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## Columbus Dispatch / Aleksander Barkov goal in OT lifts Florida Panthers to 1-0 win over Columbus Blue Jackets

**By Brian Hedger – March 21, 2025**

The challenges keep getting tougher for the Blue Jackets as games disappear from the schedule during their unexpected playoff push.

They're getting tougher, too, despite absorbing more growing pains in a stinging 1-0 overtime loss to the Florida Panthers on Thursday night at Nationwide Arena. Aleksander Barkov won it for the Panthers (42-24-3) with a goal 29 seconds into OT to cap a power play that resulted from Kirill Marchenko's delay-of-game penalty with 29.7 seconds left in regulation for accidentally tapping the puck out of play.

"Tonight, throughout the whole game — defensively, offensively — we were getting there (and) getting chances," Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner said. "They just weren't going in. It's on us to get one and get those breaks going our way, but the other side of it was (goalie Elvis Merzlikins) was outstanding all night and gave us a chance."

An inability to score goals despite creating offensive pressure continued for Columbus, but the Panthers and former Blue Jackets star goalie Sergei Bobrovsky played big roles in that continuing. Despite another game without a scoring a goal, shut out for the third time in the past four games, the Jackets stood toe-to-toe with the defending Stanley Cup champions and clawed out a needed point to end a streak of four straight regulation losses.

Merzlikins made 27 saves in regulation before Barkov finally got one by him for the game's lone goal in OT. Bobrovsky made 26 saves for his second shutout win of the season against his former team, while Jenner had an apparent goal for the Blue Jackets (31-28-9) overturned in the third on a coaching challenge that prompted replays showing he used a "distinct kicking motion" to score it.

"It happens quickly," Jenner said. "I was just trying to find it and get a piece of it, and it went in. So, they looked at it and it's a kick. What can you do?"

Florida outshot Columbus 13-5 in the first period, the Blue Jackets outshot the Panthers 12-7 in the second and both sides went 0 for 1 on power plays in the first 40 minutes with the game knotted at 0-0. Physical play also intensified as the first two periods progressed, including Blue Jackets power forward Dmitry Voronkov throwing his weight around.

Voronkov, who's largely played a skill-based style while skating on the top forward line most of the season, picked up a roughing minor at 8:01 of the second by shoving Verhaeghe against the end boards following the Panthers forward taking a late jab at a puck Merzlikins already had covered.

Voronkov went off for his transgression, while Verhaeghe went to the penalty box for slashing. The game, meanwhile, stayed deadlocked at 0-0 until the Panthers finally cracked Merzlikins on their power play in OT that started late in the third. They don't have long to feel the sting. Next up is a Metropolitan Division matchup Friday in Pittsburgh, where the Jackets hadn't won in nearly a decade before edging the Penguins, 4-3, in a shootout Jan. 7 at PPG Paints Arena.

"Every point counts for us and matters," Merzlikins said. "It's important to get at least a point. Obviously, we wanted to kill the penalty, and turn around this game and have a huge win. That would've been awesome, but it is what it is. We have to forget about this game now and get ready, our focus, for (Pittsburgh)."

## Columbus Dispatch / Monahan, Gudbranson and Sillinger nearing return to Columbus Blue Jackets' lineup

**By Brian Hedger – March 21, 2025**

Elvis Merzlikins thought his mind might've been playing tricks on him.

The Blue Jackets' top goalie, who'll start Thursday against the Florida Panthers after missing two games on personal leave, faced a high number of shots at practice Wednesday and wondered if he was working a little harder than usual. He asked coach Dean Evason, who confirmed it by pointing out that four injured players have recently rejoined practice.

"Just the volume of people out there gave (him) a little more work," Evason said.

The roster glut has also forced injured center Cole Sillinger (shoulder) to dress at a temporary pine stall in the middle of the locker room. There's just not a lot of space left over since adding forwards Luke Kunin and Christian Fischer prior to the March 7 trade deadline.

That's a good thing with 15 games remaining and the Blue Jackets sitting three points out of the second wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference prior to a back-to-back Thursday against Florida and Friday in Pittsburgh.

None of the Jackets' walking wounded will return for the first game, but there's a chance that Monahan and/or Gudbranson could play in Pittsburgh. If not, they'll likely return in one of three games next week. Monahan (wrist) and Gudbranson (shoulder) are considered closest to playing, followed by Sillinger (shoulder) and defenseman Jake Christiansen (upper body).

Monahan's been out since getting hurt Jan. 7 in Pittsburgh, Gudbranson has missed all but the season's first two games recovering from shoulder surgery, Sillinger has missed three weeks since his injury Feb. 27 in Detroit and Christiansen will miss his third straight game after leaving early March 13 against the Vegas Golden Knights.

Columbus Blue Jackets eager to deal with potential chemistry challenge

Getting any or all back in time for a final playoff push could be vital for the Blue Jackets (31-28-8), who've dropped four straight games and six of their past seven to drop out of a playoff spot. Working that many returning players back into regular lineup roles after long absences could prove to be a chemistry challenge, but it's one Evason and his staff would like to tackle.

"We'll talk to them daily and try to figure out the right time," Evason said. "Ultimately, it's the player's decision once he's cleared (medically). Whenever we and he feel that he's ready to go, conditioning-wise, then we'll have no problem putting any of (them) right into the lineup."

Evason said he didn't know which of his missing players had gained medical clearance, if any. Monahan was unsure about when he would return. Sillinger and Gudbranson clarified they haven't yet gotten a green light from the Blue Jackets' medical staff. Christiansen's status is even foggier, but he skated along with the rest of the team at Wednesday's practice.

What is known at this point is that Monahan, Gudbranson and Sillinger all feel close to returning, which could give the Jackets a needed boost going into a tough finishing stretch.

"Guys are working hard to get back," Monahan said. "You've got an important time of the year and guys are hungry to help push this team forward. ... We're in a spot where we're fighting to get somewhere

where, as a group, we want to go. So, we're eager to get back and help push it forward, and I think some guys are pretty close here."

## The Athletic / Goal-starved Blue Jackets suffer 'bad break' late in overtime loss to Panthers

**By Aaron Portzline – March 21, 2025**

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Two tough calls, but two correct calls by NHL officials. Two awful breaks for the Columbus Blue Jackets.

The Blue Jackets engaged in an incredibly tight and combative game Thursday against the defending Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers, matching them shot for shot, trading scoring chances, and engaging in combative puck battles that led to scrums and shoves.

"You guys talk about playoff hockey," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "Well, that's about as playoff as you get, I'd think."

Florida's Aleksander Barkov scored a power-play goal only 28 seconds into overtime, giving the Panthers a 1-0 win before 16,757 in Nationwide Arena and sending the Blue Jackets to their fifth straight loss. Incredibly, they've been shut out in three of those losses.

Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins, who returned after missing time for the birth of his second son, had 27 saves in a stellar outing.

But there were two pivotal moments in the final 10 minutes of the third period, and the Blue Jackets ended up on the wrong side of two correct calls.

At 10:13 of the third, Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner appeared to score the first goal of the game, not to mention Jenner's first goal since he returned from preseason shoulder surgery.

The cannon fired. The scoreboard read 1-0. The crowd went bonkers. But while the Blue Jackets lined up for the ensuing faceoff, the Panthers didn't show. They were on the bench looking at a replay of the goal and quickly signaled to officials that they wanted to review.

"I was just trying to find (the puck in traffic)," Jenner said. "I obviously got a piece of it and it went in. They looked at it and it was a kick, so what can you do?"

The review took roughly 10 seconds.

Replays clearly showed that Jenner's left skate was used to kick the puck past Panthers' goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky, a direct violation of the rule. No goal was the call, and the game went back to 0-0.

The bigger kick in the groin was still to come.

With 29.7 seconds remaining in regulation, Blue Jackets forward Kirill Marchenko was battling with a Panthers player along the wall in the Columbus zone. Both players were swatting at the puck, but Marchenko was the last to get it, sending it up and over the glass.

Intentional or not — and this one falls under the "not" category — that's a delay of game penalty according to NHL rules, putting the Blue Jackets on the penalty kill for the remainder of regulation and, worse, for the start of overtime.

"There's nothing you can do," Evason said. "Marchy's trying to do the right thing. He's trying to whack it into the neutral zone. It's just unfortunate, that's all. We see it all the time.

"It's one thing if we hooked a guy or tripped a guy or held a guy or did something that we shouldn't have done ... it's just a bad break. It's OK. Bad breaks happen."

But it wasn't OK.

The Blue Jackets killed off the final seconds of regulation, but the Panthers started overtime with a four-on-three advantage. It took only 28 seconds before Barkov sent in a wrister through traffic from the top of the key to end the game.

"We knew it was going to be like that against them, a playoff-type game, not much space either way," Jenner said. "We were right there with them the whole game. We played a great game.

"We get a bad bounce at the end. They get a power play at the end. It's the way it goes sometimes in that tight of a game. We knew it was going to be a one-goal game, and they got it before us."

After a win on March 1, the Blue Jackets owned the top wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference standings. But now, after seven losses in eight games — they last won March 9 against the New York Rangers — they've slid to 11th place, three points out of a playoff spot.

The Jackets, with 71 points, now have three teams they'd need to climb — Montreal (74), New York Islanders and Rangers (72) — to claim a postseason spot.

But that's going to be impossible if they don't quickly rediscover the goal-scoring that has carried them all season.

The Blue Jackets have been shut out three times in the last four games, and four times in the last seven. Two of those shutouts have been at the hand of Bobrovsky, the former Blue Jackets star, who also had a 16-save shutout in a 3-0 Panthers win on March 6 in Sunrise, Fla.

The only goal scored in the last four games has been by third-liner Mathieu Olivier. In fact, in their last five games, the Jackets have scored only four goals, three by Olivier.

Worst of all? The Blue Jackets haven't had a lead in 300 minutes, 29 seconds.

The best part of Thursday's game is that the Blue Jackets earned a much-needed point — they would have fallen to 12th place in the East, if they hadn't — and that they ramped up their intensity at all points on the ice, going toe to toe vs. the Panthers.

When they met two weeks ago, the Blue Jackets were just hanging on.

If the Blue Jackets bottle Thursday's performance, they'll surely start to score goals and win games again. But this late-season slide has made a playoff berth a tall order now.

"Are we trending in the right direction?" Evason said. "One hundred percent. This game was ... guys, we're not happy in the dressing room right now. There's no 'Oh, good. We played good against the Stanley Cup champions.' No. We're pissed.

"But did we do the right things to get a point? Did we get a ... bad break trying to do the right thing? Yeah. So we're real positive after we're pissed off."

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets may get healthy soon, but losing skid has left playoff picture blurry

By Aaron Portzline – March 21, 2025

COLUMBUS, Ohio — In the middle of the Columbus Blue Jackets dressing room Wednesday, there was a folding chair and a makeshift locker. It was the temporary home of center Cole Sillinger, who is working his way back from a shoulder injury, and an indication of what's on the horizon.

"Literally everybody was on the ice today," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "It's great. If you watched practice, you saw the energy and the excitement of everybody. It's nothing but positive."

The Blue Jackets won't put timelines on when forwards Sillinger and Sean Monahan (wrist surgery), and defensemen Erik Gudbranson (shoulder) will join the lineup, except to say that it won't happen Thursday when they host the Florida Panthers in Nationwide Arena.

But when they'll be back is only one question regarding their return. The other: Will it happen in time to matter?

Through Wednesday's games, the Blue Jackets (70 points) sit 11th in the Eastern Conference, three points behind the Montreal Canadiens (73) for the second wild-card spot. The New York Rangers (72) and New York Islanders (70) are between Columbus and the Canadiens, and the Detroit Red Wings (70) and Boston Bruins (69) are lurking in the rear-view mirror.

The Blue Jackets have lost six of their last seven games, including four straight, to tumble out of the playoff spot and down the Eastern Conference standings. Nobody has to tell them this is the worst possible time to hit the skids and forget how to score.

On March 1, after the Blue Jackets beat the Red Wings in the outdoor game at Ohio Stadium, the Jackets held the first wild card. Since then, there's been an 11-point swing with Ottawa, which was four points behind Columbus and now sits seven points ahead.

Even though the Jackets play Ottawa three times in the final month of the season, they're probably wise to set their sights on the second wild card. But crazy things can happen this time of season.

With 15 games remaining in the Blue Jackets' season, we thought we'd take a thumbnail look at what they're up against with the clubs just ahead and just behind them in the standings. Here goes:

### **7. Ottawa Senators (77 points)**

**Games remaining: 15 (8 home, 7 away)**

**Against Blue Jackets (3): March 29, April 6 in Ottawa; April 8 in Columbus**

**Outlook:** The Senators have surged into a relatively safe spot by going 7-0-1 before a loss on Monday to Montreal. The trade deadline acquisition of Dylan Cozens has given them a boost, and now they have both the easiest schedule in the league the rest of the way (opponents points percentage .528, per Tankathon) and the most home-heavy slate. Eight of their final nine games will be at Canadian Tire Centre, where the Sens are 20-9-2 this season.

### **8. Montreal Canadiens (73)**

**Games remaining: 15 (7 home, 8 away)**

**Against Blue Jackets: none**

**Outlook:** The Canadiens are on an 8-1-2 burner since the 4 Nations Face-Off break, and face a key matchup Thursday on Long Island against the Islanders. If they fare well on a four-game road trip beginning next Tuesday, they could be hard to shake. Captain Nick Suzuki is leading at the right time, with 6-12-18 totals and a plus-8 rating in those 11 games. Montreal has two games remaining vs. Philadelphia, and one each vs. Chicago and Nashville — three of the five worst teams in the league this season.

#### **9. New York Rangers (72)**

**Games remaining: 13 (6 home, 7 away)**

**Against Blue Jackets: none**

**Outlook:** The best argument for the Rangers getting in is their 30 regulation wins (non-overtime or shootout), which is the first tiebreaker. They have three more regulation wins than Ottawa, and at least five more against the other teams battling with them for a wild-card spot. The Rangers, however, are 2-4-2 in their last eight games and have a never-easy, three-game West Coast trip next week. Also, nine of their remaining 13 games are against teams currently in playoff spots.

#### **10. New York Islanders (70)**

**Games remaining: 15 (9 home, 6 away)**

**Against Blue Jackets (2): March 24 in Long Island; April 17 in Columbus**

**Outlook:** The Islanders are proof that this is less a race and more like roller derby. If you stay upright long enough, you've got a shot. The Islanders are 7-8-1 since Feb. 1, but somehow won't go away, even after a trade deadline that sent net-front stalwart Brock Nelson — an Islander for 12 seasons — out the door. Nothing the Islanders do is pretty, but it's especially effective this time of year. And goaltender Ilya Sorokin can carry a club when he gets hot.

#### **11. Columbus Blue Jackets (70)**

**Games remaining: 15 (8 home, 7 away)**

**Outlook:** It's been tough for the Jackets without centers Monahan (first line) and Sillinger (third), and their goal scoring — a surprising strength all season — has dried up, with just one goal in the last three games. The heightened pace and physicality at this time of season has been a challenge for their bevy of young players, who are going through this for the first time. They have four back-to-backs in the final month; they're 1-7-0 in the second half of back-to-backs this season.

#### **12. Detroit Red Wings (70)**

**Games remaining: 14 (5 home, 9 away)**

**Against Blue Jackets: none**

**Outlook:** The odds are stacked against the Red Wings, who have the toughest remaining schedule in the entire NHL (.594 opponents points percentage), according to Tankathon. Only five of their final 14 games are at Little Caesars Arena, and they still have two games vs. Colorado, and one each vs. Vegas and Florida. Those are the last three Stanley Cup winners. The Red Wings are on a 2-8-0 dive, which started with consecutive losses to the Blue Jackets.

#### **13. Boston Bruins (69)**

**Games remaining: 13 (4 home, 9 away)**

**Against Blue Jackets: none**



**Outlook:** The Bruins traded away captain Brad Marchand at the trade deadline, perhaps the fatal blow to a season that has been in critical condition for a while now. Boston still has proud, solid veterans on the roster, however, and this group of clubs in the murky middle of the East isn't leaving anybody behind just yet. But things won't be easy for the Bruins, who start a five-game road trip Thursday in Vegas.

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets prospect Luca Marrelli's breakout year is for the people who motivate him

**By Scott Wheeler – March 21, 2025**

OSHAWA, Ont. — Luca Marrelli saw the Sudbury Wolves following the puck to Andrew Gibson at the right point, turning their backs to him and collapsing in on the net. Sensing a chance to sneak down from the left point and anticipate an opportunity at the back post, he jumped, arriving at the net just in time to take the puck off goaltender Nathan Krawchuk's pad and curl it around his skate and in.

Above him in the crowd, the moms of his Oshawa Generals teammates, gathered for the team's annual mom's night, celebrated with him. The goal was his 18th of the season, fourth among all OHL defensemen. Early in the second, he added an assist, snapping a shot-pass off Luke Torrance's blade and in for his 71st point in 64 games, also fourth best among OHL D.

After the game, while the moms waited to be let into the dressing room area, Marrelli was on his way to meet with Blue Jackets defenseman development coach Tommy Cross, visiting from Columbus to watch the team's breakout third-round pick.

Before saying hello to Cross, he stopped in the hall outside the dressing room to talk about his mom, Melanie, who he lost in March 2022 after a battle with cancer.

"She was the most supportive person in my life and the person I leaned on the most, but it's a curveball that life throws at you and you just have to really take all of the positives away from it," he said. "She was a big believer in positivity and positive thinking so she wouldn't want me to be sad. And hockey's really an escape and something that makes me happy. Tonight's mom's night and I scored so it's a little bit more of a special goal for me, really emotional, and she's just another reason to do what I do."

Melanie was a teacher and that lesson in positivity has stuck with the eldest of her two sons.

The Gens' interim head coach Brad Malone, who was hired in September as a development coach in Oshawa and then promoted in December, lauds Marrelli's leadership and the way he is with his peers.

"He's a great kid to be around on a daily basis and we're lucky to have him," Malone said. "He's vocal. He's very social. He's not afraid to talk to anybody and that kind of bleeds right in. And off the ice he's an old-school leader — he's capable of holding people accountable and asking them and demanding of them to do things that we need to do to win, and that's not easy for a 19-year-old."

Marrelli ranks fourth among OHL defensemen in goals and points this season. (Kalvin Taylor / Goodall Media)

Roger Hunt, the Generals' general manager during Marrelli's four seasons in Oshawa, talks about him as "very likable."

"Even before (Melanie's death) happened he was a very mature kid, he was very engaging and he was very involved," Hunt said. "He keeps tabs on people. You can plunk him into any setting, whether it's school, kids or adults because he's so outgoing, comfortable and mature."

In Marrelli's 16-year-old season, Hunt got a call from Melanie before he'd ever even met her because she wanted to explain her situation as Luca moved away from home and started at a new school. As her cancer treatment progressed, Hunt said, "Luca was actually the strong one."

"He would update me and I would almost be feeling upset and he was incredibly strong going through all that," Hunt said. "And then I got a phone call one night and he was upset and he said, 'Look, my

mum's taken a turn and we're all going to go to the hospital to see her' and at that point with how strong he'd been throughout the whole process, for him to be upset I knew that it was bad."

Ever since, Luca has made the rink his happy place.

"Having a brother die in my own life, I know getting back to some sort of normality will help you cope with that, and I think for Luca that was a part of it and he got back to doing what he did and it was maybe a bit of a small distraction for small portions of his day," Hunt said. "And he has dealt with it like I fully expected him to deal with it. I'm proud of him."

Marrelli says who he is has a lot to do with the people who've influenced him. He lists his mom, his dad Antonio (or Tony), his old coach Anthony Hollyoak (who also died of cancer in March 2022) and his uncle Colin as the most influential people.

That uncle — Melanie was his only sister — is Colin Chaulk, the head coach of the AHL's Bakersfield Condors.

During the last 10 years of Chaulk's playing career and as he started climbing the ranks as a head coach, he ran a hockey school. Marrelli never missed one, driving with his Don Mills Flyers teammates to Sarnia, Ont., Fort Wayne, Ind., and Kalamazoo, Mich. Growing up, Marrelli spent three weeks every summer living with Chaulk in Fort Wayne so that he could skate with him. He spent some Christmases in Fort Wayne picking his brain at family dinners, too.

In recent years, they've skated together each summer in Toronto. Though he hasn't been able to get out to Bakersfield after Oshawa went on a playoff run last year, his dad Tony and his younger brother Michael (who was drafted by Oshawa and Luca hopes will follow in his footsteps) have.

"Anything that I was ever doing — skills sessions, pickup skates, hockey camps — he was always there," Chaulk said. "My two girls and (Melanie's) two boys, we were always together any chance we had. We're extremely close."

Marrelli even wore No. 91 because of Chaulk, switching to No. 19 in Oshawa because John Tavares' No. 91 is retired. After playing for years as "a really good goaltender," it was Chaulk who told Marrelli "my nephew's not going to be a goalie" and encouraged him to make the switch to defense.

"He's probably the most instrumental and influential person in my hockey career up until now," Marrelli said of Chaulk.

Chaulk continues to watch all of Marrelli's scoring chances for and against on Sportlogiq. Last year, when Chaulk felt Marrelli wasn't shooting the puck enough in his draft year, he drew attention to it and asked him to send a text after every game with how many shots he had. He challenged him to get to 100 shots on the season. Marrelli finished with 129. This season, he has already broken 200.

"He's really witty. He starts to go 'Not enough,'" Chaulk said, laughing as he recalled their postgame texts. "And then that little bugger, he's like 'five shots, seven shots' and we had a little competition and of course, he blows it out of the water because he's a smart kid and he's analytical and next thing you know, I lost that wager terribly. But at the end of the day it worked out and he started creating more. Partly I'm coach, partly I'm a mentor but I want my nephew to love me, not hate me, and it's not worth it to me. So I give him tips and I help him but I'd rather hug him and help him along the way than be a hard-nosed coach."

There's one game that all hockey schools do where every player gets a puck from the blue line down and they have to protect it from the crowd, making sure to keep their puck and knock their opponents' out of the zone.

Most young kids dive into the action and quickly get their puck knocked out. At 10, after making the switch from goalie to defense, Marrelli would always carry his puck straight into the corner to hide.

“He had a lot of patience and poise and foresight of ‘Hey, I’m not going to go right in that battle right away. I’m going to be smart, I’m going to stay off to the side a little bit here and then when 10 guys get eliminated I’m going to have a better chance to win,’” Chaulk said. “In a lot of sports, like in soccer, you’ll see kids running to the ball, kicking it, running after it, and repeating. They don’t want to carry it. So that’s a big thing that you’re trying to instill in them and he got that right away. Skating with the puck. Shoulder checks. Knowing who gets it next. And you see him today and one of his biggest assets is that he’s got ice in his veins and on a forecheck he doesn’t panic. And that’s 10 years of him just doing it.”

Those who know Marrelli’s game best always start with his hockey sense.

“Very intellectual brain, moves the puck really well, and we’re just trying to add pace to his game because that’s what the NHL teams are worried about. He might be a little bit of a sleeper,” former Generals head coach Steve O’Rourke said in advance of the draft last year.

Hunt said Marrelli was a smart player even when he first got to Oshawa at 15. He turned 16 in October 2021, shortly after making the Generals as a fifth-round OHL Draft pick. That year, he played 62 games — very rare for a defenseman that young who was drafted that late.

But it was the smarts that allowed him to make the team, according to Hunt.

“He has never been blessed with a skating stride that looks fast, but very rarely do you see him get beat. His skating’s not an issue but he’s such a heady player and I think that’s what makes him so good,” Hunt said. “He’s just a smart D. It’s hard to compare to Evan Bouchard but something like that. Evan’s a guy that got a ton of points, he’s a right shot, a big shot, a smart player, not gifted with a good-looking skating style but they get there.”

Marrelli signed his entry-level contract with Columbus and is eligible to play in the AHL next season. (Ian Goodall / Goodall Media)

He was so good to start this year after a big summer that Hunt believes his play should have been worthy of an invite to Canada’s World Junior Selection Camp.

Chaulk said Marrelli was “always athletic, always a big, thick and strong kid.” He grew up playing high-level competitive baseball for the East York Bulldogs until his OHL Draft year, and also loves playing golf, tennis and volleyball. (He’s not all about sports, though, as he’ll tell you he’s also into chess and cooking). But now he’s a 6-foot-2, 185-pound, above-a-point-per-game, right-shot defenseman who has already been signed by his NHL club to an entry-level contract as a third-round pick.

“I wasn’t really a super highly touted guy coming into this league but it just shows that hard work and dedication,” he said.

Throughout this year, he has had visits or weekly check-ins from folks like Cross and director of hockey operations Rick Nash. The Blue Jackets have also done some video work with him and their strength and conditioning team have him on a program. “(Cross and Nash) have been really good for me,” Marrelli said.

On the ice, Marrelli describes himself as poised, smart, dedicated, confident and competitive.

Malone, who played more than 200 games in the NHL and played in the AHL last season before jumping right out of his playing career and into coaching, said Marrelli doesn’t get enough credit for that last one — for his competitiveness and “how good of a defender he is.”

“What he does offensively kind of speaks for itself but he’s heavily relied upon in all situations and you can trust him pretty much anywhere,” Malone said.

Coincidentally, Malone also played in Bakersfield under Chaulk the last three years, and so a lot of what he’s now teaching the Generals comes from Chaulk and is familiar to Marrelli — right down to his one-liners about “\$8 million plays.” Malone jokes that Marrelli has some of Chaulk’s mannerisms, and Marrelli gives him a hard time for stealing Chaulk’s ideas.

“He kind of razzes me a little bit about the (coaching) similarities but Colin did a great job with him in terms of coaching him, the skill development, and his hockey sense is high-end because of it,” Malone said, laughing.

Though his and Malone’s sights are currently set on another deep playoff run with the Generals, because of his October birthday, Marrelli’s eligible to play in the AHL next year with the Cleveland Monsters (though the Monsters and Condors don’t play each other).

Hunt, Malone and Chaulk think Marrelli is ready for that next step, too.

“He’s serious, he’s a smart kid, and gosh as a little kid, he always wanted to know what the plan is. Like I don’t know how many times as a kid he asked his mum ‘What’s the plan? What’s the plan? What are we eating? What are we doing?’ And you look at him now and he’s going to turn pro and be on his own next year, and he’s organized, he’s an A student in school, it’s all there,” Chaulk said. “He’s a really good kid. He’s a good, responsible kid.”

Hunt’s not the only one who’s proud of him, either. Asked about his nephew and how far he has come, Chaulk’s voice cracks and breaks.

“Jeez. Emotional here for a second,” Chaulk said, pausing, his voice lowering to a whisper. “You wouldn’t know (what he has been through). You wouldn’t know. Because he was quiet about it. Any moment I have I bring (Melanie) up because I know how proud she was of him. Her boys were her life. It was ‘the boys, the boys, the boys, the boys.’ And he didn’t talk much about it. He plays it like he plays a forecheck, man. He plays it cool. He has been so mature. He has been so mature. ... He’s handled like a frickin’ champ.”

## [BlueJackets.com / PREVIEW: Blue Jackets finish homestand vs. Panthers](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – March 21, 2025

The Blue Jackets have been comforted by the fact that even through a recent string of losses, they've still played well enough to be in games, especially Monday's 2-1 loss to the Devils at Nationwide Arena.

It was a proverbial "do everything but score" game, as Columbus put 46 shots on goal and completely dominated the third period, registering a 50-7 edge in shot attempts in the final frame. Were it not for a superb, game-stealing performance from New Jersey goalie Jake Allen, the Blue Jackets would have overturned a 2-0 deficit and gotten a result.

"Sometimes you deserve better and don't win, and sometimes you don't deserve to win and you win," defenseman Ivan Provorov said after the game. "I think today we deserved a lot better, but it's part of our process, and we're going to continue to move forward and continue to get better."

But the reality is the Blue Jackets are reaching the point where the most important thing is getting a result. Columbus has lost four in a row in regulation and six out of the last seven, and after being in a playoff position every day from Feb. 25 through Saturday, the Blue Jackets are now three points behind Montreal for the second wild card in the Eastern Conference.

There are 15 games left, so there's plenty of time to make up ground, but the points have to come soon. Columbus hopes to get back in the win column tonight, but it won't be an easy task as the defending Stanley Cup champion Panthers come to town.

"You just have to focus on the next one," Mathieu Olivier said after Monday's game. "You can't start looking at the standings and start looking at all that extra stuff because then you start thinking more. Our job is to go out there and play hockey and get the job done. Tonight, we gave ourselves the best chance to win. Didn't work in our favor."

"I'm not gonna go home and dwell on the standings or the two points we didn't get or whatever. I'm gonna focus on the next game against Florida and try to recreate a similar performance but with a better result."

The goal for the Blue Jackets is to take the desperation, aggressive forecheck and high battle level from Monday and carry it into tonight's game.

"I liked everybody's game," head coach Dean Evason said Wednesday. "Listen, we just went over the game again, and obviously we had 24 shots in the third period, right? So everybody was pulling in the right direction. We did the right things. We got a really crappy bounce (on the second Devils goal), but yeah, we liked everybody. Everybody pushed. Everybody did the right things. Nobody was on their own page."

### **Know The Foe: Florida Panthers**

**Head coach:** Paul Maurice (Third season)

**Team stats:** Goals per game: 3.19 (11th) | Scoring defense: 2.71 (9th) | PP: 24.1 percent (9th) | PK: 81.2 percent (11th)

**The narrative:** One year after coming up just shy of capturing Lord Stanley's Cup, the Panthers ran it back and got to the top of the mountain last season, beating Edmonton in seven classic games to win the franchise's first Cup. It was quite an accomplishment for former CBJ assistant GM Bill Zito's squad,

and now the challenge becomes trying to repeat. Fellow Floridians Tampa Bay did so in 2020 and '21, so it's possible, and the Panthers still have the stars to do it.

**Team leaders:** Sam Reinhart inked a long-term deal to stay in Florida after tallying 57 goals last season to place third in the NHL, and he's continued to lead the way with team-high totals of 33 goals (tied for eighth in the league) and 72 points. Aleksander Barkov follows with 18 goals among his 62 points, while Matthew Tkachuk has a 22-35-57 line but is out with an injury suffered at the 4 Nations Face-Off. Carter Verhaeghe (17-29-46), Sam Bennett (22-23-45) and Anton Lundell (15-26-41) also top 40 points.

Sergei Bobrovsky again has been one of the top goalies in the league, going 28-15-2 in 45 games with a 2.51 GAA and .906 save percentage.

**What's new:** Zito wasn't shy about stocking the cupboards for a run at a repeat, making five deals in the days before the trade deadline. The biggest brought in former CBJ defenseman Seth Jones as well as longtime NHL star Brad Marchand, while the Panthers also added depth in the form of center Nico Sturm and goalies Vitek Vanecek and Kaapo Kahkonen. Marchand and Tkachuk remain out with injury and Aaron Ekblad is suspended, but the Panthers won 11 of 13 from late January through early March before dropping three of the last four.

**Trending:** The Panthers have had a mastery of the Blue Jackets in recent years, including wins in the first two contests this season. Columbus is 0-6-1 in the last seven meetings and 3-13-3 over the past four seasons.

**Former CBJ:** Now six years into the seven-year deal he signed with Florida at the end of his CBJ tenure, Bobrovsky captured his elusive Cup ring in the spring, while Jones has an assist in seven games since joining the team. Bought out by the Blue Jackets this summer, Adam Boqvist was with the team for 18 games and had two goals and six points before being placed on waivers and joining the Islanders.

**Scratches:** Christian Fischer, Jake Christiansen (upper body), Jordan Harris

**Injured reserve:** Cole Sillinger (upper body), Kevin Labanc (shoulder), Sean Monahan (upper body), Erik Gudbranson (upper body)

**Roster Report:** Christiansen, Sillinger, Monahan and Gudbranson all skated in Wednesday's practice, but while Evason said all are close to returning, none will be able to join the lineup tonight. Merzlikins returns and will get the start in net.

### The Numbers Game

Columbus has tied a franchise record with five players with 20-plus goals on the season (Kirill Marchenko, 25; Kent Johnson, 21; Adam Fantilli, 21; Zach Werenski, 20; Dmitri Voronkov, 20). ... Second among all NHL players with 48 points (14 goals, 34 assists) at home, Werenski has a single-season team record with 49 assists on the year, and his 20 goals are tied with his mark of 20 in 2019-20 as the most in team history. His average ice time of 27:00 leads all NHL players, and he's second among league defensemen in goals (20) and second in points (69) on the season. ... Adam Fantilli has a 14-12-26 line in the last 28 games. ... Marchenko has set a new career high with his 25 goals on the season. He is tied for eighth in the NHL with a plus-30 rating. ... Johnson has 21 points (10-11-21) in the past 23 games. ... James van Riemsdyk has notched a 10-11-21 line in the last 28 games. ... Mathieu Olivier has a career-high 16 goals and is one of two NHL players with 15-plus goals and 100 penalty minutes in 2024-25. He has four goals in the last five games and six in the last 10. ... The Blue Jackets have set a franchise record of 12 games with six-plus goals. ... Columbus is 19-7-4 in its last 30 home games and averaging 3.73 goals per game this year at home, second in the NHL. ... The Blue Jackets are second in the NHL with 156 goals

at 5-on-5. ... Blue Jackets defensemen have 43 goals this season, tied for first in the NHL, and 161 points, good for fourth place in the league.

#### **This Day in CBJ History**

**March 20, 2003:** Tyler Wright notches the seventh hat trick in CBJ history and his third in union blue, scoring three goals including the overtime winner in a 4-3 victory vs. Toronto in Nationwide Arena. He also becomes the first CBJ player with multiple hat tricks in a season.

**March 20, 2018:** Artemi Panarin earns his first hat trick with the Blue Jackets and the second for Columbus in six days, tallying three goals in a 5-3 win at the New York Rangers.

**March 20, 2021:** Seth Jones scores with 29 seconds left to tie the score at 2, and Oliver Bjorkstrand nets the shootout winner in a 3-2 victory at Carolina. Hurricanes defenseman Dougie Hamilton appeared to win the game with a power-play goal in overtime, but the Jackets were given new life with a successful offside challenge.



## **BlueJackets.com / Barkov lifts Panthers past Blue Jackets in OT**

**By Craig Merz – March 21, 2025**

COLUMBUS -- Aleksander Barkov scored a power-play goal 29 seconds into overtime, giving the Florida Panthers a 1-0 win against the Columbus Blue Jackets at Nationwide Arena on Thursday.

He scored from the top of the slot after Blue Jackets forward Kirill Marchenko was called for delay of game at 19:30 of the third period when he put the puck over the glass.

Sergei Bobrovsky made 25 saves in his fifth shutout of the season for the Panthers (42-24-3), who had lost two straight and three of four. Florida remained tied with the Toronto Maple Leafs for first place in the Atlantic Division, two points ahead of the Tampa Bay Lightning.

"It was a great game. It was a playoff-style game," Bobrovsky said. "Opponent played hard. Opponent played a good game, but we worked hard. We had a great focus, great concentration. We were together. We were tight and we just grinded [it] out. It's big points for us."

Elvis Merzlikins made 27 saves for the Blue Jackets (31-28-9), who have lost five straight, including three by shutout. They also have lost seven of eight, getting shut out four times in that span.

"We didn't get the final bounce. They did," Columbus forward Sean Kuraly said. "That's the way it goes."

The Blue Jackets remained three points behind the Montreal Canadiens for the second wild card into the Stanley Cup Playoffs from the Eastern Conference.

"Are we trending in the right direction? A hundred percent," Columbus coach Dean Evason said. "We're not happy in the dressing room. There's no, 'Oh, good. We played great against the Stanley Cup champions.' No way. We're [mad]. But did we do the right things to get a point? Did we catch a bad break trying to do the right thing? Yeah, so we're real positive after we're [mad]."

Barkov said the Panthers know they will be playing desperate teams down the stretch.

"We talked about it before the game, that we're also in the battle," the Florida captain said. "So, it's not over for us at all. We need to get there (to the playoffs) as well, and we need to change the mindset a little bit so that we need to win games as well and battle for the playoffs as well. So, I think it was we were desperate today, and we wanted to win and we got the win."

Boone Jenner had a goal overturned for Columbus at 10:14 of the third after video review determined he kicked the puck into the net.

"We're getting chances. They weren't going," said Jenner, the Blue Jackets captain. "It's on us to get those breaks going our way. Elvis was outstanding all night. We're honing in on some details that we need to hone in on at this time of the season."

Bobrovsky has 49 NHL shutouts after getting his fourth against his former team. He made 16 saves in a 3-0 home win against Columbus on March 6.

The Blue Jackets scored once during their four-game homestand. That included consecutive 4-0 losses, against the Vegas Golden Knights (March 13) and New York Rangers (March 15). Mathieu Olivier scored in the third period of a 2-1 loss to the New Jersey Devils on Monday.

Columbus' best opportunity in the first period on Thursday was when James van Riemsdyk put a shot off the crossbar on the rush at 16:31.

“We are battling for every single puck, every single shift,” Merzlikins said. “We really want to do something nice this year.”

At 8:02 of the third period, Florida’s Gustav Forsling put a slap shot off the crossbar.

Merzlikins kept it 0-0 with four seconds left in the third when he stopped Mackie Samoskevich’s wrist shot from the left face-off circle with the Panthers on the power play.

“I like the fact that we've been able to play in tight games,” Florida coach Paul Maurice said. “I've been saying that for two months. I think even in the two we lost last week (3-2 at Boston Bruins on March 11; 3-1 at Montreal on Saturday), they're pretty tight in the third, so to come out with a win after losing two is important.”

**NOTES:** It was Bobrovsky’s third straight shutout against the Blue Jackets dating to April 11, 2024. Only two goaltenders in the NHL’s modern era (since 1943-44) have had a longer run against one franchise: Dominik Hasek (four games against the Rangers from Dec. 21, 1997 to Oct. 27, 1998) and Glenn Hall (four games against the Bruins from Jan. 8, 1953 to Dec. 3, 1955). ... With his 10th career overtime goal, Barkov tied Olli Jokinen for the most in Panthers history. ... Columbus is 0-6-2 in its past eight games against Florida and 3-13-4 against the Panthers in the past five seasons.

## The Hockey News / Sean Monahan Back Soon?

**By Jason Newland – March 21, 2025**

Sean Monahan, who was injured back on January 7th against the Pittsburgh Penguins, practiced with the main group today at Nationwide Arena. Does this indicate his return is close?

Before injuring his wrist, he had scored 14 goals, 41 points, was a plus-17, and had 9 power play points.

Getting Monahan back soon will be a huge boost for the struggling Blue Jackets, but will it be too late?

Forward Cole Sillinger and defenseman Erik Gudbranson also practiced today, so that's good news.

Dean Evason told the media after practice that all three "are all possibilities" this week, but would need to check with the trainers to be sure.

Help is on the way, but they need to win games before they come back if they want a chance at the playoffs.

**What's Next:** The Blue Jackets get the Stanley Cup Champion Florida Panthers on Thursday at home.

## The Hockey News / Columbus Blue Jackets (70 pts) vs. Florida Panthers (85 pts) Game Preview

**By Jason Newland – March 21, 2025**

The Columbus Blue Jackets and Florida Panthers play the third and final game of the season series. The Panthers have won both games played this year.

For the Columbus Blue Jackets, there's only one thing to do - WIN! Quite literally, nothing else matters.

The Blue Jackets, thanks to a four-game losing streak, are now 6th in the Metro and three points out of the second wild card spot. These are dire times and the team's sense of urgency must be as high as it has been all season.

But, to win, they have to score goals. And that's something they haven't done much lately, and it won't get any easier facing Sergei Bobrovsky if that's who the Cats put in the net.

Elvis Merzlikins should be rested and have plenty of energy to play the defending Cup Champions.

### **Panthers Stats**

- Power Play – 24.1% - 9th in NHL
- Penalty Kill – 81.2% - 11th in NHL
- Goals For - 217 – 8th – 3.19 GPG – 11th
- Goals Against – 184 – 9th – 2.71 GPG – 9th

### **Series History vs. The Panthers**

- Columbus is 16-7-3 at home vs. Florida and 26-21-5 in 52 all-time games.
- Columbus is 0-6-1 in the last 7 games against the Panthers.

### **Who To Watch For The Panthers**

- Sam Reinhart leads the team with 33 goals and 72 points.
- Aleksander leads Florida with 44 assists.
- Sergei Bobrovsky is 28-15-2 with a .906 SV%.

### **CBJ Player Notes vs. Panthers**

- Boone Jenner has 20 points in 24 games against the Panthers.
- Zach Werenski has 15 points in 24 games.
- James van Riemsdyk has 25 points in 42 career games vs. Florida.

### **Injuries**

- Erik Gudbranson (upper body) is on Injured Reserve on Oct. 16 (64 Games)
- Sean Monahan (upper body) is on Injured Reserve retroactive to Jan. 7 (26 Games)
- Kevin Labanc (shoulder) is on Injured Reserve as of Feb. 21 and is out for the season (11 Games)
- Cole Sillinger is day-to-day with an upper-body injury (8 Games)

- Jake Christiansen (upper body); (2 Games)

**TOTAL MAN GAMES LOST: 288**

## The Hockey News / Former Blue Jackets Defensemen Having Tough Time With New Team

**By Spencer Lazary – March 21, 2025**

Former Columbus Blue Jackets blue liner David Jiricek is in a situation he is all too familiar with. He has been a healthy scratch for the last nine games for his new team, the Minnesota Wild.

The 21-year-old has missed the last nine games while his team is in the thick of a playoff race, which shows that he may not have been ready for the NHL regardless of which team he was with.

Now is a good time to look back on the trade that sent him to the Wild, which took place only four months ago, back in November.

The Wild sent Daemon Hunt, a first-round pick in the 2025 NHL Draft, third- and fourth-round picks in the 2026 NHL Draft, and a second-round pick in the 2027 NHL Draft to the Blue Jackets for Jiricek and a fifth-round pick in 2025.

This was very tidy work by Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell, who was able to trade a defenseman who may not reach his potential for another young player in Hunt and four draft picks that will help restock talent at the AHL level.

It'll be interesting to see how long the healthy scratch streak lasts and if the organization will think about sending him down to the AHL again this season or keep him sitting in the press box for the last stretch of games.

## The Hockey News / LeBron James Wears CBJ Stadium Series Jersey At Lakers Game

**By Spencer Lazary – March 21, 2025**

NBA star LeBron James was seen wearing a Columbus Blue Jackets Stadium Series jersey at the Los Angeles Lakers game last night.

LeBron, an Akron, Ohio, native, made headlines when he was spotted sitting on the bench rocking the Blue Jackets jersey.

James has always been known for supporting other teams and athletes, but seeing him in a Blue Jackets jersey was especially cool—especially considering how this season has played out for Columbus after such a difficult offseason.

Before tonight's game, Blue Jackets youngster Adam Fantilli returned the favor by wearing a Lakers jersey with James' name on the back.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Monahan, Gudbranson, Sillinger All Close to a Return

**By Mark Scheig – March 21, 2025**

Wednesday morning inside the Blue Jackets' locker room at Nationwide Arena felt different. For the first time since basically Training Camp, it was crowded.

It was so crowded in fact that Cole Sillinger had to have a temporary locker stall put up for him right in the middle of the room. Despite the setup, he was smiling from ear-to-ear. That's because he just finished partaking in practice with his teammates.

Sillinger wasn't alone though. Along with the expected skaters, he was joined by Erik Gudbranson and Sean Monahan. For Monahan, it was his first time practicing with the main group since the injury he suffered back in Pittsburgh.

All three spoke to the media on Wednesday after practice. Head coach Dean Evason acknowledged that they're all close to returning. He said they are all possibilities this week. However, all three will not play Thursday night against the Florida Panthers.

The Blue Jackets play Friday night in Pittsburgh on the second half of back-to-back games. All are now considered to be day-to-day so there is at least a chance one or more could play there. If not then, the team comes home and will practice on Sunday before departing for New York to play the Islanders. It's only a matter of time before this trio returns to action.

Here are some of the key highlights from Monahan, Gudbranson and Sillinger from their availabilities on Wednesday.

### **Monahan**

"It's fun. It's an exciting day for sure," Monahan said about being back on the ice with the group. "Nice to be back out there with the guys and nice to get back with the team. Guys are working hard to get back. We got an important time of the year and guys are hungry to help push the team to move forward."

Monahan was straight to the point when asked how he felt on the ice.

"Felt great," Monahan said with a smile.

In terms of a timeline, it's in the hands of the training staff. Monahan cannot wait to get back out there given where the team is at in the playoff chase.

"I want to get back as soon as I can. As a player, when you're sitting in the crowd watching it, it's never fun. Days are long and you want to be out there competing with the guys. I think it's an important stretch for our group. It's something that's really fun to be a part of. So I'm looking forward to getting back and trying to help the team out."

Monahan also feels confident he will be able to do everything he normally would in a game although he conceded he needs to see how it goes early on.

"I'm not sure, to be honest," Monahan said about his ability to take faceoffs etc. I think we'll see when I play a game. I feel like I should be able to do everything I got to do. It's going to be on me to see where I'm at. But yeah, I'm feeling good. As soon as I get the green light, I'm sure I'll be out there."

Monahan did also admit he thought his absence would be a lot shorter than it was.



"I had no idea to be honest. I got an x-ray after it happened and wasn't broken so I thought I was good to go. But unfortunately, I tried to go out there and it didn't work and slowly tried after. It just wasn't feeling right. Unfortunate. But I'm back now and hopefully I'll be playing soon."

### **Gudbranson**

Gudbranson as of Wednesday openly admitted that he was not quite ready to return yet. But did say soon.

"They just want this to be fully great," Gudbranson said.

This is the third shoulder surgery of Gudbranson's career. He said this one was different than the others. He also said the rehab was different too.

When he does get back, Gudbranson is going to keep things simple.

"I'm not overthinking it. I've done this for a long time now. I have a good gauge on where my game is and starts with being simple. So I'm gonna go out there and just be efficient, be simple, be as positionally correct as I can and rely on my teammates. So I'm not overthinking it too much."

On the rehab, Gudbranson said this time he had to do things in stages.

"This one, it's less gradual. There's more stages. There were blocks of time where I was just absolutely not allowed to do certain things and then okay, now you can do this. We can try this and slowly ramp it up. We have an awesome team and awesome medical department here. With this surgery, I certainly understand that it's their decision. We just gotta get ready within that."

### **Sillinger**

"I've been out pretty close to three weeks now. You're obviously working hard to get back healthy and back in the lineup. I'm confident that once I'm ready once I do step back in, I can pick up right where I left off and even I'll have gears in my game. I'm just super thankful that I have the opportunity to play hockey again this year."

Sillinger opened up about what it was like to miss the Stadium Series.

"It sucks. It was my first outdoor game. It would have been (the first) in my career. But what's most important is that the guys got a big win there. For me, it could have been a lot worse. The goal here is to play more meaningful games down the stretch than that outdoor game. So I'm thankful to have that opportunity."

Sillinger said he isn't going to rush back. He wants to ensure he is fully ready.

"You don't want to rush into anything when you're feeling good. When I'm back ready, I'm not going to be thinking about anything that's going on with my body. I'm going to be out there being able to play free and play hard in my game. Obviously, you don't want to be out too long. You want to help the group and get back in as quickly as you can. But with that being said, you want to be making sure you're safe as well."

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Settle For Massive Point After Hard Fought OT Loss to Panthers

By Mark Scheig – March 21, 2025

Both the Florida Panthers and Columbus Blue Jackets had incentive to get two points on Thursday night at Nationwide Arena. While both teams got a point, it was the Panthers who capitalized in the end.

Aleksander Barkov scored the game-winning goal in overtime on a power play to lift the Panthers to a 1-0 win over the Blue Jackets. In a game that resembled playoff hockey in every way, shape and form, an unfortunate bounce ultimately decided the outcome.

### **Game Recap**

The first period was a case of two teams feeling each other out at the start. It was the Panthers that started to get some momentum. Despite Barkov's tripping penalty, they gained a 13-5 edge on the shot clock.

Elvis Merzlikins, on the day that his wife announced the arrival of their son Jaxon, played about as confidently as he had all season. He stopped all 13 shots faced. That momentum helped the Blue Jackets gain control in the second.

The Blue Jackets held the edge in shots 12-7 and had the better of the scoring chances. Sergei Bobrovsky matched Merzlikins save for save.

The Blue Jackets had to kill a penalty late in the second when Boone Jenner tripped Tobias Bjornfot. With the successful kill, both teams went into the room in a 0-0 game after 40 minutes.

The third was great intensity on both sides with not much room being given. The Blue Jackets thought they broke the ice. However, replay showed that Jenner kicked the puck in.

Although the Panthers had some chances late, Merzlikins was there. Then the play that ultimately decided the game happened.

While in his own zone, Kirill Marchenko batted the puck out of play while the puck was in the air. By the letter of the law, it was a penalty.

The Blue Jackets killed the portion in regulation to get a much-needed point. However in the extra session, Barkov beat Merzlikins 29 seconds in to send the Panthers to victory.

Postgame, coach Dean Evason summed up the night for his team. "We're not happy in that dressing room. There's no like, 'Oh, good, we played great against the Stanley Cup champions.' We're pissed. But did we do the right things to obviously get a point? Did we catch a bad break trying to do the right thing? Yeah. So we're real positive — after we're pissed off."

Merzlikins made 27 saves on the night. Bobrovsky recorded his second-consecutive shutout when starting against the Blue Jackets by making 25 saves.

The Blue Jackets scored one goal during their four-game homestand despite playing very well against New Jersey and Florida. They turn right around and play the Pittsburgh Penguins on Friday night. The Panthers now head to Washington for a Saturday game against the Capitals.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Game Day #68: In Desperate Need Of Points, Blue Jackets Wrap Up Homestand Thursday Night With Battle Against Panthers

By Ed Francis – March 21, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets and Florida Panthers meet for the third and final time this season Thursday night, with the Blue Jackets in dire need of points to stay afloat in the playoff race.

The first two meetings went Florida's way: a 4-3 victory in Columbus' home opener in October, and a 3-0 shutout in the Sunshine State two weeks ago.

The loss on March 6th was part of a cold streak from the Blue Jackets that has given them a 1-6-0 record in their last seven games, including three shutouts.

With the streak, they've tumbled from in a wild card spot by several points to out of one by several: entering Thursday, the Blue Jackets are three points behind the Montreal Canadiens for the second wild spot, with four other teams within two points of Columbus' 70.

As the broken records will tell you again: valuable points are on the line Thursday night.

### **Here's what to know when Columbus wraps up their four-game homestand:**

- **RE: CATS**

Sergei Bobrovsky is in net. He's having another impressive season, going 28-15-2 into he starters net with a 2.51 goals against and .906 save percentage. He's also beatable, having lost two of his last three starts over the last ten days while allowing eight goals in 64 shots (.875 save percentage). ... This is the fifth game in a season-long six game road trip for the Panthers. They're 1-3-0 so far, but coming off three days off and should be well-rested. ... Bad news for the already-cold Columbus power play: Florida has stopped 30 out of 32 opposition man-advantages over its last ten games.

- **THEY PLAYED WELL MONDAY...**

In their 2-1 loss to the New Jersey Devils on Monday, the Blue Jackets managed to get 46 shots on goal and had an unheard of 50-7 advantage in shot attempts in the third period. But they could get only one puck past Devils tender Jake Allen, who was on fire all night. Head coach Dean Evason said after the team "played (their) asses off", and it's true. If Columbus can match their play from three nights ago, they'll be in good position to get back in the win column.

- **ELVIS RETURNS TO THE ICE**

After missing the last two games for the birth of his second child, Elvis Merzlikins is back in the starter's net for the Blue Jackets. He's lost his last four starts but has been under siege lately, facing an average of 33 shots per game in those starts. That does not include the Stadium Series matchup — his last win — when the Detroit Red Wings peppered him for 46 shots.

- **LINEUPS CHANGES & PROJECTIONS:**

The third period saw Kent Johnson, Adam Fantilli, and Kirill Marchenko together, with Boone Jenner centering a line that featured Dmitri Voronkov and Yegor Chinakhov. Neither line put one in the net, but both played really well. Those are the lines Evason will roll with Thursday as the offense looks to get going.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / FLA 1, CBJ 0 (OT): Merzlikins Leads Blue Jackets To A Point, But Florida Hands Columbus Another Shutout Loss

**By Ed Francis – March 21, 2025**

A tough break.

Again.

For the third time in a four-game homestand, the Columbus Blue Jackets were held off the scoreboard Thursday night in a 1-0 overtime loss to the Florida Panthers.

This time around, the game turned on a late, inadvertent penalty from Kirill Marchenko that gave the Panthers a game-winning power play.

With just 30 seconds left in regulation, Marchenko accidentally put the puck over the glass while chopping at the puck.

"He's trying to do the right thing," said head coach Dean Evason. "He's trying to whack it into the neutral zone."

"It's one thing if we hooked a guy or tripped a guy or held a guy or did something we shouldn't have did," said Evason. "It's just a bad break."

The bad break put the Panthers on the power play, with goaltender Elvis Merzlikins helping send the game to overtime in the final seconds when he made a big save on a Mackie Samoskevich shot. But 29 seconds into the extra period, Florida's Sasha Barkov scored the only goal of the game to give the Blue Jackets their fifth straight loss.

Merzlikins, who was the Second Star of the Game, finished with 27 saves on 28 shots. It was another strong outing from the Blue Jackets netminder, who once again was the hard-luck loser as a result of the scoring slump.

**Here's how the Blue Jackets finished an 0-3-1 homestand:**

### **1st Period:**

**(9:10 — Fantilli's Blocked Shot):** It looks like this block from Adam Fantilli kept the game scoreless. With the Blue Jackets on the power play, Florida gets a great chance to take a lead on a short-handed goal — until a diving Fantilli comes in and takes away any chance of that happening. The period ends with no score, but Florida doubling up Columbus 13-5 in shots on goal and 25-17 in shot attempts.

"He came from nowhere. I was surprised," said Merzlikins. "It just shows to all of us that he really cares."

### **2nd Period:**

Another scoreless period, but this one favored the Blue Jackets. They outshoot the Panthers 12-7 and grab five of the seven high-danger opportunities, leading to an expected goals of 1.34 to 0.91 in favor of Columbus. There are fireworks at 8:01 of the period, when Elvis Merzlikins took exception to a Carter Verhaeghe follow-up shot attempt at the whistle. Dmitri Voronkov steps in and lets Verhaeghe know how he feels about it, which leads to offsetting minors. Late in the period, Boone Jenner gets an interference minor to give Florida their first power play of the night, but Columbus shuts it down to send the game into the third at 0-0.

### **3rd Period + Overtime:**

**(10:14 3rd — Overturned CBJ Goal):** The cannon fires in Nationwide Arena — for nothing. Boone Jenner briefly celebrates what would have been his first goal of the season, but it's quickly overturned for a distinct kicking motion.

**(0:29 OT — FLA Goal):** With the Blue Jackets short-handed, Florida converts on the power play less than 30 seconds into overtime. Barkov fires from the slot for his 19th goal of the season.

**Stat Chat:**

- The Blue Jackets could not solve Sergei Bobrovsky this season. He shut Columbus out in both of his starts this season, stopping all 41 shots on goal.
- The Blue Jackets are now 4-for-49 on the power play since the injury to Sean Monahan, including 0-for-19 over their last eight games. Monahan is expected back soon and is currently practicing with the team.
- Fantilli was on the ice for 16:53, with the Blue Jackets garnering 25 of the 32 (78%) shot attempts in that time.

**Up Next:**

A back-to-back for the Blue Jackets, as they head to Pittsburgh for a Friday night battle with the Penguins. Puck drop is set for 7 p.m.

## **The Athletic / It's time to change the NHL playoff format. Here are some ways to improve it**

**By Shayna Goldman – March 21, 2025**

Last Sunday, the Dallas Stars and Colorado Avalanche played in a playoff atmosphere. Most fans would have circled the game on their calendars, considering what a showdown it projected to be between two of the best in the West.

It lived up to the hype, as the Stars completely changed the game's tone in 20 seconds to tie the score in the third period. That forced overtime, during which Cale Makar scored the game-winning goal.

It was just a taste of what another postseason matchup between these star-studded teams could be. Who doesn't want seven games of that?

But does meeting in Round 1 spoil some of the fun?

These two teams are on track for that despite being the second- and fourth-place teams in the West. This highlights exactly what is wrong with the current NHL playoff format.

The format isn't all bad. It prioritizes divisional matchups in the early rounds, which can help fuel existing rivalries. That has led to bangers in Round 1 in recently, like the Battle of Florida, Lightning-Maple Leafs, Jets-Avalanche, Devils-Rangers, and three straight matchups between the Oilers and Kings. Early meetings usually mean division rivals meet at their healthiest (relatively speaking, in terms of playoff health). And when teams in opposing divisions meet in the Conference Final, it can spark new rivalries — take the Stars and Golden Knights, who built up some heat after meeting in the Western Conference final twice in three years.

The big problem is that most teams are not adequately rewarded for their regular-season success outside the top seed in each conference.

Sometimes, the playoff picture would shake out the same regardless of format. But oftentimes, this system leads to imbalanced opening rounds. Take the 2023-24 Jets. Winnipeg finished second place in the West with 110 points. Because the Jets trailed the Stars and not a Pacific Division team, they were not slated to match up against the seventh seed. As the second seed in the Central, Winnipeg had to face off against the 107-point Avalanche, who finished fourth in the West, and were ousted in five games in Round 1. There is no guarantee the result would have been any different against the seventh-place Predators, but the deck would at least be stacked more in the Jets' favor.

If the current Central Division standings hold, it will be a similar situation this year for the Stars and Avalanche. It will guarantee that one of the two strongest contenders will not make it past Round 1. Not only can that storyline detract from the postseason, but when the best teams are eliminated early due to the restrictions of the format, some of the excitement fizzles out earlier than it should in the postseason.

It's not the only time excitement can fizzle in hockey. The last month of the season should build momentum toward the playoffs. However, as constructed, there isn't as much room to jostle for position within the bracket, which can limit drama down the stretch.

### **What if the league could smooth out some of the kinks to improve the product?**

Commissioner Gary Bettman may not have the appetite for it, but it is time for a change in the NHL.

#### **1 vs. 8 format**

Sometimes, the simplest approach is best. There is no need for wild-card seeds or ensuring that a certain number of teams from each division make the playoffs because some years, one division is outright weaker. The first-place team should match up to the eighth-place team; two should play seven, three versus six, and four versus five. That ensures the best teams in each conference make the playoffs and have the fairest path forward.

There are details to work out within that system. Like the last playoff format from 1999 to 2013, division winners should be rewarded with top seeding. Having only two seeds dedicated to that, instead of three, can help maintain competitive balance.

So that would make Washington the number one team in the East right now and Florida the second seed. In the West, Winnipeg and Vegas would lead the way. And the playoff matchups would be more fitting based on each team's regular season record.

Instead of Dallas-Colorado Round 1, the Stars would face the sixth-seed Wild, and the Avs would take on the fifth-seed Oilers. Neither path is easy, but on paper, it's more beneficial to the higher seeds because their regular-season accomplishments are more meaningful to open the postseason. And in that particular example, both Dallas and Colorado would get home-ice advantage. The Eastern Conference, on the other hand, would remain unchanged from the current projected matchups.

The big decisions in this playoff format come after Round 1.

From 1999 to 2013, the top-seeded team played the lowest-seeded team left after opening-round eliminations. This helped top teams maintain more of an edge after Round 1, but it was trickier to plan around from a logistics perspective. The preference could be having a firmer bracket in place. To ensure that first place doesn't have to match up against second or third until the conference final, the winner of 1 vs. 8 would meet the winner of 4 vs. 5 in Round 1. The winner of 2 vs. 7 would face the winner of 3 vs. 6.

In the West, the earliest the first-place Jets and second-place Golden Knights could meet would be the conference final. The Stars couldn't face off against the Jets or Avalanche until Round 3, either. So, while there is less of a guarantee of a split-division conference final, it would only amp up existing rivalries striving to be named best in the West.

Last year's playoff picture would have looked slightly different within this system. The Lightning would have met Carolina in Round 1, while the second-seed Panthers would have matched up with the Islanders. That could have set up a second-round meeting between the Canes and Panthers, or a Round 2 Battle of Florida. If the Rangers and Bruins still won their Round 1 matchups, the Original Six teams would have gone head-to-head in Round 2.

In the West, the Avalanche and Oilers would have met early. The Jets would have avoided Colorado in Round 1, while the Kings would have escaped their usual fate of an early matchup against the Oilers.

### **3-2-1 point system**

Maybe the playoff formatting isn't the biggest problem — the standings are.

The NHL tested out a 3-2-1 point system at the 4 Nations, and it gained a lot of traction in that tournament setting. Every single point mattered more, and teams had to play the game differently. Getting to overtime wasn't necessarily enough because all wins were no longer equal; that regulation win became all the more meaningful with a third point. That can lead to more drama and risk-taking late in games — it did for Finland against Canada, with an early goalie pull in an attempt to rally. That format is also working well in the first two seasons of the PWHL.

In a 3-2-1 system, there wouldn't be any dramatic shifts right now. But those subtle changes would still be meaningful. The Rangers would jump into the second wild-card seed thanks to their 30 regulation wins over Montreal's 24. The Blue Jackets' 23 regulation wins would hurt their playoff chances, too. But with this system in practice, the games would likely be played differently, which can't be accounted for in theory.

If the NHL wanted to get weird and make drastic changes, the 3-2-1 point system could be implemented with a 1 vs. 8 playoff format. That may be too big of a leap at once, but it is worth considering in phases.

Again, without accounting for how team strategy would change in a 3-2-1 point world, last year's playoff picture would have opened with two slight differences. The Jets' 46 regulation wins would have pushed them ahead of the first-place Stars, so Winnipeg would have started the postseason with a matchup against Vegas. The now second-place Stars would have subsequently matched up with Colorado earlier.

### **Play-in tournament**

One other way to shake up the playoff picture? Expand the postseason.

A play-in tournament would bolster interest around the NHL. With more teams involved, more fan bases would be engaged. And the drama of a few extra high-stakes games would excite fans on a national level, too. Any playoff expansion is an obvious money-maker, but the risk is watering down the postseason too much and making a lengthy 82-game season less meaningful.

The NHL is more likely to increase the regular season to 84 games than shorten it, which would cause more wear and tear on players. So, there is a fine line to walk here.

Again, a simple approach can be best with an expansion of the wild-card. To qualify for the playoffs, the seventh-place team could face off against the 10th seed, and eight could battle nine in a condensed three-game series.

Last year that would have meant a series between the Capitals and Red Wings, who tied in points but sat on opposite sides of the playoff picture due to differences in regulation wins. On the other hand, the Lightning would have had to play Pittsburgh for that top wild-card seed despite a 10-point difference in the standings. Maybe the Penguins would have made a stronger push down the stretch, knowing there was still a chance at the postseason as the 10th seed. But that gap makes this scenario more unfair for Tampa Bay. There would have been a 12-point gap between the seventh-seed Predators and 10th-place Wild in a wild-card play-in, too.

A play-in tournament could make sense if or when the league expands to 34 teams. But expanding the postseason will not fix what is fundamentally flawed with the current system. Instead of adding to the current issues, the NHL has to first fix what is broken with the playoff format.



## **The Athletic / Breaking down playoff chances for 9 NHL teams in the wild-card hunt**

**By Harman Dayal and Shayna Goldman – March 21, 2025**

The intense race for the final playoff wild-card spots in both NHL conferences is going down to the wire.

Spicy storylines and sizzling high-stakes matchups are happening nearly every night. In the East, you've got young and exciting squads emerging from long rebuilds who are trying to break lengthy playoff droughts. Standing in their way are last year's Presidents' Trophy winners and another cagey, veteran-laden team that just won't go away. The West, meanwhile, has four contenders fighting for one playoff spot.

To set the stage for this playoff sprint, we've analyzed both the bull and bear case for every playoff hopeful's chances.

### **Eastern Conference**

#### **Montreal Canadiens**

**Record: 33-27-7 (73 points, 15 games remaining)**

**Reasons for hope:** With an impressive 6-3 win over the Senators on Tuesday night, the Canadiens jumped into a playoff spot. Montreal is getting hot at the right time, with an 8-1-2 record since the 4 Nations break. The franchise cornerstones have really stepped up since returning to play. The top line of Nick Suzuki, Cole Caufield and Juraj Slafkovský have been surging at five-on-five with an 11-4 goal differential in their minutes over the last 11 games. Lane Hutson's offensive acumen has been shining on the back end — and his willingness to shoot the puck against the Senators was a major moment in the game, which could build confidence moving forward.

Even Hutson's defensive game has also trended in the right direction lately. Sam Montembeault has been the Canadiens' backbone over this last stretch, with seven quality starts in eight appearances that add up to 12 goals saved above expected.

Montreal has boosted its odds to 40 percent, to lead the field for that second wild-card seed. Even if the Canadiens ultimately fail short, the season isn't lost either — playing meaningful hockey down the stretch is an essential building block in the process, and this group is showing real promise.

**Reasons for concern:** As impressive as the top line's performance has been, there are a few red flags. The team is outscoring expectations by about five goals in its minutes. While the line's 6.24 expected goals at five-on-five do not account for shooting talent, the gap is significant enough to raise a red flag. Montreal can't rely on its top line shooting 13.6 percent forever, so the team has to generate more below the surface to help sustain it.

While Brendan Gallagher had a vintage performance against the Senators on Tuesday and secondary scorers such as Christian Dvorak and Josh Anderson stepped up, the bottom nine hasn't produced consistently enough. When Caufield, Suzuki and Slafkovský have been on the bench since the 4 Nations, the team has been outscored 12-10 and fallen below break-even in expected goals.

As sparkling as the goaltending has been — both goalies combine for a .916 save percentage in all situations — there are some defensive concerns below the surface at even strength and on the penalty kill. So, while this up-and-coming team should ride the high of this last stretch, this group has to keep improving to maintain its standing.

## **New York Rangers**

**Record: 33-30-6 (72 points, with 13 games remaining)**

**Reasons for hope:** Igor Shesterkin is an outright game-breaker. In 51 appearances, he has saved about 30 goals above expected, which puts him third in the league behind Connor Hellebuyck and Logan Thompson. And he has only amped it up over this last stretch of play, with nine quality starts in his last 11 outings, where he has saved a collective 11.7 goals above expected. Shesterkin has the chops to carry his team to the playoffs and even steal a series.

Lately, he has had some support, with Artemi Panarin and Mika Zibanejad both trending up in 2025. The addition of J.T. Miller, the return of Adam Fox and the emergence of Will Cuyll as a difference-maker have given this team a spark at times.

**Reasons for concern:** Tuesday's game against Calgary stressed everything wrong with this team. The defensive structure is an outright disaster. The Rangers bleed rush chances against and let their opponents drive right to the middle of the ice. New York gave up 15 high-danger chances to the Flames, and somehow, it wasn't even the team's worst defensive outing of the season.

What puts an even bigger strain on the team is that the offense isn't consistent enough to make up for those defensive breakdowns, which leaves the Rangers even more reliant on their goaltenders to be perfect. This year, the Rangers have struggled to convert on the man advantage and rank in the bottom 10 in power-play scoring.

The roster is middling, key contributors such as Alexis Lafrenière, Chris Kreider and Vincent Trocheck have all taken a step back this year, and the coaching hasn't been able to channel this team's best energy consistently.

## **Columbus Blue Jackets**

**Record: 31-28-8 (70 points, with 15 games remaining)**

**Reasons for hope:** The Blue Jackets have been one of the season's best stories, thanks to so many players exceeding expectations. That starts with Zach Werenski, who has been an outright difference-maker on the blue line. He has been the team's engine with his play-driving and defense, which has landed him in the conversation for both the Norris Trophy and the Hart.

Up front, Kirill Marchenko has developed into a true first-line player. So has Dmitri Voronkov, who has generally played on his left on the top line. Sean Monahan has blown away expectations and should return to action soon. Adam Fantilli stepped up in Monahan's place and has progressed into a top-six role.

Dean Evason deserves a lot of credit for managing this team into the playoff picture. The odds may not be in their favor right now, but there may still be some magic left to push past what has been a difficult stretch.

**Reasons for concern:** After generating a lot of momentum in the playoff race, with back-to-back wins over the Red Wings and a decisive 7-3 win against the Rangers, the Blue Jackets have fallen flat. The team has only mustered four goals over their last four games while giving up 15. Elvis Merzlikins' return should help after missing the last two games, but this trend stretches past his absence.

There have been some red flags throughout the season, and now they may finally be catching up to the team. The Blue Jackets have been riding a high shooting percentage most of the year and exceeding expectations on the scoresheet. There have been poor defensive habits throughout the season, too —

the team's scoring pop and goaltending have just made up for them. Plus, there are some special teams concerns on both ends of the ice.

### **New York Islanders**

**Record: 31-28-8 (70 points, 15 games remaining)**

**Reason for hope:** After a disappointing California trip, the Islanders got back on track with two convincing wins, both by a score of 4-2, against the Panthers and Penguins. As a result, New York's playoff hopes have ticked back up to 21 percent, which is right in line with the Rangers and Blue Jackets. With four games ahead against three teams in the wild-card race — one each against the Canadiens and Rangers, two versus Columbus — the opportunity is there to make a late run for the playoffs.

Ilya Sorokin has been giving his Islanders a chance most nights, no matter how the team in front of him has played. He has earned seven quality starts in his last nine appearances, with 12 goals saved above expected along the way. Noah Dobson's return has given this team a spark, too. He underwhelmed through the first half of the year and only averaged a 0.80 Game Score through January. But since returning from injury in late February, his average Game Score over the last 10 games has jumped to 1.93.

**Reasons for concern:** The Islanders' roster strength holds them back. Mathew Barzal's absence leaves a gaping hole at the top of the lineup, considering how well he played this year. The forward group is even more strained after Brock Nelson was traded.

The Islanders were outplayed by lesser opponents in the Ducks and Sharks on the California swing, and their five-on-five play against the Oilers also fell short. Special teams have been a major weakness all season. New York is a bottom-five team in expected and actual goal suppression while short-handed, while the power play sits dead last in the league with just 3.63 goals per 60.

### **Detroit Red Wings**

**Record: 32-30-6 (70 points, 14 games remaining)**

**Reasons for hope:** The Red Wings' power play has been absolutely lights-out this season and is on pace for a franchise record. The team has been generating some quality offense at five-on-five since the 4 Nations break, with 2.91 expected goals per 60. Detroit likely won't shoot under seven percent forever, so the team should start converting on those chances at a higher rate.

After a sluggish return from the tournament, Lucas Raymond seems to be getting back on track after ending a 10-game goalless drought. Marco Kasper is proving he can perform away from the Red Wings' leading forwards and help drive play on the second line.

**Reason for concern:** The Red Wings may be plagued by a lower shooting percentage since the 4 Nations, but their five-on-five offensive creation has been a weakness all year. The bottom six doesn't thread the needle enough; it can be especially glaring when the top guys or power play aren't producing. Detroit's 1.99 five-on-five goals per 60 is third-last in the league, and their expected goal generation ranks 23rd. As much as the power play can give this team a lift, the Red Wings are over-reliant on it to make up for what they lack at even strength and in their own zone.

Team defense and penalty-killing woes have been a theme all year, and the goaltenders can't always contain some of the breakdowns in front of them. Adding Petr Mrázek helps take some of the growing burden off Cam Talbot and Alex Lyon, but his track record this year, despite his results so far in Detroit, is still a cause for concern. So is the road ahead — the Red Wings have the most difficult remaining schedule in the league, which has tanked their playoff chances down to just five percent.

## **Western Conference**

### **Vancouver Canucks**

**Record: 32-25-11 (75 points, 14 games remaining)**

**Reasons for hope:** The Canucks currently hold the final wild-card spot and are coming off their most impressive win of the season, a 6-2 rout of the formidable Winnipeg Jets. Quinn Hughes has returned to the lineup after missing 10 of 13 games since Feb 1. Hughes is playing at less than 100 percent health but his return has ignited the club's dormant offense. Since Hughes' return, the Canucks have won three of their last four games while averaging 4.25 goals scored per game.

Struggling star center Elias Pettersson also appears to be turning a corner with four goals and eight points in his last seven games. If Hughes and Pettersson can maintain their current form, the Canucks will produce just enough offense that their lockdown defensive play, elite penalty kill (which ranks No. 1 in the NHL since Feb. 1) and Kevin Lankinen's solid goaltending should allow them to win games consistently down the stretch.

**Reasons for concern:** Vancouver's recent offensive outburst is a positive sign, but this is still an attack that can go cold at any time. Since Jan. 1, the Canucks have been a bottom-five team in goals scored per game. Their five-on-five offensive shot generation rate ranks 31st in the NHL during that span. Filip Chytil is out with a concussion and Conor Garland missed the last game, which hurts an already-thin top six.

Pettersson and Boeser clicked last game, which could be a launching pad for them, but that's just one game and we've seen them previously struggle to build chemistry. Boeser has been fighting it since losing former linemate J.T. Miller — he was mired in a 12-game goal drought before finally scoring twice against Winnipeg. This team is still reliant on Hughes to carry them and while he undoubtedly has the talent for that, we'll see if his body can hold up with the injuries he's playing through and the monster workload he's being tasked with.

Vancouver's remaining schedule isn't easy either. The Canucks have two games left against Vegas and one more against each of Winnipeg, Dallas and Colorado.

### **St. Louis Blues**

**Record: 34-28-7 (75 points, 13 games remaining)**

**Reasons for hope:** The Blues are 11-3-3 since Feb 1, which is the third-best record in the NHL. Jim Montgomery's midseason arrival has drastically improved the club's underlying profile. St. Louis has controlled nearly 53 percent of five-on-five expected goals, which ranks top-10 in the NHL, since Montgomery's hiring in late November, compared to an ugly 45 percent share of expected goals under Drew Bannister, which was one of the worst marks in the league.

St. Louis' top-six forward group is firing on all cylinders, with Robert Thomas, Pavel Buchnevich, Jordan Kyrou, Dylan Holloway and Brayden Schenn all hovering around the point-per-game mark since Feb 1. The Blues are defending significantly better, with newcomers Philip Broberg and Cam Fowler making a strong top-four impact, plus Justin Faulk playing rejuvenated hockey.

St. Louis' remaining schedule is also relatively favorable in terms of opponent quality. Only three of the Blues' remaining 13 games are against an opponent that's top 10 in the league standings by points percentage. Over the next five games, they play Nashville twice and Chicago once.

**Reasons for concern:** Calgary, Vancouver and Utah all have an extra 1-2 games in hand relative to the Blues. Colton Parayko, their best defenseman, is recovering well but could miss the rest of the regular

season with a knee injury. St. Louis has held up impressively in six games without Parayko so far, but its schedule has been quite soft in that timeframe, and it's not easy for any team to sustain success over a larger sample when you're missing your No. 1 defenseman.

The Blues' playoff hopes will also suffer a huge dent if they lose on Thursday to the Canucks; they can't afford to drop this one.

### **Calgary Flames**

**Record: 31-25-11 (73 points, 15 games remaining)**

**Reasons for hope:** This team doesn't quit and is greater than the sum of its parts. The Flames were on the verge of falling apart after losing three straight games, but they walked into Madison Square Garden on Tuesday on the second leg of a back-to-back and impressively shellacked the Rangers 35-13 on the shot clock en route to a massive victory. That shows huge character and resilience.

Dustin Wolf has been a rock star in net. Calgary doesn't have any remaining back-to-backs, so the coaching staff can ride Wolf as heavily as they want down the stretch.

The Flames are a structured, hard-working group that doesn't surrender many egregious Grade-A chances. Calgary's special teams have been a strength lately — its penalty kill ranks fifth-best in the NHL since the 4 Nations break, and the power play has been about league-average.

**Reasons for concern:** Where are the goals going to come from? The Flames have been limited to three or fewer goals in 16 of their last 17 games. They're averaging 2.54 goals scored per game, which ranks 32nd in the NHL this season. Nazem Kadri, Jonathan Huberdeau and MacKenzie Weegar have been productive lately, but besides that, Calgary is starved for reliable scoring threats.

The Flames are 6-7-4 since Feb 1, which is by far the worst record out of the four main wild-card hopefuls in the West. It isn't going to be easy to turn the ship around given the deficit of high-end talent on this roster. Calgary is still a legitimate threat in this race but you can't help but wonder if the clock is about to strike midnight for a Cinderella team that has been scuffling over the last 20 games and has arguably the weakest roster of the Western wild-card contenders.

### **Utah Hockey Club**

**Record: 30-27-11 (71 points, 14 games remaining)**

**Reasons for hope:** Utah is a better team than its mediocre record indicates. Clayton Keller's team is fast, dynamic and consistently generates more shots and scoring chances than they surrender. Utah ranks sixth and fifth in the NHL, respectively, at controlling five-on-five shot attempts and expected goals. They've been snakebitten by poor finishing, but if that reverses, they arguably have the highest offensive ceiling of the four remaining hopefuls based on the ease with which they pile up quality shots and chances and their exciting young core led by Keller, Logan Cooley and Dylan Guenther.

The back end is finally healthy after Sean Durzi and John Marino's extended absences. From top to bottom, this is a skilled, deep roster that could conceivably get on a roll.

**Reasons for concern:** Utah has the steepest deficit to climb in the West. The club sits four points back of the final wild-card spot and would need to leapfrog Calgary, St. Louis and Vancouver with only 14 games remaining. While the team's skill is undeniable, this group is young and inexperienced, which leaves it prone to self-inflicted wounds and inconsistency.

Karel Vejmelka's heavy workload is also a potential concern. The 28-year-old netminder has been very solid this season, but with Connor Ingram entering the NHL/NHLPA Player Assistance program, he's started 11 of the club's last 12 games, which included playing both ends of a back-to-back set.

Vejmelka is showing signs of potential fatigue, as he's slipped to an .873 save percentage in his last six games. Utah will be in trouble if he can't perform at an above-average level down the stretch. They have two remaining back-to-back sets, which isn't ideal. Jaxson Stauber, the current backup, only has 11 games of NHL experience.

## [Sportsnet.ca / 32 Thoughts: A tax balance proposal as CBA talks begin](#)

By Elliotte Friedman – March 21, 2025

- **What we learned at the GM Meetings**
- **Goal scoring up, power plays down**
- **Landeskog trying to come back**

Now that commissioner Gary Bettman has come right out and said there will be CBA negotiations with the NHLPA, it's time to write about everyone's least-favourite topic.

Taxes.

No one likes calculating them, paying them, worrying about them, everything about them.

Hockey is supposed to be an escape from them. Alas, no more.

It's taken me a long time to warm up to the idea that non-tax states — like Florida, Nevada, Tennessee, Texas and Washington — have a competitive advantage that needs to be addressed. Everywhere you can live has advantages and disadvantages. Life is about making the best of both, right?

Plus, if you're a bad organization, low taxes won't save you.

Maybe it's my Canadian bias. Maybe it's our dollar dropping to the abyss while this country's Stanley Cup drought stands at 31 years. Maybe it's because the NHL and NHLPA shouldn't take their most passionate fans for granted. Someday, even they will turn away if unwilling to believe their teams can win.

Maybe it's because one of my remaining career goals is covering a Canadian champion. I don't care which of the seven it is, as long as one does it before professionally I am fired into the sun. Although a young-looking 54, I'm much closer to the end than the beginning.

Any potential solution must be part of CBA discussions. It is possible this is a futile exercise, because this won't be a priority unless enough teams and players wish to make it so. If I was a player on a Canada- or California-based team, I'd be pushing for it. But, those with low taxation won't be eager to punish themselves.

Whatever the case, I've been soliciting ideas. Here's the one I like best: teams in non-zero tax locations should get small relief in one particular situation — signing players to contracts that involve unrestricted free agency.

The vast, vast majority of players don't reach UFA status until they are 27 or have played seven seasons. A few get there sooner — those who are undrafted, unsigned after being drafted, or don't play enough NHL games in their first few professional seasons. But for the purposes of this exercise, we are only using the "27-and-seven" criteria.

Auston Matthews will be our key example. The Maple Leafs draft Matthews. That's not his choice. He's picked by them. No relief for the team.

Before his entry-level contract expired, Matthews signed a five-year extension with an \$11.634 million cap hit. Matthews was not eligible for unrestricted free agency until the fifth and final season of that deal. Since Toronto would have the right to match any contract offered during the first four of those seasons, they do not get relief during that time.

But in Year Five, they do. At that point, Matthews is choosing to stay in Toronto rather than go elsewhere. (If you want to use Connor McDavid as the example, Edmonton would not get any break for the first four years of his current eight-year contract. But it would for the last four.)

And, when Matthews extends four more years, as he agreed to in 2023, every season is eligible for this "credit." No team receives any relief unless a 27-and-seven player invests UFA seasons in a tax market.

There are other questions that would need to be answered:

First, who qualifies? California and Canadian teams for sure, but what's the cutoff? There are many franchises with a rate between zero and Quebec. To avoid giving Bettman a headache he won't want, calculate each team's discount based on the effective tax rate where they are located compared to those with no income tax. (The NHL/NHLPA could set a limit if the largest difference is too wide for everyone's liking. On a \$10 million player, I believe the Rangers would be 18 percentage points higher than the no-tax teams; Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto 17. I could see some screaming that's too much.)

Second, how does everyone feel about extra salary in the system that doesn't count against the ceiling? There have been times (2005 and 2013) when teams were given the opportunity to buy out players and not have it count against their cap totals. It hasn't happened since because teams didn't want to pay salaries that aren't part of the 50/50 revenue share.

We'll see. Probably doesn't happen. But my primary audience is Canada, and those fans are passionate about this topic. Don't take your golden goose for granted.

## **32 THOUGHTS**

**1.** Let's empty the GM meeting notebook. If you've been around long enough — media member or passionate fan — you recognize storm clouds on the labour horizon. That's not the case in 2025. The salary cap is set for the next three seasons (assuming tariff lunacy doesn't throw everything into chaos). There isn't some gigantic philosophical hurdle blocking peace.

Could the players ask for a piece of expansion revenue? Sure, they could try. Could the league try to shorten contract length or change the financial structure to limit July 1 bonuses? Sure, they could try. The personalities involved here don't mind challenging one another or pushing to see what they can get away with, but no one's itching for a fight. Bettman said at last fall's Board of Governors he would love to announce something at his annual Stanley Cup State of the Union. That's ambitious, but, if we are talking about changing some parts of the current CBA as opposed to re-writing it, not impossible.

**2.** Bettman re-iterated he's dead-set against expanded playoffs, but I would expect the players to ask about changing the format to one-versus-eight, etc., in each conference. (Don't even think about one-versus 16. Talk about travel nightmares.)

As one player texted Wednesday, "Dallas and Colorado are third and sixth in the NHL. If there's a way to avoid having them meet in the first round, we should find it." One of the ways I look at the playoffs is not when you lose, but who you lose to. If the Avalanche and Stars do meet, I'm not going to look at the loser and say, "That's an opening-round playoff choker." That could be a Stanley Cup Final.

**3.** Bettman and Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly were careful not to get into any negotiation wish lists or strategies. Near the end of each regular season, the NHLPA schedules agent meetings in Los Angeles, New York and Toronto to touch base and discuss important topics. Not this year. The Cone of Silence is upon us.

**4.** Monday night, the architect of the two-time Stanley Cup champion Los Angeles Kings, Dean Lombardi, was honoured by his peers. "As long as you thought his speech would be," one laughed, "it was longer."



During a vintage performance, Lombardi waxed poetic about the necessity of great drafting/great development, admitting surprise at Vegas and Florida winning via a different model: attracting players raised elsewhere to highly-desired locations/organizations. He closed by addressing a major problem: cost. Lombardi warned the game is too expensive for so many children/families to play that it excludes good athletes from picking up the sport. He took pains not to blame the NHL for it, calling it a grassroots problem, but thought it was important to mention it to that audience.

5. Expanded three-on-three, which energized fans during Canada-Sweden at the 4 Nations, fizzled like my Western University pickup attempts. Players were concerned it wouldn't mean more opportunity for those who don't normally get it, but even more dependence on those who already do. Bettman referenced injury and ice conditions.

I was reminded afterwards he's also very aware of the clock. He does not like longer games, and has data that, outside of playoffs, fans don't either. This season, 74 per cent of games going into overtime end before the shootout, the highest ever. (In 2014-15, the final season of four-on-four, the number was 44 per cent.) So they left it alone.

6. At the November GM meetings, one manager laughed recalling Bettman discussing the decentralized draft: "He reminded us this was our idea. He wasn't hiding that he didn't like it." He did it again on Tuesday, then publicly on Wednesday. After last season's super successful Sphere presentation, there was conversation about reversing the decision to decentralize this June, but the commitment was already made and it wasn't like every year was going to be at Sphere. Now there's definitely "Buyer's Remorse," as a couple of people put it.

Bettman said there will be a full debrief afterwards, and he doesn't want flip-floppery — decide how the draft should be done and stick with it. My vote: everyone there. It's hockey's thing and the sport should be proud of that. Bettman also made it clear he wants all first-rounders in attendance, so Central Scouting and the teams will have to work together on that. (I've already heard from some prospects nervous about paying their way to go there and sitting longer than you want, since more than 32 will be asked to go. No one likes seeing that.) A "virtual room" is being created where players will "meet" their new team, while the league is working on guests to announce the selections — Celine Dion and Michael Buffer were tremendous last year. Those named to the NHL's 21st-century team may be on-site, so they could announce picks, too.

7. The NHL would like to have some idea by start of the playoffs how next season's All-Star Extravaganza will look. They don't want to cancel it and they shouldn't. When the 2026 edition was announced on Long Island, it was discussed as a "gateway to the Olympics," since the players will leave from New York to Milan. There's no reason to think any different. The All-Star Game itself is a goner. We never need to see it again. But you can still have a skills competition — I like it better than the game anyway — and there are plenty of things you can do to celebrate the sport and make fans/sponsors happy. (Make no mistake, All-Star is big for the sponsors.)

You can have the players do clinics for kids, you can have autograph sessions, Q&A fan forums, kiss babies, take selfies. Player versus player in NHL trivia. Make it a two-day event, one for skills, the other a convention of fun. Have a women's game, have some kind of prospects game. There's no shortage of ideas. You don't need an All-Star Game to have a successful All-Star event. I'd argue you can make the weekend even better.

8. The Hockey Operations Department was ready for goaltender interference complaints. They knew managers felt things were getting too soft, that goalies are being treated too daintily. Fine. Here are 54 plays, tell us how you'd vote. As it turns out, the majority of the managers sided with 52 of those rulings. Teams on the cutline essentially are in the playoffs now, and the real stuff starts April 19. Guys will go

hard at the net. Number one rule of goalie interference: do not go into the blue area on your own. And if you do, get out of there as fast as possible. It is the surest way to get a goal disallowed.

**9.** Hockey Ops staff ran through some of the questions asked during a review: Did the contact happen in blue ice or white ice? Was the contact deliberate or accidental? Can the goalie do his job? Does the goalie have time to reset? Is there any information the officials have on ice that we do not? Was it the actions of the attacking or defending player that caused the contact?

One thing that stuck with me: we were shown Brock Nelson's goal that made it 5-2 for the Islanders over Nashville on March 1. Kyle Palmieri bumps Jusse Saros.

The Predators challenge and lose. Contact is outside the crease. But Hockey Ops says they watch Palmieri's eyes. He's looking at Nelson, the shooter, the whole time. He's not focusing on Saros. That factored into their decision. I try to remember this stuff in case anything similar happens during a game we're broadcasting. You're always looking for patterns.

**10.** Two other examples were excellent reminders as the playoffs approach. First, Pontus Holmberg's empty netter from Toronto's 5-2 win over Chicago on Feb. 23.

That seems an obvious offside. But watch John Tavares. His stick does not touch the puck across the blue line until after the Maple Leafs clear the zone. So that's a good goal.

**11. Finally:** Cole Caufield's 6-5 goal from Montreal's win at Buffalo on Remembrance Day. The Sabres challenge because the puck hit Mike Matheson's glove, but the Situation Room rules that is a deflected puck, not a gloved pass.

The Sabres tried to get the score erased as a missed offensive-zone stoppage.

**12.** To me, the bigger concern with the coaches' challenge is that we are all suffering from replay fatigue. There's too much of it (and I confess I was one of the biggest supporters of video review when it arrived and expanded). Last season, there were 88 goaltender interference challenges, with 48 reversals. In 2024-25, we are waaaaaay past those numbers already: 105 and 60. But there's no plan to decrease video review. Hard to put the genie back in the bottle.

**13.** Only real concern from otherwise magnificent 4 Nations: making sure NHL teams have access to information when their players suffer injuries. Hopefully none happen, but with the Olympics half a world away and other federations in control, no one wants an information vacuum.

**14.** Eleven years ago, former major league catcher Mike Matheny sat before baseball's Rules Committee, passionately arguing for a ban on home-plate collisions. Matheny, whose playing career ended due to concussions, didn't get everything he asked for. But, due to his persistence, MLB and the players' union agreed contact could only occur if a catcher already fielded a throw and set up to block the plate before a runner arrived.

I was reminded of that as Tom Fitzgerald detailed what he and wife Kerry went through just after Christmas when son Casey — playing for AHL Hartford — was cut by a skate blade to the neck. AHL players must wear neck protection, but testing is underway to improve it and cover even more skin. Right now, this isn't mandated for NHLers, but you can see the day it comes, just like helmets and visors. It starts at the youth level, and eventually will be second nature to future generations of players. Amazingly, Montreal's Josh Anderson was saved from a potentially serious skate cut Tuesday night when he wore Kevlar socks for the first time. Hopefully, that gets noticed.

**15.** Fitzgerald floated the idea of making it mandatory for the Devils regardless of NHLPA approval. There's some history with these attempts. When Jay Feaster was GM of the Flames, a Mark Giordano

injury had the team tell its players to wear plastic shot-blocking shields around their skates. The union blocked that one. Glen Sather agreed the NHLPA needed to approve but countered by saying he wouldn't dress anyone who didn't follow his injury-prevention moves. Sather demanded players wear helmets in warmups long before it was mandatory and had equipment staff insert a thicker "flat-top" on gloves.

Former Rangers captain Ryan Callahan was listening to an NHL Radio hit where I described this, and texted, saying the GM wanted the glove reinforcement after Kris Letang broke his hand. Suffice it to say, Callahan added, the other Rangers weren't crazy about it. Sather also made players wear Mark Messier's old leather gloves in practice because he thought that they were more protective. They came up to the elbows and guys couldn't feel their sticks. Only Sather could get away with it.

**16.** Some numbers provided to us by the NHL: We are seeing the highest percentage of even strength goals since 1972-73 (77.8); the best power play success rate since 1985-86 (21.6); and the best shooting percentage since 1993-94 (10.5). Jason Gregor did some interesting work this week on overall power plays being down. I'll have to watch that more closely to come up with a hypothesis. There are always missed calls, of course, but I don't know that it's more egregious than ever. The league says the one-goal "comeback wins" rate is at 42 per cent, second-highest in history; we are on-pace for the highest total of "close games" ever, with the score tied or within one goal for an average of 43 minutes per game. As a result, there is a projected total of a record 432 empty-net goals.

**17.** NHL representatives continued discussions with the various developmental leagues (USHL, USA Hockey, CHL) about the future of junior hockey in North America. Until/Unless a new CBA changes things, NHL teams were told draft rights remain two years from the CHL, four years from USHL, NCAA, Europe and associated branches.

**18.** One more junior note: the WHL is announcing Thursday a new streaming deal with Victory+. That app is growing in power and popularity in hockey circles. Already a rightsholder for the Anaheim Ducks and Dallas Stars, it added three St. Louis games in February and March. (Dallas owner Tom Gaglardi also owns WHL Kamloops.) Beginning next Friday, all regular-season and the first three playoff rounds will be streamed for free without geo-restrictions — a big, important step for the league. You must make your games accessible and available, get them to your fans rather than making them come to you. This is where we are, and the sooner leagues get there, the better off they will be.

**19.** You'd have to be soulless not to cheer for Gabriel Landeskog's comeback, especially watching the documentary about his recovery. I'm no different than anyone else, wishing it into existence. There've been stops and starts on this journey, so what I'm watching for is a longer resume of good-looking skates. Will Landeskog join AHL Colorado for a sustained run of practice? That would be a great sign, because the condensed NHL schedule makes it harder to find that consistency. The Avalanche would need some LTIR juggling to activate him in-season, but that's not a concern in the playoffs. I'd love to see him get a playoff game as a reward for three years of work.

**20.** Vancouver's told Rick Tocchet it wishes to extend him. As Tocchet told teammate Iain MacIntyre, this is not the time. We're paid to speculate about it, but the coach himself sees it one way: he wants the Canucks focused on making the playoffs, and his eyes are on the same prize. After the season, a bigger conversation gets this sorted out one way or another.

**21.** Massive games Thursday night for those in the playoff chase: Calgary/New Jersey, Colorado/Ottawa, Toronto/Rangers, Florida/Columbus, Buffalo/Utah and especially Montreal/Islanders, Vancouver/St. Louis. As rumours swirled around Brayden Schenn, heard in the aftermath Blues players made it clear they wanted him to stay, they could make the playoffs with him. Big test tonight.

- 22.** As Alexander Ovechkin continues his Gretzky chase, our cameras found something interesting from the Capitals' Feb. 23 game against Edmonton. Son Sergei switched seats each period so he was always in the offensive zone, near the famous left circle. When Ovechkin completed his hat trick that day with an empty netter, he had a longer skate to celebrate with Sergei. Not that he minded.
- 23.** Zack Ostapchuk earned the respect of his new San Jose teammates the hard way: challenging one of the NHL's toughest, Tom Wilson. After they fought last Saturday, we thought the continued yelling between them was Ostapchuk letting the Capital crusher know he wouldn't back down and was ready for more. But someone reached out to say that wasn't the case. Wilson, impressed, asked Ostapchuk where he came from and how much he fought.
- 24.** John Prokop is a nice bet for Toronto. The Maple Leafs just traded two first-rounders and two prospects for Brandon Carlo and Scott Laughton. You need to fill your prospect pool. They aren't done with free-agent shopping, trying for a centre.
- 25.** Michigan State is expected to be the No. 1 seed in the upcoming NCAA tournament. Karsen Dorwart, their second-leading scorer behind Tampa's Isaac Howard, nearly went to the Maple Leafs one year ago, but returned to school. Several teams suspect Philadelphia lusts after him like an Angelo's cheesesteak.
- 26.** Of all these free agents, there is no one more deserving of success than Minnesota-Duluth's Will Francis, signing with San Diego, the AHL affiliate of Anaheim, which drafted him in 2019. Now 24, the defenceman was diagnosed with leukemia five years ago, the first of three cancer diagnoses in that span. He had a bone marrow transplant last April. Go get 'em, Will.
- 27.** Very interesting hearing the Senators players discuss why they thought this year had a chance to be different. Several said the same thing: everyone showed up early and in shape. "Good thing, because (Travis Green) runs a hard camp," Thomas Chabot laughed.
- 28.** Small thing Anaheim did at the deadline: trading Brian Dumoulin (and getting a good return) opened space for both Pavel Mintyukov and Olen Zellweger to regularly play. The Ducks were content to let them face some adversity and battle for their ice time, but other teams were waiting to see if either lost patience. Not an issue anymore. I think there's some frustration John Gibson didn't get moved (from the player, the Ducks themselves and other clubs that have engaged) so that will kick up again in the off-season. Another Western GM said you can see the young Ducks starting to figure it out.
- 29.** One name to keep watching in NHL coaching circles: Olli Jokinen, who played 1,231 NHL games from 1997-2015. He's making a name for himself overseas, first in Finland, now in Sweden. A recent newspaper poll of players named him as the coach they'd most like to play for. He's made it known he's willing to be an NHL assistant.
- 30.** After he retires, there's going to be a five-part podcast series on Mikko Rantanen's 2025 trade deadline.
- 31.** Olympic teams asked for a later deadline to name their roster than the 4 Nations, which were announced in the first week of December. They got it: New Year's Eve.
- 32.** Forgot to mention this in a previous blog, but the morning of Canada's must-win game against Finland in the 4 Nations, I went down to the hotel lobby to leave for the rink. You know what song was playing? Gloria. Doug Armstrong, Jordan Binnington, Colton Parayko. No way they were going to lose.