



**Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips**  
**January 3-6, 2025**

**Columbus Blue Jackets**

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## Columbus Dispatch / Detroit Red Wings deal Columbus Blue Jackets gut-wrenching loss with late breakaway

**By Brian Hedger- January 3, 2025**

It flipped in a flash.

After gaining momentum off a late tying goal and getting a late power play after a failed coaching challenge for goaltender interference, the Blue Jackets had a golden opportunity to complete a thrilling comeback against the Detroit Red Wings turn upside down in a gut-wrenching 5-4 loss Thursday before a sellout crowd of 18,370 at Nationwide Arena.

Detroit's Ben Chiarot blocked Ivan Provorov's one timer from the right circle with the Jackets' power play expiring, which created a loose puck near the Red Wings' blue line with Jonatan Berggren preparing to exit the penalty box. Former Blue Jackets forward Tyler Motte dove to send him a pass for a late breakaway and Berggren beat Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins with 35.7 seconds left to give the Red Wings (16-18-4) a wild win.

"I would love to be sitting here at least with a point and having the opportunity (to win in overtime), but ... we made a mistake, right, at the end?" Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "We should get out of (the offensive zone), but our group's trying to score ... but we make a mistake at the end."

Columbus Blue Jackets and Detroit Red Wings get into a scuffle after the Red Wings defeated the Blue Jackets at Nationwide Arena on Thursday, Jan. 2, 2025 in Columbus, Ohio.

A couple minutes earlier, the Blue Jackets (16-17-6) owned every ounce of momentum after James van Riemsdyk's second goal of the night tied it 4-4 with 2:41 to play. Red Wings coach Todd McLellan challenged for goaltender interference, which failed to give Columbus a chance to win on a power play without needing overtime.

"We tie it up, we get a power play, and we talked about getting (a goal) on it, obviously," Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski said. "We didn't want it to go to overtime. Our (top) unit didn't do a good job of getting it in the (offensive) zone, and that's frustrating for our group that's been really good at home this year. It's on us, as well, for not giving us that chance (to win). This game's crazy. It can take weird bounces and change on a dime."

Werenski finished with a goal and two assists for a three-point game, Van Riemsdyk added an assist to his two goals for a three-point game and Sean Monahan scored the other goal for the Blue Jackets — who will host the Red Wings on March 1 at Ohio Stadium in their first-ever outdoor game.

Detroit Red Wings left wing Lucas Raymond (23) yells at Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski (8) after the Red Wings defeated the Blue Jackets at Nationwide Arena on Thursday, Jan. 2, 2025 in Columbus, Ohio.

Alex DeBrincat had a goal and two assists for a three-point game to lead the Red Wings, whose other goals were scored by Patrick Kane, Erik Gustafsson, Dylan Larkin and Berggren.

Detroit overcame an early 1-0 deficit after Van Riemsdyk's first goal on a power play 2:42 into the game, finishing the first period to lead 3-1 on goals by Kane, Gustafsson and DeBrincat. Werenski and Monahan scored to tie it 3-3 in the second, but Larkin reclaimed the lead for the Red Wings, 4-3, early in the third.

That led to Van Riemsdyk pushing the equalizer over the goal line to set off the frenetic finish.

## Columbus Dispatch / How to watch Columbus Blue Jackets vs Detroit Red Wings simulcast games

**By Brian Hedger- January 3, 2025**

The arrival of a new year brings Blue Jackets fans in Ohio, West Virginia and Kentucky a new way to watch five of the team's remaining 44 games.

Beginning with the Jackets' matchup against the Detroit Red Wings on Thursday at Nationwide Arena, five games will be shown via simulcast on the FanDuel Sports Network and local affiliates of the Sinclair Broadcast Group and Gray Media.

The select games will air locally on ABC 6 or CW Columbus (Ch. 53), which are available via antennae plus cable and streaming providers that include Spectrum, DirecTV, DirecTV Stream, YouTubeTV, Dish and Breezeline.

Thursday's game will air locally on CW 53 at 7 p.m. against the Red Wings (15-18-4), who are four points behind Columbus in the Eastern Conference. Detroit returns to play the Blue Jackets outdoors March 1 at Ohio Stadium in the NHL's 2025 Navy Federal Credit Union Stadium Series.

Oct 16, 2023; Columbus, Ohio, USA; Columbus Blue Jackets left wing Kirill Marchenko (86) bats a puck out of the air during the first period of the NHL hockey game against the Detroit Red Wings at Nationwide Arena.

How can I watch Columbus Blue Jackets vs Detroit Red Wings on Thursday?

Start time: 7 p.m.

Regular broadcast: FanDuel Sports Network

Local simulcast: CW Columbus

Regional simulcasts: WKRC 12.2 CW (Cincinnati); WUAB 43.1 CW (Cleveland); WKEF 22.3 MyTV (Dayton); WQCW 30.1 CW (Charleston, WV/Huntington, WV/Portsmouth, OH); WKYT 27.2 CW (Lexington, KY)

Streaming: Spectrum, DirecTV, DirecTV Stream, YouTubeTV, Dish and Breezeline

Going into the game, the Blue Jackets are tied with the Philadelphia Flyers at 38 points after outlasting the Carolina Hurricanes in a shootout Tuesday to ring in the new year at Nationwide Arena. They're just two points behind the Ottawa Senators for the Eastern Conference's second wildcard spot and one back of the Pittsburgh Penguins for fourth place in the Metropolitan Division.

Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski (8) celebrates scoring a goal during the second period of the NHL hockey game against the Washington Capitals at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Dec. 12, 2024.

What other Columbus Blue Jackets games will be simulcast?

Thursday's matchup against the Red Wings is the first of five games that will be simulcast over free local affiliates along with the Jackets' regular FanDuel Sports Network broadcast.

Here are the other four games:

Saturday, Jan. 11: at St. Louis Blues (ABC 6)

Thursday, Jan. 23: at Carolina Hurricanes (CW 53)

Thursday, Feb. 27: at Detroit Red Wings (CW 53)

Monday, Mar. 17: New Jersey Devils (CW 53)

Columbus Blue Jackets center Sean Monahan (23) fights for the puck against Boston Bruins center Morgan Geekie (39) in the third period at Nationwide Arena on Friday, Dec. 27, 2024 in Columbus, Ohio.

Here's the regional lineup for the other four games:

Saturday, Jan. 11 at St. Louis Blues:WSTR 64.1 MyTV (Cincinnati); WKEF 22.3 MyTV (Dayton); WSAZ 3.2 MeTV (Charleston, WV/Huntington, WV/Portsmouth, OH); WKYT 27.4 MeTV (Lexington, KY)

Thursday, Jan. 23 at Carolina Hurricanes: WKRC 12.2 CW (Cincinnati); WUAB 43.1 CW (Cleveland); WKEF 22.3 MyTV (Dayton); WQCW 30.1 CW (Charleston, WV/Huntington, WV/Portsmouth, OH); WKYT 27.2 CW (Lexington, KY)

Thursday, Feb. 27 at Detroit Red Wings: WKRC 12.2 CW (Cincinnati); WUAB 43.1 CW (Cleveland); WKEF 22.3 MyTV (Dayton); WQCW 30.1 CW (Charleston, WV/Huntington, WV/Portsmouth, OH); WKYT 27.2 CW (Lexington, KY)

Monday, Mar. 17 vs. New Jersey Devils: WKRC 12.2 CW (Cincinnati); WUAB 43.1 CW (Cleveland); WKEF 22.3 MyTV (Dayton); WQCW 30.1 (Charleston, WV/Huntington, WV/Portsmouth, OH); WKYT 27.2 CW (Lexington, KY)

## Columbus Dispatch / 3 takeaways from the Columbus Blue Jackets' painful loss to the Detroit Red Wings

By Brian Hedger- January 4, 2025

One of the biggest reasons hockey is a great sport to follow, its unpredictability, slugged the Blue Jackets in the gut Thursday night at Nationwide Arena.

Possessing the puck in the Detroit Red Wings' zone and carrying momentum during a late power play, the Blue Jackets let two points — or one had they lost beyond regulation time — slip through their fingers.

A blocked shot plus a diving play by former Blue Jackets forward Tyler Motte led to a breakaway goal at the end from Jonathan Berggren that won the game, 5-4, for the Red Wings with 35.7 seconds left.

“We came back and gave ourselves a chance,” Blue Jackets center Adam Fantilli said. “A tough bounce there with the guy coming out of the box. It sucks. What can you do?”

Here are three takeaways:

Columbus Blue Jackets center Cole Sillinger (4) shoots the puck in the third period at Nationwide Arena on Thursday, Jan. 2, 2025 in Columbus, Ohio.

### Columbus Blue Jackets make stinging 'mistake' against Detroit Red Wings

Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins clacked his stick on the ice as he spotted time running out in a power play with the game tied 4-4 and less than a minute to play in regulation. That's what goalies are trained to do to alert their teammates when a man advantage is about to expire and a penalized player is preparing to rejoin play.

The Jackets didn't have either of their top power-play units on the ice, instead sending out a defensively responsible group to finish the man advantage, but they either didn't hear Merzlikins' stick hitting the ice or tuned it out while looking for a knockout punch of their own. Instead, the Blue Jackets lost a chance to earn a point or two in the standings.

Columbus Blue Jackets right wing Kirill Marchenko (86) fights for the puck Detroit Red Wings defenseman Ben Chiarot (8) in the second period at Nationwide Arena on Thursday, Jan. 2, 2025 in Columbus, Ohio.

Ben Chiarot blocked Ivan Provorov's one-timer, Motte turned into Superman while diving for the puck for a tap out to Berggren and a couple of seconds later it was behind Merzlikins following a winning wrist shot under the glove. Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason used the word “mistake” multiple times in his postgame press conference about the sequence, saying the Blue Jackets should have been more careful with how they handled the last few seconds of their power play.

“We should get out of (the offensive zone), but our group's trying to score,” he said. “(They're) obviously trying to score, but we make a mistake at the end. The resilience of our group is good. We made a mistake. It's fine. We'll learn from it, and we'll move forward.”

What can they learn?

“It's clock awareness,” Evason said. “It's recognizing where we are in the game, obviously, and just get out of there, right? And we didn't. We made a mistake. It ended up in our net, unfortunately, and it could've (gone) the other way.”

Columbus Blue Jackets and Detroit Red Wings get into a scuffle after the Red Wings defeated the Blue Jackets at Nationwide Arena on Thursday, Jan. 2, 2025 in Columbus, Ohio.

Fantilli, who assisted on James van Riemsdyk's tying goal to spark the finish, aptly summed up the Blue Jackets' feelings.

"Provy goes for a one-timer, it deflects off the guy's pants and right up the middle," he said. "A few degrees different on that shot and we're in a different situation. That's hockey, though. Bounces happen, and that's how that game went."

Columbus Blue Jackets right wing Kirill Marchenko (86) attempts to shoot the puck in the third period at Nationwide Arena on Thursday, Jan. 2, 2025 in Columbus, Ohio.

Columbus Blue Jackets continue utilizing unconventional lineup

This was the fifth straight game in which the Blue Jackets dressed seven of the eight defensemen they're carrying on the NHL roster plus 11 forwards instead of the usual allotment of 12. They went 3-1-0 in the first four, which is likely the reason Evason and his assistants have continued the experiment.

The advantage is tied to the usage of forwards. Not dressing 12 allows Evason and assistant Mike Haviland to double shift select forwards from the top two or three lines by skating them on the fourth line with Sean Kuraly and Mikael Pyyhtia. Kirill Marchenko in particular is seeing his ice time and scoring chances rise because of it.

The drawback is having an odd number of defensemen in the lineup rather than three distinct pairings of two. It usually leads to an "odd man out" situation in which one of the seven defensemen doesn't play much and must mesh with a defensive partner sporadically whenever he's sent into the game. Evason declined to confirm at the morning skate whether he was going with the unconventional setup, but seven Blue Jackets defensemen were included on the active roster while Jordan Harris sat as a healthy scratch for the fourth straight game.

Kevin Labanc, the forward who usually skates with Kuraly and Pyyhtia, missed his fifth straight game as a healthy scratch. Evason said the decision to play a seventh defenseman over Labanc isn't a reflection of his play and more about seeking an edge in boosting ice time for Marchenko and Sean Monahan.

Going into the NHL draft last summer, Todd McLellan was the Blue Jackets' top choice to replace Pascal Vincent as head coach.

Talks fell apart due to a disagreement on contractual terms, which led to Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell going with Evason instead. Evason has since gotten off to a great start in Columbus, while McLellan was recently hired by the Red Wings, with whom he won the Stanley Cup in 2008 as an assistant coach.

McLellan did his homework on the Blue Jackets' roster and organizational system while discussing their coaching vacancy and has studied it even closer since joining the Red Wings. He's impressed with the progress they've shown under Evason and senses even brighter days ahead in Columbus.

"I think Dean has his fingerprints all over this team," McLellan said. "Anytime a coach comes in, and he can flip the identity and get the players believing in what he's selling, it becomes contagious. I can see that throughout their lineup. ... In my mind, they've definitely turned the corner and they're going to give not only the Red Wings but every other team in the league a handful."

## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets stave off St. Louis Blues, move closer to playoff position

By Brian Hedger- January 5, 2025

After a gut-wrenching loss Thursday, the Blue Jackets couldn't afford to let it snowball into something bigger Saturday night at Nationwide Arena.

Thanks to churning out another six goals in front of a sell-out crowd of 18,535, it didn't despite a nail-biting finish in a 6-4 victory over the St. Louis Blues. After nearly coughing up a 5-2 lead in a third period when each team scored four goals, the Blue Jackets (17-17-6) pulled into a tie at 40 points with the Ottawa Senators and Pittsburgh Penguins in a tight battle for the Eastern Conference's second wildcard.

The spot currently belongs to Ottawa via standings tiebreaker, but the Blue Jackets are pushing for it.

"(We) made it a little closer than it should've been, but we found a way to win and that's the most important thing," defenseman Ivan Provorov said. "We know that we have to work hard and everything else will come after it. We've shown that so far this season, and we're improving as a team, overall, game in and game out. We've just got to continue climb up and keep getting better as a team."

Dmitri Voronkov led five different goal-scorers with his 14th and 15th goals of the season. Kirill Marchenko, Mikael Pyyhtia, Adam Fantilli and Mathieu Olivier scored the other four, including the latter scoring his 10th goal of the season into an empty net with 1:01 remaining to seal the win. Provorov and Sean Monahan led the Jackets in scoring with three points on three assists each, while defenseman Zach Werenski collected two more assists to extend his franchise record home points streak to 15 straight games.

Columbus Blue Jackets left wing Dmitri Voronkov (10) celebrates after a goal was scored in the third period at Nationwide Arena on Saturday, Jan. 4, 2025 in Columbus, Ohio.

Elvis Merzlikins picked up the goaltending win with 29 saves on 33 shots, including several dazzling saves in the first two periods to allow the Blue Jackets to build a 2-0 lead on goals Voronkov in the first and Marchenko in the second. The third quickly turned into a goal bonanza after Pyyhtia made it 3-0 at 3:44 with his fourth goal of the season, scored with teammate Zach Aston-Reese watching from the penalty box serving a minor penalty for slashing.

The two sides then alternated goals three times in a span of eight minutes before the Blues scored with their net empty and a 6-on-5 advantage with 3:44 left in the third period. That goal was scored by Brayden Schenn, who slid the puck under Merzlikins off his own rebound during a furious scramble around the Blue Jackets' net.

Columbus Blue Jackets center Adam Fantilli (19) shoots and scores a goal against the St. Louis Blues in the third period at Nationwide Arena on Saturday, Jan. 4, 2025 in Columbus, Ohio.

St. Louis goalie Joel Hofer returned to his net for the next 1:44 before heading back to the Blues' bench for another 6-on-5 advantage while still trailing 5-4. A minute later, Olivier secured the victory for Columbus with an empty netter.

"We bent a little bit, but we'll correct some stuff around our net," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "But for the most part, we liked our game."



## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets roar past St. Louis Blues with another six-goal night: 6 takeaways

By Brian Hedger- January 6, 2025

One game away from the halfway point, the Blue Jackets are doing what nobody outside their locker room gave them a chance to do this season.

They're solidly in the mix for a playoff spot and continue to show resilience while dealing with challenges like Thursday's gut-wrenching 5-4 loss to the Detroit Red Wings in the final minute of the third period. Despite nearly letting another one slip away Saturday at sold-out Nationwide Arena, the Jackets improved to 17-17-6 with a 6-4 victory against the St. Louis Blues.

Have they become a legitimate playoff contender?

It's probably still early for that proclamation, but the Jackets are making significant gains in their ascent back to relevance in the Eastern Conference. They're tied at 40 points with the Pittsburgh Penguins and Ottawa Senators for the East's second wildcard, which belongs to Ottawa based on points percentage.

"It's something we've been working for all year," center Adam Fantilli said. "We want to jump into those (wild card) positions and jump into the playoffs this year."

Here are six takeaways from the Blue Jackets' win over the Blues:

Columbus Blue Jackets learning to preserve leads

Last season, the Blue Jackets probably would have lost despite holding leads in the third period of 3-0, 3-1, 4-1, 4-2 and 5-2 before the Blues pulled within a goal, 5-4, on goals by Colton Parayko and Brayden Schenn. They coughed up 15 leads in third periods last season and went 2-11-2 in those games.

That hasn't been the case this season, including a calm response to Schenn's goal that led to Mathieu Olivier sealing it with 1:01 left by scoring into an empty net.

"I think we've grown a lot as a team," defenseman Ivan Provorov said. "As a young team, you need experience. You've got to find ways. You've got to learn how to win, and that's what we've shown this year."

Columbus Blue Jackets offense still thriving

Despite trading Patrik Laine, per his request, and losing Johnny Gaudreau to a heartbreaking tragedy, the Blue Jackets are scoring at an unprecedented rate. This was their ninth game with at least six goals, which surpasses their eight from last season and pulls the Jackets within two of tying the franchise record of 11 in 2018-19, when Artemi Panarin was the catalyst and they stunned the Tampa Bay Lightning in the playoffs.

This version of the Blue Jackets is younger but just as capable of scoring goals. Excluding shootouts, their 135 goals are the most they've scored in the first 40 games of a season and rank sixth in the NHL at 3.38 goals-per game.

Columbus Blue Jackets forward Dmitri Voronkov is a matchup nightmare

Despite missing nine games with a shoulder injury, Dmitri Voronkov has become a consistent threat. After scoring two more goals, Voronkov is on pace for 35 goals, 26 assists and 61 points in 73 games.

He might also just be scratching the surface of his full capabilities as a power forward listed at an imposing 6 feet 5, 227 pounds. Voronkov, who played center in Russia, has nimble hands and playmaking instincts to go with a strong shot. Adding more physicality could make him even more of a matchup problem.

Zach Werenski keeps chugging for Columbus Blue Jackets

It's becoming an expectation to look at the Blue Jackets' scoresheet and see goals and/or assists next to Zach Werenski's name.

Two more assists against the Blues pushed his team-leading scoring total to 45 points on 12 goals and 33 assists, which has the star defenseman on pace for a jaw-dropping scoring line of 25-68-93 over a full season (82 games). He also extended his franchise record home points streak to 15 straight games and shows no signs of slowing his scoring pace regardless of location.

Werenski has 9-21-30 during the streak, which is the longest of its kind by an NHL defenseman in the past 40 years. He's one of nine defensemen in league history who've strung together points in 15 consecutive home games and first to do it since Ray Bourque's 17-game streak in 1992-93. Werenski's multi-assist night was also the 38th of his career, which moves him within one of tying Rick Nash (39) for most in franchise history.

Kevin Labanc misses Columbus Blue Jackets' win over St. Louis Blues for great reason

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason went with a lineup of 11 forwards and seven forwards for the sixth straight game, but that wasn't initially his plan. Kevin Labanc, a healthy scratch the previous five games, was supposed to draw back into the lineup on the fourth line with Mikael Pyyhtia and Sean Kuraly before a family situation presented a curveball.

The curveball?

Labanc's wife went into labor.

Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Damon Severson scratched again

It's a tough stretch for defenseman Damon Severson, who was scratched against the Blues for the second time in the past six games.

Those are the only two times Severson has been a healthy scratch since joining the Blue Jackets in a June 2023 trade with the New Jersey Devils that included him signing an eight-year contract extension worth \$50 million. Severson, 30, has six years left on the deal, so trading him wouldn't be easy with a \$6.25 million charge per season against the NHL salary cap.

That hasn't even been mentioned, though, so the Blue Jackets' most likely path forward with Severson is simply working through his current rough patch with patience.

## The Athletic / How Blue Jackets' crucial last-minute mistake led to gut-wrenching loss to Red Wings

By Aaron Portzline- January 3, 2025

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Columbus Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason had two defensemen and three checking-line forwards on the ice for the final minute of a late-game power play, an opportunity that presented the Jackets with a chance for a rousing comeback win or, at minimum, a point for dragging the game beyond regulation.

They got neither.

As the Blue Jackets pressed for the go-ahead goal in the final minute, nobody remembered to watch the back door, where Detroit Red Wings forward Jonatan Berggren was waiting to jump out of the penalty box.

Berggren's breakaway goal with 35.7 seconds remaining was the final dagger in a wild final few minutes, leading the Red Wings to a 5-4 win before an over-capacity crowd of 18,370 in Nationwide Arena.

"We'd like to get it to overtime there," Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski said. "It's an unfortunate bounce. Stuff like that happens in the game. It's definitely tough."

The Red Wings led 3-1 after the first period and 4-3 for much of the third, but the game appeared to turn with 2:51 remaining when Columbus' James van Riemsdyk scored his second goal of the game to pull the Blue Jackets into a 4-4 tie.

Detroit coach Todd McLellan asked for a review of the goal, as van Riemsdyk was clear in the Red Wings' crease, towering above goaltender Cam Talbot when he scored off a rebound from an Adam Fantilli shot. After a review, the goal was allowed to stand, which led to McLellan being charged for a delay of game penalty.

By losing the challenge, though, the Red Wings won the game.

Evason had forwards Cole Sillinger, Zach Aston-Reese and Mathieu Olivier and defensemen Ivan Provorov and Denton Mateychuk on the ice for the final minute of the power play, and they were pressing hard to score the go-ahead goal.

Provorov's shot from above the right circle struck Ben Chiarot and kicked hard up the middle of the ice as the penalty box door swung open for Berggren. Former Blue Jackets forward Tyler Motte dived to push the puck forward, springing Berggren for the breakaway as Mateychuk gave chase.

Berggren's shot glanced off Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins' glove before finding the net.

THE BLOCK. THE PASS. THE SHOT. [pic.twitter.com/XF77fp5ZTX](https://pic.twitter.com/XF77fp5ZTX)

— Detroit Red Wings (@DetroitRedWings) January 3, 2025

"It sucks," Fantilli said. "It deflects off the guy's pants and goes right up the middle. A few degrees different on that shot and we're in a different situation.

"That's hockey, though. Bounces happen. That's the way the game went."

It didn't have to be that way, though.

In that situation — late in the game, a tie score, a player set to come out of the penalty box behind you — you'd want the players on the power play to pull out of the offensive zone and be ready for a player to

exit the box. That's why goaltenders bang their sticks on the ice near the end of the power play, to remind their teammates of the risk that lurks behind them.

"I'd love to be sitting here with at least a point and the opportunity (to win in overtime or shootout)," Evason said. "We made a mistake, right? We should get out of there."

"It's clock awareness. It's recognizing where we are in the game. And just get out of there. And we didn't. We make a mistake. It ended up in our net, unfortunately. It could have gone the other way."

The Blue Jackets' frustration was evident at the final buzzer after they came oh so close to tying it again. A scrum broke out in front of the Red Wings' net, with Dmitri Voronkov (cross-checking) and Werenski (roughing) drawing penalties.

Werenski had a goal, two assists, a plus-3 rating and eight shots on net. The goal was his 12th of the season, tops among NHL defensemen. He also extended his home scoring streak to 14 games, the longest in the NHL in 15 seasons.

Zach Werenski cut the @BlueJacketsNHL's deficit to 3-2 and assisted on the tying goal to extend his franchise-record home point streak to 14 games.#NHLStats: <https://t.co/tEemP97qS1pic.twitter.com/zgYXuPevOa>

— NHL Public Relations (@PR\_NHL) January 3, 2025

Van Riemsdyk had two goals and an assist — his best night offensively with the Blue Jackets — and Sean Monahan also scored a goal. It was Werenski's goal at 11:09 of the second period that seemed to awaken the Blue Jackets from their early-game doldrums.

As much as the end of the game stung, the Blue Jackets were left to wonder how it might have played out if they hadn't slumbered and stumbled through the first 20 minutes.

"Our start was not very good," Evason said. "Our first period was not very good. That probably hurt us as much as everything that happened at the end."

The Blue Jackets (16-17-6) missed a chance to get over .500 with a win, a place they haven't been since a Dec. 5 loss to the Edmonton Oilers. They also missed a chance to pull into ninth place in the Eastern Conference, just a sniff away from a wild-card spot.

"We have another game in two days," van Riemsdyk said. "We have to be ready to play in two nights. We're right in the thick of a race to try and make the playoffs. We don't have time to sulk and feel sorry for ourselves."

## The Athletic / As Blue Jackets lean hard on Elvis Merzlikins, backup Daniil Tarasov watches, waits

**By Aaron Portzline- January 4, 2025**

COLUMBUS, Ohio — For the last five games, the Columbus Blue Jackets have played with an unconventional lineup, dressing 11 forwards and seven defensemen. Coach Dean Evason acknowledged after practice Friday that he and the rest of the coaching staff are considering a return to the more typical 12-6 alignment.

But there's one lineup decision that's more confounding and shows no signs of change.

Evason said that Elvis Merzlikins will start in goal for the Blue Jackets on Saturday when they host the St. Louis Blues in Nationwide Arena, which means that backup Daniil Tarasov will be in his familiar seat at the end of the Columbus bench.

"We're going to stay with exactly what we've been doing, and that's (going) game by game," Evason said earlier this week. "If we feel like any player gives us a chance to win, then he's going to go in."

Merzlikins is in the top half of the league's goaltenders with 25 starts, putting him on pace to blow past last year's figure (40 starts) and challenge his career mark (59 starts) in 2021-22. That's quite a workload for a goaltender with an .888 save percentage, which is among the worst in the NHL.

As for Tarasov ... he's watched more Blue Jackets games than most fans.

Tarasov's last start was last Saturday, a 4-0 loss in Boston. The Blue Jackets don't have a back-to-back on their schedule until Jan. 22 (at Toronto) and Jan. 23 (at Carolina), which means Tarasov — if nothing changes — could once again be waiting three weeks between starts.

Beginning in mid-October, Tarasov made four consecutive starts, and it looked like he was challenging Merzlikins for the No. 1 job.

But since then, he's gone the following number of days between starts: six, eight, six, 19, 23 and, currently, at least 10 heading toward Tuesday's game in Pittsburgh. Before his start in Boston one week ago, he hadn't played since Dec. 5.

"It was awesome to be back feeling the game, feeling the shots in a game, the speed of the game and just the atmosphere," Tarasov told The Athletic. "It was great to have a chance to help the guys get a win, but unfortunately it didn't happen."

"It's kinda tough when you're not playing and you can't really help the guys and you're not feeling like you're part of the success."

This has become an awkward situation.

At some point last month, the Blue Jackets gave Tarasov, 25, an opportunity to go to minor-league Cleveland on a conditioning assignment — those are typically used for players coming back from injury, but they can be used after a period of inactivity, too — but he declined.

It's within Tarasov's rights to refuse, per his contract and the NHL's collective bargaining agreement, but it likely didn't sit well with some inside the organization.

Given Tarasov's refusal, the only way the Blue Jackets could have sent him to the minor leagues would have been to first expose him to waivers, and general manager Don Waddell has said that's not an option given Tarasov's talent and previous success in Columbus.

Tarasov told The Athletic that he declined the conditioning assignment because “I felt like it would be better for me to play in the NHL than to play a couple of games in the AHL, honestly. I was really focused on playing well here (with Columbus).”

His agent, J.P. Barry, told The Athletic that Tarasov’s injury history in the AHL made him reluctant to accept an assignment, which can last as long as two weeks.

“His last few injuries were in (AHL) games and he felt like it was a risk/reward situation he didn’t want to take,” Barry said. “He’s been working hard with goaltending coaches, but he needs games.”

Evason declined to say what he felt about Tarasov’s decision, but the Blue Jackets recalled Jet Greaves from AHL Cleveland twice last month to give Merzlikins a rest. Greaves, who’s having a strong season in Cleveland, started four games between Dec. 12 and 23.

“I did have in my mind that (Greaves being recalled to start) might happen,” Tarasov said. “He’s a good goalie and he was playing pretty well (in Cleveland). He got the chance because I didn’t play well.

“(Greaves) earned this chance, so I can’t say it was really surprising. I just kept focusing on my game and getting back on track.”

Tarasov went 3-1-1 in his first five starts. He’s now lost five straight. His save percentage (.857) and goals-against average (4.23) are last in the league among the 58 goaltenders who have started 10 or more games.

This is how a chicken-or-egg conundrum gets started. Is Tarasov struggling because he’s not playing regularly enough? Or is he not playing regularly because he’s struggling?

A better question: How much longer can this goaltending rotation (stagnation?) be maintained?

“It’s part of the game,” Tarasov said. “It can happen in your career. I just need to focus on the team and focus on my game in practice and be ready.”

Waddell was hired as GM in May. Evason came aboard in late July. They don’t have vivid memories of Tarasov’s run of play last season when he took over the No. 1 job from Merzlikins. In a 12-game span from Feb. 21 to April 1, Tarasov went 5-5-1 with a .935 save percentage and 2.40 goals-against average.

“We had a good discussion today,” Evason said after Friday’s practice. “We didn’t pinpoint anything (as far as Tarasov’s next scheduled start).

“I worry about all the players. You worry about guys who are sitting out, if it’s too long. Hockey players want to play hockey, regardless if it’s a goalie, a defenseman or forward. We’re mindful of it, but we have to make decisions that are in the best interest of the team.”

## The Athletic / Dmitri Voronkov scores twice, Blue Jackets survive wild third for bounce-back win

By Aaron Portzline- January 5, 2025

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Towering Columbus Blue Jackets winger Dmitri Voronkov, who rarely speaks to the media because of a language barrier, saddled up next to defenseman Ivan Provorov so that he could field questions after another banner night at the rink.

Two questions stood out: Is he surprised that he's having this much success as a goal scorer in the NHL? How high is his confidence now that he's 100 games into his NHL career and becoming a major force?

Both questions bounced off Voronkov like most of the opponents who try to check him.

Is he surprised?

"Not surprising," Voronkov said. "I work hard. I play hard. I'm going to continue to do the same thing."

As for his confidence?

"Everything is good with me all the time," Voronkov said. "I'm always confident."

Voronkov continued his torrid pace, scoring two more goals on Saturday — his third two-goal game in his last seven outings — to help the Blue Jackets to a 6-4 win over the St. Louis Blues before an over-capacity crowd of 18,535 in Nationwide Arena.

Adam Fantilli, Mikael Pyyhtiä, Kirill Marchenko and Mathieu Olivier also scored goals, while Provorov and Sean Monahan each had three assists.

The Blue Jackets never trailed, but they had to survive a wild third period in which each club scored four goals. It wasn't until Olivier's empty net goal from the neutral zone, his 10th goal of the season, that the Blue Jackets could breathe easy.

When is the last time it's been safe to look at the NHL standings after New Year's Day? Hell, after Thanksgiving?

There have been so many individual performances that have allowed this resurgence to happen — Zach Werenski's ridiculous scoring and puck wizardry, Marchenko's puck-hounding and lethal shot, Monahan's quiet excellence and scoring ... we could go on here.

But Voronkov has been a revelation.

The 24-year-old left winger now has 15 goals (in only 31 games) after scoring in the first and third periods on Saturday, leaving him just three goals short of the surprising sum he managed last season as a rookie. And consider this: He never scored more than 18 goals in any pro season in Russia.

Over his last 10 games, Voronkov has eight goals, six assists, 14 points and a plus-9 rating. He's figured out that on a line with Monahan at center and Marchenko on the wing, his best bet is to head to the net and throw his 6-5, 228-pound frame into the dirty areas.

"He's been great," Provorov said. "Big body. Plays a smart game. Can make plays. A great player who can make an impact on a team. It's still (only) his second year. If he continues the same way, he's going to only continue to be a better player."

Voronkov gave the Blue Jackets a 1-0 lead late in the first period when he cleaned up a Werenski shot behind Blues goaltender Joel Hofer. A power-play goal by Marchenko at 2:15 of the second made it 2-0, and that was where it stood through 40 minutes.

The third period was chaos on skates. At 3:44 of the third, and with Columbus on the penalty kill, Pyyhtiä skated around a flat-footed Brandon Saad in the neutral zone, zooming wide of the Blues forward — and former Blue Jacket — for a clean look and score on Hofer.

That was the first of five goals — three for Columbus, two for St. Louis — scored in the next 3 minutes, 40 seconds of playing time, leaving the Jackets with a 5-2 lead. The Blues pulled to 5-3 at 12:54 and added an extra-attacker goal at 16:16 to make it 5-4.

This was not at all what the Blue Jackets needed, not after losing in heartbreaking, last-minute fashion to Detroit only 48 hours earlier. They held a meeting on Friday to discuss the loss — and the way they lost — then did their best to move beyond it.

“If you lose 4-0 or lose (like that) it’s still two points you didn’t get,” Provorov said.

“We’ve grown a lot as a team. As a young team, you need experience. You have to learn to win. That’s what we’ve shown so far, is that we’re learning how to win.”

The Blue Jackets are part of a logjam in the Eastern Conference. Only four points separate seventh-place Tampa Bay (the first wild card) and the 13th-place Philadelphia Flyers. The Jackets haven’t felt safe looking at the standings since the 2020-21 season.

“I check (the standings) every now and then,” Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. “We don’t have boards (with the standings) or that type of stuff in the dressing room. But the guys know that we’re in it.

“More importantly, they know when they come into the dressing room every night for a game that we have a chance to win. We have a chance to win every single night. That’s what’s exciting for this group. That’s what gets them jacked.”



## The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: Luca Del Bel Belluz becoming a bona fide NHL prospect

By Aaron Portzline- January 6, 2025

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

Item No. 1: By any other name

Luca Del Bel Belluz's name is distinct in its own right. But it's a dream come true in a hockey dressing room where every player is tagged with a nickname, usually some variation of their name.

"Some guys call me Del Bel," Del Bel Belluz told The Athletic. "Some guys call me Delly. I get Beller sometimes, and Bel. There's the occasional Lukey. It's kind of all over the place. A lot of different people call me a lot of different things."

Here's something else the hockey world is calling Del Bel Belluz: a bona fide NHL prospect.


The Blue Jackets' second-round pick (No. 44) in 2022 has bloomed in his second season with AHL Cleveland, leading the American Hockey League in scoring with 17-19-36 in only 33 games. The 21-year-old center has already blown past the numbers he put up last season (9-22-31 in 58 games), his first as a pro.

For perspective: The Blue Jackets have never had a player finish among the top five scorers during an AHL season, mostly because they've all been recalled (rushed?) to Columbus to help the Blue Jackets at the very first sign of success.

It's not as if the Blue Jackets haven't thought about recalling Del Bel Belluz. Coach Dean Evason was surprisingly frank when asked about him on Friday.

"He's playing great, obviously," Evason said. "We had a good chat about him the other day, that if we're in a spot (where we need a forward), he deserves — he has earned — the right to be here. We just don't have a spot at this point.

"(Coach) Trent (Vogelhuber) has told us he's doing all the right things in his development and playing extremely well, not only offensively — you can see the numbers — but he's doing the right things defensively, as well."

.@monstershockey leading goal-scorer Luca Del Bel Belluz nets his 16th of the season   
[pic.twitter.com/to5cxL56N9](https://pic.twitter.com/to5cxL56N9)

— American Hockey League (@TheAHL) December 20, 2024

Del Bel Belluz said the Cleveland coaching staff, along with GM Chris Clark, was frank and direct last spring after the Monsters' playoff run ended, telling him in their exit meeting that he needed to continue getting stronger and faster if he was going to play his way out of the minors.

"I went into summer with a real clear idea of what was needed," Del Bel Belluz said. "I didn't take any days off. This is what I want to do, and I'm very determined to do it. When they told me what to do, I got to it right away."

For the two previous summers, he'd attended the highly respected summer camp run by former NHLer Gary Roberts, skating mostly with players from the junior and college ranks. But last summer, former Blue Jackets minor-leaguer Brendan Gaunce helped get him into camp with NHL players.

Connor McDavid was there. So were Steven Stamkos, Leon Draisaitl and others, Del Bel Belluz said.

“I was picking their brains as much as I could,” Del Bel Belluz said. “But mostly I was watching them ... their habits, the way they go about their days, the way they treat their bodies. It’s not just going to the gym for an hour or two and calling it a day. It’s everything they do, from the time they wake up to the time they go to bed.

“By the end of last season in Cleveland, I was playing in a top-six role. I came into this season really wanting to be the guy. If I wasn’t going to be in Columbus, I wanted to be the guy in Cleveland.”

Del Bel Belluz had a hat trick in the second game of the season. He’s had four other games with two goals and has only once gone three games without a point.

AHL Cleveland assistant coach Mark Letestu, who played 567 NHL games with four different franchises, including two stints with Columbus, said there are distinct differences in Del Bel Belluz’s game this season.

“The reason for his success this year is he’s playing on the interior much more,” Letestu said. “He has scored and created much more around the net: tips, screens, rebounds, etc. That, combined with his ability to score from range, has really let his numbers take off.

“He doesn’t go stretches without goals or points because he’s playing in areas where they occur most. It’s difficult and it requires a price that others aren’t willing to pay, but he’s embraced that and he’s been rewarded for it.”

Or, as Del Bel Belluz put it: “You might get a couple more cross-checks, but you’re going to score if you go there.”

Del Bel Belluz said he’s not preoccupied with when the call from Columbus will happen. He made his NHL debut in the final Blue Jackets game last season and scored a goal on his first shot.

The Blue Jackets are as solid at center — Sean Monahan, Adam Fantilli, Cole Sillinger, Sean Kuraly, etc. — as they’ve been in years, so a path to the NHL isn’t clear as of today. But if his development continues, and if he continues to get stronger and more explosive with his skating, the Jackets will make room.

“It’s good to hear they recognize (how the season is going),” Del Bel Belluz said. “Veteran guys and coaches keep telling me to just stick with it and eventually you’re going to get your chance. They say things like, ‘They see it. They notice it. It will come.’

“Whenever I walk into Vogie’s office, he drives the point home that goals and points are great, but the real goal here is to become a 200-foot player and be solid in all three zones.

“I’d love to be there today and be able to showcase what I can do. Hopefully, soon enough, I’ll get my chance.”

Item No. 2: So many goals

Through Saturday’s games, the Blue Jackets are the sixth-highest-scoring team in the NHL, averaging 3.38 goals per game. Put another way: They’ve been able to score enough goals to cover for their shoddy goaltending and maddeningly inconsistent defensive play.

With Saturday’s 6-4 win over the St. Louis Blues, the Blue Jackets have now scored six or more goals in a game for the ninth time this season, which will hit the midpoint — Game No. 41 — when Columbus plays in Pittsburgh on Tuesday.

The Blue Jackets scored six-plus goals on eight occasions last season, so they’ve already surpassed that. The franchise record — 11 times during the 2018-19 season — is now in the crosshairs.

Other scoring stats to consider:

- The Blue Jackets are the highest-scoring home team in the NHL this season, averaging 4.1 goals per game in Nationwide Arena. With 86 goals in 21 home games, the Jackets are on pace to score 168 goals at home this season. (That's a lot of cannonballs.) The previous franchise high is 139 goals, set in 2021-22.
- At 3.38 goals per game, the Jackets are on pace to score 277 goals this season, which would be a franchise record. The 2021-22 Blue Jackets scored 258 goals.
- The Blue Jackets have three players — Zach Werenski (45 points), Kirill Marchenko (43) and Monahan (40) — on pace for 80-point seasons. Only one player in franchise history has ever had an 80-point season: Artemi Panarin, who had 87 points in 2018-19 and 82 points in 2017-18.

Item No. 3: Take 5, James van Riemsdyk

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

1. What part of Columbus is home and why?

New Albany. I'm out there because a lot of the guys are out there, and I'd always heard good things about it. There's nothing that's too far away here. Renting a house last minute is never easy, but we found a good spot.

2. What's your biggest surprise with Columbus?

I've been coming here a long time and I've heard so much about it, so I kinda had a clue already. But it's just as nice as everybody says it is. I'd say the food scene is the biggest surprise. I'm very much into healthy eating, and there are a lot of options here. I still haven't been to all of them, but the places I've found have been really high quality. It's better than most cities.

3. Favorite restaurant in Columbus?

I've got a bunch. For casual, I'd say Town Hall and Bareburger right here near the rink (in the Short North), REBOL (in Dublin) and True Food (Kitchen) out near us. Those are the ones I cycle through. As for nicer places, Martini (Short North) is obviously really good. The Guild House is a good spot. We like The Barn (in New Albany), too, and we've been to a couple of spots in German Village that were really good.

4. Who's the best player you've played with and against?

Man, I've played with a lot of good ones. Z (Werenski) is right up there. Chris Pronger, Claude Giroux, Phil Kessel ... oh, and Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner. As far as against ... Connor McDavid, for sure. But I'd put Sidney Crosby and Cale Makar there, too.

5. Which teammate should have a podcast?

I feel like (Dmitri) Voronkov would be a good one. He'd be like "Spittin' Chiclets" style, with some really good stories. (Justin) Danforth would be really good. I'd put Jack Johnson and Erik Gudbranson there, too.

Item No. 4: Snacks

- With two assists on Saturday, Werenski extended his home points streak to 15 games, the longest by an NHL blueliner since Ray Bourque fashioned a 17-game home point streak with Boston during the 1992-93 season. The record is held by Paul Coffey, who scored at least a point in 23 straight home games with Edmonton during the 1985-86 season. The last time Werenski was held off the scoresheet in

Nationwide Arena was Oct. 30 vs. the New York Islanders. During that 15-game span, Werenski has 9-21-30 with a plus-17 rating and 82 shots on goal.

- When watching the play Werenski made at 5:25 of the third period on Saturday, the numbers he's piling up this season — 12-33-45 in 40 games, good for second in the NHL — only make sense. Werenski gathered the puck in his own end and curled behind the net to survey the ice as the Blues made a line change. Fantilli took off out of the zone with speed and Werenski sailed the puck his way with a perfect carom off the boards to avoid St. Louis' Mathieu Joseph, the puck meeting Fantilli in stride at the far blue line. Fantilli scored his eighth of the season for a 4-1 lead. "We talked about it maybe 2-3 weeks ago," Fantilli said. "When he's behind the net and if one of their D is changing or has pinched, I'm going to take off and try to get the pass on the outside. We both kind of remembered that. I went for it and he put it right on my tape."

20th career goal for Adam Fantilli! 🏒 #CBJ pic.twitter.com/XVaLPXf5XO

— FanDuel Sports Network Columbus (@FanDuelSN\_CBUS) January 5, 2025

- The Athletic had a chance to catch up with former Blue Jackets forward David Vyborny, who last week was named to the IIHF Hall of Fame. Vyborny didn't stick in the NHL until after the Blue Jackets signed him as a 25-year-old free agent out of Europe ahead of their inaugural season. In 543 games with Columbus, he had 113 goals, 204 assists and 317 points, currently sixth on the franchise points list. Vyborny won five gold medals with Czechia at the World Championships and bronze medals at the 2006 Olympics, 2004 World Cup and 1993 and '94 World Junior Championships. He went into the Hall with Henrik Lundqvist, Zdeno Chara, Frans Nielsen and three others.
- Vyborny said he was surprised to get the phone call. "I did not expect this at all," he told The Athletic during an email exchange. "I will be turning 50 soon (Jan. 22), so this is the time the prizes are given. It is the prize of my hockey career." Vyborny currently lives in Prague, where he and another former Jacket, Jakub Voracek, meet up to play tennis and have beers. He also has stayed in touch with longtime Blue Jackets trainer Jamie Healy. Asked for his favorite memory during his time with the Blue Jackets, Vyborny said: "That first game (in franchise history). My 100th goal (Dec. 28, 2006, vs. Detroit) and 500th game (Nov. 24, 2007, vs. Detroit)."
- After seven straight healthy scratches, Blue Jackets winger Kevin Labanc was expected to return to the lineup on Saturday against the Blues. But he had to miss the game for the best reason imaginable: Lara Grace Labanc, all 6 pounds and 2 ounces of her, entered the world on Saturday. Kelly Labanc and the little one are doing well, the veteran forward informed the Blue Jackets this morning.
- Blue Jackets forward Mikael Pyyhtiä scored the first short-handed goal of his career on Saturday only 11 seconds after the Blues went on the power play. Monahan won a defensive-zone faceoff and Ivan Provorov skated the puck out of the zone, finding Pyyhtiä with speed entering the neutral zone. He skated around former Blue Jackets winger Brandon Saad for a clean look at goaltender Joel Hofer. Scoring 11 seconds into a penalty kill is not a franchise record, but it's darn impressive considering the ensuing draws are taken in the offensive zone for the club on the power play. Twice the Jackets have scored a short-handed goal only six seconds into a kill, according to the league: Cam Atkinson on Feb. 8, 2021, vs. Carolina, and Werenski on Dec. 21, 2019, vs. New Jersey.
- Sunday Gathering trivia question: Detroit's Patrick Kane had a goal and an assist on Thursday in a 5-4 win over the Blue Jackets, giving him 27-56-83 in his career (62 games) against the Blue Jackets. Most of that damage, of course, was done with the Chicago Blackhawks when the Blackhawks and Blue Jackets played in the NHL's Central Division. Kane's assists and points are the most by any opponent against the Blue Jackets. But which player, active or retired, has scored the most goals against Columbus?

- The Blue Jackets had two players participate in the World Junior Championship this year. Forward Luca Pinelli, a fourth-round pick (No. 114) in 2023, had 1-1-2 and eight penalty minutes in five games for Team Canada, which lost in the quarterfinals. Goaltender Melvin Strahl, drafted one round later than Pinelli in the same draft (No. 156) did not appear in a game for Sweden, which was bounced by Finland in the semifinals. The United States plays Finland today in Ottawa for gold.
- AHL Cleveland beat the Toronto Marlies 3-1 on Saturday with goals from Stanislav Svozil, Gavin Brindley and Dylan Gambrell; two assists from Owen Sillinger and 33 saves by Jet Greaves. It marked the 14th straight win by the Monsters over the Marlies dating back to Nov. 2022, which is pretty impressive considering the Marlies have had winning teams in all three seasons. They get a chance to push it to 15 games when they meet again today at 4 p.m.
- Trivia answer: It's another Patrick — Patrick Sharp — whose 28 goals vs. Columbus rank as the most by an opponent. Sharp had 28-21-49 in 51 games vs. Columbus with Philadelphia, Chicago and Dallas. Other goal leaders against the Blue Jackets: Kane and Jarome Iginla (27), Alex Ovechkin (26), Keith Tkachuk (24), David Legwand (23) and Teemu Selanne, Pavel Datsyuk, Corey Perry and David Backes (21).

## [BlueJackets.com / Berggren scores late, Red Wings edge Blue Jackets](#)

By Craig Merz- January 3, 2025

COLUMBUS -- Jonatan Berggren scored the go-ahead goal with 36 seconds remaining in the third period for the Detroit Red Wings in a 5-4 win against the Columbus Blue Jackets at Nationwide Arena on Thursday.

Tyler Motte poked a loose puck ahead to Berggren, who scored on a breakaway to give Detroit a 5-4 lead five seconds after exiting the penalty box following a Columbus power play.

Berggren was serving the Red Wings' delay of game penalty for unsuccessfully challenging for goalie interference on the Blue Jackets' goal by James van Riemsdyk at 17:19 that tied it 4-4.

"Ben (Chiarot) made a huge block and then it landed perfect on Motte's stick. He saw me and I tried to score," Berggren said. "When you're sitting in the penalty box you kind of hope it comes like that. This time it was lucky."

Alex DeBrincat had a goal and two assists, Patrick Kane and Dylan Larkin each had a goal and an assist, and Erik Gustafsson scored for the Red Wings (16-18-4), who have won three straight following a four-game skid. Cam Talbot made 21 saves.

"The finish is what we were looking for, not necessarily the road map we had to get there, but we said we'd find out a little bit about our team," Detroit coach Todd McLellan said. "Found out that there's some resiliency in the group."

Van Riemsdyk had two goals and an assist, Zach Werenski scored and had two assists to extend his home point streak to 14 games, and Sean Monahan scored for the Blue Jackets (16-17-6), who had won three of four. Elvis Merzlikins made 21 saves.

"There's a lot of stuff we could have done better to put ourselves in a position to not have it come down to the end like that," Werenski said. "I think if we start better, get to our game better, it's probably a different story at the end. I think that's the main thing -- playing the full 60 minutes -- and I don't think we did that tonight."

Van Riemsdyk gave Columbus a 1-0 lead at 2:42 of the first period on the power play, tipping a shot by Cole Sillinger.

Kane tied it 1-1 at 6:55, poking in the puck after Merzlikins couldn't corral a shot from the slot by DeBrincat and the Blue Jackets were unable to clear the rebound. He extended his goal streak to three games.

Gustafsson put the Red Wings ahead 2-1 at 14:39 with a shot from the left point that went in off the post for his first goal of the season. He ended a 42-game goal drought back to March 11, 2024.

DeBrincat scored seven seconds into a power play at 17:09 to extend it to 3-1.

DeBrincat said there is a positive vibe since McLellan was named coach on Dec. 26.

"I think there's no quit," DeBrincat said. "We give up that late goal, and our PK does a great job, and obviously [Berggren] scores after that."

"We're not getting down on the bench when we have a momentum swing. We just keep working to get that momentum back and it's been going well for us."

Werenski cut it to 3-2 at 11:09 of the second period after Fantilli won the draw in the left face-off circle back to him before skating in and scoring from the high slot.

Monahan tied it 3-3 at 18:40, converting a backhanded pass from the right corner by van Riemsdyk.

Larkin gave the Red Wings a 4-3 lead with a power-play goal at 4:54 of the third period off a centering pass from DeBrincat.

Van Riemsdyk's second goal then appeared to set the Blue Jackets up for overtime until Berggren scored in the final minute.

"I'd love to be sitting here with at least a point and have the opportunity," Columbus coach Dean Evason said. "We made a mistake at the end. It's fine. We'll learn from it, and we'll go forward."

NOTES: Kane recorded his 824th career assist and needs one to tie former Red Wings captain Alex Delvecchio (825) for 28th place on the NHL's all-time list. ... Larkin has five points (two goals, three assists) in a four-game point streak. ... DeBrincat has six points (three goals, three assists) in a three-game point streak.

## [BlueJackets.com / Sillinger's versatility, consistency make him a big piece for Blue Jackets](#)

By Garrison McDaniel- January 3, 2025

After becoming the fourth-youngest Blue Jacket to debut for the club and only the sixth 18-year-old to wear the union blue, Cole Sillinger has continued to build his game four seasons into his career.

Since his debut, Sillinger has had to develop in front of the fans while managing the lofty expectations that were set for him by the CBJ faithful as a first-round pick in the 2021 draft as well as being a CBJ legacy. This season, he has found his scoring touch while also playing well in all phases of the game.

"He's been a versatile guy," head coach Dean Evason said. "He's played on the wing, up and down our lineup, kills penalties, plays on the power play, does all those little things. He's still a very young guy. He's a very good player for us in all situations. He's had a really good season so far."

His six goals and 21 points in 38 games played this season puts him in a tie for fifth on the squad and leaves him on pace to set career highs in assists and points in a season. Sillinger's 17:44 average time on ice per game is also a career high, and his faceoff winning percentage of 49.6 is the best of his career as well.

"Each year you play, you gain more experience and you just learn a little more about the league," Sillinger said. "Now I feel like I want to just take advantage of some of the opportunities from that."

As a center in the NHL, it takes experience and repetition to make the correct reads on each play and in each situation. Now in his fourth year at this level, the 21-year-old is developing that muscle memory.

"If I'm thinking, I'm not having a good game," Sillinger said. "A thinking hockey player is one that is a step behind."

His father, Mike Sillinger, played two seasons in Columbus, recording 86 points in 155 games with the club. He has been impressed with his son's play this season and credits it to the maturity he has shown through his years in the league.

"He's in his fourth year and he's only 21," Mike said. "So my big thing is that I think the reason why he's having a good year is because of maturity."

His consistency has stood out to his elder Sillinger this season. Cole has had the tools to be a scorer in the NHL since his debut, including 16 goals in his first season to place fifth all-time in rookie scoring for the Blue Jackets. However, he is starting to show that skill day in and day out this season.

"I think a good year is based on how you consistently be successful every night playing the game," Mike said. "That's what he's starting to do right now. He's always been competitive, but I think day in and day out, what Cole is doing is that he's competing and playing the same every day."

Another aspect of Sillinger's game that has developed this season is, as Evason referred to it, his "bite." Sillinger is fifth on the Blue Jackets with 53 hits and hasn't been afraid to mix it up with opposing teams, including against Tampa Bay when he confronted Conor Geekie after a hit that left Dante Fabbro injured – an action that earned him plaudits from Evason.

"I want everybody to play with a bite, play with some grit and some determination, and some in-your-face hockey," Evason said. "He does that. He plays a straightforward game. He's physical, gets in the battles and the confrontations. Yeah, we really like it."



Not only do Evason and his staff look for that commitment from the players, and specifically Sillinger, but the center looks for that in his own game. He knows that playing that style of hockey helps him get into the game and play better all around the ice.

“I do feel like when I’m at my best, that’s playing with an edge, that’s intense, that’s playing with emotion,” Sillinger said. “Yeah, I do feel like when I’m at my best, playing my best hockey, it involves bringing a chip on my shoulder.”

His dad believes that has always been a big part of Sillinger’s game and has been proud of how his son has used it to his fullest advantage.

“He’s a big guy. He’s 6-1 or 6-2, so I think his big thing is that he’s always been competitive,” Mike said.

“So as far as being engaged, I think he’s always engaged. I think that’s what he does. He’s a big competitor. He doesn’t take any nights off.”

## [BlueJackets.com / Winning Thoughts: Blue Jackets win another home thriller](#)

By Garrison McDaniel- January 4, 2025

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

BLUE JACKETS 6, BLUES 4

1. The Blue Jackets extended their NHL lead for goals at home to 86.

All season long the Blue Jackets have loved to play at Nationwide Arena. With a record of 13-5-3 and a league high in goals scored, their play at home has kept them firmly in the playoff race throughout the first half of the season.

"The fans are awesome. We love playing in front of them. They're great," Adam Fantilli said after notching his eighth goal of the season in front of a sellout crowd. "They show it every night. I'm sure when the guys are at home ... there's a level of comfortability, but fans are great. We love coming out and playing in front of the fans."

Their power play has helped feed into the offensive production at Nationwide Arena. They currently sit at third in the league for power-play percentage at home at 31.6 percent and have scored a goal on the man advantage in 11 of the last 14 games overall as well as 10 straight home contests.

In large part because of their successes at home, they exit play tonight tied on points for the second wild card spot in the East.

"They know when they come in the dressing room every night for a game, we have a chance to win," head coach Dean Evason said. "Hopefully at the end of the day, we'll take that first step, which we've talked about, of making the playoffs."

2. Zach Werenski continued his dominance at Nationwide Arena.

After a pair of assists against St. Louis, Werenski now has recorded a point in 15 straight home games, the longest such streak in the NHL since Ray Bourque in 1992-93. His 12-33-45 line places him second in the NHL for points by a defenseman and second for goals by a defenseman, and his 33 points at home are third for all NHL skaters on home ice, behind only Nathan MacKinnon (35) and Connor McDavid (34).

On a highlight-reel play against the Blues, he recorded the primary helper on Fantilli's third period goal to make the score 4-1. His stretch pass from behind Elvis Merzlikins' net to the far side blueline showcased his vision and skill to be able to make such plays.

"That's something I've talked to him about before, where if he's behind the net and one of their D changes, I'm going to take off and try to get the pass on the outside," Fantilli said. "We talked about it maybe two weeks or three weeks ago, and I think once I saw him come around the net, we both kind of remembered that. I went for it, and he put it right on my tape. It was perfect."

It seems every game that the Blue Jackets have played this season, Werenski has had some highlight that stands out. That's especially true of late, as Werenski has 13 points (one goal, 12 assists) in the last six games.

"I know I'm not articulate enough to explain or to say how great a player and/or a person he is," Evason said. "He's so, so good offensively, but he's also fantastic defensively, and he's a pro."

3. The Blue Jackets were rewarded for sticking with 11 forwards and seven defensemen.

However, in this instance it was not the play on the ice that made Evason stick with his 11/7 lineup, but an important life-changing event for forward Kevin Labanc.

“Labanc was supposed to play tonight, but his wife's having a baby,” Evason said. “Still waiting for the update.”

But it's also hard to mess with success. Since Dec. 23, the Blue Jackets have played six straight games with seven defensemen and 11 forwards, as rookie Denton Mateychuk has earned a spot on the NHL roster and Evason wanted to give more playing time to the top of his forward group.

This decision has paid off for the head coach, with the Jackets going 4-2-0 in the games since the change. They have scored four or more goals in five of the six games.

## [BlueJackets.com / Voronkov has 2 goals, Blue Jackets hold off Blues](#)

By Craig Merz- January 4, 2025

COLUMBUS -- Dmitri Voronkov scored twice, and Sean Monahan and Ivan Provorov each had three assists when the Columbus Blue Jackets held off the St. Louis Blues for a 6-4 win at Nationwide Arena on Saturday.

Blues at Blue Jackets | Recap

The Blue Jackets had a three-goal lead three times in a third period in which eight total goals were scored. Mathieu Olivier sealed it with an empty-net goal at 18:59 for the 6-4 final.

"There was a lot of goals, but that can happen at any time," Columbus forward Adam Fantilli said. "They're a good team. They played last night, so maybe they had a bit of a slow start, and maybe they found their game in the third and that's what caused that.

"They're a team that likes to go. We knew they were going to try and score their goals at the end there, and it was going to get run and gun. All that matters is we ended up with the win."

Kirill Marchenko and Fantilli scored, and Zach Werenski had two assists to extend his home point streak to 15 games for the Blue Jackets (17-17-6), who are 5-2-1 in their past eight games. Elvis Merzlikins made 29 saves.

"They're building that resilience," Columbus coach Dean Evason said. "They're building that whole pack that they stick together."

Jordan Kyrou, Brayden Schenn and Cam Fowler each had a goal and an assist, and Colton Parayko also scored for the Blues (19-18-4), who had won two straight and four of five. Dylan Holloway had two assists, and Joel Hofer made 33 saves.

St. Louis was coming off a 4-0 victory against the Ottawa Senators on Friday.

"I wish we would have capitalized on some of the odd-man rushes that we had in the first," St. Louis coach Jim Montgomery said. "First goal was big. They got it there towards the end of the first. They played really desperate. They went hard to our net, throwing everything at the net. We expected it. And then the second, we were kind of flat. And then the third, we pushed back."

Voronkov gave Columbus a 1-0 lead at 19:01 of the first period.

Marchenko scored on the power play to make it 2-0 at 2:15 of the second period. His shot from the left went off the skate off Parayko.

Mikael Pyhtia extended it to 3-0 with his first NHL short-handed goal at 3:44 of the third period on a breakaway.

Kyrou cut it to 3-1 on the power play at 4:54, scoring from the slot.

"A little bit desperation, a little more push from us, like we're just trying to fire pucks more and just get to the net more," Kyrou said.

Fantilli took a long pass off the boards from Werenski and pushed it to 4-1 at 5:25 with a goal from the right circle.

Fowler made it 4-2 at 6:55 off a pass by Holloway for his 100th NHL goal.

Voronkov scored his second goal of the game on the backhand to extend it to 5-2 at 7:24, the last of five total goals scored in a span of 3:40.

Parayko cut it to 5-3 at 12:54, but Schenn made it 5-4 at 16:16.

“We made a strong push, for sure,” Parayko said. “I thought that's obviously a positive. Disappointing not to get two points, but it's good to see the push.”

But it wasn't enough, and the Blue Jackets continued their surge.

“Anytime you go into the season, no matter what you have on the team or whatever happens with the team, your goal is to make the playoffs and then see what happens,” Provorov said. “Right now, our goal is to get better as a team and to make the playoffs.”

NOTES: Marchenko's 43 points (17 goals, 26 assists) in 40 games surpasses his NHL career best of 42 (23 goals, 19 assists) in 78 games last season. ... Werenski has 30 points (nine goals, 21 assists) during his home streak, which is the longest such streak by a defenseman since Ray Bourque had a 17-game streak in 1992-93. ... Werenski has six points (goal, five assists) in a three-game point streak and 13 points (one goal, 12 assists) in his past six games. ... Parayko, who played in his 700th NHL game, became the third defenseman and eighth player to appear in as many games with the Blues.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets News & Rumors: Evason, Werenski & More

By Mark Scheig- January 3, 2025

Welcome to the first Blue Jackets' News & Rumors of 2025. The team hopes to start the new year off right as they host the Detroit Red Wings and St. Louis Blues over the next couple of days.

The Blue Jackets are coming off an impressive 4-3 win over the Carolina Hurricanes. The shootout win was their second of the season against the Hurricanes. It also put their home record to 12-4-3 on the season with the next two within the friendly confines of Nationwide Arena.

Today, we hear from Dean Evason on his philosophy playing 11-7 as well as thoughts on his lines right now. Then Zach Werenski reacts to his franchise-record 11 shots on goal from Tuesday night.

### Coach Speak

The Blue Jackets are likely staying with an 11-7 lineup for Thursday's game against the Red Wings although Coach Evason would only go as far as saying "maybe" when pressed. He did say that Kevin Labanc being out was not performance related but a "numbers game."

With both Labanc and Jordan Harris skating late, that implies the Blue Jackets are using the same lineup as Tuesday. Elvis Merzlikins was in the home net and is projected to start.

Going 11-7 has its advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, if a defenseman gets injured, there are six others still available to play. It also allows another forward the chance to double shift with the "fourth line." On the other hand, going 11-7 can create situations where the lines and pairs are constantly mixed making it hard to find chemistry at times. It also limits the ice time of certain players while increasing the ice time of others.

We asked Evason what goes into deciding who plays the extra forward spot. We also asked him how that affects the two forwards on that bottom line when linemates are constantly changing. He had an interesting answer.

"We go into the game with a plan," Evason said. "There's a thought process of who and when and situational (who) we put into that spot. But then it varies with penalties or matchups. If we short shift the line or what have you to match up, then it flips off of the line that we were going to double up. So there's a lot of factors that go into it. Feel is certainly one of them."

"But those two guys in particular, Kurlis (Sean Kuraly) and Tuna (Mikael Pyyhtia) have done a great job. The other night we put (Monahan) there a couple of times. Kurlis played left. Tuna played right. Our guys have done a really good job of staying focused, communicating on the bench because it can easily get confusing if (Kirill Marchenko) plays right wing with one line and plays left wing with the other. Our guys have been real good at communicating and making sure that our changes are properly executed after we've made that call."

As for the lines, although not everyone is making an impact on the scoresheet, Evason has liked what he's seen from them as a whole. The trio of Werenski, Marchenko and Dmitri Voronkov combined for 20 of the 28 shots on goal Tuesday night. While that's the skill of the top players doing their thing, Evason made it a point to say everyone has contributed in other ways.

"Would we like consistency? Would we like every line to be producing, every player, every defenseman? Absolutely," Evason said. "Some will produce more than others just because of skill set. Ice time, special teams, that type of stuff all play into it. So would we like having depth in the scoring? Yeah, of course."

Sure those guys have scored, probably majority (of the points.) But other lines are generating. Even if lines aren't scoring or a D-pair is not scoring, it's creating momentum. We're keeping the puck out of our net as well. But every shift, you want to create momentum and keep that going on our side. And I think all four lines have done that on a regular basis."

As long as they are winning and seeing results, expect the Blue Jackets to keep the same alignment. Here's how they looked at the morning skate.

- Voronkov-Monahan-Marchenko
- K.Johnson-Sillinger-Olivier
- van Riemsdyk-Fantilli-Aston Reese
- Pyyhtia-Kuraly
- Werenski-Fabbro
- Mateychuk-Provorov
- Christiansen-Severson
- J.Johnson
- Merzlikins (likely starter)
- Tarasov

#### Werenski Taking What's Available

No Blue Jacket in team history has unleashed 11 or more shots on goal in a single game. That was until Tuesday when Werenski did it. He didn't even know until it was brought up to him on Thursday morning.

His great start to the season is well documented. He's among the NHL leaders in defensemen scoring while leading the league in average time on ice.

Is Werenski looking to shoot that much? He explained Thursday morning what he sees and how he views trying to generate shots on goal.

"I feel like for me, it depends on the game," Werenski said. "I'm not going to just force shots but I feel like if it's a team like Carolina, that's all they do is throw pucks at the net. They're good defensively as well. They don't really give you much. So I feel like for me, every time I had a chance to put a puck on the net, that was my thought process. A lot of faceoff wins to me in the offensive zone that had me going down the wall and guys going to the net. Trying to throw pucks there, create traffic and create chaos. (Kent Johnson) finds me in the slot on one for a great chance."

"I wasn't really trying to force it. It's just how the game flowed. It just worked that way. I think whenever you can get pucks on net especially with guys going there, it's always a good play in the NHL. So definitely more of an emphasis on it for me this year."

The Blue Jackets are 1-10-2 when Werenski is held off the scoresheet which means they are 15-6-4 when he records at least one point. His production has been an integral part of everything the Blue Jackets have done to be in the playoff race.

#### Side Dishes

- Red Wings coach Todd McLellan admitted he was in the conversation to be the next Blue Jackets' coach. Although it didn't work, he was very complimentary of the Blue Jackets: "I think Dean (Evason) has his fingerprints all over this team. Any time a coach comes in and he can flip the

identity and get the team or get the players believing into what he's selling, it becomes contagious." Then he added: "Dean was the right guy for this job at this time and they made a tremendous decision in that."

- The Red Wings will start Cam Talbot in net Thursday against the Blue Jackets.
- Werenski won some lunches thanks to the World Juniors. Both Kent Johnson and Cole Sillinger owe him a lunch. Sillinger also owes Werenski a lunch for fantasy football. Ouch.
- Merzlikins is 3-0-0 against the Red Wings all time at Nationwide Arena with two shutouts. He's won his last four starts against the Red Wings overall.



## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Lose Heartbreaker in Last Minute to Red Wings

By Mark Scheig- January 3, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets were in great position to win against the Detroit Red Wings on Thursday night. But then things got ripped from them in an instant.

Jonatan Berggren scored the game-winning goal with only 36 seconds left in regulation to lift the Red Wings to a 5-4 win over the Blue Jackets in front of a sellout crowd at Nationwide Arena. The Blue Jackets will be thinking about this one for a bit.

### Game Recap

An early too many men penalty against the Red Wings got the Blue Jackets off to the right start. James van Riemsdyk scored on a deflection just 2:42 into the game.

For the rest of the first period, the Red Wings controlled the game. They scored three unanswered goals while swarming the Blue Jackets every time they touched the puck.

Goals by Patrick Kane, Erik Gustafsson and Alex DeBrincat lifted the Red Wings to a 3-1 lead. Gustafsson's goal was his first of the season. DeBrincat's was the first of two scored on the power play.

The Blue Jackets found themselves in the second period. Zach Werenski scored his 12th goal of the season putting him in the NHL lead for goals by a defenseman. He had eight shots on the night giving him 19 in the last two games combined. Sean Monahan then tied the game off a great feed by van Riemsdyk.

Then things got quite interesting in the third. On another power play, Dylan Larkin was able to put the Red Wings up 4-3. They had multiple chances to put the game out of reach but Elvis Merzlikins made three huge saves to keep it a one-goal game. That seemed to pay off at first.

With just 2:41 left in regulation, van Riemsdyk scored his second of the night by winning a battle and putting the loose puck past Cam Talbot. The Red Wings challenged for goalie interference. Officials ruled that van Riemsdyk did not impede Talbot from playing his position. The failed challenge resulted in a Blue Jackets' power play in a 4-4 game.

Not only did the Blue Jackets fail to score on that power play, they got an unfortunate bounce that turned into the game-winning goal. Berggren came out of the box after serving the delay of game penalty and got a breakaway thanks to a diving play by Tyler Motte. Berggren made no mistake to convert the game-winning goal. The Blue Jackets had a chance in the final seconds but couldn't convert.

Each goaltender finished the night with 21 saves. Postgame, the Blue Jackets admitted they had a slow start but got better as the game went on. Adam Fantilli said they thought they should have won the game.

The Blue Jackets will practice Friday in advance of their game against the St. Louis Blues Saturday. The Red Wings head to Winnipeg on Saturday to finish their two-game road trip.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Fantilli Settling into Defined Role

By Mark Scheig- January 4, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets enter their game Saturday against the St. Louis Blues seventh in the NHL in goals for. That in part has helped the team stay within shouting distance of the playoff race.

With skill and young talent all over the ice, seeing the Blue Jackets start to figure things out offensively shouldn't come as much of a surprise. But perhaps a little surprising is that they're in the top-10 in offense while Adam Fantilli has seen a slight dip in his numbers despite averaging a little more ice time in Year 2.

Fantilli is still impacting the game when he's on the ice with his speed and playmaking ability. What is going perhaps a little more unnoticed is what he's doing with the things that don't always pop on the scoresheet.

### Fantilli Has Defined Role

In recent games, Fantilli has centered a line with James van Riemsdyk on his left and Zach Aston-Reese on his right. That has been the Blue Jackets' third line.

Head coach Dean Evason said on Saturday morning that the lines except for Sean Monahan's line could see a different look. According to Jeff Svoboda of the Blue Jackets, van Riemsdyk moved up to play with Cole Sillinger and Kent Johnson while Mathieu Olivier skated with Fantilli and Aston-Reese at Friday's practice.

Fantilli is not being asked to carry the offense. He's being asked to play a defined role as the Blue Jackets' third-line center. It's an important role for several reasons. While they will provide some offense and do everything they can to keep the puck out of their net, Aston-Reese said there was another big thing they provide the team as a line. It's an area that he thinks Fantilli doesn't get enough credit for.

"I think I'd like to consider it more of an energy line where it's physical," Aston-Reese said. "(Fantilli) actually doesn't get enough credit (for being physical.) Look at the leaderboard. He's up there a lot of nights chipping in in the hits department. I think it's generating energy for the team, being physical. I think whoever is with us we're always going to be pretty sound defensively."

Looking at the Blue Jackets' leaders in hits, Aston-Reese has a point. Olivier leads them by far with 141 hits. Then it's Sean Kuraly with 91 and Aston-Reese with 89. Coming in fourth place in the hits department is Fantilli. He has 59 hits on the season. He's showing he's not afraid to play that way. He's centering the line that will bring most of the physicality.

Fantilli understands the role he has and is embracing it. Now playing with Olivier will only make that energy and physical play a stronger point of emphasis. But Fantilli and Aston-Reese have complemented each other so far.

"He plays fast. He plays hard," Fantilli said of Aston-Reese. We were just talking about keeping things simple which is great. We're going to run the third line so we're trying to do a third line's job. Just get the puck in, play hard, play fast and try and get the offense where we can."

Having a wealth of knowledge around Fantilli certainly doesn't hurt things. van Riemsdyk and Aston-Reese have both been around a long time and have seen many things. There is one thing in particular that Fantilli has appreciated playing with them.

“He’s always talking on the bench which is extremely helpful,” Fantilli said of van Riemsdyk. “He’s always there for advice whenever you need it. So he’s been great to play with.”

“There’s a lot more communication,” Aston-Reese said of Fantilli. “He’s doing really good talking in the D-zone. Just the way our system is, it’s a lot of whoever’s first back is with the low forward. So it’s recognition there and he’s been really good with communicating who’s the low forward and things like that.”

#### Final Thoughts

While Fantilli isn’t lightning up the scoreboard as some think he should by now, he’s still doing plenty to impact the game while learning the other side of the puck. He’s learning from those that have seen a lot in the NHL.

Fantilli and his lack of offense is far down the list of worries for the Blue Jackets. He’s being asked to play a defined role in which doesn’t require him to generate offense every shift.

The offense will come for Fantilli. For now, he’s impacting the game with his speed and his physicality. It’s caught the attention of his linemates.

Having a potential number-one center bodes well for the future of the Blue Jackets. Having that potential number-one be just as dependable defensively could be a game-changer. Fantilli is investing his time now in being more dependable defensively. That should make every Blue Jackets fan smile.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Hold Off Blues After Wild Third Period

By Mark Scheig- January 5, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets went into Saturday night's game against the St. Louis Blues looking to move past a brutal ending to the game Thursday against the Detroit Red Wings. After a bit of a dicey third period, they accomplished their task.

Dmitri Voronkov scored two more goals while Sean Monahan added three assists to help the Blue Jackets to a wild 6-4 win over the Blues on Saturday night in front of another sellout crowd at Nationwide Arena. This game was a tale of two games, the first 40 minutes and then the last 20 minutes.

### Game Recap

The first period was a battle of the goalies despite what the final score tells you. Joel Hofer and Elvis Merzlikins traded saves with Merzlikins making a few big ones to keep it 0-0. The Blue Jackets were able to break through in the final minute.

Voronkov scored his first of the night from his usual position in front of the net. It gave his team momentum going into the locker room up 1-0.

The Blue Jackets were able to double their lead by the end of the second period thanks to a Kirill Marchenko power-play goal early in the frame. That was Marchenko's team leading 17th goal of the season. They were able to limit the Blues' chances to the tune of just nine shots on goal in the second.

But then the third period happened. The teams traded eight total goals, four on each side on 30 total shots. The third started as well as the Blue Jackets could have asked for. Mikael Pyyhtia scored shorthanded to make it 3-0. Turned out the game was far from over.

Jordan Kyrou scored 1:10 later on the same power play to make it 3-1. Adam Fantilli needed only 31 seconds after Kyrou's goal to make it 4-1. Cam Fowler made it 4-2 just 1:30 later. Voronkov added his second of the night just 29 seconds later to make it 5-2.

The Blues then got consecutive goals from Colton Parayko and Brayden Schenn to close it to 5-4. Schenn's goal was scored with Hofer off for an extra attacker. That marked the seventh goal allowed by the Blue Jackets when faced with an opposing 6-on-5, tied for the most in the NHL.

Although the Blues still had 3:44 left to tie things up, they could never get that fifth goal. Mathieu Olivier sealed the deal with an empty netter to get to the final score of 6-4.

With the win, the Blue Jackets tied both Ottawa and Pittsburgh in points for the last wildcard spot. The Senators have games in hand. Postgame, Ivan Provorov and Adam Fantilli each expressed the team's goal is to make the playoffs this season. Meanwhile, Zach Werenski had two assists and now has points in 15 consecutive home games.

The Blue Jackets have Sunday off and will be on the ice Monday for practice in advance of their next game Tuesday in Pittsburgh. The Blues also have Sunday off and will play in Minnesota on Tuesday night.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Columbus Blue Jackets Have Legitimate Momentum, Optimism As Calendar Flips To 2025

By Dan Dukart- January 3, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets ended 2024 with a bang, a feel-good win over the playoff-bound Carolina Hurricanes.

And as the calendar flips to 2025, there is genuine momentum, and dare I say optimism, about the immediate future of the organization. How many times have we been compelled to prematurely turn the page on the season, look ahead to the draft, and ultimately to the next season? More than most, this fanbase is accustomed to hearing about shiny prospects in a faraway land, and a hopeful tomorrow.

And while that long-term optimism still pervades, 2025 can be welcomed with eyes on a playoff push. Earlier this week, Will Chase wrote about a handful of nuggets illustrating what has allowed this team to climb to the outskirts of a playoff berth. Here are three reasons why the Blue Jackets have earned this opportunity:

### Zach Werenski On Norris Trophy Short-List

After an obviously difficult offseason, Zach Werenski has taken the mantle of leader and best player and run with it. It could not be more clear that he is the team's undisputed go-to player. As Chase mentioned, the power play is clicking at its best clip in a literal decade, and I wonder how much of that can be distilled to Werenski simply being the go-to option, and not 'just' the quarterback.

Aside from his on-ice play, his recent critique of Patrik Laine's comments shows a willingness to step into a more vocal leadership role for a team that desperately needed it.

### A Major Step From Young Players

Kirill Marchenko (24), Dmitri Voronkov (24), Kent Johnson (22), Adam Fantilli (20), Cole Sillinger (21), and Denton Mateychuk (20) played key roles in the team's most recent win.

- Marchenko, in particular, has evolved from 'nice middle-six winger' to 'first-line star winger' in the past calendar year and is on pace to challenge for the club's all-time single-season points record.
- Voronkov is something of a unicorn, and while he's not a perfect player, his huge frame and high-end hands should allow him to be a perennial 25-goal guy, and a staple on PP1.
- Fantilli has had some growing pains this year, but his star is still plenty bright, and at 20, there's no reason for anything but confidence.
- Sillinger has settled into a nice role as a middle-six center who can win draws and play a responsible, mature game.
- Johnson was the club's most dynamic player at the start of the season, and while he's cooled a bit, he's still nearly a point-per-game player. His growth has been, arguably, the best story of the season to date.
- Mateychuk has come right into a top-four pair and looked comfortable. His effortless skating and natural hockey sense have made for a seamless fit in Dean Evason's system.

Yes, the future is bright, but so is the present.

## Cohesion Throughout the Organization

Evason deserves plenty of credit for having this team ready to play (most nights), and the roster has responded well to a system that genuinely seems to play to its strengths. But perhaps more than anyone, GM Don Waddell deserves a ton of credit for simply quieting the noise - and man, was there plenty - around the organization. He, and by virtue, the organization, deftly navigated through some incomprehensibly difficult circumstances this offseason, correctly moved on from a slew of oft-unavailable players, and even shipped out David Jiricek before it became too much of a distraction.

The calendar reads 2025, and for the first time in a long time, the Blue Jackets are playing meaningful games in the new year, and the fanbase has reason to talk about the here and now, here and now.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / DET 5, CBJ 4: Blue Jackets Lose Heartbreaker In Final Seconds On Tough Break

**By Ed Francis- January 3, 2025**

Jonatan Berggren scored the game-winning goal with 35.7 seconds left in regulation Thursday night to help the Detroit Red Wings defeat the Columbus Blue Jackets by a final of 5-4.

After the Blue Jackets took an early lead on a power play goal from James van Riemsdyk, the Red Wings answered with three straight goals. Columbus would tie the game in the second on goals from Zach Werenski and Sean Monahan.

Detroit would regain the lead in the third period before the Blue Jackets would tie the game with 2:41 left on van Riemsdyk's second goal of the night. The Red Wings challenge for goaltender interference and quickly lose it, resulting in a Blue Jackets power play.

Columbus is unable to do much with the power play and as it's expiring, Red Wings defenseman Ben Chiarot blocks Ivan Provorov's shot attempt. It trickles over to the stick of former Blue Jacket Tyler Motte, who pokes it ahead to Berggren for the game-winning goal.

Here's how a tough loss played out in front of a sellout crowd:

1st Period:

(2:42 — CBJ Goal): The power play stays hot with a goal in the opening minutes. Van Riemsdyk has made a career, in part, off deflection goals in front of the net — and he does that here on Cole Sillinger's shot to put the Blue Jackets in front 1-0 less than three minutes into the game. Sillinger get the primary assist with Provorov picking up the secondary apple.

(6:55 — DET Goal): The Red Wings strike three times in just a shade over ten minutes, starting with Patrick Kane's 8th of the season. The scoring sequence starts with Damon Severson having trouble clearing the puck. Alex DeBrincat fires from the slot and Kane is there to clean up a rebound a few seconds later.

(14:39 — DET Goal): Elvis takes too much time getting set after going behind the net to play the puck and Erik Gustafsson gets his first goal as a Red Wing as a result of it. He fires from way downtown and it pings in past the glove side of Merzlikins to put Detroit in front, 2-1.

(17:09 — DET Goal): The Red Wings need just seven seconds on the power play to extend their lead to 3-1. Dylan Larkin wins the faceoff, he gets it to Mo Seider, he gets it to DeBrincat, and he gets it into the back of the net.

2nd Period

(11:09 — CBJ Goal): Adam Fantilli wins a faceoff in Detroit's zone and that's all it takes for the Blue Jackets to trim the Detroit lead to 3-2. Fantilli's win puts the puck on the stick of Werenski, who goes top shelf for his 12th goal of the season.

(18:40 — CBJ Goal): Detroit is caught in a line change, which is noticed by van Riemsdyk and he immediately streaks through the Detroit zone. He gets a great backhand pass over to Monahan, who has a gaping open net because Talbot was focused on JVR. That allows the Blue Jackets to easily tie the game at 3-3 in the closing minutes of the period. Werenski gets the secondary assist, his second point of the night and third multi-point game in his last five.

### 3rd Period

(4:54 — DET Goal): For the second time in the game, the Red Wings surging power play connects for a goal to put Detroit ahead again, this time 4-3. Larkin draws the penalty to put them on the man-advantage, then takes a great pass from DeBrincat and gets it past Merzlikins for the lead.

(17:19 — CBJ Goal): The second goal of the night for van Riemsdyk to give him his first multi-goal and three-point game as a member of the Jackets.

Detroit challenges for interference, the call stands, and the Blue Jackets get a power play. They don't do much with the power play, and as it comes to an end...

(19:25 — DET Goal): ...Berggren comes out of the box and takes Ivan Provorov's blocked shot all the way to the back of the net.

DET	GAME STATS	CBJ
26	SHOTS	25
49%	FACEOFFS	51%
2/3	POWER PLAY	1/2
1/2	PENALTY KILL	1/3
16	HITS	19
15	GIVEAWAYS	11
7	TAKEAWAYS	4
15	BLOCKED SHOTS	18
ALL SITUATIONS ADVANCED STATS		
2.49	EXPECTED GOALS	1.67



DET	GAME STATS	CBJ
48	SHOT ATTEMPTS	53
25	SCORING CHANCES	14
7	HIGH-DANGER CHANCES	8

Data via NHL.com & NaturalStatTrick.com

Stat Chat:

- The goals from van Riemsdyk and Kane's goals came with a side of irony. They were the first two overall picks (Kane first, van Riemsdyk second) of the 2007 NHL Draft, which was held at Nationwide Arena. Columbus' first round pick that year was seventh overall, where they picked up Jake Voracek. Their last pick of the draft? Current Cleveland Monsters head coach Trent Vogelhuber.
- Werenski's goal made it 14 straight home games with a point, the 8th longest streak in the NHL over the last 40 years by a defenseman according to NHL Public Relations. It's also tied for the longest of the 21st century at the D position.

Up Next:

Another chance on home ice for the Blue Jackets comes Saturday night when the St. Louis Blues come to town for their only visit of the season. Puck drops at 7 p.m.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Three Things: Werenski Continues Historic Tear, JVR's Three-Point Night, Wings Steal Two Points

By Will Chase- January 3, 2025

That'll sting.

Jonatan Berggren scored the go-ahead goal with 35.7 seconds left in the third period to lift the Detroit Red Wings over the Columbus Blue Jackets 5-4 on Thursday night at Nationwide Arena.

### Werenski Continues Historic Tear

Zach Werenski had another three-point night to continue a 14-game home point streak (nine goals, 19 assists).

Werenski's first point of the night came on his 12th goal of the season (unassisted) at 11:09 of the second period to cut the Columbus deficit to one at 3-2.

He picked up his second point on a secondary assist when Sean Monahan (14) scored at 18:40 to tie the game 3-3.

Werenski's second assist, his team-leading 31st, came on James van Riemsdyk's goal at 17:19 of the third period, which tied the score 4-4. Werenski jumped Marchenko for the team lead in points with 43 and led the game with eight shots.

### JVR's Three-Point Night

With a three-point night including two goals and an assist, van Riemsdyk had one of his best nights as a Blue Jacket.

His goal at 2:24 of the first period on the power play started the scoring for the game. Cole Sillinger (15) and Ivan Provorov (12) had the assists. The Blue Jackets have a power-play goal in 10 of the last 13 games.

van Riemsdyk picked up a primary assist on Monahan's second-period goal. His sixth goal of the year and second of the game at 17:19 of the third period tied the game 4-4. Detroit challenged the goal for goaltender interference but the goal stood up. In addition to Werenski, Adam Fantilli picked up his ninth helper on the primary assist.

### Wings Steal Two Points

The Jackets and Wings tied 4-4 late, Columbus had a power play thanks to a failed challenge by Todd McLellan and Detroit for goaltender interference on van Riemsdyk's goal to tie it.

A lucky break and a bounce ended up being the difference for Detroit.

With time ticking down on the power play, Provorov's one-time shot was blocked, resulting in a rush up the ice for Detroit.

Berggren, serving the late delay of game penalty, came out of the box and was there for the 1-on-0 break to bury the game-winner at 19:24. Tyler Motte (1) and Ben Chiarot (6) had the assists.

The loss snaps the Jackets' four-game home winning streak and six-game home point streak (4-0-2). Elvis Merzlikins made 21 saves on 26 shots. Cam Talbot made 21 saves on 25 shots. Columbus was 1-of-3 on the penalty kill.



The NHL released the Blue Jackets' Quarter-Century Team.

Hit The High Note

The Blue Jackets conclude their brief three-game homestand when they entertain the St. Louis Blues On Saturday, Jan. 4 at 7 p.m. ET from Nationwide Arena.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / CBJ 6, STL 4: Blue Jackets Prevail In Chaotic Third Period, Defeat Blues In Front Of A Sellout Crowd

By Ed Francis- January 4, 2025

	1	2	3	F
	0	0	4	4
	1	1	4	6

CBJ GOALS:  
Voronkov (P1, 19:01)  
Marchenko (PP) (P2, 2:15)  
Pyyhtia (SH) (P3, 3:44)  
Fantilli (P3, 5:25)  
Voronkov (2) (P3, 7:24)  
Olivier (EN) (P3, 18:59)

After an exciting but low-scoring first forty minutes of action, the Columbus Blue Jackets and St. Louis Blues scored a games worth of goals in a matter of minutes during a third period barrage Saturday night.

With the score 2-0 Columbus entering the third period of play as a result of goals from Dmitri Voronkov and Kirill Marchenko, the teams combined for eight goals in the final frame — including five goals in a span of just 3:40 — en route to a 6-4 Blue Jackets victory.

The flurry came out of nowhere. First it was Mikael Pyyhtia, who scored a short-handed goal at 3:44 of the third to make it 3-0 Blue Jackets. St. Louis' Jordan Kyrou would answer just 70 seconds later on the power play to make it 3-1. Adam Fantilli made it 4-1 with his 8th of the season 31 seconds later, but the Blues would answer again as Cam Fowler scored 90 seconds later to make it 4-2. Columbus would go up by three again with Voronkov's second goal of the night, this time just 29 seconds after Fowler's goal.

The Blues made it 5-3 with 7:06 left in the game on Colton Parayko's 7th of the season, then created tense moments for the sellout crowd at Nationwide Arena when Brayden Schenn scored with 3:44 left in the game, making it a one-goal game at 5-4.

Mathieu Olivier, who in the second period got the crowd on its feet with a decisive victory in a fight against Tyson Tucker, did so again with an empty-net goal — his 10th of the season — with 1:01 left in the game, sealing the victory for the Blue Jackets.

## A DEEPER DIVE: Three Things From The Jackets Chaotic Win

Defensemen Zach Werenski and Ivan Provorov combined for five assists in the winning effort. It was Provorov's first multi-point game of the season and his first three-point game as a member of the Blue Jackets.

Werenski's assist on Voronkov's first goal was his 15th straight with a point at home, giving him the longest streak by a defenseman in the 21st century. He was previously tied with Mike Green, who had 14 straight in the 2009-10 season.

The last time a defenseman went 15+ straight with a point at home: Ray Bourque in the 1992-93 season.

Sean Monahan also had three assists in the game, joining Voronkov, Werenski, and Provorov in the multi-point efforts.

Here's the period-by-period breakdown of a wild one to end a Columbus homestand:

### 1st Period:

(19:01 — CBJ Goal): It looked like the game was going to have a scoreless opening period until Voronkov's 14th goal of the season put the Blue Jackets in front 1-0 just inside the final minute of the frame. The sequence would start with good work from Ivan Provorov to protect the puck from the Blues as he works his way down the boards. He gets it to Werenski, who sees Voronkov (and Sean Monahan) in Blues' goalie Joel Hofer bubble. It's Voronkov who pokes it home on the rebound for the first goal of the game.

### 2nd Period

(2:15 — CBJ PP Goal): The Blue Jackets double their lead with Marchenko's 16th goal of the season, a power-play strike that made it five out of their last six games with a power play goal for Columbus. It took just 14 seconds this time around. Kent Johnson is to the left of Hofer, gets a good look over to Monahan in the slot, who immediately gets it over to Marchenko on the right of Hofer. Marchy's shot grazes off St. Louis defenseman Colton Parayko and into the back of the net to make it 2-0 Blue Jackets.

(13:00ish): With the game at 2-0 and around 7:00 minutes left in the second, Elvis Merzlikins denies Jordan Kyrou a couple of times in impressive fashion and then keeps a loose puck out of the net to maintain the Blue Jackets lead. Merzlikins finished the game with 29 saves on 33 St. Louis shots.

### 3rd Period

(3:44 — CBJ SH Goal): An excellent burst of speed and effort from Pyyhtia while short-handed extends the Columbus lead to 3-0. It's the fourth goal of the season Pyyhtia, and with the assist that sprung him, Provorov gets his second point of the night and his first multi-point game of the season.

(4:54 — STL PP Goal): The Blues get on the board for the first time in the game with a power-play goal from Kyrou, his team-leading 17th of the season.

(5:25 — CBJ Goal): It would take just 31 seconds for the Blue Jackets to answer and restore the three-goal lead. Fantilli sees the Blues in a line change and gets a good dish from Werenski from behind Merzlikins all the way to just outside the Blues zone. After the game, Fantilli said that he and Werenski talked about that exact opportunity in recent weeks.

(6:55 — STL Goal): Fantilli's response 31 seconds after the Blues get on the board is met with a goal by Cam Fowler just 90 seconds later, again cutting into the Columbus lead — this time 4-2...

(7:24 — CBJ Goal): ...but Voronkov response to Fowler's goal just 29 seconds after that, putting the Blue Jackets in front by three again — this time 5-2. It's Voronkov's second of the night.

(12:54, 16:13 — STL Goals): The Blues would cut the lead to 5-4 after the goals by Parayko and Schenn.

(18:59 — CBJ EN Goal): Mathieu Olivier's 10th goal of the season comes via an empty-net, sealing the deal in the Blue Jackets victory. Provorov (along with Cole Sillinger) would get an assist on the empty-net goal, giving Provorov the second three-point game of his career.

STL	GAME STATS	CBJ
33	SHOTS	39
55%	FACEOFFS	46%
1/2	POWER PLAY	1/2
1/2	PENALTY KILL	1/2
21	HITS	14
14	GIVEAWAYS	16
3	TAKEAWAYS	9
18	BLOCKED SHOTS	24
ALL SITUATIONS ADVANCED STATS		
3.47	EXPECTED GOALS	3.94
69	SHOT ATTEMPTS	69
31	SCORING CHANCES	28
17	HIGH-DANGER CHANCES	17

STL

GAME STATS

CBJ

Data via NHL.com & NaturalStatTrick.com

#### Stat Chat:

- Columbus scored six or more goals of the ninth time this season, in game 40 of the season. They scored 6+ just eight times total last season.
- Werenski's two-point game was the fourth time in his last six games that he's scored at least two points. He's now up to 45 points in 40 games, on pace for 92 points. That would easily best Artemi Panarin's 87-point franchise record.
- Despite the four-goal period for the Blues in the third, their expected goals in the final frame was only 1.42 — slightly less than their 1.53 xGF in the opening period. Merzlikins was dynamite in the first two periods.
- Both teams were dead-even on shot attempts (69) and high-danger chances (17). Both teams were also 1/2 on the power play.

#### Up Next:

For the first time this season, the Blue Jackets will travel to Pittsburgh to face Sidney Crosby's Penguins. Columbus won the first game between the two, 6-2, in November at Nationwide. Puck-drop from the PPG Paints Arena is set for 7 p.m. Tuesday.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Three Things: The Streak, Marchenko Is A Complete Player, 8-Combined 3rd Period Goals

By Will Chase- January 5, 2025

That's the bounce back you're looking for.

Dmitri Voronkov scored twice and the Columbus Blue Jackets beat the St. Louis Blues 6-4 Saturday night at Nationwide Arena.

The Streak

What else is new?

Zach Werenski recorded a primary assist for his team-leading 32nd helper on Dmitri Voronkov's (14) first-period goal at 19:01 to give the Blue Jackets the 1-0 lead. The assist extended Werenski's home point streak to 15 games. Ivan Provorov registered his 13th assist.

Werenski extended his team lead in points to 45 and lead in assists to 33.

Marchenko Is A Complete Player

Marchenko's second-period power-play goal gave the Blue Jackets a 2-0 lead at 2:15 of the second period. The goal is Marchenko's team-leading 17th. Sean Monahan (24) and Kent Johnson (12) assisted on the goal. The assist snapped three straight games without a point for Johnson. He has not had a streak longer than three games without a point this season.

The Blue Jackets have power-play goals in 11 of the last 14 games. Marchenko is a +22 on the season after being -23 in 2022-23 and -5 in 2023-24.

8-Combined 3rd Period Goals

The Jackets went into the third period leading the Blues 2-0. Then things got wild.

With eight combined third-period goals between the two teams, Columbus stretched its lead to 4-1 before the Blues pulled it within one goal late at 16:16.

Provorov and Monahan each had three assists for the game. It's Provorov's first career three-assist game with Columbus, tying a career high. Werenski had seven shots for the night, leading the Jackets with 160 on the season.

Here's how it all went down:

- Mikael Pyyhtia's (4) short-handed goal gave Columbus a 3-0 lead at 3:44. Provorov (14) and Monahan each picked up their second assist.
- Jordan Kyrou (17) scored on the power play to break the Elvis Merzlikins shutout. Dylan Holloway (14) and Brayden Schenn (15) assisted.
- Adam Fantilli scored his eighth at 5:25 to make it 4-1. Werenski (33) and Dante Fabbro (6) recorded the assists.
- Cam Fowler's (4) goal made it 4-2 at 6:55. Assists: Holloway (15), Kyrou (17).
- Dmitri Voronkov (15) made it 5-2 at 7:24. Assists: Monahan (26), Jordan Harris (2).



- Colton Parayko (7) scored at 12:54 to make it 5-3. Assists: Pavel Buchnevich (17), Alexandre Texier (5). Texier picked up the helper in his return to Nationwide Arena following last summer's trade.
- Schenn (8) made it 5-4 at 16:16 Assists: Cam Fowler (9), Kyrrou (18).
- Mathieu Olivier (10) (Empty Net) at 18:59. Assists: Provorov (15), Cole Sillinger (16).

Merzlikins finished with 29 saves on 33 shots. Joel Hofer had 33 saves on 38 shots.

The Blue Jackets are seventh in the NHL, and tied with the Carolina Hurricanes, with 50 third-period goals. Columbus has allowed 52 third-period tallies. The Jackets are third in the NHL with 95 5v5 goals.

#### Another Challenge

Columbus will travel to Pittsburgh to face the Penguins on Tuesday, Jan. 7, at 7 p.m. ET. The Jackets lead the season series 1-0 and are looking for a rare win at PPG Paints Arena. Columbus is 0-9-5 in its last 14 games in Pittsburgh.

## The Athletic / After another disappointing World Juniors, Hockey Canada has big questions to answer

By Scott Wheeler- January 3, 2025

OTTAWA — They didn't practice.

Not once. In the entire tournament. "CANCELLED," the nightly practice schedule said for their planned skates on Dec. 28 and Jan. 1, and again for their morning skate ahead of their quarterfinal matchup with Czechia on Jan. 2.

They had two full-team morning skates while in Ottawa but between their loss to USA on New Year's Eve and puck drop against the Czechs, they didn't skate at all.

And on Thursday night, when the puck dropped, they weren't prepared. The Czechs scored 43 seconds in on their first shot of the game, and again with 2.4 seconds left in the first period — inexcusable times to give up a goal.

In a tournament that they struggled mightily to score in, they scratched two of the OHL's leading scorers, Porter Martone and Carson Rehkopf. When one came out, the other went in and played little. Despite being OHL linemates — two-thirds of the league's best line — they were never tried together.

They couldn't make consequential changes to their disjointed power-play units because they didn't bring the personnel to do so. (Mathieu Cataford, Tanner Howe, Ethan Gauthier, Cole Beaudoin, Luca Pinelli, Sawyer Mynio, Beau Akey and Andrew Gibson aren't power-play guys at this level.)

But between Rehkopf and Martone, one of their options was also always sitting in the press box. In that way, it was fitting that it was Martone who scored on the power play to bring Canada to within one with Czechia.

They didn't try Gavin McKenna on their first line until midway through the quarterfinal. By then they were down 3-1 in an elimination game.

Late in the second and through the first half of the third, they came to life, winning battles and races and playing with a desperation that matched the moment.

They nearly tied it playing that way, with Cataford bowling into Czech goaltender Michael Hrabal on a goal that was immediately and emphatically waved off for goaltender interference.

Still, head coach Dave Cameron, in what felt equally as desperate, chose to challenge it and Canada landed on the penalty kill — after a very quick review — midway through the third period. Though they killed the penalty, two minutes came off the clock and their momentum slowed. A game-tying goal from Bradly Nadeau with less than five minutes was just a temporary respite. Czechia scored on the power play with 40 seconds to play in regulation and put Canada out of their misery.

After their stunning loss to Latvia, it was "full marks" and talk of 6-8 goals worth of chances. Cameron said they win that game nine out of 10 times. The next day, management group lead Peter Anholt raised it to 99 out of 100.

After a 3-0 win against Germany on an empty-netter, a game that was 1-0 late and extended a scoreless-at-five-on-five drought to 120 minutes, it turned to "snakebitten."

Against USA, it was discipline — 11 minor penalties from a team that looked off-kilter. Asked what he could do to address it, Cameron said there was nothing, that it was up to the players. The tournament

was too short to bench players he said, a couple of weeks after Anholt and Program of Excellence head Scott Salmond had said there was a higher standard this year and talked up their preparedness.

They didn't look prepared all tournament, and the program feels a long way from excellence. In fact, the back-to-back quarterfinal defeats is a first for Canada since the tournament moved away from its early days round-robin format to its current iteration in 1995. It's easy to forget, but if not for a diving stretch save from Thomas Milic or Connor Bedard's overtime heroics against Slovakia in Halifax, we might be talking about three straight quarterfinal defeats.

That doesn't matter, though. Consecutive fifth-place finishes do.

And in the wake of this second disappointment, different from last year's because it's on home ice, those in charge, from Cameron to Salmond, Anholt and the rest of their management team (which includes Scott Walker, who flew to meet with returning leaders Brayden Yager and Tanner Molendyk to talk to them about that new standard, and Brent Seabrook, whose first foray into management has been to help build these last two teams) will have difficult questions to answer.

Why didn't you practice?

Did you bring enough talent and why didn't this roster construction work?

After all of the talk about being more prepared, knowing these players better, a return to the World Junior Summer Showcase and naming your coaching staff early, were you really more prepared?

And maybe most pressingly, should Hockey Canada entrust you to continue to lead the program?

I asked Cameron that first question postgame. "Because we're exhausted," he said of the canceled practices. "There's no system for tired hockey players."

There are excuses, if they want there to be, including that the penalties in this one felt more like questionable officiating at times than the selfish, unquestionable ones they took against USA.

The quarterfinal against Czechia was a great, down-to-the-wire game — as they always seem to be at the World Juniors. And sometimes you lose great games.

But if there's truly a high standard at Hockey Canada, then not playing in a medal game for two straight years shouldn't meet it.

## The Athletic / Why Canada's World Juniors struggles shouldn't have been a surprise

By Corey Pronman- January 3, 2025

OTTAWA — Team Canada lost in the quarterfinals to Czechia at the World Juniors for a second straight year. It's natural given their difficult effort on home ice — highlighted by only scoring 10 goals in the round-robin and a historic loss to Latvia — to want explanations and look for scapegoats. Did the management team make bad decisions in the selection process? Did the team deploy the talent it had properly? Did the players underperform and choke in the big moments?

Those are all good questions, and as I tend to do for almost every World Junior tournament, I had predicted this team would win gold and thought it had a roster that could roll over opponents like we're accustomed to. But that was wrong, and that's on me for misevaluating the team.

In hindsight, there were obvious signs this could happen. When Canada's selection camp ended, we had inklings they focused too much on compete and not enough on skill. They opted to bring a lot of small, energy wingers with good but not great skill like Tanner Howe, Luca Pinelli, Ethan Gauthier and Mathieu Cataford over a dynamic selection camp standout and 2024 No. 3 pick in Beckett Sennecke, even if he was 18 and his two-way game wasn't as polished. He was impressive enough at camp that one NHL scout in attendance thought Sennecke would be one of Canada's best forwards. The result was a forward group that made shockingly few creative plays and never seemed to consistently generate dangerous chances. After the end of the quarterfinals, not one Canadian player ranked in the top 30 in tournament scoring.

This team had some high-end skill, but focusing in on where their most dynamic talents were, it was often on players who were draft-eligibles like Porter Martone and Matthew Schaefer, a draft-minus-one in Gavin McKenna or the 18-year-old Berkly Catton. After those players, there weren't many others whose skill was truly special. Those four players are excellent NHL prospects who perhaps should have had better tournaments, but it's difficult for even great 17- and 18-year-olds to stand out on Team Canada or in the World Juniors in general. The injury to Schaefer did sting a lot, though. Pre-tournament play can often be a mirage, as Canada beat Sweden and Czechia, but Schaefer was excellent in the warmup games and the first four periods of the regular tournament, looking like a legit potential No. 1 pick. Canada never seemed the same after he went down with a broken clavicle in the first period versus Latvia.

Outside the unique cases where you have someone like Connor Bedard on your team, 19-year-old players need to be the leaders, as they were for Czechia, USA and Sweden in this tournament, and Canada's were very vanilla. As one NHL scout said following the loss to Latvia, "Their most talented 19-year-olds are Calum Ritchie and Easton Cowan, who are probably third-line players in the NHL." That's not the end of the world on its own if they had a lot of older guys who rose to that level like Sweden or Czechia, but they didn't. Some may shout that they should have played Carson Rehkopf, who is 19 and a rich junior scorer, more. That's reasonable, but his effort and discipline didn't do him any favors with the coaching staff.

Canada's blue line was a significant issue. Coming into the tournament we knew they were opting for steady, mobile two-way guys over one-way skill, and they would be a bit plain with their puck-moving, but it was plainer than I anticipated. There were no plays being made by their defensemen, and collectively their defensemen scored 10 points across five games.

There were two potential explanations for this. One was the loss of Schaefer to injury. He was expected to run a power-play unit and prior to the injury, most of the blue-line offense was coming from him. The second was to bring top-10 2024 picks Zayne Parekh or Carter Yakemchuk. On the one hand, they're both dynamic players who could have helped the power play and brought a lot of offense. On the other hand, neither was as amazing in the first half of the season as hoped and Yakemchuk didn't have a great summer camp while Parekh struggled at selection camp. Some may argue they should have been on the team regardless, and some may play devil's advocate and point out that "They couldn't make THIS team?!"

Despite all their issues, this was still a Canadian team full of junior players who have been top players in their respective leagues. Even if this actually wasn't a great Team Canada, they should have done better, and not scored just as many round-robin goals as Switzerland. You can blame deployment, luck, officiating and discipline. Sometimes players simply underperform. Regardless of what the true talent bar and expected outcome for this team was, it's hard to look past the mediocre skill level that was often on display, especially against teams like Latvia and Germany, never mind in the tough games versus Czechia and USA.

When the finger-pointing ends, I think a realization will settle in. This team simply wasn't good enough.

## The Athletic / Canada loses in World Juniors quarters again while USA's top players shine vs. Swiss

By Corey Pronman and Scott Wheeler- January 3, 2025

OTTAWA — The stage is set for the medal round at the 2025 World Juniors. After the tournament's only five-game slate (all four quarterfinals plus the relegation game), here are the standouts, notes and analysis from The Athletic's on-site prospects writers, Corey Pronman and Scott Wheeler.

- Germany defeated Kazakhstan 4-3 in this year's relegation game. Kazakhstan jumped out to a 3-1 lead early in the second period but they couldn't hang on and the Germans scored three unanswered. Denmark won the Division 1A tournament and will replace Kazakhstan in the 2026 World Juniors in Minnesota.
- Sweden defeated Latvia 3-2 in the first quarterfinal of the day to remain the tournament's lone undefeated team. David Edstrom (Nashville) was named player of the game for the Swedes. He scored and had a second goal called back after an offside review.
- USA defeated Switzerland 7-2. Ryan Leonard (Washington) and James Hagens (2025 draft eligible) each scored twice and Gabe Perreault (NY Rangers) had three assists. Oliver Moore (Chicago), Zeev Buium (Minnesota) and Brodie Ziemer (Buffalo) each also had multi-point games.
- Finland defeated Slovakia 5-3. Jesse Nurmi (NY Islanders) and Rasmus Kumpulainen (Minnesota) each had two goals for the Finns.
- Czechia defeated Canada 4-3 on a late goal from Adam Jecho (Blues), ousting them for a second consecutive year in the quarters.

Latvia one of the stories of the tournament

Capitals prospect Eriks Mateiko scored both of Latvia's goals on Thursday afternoon and finished the tournament with five goals in five games. He had half of the 10 total goals Latvia scored in the tournament and while it's rare for a player who doesn't make the semifinals to make the tournament All-Star Team, I think he's got a compelling case. So does Latvian goalie Linards Feldbergs, who made another 47 saves, finishing the tournament with a .929 save percentage on 226 shots in five games (45 shots a game). Latvia had their best tournament ever at the World Juniors, winning two games for the first time. They beat Canada and Germany, and played Sweden, Finland and USA closer than expected. Mateiko and Feldbergs were the biggest reason for that.

Mateiko looks like a potential future bottom-six NHLer. He's listed at 6-foot-6 now, he plays his heart out and his skating has made enough progress to give him a real chance.

While both Mateiko and Feldbergs aren't eligible to return to next year's tournament, the Latvians had the youngest team in the tournament, with four 2008s and two 2007s. They should be able to build on this. — Scott Wheeler

USA's top players have their big day

We've been waiting for the USA top line of James Hagens in between Gabe Perreault and Ryan Leonard and their top defenseman Zeev Buium to have a huge game, and the quarterfinal against Switzerland was that game. Buium in particular was buzzing all night long. He was activating into attacks like we're used to seeing him do at Denver, using his high-end skating and skill to create a ton of chances including his flashy goal in the second period. Hagens and Leonard both scored twice, and Leonard was chosen as

USA's player of the game. He was involved in a lot of offense, while also being highly physical and agitating the Swiss team throughout the game. — Corey Pronman

Czechia re-emerging as hockey power

The Czechs are on a run of three straight medals at the World Juniors and have now guaranteed themselves an opportunity to make it four in a row. That would be a first since their days as Czechoslovakia. They're a deep enough program right now that they actually had quote-unquote snubs this year. They left off a second-rounder prospect in Dominik Badinka (Carolina) off their roster and a soon-to-be first-rounder in Radim Mrtko, as well as Adam Benak, who has carried their next age groups at the Hlinka Gretzky Cup the last couple of years. Michael Hrabal (Utah) has been great in net for them for a second straight World Juniors and is in the top goalie conversation into the semifinals. He stopped another 29 of 32 on Thursday. But I've been struck by their depth. This group has three strong forward lines and three legit D pairings. Eduard Sale (Seattle), Jakub Stancl (St. Louis), Petr Sikora (Washington) and others have all had really nice showings in Ottawa. — Scott Wheeler

## [The Athletic / World Juniors Today: Previewing every 2025 quarterfinals matchup](#)

**By Julian McKenzie and Sarah Jean Maher- January 3, 2025**

We've reached the knockout stage of the 2025 IIHF World Junior Championship in Ottawa.

Eight teams still have a chance at ending the tournament with a gold medal. The other two teams will square off for the right to remain in the World Juniors next year.

Today, we're going to break down all of Thursday's games. The tournament doesn't use a bracket format and the winners of the quarterfinal matchups will be reseeded for the semifinals.

It's a rematch of the 2023 World Juniors gold-medal game which saw Canada edge Czechia with an overtime winner from Dylan Guenther in Halifax. Two years later, they meet in the quarters.

Canada's performances at these World Juniors have drawn the most attention, and criticism, from fans and pundits. After a tournament-opening win against Finland, Canada was upset by Latvia and then dropped a New Year's Eve clash against the United States. In that game, the Canadians allowed three power-play goals after being penalized 11 times. Canadian head coach Dave Cameron said only his players could rectify that problem and it's not something he could "address."

"They know that penalties are penalties," Cameron said. "You talk all you want in the short term. They have to decide. Simple as that."

Canada enters the quarterfinals with 10 goals scored over four games. That ties them with Finland and Switzerland. Only Latvia, Germany and Kazakhstan have scored fewer goals.

If Canada takes pride in being tight defensively, Czechia should prove to be a significant test.

Meanwhile, Czechia entered the final day of preliminary play level with Sweden at nine points. Both teams were undefeated entering their preliminary-round showdown. Despite losing that game against Sweden, Czechia has scored the most goals of any team at this year's World Juniors. Three Czechs hold a share of third place in scoring: forwards Vojtech Hradec, Jakub Stancl and Eduard Sale, each with seven points.

Those three are also tied for the goal-scoring lead (4) with Sweden's Axel Sandin-Pelikka and Slovakia's Dalibor Dvorsky. The Czechs are coming off a silver medal in 2023 and a bronze medal in 2022. A gold medal would be their first since 2001 when they defeated Finland.

USA's Cole Eiserman, Zeev Buium and Ryan Leonard celebrate in win over Canada. (Sean Kilpatrick / The Canadian Press via AP)

(4B) Switzerland vs. United States (1A)

USA is hellbent on defending gold.

Trey Augustine is coming off his best game yet, backstopping USA to a 4-1 takedown of the Canadians with 38 saves on New Year's Eve. The top line of Gabe Perreault, James Hagen and Ryan Leonard got rolling in a 10-4 win over Germany and has continued to look stellar, as has tournament points leader Cole Hutson and Cole Eiserman. The U.S. convincingly powered through Germany, Latvia and Canada with a talented roster from top to bottom, and with an overtime drop to Finland the only blip.



Switzerland doesn't have anywhere near the offensive star power. After dropping the opening game to Czechia, it managed to avoid the relegation game with a 3-1 win over Kazakhstan. The Swiss lost a close one to Slovakia 2-1 and scored four power-play goals in a 7-5 loss to Sweden.

#### (3B) Slovakia vs. Finland (2A)

This one could be closer. The Finns have strong goaltending in Petteri Rimpinen, who has posted a .947 save percentage and 1.75 goals-against average, second only to Canada's Carter George. They were blanked 4-0 by Canada to open the tournament, their only regulation loss, but later edged USA in overtime, handing the Americans their lone loss. Finland finished second in Group A.

Slovakia finished third in Group B, led by Dalibor Dvorsky (tied for the tournament lead with four goals), Juraj Pekarcik and Maxim Strbak, and played well against their stronger opponents in losses to Sweden and Czechia.

#### (4A) Latvia vs. Sweden (1B)

Sweden whizzed past the preliminary round, sweeping Group B and entering the quarterfinals as the only undefeated team. Captain Axel Sandin Pellikka and Tom Willander lead a powerful Swedish back end, with offensive weapons Anton Wahlberg and Otto Stenberg up front, among others. Sandin Pellikka, named the top defenseman at the 2024 World Juniors, leads the tournament with eight points. The Swedish power play is a tournament-leading 7-for-20.

Sweden fell 6-2 to USA last year on home ice in Gothenburg, winning silver.

"I think this is a little receipt of the work we've put in, and respect for our team winning all four games here," Sandin Pellikka said of Sweden sweeping group play. "And we want to continue on this train that has started to roll and looking forward for the playoffs."

But ... can you really count Latvia out completely? Linards Feldbergs backstopped the team to a stunning upset over Canada with an MVP-worthy 55-save performance and leads the tournament with 163 saves. Washington Capitals prospect Eriks Mateiko has come up big with three goals. The team pulled off a gutsy overtime win over Germany to avoid the relegation game. They've emerged as a fan favorite and one of the stories of the tournament.

"We knew that we can do good things, big things. And we knew like as a team that we can do that," Feldbergs said. "So, yeah, right now we just have to concentrate on that."

Relegation game: Germany (5A) vs. Kazakhstan (5B)

The winner will remain in next year's World Juniors while the losing team will be relegated to the IIHF World U20 Championship Division I. Kazakhstan won it last year to be promoted. The loser will be replaced by this year's Division I winner, Denmark.

Kazakhstan has had some close calls at the tournament despite not winning a game. After blowout losses to Sweden and Czechia, Kazakhstan rallied from two goals down to force overtime against Slovakia in their third game. An overtime loss denied them from creating one of the biggest shocks of the tournament so far. They were still alive for the quarterfinals until they lost to Switzerland in their final preliminary game.

The Germans were off to a slow start after losing to the United States 10-4 in their first game. Their next two games saw them limit their deficits, losing 3-1 to Finland and 3-0 to Canada. They picked up their first point of the tournament when they went to overtime against Latvia. But an overtime goal from Latvian hero Mateiko sank them into the relegation game. Germany hasn't been in Division I since 2019 when they won to gain promotion.

## [The Athletic / 2025 World Junior Hockey Championship predictions: A new gold medal favorite emerges](#)

**By Corey Pronman, Scott Wheeler, Max Bultman and The Athletic NHL Staff- January 3, 2025**

How much could have changed in just over a week?

Well, at the 2025 IIHF World Junior Championship, the answer is a lot.

Our pre-tournament pick for gold in our World Juniors predictions, Canada, was upset by Latvia and lost an important matchup with rival USA in the preliminary round. One of our picks for the top 2025 NHL Draft-eligible player, Matthew Schaefer, suffered a tournament-ending injury.

What else changed? Before the tournament's quarterfinals, The Athletic polled 19 NHL staffers between Dec. 31 and Jan. 1 on the same set of questions we asked pre-tournament, plus their picks for the quarterfinal matchups. All those polled answered each question in the staff team picks portion of the survey.

Here's how our staff's expectations for the tournament have already evolved, with expert analysis, critique and player picks from prospect experts Corey Pronman, Scott Wheeler and Max Bultman.

Preliminary round standings

Wheeler: The results here aren't a surprise. Sweden is the only team that went 4-0 in group play, and Latvia has never made the semifinals at the tournament.

This is Latvia's second quarterfinal in the past three years, though, and this team has exceeded expectations every step of the way. It beat Canada and Germany and played tight, responsible hockey in losses to the U.S. and Finland (midway through the USA game, Latvia was leading in shots on goal). Eriks Mateiko (WSH) has been one of the top players in the tournament, and goaltender Linards Feldbergs has been excellent. The Swedes are the heavy, heavy favorites, though.

Bultman: Latvia has been impressive. Even in its 5-1 loss to the U.S., it was right in the game and had some chances to put a scare into the Americans. I picked Sweden like everyone else, but the Latvian team isn't going to come into this game just happy to be there. It'll put up a fight.

Which team will win the quarterfinal matchup of Finland vs. Slovakia?

Finland

78.9%

Slovakia

21.1%

Wheeler: This matchup is probably a little closer than the splits here, but the Finns are the favorites, especially with how well goaltender Petteri Rimpinen has played. Sometimes all you need in this tournament is a few core guys you can play the hell out of when it matters most, though, and nobody has leaned on their guys more than Slovakia has with Dalibor Dvorsky (STL), Juraj Pekarcik (STL) and Maxim Strbak (BUF). I'd expect them all to play 25-30 minutes, and if they rise to the challenge, the Slovaks could win.

Pronman: This is closer to 50/50 for me as well, even if I would lean toward Finland, which has a deeper lineup and a better goalie. Its best player, in theory, Konsta Helenius, has had a disappointing tournament, though, compared to Dvorsky.

Bultman: It scares me a bit that Finland managed only 10 goals through four games of pool play, but Slovakia wasn't much different, and the Finns are a notoriously tough out.

Which team will win the quarterfinal matchup of the United States vs. Switzerland?

United States

100.0%

Switzerland

0.0%

Wheeler: I might pick any of the seven other teams in the quarters against the Swiss. They have a couple of interesting young players, but their top guys have been a mixed bag and they weren't convincing in any of their games (even their 7-5 loss to Sweden doesn't tell the full story, as that game was played on the power play). The only thing that could undo the U.S. in this matchup would be discipline or getting "goalied" by Christian Kirsch (SJS). It's more likely to be a blowout.

Which team will win the quarterfinal matchup of Canada vs. Czechia?

Canada

57.9%

Czechia

42.1%

Wheeler: These odds are pretty close. I get a slight lean toward Canada because it might be the favorite on paper. It's been less of one on the ice. This Czech team has a goalie who can steal a game, Michael Hrabal; four forward lines; and a strong blue line. If Canada doesn't stay disciplined and continues to struggle to score, the Czechs could win a close game.

Pronman: I would argue Czechia is the mild favorite based on how the tournament has gone. It has scored more goals than Canada, and its older players have been more impactful in general, showing a lineup that has quality depth even if it lacks star power.

Bultman: The deciding issue will be whether Canada — which has struggled mightily to score — can solve Hrabal, who at this stage might be the favorite for the tournament's top goalie. I picked Canada on the belief it will eventually figure it out, but I don't feel good about it after how pool play went.

Which country will be relegated?

The two last-placed teams play a Relegation Round game. The winner plays again at the 2026 IIHF World Junior Championship, and the loser is relegated to the 2026 IIHF Ice Hockey U20 World Championship Division I Group A.

Kazakhstan

91.3%

89.5%

Germany

0.0%

10.5%

Latvia

8.7%

N/A

Wheeler: This is a weak German team that is susceptible to losing this game, but it's hard to pick Kazakhstan to win at this level.

Which team will win gold?

United States

39.1%

63.2%

Sweden

4.3%

26.3%

Canada

56.5%

5.3%

Finland

0.0%

5.3%

Wheeler: You should be taking Canada if these were Vegas odds, but it has wholly earned our voters' hesitation.

Bultman: Sweden has been the most impressive team, so its jump here is well earned. I changed my pick to Sweden, too. But we haven't seen it against the U.S. or Canada, and if Trey Augustine can keep up the form he showed against Canada (but notably didn't have early in the tournament), the U.S. will be a tough out.

Which team will win silver?

Sweden

39.1%

36.8%

United States

26.1%

36.8%

Finland

4.3%

15.8%

Canada

30.4%

5.3%

Czechia

0.0%

5.3%

Wheeler: Wow. Between the 5.3 percent for gold and the 5.3 percent for silver, few people are picking Canada to make the final after nearly 87 percent of voters picked it to be there pre-tournament.

Bultman: It's going to take more than a couple of goals to beat Sweden, and we just haven't seen Canada break through offensively in this tournament.

Which team will win bronze?

Canada

8.7%

36.8%

Czechia

4.3%

31.6%

Sweden

47.8%

26.3%

Finland

8.7%

5.3%

United States

30.4%

0.0%

Wheeler: I'd love to see the Czechs medal for a fourth straight year!

Panel player picks

Who will be the leading scorer?

Pronman's pick

Ryan Leonard, F (USA)

James Hagens, F (USA)

Wheeler's pick

Gabe Perreault, F (USA)

James Hagens, F (USA)

Bultman's pick

Otto Stenberg, F (SWE)

James Hagens, F (USA)

Wheeler: I almost went with a defenseman. Cole Hutson and Axel Sandin Pellikka have a 2-point lead over our pick of James Hagens, with 8 points to his 6, and if they each get 1 point in the next three games, which seems realistic, I wonder if 11 is enough in the end. It'll be an American or a Swede, though. They have the softest quarterfinal matchups and the greatest opportunity to add to their tallies.

Bultman: The Hagens line will break through in the knockout round, and if it does, Hagens is well positioned to grab the scoring crown.

"I saw my chance and I took it."

– James Hagens (probably) #WorldJuniors [pic.twitter.com/3qoviz6Obd](https://pic.twitter.com/3qoviz6Obd)

— USA Hockey (@usahockey) December 26, 2024

Who will be the MVP?

Awarded to the most valuable player at any position, as selected by media representatives at the end of the tournament.

Pronman's pick

Berkly Catton, F (CAN)

James Hagens, F (USA)

Wheeler's pick

Gabe Perreault, F (USA)

Cole Hutson, D (USA)

Bultman's pick

Trey Augustine, G (USA)

Axel Sandin Pellikka, D (SWE)

Pronman: It's anyone's guess who will emerge as the best player. There isn't a clear candidate right now (hence, us all picking someone different). Through the round-robin, this has been a World Juniors without a standout performer, even if several players have played well.

Wheeler: If Hutson lights it up against the Swiss and makes another big play or two in the semifinal and the final, it'll be his to lose.

Bultman: I changed my gold medal pick to Sweden, so going with its leading scorer felt like a natural switch as well.

Who will be the best goalie?

Awarded to the best goalie, as selected by the Directorate of the IIHF at the end of the tournament.

Pronman's pick

Trey Augustine (USA)

Michael Hrabal (CZE)

Wheeler's pick

Trey Augustine (USA)

Carter George (CAN)

Bultman's pick

Trey Augustine (USA)

Michael Hrabal (CZE)

Wheeler: Carter George, Hrabal, Rimpinen and Feldbergs have been among the standouts, but George has been beaten only three times in three starts, and they were all on the power play. He's locked in right now; I picked Canada to beat Czechia against my best judgment, and if it does, he'll win this award handily.

I take it you two picked Czechia to beat Canada?

Bultman: It is tough to win one of these without making the final four, but Hrabal's been good enough that he can contend for this award with a strong performance in a low-scoring loss, too. But George is a contender, and if Augustine rallies and leads the U.S. to gold, I wouldn't count him out, either.

Who will be the best defender?

Awarded to the best defender, as selected by the Directorate of the IIHF at the end of the tournament.

Pronman's pick

Zeev Buium (USA)

Axel Sandin Pellikka (SWE)

Wheeler's pick

Axel Sandin Pellikka (SWE)

Cole Hutson (USA)

Bultman's pick

Zeev Buium (USA)

Axel Sandin Pellikka (SWE)

Wheeler: It's funny that I picked Sandin Pellikka before the tournament and am now the one who has switched, but Hutson has been lights out and USA had the tougher group.

Who will be the best forward?

Awarded to the best forward, as selected by the Directorate of the IIHF at the end of the tournament.

Pronman's pick

Berkly Catton (CAN)

James Hagens (USA)

Wheeler's pick

Gabe Perreault (USA)

James Hagens (USA)

Bultman's pick

Calum Ritchie (CAN)

James Hagens (USA)

Wheeler: It's not going to be any of the Canadians! I thought about USA's Danny Nelson here.

Who will be the top 2025 NHL Draft-eligible player?

Pronman: Hagens has been excellent, but Schaefer was playing at such a high level. Had he not gotten injured, he probably would have been my vote.

Wheeler: Yeah, this could have been a great story in the tournament but has become Hagens' by default due to Schaefer's injury and Porter Martone's scratches. Rimpinen has had an excellent tournament as well.



## The Athletic / Sharks prospect Kasper Halttunen trying to be more than just his big shot at World Juniors

By Scott Wheeler- January 3, 2024

OTTAWA — When the puck ripped past Latvian goalie Linard Feldbergs on New Year's Eve, Kasper Halttunen celebrated by wiping his glove across his forehead, miming his relief that one had finally got in.

Halttunen had just uncorked his patented one-timer, a shot that scouts will tell you is one of — if not the — hardest outside the NHL.

It led him to a tie for the OHL lead in power-play goals with 16 last year for the London Knights, to the OHL playoffs lead in goals with 17 in 18 games after that, and then to the Memorial Cup tournament all-star team after scoring another four more in five games in Saginaw, including one in the final.

Rob Simpson, London's longtime assistant general manager, named Evan Bouchard as the only other Knights player they've had with a shot that could be considered even close to as big as Halttunen's.

"It's a big weapon and not only for himself but for our team because guys have to really adjust to that. Because if you give him a shot — and it can be outside of the scoring chance area — he can beat goalies with it even if it's not in the prime location," Simpson said. "He can hit it and hit it consistently. It's one thing to be able to shoot it hard but to be able to score and to put it into spots that you need to is another thing altogether. It's pretty special. They're hard to find, that's for sure."

But it had evaded him through the first three games of this year's World Juniors.

After one finally clapped in, he acknowledged that "it's not easy" trying to get it off when every team in the tournament makes it the focus of their penalty kill.

"Guys are willing to block shots and it's tough but it was pretty nice to get the first one. It felt really good," he said. "It has just always kind of been my thing, but I'm just working on it every day."

It's not the only thing he's working on every day, either.

The shot is his trademark and was the focal point of his game when the San Jose Sharks drafted him with the No. 36 pick in the 2023 NHL Draft. It will be a leading factor if he's to make it to the NHL (he's already got two goals and four points in six AHL games after starting at the pro level this year before returning to London to chase another OHL title).

But his work has come as much off the ice as on it as he tries to prove that he's more than just his one-timer.

The next step is to try to medal as a leader with Finland at the World Juniors.

Kasper Halttunen won the J. Ross Robertson Cup as OHL champions with the London Knights last season. (Ian Goodall / Goodall Media)

Halttunen has always had the shot. Not just the one-timer but the wrist shot too, according to Simpson.

But early on he was "just a goal scorer."

"He could make plays as well but he wanted to be a finisher and sit on the power play in that Ovi spot," Simpson said.

Over time, though, they also realized he has more to his game than meets the eye.

“He has a great set of hands, too,” Simpson said. “For a big player with size, he can really pull pucks and use his wingspan very well. He can move pucks to areas so that he can make plays or get his shot off.”

He has also worked really hard to round out his game. Progress in becoming more reliable and responsible defensively has landed him on London’s penalty kill this year. His “skating and his feet have really come to another level,” Simpson said. His “pace of play at five-on-five has really improved.”

“Watching the progress that he has made ... I think he’s done a lot of work,” Simpson said. “You’ve got to give a lot of credit to Kasper. He had a good summer this year training-wise and working on the areas that he needed to and now he has become a complete player, and every game you just see more and more of that coming out with us this season where (head coach Dale Hunter) is trusting to put him in situations not just in offence but more defensive situations as well too, which is nice to see.”

That work in the offseason has also included a particular emphasis on the 6-foot-4 forward’s fitness and work done to cut his weight down to 205 pounds.

For Halttunen, it was never really about a lack of work ethic to begin with.

“He had a couple of summers there where he was very, very busy going around to development camps and the NHL Draft and it’s tough to get a lot of consistent training in just because you are so busy with everything that you need to do right after your draft year,” Simpson said.

“And then once you get that 18-19-year-old year where you only have development camp and you can really get months of time to put in the work to the areas that you need to, it makes a big difference. And I’ve got to give a lot of credit to Kasper because when you have players come in, we’re honest with them about what we really feel they need to develop and then they end up not only being good juniors but good NHL players. Some guys take that and really take it to another level and some players sometimes don’t want to hear about their deficiencies.”

When the Knights laid out a plan for Halttunen, he was “really open from the start.”

“(Halttunen) had a good mindset and really worked with us together to improve and I think it’s showing now, all of his work, and his positive attitude, and his appreciation of trying to get better in the areas that you need to,” Simpson said.

Halttunen’s not done working on it, either.

“I’m working to gain the coaches’ trust every night now and working on my weaknesses,” Halttunen said. “I’ve got some things that I’ve still got to be better on, just skating and my overall game.”

Halttunen scored two goals and four points in six games with the AHL’s San Jose Barracuda before returning to London to chase another title. (Ian Goodall / Goodall Media)

This is technically a third World Juniors for the Halttunen family. After registering six points in seven games at last year’s tournament in Gothenburg, Sweden, Halttunen, with his two points through four games so far this year, is back as a returnee, this time with a letter on his jersey.

But his father, Niko, also played for Finland at the 1995 World Juniors and went on to have a long pro career in Finland and Sweden.

Niko is now the coach of Jokerit’s U20 team in Finland and coached Kasper until his under-16 year.

His dad, he said, was a different player than him, more of a third/fourth-line grinder. But he was hard on him and has been both his biggest supporter and critic.

“Everybody was always saying that it was always easier for me because my dad’s a coach but it was the other way around. I had to battle through everything even more than the other guys because my dad was trying to push me to be a better player,” Halttunen said.

He’s also one of five Knights at this year’s World Juniors and says the move to London last year was big for him and his development, listing off Rob and the Hunter brothers (Dale and Mark, the club’s owner and general manager) as having taught him a lot in a short period.

One of those Knights is his Finnish teammate Jesse Nurmi, who joined London as their second import this season. Before they were teammates in London, they’d played against each other their whole lives and with each other for three years with the national team. Nurmi said Halttunen has been a big help for him in London, not just because it’s nice to have someone to speak Finnish with but because they live next to each other and Halttunen has made an effort to show him the ropes and involve him with everyone else.

“He’s such a good guy and chill guy,” Nurmi said. “He makes jokes and he gets the guys smiling. ... He’s a really important part of our team.”

At the end of this season, when he makes the full-time move to the pro level with the Sharks organization, that’s what Simpson will remember most about him.

“He’s a really good kid,” Simpson said. “He’s always got a smile on his face. He wants to be a difference-maker on the ice. He wants to be put in key situations. So he’s got that competitive fire to be that. But he’s also a happy-go-lucky guy around the room who has just been really enjoyable to be a part of our team and have here for the last couple of years.”

## The Athletic / Hockey Canada brass stand by choices after second straight World Juniors 'disaster'

By Scott Wheeler- January 4, 2025

OTTAWA — On Friday afternoon, Scott Salmond, Peter Anholt and Al Murray, the three men chiefly in charge of Hockey Canada's 2025 World Junior team, stood shoulder to shoulder inside Ottawa's Delta Hotel and fielded 22 minutes of questions from reporters.

After Canada's first-ever back-to-back quarterfinal exits at the tournament, Salmond said it was on him.

"The buck stops with me," Salmond said. "The Program of Excellence is my responsibility. And so like other Canadians, I'm incredibly disappointed. I'm apologetic. ... It's not unacceptable but we can't accept it. It's something that we'll work very diligently on improving. ... You can blame me. If you think it's scouting, I hire the scout. If you think it's coaching, I hire the coach."

At the end of the day, he said, it boiled down to too many penalties and not enough goals.

"That's how we got here," he said.

They stood by their decisions, though.

Anholt, their management group lead these last two years, said he wouldn't make any changes to the lineups they used or the personnel they had. Head coach Dave Cameron's decisions were "100 percent right on line," with management's view.

Asked to assess the job Cameron did with the team, Salmond spoke first of him as a character man he's known a long time. After last year's quarterfinal loss in Gothenburg, Salmond said they wanted an experienced coach and pointed to the eight Hockey Canada events Cameron had been a part of and his experience as an NHL coach.

"I thought from Day 1 of the camp we had an identity that we wanted to play and that Dave held firm to that identity," Salmond said. "I think he pushed players in a way that Dave can. And then at the end, Dave doesn't score goals, it's his job to put players in positions to do that and I thought he did that."

Murray, brought in to be the team's head scout after a decades-long career as a director of scouting with the Tampa Bay Lightning and the Los Angeles Kings, said he didn't think their team, which scored just one more goal than Germany and Switzerland in the event and two more than Kazakhstan, was short on talent.

"We didn't score at times and that seemed to be a collective thing. I don't know how to explain that," he said. "We didn't want to go with one-way players. We didn't want to go with just competitors that didn't have any skill and I thought we had a good combination of it. ... I think the process was a sound process and I think we brought the players that we thought were the most deserving to have spots, and I thought we had a real good team that was capable of winning a gold medal."

Anholt said they "wanted to have a back end that could really skate and defend with their legs and I think we proved that that was correct."

"When I look at our group, I like our team, I think there's a lot of talent there, we can skate, and we can do a lot of good things and we just didn't get it done," he added.

Salmond felt they were close, that if they could have come back against the Czechs after falling behind 3-1 on Thursday night, it could have been the spark they needed to ignite the team.

"I told our group before (the quarterfinal), 'usually you get what you deserve' and I actually thought yesterday we deserved a little bit better," Salmond said.

He felt they dominated stretches of play against USA and Czechia, and pointed to a 24-6 shot advantage at one point in their New Year's Eve game against the Americans.

"Those sound like excuses but in fact they're reality," Salmond said. "Do we need to blow everything up and start over? I don't think so. I think we need to probably fine-tune some things. Again, this sounds like I'm making excuses, but we won two in a row prior to coming in and losing two in a row so it's not completely a disaster. It is in the last two years but I think you've got to look at the long-term and the success that our program has had as well."

They've also won the last two U17 tournaments, the last three Hlinka Gretzky Cups and last year's U18 worlds, he pointed out.

"That should be indicative of success at U20s," he said. "Why didn't that translate this year? That's something that certainly we'll ask ourselves and we'll do a little more investigation and spend some more time thinking about."

The roster decisions, he said, were not political, or based on emotion. They were "calculated decisions based on winning," he argued. "And sometimes you win and sometimes you don't."

Challenged on all of the potential goals they left at home, though, and why this Team Canada didn't prioritize skill first and fitting skilled players into roles, like other Canadian national teams have before at higher levels, Anholt argued he doesn't think that really works.

"You create a team that you fit in different roles and to be successful you need to do that," Anholt said. "I don't think that just looking at stats and bringing the most goals or the most assists, I don't think that, that really does it. I think you have to look at character, you have to look at how they compete in any situation and I think we were comfortable with the group."

Though Canada's 113 penalty minutes were 24 more than the nearest team (Kazakhstan's 79) through to Friday, Murray said it wasn't a byproduct of the emphasis they placed on bringing gritty players.

Against USA, he felt their penalty troubles were earned. Against Czechia, he said he wasn't so sure.

"I don't think we expect players to take undisciplined penalties and I don't think gritty players that have skill are guys that we don't want to have as part of the team," Murray said. "When you look at our players and go through the statistics of all of the guys that are on the team, they're all high-skill players plus they bring a competitiveness that we were looking for. Sometimes it gets away from you a little bit and it did this tournament."

They didn't know when they named their roster, either, that Matthew Schaefer, their power-play quarterback and a player Salmond thought was their best defenseman, would go down with an injury.

"When we built the team, we built it on the group of players that we had at the time. And we have a (Tanner) Molendyk and a (Sam) Dickinson and some other guys who run power plays, we have power-play guys," Salmond said. (Canada's power play finished 4-for-19, a 21 percent clip that was sixth-best in the tournament through five games.)

Though they talked about a lack of team chemistry, they weren't prepared to say that they should have practiced more, either — after not having a full practice in-tournament.

"That's a situation where you're always thinking about the fatigue of the players and the energy level, and the emotional level of the team," Anholt said.

“That’s not really how it works,” he answered a follow-up about building chemistry in practice.

And “Why should (Canadian hockey fans) be confident that this management group has the answers moving forward?”

“I think we’ve proven to do things the right way, with the right people, and so that’s not going to change,” Salmond said. “I don’t think the results are always indicative of the people or the process. (But) in our country, you’ve got to win way more than you lose and that’s what we sign up for.”

## The Athletic / How Latvia goalie Linards Feldbergs became the feel-good story of the 2025 World Juniors

**By Sarah Jean Maher- January 4, 2025**

OTTAWA — Linards Feldbergs could barely stop smiling throughout the World Juniors.

It started when Latvia upset Canada 3-2 in the preliminary round, which set off alarm bells throughout the host country. Feldbergs stopped 55 of 57 shots through regulation and overtime and then remained perfect through an eight-round shootout.

People across the hockey world were supportive of his performance, including Carey Price, who tweeted about Feldbergs.

Feldbergs, wow. Well done kid.

On to the next one boys. CA

“Actually, that’s really crazy that, like, the popular players saw me playing and also (are) saying good words for me,” he said. “I’m really excited about it and I really feel it in my heart.”

Latvia lost to a strong USA team less than 24 hours later, wherein Feldbergs was once again kept busy with 41 shots. The fans inside the arena in Ottawa loudly cheered him on, which energized him.

Despite the result, he was still buzzing over his team’s historic win the night before.

“I’m thinking about it for the day, like for the next two hours I’m going to still be happy about it,” Feldbergs said after the 5-1 loss to USA.

The Latvians next edged Germany 4-3 in overtime to lock up their spot in the knockout round for the second straight year. Again, the crowd’s support wasn’t lost on him.

“When we scored, it was really loud then. And also on power play there was cheering ‘Latvia, Latvia,’” he said.

Latvia ultimately lost to Sweden 3-2 in the quarterfinals on Thursday as Feldbergs faced another 50 shots.

He received a standing ovation from the TD Place crowd who chanted “MVP” as he was named Latvia’s player of the game and one of the team’s players of the tournament.

And amid mixed feelings of disappointment and pride, he still couldn’t help but smile.

“I think this is one of the best weeks in my life,” he said after the quarterfinal contest. “And I’m gonna remember this tournament class, World Juniors. It’s going to stay in my head, in my heart for the rest of my life.”

The goalie behind Latvia’s unexpected run who stood on his head over and over again has become one of the stories of the tournament. It’s exactly what his team set out to do.

“It’s fun being an underdog. Nobody really believed in us and we can always prove them wrong,” said Latvia forward Eriks Mateiko, who led the team with five goals in five games.

In his second World Juniors, Feldbergs has faced the most shots on goal by a mile with 226. He totaled 210 saves.

“We wouldn’t be here if not for our goalie,” said Mateiko. “I think if not (for) him, we will be nowhere near here in this game or the Canada game. Just overall, I think he’s the tournament’s MVP for sure.”

Feldbergs will now return to the QMJHL’s Sherbrooke Phoenix.

A native of Ogre, Latvia, Feldbergs was selected by the Phoenix with the No. 25 pick in the 2024 CHL Import Draft out of HS Riga.

What Phoenix goalie coach Olivier Gervais remembers most about his first interaction with the Latvian netminder was his dedication to getting better and learning the North American style, and his excitement to play in a new country. He also recalls that he wouldn’t stop smiling.

“He was like, ‘Oli, my goal is just to get better 1 percent every day. So I’m willing to do anything,’” Gervais said. “I’m like, OK, let’s have fun together and let’s start with the basic stuff like work ethic.”

Gervais and the coaches learned quickly that Feldbergs’ strength is his athleticism. He has good hands and good speed. And since joining the CHL, his reads and decision-making have improved. Learning to understand structure is what he’s worked on most with Gervais so far this season.

“Right away he jumped into the plan, into the structure without hesitation,” Gervais said. “It’s just like all the hard work since the month of August day after day in the gym, in the video room, on the ice. He’s a student of the game.”

Latvia’s run through Canada and to the quarterfinals — their third appearance ever — wasn’t necessarily expected, but Gervais and Phoenix assistant coach Jonathan Deschenes weren’t surprised to see an impressive performance from their goalie.

“I was not expecting him to get like more than 200 shots in, what, five games? So he must be pretty tired right now,” Gervais said. “But the result, I’m not surprised at all. He deserves all the MVP chants he got from the fans.”

Said Deschenes: “We knew he was able to have a really good performance, he did it with us during the year. But to be able to do it at such a high level, like four games in a row, that’s really outstanding for him. We’re all really proud of him here.”

Feldbergs said he’s emerged from the tournament a much more confident goalie as he heads into the second half of the season with the Phoenix, who sit in third place in the Western Conference and fifth in the league. The team anticipates his experience at the tournament will help his new 17-year-old goalie partner Kyan Labbé, whom they traded for before Christmas.

“Yes, we are a team in rebuild. To have Lenny to show the pass, to work every night, because right now we’re working every night and we’re playing very good teams,” Gervais said. “(Labbé)’s going to learn a ton from Lenny.”

Through 21 games with Sherbrooke, Feldbergs has an 11-4-2 record with a .899 save percentage and a 2.51 goals-against average. His billet family drove from Sherbrooke to watch him defeat Canada. And they were cheering for him.

“He’s so happy to be at the rink every day. He loves everything that comes with hockey: being at the rink, the next rush on the ice, skating a little bit later,” Deschenes said. “He’s just a really happy person all the time.”

Feldbergs is eligible for the 2025 NHL Draft, and there’s a chance he’s proved he’s ready for a team to take a chance on him. But regardless of what the near future brings, beating Team Canada on their home ice in Ottawa will be a career highlight.



“Probably I’m going to be happy about it for the next year. I remember the moment that we won against Canada,” he said.

After the loss to Sweden, FloHockey’s Lizz Child asked Feldberg to sum up the tournament in one word. He said, “Believe.”

Child later asked Mateikos the same question, to which he answered “Feldbergs.”

## The Athletic / Florida vs. California: Debating the NHL's best state of the salary cap era

By Sean McIndoe and Eric Stephens- January 4, 2025

Which state has been the NHL's best of the salary cap era?

There are four states with multiple NHL teams, but two stand out above the others for our purposes today. New York has three teams but no championships to show for the cap era and is, to put it mildly, going through it right now. And while Pennsylvania has three titles to go with plenty of big stars and memorable moments, virtually all of those have come from the Pittsburgh Penguins, which would make for a one-sided combination.

That leaves us with two contenders, at least for today: Florida and California, the only two states that can boast multiple cap-era Stanley Cup winners. And with the Tampa Bay Lightning arriving in California for a three-game road swing that starts on Thursday, this feels like as good a time as any to have the debate.

We'll divide the question into categories, and then make the case for each side. Eric Stephens will represent California because he pulls double-duty covering the Anaheim Ducks and Los Angeles Kings and knows the state's NHL situation better than anyone. And Sean McIndoe will take Florida because he's an Eastern-based writer and has therefore never watched a West Coast team play in his life. (That was, of course, a harmless little joke. Sean has indeed watched a California team play. Once. It did not go well.)

It's California vs. Florida, and Eric vs. Sean. Ring the bell and let's see where this goes.

Championships won

It's all about the Stanley Cup. Or in this case, Cups — plural. Both states have combined to win three Cups, with California's coming from the Ducks in 2007 and the Kings in 2012 and 2014, and Florida's with the Lightning in 2020 and 2021 and the Panthers in 2024.

Sean's case for Florida: You might assume each state having three Cups means we just have to concede a draw here. But instead, I'm going to suggest we go to the tiebreaker: Stanley Cup-winning goals scored. The Ducks had to get the other team to do the dirty work, which means Florida wins by a 3-2 margin.

Eric's case for California: I'll give Florida credit for great catch-up work with the Lightning's terrific sustained run and for the Panthers currently wearing the crown. But success in the NHL is cyclical and they've jumped into the spot the three California teams were in through most of the 2010s. Recency bias might be out the window but they were pushing for titles and winning them first. (Cap era, folks. I know the Bolts lifted the Cup in 2004.)

Regular-season success

Sean's case for Florida: California has more wins because it has more teams, but Florida can boast the best team (Tampa) and the best combined points percentage. Florida takes this one, right?

Eric's case for California: That's a great mark considering the Kings went through a rebuilding stretch after the Cup years while the Ducks are trying to pull out of theirs and the San Jose Sharks are knee-deep in one. Yeah, it was a chore to go through California back in the day.

Playoff success

Back to the postseason. We've already talked Cups, but you can't always win it all. How often do you at least make the dance, and how many games that matter can you win? (Records via Stathead, with the 2020 preliminary round counted as the playoffs.)

Sean's case for Florida: This is more or less a repeat of the regular season category, with the Lightning being the best of the bunch across the board while the Panthers bring up the rear. This time, though, the gap between the Panthers and the three California teams is wider, so it's tougher to make the case for Florida. Tough, but not impossible, as I'll point out that the two Florida teams have combined to average 14 rounds won, a number that none of the three California teams can beat.

Eric's case for California: Could you imagine the discrepancy if the Sharks had gotten to the Cup Final more often and closed the deal? I get it, three teams against two presents an inherent advantage. I'm just saying that this underscores how consistently good-to-great the Sharks were for those who've forgotten. They never hit the peaks the Kings and Ducks reached but they were in the contending mix for a longer stretch.

Great players: Forward

There's nothing quite like watching a flashy forward rack up points. Which state can boast the biggest stars with the most hardware?

Sean's case for Florida: This one should be easy. We can start with Nikita Kucherov, who has two scoring titles and a Hart Trophy. Aleksander Barkov is a two-time Selke winner. We can also add Rocket Richard trophies from Steven Stamkos and Vincent Lecavalier, plus an Art Ross from Martin St. Louis. Mix in names like Matthew Tkachuk, Brayden Point and Sam Reinhart, and Florida might have more pure star power even with California having an extra team.

Eric's case for California: Hmm. Corey Perry does have his Hart but I'm not foolish enough to put him in Kucherov or even Stamkos territory. Joe Thornton helps balance that out. Thornton will get in the Hall, while Patrick Marleau might one day and Joe Pavelski should. Perry and Ryan Getzlaf defined Ducks hockey for more than a decade. Anze Kopitar, a two-time Selke winner, is still going strong. What probably hurts California's case is none but Thornton put up massive numbers and all were at their peak before scoring in the NHL took off.

Great players: Defense

Sure, the forwards get all the attention, but ask any NHL GM and they'd take a blue-line star to build around.

Sean's case for Florida: It starts with Victor Hedman, who has a Norris and a Conn Smythe. Aaron Ekblad was a No. 1 pick, and Gustav Forsling is emerging as a legitimate star. We've also got Ryan McDonagh and Mikhail Sergachev, so this will be a competitive category as long as Eric doesn't immediately hit me with a long list of Norris winners.

Eric's case for California: Scott Niedermayer. Drew Doughty. Chris Pronger. Brent Burns. Erik Karlsson. No offense, Sunshine State, but this kind of ends the discussion, no?

Great players: Goaltenders

You build great teams from the net out. Or so it has been explained to me.

Sean's case for Florida: We can start with Andrei Vasilevskiy, who owns a Vezina and a Conn Smythe and could make a case as the best big-game goalie of his generation. Sergei Bobrovsky won his two Vezinas in Columbus, but he's been able to rediscover his elite game in recent playoff runs. Roberto Luongo built

half of his Hall of Fame resume with the Panthers. Mix in Ben Bishop, Mike Smith and the criminally underrated Tomas Vokoun, and I feel a lot better about this category than I did the blue line.

Eric's case for California: I can counter the brilliant Russians, Vasilevskiy and Bobrovsky, with Jonathan Quick, who presents a good argument for being the best American-born netminder. Yeah, Quick doesn't have a Vezina but he brings a Conn Smythe to the table. Let's not forget about Jean-Sébastien Giguère. He carried the mail for the powerful Ducks in 2007 after his son was born with a medical issue to start the playoffs. He's also got one of those Conn thingies, too. Evgeni Nabokov was a hell of a goalie as well.

#### Coaching

When they're not staring forlornly at iPads trying to decide whether to challenge random goals, coaches play a major role in a team's success. Which state has had the best of the bench bosses?

Sean's case for Florida: Jon Cooper is quite possibly the best coach in the NHL, and has been for over a decade. Paul Maurice is very funny and, like a cool uncle, occasionally swears. The state also served as a proving ground for names like Rick Tocchet, Gerard Gallant and John Tortorella who went on to find significant success elsewhere. I will not be answering questions about Barry Melrose at this time.

Eric's case for California: Good call. I don't think Cooper or Maurice could rock the Melrose mullet like Barry, though I'd say Tocchet once had a pretty strong one. It's hard for the California guys to compare in terms of personality and killer quotes but Darryl Sutter and Bruce Boudreau press conferences were appointment viewing in their own unique ways. The two could also coach a little bit. Pete DeBoer isn't in the Golden State anymore but he's still getting it done.

#### Front offices

None of the rest of this matters if the boss is useless.

Sean's case for Florida: Bill Zito and Julien BriseBois are among the top GMs in the game right now, while Steve Yzerman built a fantastic resume in Tampa and probably went on to unimpeachable success at his next stop. The Panthers even provided us with one season of the inimitable Mike Keenan as a GM in the cap era, which isn't much but is one more than any other franchise has. I will not be answering questions about Tom Rowe at this time.

Eric's case for California: Rob Blake, Pat Verbeek and Mike Grier have a lot to prove for different reasons. So I'll go back a bit. Dean Lombardi did fashion a two-time Cup winner from big-boy hockey but put off a necessary rebuild. Doug Wilson had the Sharks in the playoffs almost every year but put off a necessary rebuild. Bob Murray never pushed the Ducks over the finish line and lost his job amid accusations of improper professional conduct. And he put off a necessary rebuild. I'm sensing a theme here.

#### Low moments

We've been focused on the positive, but hockey is a game of ups and downs, and we have to consider the rock-bottom moments. Let's own our low points.

Sean's case for Florida: My first assumption was that the Panthers would dominate this category. But with apologies to the Gerard Gallant taxi incident, and that time they replaced a broken glass panel with cardboard, I think the answer here actually has to be the 2019 Lightning shattering regular-season records only to get absolutely rolled by the Columbus Blue Jackets in one of the greatest postseason collapses of all time.

Eric's case for California: It doesn't get much lower than the unmitigated worst team in the league, and the Ducks and Sharks have been taking their turn recently. The Kings haven't been that putrid, though they did clumsily hand off the captaincy from Dustin Brown to Kopitar and once had Willie Desjardins as

their coach. Of course, the Sharks did have their own greatest postseason collapses of all time against L.A. in 2014. And can't leave the Ducks out as the Boudreau era was littered with playoff disappointment. Not burying Chicago when it had the chance in the 2015 Western Conference final will always sting.

#### Closing arguments

One last chance for each side to make their case with any final considerations we haven't already covered.

Sean's case for Florida: Admittedly, the Lightning are carrying this duo, but the Panthers have finally shed their little brother status and shown they can hang with the league's elite. That makes Florida the only multi-team state in which every franchise has won a cap-era Cup. And they've done it while icing star-studded teams, backed by A+ coaching and front-office talent. Also, in Florida, you don't have to wake up early to watch football on Sundays. We all love the adventures of Florida Man, but when it comes to the NHL's modern history, the choice is obvious: Florida Team.

Eric's case for California: I know things are rosy in Florida these days with two teams in firm positions as contenders, but as I said before, the NHL is a cyclical league. I'll hold on to the belief that the Bolts and Panthers will face a downturn (someday) and the Ducks and Sharks will see this young talent they've assembled take them to the top (someday). Yeah, the taxes are high, but someone's got to pay for the roads and schools and we don't have that horrific humidity that comes with our great weather. I can shower and not feel like I need another five minutes later.

## The Athletic / USA, Finland advance to World Juniors gold medal game, Americans on brink of history

By Corey Pronman and Scott Wheeler- January 5, 2025

OTTAWA — The penultimate day at the 2025 World Juniors saw USA and Finland advance to Sunday's gold medal game, setting up a rematch after the Finns beat the Americans in overtime in group play. USA Hockey will look to make history and win their first-ever back-to-back golds. The Finns will have a chance to win their sixth gold medal, which would tie them with the United States for third all-time.

Here are The Athletic's prospects writers Corey Pronman's and Scott Wheeler's semifinal standouts and analysis.

- Finland defeated Sweden 4-3 in overtime. Sabres first-rounder Konsta Helenius had assists on all four Finnish goals. Draft-eligible forward Benjamin Rautiainen scored the overtime winner. Blues prospect Otto Stenberg had two goals for Sweden. Finnish goaltender Petteri Rimpinen made 43 saves.
- USA defeated Czechia 4-1. Islanders first-rounder Cole Eiserman scored the game-winner. Red Wings goalie prospect Trey Augustine stopped 26 of 27 shots for the Americans. Gabe Perreault (NY Rangers) and Ryan Leonard (Washington) each had two points (one goal, one assist apiece).

Eiserman making most of unconventional role

There has always been a lot of talk about the Islanders' first-rounder. He's a unique cat with a one-of-one play style and one-shot goal-scoring punch. After starting this year's tournament on Team USA's quote-unquote second line, he was moved to the 13th forward role against Canada on New Year's Eve and has played limited minutes. I've actually quite liked what he has brought in that role the last three games though. While he's playing primarily on the power play, when he has got out there at five-on-five, I've felt he's played with intensity and has done a good job chasing down pucks and applying pressure on the forecheck. He scored a big goal against both Canada on Dec. 31 and Czechia in the semifinal. Credit to him for accepting the role and coming up big in usage (under 10 minutes average for the last three games since the switch) he has never had in his career. He's going to be a first-line forward for the Americans next year but for now, he's giving them exactly what they need out of him as the 13th forward. — Scott Wheeler

Sweden can't score when they needed one

Sweden's blue line was known as a strength coming into this tournament, but despite having two strong lines of forward, whether there was enough pure skill and offense on this team was always a mild question. They scored in the round-robin, but aside from Felix Unger Sorum and Victor Eklund, there wasn't a whole lot of dynamic puck play among the forward group. That showed up in the semifinal. They had a ton of pressure on Finland in the second half of the game, getting 11 more shots on goal and many more dangerous looks overall. They just couldn't beat the Finnish goalie Rimpinen. Other than Otto Stenberg, there wasn't a true natural finisher in this group; their leading goal scorer was a defenseman, Axel Sandin Pellikka. They were the better team, they just couldn't find a hero to bury a shot. — Corey Pronman

Finland grinds their way to gold medal game

This Finland team has often looked ordinary in this tournament. They haven't scored many goals, beating Germany by two goals and Latvia by three goals. On paper, they don't have many top NHL prospects and seemed like a notable underdog coming into this game. They saved arguably their best performance of

the tournament for the semifinal, and that includes the fact they beat the USA in the round-robin. Finland was out-competing Sweden for the first two periods of the game. They were out-skilled, but still kept the game close in chances until they went up by one and started to sit back. They didn't shorten the bench and trusted all their players in important situations. — Corey Pronman

#### Helenius arrives for Finland

I expected more out of Helenius at this year's tournament. Entering the semifinal, he had just three assists through five games. For a returning player with men's senior team experience who has been a top player in Liiga and a good player in the AHL, the expectation is that they'll dominate and be one of the top players in the tournament — and certainly for their team. And while Helenius was named one of Finland's top three players of the tournament (his 19:03 average ice time also leads their forwards) as selected by the team after his four-assist performance in the semi, bringing him to seven assists in six games, he's not in the mix for the tournament all-star team in my opinion and has been bland at five-on-five at times. His craft on the puck, feel for spacing and timing and vision were all on display on Saturday, though, and it was nice to see him really connecting on his passes and finding guys. His athletic profile isn't an asset but his brain always has been. — Scott Wheeler

## The Athletic / World Juniors Today: Previewing the 2025 semifinal matchups

By Julian McKenzie and Sarah Jean Maher- January 5, 2025

It's semifinal day at the World Juniors.

Each team will have a chance to play for a medal. The Americans' drive for back-to-back gold medals remains alive, while Sweden can still have their revenge after a silver medal last year. Finland seeks its first gold medal since 2019 while Czechia hopes for a gold medal after earning silver and bronze medals at their last two tournaments.

The semifinals won't include the Canadians, who were shocked in their quarterfinal encounter with Czechia earlier this week. It's something Canadian fans did not take well.

It's over. Czechia hangs on to defeat Canada 4-3. Canada is eliminated from the quarters for a second consecutive year.

It was a much different reaction from Czechia's group, obviously. Czechia led for most of the game but needed to compose themselves after Canada tied the game at three in the third period.

"After the third goal, 3-3, the team was a little bit down," Czechia forward Eduard Sale said. "But I just say something, just keep going. We will have a chance again."

Sure enough, Czechia's power-play goal from Adam Jecho was what they needed to seal the deal.

"I'm very proud," Czechia head coach Patrik Augusta said. "I think it's a big game. I know for this tournament, it doesn't mean anything right now. We're in the semifinals. It's not going to give us any medals or nothing. But, you know, playing the big game like this in Canada, the big stage like this with 18,000 people cheering for Canada, I think it's going to be something the players will remember and it's going to be something that's going to make them better and stronger character-wise into the future of their career."

Let's break down today's semifinal matchups.

Today's schedule

- Sweden vs. Finland, 3:30 p.m. ET/12:30 p.m. PT
- USA vs. Czechia, 7:30 p.m. ET/4:30 p.m. PT

Sweden vs. Finland

Latvia didn't make it easy, but Sweden won 3-2 in the quarterfinals and continues its quest for gold after coming one win short at last year's World Juniors against the USA. Defenseman Axel Sandin Pellikka has a tournament-leading nine points (four goals, five assists) while forwards Anton Wahlberg (4G, 3A) and Felix Unger Sorum (1G, 6A) have seven points each. Sweden's blue line also boasts Tom Willander, Theo Lindstein and Rasmus Bergqvist. Sandin Pellikka and Willander have helped lead the tournament's best power play (8-for-22).

The Swedes put 50 shots on Latvia. Captain Sandin Pellikka credited Latvian goalie Linards Feldbergs, one of the feel-good stories of the World Juniors, with standing on his head but said Sweden didn't let his opponent's good goaltending get to him.



"I still think we played pretty good. And I mean, first period, I think they had three shots and same with the last period. So we played pretty solid, solid defense and we had good offense, but we just need to capitalize," Sandin Pellikka said after Sweden's quarterfinal win.

"We take the good things from this game and just look forward here. We want to give this all we want. And so now we're looking forward for the semifinals here."

Finland advanced with a 5-3 win over Slovakia in the quarterfinals and will surely lean heavily on goaltender Petteri Rimpinen, who recorded 33 saves in the quarterfinal win and enters the matchup versus Sweden with a leading .940 save percentage. The Finns' offense has come from Jesse Kiiskinen (4G, 1A) and Jesse Nurmi (2G, 2A) as well as Konsta Helenius and Heikki Ruohonen and their penalty kill ranks first in the tournament (16-for-17), tied with Germany.

USA vs. Czechia

Team USA returns to the semifinals as they aim to repeat as gold medalists for the first time in the tournament's history. They made short work of Switzerland in a 7-2 quarterfinal win on Thursday afternoon. Their top line of Gabe Perreault, James Hagens and captain Ryan Leonard has powered the team throughout the tournament. The Boston College trio combined has 10 goals, 11 assists and 21 points through five games. Hagens and Leonard scored twice against the Swiss while Perreault contributed three assists.

Hagens feels communication has played a great role in their success, and not getting "frustrated" whenever they have a moment when they're not on the same page.

"We've had a lot of chances," Hagens said. "We might miss a couple. We don't get frustrated. We just know we've just got to keep sticking to it. We've had a long year together. Especially being here and being able to come from school, it's awesome."

"We're really fortunate and lucky enough to play with those two guys throughout the season and then here," Leonard said. "It's been so fun. You know their tendencies out there."

Czechia, meanwhile, will play its first game since upending Canada in the quarters. Vojtech Hradec and Jakub Stancl are tied for second in points through the tournament while Stancl and Sale are among four players for the goal-scoring lead (5) at the tournament. Stancl and Sale both scored in their victory over Canada.

"It's something special," Sale said. "Like, I mean, playing against Canada in Canada, in Ottawa is something special for us. It was a tough game. In the first period, I would say it was better. In the second period how they played on the puck, it was tough to defend. But yeah, our goalie was pretty good (Thursday night) and that was the key. And the last penalty, maybe that was the key of the game."

## The Athletic / NHL report cards: Grading every team's season as we near the midway point

**By The Athletic NHL Staff- January 5, 2025**

The NHL season is nearing its midway point, with all 32 teams playing between 35 and 41 games. By now, we generally know what each team is and isn't and whether the rest of the season should be focused on title contention, short-term progress or the long-term future.

What better time to break out our red pens and hand out some grades? That's exactly what The Athletic did this week when it asked its NHL staff to assign a grade to every team with expectations in mind. You'll definitely want to show some of these to your parents (or general managers). Others ... maybe not.

Anaheim Ducks: C+

The Ducks are more competitive in Greg Cronin's second season. Tangible proof exists with a minus-19 goal differential through 37 games compared to the minus-91 in 2023-24. They're also starting to close the gap between shots on goal and against, and their defending in five-on-five play is improving, as evidenced by their goal share bumping up from a brutal 42.19 percent to a more respectable 47.79 percent. But their special teams remain horrid, ranking 31st on the power play and 26th in penalty killing (as of Thursday). The lowly offense is keeping them from winning more close games, but wins this week against Edmonton, New Jersey and Winnipeg point to resiliency and positive momentum being created. — Eric Stephens

Boston Bruins: B-

The Bruins have improved under interim coach Joe Sacco. They are in a playoff position. They are far tighter defensively. David Pastrnak and Brad Marchand are looking more like themselves. But it does not excuse their start under ex-coach Jim Montgomery. That they went 8-9-3 has put them in a position where every point matters. — Fluto Shinzawa

Buffalo Sabres: F

The Sabres were supposed to be in win-now mode, ready to take the next step under new coach Lindy Ruff. Instead, they are in last place in the Eastern Conference after a 13-game winless streak derailed their season. It's tough to justify anything other than a failing grade for a team that had 91 points two seasons ago and is on track to regress for the second straight season. — Matthew Fairburn

Calgary Flames: B-

It's a season above expectations in some regards for the Flames. They're in the hunt for a playoff spot instead of being in the basement. Their young players — Dustin Wolf, Connor Zary and Matthew Coronato — are taking steps forward. Even Jonathan Huberdeau is having a better season than expected, having already surpassed his goals total from last year. But they still need to make some crucial decisions for their rebuild/retool, including obtaining a game-breaking talent. — Julian McKenzie

Carolina Hurricanes: B+

Most everyone expected the Hurricanes to take a step back this season, with some even suggesting Carolina would miss the playoffs. It didn't take long for the Hurricanes to silence the doubters with a red-hot start to the season. Carolina has struggled some of late due to a combination of injured and inconsistent goalies and difficulties scoring at five-on-five. Still, the Hurricanes have firmly established themselves as Metropolitan Division contenders and a threat in the Eastern Conference. There are facets

of the game Carolina can improve upon, but Rod Brind'Amour again has the Hurricanes near the top of the league. — Cory Lavalette

Chicago Blackhawks: F

The Blackhawks didn't have a high bar to meet this season. All they had to do was show better than last season. That was the expectation from Blackhawks general manager Kyle Davidson. So far, they haven't even reached that. They're at the bottom of the league in the standings and have already gone through a coaching change. Another top-three draft pick would help the rebuild, but that wasn't the goal for this season. — Scott Powers

Colorado Avalanche: B+

After a disastrous start, the Avalanche appear to have righted the ship. They've rounded into form and climbed into a comfortable playoff position in the Central. Colorado has played solid hockey all season but was undone by poor goaltending early. Since GM Chris MacFarland reworked the crease in late November, the team is 11-3-1 with one of the best save percentages in the league (.912). Combine that with Nathan MacKinnon, who leads the league with 64 points, and Mikko Rantanen, who isn't far behind with 56, and the Avalanche are right on track with room to grow. — Jesse Granger

Columbus Blue Jackets: B

The Blue Jackets were expected by many to be a lottery team, perhaps the worst club in the NHL. When held to that standard, they deserve high marks for hovering around .500 and hanging in the race for a wild-card spot. One more reason for the solid report card: Their young forwards have started to look like difference-makers, especially Kirill Marchenko, Dmitri Voronkov and Kent Johnson. So why is this not an A? The Jackets are one of the NHL's worst road clubs (4-12-3), and they've had two stretches — a six-game winless streak (0-5-1) in November and a five-game skid (0-3-2) in December — in which they lost their way. — Aaron Portzline

Dallas Stars: B-

The Stars are good, but we're grading on a curve based on expectations. They seem to have reached that stage of contention in which they realize the regular season doesn't really matter. But they might want to flip that switch a little earlier this time around because they're hovering around the periphery of the playoff picture a little too often. A putrid power play, Tyler Seguin's injury and some underperforming forwards have the team underachieving. But it's still picking up points at a .600-plus clip, and with reinforcements likely on the way at the deadline, the Stars will still be a team nobody wants to see come playoff time. — Mark Lazerus

Detroit Red Wings: D

Most expected some kind of step back for the Red Wings, but their first half still fell well short of expectations. Detroit has issues with its roster, but there's still more talent on the team than its bottom-10 record suggests. We'll see if new coach Todd McLellan can help the Red Wings get back on track in the new year, even if the playoffs look tough to reach. — Max Bultman

Edmonton Oilers: B+

The Oilers have been one of the NHL's best teams since starting the season 0-3. Even with that initial blip, they're comfortably inside the top third of the league when it comes to points percentage. Still, there's room for continued improvement on the power play, in net and at a few key spots in the lineup. Get those improvements and the Oilers might attain their goal of tracking down Vegas for the top spot in the Pacific Division. — Daniel Nugent-Bowman

#### Florida Panthers: B

It's a testament to how good the Panthers have become that their B-game still makes them a top-10 team. We know what they're capable of; we don't necessarily need to see 82 games' worth of it to be convinced. Eventually, they'll need better from Sergei Bobrovsky (.899 save percentage, minus-1.75 goals saved above expected), and the bottom of the lineup is a bit dodgy, but the defending champs are doing just fine. — Sean Gentile

#### Los Angeles Kings: A-

Credit should be thrown coach Jim Hiller's way, as he has the Kings in a firm playoff position despite not having Drew Doughty all season. Just once have they dropped consecutive games in regulation play, and they're an impressive 12-2-2 after any defeat. Anze Kopitar is a 37-year-old wonder, and Adrian Kempe, Vladislav Gavrikov and Mikey Anderson are also leading the way. Offseason adds Warren Foegele, Darcy Kuemper, Joel Edmundson and Tanner Jeannot have contributed to varying degrees, and youngsters Alex Laferriere, Brandt Clarke and Alex Turcotte have stepped up. Quinton Byfield and Jordan Spence are trending up. If anything, the 27th-ranked power play (as of Thursday) doesn't get a passing grade. — Eric Stephens

#### Minnesota Wild: B+

Some predicted the Wild to finish in the lower tier of the Central Division. The fact that Minnesota has the third-most points in the Western Conference says two things: (1) Kirill Kaprizov is a Hart Trophy candidate. (2) The Wild get a high grade for exceeding expectations. They hit a recent rut after a hot start, but they've put themselves in a good spot thanks to Kaprizov, a big bounce-back year from goaltender Filip Gustavsson and plenty of resilience, including being tested by injuries to Kaprizov, captain Jared Spurgeon and Jake Middleton. — Joe Smith

#### Montreal Canadiens: B+

A late surge to close out 2024 helped achieve this grade, but the Canadiens' stated goal for the season was to be in the playoff mix and learn winning habits. In that sense, the Canadiens are achieving their goals, beginning 2025 with a .500 record and within earshot of a playoff spot. Thus, a strong grade. The best part of this Canadiens season is there is still room for improvement from some of their best players. — Arpon Basu

#### Nashville Predators: F

The season that started with arguably the most talented roster in franchise history, with some of the highest expectations, has a chance to be the worst season in franchise history. How can it be anything other than an F? The Preds have picked it up a bit lately, but unless they make a miraculous turnaround to make the playoffs, the F will stand. — Joe Rexrode

#### New Jersey Devils: A-

New Jersey has integrated its offseason additions well and is near the top of the Metro Division standings. Coach Sheldon Keefe has brought a detailed approach, and the Devils have draft picks with which they can work ahead of the deadline. They look like legitimate contenders. — Peter Baugh

#### New York Islanders: D+

The worst power play in the league. The worst penalty kill in the league — and potentially in NHL history. Blown leads. Missing offense. A tired No. 1 goalie. The Islanders are only in shouting distance of a playoff spot because half the East is mediocre, but they've separated themselves of late to be even worse. — Arthur Staple

#### New York Rangers: F

The Rangers' collapse is impossible to justify. There's blame to spread up and down the organization, from the owner to the general manager to the coach to the players. This team was two wins from the Stanley Cup Final in June and started 12-4-1. Now it feels almost certain the Rangers will be sellers at the deadline. They've already moved Jacob Trouba and Kaapo Kakko, and more changes are coming. — Peter Baugh

#### Ottawa Senators: B

Despite a wonky November, the Senators look to be back on track and playing to their potential. They'll need to survive without Linus Ullmark for some time. But the confidence surrounding their team under Travis Green's coaching could help. Ullmark, Tim Stützle, Drake Batherson and Brady Tkachuk are at the forefront of their team's success with occasional contributions from their supporting players. They'll need good goaltending back and a few roster tweaks to cement their place in the playoffs. — Julian McKenzie

#### Philadelphia Flyers: C-

The Flyers are probably about where they should be at this stage of their rebuild, hovering around .500 while experiencing some growing pains as a team and individually. Rookie Matvei Michkov looks like the real deal despite some ups and downs under coach John Tortorella, and Travis Sanheim and Travis Konecny have shown why they are franchise cornerstones. Conversely, other young players such as Jamie Drysdale, Tyson Foerster and Owen Tippett have struggled with their consistency. What drops the Flyers a bit below average is their goaltending, as Sam Ersson hasn't yet shown he can handle a No. 1 workload, and projects Ivan Fedotov and Aleksei Kolosov have been brutal. — Kevin Kurz

#### Pittsburgh Penguins: C

The Penguins started the season with a brutal October, and though they've played much better since, making the playoffs will be a chore because of that horrific start. Goal prevention, because of leaky goaltending and an overall inability to defend, remains the Penguins' biggest issue. Sidney Crosby has come alive in recent weeks after a slow start, which offers some hope. — Josh Yohe

#### San Jose Sharks: B+

It feels weird to give a good grade to a team near the bottom of the standings, but this season is going to plan. The Sharks had low expectations going in, and they've been much more competitive most nights, but there have been enough blown third-period leads to keep them in the mix for another top-three pick. Macklin Celebrini is a leading Calder Trophy candidate. Pending UFAs have provided potential trade value, with Mikael Granlund and Luke Kunin having strong seasons. Cody Ceci should be a depth add for a contender on defense. Jake Walman has been a steal from Detroit, and Yaroslav Askarov is getting NHL action and showing, as he did Thursday against Tampa Bay, he'll soon be their No. 1 goalie. — Eric Stephens

#### Seattle Kraken: C-

The Kraken are shaping up to be an also-ran side for a second consecutive year, sapping the momentum the franchise was able to generate during its dream second season. Poor backup goaltending, young players not taking a significant step (or not bouncing back as hoped, in Matty Beniers' case) and a high-profile UFA who has massively underperformed in Chandler Stephenson have hurt the Kraken's efforts to take a step forward this season. The club is still technically in the mix for a playoff spot, but it's going to be a steep climb over the balance for a team that has mostly underwhelmed in the first half. — Thomas Drance

#### St. Louis Blues: B-

This is where most of us expected the Blues to be near the halfway point of the season: hovering around .500 and within reach of a wild-card spot. That probably means they deserve an average “C” grade, but I’m giving them a slight bump because of their .618 points percentage (through Thursday) since Jim Montgomery took over on Nov. 24 — which is tied for 10th in the NHL in that span — and also because of the jolt Cam Fowler has given them on the blue line since being traded from Anaheim. — Jeremy Rutherford

#### Tampa Bay Lightning: B

The Lightning’s playoff chances hinge on their elite core, and big offseason additions have helped elevate them. Jake Guentzel is bringing the heat on the top line, Ryan McDonagh has been a stout shutdown force, and J.J. Moser has solidified the top four. This team looks like it could do some damage in the postseason, but it still needs a little help. Andrei Vasilevskiy isn’t playing at his best yet, and the Lightning could use more scoring depth and need some injury luck after Victor Hedman left Thursday’s game. — Shayna Goldman

#### Toronto Maple Leafs: A-

The fact the Leafs have hung around the top of the Atlantic Division all season despite their best player, Auston Matthews, either missing time or playing at less than 100 percent is deserving of praise. This team has bought into Craig Berube’s approach, playing a less risky, lower-event brand of hockey. With improved personnel and much better goaltending, the Leafs give up less than they did last season, including on a penalty kill that has made a leap. The trade-off has been a less potent offense, though stars Mitch Marner, William Nylander and John Tavares are having strong seasons. — Jonas Siegel

#### Utah Hockey Club: C+

Utah’s season has been a bit all over the map, especially lately. A 6-0-1 stretch in mid-December gave way to a frustrating losing skid that has made the playoffs a long shot. After Thursday’s win against the Flames, the Hockey Clubbers are on pace for just 86 points, which is below preseason expectations. There have been mitigating circumstances, with injuries to two of their top four defensemen and goaltender Connor Ingram, but Utah’s offense has been surprisingly impotent (21st in goals per game as of Thursday), and that has wasted a strong season from Karel Vejmelka in net (fourth in the NHL in GSAX as of Thursday). But it’s an A-plus for the new owner and fans so far. — James Mirtle

#### Vancouver Canucks: C+

The Canucks’ results have been disappointing, and their perch in the standings is modest relative to preseason expectations. But given all the team has dealt with on the injury front and the off-ice drama, the fact the Canucks are still clear of the playoff bar in the West is probably a strong indicator of roster quality. We’ll fairly ding their grade for their game-to-game inconsistency, struggles to generate offensively, defensive regression and lack of answers in non-Quinn Hughes minutes, but we expect this club to be more formidable down the stretch. — Thomas Drance

#### Vegas Golden Knights: A+

The Golden Knights have won 11 of their last 13 and have the best record in the NHL at 26-9-3. They’ve been strong in nearly every phase of the game, with the fifth-ranked offense and sixth-ranked defense (as of Thursday). Vegas’ best players have been excellent, with Jack Eichel entering the Hart conversation. Players down the lineup — such as Brett Howden and Keegan Kolesar — are having career years, and goaltender Adin Hill has been solid in net with 8.28 GSAX. It’s hard to find a weakness on this team through 38 games. — Jesse Granger

#### Washington Capitals: A

There are things not to love about the Caps' season; they're 4-4-1 with a goal differential of zero in their last nine. Alex Ovechkin missed a chunk of time that could push his record chase into next season. The power play is just OK. Other than that, though? Smashing success. They're leading the Eastern Conference in points as of Thursday, and they're doing it sustainably. A no-brainer "A"-worthy showing thus far. — Sean Gentile

#### Winnipeg Jets: A+

When the season began, I thought last year's 110 points were out of reach but that an improved power play could make up for any trouble at even strength. I thought the Jets would be a playoff team, but the chance of finishing first in the standings is beyond my expectations. Connor Hellebuyck is having another fantastic, Vezina Trophy-caliber season, Davis Payne's power play is firing on all cylinders, and Winnipeg's top skaters — Mark Scheifele, Josh Morrissey, Kyle Connor, Nikolaj Ehlers and Gabriel Vilardi — are all playing like game breakers. Jets fans know second-half slides all too well, but for now, this season is beyond most fans' wildest dreams. — Murat Ates

## The Athletic / 2025 World Juniors standouts and disappointments: USA's top talent shines, Canada's falls short again

By Corey Pronman- January 6, 2025

OTTAWA — The 2025 World Juniors concluded Sunday with USA beating Finland 4-3 in overtime to win their second straight gold medal. I conclude our coverage of this tournament by looking at who stood out on the ice (and who didn't) over the course of the last 10 days.

I'm evaluating these players today with a lens on how their tournaments shaped my perception of them as NHL prospects. What does that mean? It means I'm not going to make a big deal of a 19-year-old 6-foot-1 goalie having the week of his life. While it's a nice story, I've seen that movie before and it doesn't usually end in the NHL.

### Standouts

Zeev Buium, LHD, USA (Minnesota)

Buium didn't get the points his teammate Cole Hutson did, but he was clearly USA's best defenseman and a guy they leaned on to play massive minutes in the important games including a 30-minute performance in the semifinal against Czechia. Buium's talent is obvious. He's an outstanding skater with a high skill level and great hockey sense. He makes so much happen around the puck, but what I was also impressed by was his defending. There weren't many chances going against USA when he was on the ice, showing a compete level that some NHL scouts questioned going into last year's draft.

Jesse Kiiskinen, RW, Finland (Detroit)

Kiiskinen was full of big goals for Finland in this tournament. He's a skilled player who can finish, but what makes him endearing as a pro prospect is the pace and work level in his game. He can shoot from range, but looks to finish at the net and is constantly around the puck. He's not that big, but he plays in a way that gives him a chance to make it to the NHL.

Victor Eklund, RW, Sweden (2025 draft eligible)

Eklund was quite impressive for Sweden especially given he's a draft eligible in this event. Like his older brother and San Jose Sharks forward William, Victor displayed tremendous skating, skill and pace in his game. His energy level was also very high, constantly engaging physically and competing to get to pucks first. Despite his size and age, he was a driver at even strength and an important part of Sweden's top power-play unit. He looked like a potential top-10 pick in the upcoming NHL Draft.

Vojtech Hradec, C, Czechia (Utah)

Hradec was arguably Czechia's most important forward; he was their minutes leader and played in every situation for them. A sixth-round pick by Utah last summer, he intrigued going into the draft due to his athletic tools: He was big and fast and showed flashes of skill. His game has developed very well. He was a top scorer for Czechia, showing good small-area skills and playmaking and a detailed two-way game. He looks like a legit NHL prospect currently.

Cole Hutson, LHD, USA (Washington)

Hutson was a leading player for Team USA in this tournament. That wasn't supposed to be the story. He was supposed to sit behind Buium, who was going to be the guy USA leaned on, and pick up a few points. Next year would be Hutson's year to lead this team. He wasn't their ice-time leader, but he was certainly their offensive leader in the tournament. Hutson was a dynamo around the puck consistently.



With his great skating, skill and offensive IQ, he made a ton of plays and was constantly giving opponents trouble with his rushes, blue-line movements and playmaking. His size is a concern for the NHL, but I was very impressed by how mobile he looked versus good players and think he'll be able to survive at higher levels defensively.

Ryan Leonard, RW, USA (Washington)

When you think of competitiveness, watching Leonard over the past week was that in spades. He was USA's engine, giving it his all on a nightly basis with his pace, skill and especially his physical play. He was all over the puck when he was on the ice, being a nuisance on the forecheck and backcheck while also being involved in a ton of chances. He broke his nose and kept on playing the same way.

Danny Nelson, C, USA (New York Islanders)

Nelson was a very important part of USA's team as the second-line center. He drove the play on a highly effective line at even strength, got critical points for them during the tournament and was a great defensive forward. He's a big, hardworking center who doesn't shy away from physical play. He's also a good skater with some touch and ability to score. He checks a lot of boxes and looks like he will be an NHL player.

Axel Sandin Pellikka, RHD, Sweden (Detroit)

ASP was the driver of Sweden's team and offense. Just like in the SHL, he was expected to make a lot of plays and score a lot of goals for this Sweden team while playing big all-situation minutes. He did that successfully. I wouldn't say he was full of highlight reels, and in that way, he reminds me a lot of a former Detroit Red Wings defender, Filip Hronek, in how I think his game could translate to the next level. He isn't very big, but he plays hard and doesn't shy away from using his body to make stops.

Matthew Schaefer, LHD, Canada (2025 draft eligible)

How good Schaefer looked in the pre-tournament and first four periods of regular tournament play can only be further emphasized by how much Canada fell into shambles following his injury. Schaefer looked dynamic with his skating, rushes and playmaking to go with strong, physical defensive play. He looked the part of a potential No. 1 draft pick.

Jakub Stancl, RW, Czechia (St. Louis)

Stancl had a big tournament, scoring a lot of important goals and being a major part of Czechia's offense. His skill level is quite high for a guy his size, and he made a lot of plays. His skating is just OK, and his previous season in Sweden didn't go that well. He has rebounded very well this year in the CHL and now at the World Juniors. He looks like a player with a legit chance to be a bottom-six forward.

Felix Unger Sorum, RW, Sweden (Carolina)

It felt like the puck was glued to Unger Sorum's stick whenever he was on the ice. He was clearly the most important forward offensively for Sweden, making a ton of skilled plays with the puck. I wish he shot the puck a bit more, but his playmaking is excellent.

Petteri Rimpinen, G, Finland (2025 draft eligible)

Rimpinen was the most valuable player at the World Juniors. He carried an at times average-looking Finland squad to the gold medal game with numerous big-game performances. Rimpinen is a re-entry draft eligible who was passed over in part due to his 6-foot frame. That issue remains and I can't say he's a true top NHL prospect, but other than his frame, he has a lot of the traits NHL teams look for in a goalie. I think he could be drafted this summer and he has a chance to play NHL games.

Team Canada was eliminated in the quarterfinals for a second straight tournament. (Adrian Wyld / The Canadian Press via AP)

## Disappointments

### Team Canada

I was tempted to list about 10 different Canadian players, but it makes sense to group their collective disaster of a tournament together. Be it players like Jett Luchanko, who broke camp with the Philadelphia Flyers this fall, providing almost no offense; reigning OHL MVP Easton Cowan (Toronto) looking lost at times with the puck; two-point-per-game top 2025 draft prospect Porter Martone struggling with the pace; AHLer Bradley Nadeau (Carolina) being a passenger most of the tournament; or the two London defensemen, Oliver Bonk (Philadelphia) and Sam Dickinson (San Jose), being very ordinary after torching the OHL — and there were plenty of other names to list — it was a tournament of disappointments for Team Canada.

### The tournament in general

When you watch the World Juniors, you're hoping to see the NHL stars of tomorrow. I can't say I saw a lot of that in this tournament. When watching the medal round games, I didn't see a ton of players on the ice I felt confident could be top six forwards or top four defensemen in the NHL. Sure, there were some, specifically on Team USA, but this was a pretty vanilla tournament on a pure talent level. Numerous players had good tournaments, but I didn't feel there were many outstanding performances.

That partly ties into Canada's disappointing tournament, as they do have some of those names, but they didn't have a good week. This is also an excellent age group for Russia but the federation remains banned from IIHF competition.

## The Athletic / USA rallies past Finland in OT for second straight World Juniors gold

By Julian McKenzie- January 6, 2025

OTTAWA — Team USA's Teddy Stiga ended the 2025 IIHF World Junior Championship with one shot on target. It won his country a gold.

The Nashville Predators prospect scored the overtime winner in a 4-3 victory over Finland on Sunday evening at the Canadian Tire Centre, giving the United States a second consecutive World Junior gold medal victory. It's the first time Team USA has ever repeated as champions at the event.

Teddy Stiga, the golden goal belongs to you! 🏆 #USAFIN #WorldJuniors #IIHF @usahockey  
pic.twitter.com/o9kNXQsmhu

— IIHF (@IIHFHockey) January 6, 2025

"Unreal," Stiga said. "Being able to win a gold in that way, nothing better."

"Joy," U.S. head coach David Carle said. "Pure joy for the guys. All the work that our staff and people behind the scenes put in. It's all worth it."

Stiga began the tournament as a healthy scratch, sitting out Team USA's first tournament game against Germany. His Boston College teammates Gabe Perreault, Ryan Leonard and James Hagens took up most of the spotlight with their production, combining for 13 goals and 29 points. Defenseman Cole Hutson was the team's leading point-getter with 11, the first time a defenseman has ever led the World Juniors in points. Hutson and Leonard each had two-point nights while their goalie Trey Augustine made 21 saves on 24 shots. Hagens also scored in the first period for the Americans.

But in three-on-three overtime, it was Stiga who played hero.

"(Finland) was changing. I saw their guy slow up. So, I skated by him. Zeev (Buium) had a nice sauce pass. I kind of lost it behind the Finnish guy. It almost went in the corner. But, I luckily recovered it and I don't really remember doing it. I just shot the puck, honestly."

"Throughout the (National Team Development Program), Boston College now and here," Hagens said. "It just shows that he's worked every day and he's one of the hardest workers in the room. It all paid off today."

For Finland, they were left disappointed. Finland's Emil Hemming had two assists in the loss while goalie Petteri Rimpinen — nicknamed Mr. Showtime after it was written on his skate blades — made 36 saves on 40 shots. Finland was a silver medalist back in 2022 when they lost to Canada and sought their first gold medal since 2019.

"We had good chances to make the winning goal," Finland head coach Lauri Mikkola said. "But we didn't make it."

Finland had a 3-1 lead, thanks to first-period goals from Jesse Kiiskinen and Tuomas Uronen. Emil Pieniniemi scored his team's third goal in the second period, celebrating by mimicking revealing his chest a la Clark Kent turning into Superman. The Americans began their comeback after that. Brandon Svoboda put his team within one after firing a puck off a Finnish defender before it beat Rimpinen. And with seconds to play in the period, Hutson cut to the middle of the ice and wired a shot past Rimpinen. The

young defender then copied Pieniniemi's celebration. Hutson says he didn't have Pieniniemi in mind when he did it.

"I just wanted to do a cool celly," Hutson said. "I love celebrating if you can't tell. You've got to love it when you don't score that much. So, just trying to do something cool every time."

Neither team scored in the third, necessitating overtime. At 11:56 of OT, Stiga received a pass from Buium and then beat Rimpinen while all alone, leading to his teammates clearing the bench and celebrating on the ice.

"Unbelievable," Hutson said. "I think we had control the whole overtime. Zeev made a hell of a pass to Stiga. You know that kid, he's going to put it in the net."

"To have him out there," Carle said. "It's his speed, how smart he is. Great job hitting that hole, obviously Zeev had to hit him on that crossing route. Great finish to put it five-hole."

The Americans spent the entire tournament as the villains, constantly booed by the Canadian crowd in Ottawa. But it was their national anthem and their goal song, "Free Bird" by Lynyrd Skynyrd, that rang through the speakers of the Canadian Tire Centre as they celebrated their latest success.

"We tuned out the crowd this game," Hutson said. "Not sure if they were cheering for us or against us. (We) just focused on our own game and it turned out pretty well."

"Last year, we were the highest-playing country in the world," Carle said. "You know you look at the sheer demographics of the population and the grassroots that's going on by USA Hockey, by many of the NHL teams in growing the game. The player pool continues to get bigger, deeper, more talented. My opinion is that it's a sign of things to come. We're really proud of the fact that we're able to win back-to-back and be the first team to do that in USA Hockey history. But, I think for us, it's just keeping on this path and making sure that we continue to raise the bar and have the standard."

Earlier in the day, Czechia needed a 14-round shootout — the longest in IIHF tournament history — to defeat Sweden 3-2 to win their second consecutive bronze medal at the World Juniors. Eduard Sale scored twice on five attempts in the shootout, including the game-winning goal, to upend the Swedes.

Eduard Sale's shootout winner. [pic.twitter.com/Ej7lt3DWKS](https://pic.twitter.com/Ej7lt3DWKS)

— Julian McKenzie (@jkamckenzie) January 6, 2025

2025 World Juniors tournament honors

Media Team All-Stars

Petteri Rimpinen

G

Finland

Cole Hutson

D

United States

Axel Sandin Pellikka

D

Sweden

Ryan Leonard

F

United States

Jakub Stancl

F

Czechia

Gabe Perreault

F

United States

Goalie of the tournament: Petteri Rimpinen (Finland)

Defenseman of the tournament: Axel Sandin-Pellikka (Sweden)

Forward of the tournament: Ryan Leonard (USA)

MVP: Leonard

## The Athletic / World Juniors Today: Previewing USA-Finland and Sweden-Czechia

By Julian McKenzie and Sarah Jean Maher- January 6, 2025

It's the final day of the 2025 World Juniors in Ottawa. By day's end, we'll have a champion.

Team USA hopes to repeat as gold medalists at the World Juniors for the first time in their history at the tournament. They'll need to upend Finland to do so, and the Finns defeated the U.S. in the preliminary round. Meanwhile, Group B's top two teams — Sweden and Czechia — will lock horns in the bronze medal game.

Let's check in on both games.

Today's schedule

- Czechia vs. Sweden 3:30 p.m. ET/12:30 p.m. PT
- Finland vs. USA, 7:30 p.m. ET/4:30 p.m. PT

Finland vs. USA

USA defeated Czechia 4-1 in the semifinals and now has a shot at history — not to mention an opportunity for redemption against Finland, the only team that beat them in the preliminary round.

While flipping the script on Finland is the focus, the historical significance of a gold medal win has long been part of the team's motivation heading into the tournament. Coach David Carle said they discussed it at the group's first meeting in the summer.

"We spoke about that pretty honestly, that our country has never done that ... a lot goes into getting back to that opportunity," Carle said. "And so you start with the end in mind and then you kind of build your process from there. And our guys have believed and been on board throughout and we've continued to get better and better. And I think that's what I'm most proud of, to put ourselves in this situation. We've earned it and we get to go lay it all on the line tomorrow evening."

The Americans learned a lot from that 4-3 overtime loss to the Finns and hope they can use it as fuel Sunday night.

"I think their goalie's playing extremely well, their defense has been great and they've had contributions from up and down the lineup so we've got to address what's been working for them and find a way to stop it and just play our game," captain Ryan Leonard said after the semifinal win.

"We know what they're going to do," USA defenseman Cole Hutson said. "They're a really good team and we'll be ready for that. ... We're pretty familiar with them, so yeah, we'll just play our game and hopefully Trey (Augustine) has another big one tomorrow."

Hutson and forward Gabe Perreault both have a tournament-leading nine points. Regardless of the final result, the USA has already made a little bit of history: With his 11th win Saturday night, in which he stopped 26 of 27 shots, Augustine became the winningest U.S. goaltender at the World Juniors.

"It's so special. Just the whole list of goalies that have played for our country. But obviously looking at the gold medal game tomorrow, that's my focus," Augustine said.

Finland hasn't won a gold medal since 2019. Following a hard-fought 4-3 overtime win against Sweden, the team wasn't too worried about who its opponent would be the following night.

“We are full of full of confidence. I think we can win against any team in the tournament. Just have to play our own game like we did today,” said Benjamin Rautiainen, who scored the overtime winner.

The Finns lost 4-0 to Canada to open the tournament but have been rolling ever since. Entering the tournament, they weren’t exactly favored to make the gold medal game over the likes of Canada, Sweden and Czechia.

Finland goaltender Petteri Rimpinen said being an underdog has only motivated the team.

“It just gives some fire to the group,” he said. “Nobody believed in us before the tournament, so this is great and everything from now on, it’s just focus on winning.”

Rimpinen has a leading .939 save percentage and could emerge as the goaltender of the tournament, a feat he says he feels “just pure emptiness” over.

“I can’t even think about it right now. It’s unbelievable that we are playing in the final in the first place. So but of course it would be a dream come true,” Rimpinen said. “I can’t believe it. Like someone’s going to hit me or something because I can’t believe that this is, like, true.”

Czechia vs. Sweden

Czechia is seeking a medal at the World Juniors for the third consecutive year, but they were hoping for a color different from their last two: bronze and silver. Instead, the loss against the Americans has them in the bronze medal game for the second consecutive year.

“It’s tough,” Czechia captain Eduard Sale said. “U.S. played pretty good structurally.

“We were bad. Not bad. But we didn’t play our game and we didn’t have energy. So, we need to be better next game.”

“I think the U.S. played a really strong game,” Czechia head coach Patrik Augusta said. “They didn’t really push us too hard. But they played so smart and they were waiting for their chances. They weren’t cheating for them and we gave it to them at the end.”

Meanwhile, Sweden will play for bronze as they did during the 2023 tournament in the Canadian Maritimes. The Swedes have two gold medals to show for in their entire history at the World Juniors. They too are trying to wash away disappointment after losing to rival Finland in overtime during their semifinal encounter.

“We don’t want to go home with fourth place. We want to win tomorrow,” Sweden’s Otto Stenberg said after his team’s loss on Saturday.

The last time these two teams met was in the final game of group stage play. Sweden edged the Czechs on New Year’s Eve with a 4-2 victory to give themselves top seed in Group B. Both teams also played each other for bronze at the 2022 World Juniors in Edmonton, with Sweden getting the win. A win for Czechia would be their second consecutive bronze medal at the tournament, having won bronze in Gothenburg last year at the expense of Finland.

There’s also an opportunity for Czechia forward Jakub Stancl to end his time in Ottawa as the tournament’s goals and points leader. Entering Sunday’s game, he’s in a five-way tie for first in points (9) while also leading the tournament in goals (6).

## ESPN / Ranking every NHL Winter Classic: Where does Blues-Hawks land?

By Greg Wyshynski- January 3, 2025

### Reactions

The Winter Classic has been the NHL's signature outdoor event since 2008, when the Pittsburgh Penguins and Buffalo Sabres played through picturesque snow and launched an institution.

The St. Louis Blues' 6-2 win over the Chicago Blackhawks at Wrigley Field marked the 16th edition of the Winter Classic. Even when returning to previously used venues, the Classic continues to grow and change every season. Each game has its signature virtues -- and in some cases, unique drawbacks.

Here is our ranking of the 16 Winter Classic events:

#### 16. 2025\*: Wrigley Field

St. Louis Blues 6, Chicago Blackhawks 2 (18 points)

Environment: 7

Hype: 4

Game: 2

Style: 5

The NHL's outdoor games can be split up into two eras: The games before Steve Mayer arrived as chief content officer in 2015 and everything after it. He's the one who helped bring the fun for these outdoor games, with quirky aesthetics, a real sense of staging and a boldness in scope.

The first Wrigley game in 2009 predated Mayer -- and, frankly, the NHL's cracking of the outdoor game code in general -- so it was exciting to see what a return trip would yield. They leaned into the brick wall and ivy motif around the rink, and thus the friendly confines looked great. Alas, the weather didn't always cooperate, with rain early in the game -- though not enough to delay things.

There's one fatal flaw to the 2025 Winter Classic: The Blackhawks were in no way worthy of the stage they were given, despite the presence of second-year star Connor Bedard. Mired in a rebuild, in a season that already saw them change coaches, the Blackhawks entered Wrigley in last place overall in the NHL. Their .351 points percentage at the time made them statistically the worst team ever featured in the Winter Classic, worse than the Buffalo Sabres' .368 points percentage for the Citi Field game.

To the surprise of no one, the Blues rolled to victory in this one, taking a 1-0 lead just 1:10 into the game and never looking back. But hey, at least there was a good center-ice scrap between the captains, as Brayden Schenn asked Nick Foligno to drop the mitts and he obliged:

The Blues' jersey was the bigger stylistic departure of the two, although incredibly this was the first time the Blackhawks wore red as their primary color in an outdoor game. Both looked good on the ice. The team's walk-in outfits were drab bummers, but at least Chicago honored first responders with its look and took the train to the game in a nice touch.

\* As far as hype goes, the move from Jan. 1, 2025, to Dec. 31 might have caught some fans off guard, as the NHL avoided the first New Year's Day set of games of the new college football playoff.

#### 15. 2024: T-Mobile Park

Seattle Kraken 3, Vegas Golden Knights 0 (20 points)



Environment: 4

Hype: 2

Game: 4

Style: 10

It didn't rain. Oh, the NHL was prepared if Seattle lived up to its reputation, what with T-Mobile Park having a retractable roof. But it stayed open, and the game was played in crisp, 44-degree weather.

In some ways, putting the NHL's two newest franchises in a Winter Classic together made sense. Like many other matchups, they're division rivals, and the Golden Knights had the gravitas of having already won the Stanley Cup. But whether it was the newness of the teams or the lack of interesting venue, the game just didn't connect with fans, earning the lowest ever U.S. television ratings for a Winter Classic (1.1 million viewers).

It didn't help that the game was a dud: Joey Daccord recorded the only shutout in Winter Classic history, 3-0 over Vegas. OK, a dud for the Golden Knights and for those tuning in for outdoor game offensive pyrotechnics, but pretty cool for Daccord, who had at least one highlight-reel save on Jack Eichel.

Speaking of highlights: The saving graces for the 2024 Winter Classic were the fashion and the fish.

Since neither team had its own history of sweaters to draw on, both got creative: The Kraken's Winter Classic sweaters are inspired by the jerseys the Seattle Metropolitan wore in 1917 when they became the first U.S.-based team to win the Stanley Cup, while Vegas used the negative space V in its logo as the basis for its jerseys. Both looked absolutely outstanding in the ice.

Also outstanding -- although predictable -- were the teams' walk-in costumes. The Golden Knights came dressed as Elvises (Elvi?). The Kraken were dressed as fishmongers. That was the precursor to perhaps the game's most memorable moment: When Seattle strode to the rink under a "canopy" of tossed fish, inspired by Pike Place Market.

It all ended up being a worthy swing for the NHL.

14. 2016: Gillette Stadium

Montreal Canadiens 5, Boston Bruins 1 (21 points)

Environment: 4

Hype: 7

Game: 2

Style: 8

After pulling Chicago and Washington out of a hat for the 2015 edition, the NHL course-corrected back to an Original Six rivalry. The fans ate it up: 67,000 tickets were sold for the Winter Classic, and there were 42,000 in the house for the alumni game held the same weekend in Foxborough, Massachusetts.

The teams looked tremendous: Boston rocked a black-and-gold version of its 1924 inaugural season sweaters, while the Habs wore striking white jerseys inspired by that year as well -- including a globe on the sleeves, which was actually the primary logo on those 1924-25 jerseys.

But the game ... well, at least the Bruins got a participation ribbon. With backup goalie and Massachusetts native Mike Condon in net, the Canadiens built a 3-0 lead by the 17:20 mark of the second period and controlled the game in a way that would have made Bill Belichick squint in approval.

At an unremarkable venue with unremarkable weather, and with a Canadian market in an unremarkable game, this was the lowest-rated Winter Classic to date in the U.S. The weekend would also be remembered for heartbreaking reasons: Denna Laing, playing for the Boston Pride in the first Outdoor Women's Classic, suffered a significant spinal cord injury in a collision with the boards on the eve of the Winter Classic and was stretchered off the ice. To this day, she continues to rehabilitate from that injury. Laing said in a December 2024 Instagram post that she has "made strides in my recovery."

### 13. 2017: Busch Stadium

St. Louis Blues 4, Chicago Blackhawks 1 (23 points)

Environment: 6

Hype: 5

Game: 5

Style: 7

The Blackhawks had reached the perfunctory stage of their overexposure as an outdoor game foil. In this event, they were like a team of jobbers hired to make the crowd favorites look good, getting dominated for the last 40 minutes of the game.

This was all about St. Louis. It gave us an alumni game that featured Wayne Gretzky, Brett Hull and Martin Brodeur on the same team. It gave us perhaps the best Blues jerseys ever created -- counterbalanced by another pedestrian Chicago sweater. And it officially started the Nelly renaissance years before he landed on "Dancing With the Stars."

But the NHL hurt the game's buzz with its scheduling, putting the Maple Leafs and Red Wings in an outdoor game in Toronto on Jan. 1 -- and a good one at that -- before playing this game on Jan. 2. The league wanted the Classic on a Monday to avoid Week 17 of the NFL schedule; it ended up pushing a game that was already struggling for hype into obscurity.

### 12. 2015: Nationals Park

Washington Capitals 3, Chicago Blackhawks 2 (24 points)

Environment: 5

Hype: 3

Game: 9

Style: 7

After years of pitting geographic and traditional rivals against each other, the NHL made the truly bizarre choice to pit teams from opposite conferences with no discernible association in its marquee event.

The result was a game seen by few people outside the D.C. area -- the 3.47 million viewers in the U.S. were, at the time, the event's smallest audience -- which is a shame because it was one of the most exciting Winter Classics in history.

The Capitals took a 2-0 lead, and the Blackhawks rallied to tie before the third period. Troy Brouwer, who won a Stanley Cup with Chicago, scored the winning power-play goal with 13 seconds left in regulation to send a partisan crowd of nearly 43,000 fans into a frenzy.

The 40 degrees and sunny weather didn't make for the best conditions for a hockey game, but the Nationals' ballpark made for a gorgeous backdrop -- including a replica of the Capitol and the reflecting pool near the rink.

The Blackhawks weren't even trying to create anything interesting fashion-wise for yet another outdoor game appearance, basically wearing their normal road white sweaters. But the Capitals' deep red jerseys -- with a crest that evoked both the D.C. flag and the Washington Monument -- were dope.

Plus, this was perhaps the only event in human history to have both Billy Idol and Lee Greenwood perform.

#### 11. 2022: Target Field

St. Louis Blues 6, Minnesota Wild 4 (25 points)

Environment: 8

Hype: 4

Game: 6

Style: 7

If there's going to be a Winter Classic held in Minnesota, then by rights it should be the coldest on record. The 2022 game unlocked that achievement with a game-time temperature of minus-5.7 degrees Fahrenheit, putting the "winter" back in the Classic after the previous edition's foray to Texas. The warmth of the sun had no home here -- the game was held at night, too.

The Blues memorably rejected that climate by hilariously sporting beachwear as their walk-in fit, including Jake Walman wearing only a Winter Classic scarf around his bare chest while walking in sandals. Their fashion choice helped offset one of the worst jerseys in the Classic series: The Wild's 1930s throwback that read "MPLS. St. Paul" and looked like a wrapped piece of candy your grandmother puts out for Christmas.

The game at Target Field was supposed to happen in 2021 but was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The wait was worth it for the aesthetics: While the 12-year-old Target Field didn't have the gravitas of other Classic venues, the combination of nature and pod hockey rinks on the field gave it instant "winter wonderland" character -- along with those aforementioned subzero temps.

The game featured a four-point night from Jordan Kyrou, which was an outdoor game record, but the Blues blew the game open with five second-period goals. Not the most competitive night, but not the worst game either.

#### 10. 2018: Citi Field

New York Rangers 3, Buffalo Sabres 2 (26 points)

Environment: 5

Hype: 6

Game: 9

Style: 6

We have to admit to some recency bias in overpraising this game in January 2018. The 10th anniversary edition of the Winter Classic was held at a venue that had capacity but not personality, even though the

weather came through with freezing temperatures at game time. The most memorable things about Citi Field were the giant shadows it cast on the ice for the first period.

Also, the Rangers' jerseys get a downgrade from our previous evaluation. Yes, they evoked the color scheme of the "Liberty Head" jerseys that were among the best in the NHL in the past 30 years. But as The Tennessean wrote in its Winter Classic jersey countdown, putting the Rangers second to last: "the 1926-inspired font looks more like something that'd be slapped on a roller hockey jersey."

The Sabres wore classic white jerseys for the game, which brings us to another oddity about this event: Buffalo, located close to 375 miles from New York City, was the home team at this game. Much like the New Jersey Devils and New York Islanders were home teams at Yankee Stadium, the Sabres "hosted" the Rangers because the Blueshirts aren't allowed to play a home game outside of Madison Square Garden due to tax exemption reasons.

All that said, the game was great: The Rangers took a 2-0 lead in the first period, and the Sabres rallied with goals in the second and third. For the first time since 2014, the game went to overtime, where J.T. Miller ended it for the Rangers.

After a couple of duds, a cool return to form for the Classic on a frigid New York day.

#### 9. 2023: Fenway Park

Boston Bruins 2, Pittsburgh Penguins 1 (27 points)

Environment: 7

Hype: 6

Game: 7

Style: 7

The Steve Mayer effect was evident in Boston, as there were clear differences between the 2010 Fenway Classic and the 2023 edition. There was the "first pitch with a puck" featuring Bobby Orr and Red Sox great Jason Varitek. Mayer also moved the rink parallel to the Green Monster in left field, which meant that Fenway Park's most unique seats were also arguably the best seats in the house for the NHL outdoor game, with glorious center-ice views.

That said, the hype was hindered by being the first repeat venue for the Classic. Although not the last.

The Penguins and Bruins got into the spirit by walking into Fenway in full Pirates and Red Sox throwback uniforms, respectively. Pittsburgh goalie Casey DeSmith, who would take over for an injured Tristan Jarry in the game, even put on catcher's gear.

The game lacked the offensive fireworks of other Winter Classics. For better or worse, it was one of the most "real" games played between two conference rivals in the Classic. The Bruins pulled out the win with two third-period goals by Jake DeBrusk, an exhilarating comeback that sent Boston fans home happy.

#### 8. 2011: Heinz Field

Washington Capitals 3, Pittsburgh Penguins 1 (27 points)

Environment: 4

Hype: 10

Game: 4

Style: 9

The hype for this game was off the charts: two blood-rival teams, and the NHL's two biggest stars in Sidney Crosby vs. Alex Ovechkin. Plus, the Penguins and Capitals were featured on the first season of HBO's "24/7" series dedicated to the Winter Classic, which remains the season by which all other NHL reality shows are judged. (We'll always remember you, sauce-faced, profanity-laced Bruce Boudreau.)

Alas, the hype was not met, in quality of play or in venue aesthetics.

The 2011 Winter Classic will be remembered for two reasons. First, for having an 8 p.m. start time thanks to concerns about rain. At first, "under the lights" seemed cool, until one realized it killed much of the charm of the event. But hey, at least the teams looked good: Capitals throwbacks vs. Penguins dark blue alternates, featuring a penguin with a scarf on the logo.

Second, and more than somewhat it will be remembered for the injury Crosby suffered in a collision with Dave Steckel of the Capitals, which contributed to his missing most of 2011 with concussion-like symptoms.

When it came to this Winter Classic, getting there was all the fun.

7. 2019: Notre Dame Stadium

Boston Bruins 4, Chicago Blackhawks 2 (29 points)

Environment: 7

Hype: 7

Game: 8

Style: 7

The NHL returned to a college venue for the first time since 2014.

The upside was bringing hockey to an iconic venue, getting the chance to use Fighting Irish iconography around the rink and on briskly selling gear. The downside of using Notre Dame was that it meant the sixth outdoor game appearance for the Blackhawks, who held their training camps at the campus. (The Bruins were an obvious opponent, as anything in America even tangentially Irish must include either Notre Dame or the city of Boston.)

The venue looked great, but the game didn't have the luck of the Irish, from running out of food and beer to the school's leprechaun biting it at center ice.

Boston's jerseys were a combination of different throwback looks and continued the Bruins' trend of fine-looking sweaters. Alas, the Blackhawks chose to wear a jersey that looked like a photo negative and had more stripes than a referee training camp.

All that said, the game itself was one of the better ones, as the teams traded goals for two periods before Sean Kuraly scored at 10:20 of the third period to put Boston ahead for good. Tuukka Rask made 36 saves.

Also of note: Weezer performed its cover of "Africa" by Toto between periods. We're still not sure how to factor that into the overall scoring. Perhaps it defies classification.

6. 2010: Fenway Park

Boston Bruins 2, Philadelphia Flyers 1 (30 points)

Environment: 8

Hype: 8

Game: 7

Style: 7

This game was notable for its firsts. Like the first overtime-winning goal in Classic history, scored by the Bruins' Marco Sturm at 1:57, which followed Mark Recchi's tying goal late in the third period. For the first time in three Winter Classics, the home team won, and in dramatic fashion. Danny Syvret scored his first NHL goal in his first outdoor game. And, of course, the first fight in Winter Classic history occurred, between Shawn Thornton and Daniel Carcillo, though one could not have expected anything else from the Flyers and Bruins.

Fenway was a great venue ... in theory. There were awkward sight lines and seats that made it feel as if you were watching the game from Plymouth.

Adding to the hype was that the 2010 U.S. Olympic roster was announced during the event. Detracting from the hype was that the NHL had just done a game in a historic baseball stadium -- and a more entertaining game at that.

#### 5. 2020: Cotton Bowl Stadium

Dallas Stars 4, Nashville Predators 2 (32 points)

Environment: 9

Hype: 6

Game: 9

Style: 8

Forever remembered as the event that married NHL hockey with pig races.

The aesthetics at this game were among the best for any NHL outdoor event. The area around the rink had everything from giant cowboy boots to a square-dancing floor to a mechanical bull to the aforementioned sprinting swine, with hockey-centric names like Andrew "Hog-liano" and "Pork-a" Rinne. Outside was a Texas state fair-type midway complete with food and rides.

The game looked great, especially with the Stars' victory green jerseys with "leather" gloves. The game sounded great, with 85,630 fans in attendance -- second-most ever for a Winter Classic -- and Dan + Shay playing during intermission.

The game actually was great, with the Stars rallying from a 2-1 deficit with four straight goals, three of them in the third period. Plus, drama: Stars forward Corey Perry received a five-minute major and a game misconduct for elbowing Predators defenseman Ryan Ellis in the head at 2:44 into the first period. Perry would earn a five-game suspension, which paled in comparison to the embarrassment he felt taking the world's longest walk of shame.

Alas, there wasn't much hype for these two divisional opponents. Fans had been conditioned to expect Original Six teams and glamour franchises in this event. Despite the venue and a terrific game, the Cotton Bowl classic was the lowest-rated Winter Classic to that point and was the first to draw under 2 million viewers.

#### 4. 2012: Citizens Bank Park

New York Rangers 3, Philadelphia Flyers 2 (33 points)

Environment: 7

Hype: 9

Game: 9

Style: 8

Citizens Bank Park was less than a decade old when it hosted the Winter Classic. The weather was even less iconic: 45 degrees, with the game delayed due to sun glare before it was played through spotty drizzle. The Flyers had just appeared in the Classic two years earlier, so there wasn't much novelty there, either.

Despite all that, few Classics can match the fun factor of this one, both in the lead-up to the event and in the game itself.

The hype started with HBO's "24/7," which introduced us to the cosmic meanderings of Flyers goalie Ilya Bryzgalov and the snarly puppy dog that was Rangers coach John Tortorella. Then there was the alumni game that saw Eric Lindros make an emotional return to the Flyers organization. And there was controversy: In a surprise move, Bryzgalov sat for the Classic in favor of 23-year-old Sergei Bobrovsky.

The game itself was one of the best-played Classics from the second period on, right down to the Daniel Briere penalty shot that was stopped by Henrik Lundqvist with 19.6 seconds remaining to preserve the Rangers' win -- a penalty Tortorella claimed was part of an NBC conspiracy to extend the game into overtime, an accusation that earned him a hefty fine from the NHL.

Two compelling, rival teams filled with big personalities. It lacked the legendary status of the top three but certainly made up for it with the fun factor.

### 3. 2009: Wrigley Field

Detroit Red Wings 6, Chicago Blackhawks 4 (34 points)

Environment: 9

Hype: 9

Game: 6

Style: 10

The first Winter Classic to stick a hockey rink inside a mythic sports venue. The second Winter Classic introduced some enduring concepts, such as the NHL holding an outdoor fanfest, adding its own aesthetics -- in this case, fake ivy on the outfield walls -- and most of all, having the Blackhawks involved in an outdoor game.

It also saw the NHL adopt local traditions into its Winter Classic motif: Witness Cubs legend Ryne Sandberg joining Bobby Hull, Stan Mikita and Denis Savard to sing a variation on "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" with a few word changes to reference hockey.

Nearly 41,000 fans crowded Wrigley, and even more watched from rooftops across the street, as the Blackhawks and Red Wings put on an offensive show. The Blackhawks built a 3-1 lead by the end of the first period, and the Red Wings roared back with five straight goals to build a 6-3 lead at 3:24 of the third.

These teams looked incredible, too. The Red Wings' "big D" jerseys are some of the best in Classic history, while the Blackhawks' horizontal stripe sweaters were the most memorable they have worn in an outdoor game.

Alas, the temperature wasn't much colder than it is for a Cubs game in April. Despite NBC broadcaster Pierre McGuire's comments about "wind-assisted goals," it wasn't all that much of a factor at the Wrigley game.

Overall, the game itself was the most underwhelming part of the Winter Classic, which is a shame: The Red Wings were the defending Stanley Cup champions, and their archrivals from Chicago were quickly ascending to challenge their throne. You almost felt cheated not seeing these two battle it out in a vacuum in an arena instead of inside of a baseball stadium.

## 2. 2008: Ralph Wilson Stadium

Pittsburgh Penguins 2, Buffalo Sabres 1 (36 points)

Environment: 10

Hype: 10

Game: 6

Style: 8

The greatest praise that can be given to the first Winter Classic is that our vivid, happy memories of the snow globe in Buffalo have plastered over all those lengthy Zamboni appearances and ice-repair delays.

Oh, but those memories. Those 71,217 frozen puckheads, some of them shirtless, watching baby blue Penguins jerseys peek out through the steadily falling snow. Seeing players battle those elements, skating through clouds of their own breath in the frigid air. In the end, seeing Sidney Crosby win the game in the shootout with the flurries falling, as if Gary Bettman himself had scripted it.

The hype for the game was off the charts. It was an instant signature television event, even if a good portion of the massive viewing audience -- the game garnered the highest ratings for a regular-season NHL game since 1996 -- was just tuning in to see whether the NHL could build a rink in a football stadium in seven days and actually pull this event off.

It's the "Iron Man" of NHL stadium events: If it had been unwatchable and failed to connect with the fans, then the NHL Outdoor Game Universe might never have launched. But although this was the first Classic, it wasn't the best.

## 1. 2014: Michigan Stadium

Toronto Maple Leafs 3, Detroit Red Wings 2 (37 points)

Environment: 10

Hype: 10

Game: 8

Style: 9

This was a special kind of cold. The seat cushions handed to the 105,491 hockey fans at the Big House -- an NHL record -- could barely protect their posteriors from the numbing metal benches. The balls inside the linesmen's whistles froze in place during the game. Snow fell, winds whipped. It was truly hockey vs. the elements that day in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

All of it helped create a legendary environment for the outdoor game. So did the split loyalties in the crowd, which was dotted with blue Maple Leafs jerseys that contrasted with Red Wings jerseys. On the



ice, the teams' throwback jerseys -- both wore full-color uniforms -- were among the best looking in the event's history.

Impossible as it might seem, the game was actually good! Jonathan Bernier saw 43 Red Wings shots sail his way, and Detroit needed a late third-period goal to force overtime. Toronto won in a shootout on a Tyler Bozak tally, sending tens of thousands back over the border happy.

An entertaining game, in many ways, is the cherry on top for a Winter Classic. There are other aspects more central to the event's success. Like having a compelling matchup, challenging winter conditions and a memorable venue with a personality of its own. But a great Winter Classic should also be a celebration of hockey: To that end, the Leafs and Wings played an alumni game doubleheader at Comerica Park in Detroit because they had so many darn great players who wanted in, and so many fans who wanted to watch them.

The Winter Classic at the Big House satisfied all these obligations. Which is why it's the classic among Classics.

## ESPN / Predictions for World Juniors medal round: Champs, award winners

By Rachel Doerrie- January 3, 2025

### Reactions

With the round-robin complete, the focus shifts to the medal round of the 2025 IIHF World Junior Hockey Championship. After an entertaining preliminary round with plenty of parity and intrigue, the stage is set for a classic medal round.

One wrinkle to note moving forward is that there is a reseeding after the quarterfinal. The highest remaining seed based on group placement, points accrued and goal differential (in that order) will play the lowest remaining seed. The top four teams are Sweden, United States, Czechia and Finland.

Given the lack of a set bracket, it is hard to predict all the way through, but we'll give it our best shot, including tournament awards.

Finland takes on Slovakia in what should be an entertaining matchup. Both teams showed weakness in the preliminary round, with Finland getting shut out by Canada and beating the United States in overtime. Slovakia needed overtime to beat Kazakhstan and a late winner against Switzerland after disappointing performances against Sweden and Czechia. Both teams have goaltenders capable of stealing a game, but Slovakia's Samuel Urban has underperformed.

The Finns are yet to have a standout offensive performance and lack a real game breaker up front. They rank ninth on the power play, besting only Kazakhstan, and are shooting 6.37%. Their bright spot is their perfect penalty kill, something they will need to continue if they are to win low scoring games in the medal round. The Finns need more from Jesse Nurmi, Emil Hemming, Kosta Helenius and Kasper Halttunen on offense.

Slovakia's medal hopes rest largely on the shoulders of Dalibor Dvorsky and Maxim Strbak, both playing in their fourth World Junior tournament. Dvorsky started slowly and was not as dominant as many expected him to be, but factored in four of five goals against Kazakhstan to secure the win. Strbak will be critical to keeping the best Finnish players off the scoresheet while also contributing offensively. Dvorsky is a true game breaker for Slovakia, capable of scoring a key goal, creating scoring chances and putting the team on his back.

If Urban can play up to his potential and keep the Finns out, Slovakia has the advantage because of Dvorsky's game-breaking ability. But for now, advantage Finland.

The American matchup against the Swiss should be a simple case of the United States having far too much for Switzerland to handle in every aspect. The Americans are stronger in every area.

In goal, Trey Augustine will lead the way and has rounded into form. Cole Hutson and Zeev Buium are offensive dynamos on the back end who will eat minutes and drive offense. The first forward line of Gabriel Perreault, James Hagens and Ryan Leonard will likely be far too much for the Swiss to handle.

Further down the lineup, the Americans have players who check well, wear opponents down and hold the puck. Barring an outstanding performance in the Swiss goal and a calamitous offensive performance, the Americans should cruise through to the semifinal.

Sweden and Latvia should be similar to USA-Switzerland, but the Latvians have proved they cannot be taken lightly.

Linards Feldbergs has been the tournament MVP, carrying the Latvians to wins against Canada and Germany, earning a quarterfinal berth. The Swedes looked strong in the preliminary round, led by Axel Sandin-Pellikka, Otto Stenberg and Anton Wahlberg.

The Latvians will work hard and create chances off the rush, but the Swedish depth should be too much for the Latvians to overcome. If Feldbergs has another rabbit in his mask, the Latvians have a chance -- without that, expect Sweden to cruise to the semifinal.

In what will likely be the best matchup of the quarterfinals, Czechia and Canada will meet in the quarters for the second straight year. Canada looks to avenge last year's disappointing loss in Sweden, and given Czechia's offensive firepower, Canada has a big hill to climb.

The Czechs are getting solid production from Eduard Sale and Vojtech Hradec up front and stable goaltending from Michael Hrabal. The Czechs have a tournament-leading 25 goals, rank top four on both special teams, and lead the tournament with a 19.7% shooting percentage. That shooting percentage will not continue in the medal round, as the bulk of the offensive production came in a 14-2 win against Kazakhstan. In their remaining three games, the Czechs scored 11 goals on 91 shots, for a 12.1% shooting percentage. That is far more sustainable and gives them an advantage against Canada.

Canada has struggled in every aspect of their game, aside from goaltending. Carter George has been excellent and will need to continue his run of play if Canada is to have a chance. Two things are plaguing Canada: a lack of finish and undisciplined play. Canada opted to leave scorers at home in favor of penalty killers and checkers, something many pointed out prior to the start of the tournament. Fast forward to now, and Canada is struggling to score, it is the most undisciplined team in the tournament, and the penalty killers have been ineffective.

Porter Martone, Carson Rehkopf and Gavin McKenna are not being deployed to maximize their offensive potential, and the rest of Canada's forwards are not scoring at the expected level. Most of the scoring chances are coming from the outside, as Canada struggles to generate in the middle of the ice. Canada will need to get to the middle of the ice and avoid the penalty box (a tall task). All of that starts with the coaching staff altering the deployment of their offensive players.

As it stands, the Czechs have a distinct advantage, but no one will be surprised if Canada pulls it together and gets revenge for last year's early exit.

Who wins the tournament?

Heading into the semis, it is fair to expect at least one quarterfinal upset. Slovakia and Canada are most likely to knock off their respective higher-seeded opponents, with Canada getting the advantage because of the goaltending.

Given the reseeding, let's say the semifinalists are Sweden, United States, Finland and Canada. That would mean we would get Sweden vs. Canada and United States vs. Finland. If the Czechs and Slovaks were to win, it would produce USA vs. Czechia and Sweden vs. Slovakia. Regardless of outcome, Sweden and the United States would be in excellent position to meet in the gold medal game -- a rematch of last year's championship game.

This year, the Swedes are a deeper team and have a slight advantage over the United States. In a game that would be very close and could come down to overtime, Sweden's mobile defense core and ability to create offense up and down their lineup may be the difference maker. Given the number of returnees with professional experience playing significant roles for Sweden (Sandin-Pellikka, Wahlberg, Felix Unger Sorum and Theo Lindstein), they should have an advantage as games get tighter and space is less available.

The Americans have the advantage with game breakers. Hagens, Perreault and Cole Eiserman are capable of creating and finishing scoring chances with lethal precision. Regardless of outcome, this game will come down to whether the Swedish depth can keep the American firepower at bay. If they can, the Swedes are well set up to avenge their silver medal in Sweden last year.

#### Individual awards

As for the tournament awards, it is hard to envision a scenario where Sandin-Pellikka and U.S. defenseman Cole Hutson aren't the two best, barring some otherworldly performance in the medal round by another blueliner.

In goal, if Carter George gets Canada anywhere near the gold medal game and keep a save percentage above .950, he will likely be a Directorate Award winner. If he can't, one of Augustine or Hrabal could win the award with excellent performances in the medal round.

There are many options for tournament MVP, led by Sandin-Pellikka and Dvorsky. If Dvorsky can lead Slovakia to a medal, he will get a long look for top forward and tournament MVP. The foundation for these awards is set in the preliminary round, but the true decisions are made as the medal round progresses. Perreault has been quieter than expected, but if the top line heats up for the Americans, he's got a shot at this award as well. Never count out a guy who can put the puck in the net the way that Perreault can.

## ESPN / NHL Power Rankings: 1-32 poll, resolutions for each team

By Arda Ocal- January 4, 2025

### Reactions

Do you make New Year's resolutions? If so, how long do they last? Do you even remember what your resolution was come May 1?

While some of us might ... revise ... our 2025 pledges in the coming weeks, that's not going to stop us from assigning a classic New Year's resolution to every NHL team in our latest edition of the Power Rankings.

How we rank: A panel of ESPN hockey commentators, analysts, reporters and editors sends in a 1-32 poll based on the games through Wednesday, which generates our master list.

Note: Previous ranking for each team refers to the previous edition, Published Dec. 20. Points percentages are through Thursday's games.

#### 1. Winnipeg Jets

Previous ranking: 2

Points percentage: 70.00%

New Year's resolution: Work like hell and advertise. That's an Arnold Schwarzenegger quote about success, and it's apt here; the Jets are first in the league with 56 points and a 27-10-2 record. But still, hockey fans aren't talking about them enough! Spare me the "Winterpeg is a small market" retorts; this is an NHL team that is speeding past its competition. Perhaps people are waiting to see if this regular-season juggernaut can finally get to the promised land in the playoffs.

Next eight days: vs. DET (Jan. 4), vs. NSH (Jan. 7)

#### 2. Vegas Golden Knights

Previous ranking: 5

Points percentage: 72.37%

New Year's resolution: Bet it all on red. Vegas has had a scintillating stretch: 9-1 in its past 10, and a five-game winning streak. In a strange run of coincidence, in a recent eight-game stretch, the Knights scored exactly six or three goals, and their only setback was a 6-3 loss. Jack Eichel has been red-hot, with 50 points through 38 games, putting him in the top 10.

Next eight days: vs. BUF (Jan. 4), @ SJ (Jan. 7), vs. NYI (Jan. 9)

#### 3. Washington Capitals

Previous ranking: 1

Points percentage: 69.74%

New Year's resolution: Plan an epic celebration. When Wayne Gretzky got goal No. 802 to surpass Gordie Howe on the all-time list, time stopped -- nothing else mattered but that record-breaking moment. A red carpet was unfurled as fans left to their feet to cheer for No. 99, and the game was paused to allow for the moment to breathe.

This is the bare minimum for when Alex Ovechkin gets goal No. 895 at home to break Gretzky's career goals record. Stop the game for 15-20 minutes. Hopefully Wayne is there to hug Ovi on the ice. Present the Great 8 with a memento commemorating the achievement -- a golden stick, or a plaque that has a space for the game puck that they can pop in right on the ice? The opposing team forms a line to congratulate Ovi out of respect. Video tributes, goal collage ... go all-out.

This will be that kind of moment in NHL history. If Ovi breaks the record on the road, hopefully we'll get at least part of that -- along with a hero's welcome when the team returns to D.C.

Next eight days: vs. NYR (Jan. 4), @ BUF (Jan. 6), vs. VAN (Jan. 8)

#### 4. New Jersey Devils

Previous ranking: 3

Points percentage: 62.20%

New Year's resolution: Everything in moderation. The Devils have largely been a feast-or-famine team, taking their fans on a "win by four" or "get shut out" roller-coaster ride. The Devils have been blanked five times, but they were on the right end of the goose eggs on Dec. 21 and 23, defeating Pittsburgh 3-0 then the Rangers 5-0. It was the first time in recorded NHL history that a team got back-to-back shutouts while keeping its opponents to 12 shots or fewer in each game.

Next eight days: @ SJ (Jan. 4), @ SEA (Jan. 6), @ NYR (Jan. 9)

#### 5. Los Angeles Kings

Previous ranking: 7

Points percentage: 66.22%

New Year's resolution: Exorcise your demons. Not the Devils in this case, but the Oilers. After losing to Edmonton for three straight seasons in the first round, you'd excuse Kings fans for harboring a hatred for their foes north of the border -- which probably made Saturday's 4-3 overtime win even sweeter, powered by a pair of Quinton Byfield goals (and a three-point night for former Oiler Warren Foegele).

Next eight days: vs. TB (Jan. 4), vs. CGY (Jan. 8)

#### 6. Minnesota Wild

Previous ranking: 4

Points percentage: 66.67%

New Year's resolution: Start strong and stay strong. The Wild were one of the best teams in the NHL through 25 games, amassing a 17-4-4 record before going on a 5-6-0 slide. Getting Joel Eriksson Ek back from injury will certainly help, as he is one of the best two-way centers in the NHL.

Another resolution could be to hire a financial planner for the next several months, as this is the last year of the lofty cap hits from the buyouts of Ryan Suter and Zach Parise (\$7.37 million average annual value each). Those reduce to a combined \$1.67 million on July 1, a day Wild owner Craig Leipold has said will be "like Christmas."

Next eight days: @ CAR (Jan. 4), vs. STL (Jan. 7), vs. COL (Jan. 9)

#### 7. Florida Panthers

Previous ranking: 8

Points percentage: 61.54%

New Year's resolution: Keep mixing in a water. There is no such thing as a Stanley Cup hangover for the Panthers. They are second in the Atlantic Division and a threat in the East. If they make it back to the Cup Final for a third straight year, nobody will do a double take.

Next eight days: vs. PIT (Jan. 3), @ COL (Jan. 6), @ UTA (Jan. 8)

#### 8. Carolina Hurricanes

Previous ranking: 6

Points percentage: 63.16%

New Year's resolution: Take the stairs. Rod "The Bod" Brind'Amour -- who never skips leg day -- has had a stellar month. He received the Order of the Long Leaf Pine by North Carolina governor, the highest civilian honor in the state, reserved for people "who have made significant contributions to the state and their communities through their exemplary service and exceptional accomplishments."

Soon after, the 2006 Stanley Cup champ (as Canes captain) became the fastest coach to 300 wins in NHL history, needing only 488 games to do so, surpassing Bruce Boudreau (496).

Next eight days: vs. MIN (Jan. 4), vs. PIT (Jan. 5), @ TB (Jan. 7), vs. TOR (Jan. 9)

#### 9. Toronto Maple Leafs

Previous ranking: 9

Points percentage: 64.10%

New Year's resolution: Book a trip to a new destination. The Leafs sit atop the Atlantic and are in good shape coming into 2025 -- goaltending has been among the best overall in the league, and the defense has been strong. All in all, Craig Berube is off to a great start as bench boss. Auston Matthews' health remains a concern, but not a crisis. This is around that time where some fans start to wonder ... is this the year? Even reaching the Cup Final would be a stark difference from their recent run of early exits.

Next eight days: vs. BOS (Jan. 4), vs. PHI (Jan. 5), @ PHI (Jan. 7), @ CAR (Jan. 9)

#### 10. Edmonton Oilers

Previous ranking: 11

Points percentage: 63.51%

New Year's resolution: Let history repeat itself. The Oilers started slow then got the train back on the tracks. Where have we heard that before? Right, it was last season, when they made the Cup Final and almost pulled off the reverse sweep.

Zach Hyman just completed a stretch of goals in eight of nine games, and at this rate his name will appear on a lot of "Why didn't Canada pick that guy?" lists later this month ahead of the 4 Nations Face-Off.

Next eight days: vs. ANA (Jan. 3), @ SEA (Jan. 4), @ BOS (Jan. 7), @ PIT (Jan. 9)

#### 11. Dallas Stars

Previous ranking: 10

Points percentage: 63.51%

New Year's resolution: Give more. The Stars went 1-2-1 in a recent stretch of four games, despite scoring first in all of them. Most notably, Dallas had a 2-0 lead against the Wild before a third-period collapse led to an OT loss. The team has also scored three or fewer in seven straight games. Injuries have certainly been a pain point. Did a pair of wins against the Blackhawks and Sabres get them back on track?

Next eight days: vs. UTA (Jan. 4), @ NYR (Jan. 7), @ PHI (Jan. 9)

## 12. Tampa Bay Lightning

Previous ranking: 12

Points percentage: 60.00%

New Year's resolution: Keep practicing acts of kindness. Coach Jon Cooper did an incredibly classy thing this past week. With the Rangers making their final regular-season stop in Tampa Bay, Coop invited retiring play-by-play voice of the Blueshirts, Sam Rosen, to join him at his news conference, throwing one of the greatest hockey voices in our game his well-deserved flowers. Superb vibes.

Next eight days: @ LA (Jan. 4), @ ANA (Jan. 5), vs. CAR (Jan. 7), vs. BOS (Jan. 9)

## 13. Colorado Avalanche

Previous ranking: 16

Points percentage: 61.54%

New Year's resolution: Invest in savings. The Avs committed to their new goalie, giving Mackenzie Blackwood a five-year, \$5.25 million dollar AAV contract as a holiday gift. Blackwood has had a terrific start in Denver, allowing two goals or fewer in his first five starts. The Avalanche reunited the former Devils goalie tag team in December, also trading for Scott Wedgewood from Nashville.

Next eight days: vs. MTL (Jan. 4), vs. FLA (Jan. 6), @ CHI (Jan. 8), @ MIN (Jan. 9)

## 14. Vancouver Canucks

Previous ranking: 13

Points percentage: 59.46%

New Year's resolution: Set boundaries. The Canucks just endured one of the most epic collapses in recent memory -- up 4-1 with five minutes to go in the third, the Kraken scored three straight goals to tie it up, then won it in overtime. It was the third time in NHL history a team won a game after being down by three or more goals in the final five minutes of regulation.

But, it's only one game. And the Canucks can continue to oscillate from wild-card spot to top three in the Pacific perhaps for the remainder of the season as long as they don't dwell too long on the losses.

Next eight days: vs. NSH (Jan. 3), @ MTL (Jan. 6), @ WSH (Jan. 8)

## 15. Calgary Flames

Previous ranking: 15

Points percentage: 56.58%

New Year's resolution: Sell more Wolf tickets. Dustin Wolf deserves more Calder Trophy love. The hockey world might be fixated on Macklin Celebrini's incredible exploits seemingly every game, but Wolf is sitting pretty with 11 wins, a .912 save percentage and two shutouts.

Next eight days: vs. NSH (Jan. 4), @ ANA (Jan. 7), @ LA (Jan. 8)



## 16. Boston Bruins

Previous ranking: 14

Points percentage: 55.00%

New Year's resolution: Spend less time on social media. Much has been written this season about the Bruins' epic collapse and the vibes being completely off. A coaching change jump-started their rebound, and the B's sit third in the Atlantic (despite the division being a logjam up top). Will they remain competitive or fall off? Better to delete X than be tempted to read what us non-players are saying.

Next eight days: @ TOR (Jan. 4), vs. NYI (Jan. 5), vs. EDM (Jan. 7), @ TB (Jan. 9)

## 17. Ottawa Senators

Previous ranking: 17

Points percentage: 54.05%

New Year's resolution: Stretch more. Linus Ullmark, who has a .915 save percentage and a 12-7-2 record, will be out for the upcoming slate of games with a back issue, as the Sens called up two AHL goalies for their upcoming road trip. Backup Anton Forsberg has been out since Dec. 14, but he is traveling with the team.

Next eight days: @ STL (Jan. 3), @ DET (Jan. 7), vs. BUF (Jan. 9)

## 18. St. Louis Blues

Previous ranking: 19

Points percentage: 51.28%

New Year's resolution: Embrace your surroundings. Cam Fowler has been a welcome addition to the Blues lineup, joining the team in mid-December after being traded from the Ducks, with whom he'd spent all of his previous 991 career games. Fowler in Blues Blue has seen immediate positive results, including three goals, four assists and a plus-6 rating, and the Winter Classic was his 1,000th game in the NHL.

"I get to play with a great D partner (Colton Parayko) who makes life easy and play for a great coach, an organization that believes in their players," Fowler told the media recently. "They've made my job easy and I can just go out and focus on hockey and try to do the best I can."

Next eight days: vs. OTT (Jan. 3), @ CBJ (Jan. 4), @ MIN (Jan. 7), vs. ANA (Jan. 9)

## 19. Utah Hockey Club

Previous ranking: 18

Points percentage: 52.63%

New Year's resolution: Introduce a mascot. I'm of the firm belief that every single sports team should have a mascot. They are fun, a good photo op during games, most kids love them, and they are a huge positive as part of the game presentation and social content. It's a no-brainer.

The chatter about Utah's team name will ramp up before the start of next season, but I want to see all of the mascot concept drawings, a big reveal video on social, and it'd better have a catchy name. Make it big and awesome.

Next eight days: @ DAL (Jan. 4), vs. FLA (Jan. 8)

## 20. Pittsburgh Penguins

Previous ranking: 20

Points percentage: 50.00%

New Year's resolution: Be more like Darth Sidious. "Somehow ... the Penguins returned."

There were times early in the season when it looked as if the Penguins not only wouldn't make the playoffs, but fans were talking rebuild like the Jedi immediately after Order 66. Noted Pens fan (and Chief Creative Office of Star Wars) Dave Filoni must be twirling his goalie stick lightsaber (I assume he just created one for himself, I know I would) with glee watching the Penguins turn it around, sitting one point out of a wild-card spot.

Sidney Crosby is shooting force lightning from his stick, with 41 points in 39 games, hitting a couple of milestones (1,600 points and 600 goals) along the way (unlimited power!). And how about Rickard Rakell? He could hit a point-per-game pace when it's all said and done this season. If he wore the C, he'd be Captain Rikard. ... (Wait, wrong "Star" show...)

Next eight days: @ FLA (Jan. 3), @ CAR (Jan. 5), vs. CBJ (Jan. 7), vs. EDM (Jan. 9)

## 21. Columbus Blue Jackets

Previous ranking: 26

Points percentage: 48.72%

New Year's resolution: Celebrate every win, big or small. The Blue Jackets are competitive in the Metro, which is better than many had predicted before the season. Zach Werenski earned a spot on Team USA for the 4 Nations Face-Off with his excellent play so far this season. March 1 is circled on the calendar, as it's the date of an outdoor game (finally!) for Columbus when it hosts Detroit at The Shoe in what will surely be an all-timer atmosphere.

Next eight days: vs. STL (Jan. 4), @ PIT (Jan. 7), vs. SEA (Jan. 9)

## 22. Philadelphia Flyers

Previous ranking: 21

Points percentage: 48.72%

New Year's resolution: Focus on you, not them. Before the Flyers' game against Anaheim, coach John Tortorella shut down any questions about Cutter Gauthier. When told that Gauthier said he had this game circled on his calendar, Torts replied that he didn't care what the former Philadelphia prospect said. Actions did the talking, as the Flyers beat Anaheim 3-1. Gauthier was left off the scoresheet, took a few hard hits in the game and booed in his own barn.

Next eight days: @ TOR (Jan. 5), vs. TOR (Jan. 7), vs. DAL (Jan. 9)

## 23. Montreal Canadiens

Previous ranking: 27

Points percentage: 50.00%

New Year's resolution: Journal more. It was one for the books as Habs goalie Jakub Dobes made his NHL debut with a shutout effort. Dobes became the fifth goalie in franchise history with a clean sheet in his first start in the show. I wonder if the Habs faithful will yell "Dooooooooooooooooobes!" in appreciation of future highlight-reel saves?

Next eight days: @ CHI (Jan. 3), @ COL (Jan. 4), vs. VAN (Jan. 6)

24. Seattle Kraken

Previous ranking: 23

Points percentage: 47.44%

New Year's resolution: Keep being agreeable. Joey Daccord is dealing with an upper-body injury that kept him out of the historic comeback win against the Canucks and at home against Utah. But the goalie is on pace to having the best season of his career, already nearly matching his win total from 2023-2024, and sitting ninth in the league in save percentage (.912). He was apparently a passport away from playing for Canada at the 4 Nations Face-Off. And if you're wondering about the resolution, d'accord means "all right" in French.

Next eight days: vs. EDM (Jan. 4), vs. NJ (Jan. 6), @ CBJ (Jan. 9)

25. New York Islanders

Previous ranking: 24

Points percentage: 44.87%

New Year's resolution: Hold yourself accountable. At a recent open practice, coach Patrick Roy got on the mic and addressed reporters and fans in attendance. Roy went so far as to apologize for his team's performance this season: "We are not proud of the way we are playing in front of you, but we will continue to work extremely hard to improve."

You don't often see a statement like this in such a setting, but I like it a lot coming from Roy, who has a legendary history of passion and determination.

Next eight days: @ BOS (Jan. 5), @ VGK (Jan. 9)

26. Detroit Red Wings

Previous ranking: 25

Points percentage: 47.37%

New Year's resolution: Read this book. The Red Wings relieved Derek Lalonde of his coaching duties over the holiday, with the news coming out on Dec. 26. In comes Todd McLellan, who won a Cup with Detroit as an assistant coach in 2008 but didn't have an ideal debut, losing to the Leafs 5-2 at home in a lopsided contest, before settling in with wins over the Capitals and Penguins.

Next eight days: @ WPG (Jan. 4), vs. OTT (Jan. 7)

27. Anaheim Ducks

Previous ranking: 28

Points percentage: 48.65%

New Year's resolution: Watch "Groundhog Day." We are rapidly approaching "John Gibson trade rumor" szn. This is when the hockey world speculates on whether this will be the year the Ducks' goalie will be shipped out of Anaheim to a Cup-contending team that needs a solid understudy to help put them over the top. The 31-year-old has a .908 save percentage and a 6-5-1 record this season.

Next eight days: @ EDM (Jan. 3), vs. TB (Jan. 5), vs. CGY (Jan. 7), @ STL (Jan. 9)

28. New York Rangers

Previous ranking: 22

Points percentage: 47.30%

New Year's resolution: Make one for 2026. There's no way that anyone would have predicted the Rangers -- a team that won the Presidents' Trophy last season and made it to the conference finals two out of the past three years -- would be at the bottom of the Metro Division at this point in the season. Though they re-signed star goalie Igor Shesterkin, they also traded captain Jacob Trouba in a move that ruffled feathers. The vibes are anything but immaculate in the Big Apple.

Next eight days: @ WSH (Jan. 4), @ CHI (Jan. 5), vs. DAL (Jan. 7), vs. NJ (Jan. 9)

### 29. Buffalo Sabres

Previous ranking: 30

Points percentage: 42.31%

New Year's resolution: Make a vision board. AJ Mleczko had this as Buffalo's resolution during a recent intermission report for ESPN. Unfortunately, this is a storyline that simply will not go away until the Swords do away with their playoff drought. When they are on, they are a team that can contend for a wild-card spot. A 13-game winless streak unfortunately sunk that dream.

The city of Buffalo deserves major sports joy. A championship. So print out a picture of the Cup, a parade, a yard sale on the ice, heck even a Lombardi Trophy while we're at it, and pin it to the vision board. See it, believe it, achieve it.

Next eight days: @ VGK (Jan. 4), vs. WSH (Jan. 6), @ OTT (Jan. 9)

### 30. Nashville Predators

Previous ranking: 32

Points percentage: 38.16%

New Year's resolution: Say yes to everything. Because at this point, what else can you say? Something's gotta give in Nashville, as the Predators endure a soul-crushing first half to the NHL season, sitting three points ahead of the Blackhawks in the basement of the Central. Cancelled concert jokes aside, whatever changes are coming or decided upon in the Predators organization, they must be met with positive outlook because the current group hasn't been working thus far.

Next eight days: @ VAN (Jan. 3), @ CGY (Jan. 4), @ WPG (Jan. 7)

### 31. San Jose Sharks

Previous ranking: 29

Points percentage: 36.59%

New Year's resolution: Embrace the sizzle. The Sharks have been one of the most exciting teams to watch, despite their 28 points in 40 games. Macklin Celebrini could make the "SportsCenter" top 10 with the moves he pulls off almost every game, even if they don't always lead to goals. Mikael Granlund, William Eklund, Tyler Toffoli, and Will Smith are among the other reasons to tune in and enjoy the thrill ride of a Sharks game.

Plus, their social content has been on point -- like Celebrini and Smith recreating the viral LeBron James video.

Next eight days: vs. NJ (Jan. 4), vs. VGK (Jan. 7)

## 32. Chicago Blackhawks

Previous ranking: 31

Points percentage: 34.21%

New Year's resolution: Be consistent. Connor Bedard has been interesting to watch this season. He has had 11 linemates thus far (minimum 30 minutes on ice together). His numbers are hovering around the same as this time last season, when he won the Calder Trophy, and he also leads the team in scoring.

Of course, many Hawks fans expected their generational star would take another step forward this season, to get to that level of excellence that matches the hype when he was drafted into the NHL. Perhaps a steady lineup would help?

Next eight days: vs. MTL (Jan. 3), vs. NYR (Jan. 5), vs. COL (Jan. 8)

## [Sportsnet.ca / NHL Power Rankings: It's resolution season](#)

By Ryan Dixon- January 3, 2025

It's safe to assume NHL players forgo the usual health-related resolutions the rest of us double-down on this time of year. Being pro athletes in the prime of their lives and all, there are probably other things these fitness freaks can focus on.

So what is flying around the NHL this time of year in terms of internal promises? Teams and players are surely swearing they're going to do something significant in 2025.

With that in mind, as we embark on the very first days of a new year, we're dedicating the first power ranking of 2025 to identifying one resolution for all 32 clubs.

1. Vegas Golden Knights (25-9-3) Make Jack Eichel a Hart Trophy finalist. It's crazy that the second-overall pick in 2015 has received MVP votes just one time in his career, when he finished eighth in the balloting in 2020. This is the year he pushes into the top three with a wicked second half.
2. Winnipeg Jets (27-11-1) Give the whiteout a real run. It's wild that in 30 combined seasons of Jets hockey between the 1.0 and 2.0 eras, Winnipeg has advanced past the second round just one time, in 2018.
3. Washington Capitals (25-10-2) Don't let pending-UFA Jakob Chychrun get to the open market. The first-year Capital is tied for the goal-scoring lead among defenceman (11) and seems like a dream fit in D.C.
4. Los Angeles Kings (22-10-5) Beat the Edmonton Oilers in Round 1. It feels like there's at least a 50-percent chance the teams meet for a fourth straight year in the opening round of the playoffs and the Kings must win one of these times.
5. Florida Panthers (23-13-2) Polish a new gem, the way you did with waiver pickup Gus Forsling or trade acquisitions Sam Reinhart and Sam Bennett previously. It's a big ask, but so is trying to make it to a third straight final.
6. Edmonton Oilers (22-12-3) What else: Get back to the final and finish the job.
7. Toronto Maple Leafs (23-13-2) Have a heart-to-heart with Auston Matthews about playing in the 4 Nations Face-Off.
8. Colorado Avalanche (23-15-0) Screw the internal salary cap established by Nathan MacKinnon's \$12.6-million hit; give Mikko Rantanen whatever he's worth, because somebody else will — and then some — on the 2026 open market.
9. Dallas Stars (22-13-1) If Aaron Ekblad becomes a UFA in July, find a way to make the right-shot D-man a Dallas Star.
10. Carolina Hurricanes (22-13-2) Go get Chris Krieder from your torpedoing Metro rivals in Manhattan and get him nice and healthy for the playoffs.
11. New Jersey Devils (24-14-3) Try not to snicker too much at the Rangers.
12. Minnesota Wild (23-11-4) Get Kirill Kaprizov locked up on an eight-year extension this summer and remove any drama before he heads into the final year of his contract next October.

13. Tampa Bay Lightning (20-12-2) Keep being as bold as you were in 2024, when you let Steven Stamkos walk, inked Jake Guentzel and were willing to move Mikhail Sergachev.
14. Boston Bruins (20-15-4) Get that goal-differential in line. The Bruins are minus-16 this season, the only minus mark of any Eastern Conference team currently in the playoffs and the fifth-worst mark in the conference overall.
16. Calgary Flames (18-12-7) Sign pending-UFA Dan Vladar and watch him and rookie Dustin Wolf develop into one of the more reliable batteries around in coming years.
17. Vancouver Canucks (17-11-8) Charge into the open market, jump on the trade calls and improve that blueline.
18. St. Louis Blues (18-17-4) Get frisky again if RFA defenceman like K'Andre Miller, Bowen Byram or Cam York linger on the market.
19. Pittsburgh Penguins (17-17-5) Find Sidney Crosby the 87 — yep — points he needs to pass Mario Lemieux as the all-time franchise points leader before 2026.
20. Montreal Canadiens (17-17-3) Get evangelical when it's time to stump for Lane Hutson as the Canadiens' first Calder Trophy winner since Ken Dryden in 1972.
21. Columbus Blue Jackets (16-16-6) Keep pending-UFA Ivan Provorov and just go for it in a wide-open Eastern Conference wild card chase.
22. Philadelphia Flyers (17-17-4) If you're going to live on the playoff bubble every year, get back to being the Flyers and make a big off-season UFA or trade splash.
23. Utah Hockey Club (16-15-6) Vaporize some futures and acquire some players — even rentals — who can help the depleted blueline.
24. Anaheim Ducks (15-17-4) Find a resolution with Trevor Zegras once and for all.
25. New York Islanders (14-17-4) Find a scorer — any scorer — so that when prospect Cole Eiserman arrives, you'll really have something. Maybe even call the team that's one above you on this ranking...
26. Seattle Kraken (17-19-2) Do everything you can to get Matty Beniers — who's scored in two straight games — confident and productive.
27. Detroit Red Wings (15-18-4) Figure out a way to play the smothering, two-way game the Wings used to feature when new coach Todd McLellan was an assistant in Detroit for three years coming out of the 2004-05 lockout. Granted, that'll be a tough assignment with no Pavel Datsyuk or Henrik Zetterberg around.
28. Buffalo Sabres (14-20-4) Make the second half of this season as positive as the first half has been miserable.
29. New York Rangers (16-19-1) Start figuring out who the next free agents who only want to play for the Rangers are, because there might not be another way out of this hole.
30. Nashville Predators (11-20-7) Try and get back to that good brand of boring you were for 20 years.
31. San Jose Sharks (11-23-6) When the 2025-26 schedule comes out, look up when the Dallas Stars are coming to town and retire Joe Pavelski's No. 8 that night so he can join his pals Patrick Marleau and Joe Thornton up there.

32. Chicago Blackhawks (12-24-2) If Mitch Marner or Mikko Rantanen make it to market, make a pitch that starts with things like how cool of a city Chicago is, how good playing with Connor Bedard could be for the next seven years and ends with, "Here's a cheque; fill in your number."



## Sportsnet.ca / United States emerging as hockey's true superpower after winning WJC gold again

By Alex Adams- January 6, 2025

OTTAWA — Canada is the dominant hockey superpower, right?

Wrong.

Not after the United States won its first-ever back-to-back world junior championships with a thrilling 4-3 overtime victory over Finland Sunday night in Ottawa. The U.S. showed a lot of grit to storm back from 1-0 and 3-1 deficits against the Finns. Then, Teddy Stiga was the hero with a golden goal to last a lifetime on his first shot of the tournament.

The U.S. has close to 10 times the population of Canada, 18 more NHL teams and is generally more affluent than Canada in a sport where money talks.

Despite the Americans' hiccup against Finland, losing in the preliminary round, they exacted revenge in the final. The U.S. has not lost a game in regulation in two consecutive tournaments and it's now won three of the last five gold medals. Captain and tournament MVP Ryan Leonard called the Americans "a dynasty." They are surely trending in that direction.

Over the northern border, Hockey Canada management had a discombobulated approach to selecting their team. They passed on three players drafted in the top 10 of last year's draft in Carter Yakemchuk, Zayne Parekh and Beckett Sennecke while the coaching staff made one baffling decision after another, including not practising throughout the tournament.

It showed in the Americans' resounding win over Canada on New Year's Eve.

Throughout the whole tournament, the U.S. didn't complicate things like Canada did. It played its top stars Leonard, James Hagens, and Gabe Perreault heavy minutes and was rewarded with a combined 29 points. Hagens, who is known for his flash and skill, showed his grit. In the first period, after the Finns took an early lead, Hagens jammed the puck multiple times in front of the net to score an ugly, but timely, goal to tie the game 1-1.

Later, Finland pushed to score two unanswered to take a 3-1 lead early in the second period, but the U.S. rammed back immediately.

The U.S. dominated for stretches, eventually making its own luck by outshooting the Finns 15 to four in the second frame.

A fortuitous shot from Brandon Svoboda beat Finland's Petteri Rimpinen and cut the lead to 3-2 in the second period. Then Cole Hutson, who was the most electric defenceman in the entire tournament, scored to tie the game 3-3 with a wonderful toe-drag into a shot late in the second period.

Shift your lens to Canada for comparison, which didn't play 2026 top draft prospect Gavin McKenna on the first line until a must-win quarterfinal and left two offensive stud defencemen in Parekh and Yakemchuk at home.

Talent wins out.

The problem is that Canada could once conceivably say they always had the most talented team at the world juniors. Now, it's a pick'em, if not the slight edge to the Americans in recent years. The United States has a national development program while Canada does not, and the U.S. is seeing the gold

medals from its labour. Almost every great American player in the NHL these days has gone through the program, including Auston Matthews, Jack Eichel and the three Hughes brothers. It used to be that people asked which province in Canada was the hotbed of hockey talent. Now you might ask which state.

It's not that Canada can't win anymore at the world juniors or at the men's senior level. It's just that the landscape has changed and Canadians need to get used to it.

Just look at the upcoming 4 Nations Face-off rosters. You can quibble with who is better, but it is clear that the U.S. has better goaltenders and their forwards and defence are comparable to Canada's.

As the NHL grows and more expansion teams cover the map, it'll be harder for Canada to outpace the U.S. in terms of the talent it produces. We've seen the passing of the torch happen at the world junior stage in Ottawa and we very well could see that run of success continue at the 4 Nations Face-Off.

The biggest discrepancy between the two countries at the NHL level is in goal where the Americans were able to comfortably leave Vezina finalist Thatcher Demko at home. No matter who starts between Connor Hellebuyck, Jeremy Swayman and Jake Oettinger, the Americans will have an edge over Canada at the most important position.

In Sunday's gold-medal game, American Trey Augustine demonstrated the rise of American goaltenders. The Detroit Red Wings prospect is now the winningest goaltender in U.S. world junior history with 12 victories and kept his team alive with huge saves in the first two periods against Finland. The U.S. looks to have the edge in net for years to come, though it should be noted that goalie Carter George was Canada's best player for long stretches of this tournament, too.

If there is some optimism for Canada, it is that the country continues to develop elite skaters. Connor Bedard and Macklin Celebrini are already making a mark in the NHL while CHL stars Gavin McKenna and Landon Dupont are only a few years away from doing the same.

But overall, the gap is closing and the NHL currently has 365 Canadian players (40.83 per cent) compared to 259 Americans (28.97 per cent). Roughly half of the NHL was Canadian just a decade ago.

A wave of U.S. talent is coming. Cole Hutson, younger brother to Canadiens rookie sensation Lane, became the first defenceman to ever lead the world juniors in scoring with 11 points.

The Hutsons are the future of U.S. hockey, following the impact the Hughes and Tkachuk brothers are already making at the top level.

U.S. coach David Carle was asked after the gold medal game about the growth of hockey in his country.

"You look at the sheer demographics of the population and the grassroots that's going on by USA Hockey and by many of the NHL teams and growing the game," Carle said. "The player pool continues to get bigger, deeper, more talented, so in my opinion, (that) is a sign of things to come, and we're really proud of the fact that we're able to win back-to-back and be the first team to do that in USA hockey history. But I think for us, it's keeping on this path and making sure that we continue to raise the bar and have the standard."

Brady Tkachuk and his American teammates on the Ottawa Senators — Jake Sanderson, Shane Pinto and Josh Norris — were in attendance Sunday, celebrating every goal. Americans are even taking over Canadian NHL teams.

The Americans were the best team in this tournament and deserved to win.

Get used to it, Canada — the United States may be taking over as hockey's dominant superpower.

## [Sportsnet.ca / WJC Three Stars Day 9: Ryan Leonard leads U.S. to back-to-back golds](#)

**By Courtney Jacobsen- January 6, 2025**

There were upsets, tight games, heartbreaks and triumphs, but now this 2025 World Junior Championship is officially behind us.

The final day of the holiday classic began with the fight for third place — and the battle to take the last medal — between Sweden and Czechia. The game was tight from the jump and for each goal the Czechs scored, Tre Kronor had an answer. It was a game where the best players performed like the best players and set the tone of the contest.

Of course, a game like that couldn't be solved in regulation, nor in the 10 minutes of three-on-three overtime. It took 14 rounds in the shootout to eventually determine the winner and, medalling for their third-consecutive year, Czechia walked away with the bronze. Sweden heads home medal-less for the third time in six years and have failed to medal in back-to-back tournaments since a gold, silver and silver run between 2012 and 2014.

The final match of the tournament was a showdown between two teams whose paths to the gold medal game differed slightly. Finland, who was shut out in its first tournament game against Canada, got better each day it played and hadn't lost since. The United States entered as gold-medal favourites and only cemented that as the tournament progressed. Ironically, its only loss these two weeks came to Finland.

From the moment the puck dropped, it was clear that neither team was going to bow out quietly. Finland controlled the majority of play in the opening frame and finished the first 20 minutes up a goal. But if there is one thing about this American team, they may be down but they're never out. The U.S. came out swinging in the second and, after allowing Finland to score early in the period for a 3-1 lead, it pressured hard and scored two in the final five minutes of the period to get back to square.

Though there were still 20 minutes remaining on the clock, it felt once the U.S. tied it up, that the game would enter next-goal-wins territory. Sure enough, for the second time on Sunday, this contest needed extra time.

In the end, it was Teddy Stiga who played overtime hero with his first world juniors goal, completing the gold-medal comeback for the United States and officially closing the book on this tournament.

Let's take a look at three standout performances from the final day of the 2025 world juniors.

3rd star: Eduard Sale, Czechia

It's games like this, where everything is on the line, that you expect your leaders to step up. That's exactly what Czechia captain Eduard Sale did on Sunday to earn his country bronze for the second year in a row.

Sale, suiting up for his third and final world juniors, scored his sixth goal of the tournament in the second period off an unfortunate turnover from Sweden. Miroslav Holinka intercepted an ill-informed pass from the Swedes right at the blue line and sent it down to his waiting captain in the slot. Sale then made a quick move from his forehand to backhand in tight, roofing it over goalie Marcus Gidlof's glove-side shoulder.

His quick hands and good positioning on the goal were impressive enough, but Sale was offensively dominant the entire evening. Though he took the least amount of shifts of all Czechia's top-six forwards

and finished with 19:31 of ice time, the Seattle Kraken prospect managed six shots on goal — tied for first amongst all Czechia skaters.

In a game that was as tight-checking and on-par as any this tournament, Sale won the bronze for Czechia in the shootout, where he was relied upon heavily.

Czech netminder Michael Hrabal turned aside nearly every shot he faced and Gidlof was equally brilliant for Sweden, staving off multiple Czech advantages to keep the Swedes alive. Gidlof even fought off three of Sale's five shootout attempts, but the 19-year-old stepped up when it mattered most. Facing the disadvantage for the first time, Sale tickled the twine on a must-score shot, then was called upon once again to deliver the final blow after Sweden failed to solve Hrabal. The shootout stands as the longest in the history of the world juniors.

Sale finishes ninth in tournament scoring, but second on his team, with six goals and eight points in seven games. He has won medals with Czechia in each of his trips to the world juniors.

2nd star: Petteri Rimpinen, Finland

There's a reason that Petteri Rimpinen heads home as the tournament's top goaltender.

His .900 save percentage and four goals allowed in the gold-medal contest don't adequately portray how he nearly single-handedly kept Finland in the game throughout the final 45 minutes, even as the ice started to tilt in favour of the Americans.

After the United States came out uncharacteristically lacklustre in the first period, it threw everything it had at the Finns from there on out, outshooting Finland 26-9 over the final 40 minutes. He allowed just two goals, only one of which beat him cleanly.

Once overtime began, Rimpinen looked so dialled-in against an American team that fully found its groove that it started to look like he might carry Finland to gold on his back. The 18-year-old made multiple point-blank and breakaway saves to keep Suomi alive.

Rimpinen made his first game-saving stop about five minutes into overtime as Finland's three skaters were stuck on a long shift. American Trevor Connelly shovelled a no-look pass to Zeev Buium, who sent a one-timer right into the waiting pads of the netminder. He pulled the heroics again less than a minute later, making a right-pad save after the American captain danced through all three Finnish players to get a point-blank look in tight.

Less than a minute after that, he committed robbery on James Hagens, who got a perfect feed from Danny Nelson behind the net but couldn't put it past the young netminder. In the end, it was a sneaky five-hole shot from Stiga that got the best of him, but not before he made five saves in 8:04 of overtime.

All told, Rimpinen was probably the best player on the ice for Finland all tournament, finishing with five wins, one shutout, a 2.34 goals-against average and a .933 save percentage — the best stats of all goalies who played more than two games.

1st star: Ryan Leonard

It might have been Stiga who officially won the United States its gold, but it wouldn't have made it to that point if not for the continued effort and compete level of captain Ryan Leonard.

The 19-year-old Washington Capitals prospect upped his game during his second world juniors and finished the tournament with five goals, five assists and a plus-10 rating in 10 games. He added two assists in Sunday's gold-medal game, each of them primary.

He combined with Boston College linemates Hagens and Gabe Perrault to get the Americans on the board in the first. Perrault capitalized off a Finland turnover, quickly getting the puck to Leonard in the high slot. Rimpinen made the initial save, but Hagens was right at the doorstep to put the rebound home.

Leonard's second assist came on the game-tying goal for the U.S., when he streaked into the offensive zone on the left wing, dropping a pass to defenceman Cole Hutson, who wired it home from the slot. All of a sudden, the United States was back in this game, and it had their captain largely to thank.

Aside from points, Leonard was a driver all night, finishing his checks, playing physically and creating offence for the Americans as the game went on, and helping momentum shift in favour of the red-white-and-blue. He finished the evening with a team-leading seven shots on goal.

In addition to leading his team to their first back-to-back gold medals in program history, Leonard earned top forward and tournament MVP.

A sophomore at Boston College, he leads the NCAA in goals-per-game with 16 in 12 contests and will likely make the jump to the resurging Capitals team at the conclusion of this season.

Honourable mentions: Sweden's David Edstrom stepped up when he was needed most. Prior to Sunday, Edstrom had only scored twice this tournament, but doubled up during the bronze medal match, tying the game in the first and second period and giving the Swedes a chance. ... U.S. defenceman Zeev Buium may not have been top-20 in tournament scoring, or even top-five amongst Americans, but he was the lifeblood of the team on the blue line on Sunday. Buium played a staggering 27:58 and led all defenceman in shots, totalling six on the evening, and set up Stiga for the game-winning goal. ... Jakub Stancl continued his dominant tournament by scoring the opening goal for Czechia on the power play in the first period and contributed one goal in the shootout. Along with Sale, Stancl led teammates in shots with six and led tournament scoring until Cole Hutson scored the game-tying goal for the Americans. He'll finish with seven goals and 10 points in seven tournament games.

## [TSN.CA / McKenna motivated to silence Canada's doubters in quarter-finals](#)

By Mark Masters- January 3, 2025

Team Canada faced plenty of criticism for an underwhelming preliminary round performance. Gavin McKenna didn't mind it.

"It doesn't really get to me," the 17-year-old winger said. "It kind of fuels me a little bit."

McKenna took a peek at the social media discourse after Canada's 4-1 loss to the United States on New Year's Eve.

"It's definitely fuel for sure," the Medicine Hat Tigers phenom said. "You got some people in our own country doubting us, so just want to prove them wrong."

The margin for error is now gone as Canada gets set to face Czechia on Thursday in a do-or-die quarter-final.

"It's something you dream of as a kid," McKenna said. "You watch the quarter-finals and Team Canada [growing up] so to play in it is pretty special."

It can lead to special moments. Two years ago in Halifax, Connor Bedard scored an overtime goal for the ages to beat Slovakia in the quarter-finals.

Canada went on to win the gold medal in Halifax with Dylan Guenther scoring in overtime against Czechia. It was sweet revenge after Czechia had beat Canada on Boxing Day.

"There's a bit of a rivalry starting," McKenna said. "We play them a lot, so it's going to be a big one. There's going to be lots of eyes on this game obviously so we're ready and we're hungry."

McKenna, who is a distant cousin of Bedard through marriage, is hungry to get back on the scoresheet. The native of Whitehorse, Yukon opened the scoring for Canada on Boxing Day, but hasn't produced a point since. This three-game dry spell is his longest point drought since his rookie season in the Western Hockey League.

"Just sticking with it," Canada's youngest player said of his mindset. "I know it will come at some point. I'm just going to be playing the way I've been playing. I just haven't been able to put the puck in the back of the net, but I feel like my line's generating quite a bit of offence."

Assistant coach Chris Lazary wakes up at 5 a.m. every morning and reviews every goal scored in the NHL the night before. He's been talking to McKenna and Canada's other snakebitten stars about some subtle changes that can help them get going. He wants them to remain relaxed when the chances come and make the right shot selection.

Lazary likes how McKenna, who is the projected first-overall pick in the 2026 NHL draft, is handling things.

"Not fazing him at all," said Lazary, who coached the Saginaw Spirit to a Memorial Cup title last year. "That's why he's elite. He likes the looks he's getting ... We looked at some of the habits and where shots should be and just adding those to your game when you do get a chance. But he's been a big piece for us. We don't want him to do anything outside of his game to take him away from those chances. Keep creating those chances and one will go in and when it does we feel like a lot will start to go."

McKenna has already established some clutch credentials on the international stage. His hat trick helped Canada win the gold medal game against the United States at the 2024 under-18 World Championship.

"This is when he plays his best," said winger Porter Martone, who captained that Canadian team. "I know he's going to bring his best."

McKenna plans to stick with his game in hopes of breaking out offensively for Canada. Gavin McKenna has had his fair share of chances during the World Juniors, but despite not converting as much as he had hoped, it doesn't appear to be impacting other areas of his game. The young forward believes if he sticks to the way he plays, the goals will come.

Martone will return to the lineup after sitting out the last two games as a healthy scratch.

"It's a good feeling," the Brampton Steelheads captain said. "It's always tough watching from the stands and maybe thinking you could be out there, but I have to trust in the coach's decision and that's what they thought was best for the team right then."

Head coach Dave Cameron felt that Martone was overthinking things a bit.

"Yeah, maybe," Martone said. "I just got to go out and play my game. I've been playing hockey my entire life and I just got to play with the love and passion I bring to the game. Maybe I was overthinking it a bit."

Martone has racked up 54 points in 26 games in the Ontario Hockey League. Among Canada's players, only McKenna (60 points in 30 games) has hit the scoresheet more often this season.

"This is when I think I play my best," Martone said, "when there's a lot on the line and maybe there's some adversity and when the best players have to come out and play."

Martone is expected to slot in on a line with Brayden Yager and Tanner Howe.

"I think he's going to have some big moments here in this tournament starting tonight," Lazary predicted. "He's going to be a big piece for us. He's playing on a pretty good line. Porter's just gotta be Porter. He's at his best when he's engaged and he's got his nose in the game and he's over pucks and he's going to tough areas and being hard to play against."

Martone's linemate in Brampton, Carson Rehkopf, is expected to be a healthy scratch on Thursday.

This is when I play my best: Martone draws back in at the height of pressure for Canada. Porter Martone has admittedly found it tough to watch from the sidelines as his team has struggled throughout the World Juniors, especially during Canada's loss to the United States on New Year's Eve, but the forward is ready to make his mark by playing with the love and passion he knows he can bring.

Last year, Czechia broke Canada's heart with a late goal in the quarter-finals.

"I remember watching on TV," Martone said. "Devastating loss. I think we all have that in the back of our mind."

There are four players back from last year, including forwards Easton Cowan, Yager, and Rehkopf, and defenceman Oliver Bonk.

"It's always good to get a second chance," said Bonk, who watched the game-winning goal deflect in off his stick with 11.4 seconds left. "It's going to be a fun game."

Canada fell behind 2-0 last year and couldn't complete the comeback.

"Don't take anything for granted," Bonk said of the big takeaway. "We've seen that going through this tournament. We need to learn from the games we lost and improve."

Canada lost 3-2 to Latvia in a shootout before falling 4-1 to the United States on New Year's Eve. Czechia, meanwhile, opened the tournament with three straight wins before dropping their preliminary round finale to Sweden.

'Don't take anything for granted': Canada grateful for second shot at Czechia

'Don't take anything for granted': Canada grateful for second shot at Czechia Another quarter-final date against Czechia awaits Team Canada Thursday night and although the sting is still present from last year's heartbreak, the Canadians are focusing on their own game and not the recent history between the two teams at this level.

"We're confident," McKenna said. "We've played the Czechs before, we beat them. We know we can do it again. This time there's a lot on the line, so we're going to give it our all."

Canada beat Czechia 3-2 in their final pre-tournament game on Dec. 23 at Canadian Tire Centre.

"I think we are little bit of underdogs," said Czechia head coach Patrik Augusta, who guided his team to a bronze medal last year. "I'm not going to call us real underdogs."

Canada's returning players are looking to flip the script. Czechia's eight returnees are looking to repeat the feat.

"They have the knowledge that it can be done," Augusta said. "We have players that will hopefully lead us and show other ones the way."

One change this year is that Canada has home-ice advantage.

"Everybody wants to play against Canada in Ottawa," said Czech captain Eduard Sale, who is playing in his third World Juniors. "I think 18,000 people here so it will be nice to play here."

"Canada is a big rivalry for everyone," Augusta said. "It's where hockey was born and everyone wants to play and what can be bigger than playing a quarter-final game against Canada? Probably finals, but quarter-final is a big game in the tournament."

A win on Thursday ensures two more games and a shot at a medal. A loss means an early exit and a lot of second guessing.

"It's the thing that decides whoever is a success and not success," Augusta said.

'It can go either way': Czechia believes they're slight underdogs vs. Canada

'It can go either way': Czechia believes they're slight underdogs vs. Canada Czechia may be coming into tonight's quarter-final matchup against Canada as the higher seed but head coach Patrik Augusta believes his side are the underdogs.

One of Czechia's returning players is goalie Michael Hrabal.

"I think he's better than last year," Augusta said. "He improved a lot over the year. He's giving us a chance every game."

The coach was reluctant to heap too much praise on the UMass-Amherst product.

"I don't want to say that, because if I say it you know what's going to happen," he said with a smile. "His overall game is good and I can see his confidence growing."

Hrabal posted a .926 save percentage in three games in the preliminary round.

Carter George, who leads the tournament with a .946 save percentage, will start for Canada.



Canada held a meeting on Wednesday to address its lack of discipline at the World Juniors.

"We have the same problem, especially the last game," Augusta noted. "We had seven penalties and probably four or five were really unnecessary ones. So, it's going to be on both teams. Both sides tonight, discipline will be the key factor. These tournaments and these big games are decided by special teams."

The Talking Point: How much of team discipline is a coach's responsibility?

The Talking Point: How much of team discipline is a coach's responsibility? Canada gave the United States seven power plays in their New Year's Eve clash, allowing three goals in the process. Overall, Canada leads the tournament with 29 minor penalties. How much of team discipline is a coach's responsibility, and how much lays at the players? TSN Hockey analyst Bruce Boudreau shares his thoughts.

Czechia cancelled practice on Wednesday, but held a full skate on Thursday morning.

Canada did not hit the ice at all following the loss on New Year's Eve.

"We have an excited group, energetic group," said Lazary. "They love the stage. We're looking forward to the game. We had a really good day yesterday just hanging out being dudes, playing games and just spending time with each other and trying to focus on what's ahead, but not make it the only thing we're thinking about."

Hockey Canada management group member Brent Seabrook, a gold medallist at the 2025 World Juniors, and media relations ace Spencer Sharkey organized a tournament featuring the games available to the players in the hotel like corn hole.

"It brought the energy and got our guys distracted," said Lazary. "It's been an interesting experience this tournament watching the guys get a break from the pressures and everything going on."