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Columbus Dispatch / Records fall as Columbus Blue Jackets reclaim playoff spot: 6 takeaways

By Brian Hedger- March 11, 2025

Anybody who thinks the Blue Jackets will run out of gas before making a strong final push for a playoff spot may want to rethink that prediction.

After showing resilience all season, they pushed back again Sunday at Madison Square Garden. Facing the New York Rangers in a showdown for the first wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference, the Blue Jackets overcame a blown 3-1 lead in the second period to win 7-3 in a blowout.

It was another impressive rebound for the Blue Jackets (31-24-8), who dropped consecutive road games last week to the Tampa Bay Lightning and Florida Panthers. After moving back into a playoff spot, the Jackets have 19 games left to secure a postseason spot for the first time in five years.

Here are six takeaways:

Zach Werenski is Columbus Blue Jackets' heartbeat

Zach Werenski's two assists pushed him past Rick Nash into the top spot among franchise assist leaders, but the win meant more to him.

Werenski, a defenseman, is leading the Blue Jackets in scoring with 68 points on 20 goals and 48 assists, but his value to the Jackets' stunning climb can't be measured in statistics. He's the heartbeat of a rapidly maturing team, and that showed yet again Sunday.

Adam Fantilli continues to shine for Columbus Blue Jackets

Adam Fantilli notched the second hat trick of his career to push his season goal total to 21, eclipsing the 20-goal mark in his second NHL season.

Fantilli scored two goals on the same shift to give the Blue Jackets a 3-1 lead early in the second and scored the game's final goal to make it 7-3. His first NHL hat trick was Jan. 22 in Toronto with his parents watching among a large contingent of family and friends from his hometown of Nobleton, Ontario.

In that one, his mom tossed her Blue Jackets hats onto the ice after his goal into an empty net. Fantilli, who was awarded the team's donkey hat as player of the game, celebrated this one like it was the 20th of his career. According to the NHL, Fantilli at 20 years, 148 days is the first player since former Blue Jackets forward Patrik Laine to record multiple hat tricks in a season at age 20 or younger.

He's also tied for fourth in Blue Jackets all-time hat tricks with nine others, trailing Tyler Wright's three, Nash's five and Cam Atkinson's six.

Columbus Blue Jackets unfazed by blown lead during power play

Fantilli's first two goals were scored 26 seconds apart early in the second. About four minutes later, it was tied 3-3 after the Rangers scored short-handed goals by Braden Schneider and Chris Kreider during the same Blue Jackets power play.

Kreider's goal finished a 2-on-0 rush that resulted from a turnover at the Rangers' blue line. It was the kind of sequence that might've initiated a meltdown for the Blue Jackets in recent years, but not Sunday. Instead, they responded with goals by Mathieu Olivier and Dante Fabbro to lead 5-3 starting the third.

“Those two short-handed goals we gave up could’ve been the turning point in the game, but we handled it,” Olivier told reporters who covered the game in New York. “We turned the momentum around and found a way to get it done, so ... really resilient, our group tonight.”

Columbus Blue Jackets eclipse franchise high for six-goal games

The Blue Jackets set a franchise record with their 12th game scoring at least six goals. The previous high of 11 was set in 2018-19 in a full 82-game season.

This year’s Blue Jackets, whose 210 goals rank seventh in the NHL thus far, have 19 games left to push the record for six-goal games even higher.

Mathieu Olivier shines in 'top six' role for Columbus Blue Jackets

Olivier has spent most of the season at right wing on the Blue Jackets third line, a step up from his role the past two years on the fourth line.

Olivier, 28, received another promotion at practice Saturday in Columbus. He moved to the second line with captain Boone Jenner and Kent Johnson, which paid dividends Sunday with the power forward adding two points on his 13th goal of the season and the primary assist on Kent Johnson's 21st goal.

Werenski fed Olivier a crisp pass late in the second period for his goal, and the stout power forward did the heavy lifting for Johnson's tally. Lowering his shoulder on a solo rush, Olivier shoveled a shot at goalie Jonathan Quick that led to the puck popping into the air for Johnson to bat into the net. Olivier has shattered his previous career high of five goals in each of the past two seasons and continues to show why he earned a six-year contract extension last week worth \$18 million.

Luke Kunin solid for Columbus Blue Jackets in debut

Luke Kunin’s debut for the Blue Jackets ended with just under eight minutes left to play. He was penalized for boarding and roughing after slamming Vincent Trocheck into the boards from behind and picked up another five penalty minutes for the fight that followed.

Kunin, a versatile forward acquired Friday from the San Jose Sharks, skated a 14:13 on the third line and spent 1:29 of it killing penalties. All in all, it was a solid debut performance.

Columbus Dispatch / Zach Werenski passes Rick Nash as Columbus Blue Jackets' all-time assist leader

By Brian Hedger- March 11, 2025

Zach Werenski continues to soar.

Doing what he's done all season, the Blue Jackets' star defenseman dished out two primary assists for goals in a 7-3 victory over the New York Rangers on Sunday at Madison Square Garden that got them back into a playoff spot and pushed him past Rick Nash in career assists.

The first of Werenski's big "apples" in the "Big Apple" was delivered in the first period to Justin Danforth with a pinpoint feed off a toe-drag around a defender. It was the 259th assist of Werenski's career to move him past Nash's 258 into the all-time franchise lead. Another dime pushed it to 260 late in the second on Mathieu Olivier's first of two goals, breaking a 3-3 tie.

Nash, the Blue Jackets' director of hockey operations whose No. 61 hangs in the rafters at Nationwide Arena, congratulated Werenski with a recorded message that was posted on the team's social media channels and played at the conclusion of the FanDuel Sports Network postgame broadcast.

Werenski, drafted eighth overall by the Blue Jackets in 2015, isn't fond of talking about personal accomplishments. He essentially shrugged it off during a postgame interview and after receiving a game puck to commemorate the record.

"It's one of those things, I said it to these guys in the room after the game, it's not possible without my teammates," he told reporters in New York. "I haven't really thought about it, to be honest. I'm trying to enjoy the year, enjoy the moment and enjoy the spot we're in as a team. It's one of those things where ... I really don't care, as bad as that might sound. I just want to keep helping this team win."

[BlueJackets.com / PREVIEW: Blue Jackets face another Metro showdown in New Jersey](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- March 11, 2025

BLUE JACKETS (31-24-8) at DEVILS (34-25-6), 7 PM, PRUDENTIAL CENTER

COLUMBUS, 4th in Metropolitan

NEW JERSEY, 3rd in Metropolitan

Blue Jackets stats

Devils stats

HOW TO FOLLOW

TV: FanDuel Sports Network, FanDuel Sports Network app

RADIO: CBJ radio network (97.1 The Fan), CBJ app

In the NHL, you're going to lose some games. It's all about how you respond and limiting the setbacks before they spiral into losing streaks.

It's a lesson the Blue Jackets have learned throughout the year, and they stepped up in a key situation on Sunday night. After two straight losses last week in the state of Florida by a combined 9-2 score to the Lightning and Panthers, the Blue Jackets regrouped and headed to New York City on Sunday night in search of a win.

And that's exactly what they got. Columbus had its legs throughout the game against the Rangers and turned in an all-around effort that led to a 7-3 victory against their Metropolitan Division rivals. The two points broke a tie with the Rangers and left the Blue Jackets holding a wild card spot in the Eastern Conference, and they did it by getting back to their game.

"I think we played how we play, right?" head coach Dean Evason said postgame. "We talked about it before the game about the last two hockey games, that we didn't look like ourselves. We didn't play like ourselves. ... We were a little tentative, we were a little apprehensive, and tonight we weren't. We played hard. We played right.

"We played the way that the Columbus Blue Jackets play, and when we do that, we're not going to win every single time, but we're going to give ourselves a chance. And that's what we did here tonight."

With the Blue Jackets and the rest of the NHL having passed the trade deadline, it's time for a furious sprint to the finish, and that continues tonight in New Jersey. It's another huge game in a string of them, as the Blue Jackets enter the contest just four points behind the Devils for third place in the Metropolitan.

To leave Newark with two points, the Blue Jackets will try to copy the formula that worked so well in Madison Square Garden. At the top of the list is getting to the net, as the Blue Jackets were unable to get to the dangerous areas of the ice enough against Tampa Bay and Florida; by contrast, they created more scoring chances against the Rangers and were able to convert.

"It's no secret our two games in Florida weren't great, and that's not the way we want to play," Adam Fantilli said after notching a hat trick. "Playing like that is not going to get us into the playoffs and the

positions that we want to be in, so I think we had to get back to the way we were playing before that, and that's what we did tonight."

Evason also pushed a number of the right buttons with the new lines he and his staff came up with post-deadline. Not only did Fantilli's top line score three goals, the newly composed line of Boone Jenner centering Mathieu Olivier and Kent Johnson had two, while the other two trios were on the ice for a goal as well.

"I think that line is a pretty good balance of everything," Olivier said of his new troika. "Fortunately, we chipped in with two goals tonight. We made sure we were talking, and obviously it's a line that never was together before, but it worked out tonight."

Know The Foe: New Jersey Devils

Head coach: Sheldon Keefe (1st season)

Team stats: Goals per game: 2.95 (14th) | Scoring defense: 2.52 (2nd) | PP: 28.0 percent (3rd) | PK: 82.5 percent (4th)

The narrative: The last few years have shown just how precarious the building process can be for a young team. Led by Jack Hughes, the Devils drafted an impressive number of talented players during a stretch that included just one playoff appearance from 2013-22, and it all paid off two seasons ago when New Jersey won 52 games and made it to the second round of the playoffs. Last year, though, injuries and inconsistency doomed the Devils to a seventh-place finish in the Metro. This year, a hot start is threatening to be undone again by a spate of injuries, including season-ending shoulder surgery for Hughes.

Team leaders: The injury to Hughes is a huge blow for the Devils, as one of the top young stars in the league had a team-high 27 goals among his 70 points in 62 games before going down last Sunday in a game at Vegas. One of the most underrated players in the NHL is at it again, as Jesper Bratt is tied with Hughes for the team lead in scoring with 70 points, including 17 goals and 53 assists. Nico Hischier adds 26 goals among his 49 points, while Stefan Noesen (19 goals), Timo Meier (17), Dawson Mercer (15) and Ondrej Palat (15) also could reach 20 goals.

The biggest improvement for the Devils has come in scoring defense, and a lot of the credit has to go to the new goalie tandem of Jacob Markstrom and Jake Allen. Markstrom has started 39 games and is 21-12-5 with a 2.34 GAA and .907 save percentage, while Allen has a 2.62 GAA and .908 save percentage despite a 10-13-1 record.

What's new: Hughes isn't the only one out long-term, as the defensive corps took a huge hit with recent injuries to Dougie Hamilton and Jonas Siegenthaler. New Jersey was 24-11-3 through Dec. 27 but hasn't been able to find its game for months now, going 10-14-3 in its last 27 contests to allow the Blue Jackets to pull into their rearview mirror in the Metro race. The offense has been a key culprit, as the Devils have 11 goals in the last six games (1.83 per game) and have scored four or more goals in just five of the last 27.

Trending: Columbus won the first game of the season series Dec. 19, taking a 3-0 lead and holding on in the third to take a 4-2 victory at Nationwide Arena. New Jersey had won six of seven the previous two seasons.

Former CBJ: None

Projected CBJ Lineup (Subject to change)

LW 10 Dmitri Voronkov	C 19 Adam Fantilli	RW 86 Kirill Marchenko
LW 91 Kent Johnson	C 38 Boone Jenner	RW 24 Mathieu Olivier
LW 59 Yegor Chinakhov	C 17 Justin Danforth	RW 11 Luke Kunin
LW 27 Zach Aston-Reese	C 7 Sean Kuraly	RW 21 James van Riemsdyk
LD 8 Zach Werenski	RD 15 Dante Fabbro	G 90 Elvis Merzlikins
LD 5 Denton Mateychuk	RD 9 Ivan Provorov	G 40 Daniil Tarasov
LD 2 Jake Christiansen	RD 78 Damon Severson	

Scratches: Christian Fischer, Jordan Harris, Jack Johnson

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

Roster Report: The Blue Jackets were off Monday, so Dean Evason discuss if there's any lineup changes after the team's morning skate.

The Numbers Game

Columbus has tied a franchise record with five players with 20-plus goals on the season (Kirill Marchenko, 24; Kent Johnson, 21; Adam Fantilli, 21; Zach Werenski, 20; Dmitri Voronkov, 20). ... The Blue Jackets also scored at least six goals Sunday at the Rangers for the 12th time this season, setting a new franchise record. ... The Blue Jackets are second in the NHL with 152 goals at 5-on-5, and their 3.33 goals per game are seventh in the league. ... With two assists Sunday at New York, Werenski set the CBJ franchise record with his 260th career assist, passing Rick Nash. He also set a single-season team record with 48 assists on the year, and his 20 goals are tied with his mark of 20 in 2019-20 as the most in team history. He has a 17-41-58 line in his last 47 games and has 36 points (9-27-36) in his past 28. His average ice time of 26:54 leads all NHL players, and he's second among league defensemen in goals (20) and second in points (68) on the season. ... With his hat trick Sunday, Fantilli is the youngest player in CBJ history with two hat tricks in a season and the fifth Blue Jacket to have multiple three-goal games in a season. He is also the first NHL player age 20 or younger to have two hat tricks in a season since Patrik Laine in 2018-19. He has a 14-11-25 line in the last 24 games and is tied for ninth in the NHL in goals in that span. ... Marchenko has set a new career high with his 24 goals on the season. He is fourth in the NHL with a plus-33 rating. ... Johnson has 20 points (10-10-20) in the past 19 games, including points in seven of the last eight games, and is second in the NHL in goals scored per 60 minutes at 5-on-5. ... James van Riemsdyk has notched a 10-11-21 line in the last 25 games. ... Mathieu Olivier has a career-high 13 goals and is one of two NHL players with 10-plus goals and 80 penalty minutes in 2024-25. ... Boone Jenner has eight assists in seven games this season since his return from injury. ... Dante Fabbro (1-1-2) had his first multipoint game as a Blue Jacket on Sunday... Blue Jackets defensemen have 43 goals this season, the most in the NHL, and 159 points, good for third place in the league.

This Day in CBJ History

March 11, 2006: Rostislav Klesla scores his first career overtime goal, tallying 4:06 into the extra frame to give the Blue Jackets a 4-3 win over Edmonton at Nationwide Arena.

March 11, 2022: Columbus wins a thrilling game at Nationwide Arena, coming back to down Minnesota by a 3-2 score in a shootout. Zach Werenski scores with 32 seconds left in regulation to tie the score before Yegor Chinakhov scores the lone goal of the shootout.

1st Ohio Battery / 4 Takeaways From the Blue Jackets' Dominant Win Over the Rangers

By Matthew Burhmann- March 11, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets snapped their two-game losing streak in style, lighting up the scoreboard Sunday night at Madison Square Garden. In a commanding 7-3 win over the New York Rangers, they didn't just reclaim the first Eastern Conference wild card spot, they made a statement about the potential of this team.

Adam Fantilli was outstanding, notching a hat trick, while Mathieu Olivier chipped in with a goal and an assist. Altogether, five Blue Jackets had multi-point nights, exactly the kind of effort needed to take down a tired Rangers team coming off a tough 4-3 overtime loss to the Ottawa Senators the day before.

This explosive showing wasn't just another win, it was historic. With 63 games in the books, the 2024-2025 Blue Jackets are now the highest-scoring team in franchise history. And get this, it's the 12th time this season they've scored at least six goals. When they're dialed in like this, it's hard to imagine many teams in the Eastern Conference, let alone the Metropolitan Division, keeping up with them.

Jackets Got to the Hard Areas

The Jackets didn't just outscore the Rangers, they outworked them in both ends. This team thrives on grit, and it showed. They owned the hard areas in front of New York's netminder, Jonathan Quick, creating traffic with screens, tips, and overall sheer effort. The shot count wasn't outrageous—27 total—but the quality of their chances made the difference. Power forward Mathieu Olivier leads the way in this department, doing what he does best, battling in the slot and finding ways to score from the dirty areas.

The fourth line also made an impact Sunday night, staying true to their role as reliable depth contributors. With sharp puck movement, Sean Kuraly delivered a perfect pass to defenseman Dante Fabbro, who capitalized with a pinpoint shot past Jonathan Quick, making it 5-3 late in the middle frame.

These are the kinds of goals that will matter most when it's playoff time. When the top guys are locked down and space is hard to come by, it's the depth players who can swing the momentum. Performances like this show the true depth of this team's potential—from the bottom six forwards to the defensive pairings and right up to the top six. Everyone pulling their weight is what makes this squad so dangerous.

Jackets' Top Line Found Its Groove

After two tough games in South Florida, the Blue Jackets' top line roared back to life, led by none other than second-year pro Adam Fantilli. The former Michigan Wolverine scored twice in just 26 seconds, later completing his hat trick with a snipe of a goal from the slot in the third period.

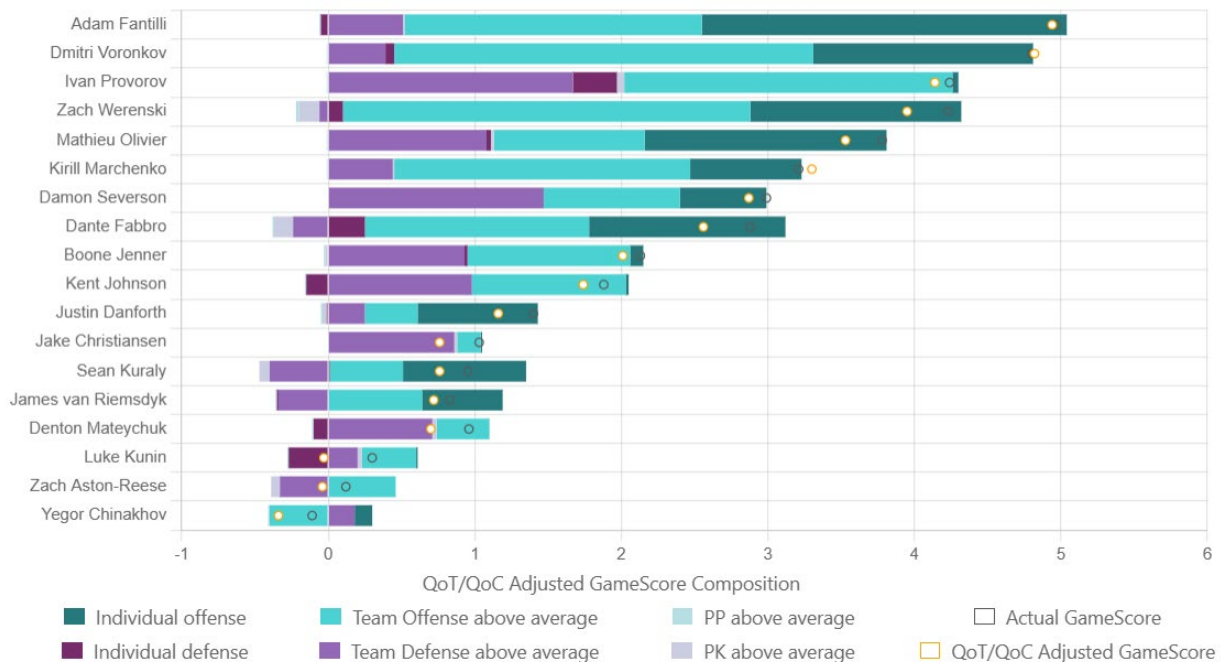
This marked Fantilli's second career hat trick—and his second of the season—following his three-goal performance against the Toronto Maple Leafs earlier this year. His efforts earned him the contest's and Sunday's highest adjusted game score at 4.94, according to HockeyStatCards, which factors in both offensive and defensive contributions.



Columbus Blue Jackets @ New York Rangers

Final Score: 7 - 3
03-09-2025

Stat Cards: @hockeystatcards
GameScore: @domluszczyszyn
Data: @natstattrick



HockeyStatCards – CBJ vs NYR (3/9/25)

Fantilli has shone as the top-line center in Sean Monahan's absence due to a wrist injury, tallying 22 points in 22 games in that spot. His breakout speed and ability to create on odd-man rushes have been game-changers, bringing a different style to the top line than Monahan.

"I wish there was inside looks at where he was at the start of the year and how his commitment to playing the game right way, how his commitment to playing defense, how his commitment to being a good leader and a good teammate (has grown). We get a guy that goes down (Sean Monahan) and he steps into a role of a real leadership spot, and he's done the work. He deserves to get all the accolades or whatever it is that he's getting" said head coach Dean Evason post-game.

From Jeff Svoboda/@JacketsInsider/BlueJackets.com

Playing alongside Kirill Marchenko and Dimitri Voronkov has clearly clicked, but it'll be fascinating to see how coach Dean Evason reshuffles the lines when Monahan returns, which is hopefully not much longer.

Jackets' Special Teams: Mixed Bag

The Jackets were rock-solid on the penalty kill Sunday, going 4-for-4 and stifling a Rangers power play that includes dangerous weapons like former Blue Jacket Artemi Panarin and star Center Mika Zibanejad. Their defensive structure and ability to clear the puck consistently kept the Rangers from getting anything going, not letting them get set up their power play system at all.

However, the power play told a different story. Columbus gave up two shorthanded goals on their only power play attempt of the night, thanks to some costly turnovers on zone entries. If there's one area to tighten up before the playoffs, it's their recent power play struggles. While their five-on-five production

produces most games, making the most of man-advantage opportunities is huge in tight games and could be the difference-maker as the season winds down.

"It could have went real sideways, right?" Evason said. "It's a credit to the guys for (saying), 'It's OK.' Stuff happens in the game, and they're trying to score, too. They catch a couple of breaks. They score those goals, and it would have been easy or would have been understandable if we didn't handle that well. But we did" said head coach Dean Evason post-game.

From Jeff Svoboda/@JacketsInsider/BlueJackets.com

Despite that rough stretch, the team bounced back in a big way, storming ahead with a four-goal outburst, crushing the Rangers' momentum.

Werenski's Historic Night

Sunday's game was just another example of why I think Zach Werenski has a legit chance at the Norris Trophy this year. On Sunday, Werenski became the all-time Blue Jackets assist leader on his beautiful toe-drag move and dish to Justin Danforth in the first period, his 259th assist of his CBJ career, surpassing one of the best Blue Jackets ever in Rick Nash.

Advertisement: 0:23

He later assisted on one more later in the game, picking up his 260th on the late second period Mathieu Olivier tip-in goal.

"I mean, it's cool," he said of the record. "It's one of those things, I said to these guys in the room after the game, it's not possible without my teammates. I haven't really thought about (the record), to be honest. I'm just trying to enjoy the year, enjoy the moment, enjoy the spot we're in as a team and just keep going and playing my game. It's one of those things where I don't really care, as bad as it might sound. I just want to keep helping this team win" said Zach Werenski post-game.

From Jeff Svoboda/@JacketsInsider/BlueJackets.com

Finish the Road Trip Strong

Next up, the Blue Jackets will head to Newark for a massive game against the New Jersey Devils on Tuesday night at 7:00 PM EST. The Jackets sit four points behind the Devils for the third Metropolitan Division playoff spot, and with two games in hand, this game is the biggest of the season so far in my opinion.

So, buckle up. With 19 games left, many against division rivals, the playoff push will be wild. Expect sold-out atmospheres at Nationwide Arena as Jackets fans cheer their team toward the postseason, something they haven't seen in quite some time.

The Athletic / Weekend NHL rankings: An unpredictable trade deadline shakes up the Top 5

By Sean McIndoe- March 11, 2025

Well, that was something.

The annual trade deadline didn't deliver huge numbers as far as the actual volume of trades, but the ones that did happen were significant, with more big names moving than just about any year in recent memory. A lot has changed since we last did this one week ago, and the rankings will reflect that.

We'll get to those in a minute. But first, let's close the book on a fascinating week with a few final deadline thoughts.

Bonus Five: Thoughts on a wild deadline

5. The Eastern bubble may have already popped — Even a few weeks ago, you figured that the Eastern Conference wild-card race would be where the action was, as teams scrambled for any advantage in a jam-packed race. But not only did the bubble teams in both conferences mostly sit out the big moves, almost exclusively letting the actual Cup contenders land the big names, some teams actively waved the white flag.

The Bruins certainly did. The Islanders and Flyers mostly did, too. Meanwhile, the Red Wings basically did nothing, the Habs stood pat and the Rangers are at best trying to straddle the line between contender and seller.

It all adds up to great news for the Senators, who made a fun hockey trade that I think they won before notching a comeback win. They now have what looks like a clear path to their first postseason in years. Same for the Blue Jackets, who did some light adding and then smoked the Rangers.

The West wasn't much better, with the four teams still in the running for one wild-card basically all standing pat (more on that in a bit). At least they didn't sell, but it sure feels like they all realize that whoever gets the spot is going to get swept in the first round anyway.

4. The first-round picks were flying — Prices were high in general in what was clearly a seller's market. But even so, the sheer volume of firsts being moved was surprising. I'd have more to say on that, but James covers it all here.

3. The goalies basically stayed put — With apologies to Petr Mrazek and Vitek Vanecsek, who moved in the aftermath of Spencer Knight being involved in the Seth Jones trade, the goalies were basically left out of the impact moves. No John Gibson trade, no Jordan Binnington, and a Karel Vejmelka extension that took him off of a market he may have never been on. None of this is all that surprising; big midseason goalie trades aren't unheard of, but they're relatively rare. But it does leave some teams open to some serious second-guessing, with the Oilers on top of the list.

2. It was a humbling week for wingers — Hockey fans know wingers are generally the least valuable position, but the point was really driven home by the prices paid last week. The asking price for anyone who could line up down the middle seemed to start with a second-rounder, with gusts up to a first if the guy also knew how to find his own zone. Blueliners were pricey, as always. Meanwhile, future Hall of Famer Brad Marchand couldn't even fetch an unconditional first, while Rickard Rakell and Brock Boeser didn't move at all.

(Side note: I've seen a few takes that were critical of Canucks GM Patrik Allvin for this dismissive soundbite about the quality of offers he received for Boeser. I don't see it that way. To me, that's a GM who knows he's going to be shredded for not moving a guy being honest about the offers just not being there. He's not going out of his way to bury a player, he's just describing reality. You can absolutely rip Allvin for how he handled the deadline, especially if Boeser now walks for nothing. But that quote didn't bother me.)

Even the biggest name to move, winger Mikko Rantanen, did so only after having three teams refuse to meet his reported asking price and in a trade that feels like a short-term loss for the Hurricanes. Might want to learn to take a faceoff, Mikko, because the league's GMs have made it clear where they think the value is.

1. The trend toward term continues — For years, the deadline has been all about rentals, with the top targets almost exclusively pending UFAs on expiring deals. That started to change a few years ago, led by the Lightning paying up for cheaper deals with term on guys like Brandon Hagel, Barclay Goodrow and Blake Coleman. This year, we saw the Leafs add two veterans with term, the Avs get two playoff runs' worth of Charlie Coyle, and the Oilers add Jake Walman with a full year left. The Panthers weren't scared off by the five years left for Seth Jones. And of course, Rantanen's deal was contingent on a max-length extension. We still saw traditional rentals, like Brock Nelson and Marchand. But that's no longer the only way to do business this time of year.

On to the rankings, where as you'd expect, we're getting a deadline shakeup in the top five ...

Road to the Cup

The five teams with the best chances of winning the Stanley Cup.

If you missed it, we handed out letter grades to every team for their deadline work.

5. Winnipeg Jets (44-17-4, +76 true goals differential*) — They've held down top spot for the last month, but I came very close to dropping them off the list completely to make room for the Avalanche. That would probably have been an overreaction, but this was certainly not a great deadline for the Jets, who saw the two biggest obstacles on their path out of the Central get significantly better. Meanwhile, Murat pretty much nails the vibe in Winnipeg: a missed opportunity. The priority now is to hold on to first in the Central and hope that means Winnipeg doesn't have to go through both Colorado and Dallas.

4. Edmonton Oilers (37-22-4, +20) — I'm still higher on them than the Friday boys, but they're not making it easy in a week in which their own coach called them fragile. Seeing them beat Dallas on Saturday certainly helps, and at least they added at the deadline, if only a little. Meanwhile, the Kings didn't seem to realize there was a deadline, while the Golden Knights faked us all out but then stood pat. I'll give the Oilers another week, but I'm getting nervous.

3. Washington Capitals (42-14-8, +67) — They settled for tinkering instead of taking a big swing, which was what most were expecting. The bigger news may be that the Hurricanes got worse, while the Devils lost Jack Hughes for the season. In other words, the Caps didn't improve much, but their odds to emerge from the Metro probably did.

2. Florida Panthers (40-21-3, +37) — They continue their mission to almost single-handedly disprove the whole "you can't build through trades" trope that timid GMs love so much. Jones was an intriguing add, one with plenty of points in both the risk and reward columns. Marchand? That's just flat-out Team Chaos stuff.

Tkachuk-Marchand-Bennett would be the most scummy dirtbag line of all time, and I mean that as a compliment. <https://t.co/Nfeh2McPrW>

— Down Goes Brown (@DownGoesBrown) March 7, 2025

As is often the case, there was a little bit of heartlessness involved, as the arrival of Jones seems to all but ensure Aaron Ekblad won't be re-signed. But the Panthers were very close to already being the best in the East, and nobody in the conference came close to improving as much as they did over the last week.

1. Dallas Stars (42-20-2, +55) — No huge surprise here, as a team that was already near the top of most lists landed the biggest impact player to be moved at the deadline in years. There are two question marks here: whether Miro Heiskanen and Tyler Seguin can get back to full health by the playoffs, and whether the Stars can avoid running into the Avalanche in Round 1. But for now, this is the best team in the league.

*Goals differential without counting shootout decisions like the NHL does for some reason.

Not ranked: Toronto Maple Leafs — They traded away two first-round picks and two of their top prospects and lost ground in the Atlantic.

I'm not sure there's any other way to look at it. Scott Laughton and Brandon Carlo are both good players who should fit in nicely, and both are signed for at least one more year on deals that (thanks to retention) will provide strong value. The two firsts should be late, and the two prospects were good but far from blue chips. And of course, people like me would have absolutely ripped Brad Treliving if he'd stood pat. With Auston Matthews basically calling for reinforcements and the possibility of some big names leaving in the summer, they did what they had to do.

Will it be enough? It sure doesn't feel like it, with the Panthers and Lightning both adding big names, and now the pipeline of future assets is all but drained. Their best (and maybe only) path out of the Atlantic now involves finishing first and letting the two Florida teams tear each other apart in Round 1 while the Leafs lose to Ottawa get an easy wild-card warmup. That's plausible, but far less likely after the last few days, especially with regulation losses in both Vegas and Colorado.

The bigger story in Toronto might be the trade that didn't happen, with reports that Treliving was in on trading for and extending Rantanen before the Hurricanes decided to send him to Dallas instead. That would have been a jaw-dropping move for a team already loaded with top-end forwards, and it makes the pivot to an apparent Plan B of two defense-first options all the more interesting.

If true, you have to wonder what their interest in committing to Rantanen says about the talks with Mitch Marner, who Carolina was apparently asking for in return at one point. While we're at it, does the other big-name winger coming off the UFA market increase Marner's asking price, or does Rantanen settling for a very reasonable \$12 million AAV bring it down? History tells us which option Marner's reps will pick; he's certainly used to having all the leverage in Toronto and squeezing for every dollar. So was this week the bump in the road that pushes both sides to get a reasonable deal done, or (finally) the beginning of the end?

For now, the Leafs find themselves in familiar territory: A very good team that's all but locked into a playoff spot but facing the prospect of heading into the postseason as slight underdogs with a ton of pressure and a summer of turmoil on deck.

The bottom five

The five teams headed toward dead last and the best lottery odds for a top pick that could be James Hagens, Matthew Schaefer or someone else.

Marc-Andre Fleury faced the Penguins for the final time yesterday, and the final goal he allowed came from a fitting source.

5. Seattle Kraken (27-34-4, -18) — Credit to Ron Francis for knowing when to throw in the towel, I guess. But where do they go from here? Even with Shane Wright starting to live up to the hype, it's getting hard to find a path back to relevance for this team.

4. Nashville Predators (24-32-7, -43) — Not moving Ryan O'Reilly in this market for centers, especially when he didn't have any formal NTC protection, will either look smart in a year or two when he's part of the turnaround or ... not that.

Anyway, Steven Stamkos is still cool.

3. Buffalo Sabres (24-32-6, -23) — I don't hate the Josh Norris deal, even though I think the Senators got the better end of it. It's certainly a fun one as a neutral fan, a true hockey trade that will take years to truly get a verdict on. What would frustrate me as a Sabres fan is that, for now, this feels like a lateral move at best, as opposed to using Dylan Cozens and his potential to land a bigger piece who could help right now. Maybe Norris can get there, assuming he can finally stay healthy. But for the league's most worn-down fan base, even the blockbusters feel like more wheel-spinning.

2. Chicago Blackhawks (20-35-9, -45) — They didn't do much after the Jones blockbuster, nor did anyone really expect them to, although seeing likely UFA target Rantanen come off the board stings a little. Still, they provided an underrated fun moment by trading for Shea Weber's contract, which is somehow still moving around the league four years after he played his last game.

In other news, the Artyom Levshunov era has arrived.

1. San Jose Sharks (17-39-9, -71) — To summarize, Mike Grier got a second from Detroit for taking Jake Walman, then got a first from Edmonton for trading him. That's a nice bit of work (and also a disaster for the Red Wings, but their fans already know that).

Not ranked: Utah Hockey Club — Remember when they were going to come storming into the league, acquire every big-name player and spend all of Ryan Smith's money? It didn't really happen, and once the novelty of a new team wore off, they kind of faded from the headlines. But now we're heading down the home stretch, and they're right there in the Western wild-card race. If you squint just right, they might even be the favorite.

They've got three teams to pass, but each looks beatable. The Canucks are a team in disarray. The Flames seem to be just happy to be there. And the Blues are all over the map, heating up over the last month enough that they chose to stand pat at a deadline in which they could have been popular sellers. In fact, you could argue that none of the four Western bubble teams got any better, with the Flames not spending any of their significant cap room and the Canucks getting snubbed by the market.

That could have been a chance for Utah to zoom past its stagnant competition, but if that opportunity was out there, Bill Armstrong chose not to take it. Instead, the focus was on keeping his group together, with extensions for Vejmelka, Alex Kerfoot and Ian Cole coming hours apart. That might end up feeling like a mistake — this is where I'll insert the cliché about how many chances you get to make a first impression. But you can see the plan in place in Utah, and at the very least, they certainly didn't lose any ground.

They've got the Leafs at home tonight, then a stretch of very winnable games that culminates with the Canucks on Sunday. That's one of just three games they have left against the trio of bubble teams they're in the mix with; they also get the Flames to kick off April, and then the Blues in the season's final game. There are some tough matchups sprinkled in between, including the Oilers, Jets, Panthers and a pair

against the Lightning, so nothing will come easy. But the West's last spot is there for the taking, even if none of the teams involved seem to actually want it that much.

(And of course, best wishes to Connor Ingram.)

One last quick bit of housekeeping: I'll be away on vacation for the next week, so there will be no rankings next Monday, which is too bad because your favorite team was going to be ranked first. We'll be back on March 24 to set up the stretch run.

The Athletic / Jonathan Toews is serious about his NHL comeback attempt: 'There's something left in the tank'

By Mark Lazerus- March 11, 2025

Jonathan Toews figured he'd pick up surfing quickly. After all, he's a world-class athlete who spent his whole life playing a sport that hinges on balance, core strength and raw athleticism.

Costa Rica had other ideas.

"No one tells you that when you're learning how to surf, it's not really surfing," Toews said. "It's more like, go out there and paddle your ass off, and struggle for your life for hours and hours and hours before you catch any legitimate waves and truly get the hang of it. I'm pretty pumped about where I'm at skill-wise now, though. I can catch waves pretty regularly, a little more effortless."

This has been Toews' life for nearly two years now — gallivanting about the globe, living the dream as the ultimate beach bum. A few months in Costa Rica. A few months in Bali. A spiritual and physical journey in India.

Toews seems to be in a good place both mentally and physically. He sounds rested, upbeat, proud of himself for prioritizing his health over his hockey. He's a free agent in life, able to go anywhere and do anything with the literal fortune he made in hockey. He turns 37 next month, a young man by any reasonable measure, with his whole life in front of him. And behind him is the kind of glory most athletes can't even fathom — three Stanley Cup rings with the Chicago Blackhawks, two Olympic gold medals with Team Canada, a Conn Smythe Trophy, a Selke Trophy. One thousand and sixty-seven NHL games, with 137 more in the playoffs. He's a sure-fire, first-ballot Hockey Hall of Famer. He's done it all. He has nothing left to prove.

It begs the question: Why has he been putting himself through grueling conditioning skates on an ice rink in Arizona the last couple of weeks?

Well, you remember the fire that made him so intense that his Blackhawks teammates dubbed him Captain Serious? The fire in that steely glare he shot at teammates, at opponents, at referees? The fire that drove him to heights few players ever reach?

That fire still burns. And surfing's just not going to cut it. Not yet, at least.

"I'm not satisfied the way things ended in Chicago," Toews told The Athletic. "It's not about proving anything. It's just that there's something left in the tank and I want to explore that. I want to go have fun, have a blast, play with passion. But at the same time, I still have some high-level hockey left. I want to be able to step away from the game having said that I've given it my all. And I still think there's something left to give."

Yes, Toews is dead serious — is he ever not? — about making an NHL comeback next fall, more than two years after his last NHL game, two years after his failing body finally gave out. Plagued by Chronic Inflammatory Response Syndrome and symptoms of long COVID, Toews fought like hell for two seasons after sitting out the 2020-21 campaign with symptoms so severe he sometimes couldn't get out of bed. But he struggled to stay in shape, struggled with the grind of the NHL season, struggled with the weight of his legacy and the pressure of propping up a Blackhawks franchise in free-fall.

But he never retired. Not officially, and not in his mind. And after what he called his "hiatus," he's feeling the best he's felt in several years — physically and mentally — and he's ready to give the NHL one last

shot. It's a decision he didn't come to lightly but came to on his own. Asked if he had a doctor's blessing, or if he's even going up against medical advice, Toews demurred.

"I don't think there's any expert out there that has a perfect bead on what's going on (with me), and I think in my situation, just going off of my own feeling and my own instinct, the time away was definitely good for me," Toews said. "If this wasn't in the cards and it didn't feel right, I wouldn't be pushing myself to do anything in that sense. I'm really proud of the time I took away from hockey.

"Everyone just assumed I was retired, but I think in my mind, I wasn't too sure for a long time. I just needed to not think about it, to just give myself time and space. ... Now I'm really missing hockey, and I think that's the biggest sign. I really miss the game and feel I have a whole different perspective and a new lease on things."

Since playing his last game with the Blackhawks on April 13, 2023, a 5-4 overtime loss to the Flyers at the United Center in which he scored the 372nd goal of his career, Toews had skated exactly once — as part of Marián Hossa's charity exhibition farewell game in Slovakia in August of 2023. When he got back to the States last month after his travel odyssey, he called up Blackhawks head equipment manager Troy Parchman and asked him to send his gear to Arizona.

"I gave it away to charity," Parchman told Toews.

"Bulls— you did," Toews fired back.

Of course Parchman had held onto the gear. It was tucked away in the back of the Blackhawks' practice facility somewhere, sitting in the same bag where Toews left it more than a year and a half ago. When Toews laced up and took the ice in Arizona for the first time less than two weeks ago, he was pleasantly surprised how naturally skating came back to him. Like riding a bike, he said.

The first week, he did some skills work. Last week, he went hard on conditioning skates. He's most looking forward to skating with some old friends and teammates in the summer, once they're done with their seasons. That's when he'll know for sure how feasible this whole comeback thing really is.

Toews admitted the conditioning skates left him a little tired, saying "the legs don't have the pop I'm looking for yet." But he also used another word for them: "exhilarating."

More than anything, Toews was struck by how much fun he was having. His last two NHL seasons were incredibly challenging, which was reflected in his production — 68 points in 124 games for a team on the verge of tearing it all down.

Toews' last five seasons with Blackhawks

2017-18

74

20

32

52

2018-19

82

35

46

81

2019-20

70

18

42

60

2021-22

71

12

25

37

2022-23

53

15

16

31

(Source: NHL.com)

"I just remembered how poorly I felt when I was finishing my last year in Chicago," he said. "Now I go out on the ice and it's a new sense of energy and lightness, and I'm just really excited to be out there. I was just remembering how much I was battling through every day and now it's a whole different story. That contrast is really motivating and really exciting for me. I really do feel like I've done the work, and I'm in a different place. It's just a lot of fun. I'm really looking forward to every time I get to go on the ice right now, and that's a really good feeling."

Toews hasn't been in contact with any NHL teams yet. He never had any intention of returning ahead of Friday's trade deadline to try to get on a playoff roster this spring; that wasn't realistic. Toews joked that he's never been an unrestricted free agent before, so he doesn't even know how this whole process works. While interest would be high among GMs and coaches to have a legend like Toews in the locker room and, if healthy enough, in their lineup, he's got a long way to go.

But one thing's clear: If he returns, it won't be with the Blackhawks. Chicago GM Kyle Davidson wanted to cut ties with both Toews and Patrick Kane to allow the next generation of Blackhawks to flourish without living in their shadows. However Blackhawks fans feel about that decision, Toews understands it. He talked at length about how much leeway he and Kane had so they could find their own paths without any pressure in a city that had long since fallen out of love with hockey, and how Connor Bedard and the Blackhawks' other young players deserve a shot to have the same, impossible though it may be.

He said there's not a veteran in the league that knows what it's like to be Bedard, "because nobody's ever dealt with the hype he's dealt with." If Toews returned, the circus would be that much bigger.

Toews just wants to play hockey again. He doesn't want to have to be Jonathan Toews, Captain of the Chicago Blackhawks, Iconic Leader of Men again, with all the pomp and weight that comes with it.

"I honestly do think that chapter is closed," he said. "I respect what Kyle and the organization is doing. They decided a few years ago to move in a different direction and I'm all for that. ... I don't think that's a fit for me anymore. I want to go somewhere and have a chance to be myself and play the game. I know my best hockey's going to come through that way, instead of trying to be in that role where I'm still living with the pressure of our Cup-winning days. That era's over."

In an interview with GQ in late December that went into great detail about what he deemed his "healing journey" in India, Toews casually mentioned that he was contemplating a comeback bid. It raised eyebrows around the hockey world and even in Toews' inner circle. Nobody knew how seriously to take it.

Yes, 21 players aged 37 or older have played in the NHL this year, and a handful more will turn 37 before the season ends. The Blackhawks have two 37-year-olds on the roster right now: Nick Foligno (who took over the captaincy from Toews) and Alec Martinez. There's nothing unusual about a 37-year-old playing in the NHL. But after two years away? After missing three of the last five seasons because of chronic health issues?

No matter how many people are pulling for him, Toews' comeback attempt — now that it's real, now that it's on the record — surely will be met with equal parts curiosity and skepticism.

"I totally understand that," he said. "I feel like I've already felt that from some people when I tell them what my intentions are. Like, I get that feeling from them, 'Oh, are you for real? You're not joking?' I realize it's a lot of time away, especially watching games now and seeing that the game is so fast and so young. But I think back to my younger years in the NHL when you don't know what you're getting into. You've got to be kind of delusional sometimes, and not think too hard about what you're up against. You've just got to go do it and the body slowly adapts."

And what if the comeback bid falls short? What if the legs never find that pop again? What if the spirit is willing but the flesh remains weak? Can Toews ever feel satisfied, knowing how many good seasons he lost to his health issues? Can he find solace in the championships, the trophies, the Hall of Fame, the respect just about every player in the league holds for him?

Can he live with that fire that still burns deep inside without playing another NHL game? Can the attempt itself put out that fire?

Can surfing suffice?

"Only one way to find out," he said. "Gotta give it my best shot."

ESPN / Trade season grades for all 32 NHL teams: Who improved most?

By Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton- March 11, 2025

The final week of the 2024-25 NHL trade season included a number of blockbusters, including Mikko Rantanen to the Dallas Stars, Brock Nelson to the Colorado Avalanche and Brad Marchand to the Florida Panthers. Meanwhile, a flurry of first-round picks were moved, aiding rebuilding (or retooling) teams as they look to the future.

Which teams did the best in setting themselves up in either direction? Using the first Rantanen trade on Jan. 25 as our starting point for trade season, here are grades for all 32 general managers, along with analysis on how those deals will affect the Stanley Cup playoffs, the draft, free agency and beyond.

Note: Teams are listed alphabetically by letter grade. Ryan S. Clark graded the Pacific and Central Division teams, and Kristen Shilton graded the Metropolitan and Atlantic Division teams. Salary and cap figures are per PuckPedia.

Find your team:

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CGY | CAR | CHI | COL

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FLA | LA | MIN | MTL

NSH | NJ | NYI | NYR

OTT | PHI | PIT | SJ

SEA | STL | TB | TOR

VAN | VGS | WSH | WPG

A grades

Colorado Avalanche: A+

Key players added: Charlie Coyle, Jack Drury, Erik Johnson, Ryan Lindgren, Martin Necas, Brock Nelson, Jimmy Vesey

Key players lost: Calvin de Haan, Casey Mittelstadt, Juuso Parssinen, Mikko Rantanen

The Avs transformed from a team that looked like a wild-card entry to one that could win the Stanley Cup. Their most jarring move this trade season was dealing Rantanen in January. But the return was a top-line winger in Necas and a bottom-six center in Drury.

It was the first in a series of moves in which the Avs addressed areas of concern, which was also the case in getting Lindgren or making up for previous missteps by adding Nelson and then flipping Mittelstadt for Coyle to give them what might be the strongest center dynamic in the NHL.

Dallas Stars: A

Key players added: Cody Ceci, Mikael Granlund, Mikko Rantanen

Key players lost: Logan Stankoven

The Stars' approach to this year's deadline was an adjustment of their philosophies. Dallas built its core using the draft, and had traditionally been hesitant to part with draft capital. That strategy has allowed the Stars to reach consecutive Western Conference finals.

But a more aggressive approach could see them win the Cup this season while remaining a long-term title contender. They parted with a 2025 first-round pick to acquire Granlund and Ceci, then dealt a pair of first-round picks as part of the trade package for Rantanen, who then signed an eight-year extension.

Florida Panthers: A

Key players added: Seth Jones, Brad Marchand, Vitek Vanecek

Key players lost: Spencer Knight

Leave it to the league's reigning Stanley Cup champions to make one of the first -- and last -- splashy deals of the deadline period.

It started with acquiring Jones from Chicago to boost the back end in a significant way. Florida's defense core was strong enough already that Jones could slide onto its second pairing and elevate the group as a whole. Plus, GM Bill Zito acquired Jones on a more reasonable \$7 million cap hit because of salary retention, which was tidy work.

Zito wasn't done there. Florida shocked the hockey world by grabbing Marchand for a second-round pick (that's all?!) in the final 30 minutes of deadline day. Now the Panthers have more sandpaper -- and scoring touch -- to complement the likes of Sam Bennett and Matthew Tkachuk (who has famously battled with Marchand in the past).

The Panthers didn't need to add much to be considered top contenders for another Cup run, and now that they've made the additions of Jones and Marchand, they've jumped into a tie for the shortest odds to do so.

Boston Bruins: A-

Key players added: Fraser Minten

Key players lost: Justin Brazeau, Brandon Carlo, Charlie Coyle, Brad Marchand, Trent Frederic

Did you hear that? It's the sound of Boston's core blowing up. GM Don Sweeney didn't mess around at the deadline, altering the Bruins as we knew them and opening the door on a still-unknown next chapter. In that sense, Sweeney made all the right moves.

It's never easy to trade a captain, but Marchand -- a pending UFA -- was at an impasse with management on terms for a new deal. Now he'll have a chance to chase another Cup with Florida.

Carlo and Coyle were two other viable, veteran assets Sweeney was able to flip to Toronto and Colorado, respectively, for first-round picks, further setting the Bruins up for success in the future. Minten -- a 20-year-old center with enormous potential -- is also an excellent addition for Boston, given its rather bare cupboard of prospects.

Sweeney had to decide if the Bruins were holding out for one more run or willing to turn the page. He chose the latter and it could be the best thing for Boston.

San Jose Sharks: A-

Key players added: Vincent Desharnais

Key players lost: Cody Ceci, Mikael Granlund, Luke Kunin, Nico Sturm, Vitek Vanecek, Jake Walman, Fabian Zetterlund

Adding one first-round pick at the deadline would be a victory for any franchise in a rebuild. The Sharks got two of them.

Obtaining the draft capital necessary to have multiple picks in multiple rounds across two draft cycles would also be beneficial to a team looking to build a promising future. Yes, the Sharks did that too.

Navigating the deadline with all three salary retention slots filled led some to wonder if the Sharks would be able to add more draft capital. GM Mike Grier and his group did it; they'll have two first-round picks in 2025 and again in 2026, and multiple picks in both the second and fourth round in both 2025 and 2026.

Seattle Kraken: A-

Key players added: Michael Eyssimont

Key players lost: Oliver Bjorkstrand, Yanni Gourde, Daniel Sprong, Brandon Tanev

Barring a miracle, the Kraken will miss the playoffs in three of their first four seasons. That led to the Kraken adding draft capital this deadline, with the hopes they would be able to snag a first-round pick.

The deal they struck with the Tampa Bay Lightning for Bjorkstrand and Gourde returned a pair of first-round picks. They also added a 2027 second-round pick in exchange for Tanev.

Though the victories on the ice haven't occurred consistently this season, GM Ron Francis and his front office personnel did quite well to stock for the future.

Toronto Maple Leafs: A-

Key players added: Brandon Carlo, Scott Laughton

Key players lost: Connor Dewar, Nikita Grebenkin, Fraser Minten, Conor Timmins

Toronto finally did it. After being cautious at the deadline too many times in previous seasons, the Leafs pushed their chips in making two significant additions. Carlo is the hulking, stay-at-home right-shot defenseman the Leafs have been lacking on their back end -- especially in the postseason -- and Laughton is a physical, two-way center who elevates their third line in a way Toronto has been begging for since the preseason.

The additions will allow Craig Berube to keep his current skaters in their natural positions -- namely Oliver Ekman-Larsson on the back end and Max Domi up front. And bringing in Carlo and Laughton shows that GM Brad Treliving sees the potential in this team to make a strong push this postseason (or else). Having to give up a handful of young players in the process (not to mention a pair of first-round picks) isn't desirable but, like the Lightning, Toronto is in win-now mode and can't be afraid to make the appropriate sacrifices to see this process through.

And by that, we mean taking advantage of the club's vaunted core before it could possibly see both Mitch Marner and John Tavares out in the offseason. It's now or never for Toronto, and no one can say that the Leafs' front office didn't leave it all out there.

B grades

Chicago Blackhawks: B+

Key players added: Spencer Knight, Joe Veleno

Key players lost: Taylor Hall, Seth Jones, Petr Mrazek, Craig Smith

There were other items of consequence, but the Seth Jones trade had the most impact.

From the moment Jones asked to be traded, the focus shifted to whether the Blackhawks could find a deal that worked for all involved. The one they struck with the Panthers added their goalie of the future in Spencer Knight, plus a 2026 first-round pick. Moving on from a top-pairing defenseman like Jones allowed them to receive a player who works in the short- and long-term, and they'll now have multiple first-rounders in 2025 and 2026 as part of a trend that started in 2022.

New York Rangers: B+

Key players added: Nicolas Aube-Kubel, Will Borgen, Calvin de Haan, J.T. Miller, Carson Soucy

Key players lost: Erik Brannstrom, Filip Chytil, Ryan Lindgren, Jimmy Vesey, Reilly Smith

The Rangers have been through serious turbulence this season, but maybe they've found smoother skies. GM Chris Drury started dealing in December, when he moved Jacob Trouba and Kaapo Kakko.

More recently it was reacquiring Miller to give New York hope of a scoring punch they'd been lacking. That Drury took care of that transaction sooner rather than later -- to give Miller ample time to acclimate -- was smart business.

Drury's other goal was to get something in return for the Rangers' pending UFAs, and he was able to move out all of Lindgren, Vesey and Smith for a solid return that includes promising prospects such as Brendan Brisson and four draft picks.

New York is no lock to make the playoffs this season. Drury's approach to the deadline mirrors that reality. He did enough to show the Rangers he's confident they can secure a postseason spot, while also prioritizing deals that set New York up to wheel and deal down the road.

Ottawa Senators: B+

Key players added: Dylan Cozens, Fabian Zetterlund

Key players lost: Jacob Bernard-Docker, Noah Gregor, Josh Norris

There's something to be said for a slow and steady approach. Ottawa has done that over the past several seasons, and now the Senators are primed to reach the playoffs for the first time since 2017.

GM Steve Staios wants to see his team get there, which is why he swapped injury-prone center Norris for the snake-bitten Cozens. The latter is just 23 years old and signed for five more years. If Staios is right, and a change of scenery can turn the former 30-plus goal scorer into another key part of the Senators' young core, then this will be a deadline when the tides truly started to turn in Ottawa's favor.

Zetterlund was a strong pickup as well, with potential to be a perennial 20-plus goal scorer who can fill in throughout the Senators' lineup. Ottawa has blossomed this season under coach Travis Green and despite years of turmoil trying to establish an identity, it feels like the Senators are finally getting there. These additions serve to make Ottawa stronger in the short and long term, and Staios did it without mortgaging the Senators' future.

Tampa Bay Lightning: B+

Key players added: Oliver Bjorkstrand, Yanni Gourde

Key players lost: None

The Lightning are perennial contenders for several reasons, and it starts with smart deadline moves. GM Julien BriseBois went all-in again to grab Bjorkstrand and Gourde, two depth guys that Tampa Bay will need for another playoff run. And who are we to doubt BriseBois' tactics?

Yes, the Lightning had to give up more first-round draft capital -- they don't have a first-rounder in 2025, 2026 or 2027) but that's fine by them. Tampa Bay's focus is on winning now, and that's reflected in how BriseBois approached this deadline.

Gourde has been in the Bolts' system before and that familiarity is invaluable. Bjorkstrand is a regular 20 goal scorer whom Jon Cooper can slot in anywhere. Tampa Bay knows from (ample) past experience that it's not the superstars who always make a difference in the postseason (although they certainly help). It's the sum of all parts that have taken them over the top before.

Washington Capitals: B

Key players added: Anthony Beauvillier

Key players lost: None

Washington required one thing at the deadline, and it was scoring depth. GM Chris Patrick addressed that by bringing on Beauvillier from Pittsburgh, where the 27-year-old had recently been skating alongside Sidney Crosby. He'll be stronger in a bottom-six role for Washington, and that's where the Capitals had to shore up as they optimistically prepare for a long spring run through the postseason.

Beauvillier didn't come cheap -- Patrick parted with a second-round pick in the process -- but this was no time for Washington to hang back. Better to have improved via an "overpriced" move than regret an early exit come playoffs.

Patrick also kept the Capitals intact otherwise; preserving that chemistry is essential when a team shows Washington's level of consistency. It might appear Patrick did the bare minimum, but even if that's true, it gives the Capitals just enough oomph to be satisfying. And remember, the Caps will also likely add top prospect Ryan Leonard to the mix once his collegiate season is over.

Anaheim Ducks: B-

Key players added: Ville Husso, Oliver Kylington

Key players lost: Brian Dumoulin

There's the 2025 second-round pick and prospect (forward Herman Traff) they got for moving on from Dumoulin. There was also the "trade" for Husso (acquired for future considerations), who gave them cover for the injured John Gibson.

But the reality of this deadline was that the Ducks didn't really need to do much unless there was a deal that was too tempting to ignore. They came into the deadline with 61 points through 62 games. That point total is more than what they've had the past two seasons and has them on a pace to finish with more than 80 points for the first time since the 2018-19 campaign.

While the Ducks were among those teams within eight points of a wild-card spot on deadline day, there wasn't a great need for them to add players in an attempt to make the playoffs. But with the way they're trending, that could be a possibility in a year's time.

Calgary Flames: B-

Key players added: Joel Farabee, Morgan Frost

Key players lost: Andrei Kuzmenko, Jakob Pelletier

The late January trade with the Flyers that saw the Flames add Farabee and Frost would be the only business Calgary did ahead of the deadline. Cap space and draft capital were in great supply, but Flames GM Craig Conroy said hockey trades like the one with the Flyers were the objective.

Even though another one of those trades didn't happen, the Flames still remained in the hunt for a Western Conference wild-card spot. But did they miss an opportunity to strike a deal for veteran help in exchange for picks or prospects? The Flames are dead last in goals per game this season (2.56), a detail that could play a crucial role in their bid for their first playoff berth since the 2021-22 campaign.

Carolina Hurricanes: B-

Key players added: Taylor Hall, Logan Stankoven

Key players lost: Jack Drury, Martin Necas, Mikko Rantanen

Carolina went from being one of the league's biggest adders to a notorious dealer in just a few short weeks. That's how quickly circumstances can change. The Hurricanes acquired Rantanen in a January blockbuster deal that bolstered their status as a top Cup contender. The problem was Rantanen wouldn't commit long term, and Carolina couldn't afford another Jake Guentzel situation, where their prized deadline addition walks for nothing.

So the Hurricanes flipped Rantanen to Dallas, because he was willing to sign an extension with them, and that lengthy process admittedly limited what GM Eric Tulsy could do in the interim. And so, Carolina's return for Rantanen -- headlined by Stankoven and a pair of first-round picks they failed to swap for another player before time ran out -- is all the work Tulsy got over the line.

Stankoven is a fine young player who should fit in well with the Hurricanes' core of Seth Jarvis, Jesperi Kotkaniemi & Co. But is he going to drive them toward winning a championship now? No. And even if Rantanen started off slowly in Carolina -- with two goals and six points in 13 games -- his potential impact on a playoff run could have been outstanding given his past playoff scoring success. As it is, Carolina will never know, one way or another, what might have been.

Columbus Blue Jackets: B-

Key players added: Christian Fischer, Luke Kunin

Key players lost: None

The Blue Jackets are having a special season. That makes GM Don Waddell's decision -- or inability -- to do more at the deadline a bit deflating. It also aligns though with what Waddell previously stated is Columbus' goal: to forgo adding high-priced rentals and instead using their assets on offseason signings.

For the time being, it's on the Blue Jackets (mostly) as they are to sink or swim. And the way Waddell spoke about his pride in Columbus worming its way into the postseason field despite a litany of injuries to key skaters (including Sean Monahan and Boone Jenner) was touching. There's clear belief that this group can succeed.

Filling in around the edges with Kunin -- a stout bottom-six forward -- and Fischer -- a waiver wire pickup -- doesn't hurt the Blue Jackets. It's addition without subtraction, and if that was Waddell's optimal outcome to the deadline then he succeeded. Consider Columbus to be playing the long game here.

Edmonton Oilers: B-

Key players added: Trent Frederic, Max Jones, Jake Walman

Key players lost: None

Once again, the Oilers needed to create financial flexibility entering the deadline -- and losing seven of their past 11 games prior to March 7 created urgency to do something. That's why they had to add around the edges by taking on players with manageable cap hits.

They were able to add Frederic with the Bruins and Devils combining to retain salary. Adding do-everything defenseman Walman was the Oilers' most notable move, but it also came with a caveat; the Sharks had all of their retention slots filled, which meant the Oilers had to utilize the LTIR space from Evander Kane's contract, while moving Frederic to IR to take on the full freight of Walman's cap hit. Still, the players added should help once the playoffs begin.

Minnesota Wild: B-

Key players added: Justin Brazeau, Gustav Nyquist

Key players lost: Jakub Lauko, Marat Khusnutdinov

Only four more months stand between the Wild and the major reduction in the Zach Parise and Ryan Suter buyouts that will finally give them much-needed cap space. It's why the Wild had to once again try to find ways to add scoring help at a team-friendly price.

Acquiring Nyquist gave them a top-line winger to bolster a top six that's currently missing Joel Eriksson Ek and Kirill Kaprizov due to injuries. Getting Brazeau allowed them to add a sizable yet productive winger to the bottom six. These moves can help the Wild remain in the race for one of the three divisional playoff entries in an already competitive Central that just got even more ruthless given what Dallas and Colorado did.

New York Islanders: B-

Key players added: Calum Ritchie

Key players lost: Brock Nelson

Well, the Islanders actually did something before the deadline -- a true rarity (it seems) from GM Lou Lamoriello. Granted, Lamoriello did try signing Nelson -- a pending UFA -- before moving him to Colorado. The return on Nelson -- highlighted by a first-round draft choice and promising center prospect in Ritchie -- was solid and gives Lamoriello some options to improve the Islanders significantly over the next few months (if he so chooses).

Of course, Lamoriello stopped at just the one transaction, and that's where the Islanders lost grade points. He could have collected more capital by unloading other veterans like Jean-Gabriel Pageau. New York is (barely) in the playoff hunt, but there's a short chance of a long spring ahead. The market showed that teams at the top wanted to add. Lamoriello may have missed out by being too inactive here.

Philadelphia Flyers: B-

Key players added: Nikita Grebenkin

Key players lost: Erik Johnson, Andrei Kuzmenko, Scott Laughton

It's not like the Flyers were destined to be buyers at the deadline, and there's no question that Philadelphia is worse off on the ice at the moment. Laughton was an integral part of the franchise and its culture for 13 years, and it's tough to part with a player like that at the best of times. GM Danny Briere did right by the Flyers though, getting a first-round pick and intriguing prospect Grebenkin back from Toronto for Laughton. He also fished a third-round pick out of Los Angeles for Kuzmenko.

That's all solid stuff. It just doesn't do much to help the Flyers right now. And Briere didn't go all-in on moving the team's top players, either -- Rasmus Ristolainen remains in the fold, despite drawing interest on the market. Philadelphia simply appears stuck as ever in its (long) rebuild, with a half-in, half-out sort of mentality. Briere is being cautious, perhaps a little too much so. We'll see what the offseason brings for these Flyers.

Vegas Golden Knights: B-

Key players added: Brandon Saad, Reilly Smith

Key players lost: Brendan Brisson

Compared to what they've done in the past, this deadline was a whisper.

Nevertheless, the Golden Knights still made intriguing moves when they signed Saad after St. Louis released him, and brought back Smith, an original Golden Misfit.

How they did it goes back to their perennial challenge: Navigating a tight window of cap space. Saad had his contract terminated by the Blues, and the Knights signed him to a prorated one-year deal worth \$1.5 million. Smith's return was made possible by the Rangers retaining 50% to reduce his cap hit to \$1.88 million -- a welcomed cost for a team with a little more than \$500,000 in deadline cap space.

Winnipeg Jets: B-

Key players added: Luke Schenn, Brandon Tanev

Key players lost: None

The Jets didn't have any glaring needs headed into the deadline, third in goals per game (3.52) and first in goals against per game (2.30). While they could have made bigger moves, it didn't appear necessary.

Schenn gives the Jets a veteran defenseman with two Stanley Cups, and he's under contract for another season. The decision to bring back Tanev, who started his career with the Jets, further strengthened a bottom-six forward group that's been instrumental in the team's regular-season success.

Again, these type of depth moves pale in comparison to what other Central Division powers in Colorado and Dallas did; are they enough to bolster the Jets for a multiround playoff run?

C grades

Pittsburgh Penguins: C+

Key players added: Connor Dewar, Tommy Novak, Conor Timmins

Key players lost: Anthony Beauvillier, Michael Bunting, Cody Glass

The fact that Pittsburgh is boasting about having the most draft choices in the first three rounds of the next three drafts tells you plenty about the priorities of GM Kyle Dubas and his front office. It's all about the future in Pittsburgh.

Dubas took back a pair of skaters -- Dewar and Timmins -- he knew from his days in Toronto, and from there didn't do much else to improve Pittsburgh's current lineup. In theory, those moves will come later. Dubas will have to be strategic in how he wields all those draft picks, whether using them in the offseason to trade for veterans or betting on prospects to potentially thrive in the Pens' system.

In a way it almost feels like Pittsburgh deserves an "incomplete" grade here. There's so much unknown about how this deadline will truly affect the franchise. On one hand, the Penguins aren't immediately better off; on the other, there's a possible foundation to do serious retooling work in the coming seasons. The rest, as they say, is still unwritten.

Los Angeles Kings: C

Key players added: Andrei Kuzmenko

Key players lost: None

Is the addition of Kuzmenko -- and only Kuzmenko -- going to be enough for the Kings to reach the second round for the first time since they won the Stanley Cup back in 2014?

Having seven players with 12 or more goals and 14 players who are in double figures suggest the Kings could have the depth that's needed in the postseason. But the fact they were 24th in goals per game entering the deadline created an expectation that they could add more scoring help.

The Kings believe Kuzmenko could play a role going forward, with the hope that a player known for strong starts in new locations can replicate that for the Kings in their bid for a long playoff run.

Nashville Predators: C

Key players added: Michael Bunting

Key players lost: Gustav Nyquist, Tommy Novak, Luke Schenn

The Predators were going to retool their roster after an aggressive offseason was followed by a disappointing regular season.

Nyquist was a pending unrestricted free agent who brought back a 2026 second-round pick. Trading Novak and Schenn to Pittsburgh returned Bunting and a 2026 fourth-round pick.

Granted, Schenn was later traded to the Jets for a 2026 second-round pick and 2027 fourth-round pick -- which raised questions about whether the Preds should have received more for Schenn. Still, it amounted to them clearing cap space ahead of the offseason, where they can address their remaining needs; they are projected to have more than \$18 million to do so.

St. Louis Blues: C

Key players added: None

Key players lost: Scott Perunovich, Brandon Saad

Sometimes, not doing anything might say everything about how a front office feels about its roster. What the Blues did -- or in this case, didn't do -- said a lot.

Leading up to the deadline, observing which way the team was trending (towards a playoff spot or not) determined whether GM Doug Armstrong would add or delete from the group. It's a dynamic that was facing clubs like the Flames and Utah Hockey Club as well.

Ultimately, the Blues' recent string of seven wins in 10 games led the front office to not tinker too much, giving this current group a shot at making the playoffs for the first time since 2022.

Utah Hockey Club: C

Key players added: None

Key players lost: None

With \$36 million in cap space, many believed the UHC could be up to something ahead of the deadline. And it was -- just not in the way most would have expected.

They traded Shea Weber's contract to the Blackhawks, and were able to get out from under the \$7.857 million cap hit they would have encountered next season. This came in addition to an onslaught of contract extensions to current roster players, including Karel Vejmelka and Olli Maatta.

All of this leaves Utah with more than \$22 million in cap space this offseason, when bigger moves can be made. The front office liked the group enough to keep it intact; can that group pull into playoff position in the final weeks?

Vancouver Canucks: C

Key players added: Filip Chytil, Drew O'Connor, Marcus Pettersson

Key players lost: Victor Desharnais, Danton Heinen, J.T. Miller, Carson Soucy

There are more questions than answers for the Canucks, which is an apt tagline for Vancouver this season as well as how they fared at the deadline.

Moving on from Miller in January left them trying to replace a forward who finished with more than 80 points in each of the past three seasons. Getting Chytil as part of the return helped, but the belief was that the Canucks had enough time to possibly add more. Beyond adding O'Connor -- who came over in the trade that landed them Marcus Pettersson -- the Canucks were unable to land another forward.

They also held on to Brock Boeser, a pending UFA with whom they have been unable to strike a long-term deal. Similar pending UFAs returned massive hauls this trade season; where was that deal for the Canucks?

This now leaves the Canucks trying to answer what might be the most important question they face all season: Do they even have enough to return to the playoffs, a season after finishing first in the Pacific Division?

Buffalo Sabres: C-

Key players added: Jacob Bernard-Docker, Josh Norris

Key players lost: Dylan Cozens

Buffalo is going to miss the playoffs for a 14th straight season. And still, the Sabres were out there at the deadline making lateral moves.

Trading Cozens -- a 23-year-old center two years removed from a 31-goal campaign -- for Norris -- a 25-year-old pivot with potential when not hampered by seemingly constant injuries -- is just such a move. So how did Buffalo also give up a second-round pick in the transaction (and surely it wasn't for the right to add depth defenseman Bernard-Docker)? That's a head-scratcher.

There was talk of cashing in on Alex Tuch's value by dealing him to a contending team, but the Sabres didn't move on that possibility either. Instead, GM Kevyn Adams inked Jason Zucker to a two-year contract extension, which is fine if he's part of the veteran solution to get them out of this decade-plus rut. But Buffalo is essentially no different now than it was a week ago. That's disappointing considering how much the Sabres need to shake things up -- and get over the proverbial hump.

D grades

Detroit Red Wings: D

Key players added: Petr Mrazek, Craig Smith

Key players lost: Joe Veleno

The Red Wings may as well have done nothing. Because as trades go, brokering with Chicago to get Mrazek -- who already did one tour with Detroit from 2013-18 -- and veteran center Smith in exchange for Veleno -- an underperforming 25-year-old pivot -- does nothing to improve Detroit's current state.

The Red Wings are battling for an Eastern Conference wild-card spot that they have increasingly little chance of grabbing given how teams around them improved over the past few weeks. GM Steve Yzerman isn't one to make moves out of desperation, but this level of inactivity suggests he doesn't

believe this group has what it takes to beat out the competition for a playoff slot. And that's not exactly a confidence booster going into the homestretch of this season.

The Red Wings look like they're headed for another mediocre finish outside the playoffs -- a result they've authored since 2016 (and counting).

Montreal Canadiens: D

Key players added: None

Key players lost: None

The Canadiens' true grade here should be DNP: Did Not Participate.

Montreal held onto all its potential trade options -- including David Savard, Joel Armia and Christian Dvorak -- and signed Jake Evans to a four-year extension instead of moving him to one of several teams interested in the center's services. So, the Canadiens are no better (but ... no worse?) for wear. That's the theory, anyway.

GM Kent Hughes justified his lack of action by saying it was a "reward" for Montreal putting itself in the playoff race (the Canadiens are in a five-team hunt for two Eastern Conference wild-card slots). That's a fine sentiment. It would be more confidence-inducing though if Hughes had made a move to boost Montreal's push into the postseason picture. Only time will tell if Hughes was right to believe in his team's core as it is, or if increasing their depth was the answer.

New Jersey Devils: D

Key players added: Brian Dumoulin, Cody Glass, Daniel Sprong

Key players lost: None

The Devils did a poor job of actually addressing their needs here.

Jack Hughes is out for the season, and that creates a gaping hole in New Jersey's offense -- which is already middle of the pack, producing fewer than three goals per game. The Devils had to restock at center, and GM Tom Fitzgerald targeted ... Glass. He has four goals and 15 points in 51 games this season; his career best was 35 in 72 games in 2022-23. That's not going to solve New Jersey's scoring issues or make the Devils more intimidating down the middle.

Then there's the questions on defense, with Dougie Hamilton and Jonas Siegenthaler out with injuries. Dumoulin is an aging veteran blueliner who isn't going to add much offensively (like Hamilton has in a resurgent season), and at best is a solid third-pairing guy.

Where was the urgency from Fitzgerald to put New Jersey in the best position possible to weather its current storms? Losing Hughes was a brutal blow, but it came ahead of the deadline, in time for Fitzgerald to do something in response. The Devils' dearth of depth scoring was concerning even when Hughes was available, and their moves don't address that either.

Can New Jersey keep up from here, holding off the Rangers and Blue Jackets for third place in the division and not slipping into a heated fight for Eastern Conference wild-card slots?

TSN.CA / Sizing up NHL's wild-card races after the trade deadline

By Travis Yost- March 11, 2025

With the National Hockey League's trade deadline officially behind us, focus now shifts to the playoff race and the bid for those final wild-card slots.

Both conferences have deep races for their two respective spots, owing largely to the NHL's scoring system that awards points for overtime and shootout losses.

A large swath of teams remain in contention, and the calibre of these teams ranges greatly.

We can only reasonably cross off three East teams at this point: the Philadelphia Flyers, Pittsburgh Penguins, and Buffalo Sabres. That's it, with only 20 per cent of the regular season remaining.

There's a similar story in the West. I wrote early in the season the Western Conference playoff race was really just about the final wild-card spot, as the top-heaviness of the conference was sure to entrench the elite teams early. That's still the case today — we can only cross off five teams right now, from the plucky Anaheim Ducks to the dead-last San Jose Sharks. Everyone else is alive.

The beauty of the Stanley Cup Playoffs is upsets do happen from time to time; the last thing a divisional winner wants to see in a first-round draw is a wild-card team that's getting hot at the right time, or a team that's shown well against better competition.

To that end, I wanted to see how our remaining wild-card competitors have performed against playoff-calibre clubs. The below tables show the performance of the wild-card hopefuls against the entrenched 14 playoff teams, as well as a check on whether the team has seen improving or deteriorating results over the course of the regular season.

Let's start with the muddled mess in the Eastern Conference:

Few teams were busier than the Ottawa Senators at the trade deadline — I start here because they were one of the only trade deadline buyers amongst the wild-card hopefuls. And though I may be skeptical about what newly acquired Dylan Cozens might mean for this organization long term, there is little doubt this team has enough talent to qualify for the postseason.

Tim Stutzle has veered into superstar territory, Thomas Chabot's pairing has blown teams off the ice all year long, and goaltending is far less of a concern than in years past. When the Senators are playing an up-tempo, frenetically attacking game, they're a dangerous foe for anyone in the league.

If I were a betting man ready to allocate that second slot, I do overweight the remaining favourites in the New York Rangers and Columbus Blue Jackets. The simple reality is both of these teams are 20 goals or more clear of any other East team and look on par with the likes of Ottawa.

While Columbus' story has been nothing short of amazing, I have an easier time believing in an Igor Shesterkin-led team than one who has been on a shooting percentage heater for the ages. Columbus is shooting a blistering 11 per cent at even strength on the year, just three points in trail of their success rate on a very mediocre power play.

Dynamic shooting teams tend to exemplify it across all situations, whereas teams benefiting from a bit more of random chance puck luck or rush play see splits like this.

There is little if no daylight separating these teams, but if I'm forecasting future outcomes, I'd rather bet on the elite goalie than the shooting percentages that are driving this late season surge. But I wouldn't

excuse anyone for taking the opposite side here. After all, the Blueshirts have only stayed in the race because they pulverize the lesser teams in the conference.

Turning over to the Western Conference:

When I say the conference is top heavy, consider that zero wild-card teams (including those holding a position now) have a positive goal differential on the season.

Moreover, only one team has shown an ability to win on the road, and that's the Minnesota Wild — they've been so good away from home (22-10-3) you wonder what's in the air at Xcel Energy Center.

They do have some buffer over the chasing pack, and I'm hopeful that injury returns from Kirill Kaprizov and Joel Eriksson-Ek solidify the Wild as a playoff team.

As for differentiating the rest of the pack, good luck.

One team I am keyed in on as a possible upside surprise down the stretch is the Utah Hockey Club.

Unlike most fringe teams at the deadline, Utah opted not to sell off players, instead extending several players on multi-year deals. Most importantly, that group includes goaltender Karel Vejmelka, who has been outstanding this season.

Separately, their skater core (when healthy; the club was noticeably challenged when Dylan Guenther and Logan Cooley were injured) has been very competitive all season, and at even strength their positive goal differential (+0.1 goals per 60 minutes played) is indiscernible from the New Jersey Devils and Colorado Avalanche.

The last team you want to play in a wild-card draw is one that can play with you at even strength, and one with a netminder who has proven he can stand on his head.

If not Utah, I like the Blues for similar reasons. Did you know they are a top 10 even-strength team on the year by rate goal differential, ahead of the Edmonton Oilers and Carolina Hurricanes?

The problem with Jim Montgomery's team is that special teams has been a disaster on both sides of the aisle — couple a 23rd-ranked power play (6.8 goals per 60 minutes) with a 30th-ranked penalty kill (10.8 goals conceded per 60 minutes), and you will lose a lot more games than you should.

Betting on Calgary's offence has been a fool's errand all year; Vancouver surely has the most talent across their roster, but genuine chemistry concerns and an injured Quinn Hughes give me great pause.

Regardless of who you support, enjoy the stretch run. This is going to be 20 games of pandemonium, carrying us right into the first round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs.