their record vs. Calgary to 36-24-8 (.588). There are only two franchises — Detroit (46) and Chicago (40) — against whom the Jackets have more wins, and only one against whom the Jackets have a higher points percentage. That's Buffalo (.622).
- Trivia answer: Kerby Rychel, the No. 19 pick in 2013, played only 37 games for the Blue Jackets before he was traded to Toronto at the draft three years later for defenseman Scott Harrington. There's plenty of competition here, though. Marko Dano, taken eight spots after Rychel in 2013, played only 38 games in two stints with Columbus. Others: Nikita Filatov, No. 6 in 2008, played only 44 games, while Jiricek, taken at No. 6 in 2022, played in 53.

[BlueJackets.com / Hockey player thankful to be back on the ice after cancer fight](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- November 28, 2024

The sound of steel meeting ice. The cold air coming through your pads. The feeling of stick on puck.

Once hockey is in your blood, there's something magical about each time you step on the ice. It feels like a second home, one where the stresses of everyday life disappear.

It's especially true once the feeling gets taken away.

For Tanner Sabau, that happened this past year when he was diagnosed with mesenchymal chondrosarcoma, an aggressive, rare form of cancer. For someone that grew up around the sport, playing for the AAA Blue Jackets and then in high school, one of the toughest things about his cancer battle over the past year was it meant the simple feeling of stepping on the ice was taken away from him.

So you can imagine how he felt this fall when he first got back on the ice after surgery, 14 rounds of chemotherapy and 25 radiation treatment sessions.

"I was happy and excited, of course, but didn't know how good it was going to feel to get back on the ice until I finally did it," he said. "My first few steps, it was wonderful. It was like, 'It's so nice to be back out here.' It was tough, I couldn't do the things I wanted to normally, but just being back on the ice, I started craving it again.

"The next week, I went out again, and then I realized half my pads are too small, so I had an excuse to get brand new pads."

As you can see, Sabau has been able to maintain a sense of humor and perspective, more so than the average 22-year-old facing an unexpected fight for his life. This Thanksgiving, as the NHL celebrates Hockey Fights Cancer Month, he can give thanks for his health, including the fact he's able to lace up the skates when he wasn't sure it would be possible again.

After all, one of the constants in his life and his journey was the sport of hockey.

An Introduction to the Sport

Sabau grew up around sports, as his father, Jamie, was the longtime team photographer for the Blue Jackets and his mother, Diana, worked at various roles in Ohio State's athletic department before becoming the athletic director at Utah State.

Tanner found himself playing such sports as baseball and football as a kid, but he said none really clicked with him. Then, during one of the NHL lockouts, there wasn't as much for Jamie to do, so Tanner wanted to get on the ice and see if hockey could be his thing.

The first issue? Neither one of them could even skate at the time.

"I asked Dad if I could learn how to skate, and neither one of us knew how to," Sabau said. "He would just take me to the Easton Chiller and we would do the free skates. He self-taught himself, and I just held on to the wall. He would help me skate after, and after all that, I was like, 'I really like this. Let's get me into lessons.'"

It helped that the Sabaus enlisted the help of Lee Harris, the Blue Jackets skating consultant who works with everyone from the AAA program to the NHL squad. As Sabau got better at skating, he climbed up

the ladder of local hockey, going from house leagues to travel hockey all the way to the Ohio AAA Blue Jackets.

He finished up competitive hockey playing for the Prowler Hockey Association, the Ohio Scholastic Hockey League squad for the southeastern high schools in Columbus, including Pickerington and Reynoldsburg. After that, he joined the Chiller adult leagues, as the hockey bug simply just doesn't go away for most.

"I was bummed to be done with it, the competitiveness," he said. "Being able to play now with them is great. You can play forever. We just had a guy on our team that was like 70 years old who just retired from his job and still playing with us. It's amazing. I'd love to be able to do that."

But in spring of this year, Sabau had to leave the ice after his cancer diagnosis. He spent months unsure if he'd ever be able to play again, before doctors recently gave him the OK to get back to skating.

When he first heard the words no one wants to hear, Sabau's mind immediately went to the sport he loves.

"I remember the day I got diagnosed, I was supposed to have a game, and I was like, 'I'm going to go to the game. I need something to take my mind off of it,'" he said. "I was in a bit of denial. But somehow, I don't know if it was the time change or something because it was in March, but I input the game on my calendar wrong. I ended up being an hour late, so I ended up missing the game.

"But that worked out well because the next day I had a meeting with my doctors, and they were like, 'You can't play hockey. You can't have any contact in that area.'"

A Stunning Diagnosis

Perhaps fittingly, hockey had a hand in Sabau realizing he had cancer.

Last fall, he first noticed an unusual bump on his leg, something he thought might be a lingering bruise from a rec league game. With a full schedule including pursuit of his degree in aerospace engineering at Ohio State, he kept putting off getting it checked, much to the chagrin of his then-girlfriend and now fiancée Kirsten.

Then, in January, he was playing in a game when he turned the wrong way in the neutral zone and collided with another player. Fearing he had a concussion, Sabau made an appointment the next day to get checked out at Ohio State's student health center. He was all clear on concussion symptoms, but while he was there, he asked the doctor to take a look at the issue with his leg.

"I was like, 'OK, cool. If we have some extra time, can you take a look at this bump on my leg?'" Sabau said. "I roll up my pant leg and I show her and she feels it. Immediately, she goes, 'I'm more concerned about this bump than if you have a concussion.' I was like, 'Oh boy, that's not good.'"

He was quickly scheduled for an X-ray, which proved inconclusive. Doctors thought the bump might be a lingering calcification from a previous injury, but he was scheduled for an MRI, which showed a large, circular lump on his leg.

Sabau was then referred for a biopsy, and along the way, he noticed something that sounded strange at the time but proved prescient. As doctors reviewed his tests, they kept saying there was no reason to panic, but the word cancer kept popping up in their discussions.

"I was talking to Dad one time, saying, 'I don't know why they were talking to me as though I was a 21-year-old with cancer, but nothing has been diagnosed yet,'" he said. "All the doctors saw (the scans) and they wrote 'inconclusive evidence,' but they were probably like, this kid has cancer. Now I'm like, 'That's why they were talking to me like this.' They just needed to get the biopsy to know what's going on."

When the tests came back, it showed one of the rarest forms of cancer, an aggressive chondrosarcoma found most often in young adults. The treatments would have to match the cancer in terms of aggressiveness, and on March 6 – two days before his 22nd birthday – Sabau found out the news he'd be starting chemotherapy within the next two weeks.

A Months-Long Battle

As Sabau noted, it was probably a good thing he didn't go to his hockey game that first night, and doctors immediately went to work. There's no set treatment for mesenchymal chondrosarcoma, with some combination of surgery, chemotherapy and radiation the line of attack depending on how the tumor responds to the therapy.

After four rounds of chemo, scans showed the tumor hadn't grown but hadn't shrunk, either, so doctors decided he would need radiation. His 25 sessions were crammed into a month of treatments, but follow-up scans showed the same thing – the tumor was still around the same size, meaning surgery would be the next option.

The good news came after the procedure, which showed that not only were there clear margins, the tumor was in 100 percent necrosis.

"Everyone was ecstatic because that rarely happens for something like this, especially because it wasn't shrinking," Sabau said. "For it to come back 100 percent dead, we must have done something right, so that was wonderful to hear."

Through the entire process, Sabau had the athlete's attitude of taking everything one day at a time, and he was able to establish a routine that helped him get through treatments. A big part of it was school – Sabau stayed on track academically and completed his undergraduate degree at Ohio State in May. He was at the James Cancer Hospital for inpatient treatment on campus at OSU the day of the commencement ceremony in Ohio Stadium, but Brutus Buckeye dropped by his room and one of his professors delivered his degree.

After surgery, he still had some chemotherapy sessions to complete, and this fall, he received a clean bill of health, with scans scheduled every few months to make sure the cancer doesn't return. Looking back, it's still hard to believe everything that happened.

"Still, there's times I'm just in the car by myself, and I'm like, 'Wow, I'm a 22-year-old who just went through cancer. That's crazy,'" he said. "Right when I got diagnosed, I talked to the doctor and he left, and I was just freaking out. I was looking in the mirror talking to myself and was like, 'Oh my God, I have cancer.' I would have never fathomed that it could happen."

Community Support

For many who go through cancer, one of most heartening aspects of the battle is the support that almost immediately materializes.

It was no different for Sabau, who quickly started to get messages from people he hadn't heard from in quite some time. That was especially true in the hockey community, and the Prowler Hockey Association even organized a fundraiser to help the Sabau family offset his medical bills.

"That was the crazy thing for me," he said. "Going through hockey and playing hockey, you get to know a lot of people. That's probably the thing I like best about the hockey community is you become friends with all these people you've played with."

“That really just came out when I got diagnosed, is all these people I met throughout my life, no matter if it was a close friend or a passerby, all of them came out to help support me in any way they can. That felt great, and it was really nice to know there are people out there to help you.”

Sabau isn't fully back on the hockey rink yet, as though he has skated a few times, he is still working his way back to 100 percent. He hopes to rejoin a Chiller league once the new session starts after the first of the year, with the new pads in tow.

Through his entire journey, Sabau was able to keep perspective and keep on fighting. While he wouldn't want to go through it again, he's been able to take some memorable experiences from the toughest time in his life.

“It's not an experience I'd ever want to live again, but I'm almost glad I did it,” he said. “I'm not glad in a sense that I wanted to go through it, but I got so much out of it, just knowledge wise and meeting new people and the community I had a chance to meet. It made the experience better. That was a good outcome.”

[BlueJackets.com / Voronkov finding a role that matches his size for Blue Jackets](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- November 28, 2024

For a full 10 seconds, it looked like men against boys during Saturday's Blue Jackets game vs. the Carolina Hurricanes.

The man? Dmitri Voronkov. The hulking Blue Jackets wing collected the rebound of Kirill Marchenko's shot with 8:24 left on the clock in the third period, then played a game of keepaway against Carolina's Shayne Gostisbehere.

First, Voronkov grabbed the puck and curled behind the net. As Gostisbehere closed, Voronkov shrugged him off, spun away and drifted toward the corner, then turned to the veteran defenseman as if to say, "come and get it."

As Gostisbehere closed on Voronkov in the corner, the CBJ forward curled back behind the net with the puck still on his stick. Gostisbehere closed and tried to shove Voronkov off of the puck, to little avail; the Blue Jacket finally skated out on the right side of the net and sent a centering pass back to Marchenko with 8:14 on the clock.

Moments later, Marchenko was clipped by a high stick that gave the Blue Jackets a four-minute power play while trailing 4-3, a golden opportunity set up by Voronkov's innate ability to use his 6-5, 227-pound frame to its fullest capabilities.

"He's big and he's heavy, weight-wise," said CBJ defenseman Jack Johnson, a big veteran himself who has had his share of battles with Voronkov in practice. "If you're strong on your stick and you can tripod yourself, those guys are hard to move. You either have to be strong enough to do it, or you have to try to outsmart him. Guys like him are a handful, no question.

"Good on him for recognizing his strengths as a player and hanging on to pucks down low because that's taxing on other teams. Even if nothing comes of it, teams have to exert themselves to play defense, so they don't have enough energy to play offense."

Voronkov is good for more than just puck possession, though. The 24-year-old second-year NHLer has scored in three straight games for the Blue Jackets, and they aren't the typical netfront battle goals you might expect for one of the biggest players in the NHL.

Voronkov has scored twice on breakaways in the last three games, tallying against Boston and Tampa Bay, the latter with an excellent wrist shot that sailed by the glove of goalie Jonas Johansson. And then in the game against Carolina, Voronkov was at the top of the crease on the power play to tap a perfect pass from Kent Johnson past the outstretched leg of goalie Pyotr Kochetkov.

"He's a smart guy," fellow Russian and linemate Kirill Marchenko said. "He finds good spots on the ice. He is ready to play on one of the first lines. He can create offense, and he can score in different ways. It's good for him, good for us, good for our line.

"He's a really smart, really skilled guy, and we try to help him. Every guy on our line does a different job, and I think we have become really good together."

The stats would agree. According to MoneyPuck.com, in the seven games since the trio of Voronkov, Marchenko and Sean Monahan has been put together, they've averaged 66.1 percent of the expected goals at 5-on-5 while outscoring opponents 7-1.

“We have a chemistry for the past year; we played together during the World (Junior) Championships,” Marchenko said of Voronkov. “I feel him. We have a good chemistry. Everybody knows on our line what we have to do for our best play. I really like this line, and I think it’s really hard to play against us.”

It’s that type of chemistry that head coach Dean Evason was hoping for when he put the trio together, with Voronkov’s size and skill complementing the do-it-all mentality of Monahan and Marchenko’s excellent shot. But Evason sees a chance for even more out of Voronkov, who has a 5-2-7 line in 11 games after missing the start of the season with an upper body injury.

“He’s a big man and he has a skill set,” Evason said. “We’re challenging him to play big every night, to be physical, to be in peoples’ faces. He’s committed to get to the net. There’s no issues there. He wants to be in front of the net. We talk about dirty areas and stuff, he doesn’t care about that. He’s getting there.

“But we need him to have a little bit of pushback when teams are pushing against us. He’s done that the last little while, and obviously he’s having success.”

Coming off an 18-goal rookie season that earned him votes for the Calder Trophy, Voronkov is solidifying himself as a unique player who can help the Blue Jackets win games. For those that know him, it’s a testament to his hard work – including an intense summer of work that helped him shed extra weight and get in better condition – and his trust in his ability.

“It’s good for him,” Yegor Chinakhov said. “He’s a good guy and a good hockey player. I like to see him smile every time when he scores.”

[BlueJackets.com / Fantilli scores 2, Blue Jackets defeat Flames](#)

By Craig Merz- November 30, 2024

COLUMBUS -- Adam Fantilli scored twice when the Columbus Blue Jackets defeated the Calgary Flames 5-2 at Nationwide Arena on Friday to extend their point streak to five games.

Kirill Marchenko had a goal and two assists, Zach Werenski had a goal and an assist, and Dmitri Voronkov had two assists for the Blue Jackets (10-9-3), who are 4-0-1 in their past five games. Elvis Merzlikins made 27 saves.

"Last year, we went on that bit of a losing skid," Fantilli said. "You never want to get used to losing and having a bit of a bit of a winning culture in here, and how much fun we have with each other and how tight of a group we have, it makes it way more enjoyable to come to the rink every day."

Blake Coleman and Nazem Kadri scored, and Dustin Wolf made 29 saves for the Flames (12-8-4), who are 0-1-1 after a four-game winning streak.

"I thought we were a lazier group tonight and not overly pleased with our game," Flames coach Ryan Huska said. "We didn't have a lot of guys at their best today."

Fantilli put Columbus ahead 1-0 at 11:56 of the first period with a shot from the left circle to end a 13-game goal drought.

"We talked about us playing faster than we did the other night," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said of the 4-3 overtime loss to the Montreal Canadiens on Wednesday. "And we did that. Not necessarily the start but the whole thought process was to play fast. There was some physicality in the game, and we held our own, stuck up for each other, and that's the right thing to do."

Kent Johnson made it 2-0 at 16:42. He skated down the right wing on a 2-on-1 and faked a pass to Cole Sillinger before scoring inside the far post.

Johnson has at least a point (five goals, seven assists) in all eight games he's played. He missed 14 games with a shoulder injury.

"The first period was awful. The second period was awful. The third a push," Calgary defenseman Rasmus Andersson said. "Just not good enough. ... We have to be better on the road."

Werenski scored at 4:43 of the second period to make it 3-0 and extend his point streak to seven games (14 points; five goals, nine assists). After Marchenko couldn't stuff the puck at the left post, Werenski got to the loose puck for his eighth goal.

The game was feisty and physical.

"Everybody gets more into it when there's an edge and it becomes a little bit more personal," Fantilli said. "Guys go out there and finish their checks a little bit more."

Coleman made it 3-1 at 14:59. A shot by Andersson went off Merzlikins and Coleman was in front to put in the rebound. He has five goals.

"Every guy needs to be better tomorrow," Coleman said. "It's one of those things where you look inside and see what you did and change up whatever you need to do to be better from the draw."

Fantilli upped the lead to 4-1 at 4:46 of the third period, completing a 2-on-1 by one-timing a pass from Marchenko for his fifth goal. Fantilli came out of the box to join the rush after serving a roughing minor to Merzlikins.

Kadri made it 4-2 with a power-play goal at 11:00 on a snap shot between the circles.

Marchenko scored into an empty net at 18:20 for the 5-2 final.

“We're definitely going in the right direction,” Blue Jackets forward Mathieu Olivier said. “We're still missing some big pieces, but everyone that's playing is doing a really good job, and we've just got to find ways to win every night. That's what we're doing right now.

“Winning is way more fun. Ask anyone, they'll tell you.”

NOTES: Werenski tied the Blue Jackets record for longest point streak by a defenseman set by Bryan Berard (2005-06) and Jaroslav Spacek (2002-03)... Voronkov has seven points (three goals, four assists) in a five-game point streak. ... Johnson has six points (three goals, three assists) in his past four games. ... Flames forward Justin Kirkland left the game after two shifts in the first period with a lower-body injury. There was no update. ... Wolf had an assist on the Kardi goal. Both of his NHL assists have come this season.

[BlueJackets.com / Winning Thoughts: Blue Jackets come together to beat Flames](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- November 30, 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 5, FLAMES 2

1. After the Blue Jackets' latest win over a quality opponent, Mathieu Olivier said something you could describe as interesting after the game.

Perhaps we're drawing a little bit too much attention into this, but the big CBJ wing was asked about the 3-0-1 homestand the Blue Jackets just put in the books when he dared mention the P-word.

"Now, we're a little over .500, but we're pushing for the playoffs here," Olivier said after the Blue Jackets improved to 10-9-3. "We have a lot of work to do. This is the time of year teams separate from others, and this is where we have to bear down and keep going here."

The game was the 22nd of 82 on the year for Columbus, which means there are still 60 contests to play. There's a lot of hockey left between now and April, but Olivier mentioning the postseason perhaps shows what the Blue Jackets think they have in the locker room.

We'll make a caveat here. Every NHL player reports for the season expecting to be on one of the 16 of 32 teams to play postseason hockey. No matter if the prognosticators say you'll win the Stanley Cup or finish 32nd, everyone goes into the season with the goal in mind that they'll be playing for the big trophy at the end of the campaign.

The win over Calgary moved Columbus, in terms of point percentage, into the eighth and final spot in the Eastern Conference race, so perhaps Olivier was on the right track there.

Again, there's a lot of hockey to be played, but we've noticed something about this Blue Jackets team throughout this season.

There's a quiet belief that this team belongs, that it has a collection of players that can stick in this race for the long haul. It's not boastful, but the Blue Jackets have set a goal and they're doing what they can to get there.

And on Friday afternoon, they showed why they believe that. The scorers scored – Adam Fantilli tallied twice, while the Blue Jackets got goals from Kent Johnson, Zach Werenski and Kirill Marchenko – while everyone else played their role. That includes three fights on the evening, two by Olivier and one by defenseman Jake Christiansen, who had exactly zero professional scraps to his record before Friday.

Add in a solid outing from Elvis Merzlikins and the Blue Jackets did what they had to do to down one of the top teams in the Western Conference thus far.

"It feels like it's just team unity through the whole thing," Olivier said postgame.

2. Speaking of Olivier, he showed again why he might be the toughest customer in the NHL.

The 27-year-old wing has told anyone who would listen this year that he's not just a set of fists, and he's proved it by tying for second so far on the squad with seven goals on the campaign.

But those fists ... there might not be another pair like them in the league.

Olivier dropped the gloves twice in this one, first when Martin Pospisil took issue with an Olivier hit in the second period and then later in the frame when Ryan Lomberg wanted to further adjudicate what had happened earlier.

For anyone who thought the teams would sing “Kumbaya” in this rare afternoon start, that was quickly dispelled in the middle frame.

“I’m never one to think a fight’s a bad thing,” Olivier said postgame.

Based on the reaction of the 17,000-plus in Nationwide Arena, it’s clear many would agree.

Olivier’s first bout came just after the midway point of the middle frame, as Calgary defenseman Joel Hanley went into the corner to play the puck; Olivier finished his check but sent Hanley hard into the boards, and Pospisil met him in the neutral zone to drop the gloves, setting off a massive brouhaha.

After that tilt, Olivier skated by the Calgary bench and let them know he’d welcome any other challengers. Once Olivier was out of the box late in the period, Lomberg obliged in a scrap that certainly showed off the CBJ wing’s skills in that area.

As Olivier skated to the CBJ bench after the tilt, he stretched his arms wide and pumped up the Nationwide Arena crowd, which responded in turn.

“I blacked out,” Olivier said of that moment. “Sorry I don’t have a better answer for you. I heard the Stone Cold music and I blacked out.”

His teammates thoroughly enjoyed the display, something Adam Fantilli confirmed postgame.

“You guys see him out there,” Fantilli said. “He might be the scariest guy on the ice in the league. I’m not gonna lie. I was telling him he should call out Jake Paul when he came in for media.”

Head coach Dean Evason said he understands and approves of why that part of the game has taken a backseat over the years. But he said there are certain moments when players have to stick up for themselves, and Olivier did just that.

“The most important thing is the guys are sticking together,” Evason said. “I’m not encouraging that we’re fighting every night, but it’s just that we’re together. It happens.”

The reviews were equally as strong for Christiansen, who chose to answer the bell when Pospisil asked early in the second after a good, clean hit by the CBJ defenseman. Christiansen was at the end of a nearly two-minute shift and had never dropped the gloves in his professional career, but he stood in with Pospisil in a bout that included as much grappling as anything else.

“I probably can’t express how much I like it,” Evason said when asked about that situation. “It is part of the game, and Christy is a hockey player. A situation happened that he was put in a spot to defend himself, and he did.”

And if there were any questions about how that was received in the locker room, those were answered when Christiansen received the donkey hat given to the player of the game from his teammates.

“That was great,” Fantilli said.

“I thought Christy did a hell of a job,” Olivier said. “He didn’t need to do that at all. His hit was clean, and he was at the end of a shift. And he did. He stood in there. He did a good job. That’s what we want to build here.”

3. As for Fantilli, you could tell how much it meant to him to get back on the score sheet.

The second-year center had said all the right things, but when you don't score a goal for more than a month (his previous tally was Oct. 28) and you're used to being someone counted on for offensive production, it can be difficult mentally.

But Fantilli busted out in a big way against the Flames, starting the scoring in the first period and then adding an insurance marker in the third for the second two-goal game of his NHL career.

"Pretty huge," he said when asked about the size of the monkey that came off his back with the first goal. "I was definitely starting to think about it a little bit. Just glad to get it off."

The opening goal wasn't exactly a thing of beauty, but it got the job done. With the Blue Jackets late in a power play, Fantilli took the puck at the left point and skated it down the wall when afforded the time you might get on the man advantage. When he got to the hashmarks, he threw the puck at the net, where it went off the glove of goalie Dustin Wolf and clattered into the net.

James van Riemsdyk was at the front of the net and it appeared he might have gotten a tip on the shot, but in the end, it was Fantilli's goal.

"When they're not going in, you have to try everything," Fantilli said. "That ended up going in. I'm grateful. I thought it was Riemer's for a little bit, so it ended up being mine, so it's great."

By the time he finished off a third-period 2-on-1 by making no mistake on a perfect feed from Kirill Marchenko, Fantilli was fully back on the score sheet. That part doesn't mean a ton to Evason, but he was happy to see the No. 3 pick in the 2023 draft finally get a pair in the net because he deserved it based on his overall play.

"He's been committed to doing the right things in the right areas," Evason said. "OK, has he sacrificed maybe a little bit of risky offensive play to be a good, defensive, sound player? Maybe. But we know in the long run, he knows in the long run, if he continues to play like he has played literally all year – he's had some learning curves, but if he plays the right way defensively and sound in all areas, the scoring will come. It came tonight."

[BlueJackets.com / Waddell happy to add Hunt, draft picks in deal with Wild](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- December 1, 2024

Don Waddell has never been afraid to make a trade, it just has to be the right one.

Saturday, he finally got an offer he couldn't refuse for David Jiricek.

Since the No. 6 overall pick in the 2022 NHL Draft was sent to AHL Cleveland last week, teams around the NHL had asked Waddell about the defenseman's availability. The Blue Jackets general manager said Jiricek never requested a trade, but it appeared both sides got to a point where they felt like a fresh start made sense.

Waddell still had to find the right move, and it finally came together Saturday. The Blue Jackets sent Jiricek and a fifth-round draft pick to Minnesota for defenseman Daemon Hunt and four picks, including a conditional first-round choice in the 2025 draft.

"If there's a deal that makes sense for the team and makes us better, then it's something I have to look at," Waddell said. "Everybody was aware of the situation. Teams started making offers. I told David's representation that I'm not making a trade for the sake of making a trade, I'm making a trade if we can help the Columbus Blue Jackets. We felt we got to that point today and we were able to make that deal."

Hunt was assigned to Cleveland after the deal, but it's fair to say it wouldn't be a surprise if he sees minutes for the Blue Jackets this season. The 22-year-old left-shot defenseman has played in 13 NHL games – one this season – for Minnesota but was one of the Wild's last cuts of training camp.

A native of Brandon, Manitoba, and the former captain of the Moose Jaw Warriors of the WHL, Hunt was a third-round pick of the Wild in the 2020 draft. The 6-1, 201-pounder has spent most of the past two seasons with Iowa of the AHL, totaling five goals and 40 points in 110 games those two years.

"I've known the player for several years, and our scouts have watched him," Waddell said. "Everybody feels that he's ready to make that next step, whether it's today or next month or whenever. He's played some games in the NHL, but he has the skill, the composure."

"As we've said, these young D, it takes time because it's just such a hard position, but we feel like that if we need him right now, he'd be ready to play. We'll see how things play out here, but I'm sure at some point he'll get a chance to play."

Hunt already has a pair of interesting CBJ ties, including playing with fellow Monsters defenseman Denton Mateychuk in Moose Jaw (Mateychuk would go on to follow Hunt as the Warriors' captain). He is also the second cousin of longtime CBJ forward Matt Calvert, who is now his agent.

Hunt also won't need much introduction to Dean Evason, as the Blue Jackets head coach was in Minnesota before coming to Columbus. When Hunt made his NHL debut a season ago in a five-game stint with the Wild, Evason was behind the bench.

"He's steady," Evason said. "He's put up numbers when he was younger in junior, which a lot of guys do, and he's a steady defenseman. He moves the puck very well, skates well, plays a hard game. I liked the games that he was up. I communicated with the coach in Iowa, and he's really liked his game this year, so I'm looking forward to having him in our organization."

Waddell said he also was pleased with the haul of draft picks acquired in the deal. Columbus now has a pair of first-round picks in the upcoming draft and eight selections overall, as well as 10 choices in the 2026 draft and nine in 2027.

Waddell has never been afraid to stockpile selections, as in Carolina, he made 12 draft picks in 2019 and 13 in 2021. Not only is it good to have more choices, Waddell said, it can give you flexibility to acquire players each year at draft.

“In all my years at the draft, there’s always players available, but you need assets to be able to get those players,” Waddell said. “If you only have four or five picks, you hate to trade those picks because your scouts work all year for that reason, to draft players. You need players coming in the pipeline, but when you have multiple picks, especially some high-end picks, it could present opportunities to make your team better today.

“And the more darts you can throw at the dartboard, the better chance to get a bullseye.”

[BlueJackets.com / Monahan, Blue Jackets top Blackhawks to extend point streak](#)

By Bruce Miles- December 2, 2024

CHICAGO -- Sean Monahan had a goal and an assist, and the Columbus Blue Jackets extended their point streak to six games with a 6-3 victory against the Chicago Blackhawks at United Center on Sunday.

"We stuck with it," Monahan said. "We're finding ways to win, I guess different ways. We're starting to enjoy that, and you get on a roll, and things are clicking right now."

Zach Werenski had two assists to push his point streak to eight games, and Kirill Marchenko and Kent Johnson scored for the Blue Jackets (11-9-3), who are 5-0-1 in their past six games. Elvis Merzlikins made 28 saves.

The point streak by Werenski (five goals, 11 assists) is the longest by a defenseman in Blue Jackets history.

"Nothing really, to be honest," Werenski said of what the streak means to him. "Just happy we got the win. Great start to our (five-game) road trip. We're going out west now, so it definitely makes it better getting a win."

"We just played simple. We played hard. Obviously, we had a few power-play goals (against) that we'd like to clean up. We just played a steady game."

Connor Bedard had a goal and an assist, and Nick Foligno also scored for the Blackhawks (8-14-2), who have lost two in a row and three of four. Petr Mrazek made 30 saves.

"One of the worst goals-against outings for us this year, but just a team like this, we talked about them being an odd-man rush team and that's what we really need to stay away from and make them work for anything," Chicago coach Luke Richardson said. "I think we gave them the game they wanted."

The Blackhawks scored all three of their goals on the power play.

"I mean sure, it's a good thing, I guess," defenseman Alex Vlasic said. "But it doesn't really mean anything. Yeah, we've been feeling good about it, but still losing games, so it doesn't really help."

Bedard put Chicago up 1-0 with a power-play goal at 2:59 of the first period. Ryan Donato picked up the puck in the slot and made a backhand pass to Bedard, who scored from the right face-off circle.

"He definitely looks more like himself the last few games, but on the defensive side of things, we have to be better and so does he," Richardson said. "He can't score one and give up two, right? Same as anybody else on the team."

Ivan Provorov tied it 1-1 at 4:27, taking a drop pass from Monahan in the slot and putting a wrist shot past Mrazek with Dmitri Voronkov providing a screen in front.

Johnson gave Columbus a 2-1 lead at 11:23 on a one-timer from the right circle off a pass from Damon Severson.

"It's a great pass by (Severson)," said Johnson, who has six goals, tying his total from last season. "I just got to hit the net. He had a great play, sold the goalie. I think I could shoot a one-T even when I first got in the League like that if I got a pass like that, so it was a great play by him."

Craig Smith tied it 2-2 at 3:00 of the second period on the power play, tipping in a shot by Taylor Hall.

Monahan put the Blue Jackets back ahead 3-2 at 4:50 with a wrist shot from the left face-off dot after taking a pass from Sean Kuraly along the left-wing boards.

Dante Fabbro extended it to 4-2 at 3:08 of the third period when he skated up the right wing and put a wrist shot past Mrazek's glove.

With the Blackhawks on a 5-on-3 power play, Nick Foligno cut it to 4-3 at 8:08, tipping in a feed from Teuvo Teravainen.

Marchenko made it 5-3 at 10:52 on a shot from the slot at 10:52.

Voronkov scored an empty-net goal at 18:34 for the 6-3 final.

"We kept battling," Columbus coach Dean Evason said. "We had some adversity, some penalties in different situations and some things that probably could have rattled our group, but didn't. So, yeah, it was a good win in that regard. I think we've been pretty resilient in that area."

NOTES: The Blue Jackets' point streak is their longest since Jan. 18-29, 2021 (seven games). ... Johnson has recorded a point in each of his first nine personal games to start the season (six goals, six assists). The only other player in Blue Jackets history to record points in each of their first nine-plus games of a season is Ryan Johansen (10 games in 2014-15) ... Columbus forward Yegor Chinakhov is not with the Blue Jackets to begin their road trip because of an upper-body-injury. Columbus recalled forward Mikael Pyyhtia from Iowa of the American Hockey League. Pyyhtia did not play against the Blackhawks.

The Hockey Writers / 3 Things Blue Jackets Are Thankful for This Year

By Jonathon Robson- November 28, 2024

With American Thanksgiving on Thursday and about a quarter of the NHL season over, this felt like a good time to reflect on what the Columbus Blue Jackets have done so far. While this season has certainly been a bit of a roller coaster, there have been plenty of positive things for the team and fans to be thankful for. The team as a whole has certainly surprised many who expected them to be on pace for a last-place finish.

The Blue Jackets currently are sitting at 20th overall for points percentage, and are fifth in the Metropolitan Division. They also have three players who are averaging a point per game in Sean Monahan, Kirill Marchenko, and Zach Werenski. They can even be thankful for the improved play of Elvis Merzlikins, who has looked much better this season. With those things in mind, here are the three biggest things the Blue Jackets and their fans can be thankful for.

New GM and Coach

The Blue Jackets went into the previous offseason with a massive question: who would be the new general manager? After they fired Jarmo Kekalainen during the season, there was lots of uncertainty about who they would bring in. A rebuilding roster needed an experienced leader to help assess what was working and what wasn't. The Blue Jackets found the perfect candidate in Don Waddell. Waddell had been the GM for the Atlanta Thrashers and Carolina Hurricanes, turning the latter into a perennial powerhouse in a smaller hockey market. That type of experience and success has been the perfect fit so far in Columbus. He quickly worked through various issues on the roster, highlighted by trading Patrik Laine before the season started after Laine had requested a trade. His fresh eyes have been a welcome change this season. But perhaps his most important change was to bring in Dean Evason.

One of the early decisions Waddell had to make was decide on the fate of previous Blue Jackets' head coach Pascal Vincent. Vincent had only been the coach for one season, which had started with the debacle of the hiring and firing of Mike Babcock. While it may not have been fair to completely judge Vincent on that one season, it was clear to Waddell that a change needed to be made. Waddell recognized the need for an experienced head coach to take over the reins, and after a thorough search, landed on former Minnesota Wild coach Dean Evason. Evason had spent three full seasons as the head coach of the Wild, going 147-77-21 with a roster that was lacking in high-end talent.

After having first-time NHL head coaches in Vincent and Brad Larsen the previous three seasons, it has been a welcome change to have a more experienced voice behind the bench. Waddell and Evason have definitely played a major role in this club performing at the level they have so far this season, and look to be setting the Blue Jackets up for long-term success.

Sean Monahan

The Blue Jackets have had lots of weaknesses recently, but one major problem that has existed since they joined the league is their lack of a top-end center. Recent seasons have seen captain Boone Jenner holding down the job, but most would agree that it was quite the stretch for him. Waddell spoke before the free agency window that he didn't expect to be very active in signing many players that way. Indeed, the only major addition that the Blue Jackets added through free agency was center Sean Monahan. Monahan was signed to a five-year contract worth \$27.5 million, and it immediately filled a glaring need for this team. While injuries derailed his career for a few years, he had a bounce-back season in 2023-24 and finished with 26 goals and 33 points.

So far this season, Monahan has been exactly what the Blue Jackets were hoping he would be. Through 20 games, he has seven goals and 13 assists. He and linemate Kirill Marchenko have stayed productive as the top line, even as the left wing position has rotated around some, most recently being occupied by Dmitri Voronkov. Monahan has not only been important in terms of his play, but also as a way to take pressure off of Adam Fantilli. With the injury to Jenner, Fantilli would have been the most likely candidate to have to step into the role of the top center. While he is certainly very talented and will likely take that role sooner rather than later, it is helpful for his development to not be thrust into that position. Monahan gives Fantilli the opportunity to play in more advantageous situations and continue to develop his game. Just look at fellow sophomore Connor Bedard to see the frustrations that can emerge when a young player is thrust into the 1C position without help and support.

The Stadium Series Game

The upcoming Stadium Series game on March 1 is an event that many felt would never come. Ever since it began in 2014, fans in Columbus have been begging the NHL to bring an outdoor game to Ohio Stadium. Various excuses have been given as to why that wouldn't work, including the pipes not being winterized. But finally, in February 2024, it was announced that the NHL would be bringing the outdoor game to Columbus. At the time, this felt like a huge victory for the Blue Jackets. It indicated both improved relations with The Ohio State University, as well as more potential respect around the league.

Blue Jackets fans often feel like an afterthought to most of the NHL, so getting this game was a high point in an otherwise forgettable season. The Blue Jackets and their opponent, the Detroit Red Wings, may still be competing for a playoff spot by the Stadium Series game, which will only add to the excitement. No matter how the rest of the 2024-25 season goes for the Blue Jackets, playing at Ohio Stadium will undoubtedly be a major highlight that will be a great time for players and fans alike.

Lots to Be Thankful For

Given the hardships on and off the ice this team has gone through in recent years, it is understandable why many might have had a hard time finding much positive coming into this season. But the Blue Jackets have surprised many and been genuinely fun to watch, which isn't necessarily something that has been true for a few years now. They have many things heading in the right direction this season, even if the playoffs don't happen. They will most likely continue to have lots of ups and downs, but the future continues to look bright for this team.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Kent Johnson Discusses Strong Start to 2024-25 Season

By Mark Scheig- November 28, 2024

What a difference one offseason can make.

For Kent Johnson, truer words have never been spoken. Coming off a brutal end to his 2023-24 season thanks to injury, he spent the offseason in rehab while placing an emphasis on getting stronger.

It didn't take general manager Don Waddell very long to see what kind of player Johnson was. Despite not having the best first couple of seasons in the NHL, the Blue Jackets identified him as an important part of their core moving forward. The three-year contract he signed was proof of that.

This reinvigorated Johnson on multiple levels. The belief in him coupled with a fresh start under new leadership has translated into a hot start to his 2024-25 season.

Although Johnson is just getting back from an upper-body injury, he's making a big impact every time he steps on the ice. In his six games, he has nine points and has at least a point in every game this season.

But it's his work in the offseason and off the ice that has really helped position himself for early success in the new season. Johnson stopped by this week to discuss his great start to the 2024-25 season.

The tape now shows he is a much different player than what we've seen before.

What Stands Out

In watching back Johnson's shifts, four key themes stand out. He's never been more confident. He's never been stronger. He's never been faster. And his hockey IQ is shining.

Johnson admitted that his confidence comes from a combination of things. He's no longer afraid to make a mistake now. That's been a key point early on under head coach Dean Evason.

"Ice time and getting better in the summer," Johnson said about his soaring confidence. "I think I'm a better player than last year. I still had confidence last year in my game. But if you turn one puck over and you're not going to play, you really can't take risks offensively. You have another role like last year, my role most of the year was more of a third liner."

Johnson came into camp noticeably stronger. The one thing he was able to do while in rehab was focus on getting stronger. He came in at 180 pounds but you could see the work he put in. That along with increased quickness has helped him get off to this great start.

"I think I got better balance on the puck and a little quicker. Definitely a lot quicker actually," Johnson said. "I was a bit more worried to see about the explosiveness and getting faster and more balanced than just pure weight. It's helping a lot more."

Another part to Johnson's start was the video work he did with the coaches. In reviewing the tape, they saw opportunities for him to become a more effective player in the offensive zone. They focused on positioning and finding the soft spots on the ice. He's been able to take advantage of that time by becoming a more dangerous player.

"They really broke down my game on video last year," Johnson said. "I think some of the stuff in the offensive zone. I wasn't really going to the spots I wanted to go to and was told to go to the net a lot more and some spots that I as a playmaker wouldn't really want to go to as much. This year, I've been able to go where I want in the offensive zone. That's been a huge thing. And just figuring out watching

the best players in the league where they go without the puck and trying to go there. It's more natural, more than I've done in my whole life. So it's really nice."

The game has also slowed down for Johnson as he continues to gain confidence. He says his increased role has helped him get into the game a lot more than before.

"You're much more in the game and that's the biggest thing," Johnson said. "I think the amount of times I touched the puck this year versus last year at a game is a crazy difference. It's not that I was making bad plays the whole year last year. I think I probably get triple the touches per game at least. So that definitely helps slow the game down when you're playing more and you're playing more with the puck."

The other major difference in Johnson's game this year is his presence on the penalty kill. He had not been used in that role previously. So far, he's doing well and making his presence known.

Johnson scored a key shorthanded goal against the Tampa Bay Lightning that helped his team to an eventual overtime win. He sees opportunity in that role to not only keep pucks out, but go on the attack too.

"When you're on the PK, first and foremost, you're worried about keeping the puck out of your net. But once you have the puck, the best thing to do is make plays if you have time. There's definitely opportunities to go the other way. It's really fun. I love PK'ing."

Johnson couldn't have asked for a better start to the season. He's thriving in an increased role. He's bigger, stronger, faster and more confident than ever. He's also not afraid to make mistakes. He's finally playing in the role that he was always designed to play. That's as an offensive playmaker who is seeing improvement away from the puck too.

Johnson will only get better as he continues to gain experience against the opposition's best players. His hard work coupled with a more defined role that fits his style has contributed to his 1.50 points/game start to the new season. He's having the most fun he's ever had in the NHL and it shows.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Lose to Canadiens on Nick Suzuki's OT Goal

By Mark Scheig- November 28, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets were hoping to jump above hockey .500 going into the U.S. Thanksgiving break. They will have to settle for .500 after an overtime loss.

Canadiens' captain Nick Suzuki scored just 44 seconds into overtime to lift Montreal to a 4-3 win over the Blue Jackets. This game will be remembered from a Blue Jackets' perspective for what was not called prior to the game winner.

Game Recap

The Blue Jackets and Canadiens traded goals in the first period. On just their second shot of the period, Mathieu Olivier beat Cayden Primeau to give the Blue Jackets a 1-0 lead. Zach Werenski's backhanded pass from the corner was perfect and Olivier finished it.

Just under four minutes later, Juraj Slafkovsky scored his first goal in 16 games. Kevin Labanc's back pass in open space turned into an odd-man rush. Slafkovsky took it himself and beat Elvis Merzlikins clean. Shots in the first period were 9-8 Blue Jackets.

The teams traded goals again in the second period. Yegor Chinakhov gave the Blue Jackets a 2-1 lead with a strong finish of an Adam Fantilli pass. But then a special moment took place that tied the game again.

Cole Caufield scored his 13th goal of the season on the power play. The Canadiens' number 13 scored his 13th of the season with 13:26 left on the clock. The goal came at 6:34 of the second. Turns out $6+3+4=13$. As Caufield told the Hockey Writers exclusively postgame, you can't script moments like that.

"I can't tell you I wasn't thinking about that going into this game, in this building in this city," Caufield said. "I know he's looking down. It means a lot to me. It's pretty crazy. You can't write a script like that."

Then for Caufield to score with 13:26 on the clock: "That just says it all right there. You can't even put into words how important that is for everybody that's close to me personally. I feel very honored. That's a special moment."

The second ended with a Zach Werenski fight against Brendan Gallagher. The teams then traded goals in the third period thanks to Emil Heineman and Werenski. That goal gave Werenski the Gordie Howe Hat Trick.

Suzuki then ended the game 44 seconds into overtime. Merzlikins stopped the first one but left a rebound that Suzuki finished. Blue Jackets' coach Dean Evason was very frustrated postgame that there was no penalty right before the winner. Kent Johnson was hauled down with nothing called. The loss snapped the Blue Jackets three-game winning streak but their point streak remains.

The Blue Jackets will play next on Black Friday afternoon against the Calgary Flames. The Canadiens return to action Saturday afternoon at Madison Square Garden against the Rangers.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Acknowledge Concern With Their Goals Against

By Mark Scheig- November 29, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets were hoping to win their fourth consecutive game on Wednesday night against the Montreal Canadiens. Although they were able to force overtime, they couldn't come away with the second point.

Nick Suzuki scored early in overtime to lift the Canadiens to a 4-3 win. While their record going into the Black Friday game against the Calgary Flames is a respectable 9-9-3, the Blue Jackets have an overarching issue that needs addressed.

On Thursday, head coach Dean Evason acknowledged this was an issue they're working to correct. They're allowing too many goals against.

Defense Work in Progress

While the Blue Jackets' offense is amongst the league's best in terms of goals for, they're 29th in the NHL at goals against per game at 3.62. Wednesday night against Montreal, Evason said his team didn't have the same kind of speed they did in their last few outings which were all wins.

"We didn't like our speed in that game," Evason said. "And not necessarily just how we skated, but we didn't play as fast as we have and certainly in the three games prior to that. We were playing a real quick game. We went over the analytics (Thursday morning) and Montreal had a lot of possession time in our offensive zone which historically, they haven't had this year but they did because they beat us to a lot of pucks. So they had first touches and then we struggled to get it off them because we were just a little bit slower."

The Blue Jackets still managed to get a point despite not playing well for long stretches. That's a testament to their ability to put the puck in the net. Zach Werenski's goal in the third period, his 22nd point in 21 games, tied the game. The team is 7th in the NHL in goals for which is helping to offset their leaky defense.

Evason said on Thursday their defense is an area of concern that they're trying to work on.

"We've had some challenges keeping it out of the net," Evason said. "We've got to really dial that in even through this little stretch we've had. We've given up way too many opportunities. It's an area of concern."

"We've worked on it here. We had the two days of practice and we worked on our defensive zone a lot to keep it out of the net. Our PK has struggled a little bit here too because of that. That doesn't help with the goals against. We're making a conscious effort to try to keep it out of our net as much as we're trying to score goals."

The Blue Jackets face a team in the Calgary Flames that are in the opposite boat in terms of their output. They're off to a great start in the standings but they have trouble scoring goals (26th in NHL) while doing a good job preventing goals (7th in NHL.) Friday will provide an interesting test to see if the Blue Jackets can start to show signs of improvement on the defensive end.

Thankful Blue Jackets

Thanksgiving is always a time in the United States when friends and family get together and celebrate with each other the things they are thankful for in life. It's no different for a few members of the Blue Jackets.

We got to ask Werenski, Zach Aston-Reese and James van Riemsdyk what they're most thankful for and if there was a Thanksgiving tradition growing up that they remember and sticks with them to this day. Here is what each had to say.

Werenski

Thankful: "I think it's pretty standard. Family, friends, health, teammates. A lot of things to be thankful for. All my family's healthy so that's the most important thing. I'm very grateful for a lot of things."

Tradition: "Watching the Lions. That's about it to be honest. They hadn't won on Thanksgiving in a couple years, so maybe a little something to prove." Author's note: The Bears certainly helped the Lions late in the game, but the Lions did get it done.

Aston-Reese

Thankful: "Honestly, the opportunity that I've gotten here. It's been quite the journey from a full year in Grand Rapids last year to being in Vegas, not clearing waivers to being here. It's just been really great. It's such a good team. Really tight. There's no egos in here. It's just nice to come in every day. I'm very grateful. I'm thankful to be here."

Tradition: "Just when I was a kid, you'd always get the sparkling grape juice. You think you're drinking wine but it comes in the wine bottle. Have the cool, champagne-like top that you pop off. That was always cool for me. It's either grape or apple."

van Riemsdyk

Thankful: "For me, just my family especially my wife and kids. It's been three teams in three years so that's a lot of moving around, lots of getting the kids settled. A lot of stuff that goes on behind the scenes with my wife, our extended families, my parents, her parents to really help us feel settled and make each place a home. So I'm thankful for that."

Tradition: "Growing up, we'd play a little football, backyard football so that was always fun. And the wishbone. That was always a good one."

I asked van Riemsdyk if any of his wishes ever came true. He said he couldn't remember. "I must not have been wishing high enough for stuff."

Side Dishes

- Black Friday will mark the first meeting between the Blue Jackets and Calgary Flames since the passing of the Gaudreau's. The two franchises will be forever linked. The same two teams play in Calgary next week. The Gaudreau family is expected to be in attendance at the Saddledome.
- Cole Sillinger, who missed Wednesday's game against Montreal with an upper-body injury, will play Friday, Dean Evason said on Thursday. However Yegor Chinakhov is questionable for Friday. He missed practice with Evason saying he was "banged up." We'll see if he can play when Evason speaks around 12:15 P.M.
- One last note on van Riemsdyk. He and his wife hosted 30 or so people including families for Thanksgiving. "It's fun to coordinate stuff like this and get some of the guys together that maybe don't have families here. It should be good."

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Defeat Flames in Fight-Filled Game

By Mark Scheig- November 30, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets and Calgary Flames met on Black Friday afternoon for the first time since the passing of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau. The game itself will be remembered for how physical it was.

Adam Fantilli scored twice to help the Blue Jackets improve to 10-9-3 and over hockey .500 with a 5-2 win. After a bit of a slow start, the game picked up in a major way.

Game Recap

The first period started off slowly with both the Flames and Blue Jackets trying to adjust to a 3 P.M. eastern/1 P.M mountain time start in Columbus. But then Nazem Kadri's holding penalty against Damon Severson opened the door for the Blue Jackets to open the scoring.

Although it wasn't officially a power-play goal, it might as well have been for Fantilli when he opened the scoring exactly two minutes after Kadri's penalty. His shot did not deflect off James van Riemsdyk after several reviews. Postgame, Fantilli admitted his goals Friday were big as he was starting to think about his goal slump.

Just under five minutes later, Kent Johnson made it 2-0. He was left plenty of room and made no mistake beating Dustin Wolf. But then the second period started. With that came the fireworks for the game.

Jake Christiansen laid a clean hit on Andrei Kuzmenko. Martin Pospisil came in and challenged Christiansen. He more than held his own in the scrap. That was just the beginning.

Mathieu Olivier boarded Joel Hanley in which Pospisil took exception. It created a third-man in situation that went uncalled. Dean Evason postgame called that a dangerous situation and lucky there were no injuries created. Then to top it off, Ryan Lomberg challenged Olivier and got the worst of it. The crowd became electric as soon as Olivier left the ice asking them to cheer loudly.

Zach Werenski and Blake Coleman traded goals in the second period to make the score 3-1. Fantilli's second of the game off a great Kirill Marchenko pass made it 4-1. Kadri added a power-play goal to make it 4-2 but then Kirill Marchenko added the empty netter for the 5-2 final.

Elvis Merzlikins stopped 27/29 for the win and was able to help kill a penalty in the third on his own roughing call against MacKenzie Weegar. Wolf stopped 29/33 for the Flames.

The Blue Jackets finished a 3-0-1 homestand and will not practice on Saturday while they travel to Chicago for Sunday's matinee against the Blackhawks. Meanwhile the Flames play Saturday night in Pittsburgh before heading back home to face the Blue Jackets.

The Hockey Writers / Why the Blue Jackets Would Consider Trading Top Prospect David Jiricek

By Nicholas Arnold- November 30, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets have seen a lot of changes over the past several seasons. Four different head coaches, two general managers, and a lot of shuffling through their roster players as they continue to rebuild in the wake of their last playoff appearance in 2020. The team has been a perennial bottom-quartile team, offloading current talent and acquiring future picks and prospects. One could argue that they've bottomed out over the last four seasons. Over that time, they've selected in the top six in each NHL Entry Draft. With those picks, they've added the players they hope to be cornerstone pieces to their future.

Skilled forward Kent Johnson was fifth overall in 2021; big-bodied defender David Jiricek was sixth overall in 2022; future number one center Adam Fantilli was third overall in 2023; and power forward Cayden Lindstrom was fourth in 2024. There is certainly potential for all of those players to make a big difference in the best hockey league in the world. However, there seems to be trouble in the developmental pathway for Jiricek. It could be enough to force a divorce between the 22-year-old and the organization.

How Jiricek and Columbus Have Gotten To This Point

Jiricek was lauded as one of the two best defenders available in the 2022 NHL Draft. He was a standout at that year's World Junior Hockey Championship imposing his will on others with his 6-foot-4 frame. He fell to the Blue Jackets at sixth overall and they brought him over to North America right away. He transitioned to the continent's pro game well, as almost a point-per-game player in his first American Hockey League (AHL) season. It seemed like he was on track to become a key part of the Blue Jackets' blue line the next season, but that didn't end up becoming the case.

Jiricek spent the next season in the proverbial doghouse of head coach Pascal Vincent, who was coaching for results in an attempt to keep his job. He was occasionally scratched, and when he was in the lineup only averaged 14 minutes a night through 43 games. Not the kind of environment a player can develop in. He was again sent down to the AHL and there was some rumbling that he had become unhappy with his opportunity in Columbus. Rumor has it that his aggravation was spurred on because he was sent back to Cleveland after being told by management that he could get an apartment in Columbus – implying he would be a full-time NHLer.

Then, after the firing of general manager Jarmo Kekalainen and Vincent, came the hiring of Don Waddell and Dean Evason and many thought this could be the beginning of a healthier relationship between the two sides. There was a lot of optimism around the organization that Jiricek would get the runway he needed to become the player he's been projected as.

While Waddell had unclogged the logjam that was the right defense position over the last several seasons, Jiricek was still scratched for a majority of the team's first 20 games and only averaged 11 minutes during his six games played. To make matters worse, Waddell claimed right-shot defender Dante Fabbro from the Nashville Predators to take the roster spot that seemingly had been reserved for the young Czech. Following that claim, Jiricek has again been sent to the minors and things seem to have come to a head rather imminently with the organization – based on some reporting from Daily Faceoff's Frank Seravalli.

Although the main knock on Jiricek is his skating, that's an easier skill to be worked on with specialty coaches and the potential for him to blossom into a legitimate top pairing defender is still within reach.

There is no shortage of teams looking for a recent top-ten draft pick who is a big-bodied and right-shot defender, especially one that seems to be ready to break into the NHL right now. You could make a list 31 teams long of potential suitors for the Blue Jackets' Jiricek, should they opt to move on from him.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Trading Jiricek Provides Glimpse Into Future Plans

By Mark Scheig- December 1, 2024

In the National Hockey League, most every player can be had for a price. If an acquiring team is willing to meet that price, trades will happen.

For the Columbus Blue Jackets, they had a price in mind when listening to offers for their prized defensive prospect David Jiricek. Several teams were interested. But it was the Minnesota Wild who stepped up and met the asking price.

In the process, we learned a couple of interesting things about the Blue Jackets including a potential glimpse into their future plans.

Trade Recap

On Saturday afternoon, the Blue Jackets and Wild completed a trade that saw two players and several draft picks involved. Here is the full trade.

- The Blue Jackets received D Daemon Hunt, a 2025 top-5 protected first-round pick (it will transfer to 2026 if it's in the top-5), a 2026 third-round pick (Colorado), a 2026 fourth-round pick (previously Toronto's) and a 2027 second-round pick.
- The Wild received D David Jiricek and a 2025 fifth-round pick.

For now, both Hunt and Jiricek were assigned to the AHL. It's clear what the Wild had in mind. They see they upside of Jiricek and were interested in adding him to an already loaded blue line. If they're able to develop him while working the flaws out of his game, they'll be positioned well for future success.

The question we will consider for the Blue Jackets here is why now? Why were they interested in trading Jiricek now when he's still only 21 and barely beginning to scratch the surface of how good he can be?

Like we said in the beginning, everyone has a price. The Blue Jackets were comfortable making this trade with the return they got.

Glimpse into Future

Hunt will have a role within the Blue Jackets' organization. While he'll start with the Monsters now, he could work his way into the rotation for games in the NHL. He reunites with Denton Mateychuk in Cleveland. Both were teammates back in Moose Jaw.

While the number of picks surely helped to facilitate this trade, it's the 2025 first rounder that the Blue Jackets clearly valued. Here is what GM Don Waddell had to say about the trade. Notice the ending.

"Daemon is a very good, young defenseman and we are excited to welcome him to the Blue Jackets family. In addition to adding a very good prospect, the draft picks we've acquired provide us with valuable assets that we can use to improve our club moving forward. I'd also like to thank David for his contributions during his time with our organization and wish him well."

The Blue Jackets acquired "valuable assets" that they can use to improve the club moving forward. They now own two firsts in the 2025 Draft. Depending on the rest of the season, that number could go to three if they're able to get the return on Ivan Provorov should he be traded by the deadline.

Here's how it provides a potential glimpse into the future. First, they can add significantly to an already loaded prospect pool. Should players be available within those ranges, the Blue Jackets have the means to draft them.

But where this gets interesting is the potential improvement to the roster. The Blue Jackets can now involve themselves in potential trades to acquire NHL players without having to give up their own first rounder. They have significant draft capital and cap space to work with.

Suddenly, their rebuild might not take as long as first thought if the right moves are made with the assets they have.

The Blue Jackets have obvious holes on their roster. Unlike most teams, they have the flexibility to address those holes. They're now positioned to be one of the more active teams of the upcoming offseason.

Looking at this trade from a potential roster improvement lens, the trade makes more sense. Now consider who the Blue Jackets still have in the organization.

Still Have Defensive Depth

Denton Mateychuk currently leads all AHL defensemen in scoring as a rookie. He's three points clear of the next player. He's off to a tremendous start. His rise is one factor that opened the door for the Blue Jackets to make the Jiricek trade.

Monsters head coach Trent Vogelhuber told the Hockey Writers on Saturday that Mateychuk's maturity is what stands out. He's already developing the habits of an experienced NHL veteran at such a young age. It's only a matter of time until he stars in the NHL.

Jiricek is right-handed. The Blue Jackets have right-handed depth in the organization namely in the form of Charlie Elick, their second-round pick from this past draft. There is optimism about what he could eventually become.

Even without Jiricek, the prospect pool remains strong. But the Blue Jackets now have extra flexibility they didn't have before that will allow them to address needs with multiple avenues to do it.

Waddell was interested in trading Jiricek now because the player wasn't ready to step into the NHL. His skating, decision-making and play away from the puck are all a work in progress. Hunt and the draft capital coming back was more valuable to the Blue Jackets at this moment than waiting for Jiricek to hit his stride.

Hence, the trade was completed with both teams getting what they wanted. We now have a glimpse into what the Blue Jackets' future could look like. We'll see which direction they decide to go with their assets. But they now have the means to be a significant player in future trades.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Werenski Catapulting Into Norris Trophy Discussion

By William Espy- December 1, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets have never had a defenseman named as a finalist, let alone win the James Norris Memorial Trophy.

With a strong start to the season, not only offensively but in all aspects of his game, Zach Werenski is quickly catapulting himself into that conversation. If he continues playing like he has, Werenski can become the first Blue Jacket to win the honor. But how sustainable is his start?

Werenski's Offensive Production

Werenski has always found ways to contribute offensively for the Blue Jackets. Last season, he set a career-high in points with 57 in 70 games. This season though, he's simply been on a different level. Through the first 22 games, he's scored eight goals and posted a total of 24 points.

If Werenski continues at this same pace, he'll become only the second defenseman since the turn of the century to have a 30-goal season. Mike Green is the most recent blueliner to accomplish the feat, scoring 31 goals in 68 games for the Washington Capitals during the 2008-09 season. It's hard to imagine that Werenski keeps up that pace, but it's certainly possible. He set his current career-high in goals during the 2019-20 season with 20 in 63 games.

Now that we've talked about goal-scoring, let's discuss Werenski's point totals as a whole. He's currently on pace for 90 points, which would be two points less than Quinn Hughes had when he won the Norris last season. Although his career-high for points is currently 57, Werenski has struggled to play full seasons for the Blue Jackets which often makes his numbers lower than they should be. He's only played a full 82-game season once, which was in 2018-19. In his other seven NHL seasons, Werenski has averaged roughly 57 games per season. Injuries have plagued him over the course of his career. If he wants to walk away with the elite point totals he's shown that he's capable of, he'll need to remain healthy which is easier said than done.

Werenski's Defensive Responsibility

Although it seems that offensive production is the biggest indicator of who will win the Norris Trophy, it seems redundant to say that the biggest responsibility of any defenseman is simply to defend. Werenski has only been on the ice for 14 goals against so far this season, which is phenomenal for a player who is averaging about 26 minutes of ice time per game.

According to Natural Stat Trick, the Blue Jackets' opponents have had 185 scoring chances with Werenski on the ice, 92 of which were considered high-danger chances. This season, the Blue Jackets' goaltenders have struggled mightily, however, that hasn't been the case with Werenski on the ice. His on-ice save percentage currently sits at 93.17%, meaning his goaltenders are making quite a few saves when he's defending. Meanwhile, Elvis Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov's combined overall save percentage comes out to .881. They're essentially making 5% more saves with Werenski on the ice, which shows the impact he's making for the Blue Jackets.

While fans have certainly praised Werenski recently, he has also regularly earned praise from new head coach Dean Evason this season:

As his Gordie Howe hat trick against the Montreal Canadiens showed, Werenski is playing a complete game this season for the Blue Jackets. If he can stay healthy and his level of play doesn't dip, it's difficult to imagine he doesn't become at least the first Norris Trophy finalist in Blue Jackets history.

With that being said, even if Werenski's offensive numbers don't eclipse those of Quinn Hughes and Cale Makar, his all-around play this season could elevate him in the eyes of the voters. It'll be difficult for him to walk away with the trophy given the heavy competition at the top of the league, but it's safe to say that Werenski has entered the conversation.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Open Long Road Trip With 6-3 Win Over Blackhawks

By Mark Scheig- December 2, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets opened their longest road trip of the season by number of games on Sunday in Chicago. They already have more points earned on this trip than they did on their recent Washington and California trip.

Sean Monahan recorded a goal and an assist while Zach Werenski added two assists to help pace the Blue Jackets to a 6-3 win over the Blackhawks. They were able to do this despite taking eight penalties and allowing three power-play goals in the game.

Game Recap

The Blue Jackets' penalty trouble started just 2:38 into the game when James van Riemsdyk tripped Wyatt Kaiser. That turned into Connor Bedard opening the scoring 21 seconds into that power play.

To the Blue Jackets' credit, they didn't let the early Blackhawks' momentum affect them. They were able to gain the lead before the end of the first period.

Ivan Provorov scored his second goal of the season thanks to a well-placed screen by Dmitri Voronkov. Then Kent Johnson answered his friend Bedard's goal with one of his own from his new office, the right circle.

The second period featured the team trading goals just 1:50 apart. Craig Smith converted on a power-play goal to make it 2-2. Then Monahan scored a big goal after a great shift and pass by Sean Kuraly. No matter what the Blackhawks threw at them, the Blue Jackets withstood the storm and continued to push back.

The game was not one of Petr Mrazek's finer performances. Although he made some key saves including denying Johnson's second goal of the game, he allowed a soft goal to Dante Fabbro that ultimately became the game-winning goal.

The Blackhawks scored their third power-play goal of the game thanks to Nick Foligno to cut it to 4-3. That was as close as they would get though.

Kirill Marchenko's top shelf goal extended it to 5-3 before Voronkov hit the empty net to get to the final score of 6-3.

Elvis Merzlikins earned the win stopped 28 of 31. Mrazek made 30 saves in defeat.

The Blue Jackets will now head to Calgary for Tuesday night's rematch with the Flames in what is sure to be an emotional night as the Gaudreau family will be making the trip to the Saddledome. The Blackhawks have a quick turnaround as they play Monday night against the Toronto Maple Leafs north of the border.

1st Ohio Battery / The Columbus Blue Jackets And David Jiricek: A Timeline Of The Last Two Years Paints A Picture Of How We Got Here

By Ed Francis- November 28, 2024

The opinions vary greatly.

"David Jiricek is going to be a star. The Columbus Blue Jackets would be foolish to trade him."

"He stinks. They should move him right now for whatever they can get."

"He clearly wants a trade, but the Blue Jackets won't do it."

"He wants to be in with the team, but the Blue Jackets don't want him."

"He should be in Columbus."

"He should be in Cleveland."

Okay — those aren't exact quotes, but damn if they aren't close. Instead, that is the general range in takes that have surfaced from the Blue Jackets' faithful in recent days, as well as pundits and insiders from around the league.

Jiricek, the sixth overall draft pick in the 2022 NHL Draft, has played a total of just 53 games with the Blue Jackets over the last three seasons. In that time, he's scored one goal and added ten assists for 11 points.

In just six games with Columbus this season, Jiricek had one assist, a -2 plus/minus, and averaged only 11:12 per game. He was loaned to the AHL's Cleveland Monsters last week and had the game-winning goal in overtime Sunday in just his second game back with the team.

The career trajectory of Jiricek is still unknown — there isn't a human being out there that knows if Jiricek is going to be a top-line All-Star blueliner or AHL journeyman who spends the next decade on two-way contracts. Anyone who claims to know or is convinced one way or the other is fooling themselves.

But does he want a trade and are the Blue Jackets willing to move him? Those, we have some intel on.

Tuesday, NHL insider Frank Seravalli reported on his Daily Faceoff podcast that he believes it's a matter of when, and not if, the Blue Jackets move Jiricek — and that a move is close.

"(President of Hockey Operations and General Manager) Don Waddell has 5 to 6 concrete offers on the table that he's evaluating," said Seravalli, and listed the Minnesota Wild, Pittsburgh Penguins, Philadelphia Flyers, San Jose Sharks, and Buffalo Sabres as potential suitors.

As for a potential return, Seravalli said that the team is looking for a "young, top-end pick or prospect or potentially a package of players."

The tone was different from Chris Johnston of TSN and The Athletic. He said, also Tuesday, that "Columbus is trying to sort through where the best offers are coming from and initially focus on trying to get another prospect like him sort of type of deal."

Johnston, speaking on his Insider Trading podcast, added that he "think(s) Columbus is shifting into draft pick packages." He said that there has not been an official trade request, but described Jiricek as "a player that wants a fresh start."

ESPN's Emily Kaplan said Wednesday to "expect something to get done quite soon" on The Hockey PODOcast, saying that Jiricek is "very available" and that she believes the Blue Jackets "have narrowed it down to a handful of teams."

Aaron Portzline of The Athletic has said on several occasions that Waddell is listening but that he (Portzline) doesn't feel like anything is imminent, as some others do.

So, where is all this coming from? Let's go back to the summer of 2022, piece it together from there, and see what led us here:

How Did We Get Here With Jiricek?

Shortly after being drafted, Jiricek impressed mightily at both the World Junior Championships and in training camp, but did not make the Blue Jackets 2022-23 opening night roster in his rookie season.

He would be called up just two weeks into the season but played in only two games before being sent back to the Cleveland. Jiricek would play in two more games with the Blue Jackets in the final two weeks of the season as an end-of-the-season look-see.

Jiricek made the roster last season (2023-24), when it was insinuated by the Blue Jackets last regime that he would be with Columbus for good.

That was not the case, however, with Jiricek bouncing between Columbus and Cleveland for much of the 2023-24 campaign. Over a 16-day stretch in January of this year, Jiricek:

- Played in one game (1/9)
- Was scratched for the next two (1/12 and 1/15)
- Sent to Cleveland (1/18)
- Played two games with Cleveland (1/19 and 1/20)
- Was recalled by Columbus (1/21)
- Was scratched for one game (1/23)
- Was sent back to Cleveland two days later (1/25)

At the end of the sequence — which was Jiricek's fourth demotion to Cleveland in three months — Portzline reported that the moves "raised eyebrows all season, and it reached a boiling point this week." He would go on to call the relationship "strained", while Elliotte Friedman of SportsNet called it "a big problem."

Jiricek was no fan of the situation earlier: "I played good hockey in the NHL. I'm an NHL player right now. That's my opinion, that I should be in the NHL right now," he said.

Jiricek continued: "They told me the last game was not good enough for me. I told them I don't think so, but that's your opinion. I was out of the lineup after that. A whole month now, it feels like I haven't played."

Nonetheless, Jiricek would end up playing 43 games with the Blue Jackets last season, with his ice-time varying: he played less than 12 minutes six times, and more than 18 minutes five teams. The metrics — both simplified and advanced — showed that Jiricek struggled more often than not. That's not a huge surprise for a 20-year-old defenseman trying to make it in the NHL, but it would be fair to say that the organization was hoping for more from their sixth overall pick.

This offseason, when Waddell was brought in as the President of Hockey Operations and General Manager and Dean Evason was hired as head coach, they promised a clean slate for everyone — including Jiricek.

But again, the organization (and a new regime) was underwhelmed with what they saw, sending Jiricek back to Cleveland on November 20th.

"I watched him last year when I got the opportunity to come here for the playoffs in Cleveland and thought he played very, very well not just defensively, but offensively (too)," said Waddell. "For whatever reason, it hasn't gone as smoothly, the transition to the NHL."

"So, we just made a decision. Let him go play games in Cleveland and we'll see how it goes."

Did The Blue Jackets Mismanage Jiricek?

This regime? No.

The last one? Probably so.

Former general manager Jarmo Kekalainen gave mixed messages last season, saying "it's best for his development to play against NHL players and practice against NHL players," before moments later adding "but if he's not playing here, he needs to play in the American League because he needs to play."

At around the same time, former Blue Jackets coach Pascal Vincent made what some could take as a jab against Jiricek, saying: "I get it. My daughter wants her own car. She's 13 years old. It's the Amazon effect. Everybody wants it now."

These aren't exactly ringing endorsements from Kekalainen and Vincent, who at the beginning of the 2024 calendar year were the two leading voices in the organization. Mix that with the tribulations of getting to know I-71 better than the Ohio State Highway Patrol, and his frustration last season was more than warranted.

This season, though? The argument could be made that it was more on the player than the brass.

Evason played very veteran defenseman Jack Johnson most nights over Jiricek, and the team wasted no time in picking up Dante Fabbro off waivers November 10th. Even when Jiricek did crack the lineup this season — just six times — he was rarely on the ice in key situations.

The holes in his game, primarily tied to his skating ability and below-average speed, didn't seem to be improving. There was (and remains) buzz that Jiricek does not seem to make much of an effort to address these concerns.

For a franchise that has turned "This Is Earned ... Not Given" into its key message in warp speed, that's not good. Jiricek's play despite his lack of growth would have went exactly against that message; one that plays on the big screen before every home game and is tattooed in large print in the locker room.

In a "State of the Team" address before the November 16th game against the Montreal Canadiens, Waddell said that the team simply hadn't "seen enough to keep him (in the lineup) on a regular basis":

Four days later, Jiricek was sent to the Monsters.

When asked about a potential trade of Jiricek, Waddell was non-committal. "I have to listen to every trade offer," he said. "It doesn't matter what the player's name is."

Those comments, along with multiple reports from around the league, began to make it clear that a trade of Jiricek was more than an option; it was likely.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Let's be candid: Jiricek's fit with the Blue Jackets is not ideal.

Evason's system commands a few things out of his defensemen: be aggressive, be quick, and be able to jump into the play. Not every system is like that — the proof of that can be seen the last couple of seasons, particularly with Vincent, who wanted his blueliners to play it safe and stay back.

For an example of what Evason's system can do for a defenseman who plays to those strengths, see: Werenski, Zach. You know, the Top Star in the NHL last week and the 20 points in 20 games defenseman who was already phenomenal and is now getting some Norris Trophy talk.

The issue here is that the speed and skating required by Evason's system has never been a strength of Jiricek, and it would probably be a good bet to assume that if Evason and Waddell ran things for the Blue Jackets in 2022, they would have drafted someone else.

That does not mean Jiricek is a bad player and it does not mean that he won't be a long-term, NHL defenseman.

But his identity and Columbus' defensive identity just don't mesh.

Combine that with everything above, and this gets us to the point we're at. Jiricek's frustration is valid and warranted in every now.

So too, though, is the desire for Columbus to see more.

And that is the perfect scenario to make a trade, provided the Blue Jackets get a reasonable offer and one that they feel can improve their club now and in the future.

What might that return look like? It's hard to say.

Will there even be a trade? Not if they don't feel they're getting fair-market value for him. The relationship seems damaged, but is it damaged beyond repair? There are only a few people who can answer that: Waddell, Evason, Jiricek, Jiricek's agent Allan Walsh, and maybe a few close friends or family members.

Here's what isn't hard to say though: Waddell and Evason are new to the organization but they've done nothing so far that should cause even the slightest bit of ire from the fans.

Let's trust them to make the right decision.

1st Ohio Battery / Blue Jackets Pick Up Point In Fourth Straight, But Fall 4-3 In Overtime To The Canadiens

By Ed Francis- November 28, 2024

Zach Werenski's game-tying goal in the third period completed a Gordie Howe Hatty for the elite defenseman, but the Columbus Blue Jackets fell in overtime to the Montreal Canadiens on Wednesday night by a 4-3 score.

Werenski picked up an assist on a first-period goal by Mathieu Olivier and had his first fight in over three years in the second period to give him the first two legs before the third period goal.

He now has points in six straight games.

Elvis Merzlikins, who was seeking his fifth straight win in net, made 19 saves on 23 shots from Montreal.

Here's how 61 minutes of hockey went down:

1st Period:

(9:08 — CBJ Goal): The Blue Jackets 1-0 all starts with hard work from Dante Fabbro and Zach Aston-Reese in their own corner. Fabbro fishes it out to Aston-Reese, who finds Zach Werenski with space in front of him. Olivier slows up and the two enter the zone together to generate a two-on-two situation with the Montreal defense. The puck makes it way into the corner and it all looks innocent enough until Olivier breaks away from the Canadien defenders and takes a slick feed from Werenski in the corner. Olivier picks up his seventh goal of the season, adding to his career best in November.

(13:00 — MTL Goal): The Canadiens bring it back to all even on a play that starts with Kevin Labanc getting a tricky pass from Werenski that Montreal defenseman Jayden Struble is able to poke away from him. Juraj Slafkovsky picks up the loose puck and snaps it past Merzlikins to tie it up at 1-1. The top pick of the 2022 NHL Draft gets his second goal of the season.

2nd Period

(4:27 — CBJ Goal): A slick move from Chinakhov to beat Primeau gives him his seventh goal of the season. Adam Fantilli makes a great play to find him, and Kent Johnson gets the secondary assist. He now has at least one point in each of his seven games this season.

(6:34 — MTL Goal): The Blue Jackets have a bad habit of giving up goals quickly after scoring them. In the first period, it was 3:52 after they took a lead. Here, it was just 2:07 before the Columbus lead would vanish again. Sean Kuraly went to the box for a high-stick (his second penalty of the game) and Cole Caufield makes 'em pay with his team-leading 13th goal of the season. Slafkovsky gets the assist for his second point of the night.

(16:15): Zach Werenski doesn't usually fight — but he did on this night. His first fighting major since January of 2021 is a decisive victory, making Brendan Gallagher wonder if he should've taken that battle.

3rd Period

(8:24 — MTL Goal): After tying the game in each of the first two periods, the Canadiens take their first lead near the midway point of the third period. Emil Heineman gets around Damon Severson and beats Merzlikins on a nifty finish to give Montreal a 3-2 lead.

(12:22 — CBJ Goal): After the assist and the fight, the final step in the Gordie Howe Hat Trick for Werenski came at 12:22 of the third period with Werenski's seventh goal of the season.

(0:44/OT — MTL Goal): Nick Suzuki wins it less than a minute into overtime for the Canadiens, scoring his 8th goal of the season at 0:44 of the extra session. Johnson was hauled down just before the Canadiens would win it, leaving a number of the Nationwide faithful unhappy.

MTL	GAME STATS	CBJ
23	SHOTS	24
51%	FACEOFFS	49%
1/2	POWER PLAY	0/3
3/3	PENALTY KILL	1/2
24	HITS	25
9	GIVEAWAYS	14
5	TAKEAWAYS	2
14	BLOCKED SHOTS	16
ALL SITUATIONS ADVANCED STATS		
2.52	EXPECTED GOALS	2.35
60	SHOT ATTEMPTS	55
33	SCORING CHANCES	21
9	HIGH-DANGER CHANCES	9

MTL GAME STATS

CBJ

DATA VIA:
NHL.COM & NATURALSTATTRICK.COM

Stat Chat:

- Sean Kuraly picked up two minors in the first two periods, the second of which led to a Montreal goal. That would be the end of the night, as head coach Dean Evason benched him. Kuraly played just 4:07 in the overtime loss.
- From the game preview: "Columbus can probably win this game 5-on-5, but if they can't stay out of the box and can't connect when given an opportunity on the power play, it may not go so well."

The Blue Jackets missed on both all three of their power play opportunities, including one with just over three minutes left in the game — and they gave up a power play goal. Special teams was the difference.

Up Next:

The Blue Jackets complete a four-game homestand Friday afternoon against the Calgary Flames. It's an early puck drop for Black Friday, with faceoff slated for 3:00 p.m.

1st Ohio Battery / Three Things: Home Win Streak Ends, Werenski's Gordie Howe Hat Trick, Chinakhov's Seventh

By Will Chase- November 29, 2024

One streak ends. Another continues.

Nick Suzuki's eighth of the season in overtime secured the 4-3 win for the Montreal Canadiens over the Columbus Blue Jackets at Nationwide Arena on Wednesday night.

The Canadiens have won seven straight games over the Blue Jackets, and one more game will be played between the two clubs at Nationwide Arena on Dec. 23.

Home Win Streak Ends

Believe it or not, the Blue Jackets are one of the best home teams in the NHL with a 7-3-1 mark.

Even though they came up a goal short of two points on Wednesday night, ending the three-game home winning streak, Columbus extended its four-game point streak at Nationwide Arena. Their overall three-game winning streak ended and is bookended by losses to Montreal. Columbus lost at Bell Centre 5-1 on Nov. 16.

Columbus has surrendered power play goals against in seven straight contests after Montreal converted on one of two chances. Cole Caufield scored his team-leading 13th on the man advantage.

Elvis Merzlikins made 19 saves while Cayden Primeau made 21 stops.

Werenski's Gordie Howe Hat Trick

Fresh off First Star of the Week honors, Zach Werenski might be up for an encore.

Werenski had a two-point night on Wednesday, starting with an assist on Mathieu Olivier's goal which started the scoring at 9:08 of the first period.

Then for the first time since 2021, he dropped the gloves with Brendan Gallagher.

At 12:22 of the third period, his seventh goal of the season tied the score 3-3 to complete the Gordie Howe hat trick. Werenski is on a six-game point streak (four goals, eight assists) and leads the team with 22 points.

Werenski and Gallagher each spent seven minutes in the box for fighting and slashing penalties, but Werenski still played 24:15 for the game. Ivan Provorov led the Blue Jackets with 24:22 ice time.

Chinakhov's Seventh

Yegor Chinakhov scored at 4:27 of the second period to give Columbus the 2-1 lead. His linemates Adam Fantilli and Kent Johnson each assisted on the play.



Johnson extended his point streak to all seven games he's played in and has 10 points (four goals, six assists). Fantilli is up to 10 points (three goals, seven assists).

Black Friday

The Blue Jackets conclude their four-game homestand with the Calgary Flames on Friday, Nov. 29 at 3:00 p.m. ET.

1st Ohio Battery / Fantilli Scores Twice, Olivier Spars Twice In Blue Jackets 5-2 Victory Over The Calgary Flames

By Ed Francis- November 30, 2024

	1	2	3	F
	0	1	1	2
	2	1	2	5

CBJ GOALS:
Fantilli (P1, 11:56)
Johnson (P1, 16:42)
Werenski (P2, 4:43)
Fantilli (2) (P3, 4:46)
Marchenko (P3, 18:20)

Adam Fantilli scored twice and both Zach Werenski and Kent Johnson continued impressive scoring streaks as the Columbus Blue Jackets defeated the Calgary Flames in Friday afternoon hockey at Nationwide Arena.

Fantilli's first goal came as a power-play expired in the first and was the first goal of the game — his second gave them a 4-1 lead in the third period that would put the game out of reach.

Johnson scored less than five minutes after Fantilli gave Columbus a 1-0 lead, continuing his now eight-game point streak. He's picked up at least a point in every game he's played in this season.

Werenski's point streak is now at seven games after his second-period goal. It was his eighth and moved him into a tie for first amongst defenseman in the NHL.

Mathieu Olivier didn't score but had a couple of impressive fights that brought the crowd to its feet and the bench to their feet, too.

Kirill Marchenko added an empty-netter in the final two minutes to give the Blue Jackets their 9th 5+ goal game of the season.

Elvis Merzlikins made 27 saves on 29 shots from Calgary and was named the game's Third Star of the game. He took a roughing penalty early in the third, but had no regrets.

"I had my puck between my legs and he went with his stick to my groin," said Merzlikins. "In that moment I just reacted and he totally deserved it."

Fantilli served the penalty for Merzlikins, and his second goal came on a rush after exiting the box — a bit of karma for the stick to the groin.

Here's how it shook out between the Flames and the Jackets:

1st Period:

(11:56 — CBJ Goal): A lot happened with this goal: for a while, it was James van Riemsdyk and on the power play. But it was later changed to an Adam Fantilli goal after the power play had expired. In either event, the 5th Flame was still leaving the box when Fantilli took a shot through a tight space near the left faceoff dot. It rings off the post and goes in for his fourth goal of the season. Ivan Provorov collects his sixth assist of the season on the goal.

(16:42 — CBJ Goal): Calgary has a little bit of trouble playing the puck, Johnson tips it over to Fantilli and he chips it right back to Johnson to create a 2-on-1. Flames goalie Dustin Wolf sees Fantilli coming down his right and isn't sure what KJ's going to do with it. He fires it, right past Wolf, to double the Columbus lead.

2nd Period

(4:43 — CBJ Goal): The Blue Jackets expanding their lead to 3-0 starts with Wolf having a little bit of trouble behind his net. He plays it clean, but then his clearing attempt is interrupted in the corner by Dmitri Voronkov. He finds Marchenko, who goes stick side on Wolf and pulls him way out of the net. With Wolf way out of the grease, Marchy gets it to Werenski who gets it past a couple of Calgary defenders with ease.

(11:54 — Donnybrook Of The Day): A lot led us to this moment. Jake Christiansen and Martin Pospisil had squared off earlier in the period, a fight without a clean winner. There was some earlier jawing at Olivier, but nothing led to it. Once Olivier gets a hard (but clean) hit onto Joel Hanley, though? Pospisil again drops the gloves (one of which ended up a few rows deep in section 105). Brayden Pachal comes in, holds Olivier's arms back to let Pospisil get a few hits in a less-than-classy move.

Spoiler Alert: Olivier will get his vengeance, as he predicted to the Flames bench after the fight:

(14:59 — CGY Goal): Some good puck movement from the Flames, but Merzlikins has a tough time handing the puck on Rasmus Andersson's shot and Blake Coleman is right there to put it back and get Calgary on the board for the first time in the game to cut Columbus' lead to 3-1.

(19:37 — Nevermind, *This* Was The Donnybrook Of The Day): Just watch and enjoy.

3rd Period

(4:46 — CBJ Goal): Adam Fantilli gets his second of the night to give the Blue Jackets a 4-1 lead and put this one out of reach, which usually would be the coolest part about a goal — but not this one. Kirill Marchenko's pass right between the skates of Kevin Bahl is an absolute thing of beauty. (It's okay if you want to watch it more than once.)

(11:00 — CGY Goal): Nazem Kadri cuts into the Blue Jackets lead just over halfway through the third, with a wrister to make 4-2.

(18:20 — CBJ Goal): Marchenko gets his team-leading ninth goal of the season on the empty-netter to send the near sell-out crowd home happy.

MTL	GAME STATS	CBJ
29	SHOTS	34
50%	FACEOFFS	50%
1/3	POWER PLAY	0/1
1/1	PENALTY KILL	2/3
28	HITS	24
35	GIVEAWAYS	28
7	TAKEAWAYS	8
10	BLOCKED SHOTS	20
ALL SITUATIONS ADVANCED STATS		
2.77	EXPECTED GOALS	3.75
61	SHOT ATTEMPTS	54
27	SCORING CHANCES	27
14	HIGH-DANGER CHANCES	9
DATA VIA: NHL.COM & NATURALSTATTRICK.COM		

Stat Chat:

- The Flames won the scoring attempt battle 61-54, but when Werenski was out there, it was a different story. The Blue Jackets had 33 of the 55 (60%) shot attempts with Z on the ice. Werenski is now tied with Colorado's Cale Makar for the most goals in the NHL by a defenseman.
- Fantilli's pair of goals gave him his second multi-goal game of his career — but the first in which Columbus has picked up a victory in.
- One bad habit the Blue Jackets have slipped into this season is allowing goals nearly instantly after scoring them. That was not the case in this game though, and kept the team energized.
- Columbus blocked twice as many (20) shots as the Flames (10) in the game. This is a team that plays hard for each other and is willing to make whatever play necessary.

Up Next:

It'll be quite a bit before the Blue Jackets are back on home ice. They begin a five-game road trip, starting Sunday in Chicago for another 3:00 p.m. puck-drop. They'll see the Flames against Tuesday night to start their western Canada swing.

1st Ohio Battery / Jiricek Traded: Young Defenseman Goes To Minnesota Wild For Package Centered On Daemon Hunt And A 2025 First Round Pick

By Ed Francis- December 1, 2024

Let the speculation end.

After days of rumors that seemed to pick up steam with each passing hour, the Columbus Blue Jackets traded defenseman David Jiricek on Saturday, dealing the sixth overall pick from the 2022 NHL Draft to the Minnesota Wild.

In exchange for Jiricek, the Blue Jackets are acquiring Daemon Hunt, a top-five protected first-round pick in next year's (2025) NHL Draft, a third and fourth round pick in the 2026 draft, and a 2027 second round pick.

While very unlikely, if the Wild do receive a top-five pick in the 2025 NHL draft, the pick would convert to an unprotected 2026 first-rounder.

The Blue Jackets will also send a 2025 5th round pick to the Wild to complete the trade.

The change of scenery will certainly be a welcome sight for both players.

Hunt, currently with the Iowa Wild (the AHL affiliate of Minnesota), was a third-round selection in the 2020 draft. The 22-year-old, 6'1", 200lb native of Brandon, Manitoba, Canada played 12 games with the Minnesota Wild last year and one game thus far this season.

He has a total of one point (an assist) in those 12 combined games. With the Iowa Wild over the last two seasons, Hunt has a combined three goals and 30 assists in 60 total games.

"Daemon is a very good, young defenseman and we are excited to welcome him to the Blue Jackets family," said President of Hockey Operations and General Manager Don Waddell.

"I'd also like to thank David (Jiricek) for his contributions during his time with our organization and wish him well."

Over three seasons, Jiricek played in a total of 53 games with the Blue Jackets, scoring one goal and adding 10 assists for a total of 11 points.

In just six games with Columbus this season, Jiricek had one assist, a -2 plus/minus, and averaged only 11:12 per game. He was loaned to the AHL's Cleveland Monsters last week and had the game-winning goal in overtime Sunday in just his second game back with the team.

What Are The Blue Jackets Getting In Return?

Daemon Hunt may not be the level of league-wide prospect as Jiricek, but one thing that's for sure is that he plays head coach Dean Evason's style of hockey. He's a two-way defender, plays a physical game, and it's highly likely that the Blue Jackets new bench boss was consulted in acquiring a player that he's coached before.

A first-round draft pick, even though it figured to be somewhere between 20th and 30th, is not insignificant. But adding third and fourth draft picks in 2026 and a second-round pick in 2027 gives Columbus will allow them to further stock the cupboard with future assets.

"In addition to adding a very good prospect, the draft picks we've acquired provide us with valuable assets that we can use to improve our club moving forward," said Waddell.

Why Did The Blue Jackets Move On From Jiricek?

A few days ago, the last two years of Jiricek's frustration with the Blue Jackets — and theirs with his — was spelled out here. To sum it up, Jiricek felt (and still feels, presumably) that he is ready to be an everyday NHL player and the Blue Jackets, for the second straight managerial regime and third straight head coach, disagree.

Columbus wanted to see Jiricek develop better skating skills and felt he needed to be faster to be an NHL defenseman. Waddell said earlier in November that the club "had not seen enough" to warrant Jiricek seeing regular NHL minutes.

This created a source of frustration that, in the end, become untenable for both sides involved.

1st Ohio Battery / Daemon Hunt: A Look At Who The Blue Jackets Received In The David Jiricek Trade

By Ed Francis- December 1, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets traded David Jiricek to the Minnesota Wild on Saturday, ending weeks of speculation that heavily intensified a week ago when Jiricek was sent to the Cleveland Monsters.

In return, the Blue Jackets (who also gave the Wild a fifth-round pick in 2025) picked up four draft picks: a first-rounder in 2025 (top-five protected), third and fourth round picks in 2026, and a second rounder in 2027.

But they also picked up an intriguing prospect from Minnesota to replace Jiricek: Daemon Hunt.

Here's a dive into what the Blue Jackets are getting in Hunt:

The Past:

Hunt was a third-round selection of the Wild in the 2020 NHL Draft, chosen 65th overall. He is a 22-year-old native of Brandon, Manitoba, Canada and is 6'1", 200lbs.

After being an alternate captain for the Moose Jaw Warriors of the WHL in the 2019-20 season, Hunt was promoted to team captain in both the 2020-21 and 2021-22 seasons. In those two seasons (69 games), Hunt scored 25 goals and had 32 assists for 57 points.

In his final season (2021-22) with Moose Jaw, he was teammates with Denton Mateychuk, the Blue Jackets current top defensive prospect. Mateychuk was named the Warriors captain when Hunt left for the Wild organization.

That first season with the Wild (2022-23) was spent with the Iowa Wild, the AHL affiliate of Minnesota. He had just two goals and nine assists in 59 games, but the Wild brass liked his development as a defensive player and his 2023-24 training camp with Minnesota was equally impressive. He didn't make the opening night roster but would play in 12 games in the NHL last season.

Five of those games were early in the season and under Dean Evason, the Blue Jackets head coach who at the time was the Minnesota Wild bench boss. In each of his five games played with Evason, Hunt saw a modest uptick in minutes from the previous game.

Evason was fired in November.

Hunt played in a total of 12 games last season, had one point (an assist), and averaged 11:14 of ice time per game. Most of his action was with Iowa, where he had three goals and 26 assists (29 points) in 51 games.

The Present:

Much like Jiricek, Hunt is a young defenseman who wants to be an every-day NHL player and feels like he is ready.

But, while the idea of not being with the NHL club seemed to irk Jiricek, the newest Blue Jacket has a much different outlook. Here's The Athletic's Michael Russo on a recent conversation he had with Hunt:

Mindset is everything, isn't it?

Hunt may also have an understanding that the biggest reason he isn't on the Minnesota roster right now could be for contractual reasons. The Wild currently have seven defenseman on one-way, NHL contracts. For Hunt to crack the lineup, one (or more) of those players would need to be hurt, traded, or fall off the map completely. It's a bit of a log jam, to say the least.

So, Hunt (with the exception of one game with Minnesota) continued to play in Iowa until Saturday's trade. In nine games this season, he has four assists and a -1 plus/minus.

The Future:

Blue Jackets President of Hockey Ops and General Manager Don Waddell described Hunt as a "very good, young defenseman and we are excited to welcome him to the Blue Jackets family."

He'll be a restricted free agent at the end of the 2025-26 season.

The ceiling on Hunt is probably not as high as it is with Jiricek — but when a first, second, third, and fourth round draft pick come in too, that was not the expectation.

But the key word there is ceiling. Yes, it's entirely possible that Jiricek goes on to be a fantastic blueliner with the Minnesota Wild. But it's also possible (and not too far-fetched of a belief) that his skating and lack of speed catch up with him, and he never does pan out to be the player that the last Blue Jackets regime thought he could be when they took him two years ago.

The current regime certainly didn't seem to see it that way, either.

It could be different with Hunt, though, who has strengths that align to Evason's style of play he demands from his defenseman. In short, that's blueliners who will jump into the play and use their speed to their advantage — but ones that can do so while still having a high-IQ on the ice and know when the right time to do that is.

That's Hunt in a nutshell. His strong two-way game, his physical game, and his good speed are different strengths than Jiricek's are but they all could prove to be more valuable to the organization.

Being reunited with Mateychuk, who was his linemate on the Warriors blue line at times three years ago, will likely bring a boost to both players too.

And that's where Hunt will start — the team has already announced that their new acquisition will report to Cleveland. He'll likely stay there as the Blue Jackets organization figure out specifically how he can fit in with the club, and it would seem that his Blue Jacket debut will likely come later this season, particularly if Columbus is in a position to be sellers at the trade deadline and move a player like Ivan Provorov.

From there, Hunt will have the chance to become an everyday, NHL player.

It's no guarantee.

But neither was — or is — Jiricek.

Get To Know Daemon Hunt:

Based off the video below, Hunt is certainly a guy that will have no trouble making friends in the Columbus (and Cleveland) locker room.

Additionally, Hunt's cousin is his agent — and it's a name that will ring familiar to many Columbus faithful: Matt Calvert.

1st Ohio Battery / Three Things: Fantilli Breaks Out, Scoring Streaks Ablazing, Olivier Is A Dude

By Will Chase- December 1, 2024

A successful way to end November.

Adam Fantilli scored twice to lift the Columbus Blue Jackets over the Calgary Flames 5-2 on Friday afternoon at Nationwide Arena. Kent Johnson scored to continue an eight-game point streak and Zach Werenski scored to tie a career-high seven-game point streak.

Columbus completed a 3-0-1 homestand and has points in five straight games. Elvis Merzlikins made 27 saves and picked up his seventh win. He's won five of his last six starts. Dustin Wolf made 29 saves for Calgary.

Fantilli Breaks Out

Who's goal is it anyway?

Rightfully credited to Fantilli at the 11:56 mark of the opening period, the Blue Jackets TV broadcast thought James van Riemsdyk might've tipped the puck for his fourth goal of the year. Instead, it was Fantilli scoring his fourth and breaking a 13-game goalless drought.

Most importantly, it was 1-0 Blue Jackets.

Ivan Provorov picked up his sixth assist on the play.

When one falls, they tend to come in bunches. Fantilli scored his second of the game at 4:46 of the third period after coming out of the penalty box to give Columbus a 4-1 lead. The Jackets killed a Merzlikins two-minute minor for roughing, which Fantilli served.

Kirill Marchenko (14) picked up his second assist of the game and Dante Fabbro (3) got one as well.

Scoring Streaks Ablazing

How hot is Kent Johnson?

The young forward continued his scoring trend with a first-period goal at 16:42, giving Columbus the 2-0 lead. He has 11 points (five goals, six assists) in all eight games, giving him a career-long point streak. Cole Sillinger had his 10th assist after returning to the lineup following an upper-body injury that sidelined him on Wednesday.

Werenski also stayed hot with his eighth goal to continue a seven-game point streak (five goals, nine assists). Marchenko had the first of his two assists and Dmitri Voronkov (5) added his first of two assists on the day. Voronkov is on a five-game point streak (three goals, four assists).

Marchenko also scored the empty-net goal to make it 5-2 for his team-leading ninth of the season with Voronkov picking up his second assist and Werenski (16) getting one. Werenski's seven-game point streak ties a career-high from 2019-20 and he leads the team in points (24) and assists.

Werenski is tied with Cale Makar for first among all defensemen with eight goals this year.

Olivier is A Dude

It started with a hit ultimately resulting in a two-minute minor for boarding. Then Mathieu Olivier answered the bell yet again with two second-period fights.

First, his challenger was Martin Pospisil. Then it was Ryan Lomberg late in the period.

There were three fights in the second period as Jake Christiansen got into his first career fight, also with Pospisil.

Long Road Trip

The Blue Jackets embark on a five-game road trip beginning with the Chicago Blackhawks at the United Center on Sunday, Dec. 1 at 3:00 p.m. ET. Then they'll play four in Western Canada starting with the emotional rematch with Calgary on Tuesday at 9:00 p.m. ET at Scotiabank Saddledome.

1st Ohio Battery / Six-Tacular: Blue Jackets Score Six Goals Again, Make It Six Straight Games With A Point In Road Win Over The Blackhawks

By Ed Francis- December 1, 2024

	1	2	3	F
	2	1	3	6



1	1	1	3
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CBJ GOALS:

Provorov (P1, 4:27)

Johnson (P1, 11:23)

Monahan (P2, 4:50)

Fabbro (P3, 3:08)

Marchenko (P3, 10:52)

Voronkov (P3, 18:34) (EN)

Make it six straight with a point.

The Columbus Blue Jackets scored in every period for the fifth consecutive game and put up 6+ goals for the seventh time as they defeated the Chicago Blackhawks by a 6-3 final Sunday afternoon.

Ivan Provorov and Kent Johnson gave the Blue Jackets a 2-1 lead after Columbus fell behind in the first three minutes. For Johnson, his goal continued his scoring streak of nine straight games — every game he's played in this season.

Sean Monahan added a second-period goal before the Blue Jackets would unleash for three goals in the final frame, including a Dmitri Voronkov empty-netter to seal the deal in with just over 90 seconds left.

Dante Fabbro and Kirill Marchenko also scored in the third, with Fabbro's goal the eventual game-winner at the 3:08 mark of the third period.

Elvis Merzlikins allowed three goals, but all were scored in the power play. He was 19-for-19 in even-strength shots faced and made a fantastic save in the second period to game tied.

Here's the deep dive into how the Jackets blew away the Blackhawks in the Windy City:

1st Period:

(2:59 — CHI Goal): The Blackhawks have had a hard time scoring goals — 30th in the league entering this game — but their power play, at 22.7%, is amongst the higher-ranked in the league. Connor Bedard is a big reason for that, and he strikes here just 22 seconds into a James van Riemsdyk tripping penalty.

(4:27 — CBJ Goal): Ivan Provorov ties the game at 1-1 on his second goal of the season but Monahan makes a pair of great plays in this sequence to make it happen. First, it's good work from behind the net to maintain possession of the puck and get it to Kirill Marchenko. He has a little bit of trouble playing it but Chicago is unable to clear it because Monahan has jumped back into the play. He finds Provorov, who gets it through traffic to score the goal.

(11:23 — CBJ Goal): Halfway through the first period of his ninth game of the season, Kent Johnson gets his sixth goal and 12th point to continue an incredible start for the 22-year-old. On this goal, he enters the zone 1-on-4 but draws enough attention from the Chicago skaters that the rest of the Blue Jackets are able to get into prime position. Johnson dumps it to Sillinger in the corner, he finds Severson charging into the high slot, and then Sevo gets it back to Johnson, who goes off the post and in for the goal.

2nd Period

(3:00 — CHI Goal): The Blackhawks power play strikes again here, this time to tie the game at 2-2. Craig Smith gets his sixth of the year. Head coach Dean Evason did not care for the power play, which came as a result of Dmitri Voronkov picking up an extra two for instigating after a fight with Chicago's Connor Murphy. The fight came after this play, where Murphy goes way-high on Marchenko:

(3:22): The save of the season by Merzlikins, but make sure you watch the replays. In real time, it's a good save. In the replays, it's eye-popping. This kept the game tied, and the Blue Jackets would take a lead less than two minutes later. You never know how a game may shake out by the goals that are never scored, but this would've been two in 22 seconds for Chicago and would've put them in front.

(4:50 — CBJ Goal): The Blue Jackets needed just 1:28 to answer Chicago's goal in the first period and here in the second period, just 1:50 before they would regain a 3-2 lead following a Blackhawks goal. Monahan gets goal number eight on the season, but check out the pass from Sean Kuraly. He threads the needle between a couple of Chicago sweaters to find Monahan, who wrists it past goalie Petr Mrazek.

The assist from Werenski on this goal made it eight straight games with a point to break the team record for consecutive games with a point from a defenseman.

3rd Period

(3:08 — CBJ Goal): One of the more simple goals in the game and really of the season to make it a 4-2 Blue Jackets lead. Werenski finds Fabbro, who skates down the right side of the ice with little resistance. As Chicago closes in, he rips a shot near the face-off dot and it beats Mrazek to make it three goals in nine games for Fabbro since joining the team. Werenski gets the primary assist on this to give him his second assist of the game and his third straight multi-point game.

(8:08 — CHI Goal): Another power play, and another goal for the Blackhawks. This took up a good chunk of Chicago's 1:51, 5-on-3 power play, but Nick Foligno connects to cut into the lead and make it a 4-3 game.

(10:52 — CBJ Goal): Marchenko gets his team-leading 10th goal of the season on a top-shelf laser that comes after the puck is chipped at near the Chicago net and springs right to Marchy in the slot. After taking a high hit earlier in the game that resulted in a missing tooth, this goal to demoralize the Blackhawks comeback effort had to feel good.

(18:34 — CBJ Goal): Ice, Ice Baby. Dmitri Voronkov, after 17 minutes in the box for a mid-game fight standing up for Marchenko, is the apropos empty-net goal-scorer. This extends Voronkov's point streak to six games

CBJ	GAME STATS	CHI
36	SHOTS	31
55%	FACEOFFS	45%
0/2	POWER PLAY	3/6
3/6	PENALTY KILL	2/2
30	HITS	21
14	GIVEAWAYS	11
3	TAKEAWAYS	4
11	BLOCKED SHOTS	9
ALL SITUATIONS ADVANCED STATS		
3.18	EXPECTED GOALS	2.52
54	SHOT ATTEMPTS	51
21	SCORING CHANCES	19
7	HIGH-DANGER CHANCES	8

DATA VIA:
 NHL.COM & NATURALSTATTRICK.COM

Stat Chat:

- The Blue Jackets have now scored in 16 straight regulation periods. That ties the record for longest stretch in club history. A first-period goal Tuesday in Calgary would, of course, break it.
- With the goals from Provorov and Fabbro, the Blue Jackets now lead the NHL in goals by a defenseman, with 17.
- Take a look at the expected goals. The Blue Jackets had a 3.18 to 2.52 advantage, but that was in all situations. Their even-strength domination this game was something to behold, including a 2.91 to 1.42 xGA and 50-37 advantage in shot attempts. When they weren't down a man, Columbus was suffocating Chicago on both sides of the puck.

Up Next:

For the second time in five nights, the Blue Jackets will battle the Calgary Flames. This one takes place in Calgary with a 9:00 p.m. first faceoff. It's sure to be a heavy one, as the family of the late Johnny Gaudreau will be in attendance.

The Athletic / NHL hype-o-meter: Praise for the Hurricanes' system, Canucks' new-look top line and more

By Shayna Goldman- November 28, 2024

Navigating the Carolina Hurricanes' 2024 free agency would have been a tall ask for the most experienced general manager, let alone Eric Tulsky, who was promoted just weeks earlier.

Deadline addition Jake Guentzel headlined the list of unrestricted free agents. Then there was Carolina's entire second pair of Brady Skjei and Brett Pesce, along with depth forward Stefan Noesen.

Tulsky and the Hurricanes traded Guentzel's rights and let their other key free agents walk. The team wasn't splashy with their replacements. They signed Sean Walker and Shayne Gostisbehere to replenish the blue line and added Jack Roslovic and William Carrier up front. The team may have shed \$13 million in salary in the process, but the roster also dropped in value by a minus-21 Net Rating.

But a quarter way into the season, those subtractions aren't the story. The Hurricanes are proving to be one of the strongest teams in the league and should be a playoff lock.

While some dramatic and concerning trends are developing around the league on Thanksgiving, there is also a lot to highlight. The Canes are first up on the hype-o-meter's™ radar.

The Hurricanes' system keeps thriving

Hype-o-meter: 9/10

Tulsky and the Hurricanes' front office decided not to seek out a Guentzel replacement in free agency. Instead, the team held onto Martin Necas, whose name was swirling through trade rumors. The decision to trust Necas after a down year and let him cook in Carolina has been a game-changer. He is leading the entire league in scoring with 35 points heading into Wednesday night. That's the oomph this team needed upfront.

Not every team would have been able to withstand losing their entire second pair, either. As much as the Hurricanes have developed a reputation for maximizing defensemen within their system, Jaccob Slavin and Brett Pesce have always been the staples on the blue line to help facilitate that. Dmitry Orlov and Jalen Chatfield, last year's third pair, were promoted into expanded roles and have thrived so far, with a 60 percent expected goal rate and a 22-8 scoring edge in their minutes.

With a top four that can be leaned on against top competition, the coaches can shelter their third pair. Walker and Gostisbehere help drive play from the back end with 63 percent of the expected goal share. If the team started shooting more than 5.7 percent in their minutes, the goal scoring would probably reflect their efforts a lot better. Even Roslovic, who is a bit of a one-dimensional scorer, has carved out a role for himself with the Hurricanes.

It's all a testament to Carolina's identity and structure, which remains a major strength year after year. The Hurricanes are one of the best two-way teams in the league, which is helping them overcome some deficits in goal — Monday night's comeback win over the Stars was a prime example of that. Management bet on that, and it's clearly paying off.

Anthony Cirelli's shutdown game

Hype-o-meter: 8/10

On Monday night, Anthony Cirelli was served a heavy diet of Nathan MacKinnon and Mikko Rantanen. Most opponents struggle to contain that dynamic duo, but Cirelli helped shut them down. In 13:37 head-to-head five-on-five minutes against MacKinnon, the Lightning dominated play.

Tampa Bay held Colorado to just five shot attempts in that time, worth an expected goal value of 0.21. The Lightning, on the other hand, put up 21 attempts worth 1.36 expected goals and outscored the Avalanche 2-0.

It's just a small glimpse into a fantastic season for Cirelli so far, which is made all the more impressive by his workload. The Lightning have had one of the most difficult schedules in the first quarter of the season, and Cirelli has had one of the toughest workloads in the league in terms of offensive competition. Still, Cirelli and the Lightning are shutting down some of the league's best in that time, only giving up 1.88 expected goals against per 60 minutes of play — 0.51 per 60 less than his teammates.

Unlike the last couple of seasons, Cirelli has more support around him to elevate his two-way game. He tends to share the ice with Ryan McDonagh, whose shutdown presence has helped revitalize Tampa Bay's top four. Just like McDonagh's helping ease the workload for Victor Hedman, Cirelli is for the Nikita Kucherov line.

Brandon Hagel has been the perfect fit on Cirelli's wing; the two aren't just neutralizing their opponents' offense, they're forcing them to play defense as well. The duo has earned a 67.6 percent expected goal rate in their minutes so far and is making an impact on the scoresheet. With 22 points in 20 games, Cirelli is scoring at a career-high pace of 3.40 points per 60.

While scoring shouldn't drive the Selke conversation, Hagel's production and play-driving could finally help him get recognition for his elite defense.

Jake DeBrusk-Elias Pettersson-Kiefer Sherwood

Hype-o-meter: 8/10

Unfortunately for the Canucks, a lot of the talk around Elias Pettersson picked up where it left off last postseason. Despite making moves to solidify the winger depth around him — like swapping Ilya Mikheyev out for free agent Jake DeBrusk — the franchise center underwhelmed in the early goings of the season.

But with a new-look top line, Pettersson is finally back on track and performing like the difference-maker this team needs. The switch came against the Blackhawks earlier this month when Kiefer Sherwood got the boost alongside Pettersson and DeBrusk in place of Conor Garland.

Sherwood was one of the bright spots in Vancouver to open the season. He has helped the Canucks gain the zone with his entries, is super physical, and makes life hard for opponents on the forecheck. And he chipped some much-needed depth scoring in a bottom-six capacity and added energy to the lineup. Now, he's proving he can keep up and complement the team's best on the top line with his passing and scoring chance creation, along with his physical edge.

This line made an instant impact against the Blackhawks and has only built on it. And the timing couldn't have been better for the Canucks, who were already down Brock Boeser when the trio was put together and then lost J.T. Miller two games later.

This trio has only been together for 56 minutes of five-on-five play, and small samples can inflate results. But that doesn't take away from how impressive they have been together over this last stretch of play. With DeBrusk-Pettersson-Sherwood on the ice, the Canucks are thriving with a 64.8 percent expected goal rate which is one of the best marks among any line combination with at least 50 minutes of play

under their belt. And most importantly, considering how short-handed the team has been, the results back that up. Their offensive zone control is turning into goals, with a 6-1 edge in scoring in their minutes.

Surprising goalie standouts

Hype-o-meter: 7.5/10

Connor Hellebuyck, Juuse Saros and Igor Shesterkin are expected to sit atop the goalie charts. The three are among the elite bona fide starters left in the league. But they aren't the only goaltenders excelling.

Heading into Wednesday night's matchups, Lukas Dostal sat at the top of the league in goals saved above expected at 16.8 — just a shade above Hellebuyck. Despite facing one of the most challenging workloads in the league, Dostal has been a game-breaker for the Ducks.

Joey Daccord is showing that last season wasn't a fluke, with nine quality starts in 15 appearances and the third-best goals saved above expected in the league ahead of Wednesday night. He has stepped up in a big way in Seattle and has earned the starting net. The same is true in Utah with Karel Vejmelka. After a breakout in 2022-23 in Arizona, he fell below average last year and lost the net to Connor Ingram. While Ingram hasn't followed that up this season, Vejmelka has rebounded in a big way with 12 goals saved above expected through 11 games.

When Joseph Woll, the projected 1A in Toronto, was sidelined to open the season, it was Anthony Stolarz to the rescue. He put up sparkling numbers across his first five starts and continues to earn his minutes in rotation with Woll. In Calgary, Dustin Wolf has emerged as the front-runner in the Calder Trophy race. He is a major reason why the Flames sit in a playoff position right now. Logan Thompson has helped the Capitals surprise this season as well. He looks like one of the best goalie adds of the summer, along with Stolarz. Even Cam Talbot and Mackenzie Blackwood have earned praise for their starts behind bad defensive teams.

Nico Hischier's two-way game

Hype-o-meter: 7/10

What makes the Devils such a threat? Their elite one-two punch down the middle has something to do with it. Jack Hughes is the more well-known superstar, but Nico Hischier can't be underestimated, either.

Just look at his performance on Monday night against Nashville. In Hischier's five-on-five minutes, the Devils outshot the Predators 18-7, earned 79 percent of the expected goal share, and had a 2-1 edge in scoring. Oh, and Hischier had a hat trick. That came just a few games after a dominant game against the Panthers, where his usual strengths — his playmaking and solid defense — were the shining elements.

Hischier's back-to-back performances against Florida ended a small blip in the first quarter where his game trended down for a short stretch. But he has rebounded back to the heights of the early-goings of the season. Heading into Wednesday night's game, that play has earned him a 55 percent expected goal rate at five-on-five while being tasked with matchup minutes in New Jersey.

Like Cirelli, Hischier's making a statement through the first quarter of the season as one of the best two-way centers in the league. That could add some heat to the Selke conversation instead of just the usual race for second place behind Aleksander Barkov. It could even earn him some late-ballot Hart votes if he keeps driving the Devils.

Minnesota's top four on defense

Hype-o-meter: 6.5/10

Brock Faber and Jonas Brodin picked up where they left off last season. They were stout in their own zone in their first couple of games together and helped bolster Minnesota's offense. But when Jared Spurgeon was sidelined early lineup adjustments were made — including moving Jacob Middleton to Faber's left.

The 2024-25 season wasn't too kind to Middleton, who seemed to be missing his mainstay partner Spurgeon. But playing with Faber this season seems to have revitalized his game. In 287 minutes together at five-on-five, they have earned about 53 percent of the expected goal share while shouldering minutes against top competition and outscored opponents 16-6. Faber is the driving force of that — he is already building on his impressive rookie season with more shutdown play. The fact that Middleton is clicking there allows for more balance on the blue line behind them.

Unlike last year, the Wild don't have one strong pair to lean on. When Spurgeon returned to the lineup, he landed in a familiar spot alongside Brodin. And the two have quickly rekindled their chemistry on the second pair. The Wild are controlling play with a 64 percent expected goal rate, and much of that is thanks to their stingy play. Minnesota has only conceded 1.45 expected goals against per 60 with this duo on the ice, which is among the best in the league.

This top-four has helped the Wild renew their identity as one of the best defensive teams in the league, and that seems to be benefitting their goaltenders after a rough last season.

The San Jose Sharks

Hype-o-meter: 6/10

The Sharks are projected to finish 32nd in the league with just 67 points. That's a part of the process. But despite all of their flaws, the vibes feel different.

Coaching is a part of it, with a fresh voice behind the bench in Ryan Warofsky. Management bringing in veterans to complement the up-and-coming talent, like Tyler Toffoli, Mikael Granlund, Alex Wennberg and Jake Walman, has made a difference, too. Each one has been a better contributor than expected and given this team a surprising offensive punch some nights, along with up-and-comers William Eklund and Fabian Zetterlund.

Then, of course, there's Macklin Celebrini. On the season as a whole, the production isn't as eye-catching as it could be. And concerns are emerging below the surface, considering his number relative to his teammates. But there have been glimpses of his skill — and that started Night 1 of the season when he attempted a gusty spinning pass that ended up in the back of the net. That star power was on display again on Monday night in a three-point performance when the Sharks dominated the Kings, even if his underlying numbers were suspect.

That game on Monday was a reminder of what feels different about this Sharks team. San Jose is rising to the occasion against stronger opponents and staying in games longer than expected (some of which is thanks to that better-than-expected goaltending from Blackwood). Their games against the Rangers and Sharks earlier this month are reminders of that. Same with their 3-0 comeback against Pittsburgh to force overtime and their rally against the Red Wings for an overtime win just one game later.

The Sharks may not be good or have any hope of climbing up the standings. But they're a lot more fun and disruptive this season.

— Data collected before Wednesday night's matchups via Evolving-Hockey, HockeyViz, Hockey Stat Cards, All Three Zones, and Natural Stat Trick. This story relies on shot-based metrics; here is a primer on these numbers.

The Athletic / Kelowna Rockets win bid to host 2026 Memorial Cup

By Scott Wheeler- November 28, 2024

The Kelowna Rockets have won the bid process to host the 2026 Memorial Cup, the Canadian Hockey League announced on Wednesday afternoon.

Five Western Hockey League clubs submitted bids ahead of September's deadline for the 106th Memorial Cup — the largest number of CHL teams vying to host the tournament in more than 15 years.

Among them were the Medicine Hat Tigers, the Brandon Wheat Kings, the Lethbridge Hurricanes, and the Spokane Chiefs (one of the WHL's six American markets, fresh off the Saginaw Spirit's successful hosting of the 2024 tournament in the United States).

The Tigers positioned their bid around 2026 NHL Draft sensation Gavin McKenna's draft year — and could have potentially iced a roster around him that included 2024 top-five pick Cayden Lindstrom, 2024 second-rounders Andrew Basha and Ryder Ritchie, as well as the Ruck twins, a pair of fellow 2026 prospects.

Instead, the Rockets, who successfully won the bid to host the 2020 Memorial Cup and had nearly completed preparations for it when it was canceled due to the COVID pandemic, have won the chance to host again.

"We are truly devastated to not be bringing this event to Kelowna," then-Memorial Cup Committee Chair Tom Dyas said in March of 2020. "We've been working so hard with our local committee, partners, sponsors and volunteers over the last year and having to cancel this event is something that we never expected. We know that the health and safety of the community needs to come first, so we are supportive of the CHL's decision to cancel the 2020 Memorial Cup."

Back to B.C.

The @Kelowna_Rockets will host the 2026 #MemorialCup!

 <https://t.co/OpTGXnyvpo> pic.twitter.com/TME9jmtFjx

— Canadian Hockey League (@CHLHockey) November 27, 2024

As part of their bid process, the Rockets and the City of Kelowna also committed to making upgrades to the team's arena, Prospera Place, including the installation of a brand-new scoreboard, improved lighting and sound systems, and dedicated press.

"The bid committee has done a phenomenal job and we're so happy for our community," said Rockets governor, president and general manager Bruce Hamilton. "The 2026 Memorial Cup is for the City of Kelowna and the surrounding area. We get the chance to bring this event back to the Okanagan and while it has been a long grind to get it, we're excited for the city as well as our season ticket holders. It's an opportunity for something special."

Rockets head coach Kris Mallette — who was on the bench when the Rockets lost to the Oshawa Generals at the 2015 Memorial Cup and is friends with some of the alumni who won the 2004 Memorial Cup (Kelowna's only CHL title), including Josh Gorges, Shea Weber and Blake Comeau — remembers the loss as a "game of inches."

“I was talking to somebody today about how many chances we had to put that game away and then Anthony Cirelli had probably played five minutes in that game and comes out the hero — one mistake and it’s in the back of your net,” he said.

He also remembers the heartbreak of March 2020.

“We thought it was just going to be a two-week thing and we’d be back playing and finish the season. And then it was two weeks, and a month, and then nothing. It was hard. And it was hard for our organization as well because we gave up quite a few assets to try and build that team, and the following season not being able to recoup that with a couple of 19-year-olds to restock the shelves, it made for some difficult times in Kelowna over the last few years,” Mallette said. “That was heartbreaking for everybody because it was a lot of work.”

WHL commissioner Dan Near said the Rockets losing out on hosting in 2020 wasn’t a major factor in the decision to re-award the team the 2024 event.

“In this case it was a clean slate, so there was not a concession,” Near said. “All five of the clubs going in, that was made clear because I think if there was a scenario where it was a make-good or something to that extent, I don’t think that everyone would have bid. It was made clear that you’re going to have to win and you’re going to have to beat four other teams.”

The Rockets’ 2025-26 roster could be headlined by 2024 top-10 pick Tij Iginla.

On Wednesday morning, Mallette, who is in Oshawa as head coach of Team CHL for the CHL USA Prospects Challenge, broke the news to his players on a Zoom call.

“There’s a lot of guys from our team who are going to be a part of it, we talked about it at the beginning of the year,” Mallette said. “It’s also a little bit bittersweet because at the same time, we’re going to have to build and have some additions and some of our players are going to have to be traded away and I think some guys realize that.”

The Athletic / NHL awards WATCH: Kirill Kaprizov is the early MVP front-runner

By Dom Luszczyszyn- November 28, 2024

Throughout the season I'll be breaking down the numbers behind the race for each major player award: the Hart, the Norris, the Calder, the Selke, the Vezina, the Art Ross and the Rocket Richard. Numbers of course aren't everything, but they add much-needed context to the awards race and can help shine a light on players deserving of more recognition while adding caveats to other players who may have some warts. This post will present the top 10 for each category based on a set criteria of guidelines. There is plenty of room for discussion and debate within (and outside) those guidelines.

Welcome to the first awards watch of the season. The 20-game mark is a good time to start the discussion on where each awards race stands, but it's also still very early. This is where narratives start to build, but it's also worth taking the numbers listed with a grain of salt. Any catch-all number used to measure player value won't perfectly measure the full scope of their ability and that's especially true after only 20 games. These are still very small samples we're talking about.

Those samples can set the tone for the rest of the year, but a lot can and will change from here on out. It's still worth taking stock of where the race stands at the quarter-mark of the season, but it's important not to be overzealous or definitive in any direction.

Here's who leads each awards race at the moment and who the contenders are.

Data as of Nov. 26

Hart Trophy

Given to the player judged to be the most valuable to his team.

Criteria: Skaters ranked by Net Rating, adjusted by position.

Welcome to the Kirill Kaprizov show.

Minnesota's superstar winger has turned a lot of heads this season with his out-of-this-world performance to start the year, enough to be the early Hart Trophy front-runner. No one is on his level right now and he's making a strong case as a no-doubt Tier 1 player.

To start the year, Kaprizov is scoring at a ridiculous 51-goal and 139-point pace. Those marks would put him in illustrious company and there's real substance behind them, too. There are no shortcuts to Kaprizov's game — he does it at both ends of the ice. This year he's rocking a 56 percent expected goals rate while outscoring teams 22-10 at five-on-five. He's been elite relative to his teammates, not only showing dynamic game-breaking ability but also responsible two-way play. He's been the whole package for the Wild.

And he's doing it without anything close to the same amount of help. The next guys on the list all play with another superstar (or two!) while Kaprizov makes relatively ordinary players look extraordinary. He's a one-man show and the difference between his Net Rating and his next-best teammate's really emphasizes that.

Kirill Kaprizov: +8.7 (next best: Brock Faber, +5.1)

Sam Reinhart: +8.0 (next best: Aleksander Barkov, +5.2, +8.2 pace)

Nikita Kucherov: +7.8 (next best: Victor Hedman, +7.2)

Leon Draisaitl: +7.2 (next best: Connor McDavid, +6.4)

Cale Makar: +6.8 (next best: Mikko Rantanen, +6.3)

Kaprizov is the perfect embodiment of MVP, in every sense of the term and he's taking the Wild to new heights this season.

After Kaprizov, arguably no one has impressed more than Reinhart. He's shown last season was no fluke by repeating his elite play and doing so for a long stretch without Barkov next to him. He's proving he's his own man, a true franchise player.

Beyond those two, there are some tough calls to make — mostly because there's a big cluster of superstars bunched together from three teams. Edmonton's Leon Draisaitl and Connor McDavid; Colorado's Cale Makar, Mikko Rantanen and Nathan MacKinnon; and Tampa Bay's Nikita Kucherov and Victor Hedman have all been incredibly strong this season so far. Kucherov currently leads that pack, but there isn't much separating the group at the moment so just pick your favorite. Players in the 6-10 range also make a strong case, especially the surprising Martin Necas whose offensive case is just as strong as Kaprizov's and Kucherov's.

That jumble of superstars will likely take up most of the spotlight, though, and that could work in Kaprizov's favor. Unless someone from Edmonton, Colorado or Tampa Bay really stands out, it might be difficult to make an air-tight case for any one individual. They could end up eating into each other's vote share, paving the way for a Kaprizov victory.

That's if they catch up to what he's done so far. For now, Kaprizov stands alone at the top.

Norris Trophy

Given to the defenseman who demonstrates throughout the season the greatest all-round ability in the position.

Criteria: Defensemen who play top-pairing minutes, ranked by Net Rating.

It's hard to ignore a 112-point pace for a defenseman. It's even harder to ignore when the next closest is pacing for 82. Cale Makar is on a completely different level offensively right now.

Is it easier for him to be at that level given who he gets to share the ice with? Yes. Does that mean his on-ice differentials should dazzle even more? Also yes. But even accounting for all those things, Makar has been special this season. He looks back to his usual self with a plus-6.8 Net Rating.

That's driven by his production and while his on-ice numbers are a shade below some of his competitors, they represent a marked improvement over last season. His 56 percent expected goals rate is three percentage points better than last year and he's back to tilting the ice relative to teammates like usual. The Avalanche's expected goal differential per 60 is 0.35 better with Makar on the ice. Last year it was 0.07 worse. The same thing applies to his goal rate and in both cases, the effect is seen at both ends of the ice. Whatever was ailing Makar last season looks to be in the past.

Despite the difference in production, Victor Hedman and Quinn Hughes should not be overlooked here, with Hedman leading all defensemen in Net Rating. What both lack in points they make up for in how they've helped influence their team's success. Relative to teammates, the Lightning and Canucks see a much bigger rise in their expected and actual goal numbers with their top defenseman on the ice compared to Makar. That's led to both teams massively outscoring opponents at five-on-five, an area Makar still struggles with. Those two could make this race interesting if they can close the points gap.

Having said that, there's one other feather in Makar's cap: He takes on shutdown responsibilities for the Avalanche. In both Tampa Bay and Vancouver, that's another pair's job, which gives both Hedman and

Hughes more freedom. Again, that's an easier job playing with MacKinnon, Rantanen and Devon Toews, but it's still worth pointing out.

After this year's big three is a group of strong performances worthy of praise. Adam Fox, Evan Bouchard and Josh Morrissey have kept up last year's excellence. Zach Werenski is emerging as one of the league's best. John Carlson looks vintage. Brock Faber has taken a big step after a successful rookie campaign. And Dmitry Orlov has looked excellent stepping into a bigger role.

Filling out this ballot is going to be tough.

Selke Trophy

Given to the forward who best excels in the defensive aspects of the game.

Criteria: Forwards who play over 15 minutes per game, receive 15 percent of their team's short-handed minutes and face above-average forward competition, ranked by Defensive Rating.

There's a notable name missing — please don't yell at me about it. If Barkov hadn't missed any games this season, he'd be right in the mix next to his linemate Reinhart, thanks to a plus-1.5 Defensive Rating over 14 games. We'll talk about him next time when he inevitably climbs the ranks, but for now, we have an opportunity to discuss other shutdown stars ready to challenge Barkov.

His absence could create space for Reinhart to make his mark here. Reinhart finished fourth in voting last season as part of Florida's incredible duo and this year he's cementing his case as one of the league's best defensive forwards in his own right. It could be #HisTurn. Reinhart arguably proved that while Barkov was out, carrying the shutdown mantle against tough opponents and maintaining his same level of usual defensive excellence. To do that without the reigning Selke king speaks to how strong Reinhart is defensively on his own. He deserves plenty of respect for that.

So too does Carolina's vaunted shutdown line, represented here by Jordan Martinook. While it's usually Jordan Staal getting the lion's share of credit for that, Martinook's on-ice results have been a shade better this season with 1.77 xGA/60 (Staal is at 1.97) and 1.07 GA/60 (Staal is at 1.16). Either way, Carolina's shutdown line continues to be a defensive force, a nightmare for opposing offensive players who have been forechecked into oblivion.

Beyond Florida's and Carolina's shutdown forward pairs, other names are worthy of early praise. Anthony Cirelli has been excellent in Tampa Bay at easing the burden for the top line with his best season yet. Mitch Marner, Elias Lindholm, Nico Hischier and Mikael Backlund are no strangers to the Selke conversation and have played some strong defensive hockey to start. Jason Dickinson established himself last season as a name to watch in this space and he's picked up where he left off, while Claude Giroux has put in some nice work for the Senators.

The one potential shocker on the list is Logan O'Connor who ranks second with the highest expected goal impact to boot. With so many injuries up front in Colorado, O'Connor has been tasked with soaking up some tough minutes for the Avalanche without much defensive help from his teammates. Despite that, the Avalanche only allow 1.72 expected goals against per 60 with him on the ice, 0.57 less than when he's on the bench. That mark ranks sixth among all forwards, which is impressive given the difficulty of his minutes. O'Connor may fall back to earth as the season progresses, but he deserves credit for his start. He's making a name for himself.

Calder Trophy

Given to the player selected as the most proficient in his first year of competition in the NHL.

Criteria: Rookie skaters ranked by Net Rating, adjusted by position.

The Calder Trophy rankings tend to be really funky this early, but they can point to some things to watch.

The first is that the Calder could be Dustin Wolf's to lose. He's been the best rookie so far and has almost single-handedly put the Flames on the map this season. His plus-6.7 GSx puts him eighth in the league among all goalies thanks to a sterling .922 save percentage. He's been one of the best goalies in the league, period, and there isn't another rookie that can say the same relative to their position. Wolf looks strong early, channeling his AHL dominance to the big leagues.

The second is that Logan Stankoven may have the early edge over Matvei Michkov due to a difference in play-driving ability. The two have similar point totals, but Stankoven grades out higher by Net Rating so far because of what he's done at five-on-five. Relative to teammates he's creating more goals, which has led to a sizeable discrepancy in five-on-five points between the two (10 for Stankoven and four for Michkov). Michkov has also been a slight negative defensively, enough for the model to lean toward Stankoven.

The third is that Emil Andrae could be a dark horse to watch. That it's his name directly behind Stankoven's and not Michkov's comes as a surprise, but his work at five-on-five so far has been outstanding. Andrae leads all Flyers defenders with a 59 percent xG rate and 65 percent of the goals. Only Cam York is above 50 percent in xG and no other Flyer defenseman has even been on for 45 percent of the goals. That difference gives a big boost to Andrae's value, though it's worth noting he's been given mostly sheltered minutes. Still, his results have been really promising.

After those four names, the rookie race is mostly a mix of low-minute guys who are surviving defensively so far in easier minutes. We'll see how much of that is for real. For now, the fifth best option is probably Maxim Tsyplov. He's 26 (!) which could sour voters, but he's made a tangible impact so far in the team's top six. His 59 percent xG rate ranks second on the team among forwards.

As for Macklin Celebrini, having six goals and 10 points in 12 games is impressive, but his on-ice results relative to a bad team are a bit of a red flag at the moment. He'll obviously get votes, but that's something to monitor as to why the model isn't fond of him yet.

Vezina Trophy

Given to the goalkeeper adjudged to be the best at this position.

Criteria: Goaltenders who have played half of their team's games or more, ranked by goals saved above expected courtesy of Evolving Hockey and MoneyPuck.

Once again, the Vezina is likely Connor Hellebuyck's to lose. With a .928 save percentage and 0.77 goals saved above expected per game, Hellebuyck hasn't just picked up right where he left off from last year's Vezina-winning campaign, he's arguably taken his game to an even higher level. Hellebuyck is the best goalie in hockey.

While Lukas Dostal technically has better numbers this season, Hellebuyck is obviously the safer bet. He's played at this level before and shown the consistent staying power necessary to believe he'll keep this up. At some point, Dostal will likely fall back to earth. Kudos to him for leading in GSx early and it'll be interesting to see how he progresses through the season, but the favorite is still Hellebuyck given his resume.

There are other annual stalwarts here — Juuse Saros, Igor Shesterkin, Andrei Vasilevskiy — who could make things interesting down the stretch. Newcomers like Joey Daccord, Anthony Stolarz, Dustin Wolf and Logan Thompson also deserve praise. But until someone else gives a good enough reason to usurp him, the Vezina is going to have Hellebuyck's name etched on it for the second straight season.

Art Ross Trophy

Given to the player who leads the National Hockey League in scoring points at the end of the regular season.

Criteria: Skaters ranked by their projected end-of-season point total.

Once again, it will probably be a battle between MacKinnon, McDavid and Kucherov. Shocker. The league's big three in point production will likely be the big three up for the award again this year, with all three on track to hit 130 points. And with only one point separating the projections for the trio, it will likely be a tight race.

Kaprizov, Draisaitl, Rantanen and Jack Eichel could make things spicy on that front, they just don't have the same recent track record. Some drop-off is expected for those four, though it wouldn't be a shock to see Kaprizov and Draisaitl maintain their paces. Draisaitl has done it before and Kaprizov looks like he's found a new level.

Noticeably absent is Necas, the current scoring leader. Because he doesn't have a track record for scoring at this rate, the model does expect a heavy dose of regression in his future and projects Necas to dip just below a point-per-game pace the rest of the way. Necas is projected to finish with 93 points which would represent a career high, though it would be well short of his blistering current pace of 137 points. It'll be interesting to see how much of that pace Necas can maintain and it's more than possible the model isn't quick enough in recognizing his leap. In these cases, though, it's usually better to be safe than sorry.

Rocket Richard Trophy

Given to the NHL's top goal scorer.

Criteria: Skaters ranked by their projected end-of-season goal total.

With Auston Matthews starting slow and missing time, the Rocket Richard race is suddenly wide open. Three names currently hover around the projected 50-goal mark and are separated by just two goals.

Draisaitl currently leads the pack and looks like he's on track to return to his 50-goal ways after taking last year off. Reinhart has laughed in the face of regression and could have a second straight 50-goal season. Kaprizov is right in the mix to have his first 50-goal season.

Matthews' projection currently sits at 43 goals with the model expecting his pace to drop to 51 goals per 82. If he's fully healthy and can get back to his usual 60-plus pace, he still has a shot to catch up — but even at a 60-goal pace, the race would be tight. He has a lot of ground to make up.

The Athletic / Ranking NHL's 5 best rookies so far in race for 2024-25 season's Calder Trophy

By Scott Wheeler and Harman Dayal- November 28, 2024

Each season at The Athletic, we run a quarterly Calder Trophy watch breaking down the top rookies in the NHL.

For our first-quarter ranking, reporters Scott Wheeler and Harman Dayal each submitted five-player ballots (the same length as their PHWA awards ballot) and combined the results. Though their ballots each included the same five players, they differed at the top.

Here are their evaluations of the top five.

T1. Matvei Michkov — RW, 19, Philadelphia Flyers

20

8

9

17

Minus-1

39

17:30

Wheeler's ballot: 1st

Dayal's ballot: 2nd

Average: 1.5

Wheeler: I think there's a case to be made for Michkov, Logan Stankoven and Dustin Wolf in any order but Wolf has played in an almost even tandem early on, Stankoven's played primarily on his team's third line and Michkov is his team's second-leading scorer and the rookie points leader. He plays at the top of the Flyers' lineup (about 17.5 minutes per game to Stankoven's 15.5) and he has resurrected the worst power play in the league last year; the Flyers are starved for offense and he has given them it.

The two scratches would be a knock against a player's case in any other scenario but in his, it was an expected rite of passage from a one-of-one coach. Even with the two scratches, he's on track for 30-plus goals and nearly 70 points in 80 games. That's the Calder sweet spot these days (see: Connor Bedard and Elias Pettersson) and he should get past the 57 that won it for Matty Beniers without trouble.

I think he's been better at five-on-five than people realize, too. He's been unlucky offensively, with an on-ice shooting percentage that has hovered between 6-7 percent, and has been better defensively in the context of the Flyers than in the context of the league (he's middle of the pack among the Flyers' 12 regular forwards in five-on-five xGF%).

Dayal: The Flyers got a steal when Michkov inexplicably fell to them at the No. 7 pick. Yes, there was hesitation around drafting Russians at the time. Yes, he's undersized and yes, there were other elite prospects available at the top of the 2023 draft class, but Michkov's offensive tools were off-the-charts impressive and he's immediately living up to the hype.

Michkov has single-handedly dragged the Flyers' power play, which was last in the NHL last season, back to respectability. He's creative, deceptive and decisive making plays from the right half-wall on the man advantage. He can beat goalies clean from distance with his shot but also has the high-end playmaking vision to set up his teammates (especially Travis Konecny) in dangerous scoring areas. Michkov is an offensive genius and has the most pure skill and talent of any player in this rookie class.

All of that is enormously impressive, but I would like to see more from him at five-on-five. Michkov has scored a paltry 0.94 points per hour at five-on-five, which ranks 295th out of 363 NHL forwards who've logged at least 150 minutes this season. He doesn't have a single primary assist at five-on-five and just two goals in that game state. In fairness, he hasn't always had the best linemates to help him out, but improving there would be the next step in what's already been a dream rookie campaign.

T1. Dustin Wolf — G, 23, Calgary Flames

12

8

3

1

0.921

2.47

Wheeler's ballot: 2nd

Dayal's ballot: 1st

Average: 1.5

Wheeler: As someone who ranked Wolf in the second round when he was drafted in the seventh, and has graded him as one of the top goalie prospects in the sport ever since, I'm not used to others being higher on Wolf than me, Harman!

Here's where I landed, though: If he maintains a save percentage above .920 and plays 50-plus games, he might win it or at least come close. Right now, it's been an even split and I don't think 42-45 games get it done, even if he remains excellent (saying nothing of how hard it is to hold a .920s save percentage across a full season).

The last two goalies to win the Calder were Steve Mason and Evgeni Nabokov, 16 and 24 years ago, respectively. They played 61 and 66 games and were top-of-the-league starters. I don't think Wolf needs that to win it, or that goalies should need that to win it, but he's probably going to need to be viewed as the clear starter there.

Dayal: I understand the lack-of-games-played argument against Wolf — he'll need to hit the 50ish starts mark to come close to winning the Calder — but the splits are so stark that it doesn't matter for me right now. The Flames have an 8-3-1 record (116-point pace) during Wolf's games and a 4-4-2 record (82-point pace) when he doesn't start. Wolf's .921 save percentage is tied for seventh among the 38 goaltenders who've played 10 or more games.

Wolf is the most valuable player on a team that's wildly exceeded expectations. In my mind, there's no rookie in the league who's been more important to his team's success.

3. Logan Stankoven — C/RW, 21, Dallas Stars

20

4

11

15

Plus-4

60

15:17

Wheeler's ballot: 3rd

Dayal's ballot: 3rd

Average: 3.0

Wheeler: Stankoven's been an impactful player on a top team and that means something. He leads all rookies in assists and shots on goal (by a wide margin) and he's also on pace to break the 60-point benchmark that seems to be the Calder standard for forwards. He's owed better luck offensively, too, believe it or not. If his shooting percentage were league average, he'd be touching a point per game. I'm not sure he'll be able to maintain that pace if he stays playing 15 minutes per game but his current role on PP1 (which wasn't a given before the year) could help him. If he were doing it as a center I think that would have played in his favor too but his primary role on the wing doesn't give him that notch in his belt vis-à-vis Michkov.

Dayal: Stankoven has been so good this year that it almost feels wrong to have him No. 3 on this list (I was torn between whether I should put him or Michkov higher). But the race is so tight with this top three that all it'd take is one mini hot streak for him to separate and become the Calder favorite. The diminutive 21-year-old is so slick and smooth with the puck. He has the hands and creativity to make elite-level plays off the rush.

Stankoven's playmaking below the dots is a huge asset too. He always has his head up and can feather passes past defenders' sticks and bodies into the slot to set up scoring chances. His dogged puck pursuit and battle-winning ability are admirable considering how small (5-foot-8) and young (21) he is. That's helped him legitimately elevate whatever line he's played on rather than just serving as a passenger.

It's noteworthy that Dallas' top line with Roope Hintz and Jason Robertson produced considerably more offense when Stankoven was riding shotgun with them compared to when he's played further down the lineup.

4. Lane Hutson — LHD, 20, Montreal Canadiens

20

0

11

11

Minus-12

19

22:56

Wheeler's ballot: 4th

Dayal's ballot: 4th

Average: 4.0

Wheeler: Hutson has driven a huge amount of offense with his feet and passing. He's on pace for mid-to-high-40s points and nobody would be surprised if he touched 50 points (if you include the two games he played late last year, he has actually played at a 50-point pace). He's doing it as the youngest full-time defenseman in the NHL and the third-youngest to appear in a game this season by one day (he was born on Valentine's Day 2004 and Isaiah George and Simon Nemec were born on Feb. 15, 2004). Since the 2004-05 lockout, just three U21 defensemen have hit 50 points: Drew Doughty, Quinn Hughes and Moritz Seider.

There has been a lot of talk about some of the defensive mistakes Hutson has made but some of that is also just a natural byproduct of how much he's out there. At the end of the day, he's playing 23 minutes per game on one of the worst defensive teams in the league — and debatably in recent history. His plus-minus column doesn't tell the full story either, as five of the minuses are from empty net goals scored while he's been on the ice late in games. Just for context: the Habs have been outscored 19-13 with Hutson on the ice (41 percent) and 36-23 without him (39 percent).

He's always going to have his critics because of the attention he gets, the market he plays in and the uniqueness of his game. Here's what Dom's model is already projecting about his end-of-season projection.

Dayal: Hutson already ranks top 20 among all defensemen for five-on-five ice time per game. That speaks volumes — how many rookie 5-foot-9 defenders would be trusted with such heavy deployment? The slick 20-year-old puck mover has shown electrifying flashes of transitional and offensive ability. He'll make occasional mistakes from being too ambitious with the puck, but I'd much rather see a player with elite tools learn what they can and can't get away with at the NHL level rather than play it overly safe and stunt their potential upside.

Two other things I'd mention: Hutson's 11 points in 20 games are especially impressive because he isn't even getting first-unit power-play time. He's logged about 21 fewer minutes on the man advantage compared to Mike Matheson.

Secondly, Hutson's been mostly paired with David Savard, who isn't a top-four caliber defenseman at this stage in his career. That context — coupled with their heavy usage and Montreal's leaky overall defensive environment — makes Hutson's start look even more promising.

5. Macklin Celebrini — C, 18, San Jose Sharks

12

6

4

10

Minus-5

40

19:49

Wheeler's ballot: 5th

Dayal's ballot: 5th

Average: 5.0

Wheeler: Celebrini's been extremely impressive for an 18-year-old center on a team that looks like the Sharks do. He's already a clear driver of offense for them. His 19 minutes per game leads all rookie forwards and should help him catch up. His shot rates look really promising and eight of his 10 points so far this season have come at even strength, which triply bodes well.

If he plays every game from here on out, he'll play 70. I don't think 60 points is out of the question, and even if he finished in the high 50s, he'll be on every ballot. It might be enough to win, too. There was some precedent set with Bedard winning it with 61 in 68 games last year on a similarly bad team, and while that might be tough for Celebrini to match in San Jose, it doesn't feel out of reach. What a stud he looks like already, though, either way.

Dayal: Celebrini has arguably performed even better than his point totals indicate. He's driving play, way sturdier physically than most 18-year-old rookies and is showing flashes of offensive brilliance.

Sportsnet analyst Justin Bourne posted some of Sportlogiq's tracked data last week on X, which showed that Celebrini was leading the league in puck battles won per game, controlled entries per game and was second behind Connor McDavid for end-to-end rushes per game.

Celebrini's hockey IQ and creativity have stood out too. This no-look snipe from earlier this month was just outrageous.

Macklin Celebrini goes top shelf with an incredible no-look goal 🤯 pic.twitter.com/0Xbp6MDr8v

— Sharks on NBCS (@NBCSSharks) November 8, 2024

HM. Maxim Tsyplov — LW/RW, 26, New York Islanders

22

2

9

11

Plus-4

30

16:35

Wheeler: This rookie class really starts to thin out after the big five but Tsyplov deserved a mention. I'm on the record believing 26-year-olds shouldn't be eligible for a rookie of the year award but Tsyplov does meet the current criteria and he's playing a second-line role, on pace for 45ish points and has looked like a solid top-nine player in the NHL from the start. Those who are familiar with his game know that he has a heavy shot too and that his low goals-to-assist ratio won't last. He's a pretty unique player as a big man who can move and play in straight lines.

Dayal: Tsyplov's long-term ceiling isn't anywhere close to being as high as the other players on this list, but he's been an effective top-six option on Brock Nelson's line. The heavy 6-foot-3 forward is scoring points at a respectable pace and the Isles are decisively winning his minutes, controlling nearly 58 percent of scoring chances and outscoring opponents 14-11 with him on the ice.

I also love the physical edge that he brings to the game. Tsyplov ranks top 20 among all NHL forwards for hits this season. He's delivered some hefty blows like this massive open-ice hit on Canucks star Quinn Hughes.

Maxim Tsyplov delivers a MASSIVE hit on Quinn Hughes 🤔

pic.twitter.com/03KCM57HP

— Spittin' Chiclets (@spittinchiclets) November 15, 2024

The Athletic / NHL Trade Value Rankings: Connor McDavid still reigns, but where does Connor Bedard fit?

By Max Bultman and Corey Pronman- November 28, 2024

What would it take for the Chicago Blackhawks to trade Connor Bedard?

It's probably not something most Blackhawks fans ever want to ponder, with Bedard poised to define their franchise for the next decade-plus. And the good news is, in all likelihood, it's not something Chicago's front office needs to spend much time considering. At least, not for many years to come.

But that lens, of what a player would return on the trade market — with age, contract, team control, and performance all factored in — is one of the most interesting ways through which to examine player value in the modern NHL.

It's one thing to rank the league's best players (and we've certainly done that here at The Athletic), or to project the league's top youngsters by their future impact (we do that, too). But a trade value ranking has to balance both the short- and long-term evaluation of every player.

And that leads to some difficult questions. What's more valuable between a young, cost-controlled defenseman with a bright future (but who is still taking some early lumps) and a proven top-line center who has already made a significant impact on the biggest stage, but who has just one year left on his deal? The answer may vary based on a given team's current and future outlook — which is the very basis for most trades, even if the magnitude is usually lower.

For this ranking, The Athletic's Corey Pronman and Max Bultman averaged out their opinions on the value of the league's best players and prospects and then, after a lengthy debate, cut that group down to a top 100 and divided it into five tiers — updating their order from last year with some notable shake-ups.

The result is this list, of the league's best players and prospects ranked by their trade value.

Tier 1

1

Connor McDavid

EDM

2

Nathan MacKinnon

COL

3

Cale Makar

COL

4

Miro Heiskanen

DAL

5

Aleksander Barkov

FLA

6

Auston Matthews

TOR

7

Quinn Hughes

VAN

Most of this tier is made up of the slam dunks: the NHL's true irreplaceable players at premium positions. We've shortened this tier by nearly half this year, to capture just how essential these players are to their teams.

Still, two players who were in tier 2 last year elevated themselves into this even more exclusive grouping this time around. Quinn Hughes won last season's Norris Trophy, and the start he's off to this year has him looking like he'll be a finalist again. That's significant because five of the seven players in this tier have either won the Hart or Norris.

One of the two who hasn't — and the other player to climb into this tier — is Aleksander Barkov, who is the best player on the reigning Stanley Cup champion, plays the premium position and looks like the heir apparent to Patrice Bergeron's Selke-winning dynasty. When you're the most trusted two-way center in the league, have a winning track record, and can still produce the way Barkov does, it's almost impossible to replicate that value.

Aleksander Barkov looks like the heir apparent to Patrice Bergeron's Selke-winning dynasty. (Sam Navarro / Imagn Images)

As for the lone player here who has yet to fill his trophy case, Miro Heiskanen, it feels like only a matter of time. He is perhaps the league's most complete defenseman, is on an incredible contract (\$8.45 million AAV through 2029) and manages to be even better every year in the playoffs.

This tier also skews a little older this year than it did last season, as this time we placed more emphasis on the established megastars, compared to raw potential and team control. Still, all of these players are under 30 and have at least two full seasons left on their contracts — with the exception of Connor McDavid, whose deal expires in 2026. Nothing beats having the best player in the world, though, which is a good way to sum up this group.

Tier 2

8

David Pastrnak

BOS

9

Connor Bedard

CHI

10

Leon Draisaitl

EDM

11

Jack Hughes

NJD

12

Tim Stützle

OTT

13

Macklin Celebrini

SJS

14

Matthew Tkachuk

FLA

15

Charlie McAvoy

BOS

16

Rasmus Dahlin

BUF

Tier 1 features players who are exclusively NHL superstars at premium positions. Tier 2 is a lot of the same, but players have one or two minor questions in their profile.

They may be young and unproven like Bedard or Macklin Celebrini. They may be a winger like David Pastrnak or Matthew Tkachuk who we don't feel brings the true value of a star No. 1 center. They could be a true star producer like Leon Draisaitl or Jack Hughes, who have been great in the league, play the middle and are paid big money, but we are skeptical they should rise to the level of the centers above them. Draisaitl has the production to be tier 1, but there's a part of his evaluation that makes you wonder how much playing with McDavid elevates his and the rest of the Oilers' numbers.

Pastrnak and Bedard were tier 1 last season, so why did they drop? For one, we were a bit stricter with defining tier 1. The players in there are exclusively current superstars at premium positions. It doesn't mean a winger like Pastrnak can't get to that level of value, but given the fact Boston has struggled a bit this season, and we didn't feel his talent elevated to the special level for his position to be a complete tier above someone like Tkachuk.

With Bedard, he's obviously a special talent who has been excellent as a teenager in the NHL. He has dynamic skill, IQ and scoring ability, but we have at least some minor reservations he's going to for sure

hit the production of someone like McDavid or Matthews, in part due to his size, to justify being in that grouping as of today. He has the potential to get there someday.

Tier 3

17

Leo Carlsson

ANA

18

Adam Fantilli

CBJ

19

Nikita Kucherov

TBL

20

Brady Tkachuk

OTT

21

Matvei Michkov

PHI

22

Jack Eichel

VGK

23

Brayden Point

TBL

24

Adam Fox

NYR

25

Noah Dobson

NYI

26

Wyatt Johnston

DAL

27

Igor Shesterkin

NYR

28

William Nylander

TOR

29

Mikko Rantanen

COL

This tier combines some of the players we expect to define the NHL's next generation — headlined by Leo Carlsson, Adam Fantilli and Matvei Michkov — with current elite superstars starting to age (Nikita Kucherov), and other prime-aged stars just a half-step down from the first two tiers.

Carlsson and Fantilli are on two of the league's worst teams, so we're staying patient for now waiting for the results to come. Both still look like star No. 1 centers in the long term, though it's notable that Carlsson climbed ahead of Fantilli this time around.

It was a little tough to put them ahead of Kucherov, who was last season's MVP runner-up and is making another bid this season, but as incredible as Kucherov is, he's now 31 and that has to be taken into account in a trade value ranking. If Tampa was offered a future No. 1 center with loads of team control, they'd have to at least think long and hard about it. But his placement this high still reflects our tremendous respect for the player he still is today: one of the league's true game-breakers.

Nikita Kucherov is still one of the league's true game-breakers. (Kim Klement Neitzel / Imagn Images)

Really, that's true of everyone in this tier, and particularly for a pair of players who might have been in tier 2 were it not for contract-related factors. Igor Shesterkin is the best goalie in the world, and Mikko Rantanen is a 100-point star power forward, but both are pending free agents after this season. We expect both to eventually extend with their current teams, and thus wouldn't imagine either actually being traded, but their contract status would be a significant factor if they were.

Adam Fox was a tough case, as he's more accomplished to this point than Rasmus Dahlin, who is in the tier above. But Dahlin is younger and has really hit his stride with superstar-level production in the past two seasons, and is on track to continue that this year. Combining that development with his added size and skating ability explains the difference there.

We're also bullish on Wyatt Johnston's ascent toward becoming a legit No. 1 center. He got off to a quieter start this season, but some of that appears to be tough shooting-percentage luck. At just 21 years old and playing a big role for a Cup Contender, we feel good that he'll continue on the impressive start to his young career.

Tier 4

30

Andrei Vasilevskiy

TBL

31

Moritz Seider

DET

32

Luke Hughes

NJD

33

Connor Hellebuyck

WPG

34

Roman Josi

NSH

35

Jake Sanderson

OTT

36

Roope Hintz

DAL

37

Kirill Kaprizov

MIN

38

Elias Pettersson

VAN

39

Artemi Panarin

NYR

40

Juraj Slafkovský

MTL

41

Victor Hedman

TBL

42

Matt Boldy
MIN
43
Evan Bouchard
EDM
44
Artyom Levshunov
CHI
45
Matty Beniers
SEA
46
Juuse Saros
NSH
47
Sidney Crosby
PIT
48
Mitch Marner
TOR
49
Filip Forsberg
NSH
50
Devon Toews
COL
51
Dylan Larkin
DET
52
Alexis Lafrenière
NYR
53

Sebastian Aho

CAR

54

Jason Robertson

DAL

55

Nico Hischier

NJD

56

Jake Oettinger

DAL

57

Owen Power

BUF

The criteria was very specific in the first three tiers, and the number of players per tier was quite small. When we get to tier 4, it opens up significantly.

These are all still excellent players, but there are notable differences between them and the top 25 or so players. Maybe they are legit star players, but they are old or on a questionable contract. Maybe they're still a pure prospect like Artyom Levshunov or quite young with a lot of room to grow like Juraj Slafkovský.

It was around this range of the project that we started to struggle with what to do with pending free agents, with Rantanen right toward the end of tier 3, and star wingers Kirill Kaprizov and Mitch Marner being in tier 4. They all on merit deserve to be higher, if not much higher, but their probability of resigning and/or what their next deal may be was a major part of their value conversation.

We had tough philosophical debates in this tier. What do you do with Andrei Vasilevskiy? NHL people love the player, but he's getting up there in age, and his play has declined a bit. We still think he would be highly valued if on the market.

Why is Marner in tier 4, as opposed to another pending free agent like Rantanen? We felt if he was on the trade market his playoff performance and likely contract demands would loom large. Elias Pettersson is a great player, but his recent struggles combined with his contract led to him sliding down as a value proposition. He's a super-talented offensive player who we feel will rebound, but his skating and inconsistency keep us from rating him with the most premium forwards.

Finally there was the issue of Sidney Crosby, one of the best all-time players at the end of his career. There are obvious tension points, but given the name, the career, and the current talent level, we feel if he was on the block teams would see massive value in adding him even if only for a couple of seasons.

Tier 5

58

Dylan Cozens

BUF

59

Ilya Sorokin

NYI

60

Seth Jarvis

CAR

61

Sam Reinhart

FLA

62

Logan Cooley

UTA

63

Nick Suzuki

MTL

64

Andrei Svechnikov

CAR

65

Ivan Demidov

MTL

66

Jeremy Swayman

BOS

67

Mathew Barzal

NYI

68

Lucas Raymond

DET

69

Tage Thompson

BUF

70

Josh Morrissey

WPG

71

Zeev Buium

MIN

72

Quinton Byfield

LAK

73

Will Smith

SJS

74

Berkly Catton

SEA

75

Beckett Sennecke

ANA

76

Gustav Forsling

FLA

77

Brock Faber

MIN

78

Mikhail Sergachev

UTA

79

J.T. Miller

VAN

80

Aaron Ekblad

FLA

81

Mika Zibanejad

NYR

82

Cole Caufield

MTL

83

Pavel Mintyukov

ANA

84

Dylan Guenther

UTA

85

Carter Yakemchuk

OTT

86

Zach Hyman

EDM

87

Mason McTavish

ANA

88

Anton Silayev

NJD

89

Carter Verhaeghe

FLA

90

Robert Thomas

STL

91

K'Andre Miller

NYR

92

Anton Lundell

FLA

93

Alexander Nikishin

CAR

94

Jacob Slavin

CAR

95

Linus Ullmark

OTT

96

Kyle Connor

WPG

97

Mark Stone

VGK

98

Joel Eriksson Ek

MIN

99

Thomas Harley

DAL

100

Ryan Leonard

WSH

This is the biggest tier by far, and the makeup is accordingly all over the place. There are several prospects just months removed from being drafted. There are veterans like Mark Stone, who at this point in his career is a perennial health question mark — but is still one of the best players in the world when healthy. And there's just about everything in between, too.

As a result, it's easy to see different teams valuing these players in vastly different orders depending on their place in the competitive cycle. Florida, for example, probably would not trade Gustav Forsling for

Will Smith with the Panthers looking to repeat as Stanley Cup Champions. But for the Sharks, Smith is a more valuable piece than Forsling because they're still years away from winning.

You can do that in all kinds of scenarios with this group: Who says no to Zach Hyman for Beckett Sennecke? Or Mika Zibanejad for Mason McTavish? The answer, in both cases, is likely both teams — which is how you know they're in the right tier.

There are some players worth monitoring to climb this list next year. Brock Faber is off to another excellent campaign, and if he keeps that up, it's easy to see him joining the other top young defensemen in tier 4. Sam Reinhart is repeating his own huge breakout. Tage Thompson is back to terrorizing opponents, but this time with an improved defensive impact. If he can stay healthy, does Morrissey now belong a tier above, with consecutive top-seven Norris finishes and an incredible contract with a cap hit of just over \$6 million?

Interestingly, none of these players feel like actual trade candidates this season, after three players from last season's tier 5 changed teams either at the trade deadline or in the offseason. That's not great for deadline buzz, but it speaks to how important each of these players is to their respective teams' present and/or future.

The Athletic / The Contrarian: That famous Bobby Orr photo is bad, and other fake NHL arguments

By Sean McIndoe- November 30, 2024

Welcome back to The Contrarian, one of the most beloved and popular features that I write. Unless it isn't.

The concept here is simple. Readers send me statements about the NHL that they believe to be obviously true, bordering on the inarguable. Then I argue against those statements anyway and see if I can convince you to start thinking the unthinkable.

Do I actually believe any of this? Maybe, but that's not the point. The point is I'm a sportswriter, and if I'm going to have any success in this media world, I need to master the art of making ridiculous contrarian arguments that make just enough sense to be infuriating.

Previous editions of The Contrarian have seen me make the case that Mark Messier was a great Canuck, Ray Bourque's long-awaited championship was bad and Brett Hull's skate-in-crease goal was actually fine. Today, we've got a new batch of reader statements that can't be argued. Spoiler alert: All of them will be.

For example, why is Orr flying through the air in the first place? Because he was tripped. By Noel Picard of the Blues, to be specific, who decided to give Orr a little post-goal oopsie-doodle in what was, let's be honest, a bit of sore loser shenanigans. Again, kind of a weird thing to decide we need to memorialize forever.

You may have noticed the keyword in that last paragraph: post-goal. No, Orr didn't score the Cup-winning goal while flying through the air. That would have been undeniably cool, and it sure seems to be what the NHL wants us to believe happened. You'll often see the play referred to as being Orr's "flying goal," but it was no such thing. Go ahead and watch for yourself — it's a basic give-and-go play, even kind of a weak goal. And Orr has both feet firmly on the ice when he scores it.

OK, you might say, maybe the goal itself was overrated, but it was a Cup-winner, and it came in overtime. Surely that has to count for something, right? I guess. Congratulations to the Bruins on sweeping an expansion team. That's right, a sweep. Orr's clutch moment came in a series his team was already leading 3-0. Everyone already knew the Bruins would win easily, just like they would when the same two teams met for a rematch two years later and Boston swept again. Orr's goal didn't win anything that hadn't already been all but locked up. All he did was save everyone an extra flight.

Digital ad boards are bad. — Chase S.

On the contrary, Chase, you ninny. The NHL's digital ad boards are a clever use of technology that increase revenue.

Are they perfect? No, and we all agree that the animations sometimes get a little too aggressive; the occasional player-eating glitch is obviously bad. But those problems are infrequent these days, as the league has worked hard to find a better balance than what they launched with. These days, with exceedingly rare exceptions, everything works smoothly, and the only people still complaining are people who just like to complain.

Look, I'm old enough to remember a time when there were no ads on the boards at all, or the ice, or the uniforms. But those days are gone, and you can't blame the NHL for figuring out a way to squeeze some

extra advertising revenue. Yes, it means you won't get to see ads for some local brake-repair shop you've never heard of when you watch your team play a road game. But that extra revenue trickles into a higher salary cap, which means more player movement and (hopefully) less chance of a lockout. If that means I have to see an overly aggressive animation happen at exactly the wrong time and feel confused for a fraction of a second once or twice a season, well, I think we should all be happy with that trade off.

The whole "playoff on Thanksgiving" thing is a myth, and at least one team that was out of the playoffs yesterday will end up making it. — Nate M.

On the contrary, Nate, you ignoramus. While the conventional Thanksgiving wisdom — that teams that are outside a playoff spot on the U.S. holiday won't be able to claw their way back into the race — isn't some sort of infallible rule, it will be this year.

That's for two reasons. First, U.S. Thanksgiving is late this year, meaning we're a few games further into the season and there's less runway ahead for teams that need to battle back. But more importantly, the current 16 teams on the outside are the right ones. None of them deserve to make it.

Let's run down the list. The Sharks, Habs and Hawks are all rebuilding, and barely even trying to stay in the race. The Flyers are only slightly better. The Ducks and Blue Jackets have been nice stories so far, but they'd be happy just to play meaningful games in the new year, and that's their likely ceiling. The Penguins and Predators are disasters. The Senators are trying to dig out from the same November fade they have every year, and the Red Wings have been stuck in neutral since Steve Yzerman took over in 1972. The Kraken used up all their flukey playoff luck two years ago. The Blues just fired their coach after 22 games, which tells you how well their season is going. And Utah has already remembered that they're the no-name Coyotes.

Who does that leave us with? Three teams: The Islanders, Sabres and Oilers.

Am I completely sure the Islanders won't make it? No, because this is what they do — fade into the background, watch as everyone counts them out and then sneak into one of the last spots at the end of the season. But between injuries and the apparent lack of a new coach bounce in Patrick Roy's first full season, I don't think they have the juice. They're done.

The Sabres are in the best shape of any of these teams and actually already hold a spot based on points percentage, meaning they're only on the "outside" because the schedule-maker has given the Bruins more games. They're also the Sabres, so who are we kidding? They're done, too.

And the Oilers ... um ... (remembers the concept of this column) ... they're bad, you see. The goaltending is sinking them, and that's certainly not something you can fix with only cap space and three months to work with. Their depth forwards aren't scoring, and those sorts of slumps never last less than a full season. Connor McDavid has been merely great and not otherworldly, because he's already peaked as a player and is now in decline. Add it all up and there's just no way the Oilers are clawing back from the massive (checks notes) one-point deficit they've built up. They're done.

It's over. We might as well start the playoffs today because we already know the 16 teams making it. You read it here first.

Despite what other fan bases say, the Toronto Maple Leafs do not in fact get too much media coverage. — Steve T.

On the contrary, Steve, you goofball.

We all know the ugly details by now. No championships since 1967, no trips to the Final in the same timespan, just one playoff round won in the cap era, only one division win since 2000 and that one was

fake ... that is not the resume of a team that should be front and center in everything the league does. I don't know how often the Maple Leafs deserve to be headlining Hockey Night in Canada during the season, but I'm pretty sure the number isn't "roughly 95 percent." If you're a fan of another team and you think the Leafs are overexposed, congratulations, you're right.

But of course, it's 2024, and nobody can just be right about anything and leave it at that. No, instead we get those other fan bases moving onto the next stage of modern discontent, which is performative confusion. Why does this team get so much media coverage? Some of you can't quite figure it out.

On the contrary, Sean, you dingbat. First, your name is dumb. And second, your question is ... well, actually, it's pretty interesting. Let's do this.

Right off the bat, you're missing two of the greatest duos of all time: Phil Esposito with Bobby Orr and Steve Yzerman with Nicklas Lidstrom. The Bruins combo completely rewrote the record book in the 1970s, redefining what offense could mean. And the Detroit pair won three Cups together while playing for two decades for a century-old franchise. I think you could actually argue either of those pairs is ahead of Wayne Gretzky and Paul Coffey.

From there, we can look at other legends to see if there's a partner that fits. Ray Bourque never had an elite center stick around long enough to qualify, with apologies to Adam Oates, and I don't think Larry Murphy (or post-Oiler Coffey) is good enough to get Mario Lemieux on the list. We don't really find a combo in the 1970s Habs dynasty, but if we want to go back to the 1950s then Jean Beliveau and Doug Harvey certainly qualify. And speaking of dynasties, we have to include Bryan Trottier and Denis Potvin.

In the end, I think my top five in order would be: Esposito/Orr, Beliveau/Harvey, Gretzky/Coffey, Yzerman/Lidstrom, Trottier/Potvin. Honorable mentions to Mark Messier/Brian Leetch, Patrice Bergeron/Zdeno Chara and Sidney Crosby/Kris Letang, if only for longevity. That's a tough list to crack for MacKinnon and Makar, as brilliant as they've been, so let's check back in a decade or so.

That was a good question, Sean, thanks for sending it. I'm sorry I called you a dingbat. Still a dumb name, though.

There's no way the Penguins can come back to make the playoffs, so they should start a total rebuild. — Andy M.

On the contrary, Andy, you flapdoodle.

Your problem is that you're starting from an unstated but flawed premise, which is that the most important goal of a sports team is to eventually win. If that was true, then sure, the Penguins should blow it all up, including trading any and all of their longtime stars. Bottom out, add some picks and prospects and cross your fingers that the ol' Penguins lottery luck kicks in once again. If your goal is to have the best record possible five years from now, that's the only rational way forward.

But that's not the goal, or at least it shouldn't be. Not in Pittsburgh. Because in rare cases, there is a goal in the sports world that's even bigger than winning: Being historically great.

Look, winning a championship is cool, and flags fly forever. But not all champions are created equal, and there's a higher tier that only a small number of teams will ever reach. And when a team can get there, it lives forever. We're talking about the Wayne Gretzky Oilers, the Bill Russell Celtics, the Joe DiMaggio Yankees or the Tom Brady Patriots. Those are the teams that ascend to a higher plane. As a fan, you're lucky to get to root for even one in your lifetime.

And sure, you could argue that Crosby's Penguins are already there, given the watered-down era they play in. But even if they are, you have to keep going. There's always another step. One more championship changes the conversation, and so would one more after that.

If you're lucky enough to get to this level and there's any chance at all of one more run — even one in a million — you have to take it. You squeeze absolutely every drop out of this stone, and then you squeeze some more just to make sure. Every great dynasty must end, and most end badly, but the point is you never choose to end it. You ride it for as long as you possibly can, because the odds are stacked that you'll never get the opportunity again.

Father Time is undefeated, and parity comes for us all in the NHL. The rebuild will happen in Pittsburgh because eventually, it will have to. But that isn't a moment Kyle Dubas or Fenway Sports Group should be trying to summon until there's no other option. For now, you have Sidney Crosby, a trio of championships and two decades of the best memories your fan base will ever have.

The Athletic / NHL Power Rankings: A new No. 1, Rangers fall from top 10 and the league's best deals

By Dom Luszczyszyn and Sean Gentile- November 30, 2024

The most important day in the American calendar is finally here: Black Friday.

It's a day to celebrate consumerism in all its glory with epic deals on TVs, toasters and coffee makers. At Power Rankings HQ, we wanted to join in on the festivities of this very important holiday.

We scoured the books for this week's rankings to find the best Black Friday deals for each team. A guy scoring at a 40-goal pace making a million bucks? What a bargain! A top-five goalie for \$2 million? What a steal!

Here are the 32 best values around the league this season.

1. Carolina Hurricanes, 16-5-1

Last week: 2

Sean's ranking: 1

Dom's ranking: 1

He's not the cheapest Hurricane (\$6.5 million AAV), and Carolina is getting plenty of value from defensemen Shayne Gostisbehere and Jalen Chatfield, but we can't say anyone other than Martin Necas. Is that because he took over first place leaguewide in points heading into Thanksgiving? Perhaps.

Even if he'd stayed in second place, Necas would still be locked in as the league's foremost breakout star. He's not just racking up points, either — he's doing it more efficiently than anyone else in the league (5.58 per 60). With him producing at this level, Carolina's top six makes a whole lot more sense.

2. Winnipeg Jets, 18-5-0

Last week: 1

Sean's ranking: 2

Dom's ranking: 2

It's not often that a team's best deal belongs to their highest-paid player and the Jets certainly have other options, but the answer right now has to be Connor Hellebuyck. He is once again carrying Winnipeg to incredible heights and is looking like the Vezina front-runner. Hellebuyck's consistency at such a volatile position is a marvel and when you compare what he's doing to what others being paid roughly \$8 million are doing, it's not even close. It can be risky paying goalies big bucks, but that's not the case for Hellebuyck. Year after year, he's worth every penny and then some.

3. Minnesota Wild, 14-4-4

Last week: 3

Sean's ranking: 3

Dom's ranking: 3

For one more season, the Wild have Brock Faber on an entry-level deal and they're certainly getting the most out of that forced bargain. Faber has leveled up from a strong rookie season to prove he's every bit

the elite No. 1 stud he looked to be in flashes. He's dominating in a shutdown role, an impressive feat for such a young defender.

4. Washington Capitals, 15-6-1

Last week: 7

Sean's ranking: 4

Dom's ranking: 5

The Capitals have a ton of great choices thanks to several players taking a big step forward, but we have to give the nod to Connor McMichael. He signed a two-year extension this summer worth \$2.1 million per season and it's safe to say he's been worth way more than that to the Capitals. In 22 games he already has 13 goals, just five off last year's career high of 18 with 60 games to go. He's managed that while tilting the ice heavily on Washington's shutdown line. McMichael looks like the real deal.

5. Vegas Golden Knights, 14-6-3

Last week: 10

Sean's ranking: 6

Dom's ranking: 4

No Golden Knights defender has been on for a higher goals percentage than Brayden McNabb; Vegas is outscoring opponents 23-10 in his minutes, plenty good enough for a player who makes less than \$3 million this season and a necessary bit of economy on a top four that, aside from McNabb, counts more than \$21 million against the cap.

6. New Jersey Devils, 15-8-2

Last week: 8

Sean's ranking: 5

Dom's ranking: 6

Nothing says "value" quite like a right-shot defenseman who can crush matchup minutes, and that's what New Jersey has gotten from Johnathan Kovacevic this season. New Jersey's goal share, expected and actual, are both above 60 percent when Kovacevic is on the ice, and plenty of that has to do with his ability to suppress offense. No defenseman in the league with at least 100 minutes played has been on the ice for fewer expected goals against per 60 than Kovacevic's 1.59. That's big-time stuff for anyone, let alone a player who cost the Devils just a fourth-round pick over the summer.

7. Dallas Stars, 13-8-0

Last week: 5

Sean's ranking: 7

Dom's ranking: 8

Mason Marchment was a revelation in his last season with the Panthers. He scored at a 73-point pace and dominated puck possession to an incredible degree. It was the kind of breakthrough that put him on the map, enough to figure any team signing him was about to get a real steal. That didn't happen for Dallas immediately, but in Year 3 of his deal, the Stars are getting a massive return on their investment. Marchment is right back at that ridiculous level we saw in 2021-22 scoring at a point-per-game pace and

once again dominating the shot clock on a nightly basis. His line with Matt Duchene (also a steal!) and Tyler Seguin has easily been the team's best and at \$4.5 million, Marchment has been a bargain.

8. Toronto Maple Leafs, 13-7-2

Last week: 9

Sean's ranking: 9

Dom's ranking: 7

Ask any Leafs fan who the team's best defenseman is and a large majority will likely give you the same answer: Jake McCabe. His shutdown game is underrated and he's taken that to another level this season with Chris Tanev, another defensive ace, to form one of the league's stingiest pairs. McCabe has been a rock for the Leafs and an absolute bargain at only \$2 million this season (with Chicago retaining 50 percent of his salary). Say what you will about Kyle Dubas' tenure with the Leafs, but he seriously cooked with that deal.

9. Florida Panthers, 13-9-1

Last week: 6

Sean's ranking: 8

Dom's ranking: 9

Is it Sam Reinhart? It might have to be Sam Reinhart. The same Sam Reinhart who signed a \$69 million contract in the offseason. When you're leading the league in goals and scoring on nearly 28 percent of your shots, the salary number barely matters. (Florida will need someone outside of its very talented, very expensive core to step up, but that's another issue for another time.)

10. Colorado Avalanche, 13-10-0

Last week: 14

Sean's ranking: 11

Dom's ranking: 10

It's Cale Makar, and we have two points to make. The first, and we're breaking some ground here — man, this guy is really good. He's 10th league-wide in scoring (30 points, more than Connor McDavid and seven ahead of the second defenseman), and the Avalanche are winning his minutes to a degree comparable to his Norris season in 2021-22. Back then, his on-ice expected goals plus/minus per 60 was 0.72. Currently, it's at 0.66, 28th in the league among D-men with at least 100 minutes played.

The second: As good as Makar's contract may be, it's not a great sign that the Avs' top value makes \$9 million a year. Someone down the lineup needs to step forward.

11. Los Angeles Kings, 12-8-3

Last week: 12

Sean's ranking: 10

Dom's ranking: 13

The Kings have used a by-committee approach to replacing Drew Doughty on the blue line, and they've gotten plenty of production from rookie Brandt Clarke along the way. Clarke leads the Kings' blue line in

points (15, six more than anyone else), on-ice goals for per 60 (3.48) and expected on-ice goals for per 60 (3.36).

12. Edmonton Oilers, 11-9-2

Last week: 15

Sean's ranking: 12

Dom's ranking: 11

If you're looking for a place for Evan Bouchard slander, you've come to the wrong spot. While Bouchard isn't quite scoring at his usual rate, no one is for Edmonton. Everything else under the hood is business as usual for Bouchard, whose on-ice numbers are just as good as they were last season when he emerged as a Norris contender. His pair with Mattias Ekholm has officially been elevated to shutdown duties and have done a damn good job with that considering their current goaltending circumstances. Bouchard has more to give, but he's still been really good — and at \$3.9 million he's still the best bargain on the team.

13. Tampa Bay Lightning, 11-8-2

Last week: 11

Sean's ranking: 15

Dom's ranking: 12

Future Team Canada member Brandon Hagel signed a massive eight-year extension last year priced at \$6.5 million per season, a deal that gave a lot of folks some sticker shock. "Hagel? \$6.5 million?" There's no shock these days with what he's bringing to the table. After quietly scoring 75 points last season, Hagel has taken another leap with 26 points in 21 games this season which is second to only Nikita Kucherov on the Lightning. Yes, he's got more than Brayden Point and Jake Guentzel while also soaking up matchup minutes on a fantastic shutdown line with Anthony Cirelli. Hagel is a helluva player.

14. Vancouver Canucks, 11-7-3

Last week: 13

Sean's ranking: 14

Dom's ranking: 14

Flying way under the radar this summer was the Canucks adding Kiefer Sherwood at just \$1.5 million. That's looking like one of the best bargains of the offseason with how he's started, scoring 2.9 points per 60. Sherwood has been so good that he's earned a spot next to Elias Pettersson over the last six games, a stretch where he has three goals and five points while dominating at five-on-five.

15. Calgary Flames, 12-7-4

Last week: 16

Sean's ranking: 13

Dom's ranking: 16

Calgary is getting a top-10 goaltending season, in both save percentage (.921) and goals saved above expected (8.43), from Dustin Wolf. Really good stuff from a 23-year-old rookie. He's a big reason the Flames are up this high.

16. New York Rangers, 12-8-1

Last week: 4

Sean's ranking: 16

Dom's ranking: 15

One of the more disheartening things about the Rangers' slide (if you're a fan, at least) is the big-picture timing. If players like Chris Kreider and Mika Zibanejad are aging out as difference-makers, it's happening right as a bunch of younger guys are hitting their strides.

Will Cuyllé might lead the way there — only Artemi Panarin has more points than Cuyllé's 18, and his line (with Kaapo Kakko and the currently sidelined Filip Chytil) has outscored opponents 10-0 while driving play. Not bad for a guy on an entry-level deal.

17. Buffalo Sabres, 11-10-1

Last week: 17

Sean's ranking: 17

Dom's ranking: 17

It's Tage Thompson. A superstar being paid just 0.92 Elias Lindholms per season? How could it be anyone else?

We would love to talk about anyone else in Buffalo, but every road leads back to Tage. He's having a magnificent year at both ends of the ice, producing at a high level, and doing everything you'd want out of a franchise center. Tage is back, and he's easily Buffalo's best deal. Now if only the Sabres could get just fair value out of their other \$7 million center ...

18. Boston Bruins, 11-10-3

Last week: 20

Sean's ranking: 18

Dom's ranking: 18

If you want a bit of shorthand for how Boston's season is going — or how Don Sweeney's offseason went — our pick for their top value is a league-minimum fourth-liner who's been ... fine. Give Cole Koepke some credit; eight points and solid play-driving in a bottom-six role counts for something. It's the guys ahead of him who have been the problem.

19. Seattle Kraken, 11-11-1

Last week: 19

Sean's ranking: 19

Dom's ranking: 20

Next year when a \$5 million extension kicks in, the answer to this question probably won't be Joey Daccord. For now though, he's making just \$1.2 million as the team's starter and ranks in the league's top five for GSAX. The Kraken might be painfully mid, but they'd be a lot worse off if not for Daccord.

20. Detroit Red Wings, 10-10-2

Last week: 21

Sean's ranking: 20

Dom's ranking: 19

At long last, Moritz Seider has a competent partner and the Red Wings have a terrific top pair. Simon Edvinsson has lived up to the hype so far and has been better than advertised for Detroit. The team's top pair is getting buried in difficult minutes as usual, but Edvinsson's presence has allowed Seider's pair to not just survive those minutes, but dominate them. In 279 minutes together the pair has earned 58 percent of the expected goals while outscoring teams 10-5. Defensively, they've felt impenetrable. Edvinsson is the missing piece and, lucky for the Red Wings, is on an entry-level deal for this season and the next one. What he's delivering at that price is exceptional.

Now about the rest of the defense...

21. Columbus Blue Jackets, 9-9-3

Last week: 24

Sean's ranking: 22

Dom's ranking: 22

With 44 goals in his first 137 NHL games, we knew Kirill Marchenko could score. This season, though, he's become a more productive playmaker, averaging nearly two assists per 60 minutes. Marchenko, along with Sean Monahan, have given the Blue Jackets two reliable first-line elements.

22. Philadelphia Flyers, 10-10-3

Last week: 26

Sean's ranking: 23

Dom's ranking: 21

Emil Andrae's emergence has been a pleasant surprise along Philadelphia's blue line. In his first 13 games, he (seemingly) won over John Tortorella and played to the best on-ice results of any Flyers defenseman. He's a fun watch, too. Philly could use a few more like him.

23. Ottawa Senators, 10-11-1

Last week: 22

Sean's ranking: 21

Dom's ranking: 24

It's been a weird season in Ottawa, but Drake Batherson isn't to blame. He's been a point-per-game guy, a top-10 scorer on the power play and a relatively decent play-driver at five-on-five. That's plenty of value on a contract that pays him less than \$5 million annually.

24. Anaheim Ducks, 9-9-3

Last week: 25

Sean's ranking: 24

Dom's ranking: 23

There is exactly one goalie who's saved more goals above expected this year than Lukas Dostal: Connor Hellebuyck. Pretty good company made even better by a near league-minimum salary. Dostal looks like Anaheim's goalie of the future.

25. St. Louis Blues, 11-12-1

Last week: 27

Sean's ranking: 26

Dom's ranking: 25

When the Blues signed their dual offer sheets this summer, the number next to Philip Broberg's name almost felt like a mistake. It was a lot of money for a guy who couldn't crack a lineup that featured Cody Ceci and had struggled to make a name for himself after being picked in the top 10 of the 2018 draft. It was a big bet that how he looked in the playoffs was the real Broberg — that the Oilers didn't know what they had in him.

Turns out, the Blues were right on the money there. Broberg looks like a legit top-four defenseman and Edmonton's loss is St. Louis' gain.

26. Utah HC, 9-10-3

Last week: 23

Sean's ranking: 25

Dom's ranking: 26

Filling in on the top pair is not easy. Michael Kesselring has made it look that way though. With Sean Durzi and John Marino out, it's been him next to Mikhail Sergachev and so far he's looked solid there. The pair has outscored opponents 6-3 and won the scoring chance battle to boot. That's great work for \$1.4 million.

27. New York Islanders, 8-10-5

Last week: 18

Sean's ranking: 27

Dom's ranking: 27

Value is tough to find overall on Long Island, given that they're a cap-locked team that's 27th in points percentage, but Maxim Tsyplov has added something to the lineup in his first North American season. He's got 13 points, the highest on-ice expected goals percentage on the team (58.99) and the Isles are winning his minutes 18-15. Once again, not bad for an entry-level contract.

28. Montreal Canadiens, 8-11-3

Last week: 29

Sean's ranking: 28

Dom's ranking: 29

Three pairs play tougher minutes than Kaiden Guhle: Tampa Bay's top pair, Detroit's top pair and Carolina's top pair. That's the context needed for what Guhle has dealt with this season and he's still managed to be Montreal's best scoring chance suppressor. He has a real future as a shutdown force and will be a bargain on his \$5.5 million extension, let alone the ELC he's currently on.

29. Chicago Blackhawks, 8-12-2

Last week: 31

Sean's ranking: 29

Dom's ranking: 28

Chicago's best forward (and arguably the best young forward in hockey) is still on his ELC so it would be silly not to pick anyone but Connor Bedard. While his production isn't where many expected for his second season, a boom does feel like it's coming. Bedard looks a lot better under the surface this year.

30. Pittsburgh Penguins, 8-12-4

Last week: 28

Sean's ranking: 31

Dom's ranking: 30

If nothing else — and the Penguins, indeed, don't have much else — Jesse Puljujarvi is having the exact sort of bounce-back season in a bottom-six role that plenty of us expected. Eight points and solid play-driving on an \$800,000 AAV counts for something, regardless of how bad the rest of the roster might be.

31. San Jose Sharks, 7-13-5

Last week: 30

Sean's ranking: 30

Dom's ranking: 31

It's not just that Jake Walman has been the Sharks' best defenseman — it's that they reeled in a second-round pick along with him. It was a bizarre move by Steve Yzerman at the time, and it's only gotten worse. San Jose is outscoring opponents with Walman on the ice; they can't say that about any of their other D-men. He's got 15 points, too, and is playing on the top power-play unit. Seems like a useful fella!

32. Nashville Predators, 7-12-4

Last week: 32

Sean's ranking: 32

Dom's ranking: 32

The top-paid Preds have been mediocre in most cases and terrible in others. They're not getting any true breakout seasons, either. So let's just give this one to Luke Evangelista (eight points in 21 games, not-putrid five-on-five numbers) and move on with our lives.

The Athletic / NHL playoff tiers, buyers and sellers: Where does each team stand at Thanksgiving?

By The Athletic NHL Staff- November 30, 2024

For NHL teams, American Thanksgiving isn't all about turkey, gravy and Black Friday sales. Just past a quarter way through the regular-season schedule, it's the point by which general managers traditionally want to know what kind of team they have — and to figure out a course forward based on that.

Last year by this point, seven of the eight eventual postseason teams in the East were already in playoff position, and six of eight were in the West. The rest of the way, only the New York Islanders (who had a .528 points percentage on Turkey Day), Nashville Predators (.444) and Edmonton Oilers (.306) moved into the field, with the Detroit Red Wings (.583), Seattle Kraken (.500) and St. Louis Blues (.583) falling out.

So, is it too early to talk about buyers and sellers with the trade deadline still just over three months away? Or playoff tiers with nearly four and a half months left in the regular season? Maybe ... but history says that the trends we've seen so far will mostly continue.

Here's what our writers said.

Anaheim Ducks

Record: 9-9-3

Playoff tier: Long shot

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Cautious seller

Analysis: This is where GM Pat Verbeek must have a vision of who will make up his team as it tries to make the leap out of a rebuilding stage into a competitive one. At some point, major selloffs should not be part of their plan. But the Ducks have six impending UFAs on their roster, the two holding the most value being goal-scoring winger Frank Vatrano and shutdown defenseman Brian Dumoulin. Vatrano's name surfaced at the 2024 deadline, but Verbeek held onto him as he completed a 37-goal career season. He's started to heat up after being ice-cold the first few weeks. Dumoulin has been a great addition to the Ducks blue line. If he hasn't already, Verbeek will have to decide if either is worth keeping to help Anaheim take the next step or use them to continue adding futures.

Boston Bruins

Record: 11-10-3

Playoff tier: Bubble team

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Cautious seller

It's going to be hard for the Bruins to make up ground from their first 20 games. It does not appear they have enough offensive depth to be a serious playoff contender. Brad Marchand and Trent Frederic are pending unrestricted free agents. If the Bruins can get back high-end futures, they'll have to consider trading both forwards and accelerating their rebuild.

Buffalo Sabres

Record: 11-10-1

Playoff tier: 50-50

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Aggressive buyer

The Sabres should be an aggressive buyer at the trading deadline as long as they're still in the playoff hunt. GM Kevyn Adams and coach Lindy Ruff have both said this is a win-now situation. They also have at least \$6 million in salary cap space to work with and plenty of prospects and draft picks to use as trade bait. There's no reason they shouldn't be willing to acquire an extra player or two to put this team over the top.

Calgary Flames

Record: 12-7-4

Playoff tier: 50-50

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Cautious buyer

The Flames were written off by many to start the season. But they're currently in a playoff spot. Optimism says that if their goaltending holds throughout the rest of the year, the Flames could make it to the postseason. And as Darren Dreger of TSN said earlier this week, the Flames might not be as cautious ahead of the deadline. But this status could very much sway down to cautious seller if their goaltending falls off and their scoring issues persist. If the Flames have to sell, it will help with their retool/rebuild anyway.

"He (Conroy) could get aggressive, it all depends on if Calgary can hang in the mix... Conroy and the Calgary Flames could be a bigger player than anticipated on that March 7th trade deadline"

We might be in for another premature end to the rebuild just like 2015...

Carolina Hurricanes

Record: 16-5-1

Playoff tier: It's a lock

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Cautious buyer

The Hurricanes are usually very measured in their moves at the deadline. That doesn't mean they won't be aggressive if they think the fit is perfect — such as last season when Carolina added Jake Guentzel. Still, the Hurricanes won't recklessly compromise their future for short-term gains.

Chicago Blackhawks

Record: 8-12-2

Playoff tier: Not happening

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Aggressive seller

The Blackhawks will be looking to move whatever they can of their expiring contracts again under Kyle Davidson. There are a handful this season. Taylor Hall is the most high-profile player, but he hasn't had much production so far. Ryan Donato, Pat Maroon and Craig Smith could also be traded and have all performed relatively well this season. The Blackhawks would likely be willing to eat some of their caps, too.

Colorado Avalanche

Record: 13-10-0

Playoff tier: Looks like a good bet

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Aggressive buyer

Excellent starts by Winnipeg, Dallas and Minnesota have made the playoff race in the Central incredibly competitive, but the Avalanche have an 87 percent chance of making the playoffs according to Dom Luszczyszyn's model. Expect Colorado to be buyers at the deadline, especially in the crease if Alexandar Georgiev and Justus Annunen don't improve before then. The Avs have turned things around with seven wins in their last nine games, but they still have the worst team save percentage in the entire NHL.

Columbus Blue Jackets

Record: 9-9-3

Playoff tier: Long shot

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Aggressive seller

GM Don Waddell is new to the Blue Jackets organization as of last May, so these next few months will be quite informative. He's learning what his young nucleus is made of, and how best to surround them. Expect more significant changes, especially at the trade deadline. The Blue Jackets have several significant pending UFAs, headlined by defenseman Ivan Provorov, who could bring a first-round draft pick from a contender. The others are forwards Sean Kuraly, Mathieu Olivier, Justin Danforth, James van Riemsdyk, Zach Aston-Reese and Kevin Labanc, plus defensemen Dante Fabbro and Jack Johnson. They won't all be traded, but Waddell will be busy.

Dallas Stars

Record: 13-8-0

Playoff tier: It's a lock

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Cautious buyer

The Stars typically are cautious at the deadline, but last year grabbed the best defensive defenseman on the market in Chris Tanev, and did so without having to give up a first-round pick. It's easy to envision them trying to bolster their blue line again at the deadline, but they won't overpay for the privilege because — at least for now — they don't need to.

Detroit Red Wings

Record: 10-10-2

Playoff tier: Long shot

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Cautious seller

It's not so much that the Red Wings are off to a slow start, but rather that they haven't shown much of a path to a possible turnaround. The team's defense is improved, but Detroit still spends too much time having to defend on most nights, and the offense has taken a significant step back. A strong power play and good goaltending thus far have kept them nominally afloat in the Eastern Conference playoff field, but their five-on-five game just hasn't been good enough to believe in them actually emerging from that race. Selling at the deadline, then, seems probable. Still, there are only a couple of players on expiring contracts who would be expected to garner much interest. Alex Lyon and Patrick Kane stand out at the top of that list — if Kane wants to move again, that is.

Edmonton Oilers

Record: 11-9-2

Playoff tier: It's a lock

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Aggressive buyer

The Oilers made it to Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final a few months ago. They have the oldest team in the NHL while having Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl at top form. They're in the league's worst division. They've been trying to accrue salary cap space at almost every turn. The choice to buy at the trade deadline is clear. What's less obvious is what they'll use to acquire a player or two. Their prospect pipeline is paper thin and they've already dealt their first-round pick, on a conditional basis, to Philadelphia.

Florida Panthers

Record: 13-9-1

Playoff tier: Looks like a good bet

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Cautious buyer

The Panthers' recent dip has, at least temporarily, taken them out of the "playoff lock" category, but be honest: Do you really think the defending champs aren't going to be in the mix come April? We also know GM Bill Zito is always open to improving his team around the margins — and a fresh bottom-sixer wouldn't hurt — but he's got well below \$1 million in projected space.

Los Angeles Kings

Record: 12-8-3

Playoff tier: 3 – 50-50

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Aggressive buyer

The Kings' consistency at being inconsistent has been confounding. Being trounced in the third period by San Jose and then locking down Winnipeg for 60 minutes two days later is Example A. They're in playoff position now and if they manage to be there when Drew Doughty returns for the second half, this could swing Rob Blake to be active if this becomes his final season in the GM chair. They're in need of an impact winger, particularly one they can plant with Anze Kopitar and Adrian Kempe. Goaltending could also be a question mark. While there is an appetite from vocal parts of the fan base to sell off veterans, that's easier said than done as most of their key players still have term on their deals. Vladislav Gavrikov is an impending UFA who has the most value, but he's also been their best defenseman as Doughty recovers from his broken ankle.

Minnesota Wild

Record: 14-4-4

Playoff tier: Looks like a good bet

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Cautious buyer

If the Wild keep accruing cap space by staying out of LTIR, you can bet a team that has a cap ceiling that's \$15.4 million less than most others will try to add at the deadline if it feels it's a true contender. As well as the Wild have defended this year and as good as Kirill Kaprizov (35 points) and Matt Boldy (10 points in his past 10 games) have been, generating chances has been a concern. They're at the bottom of the league in expected goals, so a play-driving top-six forward would be just what the doctor ordered.

Montreal Canadiens

Record: 8-11-3

Playoff tier: Not happening

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Cautious seller

The Canadiens have four impending unrestricted free agents that could attract some attention at the deadline — David Savard, Jake Evans, Joel Armia and Christian Dvorak — but they are also a team already loaded with draft picks and prospects. Thus, if the return is simply more middling draft picks, they might be tempted to hang on to some of these players to try to finish the season strong. The case of Evans is particularly complicated because there could be some interest in re-signing him. So yes, some or even all of these players might be traded by the deadline, but the sense is the organization won't necessarily feel obligated to do it.

Nashville Predators

Record: 7-12-4

Playoff tier: Long shot

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Aggressive buyer

GM Barry Trotz has warned publicly about getting his "rebuild plan" going because of this team's dreadfully disappointing play. But you can't do all he's done to load this roster with aging stars and do anything but try to figure it out this season. So he has to go get a legitimate No. 2 center, because Tommy Novak isn't cutting it. The identity of that player isn't obvious and a quality add there won't necessarily fix enough of this team's long list of ills. But Trotz has to try.

New Jersey Devils

Record: 15-8-2

Playoff tier: Looks like a good bet

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Cautious buyer

The Devils are rounding into form nicely with their collection of offseason additions, which included coach Sheldon Keefe. Barring a regression, they're in a good position to make the playoffs again after a disappointing 2023-24. That means they'll be buyers. Tom Fitzgerald isn't afraid to be aggressive, but he already did a lot of his aggressive business over the summer, acquiring Jacob Markstrom and multiple solid free agents. My guess is New Jersey will look to add but likely with upgrades around the edges rather than with a ginormous trade.

New York Islanders

Record: 8-10-5

Playoff tier: 50-50

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Cautious seller

It's logical to think a team that's going to need to fight to get into the playoffs for a third straight season and currently sits under .500 would sell, especially since the Islanders have some players to sell — Brock Nelson and Kyle Palmieri foremost among them. But Lou Lamoriello has been holding onto his core Islanders for years, so even at under .500 he may believe this team has something to offer.

New York Rangers

Record: 12-8-1

Playoff tier: Looks like a good bet

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Aggressive buyer

The Rangers will be aggressive one way or another. GM Chris Drury made that clear by alerting other executives that he's open to making moves and mentioning captain Jacob Trouba and longest-tenured player Chris Kreider by name. But barring a major tailspin, New York is going to want to get better before the trade deadline. This is a team with pressure to win now, especially with Igor Shesterkin's next contract looming over everything, so don't be surprised if Drury tries to make bold moves.

Ottawa Senators

Record: 10-11-1

Playoff tier: Bubble team

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Cautious seller

The Senators need to stack up some wins if they want to help their chances of making the playoffs. And with a lack of depth showing on defense already, the Sens could make a move sooner rather than later. If the Sens improve their standing, this could change to "cautious buyer." But if the Sens continue to trend toward another lost season, they will need to set the table for a significant shock to their system. And offloading assets for picks and prospects.

Philadelphia Flyers

Record: 10-10-3

Playoff tier: Long shot

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Cautious seller

The Metropolitan Division already looks like the haves and have-nots, with the Flyers part of the latter group. Getting back into the playoff race doesn't seem likely. Further, the Flyers have a handful of players that could be of interest to contenders like Rasmus Ristolainen, Scott Laughton and Morgan Frost. Still, GM Daniel Briere is also surely on the lookout for a center that could play with Matvei Michkov and potentially fit for the long term, too. The Flyers could sell off some pieces while also attempting to fix what is their biggest positional problem.

Pittsburgh Penguins

Record: 8-12-4

Playoff tier: Not happening

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Aggressive seller

The greatest era the Penguins have known is over — at least except for nostalgia. President of hockey operations and GM Kyle Dubas inherited a mess two years ago, had a disastrous first summer, and is well into taking a ticket on any young player who was once a touted prospect. He's already dealt one veteran, Lars Eller, and is looking to ship out others — notably Marcus Pettersson and Rickard Rakell. Although Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and coach Mike Sullivan are doing their best to prop up an inferior roster, they can't. The Penguins not only aren't contenders, they're barely competitive. They're headed for the draft lottery.

San Jose Sharks

Record: 7-13-5

Playoff tier: Not happening

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Aggressive seller

The Sharks have numerous impending UFAs to peddle. But do they want to move all of them? For starters, Mackenzie Blackwood (and even Vitek Vanecek) could certainly be shopped to open a spot for prized goalie prospect Yaroslav Askarov to be in San Jose full-time. Veteran right-shot defensemen Cody Ceci and Jan Rutta don't figure to be long for the Bay Area. Up front, Mikael Granlund, Luke Kunin and Nico Sturm have been effective in their roles and could be useful depth pieces for contenders. The toughest call might be Granlund, who has been a leading player for them since coming to San Jose. Extending him shouldn't be out of the question but with Macklin Celebrini already their new franchise face and eventual No. 1 center, it still makes sense to see what the trade market brings for the veteran and whether there's an offer too good to pass up.

Seattle Kraken

Record: 11-11-1

Playoff tier: Bubble team

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Cautious buyer

The Kraken have played better hockey lately, but are still toward the bottom of the Pacific Division. Seattle's biggest issue this season — backup goaltending — is a relatively straightforward fix, but the bigger-picture flaw of its roster, the lack of elite star-level talent, is more complicated. Another layer of complexity is the overall state of the business in the upstart Seattle market. The Kraken have got off to a decent start to their existence, with their magical second season standing out as a high point. Was that a one-off or a real baseline to build on? If Kraken management is going to make the latter case and continue to build inroads in a crowded Seattle sports market, finding a way to succeed this season will be essential. It's a dynamic that could make them a wild-card buyer, despite Ron Francis' trademark conservatism, between now and the deadline.

St. Louis Blues

Record: 11-12-1

Playoff tier: Long shot

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Cautious seller

The playoffs are a long shot, but with Jim Montgomery now behind the bench, the Blues could put themselves back in contention. They're carrying a points percentage of .479, which includes two wins under Montgomery. If the offense can get on track, this could be a different team. If the Blues are out of the postseason picture at the deadline, I'd expect them to be cautious sellers. They have a few pieces such as Brandon Saad, Radek Faksa and Nick Leddy who could be dealt, but any other significant moves probably won't happen until the team's recent high draft picks are NHL-ready.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Record: 11-8-2

Playoff tier: It's a lock

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Cautious buyer

The Lightning made big offseason swings to keep their playoff window open, and management probably isn't going to stop anytime soon. Tampa Bay just probably can't afford to be an aggressive buyer

between its limited cap space and trade assets. The team has depleted its prospect pool through years of contention and is already without its 2025 first-rounder. Sure, they can trade picks further out, but those picks are going to get more and more valuable if the Lightning's long-term trajectory looks suspect. Still, they should be pursuing low-key moves to bolster their depth.

Toronto Maple Leafs

Record: 13-7-2

Playoff tier: It's a lock

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Aggressive buyer

The Maple Leafs will — again — have immense pressure on them to finally make a deep run in the postseason. Which means pressure on management to ensure the roster is as strong as possible. The Leafs have a clear need at center. Right now, they have Auston Matthews, 34-year-old John Tavares and a bunch of question marks, including Pontus Holmberg, Max Domi and David Kämpf. What they need is someone capable of playing, at worst, as the team's No. 3 down the middle. Ideally that player can score a bit and help the cause defensively too. Too much to ask? Maybe.

Utah Hockey Club

Record: 9-10-3

Playoff tier: Long shot

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Cautious seller

Utah's season hasn't gone according to forecast. It's down to a less than 20 percent chance of making the playoffs and is having issues both producing offense and getting enough saves. This isn't the end of the world — it's a young team that wasn't projected to be a Cup contender and has some good prospects coming — so regrouping and selling makes a lot of sense. Utah has useful veteran pending UFAs like Nick Bjugstad, Ian Cole and Karel Vejmelka who could all be in high demand before the deadline, too.

Vancouver Canucks

Record: 11-7-3

Playoff tier: Looks like a good bet

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Aggressive buyer

This is Jim Rutherford and Patrik Allvin we're talking about. Aggressiveness on the trade market for this Canucks management group isn't just something we've seen in the past, it's the product of a philosophical belief that being active and making changes gives this team a competitive edge. The Canucks are interested in upgrading their back end and are going to want a defender who can be a top-four upgrade over multiple years. The Canucks will do something to boost their roster, perhaps sooner than later but certainly by the deadline. If the club can play the right way more consistently, and if the right piece shakes loose, they could be one of the NHL's most aggressive buyers.

Vegas Golden Knights

Record: 14-6-3

Playoff tier: 5 – It's a lock

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Aggressive buyer

The Golden Knights are well on their way to their seventh playoff appearance in eight years of existence, and should once again be buyers at the trade deadline. The most likely spot to add is on the wing, but Vegas may not have the assets to be quite as aggressive as it has been in past years. The team is without its first-round pick for the next two drafts, so the addition(s) may not be quite as flashy, but still expect Vegas to add.

Washington Capitals

Record: 15-6-1

Playoff tier: Looks like a good bet

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Cautious buyer

The Capitals already have Nicklas Backstrom and T.J. Oshie stashed on LTIR, which is a double-edged sword; it allowed them to add big-ticket items during the offseason but also made them ineligible to accrue cap space. Thus, any additions will have to be extremely budget-friendly. The good news, though, is that those summer adds seem to have paid off — this is a playoff-caliber roster without any obvious holes (assuming Alex Ovechkin eventually returns).

Winnipeg Jets

Record: 18-5-0

Playoff tier: It's a lock

Trade deadline buyer or seller? Aggressive buyer

Kevin Cheveldayoff has shown a willingness to make big moves whenever the Jets have been in contention, notably adding Paul Stastny in 2018, Kevin Hayes in 2019, Nino Niederreiter and Vladislav Namestnikov in 2023, and Sean Monahan, Tyler Toffoli and Colin Miller last season. Now, Winnipeg is at the top of the NHL standings and projects to be able to add over \$10 million in contracts on deadline day. Add it all up and it's easy to see the Jets making moves for center help and/or a big, crease-clearing, veteran defenseman with a legitimate playoff resume.

The Athletic / U.S. 4 Nations roster: What we're hearing about how final decisions were made

By Michael Russo- December 2, 2024

The decisions have been made. The analyzing is finally over.

On Monday, the United States roster for the 4 Nations Face-Off will be submitted to the NHL and NHL Players' Association. On Wednesday, the group of 13 forwards, seven defensemen and three goaltenders will be revealed across the United States and Canada on TNT and Sportsnet at 6:30 p.m. ET.

Bill Guerin, GM of the U.S. team, is comfortable with every decision made. He understands the facts of life, too. Just like he and his staff — which includes John Vanbiesbrouck, Tom Fitzgerald, Chris Drury, Bill Zito, Chris Kelleher and head coach Mike Sullivan — picked and prodded the games of a large pool of American players, fans and media members will soon scrutinize all of theirs.

There will be some big-name snubs. As The Athletic reported in mid-November, the management group had hard debates about players like Tage Thompson, Cole Caufield, John Carlson, future Hall of Famer Patrick Kane and others.

"It's just not easy, but you have to make the decisions," Guerin told The Athletic Friday. "It's not that I don't care what the outside thinks. It's just that I understand that it doesn't matter what I do, people will question, and people will say, 'Oh, you should have done this, you should have done this.'"

"Sorry. This isn't an All-Star team. Not every great American can make it. It's about fit and trying to win a short tournament against three other great teams."

The tournament between the U.S., Canada, Sweden and Finland will take place in Montreal and Boston from Feb. 12-20. It's essentially an NHL-only Olympics appetizer once the pool of nations can grow.

In choosing the U.S. roster, Guerin has one regret: Why on earth couldn't each country pick a 14th forward and eighth defenseman?

"I don't understand their reasoning to deny two more guys per team the opportunity to be part of this when every other international tournament is 25 players," Guerin said. "It doesn't make sense to any of the (four nations)."

With the NHL shut down during the tournament, it has been said the rationale from the NHLPA is players don't want to give up their vacations to go to the tournament and not play. But what concerns the GMs for the four countries is that with only one extra forward and one extra defenseman, if there are injuries, teams are at risk of playing short and putting players in further peril of being hurt or becoming overtaxed before they return to their day jobs once the NHL schedule resumes.

"I just wish we could bring two more players for the experience because that's how many we'll bring to the Olympics," Guerin said.

That's why Guerin's next two days before Wednesday's roster unveilings will be spent calling many of the players who didn't make the team and explaining the reasoning. It is a bit of damage control because with the rosters announced two and a half months before the tournament, there are bound to be injuries and some of these players will need to push aside their disappointment in case USA Hockey comes calling later on.

"A lot of guys who didn't make the team are having good years," Guerin said. "It's about fit and just trying to put together the best team."

With hard phone calls left to make to those who, at least for now, didn't make the team, Guerin wouldn't go so far as to give The Athletic the U.S. roster to unveil. But here's the toughest debates management has had over the past few months and the logic we think was used in making the final decisions.

Forwards

Named in June: Auston Matthews, Matthew Tkachuk, Jack Eichel

Presumed shoo-ins: Kyle Connor, Jack Hughes, Jake Guentzel, Brady Tkachuk, J.T. Miller

Miller has been on a leave of absence from the Vancouver Canucks since last month, but the United States could still plan to name him to the roster after doing its due diligence. According to multiple sources briefed on the discussions, Guerin has talked to Miller, Miller's agent Brian Bartlett and Canucks GM Patrik Allvin and believes Miller wants to play in the tournament and will be back playing in the NHL well before then.

This leaves five other players.

Matt Boldy, the Minnesota Wild's rising star right wing, has almost surely played himself onto the team. He led the World Championship in scoring with Wild coach John Hynes, one of Sullivan's assistants for the 4 Nations, acting as head coach. He's a point-per-game player this season for Minnesota, a high-volume shooter, dynamic on the power play and can play left or right wing.

That leaves four other spots.

Some candidates: Kane, Caufield, Thompson, Chris Kreider, Vincent Trocheck, Jason Robertson, Brock Nelson, Clayton Keller, Troy Terry, Brock Boeser and a whole horde of others

We just can't see the United States tapping on Kane. Roster spots are just too precious.

Caufield isn't a fourth-liner. And even though he leads all Americans with 14 goals, the United States is stacked with power-play forwards and he just seems too much like Hughes and Boldy. It feels like he'll be on the outside looking in.

For the fourth line, we think Dylan Larkin gets a spot. On the power play, he's one of the best bumpers in the NHL. And for what should be a fast-paced tournament, the Red Wings captain flies. He can play left wing, center and right wing. He can kill penalties. He's just so versatile that it would be hard to leave him off.

That leaves three more spots.

This is where the critics will likely have a field day because there are great players there is simply no room for.

If we had to guess, guys like Robertson, Keller, Terry and Boeser are likely boxed out, using the same rationale they used for Caufield. If so, it comes down to Thompson, Kreider, Trocheck and Nelson.

As Guerin told The Athletic in early November, the coaches want flexibility and versatility; guys to fit specific roles. Not everybody can be in the top six. Not everybody can be on the power play. They need guys to win big draws, kill penalties and play physically when the games get tight.

Nelson, the New York Islanders veteran, is a chameleon who can play anywhere. He can play up your lineup, down your lineup, take big draws, play wing or center, kill penalties or protect leads late in games. That flexibility feels too appealing to leave off.

So now it comes down to Thompson, Kreider and Trocheck.

From a versatility standpoint, Kreider and Trocheck probably have the edge. But from a “who’s playing best” standpoint, the Buffalo Sabres’ Thompson, by far, has the edge over Kreider and Trocheck on a slipping New York Rangers team.

Kreider has nine goals and zero assists in 20 games. Bizarre, but he has played mostly with Mika Zibanejad, who is struggling dramatically and last week was attempting just 10.95 shots per 60 minutes, the lowest volume of his career. Trocheck’s game also hasn’t been nearly as stable as it was in last year’s playoffs when he was the Rangers’ Mr. Everything.

But both players could fill fourth-line roles, kill penalties, block shots and have a body of work USA Hockey likely covets.

We wonder if that squeezes Thompson out. He’s a top-six guy who’s not better than Matthews, Eichel or Hughes, who’s playing unreal right now. Plus he’s not great on draws. So you do wonder if he has been boxed out when you look at the number of power-play guys and top-six players who can play offensive roles.

We’ll see. It’ll be hard to keep him off the team.

He’s gigantic with a cannon of a shot. If he doesn’t make the roster, he’s the one player you bet Guerin will need to smooth things over with because he’d be the perfect guy to come out of the bullpen if Miller has to bow out, if Matthews isn’t healthy or if there’s another injury by the Feb. 12 tournament opener.

Presumed shoo-in: Jaccob Slavin (six months ago, there was talk of him being one of the six Americans selected to the original roster)

Next up, Brock Faber.

He didn’t play in the World Championship after playing the final two months of last season with broken ribs, but he has had a strong first quarter to this season and plays the right side. He is a shutdown blueliner, is a world-class skater, can join the rush, has a heavy shot and can kill penalties — although that area of his game must continue to get better.

That leaves only two other spots.

Some candidates: Carlson, Zach Werenski, Jake Sanderson, Noah Hanifin, Seth Jones, Ryan McDonagh, Brett Pesce

Our gut?

Werenski has played himself onto the team. In fact, the Columbus Blue Jackets veteran may be playing better than any other American defenseman currently. He can play in all situations and if something happens to Hughes or Fox, Werenski could easily slide onto the power play.

As good as Carlson has been for the Washington Capitals this season with 19 points, we think he’s squeezed out. Assuming Sullivan goes with four forwards on each of his power-play units, the blue-line spots go to Hughes and Fox. Carlson is a power-play guy, and when it comes to pace of play and ability to defend, there are better choices.

That means the last spot likely comes down to Sanderson, Hanifin, Jones, McDonagh and Pesce.

Over the last few weeks, it was clear U.S. staff was scouting a lot of Vegas and Ottawa. Will they go with Hanifin for the experience or Sanderson, a young stud who may have an inside track in a year for that eighth blue-line spot at the Olympics?

A case could be made for both, but because Sanderson has been so up and down of late, perhaps Hanifin makes the most sense.

Regardless, if there's an injury at left D before the tournament, whoever doesn't make it between Hanifin or Sanderson could come out of the bullpen. If it's a right D, there's Jones, Pesce and, quite frankly, Neal Pionk, who has been outstanding for Winnipeg.

Hellebuyck "hellebuyck'ed" the Wild last week by stealing a victory in Minnesota. After the game, Guerin met up with Hellebuyck quickly.

Asked what he told him, Guerin said, laughing, "I'm tired of all you guys trying out (for 4-Nations) against us."

Hellebuyck and Oettinger are guaranteed. While there have been some questions about whether they'd put Anthony Stolarz on the team, with Thatcher Demko hurt and Swayman off to a tough start to the season, it's hard to imagine they'd do that.

Swayman is an Olympic hopeful. Stolarz is not. And if something happened to Hellebuyck or Oettinger, would you count on Stolarz over Swayman to win one game?

On paper, regardless of the so-called snubs, the Americans should have a team well-built to win this tournament.

But as Guerin said, "I don't get too excited about things on paper. Look, we're gonna do the best job we can, put together the best team we can, but now we have to go play the games. That's the only way to prove what you've done is right is to go out and play the games. That's the only measure.

"It's not writers or fans. Everybody's entitled to their opinion. I'm totally fine with that. That's great. But in order for us to prove it, we actually have to go out and play the games and prove that we're right and capable of winning."

ESPN / Standout, surprises at the 2024 CHL-USA Prospects Challenge

By Rachel Doerrie- November 30, 2024

Reactions

The inaugural CHL-USA Prospects Challenge wrapped up after games on Tuesday and Wednesday in London and Oshawa, Ontario. The CHL team took both games, and the run of play was not close. After taking the first game 6-1, the CHL required a late goal from Cole Reschny in Game 2 to win 3-2. However, USA goaltender Harrison Boettiger was the only reason the game was not 6-1 or 7-1. The 2026 draft eligible was outstanding, and kept the USA in it.

Over the course of two games, quite a few players stood out -- particularly for Team CHL. In what is considered a down year for the program, where they lack the true elite players of years past that included numerous top 10 picks, the CHL iced three players that are likely to be taken in the top 5 of the 2025 NHL draft. In their first chance head-to-head matchup after the Hlinka Gretzky Cup, many players expected to be taken early were impressive.

Here's what stood out the most from the two games, and what it means for the remainder of the draft season:

Matthew Schaefer was the talk of the event, with some chatter about him moving up to be the first overall selection. The left-handed defenseman was far and away the best player in Game 1 of the challenge, dazzling with end-to-end rushes, blocking shots while missing his equipment, and dictating the pace of play from the back end. In an event that was star-studded, he rose to the occasion and cemented his status as the draft's best defenseman.

A few scouts opined that if he were right-handed, he'd likely be the clubhouse leader for the top pick in June. As it is, he's making a legitimate case to be in the discussion.

He showed excellent skating ability, with changes of pace to beat defenders on offense and match the USA's best offensive players in defensive transition. When he wasn't raising eyebrows with his rushing ability, his first pass was accurate and on time. He made sound puck decisions and consistently thwarted the USA's top players.

The CHL's top line of Porter Martone, Michael Misa and Caleb Desnoyers was nothing short of outstanding over the two-game stretch. They dominated play for long stretches, with all three looking the part of being top-10 draft picks. Martone and Misa dictated pace of play, were excellent in transition and dangerous every time they were on the ice. Both created a litany of scoring chances with their individual puck skill and their ability to read the play and cause turnovers.

Desnoyers was the best player for the CHL in Game 2, and the perfect complement to Misa and Martone. He demonstrated an ability to play without the puck, read off his linemates and arrive at the right place at the right time to make plays happen. He showed a versatile game, with quick-strike ability and speed in transition, while also forechecking, recovering pucks and creating chances off the cycle. In what is likely the first time that many GMs have seen him play (they don't usually scout in November), Desnoyers did himself a lot of favors with his skill, sense and competitiveness in every area of the ice.

Kashawn Aitcheson raised eyebrows in a positive way over both games with a pronounced physical presence, willingness to mix it up and a bomb from the point that took more than five minutes to confirm as a goal. He stood out as the CHL's best defensive defenseman this week, and will get a long look in the top 20 of this year's draft.

He's at his best when he's shutting the opponent's best players down and physically punishing them. Both of those attributes were on full display over the two games, with the scouts loving the toughness and grit to his game.

On the USA side, when you only score three goals in two games, you leave scouts wanting more. Jack Murtagh scored two of the three goals and caused the turnover that led to Cole McKinney's goal. He was clearly the most dangerous American forward and created most of their scoring opportunities.

Murtagh didn't generate a ton of shots, but many of his scoring chances fell apart in the most dangerous areas. He was the only American that showed a consistent ability to get to those areas and create opportunities. It was not a standout performance, but one that he can certainly build off as he makes his case to be a first-round pick.

Boettiger was outstanding in goal for the USA in Game 2, and was the only reason the game script didn't follow in the footsteps of Tuesday's 6-1 drubbing. After surrendering a goal in the first 30 seconds, Boettiger settled in very nicely and made very timely saves on Grade-A scoring opportunities to keep his team within striking distance. His ability to quickly compose himself and bounce back is a rare trait for young goaltenders.

He turned away wave after wave of CHL attack, until he was finally beaten with less than five minutes left in the third period on a brilliant shot from Reschny. The USA looked scrambling and lacked structure in the defensive zone, and Boettiger masked a lot of mistakes in front of him with his consistent play. After that performance, he'll be on quite a few radars heading into next year's draft.

Overall, this was a dominant showing from Team CHL and shows the caliber of team they could send to the under-18 World Championships if every player was available for selection. Schaefer, Martone and Misa cemented themselves as top-5 picks in this draft, with a few others raising their stock.

It is only two games, but those two games matter when NHL GMs are in the stands. You can guarantee that when lists are being made in June, a GM will say, "Player X was outstanding when I saw him play in those games," or "Player Y wasn't great against the top dogs, we need to unpack that a little more." No one should base their lists off one or two performances, but GM's do not see these players a ton, so when they do, a standout performance goes a long way.

ESPN / NHL trade grades: Wild add former top pick David Jiricek

By Ryan S. Clark- December 1, 2024

Reactions

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.

How could the trade benefit both teams in the future? Let's find out.

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.

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.

[Sportsnet.ca / What a sharp increase in NHL's salary cap could mean for star contracts](#)

By Sonny Sachdeva- November 28, 2024

Two months ago, when the Edmonton Oilers inked Leon Draisaitl to an extension carrying the largest cap hit in NHL history, there was an understanding that his time atop the mountain would be brief.

Waiting in the wings is teammate Connor McDavid, whose own deal expires at the conclusion of next season, after which the face of the league will reset the market with his own landmark extension. The question of what exactly that new record-setting deal might look like shifted some over the past week, though, amid reporting from Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman regarding the future of the league's salary cap.

At the moment, the league's cap is projected to rise to \$92.5 million next season, from where it currently sits at \$88 million, but there's some idea the PA and league may work towards a slightly higher jump, given what could happen after that campaign. Where the cap could go two years from now, in 2026-27, has raised eyebrows, as Friedman discussed on last week's episode of the 32 Thoughts podcast.

"Everyone's assuming in the next CBA we're going back to 50-50 (split in revenues between owners and players)," Friedman said on the episode. "If that's the case, and again it depends on who you talk to, there are some estimates ... that think in two years, a 50-50 cap will be close to \$110 million."

It just so happens that that particular season — the one where this exceedingly optimistic scenario could take shape — is the same season that would mark the beginning of McDavid's next deal.

Whether that lofty number becomes a reality remains to be seen — as Friedman pointed out in his latest 32 Thoughts column, there's still much to be discussed. But the conversation is coming. And if it does all end up falling that way, with the cap spiking after next season, what exactly might the ripple effects look like for the wave of marquee talent set to begin new deals in 2026-27? Here's a closer look at a few key names that would be part of that conversation.

Connor McDavid, Edmonton Oilers

Current Deal: 8 years, \$100 million (\$12.5 million AAV)

The last time the NHL's leading man reset the market, with an eight-year, \$100-million deal inked back in 2017, he signed on for a \$12.5-million cap hit that accounted for 15.72 per cent of the Oilers' available cap room (the league's salary cap sat at \$79.5 million in 2018-19, the first season of that deal).

For frame of reference on how exactly a \$110-million cap would shake things up, if the Oilers captain opted for consistency and looked to sign a new deal occupying the same percentage of his club's cap space, in a \$110-million cap world his new contract would clock in at \$17.3 million per season. Over eight years, that would amount to a \$138.3-million deal.

Not only would that eclipse Draisaitl's landmark \$14-million AAV signed in September, the total sum would top Alex Ovechkin's \$124-million pact signed back in 2008 — still the largest total netted on one deal in league history.

Of course, that might not even be the true top end of how McDavid's next contract could shake out.

When he began the eight-year pact he's currently playing through, No. 97 had amassed a Hart Trophy, a couple scoring titles, a couple MVP nods from his fellow players. In the years since, he's reached an even higher level, piling on more scoring titles, more MVP nods, a Rocket Richard Trophy for a 60-goal

campaign. He's pushed the boundaries of offensive dominance in today's game, and led his club to within one win of a championship.

The maximum percentage of the cap a player's hit can reach, per the collective bargaining agreement, is 20 per cent. With a \$110-million cap, that percentage would mean an AAV of \$22 million. Over eight years, that would amount to \$176 million total.

Now, the chances of McDavid signing a deal anywhere close to that absolute max hypothetical seem slim to none, as even if the cap were to balloon to \$110 million, it seems a longshot that the Oilers captain would max out on cap percentage. Still, given his stature in the game, and the years of dominance he has left in front of him, nudging that percentage up higher than 15.72, perhaps to 16 or 17 per cent (the latter of which would net him more than \$18 million per year with a \$110-million cap), doesn't seem quite as far from the realm of possibility.

Current Deal: 5 years, \$45 million (\$9 million AAV)

The Wild find themselves in an especially interesting position heading into this potential cap jump. Kaprizov sits at the centre of that situation, as the 27-year-old has quickly become one of the game's marquee talents himself. It's one thing to look at how a sharp cap jump might affect McDavid, who will surely max out regardless, but what of those like Kaprizov, whose situations aren't quite so clean-cut?

When he inked the five-year pact that he's now approaching the end of, Kaprizov signed on for 11.04 per cent of his club's cap, the ceiling sitting at \$81.5 million in the first year of his deal. If he were to stick with that percentage in a \$110-million cap world, Kaprizov's new contract would come in at just over \$12 million per year. Not a gaudy sum necessarily, but one that would, for example, put him just a shade behind what Nathan MacKinnon is earning on the long-term deal he just began (which briefly made him the highest-paid player in the game).

But Kaprizov's stock has risen plenty over the course of his five-year deal and he has more leverage this time with unrestricted free agency on the horizon. He's become a 100-point threat, a lock for 40 goals who's twice flirted with the 50-goal plateau. More likely would be a new deal accounting for roughly 13 per cent of his club's cap — as was the case with Elias Pettersson and William Nylander's recently-signed extensions.

With a \$110-million cap, that percentage would push Kaprizov's potential AAV up to \$14.3 million per year, already topping Draisaitl's current league-leading mark. Over eight years, that would clock in at more than \$114 million, a sum topped only by Ovechkin's '08 contract to this point. There's a chance he could push that even further, too, and eye something close to fellow Russian Artemi Panarin, who we'll get to shortly...

Current Deal: 8 years, \$80 million (\$10 million AAV)

Eichel was still a member of the Buffalo Sabres when he inked his eight-year, \$80 million deal. With the cap sitting at \$79.5 million in the first season of that deal, 2018-19, his \$10-million AAV accounted for 12.58 per cent of the Sabres' cap space.

Of course, much has changed for the 2015 second-overall pick since then, with Eichel moving on to Vegas, getting his health back, and helping the Golden Knights lift a Stanley Cup. Though not as prolific a scorer as some of the others in this group, at 28 years old he remains a core piece for a Golden Knights team hoping to hang more banners. If that netted him a new deal at the same 12.58 per cent mark, a \$110-million cap would push his next AAV up to \$13.8 million.

Again, measured against the deals inked in the current cap situation, we can see how much a \$110-million cap would potentially shake up the league, as a \$13.8-million cap hit would place Eichel above

Auston Matthews (\$13.25 million AAV) and MacKinnon (\$12.6 million AAV), both of whom are still in the early years of their own new deals. Of course, Matthews would stand to benefit from a sharp cap increase himself, with his current deal ending after the 2027-28 season.

Artemi Panarin, New York Rangers

Current Deal: 7 years, \$81.5 million (\$11.6 million AAV)

At age 33, the veteran Panarin is fresh off a wild 49-goal, 120-point campaign that saw him finish fifth in Hart voting. The complexion of his next contract will be impacted by his age, surely, but the numbers he's putting up at this point in his career suggest he's still in line for a hefty payday.

Back when he first joined the Rangers, Panarin signed on for 14.29 per cent of New York's cap, with the ceiling sitting at \$79.5 million in the first year of that deal. It would be tough to argue that he hasn't made good on the faith the Rangers brass had in him, Panarin having topped 90 points in every season he's been with the club (aside from the pandemic-shortened 2020-21 campaign, in which he produced at better than a 100-point pace).

If he stuck with that 14.29 per cent on his next deal, with the cap rising to \$110 million, that would put Panarin's next AAV at a shade under \$16 million per year. Even a reduction to 14 per cent of his club's cap would still amount to a \$15.4-million AAV, higher than anything the league's seen to this point.

Interestingly, this extension would also come after one that's due this season to Rangers goalie Igor Shesterkin, who himself could push the limits of what goalies make in the NHL, knowing such a big cap increase is on the way.

Current Deal: 7 years, \$50 million (\$7.14 million AAV)

The Jets' resident sniper might in fact be the most interesting of the bunch.

Back when Connor signed his seven-year deal, his \$7.14-million AAV accounted for only 8.76 per cent of Winnipeg's cap. In a \$110-million cap world, that same percentage would net him a \$9.6-million AAV, and roughly \$77 million if he signed on for eight more years.

But Connor's stock has risen notably over the course of his current deal, too. Since the first season of that contract, 2019-20, the 27-year-old's been a top-10 goal-scorer league-wide, potting the seventh-most overall in that span, and the fifth-most at even strength. Even if the argument was made that he hasn't produced quite at the level of those who earned deals in the 13-per cent range, like Pettersson and Nylander, a jump to just 10 per cent of the cap would still take Connor's hit to \$11 million per year with a \$110-million cap — quite a bit higher than the \$8.5 million per year teammates Mark Scheifele and Connor Hellebuyck just signed on for.

The Scheifele deal accounts for just 9.7 per cent of the Jets' cap, beginning this year with the league's ceiling at \$88 million. Even if Connor's new deal were to sit level with that percentage, a cap spike to \$110 million would put his AAV at \$10.67 million — in today's environment, that would slot him in as the 10th-highest-paid forward in the league, and still the Jets' highest-paid player by a fair margin.

32 Thoughts: The Podcast

32 Thoughts: The Podcast

Hockey fans already know the name, but this is not the blog. From Sportsnet, 32 Thoughts: The Podcast with NHL insider Elliotte Friedman and host Kyle Bukauskas is a weekly deep dive into the biggest news and interviews from the hockey world.

Latest episode

As Friedman reported last Thursday, much would need to happen before that \$110-million hypothetical becomes a reality, however. And there's reason to believe the league may choose to specifically avoid a sharp one-year uptick, as he mentioned, with the NBA having gone through its own similar situation eight years ago, and winding up with a less-than-desirable result. The 2016 hoops cap spike saw the league's limit rise by a record \$24 million in one off-season, a move that enabled the Golden State Warriors to add Kevin Durant and assemble one of the most dominant lineups in the history of the sport.

In the end, the league opted for a "smoothing" plan in regards to future cap increases, as it felt the one-year spike "disproportionately rewarded" certain organizations and free agents. The NHL now wades into the same conversation in their own house, with the game's brightest star and the league's next landmark deal set to be directly impacted.

Sportsnet.ca / Talking turkey about who is on the playoff bubble at the U.S. Thanksgiving mark

By Justin Bourne- November 28, 2024

It takes about 20 games to figure out which NHL teams are great and which are awful. The sorting that happens over that time is rarely a complete aberration, and when it shakes out that a team finishes the season in a very different spot from where they were after 20, there's usually some dramatic reason (often related to coaching and/or injury).

It's also pretty fitting that to decide the Stanley Cup, you play another roughly 20-25 games. Makes sense right? If you figured out the who's who among the 32 teams after 20 games, let's take the best 16 and do it again, this time crowning a winner.

It just so happens that 20-ish games played for every NHL team happens around U.S. Thanksgiving, which just so happens to be ... about now.

The numbers bear this out. Last season, just three teams that were out of the playoffs on U.S. Thanksgiving got in: the N.Y. Islanders, the Nashville Predators and the Edmonton Oilers.

Keep in mind how wild that is, given this includes teams that can be out by a piddly point with 60-plus games left in the season. The year before, just Florida, Minnesota, and again Edmonton, did it. Four teams got in the season before that, but I think you get the point — if you're not at least close around now, things are looking pretty bleak.

A brief piece of positivity for fans of bubble teams: you may have noticed the Oilers were an "out" team who got "in," then went to the Cup Final and came within a goal of winning the Stanley Cup. The year prior, Florida was in 10th in the East at U.S. Thanksgiving, before going to the Cup Final. The year before that, it was the Colorado Avalanche who were inside the playoff cut line by a single point — last among all 16 playoff teams — and they went on to win the Stanley Cup.

So, if you're a ways out at this point, but get red hot down the stretch, that can translate into great results. There's still a meaningful race left to run for those close.

So, which teams are we talking about this season?

THE EAST

As of today, the Buffalo Sabres are in! I don't use many exclamation marks, but the Buffalo Sabres are in! They've got great fans, some great D-men, and good goaltending. They've got a real chance to finish the season in that spot, as much as everyone watching the team has been conditioned to doubt them. I'll list the potential out teams that are trying to get in, along with the likelihood of them making the playoffs, as given by Dom Luczszyn of The Athletic's mathematical model.

Boston Bruins (31 per cent)

In the opening of this piece, I mentioned that when teams finish drastically different from how they started the first quarter of the season, it's often related to injuries or coaching, and we know the Bruins just fired their head coach and gave the job to Joe Sacco (for now). The team has looked mostly terrible this year. The goaltending has gone from a major asset to a liability, and their goal differential is minus-21, a number in the ballpark of the 15th-place Montreal Canadiens, but above the putrid Pittsburgh Penguins. But we know they've got talent, and their stars haven't performed like stars yet. They still can. If David Pastrnak and Brad Marchand (who is showing signs) and Charlie MacAvoy get back to their

games, and Jeremy Swayman settles back in, they're Buffalo's biggest threat to climb back into playoffs. (Dom's model gives the Sabres a 30 per cent chance of making the playoffs, if you're asking.)

Dark Horses

N.Y. Islanders (60 per cent)

The Islanders are the league's most average team (just, shocking average) with a roster of steady veterans, good goaltending, and they give a good effort most every night. Play well, you can beat them; don't show up, you'll lose. When healthy they could be just above average, which should get their point total up into the 90s. A few extra OT/shootout wins along the way could get them into the conversation.

Ottawa Senators (25 per cent)

Ottawa looks like the longest odds to get in here, but they've got the most talent of any team that's struggled badly so far this year, and I think they're desperate enough to do something about it. A trade or two could be all it takes to get this group's mojo going, and a real winning streak at some point is not out of the question. Particularly if Linus Ullmark gets comfortable and gives them league-average goaltending or, ideally, better.

THE WEST

Oh hello, Edmonton, there you are again. I don't think Flames fans saw that spot in the standings coming at this point, and it's just so hard to see them holding on there unless Dustin Wolf remains a name that stays in the Vezina conversation for a full season. Which if you've watched him, doesn't feel impossible? The model has them at 25 per cent chance to make playoffs, even with them currently holding down a spot.

The Kings are a flawed team too, but they'll get Doughty back before long, and that should help them earn a points total in the mid to high 90s.

Edmonton Oilers (97 per cent)

Say it with me without wavering: the Oilers will make the playoffs (barring injury). Their top guys are too good, the team is too experienced, and they won't sit by and leak away the prime of two Hart Trophy winners while getting bottom-of-the-league goaltending. They just never get a key save when they need it, and while I think everyone likes Stu Skinner as a guy (I do, too), it's only a matter of time before the team considers a change there. They're also definitely going to add a D-man or two, and it's probably the right time of year to make that move.

Dark Horses

I've watched a lot of Utah lately, and I just can't see it. Maybe they've had an unusually tough run of games, but it's an absolutely highway through their neutral zone, which makes life way too hard on their defence and goalies. I can't see that team, without additions, getting in.

Seattle Kraken (17 per cent)

I don't know how they'll be as long-term contracts, but Chandler Stephenson and Brandon Montour were nice adds for the Kraken. They remind me of the Islanders of the West: Extremely average, with enough talent to win if you don't bring a decent effort, but just lacking the high-end talent to beat the legitimately good teams consistently. Still, they could get their point total into the 90s, so you never know.

St. Louis Blues (7 per cent)

They're no Cup contender, but the Blues roster isn't outright bad, and I do think Jim Montgomery is a legitimately good coach. We've seen the Blues make the swing from bad to great after a firing once, I don't think it's impossible that they've got enough talent to get hot and become a post-season threat yet again. As mathematical models go, this pick has the longest odds of any team that I've mentioned (including Ottawa), as Dom Luszczyszyn of The Athletic has their odds of getting in at seven per cent.

There are other teams who would read the above and take offence, perhaps no more so than the Detroit Red Wings (three per cent playoff odds), who likely see themselves in the class of the Ottawas and St. Louis of the world. They also tied for the final playoff spot in the East last year, before losing in a tiebreak, so I'll say: of the unmentioned teams, they're the only other one I can see sneaking in. After that, teams have entered the time of year where they need to make decisions. Are they going all-in on development? Are they starting to shop for those defibrillator-style jolts to their not-yet-dead seasons? Or are they starting to sell off and stockpile assets to those earliest movers around the league?

More than anything, it's coach-firing season. That's the one button teams can push at the quarter mark that can make a difference, that reflects their frustration with their start. Either way, things will start to happen around the league as we've seen the cream rise to the top, and everyone else scramble to keep up.

[Sportsnet.ca / As Monahan mourns Gaudreau, friendship lives on through their sons](#)

By Eric Francis- November 29, 2024

COLUMBUS – Standing in front of the stall bearing Johnny Gaudreau’s name, Sean Monahan thumbs through pictures on his phone the way all proud parents do.

He lands on a snapshot of two young toddlers in a playpen he’d taken one day earlier, and he turns to show how his son celebrated turning six months old.

“That’s Little Johnny and Leo,” beams Monahan, whose son is dwarfed by Gaudreau's boy, who is three and a half months older.

“He’s a truck.”

Two little donkeys, as Johnny would have called them.

Living two doors down from Johnny’s pregnant wife, Meredith, and the two Gaudreau kids, regular toddler playdates have had to replace the daily visits Monahan spent alongside Johnny the last dozen years.

“The hard thing for me is being around his kids, because it's something that we were really looking forward to, being dads together in the next step of life,” said Monahan on the eve of a visit by the Flames.

“We were young kids in Calgary, we grew up, and our sons are three-and-a-half months apart, so you have them together playing. You do what you can. That's a really tough part.”

Inseparable since they met as young Flames prospects, Johnny and Monny forged a well-documented bromance so powerful that Monahan signed in Columbus last summer to play and live beside his best buddy.

But once tragedy struck, in the form of an alleged drunk driver who killed Gaudreau and his brother Matthew while bicycling on Aug. 29, the hockey world knew that no one outside of the family would take it harder than Monahan.

“I still haven't gotten over it, I don't think I ever will,” said Monahan, staring blankly down at the dressing room floor.

“Ninety percent of the time it doesn't feel real.

“You lose your best friend, your teammate, it’s tough to comprehend.

“When something happens in my life, I’d usually give John a FaceTime. I go through those situations a lot where you want to pick up the phone, call or text him or send him a picture or something, and you realize that's when it hurts.”

Despite wearing a brave face and returning from injury to be the point-per-game player he was in his Calgary heyday alongside Gaudreau, he admits he still has regular breakdowns.

“Yeah, almost every day, to be honest,” he said.

“A lot of different things can set it off.

“Even just driving to the rink, it's basically all I think about. It’s in my head all day, every day.”

The banner bearing Gaudreau's name and no. 13 is just one of the many reminders around Nationwide Arena of Gaudreau.

He's pictured in a large mural on the front of the rink, his jersey hangs in his stall on game days, and every player's tracksuit includes a no. 13 patch.

Monahan asked for his stall to be beside Gaudreau's, and purposely does all interviews in front of it.

"I always try to get it in there, for sure, when I'm doing interviews, just trying to carry on his legacy," said Monahan.

"His dry stall is still back there, all his stuff is still in there. I open it up every day and still laugh at some of the stuff he's got in there.

"For me, it brings back good memories, because some of the stuff that was in there I was actually with him when he got it, or he has had for 10-plus years. He's a guy who didn't change much.

"He actually never changed as a person, except for when he had kids and he became a great father."

Following Blue Jackets practice Thursday, Monahan went straight to Meredith's house, where teammate Erik Gudbranson and several others arrived to meet up with visiting Flames teammates Rasmus Andersson.

Those are the moments Monahan and Gaudreau loved the most, just hanging out.

"Just two donkeys that really enjoyed being with each other," smiled Monahan, who said that even during the two years they played apart, they still vacationed together and communicated daily.

You can imagine the roller coaster of emotions that came with signing a five-year, \$27.5 million contract to reunite them last summer, followed by Gaudreau's tragic passing two months later.

"Some days are tough to still comprehend it," he said.

"We were going to be back together, which felt pretty surreal. I'm healthy again and we were excited to see what we could do.

"He was super motivated. I don't want to say it was the first time, but he was FaceTiming me and putting his phone up and I was watching him work out. It was not something that would be happening often. So this was going to be a special year. And, I mean, now you've got to carry on that legacy of him and what he has meant to me in my career, and obviously, in my life."

He's doing a fine job of that, becoming just the third Blue Jacket with Gaudreau and Andrew Cassels to post 20 points in his first 20 games with the club.

Given the tragedy, and ongoing injury battles that led to his unceremonious trade out of Calgary in 2022, it's safe to say the hockey world has been cheering Monahan on.

Blake Coleman was one of the first to text Monahan when he scored opening night and punctuated it with an emotional point to the banner.

"I'm sure he's playing with a heavy heart, and I would imagine he feels like John is along for the ride with him," said Coleman, who said good people like Monahan are easy to root for.

"I think sometimes when you have higher motivation or something to play for, I'd imagine he feels connected to him in a way on the ice."

Monahan concurred, saying he has plenty to play for.

“A huge reason I'm here is because of John, and I play for him, his wife, his kids, his family, guys in the room,” said Monahan, who sits top-50 in scoring with seven goals and 13 helpers.

“At the same time you are playing for yourself to get through a time like this. I try to enjoy it as much as I can. Having John's wife here, and living two houses away from each other, has helped stabilize the situation.”

Blue Jacket coach Dean Evason said the club has made a conscious effort to keep Gaudreau's memory alive, which led to the players awarding their player of the game “donkey hat” in Johnny's honour.

“I remember I was hurt in Montreal, and we're playing Columbus — John actually came over and had the pregame meal at my house and took his nap there,” laughed Monahan.

“I drove him to the game. You look back at the memories, and it's just the small little things that, I mean, really stick out to me and that relationship that obviously grew over a 12-year span.”

“It wasn't about the goal, it's more so about his excitement and our friendship,” said Monahan of the hug.

“You watch him play the game, you know he loves the game. He scored that goal and I'm thinking, 'He gets to play more games, and I get to watch.'”

“It was a good, good moment, for sure, and one that I definitely look back on quite a bit.”

Thoughts like those help him through the tough moments.

“At some point, I think it'll feel real,” said Monahan of losing his pal.

“But as of today, it still doesn't for me.”

[Sportsnet.ca / NHL Power Rankings: One blunt truth about all 32 teams](#)

By Ryan Dixon- November 29, 2024

Thanksgiving in the United States really marks the start of a six-week holiday season in North America. Christmas is right around the corner, making the next few weeks filled with food, drink, family and, in all likelihood, some blunt commentary from those closest to you.

On Monday, we touched on the need for a quiet-part-loud conversation in Pittsburgh, as the team continues to crater. That got us thinking: What if, for this week's power rankings, we assumed the persona of a loose-lipped family member at the dinner table and just blurted something out for all 32 teams?

Of course, the nature of that unfiltered commentary tends to be unflattering. Crazy as it can be, though, critiques have been known to contain a kernel of truth. So, without further delay, let's check in with the straight-talkin' sister or, as the family calls him, "Uncle Uh Oh" to see what they have to say about your team.

1. Winnipeg Jets (18-5-0) We're not here to rain on your parade, we're just making sure you know 19 teams — including such heavyweights like the Blue Jackets, Penguins, Utah Hockey Club and Ottawa Senators — have a better expected goals percentage than you.
2. Carolina Hurricanes (16-5-1) Who are you kidding with this goalie situation? Just be done with it, stick that ridiculous helmet on Arturs Irbe and bring him out of retirement!
3. Minnesota Wild (14-4-4) You're right, of course, you're right. There's a zero per cent chance Kirill Kaprizov leaves in 2026.
4. Washington Capitals (15-6-1) Hey, this fast start is fun and all, but wake me up when you win a playoff round for the first time in seven years.
5. New Jersey Devils (15-8-2) You've been in 17 playoff games since 2012. Guys, the Kraken have played 14 and they haven't been in the league as long as Jack Hughes.
6. Toronto Maple Leafs (13-7-2) People say you've got the most clout in the league... lobby the NHL for an NBA-style in-season tournament and maybe you can win that!
7. Vegas Golden Knights (14-6-3) Sure, just go out and trade for everyone else's good players. THAT'S YOUR SOLUTION TO EVERYTHING!
8. Dallas Stars (13-8-0) Who's job was it to tell Jason Robertson that the season started two months ago?
9. Vancouver Canucks (11-7-3) Your fans love bad-mouthing the Leafs, but your Cup drought is only three years shorter than theirs.
10. Calgary Flames (12-7-4) I thought you wanted to draft in the top 3! You never follow through with any plans!
11. Florida Panthers (13-9-1) Establishing a winning identify is all about accountability...and not requiring accountants because you play where there's no state income tax.
12. Los Angeles Kings (12-8-3) Has any club lost in the first round to the same team in four straight years?

13. New York Rangers (12-8-1) Yeah-no-yeah, totally normal for cohesive, Cup contenders to be talking about trading either their captain (Jacob Trouba) or longest-serving member (Chris Kreider) who scored 39 goals last year.
14. Colorado Avalanche (13-10-0) 1996 PATRICK ROY IS NOT WALKING THROUGH THAT DOOR!
15. Edmonton Oilers (11-9-2) How far do you think you can go if Mattias Janmark is your third-highest scoring forward?
16. Tampa Bay Lightning (11-8-2) How's the view from the backside of the mountain?
17. Buffalo Sabres (11-10-1) Literally half the league makes the playoffs. WHAT IS SO HARD ABOUT THIS?!
18. Boston Bruins (11-10-3) All we're asking is, what's the backup plan if not having a No. 1 centre is a fatal flaw?
19. Detroit Red Wings (10-10-2) At least you have the Lions.
20. Seattle Kraken (11-11-1) So... are we sure about this idea Matty Beniers and Shane Wright will be a one-two punch down the middle for a decade? Because they have six goals between them.
21. Philadelphia Flyers (10-10-3) Keep finishing close to .500 and all your rebuild will need is two more generational talents like Matvei Michkov to fall six or seven slots in the draft.
22. Anaheim Ducks (9-9-3) Wherever you go, just make sure Lukas Dostal and John Gibson are in bubble wrap because you're in a world of trouble without the goalies.
23. Columbus Blue Jackets (9-9-3) Let's just do a quick check-in with the past four super-high draft picks: Kent Johnson (fifth overall, 2021) has been in trade rumours before, David Jiricek (sixth overall, 2022) is in trade rumours now, Adam Fantilli (third overall, 2023) has three goals this year and Cayden Lindstrom (fourth overall, 2024) hasn't played regular season major junior hockey in about a year.
24. St. Louis Blues (11-12-1) Three head coaches inside 12 months? Totally normal.
25. Ottawa Senators (10-11-1) But what if a new goalie isn't the answer to everything?
26. Utah Hockey Club (9-10-3) I'm just telling you right now, Hockey Club is better than Yeti.
27. New York Islanders (8-10-5) All I'm saying is, if someone ever finishes 26-26-24, it's going to be you.
28. Montreal Canadiens (8-11-3) At this rate, if every year you didn't win a title you had to lower a championship banner, all 24 might make it to the floor.
29. Pittsburgh Penguins (8-12-4) I can tell now isn't the time to talk.
30. Nashville Predators (7-12-4) Bad news; you've already spent your inheritance.
31. Chicago Blackhawks (8-12-2) No worries, Gavin McKenna is a 2026 generational prospect from the WHL who CAN'T MISS!
32. San Jose Sharks (7-13-5) It's not that we like your sports cousins more than you, it's just that the Warriors, 49ers and Giants have all won at least three titles in their lives.

[Sportsnet.ca / Scout's Analysis: Re-thinking the top of the NHL Draft rankings](#)

By Jason Bukala- November 29, 2024

The first ever CHL-USA Prospects Challenge concluded Thursday night in Oshawa, Ont. The two-game set ended in a sweep for Team CHL after a 6-1 win in London, Ont., on Tuesday, followed up by a 3-2 win on Wednesday. Both games featured playoff intensity, skillful playmaking and after-the-whistle scrums. Most importantly, the series provided NHL scouts, and fans of the game, a unique opportunity to view many of the top prospects for the 2025 NHL Draft in high leverage competition outside of regular-season contests.

I'm working away on my draft rankings, which will be updated next week, and these two games confirmed my early season observations about some of the prospects. James Hagens has long been identified as the top prospect for this draft cycle, but the winds of change are on the horizon.

Here are some of my player observations from the two games between Team CHL and the USNTDP U18 program:

TEAM CHL

Matthew Schaefer, six-foot-two, 183 pounds, D, Erie Otters (OHL)

Schaefer was outstanding. He was deployed in all situations, pushed the play with his pace and skill, blocked shots, and didn't shy away from sticking up for his teammates. He didn't leave a stone unturned with his performance. Schaefer is a complete player. He's a defenceman who can play well over 25 minutes per game and never seems to run out of fuel. He's charging towards number one overall status in my books. Schaefer was held off the scoresheet in Oshawa, but contributed a goal and an assist in the first game. His goal was scored on an end-to-end rush.

Porter Martone, six-foot-three, 209 pounds, F, Brampton Steelheads (OHL)

Martone played right wing on a line with Caleb Desnoyers (Moncton Wildcats) and Michael Misa (Saginaw Spirit) and the threesome was Team CHL's most prolific line. They were first over the boards on the power play and drove play in both games. Martone was involved every shift. He was "around" the play and battled for pucks along the wall and out front of the net. I would have liked to see him rip a few more shots on goal, but there's no doubt his combination of size, skill, and will project him as a first-line NHL player. Martone had one assist in two games.

Michael Misa, six-foot-one, 185 pounds, C, Saginaw Spirit (OHL)

These two games confirmed for me that Misa is much more dynamic when playing the middle compared to the wing. He plays centre in Saginaw, but was deployed at left wing for Team CHL. Misa still ended up with a goal and two assists in the series and played a responsible game overall, but cutting the ice in half doesn't agree with his defensive zone exits and his ability to lead the rush more often through the neutral zone. When he plays centre his skating and vision allow him to roam more freely in open ice. Misa returns to Saginaw as the leading scorer in the OHL (23 goals and 23 assists), riding a wave of momentum and trending up in the draft.

Lynden Lakovic, six-foot-four, 190 pounds, F, Moose Jaw Warriors (WHL)

Lakovic had one goal and two assists in the first game, but was held off the score sheet in the second. I'm intrigued by his size and skill. Lakovic skates very well, especially in straight lines, for a big man. Part of the reason he didn't produce offence in Game 2 was due to the fact he failed to take the puck to the

hard areas and use his frame to his advantage. Lakovic has tons of upside. I'm monitoring his interior game. He has top-six NHL forward potential.

Caleb Desnoyers, six-foot-two, 173 pounds, C, Moncton Wildcats (QMJHL)

Desnoyers sat down with Sam Cosentino and I for an interview on Monday. He's a gregarious kid with confidence and swagger that is evident on and off the ice. Desnoyers had one goal and one assist in the two games. He seemed to have the puck on his stick every shift. I'm impressed with his overall puck touch and vision. He sees the ice and makes plays. I was equally satisfied with his battle game. Desnoyers was in the middle of everything in both contests. He leads by example with a huge grin on his face.

Justin Carboneau, six-foot-one, 191 pounds, F, Blainville-Boisbriand (QMJHL)

Carboneau is an intriguing prospect who contributed two assists in the series. His small-area game is crafty and elusive. Carboneau, arguably, had the best set of mitts on Team CHL. He has to be watched closely in traffic because he makes puck plays under, and over, sticks and through opponents' skates. Carboneau is a "wide-track" skater in open ice. It doesn't hold him back on straight lines, but when he gets the edge he has to work on bringing his stride closer together to open up more of a "cut and drive" to the net.

Cameron Schmidt, five-foot-seven, 161 pounds, F, Vancouver Giants (WHL)

Schmidt is an elite shooter and he didn't hold back against Team USA. He is undersized, but he plays the game fast on straight lines and wastes no time directing the play to the net. I'm not sure anyone in the draft class has a harder, more accurate, snap shot than Schmidt does. Sweden's Anton Frondell has the top weak side one-timer on the power play, but Schmidt snaps pucks bar down from both sides of the ice. Schmidt ended up with a goal and an assist in the two showcase games. In the second game he directed 12 shots towards the net, connecting on six. There's at least one NHL team that believes he is at worst "Cole Caufield light" for comparison.

TEAM USNTDP

Jack Murtagh, six-foot, 200 pounds, F

Murtagh scored from nearly the exact same spot in both games — the weak side flank — on the power play. He one-timed both of his goals before defenders could get in the shooting lane. In my opinion Murtagh was the most consistent and impactful player for Team USA. He plays fast, has better than secondary scoring upside, and was engaged in the hard areas. Murtagh works to extend plays in the trenches. He's hard to play against and never goes away. This series elevated my interest in Murtagh as a prospect.

Drew Shock, six-feet, 175 pounds, D

Shock had two assists in the second game of this series. He was deployed in all situations for Team USA. He's not the biggest body, but his compete level is undeniable. Shock was consistently involved. He doesn't have a single elite element, but his detail is reliable. When game two was on the line Shock went the extra mile blocking shots and doing whatever he could to will his team to victory. He's earned a follow up from me. I'm interested to monitor his next segment of games.

Charlie Trethewey, six-foot-one, 200 pounds, D

Trethewey was steady in the second game after having an average performance in the first. The right-shot defender has historically produced more offence than he is so far this season so I'm mining down on his defensive detail and engagement. Trethewey is a work in progress, but I felt he leveraged much

better in Game 2 and worked to kill plays along the wall. He's a solid skater who can direct pucks on net from range with authority. For now, at least, he has some proving to do over his next segment of games.

Will Moore, six-foot-two, 175 pounds, F

Team USA was generally overmatched in these two games so I'm not going to be overly critical about Moore's performance. However, I did expect more impact than he provided. He attacked off the rush a couple times and made a few plays in traffic, but his pace and physical engagement needed to be better. Moore has been projected as a first-round talent, but he's going to have to prove to me he is worthy in the coming months.

SHOUT OUTS

Events like these involve a lot of foot soldiers behind the scenes who do a ton of heavy lifting to deliver these games. With that in mind I want to thank Nikki deCarle, Chris Seguin and Carla Graansma from the CHL and Jon Edwards from USA Hockey for their professionalism and hard work. They're always available to assist Cosentino and I. We appreciate their dedication.

[Sportsnet.ca / Poor calls in Canadiens-Rangers game reinforce need for officials to face media](#)

By Eric Engels- December 1, 2024

NEW YORK — The post-game press conference lasted 1:10 and consisted of six questions that were all responded to with a variation of the same answer from Montreal Canadiens coach Martin St. Louis.

“I loved our game, but I’m not going to talk about the refs,” he said over and over again after the Canadiens lost 4-3 to the New York Rangers at Madison Square Garden on Saturday.

It didn’t matter if St. Louis was being asked about his team’s performance, or about the undebatable penalty Kirby Dach took for high-sticking with 2:40 to go and with the score knotted at 3-3, he stuck to his mantra.

“Like I said, I loved everything about our game,” St. Louis repeated, “but I’m not going to talk about the refs.”

Well, we are.

Kelly Sutherland and Francis Charron — two of the league’s most tenured and decorated officials, with 2,271 regular-season games of experience and 12 Stanley Cup Final appearances between them — ended up making the difference in one of the most evenly played games of the season, leaving St. Louis and the Canadiens with every reason to be as frustrated as they appeared when all was said and done.

He, and they, couldn’t talk about it without being fined by the NHL. So they chose not to.

But the officials themselves should be forced to talk about it.

Not just these ones on this day, but all officials should be forced to speak after all games in this league.

If not them, the supervisors overseeing each game should be made available to the press to provide clarifications, justifications, or perhaps just a smidgen of accountability for when the job is botched on the level it was in Saturday’s game.

There were several missed calls, and there were too many calls made that were completely inexplicable.

And in the void left by the NHL’s refusal to have anyone answer for it, we’re left to go with our own interpretations of what happened.

In our view, the misses went both ways, but there were more of them favouring the Rangers than the Canadiens.

Canadiens defenceman Arber Xhekaj threw a late hit on Alexis Lafreniere in the second period, and he completely missed with his shoulder and ended up clipping Lafreniere’s knee. It should’ve been a penalty on Xhekaj, but he escaped punishment while Sam Carrick went to serve two minutes for trying — and failing — to engage Xhekaj in a fight.

But Sutherland and Charron missed a crosscheck from New York’s Chris Kreider on Josh Anderson in the same frame and their biggest miss of the afternoon came on the play that ended up winning the game for the Rangers.

“I think I got tripped,” said Joel Armia.

Everyone in the building saw that he got tripped by Will Cuyllé, who then made his way unimpeded to Montreal’s net to set up the deciding goal for Kappo Kakko with 24 seconds to play.

But somehow, Sutherland and Charron either completely missed it or decided to let it go.

If it was the latter, it was one of several curious decisions they made in this game.

One of the more egregious ones was the roughing penalty to Anderson, which was assessed in the 17th minute of the second period — or several minutes after he complained to the officials for missing the cross-check he took from Kreider.

Mika Zibanejad put the Rangers up 3-1 just 49 seconds later.

And then, in the 19th minute of the second period, came the most bizarrely sorted situation of the game. Kirby Dach pushed Zibanejad into Rangers goaltender Jonathan Quick and Quick came up swinging, leading to an 11-player melee.

It took Sutherland and Charron roughly 10 minutes to figure out who to penalize before sending three players from each side to the box — none of them being Dach — and (seemingly) arbitrarily deciding the Rangers should get a power play out of it.

They gave Juraj Slafkovsky two penalties for roughing on the sequence but left everyone in the building guessing as to how the Rangers came out of it all with a five-on-four advantage.

NHL protocol is for one of the two officials to use the microphones they're wearing to announce the penalties they're handing out to the crowd, but neither official did that after the absurdly long delay, and confusion ensued, with the league's website reading the double-minor was being given to Xhekaj before it was eventually correctly attributed to Slafkovsky.

The whole thing was a mockery, and there was nobody around to explain afterwards.

St. Louis was certainly going to be asked about it, but he didn't even wait for a question about officiating before saying — and repeating several times — he loved the way the Canadiens played and wasn't going to talk about the officiating.

The Canadiens' effort was strong from start to finish, with Anderson setting the tone by landing a decisive win over Jacob Trouba in a first-period fight. They fought back hard to tie the game 3-3 in the third period, with goals from Cole Caufield and Nick Suzuki putting them in position to at least earn a point in the standings.

St. Louis might not have loved the penalty Dach took on Zibanejad, which came from behind the Rangers net.

But he definitely hated that Armia had no chance of recovering from Cuyllé's trip on time to deny Kakko the winning goal.

The big Finnish winger said he asked for an explanation from the officials, and then said, "I didn't get much of an answer."

We never get any answers from them, which is something the NHL should change.

The NFL makes officials available to a pool reporter, who gathers questions and asks them on behalf of the press. Major League Baseball does the same.

It's all done with the understanding that officials are human, and that they're never going to call a perfect game.

But at least they're given the chance to own it when they call one poorly.

This game, which saw both teams go toe-to-toe all afternoon, was called terribly, and St. Louis said what he had to say about that without saying anything at all.

Sportsnet.ca / Team Canada check-in: Who will make the cut for 4 Nations Face-Off?

By Josh Beneteau- December 2, 2024

We are just days away from learning who will represent Canada at the 4 Nations Face-Off.

The highly anticipated roster will be unveiled Wednesday night on Sportsnet, giving us answers to the many debates that have been held from coast to coast.

Will this team be all-skill? Or will some sandpaper be mixed in?

Will the defence be an even right-left split? Or will some players be asked to play on their off-side?

And who will start in net?

We already know Sidney Crosby, Nathan Mackinnon, Cale Makar, Brad Marchand, Connor McDavid, and Brayden Point will be on the team.

But before the rest of the names are announced, let's take one more look at who is trending up and down for the final spots.

FORWARDS

Trending Up

Mitch Marner and John Tavares, Toronto Maple Leafs

Marner has stepped up in a big way this season, especially with Auston Matthews unavailable, scoring 31 points in 23 games. Tavares has played for Canada at every possible level and with 21 points in 22 games this season, he remains in contention this time around at age 34.

Sam Reinhart and Sam Bennett, Florida Panthers

Reinhart hasn't slowed down after a season to remember last year and leads the NHL with 18 goals. Bennett is one of the players Canada may turn to to provide a physical edge, but he also has some offensive talent, with 23 points in 24 games.

Mark Scheifele, Winnipeg Jets

The NHL's best team has been getting scoring from plenty of people but Scheifele has been one of the leaders with 12 goals and 26 points. Canada's centre depth might be the best in the tournament but Scheifele can slide to the wing to provide some secondary scoring.

Travis Konecny, Philadelphia Flyers

Konecny is coming off back-to-back 30-goal seasons and is on pace to crack 40 for the first time this year. His 20 points in 14 November games were tied for fifth-best in the league with Jack Eichel and Kirill Kaprizov.

Anthony Cirelli and Brandon Hagel, Tampa Bay Lightning

Team Canada coach Jon Cooper knows Cirelli and Hagel well and trusts them in all situations, often on the same line. Cirelli (10 goals, 23 points) and Hagel (10 goals, 29 points) are both on pace to set career highs in scoring this year.

Matt Duchene, Dallas Stars

Duchene has been leading the way offensively in Dallas while some of his teammates navigate slow starts. The 2014 Olympic gold medalist has 27 points in 22 games to lead the Stars, putting him on pace to set a new career-high in scoring at age 33.

Dylan Strome and Tom Wilson, Washington Capitals

While much has been made about Alex Ovechkin's goal-record chase, plenty of other Capitals have stepped up, too. Strome has emerged as an elite set-up man this season with 26 assists and 34 points already. Wilson continues to be one of the more feared hitters in the game, but his nine goals and 19 points in 24 games so far have him on pace to set a new career-high offensively, too.

Alexis Lafrenière, New York Rangers

Lafrenière is a rising star as a scoring winger who will certainly be part of Team Canada's future plans. This season he's on pace to crack the 30-goal and 60-point marks for the first time in his career.

Trending Down

Zach Hyman, Edmonton Oilers

Hyman has not been able to replicate the success he had last year when he scored 54 goals. Through 20 games so far, he has just three goals and eight points. Now with an injury keeping him off the ice, he's run out of time to earn his way back onto this team.

Mark Stone, Vegas Golden Knights

Stone last played on Nov. 6 due to a lower-body injury, a concern that has hovered over his career for years now. He is one of Canada's more impactful wingers when healthy, but will management be willing to take that risk for a short best-on-best tournament?

Connor Bedard, Chicago Blackhawks

While we can all dream about a line featuring Crosby, McDavid and Bedard, the reality is Chicago's superstar is stuck in a sophomore slump. With just four goals and 17 points in 23 games, we'll see if he's done enough to crack this team.

DEFENCEMEN

Trending Up

Josh Morrissey, Winnipeg Jets

Morrissey is tied for fourth in defenceman scoring with 22 points this season as a major contributor to the NHL's best team. His analytics have also been improving in November and he's now up to a 47.61 per cent expected goals rate.

Alex Pietrangelo and Shea Theodore, Vegas Golden Knights

Pietrangelo would be one of the more experienced blueliners on Team Canada but even as he nears age 35, he's showing he can still make an impact. Theodore's calling card is his offence and with 18 points in 24 games this season he's off to a great start.

Owen Power, Buffalo Sabres

Power contributes to both special teams and has 15 points this season, putting him almost halfway to his previous career-high in scoring. He just turned 22 in November and figures to play a larger role for Canada in future tournaments.

Brandon Montour, Seattle Kraken

Montour is getting his first taste of being a No. 1 defenceman after signing a big contract in Seattle and he's lived up to the billing. The 30-year-old has a 52.25 per cent expected goal rate and isn't afraid to throw a hit when called upon.

Dougie Hamilton, New Jersey Devils

Hamilton continues to make strides this season coming off an injury-ravaged 2023-24. The six-foot-six right shot has 19 points and a 52.32 per cent expected goals rate in 27 games.

Trending Down

Devon Toews, Colorado Avalanche

Toews has an advantage as Cale Makar's primary partner and that should be enough to get him on the team. But he has just seven points in 21 games, which is concerning after three straight 50-point seasons.

Evan Bouchard, Edmonton Oilers

Bouchard was very hot and cold offensively in November. He had 11 points in 13 games during the month, but those 11 came in just five games. With so many other power play leaders available to Team Canada, Bouchard hasn't been able to separate himself from the group with his play so far.

Morgan Rielly, Toronto Maple Leafs

Another offence-first defenceman, Rielly's scoring (four goals, 14 points) just hasn't matched the others competing for spots on the left side so far. Without a path to powerplay time, it will be difficult for Rielly to crack the final seven.

GOALTENDERS

Trending Up

Logan Thompson, Washington Capitals

Thompson asked for a trade out of Vegas to escape Adin Hill's shadow and now has a chance to surpass his former tandem mate for Canada's No. 1 spot. Thompson has 10 wins in 12 starts this season and his .911 save percentage ranks second among Canadian starting goaltenders.

Jordan Binnington, St. Louis Blues

Binnington is a former Stanley Cup champion and the winningest goalie in Blues history. He has a .899 save percentage this season but just seven wins in 19 appearances.

Adin Hill, Vegas Golden Knights

Hill had a disastrous start to the season but is climbing back up the Canadian goaltender ranks. His save percentage is up to .894 now after winning six of 10 starts in November.

Cam Talbot, Detroit Red Wings

Talbot is now on his eighth NHL team and continues to be a steady presence. His .916 save percentage leads all Canadian goaltenders two months into the season.

Marc-Andre Fleury, Minnesota Wild

Fleury is a future Hall of Famer who just turned 40 and has said this will be his last season. He's been effective in six starts as a backup in Minnesota, collecting five wins and a .905 save percentage.

Trending Down

Stuart Skinner, Edmonton Oilers

Skinner built up a lot of goodwill coming within one win of the Stanley Cup last spring but he still hasn't separated himself as an elite starting goaltender. The Oilers are tied for third in the Pacific Division and Skinner's .887 save percentage in 16 starts is one of the reasons why.

Samuel Montembeault, Montreal Canadiens

Montembeault's season has featured some highs (two shutouts) and some lows (three times pulled). His .897 save percentage is decent among Canadian goaltenders but he hasn't done enough to overcome the playoff-experience edge the other goalies have.

[TSN.CA / U.S. judge dismisses lawsuit that sought end to major junior drafts](#)

By Rick Westhead- November 28, 2024

A U.S. District Court judge in New York has dismissed a class-action lawsuit that attempted to end the entry draft system in major junior hockey, citing numerous jurisdictional issues with the case.

“Plaintiffs have not met their burden to show that the [Canadian Hockey League] defendants invoked the benefits or protections of the laws of New York through scouting and recruiting in New York,” Judge Margaret Garnett wrote in a Nov. 26 decision. “The Court does not have personal jurisdiction over the CHL defendants under New York’s long-arm statute because, among other reasons, the named plaintiffs – who are not from New York and did not play hockey in New York – did not experience injury in New York.”

Garnett wrote that the plaintiffs in the case did not establish that the CHL defendants “transact business” in New York state.

Garnett’s ruling comes two months after the plaintiffs asked Garnett to approve a preliminary injunction to eliminate the annual player drafts in the Western Hockey League, Ontario Hockey League, and Quebec Maritimes Junior Hockey League, or to at least force the leagues to sign collective bargaining agreements with their players.

The lawsuit was filed in U.S. District Court in New York in February and sought to improve rights and compensation for players in the CHL. The plaintiffs wanted major junior hockey to more closely resemble NCAA hockey, where players can choose which school to play for, and where players, if they so choose, can transfer to a different school without the permission of the school they are leaving.

Two former Western Hockey League players, Isaiah DiLaura and Tanner Gould, were involved in the case as plaintiffs and argued that prospective players should have the right to decide the teams they play for.

While the plaintiffs argued that CHL teams routinely attend development camps in New York and that OHL teams scout, draft, and sign players from the state, the CHL successfully countered that the court has no jurisdiction because there are no major junior teams based in New York.

“Plaintiffs provide some general evidence that an OHL scout travels to watch players where their teams play, and has scouted New York-based teams,” Garnett wrote in her 41-page decision. “This is plainly insufficient to show the transaction of business of any ‘substantial character.’ Plaintiffs do not show that any scout has ever even travelled to [New York] or how many times a scout has observed a team located in this [New York].”

Garnett also wrote that DiLaura, an American from Minnesota who played for WHL teams in Canada and Oregon, and Gould, a Canadian who played in Washington state and in Canada, did not have sufficient ties to New York to proceed.

“Gould and DiLaura – who are not from New York and did not play on New York-based hockey teams – do not argue that they have experienced any injury in New York, and they may not rely on the injury experienced by absent putative class members who may or may not ever become parties to this action to assert personal jurisdiction,” Garnett wrote.